My world was pitch black. What little thoughts I had didn’t remain for long before what little consciousness I could muster fell back into the abyss. Part of me didn’t know what or who I was. I couldn’t feel my fingers, my tail or my ears, let alone a single muscle in my body.

Until I did. It started off small. A wiggle of a big toe followed by a few agonizing moments of opening the right eye, then the left eyelid. The plain ceiling, through a dull lavender, was bathed in a flashing red light. Suddenly, my anxious orbs immediately widened as shards of recent memories surged through my body. I tried lifting a paw or my head, only for a sharp pain to pull me against a used pillow. It wasn’t long before I realized a few tubes were hooked to my arms and to my nostrils. For some reason, I remembered the latter was called a ‘cannula’. Was it from something my dad once taught me?

Attempts to raise my head up felt like an extra needle had been pierced into my skull. Despite this drowsy state though, I could recognize the sounds of shuffling footpaws and angry shouts nearby.

“Help me with this one!” one voice muttered. “It looks like he’s awake!”

“Great, let’s hurry, Lowell!” the other hissed hurriedly. “The backup generators’ll be back on in less than three minutes. And we can’t save ‘em all.”

“I know, I know!”

A few seconds later, two silhouettes hovered over me. One belonged to a female otter while the other resembled a canine, a gray-and-black-furred wolf, who carefully pulled the tubes out of my arms and yanked off the cannula from my nose. I suddenly coughed and hacked before drifting in and out of consciousness. Images of the duo pulling me from the bed and carrying me by an arm each, combined with the memory of the wolf baring his fangs in a hopeful grin, further confused me. My footpaws and tail drooped and dragged along the floor of an endless, barely-lit hallway, any attempts to regain my footing only led to me stumbling.

*How long have I been out?* I asked myself. I barely remembered seeing the otter hastily take a pair of cutters and slice off something on my wrist. It clattered on the ground with a faint beep. *Where…am I? Who are they?*

“Hey come on, stay with us, Adam! We’re almost there…”

*Huh?* I blinked back to reality.

We were now approaching a door, leading to a lone van on the rainy sidewalk of the dark complex. I could see outlines of other dark buildings in the distance. A few other neighboring vehicles were driving away from us, leaving this one van parked and guarded by two wolves in gray clothing, who raised their guns toward us. At first, I braced myself for the end, until deafening shots fired to crumpling forms behind us as something ricocheted off the van.

Unfortunately, I did witness the sight of a bullet hitting the wolf’s leg, except scorching smoke seemed to rise with his pained screams.

Then blackness enveloped me once more.

\*\*\*

I groaned before opening an eye. My conversion clinic room had become smaller, my entire body sitting propped up against a cold metal wall. There were five other furs dressed in the same plain clothing as me, all of them buckled and unconscious, with the otter from earlier was at the back speaking through a sliding window to the driver.

As for the wolf, kneeling and sitting along the floor, he’d noticed me stirring awake.

“Hey, kid!” he perked his ears, both as high as his smile. My vision traveled down to his leg, now heavily bandaged. “Glad to see you’re, ngh…among the living.”

I tried speaking up, only to start coughing heavily, like my throat burned cinders. Immediately, the alarmed wolf handed me a water bottle, and he let me drink every last drop. Now I could breathe again.

“Thank us later, Adam. For now, don’t talk too much. You haven’t used your voice in a long time, and we have no idea how long those clinic thugs have been pumping those drugs into your system.” The handsome canine muttered audibly, “Fucking DSA…”

“H-H-How…know…name…?” I struggled saying.

He shushed me. “I saw it written on that bracelet on your wrist before we tossed it out. They’d have been able to track you if we hadn’t cut it off,” he replied amusedly, “‘Adam Grimwald’. That’s a pretty bad-ass name if I say so.”

“Your…leg…” I struggled pointing to his blood-speckled ankle.

“Oh this?” he smirked between winces amid the swerving van. “Hellfire bullets are pretty nasty hot when they pierce a body, especially since they’re supposed to keep you from bleeding out, but their design is their greatest flaw. Cauterizing bullets means no blood loss. It’ll take more than a fancy-schmancy gun to keep me from rescuing you.”

“Are you done flirting with him, Lowell?” Olivia quipped.

The wolf named Lowell rolled his eyes, which were an auburn shade of yellow.

“I’m just making sure he isn’t braindead like the rest of these guys.” He groaned. “Are we at the hotel yet, Liv? I’m pretty sure Nick’s driving isn’t *helping* any…”

“Fuck off, Lowell!” someone gruff and older growled. He sounded more annoyed than angered, but it didn’t stop me from imagining the driver’s scowl. Whatever species he was.

