

Brothers In Arms

By Scribblesinink

Alec strolled over to where he'd stashed his Duke in a dark alley a couple blocks from Terminal City's main gates. The genetically engineered soldier part of him, the part that never allowed him to fully let his guard down, continued to keep track of his surroundings, but most of Alec's attention was turned inward as he mulled over the events of the evening: Max's clone showing up; White nearly getting the upper hand; learning about all the Nomalies hiding in TC....

Not that he hadn't found out a while ago about the Manticore escapees living in the toxic wasteland smack in the middle of Seattle, of course. Heck, he'd told Joshua about it himself, when he discovered how lonely and outcast the poor guy felt, living alone in Father's old digs and never able to go out. Especially after Alec had been able to return to his own apartment and his normal-seeming life, a false birth certificate and a manufactured passport clearing him of all charges against him. But to see exactly how *many* of the transgenics had managed to make it to TC? *That* had been a bit of a shocker.

Everyone at Manticore had known about the Nomalies locked in the basement: the freaks that were the result of failed experiments. And like everyone else, Alec had heard the rumors about specialized units, like this guy, Mole, who'd been designed for combat in extreme environments. Yet he'd never actually set sight on any of them, never fully appreciated exactly how many testtube babies Manticore had made.

As he leaned down to unchain the bike, a soft noise further along the alley tickled his senses. He tensed, breathing superficially, straining his ears and readying himself to defend against attack. But the sound wasn't repeated and nobody jumped him. Finally Alec straightened and relaxed. Maybe it'd been a cat on the prowl. Or a rat. There certainly was enough garbage around here to attract rodents.

A few minutes later, he was heading down the road at a sedate pace. A part of him wanted to let rip, push the Duke to its limits, open up the gas to full throttle and race off noisily. It was late; there wasn't anybody out on the road; and with his enhanced sight, he could see almost as well in the moonlit night as during the day. But, like all streets in Seattle nowadays, the asphalt was slick with drizzle and pockmarked with potholes. Besides, roaring along without a care in the world might draw unwanted attention—Alec chuckled softly as he caught himself in the act of thinking that. *Max must be rubbing off on me*, he decided. What was that saying? Discretion was the better part of valor? Well, he could do

discreet if he wanted to.

Approaching the checkpoint between sectors seven and five, he slowed even further. A lone guard huddled next to a small space heater in the little cubicle next to the checkpoint. His tiny television was tuned to an all-night shopping channel, no other entertainment available at this hour. Zooming in on the screen out of sheer curiosity, Alec had to commend the cop on his cleverness and taste: several buxom women in tight cat suits were demonstrating various kinds of fitness equipment, contorting their bodies in appetizing—if somewhat uncomfortable looking—poses. As far as finding diversion while on mind-numbing duty at a sector border in the middle of the night went, it wasn't bad.

Alec revved the engine briefly to alert the cop, before perfunctorily waving his sector pass in the man's face. "Jam Pony messenger."

"At this hour?" the cop grouched. He clearly didn't appreciate having to leave his heater and television to check Alec's pass and let him through the barrier.

"Yeah." Alec rolled his eyes. "That's what I said. But the boss man, he's not hearing it. 'Bip bip,' he says. 'We aim to please,' he says." Alec spoke in a scarily good imitation of Normal at his finest. "At least it pays overtime," he added in his normal voice.

The sector cop grunted and waved him through.

Just as Alec was about to reopen the throttle and drive off, the tiny hairs at the back of his neck rose up. He had to resist the urge to rub at his barcode. But he knew what the feeling meant.

Someone was watching him.

He darted a furtive glance around, seeing nothing but shadows. Still, it was the second time this night that his instincts had warned him. He'd learned to trust those feelings the hard way and—

"Hey!" The cop was holding up the barrier with one hand, glaring at Alec. "You plannin' on standin' there all night?"

"Um, no." Offering the cop a smirk, Alec drove through, entering sector five.

He kept his senses on high alert, only diverting enough of his attention to keeping the bike upright so he wouldn't smear himself over the road. It didn't require much concentration; after the many months he'd spent living in Brain's old apartment, he knew every nook and cranny of this sector like the back of his hand.

Alec could still feel the unseen eyes on him now that he'd caught on to their presence—although whoever was watching him seemed to be falling behind when he sped up. He slowed the bike back down to a near crawl and the sensation became stronger again. He wasn't sure if Manticore had put a dash of the supernatural in his genetic cocktail or if this was just the animal's instinct for survival at work, but he knew to pay attention.

Driving right past the building where his apartment was, he turned into a small side street a block further down. He took his time, going slowly enough that anyone tailing him could clearly see where he went. But as soon as he rounded the corner and would no longer be visible from the main road, he killed the engine, leaned the bike against the wall and hurried on silent, cat's feet up the fire escape of the building opposite. Crouching in the darkest shadow he could find, he waited.

It didn't take long. About half a minute after Alec had settled in his hiding place, a dark silhouette appeared at the mouth of the alley. A man, on foot, and—Alec used his vision to zoom in—dark-haired and clad in jeans, an old army jacket and worn sneakers. As Alec watched, his pursuer glanced around quickly, before he hurried into the alley.

Alec's muscles tightened, readying for the jump.

As soon as he saw the abandoned bike, the guy froze, gaze darting about. Alec didn't wait for him to look up. Instead, he flung himself off the stairs, taking the other man down to the ground with him. Prepared for the move, unlike his opponent, Alec was the first to recover from the impact with the hard pavement. He again lunged for his pursuer, intending to pin him down and get some answers. But the other guy's reaction came lightning quick: his hand snatched at Alec's wrist and gave a hard enough pull to make Alec, not expecting that turn of events, flip over and land on his back, air whooshing out of his lungs as he hit the ground.

Damn.

More cautious now, Alec sprang back to his feet, delivering a high kick in the same instant that should have taken out his adversary the moment Alec's foot connected with his head. But the man pulled back at the last instant, so Alec's boot only grazed his skull. He shook his head, absorbing the blow, and rushed Alec, head down.

Alec ducked to the side, thinking fast. Was this one of White's guys? They seemed to have strength and endurance beyond what any Ordinary had a right to. In any case, it was time to stop playing and end this.

He grabbed his opponent's elbow and swung him round so the guy ended flat-

faced against the wall. Alec was on him the next instant, the captured arm twisted painfully up the man's back, keeping him pinned against the brick.

"Is that any way to greet a brother?" The words were muffled, difficult to understand from the way the man's face was pressed against the wall. Still, something about his voice tugged at Alec's memory.

