Chimera
by JoeLawson

Summary

Mix Alec, his out-of-control pheromones, and a reluctantly attracted Ames White, then add a dash of Manticore meddling and stir.

Notes
See the end of the work for notes.

Chi-me-ra also Chi-mae-ra (kī-mîr'ə), n.

1. Greek Mythology: A fire-breathing she-monster usually represented as a composite of a lion, goat, and serpent.
2. An imaginary monster made up of grotesquely disparate parts.
3. Genetics: An organism composed of two or more genetically distinct tissues, as an organism that is partly male and partly female, or an artificially produced individual having tissues of several species.

Chapter One:
Everybody's Darling

It started on day twenty-three of the siege of Terminal City. At first, it was only Joshua. A hitch in the dog man's step when he passed Alec in the hallways, long looks when they were both working at
headquarters, a few overly enthusiastic hugs for no discernible reason. It was kind of weird, but Joshua was always good for a little weirdness, so when he kept sniffing Alec and grinning goofily, Alec briefly wondered whether the big guy had spent too much time inhaling paint fumes again, then shrugged and forgot about it.

There were others, too, but since Alec was a tad preoccupied helping Max in her endeavor to keep them all alive – and not, you know, bombed from above or nuked from below – he couldn't be blamed for not noticing. So maybe the X5 males and the odd X4 or X6 eyed him more appreciatively than usual. Wasn't that big a deal. Alec was handsome even by transgenic standards and Manticore's elite hadn't been designed to worry about gender. Wouldn't do for a spy or a sleeper assassin to suffer a heterosexual freak-out when proposed by a mark. The only thing that might've puzzled Alec, had he been aware of the looks he was getting, was the complete lack of female flirt-attempts. However, Alec was in full survival mode and consequently not particularly concerned with other people's libido.

Max, once she'd grudgingly accepted the mantle of leadership, was a demanding chieftain. She relied on the people she knew best, and when she realized how well both military and civilian negotiators reacted to Alec's smooth manner and professional attitude, she didn't hesitate to put him to work. Run ragged between his everyday duties of coordinating the transgenic defense and the numerous peace talks, Alec didn't pick up on anything unusual until Mole kindly drew his attention to it. There were some things even Alec's mind couldn't blank out, and one of them was cigar-puffing, whiskey-guzzling, booby-ogling Mole wagging his tongue at him and then telling him he smelled nice.

Just. No.

He wrote it off as sarcasm at first, but upon further contemplation had to admit that Mole didn't do subtle. When Old Scaleface was being sarcastic, everybody within hearing range knew. It was impossible to miss. Mole could etch graffiti into a wall with his sarcasm. His brand of subterfuge consisted of taking a battering ram to the back window instead of the front door.

Shaken out of sweet oblivion by this rather distressing wake-up call, Alec perked up and started to pay heed to what his fellow ex-Manticores were up to. He noted there was general sniffing whenever he was in the vicinity of male transgenics, followed immediately by very interested looks and a few cases of mild stalking. Under normal circumstances, Alec would've been slightly mystified and pretty flattered, but seeing as they were trapped in the most desolate sector of Seattle, surrounded by armed forces and wandering lynch mobs, even he really didn't think this was the time or the place.

The logical solution was to wash off whatever odor had everybody so revved up; unfortunately, the water supply was extremely limited. As it turned out, the result left something to be desired anyway. After his one and only bath, a random X4 groped him, Mole offered him one of his carefully rationed cigars, and Joshua hugged him from behind just outside the command center and licked his neck until Alec, in desperation, grabbed a doggy-ear and pulled hard.

Joshua yelped and dropped him, and Alec, pissed off beyond belief, whirled around to get right in his face. "Are you outta your fucking mind?" he barked. It was a testament to how annoyed he was that Joshua's confused, apologetic whimper only made him wish for a rolled-up newspaper. "What the hell's up with everybody?"

Joshua squirmed. "Don't know?" he offered in that guilty tone of voice that yelled "liar" even louder than the way he wrung his hands.

Alec wasn't in the mood to dance around the issue. "Try again," he snapped, pointer finger poking Joshua's broad chest. His ears caught the distant click-clack of heels hitting concrete in a familiar purposeful stride and he had to beat down the urge to retreat. Max's timing was abysmal, but he had
a few minutes and this opportunity was too good to waste. Alec jabbed Joshua once more. "Talk fast."

"Alec just– smells good," Joshua admitted, eyes big and round, flat nose twitching. His grin was almost a leer. Directed at Alec, it was the most disturbing thing he'd seen since Normal's attempt to belly-dance. "Really good."

"Yeah, I get that," Alec growled, anxious to get his answers before Max rounded the corner. "What I want to know is why. Is it my aftershave? My dirty socks? Should I start wearing underwear again?"

Joshua whimpered, one hand going down to press hard against what looked like a boa constrictor trying to burst out of his pants. His voice came out a strangled squeak. "Alec's not wearing–"

The footsteps stopped as Max was intercepted by Luke. *Keep talking, Luke.* Alec nudged Joshua firmly a few times, impatient. "Josh! Focus!"

"Heat," Joshua whined, pupils blown, cheeks flushed. "Alec smells like he's in heat, like a bitch, hot, tight-ass little bitch, makes Joshua crazy, want to get busy, it's everywhere, nutmeg and pepper and fire-smoke--"

He took a deep, stuttering breath and swayed closer, a heavy weight against the finger still resting against his right pectoral. The way he stared down at Alec made the usually fairly self-confident X5 quiver deep inside with something he refused to acknowledge as fear. He wasn't scared. No way. This was gentle Joshua, his friend. The guy might be a bit rough around the edges, but he wasn't going to jump Alec without permission. And even if he did – which he wouldn't – Joshua wasn't combat trained. Alec could take him in a fight, sex-crazed or not. He could.

Jesus, the guy was *massive.*

"Hate to burst your bubble, Josh, but I'm a dude. We don't go into heat." Hell, not even all transgenic *females* did; it was a matter of cocktail, not gender–

Oh, *shit.*

Alec froze, even as his thoughts raced. They wouldn't have. They couldn't have. He would've noticed before now, right? Wasn't something you could miss. He would've–

But they'd fed them all a lot of pills, all the time. For years and years. The X5s and X6s in particular had been saturated with chemicals when Max set them free, and he knew for a fact some of the stuff had an impressive half-life. But shouldn't *he*–

"Oh, not you two again. What's going on here?"

–be feeling something, too? He stared at Max, who'd sneaked up on them after all and stood with her arms crossed now and her irritated kitten scowl firmly in place. Caught pre-panic-attack, he madly considered asking *her.* Max went into heat. Max would know what it was supposed to feel like. He could just–

"Alec?" There was the nose-scrunch, herald of the Suspicious Questioning. It was enough to bring him back to himself and remind him why it was not a good idea to quiz a prickly control-freak like Max about her hormone-induced periods of uncontrollable sluttiness. Anyway, it *couldn't* be heat – he'd rarely felt less turned on in his life.

"Yeah?" he asked. At least her presence had a cooling effect on Joshua as well: the first transgenic moved back until he wasn't looming over Alec anymore and turned slightly so Max wouldn't be able
to see his undaunted boner.

Max briefly studied Joshua, huge and hunched over, then her gaze unfailingly honed in on her favorite scapegoat. "What are you up to, Alec?"

"Me?" Alec yelped, his uneasiness swept away by righteous indignation. "Why d'you always assume it's me who--" Well, he had betrayed her to Manticore once. And he had almost knifed her. Then, of course, there'd been the incident with the Steelheads... "Never mind."

"Joshua?" Max questioned, markedly softer and a lot friendlier, for Joshua could do no wrong. For such a hard-ass, the woman had the most amazing blind spot when it came to the shaggy giant. Alec had started a betting pool about whether or not she'd ever really work out that her adorable "big fella" was actually old enough to be her father and fully capable of managing his own life.

"Nothing's going on," Joshua whuffed, sounding only slightly strained. In a move worthy of a dancer, he turned, took a step aside, then slung a heavy arm around Alec's shoulder and pulled him half in front of Joshua. On the plus side, Max wouldn't be able to see the bulge of the big guy's not so little "little guy". On the other hand, the insistent bump and sly grind of Joshua's excitement against the small of Alec's back was disconcerting to say the least.

Alec mustered a smile for Max's sake — the last thing he wanted was to tip her off as to his predicament — but he could tell it came out wooden, more like the snarl of a trapped animal than his usual cocky smirk: eyes too wide, teeth bared, fingers twitching with the desire to remove the restricting weight from where it lay draped over him like the restraints of a Manticore examination table. He didn't believe Joshua would actually try to force him, had to trust his friend on this or damage one of the very few relationships he had that were worth fighting for, but his instincts were screaming so loudly he damn near jumped out of his skin when Joshua spoke again, too close to Alec's ear by far.

"Alec and Joshua are just playing," Joshua explained with an earnestness that came across surprisingly well considering he was lying his ass off. "Rough—huhn—roughhousing," he elaborated, in case Max hadn't gotten it the first time.

"Yeah, well, play elsewhere," Max ordered, mollified but incapable of just letting it go. She narrowed her eyes speculatively at Alec. "In fact, Alec, since you've got so much energy to spare, why don't you join one of the recon teams? We don't have any meetings scheduled until tomorrow and I want you to keep an eye on Dalton."

"Dalton is going out?" Joshua asked, suddenly back to normal as concern smothered the crazy fascination he had developed with Alec. His erection finally wilted. "He's a kid, li'l fella."

"He's a soldier," Max shot back. Instantly on the defensive; looked like Max wasn't totally sure about her decision herself. "He kept himself and Gem safe for more than half a year before he joined us."

He was also young and innocent-looking enough people wouldn't automatically assume he was a tranny should they catch him in the vicinity of Terminal City. Send him out with one of the few remaining X3 females and it'd be just a mother and her teenage son out to gawk with the rest of the rabble. That had been the idea. Alec wasn't sure how he was supposed to fit into the mix, but he'd make it work somehow.

"Dangerous out there," Joshua rumbled. "Safer in here."

"We gotta make sure it'll stay safe, big fella." Max's sorrowful frown expressed her regret about the state of affairs, but her tone was firm. "We can't rely on other people to play fair. We gotta know
what's going on outside, and Dalton was one of the first volunteers."

"Dalton just a kid," Joshua repeated, unhappily. It was at times like these that his lack of military training showed most clearly; none of the others had paused to think about Dalton's age. X-series soldiers didn't get a childhood, never experienced a period of grace like lower-class transgenics like Dix or Luke did. They were trained to think of themselves as things, machines, war dogs; Joshua, despite his canine DNA, would never truly understand this attitude, no matter how often and tirelessly Mole tried to teach him.

Almost as uncomfortable with upset Joshua as with randy Joshua, Alec patted the arm still anchoring him to the taller man before he squirmed free and went to stand beside Max. "Don't worry. I'll take care of Dalton. He'll be fine." He flapped a hand to emphasize the "fine" then pulled it in quickly when Joshua looked like he wanted to snatch it and use it to pull Alec close again. Fucking pheromones or whatever else was responsible for this annoying case of Cupid's syndrome that had befallen Alec's brethren.

Joshua nodded. "Alec be careful out there too," he said quietly, and it was the friend speaking this time and not the unfamiliar horndog. Alec hadn't realized how much he'd missed him.

"Hey, don't worry 'bout me." Alec grinned, and this time, it was honest. "I'm always all right."

Famous last words.

When things went FUBAR in Alec's world, they did it fast. One second he was on his way back from a successful scouting mission, pretending to chat with a rather taciturn Belle and ignoring the covert glances Dalton kept darting his way, the next it felt like he was being flattened by a tank. The fight was over for Alec before it had really begun.

He heard Belle cuss and a meaty thud like someone else getting body-checked, then the back of his skull met concrete and that was it. Stars burst across his vision and blackness rushed at him like a tunnel with no end.

Alec must've passed out for a moment or two, because the next thing he was aware of was a high-pitched yell and the weight of a skinny body against his, moving jerkily. Dazed as he was, his first thought was that Dalton had finally snapped and was humping him right there in this dirty alley – on the ground next to a dumpster, no less. It took him a few seconds to figure out the kid was actually trying to protect him, wasn't grunting and twitching in lust but pain as their assailants tore and kicked at him.

"Fuck," Dalton whimpered, thin fingers clenched in Alec's shirt, "fuckers, ah–! Goddamn fuckers!"

And he held on, strained to cover as much of the older man's body with his own as he possibly could, elbows and arms cradling Alec so his own head and shoulders sheltered Alec's face and throat, the rest of him stretched out painfully to provide some padding for abdomen and crotch.

Some of the kicks connected anyway, along Alec's side, against his thighs. The taste of copper was in his mouth. Some asshole stepped on his wrist until even the extremely dense bone-structure of an X5 couldn't take it anymore and the carpals broke and splintered. It didn't hurt as much as it should have; he still wasn't quite there, not all the way. He couldn't feel much, couldn't open his eyes. He heard Dalton's breathless swearing, though, the sobs the kid couldn't hold back, the dull sounds of the beating. Couldn't hear Belle, couldn't understand what their attackers were shouting. He gagged at the stench of rotting trash, acid rain, synthetic aftershave, fresh blood...

...musky bitter chocolate, almond, and sandalwood.
His eyes snapped open as his entire body reacted to this new scent, faint yet but growing steadily stronger. He moaned quietly as he stared blindly up at the pale blob above him that was Dalton, everything fading into the background but the tantalizing smell teasing his nose. It invaded him, possessed him, would've gotten him hard and ready if he hadn't been lying in a cold puddle with what had to be at least a concussion.

He heard the footfalls through all the noise and confusion. Fast, purposeful, near-silent even though there was no need for stealth.

No warning, no hesitation – suddenly, people went flying, torn off Alec and Dalton like disobedient puppies. The dumpster crashed against the wall when a man slammed into it head-first. Someone screamed; a pitiful shriek that was cut off without delay. A heavy body slumped to the ground next to Alec, belly down and face up. Alec barely spared it a glance.

Dalton squawked as he was grabbed by the scruff of his neck and the seat of his pants and hauled off Alec to be tossed aside much like the wannabe lynch mob. The instant he disappeared from Alec's line of sight, Alec's eyes focused.

Burning, dark gaze. A beautiful, cruel mouth. Even, familiar features, as usual arranged in an unbecoming scowl.

God help them: they'd just been rescued by Ames White.

Chapter Two:
Temporary Insanity

One of the most bothersome and dangerous things about being under siege was the lack of information about what was going on in the enemy's camp. The most logical (and dangerous) solution was to send out scouting parties to find out.

Anticipating the inevitable move, Ames White had equipped his own people with thermals once more and positioned them at key locations in a ring around Terminal City. Their orders were simple: detect and destroy any transgenic stupid or desperate enough to venture into the no-man's-land between the fenced-in area of the self-declared Freak Nation and the rest of the city.

On day twenty-eight, their patience was rewarded. Two freaks dead, the excited report said, one captured. Ames White was so pleased with the news he left a morose Otto at their temporary headquarters to man the computer and coordinate to his anal-retentive little heart's content while Ames strode out into the rainy Seattle evening. He'd been cooped up for too long; the Whites were a hunter breed, happiest when the chase was on and miserable when forced into idleness. Ames could be patient – had had to be, seeing as he'd been undercover for years – but confinement still chafed and made him snappish and mean. Well, meaner than usual.

It was a relief to walk beneath the gray sky again, to navigate the chaotic, ever changing tangle of the area's cul-de-sacs and back alleys as he picked the most direct route to his successful team. Seattle was a dirty city, a cesspool of human refuse both in a literal and figurative sense, but Ames had gotten used to it. He stalked past the litter and the ragged two-legged jackals without a second glance, a proud, fearless predator in a business suit. Deep down in their lizard brains they recognized him – not who he was but what he was – and they kept clear of him, let him pass unhindered where his shiny, expensive shoes alone would've cost other people their lives.
It was the smell that made him pause at a narrow intersection; a hint of spices in the air, musky and delicious, as out of place this close to Terminal City as a rib eye steak at a vegan buffet. He closed his eyes, intrigued against his will, and lifted his nose into the wind to catch another whiff. He got it, and it hit him like a punch, low and hard. His dick twitched and started to fill, his skin prickled delightfully... even his mouth watered.

Before he could think about it, he was hurrying down the wrong path, followed the tantalizing fragrance into the seedy underbelly of the sector. Down another alley, through a bleak little backyard, around a corner – he was almost running by then, coat billowing around him like a cobra's hood, fists clenched because he had to get there, get there now, find the source of the scent, and--and--

_Argh_. Okay.

Fuck him through the floor, whoever he was. He could still gloat over the dead transgenics later.

He discovered the flaw in this strategy when he arrived at the scene and found the most probable candidate for said fucking already flat on his back... alas, with a pack of scruffy thugs all over him. This would not do. Ames disposed of the vermin in his way, plucked a slightly dinged teenager off the motionless figure on the ground, and stared at his prize.

It was, as it turned out, X5-494.

The revelation came as something of a shock.

There was a part of Ames White that smiled evilly at the helpless X5, pulled his gun, and gleefully put a bullet right between those ridiculously big, green eyes, because even as a kid he'd always thought of Bambi as a fucking pest and 494 had been a thorn in his paw ever since he'd first whammed Ames into not killing him. He wanted to do it. He really did. Wanted it so much his trigger finger twitched in anticipation.

He also wanted to spread the boy open and bang him like a bitch.

Dick trumped finger and the Glock stayed safely in its holster. "You lucky bastard," Ames breathed, which got him another noseful of that maddening smell. If this was some sort of new-fangled chemical weapon, the freaks were going to win, because every bit of fight went out of Ames with a whimper - and he was one of the Conclave's most dedicated soldiers.

494 must've gotten brained hard, judging from the way he blinked up at his savior. He didn't move, didn't try to jump up and go for Ames' throat, so damage, it seemed, had been done. Not good, since necrophilia wasn't on Ames' list of kinks. He crouched down and lightly slapped a pale cheek, distracted for a moment by the feel of skin under his fingers. He wanted to-- He-- he _wanted_. Damn it. _Focus_.

"Hey," he called. "You gonna die on me?"

The X5 tried to say something, failed, closed his eyes briefly, then took a shaky breath and threatened hoarsely, "Keep hittin' me and I'm gonna ralph all over you."

Fair enough. Ames stopped patting and checked for injuries instead. He detected a growing bump on the back of 494's head and the right wrist was broken in several places, but there was no brain-leakage or protruding bone splinters, so Ames was reasonably sure the fine body beneath his – the one he was _not_ going to fuck right here right now now now – would be able to heal on its own. Probably be as good as new within a couple of days.
Trained to make decisions fast, Ames didn't linger or agonize about what to do. He got one arm under 494's knees, one under his shoulders. Discovered he hadn't tossed the blond kid into the wall hard enough. Pulled back one arm and slammed his fist into the boy's face before the skinny freak could get his grubby fingers on Ames' tailored suit.

"Motherfucker," 494 slurred, and weakly tried to crush Ames' windpipe.

Ames merely chuckled, amused by the valiant – if ineffectual – attempt, and brushed the hand aside. "Language," he chided.

He leaned down again, scooped up the incapacitated X5, and made his exit with 494 cradled against his chest and completely high on pheromones.

One of the perks of being a triple-agent was that nobody, not even the Conclave, could ever hope to keep up with all of Ames' activities without his consent. Over the years, he'd received so much hush-money, special payments, "bonuses", and outright bribes from so many different parties it had seemed prudent to manage the funds by himself instead of logging every cent with the Elders. And since he needed to be able to move quickly and stealthily at a moment's notice, it had seemed only practical to acquire a few vehicles and secure lodgings on his own. Call it a tiny flare of rebellion, call it distraction, but somehow, Ames hadn't gotten around to listing all his possessions and hiding places to his superiors.

He'd never really thought about it, because all he did was in service of the Cause anyway and not for his personal gain, but failure to report everything came in handy now. At first, Ames' intention had been to drive to the nearest motel, rent a room, and fuck this unhealthy attraction out of his system posthaste. Wasn't like he was particularly happy with the fact that he was about to do it with one of his sire's toy soldiers, even a good-looking one, and he sure as hell didn't want anybody to know. Ergo motel.

When 494 passed out before they even reached the car though, he admitted grudgingly that a change of plans might be advisable. For one, carrying an unconscious guy from the car to a room would attract attention no matter how run-down the place or how seemingly indifferent the inevitable audience. Also, the necrophilia thing extended to insensible partners and people in too much pain to enjoy themselves. Ames didn't mind killing, had no trouble torturing or double-crossing whenever he deemed it necessary, but he'd never developed a taste for rape. His breeding partner had been willing, if ignorant of her purpose, and random sex was taboo for his kind. Wouldn't do to muck up bloodlines so carefully cultivated.

It occurred to him, fleetingly, that what he was doing was a lot worse than picking up a hooker or having a fling with a regular human. Ames was about to commit the ultimate sin. Transgenics were a mockery of everything the Conclave had been working towards, a cruel distortion of their ideal. They were a travesty. An abomination. The idea of a thoroughbred hunter bumping nasties with a thing like that... it was unthinkable.

So Ames, dizzy with desire, didn't think about it.

There was no way around it: he'd have to hide the X5 somewhere safe and wait until he was healed up before he could give in to the siren call. With a bit of luck, he thought as he arranged 494's long limbs in the custom-made trunk of one of his emergency BMWs, by the time the other man was back on his feet this pheromone shit would have blown over and they'd be trying to kill each other again. Or, even better, he'd get to nail that extremely fuckable ass a couple of times, see what 494 looked like when he came so hard he saw stars, and then he'd terminate the pretty freak.
Nobody had to know. Nobody would know, because nobody gave a damn about what happened to a lone transgenic, except maybe for his worthless kin... and they'd never find out either. Not for sure, anyway. He should've killed the boy, he realized belatedly. He would have, had he not been too preoccupied with 494, who smelled so good, felt so perfect in his arms, was so warm and pliant and–

Red light. Oh, right. Stop. He hit the brakes, watched a truck roar through the intersection inches from the BMW's front end, and concluded that driving with 494's scent wafting through the car was dangerously similar to driving under the influence.

The rest of the drive to one of Ames' more secluded safe houses passed without incident. Ames opened the windows wide, breathed through his mouth, and distracted himself by calling Otto and feeding him a bullshit story while he crept along like an eighty-year-old grandmother. It wasn't dignified and if anybody ever found out he'd have to kill them, but it was better than wrapping the car around a goddamn telephone pole because he was fantasizing about humping the transgenic currently curled up in his trunk.

He allowed himself a sigh of relief when he finally steered the car through the gate and up the cracked driveway. Home, sweet home. Or rather, bolt hole, useful bolt hole. The abandoned house tucked back behind overgrown hedges and surrounded by nothing but unkempt grass and the omnipresent litter was his favorite place to hide. It was one of the many residences that had been wiped off the grid by the Pulse. No records left but the forged ones he owned, the family that had lived there long gone. The neighborhood had once been a thriving suburban community; now it was subdued, a quiet compilation of run-down houses and weed-covered lawns at the edge of Seattle, inhabited by people who mostly minded their own business.

Ames cut the engine and sat behind the steering wheel for a minute or two, staring blindly straight ahead. This was madness. He knew it, but he couldn't bring himself to care. He breathed in the intoxicating blend of male musk and spices, like chestnuts roasted over open fire, like cinnamon and white pepper, and something deep in his gut tightened with a longing so keen it hurt.

The next thing he knew was that he was standing behind the car, reaching into the open trunk. He extricated the limp transgenic from where he'd stashed him, lifted him into his arms again, elbowed the lid shut, and got them both up the stairs and into the house with a minimum of fuss. He carried the X5 across the threshold thinking about handcuffs and piss pots instead of blushing brides, though he did manfully resist the temptation to accidentally bang the freak's head against the door frame. Harming his... prisoner? guest? future fucktoy?... wasn't an option at this point, not with the instinct to claim, take, mate hot and urgent in his blood. Wouldn't keep him from shooting 494's ass as soon as this bout of temporary insanity was over, he promised himself, but until then Ames found himself playing nurse.

The master bedroom upstairs was the only fully furnished room in the house. It was also the safest, tactically speaking. Clean, warm, easily defendable. Ames deposited his burden on the big marriage bed, studied the picture that made with a glazed eye, then muttered a curse and staggered out of the room and down the stairs before he could tear off 494's filthy clothes and molest him on the spot. And there he'd thought unconscious people didn't turn him on.

He barely made it to the downstairs bathroom before he had to yank down his zipper. He pulled out his cock with trembling fingers, aimed it in the general direction of the toilet, stroked it twice, and shot strings of creamy jizz all over the place with a strangled yell. He hadn't come this hard since the first time he'd fucked Wendy.

Remembering the ex-wife he'd had to kill with his own hands worked better than a cold shower against the remaining warm curl of arousal. He shivered in the dark as if touched by a ghostly hand,
but when he stared at his own pale face in the cracked mirror, he was alone. Damn it. He needed to get a grip. He needed to think, or he wouldn't have to worry about what to do with 494 anymore, because they'd both end up dead.

It took him a while to get a grip. Ames sought refuge in the kitchen, where he occupied himself searching the cupboards for the bottle of single malt he knew he’d left there somewhere. It was a little easier to think now that he'd taken off the edge. The need was still there, always at the edge of his awareness, but he was able to shove it aside in order to map out his strategy.

He couldn't just disappear without a word and hole up in suburbia until this fever was out of his system. People would notice; his agents as well as his kind. He'd have to keep up appearances, distract attention away from his person so nobody would go looking for him and find 494.

Wait.

Ames slammed shut the drawer he'd been checking and stood up straight. What the hell. There was a much easier way out of this, no planning necessary. He might be stricken with an annoying inability to kill 494 outright, but there were always alternatives.

A quick detour out to the car later, Ames hurried back up the stairs with a cruel smile on his face and joy in his heart. The X5 was were he'd left him, sprawled out across the bed, too tempting for his own good, but this time Ames was prepared for the insidious whispers of the man's scent. 494 stirred when the cold metal of a handcuff snapped closed around his broken wrist. His eyes blinked open to stare at Ames in confusion.

Ames grinned toothily. "Don't worry, this won't hurt. Much. Don't yank it, you'll only cripple yourself. See you in a couple of months, 494."

"What?" 494 slurred, clearly not catching on yet. "What the fuck--"

"Have fun seducing the quilt," Ames crowed, and fled before the dawning terror in that green, green gaze could kick start those unnatural protective instincts again.

Chapter Three: Consummation

White was leaving? He was going away? Was the man out of his mind? Panic clawed up through Alec's still sluggish consciousness, sharp and acidic. White couldn't just leave, he had to get back to the bed and fuck this maddening itch away! Alec was burning up. He had to– He needed– He wanted–

That was when Alec came all the way awake and realized what he was thinking. Oh no, no way, no how. He closed his mouth before he could give in to the urge to call after the other man, held his breath and counted to eight hundred. By the time he was done, White was long gone, his lingering scent was thankfully less intense, and Alec had regained a measure of control. Thinking about Max helped. All he had to do was try to imagine how she'd react if she walked through the door to find him like this, chained to a metal bed frame and painfully hard; it was more than enough to take care of his boner and get his upstairs brain working again.

If there was one thing Manticore had taught Alec, it was to be a survivor. When stuck in a tight spot,
He didn't waste his time bemoaning his fate or blaming others, he dealt with it. Forced to go through psi-evaluation after your twin went AWOL, then again when he went psycho? Endure, obey, survive. Damn near lobotomized after watching your first love get blown up by the explosives you planted? Endure, swallow, survive. Tossed out into a world as hostile and alien as another planet then left to fend for yourself? Observe, adapt, survive. Almost beaten to death by a pack of ordinaries, rescued by your mortal enemy, suddenly irrationally attracted to same enemy, kidnapped, then shackled and left to die? Survive, repress-repress-repress, survive.

It took Alec a few minutes to assess his situation and decide on a course of action. He was handcuffed to the thick bedpost, but the chain wasn't too restrictive and he had an okay range of movement. White hadn't even tightened the cuff as much as he could have, so Alec's broken wrist wasn't offended but rested comfortably on the pillow. He was fully dressed and that, to his astonishment, included his knife and his lock picks. Apparently, White had been so intent of getting away from Alec and his pheromone-stink he hadn't bothered to search him. Yeah, right back at 'cha, buddy. Wasn't like Alec had really wanted the rank son-of-a-bitch to fuck him. Wasn't like he still did. He was perfectly happy on his own, thanks. Give him a moment to unlock the cuffs and he'd be out of here and back in TC to make White's life difficult.

He patted his little tool kit to reassure himself and lifted his head to get another look at the lock. It was hard to focus, because the room that had been spinning around him slowly was picking up speed now. He could've sworn the bed was swinging from side to side. It made him queasy... or maybe that was the concussion...

His eyes drifted shut out of self-defense and stayed shut because everything felt so much nicer from under a blanket of darkness. Maybe he should rest a bit before he started the tedious trek from wherever he was back to the city. It was quiet here, hardly any traffic noise, only birdsong and the muted, distant hum of human life. Not small-town quiet, but definitely far from the busier streets. Must be somewhere on the outskirts of Seattle. He'd find his way home, no problem, but it couldn't hurt to take a break first. Not long, he promised himself. He'd only take a short nap, let his brains unscramble themselves and his bones start knitting together. He could get out of the restraints any time, White had fled like a bat out of hell and wasn't likely to return before the next century, he was warm and comfortable and, honestly, wouldn't make it back into the besieged sector anyway in this condition.

Five minutes. Half an hour, tops. He was so tired. Scratch that; with half the transgenic population of Terminal City sniffing after him for the past few days, between sentry duty, negotiations, and everybody needing something from him, he was exhausted. Max could handle things on her own, she was one tough lady and she had Mole to help with keeping the 'nomalies in check, Logan and Dix for the technical details, and Joshua to keep her grounded. They'd be fine, and Alec needed a time-out.

