

## Flawed

"Your hands are shaking," Max accused. She pulled the door of her locker open and started emptying her backpack.

"Are not." Alec shoved his fists deep into the pockets of his jacket, willing the tremors to stop. His hands had begun to tremble the day before, and not even a good night's sleep—for the record: alone—had helped any. In fact, he didn't feel so hot at all this morning, if not to say he was downright cold. But he'd be damned if he were going to show such weakness in front of Max.

"Are too." She slammed the locker and peered up at his face, examining his features intently. "Oh, don't tell me! You haven't kept up with your supplements. You moron!" The last came out in an angry hiss.

"What?" He was genuinely surprised, clueless as to what he had done wrong this time. Though judging by the look on her face, he'd definitely messed up somewhere. "What supplements?"

She sighed. "Don't screw with me, all right."

The combination of 'screw' and 'Max' made a smart remark pop up in his mind, but one glance at her made him swallow it. She didn't appear as if she'd laugh, and truth be told, he doubted he would be able to hold his own temper if she reverted to her customary shoulder-smacking or ass-kicking. Not with the way he felt: his knees threatening to give way and what promised to be a whopper of a headache slowly building behind his eyes.

"I wouldn't dare," he said instead, his expression honest. "I swear, I haven't a clue what you're on about."

She was quiet for a moment, still holding him with her gaze and he clamped down on the urge to shuffle his feet. "They never told you, did they?" she said. Her soft tone took him aback.

She turned to reopen her locker and rummaged around it in some. "Here, take these." She offered him two white pills. "My emergency stash. These should help tie you over until I can get you more."

"More what?"

"More tryptophan. Look, it's too long a story to tell right now. So, do yourself a favor, take these, go home, and wait for me there."

"Go home?" he repeated. His lips quirked up. "Leave Normal short-handed because I'm feeling a little under the weather? You know he'll have you cover my shift. And whom will you blame then? Good ol' Alec, that's who. No, Max, thanks very much. I'll be all right. I always am."

"Alec..." She looked up at the ceiling as if looking for guidance. "Just this once, do what I tell you. Or I will drag your ass home myself."

He opened his mouth to tell her no again, but something in her voice stopped him. He could have sworn he detected a note of concern beneath the exasperation. That, more than the threat to his person, made him give in.

"All right," he agreed, though with a shrug to show he was humoring her and not in the least intimidated.

"Have you got any milk at home?"

"Milk?" The change in subject bemused him enough to echo her words once more. He really needed to come up with a few lines of his own, but for some reason his mind failed to work properly.

"Yes. You know, white stuff, comes from cows? Oh, never mind, I forgot: you're a Scotch man."

"Hey, there's no need to get nasty." His own temper was slipping away from him. His migraine was increasing, and he thought he was running a fever—unless Normal had decided to no longer skimp on heating up the Jam Pony offices during the Seattle winter. He wasn't in the mood for batting words with Max, fun though it often was.

"Chocolate, then?" Max tried.

He smirked. "What's this? You offerin' to do my grocery shopping now?"

She jabbed a finger into his chest, punctuating each word. "Do. You. Have. Any. Chocolate? "

"Ow! What you doin' that for? Yes, I've got some candy bars stashed away." He winked at her. "Didn't know you had a sweet tooth."

She ignored him. "Good. Take the pills now, they'll get you home. And then eat those bars, stay inside, and wait until I get there."

She stalked away without waiting for a reply, muttering angrily below her breath. "Leave it to that idiot to run around 'til he keels over."

His sharp hearing picked up the words despite the distant ringing that had somehow begun to sound in his ears.

"And guess who'll get to pick up his pretty carcass?"

*Pretty carcass?*

Louder, Max called, "Yo, OC, I need a favor."

Alec started cramming his bag back into his locker; he wouldn't need it if he took the day off. He pricked up one ear to listen to OC and Max.

"OC, I need you to cover for me. Got a few errands to run."

"Sure, Boo. You got it."

"Oh, and tell Normal Alec's gone home sick."

OC shot him a curious look and he shrugged. *Don't ask.*

"Aiight..."

"Thanks." Max dashed off.

