

**CHAPTER FOUR:**

Xen

 *Septemly 45*

 By the time they arrived in the city proper, it was dawn. Gabriel had somehow managed to get some sleep on the ride over, but only a few hours worth. He wasn't sure if the others had slept, but he suspected as much, as they had taken turns driving in the night.

 They were now in a high end hotel, no doubt paid for by Jessica and Wetzel’s boss, Gabriel had thought to himself. "I still don't understand why we couldn't get separate rooms." he said to Wetzel. Jessica was currently taking a shower. "Well, something I've learned from doing this over the years is that sharing a room has it's benefits. I mean, privacy can get scarce, but at least it's easy to watch each other's back." Wetzel replied, "But if it really bothers you, I'm sure Jessica would be happy to give you the closet." "You know what," Gabriel said, "I think I'm fine after all."

 After Jessica had finished washing up, she gathered the two around her laptop. "Alright boys, time to get to work." "Who do we have this time?" Wetzel asked. "A woman called Josie Xen. She lives here in the Bronx, but other than that, I couldn't find much else." "Any idea who would want to hurt her?" Wetzel asked, "No, not yet." Jessica replied, "I guess we'll just have to do this the old fashioned way."

 "Hold on," Gabriel said suddenly, "If your job is to protect people, how do you even know who to protect? I mean, you don't know anything about this women, but you're already saying she's in danger?" Jessica turned to him. "All you need to know right now is that our source is never wrong. Also, no one ever said she was in danger, only that she *could* be. Or she could be the person putting others in danger-" "So you don't even know *why* you're investigating her? That's insane!" Gabriel interrupted. "What kind of guardian angels are you?"

 Now it was Wetzel's turn to answer. "I know it seems strange, but that's just how things are. Its how it’s always been. True, someone could try to kill her, or she could be a killer herself. That’s why its our job find out which, and to stop whatever is going to happen from happening."

 "Speaking of which," Jessica interjected, "We aren't going to find anything out by just sitting around. We need to find out more about Ms. Xen before we can act. I did find an address; I'll go check it out. Meanwhile, Wetzel, you take Mr. Smith here and check out Xen's workplace. Based off her current records, she seems to be working as a nurse in a hospital." "Alright, we'll check it out." Wetzel answered. "We'll be sure to keep in touch." "Good." Jessica said, "I'll let you know when I find something. Happy searching." With that, Jessica left, hair still dripping wet. "C'mon, moody." Wetzel said to Gabriel, "You heard the lady. We've got a job to do."

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 The hospital was like any other. There seemed to be more patients than Gabriel thought was typical, but other than that, it looked normal. "So what do we do when we find this Josie?" Gabriel asked as they headed towards the reception desk. "*You* don't do anything. Just pretend you're here because of a broken nose." "Very funny." Gabriel snarled. "Oh I'm serious," Wetzel replied, "The best way to find out more about this nurse is to be a patient. And you've already been injured, so that makes this easy. Just let me do the talking."

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 After they'd signed in, it was nearly half an hour before someone came for them. When someone finally did, it was just the person they'd been looking for. She'd tried to explain usually patients were treated alone, but Wetzel had insisted on going along. Now, they were in an exam room, waiting for Xen to return with some X-rays.

 "Gotta say," Wetzel told Gabriel, "I wasn't sure you were gonna pull it off, but you actually did a pretty good job." "Did you really need to tell her we were a couple?" Gabriel asked, with a clear look of disgust on his face. While inter-species relationships were very uncommon, the thing that had bothered Gabriel most was how clingy Wetzel had been. "It was the only way to avoid splitting up," Wetzel explained, "And besides, who knows what you would have done if you were all alone."

 The door opened, and Ms. Xen came through with a few x-ray charts in her hands. "Good news, Mr. Watson." She told Wetzel as she put up the x-rays. "Looks like there was no damage to the bone. The doctor should be here shortly, but it seems as if the only thing he'll need are a few painkillers." Wetzel smiled at her, and said "Thank you, nurse. I couldn't stand it if someone had broken my little bow-wows nose." "No problem." she replied as she left the room. "Alright, lets get back to Jessie," Wetzel said. "If you ever call me that again," Gabriel told him, "I am going to kill you." "You can try," Wetzel said calmly, "But if you ever let Jessica find out, she'll have you pulling a sleigh through the snow for the rest of your life." At least he wouldn't have to deal with any of *this*, Gabriel thought.