He fell asleep and for a while he dreamed about beer, boobs, chocolate... and hazel eyes that set his soul afire. And if, after that, he slipped deeper into unconsciousness than was wise, he didn't know and didn't care.

"Wake up. Damn you, wake up, you stupid piece of transgenic shit!"

The words made it through the heavy blackness that was shrouding Alec, sent a frisson of alarm through him. A vague memory of brutal fists and heavy boots propelled him further towards wakefulness, survival instinct still strong. It was slow going though, hard work to struggle through the gooey lethargy that kept him helpless.
"Would you just– Damn it! Snap the fuck to, soldier! Open your fucking eyes or I'll kick your fucking ass so hard it'll shatter the fucking test-tube you were fucking hatched in, you fucking freak!"

The tone wasn't right, he noted, confused but straining to obey the order. It was a voice he knew, but it should've been angry and disgusted, not near frantic. Closer to the surface, he could feel hands on his face, thumbs stroking his cheeks. The smell was back, that devastating, spine-tingling mix of man and sex and spices. It took his breath away, which proved to be the right reaction, because that sharp, worried, oh-so-familiar voice rose briefly in heated denial – "No. No! Fuck you, don't you dare– Breathe!" – and then his head was tilted back, his jaw forced open, and smooth lips pressed firmly against his own.

Oh yeah.

Alec rejoined the living with an enthusiastic thrust of his tongue into Ames White's mouth followed by a blissful moan. White tasted even better than he smelled; perfect, so fucking perfect Alec could've eaten him alive. He tried to get closer, hips jerking, arms lifting so he could cling to broad shoulders. Well, arm. Singular. White, that incredible asshole (yummy though, such a delicious body, such a delectable taste), hadn't bothered to uncuff him before he'd started with the insults. Alec groaned a muffled command into their kiss. When that didn't yield immediate results, he shook his trapped arm to draw attention to the problem. His wrist ached a bit – had it been hurt? – and White's fingers untangled from Alec's hair to wrap around it and keep it steady, surprisingly careful despite the hard grip.

Man, White was an aggressive little fucker. Not that Alec was complaining; he didn't mind being straddled and held down so he could be kissed stupid. It was just that, while the tongue-fucking was absolutely great, he desperately needed to touch some skin here, lick and kiss down to the part of White's anatomy that was currently poking him in the stomach. He wanted to see the man lose it completely, so he'd finally give Alec what they both craved. If only he hadn't been tied to the fucking bed!

Frustration had him break their clinch and twist his wrist as much as he could, immobilized as it was by the steel bracelet and White's unbending grasp. "Off," he growled. "Take it off."

"Don't move," White ordered gruffly. "Don't–" He bit his lip (such a pretty red lip, swollen from kissing, shiny with their mingled saliva), pressed one hand against Alec's chest to balance himself and keep Alec from moving. "Hold on."

Years and years of fumbling and cussing later, the lock clicked and Alec was unfettered again, free to wrap himself around White like an octopus and hump him like a dog. (When it came to sexual gratification, Alec was an equal-opportunity animal.) White seemed to approve; he groaned deeply and humped right back, all hunger and burning, blazing intent.

They wriggled and squirmed out of their clothes, dexterous fingers wrestling with shoe laces and shirt buttons, awkward and clumsy in their mutual desire. White's tie wouldn't give, so he left it, let it dangle from his neck like a leash. Alec's shirt became a casualty, seams tearing with a tortured rrrrip when White put thousands of years of selective breeding to good use and demonstrated the supremacy of muscle over fabric with one brutal yank that finally bared Alec's torso to his view.

It was fast and dirty, a frenzied meeting of fever-hot bodies on top of the covers. If he hadn't been so far gone, Alec would've been mortified by how eagerly he spread his legs for his enemy. As it was, he lifted his hips like a whore, took White's fingers, begged for his cock. There wasn't enough lube or preparation, both of them strung too tight, unable to muster the patience for proper care, but not even the painful stab and burn could dampen the need. It didn't matter that Alec's sphincter tore a little, or that White was grunting in as much pain as pleasure – they couldn't stop. They didn't want to
Alec's head tossed on the pillow, hair damp with sweat, eyes unfocused as he clung to White's arms to keep from being shoved against the headboard with every hard, merciless thrust. He couldn't see, couldn't even scream, could only feel the way his sore ass stretched around his lover's fat dick, the heavenly fullness so deep inside, the oddly arousing slap of heavy testicles against his backside. His legs trembled, unaccustomed to this kind of strain, though he found he dearly loved the silky slide of White's hips against his inner thighs. Torn between the desire to offer all he had and his newly discovered yearning for touch, his legs would fall open wide then close to cradle White between them in a messy rhythm.

At the end of it, White grabbed Alec's waist to hold him still as he fucked into him so deep Alec finally did cry out. White threw back his head and gasped, pressed close, so close, buried to the root, and he came in slow, long spurts, body taut, hips pumping sinuously.

The feel and smell of it was so intense it tipped Alec over as well, quick and painless, his muscles clenching once, twice, so good, so good--

Wipeout.

The next time Alec came to, he was marginally more clearheaded, which wasn't necessarily an improvement. He blinked his eyes open. The ceiling was yellow. How quaint. He fixed his gaze on a tiny crack near the lamp and kept it there while he took stock, because he wasn't quite ready to deal with--

No. One step after the other.

The good news was that his brain had stopped to try and blast its way out of his skull and had deigned to resume some of its regular duties. No more revolving room, no more drifting in and out of it. Also, he wasn't tied up anymore and his wrist, while not yet wholly mended, could've been worse.

The bad news was that Alec's rear opening throbbed and stung like a motherfucker and -- he finally gave up on the ceiling and lowered his gaze -- yep, that was Ames White sprawled out on top of him, dead to the world but regrettably likely to wake up sooner or later.

At least the shithead looked about as beaten as Alec felt, dark circles under his eyes and his skin almost gray with exhaustion. Huh. As far as Alec remembered, White had seemed fine when he'd chained Alec to the bed, so either something drastic had happened or Alec had lost time. Sadly, White's scent hadn't changed or abated a bit, and it still punched each and every one of Alec's buttons, kept him weak-kneed and flat on his back under White when normally he'd have snapped the fucker's neck and delivered his severed head to Max.

Oh, crap. Max. She'd be furious by now, not to mention upset. Alec had fucked up again. She'd sent him along to watch after Dalton and Belle, but first he hadn't been vigilant enough to notice a horde of ordinaries descending upon them and then he'd gotten himself knocked out two seconds into the attack. Dalton had had to protect him, and Belle... he didn't even know what had happened to Belle. He almost wished Max wouldn't come rescue him this time, even though he knew he wouldn't be able to get out of this one on his own. Just look at him. He wasn't chained. He was armed, for Chrissakes (well, his pants were armed, but they should be somewhere within snatching distance), and if he'd been weaponless, he could kill a man -- even a Familiar -- with his bare hands, but still he was lying there naked and docile, waiting, hoping, for White to awaken and fuck him again.

Speaking of White...
"You're a filthy waste of space, and as soon as this is over, I'll kill your ass and dump your remains in a vat of acid."

...definitely back online. And getting laid obviously didn't help his disposition any.

"Aw, baby, you say the sweetest things," Alec chirped. He could fret all he wanted in private, but damned if he'd show any weakness of the non-sexual kind in front of White. "I didn't know you cared." A thought occurred to him. He dropped the saccharine smile and scowled. "Why the fuck did you come back anyway?"

Probably had remembered about not searching his prisoner, Alec guessed. Or decided a bullet was more fun after all. Who knew? White was a first-rate asshole, could be he'd just wanted to watch Alec die.

White lifted his head the better to scorch Alec with a glare that was positively poisonous. "None of your business, 494." He stared some more, dismay softening his hard gaze. "Shit. It's not over."

It wasn't. It definitely wasn't. The hunger still tore at Alec, not sated by the much too brief fuck, held in check only by the reassuring feeling of White's body pressed against his. White was warm; not quite as hot as a transgenic, but definitely warmer than the average human. Shorter than Alec, but compact, a powerful bundle of dense muscle and soft skin that fit against the sculpted X5 like they'd been created for each other. Dangerous, dangerous thoughts there.

"What," Alec sniped, though his heart wasn't in it, "you thought I'd be some one-fuck wonder?"

He didn't want to admit it even to himself, but he was scared. White had returned for him; not to kill him or mock him but because he couldn't stay away. It must've been some terrible force that had driven the man back to Alec; Ames White was a murdering, supremacist asshole, but he was also one tough son-of-a-bitch, and stubborn as a terrier. For him to have caved like that...

It made Alec wonder, had he been awake, would he have felt the same? Would he have come crawling back like a dog, hating it but unable to help himself? He was afraid he might have, because whatever this was, whatever they'd done to him at Manticore, it affected them both in equal measure. They were so screwed. Or Alec was, anyway, seeing as all he wanted even now was for White to take him again. He wanted those hands to hold him down, force him into submission so he wouldn't have to admit how he yearned to be mounted and pounded through the mattress. It made him hard and made him nauseous at the same time. This was worse than rape, because not only was his hard won independence stripped from him, his out-of-control body made him enjoy every second of the violation.

He was almost ready to beg for it like a slut already, was going crazy from the emptiness inside and an unfamiliar, blood-heavy pulse somewhere in him that demanded attention. It was like a constant woody he couldn't touch, a tingling rawness that had lain dormant until the insistent pressure of White's cock had woken it. He shifted uncomfortably and gasped at the soreness in his ass and the almost overwhelming compulsion to ease it by impaling himself once more.

"Stop," White ground out, as if he'd read Alec's mind. "We're not doing that again."

"Yeah, I'm with you on that one," Alec agreed, acutely aware of the tempting, wet kiss of White's erection against the jut of his hipbone.

They lay rigidly for a few minutes, staring off into space as they fought the pull of artificial attraction. Sweat pooled between them and nearly drove Alec out of his mind when it began to trickle down his sides. His fingers were clenched around fistfuls of quilt to keep from reaching for his enemy. Both
their breath came in shallow pants.

It was Alec who gave up first. "You know, it'd help if you got off me," he bit out.

White's jaw worked as if the man had swallowed something foul, but he didn't budge. "No."

Fine. Okay. Alec was just gonna push him away then and roll out of bed on the other side, put some distance between them. Distance was good, his head said. His body didn't agree, but his body was kind of stupid that way. White's hand was stroking his chest and Alec's traitorous heart leapt in a futile effort to reach it. He had to move, get away before–

"Three days," White said, apropos nothing.

Alec's resolve suffered another critical blow when one of the man's knees – oh yes, thank you, thank you – gently pressed against Alec's and nudged them apart. "Th- three days?" he asked, distracted and almost choking with arousal.

"I managed to stay away for three days," White clarified, and bowed his head to lick and suck one of Alec's nipples. "Couldn't sleep," he whispered against the stiff little teat. "Couldn't eat." He nosed the dusky aureole and Alec whimpered, cock dripping, legs spreading helplessly. "Couldn't concentrate," White, the fucking sadist, continued in a throaty murmur. He kissed his way to the other nipple, tongued it thoroughly while swinging one arm over the edge of the bed and rummaging around somewhere out of sight. "Thought about you all the time. About what I wanted to do to you... with you."

He grunted in satisfaction when he found whatever he'd been hunting and settled down again. "Couldn't get your scent off my skin." The pop of a plastic cap was followed closely by– "Burned my clothes, washed my hair, but that smell... It was everywhere." –Fingers. Oh. Fingers where it counted, slick and persistent, so careful Alec had to close his eyes, because it could've been different, White could've humiliated him beyond belief, but he didn't. The gentleness made it near unbearable. "You haunted me," White moaned, mouth hovering over the base of Alec's throat. "Three days. It got worse every hour, knowing you were out there, ready for me, waiting..."

A reedy whimper slipped past Alec's lips. He undulated slowly as White worked him open, teased him when he should've hurt him, licked his vulnerable skin when he should've bitten it bloody. "Could've just shot you from a distance," White moaned, his breath cool against the wetness his tongue had left, "should've just ended it, but--" Teeth, finally, but still too tender, teasing instead of punishing. "Don't want it to end. Feels so good." Too good. "It's not real," White's voice told him, and he repeated it feverishly, "No, it's not, it's not," and yet he sobbed when he was breached again – good, so good, long and thick and curved just right – and rocked with lingering, unhurried strokes.

"Not gonna stop." Deeper, inch by inch, infinitely more intimate than the first time, and so much more devastating. "I'll keep you here, and you will stay. Right here, in this house. My house. My bed." White pulled back a little, then slammed in all the way in one go. Alec's eyes snapped open and White captured his shocked gaze and held it. "For however long this'll last, you're mine, do you understand? You'll wait for me, and I'll have you whenever I want, because this shit is your fault. I'll make you pay for it, I swear."

Almost there, almost where Alec wanted him most, required him most, but while he did give Alec's prostate a workout as he picked up the pace until he was pistoning in and out of Alec's hole, he never quite nailed that mysterious spot that really howled for it. Alec was no stranger to torture, but this was worse than anything he'd experienced to date. Not pain, not fear, only pleasure so great it threatened to fry his mind and the promise of release just out of reach.
Someone was pleading, a husky, mindless litany of need, and one single tear spilled over when Alec realized it was him, not White, who'd broken at last.

"Mine," White declared harshly. "Say it, damn it!"

Alec writhed, pierced to the core, shattered, so close to the peak and so far from it at the same time. It hurt. So of course he bared his teeth and fought back the only way he presently could. "F- f- fuck you," he stammered, and crossed his ankles behind White's buttocks to pull him in deeper. "F- fuckin' pussy, c- can't even m- m- make me come."

"Bet I can make you scream though," White grinned, and latched on to Alec's nipple again.

Alec didn't scream. He didn't come either.

Not that time, and not any time after that, for almost two weeks.

Chapter Four:
Satisfaction

They say the road to hell is paved with good intentions. In case of Ames White, it was paved with shoddy planning. It had seemed eminently doable at first. Keep Alec at the house, locked away and safely out of the game, available at all times. Go there when the need became too great, find relief in the man's exquisite body, then get back to work eradicating the rest of the freaks.

The trouble, he learned, started with his own diction.

"Alec." "Man." "Exquisite."

That was where the lines began to blur. Because you couldn't just fit somebody with a collar and only use them for sex, not even if "they" happened to be a hormone-driven X5. Alec needed food, water, bare necessities like soap, towels, a toothbrush... lube... lots and lots of lube... Communication was inescapable, if admittedly difficult.

Alec, naturally, didn't take Ames' word for anything. The moment he was well again, he split, and he stayed gone for fifty-four hours before his need for Ames proved stronger than his resolve. Ames would've liked to mock him, but not only had he – technically – caved first, he'd been out looking for Alec and met him halfway. It took the joy out of the jeering. They wordlessly agreed never to mention either of their failed breaks for freedom again.

Things didn't get much easier with Alec staying put. The transgenic got bored easily and he was curious as a damn cat, so Ames was forced to supply him with reading material or suffer the consequences. Their preferences weren't exactly compatible; Alec considered the books mind-numbing and promptly went back to making his own entertainment. Ames learned quickly that the X5, when left to his own devices, had a tendency to get into all sorts of mischief, so eventually he caved and procured a TV set. These were the first compromises of many.

From the moment he reluctantly had to acknowledge they were indeed stuck with each other, Alec made it crystal clear that while he might currently be a slave to his sex drive and inexplicably attracted to Ames, he absolutely was not Ames' prisoner, servant, blow-up doll, or pet. He talked back, he talked first, he spent every waking minute he wasn't busy getting fucked challenging Ames' authority, his values, opinions, lifestyle, taste in cars, sports teams, and guns– In short, he drove
Ames batshit. On the plus side, he knew the best take-out places in town, was never ever boring, and had a mind sharp as a fucking bear trap.

They came close to trading blows several times, but whenever that started, Alec's – or maybe Ames' – pheromone levels would shoot through the roof and they'd end up fucking like animals. Ames hadn't known it was physically possible even for his kind to get hard so often and stay erect for so long without heavy duty chemicals involved. Then again, there probably were chemicals involved, or at least genetic tampering of the worst kind. Something had been done to 494 at Manticore to cause this. He clearly didn't have the faintest idea what or why; of course, the man had been brainwashed so often his memory had more holes and sloppy patches than a fucking fishnet.

If Ames wanted to know what was going on, he'd have to find out by himself, which was easier said than done. Manticore had kept meticulous files on every one of their subjects and most of those records still existed, but it was almost impossible to get one's hands on them without raising red flags left and right. Ames had to use all the dirty skills he'd learned in his years undercover, track down the backdoors and sneak into the system using go-betweens and drones so as not to leave any traces of his snooping. It was a delicate process, and it took time.

Meanwhile, Ames and his not-prisoner spent nearly all of their time together screwing each other into unconsciousness. Ames hated to admit it, but the transgenic body fascinated him. He spent hours mapping the graceful valleys and slopes of Alec's physique, intrigued by the flawless skin, unmarred but for the marks Ames' teeth and fingers had left most recently. Alec was almost hairless from the neck down. No need to shave his genitals; Manticore design had left him completely exposed there, soft, vulnerable, and very, very touchable. Ames fingers were drawn to the smooth groin constantly, to rub and stroke, to wind Alec up and make him squirm and pant and beg.

Intellectually, Ames knew he should be repulsed. Nature hadn't conceived this; but man-made or not, the spirit that blazed inside was extraordinary in its own right. The man who looked at Ames from behind genetically engineered eyes wasn't near as perfect as the vessel that carried him. He'd undergone training and conditioning as brutal as any Familiar's, had been tested and used, taken apart and put together again until his soul was scarred and battered like an old alley cat, yet he'd never broken. His swagger and sass might be aggravating, but they were born from a core of strength and defiance that just wouldn't quit. Ames couldn't help but admire that. Maybe it was a weakness in his own design, a softness rooted in his too-brief foray into family life. He'd cared for his late wife; he loved his missing son, fiercely and without compromise.

Somehow, Alec had slipped in through this crack in Ames' armor and had started to erode Ames' conviction from within. Hard to remember "Alec" wasn't real, was nothing but a creature cooked up in a lab, a chimera with a smile like the sun and the genetic purity of a bowl of potluck. Something to be captured, studied, and killed. He'd watch the man go through a bag of pork rinds with his mouth open just to gross out Ames, and the little bit of sanity he still possessed would yell at him he might as well be observing an alligator, because 494 had the same predator's patience, the same inbuilt killer instinct, might be smarter and prettier but was an animal all the same... and simultaneously, the idiot madman awakened by spending way too much time in the transgenic's company only wanted to reach out, slap Alec on the back of his too-gorgeous head, and drag him off to bed.

Two weeks of great sex and reluctant conversation, of wanting and hating and hiding, and Ames was so messed up inside he could've screamed. He was a terror at work, snappish even when he talked to his Elders, and Lord have mercy on any transgenic unlucky enough to cross his path, because Ames itched to kill himself a freak.

And the worst part of it was that the reason for his frustration wasn't primarily that he couldn't get out of X5-494's thrall, but rather what should've been a minor detail of his fucked-up sex life:
He still couldn't seem to satisfy Alec.

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It was Otto who unwittingly got them on the right track. Ames' agents had taken the brunt of his bad temper to such a degree they twitched nervously whenever he walked into the room. They shuffled around with their heads down and restricted conversations about anything even remotely personal to piss- and lunch breaks. Ames would've been grateful for the reduction of inane chatter, but "grateful" – like "mercy" – wasn't in his vocabulary at present.

Thus he was disgruntled to find himself overhearing a restroom conversation between Otto and one of the younger agents while taking care of business in one of the stalls. Apparently, Moron #1 had trouble with his girlfriend and Otto, who would be Moron #2, felt compelled to give advice. Advice. Otto. As far as Ames knew, Otto hadn't had a private life since 2017, which, incidentally, had been when he'd first started working with Ames. Go figure.

Ames closed his fly and was about to burst out of the cubicle and cause some trauma when he happened to catch the magic words, "–and I just can't make her come!", uttered in a tone of nearly-desperation that echoed uncomfortably in his mind.

Okay. Maybe he'd wait for a minute longer, see what pearl of wisdom Otto had to offer about that humiliating confession.

Otto, it seemed, had experience with performance troubles, because he didn't seemed fazed at all. It made Ames want to kick him in the balls just to check if he still had any. "Have you tried talking with her?" Otto asked, provoking instant abject horror in both Ames and Moron #1.

"Hell, no!" Moron #1 exclaimed, then added in a mortified whisper, "Are you nuts? I can't just– I– she–"

"She's a chick," Otto said, as if that made sense. "She'll only think you're sensitive." It wasn't a statement likely to reassure Ames and Moron #1 in their dented masculinity. Otto must've gotten the message from Moron #1's face, because he added, "Girls like that, you moron."

Heh. Sounded like Ames was starting to rub off on Otto.

"Yeah, but– Shit, man. That's– How'd you even start a conversation like that?" Good question. Ames was pretty sure 494 would laugh in his face if he tried.

"What d'you want, a fucking script?" Otto snarked, which helped him rise in Ames' esteem while at the same time losing him points for refusing to give foolproof step-by-step instructions. "She's your girlfriend."

"Yeah, but–" Ames made a mental note to send Moron #1 to a rhetoric seminar first chance he got. That would, with any luck, also improve the quality of mission reports. "–but, I mean, how did you do it?"

Otto huffed in exasperation. "Made her dinner, sat her down, said I noticed she didn't seem to enjoy herself all that much–" Oh, subtle! "–and then kept asking until she was done giving me the runaround. Turned out she really didn't like having her boobs squeezed."

She– what?

"That was it?" Moron #1 asked, incredulous yet nauseatingly hopeful.

"Yep," Otto confirmed, sounding smug. "That was it. Just gotta stay on the ball, she'll tell you... and
all you gotta do is go from there."

Well, that sounded nice and painful, but still better than anything Ames had come up with on his own. To show his appreciation, he flushed the toilet to give the two morons a head start.

Never one to delay unpleasant conversations, Ames spent the drive back home that morning rehearsing, though it wasn't easy to come up with a strategy with his dick pressing against his zipper and every cell of his body crying out for its favorite playmate. He'd been gone for too long; 452, the bitch, had decided to give a press conference and successfully delayed Ames' departure. Thirteen days of fairly regular contact with Alec had dulled the memory of how agonizing it was to be separated for more than a few hours. Halfway through the conference, Ames had been sweating and restless, his stomach in knots and his pulse hammering – he'd felt like a fucking drug addict in need of a fix.

By the end of the Q and A, he'd been a hair's breadth from grabbing a sniper rifle and shooting the cunt just to shut her up. Lucky for her, the wrap-up didn't take long and Ames had more important things on his mind than waylaying his haughty little nemesis. He was out of there and on his way to Alec before the gates of Terminal City had crashed shut behind her. Let her have her five minutes in the spotlight; Ames would get her in the end and, better yet, he already had her former breeding partner. He sneered at the thought of 452 touching what was his. It was a sore spot, one that he couldn't resist poking whenever the thought sneaked up on him. Had Alec pressed against her like he'd die without the feel of her skin? Had he whimpered for her, trembled for her... come for her?

He'd come for Ames this time. Ames didn't care what it took, he was going to see Alec climax even if he had to *lick* him into ecstasy. They were going to discuss this – or rather, Ames would interrogate and Alec would answer, or else – and then they were going to do whatever was necessary and Alec would finally prove Ames' skill as a lover by giving it up.

He took the corner into the driveway a bit too fast, parked half on the scruffy lawn, and took the four stairs up to the porch in one easy leap. The door wasn't locked; it never was. Alec wasn't gonna run again as long as his need for Ames flared with every heartbeat, and whoever was unfortunate enough to break into a transgenic's lair deserved what they got.

Alec was in the bedroom, dressed only in soft gray sweatpants. He pretended not to be waiting, but the nervous jiggle of his knee betrayed him. Also, not even super-soldiers made a habit out of reading their magazines upside down. However, the smirk that wanted to pull at Ames' lips died when Alec looked up, pupils blown, lips parted, his entire body turning towards Ames in unconscious welcome. Ames swallowed. Usually, this would be the part where he tore off his tie, pounced, and initiated the first round of mind-blowing sex. He almost did, because... *damn*. His body had definitely picked the most stunning freak of the lot. Alec looked good enough to eat. It took a concentrated effort not to take what he desired, but the mental image of Alec's misery and mute disappointment every time Ames spilled into him without getting him off accomplished what buckets of ice water couldn't have done: it stopped him cold.

"What?" Alec asked, irritated. "No 'Hi, Honey, I'm home, let's fuck'?"

"Oh, we're gonna fuck." That much, Ames could promise. Not that they had a choice. "We're just gonna play it a bit different today." He grabbed the chair from its corner, turned it around so he could straddle it comfortably, then crossed his arms on the backrest mostly because he needed some kind of barrier between himself and Alec or all bets were off.

"Oh, for the love of--" Alec sighed. He rolled his eyes, tossed the magazine on the floor – fucking slob – and leaned back against the headboard, arms and ankles crossed defensively. "You gonna get
kinky on me?"

Ames snorted. "Doing it with your mortal enemy not kinky enough for you?"

Alec pulled a face and shrugged, conceding the point.

Content that he'd won the first round, Ames decided to jump right into it. Maybe he could blindside the mouthy SOB. "You haven't come once, since that first time. I want to know why."

Green eyes widened almost comically, then Alec pulled up his knees and the shutters slammed down even as the expected sneer went up. "Your technique sucks."

Now, generally, Ames' temper was somewhat on the explosive side. He could be cool and composed whenever the situation demanded it, but Alec had always had a gift for getting under his skin, make him act and talk rashly. He had to clamp down hard on the scathing retort coiled at the tip of his tongue, but he did keep it inside. "So what do I have to change to make you come?"

They stared at each other across the room. Alec wanted to crack a joke, spit out another insult, tell Ames to fuck off... it was all there in his expressive gaze. Ames kept his face neutral, his body language passive and non-threatening. No matter what, they were in this together. Chances were, the sooner they figured this bitch out the sooner they could go separate ways.

Ames was willing to do whatever it took, and he must've communicated his determination, or maybe Alec just reacted instinctively to the no-nonsense approach, because after a long minute the X5 bowed his head and told his knees, "There's this... spot... inside. Drives me crazy. You... uh... Sometimes you skim over it and it feels--" He rubbed the back of his neck, blushed. "--feels better than anything," he admitted quietly.

Spot inside? What the hell? Couldn't be the prostate, Ames had been nailing that religiously every time they did it. There shouldn't have been anything else, but since nothing about this was even remotely normal, he wasn't going to rule out the possibility that Alec's body had been altered more drastically than it appeared.

Only one way to find out.

"Let me check," he ordered. He stood up, walked around the chair, and made a detour to the dresser to grab the lube.

When he looked back at Alec, the other man was staring at him like a deer in the headlights. "What?"

"Get naked," Ames directed patiently, "kneel on the bed, and spread your legs." He tried to figure out the weird look on Alec's face, and when he did, he raised an eyebrow in sudden amusement. "Don't tell me you're getting shy now. I spent the past two weeks fucking your ass in every conceivable position; it's a little late for modesty."

"That was sex," Alec snapped, every muscle tense. He was poised on the edge of the bed like he wasn't sure whether to obey, run, or fight. "I don't like being examined like a-- a--"

"Thing?" Ames suggested, and for the first time felt no satisfaction when Alec flinched like he'd been slapped. "Just do it," he said brusquely. "This whole mess is your fault; I'm just trying to finish what you started."

He expected a heated reminder that Alec was as much of a victim here as he was, but the X5 merely stared at him bleakly for a second, then turned his head, broad shoulders slumping in what looked
uncomfortably like defeat.

Wordlessly, Alec got off the bed and dropped his pants. He climbed back on, went down on hands and knees with his thighs spread wide, and waited. It was a victory of sorts, but for some reason it tasted bitter.

Struggling with the ridiculous urge to... well, not apologize, obviously, but... take the bite out of his comment, maybe... Ames stripped naked as well. He opened his mouth to say something, but the words wouldn't come, so he pressed his lips together grimly and set to work.

Alec's ass should've been familiar territory by now. He'd certainly penetrated the tiny opening often enough to develop a slight obsession with the way it looked when stretched around his cock, the way it gripped him so perfectly; a clenching, clinging ring of silky-firm heat. The thing was, with all the fucking going on, he'd never really taken the time to explore. Theirs had been more of a "one finger, two fingers, three fingers, cock" kind of relationship so far.

It was strange to kneel on the bed behind Alec and work him open purely for reconnaissance purposes. His dick complained; it wanted in there, pronto. Counting on a lifetime of discipline to keep his raging libido in check, Ames squeezed his eyes shut and felt around carefully, fingers slip-sliding gently along the soft walls inside.

"Where?" he asked, voice low and raspy, because, fuck, this felt a lot more personal than simply boning the irresistible bastard.

"Down," Alec told him, somewhere between toneless and reluctantly aroused. "Towards belly, not back." And, being Alec, just couldn't resist adding a muttered, "Fuckwit."

Ames ignored the slur and the stab of something like relief at the spark of spirit and adjusted his grip, excruciatingly aware of the impatient flexing around his knuckles and the answering swell of his eager erection. Wait. Slow. Sacrifice instant gratification for the possibility of something more rewarding, battle instinct to reach true perfection. Sweat formed on his skin. He wanted to press his lips to the small of Alec's back and lick him, see if he, too, was damp with stress and desire. Find out whether he tasted as good there as everywhere else.

They were both panting and shaking by the time Ames rubbed the pad of his index finger across what felt like a long fold of tissue, or a thin scar. Alec jerked and whimpered, knees sliding further apart obscenely. Bingo.

"This it?" Ames demanded, needing verbal confirmation, because he was not going to fuck this up, damn it.

His only answer was a strangled, "Ugh", and a languid roll of Alec's pelvis. Another, more confident stroke and Alec quivered and bowed his head with a grunt.