"Well, you heard the boss lady," Alec said with a quirk of his lips and a little bow toward OC. "I'm on sick leave."

oOo

The streets were filled with morning commuters making their way to work. Alec mulled over Max's words, absently weaving through the crowds. She really was a piece of work, wasn't she? Where did she get off to make it sound like it was *his* fault that he wasn't up to his usual witty, energetic self, or running a little fever and having a bit of a headache? She always managed to find a reason to say he'd screwed up, no matter what he did, and frankly, he was growing tired of it. He glanced up as it started to drizzle. Probably would get blamed for that, too.

Come to think of it, he was feeling quite a bit better already. Either those pills she'd

given him worked real miracles, or it had been something he ate. Perhaps those three bags of pork rinds last night had been a bit excessive, even for a transgenic's digestion?

So, now the question was, would he be a good little soldier—obey Max's orders, go home, eat his chocolate, and wait for her to explain how he had mucked up this time—or should he do something more profitable with his unexpected day off?

It didn't take him long to decide. He'd be damned if he gave Max the idea she could make him dance on her strings—his name wasn't Logan Cale. And besides, he could still get to his apartment before she did, leaving her none the wiser.

He adamantly refused to admit the lack of logic in those two arguments.

oOo

He'd earned himself some good money hustling pool, making the rounds past several dockside establishments. Even during the daytime, the bars had been full with sailors on shore leave and stevedores skipping work on a rainy day. Easy pickings for a charismatic transgenic like himself. But he was growing tired. The tremors had returned with a vengeance, making it near impossible to line up a proper shot. It had taken all he had to beat his last opponent—a deckhand from Russia who spoke broken English and towered over him by a full head. He hadn't liked the way the man was eying him sideways when handing over his money, suspicion sharp in those pale blue eyes. High time to fall back.

Alec glowered up at the gray sky as he stepped outside. Damn, it was cold. It had started raining in earnest around noon, a chilly downpour mixed with sleet driven before a strong wind. He pulled the collar of his jacket up and hunched, hands in his pockets in an attempt to stay warm, before he began to walk away. The toe of his boot caught the curb, and he tripped, windmilling a few steps before he regained his balance. What the fuck was wrong with him? That sort of thing was *not* supposed to happen to someone whose genetic cocktail had been laced with feline grace.

The next instant, Alec found himself on hands and knees, palms scraped raw, without any idea how he got there. Water soaked through his jeans. His head pounded, and from the corner of his eye he caught odd lights streaking across his vision. He didn't think they were real.

Something was very, very wrong.

He shook his head, hoping to get rid of the buzzing noise, and tried to clamber to his feet. His knees were shaking so hard that they refused to carry his weight and they buckled, sending him right back to where he started.

*Crap.*

He needed to get out of this rain so he could try to catch his bearings and come up with a plan B.

There was a small alley off of the main street and he stumbled to it. The cracked paving was layered with filth and he scrunched up his nose at the stink that hung cloyingly in the passageway. He crawled into the narrow space behind a dented dumpster and pulled a discarded carton on top of him. The cardboard wouldn't last long in the downpour but it kept the worst off for the moment.

Sheltered from the rain, he blew on numb, trembling fingers, attempting to restore some feeling in them. He didn't know what was going on, but he was quite sure he wasn't going to get home by himself. He'd have to call Max—assuming she was still willing to help his stubborn rear end. Fortunately, he was not above begging if the situation called for it. And judging by how his hands and feet tingled and the way his head felt about to burst, *now* was definitely a time when a little groveling wasn't too high a price to pay.

He pulled his cell from his pocket, squinting at it through narrowed eyes. The buttons danced and wavered, and he blinked to clear his vision. It wasn't easy to think straight, or to hold the phone in fingers that were shaking so hard he wouldn't have been surprised to hear bones rattling. Then, another seizure hit, more powerful than the last, and Alec's world imploded in agony.

The phone clattered from useless fingers.

oOo

"Alec?" Max pounded on his door, then pressed her ear against it. The apartment remained deadly silent, not even the sound of a television could be heard. She frowned, concerned. Could the seizures already have grown so bad as to render him unconscious? She hadn't thought him that far progressed yet, and the pills and chocolate should have taken the edge off until she could get him the tryptophan.

She still couldn't believe he hadn't known. Then again, Manticore had always been strictly 'need to know'; as long as they'd had their soldiers in their grip and could provide them with serotonin supplements on a regular basis, telling the X5s about their genetic defect hadn't been necessary.

