I could feel him against my body. His warm chest close to mine, and his claws running down my back. Something hot and wet poked at the corner of my thigh as we passionately rolled in bed. God, I could taste him already, and hear his wolfish growls echo in my ear.

 Seeing his cocky smile and writhing at his tender touch, I began panting louder and louder beneath the canine, happily moaning his name to the world. “Lowell…”

 I startled awake, blinking to find myself back in the hotel room. Confused at first, and still aroused from what I suddenly realized was a dream, I finally noticed my underwear was damp and sticky.

 “Ugh, not again, Adam,” I moaned, sitting myself up. “This is the third time already…”

 The day after I was accepted as a member, Johanna had me dress myself in a pair of casual blue jeans and a plain grey t-shirt, then gave me a cane. And let me say, walking out my room and into the stretching hallway, it felt exhilarating. No more bed sores either. After getting myself ready (as well as hiding any traces of my embarrassment from the sheets), I joined her in the hallway. Right now, she was telling me the rules as we passed by numbered rooms that gave me flashbacks to the clinic’s system.

 “Thanks to our tech guys, we managed to create a separate ISP network that isn’t traceable on surveillance bots. How it works is too complicated to say, but feel free to go to Oscar’s room to borrow a laptop. Don’t misuse it though, or else the otter will get mad.”

 “Oscar?”

 “Oh yeah, Oscar is one of our hackers,” she went on. “He and his pals downstairs, they run our hacker central. On top of cracking firewalls and security, they like to spend time intercepting comms between police, Archangels, whoever’s of interest. You already met his twin sister, Olivia, when she and Lowell broke you out.”

 “Can I ask where Lowell is, ma’am?” I spoke up, still uneasy on my footpaws.

 “He’s around, but let’s not dawdle, Adam.” the doe stated, then inhaled sharply. “By the way, I’m well-aware this is all new to you, but I would prefer you not to stare at me.”

 “Oh, uh, sorry…” I awkwardly averted my eyes from her. “It’s just…I, uh…”

 “Not every day a God-fearing Christian from Devout America sees a transwoman, do they?” she offered a serious gaze. “Don’t worry about walking on eggshells. You can ask me any reasonable question, but I only have two rules: do *not* call me ‘John’, not anymore, and be respectful. Am I clear?”

 “Yes, ma’am.” I nodded firmly.

 “Good.” She tucked her hair behind her swiveling ears and pressed a button for the elevator. “Now, until you fully recover, you’ll be helping Abigail Foreman with her nursing duties. She and a couple other uh… ‘soldiers’…were the last of a Defiant cell in Kansas City before moving here. I’ve already told the staff this morning to bring some extra food to her room for you.”

 She noticed my alarmed look, and added, “Don’t worry about it. Every employee here knows how to keep quiet. The managers here do background checks to make sure where their loyalties lie, Adam.”

 Joining her in the elevator, Johanna described how originally, the Defiant were just that: a loose collection of resistance circles defiant against the Devout regime when it came to power in America. Hideouts ranged from discussions to suburban basements to disorganized saboteurs and even one notable instance of an abandoned priory deep in the Wisconsin wilderness.

 In time, with the help of contacts in the Western Republic and some financial support from the hotel’s owners, these individual resistance groups would eventually band together for the common goal of resisting the theocratic regime.

 The Maverick Hotel & Bar was one of many hotel chains covertly used as a front for Defiant HQs. Eight stories with 120 different rooms. The top floor was where they kept me and the other seddies in suites, while the other nineteen active members lived on lower-floor rooms as a precaution in case of an Archangel raid. The bar and breakfast area were connected together on the ground floor, while the back kitchen utilized a private elevator whenever things were busy.

 “Of course, not *every* hotel is like this,” Johanna mentioned as we came to a random room on the second story, “but it helps to have a few in almost every state.”

 “You mean *every*…?”

 “Yep,” she smirked between knocks. The door, despite her older physique, smiled like a proud cub who earned a perfect score on a test. “It’s taken me and others blood, sweat, tears and years to expand this much. There’s even Defiant somewhere in Devout-occupied Mexico. I hear they did a number on—”

 The door opened a crack to reveal an elderly rabbit peeking her muzzle out.

 “Mrs. Cardinal!” she peeped.

 This rabbit, though frail and very elderly, opened the door like a young woman welcoming a childhood friend. Her long, green-and-blue-speckled dress contrasted the greying white fur on her. Hanging on two pointed, twitching ears, a large pair of glasses obscured some of her face, but the smile on her couldn’t be any brighter and more visible.

 “Good morning, Abigail. How’s your new room?”

 “Very good, Mrs. Cardinal,” Mrs. Foreman timidly smiled, “very good.”

 Johanna beamed as she presented me. “This is Adam. He’ll be assisting you with anything needed.”

 “Ah,” she stared curiously at me, “you’re one of the seddies Macdonald likes to brag about. It’s really sad about what’s happening in Canada though…” the rabbit perked up and clapped her paws. “Oh well, our boys need all the help they need! Come in then, son! Come in!”

 With the doe walking off, I closed the door behind me and followed the elderly rabbit inside. Everything inside seemed like my hotel room, even down to the same layout and ugly wallpaper, except for everything being neater. It’d been cleaned not too long ago.

 Sitting down momentarily on the couch—also positioned the same way, facing an unused TV set beneath a hung portrait of Jesus Christ—I felt like I’d been transported to the living quarters of a classical nursing home. The scent of cleaning spray and a plug-in air freshener heightened my memories of visiting Grandma and Grandpa (Mom’s side, since Dad never knew his parents) in their idyllic condo south of Milwaukee, before they each passed away.