“Who…Who are…” I strained to speak, “…you?”

A sudden bump in the road caused me to nearly slip from my seat. My numb legs still felt like five-pound weights, but Lowell managed to readjust my legs straighter. I would’ve probably blushed at his firm yet gentle touch if I weren’t paralyzed this way.

“We’re like you, Adam.” Lowell answered after a moment, offering another soft grin. “The blackout our moles caused helped temporarily knock out the power grid to most parts of Chicago. As we speak, our other cells across the Devout States are rescuing clinic patients, outcasts like you, in the same manner. Heh, Happy Easter to them, am I right?”

The otter groaned.

“We…?”

“We’re the Defiant, kid.” Olivia finished for him.

Despite my drowsy stupor, I immediately recognized the name. Everyone called them by many titles: the Deviants, the Godless, radicals, Satan-worshippers, unholy, intolerant oppressors. Any known terrorist attacks were often pinned on them by reporters if the government didn’t find any other culprits.

“Are…Are you…kill…me?”

The wolf’s nostrils flared, and I expected him to strike me. No, instead, he hugged me, catching me by complete surprise. The thought of physical contact, even with a stranger like him, seemed addicting after the cold, distant atmosphere of the clinic.

“We know what the media says about us, but it isn’t true,” he spoke softly, as if he was quelling a hidden rage not directed towards me. “We aren’t Satanists, we aren’t mindless killers or uncaring murderers. We are simply defiant against what this government does to its own citizens. We know how they treat you, Adam. We know what you’ve been going through…”

All of the newscasts on FaithTV told me to be disgusted by this rebel. To remind myself how untrustworthy these terrorists were, how they murdered unborn cubs and basked in sin like a drug. But then my slurred speech and movements instantly reminded myself what led me to this drugged moment. Somehow, deep down, I trusted them. Lowell specifically. Something about him compelled me to ignore the repetitive mantras the government-run clinic had been bashing into my skull.

The van suddenly slowed down.

“Hey, guys:” the driver groaned, “the blackout has led to a traffic jam on Highway I-290, so we’ll be stuck here for a bit.”

“Any trooper checkpoints?” Olivia asked.

“None that I can see, ma’am, but the Archangels just sent out an alert warning of kidnapped clinic patients, telling civilians to look out for any suspicious persons. Luckily, they don’t have any vehicle plates or models. Nor do they have any footage.”

The otter heaved a sigh before slumping against the wall. “Good.”

Moments passed before Lowell shook me awake.

“Can I ask you a few questions, Adam?” the wolf asked in a serious manner. “It’ll save our doctors the time in figuring out if you have amnesia or if it’s just the drugs. I’ve already asked a few of your compatriots while you were dozing off, and we have some time, so take as long as you need.”

“Are you seriously about asking him, Low?” his otter friend questioned. “Go ahead, but Jordan isn’t going to be happy you’re doing his work for him.”

“I know, Liv.” Lowell scoffed before smiling comfortingly. “So? What do you say, Adam? Is it alright if I ask you a few personal questions?”

I precariously nodded.

“Great,” he chuckled. “So, can you tell me your parents’ names?”

“G-Gerald…and…Elizabeth…Griswald.”

“Do you have any siblings?” I shook my muzzle. “What about any family members in any government agency? Archangels? Covenant Guard? The Homeland Security Agency? The National Church? Got a secret uncle running for Congress?”

Again, I shook my head.

“Tell me what you know about the DSA as a whole.”

Breathing in, I slowly formed the correct words, and told them what I knew about the country’s history. “Well,” I began, “almost…fifty years ago…”

I recalled what little I knew from school, how the teachers described pre-Devout America; the high crime rates, lack of faith in schools and government, and the decadent immorality used by non-believers to persecute practicing Christians. However, our nation regained itself on the correct path when a brave timber wolf named David Farthing brought our country back from the brink of economic collapse. An election season later, and his presidential approval ratings soared all the way to Heaven, to the point his new political party, the Revenant Party, held a majority seat in the House and the Senate. Ten years later, and the country was reshaped into the Devout States of America, a nation reborn under God.

“Okay,” Lowell continued warily, “now can I ask you a couple of questions? They’re kind of serious ones.” Nodding again, the wolf cautiously asked, “Do you know why you were put in that conversion clinic?”

The van’s interior became silent save for honking horns.

“B-Because…because…”

My breathing stilled for several minutes. A lump of raw coal lodged itself in my throat, while I could barely look back at him. The reason was so shameful. It made me feel slight arousal, but it soon overshadowed itself with immediate guilt.