She blamed herself, really. She should have remembered it, realized Alec might have no clue of the pitfall that came with his extra strength and speed. But she had dealt with it

on her own for so long, it never crossed her mind that the Manticore escapees might not even be aware they *had* a condition. Alec's penchant for peanut-filled snacks and chocolate, both practical sources for tryptophan although milk was better, must have kept his serotonin levels within acceptable parameters even as the effect of Manticore's highly efficient supplements wore off. Until now.

She got out her tools and quickly set to work. The lock on Alec's apartment really was barely worth the name; within seconds the door clicked open and she stepped inside. It was dark, cold, with the sparse illumination flooding in from a miraculously unbroken streetlamp revealing it was also very, very deserted.

Alec was not there.

Dammit. Had it really been too much to ask that for once he'd do what she told him?

She rushed outside, in search of a pay phone. She had to find him soon; Alec didn't know he was bargaining with his life. She found a booth a few blocks over and quickly dialed his cell. It rang. And rang—and rang. She pressed down the receiver and thought for a moment. Making up her mind, she punched in Logan's number.

He answered on the third ring, and she couldn't help but sigh with relief when she heard his voice.

"Hey. It's me."

"Max." He sounded a bit surprised. "What's up?"

"I need your help. Alec's missing."

Logan gave a dry laugh. "And that's worrisome how? He's probably got some scheme going he doesn't want you to know about. Max, Alec can take care of himself."

"Not today, he can't," she said. "I saw him this morning. His serotonin levels are dropping. I was going to get him some trypto. Logan, he doesn't even know what's happening to him."

"Oh." There was a brief pause. "That's bad."

"Yeah. I tried his cell, but he's not answering. Can you—"

"—trace it? Yes. Hang on."

Dimly, she heard the click-clack of computer keys coming over the line. She pressed deeper into the booth, attempting to avoid the rain. A few minutes later, Logan came back.

"Sector nine. Elliot Avenue, near pier sixty-nine."

"Thanks, Logan. I owe you one."

"Don't mention it. Just find Alec, before anyone else does."

She hung up and ran back to her bike. A moment later, she roared down the slick, gleaming streets.

Pier sixty-nine wasn't far from Alec's place, but it was one sector over. A rookie cop manned the check-point, enjoying his newly acquired authority to the fullest and taking his own sweet little time to double check her Jam Pony pass. Max bit the inside of her cheek to keep her grievances to herself. Complaints would gain her nothing, except perhaps a disgruntled sector cop who might delay her even more just to spite her. And if her suspicions were right, Alec did not have time to waste. Those two pills wouldn't have lasted him this long. Not in his condition.

The docks were dark and deserted except for a couple of all-night nude bars, where light spilled through cracks, and the occasional burst of laughter or shouts drifted out. She slowed the bike to a crawl. Alec should be here somewhere and she hoped it wasn't in one of those bars. She might have a difficult time getting to him if he was. She stopped, cut the engine and concentrated on her senses. She tried to shut out the muted laughter, the lapping of waves against the quay walls, the distant barking of a stray dog.

*There!*

It was the soft but unmistakable sound of slow, labored breathing she'd heard. And it came from an alley just off of Elliot. She parked the bike, grabbed her backpack and hurried down the dim street. With her night vision it wasn't difficult to detect the slumped form behind the dumpster, half hidden beneath a soggy cardboard box.

"Alec!"

She knelt at his side, grimacing when her hand brushed against something soft and slimy, and tore the carton away. Alec was unconscious, his body seizing with tremors that grew in strength before they faded to mere shivers and the process started all over again.

"You big idiot." There was no fire in her voice and she cradled him in her arms. He was so cold. "Don't you dare die on me now."

With one hand, the other snuggling Alec close so he could benefit from her body heat, she searched her pack until she found the plastic bottle of water. She dug around some more and pulled out a small bottle of brown glass, filled with white pills. For a moment she was at a loss. How was she going to get those in him? He was out cold and couldn't very well chew and swallow them.

She leaned back against the wall, hoisting Alec up until he lay against her and she no longer needed to hold on to him. She shook a couple of pills into her palm. Using the bottle for leverage, she ground them against her gloved hand. It wasn't easy; the pills threatened to slip away from her grip, and perspiration beaded her forehead. Yet, after a few minutes of concentrated effort, she managed to break the pills up in smaller pieces. These, she dropped into the water bottle. She swirled the liquid around, holding it up against the meager light. Even with the pills broken into crumbs, it took longer than she liked but finally the tryptophan dissolved in the liquid. She brought the bottle to Alec's mouth.

