

**CHAPTER EIGHT:**

Acceptance

*Augtober 6*

Jessica was grateful for Mr. Fox giving her a secure location to recover. She was *not* grateful for having to share it. Although her room itself was private, the floor she was on was shared with several other patients, all of who were either fairly wealthy, or were high status individuals. Unfortunately for her, she was both.

The first day, she had gone against her doctor's wishes, and had explored the entire floor; in about half an hour. All of the other patients had been exactly as she’d expected: boring. After that, she’d tried wandering around the rest of the building, but was unable to leave her floor. "You would think that such a high end care facility would have a little more… entertainment." she had said to Gregory over the phone. Gregory had reasoned that it was most likely to keep the hospital, which was closed to the public, from getting into trouble, as a single scratch to a patient could result in millions of dollars in malpractice suits.

Still, they could of at least given them some books, or magazines. Instead, all she had was a view of the distant snowy mountain top. It was barely Augtober, but it was already getting pretty cold. It also didn’t help that the beds were quite stiff. She was already having enough trouble sleeping, and this whole incident was probably only going to make things worse. At least she knew Gabriel was suffering as well.

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Gabriel had almost gotten an aneurysm when Jessica had told him "the plan." All that talk of changing the world, and where was he? "C'mon, Gabe, you're gonna miss it." A short, human woman said as she rushed passed Gabriel. "I'm going, I'm going." he said in a very deflated tone as he lumbered slowly after her.

He was last to arrive in the gymnasium; everybody else had already taken their seats. Although there weren’t too many cadets, space was still fairly tight. He decided to sit in the last row; he didn't really want to be here anyway. He was only here because he had to “fit in,” as Jessica had put it.

The lights dimmed, and the crowd went silent. On the stage that had been set up, an announcer came out of the smoke screen, and particularly obnoxious music began to play. "All right all right, ladies and gentlemen, girls and boys, foxes and deer, birds and bears, make some noise for the one the only-" *Fates, why?* Gabriel thought to himself, "-SERGEANT VANCE!!!" Much to Gabriel's demise, the crowd erupted into roaring cheers as the beefy horse came out onto the stage. "No, NO! Why?" His pleas were easily drowned out by the crowds ever faithful cheers. It was bad enough that horses were touted as making the best soldiers, but one of them had actually become a famous TV and movie star.

"Go back to playing a fake cop." Gabriel whined, knowing full well what would come next. "Thank you, thank you." The sergeant said, in a typical entertainer fashion. "Now, many of you may know me from my star roles in my several movies, but that's not why I'm here today. See, what you may not have known, was that once, I was an ordinary soldier out on the field. And I climbed up the ranks, until I got to the top-" "More like the top of the bottom." Gabriel sneered, "…and then one day, I decided to take him up on his offer. You see, what I'm here to talk to you about today, is how you too, can MAKE IT BIG!" He struck his famous pose, and cheers erupted once again.

Gabriel could only bury his face in his hands. Normally, he might have been able to stomach this, but compared to what had happened last week, this seemed very, very stale. "To be fair, you’re still going to be able to do what you wanted to do originally." Jessica had told him. Looking back, that was probably also a snide remark. "You said you loved the academy. At least, I think you did?" He was never going to trust her again.

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Mr. Fox walked into the dimly lit cellar. He had tried to get a more sophisticated holding facility, but Gregory had insisted on this one. Located in the basement of an abandoned apartment building, it was a little rough. Despite disliking it, Fox wasn't going to argue. Unlike the others, he knew firsthand what Greg was like when he was angry – *truly* angry. He knew most everything about almost every one. But Alex? Alex was still very much a mystery.

So when Gregory had "offered" to help him question Alex, he had no choice but to agree. Not so much to try and get any information from Alex, but more so to be able to keep a watchful eye on Gregory. He prayed the situation wouldn’t escalate, but even now he remained unconvinced things would go smoothly.

"Out with it already!" Greg demanded. He slammed his fists on the small metal table. "Why did you do it?" Fox sighed, and decided to intervene. "Mr. Wetzel, a word.” They exited the cellar, and Fox closed the door behind them. Gregory spoke first. "What is it now?" He was clearly agitated. Fox spoke in a concerned manner, doing his best to try and get through to Gregory. "Mr. Wetzel, I don't know if this is really the best course of action. Mr. Baud hasn't said a single word since we apprehended him. You should get some rest, I'll take it from here-" "That bastard nearly chopped her arm off, and would have killed you and Gabriel. I knew we couldn't trust him the minute Jess told me you had actually hired him." "Mr. Wetzel, please. We've been working together for years now-" "But we've only just *met*, haven't we?" Greg interrupted. "I'm going to get the truth out of him, one way or another. If you don't like it… maybe you should have hired someone else." He went back into the cellar, shutting the door behind him.