“You’re gay?” Lowell finished for me.

Stared back at the wolf, hesitantly nodding.

Memories emerged from that darkened abyss in my mind. My parents’ ashamed faces I once the Archangels pulled over outside our house. The tears crawling down my nose and cheeks as they escorted me to the Cicero Conversion Clinic, which was conveniently blocks away from the Cicero Health Center.

We were separated into different groups; boys from girls, nonbelievers from perverts and heretics, cubs from teenagers and adults, and redeemers from the praying souls under sedation. Everyone called them ‘seddies’, patients who either refused to find ‘redemption’ or who couldn’t find it at all. They were housed in the neighboring building owned by the Cicero Conversion Clinic. And furs who walked out were never the same as when they entered.

“Do you know how long you’ve been under?” Lowell asked me, this time solemnly with folded ears. “What year is it exactly?”

I thought for a short while and raised a confused brow. “Twenty-eighteen?”

“Not exactly” he shook his head, clearly saddened. At me? “The year is 2019. Those clinic bastards have been keeping you comatose for almost a year, Adam.”

My mind could not process what he said at first. It couldn’t be. I had only been sedated just yesterday, or did it feel like a week ago? It was hard to determine through my sea of loose thought. I wasn’t hungry, but then again there were clinic nurses who fed seddies continuously.

“W-Wait…you said…Easter, right?”

*My God*, it dawned on me in horror. *Have I really been asleep for seven months?*

Minutes later, the van came to a sudden halt, and I could hear the engine turn off. I almost asked where we were when I suddenly blacked out once more. Memories came like a tital waves, overwhelming me; my younger self, an orange-furred tabby running for recess, praying on my bed, and laughing with someone. We were giggling about something. As much as I tried, all I could recall were his nimble paws, two cerulean orbs, and his fox tail.

A name suddenly formed on my lips. “S-Stephen…”

*“Stephen?”*

*“What?”*

*“This cat just said something, a name.”*

*“Well what did he fucking say, Doc?”*

*“‘Stephen’.”*

“Adam.”

I woke up again, this time in an unfamiliar room in an unfamiliar bed. To my left rested a window blocked by white curtains, but the lights outside made it difficult to tell if it was either midday or this place was in the middle of Chicago. Based on my previous memories of a highway, I immediately guessed we were far from the lakeside metropolis.

To my right stood a familiar wolf wearing casual jeans seemingly patched together by duct tape and a plain red t-shirt, his form leaning over me with a relaxed smile. A sleeveless, zip-up hoodie, the same color as the wolf’s rich fur, hung on a nearby hook, but it was the figure beside him that grabbed my attention. Next to the bed stood tall, pale-furred ferret in a buttoned white shirt, carrying a pen and notebook in his paws. His glasses were too thick for me to see his entire expression.

“Good morning, sleepy-head,” Lowell greeted sheepishly. His bared fangs shone in white compared to his black-and-grey fur, as well as his auburn orbs. “It’s about time you woke up. How do you feel?”

“Fine.” Gaping in surprise at the sound of my speech, I lifted a paw to my throat. It no longer felt heavy or raw. “My-My voice. I…I feel great now.” I glanced cautiously up to them. “How-How long was I out exactly? Where am I? And why did you rescue me—”

“Calm down, Mr. Grimwald,” the ferret responded with a surprisingly deep voice. “We will answer all of your questions, but first I need to examine you further, please.”

“Long story short:” he chirped. “You’ve been asleep for a couple days, you’re at resistance headquarters—well, one of our headquarters—and I did it because nobody deserves to be put under for being who they are.” A somber gaze appeared on his face, which was further visible from the lamp’s beams. “*Nobody*.”

I blinked multiple times as the ferret, sighing in visible annoyance towards the wolf, stepped up to examine me. Placing a stethoscope to my temple, he paused and suddenly mentioned, “Dr. Jordan McCann, by the way. Nice to meet you, and I assume you’ve already meet Lowell here. Now, do you feel sore anywhere?”

“O-Only on…my back.” I replied.

“Hmmm, typical among post-comatose patients.”

As Dr. McCann further examined me, checking my pulse, heartbeat and whatnot, Lowell further illustrated the situation: after I passed out, the Defiant placed me in this hotel room so I’d expel the drugs from my system while unconscious. According to the timber wolf, I was among nineteen sedated patients rescued from the conversion clinic, while estimations among rebel cells across the Devout States ranged from eighty to a hundred rescued patients, saying, “Johanna and the other leaders are having a field day about this accomplishment. It’s a mass rescue never been done before, and that crazy doe’s celebrating in her office right now.”

