

**CHAPTER SEVEN:**

Retribution

 *Augtober 1*

 "Come on, there has to be *something!*" Jessica exclaimed. It had been bad enough Alex had kidnapped Gabriel and Mr. Fox, but did he really need to steal her car too? "Found one!" Gregory shouted out to her. When Jessica approached him, she noticed the minivan had a broken window. "Really?" She asked him. "You said it yourself, we don't have time to wait around," he said to her, "Besides, you know as well as I do these were abandoned a long time ago." Jessica reluctantly agreed, and got in.

 "Dammit!" Jessica said, in response to the broken data pad in her hand. "We should have been there. I knew something could have happened, and guess what? It did. And now here we are. I mean- do we even know where they’re going?" Gregory wasn't sure how to respond; truth be told, he had no idea. "Well, no." he began, "But we have to start somewhere. What about Ingrid, or Helena?" "No good. They're too far away. Not to mention he's the one who managed to patch us through to each other. Unless, you know all the codes?" Gregory had to admit she had a point.

 They were coming into Old Trenton now, pushing their speed well above the legal limit. "Where are we going anyway?" Jessica asked Gregory. He talked quickly, his main focus being the road, "If you're right 'bout Alex, then we need to be prepared. I know a guy, who can give us some gear. After that, we can focus on finding them."

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 Gabriel woke up abruptly. So far, this car ride was even worse than when he was in the trunk. "Where are we?" He asked with a groan. "Are you okay?" he heard someone say. He looked up, and saw Mr. Fox, handcuffed, sitting next to him. "ARG- No, not really." He had a look at the driver's seat. He remembered a few things: he had tried to fight off –whoever the hell that was– and had received quite a hard smack to the back. "Hey, you. What do want with us?" Gabriel said to the figure. All he got in response was a withering stare, which made him particularly uneasy. It did give him a chance to better examine their captor. He was wearing some sort of black mask or helmet, probably to hide his species, Gabriel thought. After all, only those with very good senses would be able to tell the species by other means. Why he would want that to be the case was a mystery, though so far, they had been in human dominated territory. He wore gloves, and he was also wearing some sort of coat, or jacket, with a hood. Of course it was all colored black, just like the mask.

 Eventually, the car stopped. They were at some sort of border checkpoint. "Wait here. Don't try anything." Not as if they could; he had taken care to remove any possible chance of escape. Mr. Fox took the opportunity to talk to Gabriel. "Mr. Smith, are you severely injured?" "Mostly just sore… *mostly*." Gabriel said, clearly in pain. "What the hell is going on? Who was that wolf?" "How did you- never mind." Fox looked out the window, "Unfortunately for us, that was Alexander Baud, otherwise known as 'Alex', as he likes to be called." "THAT was Alex?" Gabriel asked in surprise. He had had a brief talk with Jessica about Alex and the others, but he hadn't imagined someone quite that intimidating.

 "Isn't he supposed to work for you?" Gabriel asked. Fox turned to look at him, "As far as I was aware, he was. Clearly, he has his own agenda now." "Well, what do we do?" Fox took a moment to think. It was almost a minute before he said anything, "For now, our best option is to do nothing. You saw his abilities firsthand. He clearly doesn't want to negotiate, so for the time being, we have to hope Mr. Wetzel and Ms. Ansi will be able to do more than we can." "Right. So waiting it is then." Not the best plan, Gabriel thought, but at least this time it didn't involve a trunk.

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 Gregory's "friend" had indeed had the gear that they wanted, though Greg had failed to mention it was all stolen. "Tell me again why you thought that would be a good idea?" Jessica asked, as she stepped over a groaning thug. "I knew you could handle yourself," Gregory said as he grabbed a bag full of ammo, "and we helped clean up the streets of Manhattan. It's a win win, really." Jessica was not amused. Aside from the fact her heart had nearly stopped when the thugs had started shooting, she was sure they had come close to being hit many times. Their stolen car hadn’t been so lucky.