 Were they looking over me right at this minute? Could they see their ‘degenerate’ grandson all the way from Heaven? I wondered what they were thinking at this moment.

 “Are you alright, son?” Abigail spoke up.

 I blinked back, realizing there was a small tear forming in one of my eyes.

 “Oh, uh…it’s…nothing.” I lied, “It’s nothing, ma’am.”

 “Son, I know a liar when I see one,” she scratched one of her turned ears. The golden cross adorned around her white neck shone from the nearby lamp, contrasting it and the light green uniform scrub she wore. “Do you know Proverbs 12:22?”

 *The Lord detests lying lips, but He delights in people who are trustworthy.*

 She continued without letting me recite it, “It’s a sin to lie to one another, especially when I need someone trustworthy to help me out. If it’s personal, fine, but don’t pretend these ears don’t work, sonny.”

 I glanced away. “Sorry, ma’am…”

 “No, no, please call me Abigail,” she chuckled, handing me my own green shirt, “Now if you ever need to sit down for any reason, do it, okay? It’s good to get some assistance whenever I need, but I don’t want you to overwork yourself, Adam. I don’t want your recovery to go to waste.”

 I smiled assuredly, gripping the top of my cane. “Thank you, Abigail.”

 After putting the green shirt on (and devouring a delicious egg sandwich), I followed Abigail outside into the hallway. My eyes refused to stop glancing from door to door, room number to number, expecting an Archangel to appear. None came though.

 Soon, we came to the elevators and joined a bear inside the closest one going up. His uniform and the fact he gripped onto a silver luggage cart made me do a double-take. Then I calmed myself. Although I remembered Johanna’s words about trusting the hotel staff, it was difficult looking directly at the bellboy beside me. Maybe it revolved around him being good-looking, albeit older bear, but Abigail didn’t mind his company.

 “Good morning, Matt. How have you been faring?”

 “Pretty good, Abigail…Pretty good, but it’s been awfully busy lately,” the bear rumbled. “Several guests checked in this morning, and it looked like they’re pastors looking to go to that church youth convention. Already told Mrs. Cardinal they don’t look suspicious, but we must be careful still…”

 “Matt, this is a hotel,” the older rabbit chuckled. “They’ll be more concerned about the convention over anything else. But you’re right. We need to be more careful since the rescue of those sedated patients in Easter.”

 Matt turned to me and offered a smile, only for me to nervously glimpse away back to watch him through the elevator door’s reflection. They ultimately opened, and we traveled down opposite hallways before Abigail patted my shoulder.

 “Oh, don’t worry about the staff. They’re with us,” she whispered, “but that was still rude of you to look at him like that.”

 “I know, I know,” my tail curled in slight shame, “but I can’t help it. I…I can’t help thinking that the secret police is going to find me, come out of nowhere and take me away…”

 Abigail softly smiled. “Don’t worry about it, sweetie. Nobody is going to take you away from this place. These hotels are confidential and the best hiding spots for a cell. Everyone likes to keep to themselves in establishments like this, no matter where you are in the world…”

 “Didn’t they find your cell?” I asked, “Back in Kansas City?”

 “Well for one thing, it was a *motel*,” Abigail giggled, then shook her muzzle as she knocked on one of the first doors adjacent to the elevator. “And secondly, that’s another story for another time. Right now, I need my trusty sidekick.”

 “For what?” I had it answered when she unlocked it.

 This room had been stripped to the bare bone, with only the ugly, colorless wallpaper and carpeting left. Three furs lay tired or unmoving in beds, save for one speaking to a familiar white ferret at the far end. All of them were hooked to IVs and feeding tubes beside them, silently breathing but barely living. Walking inside, seeing them like this all helpless and trapped and vulnerable this way, made the fur on the back of my neck stand like porcupine needles. The closest seddie, a skeletal tigress laying in an army cot where the TV would normally be, looked more like she belonged in high school.

 Soon I *needed* to sit on a nearby chair.

 “You okay there?” Abigail asked, her voice piercing with concern. “Adam?”

 “I just…” my voice momentarily wavered, “I can’t believe they’re…still not awake.”

 “Yes, yes. We managed to get a few of these poor souls into Canada before the invasion started, but there wasn’t enough time for us to get everyone out.”

 I continued staring at the unconscious tigress. She, like me, now remained trapped on the wrong side of the Devout curtain, and she must have been in this state for far longer. Years maybe.

 “Adam, are you alright?”

 The grip on my cane could’ve broken it in two. “Yes,” I lied, “Yeah, I’m…fine.”

 I expected Abigail to scold me again for not telling the truth (however she figured it out was beyond me), only for a certain white ferret to save me.

 “Mr. Grimwald,” Jordan greeted me, this time his doctor’s coat dirtied, “so good to see you again walking about. You still performing those morning exercises I recommended?”

 “Yes sir,” I nodded. “Getting better too.”

 “How’s Jeannie and Kevin doing?” Abigail suddenly asked him, the rabbit’s eyes looking past him into the next room.

 “Their conditions are more or less the same since last night, Nurse Foreman,” Jordan sighed, then motioned to the tigress next to us. “Ms. Jeanne Holt here has been continuing to unconsciously respond to various external stimuli such as touch and temperature,” he cleared his throat while rolling through his notebook, “but we can’t be sure how soon she’ll regain consciousness. All we can do is continue our jobs.”

