

## What's A Life Worth

The door closed behind him with a soft click. Alec stood motionless for a long moment. The sound of Max' muted voice drifted through the thin plywood door. "I shouldn't have gotten my hopes up anyway. I just wish I knew what I was gonna tell Logan."

Alec clenched his jaw and wrapped his fingers around the doorknob, prepared to go back in and try to make it up to her.

"That guy was the last chance for me and Logan. He's gone, and it's your fault. Don't think I'm ever getting over that." Her words resounded in his mind and Alec let his hand fall away from the door without opening it.

Her eyes had flashed with cold fury as she spoke, and hidden behind the anger Alec had detected a despair so deep that it was tangible. In all his time as a soldier, he had never seen such a combustible mix of emotions, and it had frightened him enough to shrink away from her.

She had known what the price for his life would be. And yet, knowingly and willingly, she paid it and told the lab tech to proceed.

Alec shook his head to clear it. He needed time to think and sort out the events of the last twenty-four hours.

He walked down the stairs, putting up the collar of his leather jacket in a sudden, inexplicable urge to hide the barcode from view. He stuffed his hands deep in his pockets and turned left. Down the street he caught a glimpse of the lab tech scuttling around the corner, clutching his suitcase in his arms. Max' last hope.

For a few seconds Alec contemplated following the Manticore employee and muscle him into finishing the research. Then he shook his head again. He had done enough damage for one day. Without a further glance at the technician he crossed the street and disappeared into a dark alley.

He soon found an abandoned warehouse and made his way to the roof. It would be quiet up there, and he'd be able to think undisturbed. Overhead, stars twinkled in a rare clear sky. It was the new moon and the roof was shrouded in darkness. It didn't bother him; the light of the stars was enough for the transgenic's enhanced eyes to see the surface clearly and Alec sat down at the edge so he could look out over the sparse lights of post-pulse Seattle.

If only he had seen more clearly where the path he had chosen was leading.

oOo

"Where the hell am I gonna get that kind of cash in the next five minutes, huh?" Alec growled, his hand tight around the technician's scrawny neck. A little more pressure and it would snap beneath his fingers. It was the thought that he needed the man to extract the tiny bomb lodged beneath his brain which kept him from adding that pressure.

"Wait." Max' voice. Alec let go and turned around. "You're paying me back," she added, her eyes boring into his. He scanned her face. Why was she doing this? Why was she helping him? Less than an hour ago, he had been trying to summon up the courage to kill her.

"No problem." He could return to Annie and cage-fighting to earn back the money. Bash a few more heads, crack a few more ribs, no big deal. Those guys would gladly dish out such punishment themselves, given half the chance.

He sat down on the chair. Max pulled out an envelope full of crumpled bills and the lab tech grabbed for it. "Great. I can leave town tonight," he said, unable to suppress his pleasure at the prospect.

Alec watched a dark cloud wash over Max' face.

"What? You haven't finished my job!"

Alec blinked. What job could she possibly--

"Look, you can have the work that I've done so far. Take my analysis. You can find some other Manticore geek to help you finish it off," the technician said. He ripped a page from his notebook and handed it to Max.

In a flare of understanding that was so bright it nearly blinded him, Alec knew. The virus! The virus that Manticore had given her, and that would kill Logan if she came near him. He was quite aware how important it was to her to get rid of the virus; he might be considered an opportunistic show-off but Alec wasn't stupid. Only a true moron would fail to notice the awkward distance between those two when they were in the same room.

"We got a deal? This guy's got like two minutes to live."

Alec held his breath, convinced that he was going to die within the next few minutes. He was certain what Max' reply would be; there was nothing else she *could* say. It was what

he would have answered, if he were in her shoes.

"Do it."

Shocked to his transgenic core, Alec could only stare at her.

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A cold gust of wind whipping around the building and ruffling his hair jolted him from his retrospection. He could play back the events again and again, analyze them, examine them, dissect them, yet he would never understand why Max had done what she did.

It didn't matter. It came down to one simple fact: he owed her his life.

Not in a million years would he be able to pay her back. Oh, sure, the money, that was easy. However, it was impossible to express the price she had paid in dollars. He rubbed the sore spot at the back of his head. The small cut hurt. But pain was better than being dead.

It was in that moment, on that rooftop, as another rain cloud drifted in from the ocean and swallowed the stars, that Alec swore Manticore wouldn't win. White would consider Alec's escape a minor setback. And he would continue to hunt the other escapees: the X5s, 6s, 7s, the nomlies.

Max had more compassion in her little finger, than White in his whole body. Left to themselves, the transgenics were doomed to die. Not all of Manticore's survivors were as well adapted to live in this world as he and Max were. Or as smart. Well, as smart as Max, Alec allowed himself with a wry chuckle. Days like today would make any man question his intellect.

He got to his feet as the first wet drops started falling from the black sky. The Manticore kids needed help. His help. And he knew where to find them. Slouched deep within his jacket to hide from the rain, Alec began to walk in the direction of Terminal City.

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