Careful not to let his grip loosen, Alec pulled down his captive's collar with his free hand. Sure enough, the barcode was there, clearly visible against olive skin.

"511." Alec recognized the code. He let go and stepped back, still coiled and wary and not about to drop his guard yet. Too much had happened to trust anyone on sight, no matter what shared history they had. "What the hell did you think you were doing, sneakin' up on me?"

"I wasn't *sneaking*." 511 twisted around to face Alec. "I was tryin' to catch up." He snorted a rueful laugh. "Manticore speed is no match for that green monster of yours."

"You hotfooted it the entire way?" Alec blinked, incredulous.

"From the sector checkpoint on." 511 wiped at a bloody lip with the back of his hand. "Had to abandon my ride at the other side."

Alec made a wry noise. He'd been taking the freedom of movement his Jam Pony sector pass gave him for granted. "How long've you been in Seattle?" He frowned, trying to remember the last time he'd seen 511. "You weren't at Manticore when it burned, were you?"

"Nope. Was on a mission in France." 511 rolled his injured shoulder, testing it gingerly. "Had a bitch of a time to get back to the good ol' US of A."

"Why d'you even bother?" Not like the country offered them much beyond fear and hatred.

511 shrugged. "Frog cuisine didn't agree with me."

Alec snorted and scratched his neck. "Not what I remember."

511 chuckled, then shrugged again and admitted, "It's different on your own."

Alec nodded. Yes. Yes, it was. Which was probably why he'd stuck it out in Seattle: working at JP, helping Max, hanging with Joshua. They might be freaks, dysfunctional half of the time, but they were family. "You stayin' anywhere?"

"Not really. I got here two days ago. Been trying to get a feel for the lay of the

land." 511 sketched a wave. "I was scoping out this Terminal City, following up on some gossip, when I caught a glimpse of you." He grinned, teeth white. "Good ol' 494."

"Name's Alec now." Alec turned back to his Duke, still leaning against the wall where he'd left it.

"Why Alec?"

Alec smirked across his shoulder. "For smart aleck." Max had given him the name, and it had sort of stuck. Alec wasn't about to tell 511 that, though.

511 threw his head back and laughed out loud. "Fits. I go by Biggs these days."

"Why Biggs?" It was Alec's turn to be curious.

The dark-haired X5 held up his hands. "No reason. I just liked the sound of it."

Alec cocked his head, regarding his former teammate. Wasn't that the most precious thing freedom had given them? The chance to do things for no other reason than the pleasure they gave?

An awkward silence fell, both soldiers unsure of their next step. They'd exchanged the *hellos* and *where you beens* and now they were trying to find common ground.

Alec grew conscious of the reek in the alley—a foul smell emanated from one of the dumpsters—and decided there were better places to get reacquainted.

"You can stay with me." He knew he was taking a chance. Just because 511—Biggs—was an old Manticore buddy didn't mean he could trust him blindly. Wouldn't be the first time White had enlisted a transgenic to hunt his own kind....

Alec swallowed down the unpleasant thought. No: he should be safe. If Biggs was double crossing him, he would surely have noticed something not quite right in Biggs' responses by now. "I got a comfy couch." He gave a wry scowl. "At least, girls seem to fall asleep on it, so I guess it's comfy."

Biggs' eyes widened in surprise. He snorted a laugh, the ice broken once again. "494, I'm shocked! Losin' your touch?" He chuckled again. "I gotta see that couch."

oOo

Jam Pony's headquarters was abuzz with activity, just like always at this time of

morning, with messengers running to and fro to get ready for the day's deliveries.

"Sorry, Alec."

Alec barely leaped out of the way in time to avoid being overrun by Sketchy riding up the ramp, a heavy bag filled with packages unbalancing his bike. Alec scowled after the lanky messenger for a moment, before turning back to survey the rest of the mayhem.

Inside his cubicle, Normal was shouting instructions to those messengers still hanging around, although not too many people were paying attention. "Bip, bip, people! These packages ain't gonna deliver themselves."

Alec snorted a laugh at the look on Biggs' face as he took in the scene.

"*Bip bip?*" Biggs mouthed, his eyes wide.

Alec gave a shrug. He hardly ever noticed Normal's quirks any more. Compared to Manticore's handlers, the Jam Pony boss was a big teddy bear. Ambling over to the cubicle, he leaned an elbow on the counter and waved Biggs closer. "Normal, my man. I want you to meet a friend of mine."

Normal glanced up from his clipboard, looking harried. "Hullo," he mumbled, before grabbing a pen and jotting something down.

Alec lowered his voice. "Biggs needs a job. Think you can help?"

Normal dropped the clipboard and took a better look at Biggs. Alec could see the argument going on in his head. On the one hand, Jam Pony really didn't need any more employees. On the other hand, Alec knew Normal could never refuse his 'Golden Boy' something. Wasn't the first time Alec had used that to his advantage, and likely wouldn't be the last, either.

"He's a hard worker," Alec wheedled. "You won't be sorry. Promise."

"Well, all right." Normal sighed heavily, as if the weight of the world was resting on his shoulders. "If you say so."

Alec shot Biggs a triumphant grin, before turning back to Normal. Now for what Biggs *really* needed. "He's gonna need one of those sector passes."

Normal rummaged around in a drawer and pulled out a sheet of paper. "Fill this in. Sector pass should be ready tomorrow." He shoved the form at Biggs. "Today, you can ride with Alec; he'll show you the ropes."

Biggs nodded, and took the form. "Sure. Thanks, boss."

Normal grunted something unintelligible and reached for another package from the pile behind the counter. Alec clapped Biggs on the shoulder. "Welcome to Jam Pony, buddy."

Spotting Max among the lockers, talking to OC, Alec pushed away from Normal's counter. He dipped his head in her direction. "Someone else I think you should meet."

Biggs followed the direction of Alec's gaze. As soon as his own landed on Max, his eyes narrowed. "She one of us?"

Alec shot him a surprised look. They weren't that easy to spot, even by their own kind, were they?

Biggs caught the look and grinned. "Saw her with you, last night. She doesn't seem your usual type, so it wasn't difficult to figure out."

"Right." Alec's brows drew down. When had he become so predictable?

"And the other girl?"

"OC? As Ordinary as they come." Alec mulled over the words in his head for a second before chuckling, "Well, not ordinary-Ordinary but—."

Biggs snorted. "I got ya."

Alec headed toward the lockers, Biggs following. As they approached, Max and OC turned their attention to them.

"So, who's this?" Max demanded the moment they got within earshot. She looked Biggs up and down with the same kind of abhorrent expression she might wear if studying a bug under a microscope.