“J-Johanna?” I asked, knowing the name sounded familiar. When Dr. McCann pulled back and wrote again on his notebook, it struck me like lightning. “Wait, don’t you mean *John* Cardinal?”

“Same person,” Dr. McCann spoke, “wrong gender, actually. She hasn’t gone by that name since 2006, and never shuts up about how the DSA intentionally uses her old identity whenever they mention us. I take it you’ve heard of the Mother of Exiles?”

Of course, I did. Whenever my parents watched the evening news, and John Cardinal came up, they often muttered ‘traitor’ while officials urged viewers not to go online and watch the Mother of Exile’s podcast entries. Everyone did, to no avail. For every video or audio log the ex-Archangel captain posted, the government would take it down and four more copies would show up somewhere on the Internet.

“W-Well…” I tried to clarify, “only what the TV said. They call him a terrorist.”

“Her,” Lowell corrected me, “and don’t call her a guy unless you want to get an angry stare. Trust me, you don’t want that, especially since she’s the reason you aren’t tied back down to a gurney.”

Now I felt my ears heat up in embarrassment. “I’m s-sorry,” I told them, adding, “if I sounded ungrateful. I really am…so, what’s going to happen to me?”

“That’s alright, Adam. No need to be ashamed.” Once again, the wolf smiled that friendly smile I started to wag my tail at. “Good ol’ Canada is gonna be your next destination. Or the Western Republic.”

The ‘Immoral States’, as everyone here called them, were a group of nine former states from the Union who seceded not long after America became a nation reborn. It wasn’t a secret how much the Devout States despised the Western Republic. Every elected President in our recent history wanted to be remembered as the leader who reunited East and West together, even if the coastal rogue states had nukes as well. No progress though since 1999.

“Ever since the Revenant Party came to power, the Defiant and other resistance cells have been smuggling ex-conversion patients and refugees to our friends in the North. We know some important folk who willing to give them sanctuary or a one-way ticket to either the Republic or Europe, but…there’s a problem, Adam. You…”

“I’m afraid,” the Doctor finished for Lowell, “it will be awhile until we can get you there, Mr. Grimwald. You won’t be leaving this room for two months. Maybe longer.”

My rising heart fluttered down. “What?” I asked incredulously. “Why can’t I—” An attempt to sit on the bed resulted in my legs being pulled back down. “Ack, damn it!”

Gasping, I blushed at my swearing.

“Heh,” Lowell patted my shoulder, gently repositioning my figure so my ears flicked against the soft pillows, “don’t worry about it, Adam. You can swear as much as you *fucking* want.” He laughed and mirrored my amused grin. “Anyway, the Doc’s right: you’ll need to regain your strength before we can get you out of the country.”

“B-But, I don’t—”

“Your body is going through muscle atrophy,” the ferret added. “For the past several months, you’ve been fed nutritional gunk through feeding tubes, and the muscles need to regain their mass with time. Until then, you will be requiring someone to assist you in daily tasks. Save for one more case, the other seventeen have been placed in a medically-induced coma for much longer. You are lucky compared to them, Mr. Grimwald.”

My memories returned to my rescue, and how the other five unconscious patients swayed with the motions of the van. Their half-dazed faces and drooling jaws, as well as how unresponsive they were with what was happening around them. I couldn’t remember if they were in their teens or their early twenties like I apparently was, but I did reminisce seeing a middle-aged tigress among them. Had she been a seddie since the DSA’s first year?

“Will you stop trying to sound professional, Jordan?” Lowell scoffed. “It’s annoying and makes me want to fall sleep. Besides, I think he already figured out why.”

“Let me get the Archangels on the phone and it can be arranged,” Dr. McCann said before putting his notebook and pen aside. “Anyway, I need to check on the other furs, but Lowell here will be keeping you company until his bullet wound heals up.”

Without another word, the white-furred ferret exited down an adjacent hallway and disappeared with the sound of a closing door, making me wonder how big this hotel room really was. Lowell and I looked at each other before the wolf sat on the bed, visibly wincing at his leg.

“I’m sorry about your leg,” I apologized. Part of me noticed my speech no longer having a stutter, yet I knew it’d return during embarrassing moments.

“Don’t worry about it, Adam,” his tail flicked at my lap. “I’m staying in the room next door, is if you need anything, just knock on the back wall and I’ll be there.”

“Even if you’re asleep?” I questioned.

“Eh, even if I’m having the sexiest wet dream imaginable,” Lowell cleared his throat awkwardly. “So…do you want to watch something on TV? Some of it’s just shitty propaganda, but there are a few shows I kind of like…”

I raised my head up and scooted to the side.

