**

**CHAPTER SIX:**

Alex

*2 days earlier*

*Septemly 44*

"And where did they go?" Alex barked at the doe. She was young, probably about four years old. He normally wouldn't be this… intimidating, but he was running out of patience. His mask (though it was more of a helmet) probably wasn't helping either. "I- I can't say," the doe answered timidly, almost in tears, "She- she made me promise." "Who made you promise?" He growled through his mask. "The… the blonde lady. B- before they left." Beneath his mask, Alex sighed. He hadn't been expecting it to be Jessica. This was going to complicate things. "Fine. You can go now." With that, the doe took off; all deer were quick when they needed to be. It looked like he was going to have to do this the hard way. At least he knew what to look for now.

He tracked Jessica’s car as far as he could, but the trail went cold after leaving the city limits; all the rubble, roads, and wilderness made it hard to track. Lacking proper infrastructure, it was the ideal place to avoid being monitored, so it only made sense she would go there. He decided to camp out near the main road. After all, they had to come back into the city at some point.

After he made his campsite, he decided to pass the time using his data pad to try and get more information. He still couldn't believe he'd managed to hack it. Or, to be more accurate, how no one had noticed. He had been aware of the occasional glitches that could happen, though it seemed to be exclusively when he was trying to take someone out – lethally. Right now, he was having an unusually hard time connecting to the network. "Damn machine." he huffed. Eventually, he managed to get past the encryption. The sun was down now, and Alex could see the moon appearing behind some clouds. He began searching the network, finding only snippets of data, but that was all he needed.

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The next day, he cleared his campsite, making sure to leave no trace that he had been there. He had seen Jessica's car go by, and while it hadn’t been easy, managed to get a tracker on it. He also had managed to "acquire" a vehicle of his own, and was now on his way towards the pair. At least, he was pretty sure there were only two of them, but in the dark he thought he might have made out the silhouette of another person.

Finding them had been the easy part. Now he had to find out everything he could without getting compromised. He had thought about going in directly, but decided against it. They were more useful to him being unaware of his presence. He couldn't hear what they were saying, but he could see now there were indeed three people. He instantly recognized Gregory and Jessica, but the third one was still a mystery. Could he know something? Well if he did, Alex was going to get any information out of him, one way or another.

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Alex now looked down through the glass ceiling covering the food court of the mall. It hadn't been easy getting up there, but it was worth being able to see everything at once. He looked through his scope at where Jessica and the wolf were sitting. It would be so easy to take him out just like that… He thought about pulling the trigger when he realized what he was thinking. "Stop it!" He said to himself. He wasn't sure what was going on with himself recently. He had to focus. He couldn't compromise himself now, like this. There was too much at stake. Besides, what would killing him now achieve, other than leaving Jessica all by herself?

Suddenly, Alex noticed a jackal moving towards Jessica. At second glance, he was actually headed towards that nurse, “Xen.” Alex was about to let his guard down (what did he care about some random number?) when the mystery wolf spun around, face to face with the jackal. Alex gave out a short huff of amusement, but it didn't last long. Half a second later, the jackal was raising up a gun. Without thinking, Alex took a shot, clean through the jackals throat. "Dammit!" He cursed. Jessica could handle herself, he didn't need to be so protective of her. He hoped he wasn't spotted, but the broken window would make sure he would be before long. He quickly made his way down, hoping he’d been fast enough.

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He decided it would be best to steer clear of Jessica, and to instead focus on the wolf. It wouldn't be easy; since they arrested that nurse, the three of them had always stayed close to each other. He had thought about going in overnight, but it was likely Jessica and Gregory were taking turns standing guard. He figured they’d probably make a move in the morning, so he took the opportunity to get a few hours of sleep.

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The next morning, his prediction was proven right, and while he wasn’t entirely sure where they were going now, wherever it was, it seemed to be in the old capitol. He checked the most recently intercepted message again: M?et L0<aT,.n Osd C+p1fal. C'/rd[nites = [ERROR]. He had only made out a few details, but he was definitely getting close. He was following the group from quite a far distance, and they had been walking a long time now. They were passing by a building, when Alex noticed the cameras. "Very clever." Alex said to himself, and carefully made his way on top of the nearest building.