The sight proved too much for Ames' frayed self-control: he'd pulled out his fingers and pressed in his cock before the remains of his rational mind could stop him. Screw this. If that wasn't the spot after all, they'd try again the next time.

He had to practically climb on top of Alec to get the right angle, but once he did, it was well worth the awkwardness. The tip of his cock slid along the slight unevenness within Alec, which felt fucking fantastic, and Alec keened. "Yes, yes, yes, more, damn it, stop teasing, you fucking--"

Ames growled and shoved down hard, because if that was what Alec wanted, that was what Alec would get. He almost had a heart attack when something gave under the pressure, opened for him,
his cock sliding into tight, spongy wetness. He yelled and pulled back out in panic, certain he'd hurt Alec, had torn the delicate skin of his partner's rectum.

Fuck. *Fuck!* How did you perform first aid for an injury like that? Where was the nearest hospital? He'd have to be careful lifting Alec, to not aggravate what must be a bad wound, even for a transgenic. *Transgenic. Damn it.* Couldn't drive him to a hospital, they'd alert the cops. He'd have to call Miriam. Maybe she could--

"—keep going."

Everything stopped. Ames stared down at Alec, who'd twisted so he could peer back over his shoulder, flushed with pleasure and so needy Ames' heart stuttered. He couldn't look away, couldn't move, transfixed by the rawness of Alec's gaze.

"Please." Alec had never sounded quite like this before, as if it felt so good he could hardly remember how to form words. "Doesn't hurt. 'm not—" He shifted, tried to get Ames back where he'd been. "Aahhh..." It was a sigh riding on a sob, the head of Ames' cock prodding the ridge again. "That's it. Don't stop. 's okay. 's okay, promise, just—" He rocked his hips seductively. "—in, put it in, please. *Please.*"

He shouldn't. He knew he shouldn't, not without checking first, but Alec was putting off scent again, was pleading and swaying, and it was too much. His dick hadn't softened at all, was ready and willing, hard as an iron rod, and it found the spot with unerring surety as if there was a homing beacon in there and he had finally honed in on it.

It was a tight fit, though breaching the entrance was easier the second time around. Snug, loose, snug; hot wet smooth home home home—

Ames lost it. He sunk his teeth into Alec's skin like a wolf holding down its mate, half crouched over the taller body so he could get *just that* angle, and forgot himself in the primitive rhythm of their coupling. All he knew was heat and soggy wetness, tingling, rising, pulsing pleasure. He forced Alec down, prized him open, and took him over and over again, until Alec's thighs were trembling, barely able to hold them both up, and the covers were drenched in sweat and slick.

Alec for his part offered no resistance to the rough handling. He bucked and twitched, buried his face in the pillow to stifle his screams, and he shredded the bedspread, but he didn't lift a finger against Ames even when Ames bruised and blooded him in his frenzy. He was beautiful, breathtaking, and Ames would've killed anybody who tried to separate them in these moments, including the High Priestess. Alec was *his* and he affirmed it with every helpless jerk of his trembling form, every greedy clutch of his passage around Ames' cock, every sobbing breath and thudding beat of his straining heart.

*Mine,* Ames thought savagely, unable to say it, too far gone to speak, so he signed his name on Alec's body with the claw-like grip of his fingers, the blunt scrape of teeth, the stab and grind of his dick. *Mine.*

He barely noticed when Alec convulsed under him, didn't catch on to the fact that the man was coming until Alec put his fist through the headboard with a yowl and collapsed in an ungainly sprawl, nearly unseating Ames in the process.

The realization that he must've just fucked Alec into the mother of all orgasms gave Ames the kick he needed to tip over as well. His hips stuttered forward to press as tightly against Alec's ass as possible; he humped once, twice, and then emptied himself into the only person who'd ever made him betray everything he knew.
Mine, he thought again, the only shred of coherency left. Mine. And then, just before he passed out as well, faintly, unwillingly, hurtfully true: Yours.

Chapter Five:
Domestic Bliss

The siege was officially over, a shaky truce negotiated between the freaks of Terminal City and the ordinaris of Seattle. After sixty-two days of diplomatic meetings and nationwide debates, the blockade was lifted, snipers of both sides recalled, and Max Guevara introduced her staff to open the first rounds of deal making and public relations.

It was all over the news, people spouting their opinions at the camera, special bulletins, interviews with Detective Clemente, who'd acted as a mediator between X5-452 and the mayor, snatches of Max giving statements, proud and beautiful, so telegenic she didn't need makeup or good lighting to make her look like an advertisement for genetic engineering.

Alec watched it all from the couch of what he still shied away from calling his new home. He felt sore and achy all over, which probably was to be expected after a month of marathon fuck sessions with a man who was definitely a match for him in the strength and stamina department. Since White had figured out how to pull Alec's trigger, he'd done his damnedest to bang Alec to death. Alec spent most of the time he was alone recuperating from when he wasn't; not because White hurt him, but because he now came so often and so hard his muscles turned to Jell-O and his brains to mush.

He didn't know how much more he could take, was too exhausted to try and fight anymore, and he hated to admit that the only reason his mind hadn't fractured into a billion jagged shards yet was that White treated him with such uncharacteristic care. He'd stopped counting how often he woke cleaned up and resting in a freshly made bed, in his enemy's arms, and soothed by the already much too familiar smell of sated Ames. It kept him sane, because for once it was a kindness that came without strings attached and without the sting of ridicule.

He missed his family desperately: Joshua's steady strength and unbending loyalty, the way he always had a friendly word or touch when Alec needed it most; Mole's trust, given without hesitation despite the man's hard-earned cynicism; Dalton's adorable mix of camaraderie and hero-worship. Even Max and Logan, because sharp-tongued as she could be, Max had given him his freedom, saved his life, and become his leader, and a tentative friendship built on mutual respect had grown between him and Logan.

Alec would've never thought it possible, but he was lonely. He'd spent all his life living in extremely close quarters with no privacy whatsoever and as exhilarating as the concept of personal space had been in the beginning, he'd found himself drifting back into the company of other transgenics within a few weeks of his liberation. He'd gotten used to having people around who cared about him, knew most of his flaws and quirks and still called him friend.

More than once he'd thought about calling them, if only to let them know he was still alive, but as days turned into weeks his initial reluctance to ask for help grew into an even deeper apprehension. It wasn't only that he'd gone into heat, which was humiliating enough but also quite indisputably something he couldn't control. It was that he wasn't merely tomcatting around; he was fucking Ames White. He should have fought the attraction harder, should have snapped out of it and killed White if he wasn't able to run, but he hadn't.

While his brothers and sisters had made their desperate stand in Terminal City, cut off from all major
supply routes, outgunned and outnumbered, Alec had surrendered without firing a single shot. Worse, he’d whored himself to the son-of-a-bitch whose life mission was to wipe out Alec’s people, the ice-cold killer who’d murdered sweet, blind Annie. Max would despise him for the former, Joshua never forgive him for the latter, and the others wouldn’t want anything to do with him.

He couldn’t face them. He could hardly stand to see his own face in the mirror. Better they think him dead or deserted.

But he still missed them.

This was why he was currently sitting on the couch with his knees drawn up, wrapped in a quilt that smelled of Ames... White. It smelled of White. He'd eaten half a sandwich earlier, but it sat in his belly like lead as he watched a live news report and tried to catch glimpses of familiar faces behind the chain-link fence. He thought he saw Joshua at one point, but he was there and gone, nothing but a tall, long-haired shadow crossing from one building to another.

The purring rumble of a powerful engine made him sit up too quickly; the world spun until he shook his head impatiently. He knew the sound, could’ve picked out White's BMW from a fleet of cars by now, and he hated the way his pulse sped up expectantly. At least his dick behaved itself for a change – guilt was an extremely effective turn-off – though he allowed himself a moment to close his eyes and savor the scent. He frowned. The smell was different somehow, less peppery and more chocolaty, comforting rather than arousing. Before he could analyze it in detail, the front door swung open and Ames' fast, confident footsteps headed straight towards him.

Alec turned up the volume for the sole purpose of rubbing it in that the freaks had won another round, but it was habit, not real spite, that made him do it. He was losing ground fast, his emotional defenses eroding with every unintentional shred of regard offered and accepted. Alec tried to counteract. There was one beer left in the fridge and Ames would want it after a long, taxing day of playing at least three different factions against each other and possibly working towards world domination. Alec didn't particularly want anything to drink. He did want to nettle Ames... White, damn it... so he got up and took a step towards the kitchen just as the other man entered the living room.

The dizziness returned with a vengeance. One second he was fine and vertical, the next the ground was rushing up to meet him. Hands caught him before his head could connect with the hardwood floor. He wasted precious time being thankful for superhumanly fast reflexes, then his stomach joined the rebellion and he threw up peanut butter and jam all over Ames' impeccably polished shoes.

Thus ended the introductory part of their relationship.

The alleged hardiness of transgenics, Alec decided eight days into the worst case of stomach flu imaginable, was a myth, possibly even a bad joke. Let those stupid test-tube suckers believe they’re indestructible, impervious to every poison and bug known to man. It'll be hilarious when the first traveling virus lands them flat on their faces. Alec wasn't laughing. Surprisingly, neither was Ames White.

White should have gotten a kick out of seeing Alec brought this low; with those fucking pheromones gone or smothered by a much less attractive sick-smell, the man had no reason to play nice anymore. All things considered though, the churlish bastard kept his gloating to a minimum. He did bitch about his shoes – and, later, about his pants, his suit jacket, and his quilt – but more often than not he didn’t say a word, just shoved a plastic bucket under Alec’s nose or dragged him to the bathroom so Alec could suffer in peace while Ames cleaned up the mess. He forced Pepto-Bismol and chamomile tea
down Alec's throat, made him godawful canned chicken soup, and entertained the ailing transgenic with long diatribes about Manticore's ineptitude when it came to basic immunization.

That was, until White caught on to the fact that Alec's body temperature was slowly but steadily rising to levels far above what was normal for X5s. He got quiet then, and intense. When cold compresses and aspirin didn't work, he insisted on checking Alec over again. Alec secretly thought he was being a bossy know-it-all, but the cool fingers felt good on his overheated, sensitive skin and it gave White something to do, so Alec didn't argue. His generosity only seemed to worry Ames more.

They both flinched when those questing fingers pressed against Alec's flat, unyielding belly and made him cry out pitifully.

"If this is a common stomach bug," White barked, pointing accusingly at the stomach in question, "then I'm a transgenic."

"Well, what do you think it is?" Alec grumped back, voice brittle with the fresh memory of pain. He settled back down against the pillows carefully, refusing to admit he was every bit as freaked out as Ames. He dredged up a smirk, partly to distract from his discomfort, partly because no matter how bad he felt, his mouth was still in perfect working order. "Hey, maybe you fucked me pregnant."

"Very funny." Impassive voice, scowl firmly in place; White was Not Amused. "I'm thinking appendix, actually." His gaze flitted down, then back to Alec's middle. "Or some kind of infection, maybe."

"Infection?" Alec frowned, confused. He lifted himself up on his elbows to stare down at his belly. It looked normal to him, though it felt tender and hot. "Nah. How the hell would it have gotten infected anyway, isn't like I got hurt recently."

Alec's eyes widened. "No way," he yelped. "Since when does the 'elite of mankind' spread STDs?"

"We don't," Ames snapped, going from embarrassed to offended in 0.2 seconds. "Infections are usually caused by contaminants or foreign substances the immune system's trying to remove or burn out, right?"

"I think you're talking about inflammation," Alec pointed out uncertainly; Manticore first aid training hadn't gone into that much technical detail seeing as Alec had been designed to cause damage rather than heal it. "So what?"

"Filled you with plenty of 'foreign substance', didn't I?" Ames said grimly.

"Speaking of faulty..." Alec interrupted, faintly, as the mental image of decaying sperm caught up with him, "Bucket. Quick."
Had to be a bug.

One of the most disconcerting experiences of Alec's life – and he had plenty to choose from – had been the stint in psi ops that had followed the Berrisford debacle. It wasn't so much the general shittiness of being at the complete mercy of people who hadn't yet decided whether to keep you or put you down like a useless dog – he was used to that. No, what had spooked Alec like nothing else had been the way he kept losing time.

It hadn't happened during the first go around, after Max and her merry band of egoists had abandoned ship and left their brethren to suffer the consequences. Either the behavior therapists hadn't been able to use the same methods then or they hadn't deemed it necessary with a bunch of confused but obedient kids. The post-exodus check-up hadn't been a walk in the park, but it hadn't come close to the final run.

It wasn't merely disorienting to lose time. For Alec, it was absolutely terrifying. Between the moment you closed your eyes and the one when you blinked them open again, every single bit of control was stripped from you. As long as you were awake, you had at least the illusion of supervision. You were there. You knew what was happening to you, even if you couldn't stop it. If you were gone for an hour or two, you could be relatively certain nothing much had happened. In psi ops, they took whole days from Alec, all in all about two weeks he'd never recovered.

He wasn't in acute pain this time, wasn't strapped down, or getting brainwashed – well, if you didn't count White's unnatural fondness for baseball statistics and golf handicaps – but... Alec would go to sleep one rainy afternoon and wake up on a sunny morning two or three days later. He took a bath and dozed off and suddenly he was back in the bedroom, cozy and dry, no idea how he'd gotten from A to B, but strongly suspecting he'd been carried to bed like a child by his unlikely guardian.

Sometimes, he wouldn't go to sleep, he'd just, for no discernible reason, be too exhausted to move. When that happened, which was far too frequently for Alec's peace of mind, he'd lay there with his eyes half open, too tired to talk, too numb to think.Disconnected. He couldn't quite decide if that was better or worse than being completely dead to the world.

He remembered almost dying. He'd been so hot, so thirsty; his sole anchors the coolness of Ames' touch and White's sharp voice yelling at him. He dimly recalled seizing so badly he smashed one of the bedside tables, and White telling him in great detail what a pain in the ass he was as he held Alec down so he wouldn't hurt himself. The fever had broken eventually, but it hadn't disappeared entirely; weeks later, Alec's blood still simmered at a low heat that left him dazed, headachy, and sluggish.

White had stopped giving him medicine when it became clear it didn't have any effect, but he was there, not always, but often – probably more often than was wise, but Alec didn't bring it up, too grateful for the company, and Ames never said anything either.

When Alec wasn't sleeping or weighed down by unexplainable lethargy, he was hungry, always hungry. He ate everything Ames brought him, ravenous. They started with broth, soup, toast; when Alec didn't throw up, they slowly upgraded to vegetables (of the take-out variety) and noodles, until Ames gave up and simply grabbed whatever was most convenient on the way back, be it pizza, fast food, or pie.

Occasionally, in the shower or after, Ames would run his hands over the lean lines of Alec's perfect body and frown, puzzled. Alec could only shrug helplessly. He didn't know why he wasn't gaining weight like he should, though the rest of it could be explained away by excellent design. The cool thing about being "better" was really being better: Manticore's X-series didn't need constant exercise
to stay fit and in fighting condition. The daily torturous training regime they'd undergone at the compound had been one third mission prep and testing, and two thirds keeping them occupied.

"Maybe I'm just making up for sleeping so much," he joked feebly.

"Maybe," White allowed, quietly. "Or maybe you got a tapeworm." Or worse remained unsaid.

Alec didn't reply, but he put down the burrito he'd been eating and crawled back under the covers like a sick animal, fatigue already gnawing at his bones again. After a long moment, Ames lifted the blanket and got into bed with him, his forehead resting against Alec's back, between his shoulder blades.

"Do you think they remember me?" Alec murmured, already half asleep. No need to explain who he was talking about, but he was crossing a line he'd never touched before and they were both aware of it. Unspoken Rule Number One: real life stayed out in the world, beyond the walls of their den. Exceptions were made, but never ever in bed. It was the only way they could do what they did and stay sane. Alec wouldn't have let the question slip out if he hadn't been so tired and scared, and he fully expected White to either shoot him down with a caustic remark or get up and leave.

Instead, a strong arm snaked across his waist and pulled him closer. "Yes," Ames whispered, so softly Alec's fading consciousness barely caught the words. "You're hard to forget."

"D'you think they're goin' t' forget me anyway?" Alec couldn't keep his eyes open anymore, but he clung to awareness by the skin of his teeth until Ames finally breathed his answer into the dusk.

"I hope so."

They came for Alec three weeks later, while White was gone – Max, Joshua, Dalton, and Mole – and they took him back to Terminal City where he belonged.

Alec slept through the entire rescue.

He never let go of Ames' quilt.

Chapter Six:
Wayward Son

Max wasn't going to admit it out loud, but she'd missed Alec.

When Dalton had come home all those months before, carrying Belle's dead body over one thin shoulder and reporting brokenly that Alec was hurt and had been taken by Ames White, the command center had fallen completely silent. Joshua had nearly gone catatonic, unable to handle the implications so shortly after losing Annie. Mole had bitten clean through his cigar, then stomped the tattered ends to bits while he turned the air blue. For once, Snow hadn't needled him for his temper. Luke had only stared with hopeless eyes while Dix muttered a prayer.

Max's first reaction had been to curse Alec and his propensity to get into dire straits no matter where he went. So typical for him, to stumble right into a stray group of tranny-haters; so Alec to get kidnapped by their most dangerous enemy during a simple recon mission. She had raged and ranted until she'd vented her fear and exasperation, and then she'd put Logan and Luke to work to find the annoying SOB so she could go rescue his trouble-prone, though admittedly fine, derriere. It was
what she did, after all. Sometimes it felt like she was doing little else.

To everybody's shock, Logan found jack shit. White didn't follow pattern. His staff stayed right where it was, no discernible movement at all. No official or unofficial military transports, no relocations, no passing through any checkpoints in a hurry. Nothing. Worse, the man himself was back to work within hours of Alec's disappearance... and he stayed put. It was theoretically possible he'd hidden Alec somewhere to interrogate him or use him as a bargaining chip, even that for some reason he might want to keep a lid on it for a while, but Logan was right when he told them, three weeks in:

"It doesn't make sense. White's a bulldozer, he doesn't play the waiting game. If he had Alec, don't you think he'd have made a move by now? Don't you think he'd have dangled him out on a hook to get you?" And then, hesitantly, "Max. I really– I– I think you have to take into consideration that Alec might be dead."

She'd gone off like a firecracker, of course. No way was she giving up on Alec that easily, not when there was no body, no proof White had learned from previous experience and simply put a bullet into Alec's head this time. He could've offed both Alec and Dalton in that alley; he hadn't, ergo he'd surely had some kind of nefarious plan, ergo Alec was probably still alive. They were going to find Alec, and she was going to chew him out until he was about an inch tall, and then Joshua would stop looking like a ghost and Dalton would get out of his funk and everything would be back to normal again.

It had eaten away at her though. They couldn't keep twenty-four hour surveillance on White, not trapped in TC as they were, but as far as they could tell, the man didn't do anything out of the ordinary. He hung around the main players and tried to influence them against Max, he kept a tight net of agents around the besieged sector, he sowed anti-transgenic paranoia wherever he could; in short, he was a prick. Sometimes he took off alone, presumably to conspire with his breeding cult buddies or to sleep. He never tried to contact Max, be it to negotiate for Alec's life or to taunt her with his pain; he didn't show off Alec's bloody corpse... It was as if the incident in the alley had never happened, as if he'd never snatched Alec at all.

Alec wasn't dead, couldn't be dead, and they were going to get him back... but Terminal City was surrounded by hostile forces and Max could not spare the time or the resources to keep looking. She was responsible for a whole lot of people now who depended on her to keep them alive, she couldn't afford to drop everything and go haring off to search a needle in a haystack. It wasn't giving up, she told herself and Joshua, it was... putting on the backburner. Just until they had room to breathe again. Alec was a tough guy, a survivor; if any transgenic could make it out there on his own, it was him.

They all kept a weather eye out for any sign of Alec through the long weeks of the stand-off, half expecting him to come strolling in one day with a cocky grin on his face and a bag full of goodies on his back like he'd done so often. He didn't though, and as time went by, life went on without Alec. Max was kept too busy with other things to brood about her brother's disappearance for long. The siege ended, five more babies were born – 'nomalies all of them, and cute as buttons with their huge black eyes and twitchy little ears – Max and Logan survived another virus scare, Mole nearly sent them all back to war when he beat the shit out of a marine for calling Joshua a "motherfucking cur", Gem opened the first real business in TC – a colorful coffee shop that turned into a favorite hang-out for pretty much everybody –, and Max, as the official leader of Freak Nation, became an instant hit with the media and other assassins.

Then one day, when Max was on the phone with Logan, definitely not flirting, a shadow fell over her. She lifted her gaze and felt her smile dry up at the sight of a grim Joshua and a tense Dalton staring down at her. "Call you back," she told Logan, and disconnected without a word of
Maybe it was the cold neon light, maybe she hadn't really looked at Joshua in too long, but her heart constricted when she noticed how gaunt the beloved face had become, more animal-like than ever with those deep-set, burning eyes, freckles like specks of dried blood on pale skin, stubbled jaw-line sharp and stubborn. More Isaac than Joshua, and wasn't that a calming thought. His voice sounded lower when he spoke, gruff and gravely as if he didn't talk much anymore, and she realized with a start she hadn't visited him in many weeks, because all of his pictures now screamed "Alec" – the flash of green eyes here, the curve of a sweet smile there; the graceful V of a back, the pleading stretch of a hand...

"It's been five months, little fella," Joshua said.

It wasn't an accusation, but it made her bristle regardless. She was honest enough with herself to admit her irritation stemmed from guilt, for she didn't even have to ask what he was talking about. Joshua had grieved for Annie and moved on, but Alec was missing, his status unknown, and it seemed that Joshua wouldn't find peace until he'd found his friend or seen his body.

It didn't matter anyway, because Joshua didn't give her a chance to voice her pique. "No more barricades. Time to go get Alec," he declared.

"We've been trying, big fella," Max reminded him gently. "Logan's been monitoring White–"

"No." Joshua shook his mane, blue eyes hard and uncompromising. "Computers aren't working. We gotta find another way."

Max leaned back in her chair, hanging on to her patience because this was Joshua and she loved the big guy. "We don't have enough food," she said, calmly. "We need medicine for some of the less stable models, we're short on blankets, gas, batteries, and diapers. Half of the buildings still have no electricity and if I could get my hands on a decent plumber, I'd probably offer to marry him."

"Max–" Dalton pleaded; she cut him off with a raised finger without breaking eye contact with the bigger of her problems.

"Our supplies are pitiful. We're in negotiations with the mayor, the chief of police, and three senators about our basic human rights, and trying to fend off claims from the US military regarding our status as 'military property'.

We're barely standing, Joshua, and you want me to perform acrobatics."

"Easier to stand with Alec there to prop you up," Joshua countered.

He hadn't missed a beat, she noticed, didn't avert his gaze, didn't shift or show any other signs of submission. He wasn't questioning her authority, but he didn't follow her blindly anymore either. Her doggy-dog was stepping out of her protective shadow, and it sent a crack of panic through her just like the first time he'd done it, when he'd gone to Terminal City on his own. The world was ugly and brutal; she didn't want gentle, innocent Joshua out in all the filth and corruption.

"We don't even know if Alec is-- still alive, --still in Seattle." Or capable of propping up anyone. If he was indeed out there in one piece, there had to be a reason why he hadn't come back... and try as she might, Max couldn't think of a single one that didn't translate to "held prisoner", "physically and/or mentally too broken to return", or "mercenary traitor asshole".

Again Joshua seemed to read her mind; she was starting to suspect he'd planned this conversation with unprecedented precision. "Assume Alec's in Seattle," he proposed, "then Alec's gotta be locked
up somewhere, maybe hurt." He swallowed. "Maybe sick. Can't travel, probably, because people would notice. Logan," he clarified, "Logan would notice. Logan hasn't noticed. So... so Alec wasn't
moved. And if Alec stays in one spot, I can find him."

It took Max a moment to get it. "What? No way!" she yelped. She jumped up in a vain effort to make her size match the force of her personality. Sometimes it was a bitch to be stuck in the body of a diminutive beauty; it would've been much easier to lead this pack of testosterone-filled Pit Bulls had she been able to simply bully them into obedience whenever they got stupid. Well, fine, volume would have to do. "You can't go out there! Forget it!"

"Actually," a deep voice threw in from where Mole had oh-so-casually wandered closer, "the man's come up with a decent idea – you should listen to him."

"Oh, now suddenly you're an expert tactician?" Max snapped, whirling to confront him. "Mr. Just Hit Them First? There's no way Joshua can comb Seattle sector by sector and not attract attention."

It would also take ages. The X-series could've helped, for they could move among ordinaries if they were careful and avoided the Familiars and their thermal imagers, but Max needed them for supply runs and they didn't have Joshua's nose anyway.

Mole grinned, a sight that creeped her out every single time... and not because it showed a hint of retractable fangs in his bony gums. "Nobody said anything about doing a search grid. Josh did ya one better."

Damn it, now she was curious. She cocked her head, looked back at Joshua, who was nodding, and Dalton, who was all but bouncing. "So what is the plan?" she asked, prepared to shoot down any harebrained, reckless scheme they might've come up with.

Joshua smiled. "Still think White has him. And we found a way to track White."

This ought 'a be good.

And it was good. It was also reckless, dangerous, and disturbingly simple. She never did find out how Mole had discovered White used a car sometimes that looked identical to his work car but wasn't, much less how he'd acquired a copy of the hangman's keys, but she had to agree it was their best lead yet. She balked for a long time before she caved to their combined nagging and allowed Dalton to hide in the big, modified trunk and ride along. She wanted to do it herself, because she was even lighter and much better equipped to handle White if he happened to open the trunk, but they were adamant in their refusal. She was their leader; she couldn't just up and disappear on a covert mission when she had interviews and meetings to attend. It'd attract attention and possibly tip off White.

She hated it; hated to sit on the sidelines while Dalton did the dirty work, hated to be the one to act as a decoy and not the one to jump out of that trunk and ride to the rescue. Man, sometimes she missed the good old times.

And then it simply didn't matter anymore, because Dalton came back on the first day almost bubbling over with excitement.

He'd found Alec.

Apparently, White kept him prisoner in a house in the outskirts of Seattle... ironically, only a block away from Joshua's old digs. Logan had probably driven by the place a hundred times since Alec had been there.
They mounted a rescue as quickly as possible. Snow and a couple of X5s left through the gate closest to White's position to draw his attention from Mole's dented old van as it headed towards the bastard's suburban hideout. The house was unprotected, which didn't bode well, and their worries proved justified when they searched the upper floor and found Alec curled up on the bed, unconscious. He didn't rouse when they called him, just mewed a feeble protest when Joshua hugged him and then lifted him into his arms carefully.

That's where it started for Max. She saw Alec like this, pale and so strangely fragile, and thought, *this is not our Alec.*

Joshua carried him outside, settled him in the back of the van, and then he and Dalton spent the drive to Terminal City fussing over their unresponsive friend. Mole glanced into the rearview mirror so often he nearly mowed down a Jam Pony messenger, his cigar cold and chewed up.

And Max, who'd been so excited to be back in the field, saving Alec's obnoxious ass again, could only sit there like a kicked kitten and watch them take care of a very young, very beautiful stranger who wore Alec's barcode.

**Chapter Seven:**

**Separation Anxiety**

Alec was gone.

No.

*X5-494* was gone. Finally.

Ames honestly didn't understand why he'd kept the freak around for as long as he had – certainly hadn't been for the sex, because as spectacular as that had been once they'd found their groove, he hadn't so much as jerked off in 494's presence after the "stomach bug" had left the transgenic so worn out and listless. He should've ditched the freak right then. Killed him, even. It might've been a mercy, really, considering how sick Alec... 494... had been for a while there.

It had all been because of the goddamn pheromones, of course. Where 494's come-and-fuck-me scent had been the olfactory equivalent to a sledgehammer, the X5's sick-smell had been more insidious; a constant, insistent nudge right into the protective instincts Ames had thought were reserved for his own blood. Hadn't helped that he was naturally possessive and all the fucking and feeding had left his inner caveman with the unshakable conviction that Alec was *his,* and Manticore, the Conclave, and X5-452 could just go fuck themselves.

It must've been this bad case of crossed wires that had him lose it so completely when the shit had hit the fan. It had happened fast: he'd realized on some basic level the freaks were luring him not only away from his post but also further and further away from Alec, and he'd abandoned the chase immediately to race home. The bastards instantly tried to recapture his attention and, when that didn't work, to cut him off, thus confirming his fears. He hadn't bothered going back to the house then, just made a beeline for Terminal City, in the hope of intercepting the rescue team before it could whisk Alec away, out of reach in transgenic central.

He'd seen the van. He'd gotten close enough to catch Alec's scent one last time, but the piece of trash behind the wheel had floored it and roared through the open gate before Ames could think of a way to stop the vehicle without risking Alec. Knowing he'd lost, knowing they'd taken what was his and
there would be no chance to retrieve Alec from the belly of the beast, he'd turned around snarling like a rabid animal and gunned down the freaks that'd distracted him.

He was fine now. Three weeks out of the influence of 494's scent, and Ames was as good as new. Back to normal. No more conflict of interest, no more confusion. Next time he'd see X5-494, he'd execute him just to prove to them both he could. No problem. It was high time he showed his Elders he was every bit the world-class hunter they'd bred. Dedicated. Focused. One hundred percent deadly. It might move them to finally pull the surveillance they'd placed on him. Apparently, his behavior had been "erratic" lately... at least, that's what he'd overheard McKinley whisper on the phone when he'd requested the guards. The Conclave's lapdogs weren't much more than a nuisance for as seasoned a wolf as Ames was, but he'd rather they be called off without anybody ever realizing they'd been made. It'd leave a better impression.

At any rate, Ames was back on track and ready to move on, so it figured that would be when he received the call.

"Hey, vato. Got the package you wanted."


"You still there?" the caller inquired; his voice tinny and distorted through the secure connection that would leave any eavesdroppers half deaf with acoustic feedback. Listen in to that, Ears Only.

