

None Of His Business

Night had fallen on Seattle. Traffic in the potholed streets had died down a while ago and the only people still out were either homeless or working on plans that daylight would not abide. It had stopped raining but the streets gleamed with wetness, the pavement reflecting a blinking red neon light over a seedy bar advertising nude girls. A cold breeze blew in from the ocean, chasing discarded potato chips bags and an abandoned *New World Weekly* through the dim alley.

Expertly, the distant glow of neon providing plenty of light for his enhanced eyesight, Alec skipped over the newspaper and slid past the puddles, away from the main street and deeper into the shadows. A lone siren howled in the distance, quickly fading. He appeared to be alone.

Soft noises, the scuff of a shoe against pavement and slow breathing detected with cat-sharp hearing, put the lie to outward appearances. Alec pivoted toward the sound, alert but unconcerned, vision zooming in to penetrate the shadows. "Come on out and play," he said.

Something moved in the darkness and a man stepped away from the wall. Though Alec knew he himself was nothing but a silhouetted shape, he could see the other well enough. The man was not tall, with stooped shoulders further emphasizing his small stature. His head barely reached Alec's chin. His torn tweed jacket and the dirty black scarf around his neck would do little to ward off the wind's chill. The man's eyes flitted toward the street before they returned to Alec.

"Surprised to see you." Again, his gaze drifted away and he hugged himself, dancing on his toes to stay warm. "Sold you a batch just last week. You looking to get yourself dead?"

"Not quite," Alec said casually. "I need more." He might have recovered the five hundred dollars in lost profit from the Steelheads, but the androstamine had been gone. That left him shy one satisfied customer, something he was about to rectify tonight.

The man shrugged. "It's your life. You got the cash?"

"Have I ever not?" Alec pulled a wad of bills from his jeans' pocket and held them up so the man could see the money even in the gloom. He eyed the bills hungrily, then dug a hand into his tweed and came up with a small package wrapped in brown paper.

Alec accepted the parcel at the same time the dealer took the money offered in return. The roll of cash quickly disappeared beneath the jacket once the man had cast another

quick glance around to ensure they were still alone.

Nervous little bastard, Alec thought. Then again, human senses were so inferior to his, the guy probably had to rely on such constant vigilance to stay alive, especially while making a living in the illegal steroid trade.

"Nice doin' business with ya," the dealer said, turning to leave. "See ya 'round. If you last that long." He clucked to himself.

Alec had had enough with the veiled threats. He grabbed the man's elbow and whirled him back around, drawing him up for a face to face. The sensation of bones shifting beneath his fingers and the look of sudden pain in the other's beady eyes made him let up a little, but he did not let go.

"That's the second time in as many minutes you refer to my imminent death. Something you're not telling me?"

The dealer, tottering on his toes in an attempt to relieve the pressure on his arm, whimpered. "The andy."

"What about it?" Alec's eyes widened in sudden understanding. "Oh, crap! Don't tell me you're selling inferior stuff!"

"No. No, it's not... The andy kills. It gets you all pumped up until your heart can't take it any longer. Then, without warning, poof. It bursts, and you're dead." The fear in the man's gaze deepened. "I thought you knew."

Alec furrowed his brow. "Let me get this straight," he said. "If you pop enough of these--" he shook the package in the dealer's face, "you die?"

"Yes. It's not my fault. I only sell it!" the small man whined, glancing up at Alec pleadingly. "I don't manufacture it. Please, let me go."

"Fancy that." Alec let go of his elbow and the dealer backed away a few paces, rubbing his arm.

"Can I go now?"

"Huh?" Alec had already forgotten about the man. "Yeah. I'll know how to get in touch when I want more."

The man blinked in surprise at that. Alec could not blame him. The guy had basically

just told him that taking androstamine was a slow way to commit suicide, and here he was announcing he'd be back to ask for more. Of course, the dealer didn't know he was not using the pills himself, but reselling them in Sector Four. And at a nice profit, too.