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 When they were finally out of the hospital, Wetzel called Jessica. "Managed to get close to Ms. Xen, but it seems she barely uses her phone." "Wait, when did you get her phone?" Gabriel asked. Wetzel stopped and looked at him. "I cloned it. Now here, see if you can find something useful." He handed Gabriel his phone. On it was a complete copy of Xen's phone. Gabriel had never seen anything like this at the academy, “What the hell is this thing?" Wetzel sighed impatiently, “It’s a data pad, just try to find anything useful.” Wetzel spoke to Jessica “What did you find out?" After a short pause, he said "Well, guess you'll have to take a closer look. In the meantime, I'll look into the hospital's records, see all the patients Xen's helped treat. Keep us posted." He now turned back to Gabriel. "Did you find anything?" "Yeah," Gabriel responded. "Here, take a look at this."

 He showed Wetzel a text dating back a week, from an unidentifiable number. "'You'll pay for what you did, and for what your kind have done. Then, after we're done with you, your friends are next.' Doesn't seem very friendly" Wetzel said, reading the text out loud. "Could be a disgruntled patient. Let's have a look at the medical records." "Not that I have a choice." Gabriel said bleakly.

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 "Hey, have a look at this." Wetzel said to Gabriel. They had gone back to the hotel, and Wetzel had apparently gotten access to the hospitals database. Gabriel was pretty sure that was illegal, but he wasn't going to risk saying anything just yet. "I don't get it." Gabriel said. "Just, look." Wetzel replied, showing him part of a patients file.

Name: Kristoff, Hans

Gender: Male

Species: Canis Familiaris

Age: 25

Weight: 182 lbs.

Height: 6'5"

Fur color: Black

Injuries: Severe lacerations on all limbs, four deep stab wounds to the abdomen, and two gunshot wounds to the back. Also several broken ribs and fractured patella.

Current Condition: Deceased.

Cause of death: Extensive injuries.

 "I still don't get it." Gabriel said, "Its just another patient, right? I mean, what's so special about him?" "Not only was he treated by our nurse, but I just crosschecked the time of death with the hospitals security cameras, and it turns out she was the only one with him when he died." Wetzel showed Gabriel the footage, showing that Xen was indeed the only one with Kristoff when he expired, most likely performing routine medical checks. It also showed her trying to save his life as best she could when he began to crash. By the time help showed up, however, it was clear he was long dead. "Could someone want her gone because they think its her fault he's dead?" Gabriel asked. "Well," Wetzel began, "Given that she got a message threatening her life around the time all that happened, it definitely seems likely. Let's check in with Jessica to see if she found something." "Well guess what." Jessica said as she entered the room, "She did."

 "I didn't find anything in her apartment," Jessica began, "but it's what was outside that was interesting. As I was leaving her place, I managed to spot a few suspicious figures." She promptly showed the others pictures she had taken of the suspects. "All different variations of Canis Familiaris." Wetzel said. "Wasn't the dead guy – Hans, - wasn't he from the same species?" Gabriel asked, "Could they be related?" Wetzel thought for a moment. "Jessie, have you seen the local news lately?" "I've heard a few things, mainly about small extremists groups." She said.

 Next, Wetzel questioned Gabriel, "Hey, when we were at the hospital, did you notice anything strange about the patients?" Gabriel thought he had noticed something unusual, "Yeah, there were a lot of them, mostly canines and deer. Why?" Wetzel suddenly slammed a fist down on the desk. "Dammit! So the rumors were true." Gabriel jumped up, "What- what is going on?" he asked, surprised by Wetzel's sudden outburst. After a few moments, Wetzel answered him, "We thought we'd managed to get them out of the Bronx, and out of the city. But it looks like they're here again, which only makes our job harder."

 "I still don't understand." Gabriel said, "Who exactly is back?" This time, Jessica answered, "Purists. Extremists who believe their species is the superior one. We've had encounters with them in the past. Last time, we managed to kick them out of the city, but then the trail went cold. We thought they were gone, but now… it looks like they're back. And from those medical records, it looks like they're also angry." "We have to find out if Hans was a Purist." Wetzel said. "I'll go to his apartment, search it for any possible links. Jess, you take Gabriel with you and do not let Xen out of your sights." "Alright, sounds like a plan." Jessica said. "Looks like we're going to be spending a lot of time together." Gabriel almost gave out a howl, "And I thought being around *him* was bad."