 "So now what?" Jessica asked Gregory. They were now on Broadway, near 41st. "I haven't gotten that far yet, but a good step would be finding out where they went." *RIIING! RIIING!* "What the-" "There!" Jessica pointed at the payphone. No one else payed much attention to it; they were all focused on their own business. Gregory approached it, looking around to see if there was anyone calling the thing. He hesitated, before finally answering the phone. What he heard next was unlike anything he had expected. There was not a single voice, but many, as if someone had taken various bits of recorded conversations to construct phrases.

 "Who is it?" Jessica asked. Gregory answered with a frown, "Dunno. But whoever it is gave me a sequence of… words." "What are they?" "Eight, zero, zero, two, two… November echo." Jessica took a moment to think, when she suddenly exclaimed "Old Denver! That's the mail code for Old Denver! At least, the first part." "How do you know that?" Gregory asked, surprised she would know something so random. "I had to go there once, for an assignment. I needed a package from Ingrid, so I had to give her the code. But, why do we need it now? What do they want?" Gregory shrugged, phone still in his hands. "Maybe that's where Alex and the others are headed. Why else would we get a call?" "How do we even know that's for us? More importantly, if that *was* for us, how would we even get their in time? They’re probably far ahead by now." Gregory thought he could hear additional phrases, "Hold on. I think there's more." He put the phone back up to his ear. Confused by the message, he began looking around.

 "Transport six o' clock-" he turned around, in time to see a taxi pull up. The driver got out, and went into one of the nearby shops. Gregory couldn't help but notice how the driver had left the taxi running, and more importantly, unlocked. "What'd they say this time?" Jessica asked. "If I'm right," Gregory started, "They want us to steal that taxi." Jessica looked at him, surprised he would suggest such a thing. "You do realize what our job is? Why on earth would we ever do such a thing?" "Because it's the only lead we have." Gregory responded. "C'mon." Jessica reluctantly got in. "I wonder how many car's we'll have stolen by the end of today." she said, sarcastically.

 After driving for only a few seconds, they arrived at an intersection. Much to Gregory's surprise, the light immediately turned red, and refused to change. Then, a green arrow pointing left appeared. "I guess go left?" Jessica said. He did as she suggested. After clearing the intersection, the light returned to normal. "Huh." Gregory huffed. "Nine o' clock…" Jessica could only wonder as to the nature of what Gregory had been told.

 After traveling for a while, the pair arrived at an airfield. "Three o' clock…" Gregory said to himself as he pulled up beside it. The airfield was small, with several gates arranged in a semi-circle, leading to different areas. There was a small building in the middle, to act as a sort of directory. He drove slowly, until he noticed one of the gates was labeled "To The Rose." He pulled over, and got out. Jessica followed suit, and the two headed towards the mini terminal. One of the attendants spotted them, and motioned them over. "Mr. Wetzel, Ms. Ansi. As per your request, the Rose is all prepped and ready." She said to them. "Here are your passes, and you'll have to see the pilot about payment." "Thank you, ma'am." Wetzel said, and they headed off.

 They went through the gate labeled "To The Rose," and handed their passes to a guard. On the runway, they saw a small but sleek looking aircraft. It looked like it could only fit about ten people at most, and had many brass pipes covering it. There was no visible propeller, but there did seem to be one big exhaust at the rear of the craft. The wings were only about six yards each, and also seemed to be brass. The front was very aerodynamic, and seemed to have an opening about one foot in diameter. On the side of the craft, in red script, was "The Rose."

 As they neared the craft, an elderly man (probably the pilot, based off his attire), exited the vehicle and approached the two. He spoke to Gregory with a very heavy southern accent. "You Gre-go-ry?" Greg and Jessica looked at each other, and Greg simply decided to say, "Yes." "He he hee, boy oh boy, you sure picked a winner!" He exclaimed, slapping Greg's shoulder. "Oh, trust me, you won't regret it! Ya see, ol' Rose here may not be one of them fancy new e-lectro planes, but boy is she fast."

