

**CHAPTER FIVE:**

The Boss

*Augtober 1*

The next morning, they made sure to collect all their belongings, as well as making sure to leave no evidence they had been there. Gabriel had done his best to shower, but had problems drying all of his fur. The one thing he appreciated was the privacy he was afforded as a result. He still found this whole situation strange, and was looking forward to meeting the boss of this rogue operation.

They had set off at around seven, and were now in the ruins of old DC. The old capital still stood, but just barely. You could still make out the figures from various different points in history: The Apocalypse, The Enslavement, The Liberation, and most recently, The Armistice. Gabriel had only ever heard of the old capitol, but he had imagined it would look more… grand. Here they were, in the middle of one of history's grandest locations, now nothing more than a wasteland. Seeing the destruction, it was no wonder the place was abandoned.

"We're here." Exclaimed Wetzel. "Hey Greg," Gabriel teased, "what do you think he wants? I mean, is he going to go on about how great this job is that you're doing, and how I should sign up for a just cause?" "That's Gregory to you." he responded, "and as for what he's going to say, I really couldn't tell ya'." "He could of least chosen a better spot." Gabriel said. They were at the base of what seemed to have once been a tower of sorts. At some point, very long ago, the tower – no, spire – seemed to have been knocked over; that anything had manged to survive seemed like a miracle. Gabriel thought he could see small white blotches, but what remained was mostly a dark, black color. Gabriel wondered what it would have looked like were it still standing.

"What does that mean?" Gabriel wondered aloud, "'Time is running out.' Are we in danger?" For what seemed like the millionth time, no one spoke. After a full minute of silence, it was clear what the answer was. "… Alright. If we *are* in danger, is there anything we can do about it?" Again, silence. This time, however, Jessica seemed to have genuinely not heard the question. She seemed to be focused on something in the distance, but Gabriel couldn't tell what. "Hey. what is it?" He tried asking. For once, he got a response. "We got trouble, maybe, five minutes out. If he doesn't show-" She trailed off, getting lost in thought. "Okay," Gabriel started, "you're starting to freak me out. So, he definitely said he was coming, right?"

Now Wetzel – or Greg, as Gabriel liked to say – answered, "The message was pretty clear. But the old capitol can be dangerous, there's no real regulation out here, almost like the northern border." "If it's unregulated," Gabriel began, "Why are there so many cameras?" Up until now, everyone had been slightly on edge, but managed to stay calm. As soon as Gabriel had finished though, Wetzel looked at him in surprise. "Where?" He said demanding, to which Gabriel nervously responded, "On- on the ruined buildings, you know, on the sides. Didn't you know?" Jessica spoke up, "Okay, well *now* we do. More importantly, those aren't supposed to be here." "We have to go, now." Wetzel proclaimed, "He hasn't shown, and for all we know, this could have all been one big setup."

Just as they were preparing to leave, a man emerged from one of the ruined buildings. Although he was about 100 meters away, they could all make out a few details. He seemed to be human, about 5'2", wearing a three piece suit, a coat, a wool flat cap, and seemed to be wearing some type of glasses. "Is that him?" Gabriel asked them. "Not sure," Jessica said. The man began to make his way towards them. "He doesn't seem particularly boss like." Wetzel added. "Well, he seems to be headed this way, so I guess we'll find out for sure soon."

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The man had finally reached the base of the ruined spire. He seemed to be slightly out of breath, which only caused Jessica and Gregory to be more suspicious. Gabriel was the first to speak. "And you are…" "The person you're here to meet." said the stranger. "Ms. Ansi, Mr. Wetzel, I see you are both doing well." To the stranger's surprise, Gregory and Jessica took a step back, clearly ready to act if he tried anything. Now Jessica spoke, "How do we know you're really him? Your not anything like what we imagined." The stranger took a moment, considering what to say.