Ames swallowed, shaken in his newfound surety. It was over, he had his sanity back, there was no reason at all to let this continue... but he was curious. He couldn't let things go, not when they'd gone to shit so badly. He wanted to know how Manticore had done it, so he'd be able to keep it from happening again.

"I'm still here," he said, fingers tight around the plastic cover of his cell, pressure strong enough to almost crack the thing. "When and where?"

"Same place, eighteen hundred hours. Don't forget my biscuit."

Fucking smartass. Ames rolled his eyes. "Don't be late."

He didn't wait for a reply, not interested in idle chatter, and clicked off the phone. Okay. He could do this. It'd be tricky, what with the Conclave's eyes following his every move and Otto watching him like a ticking time bomb, but it was doable.

The key was timing.

One second. Two seconds. Three seconds... go.

Ames eased the dark gray Chevy forward and around the corner, counted to five, then stepped on it. It hadn't been exactly child's play, but he'd successfully wound up his own agents, a few overly curious Familiars, and the Conclave's dogs, and set them on each other's tails. He supposed he had about an hour before they saw through his game and he better be back where he was supposed to be. Not the greatest window of opportunity, but he'd had worse. If nothing else, it was good exercise.

He met his business partner at the docks, stopped, and lowered the window. "Any problems?" he asked, out of habit.

Chucho shook his head and handed over a briefcase. "Left the originals undisturbed; they'll never
know you got this."

It was a pleasure to work with professionals, especially former counter-intelligence. "Good." Ames smiled thinly. "The codeword's 'Dionysus'. The key sequence is '998-263XH'. Have fun."

"Oh, I will," Chucho muttered. He tossed Ames a salute and disappeared back into the shadows to go chase his own ghosts.

Ames drove away as well, window firmly closed against the persistent stench of rotting fish. He found himself a nice overnight garage and tore open the briefcase and the envelopes inside with impatient fingers.

Thirty minutes later, he was staring blindly out of the window at the grimy wall outside. It didn't make sense. Couldn't be what it looked like. Not even Manticore would–

He licked his lips, uncertain. Let it go, return to his post, be a good soldier and never think about it again? Or find somebody to translate all the technical jargon and find out for certain? If he drove all the way out to Miriam's, he'd lose the head start he had now. They'd think he'd gone rogue. Worse yet, if the information he'd just received was correct, if this meant what he thought it did... he might... He closed his eyes, breathed deeply. *No. Couldn't be.*

Fuck this shit. He started the car. He was going back. Maybe he could convince General Maddock to drop a cold nuke on Terminal City and finish the vermin once and for all so the Conclave could initiate the final phases of their plan. It'd be good to know the freaks were all dead. Even–

*Stop it.* It was over. X5-494 was no longer his concern. The freeway ramp was right ahead, lanes diverging; he slowed down, hesitating again. South. He needed to go south. His men, his mission, Freak Nation... everything that was important was downtown. Time was running out, he couldn't waste it playing the *what-if* game.

*If* the file was right, Alec would die.

Ames cursed, hit the dashboard in frustration, switched lanes, and headed north.

Dr. Miriam Christina Roys was what people in Ames' world called a "gray spot". It meant she was much better informed about the goings on behind the scenes than your average citizen, knew some of the true players, but only very few of these players were aware of her existence in turn. She wasn't a power so much as a human data storage facility, useful when Ames needed an outside opinion or a pit stop, so deep in his debt he didn't have to worry about betrayal. Lydecker knew about her, but Lydecker had gone to ground. Wendy had talked to her on the phone once, but Wendy was dead. Miriam was one of the major aces up Ames' sleeve, and now was the time to play her.

He knocked on her door twenty to midnight, was greeted with a sleep-blunted glare and a grunt, and wordlessly pointed towards the living room. Ten minutes later, Miriam joined him, fully dressed, graying hair done up in a no-nonsense bun, and a huge cup of coffee in one hand. Ames almost smiled. One of the many things he valued about the woman was that she didn't expect or offer pleasantries. She could be a bitch, but she knew her stuff and didn't fuck around, and Ames appreciated it.

Miriam sat down in her armchair, gulped down half the scalding coffee in one go, and waved her hand at Ames to indicate he could start the briefing.

He handed over the file. "I want you to check this," he told her brusquely. "Read it, tell me about it."
Her mouth puckered briefly, but she took the folders without comment, dug out her glasses, and went to work. Ames watched her for a while, wrestling with the desire to pace. He was edgy as hell and he hated the feeling, but bullheadedness and a deep-seated aversion to showing weakness kept him firmly rooted on the couch. He didn't chew his nails. He didn't jiggle his knees. He didn't shift, or crack his knuckles, or tap his fingers. He sat. Like a fucking statue. Pigeons would've loved him.

It took Miriam three hours to finish reading, re-reading, and crosschecking. She was thorough. She took her time. She drove Ames bugfuck crazy. By the time she finally leaned back and took off her glasses to peer at him across the coffee table, Ames was about ready to climb the wall.

"Well?" he asked, unable to stand the silence any longer.

Miriam narrowed her eyes at his impatience. She was used to it; didn't mean she had to like it. "It's a copy of a Manticore file concerning an X5 transgenic," she said, as usual starting from the top. "Looks authentic. The subject in question carries the designation X5-494. It's male, one of a twinned pair. The brother, X5-493, was part of--"

"I don't give a shit about the brother," Ames interrupted. "I'm interested in the DoN Project."

"All right." Miriam shrugged. She clearly didn't care which part of the file he wanted to focus on. "DoN. Double or Nothing. The project was initiated during 494's last round in psi ops and part of the breeding program. Supervising officer was Dr. Elizabeth Renfro." She raised an eyebrow. "Wasn't she one of your father's--"

"She was." Sore subject. Ames shifted a little in his seat to ease some of the tension that was knotting his muscles. "Keep going."

"Fine." In contrast to Ames, Miriam was someone who didn't have any trouble letting go. Ames allowed himself a moment's jealousy as she picked up the thread again. "The objective of the project was to double the generation output by upgrading the reproductive organs of X5 males and impregnating them."

Brilliant plan. Outstanding. Only the crackheads at Manticore could come up with gill-girls, lizard-men, and gender-fucked super soldiers and think it a good idea. Ames had felt queasy the first time he read through Alec's file, and it didn't get any better hearing it the second time round.

"Apparently," Miriam continued, unmoved, "at that point, 494's future status was undecided due to his poor mission performance; he was cleared for high risk experimentation and picked for DoN because of his above-average pheromone levels. He was subjected to a series of chemical and physical modifications until the project was aborted for tactical reasons."

In other words, the morons had worked out that maybe it wasn't such a good idea to get all of your elite soldiers pregnant at the same time, which meant Project DoN was a waste of time, money, and resources. Hooray.

"How far did they get?" Ames asked. He leaned forward and rested his elbows on his knees to keep them from bouncing and revealing his agitation.

A long, manicured fingernail tapped against the plastic edge of the top folder. He knew Miriam; her mind was working double-time right now, relaying and analyzing the information regarding Alec and trying to figure out Ames' angle, too. "I'd say about halfway through," she said. "They finished the pheromone treatments; even built in a fail-safe to ensure the subject in question wouldn't breed completely uncontrolled once he went into heat. Only a perfectly compatible partner would trigger a reaction, which would minimize complications in the later stages." She paused, eying him carefully.
"Are you all right? You look a bit pale."

Ames could only shake his head and wave her on. "I'm fine. Go on. I got most of that; what I really want to know is: can X5-494 actually get pregnant or not?"

"Theoretically, yes." Miriam picked up her cup and slurped down the cold dregs of her coffee, which didn't exactly help settle Ames' roiling stomach. "He does have the necessary parts. A cloned uterus was implanted and connected to the rectum, though the opening was sealed. If – and this is a big 'if', given his genetic makeup – 494 did find a suitable stud, a chemical reaction would cause the internal guardian muscle to relax some and become extremely sensitive, so if – again, big 'if' – the stud did enter at the right angle and penetrate into this opening–"

"Could you–" Ames shifted unhappily as he fought for professional distance and failed, "–could you please stop calling the– the mating partner a 'stud'?"

Miriam's eyes glittered speculatively, but she merely nodded. "Certainly. Anyway, to cut a long explanation short: yes, in theory, a matching 'mating partner' could impregnate 494. But really, that's it. Nothing more was done, so in the unlikely case 494 did in fact conceive, chances are it'd kill him dead long before pesky little details like 'labor' or 'birthing' even became an issue. He only survived the uterus transplant with the help of heavy medication; his body would most likely reject a fetus... and if it didn't – doubtful, but let's run with that for a moment–"

She smiled as her inner geek started to wake up, "–say he did manage to keep the baby... remember, he wasn't prepared for an actual pregnancy. Also, this isn't a human embryo we're talking about; it's the high-maintenance progeny of two souped-up genetically engineered thoroughbreds. The little parasite would siphon too much energy and kill him that way."

Which was when Ames' mouth, that insubordinate fucker, went off on its own and he blurted out, "He's made it almost five months now."

It was one of those moments that made him want to slam his head against the table and take himself out of his misery. Miriam chuckled, ugly and grating. "I knew it. What happened? He go into heat and whack you with a dose of tranny pheromones?" She sat up, tossed the files onto the coffee table, and grinned at Ames. "I'm right, aren't I? He got to you, you fucked him, and now you read this and think you put a bun in his oven."

Ames glared at her. He'd have liked to pull his gun and shoot her – bitch didn't need two kneecaps anyway – but he had a sneaking suspicion that he'd need her help, so he stomped down on the impulse. "I fucked him for a few weeks," he told her stiffly. "Then he got so sick he almost died. He got better eventually, but didn't recover fully."

Clearly fascinated, Miriam slid forward until she was perched at the edge of her chair. "What do you mean, he didn't recover?"

It felt weird to talk about the time he'd spent with Alec after the fucking had been over, weird to admit to himself it had actually been months. "The fever didn't go away completely. He slept all the damn time and was groggy and clingy when he didn't." Warm and pliant and trusting, murmuring secrets and tales of pain into Ames' skin. "Oh, and whenever he was awake, he ate like a fucking horse." Or two.

"Huh." She chewed on that for a couple of minutes, then nodded to herself. "It makes sense. His body probably adapted to the changes, tried to compensate for the deficiencies. Did he gain weight?"

"Not really," Ames said, leaving out how much that had worried him.
"Then he probably didn't eat enough." Which was... mind-boggling, actually. Ames' face must've showed his incredulity, because Miriam cackled like a witch. "Sleeping saves energy," she explained when she'd calmed down again, "but it also means the body can't feed. So he has to make up for the time lost when he's awake. It's not like eating for two; it's more like fighting on two fronts: he's trying to keep himself and his baby alive and at the same time blocking his immune system's natural inclination to reject the fetus. If he can keep it up, he might actually be able to carry the child to term, though he'll probably wish he were dead by then."

*The child.* Not embryo. Not fetus. Alec's child. Ames' child. Ames' heart was pounding in his chest; the blood rushing through his ears made his vision gray out until he was a hair's breadth from passing out. Memories exploded in his mind, a dizzying rush of images: Wendy telling him he was going to be a daddy; rubbing her belly, huge and round; holding his baby boy for the first time; seeing Ray for the last time, so pale and still; losing him to that bitch 452. He had never loved anything or anybody as he loved his son. No matter if Ray was dead or alive, he'd always be everything to Ames. He hadn't been able to imagine feeling the same for anybody else... but there might be another child now, his blood.

He wondered inanely if maybe he could get a little girl this time. She'd have Alec's eyes and Ames' brain and–

"–and that would surely kill them both."

Ames tuned back into the conversation with a start and scraped together enough resentment to scowl darkly. "Would you fucking stop it with the doomsaying?" he snarled.

"What? You wanna keep it?" Miriam chortled.

Ames stared at her.

Miriam's chuckles died. Her eyes grew round. "You want to keep it. You want to– Are you out of your fucking mind? No, wait." She shook her head, clearly disgusted with herself. "Of course you are. You're under the influence of a shitload of pheromones. That's why you didn't kill him either." She studied him critically. "Can you hold out for a few hours? I'm pretty sure I can neutralize the effect–"

"I haven't even been near him for more than three weeks," Ames informed her coolly.

His mind was still reeling, but the longer he thought about it, the clearer it became that he'd already made his decision. He'd chosen his path the moment he'd gone north instead of south.

Alec was carrying his child.

All bets were off.

**Chapter Eight:**

**Tailspin**

He dreamed of Terminal City, he dreamed of his family. Joshua was there, all hands and hair, whuffing and mumbling in concern. The air tasted of cigar smoke; Mole was giving crappy advice from somewhere behind Josh, sounding annoyed and worried at once in typical Mole fashion. A boyish voice, high with excitement – Dalton, had to be Dalton – was asking questions that didn't
make sense, bouncing back and forth as if the speaker was circling them like some kind of demented dolphin. And of course there was Max, ordering people to get out of the way, make room, and call Sam Carr, now.

Weird dream, that.

Everything was swaying and swinging like he was caught in a hammock. He lifted a hand to stop the motion, afraid he'd get sick again, but his fingers didn't encounter coarse twine, they bumped against something soft and firm. Joshua-chest, encased in Joshua-pullover, he thought, and blinked drowsily. Not a hammock. Joshua's arms. He was being carried once again, his head resting against an impossibly wide shoulder. He turned his face into the scratchy wool of the dog-man's turtleneck, uncomfortable with all the noise and activity around.

The world was getting clearer and more present with every step and every new voice joining the cacophony until Alec had to face reality: this was no dream. Sometime between going to sleep with his head in Ames' lap and waking in this undignified position, Max must've found him and brought him back into the fold. He could still smell Ames in the fabric of the quilt wrapped around him, hated but familiar – get it? A Familiar was smelling familiar. It was so funny he could've cried. Or maybe that was the bitter self-disgust and fear boiling in his belly. At least with White, things had been simple.

Joshua swung him around a corner and jumped up three steps at once and that was it with Alec's brief moment of lucidity.

Dr. Carr – "You can call me 'Sam', Alec, nice to meet you. Now breathe in deeply, okay?" – was a good guy, unlike the majority of doctors in Alec's acquaintance. Not that Alec would've sassed him anyway. He'd learned early on that it never paid to piss off the guy (or gal) with the needle and was always on his best behavior when dealing with medical personnel. It helped that Sam Carr wasn't a complete stranger. He was a friend of Max's and had ridden to the rescue of wounded transgenics and their allies for a while now. Alec had seen him once in passing when he'd visited Logan in the hospital – he had instinctively zoomed in on the man's ID card, because the name had rung a bell – so at least he recognized the face.

On the one hand, it was good to know there were ordinaries who weren't actively trying to enslave or annihilate transgenics. Sam Carr had saved both Max and Logan on more than one occasion, and Alec was grateful for it. On the other hand, Carr and people like him made Alec antsy. He didn't trust altruism. It was hardly ever altruistic.

He had no choice now but to surrender to the doctor's examination; Joshua was hovering, Max did her best to loom (she was annoyingly good at it), and Alec was too fucking tired to lift his head, much less fight off the benevolent physician. Thankfully, Sam Carr really was everything his reputation promised: he was gentle, soft-spoken, and seemed to know what he was doing even under less than perfect conditions. Apparently, they'd smuggled the poor guy into Terminal City via the sewers – which didn't sound very hygienic to Alec, but who was he to judge? – because nobody knew about his involvement with the freaks and Max wanted it to stay that way.

Carr tried to explain everything he was doing to Alec before he actually did it. Alec was too woozy to understand most of it, but he had no words for how much he appreciated the consideration. His reaction to the care with which Carr treated him was to practically roll over and present his belly. He submitted to one test after the other, obediently offered the wrist that had been broken even though he barely remembered which one; he let Carr shine light into his eyes, run soft hands over his body, poke him and prod him as he checked for injuries, scars, and needle tracks.
The only thing Alec wouldn't do was respond to Carr's attempts to draw him into a conversation. The questions slipped in between the running commentary: Had Alec been tortured? Alec shook his head. Had Alec been given anything? Pills, shots, infusions? Alec shook his head, because everybody knew Aspirin and chicken soup didn't count. Had Alec been provided with enough food and water? Alec nodded. Had Alec been... touched? Inappropriately? Intimately? Alec shook his head, closed his eyes, and pretended to fall asleep.

Within minutes, he wasn't pretending anymore.

Alec wasn't present – well, conscious – for Dr. Carr's final assessment of his condition, but when he tuned in again, the doctor was gone but Max still there, sprawled out over an old armchair and taking up significantly more space than such a petite woman should be able to occupy. Small feet encased in big boots dangled over the armrest on the one side, a slender arm down the other side, and the rest of her was leaning against the backrest and reading what looked like the TC equivalent to a mission report. A cascade of silky dark hair was swinging back and forth in time with her annoyed headshakes.

"Comma," she muttered, "even I know there should be a comma there... Man, we need a school." She stopped, groaned, and scrunched up her face. "We really need a school. Damn it."

"You do realize Gem's kid is still a baby and X7s don't speak human anyway, right?" Alec asked with a smirk, a little dismayed at how scratchy and weak his voice sounded.

Max sat up like somebody had poked her with a sharp stick. "Alec!" She smiled, obviously pleased. "You're awake." That was Max for you, never hesitating to state the obvious.

Alec's determined smirk softened into a more genuine smile as well. He'd missed her. Missed that smile, so rarely aimed at him. He tried to sit up, found his muscles working flawlessly though the response time was a bit sluggish, and leaned against the headboard so he could look at her more directly. "So, what'd I miss?"

The report was tossed down unceremoniously as Max twisted into a more upright position. "Nothing much. Just, you know, siege, lots of negotiations, winning our freedom and stuff..."

"Yeah," he said, lowering his gaze. He almost told her he knew about that, had watched the news faithfully whenever he could think clearly, but then she'd ask how come he could watch TV when he was supposed to be a prisoner and... he couldn't go there.

He couldn't explain to Max – to anybody – how White hadn't needed to lock him up, chain or drug him; all he'd needed to do had been to be there. To smell the way he did, touch Alec, take Alec. She couldn't understand this kind of addiction; her heat was there and gone, easily sated. His had left him at his enemy's mercy, a rape victim without a rapist, both he and Ames trapped in a spider's web of pheromones. His body had been violated by Manticore scientists long before White had first laid a hand on him, but that didn't change the fact that he hadn't been strong enough to fight the compulsion.

Something must've shown on his face despite his struggle to keep his expression neutral, because the hint of teasing had left Max's voice when she spoke again. "Hey," she said softly, almost tentatively. "Are you okay?"

The reply was automatic. "I'm always okay." He still couldn't look at her, kept his gaze averted so he wouldn't have to see the questions in her eyes. "I mean... am I? What did the doctor say?"
Maybe Carr had found out what was wrong with him. Maybe it was something simple after all, just an unusually persistent virus or a lack of certain nutrients like Max's tryptophan deficiency, easily corrected.

"Don't worry, you're gonna be fine. Whatever he gave you, it's already out of your system," Max shot down that hope. "Your blood pressure is a bit high and your temperature slightly above average for an X5, but Sam says that's probably stress." She shifted on her chair until he was forced to glance up to see what she was doing, then caught his gaze and held it, fierce and earnest. "I know you don't want to talk about it, Alec, but we need to know. What do you remember? Why did he take you? What is White planning?"

Alec stared at her helplessly, at a complete loss about what to say. *He took me because he couldn't help himself? There was no planning involved at all?* She wouldn't believe him; and if she did, she'd be grossed out and disappointed as hell. No bravery here, no heroic prisoner returned from unspeakable suffering – just Alec fucking up again, and getting fucked in the ass in the process. By Ames White, no less.

There was a pressure behind his eyes, like tears of shame uncried, but he held his head high and refused to acknowledge it. "I don't know," he said, lying in self-defense, then added what truth he could offer. "If he interrogated me, I don't remember. I was pretty out of it most of the time."

The gentleness slipped a little, impatience creeping in because Max was a born leader and a decent person, but she'd never win any awards for empathy. "Think, Alec," she ordered. "He had you for almost half a year. You really want me to believe he kept you doped up for five months straight?"

Alec didn't back down mainly because he couldn't, but her tone made it easier for him to square his shoulders and meet her skeptical stare head-on. "Those fuckers almost bashed in my head in that alley," he growled. "I slipped into a coma and almost died, all right? All I remember is puking a lot and falling on my face a couple of times. So if White gave any speeches about his evil plans, I failed to notice."

He was pissed; with himself, primarily, but Max didn't know that. She merely picked up on his anger and reacted with predictable irritation, though tempered by a side-order of chagrin. "Calm your ass down," she snapped, then added half under her breath, "When did you get so touchy?"

That would've been when he'd been on his hands and knees with his face pressed into the mattress and his mortal enemy fucking him into nirvana.

Before he could accidentally tell her just that, the door creaked open a bit and a shaggy head appeared through the crack. "Alec?" Joshua asked, worriedly. "Max? Alec all right?"

"I wouldn't go that far," Max grumbled. She shot Alec a look that promised a continuation of their conversation at the earliest opportunity before she unknotted her limbs and stood. "Come on in and say hi, big fella. I gotta head down anyway."

Alec watched her go, and an unexpected swell of hopelessness threatened to choke him. He didn't want anybody to know what had happened, least of all Max, but something told him this had probably been his one chance to explain himself before he lost the "prodigal son" advantage. Too late. He'd made his bed, now he had to lie in it. Not that there had been much of a choice. Revulsion or pity; it was hard to decide which was worse. Confronted with a bright-eyed, excited Joshua slipping into the room and padding towards him, Alec realized either would shatter what little pride he had left.

"Alec better?" Joshua inquired, smiling so wide he looked like a doggy-clown. "Not sick?" He was
positively vibrating with the need to hug the stuffing out of Alec, and Alec, in the face of that much honest affection, almost cried after all.

"Yeah, Josh, I'm all right," he lied, and when his friend swooped in to finally greet him properly, he could damn near believe it might actually become true some day.

Alec's test results came back clean; no signs of drugs or synthetic agents in his body. Sam Carr checked his head again on Max's orders and found it undamaged. Alec was officially healthy and thus declared fit for duty.

Too bad he wasn't even close to it.

At first, he could pass off his constant fatigue and the unrelenting, gnawing hunger as lingering effects of his captivity. That he was exhausted came as no big surprise and nobody could tell he'd eaten a lot better than the rest of the transgenics while he'd been gone, so everybody was happy to let him rest and feed him. The novelty and the delight of having won back one of their own wore off though, and tension crept in when after two weeks Alec still didn't get back to work.

Freak Nation might not be under direct threat of being bombed to bits anymore, but it wasn't out of danger yet and it certainly wasn't an easy place to live. There was a lack of everything, which said a lot considering the natural frugality of transgenics and their low maintenance bodies. Due to the abysmal living conditions, everybody had to contribute to their best ability just to keep them all afloat. Alec's talents had been sorely missed. Before, he hadn't only been Max's supply officer, able to procure whatever was necessary whenever it was needed: his charisma and affinity for doublethink had made negotiations with military and government representatives a lot easier, and Mole had also roped the very reluctant X5 into taking over basic and some specialized training for the 'nomalies.

However, instead of slipping back into his assigned role, Alec managed to disappoint and piss off his transgenic kin left and right. He overslept as a rule, fell asleep on the job, didn't seem able or willing to concentrate. His contacts and info were out of date, his once so easy charm fake enough to grate, and his moods were mercurial at best.

By the end of week three, Mole had to boot him out of bed in the mornings, Dalton covered for him where he could, and Joshua lived on half-rations because Alec's appetite was uncanny. Max was ready to strangle Alec and it showed. She tried to get to the bottom of his apathy a few times, but he shot her down. His recalcitrance made her mad, which made him defiant, which riled her up... It became a vicious circle neither of them was able to break.

Joshua did his best to run interference, but while he was generally respected for his simple wisdom, willingness to help out where he could, and sheer brawn, it was getting more and more challenging even for him to find excuses for Alec.

"Give me one good reason why I shouldn't kick his lazy ass down to the training center and use it as a punching bag," Mole snarled one dreary afternoon after having wasted hours searching Terminal City for Alec only to find him snuggled in his ratty quilt in Joshua's bed, fast asleep.

The first transgenic didn't reply immediately, lost in his newest painting, which was extraordinary if awfully depressing in Mole's humble opinion: a struggling flame of bright white, yellow, and red surrounded and near-smothered by thick, viscous blackness filled with rusty razorblades, torn satin, and pieces of string. The fucking thing was so hauntingly oppressive Mole hated to look at it.

"Wouldn't make a good impression on his students," Joshua offered at long last, sounding pretty tired.
himself. He soaked a sponge in a clear liquid and pressed it against a bottom corner of the canvas. The paint promptly started to bubble and froth; the effect was distressingly pestilential.

"Won't make much difference," Mole noted, once he'd managed to tear his gaze away from the sight and get his thoughts back on track. Alec's performance the day before had been... well, lackluster would've been too favorable a description. "He's not exactly stunning them with his wit."

"Doesn't need to entertain them." Joshua put down the sponge, cleaned his hands on a tattered rag, and walked over to sit at the edge of his bed, his massive body a solid barrier between Mole and Alec. "Just needs to teach them. Are you saying Alec is a bad teacher?"

He wasn't; that was part of what had Mole so fired up. While Alec's approach to teaching martial arts wasn't near as hands-on as it had been before, he had a unique knack for baiting his pupils into giving it their absolute best just on the off-chance they might get to sock him one some day.

"He could be better," Mole insisted. He was losing his drive and didn't like it and his tone turned biting in reaction. "It'd help if... I don't know... he were there to teach them."

Nothing much Joshua could say to that. His broad shoulders slumped. He reached out to gently smooth the blanket over Alec's motionless form and sighed. "Alec's tired."

"I know," Mole barked, irritation back with a vengeance. He wanted a cigar, damn it, but he was out and Alec had promised to hook him up way back when he'd still been Alec. "That's the fucking point. Alec's always tired nowadays. All he does is sleep and eat. He's next to useless!"

A low growl rumbled through the room at that. Joshua turned more fully towards Mole, lips drawn back to reveal sharp fangs, muscles tensing in preparation for a fight. It was a blind, instinctual protectiveness Mole knew better than to challenge; he lifted his hands palms out to show his refusal to duke it out and took a step back, something he didn't do often.

"Oh, can it," he grumbled. "I ain't gonna hurt your boy and we both know it. I'm just saying what's fact." He stared at a pale hand peeking out from under the quilt, fine-boned and still, and the last of his anger deflated. "Can't guess what's wrong with him," he said quietly, "but he better pull his head out of his ass real quick-like, because I ain't coverin' for him no more, and you and Dalton can't. Whatever happened when White had him, he's gotta get past it."

Joshua settled, long hair hiding his face as he went back to petting his sleeping friend. "Maybe Alec can't get past it," he whispered, roughly. "Maybe... maybe something got broken that can't be fixed."

"Then he's gotta duct-tape it together and carry on." It was the Manticore way, the only way Mole knew. Those who couldn't hack it got left behind... and to get left behind meant to die. At least now they were "free", death wouldn't come after vivisection. "Doctor checked him, says he ain't sick, so it's gotta be in his head. We can't afford to get him a shrink– hell, we can't afford to feed him if he doesn't offer anything in return."

Again, Joshua's head snapped up, blue eyes glaring daggers at Mole. "Alec is one of us. Alec fought for us and with us. Max said. We take care of our own."

"You might wanna remind Alec of that," Mole bit out, uncomfortable with the other man's reminder and the level of devotion offered to someone who didn't seem to appreciate it. "Because he's being a selfish bastard and a lot of good people are running themselves ragged to compensate for it."

"Not selfish," Joshua corrected softly. Long, bony digits laced through Alec's slender fingers; dark, freckled skin against pale skin; black claws careful not to harm. "Lost. Hurting."
"Yeah, well," Mole looked away, unnerved by the intimacy. "Tell him to get his ass down to the gym by six or he'll be hurting a lot more."

"The class will be taught," Joshua promised.

It was taught by Dalton.

Alec's new life consisted of compromises. He had turned from a respected, well-liked member of the transgenic community into a barely-tolerated outsider... but he was back among his own kind. It felt like he was working himself half to death and still they called him a slacker... but he wasn't whoring himself. He was always tired, hungry (starving), and definitely sliding back into "dizzy and nauseous" territory because of it... but he had Joshua.

He didn't understand what was wrong with him. He'd never been sick in his life, they said he wasn't sick now, but even when he did succeed in whipping his weary mind into temporary clarity his body would fail him. Oh, he was still strong, still toned – though he had to admit his abs had lost some of their definition – but his reflexes were off, his speed down to ordinary levels. He could force himself to work beyond the point of exhaustion for a while – had to, in fact, to function in such demanding company – but it cost him dearly. He ached; a constant, draining discomfort that dulled his senses, fucked up his coordination, made him snappish and unsociable.

Once, Joshua told him he smelled different. Not sick, mind you, just different; so he tried to change his diet, thinking maybe he'd developed allergies or something. It worked about as well as the ice-cold showers and the frequent dressing-downs he received. As a matter of fact, it got worse when he stopped eating high-calorie food; got so bad at one point he blacked out and barely made it to the sanctuary of Joshua's room afterwards. Joshua made him eat two chocolate bars and a handful of beef jerky and that brought him back on a somewhat even keel.

Sometimes, Alec had to bite his lips bloody to keep from tossing his head back and keening in fear and anguish. He was scared like he'd never been before, afraid he was dying, terrified it would be a slow, miserable death. He didn't want to croak huddled in some dark corner like a poisoned rat, was sure he would anyway, because he'd have alienated everybody by the time he lay down the final time.

He had nightmares about being the carrier of some new and terrible disease; a patient zero walking undetected among his people and damning them all. It got so far he refused to go near the babies and their mothers, even though he knew it was already too late. If he really was contagious, they'd all die anyway.