 At this point, Jessica decided to intervene. "Uh, excuse me, sir?" "You can call me Boone." "Uh-Boone- we need to get somewhere fast. Old Denver. Can you get us there?" At this, the man broke into a big smile. "Oh you bet your dungarees I can. Why, ol' Rose will get us there faster than an Olympic competing cheetah." When neither Greg or Jessica reacted, he promptly exclaimed, "Well, what're ya waiting for? Let's go!" They followed him into the craft, and sat on opposite sides of the aisle. The inside was small- probably less than a one and a half meters across. "What type of plane is this anyway?" Jessica asked Gregory, although the response came from Boone, "This here ain't no 'aeroplane.' Ol' Rose here is a sparrow-class steam propelled shuttle." "Wait, steam?" Jessica asked, as Boone started the engine. "Is that safe?" "Last I heard, most steam air vehicles were decommissioned." Gabriel told her. "Not all of 'em." Boone stated. "Ho boy, here we go!"

 As they taxied down the runway, the noise increased exponentially. "THAT IS REALLY LOUD!" Jessica shouted. Boone shouted from the cockpit, "Don't worry, once we get up to speed, she'll quiet down!" Sure enough, after getting into the air, the noise from the turbine decreased significantly. "Alright, looks like we should catch up in no time." Jessica said to Greg. "Let's just hope the two of us will be enough." Gregory said, grimly.

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 They drove all night and day, only stopping for gas. Alex had been kind enough to give them a bathroom break, though it had only been -*A*- bathroom break. Gabriel was starting to get restless, but he followed Fox's lead, lest he end up in the trunk, or worse.

 Now that he thought about it, Mr. Fox seemed oddly calm about the situation. Ever since they had set out, not once had he tried to escape, or showed any sign of worry. Finally, they were at their journey's end. Gabriel heard the engine stop, and Alex got out. "Move." He said plainly. He held a rather large handgun, and waited for the two to comply. They did as they were told. Gabriel tried to figure out where they were exactly, but it was very dark. Alex guided them into what looked like a warehouse. Before they went in though, Gabriel was pretty sure he caught a glimpse of a ski tower. Once inside, all they could see was what looked like machinery for manufacturing… something, along with several crates. There were a few chairs arranged in a circle. "Sit." Alex said, in his usual deep, distorted voice. After they were seated, Alex made sure to secure them. Gabriel wasn't sure, but he thought he could smell blood.

 The tension was painfully obvious. "I read somewhere that psychiatrists refrain from being the first one to talk." Fox finally said. "The patient finds the silence so uncomfortable they are forced to say something." Alex simply stared. "I just thought that was interesting." Alex turned to Gabriel. "Why are you here?" He asked, though it was more of a demand than a question. "Look," Gabriel began, confused, "I just want to help people, like you and Fox-" "*HE* DOES NOT HELP PEOPLE!" Alex snarled in a sudden fit of rage. Gabriel could tell he had struck a nerve.

 After a few seconds, he thought it safe to speak again. "This is barely the fourth day I've known them, known you." Gabriel said, doing his best to remain calm, "And quite frankly, I'd like to know what the hell is going on!" Alex considered this. "So, you associate with a murderer. You choose to help wage his bloody war on the innocent. You will get what you deserve soon enough." He turned to Fox now. "But you. You will experience the same pain and hurt you've caused. There *will* be retribution."

 Alex tossed a folder to Fox. Inside, there were several files, with pictures of different people. "Who are they?" Gabriel asked. "Files. Of people who were going to be involved in acts of terror." Fox answered. He looked up to Alex, "What happened to them?" This almost sent Alex into a fit of fury, "You sent me to kill them, *remember?*" Fox was taken aback by this. "I never sent you to kill anybody, Mr. Baud. I sent you to stop acts of terror." "Plausible deniability." Alex retorted.

 Fox tried to explain, "I told you to keep them from achieving their goal, not for you to *kill* them!" "Well what did you think was going to happen!" Alex kicked over a chair. "And because of you, all the good people I've known are dead!" "Fine. I suppose I am to blame, but not because I ordered you to kill them, but because I should have seen it sooner. Jessica insisted that you could change, that you could find less violent methods, but all I've seen so far is nothing but a trail of blood." "LIAR!" Alex exclaimed, and he picked up a sword. "Do you know how many died because of you? How many lives ruined?" "And yet the only time you complain when it affects you personally." Fox retaliated. "You’re still responsible." "How so?" Fox questioned. "You sent us those names. You knew what had to be done." "Say what you will, Mr. Baud, but you know as well as I do who's really responsible for their deaths. I never once forced you to do anything. You could have simply refused the contract and walked away. And yet you stayed, why is that?"