"Biggs." Biggs shifted on his feet, giving Alec a sideways glance. *What the hell?* that look said. "A friend of Alec's."

Alec suppressed the urge to roll his eyes. That wasn't exactly the kind of recommendation that would make Max look on Biggs more favorably. "From back home," he expanded for Max's benefit, wiggling his brows meaningfully.

Max caught on right away, and her expression instantly softened a little, if only briefly. "Oh, wonderful," she muttered, as if speaking to herself, although she had to be aware it was loud enough for the other two transgenics to pick up. "Now I get two asses to kick." But her eyes gleamed and Alec knew she didn't

mean it as belligerently as it sounded.

Biggs, on the other hand, didn't know Max. He bristled. "That's—."

Alec threw a hand around Max's shoulders, hugging her to him. "Come on, Maxie. Be nice to your brother."

She snorted and jabbed a fist at his shoulder, before shrugging off his arm and walking away. Alec winced. Playful or not, she still packed a mean punch.

"Just make sure I don't have to save his ass all the time, too," she cast over her shoulder. Alec offered her a rude gesture in reply.

He turned to Biggs. "Don't worry 'bout her," he told him. "Her bark's worse than her bite."

"As if you'd know," OC snorted. She slammed her locker shut before pushing past Alec and Biggs and after Max.

"What the hell was that?" Biggs sounded a bit bemused as he watched OC catch up with Max, like he wasn't quite sure what had hit him. Alec tried not to grin: Max had that effect on people. Biggs' earlier flash of anger seemed to have faded, though, the effect Alec had intended with his interference.

"That was Max." When Biggs gave him a confused look, Alec realized the name would mean nothing to his old comrade. "452."

Biggs quirked an eyebrow. "One of the runaways." Though he kept his voice low, it wasn't a question. They all knew the designations of the kids who'd climbed the fence in '09.

"Yeah." Alec searched around until he located an unused locker. He pointed it out to Biggs. "That can be yours." Opening his own locker, he brought the conversation back to Max. "Max's the one burned down Manticore." He still recalled crouching on the hilltop watching the complex, the only home he'd ever known, go up in flames. It'd been a shitty home, though, and he wouldn't trade his current freedom to have it back.

"So I heard."

Alec shot Biggs a startled look; he didn't think it was common knowledge exactly how Manticore had been destroyed. But before he could ask, Normal appeared among the lockers.

"All right, enough with the fraternizing. Got a run for you, my golden boy." Normal shoved a large envelope into Alec's hands and turned his attention to

Biggs. "Take my advice, young man. You stay away from Missy Miss, if you know what's good for you. She spells trouble." He jerked his head at Max, who was now talking to another of the messengers just inside the roll-up door at the top of the ramp, holding up her bike with one hand.

"Sure, eh, boss." Biggs was starting to look a bit overwhelmed, and Alec decided it was time for them to clear out, so he could catch up his Manticore buddy on what was what and who was who. He'd never realized before how complicated his life had gotten.

He glanced at the address on the envelope and groaned. "C'mon, Normal. This is in sector ten. Don't you have anything closer to home?"

"Nope." Normal scowled. "You're late? You get leftovers nobody wanted. Even you."

Alec rolled his eyes and glared at Max. She was throwing him a wide smirk, and he knew her transgenic hearing had allowed her to catch the exchange, even from across the room. Then a new plan, something he'd been considering suggesting for a while, popped back into his mind.

"Listen, Normal, I got an idea. What if I take the bike to deliver packages addressed to those outlying sectors?"

Normal looked confused. "How else would you get there? On foot?"

Alec laughed, once he realized why Normal was confused. "Not *that* bike. My motorcycle. Sixty-five horsepower, lightning-fast. Couple of those, we'd up effectiveness quite a bit."

"I don't know. Those things are dangerous." Normal still looked dubious, though his eyes had taken on a greedy gleam. Alec knew what he was thinking: higher turnover meant more business meant more money. "You could get hurt."

"Nah, not me," Alec dismissed Normal's concern. Normal might think him an Ordinary, but Alec knew there was very little he wouldn't be able to do on that motorcycle. "Listen," he argued, "why don't we give it a try? If you don't like it, we drop the horsepower and go back to manpower."

"Well, all right," Normal agreed hesitantly. "We'll try it for a few days. Now, git."

Knowing he'd wrung everything out of Normal he could for now, Alec nodded. He shoved the stiff, brown envelope into his messenger bag and waved for Biggs to follow him.

Biggs waited until they were outside. "Now what?" he asked.

"Now," Alec shook the bag at him, "we go get the Duke, and your bike, and deliver a package."

"You're serious, aren't you?" Biggs stopped in his tracks, gaping. "When you said you were gonna get me a job, I—."

"You didn't think it'd be an honest-to-God real Ordinary's job?" Alec laughed out loud at the look of horror on Biggs' face. "Don't knock it till you've tried it." His expression turned more serious. "It's a good front, you know. Those sector passes are worth their weight in gold. Well, figuratively speaking," he amended, fingering the light laminated pass. "Plus, it brings in some legit money. Something Max is big on."

"Max again." Biggs rolled his eyes. "She's really got to you, hasn't she?"

"No, she hasn't." Not really. And he didn't sound defensive at all, he insisted to himself. "She's a friend. Family, is all."

"Hm." Wisely, Biggs didn't say more but just followed Alec over to where he'd parked his motorcycle.

oOo

They picked up Biggs' motorcycle where he'd been forced to abandon it the night before, Alec's sector pass getting them through the checkpoint without a hitch. Thirty minutes later, they left the Interstate at the Jefferson Park exit and entered sector ten, slowing down as they headed further south on Beacon Avenue. On the side roads, huge houses hunkered behind ancient oaks and pines while security fences ringed the lawns. The area spoke of money and affluence. Biggs whistled through his teeth in apparent admiration.

"These people are loaded." He lifted one hand off the handlebars to indicate the villas. "Couple of X5s like us? We could make ourselves a fortune here. Easily."

"Probably," Alec commented absently. "They also have vicious guard dogs." He sketched a wave as they passed by another large house at a snarling beast behind the fence that was following them with its yellow eyes. "Plus high security systems, electric fences, and a glowing relationship with the cops."

Biggs grumbled something that Alec was too focused on his surroundings to catch.

If he turned off onto this road here, on the left, and then second right, it'd take him straight to the Berrisford mansion. It was the real reason Alec disliked runs to sector ten so much, although he could never tell Normal that. Too many

memories. And he was always worried he'd run into Robert Berrisford. He was quite convinced the man would keep the vow he'd sworn at Rachel's grave: the next time he saw Alec, he'd try to kill him.