By the end of the month, Alec was a wreck. He couldn't help but compare the way he was treated by his kin to the way he'd been treated by Ames White, and find his kin lacking. More than once, he was tempted to walk out the gates and seek out Ames, but it was a fair bet White was back to normal by now and would shoot Alec on sight. It was difficult to remember sometimes that the kindness hadn't been real, the protectiveness caused by whatever pheromone cocktail Alec's fucked-up and fucked-out body had produced there in the end. Alec might've tried to find him anyway, but cautious questioning of Logan as to White's whereabouts had turned up the discouraging news that Ames White had disappeared and left his agents and Familiars scurrying about in what looked suspiciously like panicked confusion.

So Alec struggled on alone. He couldn't do anything else, didn't know how to quit living, but even breathing seemed to get harder every day. His body rebelled against the activity he forced on it and started to punish him with random breakdowns. He lost time again, no matter how desperately he fought to stay awake, and the hunger pangs became so severe he ended up stealing food. It wasn't
much – not nearly enough – but it helped tide him over until unconsciousness wiped out his awareness again and brought relief.

He was out of options, survived on autopilot, barely able to register Mole’s stern instructions or Max’s impatient orders. Isolated and sick, all he could do was hang on. He didn’t hope for recovery anymore, didn’t talk to anybody if he could help it. Wasn’t anything he could say. Sleep became an escape as well as a necessity, though indulging usually led to reprimands and more disappointment.

Then Max caught him stealing.

In retrospect, it was hard to say whether she was more upset because he’d broken into the storage area or because he was so off his game she’d been able to catch him. She didn’t kick his ass, which spoke volumes about how low her opinion of him had sunk.

"Alec," was all she said at first, face stony, but the disappointment in her eyes hit him worse than her fists could have.

Torn between the two opposing impulses to either sneer and wise off or turn tail and slink out, he chose door number three and sat down heavily on a crate of canned tuna to wait for her next move. No excuses; every attempt to explain himself would have sounded like self-pity, and that would’ve only made things worse for both of them.

"I was gonna replace them," he muttered, indicating the can of peaches he’d taken. His belly voiced its complaint at the mere thought of giving up the loot with a shift and roll that felt like being kicked from the inside. It was familiar by now, but still made him blush. Fortunately, Max didn't even seem to notice.

"Forget it," she told him, and sat down on a crate as well, facing him. She looked very small in her skin-tight black clothes and heavy boots, worn down and disillusioned. Preserving Freak Nation was taking its toll on her, too. Her eyes were huge in the semi-darkness; he recalled with a pang of jealousy that thanks to her shark DNA she hardly ever slept. She pulled up her legs and wrapped her arms around her knees, regarding him sadly. "This isn't about the peaches, Alec. It's about you."

Every single muscle of his tensed at those words, weariness momentarily beaten back by a surge of adrenaline. This wasn't her usual rant-intro. Something had changed between them, and not in a good way. "What do you mean?" he asked, trying to project indifference and sounding like he’d just swallowed his tongue.

Max smiled faintly. "This isn't working."

"I know." He smiled back, begged her with his eyes not to say it. "The locks are a joke, I really should've--"

"I think you should go."

He swallowed against the sudden queasiness, his racing pulse thundering through him until he could hardly focus on anything but the rush of blood and the silent screams in his head. "Go?" he repeated faintly.

"I don't know if you're really depressed or faking it," Max continued with relentless calm, "and frankly, I don't care anymore. We're fighting for our existence here, Alec, and you're not pulling your weight. You're not pulling anything. You're just taking. Two men died getting you back and Snow was seriously hurt--" She must’ve seen him flinch at that, because her tone softened somewhat. "I'm not blaming you for what White did," she claimed, and maybe she really thought that was the truth.
"It's just--"

She sighed, ran a slender hand through her long hair. "You used to be a good guy, Alec. An annoying asshole, but a good guy underneath. At least you were trying."

"I'm trying, Max," he whispered, but he knew where this was going and though he'd half expected it, it still broke his heart.

"No," Max told him, and it was the judge's hammer coming down, "you're not. You neglect your duties, you mooch off Joshua, you steal food we all need. We've got eight pregnant females in Terminal City, Alec, six babies, and a bunch of 'nomalies so screwed up they need to be heavily medicated – I can't afford to wait until you've got your head straight again. We offered to help you; you pushed us away. I gave you time; it's been five weeks."

Alec's hands were shaking now; he stuffed them into his pants pockets so she wouldn't see. "You're tossing me out."

Max lowered her gaze for a second then met his again. "I'm suggesting you leave for a while. Just--"

She waved her hands, finally losing some of her cool. "Go find yourself or whatever. Deal with your issues. You're welcome to come back when you've stopped feeling sorry for yourself. God knows we need you here– but we need you. Alec. The guy who can think on his feet, and run circles around those damn politicians, and charm the skin off a snake."

"I am me," Alec cried. He jumped up, too agitated to remain seated, desperate to make her understand what he didn't understand himself. "I'm just-- I--"

"What?" Max asked, patient, ready to listen, and already completely closed off.

He stared down at her, opened his mouth to say something– and he remembered parting his lips to kiss Ames White, remembered begging to be fucked, remembered a thousand little cruelties and six months' worth of kindness. His throat closed up and the spark died. He bowed his head, clenched his fists, and turned away. "Nothing," he whispered hoarsely. "Sorry 'bout the peaches."

He was gone before the morning.

Chapter Nine:

Bip Bip Bip

Reagan Ronald was having a good day. An excellent day, in fact. The no-good mix of misfits and reprobates in his employ had been working their little asses off, and all it had taken to whip them into shape had been the suggestion he might be inclined to close early the next day if their quota was met. No need to tell them he'd do it anyway, because no power on earth could stop him from going to CageMania. The cage fights weren't the same without Monty Cora, but--

The smug smile slipped a bit as he killed that line of thought hastily. No thinking about Alec in public. He hadn't had any contact with his mutant golden boy since the Jam Pony siege – less glamorous maybe than the Siege of Terminal City, but much more personal – and he didn't even know whether or not Alec was still alive. For a while, in the beginning, Alec had been right there in the first line of the transgenic defense with that bothersome Max girl (Normal had always known something was off about that one), but then, from one day to the other, Alec had disappeared and Normal still wasn't sure how to feel about that. He'd had enough time to reconcile his rose-tinted
image of Alec with the hard facts, but--

No thinking about Alec in public. Mama Ronald's brave little soldier didn't show his wounds where everybody could see.

Anyway, the cage fights weren't until tomorrow. Right now it was regular closing time, which meant rush hour at the Jam Pony. Amazing how fast this sorry lot could move when heading towards alcohol and recreational drugs. Normal puttered around the dispatch area while the punks filed out of the building, trailing a cloud of laughter, wisecracks, and insipid noise that made him wrinkle his nose in irritation. Undisciplined horde; not a single dedicated worker among them. If Normal hadn't been there to encourage and cajole, they'd have never gotten anything done. They were lucky he was such a patient, tolerant employer, a paragon of dignified restraint, because kids today were apparently raised in the Seattle version of a barn.

"Normal, where's mah bonus?"

Greedy, too. Normal looked up in annoyance, pushed his glasses back up where they belonged so he could actually see OC while he glared at her, and explained in a fatherly fashion, "No signature on the 'fast delivery' line, no bonus, Sappho. You know the rules."

Original Cindy, naturally, couldn't accept simple information at face value and move on. She might've been more subdued since her "sistah" had moved on to greater things, but that didn't mean the woman had learned when to quit.

"I got'cha a signature," she insisted, hands on her hips, frizzy hair all but standing on end with indignation.

Since Normal was a reasonable man and well aware that some people always needed proof, he dug out the delivery sheet and smacked it on the counter between them. "You brought me a squiggle, missy. A squiggle." He pointed at the smudged curlicue to emphasize his point. "It looks like bird shit." It might be bird shit, come to think of it. Ew.

"It's initials," OC claimed in that deeply irritating voice of hers, like he was an idiot. "There. C.S.M. I want mah bonus."

Normal squinted down at the squiggle just in case, but it didn't mysteriously unsquiggle and turn into letters, so he merely eyed her over the top of his glasses, crossed his arms, and snorted his refusal.

OC leaned forward to show off coffee-and-cream cleavage in a sadly obvious attempt to distract him as she traced the imaginary initials. "There. C. S. M. Th' man wuz in a hurry, is all."

"Wasn't in a hurry when he signed the receipt, was he?" Normal countered, unmoved. He snatched back the paper and made a shooing motion with his free hand. "Nice try. Now git."

She got, but not without another death-glare and a lot of grumbling. OC had never taken well to being thwarted, though she should've been used to it by now. They all tried the squiggle trick in sporadic intervals, obviously in the misguided belief that he had to fall for it some time. As if. Normal hadn't held his own in the chaotic business world of post-pulse America because he was so pretty.

The pitter-patter of sneakered feet died away as the stragglers hurried down the ramp to do whatever bike-messengers did in their spare time. Get stoned, probably. Normal didn't know nor did he care; his work wasn't done yet. He grabbed the disorderly pile of paperwork from the front desk and carried it into his office in the back where he dumped it on the big table to sort through it in peace. He had no idea what those kids did on their runs, because it didn't seem to matter how carefully he
fixed the delivery papers into their clipboards, they always, always, ended up torn, wrinkled, and covered in unidentifiable stains. Maybe he should introduce a penalty system... nah. Wasn't worth the effort.

It took him a while to check, alphabetize, and file the day's turnout. He didn't really mind; each piece of paper stood for a parcel delivered and a happy customer. Normal liked happy customers, because happy customers became regular customers. Regular customers were good for business. Good business was good for Normal.

He had already crosschecked the delivery sheets with the log and was about to tackle the pending orders so he could send off the first hungover messengers in an organized fashion come morning, when something – a shadow, a brush of air, a hint of some enchanting fragrance – disturbed his concentration and made him lift his head.

The man who leaned in the doorway looked like a ghost; a pale, worn-out apparition with too-big eyes and the bearing of a wounded animal. Normal straightened slowly, afraid that if he moved too fast or spoke rashly, he'd spook this ethereal, hurt creature and chase it back out into a world that had clearly treated it badly.

"Is it really you?" he asked in a hushed whisper, half convinced his mind was playing tricks on him.

"It's me," Alec confirmed, his voice quiet and rough. Obviously uncertain of his welcome, the transgenic didn't come closer; he stayed where he was, one shoulder propped against the doorframe as if he needed any support he could get, leather-clad arms hugging his middle protectively. Normal's heart but broke upon seeing this proud, spirited warrior so beaten and lost. Whatever conflicting emotions he'd harbored towards his beautiful Judas, any lasting resentment went out the window in the face of Alec's wary smile and pleading eyes. He hurried around the table, glasses sliding down his nose in excitement.

"I can't believe it. You came back! Why didn't you--" He hesitated, decided there were safer topics. "Are you hurt? Hungry? Thirsty? I got some pop tarts here somewhere, I know how much you like pop tarts..." Only reason he had them, honestly, because personally, he hated the things: nothing but sticky-sweet goo wrapped in cardboard, if you asked him, but Alec had always devoured the treats with so much childlike enthusiasm it had been a pleasure to watch and he just hadn't been able to toss them out after-- after--

"Normal--"

Alec's soft call stopped Normal in his tracks before he could dive headfirst into his cupboard in search of the colorful box. It took some courage to look back over his shoulder, because, dear Lord. She'd done got him broken, the stupid bitch. Alec tried to smile again, but the gesture was lost when he hunched over abruptly and breathed out a tight, toneless gasp.

The miserable sound hit a switch in Normal: the red one, labeled "emergency". The frantic babbling and useless panicking went on mute, stuffed down into a distant compartment of Normal's mind where it couldn't interfere with what was important. The man who stepped up to the hurting X5 was the man who'd faced off against a couple of highly trained genetically improved soldiers with a peashooter to protect his boy; the man who'd delivered a baby in a hot combat zone without losing a beat.

His tone was calm and firm when he told Alec to "Come here", his hands steady and gentle when he guided the shaky transgenic to the nearest chair and pushed him down on it. He stood for a moment with his hand on Alec's shoulder, feeling the tiny tremors that shook the lean frame, staring down at
the bowed head while he waited for the younger man to pull himself together.

"Okay," he said then, and tightened his fingers a bit to make sure he had Alec's attention. "Listen to me, champ. We gotta get you out of here. Whatever happened to you, you need help. I'm gonna get the car and take you home--"

"No." Eyes as green as summer leaves stared up at a stricken Normal imploringly. Alec swallowed. "I can't go back. They kicked me out, Normal. I just--" He looked away, broad shoulders sagging in defeat. "I can't-- I need a place to crash. I didn't know where else to go."

Pride flashed through Normal, hot and immediate, for Alec had come to him, was trusting Normal to help even with all that had gone down. "Okay," he said hoarsely, and relished the way Alec sort of leaned into his grip at that. "Okay. Of course. Sure." Even as he stuttered in pleased surprise, his mind worked out the logistics, so he could segue seamlessly into, "Stay put. I'll bring the car around to the back exit. You can stay with me."

"Just one night," Alec promised. "I'll be outta your hair tomorrow, I swear. Just need a break."

He needed more than that, Normal thought. But right now, it would have to do.

Since Normal spent most of his time at work, he'd never seen the point of investing money in his home. The two-story house wedged between a row of run-down apartment buildings and an abandoned grocery store fit all too well into the neighborhood with its gray walls and the paint peeling off the door and the window-frames. Even the Stars and Stripes so proudly displayed fluttered only halfheartedly in the cool evening wind.

It hadn't bothered Normal before, because the house was mostly a place to store his stuff and rest his weary head, but as he darted around his trusty old Ford to help Alec out of the passenger seat, he couldn't help but wish he were able to offer a nicer refuge. Alec deserved only the best; satin pillows and gold ornaments, an open fireplace maybe and a bear skin rug... certainly round the clock pampering. He'd get the latter at least, because now that Normal had his golden boy back – albeit a little damaged in body and image – he was going to spoil him rotten. It was the least he could do for somebody who'd brought him so much joy.

He'd always admired Alec, from the first moment he'd seen him prowl arrogantly through the roaring crowd towards the cage. Then, it had been a jolt of desire he'd never tried to deny, as well as a hefty portion of transference. Alec was gorgeous, the perfect athlete, lithe and strong and fearless. He was everything Normal wanted to be, a wet dream come to life, and the fact that he was male hadn't even featured into it. Normal wasn't gay, no siree, he was a red-blooded all-American male who liked titties and stuff, but he could hero-worship all he wanted. That was homosocial desire, not homosexual attraction, and yes, Normal was well educated and knew the difference, thank you very much.

To have Monty Cora work for him (talk to him, laugh with him, spend time with him) had been the ultimate kick. It had also transformed Normal's purely aesthetic appreciation into something different, deeper, he didn't dare name. Part of it was celebrity fever. Part of it wasn't. He didn't get how anybody could be around Alec and not fall for him, except maybe Jam Pony's intrepid lesbian, because Alec was special. Normal might not have known about the built-in-a-lab advantages, but he knew special when he saw it.

Even now, with dark circles under and lines of strain around his eyes, no hint of laughter or sparkling charm left, Alec was so beautiful it made Normal ache. Not his. Never owned –except, if the media had it right, he always been owned; had been manufactured like a thing and raised like a dog.
Normal didn't care; the freaks didn't horrify him anymore since he'd seen that young mother fight so hard for her unborn child, had held the tiny bundle of genetically empowered life in his hands, had internalized that the man he'd been in awe of for so long was a mutant, too. Alec was precious, and right now he was in need of care and protection until he could stretch his wings and fly again, and Normal would provide it if it killed him.

Alec looked up at him when Normal opened the car door and the sleepy trust in his eyes kicked the last of Normal's mostly dormant maternal instincts into gear.

"There, there," Normal cooed, pulling one of Alec's arms across his shoulders and half-guiding, half-heaving the transgenic into the open. "Almost there, buddy. Hold on, we'll get you into a nice, soft bed, with some nice, soft pajamas--" Ohhhhh, Alec in jammies... "--you'll be as good as new before you'll know it."

"Actually, I doubt that," a dry, cynical voice interjected, and before Normal knew it, a dark-haired, hard-eyed, and unnervingly familiar-looking man had pushed him away and maneuvered himself into Normal's place at Alec's side. "Close your mouth and fucking move, dickweasel," he ordered in a tone that suggested he was used to having people jump at his command. "Into the house. Now."

Normal jumped into action, scrambling to obey, because he knew authority when it growled in his face and authority was currently scowling darkly enough to put Papa Ronald to shame – and that was saying something.

"You," Alec whispered, sounding like he was about a second from keeling over. "Logan said you were gone."

"Surprise. I'm back." The man didn't even bother to glance at Alec; too busy glaring at Normal to focus on the conversation. "Key. Lock. Door," he instructed. "What do I have to do, draw you a map?"

"No, sir," Normal assured, and quickly unlocked the door so the other man could all but carry his burden across the threshold and into the questionable safety of Reagan Ronald's residence.

"Bedroom." Again it wasn't so much a query as a demand, and for some reason it made Alec – who was swaying on his feet – lower his head and chuckle brokenly.

"Upstairs," Normal rapped back, getting into the groove of things. "Second room on the right, sir."

"Lock the door, turn on the fucking heating, and get us something to eat."

And off they went, the stranger steering Alec up the stairs and Normal doing as he was told. He ran outside, locked his car, went back, locked his door, went into the kitchen, raided his fridge... about two thirds into preparing a huge tray of food, stress-blurred memories clicked into place and he nearly dropped the bottle of ketchup.

Agent White.

Oh sweet baby Jesus, he'd just left Alec in the hands of the top transgenic hunter, the man who'd led a hit squad straight into Jam Pony to wreak havoc. White was Government, he was Authority, he was Proud American... but Alec was Normal's boy, and he was helpless right now, and daddy had always said a man had to defend his loved ones. It was a Real Man's Duty.

Alec might be more of an example of American know-how than the American ideal, but, for what it was worth, Normal loved him, so he dug out his old scattergun, said a quick prayer, and headed up the stairs to do what he had to do. He came through the door shotgun at the ready and heart in his
throat, prepared for everything from finding the room empty to White busy garroting Alec.

Reality still came as a shock.

The bed had been made with military precision when he left, because Reagan had been raised right and was no slob like everybody else in his acquaintance. White had torn off the blanket and bunched it carelessly between Alec and the wall so the transgenic could stretch out on the mattress. Alec's boots and pants had been tossed haphazardly into the general direction of Normal's armchair and the man himself was currently aiding White's struggle with his shirt, movements so slow and uncoordinated he was more hindrance than help.

Normal couldn't have said what packed more of a punch: all that flawless skin bared to his adoring gaze, or the sight of his boy giving up and leaning his tired head against his enemy's shoulder while White freed him from the tangled mess. It took the wind out of Normal's sails, though it didn't make him lower the gun.

"Let him go and step away from the bed," he told White, tone as firm as he could make it.

White dropped the shirt to the floor, patently unconcerned; one hand skimmed down Alec's chest to settle greedily on his tight little belly. "Or what?"

"Or I'll shoot."

This bold claim bought him a skeptical glance. "And hit Alec, too?" White smirked, mouth very red in his winter-pale face. "Go ahead. Think he'll still look good with a face full of buckshot?"

"You're being an asshole again," Alec piped up, words muffled against the softness of White's cashmere pullover. He sounded annoyed, but Normal noticed he made no move to dislodge the presumptuous paw. "Leave Normal alone."

"'Normal',' White said, contempt thick in his voice, "is pointing a fucking gun at me. Which I'll shove up his ass in about ten seconds." The last part was accompanied by a baleful stare.

With a sigh, Alec lifted his head until he was looking at Normal over White's shoulder. "Put the gun down, Normal. He means it."

The last time Alec had spoken with this particular mix of resignation and pride, he'd just disarmed Normal and outed himself as a freak. The memory stung. Normal lowered his weapon, a dreadful suspicion rising in his mind. "Oh Lord. He's a mutant, too?"

They really were everywhere!

White turned crimson with outrage whereas Alec barked out the first real laugh Normal had heard from him in too long.

"Nah," Alec gasped, once he could breathe again. "He's just--"

"—better," White interrupted.

"You still smell like chili-chocolate," Alec told him fondly, and passed out.

Chapter Ten:
One of the first lessons Ames had learned as a child had been that once you made a decision, it didn't pay to question it. Uncertainty caused you to falter and, more often than not, to falter meant to fail. Failure was punished severely.

Consequently, when Ames chose his unborn child over his kin and his beliefs, he didn't waste time agonizing and doubting. He made the necessary arrangements with Miriam for when he'd need somebody to help birth the child, tossed his cell phone into the open hatch of an eastbound freight train, and drew up a plan of action while driving back to Seattle.

All things considered, his starting position wasn't all that bad. He had a network of independent manpower that, while nowhere near as vast as the Conclave's, was fairly reliable. He had money, a few good hideouts, and enough weaponry stashed around the city and beyond to start a small war. He belonged to one of the absolute top breeding lines, had been playing hide and seek with the big boys for years, and possessed a ruthless skill unrivaled among his kind. He didn't need the Phalanx's brutal strength; in contrast to the "warrior elite", he had brains. Most important of all though, he had an intimate knowledge of all factions likely to go after him.

Things would get more difficult after the Coming, of course, but Alec would survive and so would their offspring, and that was what mattered. Chances were the baby would have a much easier time of it than a pureblood, actually, since transgenics had been designed to withstand the morsus serpantis. What had seemed like blasphemy before was a relief now; Ames would have his hands full keeping them all alive, he wouldn't be able to afford the distraction of worrying about a sick child on top of that.

First things first; he had to get his mate out of Terminal City. It was a safe bet neither Alec nor the rest of the freaks had figured out the reason behind Alec's "illness", which meant he wouldn't get the care he needed. Unattended, the stubborn idiot would try to work past his body's self-protective measures, staying awake and busy when he should rest, sticking to his assigned rations when he should eat more than twice as much. Ames had to get to him before Alec killed himself and their unborn child; or before some fuckbrained transgenic did something stupid.

He had no time for games. He'd gone AWOL once too often; getting back into the Conclave's good graces would take too much time and effort. His first priority now was to retrieve what was his and find a safe place to hole up until the worst was over and Alec mobile again.

When Ames dropped off the grid, chaos ensued as agents, Familiars, and the Conclave's observation team started a frantic search, stirring up the mud and getting in each other's way. The general confusion was useful as it allowed him to duck in and out of places normally well-guarded and kept people too busy to notice things going missing and equipment being manipulated. He made sure to add to the muddle whenever the opportunity arose, to keep everybody off balance and unsure about the circumstances of Ames' disappearance. His familiarity with procedure made it easy for Ames to plant faux evidence and predict his opponents' moves while he pursued his own agenda. Still, it was a complex dance that didn't allow mistakes, which made it difficult to find a way into Terminal City that didn't involve tanks, explosives, or full exposure.

He'd ruled out the sewers (too heavily guarded) and the smaller gates (very thorough surveillance) and was timing guard movements for the well tried just-jump-the-fucking-fence maneuver when he ran into an unexpected problem by the name of Otto Gottlieb. Or rather, Otto ran into him – fell over his outstretched form on a rooftop, to be precise – which was when things took a decidedly surreal turn.

"Whoa," Otto cried out when he hit the dirt, then he blinked, recognized Ames, and added with a
distinct air of unsurprised satisfaction, "There you are."


Otto's eyes widened, but you had to hand it to him: he didn't scare easily. "He left TC this morning," he said quickly, gaze fixed on Ames' face, not the gun.

Ames hesitated. He sure as hell hadn't anticipated this development. "Who?" he asked suspiciously.

"X5-494." Otto smiled weakly. "He slipped out through the north gate at daybreak."

Fuck. That was the problem when you were working alone; you couldn't cover nearly as much ground. Now what? And anyway– "How the fuck did you find me? And what the fuck do you think you know? And who the fuck else knows?"

"Uhm... can we maybe sit up while we talk? And could you put away the gun?"

The agent was doing his best to look harmless, but Ames wasn't about to underestimate him again.

"No. Talk."

Otto sighed. "I know you, okay? We've been working together for three years and I might be clueless about most of the stuff going on behind the scenes, but I'm good at reading people. Also, you... uh... you were in a bit of a hurry every time you left to meet him. I was worried, so I followed you."

Ames stared at him stonily, not a blink betraying his utter mortification. Tailed by Otto. Successfully tailed by Otto. It smarted. "What--" He had to clear his throat and consciously relax his trigger finger. "What do you know?"

From the ground, Otto regarded him solemnly. "I know you broke every rule in the book. I know you changed because of it. And I-- I know what it's like to fall in love with the wrong person."

Oh, the drama. Oh, the surprise. Otto was a fucking bleeding-heart romantic. Might be useful, so Ames made himself lower the gun slightly and tried to look stricken. He didn't say anything – too much potential to overdo it – but he closed his eyes briefly to simulate vulnerability.

It worked like a charm. Otto looked like he was ready to break out the guitar and start singing Kum Ba Ya. "I'm not sure what your agenda was before, sir," he admitted, "but I'm pretty certain you were working for more than one master. I gotta confess I'll feel safer knowing you're out of the game... and I'm willing to help you."

Not so naïve after all, but still a romantic. Time to pull the Romeo and Juliet card. "You'd help me to--" Don't say reunite. Don't say reunite. "–find my transgenic lover?"

However perceptive Otto might be in other regards, he fell for the "hesitant but guardedly hopeful" routine hook, line, and sinker. "Yeah, I would."

Well, he was Ames' best bet if Alec really had disappeared into the sizable urban sprawl that was Seattle. Ames grudgingly decided to go with the flow. "All right," he said, engaged the safety and put up his gun. "Show me what you got... and I still want to know how the hell you found me." Otto opened his mouth, laughter in his eyes, and Ames added quickly, "And if you say 'I know you', I'll drop kick you off the roof."
"Actually," Otto told him serenely, "I tried to imagine what I'd do if I were able to simply jump that fence, and then checked the most promising entry locations."

Otto, Ames decided, would either end up an invaluable ally, or shot to shit.

Jam Pony was familiar ground, so it shouldn't have surprised Ames that Alec went to Reagan "Normal" Ronald for help – but somehow, it still did. Maybe it was Otto's evaluation of the man (spineless sycophant) or his own memories of the messenger service (run-down, vermin-infested dump) that made it seem so unlikely anybody would go there voluntarily. Maybe it was Ames' unexplainable, stupid assumption that Alec would return to Ames' house and wait there like a good little pregnant super soldier.

The realization that, had he been on his own, he essentially would've counted on whatever sick bond had developed between him and the transgenic during their months of enforced intimacy to find Alec pissed Ames off considerably. He watched with narrowed eyes as Reagan Ronald and Alec left the building through the back exit, not liking the way Alec had to lean on the other man to make it to the car. It was a good thing Otto was driving, because Ames' right foot tensed automatically when Alec slumped against the passenger side window halfway to their destination, clearly at the end of his tether. It made him unaccountably angry to see this sign of weakness and know Alec was letting it happen in front of a nobody.

When they finally did pull up in front of the most desolate looking house Ames had seen in a while, Ames was seething. He almost went up to Ronald and broke his neck just to blow off some steam, but Otto had a point when he reminded him they were trying to keep a low profile.

"Just keep your head down," he said as Ames pushed open the door so hard the hinges whined in protest. "I'll get you a clean phone and keep you updated."

He better.

"I appreciate it," Ames ground out, focused on the scene before him.

"Don't kill anybody." Otto leaned across the seat, trying to catch Ames' gaze and failing. "You hearing me? No racking up a body count."

Thus provoked, Ames bent down again briefly. "You sound like my mother."

Wasn't like anybody would've ever recovered Ronald's body. Ames was no amateur. Still, it was much more practical to commandeer the moron's house for Ames's purposes, if not quite as satisfying. Nobody who knew him would ever believe he'd lay low in a place like that and actually consider cohabitating with the owner. He could hardly believe it himself, which really made it the perfect hideout.

The look on Alec's face when Ames pushed aside the human crutch and took his rightful place was priceless; the disbelief and jealousy in the moron's eyes when he burst into the room to play knight in shining glasses to find Ames undressing Alec was even better.

Mine, Ames thought viciously, resting one hand possessively on Alec's stomach. Mine. He meant the baby, but he also meant the man who was carrying it, and that was a revelation he could've lived without.

Ames didn't like Normal. Normal was an easily manipulated, conspiracy-theories spouting, totally unnecessary nimrod who was good for nothing but buying food and being in the way. If Ames
could've gotten away with it, he would've beaten the shit out of Normal and locked him into a closet for the duration of his and Alec's stay – the repressed twit would've been right at home there. Alas, they needed Normal to keep up appearances, so Ames and Reagan Ronald spent two very unpleasant days trying to avoid each other while Alec slept and fevered.

Terminal City hadn't been kind to the transgenic; Alec was worse now than the last time Ames had seen him. If he hadn't lost weight, he sure as hell hadn't gained any either: you still couldn't tell his condition just from looking at him.

Normal didn't want to go to work, but Ames kicked him out with a reminder of how many people would be delighted to get their hands on a live but helpless transgenic for all sorts of nasty experiments and worse. Judging from the glassy-eyed stumble out the door, he'd given Normal sufficient nightmare material for the next couple of years, which suited Ames fine. Regrettably, this also had the effect that Normal called every ten minutes to make sure Alec hadn't been kidnapped or expired. Ames took the harassment gracefully: he unplugged the phone, waited until Normal came racing back home in a panic, then told him to stop it with the fucking phone calls. Normal slunk away and Ames went back to the master bedroom to enjoy some alone-time with Alec.

Finally left to his own devices, Ames dug out Miriam's checklist and examined Alec to the best of his ability. The transgenic's temperature was higher than it was supposed to be, an indication he was starting to lose the battle against his own immune system, but Miriam had prepared Ames for that possibility. She'd also assured him the fever would go down once Alec was given a chance to rest and focus on reestablishing the fragile balance he'd achieved before. Ames tried to speed up the process by soaking Normal's softest towels in cold water and running them over Alec's burning skin like he'd done the last time the fever had spiked.