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 "So, just how many people have you managed to help?" Gabriel asked Jessica. It was lunchtime, and Xen and her colleagues were clearly not going anywhere. They had gone to a local mall to eat, and were now gathered around a table. "I can't speak for the others," Jessica began, "but I've helped… lets see… I think Ms. Xen here will be number seventy four." At first, he thought she was joking. After a few seconds, however, it became clear she was not. "That's… that's a lot of people." He said finally. "Wait, hold on. Did you say 'others'?" He asked, "Just how many of you are there?" Jessica didn't respond at first, and for a second Gabriel thought she hadn't heard him. Then he noticed she was watching a jackal lingering around Xen. After a few seconds, she answered. "Yes, there are more of us. But as far as I know, we're not that big of an army."

 "Well do you have an idea?" "Besides me, there are five. One is our, well boss, but no one knows who he is." The more he found out, the stranger the whole situation seemed. "So you don't know who your boss is? Must make doing taxes-" "Hold on." Jessica said suddenly, as she went to brush her hair again. "Wetzel found something." she said. "Well, what did he find?" Gabriel asked. "Turns out, Hans was quite the purist. Wetzel says that he was part of a small sect. Apparently, they blame all the other species for everything that's gone wrong in the city." As she answered him, she looked around, seemingly searching for something. "He thinks Hans’ little club may blame the nurse for his death. Have you seen-" Just as she was asking, Gabriel heard a small click, undeniably from a pistol, and promptly shouted: "GUN!" He swirled around, just in time to come face to face with the jackal from earlier. "Dumb move, stupid wolf." the jackal said, before raising his gun up. Gabriel shut his eyes.

 *BANG!* Gabriel opened his eyes. The jackal was now on the floor, writhing in pain. It looked like he'd been shot in through the neck. Everyone that had been in that section of the mall was now running to outside. "What just happened?" Gabriel asked, severely off put by the events that had just transpired. Jessica went to examine the jackal, before glancing at where the shot came from. "Dammit Alex." she said under her breath. "Come on, we need to get to Xen." "That's it?" Gabriel couldn't understand how okay she seemed to be with what just happened. "He just- how? Is he even-" "He'll be fine; the bullet missed all the vital parts. I think." Jessica told him, as she grabbed his arm tightly, her hand stained with blood. "But Xen won't be if we don't go after her. Now, I need you to keep it together, and come with me so we can protect Xen. Okay?" Gabriel took a deep breath, and turned to her. "Yeah. Okay. Let's go find Xen."

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 It hadn't been hard to find Xen; she'd gone with everybody else to the street outside. After another Purist tried to gun her down, Jessica convinced her that it would be best if she went with them. They were now in a safe room in what seemed to be a run down motel, which had clearly been renovated to some extent. Most likely to make it safer, Gabriel thought. "Who are you guys?" Xen asked. She had calmed down since the mall, but was clearly still shaken up. "Just some people trying to help, ma'am." Wetzel told her. He had met them at the safe house after hearing what had happened.

 "Ma'am, do you remember treating a black furred dog at the hospital last week?" Xen answered slowly, "Black dog? I think so. Wait, I remember now. Kristoff, right? He died before the doctors could do anything. Is that what this is all about?" "We believe so. Hans was part of a group of extremist-" "Purists?" Xen asked. "Actually yes." Wetzel responded. "Do you see a lot of them in the ER?" Xen took a sip from the cup of coffee they had given her to help keep her calm. "Yeah, we've been seeing a rise actually. We try to help everyone, but they definitely don't make it easy. Wait, are they the ones trying to kill me?" Wetzel was about to answer, when Xen continued, "They think I killed him, don't they? They won't stop until I'm dead. You're going to have to kill all of them before I'll be safe."

 Gabriel felt sorry for her. No one should have to live their lives in fear. But he couldn’t shake a strange feeling, and then he remembered something. He walked over to where Jessica was. She was at a computer, watching the CCTV camera feeds for threats. "Hey, can you get the hospital feeds up? From when Hans died?" He asked quietly. He was sure they were far enough from both Wetzel and Xen for either of them to hear. "Sure, any reason why?" She asked him. "You'll see why if I'm right." He told her.