“Is *Game of Crowns* still on?” I pondered aloud.

“Sure is, but it’s on the final season, so do you want me to help catch you up?” he laid down beside me on the bed. After giving a curt nod, the wolf eagerly explained, “So here’s what happened since the last season: remember how the Red Wedding…”

\*\*\*

The first month progressed faster than I thought it would, but so much happened during that time. Tan wallpaper encircled me for those four weeks. I knew we were on the top floor of a hotel, but nobody, not even the hotel’s housekeepers, a quiet male lynx and a talkative fennec vixen, would tell me the name. The vixen only mentioned us still being in Illinois.

“It is best you don’t figure out,” Mr. McCann told me when I asked about it, offering me an apologetic look. “It isn’t just you, Mr. Grimwald. We’ve been getting reports of spies over in Ottawa. Rumor has it they’re trying to link where our operations are, and the less refugees who know, the better.”

Save for one instance, the entirety was spent inside this two-room suite, where a hallway and bathroom separated my bedroom and a small kitchen/living room. They fed me decent meals involving nutrients and protein to regain my strength, while this wolf did everything to keep me optimistic for recovery. Sometimes in bed, other times in the bathtub exercising, and the rest watching television or eating what he called ‘healthy vomit’.

Lowell. Aged twenty-five (three…no, *two* years older than me) and self-proclaimed ‘badass’ who ignored anything regarding questions about his past. He was the only person I spoke to beyond Dr. McCann (who insisted I call him ‘Jordan’ after his third visit).

At first, I felt embarrassed allowing him to shower me, considering my legs still gave way whenever I tried to walk in the early weeks, but Lowell proved himself professional for the most part. Every day or so, he helped escort me to the bathroom, stripped me down while giving a quip and even washed my delicate back. I blushed, of course, yet he didn’t seem too distracted by my nudity. It made me wonder if the wolf had done these countless times before.

*Or possibly*, I thought at one point, *maybe he isn’t like me?*

Despite how much Lowell wanted to return to ‘the action outside’, he dedicated himself to helping me recover. He avoided his past but did tell me different stories. His first mission in the field, helping a pregnant teenager get to Ontario after her secret boyfriend evaded personal responsibility by saying she came onto him. And another time he once escaped a squad of armed Archangels with just his wits.

“—close to my location, but I got a crazy idea: kneel and pray!”

I cocked my head in clear confusion.

“What?! They just let you go like that?”

“Well, it was a Detroit church during Mass, and none of them saw my face when I went inside. Plus, when the flash bomb I set up went off outside the windows, every God-fearing Christian in there was in such a panic, I escaped before any Archie could pinpoint me.” Lowell, smirking proudly, glanced back to me. “So, what about you? Got a past yourself?”

I opened up to him as the rest of my memories gradually returned. Between childhood nostalgia, I remembered Christmases, Thanksgivings, birthdays and Easter Mornings in my suburban home. Dad worked as a medical doctor, wanting me to follow in his footpaws one day, while Mom wanted to be a gospel singer before becoming a housewife and part-time preacher at the local church. My father was the one who caught me and Stephen, a neighbor fox with handsome features, experimenting in my bedroom before he used connections to have me located to the Cicero clinic.

The rounds of sexual confusion treatment I endured were extensive; orderlies electrocuting us as we watched grotesque homosexual acts on a screen, forcing us to ‘pray’ in a closet for days, telling us we were abused as cubs, asking us to give names for the perverts who ‘stained us’, and exorcising us as a last resort. The final straw was turning into a seddie, something a family member or loved one needed to sign for.

Were my parents aware of my kidnapping?

“Hey,” Lowell remarked as we watched further FaithTV, this time from an old gameshow, “is something on your mind, Adam? I know the host of this gameshow is annoying, but you’ve been staring up at the ceiling since the last episode.” A moment later, he grabbed the remote and turned it off. “Are you still thinking about them?”

“Yeah…” I murmured moments later. “It’s kind of hard not to.”

He sighed, trying and failing not to sound bothered.

“What?” I asked. “Tell me what you want to say.”

“I’m not one to tell you how to think or anything, but I cannot fathom it. Weren’t your parents the same assholes who sent you away? How can you still miss them?”

I would’ve sounded offended, if it didn’t make sense in hindsight.

“Technically,” I counter-argued, “the Archangels sent me to that horrible place, not my mom or dad. Not directly.”