 That finally sent Alex over the edge. "Now you're really going to pay!" He raised his arm back to take a swing at Fox, when someone jumped out in between. "DON'T!" Alex tried to stop his swing, but couldn't. He managed to twist his wrist enough for the back of the sword to be the part that hit. He looked down to see who it had been who had stepped in between, but when he saw who it was, he didn't like the answer. "Jessica?"

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 12 *Hours Earlier*

 They'd been in the air for about three hours before Boone said from in the cockpit, "Alright, get ready for the landin'. S'always rougher than the take off." Gregory would never admit it, but he had a small moment of panic when the Rose suddenly began descending. When they did land, it was more than just, "a little rough." Jessica and Gregory gathered their gear and moved to leave "Thanks for the ride, Boone." "Ah, it ain't nothing. Hey, you ever need to go anywhere, feel free to call." "Oh wait, here, almost forgot to ask you. How much do we owe you?" Boone simply smiled, "Now, I can't let you do that. Just getting to take ol' Rose here out for a spin is enough. There aren't too many left who 'preciate the old ways."

 "Well, he was… eccentric." Jessica said to Gregory as they headed off the runway. "Gotta admit, seeing Rose kinda reminds me of my youth." He remarked. "Steam used to be the main source of power in the south, things like the Rose were very common. Though, I have to say, Boone was something else. I just hope whoever called sent us to the right place."

 Before they could get very far, they heard another phone ring. "Guess you better answer it." Jessica teased. "Ha, ha. Just, be quiet." He told her. As he expected, there was another message; Gregory wrote it down on a simple pad of paper. "What did they say?" Jessica asked him. "A whole lot of numbers. Take a look." "Four numbers, a name, and then ten numbers… I think that the last part is a national identification number. If we eliminate that, then that leaves-" "It's an address!" Gregory exclaimed suddenly. "The name must be a street name." "C'mon. I think I remember somewhere we can get directions." They headed out, although this time, they thought it would be better to simply rent a car than to steal one.

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 The address was to a small suburban house, near the new university, which was built over the old one. "Guess we should see if any one's home." Jessica said. Gregory took note of the front door. "There's a lot of junk mail here. Looks like it’s been out for quite a while." He peered in through the door, before discretely picking the lock.

 Inside, the home seemed to be pretty average. Based off the decor and state of cleanliness, Gregory hypothesized this was the house of a young, single man. Based off the amount of fur, Jessica hypothesized they weren't human. After a bit of searching, they found several pictures that indicated the owner was indeed canine, along with documents with the matching identification number, and the name "William." A few minutes later, Gregory managed to find a box hidden in an air vent. Inside were several items, mainly ledgers and various notes, but one item in particular caught Gregory's eye. "Look at this." He said to Jessica, "This ledger mentions Alex. You don't think that's *our* Alex, do you?" Jessica looked at the ledger, "Could be. Though what does any of this have to do with Fox and Gabriel? We should look around more."

 Upstairs, Jessica noticed an open safe which seemed to have been hidden behind a painting. Inside were detailed lists of supplies, along with quantities and prices listed, as well as a few blueprints. "What is all this? It almost seems like, plans, but for what?" Gregory stepped back, as he realized what they were holding. "Jessie, I think these are supplies to make a bomb. A big one." "Wait, look at the date!" she told him, "They should've made it days ago, I mean, shouldn’t we have heard something by now?" "Hold on, Alex is only supposed to deal with relevant threats right?" he asked. "What if- What if he was sent to stop them, but is now working with them? Maybe they were paying him to look the other way?" Jessica wasn't sure, "Maybe. But if they're still out there, someone needs to deal with the threat. I think I saw a note about a warehouse. We should check it out." "Agreed. And you can look through the papers, meanwhile." "Let's go." She said.

 As she was gathering up the various papers, however, she noticed a small photograph, about the size of a postcard. "That's strange." In the photo were various canines. One of them was a wolf. On the back was a small message, written in pen. "Alex, Dave, Henry, and Will. Graduation, 5/24/33" Also on the photograph was a bloodstain, dry but still fairly recent. All of a sudden, it all made sense to Jessica.