He found himself spellbound by Alec's belly, not flat anymore but curved very gently outward, taut and firm. Ames kept coming back to it, his fingers stroking the barely noticeable bulge that held his child, caressing smooth skin, feeling for a response to his delicate prodding and smiling like a damn fool when he actually did sense movement. It was hard to imagine there was a baby in there; by the end of her second trimester, Wendy hadn't been able to fit into her loosest pants. The last few weeks she'd looked like she'd swallowed a prize-winning pumpkin. According to Miriam, it depended on the size of the fetus and on how it was positioned – some women, she'd told him, hardly showed even in their ninth month. Alec was lucky, or maybe well designed; less distention meant less chance of discovery and probably less trauma for Alec.

Ames snorted. The man was pregnant. Ames couldn't fathom how anything could cushion that kind of news. He knew he would've freaked right the fuck out and then some. It was the main reason why he'd decided not to tell Alec. The last thing he needed was for the X5 to snap and try to cut the fetus out of his body with the first blade he found, or to run right back to Terminal City. If 452 heard who the daddy was, she'd probably dig in with a rusty coat hanger. Or, another favorite: the transgenic fuckers wouldn't even contemplate surgery but – blindly trusting Manticore's proficiency – decide to make Alec go through a "natural" birth, unaware that there was no way this could happen... and even if, by some miracle, Alec's body had adapted far enough to make it happen, there was no chance he would survive the ordeal. Miriam had been positive on that, describing the most likely scenarios in gory detail until Ames had told her to shut up, he got it, damn it. No, better to come up with some bullshit story. Ames was good at improvisation and Miriam provided the medical details to make the yarn believable. Together, they'd fabricated an airtight fable about a non-contagious viral infection with a long incubation period and a solution being in the works. When the time came, Ames would simply call Miriam who'd come and give Alec a shot that would have him sleep peacefully all through the bloody delivery.
It was perfect.

Like so many perfect plans, it went south before it was put into practice, in this case because Ames had obviously gone soft in the head where X5-494 was concerned. It started with his completely understandable urge to be close to Alec, to touch, sniff, reassure himself his mate was alive, if not well. Had to be the pheromones again, making sure the vulnerable male was protected by his partner. Ames didn't fight it, because not only was it no use trying to deny the chemically induced want, he also had every intention to protect his progeny.

Truth be told, Ames didn't really mind the closeness anymore. He'd gotten used to the warmth of Alec's body plastered against his, the unconscious nuzzling and the contented humming whenever Ames gave in and petted the soft hair or stroked along the alluring curve of Alec's spine. He liked how pliant Alec was when he was sleepy, his defenses down. He basked in the knowledge that this exquisite, deadly brainchild of his father's was now his. Somewhere along the line, his priorities had gotten all mixed up until the fact that X5-494 was little more than an animal took a backseat to the understanding that Alec fit him like a glove.

It was early afternoon, muted sunshine drifting through the quiet bedroom. Ames was propped up against the headboard, legs stretched out on the mattress with Alec pressed close, watching the dust motes drift lazily through the hazy September light. Having run himself ragged those past weeks, he was half asleep himself by the time Alec's need for nourishment finally overcame his need for rest. It took Ames almost a minute to process that the green eyes staring up at him had been closed until now; he snatched back his hand from where it had rested on Alec's shoulder and blinked the tiredness out of his own eyes.

Alec breathed out a stale sigh and crawled up until he could lean his head against Ames' stomach. "Why'd you come back?" he muttered into the fabric of Ames's shirt.

Ames' mouth did that thing again, where it bypassed every wall and bulwark of rationality and careful planning and shot off on its own without sense or permission. "Looks like I really did knock you up."

Those blasted pheromones must've mutated and eaten through the filter between his brain and his yap; there was no other explanation.

Unimpressed, Alec coughed out a raspy laugh. "Yeah. Right. We gettin' a boy or a girl?"

Once more Ames' mind flipped to the wish-image of the little girl with those incredibly green eyes and Ames' sardonic smile, and he stared at her with the same pang of longing he felt whenever he thought of his missing son. "A girl," he said softly, fingers finding Alec's hair again and stroking it absentmindedly. Might as well come clean while he was at it. "Your due date's in December. Try not to make it a fucking Christmas baby."

Alec yawned, his breath filling the fine-spun silk of Ames' shirt; it created a spot of warmth so intimate it made goose bumps rise all over his chest and sides. "I'm hungry."

"I know." Ames shifted to the side, tried to dislodge Alec without dumping him on his face. "There's steaks in the kitchen." He had no idea where Normal had gotten them, but they must've cost a pretty bundle in either money or favors. Ames didn't care; Alec needed to make up for whatever shitty food he'd been fed in Terminal City. He poked a solid biceps. "Lemme up."

"Steaks?" Alec rolled over onto his back and looked up at him in confusion. "What's the occasion?"

Two ways to handle it; and of course Ames had to choose the hard one. He didn't say a word, just
reached out and put his hand on Alec's belly like he'd done so often during the past two days. He studied the sight of his fingers splayed over his mate's bare skin, a protective shield between Alec's vulnerable middle and the world, and then lifted his gaze to meet Alec's. They stared at each other, Ames calm and certain, Alec growing increasingly uneasy.

A heavy gulp broke the silence. "This isn't funny anymore," Alec whispered.

Ames shrugged minutely. "I wasn't kidding."

"Stop it." Alec tried to sit up, but Ames merely slid his hand up to his chest and pressed down lightly. In his weakened condition, Alec was no match for him and thus had to remain flat on his back, forced to listen.

"I dug up your Manticore files," Ames told him levelly. Alec tensed; Ames held him in place. "I got them with me; you can have a look at them if you want. They sure make for interesting reading. Remember the last time you were down in psi ops?" He smiled humorlessly. "I bet you don't. Not all of it, anyway. How much time're you missing? About two weeks?"

Under Ames' restraining hand, Alec's heartbeat thrummed hectically, but Alec refused to answer, completely in defensive mode now.

"They fucked with your body chemistry," Ames explained, unable to stop, incapable of mercy. "They cut you up and played with your insides, gave you a second set of reproductive organs and rigged it to activate when stimulated appropriately... that would've been when I fucked you stupid."

Alec closed his eyes, his breath going ragged. "You fucker."

"Exactly," Ames snapped, temper rising with the retelling of what he'd thought he'd accepted. "And don't even think about blaming me, asshole. I got hit by your fucking pheromones and was dragged into this shit kicking and screaming. Think I wanted to get hitched to a freak like you?"

That might've come out a bit too harshly; Alec flinched as if he'd been hit and turned his head to the side, trying to hide his face.

Ames felt a stab of what might've been remorse, but it was too late to stop now and he didn't know how else to tell this sordid tale.

"They made you fertile; when the meds wore off, you went into heat, I came along at the wrong fucking moment, and presto! We're gonna be daddies. Congratulations."

At that, Alec started to struggle in earnest. "Get off me," he snarled. "You fucking– Get off me!"

"Why the fuck did you think you sleep so much?" Ames sneered, relentless. "Or eat like you're starving all the time but not get fat? Did you think you had some fucking viral infect–"

Whatever else Ames had wanted to say, it was lost in the crack of Alec's knee connecting forcefully with his back, driving him forward right into Alec's elbow. Reality went dim and distant for a moment as Alec shoved his stunned body to the side and tipped him over the edge of the mattress. Normal's carpet didn't look any better close up.

Ames shook his head to get rid of the ringing in his ears – damn, Alec hit like a fucking mule – then lifted himself up to his hands and knees just in time to be squashed flat again when Alec scrambled off the bed and made a beeline for the door. Horror visions of razorblades and scissors dancing before his mind's eye, Ames scrambled up and lurched after him.

"Get your pregnant ass back in bed, you moron!" he bellowed, ricocheting off the doorframe and pelting down the corridor. "You're gonna hurt the baby!"
"Fuck the baby," was the distinct answer, "I gotta hurl!"

And next thing Ames knew, he was standing in the doorway of Reagan Ronald's bathroom and watched his unwilling partner drop to his knees in front of the toilet to retch like a cat about to cough up a hairball. There wasn't much to come up, but the dry heaves kept Alec busy long enough for Ames' head to clear again. He might not feel pain, but he suspected he'd barely escaped a concussion, and his back was going to be blue and black for days. Suitable punishment for underestimating an agitated transgenic.

He checked the room while Alec was busy trying to purge his body, confiscated Normal's straight razor, a nail file, and a pair of clippers just to be on the safe side, then went downstairs to cook the steaks so he wouldn't have to listen to the godawful sounds of Alec's suffering.

Chapter Eleven:
Needle in a Haystack

Joshua, Max learned soon, didn't quite share her attitude towards slackers. Or maybe it was only this particular slacker; the big guy had always had a soft spot for Alec. Actually, that was an understatement: when Joshua found out Max had advised Alec to leave Terminal City, all hell broke loose.

It was quite the show, though only a few brave souls dared stay to watch the fireworks once Joshua turned up the volume (and Logan didn't count, as he was a safe distance away watching via camera). The earth might not have moved, but the monitors sure shook and a few glasses vibrated dangerously when Max exploded, too, and hit the higher notes of her spectrum.

Joshua smashed a table; Max punched Mole. Luke cowered under his computer console and clung to his recently salvaged laptop to keep it safe.

The fight ended abruptly when Joshua started to list all the things that might happen to Alec in exile, alone and off his game. His voice began to shake around point three (snatched up by the military) and cracked pitifully by point six (cut up and recycled by Steelheads), and when he choked up and turned away to – unsuccessfully – hide tears of fear and angry helplessness, Max folded like a house of cards.

"Okay, damn it. I'll bring him back," she promised, damn near crying herself. "Come on, big fella, stop--" She touched his shoulder tentatively. "I'll go get him, okay?"

"What for?" Joshua barked, whirling around to face her again. "If Alec doesn't get better, Max is just gonna boot him out again!" He illustrated the last part with a kick against the metal stairs that set the entire railing ringing.

Max stared up at him, at the strange, kind face wet with tears and haggard with dread and lack of sleep, and her shoulders slumped a little in shame. "Rita made you a good deal on those paintings," she said quietly. She'd planned to use the money to finally hire that damn plumber, but the septic tanks would just have to do for a while longer. "I guess we can afford to feed him until he's well again."

Joshua met her gaze squarely and with amazing dignity considering he was still crying. "What if Alec doesn't get better?"
Not an option. Alec would get over it; he had to, she wouldn't allow anything else. She wasn't going to lose her headstrong brother to this shadow version of himself. No way. No how. "Then I'll just kick his ass around TC," she joked.

"No more kicking Alec's ass." Joshua wasn't amused, but at least the tears had stopped. "I mean it, Max. No more work, or— or— or tasks, or— or bitching out." He turned to include everybody present in a pretty damn impressive glare.

"If Alec really is depressed, letting him hole up in your room and wallow in it won't make him better though," Logan argued, which made Joshua growl at the monitor. Logan ignored the irritated sound and kept talking. "I have a friend who might be able to help— She's a therapist specializing in war trauma. Might not apply one hundred percent here, but..." Logan shrugged and offered his bashful it's-our-best-shot smile.

"I bet White did something to him," Max muttered bitterly. "Anyway, we're at war with White's people, White had Alec, probably tortured him... makes Alec a POW in my book. Close enough." She moved closer to the camera so Logan could see her better and gave him a nod, case decided. "Call her."

"Wait!" Joshua called, and Logan, who'd been about to disconnect, stopped and looked at him questioningly. Joshua shuffled closer to the screen as well, ducking down so his massive frame fit into camera range, all earnest eyes and pleading. "Tell her... tell her to be nice to him."

Logan nodded, but Joshua wasn't done yet. "Tell her she's gotta be— be quiet. No yelling. Everybody's always yelling at Alec." No reproachful look around this time, but the guilty parties got the message just fine.

"Anything else?" Logan asked, unfailingly patient and polite, though his lips kept threatening to pull up into a smile.

"She can't make Alec tell things Alec doesn't want to tell," Joshua added promptly. "Alec is—" He shook his head, searching for words. "Alec is— is wounded, inside. Scared. Won't listen much, won't want to talk. Your friend pesters, Alec will fight back. She can't pester." It was a warning, as clear as Joshua could make it.

"No pestering," Logan repeated, clearly not relishing the idea of pitting his hapless therapist friend against a trained Manticore agent cum assassin when said agent cum assassin wasn't going to be cooperative. "I'll tell her. May I—" He pointed somewhere off-screen, "may I go call her now?"

Judging from the deep scowl on his face, Joshua still wasn't happy with the solution, but he bobbed his head up and down once reluctantly. "Logan blaze. Get Alec help."

"I will." And with a weak but encouraging smile, Logan logged off and the monitor went dark.

Joshua stared at the blank screen forlornly for a moment, then turned to Max expectantly. "Little fella?"

Might as well. "Lemme get my stuff," Max sighed. "And stop it with the puppy eyes. I'll have him back by tomorrow."

But of course it wasn't quite so easy.

On day five, Max caved and went back to her old place to touch base with Original Cindy and put up her feet for a while before she continued her frustrating and so far absolutely fruitless search for
Alec. She had to admit, she was a tad concerned by now – Alec might've been primed for covert ops, but he'd never kept this low a profile before. The pessimistic part of her kept sneaking up and whispering, *You want low? Six feet under is pretty low...*, into her ear.

"I even shook down Eddie and his loser 'mates,'" Max finished her tale of woe, cross-legged on her best friend's bed with a cup of hot chocolate in one hand and her favorite throw pillow squashed comfortably against her belly. Man, she'd missed that pillow. "Nothing. It's like Alec disappeared in a puff of smoke."

"Or maybe he left Seattle," OC offered, which – friend or no friend – did not endear her to Max.

"Don't even say that," Max moaned, and tipped over until she lay flat on her back so she could stare gloomily at the cracked ceiling. She held up the cup so OC could see she hadn't spilled a drop then moaned again. "I can't go back without him. Joshua cried. Can you imagine how awful it is to make that happen?"

"I feel ya, boo." A soft hand patted Max's knee sympathetically, before deft fingers pulled the cup away to put it down safely on the nightstand. "I don't know what you could possibly do, though. Your boy's good at what he does. If he doesn't want t' be found--" She hesitated.

The pause was promising enough to make Max sit up and stare at her hopefully. "What?"

OC wrinkled her nose, still thinking. "Call me crazy, but did you check Normal's digs?"

Max stared at her blankly, not sure where her friend was going. "I told you, I've been everywhere. Alec's not there; not in the back office, not upstairs. I even checked the basement."

And what a harrowing experience that had been. The upper floors of Jam Pony's were merely deserted; the basement, on the other hand, was a chamber of horrors filled with bicycle parts, rotting messenger jackets still stinking faintly of sweat and grease, rats nesting in cracked helmets, mountains of moldy files piled up to the low ceiling, and a few spray-painted mannequins that had given Max the scare of her life when she'd rounded a corner and walked right into them.

"I ain't talkin' about Jam Pony." OC rolled her eyes and smirked, her mood improving visibly with the realization that she might actually be able to help. "Th' man does have some sort of private life, y'know? He's got a house in sector eight."

Normal had a house? Normal had a *life*? Max's disbelief must've shown all too clearly, for OC snorted unladylike. "Trust me. Sky told Terrry who told Cream who talks in her sleep..." She grinned lewdly, "...and I got curious an' followed him home once." Max boggled. OC blushed. "Hey, I was drunk, okay?"

Some tales had better stay untold. Max pushed back visions of her intoxicated friend weaving after Normal with stalkerish intent and focused on the essential. "So what makes you think Alec might be holing up at Normal's?"

"Well, he wasn't anywhere else ya looked, was he?" OC raised both eyebrows, waited until Max grudgingly conceded the point, then added, "And Normal's been acting mighty weird lately. Could be just Normal bein' Normal, but..."

"Weird?" With Normal, that wasn't saying much. "Weird how?"

"Weird," OC repeated, as if that were explanation enough, but she deigned to elaborate when Max flapped an impatient hand at her. "Y'know, fidgety. Mutterin' to himself. He's been mixin' up packages, sendin' Sketchy on all-day runs, closin' early... and he fell for the squiggle trick
yesterday. Th' man's not himself, I'm tellin' ya."

That did sound suspicious. Might be nothing, but Max was all out of options and even though it was difficult to believe "Coalition for a Transgenic-Free Seattle" Normal would harbor a tranny, the tranny in question had been the man's "golden boy" once and Normal was nothing if not sentimental.

"You got an address?"

Normal's home was pretty much what Max had expected: it sat before her grimy and squat between two equally uninspiring buildings, the only specks of color a dented, purple mailbox and a huge American flag on a house-mounted flagpole. Except for the latter, the style was classic post-pulse Seattle. So was the lock.

Now, Max's DNA might've been an eclectic mix, but cat was dominant in her cocktail and, as so often, her curiosity got the better of her once she was inside. She snooped around the living room, sniggering at the pictures on the mantelpiece (Normal as a kid had been one dorky little nerd) and scoffing at the cheap china tea set locked away in a cheap display cabinet. She inspected the broom closet, which seemed to be sorted by alphabet starting with ammonia cleaner in the front and ending with Ziploc bags in the back. Talk about anal retentive.

The kitchen proved more interesting insomuch as it was extremely well stocked. The fridge was stuffed with high-protein goodies and fresh vegetables, the cupboards with whole wheat bread, cereal, and fruit juice. The entire room smelled of fresh cooked meals; nothing spicy, but good enough to make her stomach growl anyway.

Distracted by the heavenly aromas, she didn't take precautions when sneaking up the stairs until the creaks and moans of the old wood construction finally registered and she adjusted her steps accordingly. Her inattention made her wince; if Alec was indeed up there, he'd know she was here now. Then again, if this Alec was the same Alec who'd moped around Terminal City these past few weeks, he was probably still fast asleep, and Normal was at work; she'd made sure of that before she'd come.

She checked the first room on the left. It was a bathroom. Blue tiles, pink shower curtain, fancy shower gel, electric razor, huge-ass bottle of vitamins... nothing out of the ordinary, except maybe that Normal had three toothbrushes, but since OC also refused to toss out her old ones for at least a year, she didn't consider this too strange. The first room on the right turned out to be a bedroom with a narrow couch bed and a closet full of clothes. Very prep-school. Very boring. Very Normal.

The second room on the left was empty, but looked like Normal was trying to do... something... with it. She couldn't figure out why the man would want to paint the walls pink and hang up a frilly curtain, and she sure as hell didn't have the least inkling as to why there were what looked like old mattresses and boards piled up against the back wall. Knowing Normal, it only made sense in his odd little world.

She walked out the door puzzling over the mystery and stepped into the last room half expecting it to be empty as well, only to find herself staring into the barrel of a veritable hand-cannon. Held by Sketchy. Sketchy. Holding a Smith and Wesson 460XVR revolver.

The picture was so incongruous Max's brain refused to compute it at first. Then several details trickled in that made it even worse. Sketchy looked somewhere between scared shitless and relieved to see her. He was on his knees, legs spread for better balance so the recoil wouldn't knock him flat, and holding the heavy gun in a two-handed grip that wasn't half bad. Alec was snoring softly on the bed, nestled in his blankets and out cold. Protected by Sketchy. Who was holding a Smith and
"All right," Max breathed. "What the *fuck* is going on here?"

Sketchy smiled uncertainly. "Hi, Max. Would you... uhm... would you go away, please?"

What a nice hello. Max stood with her hands on her hips, irritation an acid burn trickling down her throat to pool in her belly. "Sketchy, what are you doing?"

Her sharp tone made Sketchy swallow, but he didn't lower the gun. "I'm helping Alec. Making sure no one sneaks up on him, you know?"

"Funny," Max shot back, "Looks to me like you're aiming a *gun* at your *friend".

"Oh. Yeah." Sketchy blushed and fidgeted a bit unhappily. The revolver, Max noted, stayed as it was. "I'm sorry about that. Really, I– I don't wanna shoot you. So if you could just leave? Please?"

Damn, the boy could look almost as sorry-pleading-cute as Joshua when he put his mind to it. Too bad that kind of thing didn't fly with Max. "I'm not leaving without Alec. He's sick, in case you didn't notice, with all that *gun pointing* and all. I'm taking him back to Terminal City. We take care of our own."

"Don't get me wrong," Sketchy said cautiously, a hint of steel in his voice, "but as far as I heard, you kicked him out. That's not cool. Especially since–" He cleared his throat, got that shifty-eyed look that said he was lying like a rug, and finished lamely, "–since he's sick. So why don't you just turn around and go, okay?"

"No." Max planted her feet, crossed her arms, and smiled grimly. "What'cha gonna do? Shoot me?"

"Uhm..." Sketchy blinked. "If I have to?"

It was one of those moments when Max really wanted to slap some sense into the man. "You do realize that with a high velocity gun like that one, even if you *do* hit me," which was highly unlikely, given Sketchy's track record, "the bullet will keep going, punch through the wall behind me, and probably hit an innocent bystander, right?"

Sketchy's faced hardened. "Do you realize that with a high velocity gun like this one, all I gotta do is graze you and the shock'll knock you out even though you're a transgenic? And that there's enough padding nailed to the wall behind you to stop the bullet?"

Max paused. Ookay. Somebody had been giving Sketchy private lessons. There was no way in hell the well-meaning dopehead had come up with all that by himself. She doubted it had been Alec; not because Alec couldn't have done it, but because arming friendly civilians and putting them into the line of fire wasn't Alec's style, hard-nosed as he could be. Wasn't Normal's style either.

"Who have you been talking to, Sketchy?" she asked, not liking the notion of an unknown fourth player in this game.

She had to keep the conversation going; sooner or later – sooner, judging from the minute tremors that had already started in Sketchy's arms – the gun would grow too heavy and Sketchy would either have to lower it or become so unsteady it didn't matter. He was a good friend, Sketchy was, and he could be surprisingly persistent when it counted, but he hadn't been built for this kind of situation.

One small step forward though, and Sketchy's trembling limbs steadied remarkably. "Stop," he told her loudly, eyes wide with alarm. "Damn it, Max! I can't let you in here, I promised."
Now they were getting somewhere. "Promised who?"

"Promised me."

She had just enough time to recognize the voice before a fist hammered down between her shoulder blades and slammed her face-first into the floor.

Ames White.

This was going to hurt.

Chapter Twelve:
Shit, Meet Fan

You could say what you wanted about White, but he was no slouch in the fighting department. He'd wiped the floor with Mole the last time they'd tangled, and Mole was one of the most viciously effective fighters Max knew. Not quite on Joshua's level when it came to sheer strength, but designed purely as a killer; no fancy education, no distractions. White had kicked the crap out of him without even breaking a sweat.

Max caught a quick glimpse of Sketchy finally dropping the damn gun then fingers like steel clamped around her left ankle and dragged her back on her belly, out of the room, into the corridor. She was too stunned yet to resist and White, never one to pass up a chance, made good use of her weakness and smashed her against the nearest wall with enough force to make plaster rain down.

Every bit of air left Max's lungs in a whoosh. She could feel White adjust his grip, about to keep going, bash her against the other wall, back and forth until her skull split and her back broke and her own ribs stabbed her to death. No way. She didn't take the time to force down the stomach-churning disorientation, just pushed off the floor with both arms and kicked out with her free leg. The heel of her boot connected solidly with White's face. It made him stagger back a step and loosen his hold, only a bit, but enough for her to wrench free and tumble forward, out of White's immediate reach.

He followed her at once; a juggernaut, undeterred by her strength, more than capable of matching her blow for blow. Different somehow, no more fancy suit but black pants and a black turtleneck. Quieter. He'd never been one to talk much during a fight, but this grim-faced intensity was new, disconcerting. One of White's flaws had always been his temper – the man was a hothead and he really didn't like her, which had made him sloppy sometimes in the past.

No more.

She had to fall back, hampered by the close quarters of the corridor, realized quickly the bastard was planning to pitch her down the stairs. Might work. Might not. She'd rather not risk it, so she took a running start and jumped over him. She needed room to move to add more oomph to her kicks, but the door to the empty room was blocked by Sketchy, whose curiosity had gotten the better of him again.

When Max dove through the doorway into the bedroom, White let out a roar and was after her faster than she'd have thought possible. She punched him; his head jerked to the side but his body didn't follow – it was like going up against a robot. Retaliation came so swiftly she couldn't block him, could only try to roll with it. She stumbled back, stepped on something crinkly that pulled her foot out from under her like a damn banana peel. The backs of her knees hit the edge of the bed. White
reached out to grab her but missed, and with an "oof" and a flail, Max landed right on Alec who’d somehow managed to stay asleep through all the commotion.

Alec came around with a sharp cry of pain and slammed the heel of his hand into her face in unthinking self-defense. His blow didn't pack quite as much power as White's, but it hit her unchecked. Something broke or maybe only cracked – felt like her cheekbone – and she struck back reflexively. She'd never wanted to hurt him, tried to stop the punch before it could do damage, but too late: knuckles met skin, Alec's head snapped back, and he collapsed as if he'd been shot.

Shocked and instantly contrite, Max gasped out, "Alec!"

She twisted on top of his limp body to check on him, forgetting about her enemy for a crucial second.

White, being White, gave her no quarter, no pause to make sure she hadn't accidentally killed her brother. The fingers of his right hand snatched a fistful of her long hair, used it as a handle; the other hand seized her where he got her first, between her legs, trapped there by her own thighs as she instinctively squeezed them together. She was so startled and viscerally repulsed by the offensive grip she squawked and bucked instead of reacting like she'd been taught. With White, it was a mistake she only barely lived to regret.

He tossed her through the window like she weighed nothing.

Let's hear it for Normal and his patriotic streak.

Max clung to the flagpole with all her might; the damn thing was elastic enough to bounce back and then vibrate like hell and she felt like her teeth were rattling in her skull while her brain did a fairly good impression of a rubber ball. She rode it out, because she didn't relish the idea of letting go and taking her chances with the concrete below. It wasn't that high – not for a transgenic anyway – but Alec's blow had stunned her and White had hurled her through the glass with so much force she wouldn't have been able to avoid serious injury if not for that perfectly positioned flagpole. Beautiful, deluxe-model flagpole.

Once the helpful construction had calmed to a faint quivering, Max pulled herself up and crouched on the narrow staff to gather her wits. She was reeling from the hits she'd taken and the near miss; it'd been a while since anybody had cleaned her clock like that. Either she'd gotten soft or White had gotten more dangerous. Alec's punch had been the straw that broke the camel's back... or maybe her cheekbone. Damn, she could feel the swelling start already. It wasn't really his fault, she knew that. Any Manticore alumni so rudely awakened would've had the same reaction. She kinda wanted to smack him again for it anyway.

All right. Her head wasn't going to get better than this. She took a deep breath and stood up, balancing effortlessly. Time for round two. First order of business: get back into the room and kick White's ass. Best way to do that seemed to be to take the window, since White wouldn't be expecting that. The windowsill was within easy reach, so she grabbed it and started to haul herself up, peeking through the opening first to make sure the bastard wasn't waiting for her with Sketchy's hand cannon.

White, she learned, wasn't even looking in her direction. White was too busy pawing Alec.

Max did a double take.

The vision didn't change. Alec appeared to be out cold and White was– White was taking turns patting his cheek and stroking his stomach. "Come on," he murmured, sounding genuinely worried.
"She didn't hit you that hard. Open those pretty green eyes, you freak, come on."

It was surreal. Didn't improve when Alec did open his eyes with a pained wince and instead of planting his fist in White's face merely swatted at him in annoyance and groaned. "Ow."

White looked relieved. Relieved. Max damn near fell off her precarious perch. Her own eyes felt big as plates, throbbing face forgotten as she watched the scene unfold before her.

Sketchy was slinking in through the open door now, looking guilty and almost as concerned as White had before Alec had woken. "Is he okay? I'm so sorry, man, I should've stopped her, I'm really--"

"I'm not interested in your apologies," White cut him off, glaring at Sketchy over his shoulder. "What I want to know is how she found us."

"He turned back to Alec, who had ignored both of them in favor of fingering his middle. "Are you all right?"

"I think so." Alec winced a little. "Man, what the fuck happened here? Was that Max? Or am I hallucinating now?"

"Don't worry about it," White told him, running a gentle hand down Alec's side and frowning when Alec winced again. "Does that hurt?"

"No. Not much." He tried to pull away and scowled when White prevented the maneuver deftly. "The baby's fine, asshole. Those are my ribs you're poking."

Baby? What baby? Max stared, wondering whether she actually had taken a header into the driveway and was really in a coma hooked up on drugs and dreaming weird stuff. Or maybe Alec was drugged. And White, too. Come to think of it, Sketchy wasn't exactly behaving like himself either.

"She landed right on top of you." White's voice was quiet but sharp; evidently, he wasn't done fussing.

White. Fussing. Max checked the ground below just to make sure her body wasn't down there, having gone splat.

"Yeah, well, I don't assume she did it for kicks," Alec said, eyes narrowed. "Where is she? What'd you do to her?" He paled and tried to sit up. "You didn't kill her, did you?"

"Settle down, you moron," White barked, "you're supposed to fucking rest."

Just then Alec must've felt the breeze, for he turned his head towards the window. Max instinctively ducked out of sight, thoroughly intrigued and determined to keep eavesdropping until this madness started to make sense. Thus she didn't see the look on Alec's face when he discovered the Max-shaped hole in the glass pane.

Seeing him wasn't necessary anyway; his horror rang through bright and clear when he yelled, "You fucking threw her– Max! Damn it, let go of me!" Sounds of a scuffle, then another disconsolate, "Max!"

"You killed Max?" Sketchy piped in, belatedly catching on. "You said nobody would be hurt! You said--"

"Would you two shut up!" White roared.
Miraculously, Alec and Sketchy fell silent. Stayed silent. Were silent a bit more. Max would've given a lot to be able to sprout a telescope and see what was going on.