“Regardless, they *let* it happen. They wanted you ‘cured’.” The wolf rolled onto his left side to face me on the sheets. He no longer winced at his leg. “Aren’t you pissed off at your dad for reporting you and Stephen for sexual deviancy?”

Now I was the one to flinch, causing Lowell to gasp.

“I…I’m so sorry for reminding you—”

“No, no, it’s…” I breathed in and curled my tail onto my lap. For the past few weeks, I’d asked him and Jordan if any of the Defiant knew a red fox named Stephen McConnell. Unfortunately, none of the past or recently rescued seddies from any cell resembled him. “It’s fine, Lowell. I just…I know I should be mad at my parents, but…I’m more concerned about knowing if Stephen is at another facility. I know he wasn’t at mine.”

“I can’t tell you where he is,” he lowered his head. “I’m sorry we can’t do more...”

“That’s okay,” I insisted. “It isn’t your fault.”

Later that same day, after we watched a three-hour-long rerun of *Jeopardy* on the TV, I gradually started to fall asleep. Lowell must have noticed it, because he surprised me by tucking me in. Before he left, I said something that had been bugging me for a while.

“Your leg is better.”

Lowell stood by the hallway. “So?” he shrugged. “It’s healed since last week.”

“So…you don’t have to stay here anymore,” I mumbled between deep yawns.

“Hm?” he paused putting his hooded jacket on. “What do you mean?”

“I’m…mfh, pretty sure the Defiant can find someone to take your place.” I cuddled into the warm sheets like a cocoon, my tail wrapped around my thigh and eyes fluttering to the handsome wolf. “You can go back and do what you love in the field. Resisting and all of that…”

“We’re trying to lay low for several weeks now,” he chuckled heartedly, “so I won’t be ‘resisting’ until we get you and your kin over the border. Besides,” he winked, grinning from ear to canine ear, “I like you.”

My ashy-green eyes instantly enlarged themselves to saucer plates.

“You…like me?” my cheeks started to heat up.

“Yeah,” he chirped. “You’re interesting to talk to, and not like the other seddies. You actually have a sense of humor, Adam, not like Jordan or Olivia or all the others who have to act serious every day.”

Wagging his tail, Lowell wished me good night and closed the room door. That night, I had dreams of him and me in…*very* sinful, *very* arousing situations. I even woke up the next morning to see my underpants dampened, and the nights after that.

\*\*\*

Two weeks later, it was exhilarating to go to the bathroom on my own again. Standing up to walk around, as well as basking under a showerhead never felt so good.

Lowell was unfortunately called back to his ‘resisting’ duties since I no longer needed him. I imagined the cocky wolf doing reconnaissance on a DSA government official or avoiding surveillance cameras to put up pro-Defiant posters all over a public building. Maybe even fooling another Archangel squad through his quick-thinking bravado. Regardless of how much (or how little) He cared about me, I prayed to the Lord for Lowell’s safety every night.

Jordan still came by to check up on me, commenting how impressed he was with my road to recovery. He gave me small equipment and told me to work my muscles out as much as I could, now that I wasn’t limited to a bed. Although I welcomed this change of pace, it fully made me realize my situation: The Defiant were going to smuggle me into either Canada or the Western Republic. Likely to never to see my hometown or family again.

I tried following Lowell’s past remarks about forgetting and wondered what would be in store with these two foreign nations, but all I wanted to do was hug my parents. Then scream at Mom and Dad for having me placed in that clinic. Sure, part of me missed them still, but each day in this hotel, inside this country who betrayed me, made the thought of Canada more enticing. Unfortunately, I wouldn’t get to see it.

Jordan was doing his daily check-up on me and checking my vitals when his cellphone buzzed.

“Yes?” he brought it up to his ear. I couldn’t hear anything at first, but I didn’t need to. When the ferret’s eyes widened, he muttered. “T-This is a joke, is it? It can’t be…”

“What’s wrong?” I asked on deaf ears.

“Lowell got you to join this joke, didn’t he? Tell me this isn’t true!” his nostrils flared, then immediately stopped. “Huh? Watch the news? Right now? Ugh, fine then,” groaning, Jordan clicked the room’s TV on, “but I doubt they’re…they’re…oh no.”

His shock reflected mine. It could not be true. It couldn’t!

“—now under occupation by the military of the Devout States of America.”

Neither of us could say a single thing to each other, or even pull our disbelieving eyes away from the nightmare onscreen. The only sound was the ferret’s notebook (and the remote) slipping from his paws. Yet the noise of it thudding onto the ground drowned in the patriotic background music and newscaster’s proud voice.