 "Oh my god," she began, "Its him, Greg. With William, and… the other two. They were working together." "We already knew that." Gregory said. "No- They were working together before the plans. In Will's writings, he said something about being upset, that they needed to take action against the government. Before that, he talked about striking it rich, and helping ‘the others’. I think- something happened, and Alex tried to stop them. And, I think he did." "It would explain everything here so far… but what does this have to do with Gabriel, or Mr. Fox?" Gregory asked, trying to make sense of it all. "I don't know yet." Jessica said. "Let's get to that warehouse. I think we'll find out more there."

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 When they arrived, it was early morning, about 1:00 AM. "That's my car!" Jessica said as they approached. Gregory parked the rental car beside hers. "C'mon! They're probably still here. If we act fast, we can still stop him!" "Alright, let me just get-" before he could finish, they heard some growling, and several loud bangs. "Gabriel!" Jessica shouted, and ran in. "Dammit! Jessica!" Gregory said, and ran after her.

 Jessica ran in to see Gabriel and Fox tied to chairs, with Alex stood in front. There also appeared to be several files strewn about, along with a few weapons. She saw Alex raise up his sword, and say to Fox, "Now you're really gonna pay!" She ran in between them, and shouting "DON'T!" She closed her eyes as the sword hit her, striking her down to the floor.

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 Alex had been prepared to kill. He was going to follow through no matter what. But when Jessica had stepped in, he had tried as hard as he could to back off. He hadn't come down at full force, but the strike had still been extremely powerful. He looked down at her now, curled up on the floor, unable to move. Had he killed her?

 "Jessica?" Alex dropped his sword. He had always thought he might have to hurt her, that conflict was inevitable, but he never imagined it would feel like this. He had thought he would just brush it off, like all the rest. Well, almost all…

 "JESSIE!" The silence was finally broken by Gregory's cry as he rushed in. He drew up his shotgun on Alex, "What the hell did you do!" he demanded angrily. When Alex didn't answer, Gregory hit him with the butt of the gun so hard, there was an audible CRACK, and his helmet/mask fell off. Still in horror of what he had done, Alex simply went limp. "GAAHH!" Jessica screamed from the floor. "Oh, Jessica." Gregory now turned his attention to helping her.

 Even at only partial strength, the sword’s blunt side had done quite some damage. Her clavicle was clearly damaged, but there didn’t seem to be damage aside from that, though Jessica certainly wasn't going to be using her arm anytime soon. "Are you okay?" Greg asked. "How's it look?" Jessica asked him. "Not good. We need to get you help." He carefully helped her up, but she insisted walking herself. "Someone still needs to uncuff them, and- tie him." She limped out, and Gregory released Gabriel and Fox. "Thank you." Fox said. Gabriel simply walked out, clearly in shock. "What happened here?" Gregory asked Fox. "Nothing we can't discuss later." Mr. Fox said, "But right now Mr. Wetzel, we need to get Jessica to a hospital." Gregory couldn't agree more.

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 Mr. Fox stopped for the fourth time. He wasn't quite sure if would be appropriate to enter. He turned to leave one more time, but changed his mind at the last moment. This time, he actually stepped inside. "Mr. Fox," Jessica said, surprised, "What are you doing here? Did something happen with Alex?" Mr. Fox put the flowers he had brought on the bedside table. "Actually, Ms. Ansi, I was here for you." "Oh. Well then, have a seat." She gestured towards the small couch in the corner next to the bed. "Thank you." He took a seat. "So," Jessica started, "What was it you wanted to discuss?" Mr. Fox paused, before finally speaking. "I just wanted to see how you were faring. That was quite the injury you had. In fact, I believe it was the worst you've had since you started working for me." He said his last sentence in almost a regretful way. Jessica must have thought as such, as she quickly added, "Well, we all knew the risks involved." "I understand that," Mr. Fox started, "but I never imagined that the threat would come from inside the group rather than just outside. I'm still not entirely sure why everything that happened happened." Jessica took a moment, before sharing what she and Gregory had discovered.