Alec wasn't afraid Berrisford would succeed; what bothered him was what he might have to do to stop him. They'd both be better off to never get into that position.

"You all right?"

Biggs' question pulled Alec back to the present. His face was cold with wet drizzle and he discovered he'd somehow coasted to a halt at the mouth of the shaded lane that led to the Berrisford place, one booted foot planted on the asphalt to keep his balance. He shook himself. "Yeah, always."

"Hm." Biggs gave him a sidelong glance. "You have that look."

"What look?" Alec shot Biggs a startled glance. He had a look?

"That look that says you're thinking about things you don't wanna be thinking about. The one you got a lot our first mission together." Biggs scrubbed a hand across his face, apparently unaware of Alec's discomfort. "Which one was that, again?"

"The Ekstrom assignment? In Stockholm?" Alec wasn't sure if it was the right one, but it was the first thing to jump to mind, and it served to distract Biggs. "C'mon, let's go." He pushed the Duke back into motion, the powerful engine loud in the silent streets. "Enough reminiscing. We got a package to deliver."

He could feel Biggs' puzzled gaze pricking his neck as he drove off. He didn't care; there were some things he didn't want to explain. Even to a former teammate.

oOo

A short while later, Alec heaved a sigh of relief at leaving the sector behind. The parcel had been delivered—no tip, of course; in these parts, people had maids and personal assistants to take in deliveries and tipping was not part of their job description—and the interstate beckoned.

"Race you?" Biggs challenged. He gunned the throttle on his red Honda 400R and the bike sprang forward.

Alec, never one to back down from a challenge, scowled at his teammate's back. Though his survivalist's sense told him speeding along the highway was a good way to draw attention, he felt too much in need of a distraction from his

own unhappy memories to care much. "You're on!" he yelled over the roar of his Duke as he opened up the gas.

A minute later, the two bikes were roaring down I-5 at top speed, heading back north. They wound around cars and battered lorries, ignoring the honking of startled motorists and narrowly missing hitting several nasty potholes in the badly maintained road—potholes, which could have send their bikes flying and end up with themselves seriously damaged, despite their transgenic reflexes.

The wind lashed Alec's face and tore at his jacket. Though speed made breathing difficult, he tilted his head back to inhale deeply. For once, it had stopped raining and the air tasted salty with the sea breeze.

Biggs swung by a dark green Ford station wagon, cutting it off so closely he nearly scraped the paint off the fender. The Ford's driver honked angrily. Alec smirked, and raced past the Ford on the other side, trying to catch up. They'd been bred for competition and he wasn't about to be outdone by his old Manticore buddy.

They swooped past Terminal City, the fenced-off streets eerily quiet in the light of day as most of the transhumans kept out of sight. Up ahead, the high rises of central Seattle loomed up from the gray day, the buildings' roofs hugging the leaden sky, and the interstate grew busier as they approached the downtown exits, though it was mid-morning and rush hour had already come and gone.

Alec opened the gas a little wider, pushing the Duke even faster and whisked past Biggs. He caught a glimpse of the other man's face and knew Biggs' expression was a mirror of his own: mouth wide in a grin, eyes glittering with excitement, jaw clenched in concentration to keep the horsepower between his legs steady on the road.

The fences marking the edges of sectors four and seven came and went. The interstate, for the larger part a no-sector land, now had entered sector five. Soon, they'd have to slow down to pass the sector checkpoint into sector nine and back to Jam Pony.

In the distance, the checkpoint already appeared on the horizon. The dirty windows of the small guardhouse reflected the watery sunlight that briefly pierced the slate-gray clouds being driven on above by the wind. Alec let up on the gas. No need to draw the sector cops' attention.

But Biggs apparently had no intention of slowing down. He zipped past Alec, signaling rudely with his hand as he did so, and shooting Alec a victorious grin across his shoulder.

"Biggs, no!" Alec's words were whipped away in the wind. In front, Biggs

hunched a little lower over his bike.

Dammit.

Biggs was new to Seattle; he had no idea how much trouble he could get in, showing off like that.

Alec gunned the Duke up to full speed again, even though he knew he'd fallen too far behind to have any hope of catching up with Biggs before he reached the sector crossing.

An instant later, Biggs flew past the checkpoint, black-clad officers scrambling to get out his way. Before they could recover from the shock, Alec followed. He waved his sector pass at them as he roared past, hollering at the top of his voice, "Jam Pony messenger. Urgent run." He caught a glimpse of open mouths, shouting words he couldn't make out, and then he'd left them behind.

Ahead of him, Biggs whooped, swerving dangerously as he pumped one fist in the air in triumph. *Crap*, Alec thought. He really had to stop Biggs before he got them both killed.

However, the next checkpoint—the entrance to sector three—was already coming up fast. The cops at the last crossing must've called ahead, because Alec could see the guards hurrying to erect a barricade and close off the interstate.

The police weren't fast enough, though, for two X5s on powerful motorcycles. Going so quickly they left a plume of mud and debris in their wake, the bikes squeezed through the tiny gap still left in the barrier. One of the cops pulled his gun and a bullet zinged past Alec's cheek, missing him by less than an inch. Shit. Shit shit shit.

The exit to Lake Union was coming up next. Alec at last caught up with Biggs and indicated he should take it. Far behind, sirens started howling as patrol cars followed hot on their trail. Biggs heard the sirens too, and darted a look across his shoulder, finally catching on that maybe this race hadn't been the best idea ever. He nodded curtly at Alec and took the exit.

A few minutes later they were hiding under the overpass at the bottom of the exit, waiting while overhead a half dozen patrol cars, sirens blaring and lights blinking red and blue, raced by.

"Well, that was awesome," Biggs remarked when the sound of the sirens had fallen away. He grinned at Alec. "Reminds me of that time when we got chased by the cops in Shanghai."

"Right," Alec agreed dryly. "Great fun." He glared at Biggs. "I got shot."

Biggs shrugged, unfazed. "Yeah, that was a bit of a bummer."

Another patrol car zipped by overhead, a straggler trying to catch up with the rest.

"We gotta get out of here," Alec decided. They had to get off the streets for a while, lay low until all the excitement had died down. "And you, my friend, need a reality check." He thought quickly about what was the safest place he knew in the area. "Follow me."

oOo

Making sure to stay below the speed limit this time, Alec led Biggs to Father's old house, the only sanctuary he could think of that nobody outside their little circle knew about. Fortunately, it wasn't far, and they didn't come across any cops. A short while later, they were parking the bikes at the back of the house, out of sight from the street.