After a few seconds he spoke, "To be completely honest, you don't. But Ms. Ansi, you say I'm not like what you imagined. And what was it that you imagined?" To that, Jessica simply replied, "How about a lot more… awesome?" Gregory was visibly more and more agitated with every second that passed. Eventually, he offered a solution, "How about you tell us something only the boss would know?" The stranger seemed to be happy with that suggestion. "Very well. Mr. Wetzel, when I recruited you, you had just lost your wife. Her dying words were, 'Don't do it, please. It's not worth it.' She had been shot by one of the gangs down in the Southern Coalition. A few days later, you were about to go on a murder spree, when you got a call." "And *you* offered me a job." Wetzel said, shakily. "I never told anyone about that. ‘Course, the only person who would know would be-" "The one person who recruited you." Jessica finished. "Alright, I guess that *does* prove you're the boss, but why call us here? Why meet in person? And now, after all this time?" "When I first recruited you," the stranger began, "Our mission was simple. But as you have probably noticed, things have changed. And our time- has run out!"

The stranger drew a pair of 9mm glock pattern handguns, and loaded them. By now, the others noticed that the enemies were now converging on their location. "You're not going to seriously try and take them on with those!" Jessica shouted, drawing her own meager pistol as they all ducked into cover. "Just keep your heads down!" The stranger simply responded. Gabriel peeked over the stone he was using as cover. He could see at least twelve people, all of whom were wearing strange heavy armor, colored white, and they all had sub-machine guns. "Who the hell-" Before he could finish, part of the large stone exploded into dust, and there was the sound of gunfire. "So they're definitely not friendly." Gabriel said to himself. He had always imagined being in a situation like this, in which he would rise up and defeat the hordes of enemy soldiers. Yet the only thing he could do now curl into a ball behind his cover. "Are you ready?" The stranger asked, as he turned to shoot. "Alright, let's do this."

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*BANG! BANG!* The shots rang out as the stranger faced the oncoming horde. "You're going to get yourself killed!" Jessica shouted, scrambling to cover him, but he ignored her. He raised up the 9mm, and began to shoot. *BANG! BANG! BANG!* He shot both pistols perfectly synchronized, but in different directions. It took Jessica a few seconds to realize, but he wasn't even turning his head. It was as if he could see the entire field at once, and knew exactly where everyone was going to be. "By Athena's armor." Gregory exhaled in awe, "I've never seen…" he trailed off, still unsure of what he was witnessing. The stranger only stopped firing to reload, and even then he stood firm.

"Damn it!" The stranger exclaimed suddenly, "I'm out of ammo." Gabriel peeked over his cover. "I think there's only one more! He's-" As he was saying this, the stranger had made his way behind the final enemy, and successfully subdue him. "Never mind." Gabriel said dryly. Now that it was safe, they all surveyed the battlefield. "That was amazing!" Gabriel said, impressed with the stranger's shooting abilities. Jessica meanwhile, was more focused on the writhing soldiers on the ground. "Huh, I can't believe it. You always made a point of how we should avoid as many causalities as possible, and try to resolve everything peacefully. And then here you are, just shooting up the place!" Gabriel was going to mention his situation, but given the moaning bodies at their feet, he decided against it.

The stranger spoke up, "I made sure to aim for the legs and arms only. They're alive, aren't they? It's nothing to celebrate for me either, but they *were* trying to kill us." "You put up those camera's didn't you?" Jessica asked, "How else could you have been that accurate?" The stranger pulled something out -a data-pad, most likely Gabriel thought- and frowned. "We should go," he said, "There’ll be more on their way. Follow me." He motioned with his right arm southward, and began walking. "Hold on." Gregory, although having just been saved, was still suspicious. "You haven't even given us your name, and we're just supposed to follow you?" The stranger stopped, and turned to face Gregory. "I go by many names, Mr. Wetzel, as do you, Ms. Ansi, and everyone else we've enlisted. Which one would you prefer?" "How about your real one, or at least the one you usually go by." Gregory demanded. "Very well." The stranger began, "You can call me Mr. Fox. Now, if there are no more distractions, shall we go?" Gregory reluctantly moved forward, prompting everyone else to follow suit.