"C'mon, Alec, drink up. Show me some of that X5 toughness. You can fight this. Now, drink!" He remained limp in her arms, eyes closed, dark blond hair plastered against his face, looking very fragile. Tears of frustration burned in her eyes.

"Damn you, Alec! I swear, if you die, I'll kick your ass so hard you won't know what hit you. Drink." Desperate, she wrenched his jaw open and cautiously poured some liquid into his mouth. Much to her relief, his natural reflexes were still working, and he swallowed instinctively. She repeated the process, again and again, until the bottle was empty.

Okay, she'd finished step one. Now, she had to get him out of the cold and the rain to where it was warm and he could rest. Once he woke up, she'd get the rest of the pills in him. And then rag on him for not doing as she'd said, the dork.

But how was she going to get him to safety? He was still comatose, and likely would be out for a few more hours before the tryptophan she'd managed to get into him could be processed. She couldn't put him on the bike, and his apartment, though closest, was too far away for her to carry him. She looked around in despair. Perhaps she could get him into one of the warehouses somewhere. At least, it'd be dry.

The sound of an approaching car caught her ear. She tensed, waiting and listening while the car stopped beside her bike at the mouth of the alley and a door opened. "Max?"



Thank God. "Logan! Here!" The whir of the exoskeleton seemed loud in the narrow alley.

"Figured you might need some help getting him home." He smiled.

Grateful, she smiled back. "You figured right. Move back, I'll get him to the car." She staggered beneath the dead weight over her shoulder—even an X5 had her limits—while she carried Alec to Logan's car. She dumped him into the backseat and crawled in beside him.

Logan climbed back behind the wheel and put the car into drive. "How is he?" he asked over his shoulder.

"He'll live," Max said. "No doubt so that he can make my life miserable one more day."

Logan chuckled.

oOo

Alec woke up in his own bed, his head throbbing worse than it ever had, even after several bottles of good Scotch. He shifted, surprised at the stiffness in his limbs. It was as if he'd gone several rounds against his Krav Maga teacher—and got his ass beaten each time.

"Look who's decided to wake up?" Though the words might be scathing, they were said in a suspiciously mild tone. Alec turned his head into her direction, peering blearily at her face. What was she doing in his bedroom? What had he missed?

"Max?" Grinning, he added with a snicker, "why are you sitting all the way over there? Don't you wanna join me, over here?" He patted the bed beside him.

She snorted. "In your dreams, pretty boy." Her brow drew down, her expression growing serious, and she got up anyway. She handed him a couple more pills from a small bottle, and a glass of water. "Take these."

Obediently, he swallowed. Breakfast in bed. From Max. He could get used to this.

"How're you feeling?" she asked once he gave her the glass back.

He let himself fall against the pillow. "Like three day old road kill."

She nodded and returned to the chair. "Makes sense. You suffered a pretty bad spell. I

never realized..." Her voice trailed off.

Alec pushed himself into a sitting position. "What the hell happened, Max?"

She shrugged. "Manticore. What else. They apparently neglected to tell you that that perfect body of yours comes with a serious defect. A flaw in our brain chemistry that results in a serotonin deficiency. The tryptophan helps."

"Huh." Alec considered for a moment. Then, with a typical Alec-grin he asked, "Perfect body?" He wiggled his eyebrows at her. "I can't help but notice my jeans are off. You haven't been sneaking a peek, have you, Maxie?"

Annoyance flared up in her face, and she flung the pill bottle at him. He only missed being hit because his lightning quick reflexes made him duck just in time. It landed with a dull thud against the pillow.

"The next time you get yourself in a jam," Max snarled, towering over his bed like an avenging fury, "you can save your own hide. I'm done with you." She stormed from the room and he winced in anticipation of the apartment door being slammed shut behind her.

"Max? Thanks for saving my ass!" he called.

She didn't reply. But the door closed with a soft click. Alec smiled.

**Disclaimer:** this story is based on the Cameron/Eglee Productions/20th Century Fox Television series *Dark Angel*. All characters belong to their original creators. The story was written for entertainment only and no copyright infringement was intended.