...and then she didn't have to wonder anymore, because White leaned out of the window, grabbed her by the back of her sweater, and pulled her right up and through the opening with an infuriating smirk. "Thought I'd heard something."

Max desperately wanted to break the bastard's jaw on principle, but damn if her curiosity wasn't stronger. She shook free of White's grasp – oh, the indignity! – took a hasty step back so she was out of reach, and glared at the men fiercely.

"What's going on here?" she demanded, arms crossed, trying to project the kind of strict mom attitude that tended to bring recalcitrant males to heel.

Alec had gotten up, probably when White had dragged her struggling and cussing back in through the window. Seeing his paleness and the way he was swaying made her realize Joshua had been right: Alec had to be sick. He looked like a ghost; soft, purple sweatpants – indubitably Normal's – riding low on his slim hips, his entire body burned down to corded muscle and sharp bone. The only exception was his belly, which was distended a little like a stray dog's after a good meal. Maybe he had gorged himself recently; God knew he'd been always hungry since they'd gotten him back. Or maybe (open those pretty green eyes, you freak) it was a tumor or something worse (does that hurt?), something Manticore had done to Alec (the baby's fine) before she'd even met him.

"Alec?" she asked, gently, because all of a sudden the indomitable wiseass seemed breakable as frozen glass.

He wouldn't meet her gaze, looked down, tugged on the waistband of his pants, trying to pull them up without drawing attention to what he was doing.

"Alec?" Max repeated, patience slipping despite her best intentions.

Alec glanced at White, who for some reason still wasn't attempting to kill anybody. White scowled.

"Don't even think about it."

"You keep out of this," Max snapped.

"Good advice," White sneered. "Comes a bit late though."

"Uhm... guys?" Sketchy muttered. He was standing closest to the doorway and eying it suspiciously. Max and Alec ignored him, caught up in their personal drama.

"See?" Max told Alec, livid. Her cheek stung; she touched her fingers to the puffy skin and flinched, which made Alec cringe guiltily. "This is what all that sneaking around and keeping stuff to yourself gets you – the company of assholes and a broken cheekbone."

"Ah... yeah. Sorry 'bout that."

"Guys?" Sketchy tried again, shifting from one foot to the other like a kid in dire need of a potty break. When Max still didn't pay him any attention, he swallowed, Adam's apple bobbing nervously, and edged towards the door and then out of the room. Max, at that point, couldn't have cared less, though White watched him go with unreadable eyes.

"You just couldn't come to me, could you?" Max asked Alec. She was angry, hurt, and deeply scared for her brother, because whatever mess he'd gotten into this time, it was painfully clear it was worse than usual. "What is it with that? Male pride? Stupidity? The mistaken belief that you can
handle yourself?"

Alec's turn to flinch; and she wasn't ashamed to admit it filled her with a measure of satisfaction to see his dismay. It meant she might just be getting through to him.

"What hold does he have over you?" she pressed with a glance at White who was still staring at the empty doorway. Had to be blackmail. There was no other conceivable reason why Alec would conspire with Ames White. "What did you do? Why did you go back to him?"

Wrong question; or wrong tone, maybe. Alec's handsome features iced over, mouth tightening into a stubborn line, eyes going carefully opaque. So much for seeing the error of his ways; she knew him well enough to recognize the signs. Alec was about to clam up and stay clammed.

All right. If in order to save Alec she had to negotiate with Ames White, Max would do it. She was used to sacrificing everything for her kin, and it couldn't be worse than arguing with religious fanatics, right? Oh, wait. White was a religious fanatic. Happy happy joy joy. The inconsiderate bastard also wasn't looking at her, was focused on the door, body tense and head cocked.

Max frowned. "What now?" No reaction. Max tossed her hair back and womanfully resisted the desire to tap her foot like an old-fashioned schoolteacher. "Hey, I'm talking to you."

"Tell me you're armed," White breathed, and pulled his own piece. From the corner of her eye, Max saw Alec reach under his pillow and come up with a Glock.

Crap. One obvious reason why Alec and White would not be trying to kill each other: a common enemy. Max let her eyes go out of focus, the better to listen and feel. Double crap. Make that several common enemies. On the roof. Downstairs. Outside.

Sometimes, she really wished she'd been an only child.

Chapter Thirteen:
Worst Case Scenario

Thula hated Seattle. She hated a lot of things – it was what she'd been bred for – but Seattle held a special place in her heart. Seattle was ugly and swarming with vermin; it was a miserable, dreary compilation of tumbledown buildings and raggedy bums, which was why it was sort of fitting that Seattle was where Sandeman had gone to ground to assemble his blasphemous little monsters. Seattle was also where the transgenic clusterfuck had exploded into everyone's faces and Thula had been defeated for the first time in her life.

If Thula didn't have to deal with Sandeman and the Phalanx, she'd be a happy girl. She'd be happy in Seattle, if she wasn't a monster hunter, and could forget the past. But she was a monster hunter. And Seattle was Sandeman's base. And Sandeman. And then there was Alex, who was the only person who could turn the Phalanx around.

She hadn't taken it well.

The Phalanx was the top of the warrior breeding line. Only the best of the best were accepted into this elite unit, and Thula was the proud leader of the pack. The last time she'd come to Seattle to "assist" that condescending terrier White, she'd come with her head held high and the taste of victory already sweet on her tongue. The Phalanx was used to cleaning up other people's fuck-ups – as long as their kind had to live in the shadows, this was what the Tip of the Spear was there for; kind of like the U.S. Marine Corps... only better, of course. Thula didn't mind. Blood and glory would come, and until then blood and guts would do.

Then Thula had gotten her ass handed to her by a slip of a girl, one of Sandeman's freaks.
Correction: the Freak. The glob of spit running down the Conclave's face. The spoke in destiny's wheel. The red flag to Thula's bull.

X5-452 might've snatched that win using trickery, but it was the end result that counted. Thula had miscalculated. Shouldn't have expected the artificial bitch to fight honorably; Thula had been taught better, but she'd forgotten in her excitement to finally come up against a real challenge again after all those years. Thor had been the last one when he'd rebelled against the Conclave's orders and, much as she'd despised her twin for his treachery, he hadn't gone down easy. So yes, she'd underestimated the unknowing champion of the human race. 452 had made one critical mistake though, and that was to spare Thula's life.

Thula had had to slink back to her masters with her figurative tail between her legs, but it had only been a question of time before she'd be back. Somehow, she wasn't surprised it should be Ames White who'd give her this second chance. She'd known the man was a weak link the moment she'd seen him; though, to be honest, she'd believed he'd need someone to fight his battles for him again, not go rogue. Well, most likely rogue. His official status was MIA. Apparently, White wasn't only the pride and joy of the North American hunter breeding line; he'd also collected an impressive number of powerful allies and protectors among the political and religious leaders of their kind.

There was no conclusive proof White had jumped ship, and with so many influential voices speaking out for him he couldn't simply be declared fair game. The only reason the Phalanx was back in town was to fill in until the hunters could be mobilized. Most of them were still tied up in the search for White's traitor father who'd recently been sighted again in Europe, so it'd take a while to get an expert all the way out to Washington state. Plus, Thula was highly motivated and Commander Crown knew it. Sending her had been both a not-so-friendly reminder of her humiliating failure and offering her an opportunity to redeem herself.

If Thula found White before the hunters arrived – or could prove him a traitor – her honor would be restored, the Phalanx's reputation no longer tarnished, and they might get another crack at 452 as well.

Taking out the transgenics' alpha bitch might be more difficult now that the cunt was constantly prancing around in the spotlight, showing off her Barbie doll face and spouting propaganda, but without White there to enforce "discretion", the Phalanx could still get her in Terminal City. Make it look like a coup d'état in Freak Nation maybe, or – better yet – the messy work of out-of-control freaks. Let's see how much hard won ground the abominations would lose when they weren't perceived as one ordered unit anymore but a gaggle of "genetically empowered" rabid dogs about to tear each other and other people apart. Either way, the true bloods would win.

It was almost enough to make Thula look forward to Seattle.

Thula wasn't superstitious as a rule. She had no use for divination, was highly suspicious of the spook breeds, and convinced nightmares were simply another symptom of indigestion. She'd never experienced the peculiar sensation commonly described as feeling "as if someone just walked over my grave", so when her feet touched down on the same platform at the same train station where she'd arrived the last time and a sense of otherworldly cold rushed through her body, she never broke stride. It was nothing; there and gone. A chill. A gust of wind, perhaps. It certainly didn't unsettle Thula. She walked with the same confidence as always, broad shoulders squared, boots thudding a steady rhythm on the ground.

No short, darkly attractive hunter to greet them this time round but an aging Grande Dame, short hair streaked with gray, her face composed but eyes unable to hide her awe when facing the new and improved Phalanx. Four women and seven men, and Thula made the dozen. They towered over their
one-woman welcome committee, heavy weapons bags slung casually over their burly shoulders, chiseled faces stony. No more arrogant swagger, because the Phalanx was here to defend their good name and the memory of defeat sat bitter in their bellies.

"Do we have a location?" Thula asked with no preamble.

The woman shook her head, mouth thinning briefly in what might've been worry or displeasure. "Not yet. We suspect Ames—" She faltered briefly then continued smoothly, "—White was taken prisoner by a transgenic kidnapping squad and is held captive somewhere in Seattle. Terminal City is under constant surveillance. The moment those beasts make their move, we'll have him."

"Are you sure?" Thula smiled cruelly. The taste of blood was in the water. "About the prisoner part, I mean."

The painstakingly rouged face turned a shade paler, which was all the confirmation Thula needed. The Dame was one of White's supporters. "Ames White has always been a loyal and extremely effective weapon in our arsenal," she reminded Thula bitingly. "Until proven otherwise, his status will be classified as 'missing' by the Conclave's decree."

"Say what you will," Thula grunted, jerking her chin in the direction of the concourse to indicate they'd lingered too long already. "We'll find him either way."

She marched off, her warriors behind her, and the Grande Dame who thought so highly of Ames White had to hurry to catch up. This was the kind of power balance Thula liked. One day, she'd be a Grande Dame herself – some time in the distant future (never), when she was past her prime (never!) and forced to retire to do her part to produce the next generation (never ever never) – but she knew she wouldn't ever turn into a prissy Beta like this woman. She'd be the best at what she did no matter what, and nobody would dare play this kind of games with her.

Thula would go down in history as the badass who'd taken down the Sandman's son and his precious synthetic savior.

They waited for days before things went into motion. On standby in an old house not half as spacious as the warehouse they'd occupied during their last visit, the Phalanx spent the pre-mission period training stoically. Thula oversaw the drills with a mixture of pride and a tiny hint of apprehension. Pride, because she'd hand-picked these people, and they were good; they were brilliant. Apprehension, because they weren't a team yet, hadn't seen enough serious action together to bond into a unit. It had taken her two years to forge the original Phalanx into the near-unbeatable force they'd been, so in tune they hardly needed to talk. They'd constantly been aware of the others' position and body language; synchronized.

Thula wasn't prone to nostalgia, but as she led her new squad through yet another set of basic exercises she couldn't help but miss the absolute trust and rock-steadiness of Herne, Taranis, Otso, and Camma. Their crushing public defeat had caused the Conclave to order a thorough reevaluation of the Phalanx. They'd been split up and the last Thula had heard, Taranis had been deployed to Sweden, Otso was teaching combat tactics at one of the schools, and Camma had been issued a stud. Thula was the only one left, had proven her worth and unbroken spirit in countless backbreaking physical and psychological tests. They had pitted her against Herne in the end, and she'd killed him. She didn't know why; hadn't thought to ask. They must've had their reasons, but Herne had been her lieutenant for close to five years and his absence still ached like a phantom limb.

She was secretly relieved she'd be able to fine-tune her new weapon on a comparatively unproblematic run before they'd go up against the big guns. Ames White was a Familiar and thus not
somebody she was going to take too lightly, but once driven into the open by the beaters he stood no chance against the Phalanx. Against one of them, maybe. Unlikely, but with luck, not entirely impossible. One dozen? Never. Thula was already looking forward to smashing her fist into the man's too-pretty mouth.

When the phone finally rang, Thula picked it up with a faint flutter of anticipation in her guts. "Fe'nos tol."

"Fe'nos tol," an unfamiliar voice replied coolly. Apparently, the Dame had decided to pass them on to another handler. "X5-452 has left Terminal City. Get ready to move out."

"We are."

Both of them hung up without waiting for a goodbye. Thula turned around, saw her team watching her furtively, and ground her teeth, for the old Phalanx wouldn't have had to– She killed that thought before it could turn into a real bother.

"It's on," she told them shortly, and went to hit the bag.

She'd expected things to happen very quickly once 452 was on the move, but the regular updates she received indicated the little bimbo was wandering through Seattle in a vague zigzag pattern, apparently as clueless as the rest of them. Somehow, that didn't surprise Thula. White had gone rogue, she was sure of that. Whatever 452 was looking for, it probably had nothing to do with him.

She was so certain of this, the final call damn near left her with her mouth hanging open; as it was, her eyes widened in surprise when their handler informed her curtly, "They're three doors down, both of them, plus two unknown tangos. Take them out... and do it fast, a band of four transgenics has left TC and is headed your way as well."

Fuck. Her practice run had just turned into a crucible. She dropped the phone on the table with a grunt of disgust and snatched up her gear in the same motion. "Showtime," she barked, glad her voice rang steely and true, no trace of nerves or undue eagerness.

She remembered once again this wasn't her old unit and decided it might be prudent to remind them of their mission parameters. "This one is labeled a rescue mission, people. We want Brother White alive. For questioning, if nothing else. "We're dealing with three tangos, one of them X5-452, and more hostiles are already on the way." She smiled thinly. "Feel free to kill them at will."

They nodded and moved, no questions asked, their features inanimate though their eyes betrayed a glint of excitement. Thula approved. They were dogs of war, perfectly trained, raring to go but too disciplined to just launch into action.

Thula led them down the rickety stairs, comfortable in her black BDUs, distantly amused still by the white letters on her front and back declaring her part of the Seattle P.D. There'd come a day when she wouldn't have to camouflage any longer, but until then she'd enjoy people scuttling out of her way as she sailed past under false colors.

The surveillance team on location whispered into her ear through her headset, directing her to their target area, a run-down two-story building with a bedraggled looking American flag flapping listlessly in what passed for a breeze in Seattle. They split up to secure all exits and box in their prey. Thula led the ground attack team into the house through the front door, which was conveniently unlocked.

They prowled through the sad abode weapons at the ready, the only sounds the occasional soft rasp
of a nylon gun sling against the shoulder straps of a vest and the faint creak of floorboards under their weight. Then Thula edged around a corner and found herself face to face with a shaggy-haired beanstalk of a guy. Her fist met his chin before she had time to think about it. She only knew he wasn't one of the big dogs and she wasn't going to alert 452 to their presence by firing a shot at some underling. From the way he keeled over and stayed down she deduced he wasn't even transgenic. Just a man. Pathetic. She stepped over him and moved on, leaving it to her subordinates to finish him off.

The stairs appeared solid but they were old and made from wood, so it was pretty much a given they'd make noise. Thula signaled Lúgh to give Cam a step-up so he could hook his knees into the railing above and heave them to the second floor silently. That went well until White leaned out of a doorway up the corridor, shot Cam in the face and Lúgh in the throat so they toppled down the narrow stairway, and disappeared again before any of them could get a bead on him.

That, Thula noted in a moment of philosophical detachment before the rage set in, at least answered the questions regarding White's status.

*Definitely* not a hostage.

Since stealth wasn't an issue anymore, the Phalanx jumped and bounded over the dead bodies of their fallen comrades even as the second team rappelled from the roof and smashed through the window. That was the plan, anyway. Judging from the lack of glass-smashing noises and the steady rapport of a weapon that was clearly not Sif's Taurus, things were going sideways. Again. 452 either had the devil's own luck or she was just that good.

Then Thula was through the door, diving to avoid Cam's and Lúgh's fate, ready to shoot the bitch to shit. Unfortunately, she faced White, not 452, and White had expected her move. Four bullets hit her vest in rapid succession. The impact punched the air out of her lungs and drove her back against the wall. Her legs gave out; she fell down on her hands and knees awkwardly, watching the fight with blurry eyes as she relearned how to breathe.

The scene didn't make sense. Bel was dead. He must've gotten himself shot coming through the already broken window. White stood back to back with two transgenics; X5-452 and her former right-hand man, the one who'd tangled with Camma on the first go round and had been a leading figure in the transgenic defense until he'd disappeared about a month into the siege of Terminal City. X5-494, her mind supplied helpfully, all too happy to provide relevant data that distracted her from the desperate effort to suck in air. Called himself "Alec". His presence was unexpected, to say the least, and his state of undress even more so. It didn't fit, his half-naked body wedged between White's and 452's fully clothed forms, taller than both, broad-shouldered and strong, yet distractingly vulnerable without the covering of thick fabric and shoes.

Thula watched the firefight turn into a free-for-all when more of her team poured into the room and she noticed the way White twisted and bent, took hits he could have avoided to shield the male transgenic. A weakness, she realized. 494 was White's weak spot, the Achilles heel that shouldn't be. The transgenic must've been sick or something, for he didn't move with the grace and power he should've possessed, though he still seemed to be doing fine against Týr. Most X5s had a propensity for using their legs too much, kicking and dancing around when a good, solid punch would've sufficed. 494 either didn't share this tendency or he was reluctant to put himself into a position that compromised his balance.

The screech of tires followed by gunfire from outside distracted Thula for a second. Looked like the freaks' backup had arrived. She wanted to believe four members of the Phalanx were more than enough to take care of a quartet of lab-spawned wannabes, but she no longer had the confidence to
rely solely on faith. Time to end this, before the mission went completely FUBAR.

The nice thing about not caring about pain was that short breath and bruised ribs couldn't keep Thula down for long. She pushed off with an inarticulate growl, ducked under White's arm and plowed straight into 494's side. Her team got the hint; Týr immediately joined Dag and tag-teamed White before he could jump to the transgenic's defense. Nemain and Robur were keeping 452 busy; but then, she wasn't near as fixated on her "brother" as White was.

Thula didn't give her victim a chance to think. She drove 494 right across the room until he slammed into the desk in the right-hand corner, then hammered him down with all she had. He gasped, but didn't scream. He fought her, head-butt her with enough vigor to make her stagger back a step, but he was already weakened, stunned from the painful collision with desk and wall, cornered and penned in by her armored bulk. She left him no room to move, knowing his superior height and reach might've compensated for his lack of protective clothing. Take him out, her blood sang, take him down and you'll get the traitor and the bitch, make it bloody, make it ugly, break him, break them all.

She slugged him, crowded him until she was practically on top of him. She didn't even feel her jaw fracture and her collar bone snap under his vicious jabs; just bore down and struck him with fists, knees, boots, elbows, until his resistance faded and he went down hard. Someone roared behind her, a hoarse bellow of pain and fury. Seemed like White had caught on to her intentions. She smiled and kept going. Every hurt, every humiliation, every unfair punishment and spiteful test she'd suffered because of those fucking transgenics went into the beating. She hit 494 for Herne, for Thor, grabbed his arm and broke it for Taranis, pulled him up and shattered his ribs for Otso, and then she saw his bare belly and thought of Camma, proud and perfect, reduced to a brood mare because she'd failed to kill this useless pile of genetic trash, and she started to kick his abdomen until he stopped struggling at all.

Everything faded except for the limp form on the floor at her feet, defeated, broken, payment for all she had lost because of these creatures that should never have been. He was still alive, breathing through foamy blood, long lashes fluttering weakly. His face was mostly unmarked and it made her anger heat up again to see his ridiculous beauty, designed to inspire mercy when the soldier was down. She drew her leg back to destroy this cheap imitation of her kind, but it never connected.

A hand on her shoulder pulled her back. A sinewy arm wrapped around her throat. Thula's eyes rolled desperately, caught a glimpse of a savage snarl and flashing hazel—

Chapter Fourteen:
Shattered

She was killing him. She was killing them both, and Ames was stuck, tied up by her fucking lapdogs while the red-haired cunt rained blow after blow on his mate. 452, the useless bitch, was wasting precious time trading insults with her opponents while Thula was beating. Alec. To. Death.

A haze of red descended, clouded Ames' vision. He lost any ability to strategize, just moved forward, intent on stopping her. A brush against his arm; he thrust stiff fingers into something fleshy and yielding, and warm wetness splattered everywhere. A shadow blocked his path; he jerked his knee up, crushed a set of balls, then drove the man's nasal bone into his brain when the bastard folded up with a high-pitched whine, because there was pain and there was pain.
Two steps and he was there. He hauled her off Alec, grabbed her, and broke her neck with a brutal twist. The red haze dropped with her body but still he couldn't see anything but Alec lying motionless on the floor, bleeding from mouth and nose, barely alive. He fell to his knees, reached out, didn't dare touch.

Somewhere at the very edge of his awareness, he noted the arrival of other people. Voices shouted, furniture broke, and the final two Phalanx warriors met their end at the hands of the freaks. Ames heard a grunting, snarling bark and the muscles along his back tensed in remembrance of being tossed around like a rag doll and then bent over a tree trunk of a thigh until his spine threatened to break. Self-preservation instinct warred with terror in the face of his mate's grievous injuries and lost.

"Shit. Shit shit shit," he breathed. "Don't move. Don't--"

He leaned forward, ghosted careful fingers over Alec's body, checking for breaks and signs of internal bleeding. Behind him, 452 panted, cursed, and talked fast, apparently trying to keep the dog creature from tearing into Ames. Other people butted in, argued, yelled. He didn't care, barely registered the racket. If anybody tried to separate him from Alec, he'd kill them.

Green eyes glazed with pain stared up at him, mutely asking for help as Alec fought for each breath and lost ground fast. Ames swallowed, forced himself to look away. Broken ribs moved under Alec's skin as Ames touched it gently; he could feel the splinters grinding against each other with every whistling gasp. Alec's stomach... He could see Thula's boot prints and knew he'd killed her too late.

Since getting the authorities – any authorities – involved wasn't an option, Ames took a chance and speed-dialed Otto. If Otto intended to double-cross him, this would be the time, but Alec needed help and every second counted.

Otto came through. Ames never bothered to find out how the man had managed to organize a helicopter so quickly and how he'd bullied or bribed the pilot into agreeing to an unsanctioned emergency air lift without checking their badges. It didn't matter, though it did move Otto from Ames' list of people he might have to kill one day to his much shorter list of people he'd kill for.

He stayed with Alec through it all, from the painful shifting of the broken body from the floor onto the stretcher to the similarly excruciating helicopter ride. 452 tried to talk to him a few times, but he didn't even understand the words, too focused on Alec to make sense of her nattering. The dog-man slunk closer once and reached for Alec; Ames had his gun drawn and pointed between the creature's eyes before the clawed fingers could touch the bruised skin.

"Fuck. Off," he ordered, soothing Alec with a soft murmur when his mate stirred uneasily at the grating threat in his tone.

The beast growled at him. Max and the lizard-man (nutjobs; every single scientist at Manticore must've been a nutjob) pulled him back. The looks they gave Ames were strange, confused and hating and reluctantly impressed. Ames would've laughed if his ability to do so hadn't been burned out of him by the sight of Thula trying to beat his child out of his mate's belly. He holstered the gun and went back to wiping off the blood and coaching Alec through every inhalation and exhalation until Otto arrived with their ride.

He was on the phone with Miriam before they'd even taken off, one hand wrapped around Alec's wrist to keep him grounded. 452 was there, too, watching him. "I know a doctor who can help," she offered when Miriam balked at the idea of taking care of Alec on her own. "Tell me where we're going and I'll send for him."
That, Ames supposed, would be Dr. Sam Carr. Not involved with transgenics; yeah, right. Any other time he'd have laughed in her face. Now, he rattled off the information like he wasn't talking to an enemy, because the way Alec looked he'd need every bit of help he could get. "1100 Ninth Avenue."

452 frowned. "Wait. That's the VM, the old Virginia Mason clinic. It was closed years ago. There's a nursing home there now."

"No, there's not." Alec's breath stuttered and Ames tensed and picked up his litany of "In. Out. In. Out." again until the shaky gasps steadied into semi-regular wheezing. "It's a government facility, mainly a research center, but they're equipped to handle medical emergencies."

The VM was his trump card. If you knew the right codes, the staff asked no questions and told no tales. It was amazingly difficult to shock those people. Also, they knew Miriam. Didn't like her, because she knew where all the skeletons were buried, but they'd let her do her thing.

Thanks to Ames' agency position he had the authorization to access the clinic and it was one of the perks of his day job he'd neglected to report to his handlers. He couldn't even remember why he hadn't, though it was probably because he'd been neck-deep in transgenics at the time, which was why he'd gotten the higher clearance in the first place. Some of the Conclave's deep cover sleepers might know about the hospital, but he was positive there was no Familiar at the VM. The Phalanx was dead and he'd heard the albino guy tell 452 that the freak squad had taken out the surveillance team outside Normal's house as well. No telling how much information the team had managed to pass on, but chances were it would take a while until anybody realized what had happened.

It wasn't much of a head start, too many variables unknown, but Ames was reasonably sure he could make it work and keep Alec out of the line of fire until he was well enough to be moved to a different location.

He didn't wonder about the baby. Couldn't, or he'd lose it.

While 452 called Carr, Ames made arrangements for all of them to be admitted to the VM. Highest level security. Gray op compromised, investigations necessary, do as you're told and shut up about it.

Beside him, Alec slid into unconsciousness.

Ames crushed his phone and roared at the pilot to fly faster.

They said the waiting was always worst, but, quite frankly, Ames could've dealt with the enforced inactivity and lack of first hand information if not for the presence of his arch nemesis. In retrospect, he wished he'd kicked the annoying bitch out of the helicopter when he'd had the chance, or refused to sign the security slip that identified her as part of his nonexistent team. He'd been too preoccupied to care and now he couldn't well have his "undercover operative" booted out without drawing even more attention than they already had. He was stuck with 452, though he didn't want her there and the feeling was mutual.

While 452 was eating away at Ames' already frayed patience, Otto proved again he was worth his weight in gold. Once Alec had been wheeled into the building, he'd turned around and left again to collect Miriam and Dr. Carr. He'd gotten them to the VM in record time and was currently scouring the area for drinkable coffee to keep Ames from going postal.

In the meantime, Ames wore grooves into the floor tiles as he paced the cramped, windowless room that passed for a waiting area at the VM. The place wasn't equipped for visitors. Usually, any
emergencies dropped off were left in the doctors' care while their teammates and commanding officer got their own wounds treated and then bunked down in the debriefing or barracks area.

452 broke first, unable to stand the silence for long. She rose from where she'd been sitting with her knees drawn up in one of the outrageously uncomfortable chairs and blocked his path. The fight hadn't left a whole lot of marks on her; her sleeve was torn and her face bruised where Alec had hit her, but her make up wasn't even smudged and the tiny cut in her pouty lower lip had already scabbed over. It seriously made him want to punch her.

"I just want you to know I know this is a trick," she told him. "Whatever you're planning, it's not gonna work."

"Nothing gets by you, does it?" he muttered. He had aimed for acerbic but the sarcasm sounded mostly tired and bitter. Where was his coffee, damn it? "Get the fuck out of my way."

It was too late though; he'd shown weakness and, like the predator she was, 452 pounced. "Why Alec?" she demanded. "Why Normal and Sketchy?" She frowned. "How Normal and Sketchy?"

Ames stared at her, mind going blank. A more than slightly hysterical laugh thumped painfully against his diaphragm and got stuck in his throat with a suddenness that took his breath away. Yeah, see, he thought wildly, I was having a pretty loud argument with my involuntary breeding partner about me knocking him up and your half-wit friends happened to stumble in and got an earful. And then wild horses couldn't have stopped them from helping.

The door opening saved him from actually blurt out this humiliating truth and he shifted his gaze from 452 to Otto with an unprecedented sense of relief. "Ask them yourself," he told the bitch as he shouldered past her to grab the cup of steaming caffeine the other man was holding out.

"I'm asking you," 452 persisted, practically snapping at his heels like some yappy little cur. "I want to know what you did to Alec. I want to know why you did it, and I want you to undo it!"

There was that feeling again, of things fading into the background, sound on mute except for his own pulse absurdly loud in his ears, because he'd made Alec his was what he'd done to Alec, and Alec had claimed him in turn in ways so intricate and subtle Ames couldn't even tell how he'd done it; because of Manticore, because sometimes instinct was stronger than rationality, and because without the hatred and the distance, they fit... and theirs would have been a beautiful baby, but he was almost certain Thula had already undone her.

Otto yelled, but it wasn't until he was grabbing hold of Ames' sleeve and trying to pry open his fingers that Ames realized the reason for his agitation. Huh. Looked like Ames had crushed the mug. Damn. There went his coffee, into a scalding puddle that spread slowly across the slate-gray tiles. He stared down at the dark liquid and remembered the blood pooling on the floor by Alec's head while they waited for the helicopter. His mind skittered over the memory of how diminished Alec had seemed, half-curled on his side, eyes hazy and unfocused, and how the thought had been born that Ames might have to make an active choice between Alec and their child.

It was still there, that thought, a nagging shadow with claws and sharp teeth that gnawed at him whenever he didn't consciously bury it under more practical concerns. It should have been an easy decision, not least since it was a hypothetical question at this point. And if it weren't, the answer was clear as well: make them save the baby, let the freak die.

Otto yelled at him again, and Ames clenched his jaw and relaxed his fingers before the shards could sever something important.
Let the freak die.

Let Alec–

"I'm calling a doctor," Otto said, eyes worried as he inspected the results of Ames'... distraction.

"No." Ames snapped out of it, embarrassed and unaccountably angry. "Just get me a fucking bandage or something, I'll be fine."