He had chosen a great spot: there were no cameras up here, and he could now see all around the wasteland clear as day. He also noticed “white ops” soldiers, as he called them, in the distance. It still wasn’t clear who they worked for, and he hadn't been planning on fighting them, but he would if he had to. He would have to change his plans, but either way he would get what he wanted.

After quite a short wait, Alex saw a small human male approaching the group of three, being careful to stay hidden from the operatives. He supposed this might be one of *His* messengers; he had encountered many in his searches. He decided it was time to try out his special hack. He had to be careful though. If it was discovered, he would probably be more than just fired.

Some quick hacking later, Alex could now hear everything that the four of them were saying through Jessica's data pad. Before he could make anything concrete out, the soldiers began firing. Alex considered helping them out, but before he could make a decision, the man that had approached them began firing. Not only did he seem to ignore all the bullets flying at him, but he took down all the soldiers in just a matter of seconds. Alex now became very curious as to who this new individual was – and very cautious. When only one soldier remained, the stranger sneaked around, and knocked the soldier on the head. *A bit crass for a capable fighter*, Alex thought to himself.

Now that there was silence, Alex could make out what was being said by the group, but only barely, as there was a lot of interference (which was strange, as not many people used these exact protocols). "-given us your name- follow you?" he heard someone say. "-many names, Mr. Wetzel, as do you, Ms. Ansi-” "-the one you go by." Alex's heart raced. This could be the break he'd been waiting for. "Very well. You can call me Mr. Fox. Now, if-?" Alex turned off the data pad. In fact, he'd almost tossed it. He couldn't believe it. He had thought he might get a clue as to *His* location, but never in a million years had he thought he might actually find out who he was. He couldn't let the opportunity pass. He had to act, today. But he had to be careful now that he had seen Fox in the field.

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They had holed up in one of those old run down hotels. They seemed to be focusing on the lobby and lower floors. That would make everything easier. Especially since, for some reason, Gregory and Jessica had headed out. "Two birds with one stone." Alex said to himself. He was on the first story of the building across from the hotel, and he could see everything in the lobby. He kept his head low, and aimed at "Mr. Fox." That wasn't his real name, of course, but it didn't change who he was, and what he had done. Funny, Alex thought, that he had gone with the name of an animal. And a canine, at that.

He watched for a while, waiting for the right moment. He still had an active audio feed, but it was much more distorted than before. Fox’s data pad was substantially more robust than the others’. "-making your way back- We have a busy day tomorrow. We can discuss your future then." So, the wolf did know something after all. Alex’s mind raced; he wouldn't get a chance like this again. He also couldn't afford to get discovered, at least not yet. He focused on the data pad resting on a table. He realized something: the data pads must be how Fox kept tabs on everything at once. He took a deep breath, and pulled the trigger.

In the resulting confusion, he jumped out the window, sprinted across the street, and burst in through one of the window's in the lobby. The two stared at him. "We're discussing it now." he said to them. "Both of you, outside. Now." The wolf stared for a second, and then suddenly took a swing at him, but Alex easily stopped him. The wolf then promptly bit at his arm, which caused Alex to toss him aside. The wolf hit a table, grabbed a chair, and flung it at Alex. He managed to deflect most of the impact, but he was sure he was going to have a bruise. The wolf ran at him, and Alex stepped aside at the last moment, and brought his sniper’s stock down on the wolf's back. "As I said: Outside. Now." He thought Fox might try and fight, but to Alex's surprise, Mr. Fox simply complied.

Alex dragged out the wolf, and tossed him inside Jessica's car. "Get inside." He said to Fox, who did as he was told. Given what he had seen earlier, Mr. Fox seemed to be much like the doe from two days ago. "What is it that you want?" Fox asked, once they were on there way. Alex took a second, thinking of various things to say. He settled on, "You'll see soon enough what it is I want. But for now, I’ll tell you what I *need*." "And what is that?" Fox asked him, almost accusingly. Alex responded in a tone that was cold, even through his mask. "First: answers. Second: To understand." "And third?" "Revenge." He could barely believe it had worked; that everything had gone as smoothly as it had. And soon enough, he would get what it was he wanted. No matter what would stand in the way.