*It's not about whether he can get the information,* Fox thought to himself. *It’s about how he'll get that information.* Momentarily defeated, he decided is was safe enough to go visit Jessica. It had been a few days since he had seen her last; the day everything had happened. He figured she probably wanted the company.

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He had not expected the sheer joyfulness emanating from Jessica when he’d entered the common room. After all the squealing and very uncomfortable hugs, they had gone into her room. "You have NO idea how glad I am you're here." she said, barely able to contain herself, "You really couldn't have picked a more… exciting place?" "Actually Ms. Ansi, given everything that's happened, I thought you might enjoy the tranquility." "Well, now you know for next time." Jessica stated. Fox wanted to say how ideally there wouldn't be a next time, but decided against it.

Instead, he decided to present Jessica her gift. "Well, either way, I brought you something that might help." He pulled the book out of his briefcase, and handed it over to her. "1984?" She said aloud as she examined the well aged book. "Its a classic," Fox said with a slight smile, "There's a reason it's survived all these centuries. Well, not this particular copy of course, but the story itself-" "More like millennia." Jessica interrupted, still in taking in the gift. "Though, I was never good with dates."

"Anyway, whats new with you?" she asked Fox. He was stricken with surprise, "What do you mean?" "Oh, right, I forgot you’re probably used to being just some text on a screen. Come to think of it, we really don’t know anything about you, do we?" "Well, Ms. Ansi, I happen to be a really private person. And besides, there was no good reason to share every aspect of my life with you." "Well what about now? We have time now, why not now?" "Good day, Ms. Ansi." Fox said, as he stood up. "Oh, already? Come on, please? It's so boring here!" Jessica pleaded, though her cries fell on deaf ears. "As I said, good day." "Wait, hold on." Jessica said suddenly. "I almost forgot, I got you something too. It wasn't easy, either." She reached into her bedside table, and pulled out what looked like an ordinary red rose. She placed it carefully on Fox's lapel. "There." She said, triumphantly. "Thank you for the present, but I really must be going. Take care, Ms. Ansi." "You too!" Jessica replied.

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After doing some basic errands, Fox decided to head back to Alex and Gregory. It wasn't that Gregory was likely to make a rash decision, but Fox knew where this would eventually lead if they didn’t manage to get any answers soon. He descended the stone stairs slowly, unsure of what he was going to find. The metal door to the makeshift interrogation room was shut, but Fox could still hear Gregory trying to break Alex. He opened the door slowly, as to not suddenly interrupt anything.

"God dammit, aren't you tired?" Gregory asked. He was clearly starting to lose it, especially as he seemed to be spending every waking hour, day and night, on trying to make Alex talk. "WHY THE HELL DID YOU HURT HER?" Mr. Fox jumped a little. He decided to try talking to Gregory again. "Mr. Wetzel, please. You need to get some rest. He'll still be here when you get back." "No- I can't. Not until this bastard tells me why he did it, why he had to go and try to kill one of us, and what the hell this was all for! We were supposed to be a team!" "That's exactly why he did it." said a voice from behind. Fox, Gregory and even Alex turned to the door. There was Jessica, still dressed in her fancy hospital gown.

"Jess? What are you doing here?" Gregory asked, momentarily forgetting about Alex. "I followed Fox here. Figured this must of been where you were keeping him." Fox was puzzled. "That can't be right. I took every measure to make sure no one- the rose." He examined the flower, and found what appeared to be a hidden GPS unit from one of his data pads. "The airship gave me the idea." Jessica said sheepishly.

"That still doesn't answer what you're doing here." Gregory said. "I was bored." she said with a sigh. "And, there's also the fact that I had to see *him*." Gregory was confused, "After he did that to you? To us? Why would you ever want to see his face ever again?" Jessica thought a moment, "So you never told anyone?" she asked Fox. "It never seemed to be of importance. We had more pressing issues." "What are you talking about?" Gregory asked. "Before, all this, Alex and I used to communicate. We used a hack to piggyback of Fox's network – we were untraceable." "Look, Jess, I don't know what garbage this sick bastard-" "Stop!" She urged, as she approached Alex. “The reason I'm here is because… I need to talk to him." The sleep deprived Gregory did not take this too well. "Seriously? You do remember what happened, right? Besides, the mutt isn't talking anyway." Jessica ignored him, and knelt down to be level with Alex. "Hey, are you okay?" She asked in a soft voice. "See, not a single word." Gregory stated.