 Abigail breathed in heavily and turned to place a tender paw on her cheek. Standing back to my footpaws behind her, I couldn’t see the emotions on her muzzle as it looked down at the feline. Suddenly, I felt like an intruder.

 “Can you believe she was sedated at twelve years old?” the rabbit asked us. “Her file said she was placed under for resisting treatment or listening to clinic orderlies…at twelve years old.”

 “I understand your anger, Nurse Foreman, but it isn’t professional to get emotional.”

 “I know, Jordan!” Abigail grumbled, “But I can’t help it, okay?”

 “Listen, if you’re unable to control your emotions on the job, I’m doubtful about having you around here. I don’t care if Johanna thinks you have experience.”

 Her muzzle snapped up. “Excuse me?”

 “I’m not insulting—”

 “Listen here, young man,” the rabbit interrupted, jabbing a finger at his stunned chest. “I may not be a doctor or once had a fancy degree, but I do have experience. And that includes bedridden patients, thank you very much.”

 “Look, I didn’t mean to imply—”

 “While you were frantically writing down notes in med school,” she continued, “the Devout government had me stationed in El Paso, treating the influxes of wounded soldiers returning from the Rocky front. Me and the other nurses each had to do the work of ten in order to help them recuperate. I may be old, but I could still do that if I wanted to. And I won’t let emotional baggage get the best of me. Got it?”

 Watching this nearby, I dared not to say anything. The thick tension alone made me feel less like an intruder and more as an unwelcome fly in the room. Pausing for a few seconds though, the stoic ferret cleared his throat while placing his notebook in his coat pocket.

 “Understood. Sorry for my own unprofessional behavior, Nurse Foreman,” Jordan glanced back to me, “Continue your exercises, Mr. Grimwald. I’ll be reporting to Mrs. Cardinal downstairs if you need me.”

 The ferret looked like he was about to unravel from his façade. I couldn’t blame him, given the schooling the ‘wannabe nurse’ just lectured at him. By the time he exited out the door, dissipating all the tension into awkward silence, Abigail turned and motioned for me to follow.

 “Come with me, sonny. We need to get started on our three patients,” she said. “We need to carefully disrobe and clean them, and this old lady can’t do it all on her own.”

 “Yes, ma’am,” I nodded.

 “I said to call me ‘Abigail’.”

 “Yes-er, sorry Abigail…” my voice trailed on a bit as I saw the other two patients, a tan-furred bloodhound in his early thirties alongside one other tiger, this one with white fur and matted black stripes, motionlessly positioned on one large, queen-sized bed. “So…pardon me for asking, but you used to care for seddies? Back in Kansas City?”

 The elder rabbit checked their pulses and bags (the ones carrying excreted bodily fluids), before answering my question. “…yes and no. Not exactly, but that was a very long time ago. Ancient history. Now, let’s get started.”

 “Yes, ma—Abigail.”

 The day progressed faster than I thought it would. Much of our time was spent inside that room, where I sponge-bathed the three furs and helped massage them per Abigail’s instructions. I didn’t mind it as much until we started with the white tiger, whose muscles and condition weren’t as severe as the tigress or bloodhound. His handsome features and hung member—several inches and very enticing—didn’t help keep the blood pumping to my crotch, not when my fingers were washed the fur along his arms, legs, thighs and toned chest.

 Thank God Abigail didn’t (hopefully) notice my hesitations.

 Besides that, Abigail and I watched some TV between checkups. One lion came in asking if we had any painkillers for a past bullet wound, but Jordan only budged on giving out the prescription after Johanna gave him permission. Other than that, late afternoon came by sooner than I expected. The elder rabbit and I were doing another checkup on the three seddies’ vitals when someone knocked on the door.

 “Who is it?” I asked through the peephole.

 “I’m an Archangel officer here to kill you!”

 Rolling my eyes at the unconvincing voice, I chuckled and opened the door. Lowell laughed while wrapping me in a quick, happy hug, then letting me grip onto my cane again.

 “Good to see you again, Lowell,” my tail wagged happily.

 “Nice stick there, old man,” he joked at my grip. “Soon you’ll be chasing kids down the street with that thing.”

 “Haha.”

 “So has Nurse Abby let you go yet?” he curiously peered past me into the room. “I was wondering if you would, ya know…like to hang out somewhere?”

 I paused in the doorway. “I uh…Uh, maybe…”

 “Hey Abby!” Lowell raised his voice, “Can Adam come with me?”

 Turning back to the elderly rabbit, who was affectionately patting the tigress’ railing, I expected her to refuse. To my surprise though, she smiled at us and replied, “Oh, alright, but if you overwork my assistant, I’ll stop treating your next bullet wound.”

 “Yeah, yeah, I know…” the wolf chuckled. “I’ll be easy on him.”

 Meanwhile, moths were flying in the pit of my stomach.

 “How’re they doing?” he motioned his head. “You know, the seddies?”

 “As much as they can be, I guess…” she exhaled. “But you go on ahead, Adam. I think I can handle everything else on my own.”

 I nodded. “Thanks, Abigail.”

 My attempts to smile faltered briefly when I looked at the unconscious tigress—Jeanne, I think her name was—one final time. Sighing aloud, I quickly changed into my regular shirt and handed it to Abigail (who quickly offered me a wink, much to my surprise), then found the rest of the strength in my legs to join Lowell out into the empty hallway.