"Whose place is this?" Biggs peered up at the ramshackle building.

"Joshua's." Alec opened the back door. "Before he moved to TC. I'll introduce you two later."

The television Alec had procured when he was hiding out with Joshua—property of Harbor Lights—was still connected to the power grid. Alec removed some forgotten sheaves of paper from the top of it and switched it on, flipping through the channels until he found a local news station.

"Police are still searching for two motorcyclists who crashed through several checkpoints on the interstate. The two drivers, both believed to be white males, drove at high speed along I-5, refusing to obey police orders to—."

"That about us?" Biggs walked up next to Alec, eyes glued to the screen.

"Yeah. This isn't good." The TV showed fuzzy footage from a security camera pointed at where they'd barely managed to squeeze through at the second checkpoint. Fortunately, the image quality was too bad for the cops to be able to make an ID. Even so, Alec told Biggs, "We better lay low for a bit." If he got himself arrested again, Max would kill them both. Assuming, Alec thought bitterly, White didn't beat her to it, of course.

As if on cue, his cellphone began to ring. Alec dug it out of his pocket. "Hello?"

"Alec?"

Alec bit back a groan. He should've known. "Hello, Max." Over the line, he could hear a television blaring wherever Max was, set to the same station he and Biggs were watching. Hearing the report in stereo was oddly surreal.

"Where are you?" Good old Max, always cutting straight to the chase.

"At Joshua's old digs." Alec turned his back on the television and headed to the front window to peek through the curtain, out at the street. It was empty and quiet.

"You been watching the news?"

Alec closed his eyes, taking a deep breath. "Yeah. And before you ask: yes, that was us."

"What happened? You all right?"

Her tone was still mild, a little concerned even. Alec blinked, stopping in mid-stride as he headed back toward the TV to take another look. Concern? From Max? That was... new.

"Uh, yeah," he replied cautiously. "We—." He tried to come up with an explanation that she might accept, but even the few seconds it took to gather his thoughts were too long for Max.

"Don't tell me." Her tone had changed to ice. "You did it for no good reason."

"No! See—."

"Alec, shut up." He heard her take a deep breath. When she spoke again, it was softly. "They didn't follow you, did they?"

In the background, Alec heard Normal's trademark *bip bip*, and he knew that if she hadn't been calling from Jam Pony, she'd have given him a piece of her mind right there and then. Deep down, he couldn't blame her. Gatecrashing checkpoints like that was foolish, at best.

"No. Joshua's place is still off the radar." He'd made sure of that.

"Good. Logan still needs somewhere secure to set up his operation after White trashed his place. I was thinking about asking Joshua if he could have his old place." Max paused. "What's it look like?"

Glad for the change of subject—although it was likely just temporary—Alec answered quickly. "Same as it always did." He glanced around. "Musty, filled with old books. Electricity is still running, though. I'd say it's as good a place as

any for Logan."

"Except there's nothing to eat," Biggs interrupted around a mouthful of cheese puffs. He waved an opened packet beneath Alec's nose, the scent of fake cheese strong. "Want any? This is the last."

"Who's that?" Max sounded suspicious.

"Biggs." Alec automatically snatched a handful of the chips, even though his mind was busy with other matters. "He's been with me all morning."

"Figures." Nobody but Max could make a single word sound so scathing. "I knew the two of you'd get into trouble."

"Max," Alec sighed, "we're not in trouble."

"Whatever." She hung up.

Alec munched down the cheese puffs from one hand while flipping the phone shut with the other.

"What's her problem?" Biggs crumpled the empty packet and dropped it. He dipped his head to indicate the phone Alec had just put back in his pocket. "She the boss, or something?"

Alec rounded on Biggs. "No. But she's right. What we did was stupid. If this was Manticore, we'd both be in solitary right now." *If not worse.* He suppressed a shudder.

Biggs took a step back in the face of Alec's unexpected anger.

"Chill, man. We're not at Manticore now."

Alec lowered his voice, fighting to keep himself under control. "You think Manticore was as bad as it gets? You're wrong. The entire city has it in for transgenics. The NSA is on our tail, trying to wipe out any evidence Manticore ever existed. And then there's this loony cult who believes *they're* the superior creatures, and they make the NSA look like Girl Scouts!"

He discovered he was on the verge of shouting, almost losing the struggle to stay calm. He hadn't realized how much the whole situation had been nipping away at his equanimity. Taking a few deep breaths, he continued in a calmer voice. "Listen, I know you've been out of the loop, but trust me, we better lay low. Keep our heads down, don't draw the attention of the authorities. *Any* authorities."

"Well, all right." Biggs appeared more impressed with Alec's outburst than with his actual words. But as long as he did what Alec wanted, Alec didn't care. "Don't tell me that wasn't fun, though!"

Despite himself, Alec laughed. "I won't." It *had* been fun, if only for a little while.

oOo

Dusk was falling, the clouds shifting from light gray to dark and then black, and Alec was about ready to climb the walls of their hideout. While they'd been trained to lie in wait for hours on assignment, neither X5 did well with the boredom of having no purpose and nothing to occupy their attention. They'd searched the house top to bottom for more snack food but found nothing but some of Joshua's stiff, dried brushes and emptied paint tubes; they'd discussed their various missions, still trying to remember which had been the first they'd been sent on together and not reaching an agreement; they'd argued if it had been Biggs' fault or not that Alec had gotten shot that time in Shanghai; and they'd gone over the same old quarrels about who was the best shot and the best at hand-to-hand.

The television managed to hold their interest for a while, until the excitement of the chase had died down, and the police could no longer deny the two motorcyclists they'd been hunting had avoided arrest and the news stations had moved on to other things.

"Not that easy to catch a super soldier," Biggs had commented smugly when a chagrined police spokesperson admitted the Seattle cops had been given the slip. Alec had given him a wry grin in return.

That had been two hours ago, and the news anchors hadn't said a word about them since. A bank robbery over on Western Avenue with hostages taken now occupied all the channels. Alec decided they'd wait until after dark, and then make their way back to his place. They could—.

The faint rumble of approaching vehicles brought Alec to full alert, cutting off his train of thought. The noise—at least one motorcycle, by the sound of it—came closer and closer, until it was right in front of the house. There, the engines cut off and silence fell, all the louder for the suspense.

"Sounds like we got company."

Alec rolled his eyes at Biggs' whispered warning. Did Biggs think he'd gone soft in the past few months? Or deaf?