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They had holed up inside the lobby a ruined hotel from before the armistice. The stranger, Mr. Fox, had tasked both Gregory and Jessica with securing the perimeter; something which he had been very adamant about. "Mr Smith," he said to Gabriel, "I think it's time you and I had our talk." Gabriel's ears perked up. "Well, since you’re clearly listening, let me begin by saying that if there had been a better way, I would have gone with it. I’m sorry about your less-than-ideal treatment, but we had to be certain. You see, you were chosen, Mr. Smith for a very specific reason. Do you know what that reason is?" Gabriel took a moment to answer. He gave out a short huff, "Maybe you just wanted someone to torture?" "I understand this has been hard for you, but you have to understand. The reason, Mr. Smith, was because of your fortitude, your past. Most people aren't sure of what they want to do when they’re grown up, but you've known ever since… that day. And you've only ever tried to help people, all your life; you wouldn't be able to sit idly by while bad things were happening."

Gabriel wasn't sure what to make of that. Fox clearly wasn't lying. In fact, by the look on his face, he looked almost like he was regretful of something, though Gabriel had no idea what that would be. "Then why meet here?" Gabriel asked. "In fact, why meet at all?" "I have to admit, this was not the first solution I chose. Normally, I would have found another way to contact you. But like I said, our time is running short. Those soldiers had only one objective: to kill us all. The people they work for will stop at nothing to achieve their ridiculous goals." Gabriel decided to interject, "And what are their goals?"

Fox took a second to answer, clearly deciding whether or not he should say. Finally, he spoke, "They have many, but I suppose they only really have one: to control the entire world." "How would that even be possible?" Gabriel began, "Most other places don't have anything that connects them. That's why we haven't even had a formally united country until recently. If we can barely manage having such a large government, how could anyone hope to control the world?" "So, you have paid attention to some history, I see." Fox remarked. "The reason we haven't been able to establish a large government, or even a state – until now – is that people tend to not work together in large groups. But the people for whom those soldiers work for would control the world by turning every sentient into a servant, a slave. And they wouldn't stop until they have a mindless horde obeying their every command."

Gabriel interjected again, "I thought you guys helped people, not went around playing superheros." Fox explained, making sure Gabriel wouldn't miss anything, "At first, I thought that was our purpose as well. And we did help some people, but one day, we ran into their operatives. When we found out their goals, I realized things would be much harder. These are strange times indeed. We were no longer helping one person survive an assassination, or stop another from making a mistake that would haunt them forever. Now we were ‘saving the world,’ by stopping the people who would try to enslave it."

Just then, Gabriel realized something. "Do the others know? Your 'employees' I mean. They seem to be very certain their only job is to 'help people.'" "No," Fox replied, "To be honest, you’re the first person I've ever told. Don't worry, I'll let them know at some point, when they're ready." "Hmph, You mean after they trust you again? But why tell me then? I'm a stranger." "Exactly," said Fox, "you’re still new to this, so it's easier for you to accept. To you, its all new information." "But you still haven’t answered my question, why meet here, in the old capitol?" Fox took a moment. "You've never been here before, have you? Never seen the havoc that was wrought in the past." "*That's* why you brought me here?" Gabriel asked, incredulously, "For a history lesson?" "In a way, yes. But what I really wanted to do was to help… fill in the gaps. Give you information to help you make a decision."

"I had already made it." Gabriel rebutted. Fox looked at him questioningly. "Well you're here, aren't you?" "Yeah, but that wasn't my choice!" "Wasn't it? You could have left at any time after helping with Ms. Xen. Did either Ms. Ansi or Mr. Wetzel ever try to keep you from escaping? Did they ever tell you you couldn't leave?" Thinking back, they had removed the bindings, and had only said "the boss" wanted to talk. "There was no way I could have known! Even if that *had* been the case." Fox gestured at Gabriel's nose. "Ms. Ansi told me you had tried to escape before. Twice, actually. So tell me, Mr. Smith, why didn't you try again? I'm sure you must have had a lot of chances, so surely there was a reason you stayed."