The dealer opened his mouth as if he was about to say more, then apparently thought better of it. He snapped his jaws shut, turned, and scrambled off, back to the main road and the red neon lights. Alec paid him no further attention.

He pushed the package down the front pocket of his jeans. So what if it those pills were as dangerous as any drug. It was none of his business.

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The back door to the warehouse was locked but such a minor inconvenience formed no obstacle for Alec. Within seconds, his lock pick had the tumblers falling away and he could swing the door open. Inside, the lights were low, fluorescents put out, the cage in the middle of the warehouse as deserted as the stands surrounding it. The floor was littered with empty paper cups and candy wrappers. The air smelled vaguely of blood and sweat. Over in the far corner, in the tiny office adjacent to the arena, the woman he had come to see sat counting and sorting large piles of crumpled dollar bills.

"Annie."

She looked up at the sound of his voice, startled even as her hand disappeared beneath the counter where he knew she concealed a loaded gun.

"It's me." He flashed her his trademark grin, cheeks dimpling. "Monty Cora."

"You're back!" Her hand reappeared and her stern, weathered face lit up with genuine pleasure. She got up and rounded the desk. "How did you--"

Alec chortled. "You oughta be more careful about that back door. Get yourself some dead bolts. That lock is practically worthless." He glanced over at the pile of bills on the desk, the take for the evening. "And that's like a shining beacon for anyone looking to make a quick buck."

"I can handle myself," she shrugged. "But thanks for the advice." She studied him for a moment. "You look good. You want me to set you up for a match?"

Alec shook his head. "Nah."

"The Mangler is eager for a rematch," she continued, ignoring him. She settled herself on the edge of the desk and folded her arms across her bosom. "There's some good money to be made there."

"Sorry, love. I'm out of the cage fight business. For now, at least. But I could use your advice."

Annie raised a questioning eyebrow.

"What can you tell me about androstamine?"

The alarm that flashed across her features gave him the answer before she even replied. She went to stand right before him. "You're not using that stuff, are you?" Her stare was intense.

Alec gazed down at her and smiled in reassurance. "No worries there, Annie. I'm not. I heard some rumors though."

"Good." She gave a sigh of relief. "Stay away from that poison, you hear."

He half expected her to wiggle a finger beneath his nose in warning. She might be promoting fights where men beat each other to a bloody pulp, but sometimes she resembled nothing so much as a mother hen.

"It's not like you need it, anyway, with your skills."

He grinned. "I know. And thanks, Annie."

"You're welcome."

He turned to go.

"If you ever want to fight again..."

"I know," he called over his shoulder. "I'll come see you, promise."

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Bouts of roaring laughter and cheers from the back room occasionally broke through the pounding music that washed over him. A large crowd had gathered around the pool table to watch the high stakes game going on, yet Alec wasn't paying attention. He slouched

on his bar stool, swirling golden liquid – his usual brand of Scotch – around in its glass, peering over the rim at the paper-wrapped parcel before him.

Five hundred dollars worth of andy, at the least. Enough to keep him comfortably in food, booze and willing women for several weeks.

What should he care people did to themselves? Ordinaries' bodies were theirs to use and abuse however their owners liked. At least they *had* that privilege, and if it killed them... Not his business.

He swallowed the last of his drink, peeled some bills off a larger roll and laid them on the bar in payment. He shrugged into his jacket, snatched the andy and stuffed it into a pocket. Once outside Crash, he slipped down the first alley off of Euclid Street, the fastest route home. Dumpsters, at least as much trash cluttered around them as inside, lined the wall in a disordered row. His nose wrinkled at the stink and he quickened his pace. Still, he paused beside the last one. With a chuckle, and a wry shake of the head, he dug up the package of androstamine pills and tossed it over the rim.

What people did with themselves was none of his business. But there were other ways a smart Manticore fugitive like himself could make easy money.

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