Although the house was dark, their vision was almost as good in the gloom as in

the light of day. Biggs tiptoed toward the hallway to hide in the shadows, while Alec peered through a crack in the curtains.

"It's Max." Alec relaxed when he caught sight of the slim figure in leather making her way up the porch steps. Someone was with her, taller and bulkier, and he recognized Max's companion with a start. "And Mole."

"I hope they brought pizza." At Alec's declaration they weren't in any danger, Biggs strolled back into the room.

Alec snorted, trying not to notice the way his mouth watered at the mention of food. A handful of cheese puffs wasn't much of a meal for a healthy X5. "You really don't know Max."

As if to underscore his words, the front door slammed open with enough force to bounce off the wall with a *crack*, and Max strode through. Mole stomped in right after her, cigar smoke trailing in his wake.

Max had indeed brought no pizza, Alec noted, unsurprised. Or anything else that looked like food. Lips pursed tightly together, she didn't stop moving until she was in the middle of the living room. Alec tensed, unsure if she was still upset with him and Biggs for drawing the cops' attention, or if there was something else that filled her with such angry determination.

"I need your help." As usual, Max didn't bandy words. Alec let out a breath of relief; sounded like he was off the hook. "There's—."

Before she could finish, Alec heard Biggs inhale sharply. "What sort of freak are you?" He was staring at Mole with some of the fear installed in the X5s for the things in the basement in his face.

Mole, whose temper was short-fused at the best of times, growled around his cigar, "Special Desert Unit, X5." He spat out the last word as if an X5 was something you'd step on when you discovered it on the kitchen floor.

The tone wasn't lost on Biggs and pride won out over his fear. He pulled himself up. "Watch your tone, desert boy." The X5s considered themselves the elite, the best of the best that Manticore had put out, and Alec couldn't quite fault Biggs for taking offense.

Mole snorted. "Desert *boy*?" He gripped the sawed-off shotgun he carried everywhere a little tighter. "Wanna try marching fifty clicks through the desert in one day?" He puffed on his cigar. "That'll separate the boys from the men. Guess who'd end up having to haul your pretty ass to base?"

Biggs opened his mouth for another retort, but Max was faster. She cleared her

throat, loudly. "Hey! Wanna hold off on comparing whose is bigger until later?"

"Yes, Max, why don't you explain why you're here?" Alec added quickly before either Mole or Biggs could get out another word. At the rate they were going, the next thing out of either of their mouths would've definitely been the wrong thing and it'd have ended in bloodshed.

Max didn't answer Alec right away. She continued to glower at Mole and Biggs. Alec was glad that for once he wasn't subject to her glare. At last, both transgenics shrugged ruefully and relaxed, although Biggs kept darting wary glances in Mole's direction. Alec realized he hadn't been exposed to anyone of the special units before.

"Luke intercepted a report." Max turned to Alec. "A couple transgenics are holed up in a warehouse over on West Harrison. The cops have the place surrounded. They're planning to pick 'em up in the morning. I'm thinking, we bring them out tonight and take them to TC."

"Why can't they take care of themselves?" Biggs wanted to know. "Not like TC's location's a big secret."

"Because they're *my* kind, you twat," Mole snarled. "In case you haven't noticed, they can't exactly walk up without drawing attraction."

"So?" Biggs' eyebrows drew together, whether in annoyance or confusion, Alec couldn't quite tell. "Why bother, then?"

"Hey!" Max grabbed a handful of Biggs' shirt and hauled the astonished X5 close to her. "We're all Manticore," she hissed into his face. "That means we're family. And family take care of each other."

Biggs shot a questioning look at Alec, as if looking for guidance. Alec shrugged. "You heard the lady." He turned his attention to Max as she let go of Biggs. "What do you need, Max?"

Alec hoped that his acceptance of Max's statement, and Mole's towering presence, would keep Biggs from simply walking out. Lead by example, right? It had taken Alec a while—and continuous exposure to Joshua; staying at the big fella's place had definitely helped change Alec's mind—to come round to Max's viewpoint that all transgenics were part of their dysfunctional family. But once he had, he'd fully agreed with her, and he found it hard to imagine that, not too long ago, he'd been like Biggs. He shoved the shameful memories of what he'd done back then away and concentrated on Max's words.

"A diversion." Max folded her arms across her chest. "Like I said, the police have surrounded the warehouse. We need to draw them away, so Mole can go in and

bring our people out." She cocked her head in Alec's direction, a hint of a wry smile around her lips. "After that stunt you guys pulled this afternoon—"

"—a glimpse of roaring motorcycles should be enough to have the entire sector force up in arms." Alec nodded in understanding. He grinned; he liked this plan.

"Yup. Once we draw them away, we'll split up, get lost in the confusion. Mole will get the van in and get those people out. They'll be safe behind TC's fences before anyone's the wiser."

o0o

Half an hour later, the three X5s hunkered in the shadows of a dank alley, hiding between square brick buildings which had once belonged to a shipping company. They had their bikes parked a block away and had cat-footed into the alley. Mole had stayed behind in the van, parked up near the bikes, waiting for Max, Alec and Biggs to draw the cops away.

At the far end of the street, moonlight glinted off a rusty boxcar sitting patiently on the tracks of the Burlington Northern Santa Fe railroad. Beyond that, the waters of the Puget Sound showed white crested waves. But the view wasn't what held the X5s' attention. The three patrol cars on the corner of Harrison and Elliot Avenue did—as did the two at Thomas and Elliot.

"Our people are in that building over there." Max pointed to a soot-streaked red-brick structure. Half its windows were broken and the other half so coated with dirt that it'd be impossible for anyone inside to see out.

"We need to get all those squad cars to move." Alec wasn't too happy with the odds. There were at least five they could see and probably several more nearby to provide backup, and there were only two of them to lure them away; Max needed to stay behind to make sure Mole wasn't followed back to TC. "Max, you gotta call Mole in as soon as those cops clear out."

Max nodded, her eyes not leaving the patrol cars. Even from that distance, they could see the men sitting in the front, keeping a bored eye on the warehouse. "I know."

"Alright." Alec shot a last glance at the cops at the nearest intersection. "Let's get this show on the road." He gestured for Biggs to come with him back to where they'd parked the bikes.

"You take the ones at the north corner." Alec rolled the Duke out of the shadows and waited for Biggs to follow suit with his own motorbike. "I'll distract the cops on this side."

Alec had decided he'd try to pull them all the way to sector nine, where the narrow streets formed a maze he knew like the back of his hand. He should be able to get rid of the cops there. Biggs, on the other hand, didn't know Seattle as well as Alec did. He'd need an easier route.