The next few seconds felt like an eternity as Gabriel's mind spun, thinking about everything that had happened in the past few days- in the past few hours. It had all happened so fast, and they seemed to have good enough intentions. But they had also kidnapped him, interrogated him, and nearly gotten him killed. In fact, he had all the reason to believe that they were all nothing but violent sociopaths, looking to get their kicks off. So why was he still here?

After a few seconds passed, Gabriel gave his answer. "I guess… I guess I'm still here because I really do want to help people." Fox nodded in acknowledgment. "You could have done that anywhere. The police force, for example. Its why you signed up with them, after all." "No, well, not exactly." Gabriel said. "Back at that town, Jessica told me you could do more, that you could do more than just help people when their in danger. That you could stop crimes, murders, before they happen. I know we dealt with Xen, but she had already killed people before then." Fox pulled out a data pad, and showed it to Gabriel.

"What's this?" Gabriel asked. On the screen was were names. Lots of them. Along with the names there numbers. Gabriel scrolled through the list, and he guessed there must have been hundreds of names. "Are these-?" "People that we managed to help. Every name in that list is a murder we stopped." Fox told him. "But there are many more who we couldn't help, or for who help came too late. We're only a small group, Mr. Smith. We could do more, but we would need your help. I hate having to ask you this; before we've always been able to stay ahead, and mitigate the threat. But with this new enemy, if we fail, a lot of people will suffer, even if they’re only partially successful. So you have to make a choice: will you join us, and help us try to stop them? Or will you go on your way, and live your life as a normal person? Everyone else had joined me of their own free will. I won’t force you to do anything from this point forward."

Gabriel took a deep breath. He answered, speaking slowly. "I'll… I’ll do it. I'll join you. But only because this is a once in a lifetime opportunity." Fox showed no sign of excitement or relief, simply stating, "Well in that case, we should get to work. Mr. Wetzel, Ms. Jessica, have you secured the perimeter? Very well then, you should start making your way back." "What do you need me to do?" Gabriel asked, anxious about what would come next. "What I need you to do, Mr. Smith," said Fox, "is to get some rest. We have a busy day tomorrow. We can discuss your future then." *BANG!* A shot rang out, the bullet perfectly striking Fox's data pad, which Gabriel had placed on a table.

*CRASH!* The sound of breaking glass was followed by the entrance of a tall hooded figure dressed in black. When the figure spoke, he did so with a deep, raspy, modified voice. "We’re discussing it now. Both of you, outside. Now." Gabriel couldn't see his face, it was covered by a metal mask-like object. He did manage to pick up a scent though; whoever this mysterious figure was, they were a male. Gabriel was also very positive that they were, in fact, a wolf.

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When Jessica and Gregory returned to the lobby, they were treated to what seemed like the path from a tornado. Broken glass was everywhere, and much of the furniture was broken. Jessica called out, "Gabriel? Uh, Mr. Fox? Anyone there?" "Nothing on comms." Gregory said. They quickly searched around for clues, to see if there was anything could tell them what had happened here.

"So, that was definitely a gunshot, right?" Jessica asked Gregory as she searched the area around the broken window. "Starting to think so," he replied, "But from who? Hold on, I think I found something." Gregory held up a data pad, which looked as if something very powerful had stricken it. "Fox's?" Jessica asked. "Must be," he replied, "which means they're probably both in a lot of danger. We have to find them right now!" Jessica agreed, and they gathered up everything they needed. Just as they were about to head out, when Jessica noticed something caught on a shard from a broken window. "I think I know who took them," she said to Gregory. "How could you know that? You seen something like that before?" he asked her. "Yes," she said, "But there's only one person that I know of who uses this material." She turned to Gregory, with a frightened look on her face. "It’s Alex, Greg. He must've gone rogue." Gregory cursed and said, "That son of a- do you know why he would do this?" "No," Jessica said, "But you know Alex. If we don't save them soon," she stated, urgently, "Chances are we might never see them again."