"I was just… so mad." Alex said, quietly. "We'd known each other for so long. I thought I knew them, better than I knew you. Better than I knew myself." "What the hell is that supposed to mean?" Gregory interrupted. "Mr. Wetzel!" Fox said warningly. Alex continued. "I could always kill people when I needed to. I never hesitated when it was necessary, and never mourned. The only time I hesitated was with people I knew. But there was only one time I couldn't follow through. And I… I think I know why now." Jessica laid her left hand on his shoulder. "What is it?" "I… I'm not ready to say." "I don't think you have to." Fox intervened. "Mr. Wetzel, perhaps we should give them some privacy." "Seriously? We're just going to leave them alone?" Gregory said, though he was not in the state of mind to fight. "Fine." He relented, but he clearly would've argued had he been rested.

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After the other two had left the room, Jessica and Alex had stayed in silence for a little while. It was Jessica who eventually broke that silence, "I know what you would have done it if I hadn't stepped in." "I- I'm glad you did." Alex said. Jessica noticed that his voice was still deep without his helmet… mask, but it was more comforting than intimidating. "I'm just lucky you only chipped the bone." she joked. Alex seemed to be too repentant to laugh, however. "I've killed a lot of people in my time. And I almost killed you. The one person who believed I could, 'be saved'." "Still believe." She shot back. "It won't be easy, but if you want to, I can help you. *We* can help you."

She put her hand on his back. His fur was soft, she noticed, and was a variety of reddish-yellows and grays on a white background. "It's funny. You almost killed me, and yet here I am. Sitting with you, still trying to help a number." Alex wasn't sure if it was fatigue, insanity, or just unmasked emotion, but a single tear ran down his face. "I've had a lot of time to think Ansi- Jess. I guess I've always known, deep inside. But it wasn't until… that I was forced to face the truth. But I don't deserve someone like you. I don’t deserve to ‘be happy.’ You should be with someone better. Someone who hasn't killed his only friends. Well, what he thought were friends." "I think I see a different way." Jessica said, fighting back tears of her own. "The way I see it, I'm exactly with the person I should be."

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Eventually Jessica left, and met with Fox and Gregory. "Are you okay?" Greg asked, seeing her face still had trails of tears. "Yes, I'm fine. But he's not. He's been through hell, Greg. In more ways than one." "That's exactly what he deserves, after everything he's done." Gregory said simply. "Even if he does," protested Jessica, "you can't let this get to you. He's willing to change, but only if you give him a chance." "And what if he doesn't?" Greg asked. "What about the people we protect? Surely you've seen the news? Are you really willing to put all that on the line?" "Yes." said Jessica, breathing in deeply. "And just why is that? The man tried to kill you!" Gregory asked.

Jessica looked him straight in the eyes, trying hard to keep her composure. "Remember what you told me? That day on the bridge? 'No matter what happened in the past, no matter what it was you have done, you can change; find a reason to keep going, to do more with your life.'" "That was different-" Greg tried, but Jessica interrupted. "Was it? Because now it’s him on the bridge. And I'm the only one who seems to want to help him. Seem familiar?" She paused to take a deep breath, “To be honest, I think you still haven’t fully moved on from *her.”* Gregory opened his mouth, before frustratingly turning away, unhappy with what she was suggesting. Fox decided to try and speak, "Is this really what you believe, Ms. Ansi?" "Yes, it is."

Fox considered her answer. "Then it seems to me that we should proceed carefully. He's clearly suffered trauma, and not just recently. You have to recover from your injuries anyway, so it makes sense for the two of you to stay together." "Thank you." Jessica said. Fox wasn't finished, however, "But he could still be dangerous. He's one of the two who's past I am least familiar with. There could be more problems going forward." He handed Jessica a small device, similar in construction to the data pads. "Its an emergency beacon. It'll send your location, and open a secure line. If you need anything, or anything happens-" "Don’t worry. I understand." "Good. Then by all means, Ms. Ansi." He handed Jessica the keys to Alex's handcuffs, and turned to Gregory. "Anything you would like to add, Mr. Wetzel?" Gregory only said one thing. "If you’re both wrong… well, for the sake of us all, I hope your not."