Pain didn't exist, was nothing but a phantom of the mind; he pulled the bits and pieces of the broken mug from his flesh without a flinch, but he was helpless against the burn and ache inside, so similar to what he'd felt when 452 had taken Ray. He didn't so much as glance at the self-righteous bitch, couldn't bear to see her healthy and whole when his son was missing and his lover and unborn child were dying somewhere in this cold concrete maze.

His turtleneck was a lost cause anyway, so Ames wiped his bleeding hand against the dark fabric until he could see the cuts, deep and gaping. No bone shining through the sliced tissue, everything worked; bent, stretched, bled more.

"Here." A red bandana was dangled in front of his face. 452 didn't sound quite as belligerent anymore, though the disgust was still there. "You're dripping all over the place."

Common sense overrode pride, and Ames snatched the cloth from her fingers to wrap it around his hand. He had to tighten the knot with his teeth, because there was no way he was going to ask 452 for anything. Wasn't a problem; his kind wasn't fussy when it came to first aid. It'd do until Otto was back with whatever supplies he could scavenge.

"You're an amazing actor," 452 informed him, the waver of uncertainty not entirely covered by the challenging lift of her chin. "Am I supposed to get all teary-eyed and believe you're on our side now?"

"Don't flatter yourself," Ames growled. "I wouldn't go to all that trouble just to infiltrate that fucking dung heap you call home. I don't need to play games with you. You're not worth the effort."

That got her good and riled, which was always fun to watch. He would've goaded her some more, because everything was better than to start thinking again, but footsteps from the corridor brought an end to his entertainment before it could even start.

Ames' shoulders tensed as he turned to face the door, icy apprehension pooling in his belly. He recognized the businesslike staccato of Miriam's walk, the slight drag of her left foot that stemmed from an old hip injury, the high heels none of the resident doctors would wear, because if you spent most of your day on your feet, high heels were an obvious no-no.

The news she brought were bad; he could tell from the lack of a cup of coffee in her hand. She'd come directly from surgery, no detours... never a good sign. She was no spring chicken to begin with, but right then she looked old and haggard, pissed off at the world in general and God knew whom in particular.

As usual, Miriam didn't waste time beating around the bush. "The baby didn't make it," she told him, not without sympathy. "Must've been dead before you got him into the helicopter. If he could've had a miscarriage, he would've. Things being as they are, we had to cut it out."

"Baby? What do you mean, baby?" 452 shriiled beside him.

Ames moved his head so he could stare at her, stiffly, his entire body feeling frozen, and whatever
she saw in his eyes shut her up like a slap. "He was carrying my child."

She shook her head in denial, but he suspected she already believed; she was merely putting the pieces together in her mind, added up everything that hadn't made sense until now. "That's not possible," she whispered.

Ames couldn't even enjoy the deathly paleness that leeched the life out of her features. "So are gill girls and lizard men," he said tonelessly. "Or a body without junk DNA."

"But he never--"

"What? Said anything?" Ames sneered. The numbness was already fading, chased off by a giddy sort of anger that bubbled through his veins like poisoned champagne. So this was what it felt like to be drunk on grief. "Why would he? Because you're such a nice person any guy would jump at the chance to roll over and show you his belly?"

Bad choice of words; 452 looked like she was going to cry, but Ames didn't fare much better. He felt sick and cold, and he pulled on the bloody bandana angrily to distract himself.

"For what it's worth, he didn't know," Miriam threw in, and if he hadn't known her better, he'd have thought she was trying to give him a minute to collect himself while she distracted 452. "It isn't really something a man would think of without the hard proof to force him there, and his symptoms differed from a regular female pregnancy. If Ames hadn't acquired his files and added two and two, both 494 and the fetus would've died anyway."

"Alec," 452 corrected quietly. "His name is Alec."

"Yeah," Ames muttered spitefully, "and thanks for taking such good care of him, by the way."

It was a bit like kicking a puppy while it was down; 452 flinched and hugged herself, suddenly not so superior. "We didn't know," she whispered, too shocked to put up much fight. "He didn't– We couldn't–"

"He was in his third trimester," Ames accused, unable to let it go, needing to strike out against somebody. "In the second, when he was with you. Don't tell me you didn't notice something was wrong, because he could barely function."

"Ales?" Miriam was smart enough not to touch him. She merely lifted her hand to gain Ames' attention. "What say we let the lady digest the news in peace? I want to talk to you in private."

Ames glanced at 452 to gauge the likelihood of her making trouble or trying to eavesdrop, but the bitch seemed barely able to hold back big fat crocodile tears, much less do the reasonable thing and keep an eye on her enemy. "Don't wander around," he told her. "If you trigger any kind of alarm and bring down security on your head, I will not ride to the fucking rescue."

He left her staring blindly at a potted plant and followed Miriam into the corridor. They walked side by side for a minute, deeper into the bowels of the building, until Miriam decided they'd put enough distance between them and 452 and asked conversationally, "You want me to kill the freak?"

"What?" Ames stopped dead in his tracks. He was starting to feel punch-drunk.

"The baby's dead," Miriam repeated impatiently. "We had to cut it out of him to make sure, and he was hemorrhaging, so we had to work fast." She made a clawing motion with one hand that reminded Ames of Ray eviscerating a pumpkin at Halloween. "Do you understand? He's never going to conceive again. He doesn't have the equipment anymore. Truth be told, he's probably going
to die anyway. The only reason why he hasn't kicked off yet is that Dr. Carr... the man's a fucking bleeding heart, but he knows his stuff." She huffed in annoyance and reluctant admiration, but immediately turned businesslike again. "So, do you want me to hurry him along, make it quick and painless?"

Not quite the choice he'd expected. No either-or; just the simple question whether or not to kill the freak who'd torn up his life, nearly cost him his sanity, and had made him betray everything he'd believed in. Simple.

"Ames?" Miriam checked her watch, none too subtly. "I have to go back and get rid of Carr if you want me to clean up this mess."

"Yeah, Ames thought, clean up this mess. Give me back my life. He opened his mouth to say, "Do it", but nothing came out. He felt paralyzed, torn between so many contradictory desires and emotions not even he could make sense of them.

"Yes or no?" Miriam asked, a promise of death in her cool gaze.

Ames breathed out slowly. "No." Once you make a decision, you stick with it. "I don't care how you do it, but keep him alive. I want him restored to full health."

He would not lose both of them.

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**Chapter Fifteen:**

**Picking Up the Pieces**

There was nothing, and then there was Alec, and Alec hurt.

He was used to pain. Pain was a part of life at Manticore: the strain of overused muscles, the burn and sting of too little air, skin split by needles and knives, bruised and battered in vicious punishment and training sessions, eyes assaulted by light and laser, ears deafened by thundering repetition during reconditioning. Missions brought a different kind of hurt; worse in actual damage done, cleaner in the receiving. There was a difference between being strapped down and worked over, and being injured in a fight.

This... this was something else entirely.

Broken bones he knew. He felt them now – his arm busted, his shoulder dislocated, too many ribs shattered – but it was an ache easily dismissed in this cushioning blackness. What made him fight the dark with panicked urgency was the spasming, cramping agony deep in his guts, a slow churning and fluttering, alien, nauseating. He did not understand why this pain seemed so much more important, so much worse than anything else, only that he had to make it stop. Couldn't do it himself, so he tried to call out, but his lungs seized up and his throat closed and there was no air, liquid in his nose and mouth, warm and salty-metallic, thick and oozing and everywhere–

There was nothing.

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There was nothing, and then there was Alec, and Alec hurt.

His belly was cut open like he was a fish about to be gutted and somebody was rooting around in there and he couldn't move, strapped down, held down, arms bound, bone grinding and snapping
anew as he fought for freedom, fought to get away from the cold metal that pierced him so deep inside, the icy claws that dug and stabbed, the edge of a blade like fire, and the dazzling brilliance of light above like needles in his tearful eyes.

A face blocked the light, a woman with cold eyes and blood on her cheek, her features blurring until she was every doctor and scientist who'd ever hurt him, no mercy, no emotion, nothing human in the way she stared at him. He was nothing, her gaze said; his living body but a construct of flesh and bone to be taken apart at will, tossed out with the trash when broken.

Something slid into him, deeper and deeper, hard and slick against the softness of his internal organs, rearranged him, separated him with a calm relentlessness that drove him to the brink of hysteria.

*Don't take her*, he thought madly in all the unbearable torment and horrible disorientation, *don't take her don't take her don't not yet not yet don't take her—*

He felt a sharp tug, a pulling, ripping pain that tore a scream from his abused throat, jabbed the splinters of crushed ribs into yielding tissue, took his breath and his awareness.

There was nothing, and then there was... there was...

It was dark. Peaceful. He didn't know where he was or who he was and he didn't care. He drifted through limbo, his limbs heavy and his mind blissfully numb.

It was nice. Comfortable. He felt weightless like a brain floating in a jar. That was a disturbing image. He did not like it; it made him think of vivisection and organ harvesting.

He let go and sunk back into cotton candy blackness until consciousness faded again.

There was nothing, and then there was Alec, and a raspy *hiss-click, hiss-click*, and an electronic *bip bip bip*, and the hospital smell of disinfectants and sickness.

Alec tried to open his eyes and couldn't. He tried to move his arm, a leg, a toe, but his efforts were in vain. He couldn't even panic properly, because he felt so drained, sapped of his strength and his fighting spirit. He lay in darkness and listened to the machines that were breathing for him and checking his pulse and temperature. He supposed he had tubes coming out of places he'd better not think about, but whatever drugs they were pumping into his system must've been excellent, for he didn't feel a thing.

It took him some time to realize he wasn't alone in the room. Someone was there, to his left, fiddling with something plastic, then walked around the bed to one of the machines on his right, high heels click-clacking against hard floor tiles. He could make out a slight unevenness in the no-nonsense gait, the whisper of cloth on cloth, the hint of an expensive perfume. An impression rose in his mind of pain and light and cold, cold eyes.

The drowsy *bip... bip... bip...* quickened into a fearful *biphbiphbip* as shards of memory slotted together into a disquieting whole. He tried to slow his pulse like he'd been taught at Manticore, desperate to hide, play dead, not attract the attention of that woman, but it was no use. He had as much control over is traitorous heart as over the rest of his body, which was to say, none.

The steps came closer until he could feel the looming presence of another person over his defenseless form. Bony fingers grabbed his eyelids, pried them open, and there was the light again, a harsh stab into his cornea. Funny, how he didn't see anything else, just that awful brightness and the dark. The woman checked both his eyes, gave a puzzled grunt, and clicked off the lamp. She took more tests,
most of which Alec didn't register, then huffed again.

"Don't crap out on me now, freak," she muttered. She had a low, rasping voice, and her breath smelled of tobacco. "Keep that old pump steady, or I'll kick-start you with a fucking starter cable."

Loving advice, that, and though Alec hoped dearly someone would stop her from making good on her threat, he was intimidated enough to try and follow orders. The beeping slowed down some; not much, but it seemed sufficient to prove his good intentions, for the next time the woman – doctor? – spoke, she sounded a great deal friendlier.

"Good boy," she praised, and went back to whatever she was doing. "You're one lucky bastard," she added in the distracted kind of tone of someone talking mostly to themselves. "Almost bit the dust there a couple of times, you know that? They sure built you sturdy though, gotta give them that."

Something clanked and squealed a little as it was pushed across the floor on cheap rubber wheels. "Can't imagine why Ames would want to keep you alive," she told him conversationally, "Won't do him no good no more. Seems like a waste of energy and resources to me, but fine. It's his money."

She came closer again, to the edge of his bed. Those smooth, bony fingers stroked his cheek in a gesture that could've been motherly but, coming from her, made him want to shrink back and hide under the blankets. Damn, the woman scared the crap out of him.

"You're a pretty one," she said; amazed, as if she'd only just noticed. "Wonder whose porny fantasies went into the creation of your face." Her chuckle could've spoilt milk; it was so dirty and invasive. "Guess you won't be so handsome anymore when Ames is through with you. He's gonna flay you alive for what you did to him, pretty."

No, Alec thought, surprised by his own certainty, he won't.

And he let the darkness roll him under again.

It was the click-swish of a door opening that brought him back the next time, and a stranger's clipped baritone, announcing, "We have to get out of here."

Someone was breathing near him, right next to the bed, and somebody else was pacing with fast, light steps in the background but stopped at those words. There was something familiar about both of them. He couldn't open his eyes to confirm whether they were friends or foe, was still unable to wake up all the way and, frankly, not keen on it either. He'd had an exceedingly shitty year. Taking a break sounded like a great idea right now.

The person at Alec's bedside didn't move, but the terse, "Report," was enough to cause relief to flood through his sluggish mind.

Ames.

He probably shouldn't be so happy to know an enemy was within touching distance while he was completely helpless, but through all that had happened, the only one who'd stood by him no matter what had been Ames White and if he hadn't dreamed that horrible woman's monologue, it had been Ames who'd saved his life. It counted for something. Actually, it counted a whole damn lot.

"I've been talking to security," the newcomer explained, clearly unfazed by Ames' less than gracious attitude. "Someone from outside is making inquiries. They're searching for you."

The other person approached his bed, too, the smell of cheap cherry lipstick and Ring Dings
identifying her as Max. Max, sharing space with Ames White, and neither was trying to kill the other. Damn, Alec must be in worse shape than he'd thought.

"How much time do we have?" Ames asked. Alec could feel the weight of the other man's gaze upon him. It was creepy and oddly reassuring at the same time, like an invisible touch.

"Couple of hours, maybe," the stranger hazarded. He still didn't sound familiar, but there was an ease between him and Ames that made Alec think the two of them must have known each other for a while. "A friend of mine will be here with a private ambulance in ten minutes; all I need is your permission to proceed and we'll be out of here before anybody catches on."

Friend? Somehow, Alec doubted Ames had friends. Subordinate? Probably Otto Gottlieb then, Ames' right hand man at the agency – he was the only person outside Ames' family and breeding cult buddies he seemed somewhat close to – but how the hell the poor bastard had gotten involved was anyone's guess.

His deduction was proved right when Ames opened his mouth again. "Get our people and meet us by the south elevators in five," he ordered. "And Otto?"

"Yes, sir?"

"Any chance you can get us the medical supplies we'll need?" There was a challenge there in Ames' tone, but a good-natured one, and Otto seemed to pick up on the subtle difference.

"Yes, sir," he replied, and Alec could hear the smile in his voice. "I'll meet you at the exit then... we might have to hotfoot it."

Ames shifted, the tips of his fingers whispering over Alec's arm so softly Alec wasn't sure they were really there. "See that we don't have to," he demanded.

Otto wasn't impressed. "No promises." And with another quiet swish of the door, he was gone.

"He's good," Max admitted grudgingly.

"One of the best there is," Ames agreed as he started to unplug the machines Alec was connected to with unhurried efficiency, sliding needles out of Alec's skin and easing off electrodes with deft fingers. "Not quite in our league, but as close as it gets. His Quantico trainers called him an all-round talent, but he's really just a very smart, extremely persistent son-of-a-bitch."

"Yeah? Then how come he's taking orders from you?" Max grumbled, but pitched in to help get Alec ready for transport. "Man," she breathed as she pulled the cannula out of Alec's nose, "I'm glad they took him off the respirator."

"I'm sure you'd've found a way to steal it. Wait– Watch out!"

Something jostled Alec and, drugs or no drugs; it felt like he was being impaled by a red-hot pike. He couldn't escape the hurt, couldn't curl up or move away, so he sought sanctuary in oblivion.


Pause.

"I'll– I'll put it here, okay? See? Right here. Alec?"
"He can't hear you, big fella. He's... Alec's pretty sick."


"Because, as much as I hate to admit it, this isn't his fault. And--" Deep sigh, "and without him, Alec would be dead now."

Pause.

Then, quietly: "A life for a life. Alec for Annie?"

"No, not Alec for Annie, just... I guess we owe him a ceasefire, for Alec."

"And if Alec dies?"

Pause.

"He's not gonna die."

"He's not gonna die?"

"No." Pause. "We won't let him."

Hot. So hot. His belly ached and pulsed. Something was moving in him, he knew it, he could feel it, it had been a part of him once but now it was dead, long dead and decayed, locked beneath his skin and wanting out, getting ready to claw its way up through his abdominal wall.

He screamed, or tried to, couldn't make a sound, couldn't move, couldn't breathe, and his belly throbbed and hurt. His heart beat in a rhythm that wasn't his, heavy and alien in his chest, pumping acid through his veins that ate him from within, scoured his lungs, burned and stung and hurt hurt hurt hurt.

He was being punished, there was no other explanation. This was for Rachel. For deserting his unit. For trying to kill Max and Joshua. For having Joshua paint over Max's virus research papers and for every time he'd failed since. It was just rewards for letting Ames White fuck him. For deceiving Normal. For getting Sketchy killed. For losing-- for losing--

Coolness against his aching skin, a hand cradling his face. "Listen. Listen to me, you stupid fucker!"

He stilled, tried to redeem himself by obeying, but it didn't help. Something was lodged in his chest, between his ribs, little pincers and stingers under his skin, in his lungs, and always, always the feeling of a dead emptiness at his center, a fullness that wasn't, heat around a core of ice.

"Listen to me, damn you!" Ames yelled.

But Alec was too far gone to hear him.

________________________________________

"I hate you.

You ruined my life, you freak. You and that bitch, you've been causing me nothing but trouble. She took my son. She took my son!"

Come on, you stubborn bastard. In. Out. In..."

"I swear, if you die on me, I'll destroy your kind root and branch. I won't stop until the last transgenic has bled out and Freak Nation is nothing but a fucking footnote in dusty old history books.

You're mine. You hearing me, Alec? You're mine. You don't get to leave me."

There was nothing, and then there was Alec, and no matter when he surfaced from the depths of unconsciousness, there was always Ames, too.

Ames and Joshua.

Max would drift in and out, other people visited – Normal, Sketchy (not dead, not dead, thank God; just short two teeth), Mole, Dalton, even Logan... they came and went. They brought supplies and news, sat and talked to Alec whether he was lucid or not, and cleared out again.

The only times Ames left Alec's bedside was when he went to the bathroom. He and Joshua ignored each other for the most part, though sometimes Alec would wake and find Ames moving around the room and Joshua growling at him from his end of Alec's bed. Ames never reacted to the sounds of Joshua's displeasure. He didn't react to any of Alec's friends and family, except for an occasional disgusted curl of his lips, too distracted to pick a fight.

"The baby's gone," Ames said one morning, as if Alec couldn't have told from the huge fucking wound in his belly that was healing only slowly and the lack of that warm weight inside he hadn't really noticed until it was no more.

Alec didn't know how to react; he didn't remember much after the red-haired muscle queen had started in on him. To be perfectly honest, he hadn't wanted to think about it. But Ames had brought it up, and Alec knew he'd have to deal with it sooner or later. "What happened?"

Ames stared at the bedspread, his face emotionless and his eyes dark with grief. "She died."

He'd expected the answer; it was the only thing that made sense. Had the baby lived, Ames wouldn't have been there, or he'd have had her with him. He wouldn't have handed her over to his Familiars, not with her being half-transgenic. So, yeah. Baby gone.

"Am I–" Alec hesitated, unsure what to say, how to feel. He hadn't had much time to get used to the idea, and now it was over, nothing to show for it but the angry scars on his abdomen and an oddly lost Ames White at his side, Alec had trouble adjusting. "Is it gonna happen again?" he asked carefully and tried not to show how much he wanted it to never ever happen again.

Ames shook his head. "No."

Alec nodded and closed his eyes. Good.

He got better. He slept a lot, but it was a different kind of sleep than before, lighter and actually restful for a change. Ames and Joshua fed him soup and mashed... everything, really... and tried to get along, because whenever they locked horns, Alec would become agitated, and whenever Alec got agitated, he tried to move. After he'd ripped his stitches for the second time, Ames called a truce and Joshua accepted. It still wasn't happy living with the two of them, since Ames regarded Joshua
as some funky sort of animal and Joshua got his hackles up every time he caught a whiff of *eau de White*. Theirs was an uncomfortable coexistence, but little by little they got used to each other, which proved once again people can adapt to pretty much *everything*.

Max kept talking about relocating Alec to Terminal City so he could recuperate among his people, but Alec found himself reluctant to accept. He still thought of the place as "home" and he listened avidly to her stories about what was going on there, but he remembered all too well how his "family" had ostracized him when he hadn't been able to pull his weight. He understood their attitude and approved – after all, he'd been raised the same way – but there was a difference between getting something on an intellectual level and being on the receiving end of this kind of practical thinking.

When he got wind of Alec's hesitation to rejoin his brothers and sisters, Normal offered to employ him again and even tried to interest him in a partnership. However, as much as Alec had enjoyed the freedom of being a bike messenger and genuinely liked Normal, it was too dangerous an occupation for a lone transgenic. It was risky for Normal as well, for it would make Jam Pony the target for all kinds of harassment. Normal had waved off the threat with a dismissive "Let them come", as forceful in his newfound sympathy for transgenics as he'd been in his pre-siege paranoia. Alec appreciated the man's support, but he wasn't going to see him killed or maimed for standing up for Alec either.

Also, there was Ames to consider. Ames had taken a leave of absence from the Agency, citing "personal reasons". Alec hadn't known something like that was even possible, but apparently, when you were a silver-tongued devil and had Otto Gottlieb working as your advocate, precious few things were impossible. Of course Otto could do nothing about the cult people. By now, Ames had to be on top of the Conclave's Most Wanted list, though he was predictably close-mouthed on the subject.

Alec wouldn't have been surprised to learn Ames had kept himself a backdoor open, but for once he didn't ask. Their relationship, for lack of a better word, was changing with every day they spent together by choice instead of pheromone-induced need. They were no longer enemies; not friends either. Between Max's disapproving harping and Otto's enthusiastic encouragement, Alec and Ames were trying to figure out where to go.

"I'm not going to go into heat again, right?" Alec verified two weeks into his convalescence, propped up against a mountain of pillows and soaking up the milky October sunlight.

"Miriam said you probably will." Ames didn't look up from his book, a lethally boring history of golfing. "She thinks we'll synchronize after a while, but since you don't have the parts anymore, it'll go away with enough stimulation."

*Enough stimu*–

Alec's eyes went wide. He swallowed nervously. His stomach did a little flip, which fucking *hurt*, though he couldn't have said whether his reaction was due to uneasiness or anticipation. "We're gonna fuck again?"

Joshua rumbled out a long warning in Ames' direction. He didn't do that all too often anymore – it was hard for the good-natured, forgiving dog-man to hold a grudge, even against a magnificent bastard like Ames White – but any reminder of the physical intimacy between Alec and Ames still got him going.

Alec didn't even glance at Joshua, too busy studying the man who'd killed so many of his brethren, had caused him so much grief and so much pleasure, and who'd fought so fiercely to keep him breathing when Alec's overtaxed body would've given up.
"We're gonna fuck again," he repeated, trying the statement on for size and finding it quite comfortable. Huh. When had that happened?

"Yep," was all Ames had to say to that. He was still staring at his book, but his eyes weren't moving anymore. Either he'd discovered an absolutely riveting new word, or he was pretending.

"So," Alec said, testing the waters, "what's the plan? We go separate ways and meet up every now and then to scratch that itch?"

Ames' immediate scowl made his stomach do that flipping thing once more, which was freaking weird, but Alec was willing to just go with it for the moment.

"The hell we are," Ames growled, snapping the book closed with a crack. "Your ass is mine, 494."

"Alec's gonna go back to Terminal City," Joshua threw in with more than a touch of possessiveness. "White not welcome there. Go away."

Surprisingly, Ames actually smiled at that, though it wasn't a very nice smile. "Funny, that's exactly what I was thinking," he said, all silk and sharp edges. His gaze finally lifted to catch Alec's. "Want to go on a hunting trip with me?"

Trust Ames to make things interesting. Alec stared back at him until he realized he was trying to figure out the other man's agenda out of curiosity and not distrust. A hunting trip, hmm? Definitely sounded like more fun than moping around in Seattle.

"Who're we hunting?" he asked, because he couldn't just give in.

Alec grinned.

Shortly afterwards, so did Alec.

**Epilogue:**

**Turn the Page**

Truth or Consequences, New Mexico, had never been a major city and after the Pulse in 2009, it had become one of the many truck stop towns that littered the American Interstates. It was a hot and dusty place, gritty and faded, with lots of desert around, lots of sky above, and the cracked, potholed band of the I-25 cutting straight through on its way south.

A battered 1974 Dodge Challenger passed the bullet-riddled city limits sign early in the afternoon, slicing through the heat haze like a hatchet. Its formerly glossy black finish was scraped and dirtied, the front dented, and one headlight shattered, but the deep rumble of the old 340 LA V8 engine was flawless, a low, contented growl that put a smile on every car lover's face. Broad tires kicked up gravel as the car rolled onto the near-empty parking lot in front of the Gila Grill and came to a stop next to a weather-beaten pickup truck.

The driver's door creaked open to emit a tall, broad-shouldered young man in jeans and worn combat boots who surveyed the run-down diner and its surroundings with clear green eyes. He stretched a little and rubbed his neck, fingers scratching idly over the lines of the barcode black against his tanned skin.

Paradoxically, life on the run had been good to Alec: he was fully healed, well-exercised, well-
entertained, and very well fucked. Speaking of which... He turned to look at his companion, who was currently scowling pissily at the diner as he patted his pockets in search of his sunglasses.

"You sat on them," Alec informed Ames, just to see his frown deepen. All these months, and he still got a kick out of riling the man. Had to be love. Or something.

Ames ducked back into the car to check, because he knew perfectly well when to trust Alec and when not, and found the glasses on the center console where Alec had put them. Alec grinned, waited for the inevitable slam of the door, and moseyed after his lover when Ames strode off towards the shabby watering hole.

The Gila Grill was about as appealing from the inside as from the outside. It was gloomy, for one thing, because the light was filtered through layers and layers of dirt smeared across the window pane, and it was stifling as hell, stagnant air stirred lazily by two ancient ceiling fans powered by the wind engine outside. The tables in the front were empty, but a tall guy in a cowboy hat was sprawled in one of the grimy back booths and a Hispanic-looking man was barely holding his own against some blond kid at the pool table.

Alec and Ames walked across the sticky hardwood floor and sat down on ancient bar stools, cracked pleather groaning a weary protest, their jeans-clad knees touching comfortably once they'd settled. The bartender, a lean woman of indeterminable age with a face like a dried-up cactus, ambled closer. She stared at them appraisingly, took in their stubbled faces and keen eyes, their obvious familiarity with each other. If she noticed they were both wearing over-shirts despite the heat, she either didn't make the concealed weapons connection or didn't care.

"Y'all want coffee?" she asked with all the enthusiasm of a somnambulant sloth.

Alec sniffed the air, horrified and fascinated in equal parts by the bitter-burnt stink that hung around the blind glass pot behind the counter. "You actually sell this stuff?"

"Public health department," Ames butted in, "we're here to see the manager of this... establishment."

"Public health department," the bartender repeated, openly skeptical. "Since when d'y'all drive muscle cars an' wear jeans, huh?"

Ames slammed a badge down on the counter. "We're undercover. Go get the fucking manager." He waited until she'd shambled off then held up a finger without looking. "Shut it."

"I wasn't gonna say a word," Alec claimed. He smirked. "But since you brought it up... That was lame."

Ames glared at him.

Alec shrugged. "What? Come on. Public health department? Wasn't that closed in... what?... 2012 or something?"


"Live with it," Alec told him, unmoved. "I'm already walking bowlegged thanks to you. We're checking this lead and then we can go fuck."

"I could just bend you over the counter," Ames suggested, clearly liking the idea.

A low growl drifted through the room. Ames turned his head and shot the giant in the corner a smug
Joshua gave him the evil eye from under the brim of his Stetson, then straightened abruptly and turned towards the kitchen. Alec and Ames dropped the attitude and perked up. At the pool table, Otto and Dalton feigned disinterest.

The manager was an older gentleman with sharp, hazel eyes and graying hair. He was walking with a cane, though, judging from the scowl on his face, he'd have preferred to hit someone with it. "This has to be the lamest bullshit I've heard in years," he bitched before he was fully through the doors. "I swear, if you fuckers can't even come up with a good fib anymore, I must be losing my—"

He stopped. The cane fell to the floor, went off, and shot a hole through the liquor cabinet behind the bar. Nobody noticed.

Ames patted Alec's knee, slid off the bar stool, and smiled.

"Hi, dad."

The End

End Notes

Twenty pages, my ass. Someone get me a drink.

Okay, so I'm not an mpreg writer. I don't generally like mpreg, I don't think it's particularly funny or sexy or whatever. What happened is that I suffered from writer's block, which sucks ass, and one way I sometimes get out of that kind of funk is to challenge myself. Not a "write a fic in ten minutes" kind of challenge either, but an all out "make a real squick or kink work" challenge.

I wrote down a list of kinks/squicks/never-ever-topics and a list of fandoms, closed my eyes, and pointed. The result was *Dark Angel* x mpreg. Panic ensued, but hell if my brain didn't get a kick start. I ignored and denied for a while, but an idea snuck in while I slept, and then a little scene - Max peeking in through a window, staring incredulously at Ames White holding Alec in his arms - popped up and, well, I decided WTF, I'll just write a bit until I get bored or disgusted. And then I kinda wrote this sucker.

**Geek Stuff:**

*Morsus serpentis* (Chapter Ten) is Latin for "serpent's bite".

Thula's name most likely stems from the name *Thule*, a mystical island located in the North, or, in the Medieval reading, any distant place located beyond the "borders of the known world". So, just for kicks, the names I gave the original Phalanx are all associated with the Celtic and Norse pantheon and mythology. *Herne*, as in Herne, the Hunter, is an incarnation of the Celtic Cernunnos, a god linked to nature and the hunt; *Taranis* was a Celtic god of thunder; *Otso* was a Finnish forest god/bear spirit; and *Camma* was a Celtic goddess of the hunt.

Thanks for sticking with me to the end; I hope you had fun.
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