 Jessica played the video, but failed to see anything. "Play it again," Gabriel said, "but slower this time. Wait, right there!" "I don't get it." Jessica told him. "Look her hand right before he starts to crash." He responded. Jessica saw what he meant, "She injected him with something. But why is she trying to hide it?" Jessica thought out loud. She'd been listening to the conversation with Xen, and had thought Xen was being unusually calm throughout the interview itself.

 "You don't think-?" "It would explain a lot of things." Gabriel said. "Then we have to be careful," Jessica began, "If she did kill him, then she might try to-" "Kill you?" Xen interrupted. They both looked up to see Xen holding up a gun to Wetzel's back. "I'm sorry Jess" Wetzel said, apologetically, "Shouldn't have let my guard down." "It's okay, Greg." she told him. She turned to Xen, "I just have one question: Why?" Xen took a few steps forward, nudging Wetzel with her gun to do the same, "Do you know what his kind do, what their kind do?" She scowled at Gabriel, "Do you know how many people I've had to patch up, just because of their sick little war? How many people I've had to watch die?" "So this is why we got your name." Gabriel reasoned, "Your not just being shot at. How many others have you murdered?"

 "Its not murder!" Xen exclaimed. She now looked solely at him, an undeniable fury in her eyes. "They all deserved to die. Those, *animals*, gave up their right to live long ago. You don't feel compassion, or empathy; you're no where near human." Gabriel moved toward her, which prompted an immediate click from the handgun in Xen's hand. "What the hell makes you think your such a saint?" he asked her. He took another step. "You say we are all animals, well guess what: we are. And so are you. We all are living breathing creatures. Its what we do that defines what we are."

 "There's no changing what you are!" Xen said back. Gabriel took another step, "Admit it," "You're no better than the ones you call monsters. You tell yourself your doing good, but the way you talk about them, you'd think you were one of them." Xen shouted angrily, "NO! I am NOTHING like those… *savages*!" Gabriel took one final step, and lunged at Xen. Acting fast, he managed to safely disarm her. "You are *exactly* like them." Gabriel said, as Jessica and Wetzel restrained her. "And now, you’re not going to hurt anyone else."

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 After learning the truth and taking care of Xen, Jessica had chained her to a radiator back in the hotel, along with the video of her injecting Hans, with the medical file on top of the CD. After making Xen was secured, Wetzel had called in an anonymous tip to the police. They were all now walking through the old Bay Park. "So," Wetzel began, "you saw what it is we do now. What do you think?" Gabriel stayed silent for a few seconds before finally speaking. "It was nice, helping to stop something before it could happen, putting someone away who would normally walk free. Someone who would just keep on killing people." Jessica looked at him, "So, does that mean you'll join us?"

 "-But I also think what you're doing is clearly in violation of all currently existing peace laws. Illegal surveillance, torture, and what happened to that jackal?" Jessica and Wetzel looked at each other, trying to get help from the other. "Okay, fine." Jessica said finally, "It's not your standard police investigation. But it can't be. You saw for yourself what we deal with on a daily basis, and that was only tame compared to the worst we've had to deal with."

 Gabriel stopped walking, and took a deep breath, "You know," he said, "I could have you both arrested on over a dozen charges." The others also stopped, unsure of how to respond. Suddenly, Wetzel looked at his data pad. "We've got new orders." Gabriel gave out a huff, "Thanks but no thanks, I've seen all I need to." "No, not another mission." Wetzel explained. "I just got a message, from the boss. What the hell? Seems like he wants to meet?" "The boss?" Jessica asked, "No one's ever met with him before. Why now?" "Says he wants to talk to Gabriel personally, says time is running out.”

 Wetzel lowered his data pad and turned to Gabriel, “So, Mr. Smith, what do you think?" Gabriel wasn't sure. They seemed to really want to help people, but they certainly weren't doing so legally. "Fine. But this better be good, or else I'm walking." "I actually agree with you there." Wetzel responded. "So, Jessie, you ready to meet the boss?" Jessica just smiled. "I thought you'd never ask."