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Jessica had done her best to make her apartment somewhat adequate for company, though Greg had insisted on a more "secure" setup. She still didn't believe that it was necessary, but Alex had actually agreed. Something about her staying safe, and earning trust. "You sure you don't need anything else?" She asked Alex, through the electrolyzed wire wall of his makeshift “room”. "I'm… fine." He hadn't said much since they'd gotten there.

"Well, goodnight!" She said to him with a slight smile before turning off the lights in her living room. Alex didn't respond, aside from a slight nod. She thought about saying something else, but she couldn’t think of anything and headed off to her room.

She lay in bed with her eyes open for a while. She hadn't been able to fall asleep easily in a very long time now. She laughed softly to herself, supposing it had been since she had originally started to try and "save" Alex, and maybe even a little before that. She had thought it was possible, that some small shred of humanity (or in this case, canine?) was left. And it turned out, she had been right. She wondered what would happen going forward. She was a bit afraid of his darker side, but she could also see a glimmer of light, so to speak.

Eventually, she decided to try singing to herself. It usually didn't really help, but she didn't see any reason not too. She got out of bed and stepped out onto her tiny balcony. She decided on an old song her mother used to like, leaned on the railing and started singing.

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Alex sat and thought for a while. He had been through a lot, but he had been through worse. Or, had he? He supposed he didn't actually know which was worse anymore: losing your only friends, or being tortured with hot pokers and stun guns? True, Wetzel had attempted to "torture" him, but that was nothing compared to what a professional could do. He could have held out for weeks if he had to. Still, he was glad Jessica had shown up when she had.

He had never really cared for another person. Not in *that* way at least. He had always seen those types of relationships as messy and unnecessary. When people had tried with him in the past, he had simply moved on, brushing them aside just like that. They were obviously saddened or heartbroken, but Alex? He had always just continued on, just like he would with the killings.

Of course by now he had accepted his friends deaths were basically his fault. He had never wanted to openly admit it, but they had all been adding a lot more bad than good to the world. He’d known for a while, especially after he’d first begun talking to Jessica, and learning more about the world. As if people like them could do any good in the first place. No, people like them could only ever add less bad. Halfway through his thought, he heard soft singing through the walls of the apartment. It wasn't very loud, but his ears allowed him to make it out clearly:

"*And on she rode, into the night,*

*Racing through the day,*

*And there he stood, beneath the light,*

*Of the sun's all golden rays.*

*But the light turned red, it went away,*

*And lost was he to the bay.*

*He was not seen again that night,*

*For he was swept astray.*"

He had never heard the song before, but it seemed to him like a sort of folk song that people would sing during gatherings, or maybe sad events. He listened some more;

"*The maiden went in all alone,*

*Fearless as a Hawk.*

*Months went by, then years and still,*

*She only did find rocks.*

*At last she reached him, in the dark,*

*The one she loved, oh so!*

*A shroud was ‘round him, wrapped so tight,*

*But she would bring him home.*

*She pulled and pulled, and tried so hard,*

*To get him to dry ground.*

*But what she saw gave her a shriek,*

*She fell without a sound.*

*His eyes were black, his clothes were torn,*

*His nails were long, and sharp.*

*He snarled and fought against the dark,*

*And to her shouted "run!"*

*She held him tight, and did not go,*

*The gods called her a fool.*

*She cursed at them, and stood she firm,*

*For light, he had some still.*"

After finishing that last verse, Jessica stopped. By then, it didn't matter that she’d stopped early. Alex had already fallen fast asleep, and as soon as she returned to her bed she did too. And for the first time in months, she didn't wake up until morning.

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"Morning." Jessica said to Alex. He was already awake, and was in the middle of doing exercises. He didn't reply, but one of his ears noticeably twitched. Jessica simply moved on, and made some coffee. She still couldn't believe she had agreed on housing Alex in her apartment. One bedroom, two bathrooms, a kitchen, a living room, and now half a reading room half jail cell; she supposed they would have to make do. "So, what is it you do for fun?" She asked Alex. He stopped doing push ups and stood up. "What do you mean?" "Like, is there anything you do in your off time, you know, to relax?". "I never have free time." he said plainly. "Oh, boy." she said to herself. This was going to be a very, very long day.