"Listen. Take them with you along Elliot West, then turn right onto Fifteenth, heading north. Make sure you get across Ballard Bridge before they close it off or you could end up getting stuck in sector eight. Once you get across the canal, you should be able to lose them. You can double back along I-5. Meet us at TC."

"Got it." Biggs' dark eyes glittered in the moonlight, mirroring the excitement Alec felt at the prospect of action. This, after all, was what they'd been created for.

For a second Alec considered adding a "Be careful" to his directions, but then he decided Biggs wouldn't understand if he did. It was something Manticore would never have considered doing: they were more likely to send you on your way with a dire threat of what they'd do if you failed. "Let's go," he said instead, firing up the Duke's engine.

As it turned out, it was shockingly easy to lure the sector cops away. Frustrated and peeved by the two mysterious bikers that had given them the runaround that afternoon, they jumped into action without thinking as soon as Alec and Biggs roared past.

Max, invisible in the shadows across the street to anyone not equipped with transgenic vision, offered Alec a quick grin as he raced by. He detoured around John Street, curving north onto Western Avenue, and skidded to a halt, pretending to be surprised to find the cops there. Turning tail, he started south down Elliot Avenue, back downtown. A quick glance across his shoulder told him the second lot of cops had taken the bait: there were at least three patrol cars on him. He smirked. The ruse had worked. Assuming Max and Mole didn't run into any unforeseen trouble, their brethren from the warehouse would be safe in TC in another hour.

He followed Elliott until it merged with Western again, and then started zigzagging through the narrow streets of downtown, riding down alleys, turning left and right almost willy-nilly. Every once in a while, he pulled over to listen to the sirens still attempting to keep up with him.

Two hours later, he tired of the cat-and-mouse game he was playing with the cops. Max would have gotten the transgenics out by now. He sped down Fourth, making sure he threw the cops off for good this time, until he reached Jam Pony. The place was dark and locked up tight but, despite Normal's paranoia, the lock was easy to pick for a smart guy like Alec. Rolling up the door, he dragged the Duke inside and grabbed one of the bicycles. He didn't think it'd be a good idea

to try and pass the sector points on his Duke tonight, with or without a Jam Pony pass. His Duke'd be safe here for the time being; he'd get it back tomorrow.

oOo

It was close to midnight by the time Alec made it back to Terminal City. "Max get here yet?" he asked the transhuman guarding the little-used gap in the fence on the west side.

"Yep." The kid, who obviously had a pinch of rabbit in his cocktail, grinned white square teeth at Alec, his ears twitching with pleasure. "Safe and sound. Along with a van load of our people."

Alec responded to the grin with one of his own. "That's what I wanted to hear."

"They're in Command." The transhuman waved vaguely toward the center of Terminal City. "Celebrating."

Command? After a moment's confusion, Alec realized the guard was talking about the building where they'd taken him that first night, after he'd come looking for Joshua. He'd been impressed, and secretly more than a little proud, at the set-up the transgenics had managed to scrounge together: screens monitoring the news; radios tuned in to police channels; a rudimentary electronic security system guarding the outer perimeter.

"Thanks." Alec stuffed his hands deep into the pockets of his jacket and ambled along the deserted streets toward the heart of Terminal City, from where he could hear the sounds of the celebrations, growing louder with every step. The night had gotten cold, and more rain threatened; he could smell it.

As he reached the command post, he found the street outside crowded with people: transgenics of every shape and size imaginable laughing and talking. It was the sort of behavior he'd come to associate with a mission gone well, when the adrenaline hadn't yet worn off. He spotted Mole among the crowd, towering over nearly everyone except Joshua, the customary cigar dangling from the lizard man's lips. Max, of course, was the center of attention, her hair shining and her black leathers gleaming in the light that spilled out of the command building.

Searching around, Alec was glad to see Biggs standing a little to the side, next to his motorcycle, confirmation Biggs had also successfully shaken off the pursuing cops. Biggs' expression was sober, almost thoughtful, though, as he watched the *melée* in front of him.

"Hey."

Biggs gave a start at Alec's hail. Alec shot him a curious look. Wasn't easy to sneak up on an X5, and he hadn't even been trying. He wondered what could be weighing on Biggs' mind so heavily he'd dropped his guard. "What's up? Did you have any trouble?"

"What? Nah." Biggs' teeth flashed and his cheeks dimpled as he gave himself a little shake. "Those cops sucked. They'd never have made the cut at Manticore."

Even as Alec grinned in agreement, Biggs' smile melted away and his gaze turned back to the crowd. Alec looked at him suspiciously and was on the point of prying into what was bothering him when Joshua shoved through the throng toward them.

"Alec!" The big man flapped a huge hand at the crowd. "Big party. People happy to be here." He offered Alec a paper cup containing a measure of dark orange liquid. "Alec drink."

Alec took the cup hesitantly and sniffed the contents. They reeked of alcohol, but not any brand he could recognize. He took a cautious sip and nearly choked as the liquor trailed a flaming path down his gullet.

"What the hell is that?" His voice was hoarse, hardly recognizable.

"Moonshine." Luke smiled proudly as he joined them. "I made it."

Alec coughed again. No amount of scotch could ever have prepared him for this. "It's... strong," he croaked.

Luke's smile widened. "Pretty good, huh." He dashed off again without waiting for a reply, Joshua at his heels. Looking after the two of them as they disappeared back into the impromptu party, Alec realized he didn't even know which of the transgenics among the crowd he'd helped rescue tonight.

Making sure nobody was looking their way, he furtively upended the rest of the cup behind Biggs' motorcycle. "I suspect we could make a decent buck selling that stuff as lighter fluid."

Biggs didn't reply. Alec again studied him from the corner of his eye, growing concerned. He'd worked with Biggs enough to know that something was really bothering his teammate.

"Hey? What's the matter?" Alec tried.

Someone somewhere in the crowd said something funny, and a hoot of laughter rose among the calls and cheers. Biggs didn't even smile.

Instead, he abruptly pushed himself away from the Honda. "Something I want to show you."

"All right." Alec hesitated, still unsure what had gotten into Biggs.

"Not here. It's—." Biggs broke off. "Not here."

oOo

Leaving Biggs' Honda behind, they snuck out of Terminal City on foot, through the same hole in the fence that Alec had used to get in. The transhuman on patrol nodded in greeting before fading back into the shadows to continue his vigil.