 Well, it was empty until a tired, almost-zombie like jaguar in a business suit carried a luggage bag from his hotel room. “Evening.”

 “You too, sir.”

 Lowell and I dawdled a few feet from his rope-like tail as it swept the floor, watching the feline lumber for the elevators. I expected us to join him, until the wolf walked past it towards the other end of the hallway.

 “What’re you—”

 “Up this way,” he opened the door leading to the emergency stairwell. “Now that you’re one of us, you might as well check out the view.”

 His paw clasped onto mine before he pulled me up the flight of stairs. Butterflies circled and twisted inside my stomach from his touch alone. Was I sweating? I needed to calm down.

 Soon we came to the top balcony.

 “W-What’re we doing, Lowell?” my voice echoed in the staircase.

 “I told you, didn’t I?” he smirked, “Just hold on a sec, okay?” Fishing through his pockets, the wolf pulled out a key and unlocked another maintenance access door. This one to presumably get onto the roof. “Okay, let’s see…Ah, here!” He pushed it open, and a gust of dry air blasted us in the muzzles.

 Cautiously, I followed him outside onto the roof, only to freeze where I stood.

 What a view.

 From the roof, I could see everything around me, from the sun descending into the horizon, illuminating a nearby highway and some rows of suburban housing. To the east, a river cut through the intense green of what I presumed to be a large park, while cars drove past and unassuming furs walked by, not knowing criminals and ‘terrorists’ happened to be here. And around the corner, past the haze and intense rays of sunlight, I could see bright dots outlining the silhouette of a familiar city.

 “Chicago…” I murmured, glancing back to the wolf, “We’re in Chicago?” Lowell chuckled and pushed himself off the doorframe, standing beside me as we let everything sink in. Based on his relaxed expression, it probably took him less time.

 My fur bristled at the summer air and sounds of distant birds. I’d been so cooped up in the Maverick or so long, the outside world seemed nonexistent before. Yet here it was.

 “So, do you regularly steal the janitor’s keys and sneak up here?”

 “Hey, I *borrowed* it,” he defended himself.

 “‘Borrowed’ it?” I scoffed, swishing my tail at his hip as I gripped my cane. “Won’t Johanna get angry with you for doing something like that?”

 “I plan to give it back someday, alright?”

 My raised eyebrow made the wolf squirm. “Sure…”

 “Hey, the only things I’ve stolen are virginities.” When he saw my horrified stare, the wolf hastened in adding, “My God, I meant with their permission! You thought—”

 “Well, think carefully about what you’re gonna say next time,” I scolded the wolf for lack of grammar rules. “For a split second, I was half-tempted to toss you off this roof.”

 Lowell smirked. “Won’t be the first person to try.”

 I blinked. “Really?”

 “Swear to the Defiant, it’s true.”

 We laughed shortly before our attention turned to an airplane flying overhead, then to the sun beginning to sink. Before long, I needed to seat myself, so Lowell helped me down and lay down to watch the distance. Besides cars, some loud conversations on the sidewalk and an occasional plane overhead, the only noise up here came from the conditioning units placed on the gravel rooftop. They hummed like artificial hymns.

 “You feel alright?”

 “Hm?” I glanced to Lowell, “Oh, yeah. I’m fine…”

 “You sure?”

 “I’m sure.” My tail curled against our legs, especially since I noticed it becoming cooler. “Look, you’ve been asking me that for the past couple months now. I’m fine, alright?”

 “Sorry…” he murmured.

 Somehow, I relaxed against him without knowing it. Neither of us complained, not as the sun finally dipped out of sight. Suddenly, an alarm sounded from loudspeakers at various light posts. Curfew was now in effect for this city.

 “I don’t know if ya heard yet,” Lowell mumbled, “but we got word about what’s really happening in the world, if you’re interested.” Ears raised upward, I nodded. “Alright, to make a long story short: half of Canada’s now Devout territory, but they managed to keep ‘em from getting to Alaska. Now they’re fighting alongside Republic forces. Newfoundland fell though, and this entire thing’s pissed the fuck out of NATO.”

 “How’re they not invading already?” I asked him.

 “See, here’s the thing: Even with Russia on their side, it won’t help NATO. There’s been rumors going around, but a mole of ours in Ottawa found out something interesting. Apparently, the DSA military’s moved some missiles—ICBMs—to the outskirts of Toronto, Ottawa, Detroit, you name it. Besides those damn churches and conversion camps, the Devout have been busy building launch sites too. There’s already one outside Montreal…”

 It slowly dawned in me. “That means…”

 “Yep…They’re saying, ‘Stay back, or Canadians will die.’”

 My ears became downcast at the idea of life outside the Devout States. I imagined frustrated leaders and their generals wanting to liberate one of their own countries. Unlike Mexico or the Caribbean—all of them now American territories—this crossed a line I never thought deeply about until now. Unlike the other countries, this angered a superpower equal to that of my home country. Would this lead to another world war?

 “Hey,” Lowell nudged my shoulder, “sorry for bumming you out. Here I brought you up here to cheer you up, and I’m depressing you with this shit—”

 “No,” I shook my muzzle. “T-Thanks for telling me, Lowell. It…It reminds me that life exists outside this hotel. And that there exist something to fight for.”

 “Heh, true that. Sometimes, I forget that too.”

 “Anything on Stephen yet?” I asked a moment of silence later.

 “Nah, nothing yet in the clinic systems,” he murmured to me, “but we shouldn’t give up on finding him yet.”