 "Alex would always deal with the relevant threats, right?" "His skill set made him fit the role perfectly." "Well, you do you remember giving him these names?" She handed him the graduation picture she’d held onto. "Yes, I believe that these were quite recent actually. But there were only these three." "The fourth is Alex." Jessica simply responded. "They were his… friends.” "That would explain why he would be upset, but why go after us?" "We think- Gregory and I- think that he didn't know they were building a bomb."

 "Well, we also think they had a fight when he found out about it. And that, he killed them." Mr. Fox's eyes went wide with realization. "That must be why he was so angry, so full of hatred. And you think he blames us?" Jessica looked away in slight embarrassment, "Well, you, but Greg told me he seemed pretty mad at everyone."

 After a few seconds of silence, Mr. Fox spoke in a quiet tone, as if he were speaking of the past, "We were supposed to be helping people. This was the last thing I wanted to happen. I suppose I didn't help the situation by hiding behind a screen, but I thought the less you all knew, the safer you would be. If no one knew who I was, then nobody could be put in danger in order to get to me." He took a second or to before continuing. "I can see now that that was a mistake. But, I still don't understand how Mr. Baud managed to track us so efficiently. It's almost as if he knew where we were going to be everywhere we went." "I think I might know." Jessica admitted, bashfully, as she handed Mr. Fox her data pad.

 "I thought you said you'd lost this?" He said, slightly confused. He analyzed the data pad, but it wasn’t long before he found something, "This looks like some sort of back door to what appears to be *my* network. It seems to be set up for point to point communication." He looked up, questioningly. "Me and Alex built it so the two of us could talk… privately." "I don't understand. Why would you agree to that?" "Because he asked me to." Jessica spoke apologetically, "He wanted to be able to talk about your methods without you constantly poking your nose into our business. And I thought I could convince him to stop killing so much. I'm… sorry."

 There was more silence. "I wish you would have told us sooner. Then we might have seen this coming." "I understand if you want to fire me." Jessica said, sadly. "Ms. Ansi- Jessica- it's true that I'm not very pleased with what you've told me here today, but I couldn't fire you. Besides, we're going to need as much help as we can get." Jessica gave out a small laugh, which she instantly regretted when a shot of pain ran up her arm. "Was that all you came to discuss?" "Well, there was one other thing." Mr. Fox said, noticing Gabriel's badly hidden ears perk up questionably behind the door’s window. "What is it?" Jessica asked curiously.

 "Our mission is to help people in dangerous situations, one by one, as their names come up. Or, at least it was." "What are you saying?" Jessica asked. "You see, Ms. Ansi, until a short while ago, that was our only goal. I was originally going to try to explain at the old capitol, but we were being shot at." "C'mon, just say what is already." Jessica said, getting impatient. "No doubt you've noticed things changing in the world. The homicides, the protests, the riots."

 "Well, as it turns out it's not a coincidence. There is an organization, a group that want's to see all sentient beings enslaved to do whatever they want. And no one knows they exist." "But you do?" Jessica interrupted. "Which is exactly why we're the only ones who can stop them." "Who else knows?" Jessica asked. "Well, besides myself and you, the only other person who knows is Mr. Smith." "Are you going to tell the others?" "In time, yes. But with everything that's happened recently, we have to stick to the original plan. After you’re better, we can begin discussing how to proceed."

 "About that," Jessica started, "have you told Gabriel the plan yet?" "No, I haven't. In fact, I was going to tell him right after I was finished with you." "Can you send him in?" "Why?" "I want to be the one to tell him." Fox shook his head, "You should rest. You've been through a lot." "So has he." She responded. "Very well. I'll send him in. And, sorry again for waiting so long before meeting you in person." As he turned to leave, Jessica couldn't help but ask, "How is he by the way? Alex, I mean. Is he safe?" Mr. Fox paused, and only turned his head to look back at Jessica. "Yes, he is. Although, the real question is are we safe from him. Why do you ask?" "Just curious." Jessica said, faking a smile, though she didn't think he bought it. "Get some rest, Ms. Ansi." With that, Mr. Fox left.

 Through the window, she could see him talking to Gabriel, who tried to appear as if he'd just arrived. He was visibly confused as Mr. Fox told him Jessica wanted to see him. "Oh, this is going to be fun." she said to herself. Especially since he had no idea. That's what made it even better.