Outside, Alec followed Biggs as the other X5 walked across the tracks down to the water's edge. The sea looked black, the water slick and forbidding now the wind had died down. The moon was no longer visible, hidden behind rain clouds which had moved in closer.

Biggs gazed out across the harbor, staring unseeingly at the cranes looming in the distance, haphazardly lit by the few street lights that hadn't burned out yet. Alec waited, suppressing his impatience and letting Biggs get around to sharing whatever it was that troubled him at his own pace.

Suddenly, Biggs twisted around and threw something at him. Instinctively, Alec snatched it from the air. He gasped as he got a good look at the tiny object, recognizing it at first glance; he'd seen enough of them in his day to know it was a small communicator, designed specifically for the secret frequencies only available to Manticore operatives. He tensed, wishing he'd brought the gun hidden in the kitchen cupboard back at his apartment.

"It wasn't a coincidence," Biggs began, "that I came to Seattle. That I ran into you."

The implications were clear at once. "You sold us out?" Alec couldn't keep the hurt out of his voice, his teammate's betrayal cutting him deeply even as his mind was going over the consequences. Max would kill him when she found out, that was for sure.

Think furiously, he tried to determine the extent of the damage, tried to remember how much he'd told Biggs, and how much of that information Biggs could've forwarded to Manticore already. He made a list in his head: the apartment, Jam Pony, TC.... And though he'd been with Biggs most of the time, tonight, while they'd been luring the cops away, Biggs had been on his own plenty long enough to call in an extensive report.

"No!" Biggs held out his hands, more apologetic than defensive. "No, I didn't."

Alec narrowed his eyes, wondering if he could take Biggs out. If he should. Would it matter? "They did send you here to spy on us." It wasn't a question. It'd be just the sort of thing Manticore would do. And while the facility near Seattle had burned to the ground, Alec wasn't so dumb as to believe that had been the end of the project. There would be other facilities, other bases.

"Yeah." Biggs nodded miserably. "They told me—." He cut off what he'd been about to say. "My orders are reconnaissance and retrieval. Not just *us*," he indicated himself and Alec with a flick of his hand, "but *them* as well." A dip of his head toward TC explained who he was talking about.

"Makes sense." Alec understood: they'd want their precious X-series back, of course, but, just like the government and the NSA, they'd also want to remove any evidence of the transgenics now their attempts to keep them fully under wraps had failed. The less the general public knew, the better they could spin the story. "Why are you tellin' me this now?"

Biggs turned back to the water, not looking at Alec. "Honestly? I've no idea. It's —." Again, he didn't finish, apparently more uncertain than any X5 had any business to be. He twisted his head, glancing up at Alec from under his lashes. "None of them are like us," he stated bluntly. "They're not X5s. They're all transhumans, Nomalies.... Freaks." He paused, as if the last word had been a challenge. Alec waited. Biggs broke first. "Why did we help them tonight?" His voice was soft, curious. "Why do you?"

Alec plopped down on a rusty mooring bollard, scratching his neck. His barcode itched where Max had lasered it off the other day. He thought he knew what was going on with Biggs, remembering his own confusion those first weeks after Max had destroyed the Seattle base. Once the initial euphoria over his new freedom had passed, he'd begun to realize he was on his own. He'd have to make his own decisions about his life, unaccountable to anyone but himself. It had been scary and overwhelming and exhilarating all at once. And while he'd bite off his tongue before admitting it to her, he owed Max a debt of gratitude he'd never be able to repay for helping him figure out what sort of man he wanted to be.

"Because...," Alec began slowly, the words still forming as he tried to sort through his motives, "because I can. Because they need help." He tilted his head up, seeking Biggs' gaze. His teammate was looking at him intently, as if he was hanging on to Alec's every word like a lifeline. "Because Manticore was wrong."

Less than a year ago, Alec had felt few qualms about killing the panther girl to save his own life—but he found he could no longer fully imagine being the cold-blooded killer he'd once been. It was like that had happened to someone

else, a gruesome story he'd been told.

He barked an awkward a laugh, suddenly uncomfortable with the memories. "Because it's fun to thumb my nose at the authorities."

He pushed back up from the bollard, heeling around until he could look back toward Terminal City. The warning signs designed to keep people out were visible to him even in the darkness. "They're not that different from us," he added soberly, "despite the way they look. Take Josh. He's a good guy. He doesn't deserve to be hunted like an animal, any more than we do. But you and me, we can hide more easily in the outside world than him, or any of them." He remembered what Max always said. "They're family." Alec glanced over at Biggs, feeling a little embarrassed.

Biggs hunched his shoulders against a gust of wind coming in over the water. He stuffed his hands in his pockets, shooting Alec another miserable look. "I—I guess I should go."

"Go?" Alec drew his brows down, not quite getting what Biggs was saying.

Biggs indicated the device Alec was still holding. "They know where I am."

Ah. Alec's expression cleared. "So you plan to run?" He turned the communicator over in his hands, a glimmer of a plan forming in his head. "And then what? Keep running?" He'd tried that himself, for a little while. It'd made him miserably lonely and unhappy: empty in a way that no amounts of candy or sex were able to fill.

"You got a better idea?" Biggs asked, his tone sharp with desperation. "I can't go back; I don't want to follow their orders any more. And I can't stay here."

"Yes, you can." Alec flicked the communicator back at Biggs, trusting his superior transgenic instincts would let him catch it before it splashed in the water.

He was right. Biggs plucked the communicator from the air, giving Alec a puzzled look as he did so.

"Talk to them," Alec dipped his head at the communicator. "Pretend you're still working for them." He grinned. "We might even learn something useful."

Biggs' face lit up with a slow, sly smirk as he caught on to what Alec was telling him to do. "You want me to be a double agent?"

"Uh huh." Manticore never was big on sharing intelligence with its operatives in the field, but they were still human; they might let something slip. At the very

least, they'd gain some time before Biggs' handlers realized he'd defected.

Biggs' smile faded. "What about—?" He flapped a hand to indicate TC on the other side of the railroad tracks.

"Max?"

Biggs nodded.

Alec shook his head. "I'll handle Max." Meaning he wouldn't tell her. He didn't think she needed to know how close they'd come to being betrayed by one of their own. And he trusted Biggs: the X5 had revealed himself of his own free will. He wouldn't have done that if he were planning to double-cross them.

Biggs put the communicator back in his pocket, and Alec started back across the tracks. It had been a long day, and he was hungry and tired.

"Alec?"

Alec turned back toward Biggs, quirking an eyebrow.

"Thanks."

Alec shrugged. "Don't mention it."

All in a transgenic's day's work.

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