“As we speak, our patriotic soldiers have planted the flag over Ottawa as Canadian military forces have fled either to Greenland or west to join the Immoral States. Newfoundland has yet to be claimed as enemy forces are making their last stand, but President Sara Nessen reassured Congress that this is a glorious day for Devout Americans everywhere. ‘Soon, all of North America will be under the Banner of God,’ she posted on the Oval Office’s Dove page. ‘God Bless this Continent, and our brave souls on the Rocky Mountain Front.’ Meanwhile, investigations into the Easter Evening Blackout and the involved countrywide kidnappings of patients from conversion clinics are still ongoing…”

Jordan picked up his notebook and slammed the hotel room’s door behind him, leaving me to watch the TV in solitude. FaithTV’s 24/7 news channel showcased live footage of ongoing battles happening across Canada, while another FaithTV channel displayed various perky females discussing the benefits of having our ‘northern neighbor’ now ‘living with us’. Or them giving thoughts and prayers to the ‘Army crusader bravely risking their lives’. New business deals, new construction jobs in undeveloped areas, the potential development of a new ‘Polar Paradise’ town after the ‘enemy was driven from Nunavut’. There was already plans to build the New Toronto Megachurch, a building capable of holding five-thousand attendees.

Nobody mentioned how angry the world, particularly NATO, was with the annexation.

Timed slow down to a degree I couldn’t notice. I must have been catatonic for hours when a knock at the door pulled me back.

“Huh?” I peeked through the blinds to see it was close to sundown. “C-Come in…”

The door opened, and shifting footsteps came closer to reveal a familiar wolf appear from the hallway. He wore a red-and-black *Game of Crowns* t-shirt showing a fierce dragon crest, while his solemn smile made me leap off of the bed.

“Hey, Adam. It’s been—woah!” he laughed and nearly stumbled into the closet. “Wow, it’s good to see you too, Adam. You’re walking again. Sorry I’ve been away, but they wanted me to do some errands for them, and…” When I simply hugged him tighter, Lowell sighed and firmly patted my trembling back. “I take it you know?”

I nodded. Silently, Lowell sat me down on the couch by the door and wrapped his comforting arm around my neck. Without a single beat, all the emotions I tried suppressing leaked onto his chest. Lowell started to cry too, but never let it go beyond several tears that fell onto my orange headfur. He focused instead on hugging me closely. Letting all of mine out.

“I’m sorry,” he murmured. “I’m sorry this is fucked…”

“It,” I whimpered, “isn’t your fault, Lowell.”

“It might as well be, Adam,” he stroked my back. “We all should have seen this thing coming. Now you and everyone else are stuck here. We can’t even risk talking to our contacts in the North without the risk of having the Archangels tracing the signal back to us. And now that the Disputed Zone has cut Canada in two as well, with the Republic and Canadian forces trying to keep them away from Alaska, there’s no way we can get any rescued seddies west either. All the Devout-occupied territories will keep borders tight too…”

In layman’s terms: I was stuck here for the time being.

A buzzing noise from his pocket prompted the wolf to pull out another cellphone, this one a new touchscreen. During one of our conversations, Lowell mentioned the hotel having its own ISP and cellphone network from the rest of America, protecting them from being traced.

“Uh, yeah, I’m here, ma’am,” Lowell cleared his throat, replying, “Y-Yeah, I told the kid. He’s,” the wolf softly wiped one of my eyes dry with his thumb, then placed his paw to his ear, “taking it as much as any of us are. Any updates on the other Defiant cells? Mhm, okay. That’s good.” He looked back to me. “Adam, is it okay if I leave for a moment?”

Unfortunately, I didn’t hear him at first. I was deep in my own thoughts. Throughout the past couple months, through my recovery and the grueling hours spent trying to will my toes to move, the thought a second chance somewhere fueled me to continue. In that time, my hotel room became less of a prison cell and more of a safe haven from the outside world.

Sitting on that couch, clenching my paws into my shorts and leg fur, I made my decision.

Lowell almost opened the door when I abruptly said, “Stop!”

He paused mid-turn on the knob, and turned to me, surprised. “Something wrong, Adam?”

“Can I talk to John, no I mean Johanna…” I stumbled with my words, “whoever is in charge?”

“Y-You mean on here?” he presented his phone. “I don’t know…”

“Please?” I asked again. “I…I want to talk to Mrs. Cardinal…please.”

Lowell hesitantly gave me the phone after dialing a number, and I placed the device to my ear as it rang. My eyes directly on the nervous wolf.