 I tried not to, but I continued imagining where he was, and if I could at least know Stephen was fine. The thought of him being in a comatose state all these months, unable to let go of his attractions, worried me to the bone. It made me want to scream off of this rooftop.

 “You really care about him, huh?” Lowell smiled, “Was he your boyfriend?”

 “Boyfriend?” I gasped in slight embarrassment, then remembered our solitude up here. “Uh, I don’t know…We never called ourselves that. We were more…friends who happened to be boys. His parents moved into our neighborhood years ago, and we…only started being around each other during the summer between semesters at college. I was planning on taking an extra semester to finish classes, but then…yeah.”

 “You went to college?”

 “I do…or did.” Laughing, I twitched my whiskers at the memory of damp dorm rooms and stuffy textbooks from my last classes. “I guess when you’re placed under and charged with deviancy, colleges stop expecting you to return and finish those graduation credits...”

 “I guess so,” Lowell nodded curiously. So what’d you go for, Adam?”

 “A major in psychology and a minor in Devout history.” Now it was his turn to laugh like a hyena, and me to raise an eyebrow at him beside me. “Hey, what’s so funny?”

 “That sounds like a huge waste of time.”

 “I liked what I was going for!” a light growl escaped my throat. “And I take it you didn’t go to college or something?”

 “Oh, I did,” the wolf smirked between chuckles. “I went to the University of Defiant Rebels and earned a double major. The professors loved me.”

 “Really?” I rolled my eyes at him, “And pray tell, what were these majors exactly?”

 “Mayhem and resistance.”

 “Of course.”

 After we were finished sniggering and nudging at each other, the wolf checked the time before he assisted me up. “Come on, let’s head inside before…” He froze his speech.

 “Before what?” I asked. “Before Johanna gets mad that you stole the janitor’s key?”

 “Borrowed, Adam. Borrowed.”

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 The Maverick Hotel’s second floor was where most of Defiant HQ resided. Not too far from the ground to escape down a flight of stairs, and high enough to keep hidden. Since most hotel guests preferred the higher floors as opposed to a room on the lower levels, there rarely came a time where I encountered another fur. If I did, they’d nod curtly to me and Abigail before going on with their lives. It took me a while to get used to this.

 Anyway, Johanna herself lived in a room connected to the ‘War Room’, as she and everyone else called it, where operations were planned for the Defiant. From what I could tell, the doe rarely risked leaving her room (knowledgeable guests would either recognize her or see the man Johanna used to be) unless it was critical, or something caught her curiosity. Meanwhile, soldiers often went to the ‘infirmary room’ opposite of it, having taken the service elevator after sneaking into the hotel from the back.

 For several long days, I learned from Abigail the ins and outs of nursing. Granted, most of the time we focused on the seddies in that room on the top floor, cleaning them and feeding them, but there was always a resistance fighter or two who needed our attention.

 “I told you not to work yourself too hard, Donald,” Abigail groaned at the older lion.

 “Sorry, I’ll ask the curfew squad nicely if they can give me a head start,” he rolled his eyes. I can even get us some coffee and snacks before I get to the drop point.”

 “You do that, dear. Adam, some ice please?”

 Grabbing a package from the nearby fridge, she pressed it to his left shoulder, causing the large feline to bare his teeth. “Easy!” he winced.

 “Sorry, but no. Now you keep this on you, and I’ll see if we have any cream left.” The rabbit hobbled towards the cabinet. As she rummaged for her item, I glanced silently back to Donald while holding onto my cane. Under his fur, especially along his back, swelling bumps could be visibly found.

 “So, you’re the seddie everyone’s been talking about?”

 “Hm?” I blinked at him. “Everyone’s been…talking about me?”

 “Don’t worry about it,” he chuckled lightly, half-wincing as he continued pressing the bag onto his shoulder. “It’s good to have more joining our cause, kid, and I’m glad you’re doing better than how our boys found you. I’m Donald Griffith by the way.”

 “Adam Grimwald, hey,” I shook his free paw and glanced at his wounds. “So what were you doing exactly to get all these bruises? Or is it too classified?”

 “Nah,” Donald shook his nose. “We just do drop-offs between cells, and it’s rare we interact with police. Or Archangels, depending on the risk. Tonight, I accidentally made too much noise while sending a message to a supplier of ours.”

 “Supplier?”

 “For paper,” he clarified, “for our pamphlet operations.”

 “Ah,” I nodded. “For a second I thought you were talking about a drug supplier…”

 “Nah, I do that on Tuesdays,” the lion spoke seriously, then laughed before punching my shoulder lightly. “Come on, lighten up. Not literally, but still…”

 “Alright then,” Abigail spoke up, “just let me put this on you and we’re done.”

 After placing some anti-infection cream and a bandage over his bruises, the rabbit gave Donald a clean bill of health, and told him to ‘stay out of trouble’. Consequently, I knew this was only a fragile promise to keep.

 The lion stood up and opened the door to walk out when a certain grey wolf appeared in the doorframe. “Hey Lowell, how’s the knee?”

 “Ah, it’s been good for a month or so, Don!” the wolf shook paws with him, giving me a glancing smile behind the larger feline. “Anyways, see you around!”

 “Try not to get shot next time, kid.”

 “And you try not to get even uglier,” Lowell smirked before turning to me. “You too busy with Adam at the moment, Abigail?”

 “No, not right now,” she hummed, putting some supplies away. “Why do you ask, hun?”