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"Are you sure this is the best option?" Gabriel asked, clearly tired. Jessica laughed, "Gabriel, we went over this. We need you to be our inside source. Besides, how bad can it be?" Even over the phone, she could feel his spirits lower even more. "Why do you guys get to do the all the cool stuff?" "At least you don't have to deal with Fox on a daily basis. Ever since he came out of hiding, Greg says he just won't let up-" "-And for good reason." Fox said, over the line. "Uh hey there, Mr. Fox, I didn't realize you were on this call." Gabriel said, trying to act as cool as possible. "Yeah, since when are you on the line?" Jessica asked him.

He ignored the question, and instead focused on making his point, "In case you've both forgotten, we nearly had a fatal incident, following a severe breach of security. Believe what you will, but I'm currently the one working the hardest here. Not only do I have to upgrade our network’s defensive capabilities, but I also have to do it in plain sight."

"That doesn't sound *that* hard." Gabriel said. "Then perhaps you'd like to make a network running on type Rijndael encryption algorithms, with GPS identifiers, all built off a completely new base language." "I have no idea what half those words were." Gabriel admitted, "But you didn't have to attend that awful keynote. They didn't even have snacks!" Jessica couldn't resist the opportunity, "It must have been sooo hard for you." "Yeah, well… Shut up." Gabriel conceited.

Fox tried to get the conversation back on track. "In any case, the new network should be up soon. I'll have to patch everyone in directly, in person, but hopefully by Monday, everything should be good to go." "Sounds great." Jessica said. "I guess we should all get back to work." "Agreed," Fox said, "Mr. Smith, Ms. Ansi." His line went suddenly went dead. "Well, I guess this is goodbye." Jessica said to Gabriel. "More like famous last words." he moped. Jessica couldn't help but smile. "Goodbye, Gabriel." "Bye." He said simply, still upset at his situation.

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"Do anything interesting?" Jessica jumped slightly as she entered her front door. She had briefly forgotten she was now sharing an apartment. "Woo! Hey there." she said as she locked the door, "Uh, not really. Unless, you count shopping for groceries interesting." She held up the cloth grocery bag, but Alex said nothing. Jessica frowned. He had seemed earnest before, but he was still being bit distant. The electrolyzed, metal cage was no help, but at the very least they could still get to know each other.

She put the groceries on her kitchen counter, then pulled up a stool next to Alex's "room". "You know, I've always done most of the talking, and I think, it's your turn to talk." "We've already-" "The messages don't really count." Alex shifted uncomfortably, "What do I even talk about?" Not that he wasn’t interested, but he wasn’t used to this sort of small talk. Even amongst his “friends” he’d been known as the quiet one.

Thankfully, Jessica had an answer. "Just, whatever comes to mind. I mean, surely you've done this before? It’s not like you’ve always been an assassin. You weren't, were you?" Alex responded with a simple, "No." Jessica tried again, "Alright, lets start off with something easy. Where did you get your helmet?" "Its a mask." He corrected quickly. "I made it." "Really? I never pictured you as the craftsmen type." "Most don't." Jessica sighed softly. So far, all his responses were truthful enough, but very, very short.

"Where'd you learn to sing?" Alex asked suddenly, catching Jessica off guard. Briefly flustered, after a few seconds she managed to compose herself. "Well, my mother taught me when I was young. How did you know that I sing?" Alex shifted in his cell again, clearly embarrassed himself. "I- I heard you singing last night. It was… comforting." "Thanks." Jessica said, blushing. She hadn't been expecting that. No one else really knew she could sing. It wasn't something she was very comfortable with letting other people know. But, it *had* gotten Alex to open up the most since he'd gotten here. "Do you? Sing, I mean." "No. I guess I never saw the need."

Finally, she felt they were getting somewhere! She figured that was enough of an achievement for today when Alex spoke again, "You’re the first, you know." "I'm sorry?" she asked, unsure of what he meant. "That I care about… in that way." She took a moment before responding. "In a way, I guess you’re also the first for me. Well, at least in my case, I was too focused on other things…" She trailed off, getting lost in memory.

It must have been at least a full minute before Alex managed to get her attention. "Jessica, are you okay?" "Huh?" She said, startled. "Yeah, I was just… never mind. Anyway, it's starting to get kind of late, and Greg will want to know I'm still here!" She got up off the stool, and stretched her legs. "I don't blame him." Alex said. "Who? Greg? For what?" she asked. "He had a right to be angry, like I was." "But you’re not anymore, are you?" She asked in quite an understanding way. "No. Well yes. Well, I’m not sure. But I know the truth now. And I know myself a bit better." "You know, you can be pretty cryptic sometimes." Alex again said nothing, but Jessica couldn't keep from smiling all the same. "Be safe." Alex said, before she left. "Thanks. You too." She said, and turned off the lights.