“*Did something come up, Lowell? Hello?*”

“Is this the Mother of Exiles?” my voice couldn’t have sounded more wavering, but I pressed on. I needed to speak. “I…My name is Adam Grimwald. I’m…I’m one of the—”

“*I know who you are, Adam. I’m sorry we haven’t had the opportunity to meet, but you know how careful we must be. With what’s happening in Canada, however*,” a feminine sigh could be heard on the other end. “*Is there something you want to ask me directly?*”

“Yes.” Gulping, I finally announced, “I want to do something.”

Lowell’s face lit up like a cub finding out Jesus left presents on Christmas morning.

And an anxious parent finding out a BB gun is among them.

“*…you have my attention. What do you want to though, Adam?*”

My eyes didn’t look away from him as I spoke. “I’ve been in this hotel room for two months. While you risked everything to rescue me and the others, I’ve been sitting my…” I decided, screw everything, and went for it, “…on my ass comfortably.”

“*Sweetie,*” Johanna Cardinal laughed, “*what you’ve been going through is hardly ‘comfortable’. Jordan tells me you have been making excellent strides in beating the atrophy, are you not? However, this hardly gives you much to do in spite of your weakened legs.*”

“I cannot thank you and Dr. McCann—Jordan—enough for what you’ve done. Lowell too,” I smiled momentarily, then lowered my ears crestfallen. Lowell’s worried expression seemed amplified at my words. “But I’m tired of doing nothing while this world keeps on getting worse. Instead of sitting in this room though, instead of sending me away somewhere safe until they…until they get annexed too. I want to join you…and fight the Devout States. I want to make things right.”

“*Why join us?*” she asked me after a moment. “*Why would you betray the country you were born in, Adam?*”

“Well, for one, I was born in the United States a year before this country was formed,” I smiled at the smirk appearing on Lowell’s muzzle. My confidence grew more and more. “And you’ve seen what they did to me. They tried to make me disappear. Sure, I was loyal to my nation once, but they don’t consider me a Devout citizen. Not anymore, not after…”

Sighing, I shifted on the couch and began petting my curling tail. The quieted noises of the TV’s ramblings in the bedroom nearby now sounded distant. But I felt like the noises of fighting soldiers onscreen were growing closer every minute.

“Besides, now I have nothing left to lose, ma’am. If there’s anything I can do to help the Defiant, please let me know. You don’t have to give me a gun, but—”

“*Absolutely not*,” she made my heart nearly fall, until she added, “at least, not until you’re ready.” Her short laugh followed with, “*Listen, I admire your tenacity, kid. The Defiant is always looking for support, but I will need to discuss with my lieutenants on what you* can *do for us. After the trauma you experienced in Cicero, you won’t be physically working in the field for a long while until you’re capable of more than hobbling in a room.*”

“I understand, Mrs. Cardinal.” My tail slightly wagged.

“*We are not pushovers, Adam. Regardless of your religious beliefs, remember that our goal is to return this country from a theocracy back to a democracy. I expect your complete loyalty to the cause, and for you to go beyond your reasonable limits to help us fight against this government. It won’t be easy.*”

“Neither were these past two months.”

“*Touché.*” Johanna laughed once more, then became silent. “*I am serious though. What the Devout States government does to punish perceived traitors and rebels is not something you will survive. If they don’t make a public example of you, they’ll place you in a hole so deep, you might never see daylight again. I have seen these prisons, kid, and what they do in there would make a veteran question their own sanity towards the world. Would you risk having an Archangel interrogate you, beat you, torture you and thrown into one of these hellholes, to fight in the name of freedom? Would you risk all of that to become one of us?*”

“Uh,” I hesitated at first before knowing my answer. “…yes.”

“*Louder, Adam. I cannot hear you.*”

I growled, and repeated, “Yes! I want to fight.”

“*And* why *do you want to fight for the Defiant?*”

“To…To make sure what happened to me doesn’t happen to anybody else!” Breathing heavily, I glanced up to see Lowell by the couch’s nearest armrest, grinning proudly at me. “I w-want to be myself…without being put in a coma! I want to live, ma’am!”

Another moment passed before the phone suddenly disconnected.

Suddenly, we jumped as a figure opened the door. Under the doorframe stood an imposing doe wearing a pair of tan pants and a gun holster, her muscled build doing little to hide her breasts underneath a black undershirt. Despite the lack of long headfur or antlers, it was her square jawline that reminded me who this was. Not to mention her friendly, but intimidating expression as she stared directly at me. Her eyes alone indicated a veteran status.

And in her right paw, she held a smartphone.

“Johanna!” Lowell stammered in surprise. “You mean he’s…?”

“Adam Grimwald,” smirking, she held out a paw, “you’ve convinced me. Welcome to the Maverick Hotel.”