 “Johanna needs extra paws to help the guys in Truth Committee, but only if you’re not too busy?” he asked me, then corrected himself by asking her, “If *he’s* not too busy?”

 “Oh alright,” she conceded, glancing back at me. “Do you have any art skills, Adam?”

 “A little,” shrugging, I leaned against my cane once more, “but I can only draw flowers or boxes at best. I only got a C+ back in art class…”

 “Was this before or after you decided on that Devout history minor?” Lowell teased me.

 I threw mental daggers at him across the small room. “Are you gonna keep making fun of me for that?”

 “Yes, I am,” he snickered, nonchalantly pointing a thumb by me. “Abby, can you believe he decided to go for something like that?”

 “I thought it might be useful!”

 “Come on, Lowell, don’t harass the poor boy.” Abigail offered a soft smile. “So what he decided to go for something worthless? It doesn’t matter now.”

 Deadpan, I muttered, “Thanks for the confidence.”

 “Wait,” Lowell interjected, “the psych major or the Devout minor? Which one was worthless?”

 Abigail laughed shortly. “Both.”

 “Alright then, I’ll be going now,” I rapidly pulled my scrubs off and placed them on a random countertop. “Thanks, Abigail. See you tomorrow morning.”

 “Don’t be mad, Adam!” the elderly rabbit said, “It isn’t your fault colleges these days are bad. Not many furs go to colleges like they did in my day. Now,” she pinched my cheek, “you try not to get in trouble, and Lowell, you keep him out of it.”

 Walking back out into the hallway, I followed Lowell into a hotel room on the third floor. We remained quiet when a family of furs—two parents and a young buck—squeezed their way into the elevator with us. The young cub noticed my cane, and tried to pull at it, only for his father to pull his wrist away and give an apologetic look.

 “George, you don’t take things without permission. It is a sin.”

 “I’m sorry, Daddy…”

 “Now, now,” the boy’s mother cooed, patting his smaller back. “Sorry for the trouble, boys. He doesn’t know any better.”

 “That’s…fine,” I forced a smile, as did Lowell beside me. “Kids make mistakes…”

 “You better pray extra-long tonight, Georgie,” the father told him.

 “Yes, Daddy…”

 Finally, the doors opened for us, and the wolf and I happily relaxed when they closed again. As we neared the room, I could see the wolf clenching his fists together into his palms, trying to stay focused. It made me wonder what his anger resonated from. I was about to ask when he knocked on a random room’s entrance.

 “The password?”

 “Fuck you, Liv. Let us in,” the wolf groaned when no reply came, hanging his head back and slurring something under his breath.

 “Password?”

 “Ugh,” he groaned again. “‘United we stand, divided we fall’. Now let us in, you b—”

 My nose twitched at the smell of markers and glue sticks when it swung open. A familiar female otter stared at him with eyes sharper than the scissors in her right paw.

 “What was that, Low?” she asked coyly, pointing the scissors at him. “I didn’t hear you entirely that first time.”

 The wolf nervously smirked. “—eautiful young lady.”

 “Thought so,” opening the door, the otter suddenly blinked in disbelief towards my direction. She set the scissors aside. “It’s you, that seddie we rescued. Heh, nice to see you holding up with more than just a cane.”

 “Olivia, right?” I held a paw out. “I never got to thank you for that night.”

 “So, he speaks at last!” she laughed and hugged me, then dragged us by our wrists inside. “Now come on, get in before somebody sees!”

 Before long, the door almost pinched shut on our tails, and the scent of markers fully slammed against my muzzle. Lowell also wrinkled his nose, which I would’ve found adorable if I weren’t distracted by what was inside.

 This wasn’t just one room (designed the same way as mine), but two connected to each other. A long time ago, someone had cut a large hole separating the individual rooms from each other. The hole was large enough for someone to casually walk through, but I couldn’t see at first what was in the other room. This one had stacks and piles upon piles of organized books, what looked to be posters and some supplies that heaped all along the walls. Peering through to the far room, I could see a bed where a few copy machines replaced where the bed would usually go, as well as a large table opposite that held what looked to be a banner.

 As I looked at the stacks of books, it suddenly occurred to me this was a library.

 An illegal library.

 Somewhere, I could hear rapid typing on a keyboard. Or rather *keyboards*, coming from the other room. Stepping forward to peer through, I could see two silhouettes—one sitting on the couch and another farther in the bedroom—at computers. Wiring, machinery and tech haphazardly littered either tables or even the floor, some of them impressive or miniscule. I could catch the scent of raccoon, as well as faint otter underneath the artificial smells.

 “Welcome to the Truth Committee, Adam,” Olivia held her paws up to everything surrounding us. “Here, we design and print before distributing it.”

 “About what?” I glanced around, then added, “Design and print what?”

 “Everything the Revenant Party doesn’t want us to know,” Lowell clicked his canid tongue, “FaithTV’s lies, the President’s lies, war crimes, corruption leaks, what the Western Republic is like, some historical facts, you name it.” The wolf suddenly gave me a lecherous grin. “My favorites involve sex-ed.”

 “Of course,” I earned a small laugh from Olivia nearby.

 “Lucky for his perverted mind, my little bro is designing the gay sex-ed booklets and another batch of pamphlets about the HIV quarantines during the eighties. Lucius will be double-checking them before having us print and put ‘em together.”

 “Oscar and Luc are anal about perfection though,” the wolf grabbed a random book off the piles, “so it might be a while before the geeks give us a go-to.”