After checking in with Gregory, Jessica got ready for bed. As usual, she found sleep to be evasive. She thought about singing again, but she was unsure now that she knew someone was actually listening. She’d never gotten an opinion other than her mother’s, years ago, and it felt very embarrassing. However, Alex *had* said he found it comforting. "Ah, screw it." she said, and began singing from where she’d left off, this time from her bed.

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Alex had almost been looking forward to the night. He hoped he hadn't put Jessica off by mentioning the previous night. She seemed quite embarrassed when he had brought it up. He had had an unpleasant feeling as well, in his stomach. He felt a bit anxious now, as he waited in the dark. His ears shot up as soon as he heard it through the walls, and he felt… at peace, if only for a moment.

*Snarling fiercely now, he fought himself,*

*Long enough to save her.*

*"Leave me here, I am not worth,*

*Your love and your pure soul."*

*But she refused, and said she this,*

*"You do still have some right."*

*She bound him up, and said to him,*

*"I will help you fight!"*

*The demons laughed, and out they cried,*

*“He is ours for the taking!*

*Yahweh's world will be ours still;*

*His world ours for the making!”*

*She heard them not, and went to work,*

*She toiled night and day.*

*Exorcists went out and in,*

*But she sent them all away.*

*Nothing she tried, could cast the dark,*

*Out of her lover's way.*

*She broke down, her face grew stark,*

*For this was their last day.*

*She cried out to him, desperate and sad,*

*"I know you're in there still!"*

*He snarled and clawed and tried to fight,*

*As she approached him once more.*

*She kissed him now, just as before,*

*His lips on top of hers.*

*He looked up, hopeful, different now,*

*His eyes now went to her.*

*Light came in, into his eyes,*

*tears streaming down his face.*

*The dark was gone, to her he said,*

*"Thank you, for you’re my saving grace."*

Jessica wasn't sure if Alex was going to recover completely, but he did seem to want to make a genuine try. Even if the others couldn’t see it. Ever since they had first gone on a short mission together, she had had an unusually soft spot for him. She normally wouldn’t try to get so close to a coworker, but Alex was different. Maybe it was because in a way, he reminded her of herself. Or maybe she just liked helping people more than she realized. Or maybe, it was because she had once been in a somewhat similar position, and couldn’t stand seeing someone else be in her place. Whatever the reason, she was going to stick by him, for better or for worse.

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Alex thought about all that he had gone through. His childhood had essentially been taken from him, his friends had betrayed him, and he had killed hundreds over the years. And for what? Its true that he had taken this job for the money, but even a sociopath can feel. And then there was Jessica. He wasn’t sure why he was so drawn to her. It was probably the fact that even including his friends, she was the only one who truly believed he could do any good in the world; that he could do more than simply kill. All he had ever really known was how to make others suffer. He made up his mind right then. He didn't care about Wetzel, Fox, Ingrid, or anyone else. But if anything happened to Jessica… well, the person responsible would have a very, very bad day.

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The next morning, Jessica was surprised to see Alex reading. She had made sure to leave him a few books, but he hadn’t seemed interested in them, at least until now. “Hey, what ya reading?” She asked, as she made some coffee. Alex closed the book, marking his place by folding the corner of the page. Jessica winced, but pretended not to see. “Fairy tales. You ever read them?” “Yeah, I used to read them a lot, actually. You like them so far?” Alex didn't respond immediately, clearly thinking about how to best respond. “They're good so far, but there was one that got me thinking. The one with the little girl?” “Little red riding hood?” Jessica guessed, amazed at how much he was talking. “Yea. It’s just, I know it was from long ago, but I can’t help but feel-” “That it might still be true?” Jessica finished. “The things I've seen… its why I wore the mask.” “You mean the helmet?” Jessica teased. “I’ve already told you, its not a helmet-” Alex cut himself off, realizing the joke. “Oh. Cute.” In his low voice, Jessica couldn’t tell if he was being sarcastic or genuine. However, for the first time since they had started living together, she felt they were conversing naturally. Maybe these next few weeks wouldn't be so bad after all.