 “Would you rather we start over when they’re all printed, Lowell?” a voice called from the other room. “For us, paper doesn’t grow on trees!”

 “Shut up, Luc!” he groaned, opening the book before leaning against a bare wall, “and tell Oscar I’ll give him back that laptop tomorrow night! He can quit messaging me about it!”

 “He says you’ll give it back tomorrow morning, or he’ll change the password for good,” the raccoon replied moments later, then continued typing aggressively. “One minute before they’re ready, by the way.”

 Guiding me into the furthest side of the room, Lowell had me sit down on a corner chair as he and Olivia readied the printing machines. They were ancient, probably older than the hotel itself, though not the Maverick brand, and seeing them hum to life made me wonder how the managers hid their electric bill from the government.

 “So I thought Oscar was a hacker?” I commented to his sister.

 “What?” Olivia laughed as she played with the settings. “Someone can’t have more than one hobby? Or in his case, talent.”

 “I think he overstates his talent, Liv,” Lowell continued reading that book of his nearby. “Anybody can do workshop on a computer.”

 “Anybody can’t do it without having the spy bots see your every move,” she countered, her tail swishing in annoyance. “He and Lucius are the reason you can keep browsing without the Archangels turning you into target practice, dumbass.”

 “Whatever…” he chuckled. “I’m aware of how oh-so-essential their hacking skills are.”

 “Then why don’t you be grateful more to them?”

 “What? I’m here helping out, aren’t I?”

 The otter grew silent when the printer suddenly beeped, and reels of paper started printing out sixty copies. Each one was a copied brochure page with the front titled ‘The Truth About Sexual Health and the LGBTQA Community’.

 “LGBTQA?” I asked Lowell. “What’s that stand for?”

 Before he could speak, Olivia interrupted, “Low, if you say it’s like a BLT sandwich again, I swear I’m gonna kick you in the head!”

 The wolf hesitated, then smirked nervously. “Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer and Asexual. It encompasses people all over the spectrum, not just gays.”

 When we were finished with the front cover (page one included on the backside), we began printing off another sixty copies of page two and three, which I expected to include explicit pictures. Instead, it was text after text about the intricacies of homosexual intercourse.

 Before and during college, I remembered finding similar brochures—with both gay and straight pornography—in the library that were hidden from plain sight, often inside some books furs rarely read. My high school didn’t bother scanning through their library for anything suspicious, since nobody at school read books unless needed, but in the case of my university library, it happened to be the encyclopedia where I found a certain pamphlet. On a whim and with nobody looking, I was searching for the definition of ‘gay’ when I suddenly noticed something placed in the large book.

 A pamphlet titled ‘Chicken Lollipop’, detailing lewd pictures of male wolves, tigers, stallions, etc. There were also detailed drawings of sex positions involving those same males, something that made me flustered on the spot.

 “So what’d you do with it?” Olivia asked after I told them my tale. “Did you bring it home and show it to Stephen on your dates?”

 I shook my muzzle. “Couldn’t risk it, so I kept it in there for safekeeping. Thankfully, the librarian never wondered why I spent several minutes looking at one encyclopedia book every week. It’s probably still there right now…”

 “Awesome,” Lowell cackled across the room, who had stopped reading that book of his. “That is fucking amazing. Whichever cell made those definitely knew it was a good place to hide something. Remind me to suggest that to Johanna next time we see her.”

 “Where do you place these booklets exactly?” I pondered to them.

 “You know, bathrooms, libraries, locker rooms, the usual,” Lowell shrugged, “Wherever a fur can find it, take it and secretly read in the privacy in their own home. Like you did, or rather didn’t in this case.”

 “On top of giving out truthful information,” Olivia added, “it lets them know they’re not the only ones who are…different.”

 “Does it work?” I asked, only to realize how obvious it was when Lowell motioned to me. “I know, I know, it’s just, I don’t know…everyone firmly believes in the government’s word. I did for a while…”

 “When did you start questioning them Devout propaganda?” Lowell asked me after we started printing pages four and five, as Olivia neatly stacked the individual piles next to one another.

 “I guess always—”

 “No, no, no, I’m serious, Adam,” he continued. “Every cub grows up assuming the world is absolutely perfect. They assume all the shit they hear about that’s happening all over the world isn’t happening here. There’s no evil or sin or anything, just suburban perfection. And the Devout States of America is the greatest, most holy country on the planet.” He paused. “When did you first begin to question that?”

 My thoughts turned to when I was twelve or thirteen, and I heard about how the Immoral States allowed gay refugees (or deviant traitors as they were called in church). Or when I first masturbated to the image of a male classmate in his drawers, despite the shame. Or maybe the time I first listened to Johanna Cardinal’s podcast, particularly when she mentioned how attractions to the same gender weren’t wrong or something to be tried for.

 “I’m…not sure,” I said truthfully. “Then again, I guess my generation isn’t as indoctrinated as people think.”

 Lowell laughed. “Maybe, but that’s why we fight anyway. Someone has to get the truth out to those who’re still brainwashed.”

 “Alright, boys, let’s keep working on this,” Olivia spoke. “We don’t have all night.”

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 For the next few hours, we worked on putting together the pamphlets, occasionally discussing the contents within. We folded them, organized them and then started working on the next batch. Soon we were finished and delved into a long discussion about the Western Republic, specifically things I didn’t even know about it prior to joining the Defiant.

 “Wait, wait, you can get *married* over there?” I asked incredulously, “Like, as in *wedded* *together* in a church? In front of your family and a certified priest?”

 “Yep,” Lowell nodded with the same amount of enthusiasm. “It’s been that way since 2009, and it’s even legal in the U.K., Ireland, Germany…”

 “Though it’s only legal in California at the moment,” Olivia added. “I heard Washington and Hawaii are considering too for next year’s vote.”

 “Wow…” I sat in my chair flabbergasted. “That’s incredible.”

 “It is,” Lowell beamed proudly. “Makes me want to move there when we’re all done, maybe marry and start a family. I’d love to see some of the things over there for myself.”

 “I want to move to Switzerland someday…” Olivia mused as she hovered over the printer. “They say the mountains and skiing resorts are to die for there, and there’s no such thing as a chocolate shortage.”

 “I want to visit Korea someday!” Lucius spoke up around the corner.

 “South America,” another voice, whom I’d soon realize belonged to Oscar, called to us through the thin walls. “Of course, maybe only for a small trip. I hate humid weather.”

 “You’re an otter, dumbass!” Lowell scoffed. “You’re supposed to like humid weather!”

 “Leave him alone, Low!” Olivia fumed, her eyebrows twitching slightly. “Lucius, Oscar, are we ready with the next batch yet? I’m sick of the smell in here!”

 “Go ahead, I just sent it.”

 “Get an air freshener then,” the wolf scoffed again. When Olivia glared at him, he backed away from the wall, paws raised while he held that book. “Jeez, I was joking, Liv…”

 Eventually, we finished with enough copies to spread all over Chicago. Soon, those who find them would learn the truths behind gay sex, how it didn’t give you AIDs, and what really happened during the quarantine camps from thirty years ago. Reading them alone made my fur rise with anger, especially when it conflicted with information I’d questioned on occasion in the past. Lucius suggested I take a couple to read for myself sometime, which I did, and stuffed them in my pants pocket before joining Lowell to our rooms upstairs. Olivia said she’d remain behind to take care of Oscar.

 Lowell noticed my confusion when he pressed the up button. “Oscar’s crippled from the waist down. Been that way since birth. They won’t talk about it if you ask, but not long after Olivia was born, Devout America was born too, and their parents were among the first resistance cells to form…”

 “You’re kidding?” We stepped inside and the elevator door shut itself.

 “I swear on it,” the wolf half-smiled. “Somehow, they found Johanna—or she found them. Who knows?—and they dropped out of society to hide in a Maverick to raise Olivia and her brother in secret. They died sometime before I came here.”

 My tail quick wagging. “Oh…that’s terrible. Does Olivia—”

 “She never mentions. She and Johanna only say they were killed by Archangels.”

 An awkward silence descended on us in the metal box.

 As I stepped off the elevator and headed toward my room, the wolf nudged my shoulder.

 “Hey, uh…” he coughed, “I have a couple items I want to show you in my room. I think you’ll find them interesting, if you want to?”

 “Sure!” I gripped my cane and hobbled over to him. “As long as they’re not ‘borrowed’.”

 “Heh, they are,” Lowell swiped his card, and a green light shone on the door handle.

 The Maverick’s designer either preferred identical rooms or was lazy, but I didn’t care. Sitting down at the familiar couch, I immediately noticed the lack of a Jesus portrait above the TV, as well as an abundance of dark carpet stains by the fridge. When Lowell saw me staring at it, the timber wolf muttered something about reopening stitches a while ago.

 “Alright, come in here…”

 Lowell guided me into the far-back bedroom, where books and some random trinkets Lay neatly placed on the side counter. Most likely by one of the housekeepers. And on the small desk rested a laptop Lowell readily snatched up.

 “So what was that book you were reading earlier?” I asked after remembering. “It didn’t have any words on the cover.”

 “Oh, it’s nothing. Just some romance novel I’d been reading. Anyway,” the wolf sat beside on the bed and opened the laptop, “check this shit out!”

 Lowell clicked onto an Internet tab that led to Pious, the nation’s #1 most popular search engine. The logo depicted a canine angel carrying a sword in one paw and a crown of thorns in the other, with a cross embedded into its forehead while the wings spread to the edges of the search bar. Deuteronomy 6:5 was etched into the blade of the sword: ‘And thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might’.

 Lowell typed into the search engine, “Fuck Devout America,” and clicked on ‘search’.

 “What the hell are you doing?!” I shrieked before Lowell laughed. “Are you insane?! The spy bots, they’ll see what you wrote—”

 “Relax, they won’t. The surveillance bots are locked out of the ISP system,” he explained. “Thanks to the nerds, we can search for whatever we want without a bot spying on us, isn’t that great?”

 I stared at him and then the screen. Ever since some documents were illegally leaked onto the Internet several years back, it was common knowledge how the government used surveillance (spy) bots to monitor everyone. According to Olivia, due to the risks involved, this was why undermining information and pornography were printed instead of digital. The moment somebody downloaded a file onto their computer, it could be catalogued by a hidden bot and reported.

 To what extent these bots could see on a screen died with the whistleblower, so nobody searched for something online without rechecking the wording once or twice. Everyone was paranoid typing the wrong word without context could earn them a visit from Archangels, and I remembered Dad having a long talk with me about them. To say I complied would be an understatement, but now that barrier was gone here.

 “Check this out: ‘President Nessen is a bitch.’” Click.

 “Oh, come on…” I snickered.

 50,000 searches, all of them unconnected.

 “You type something in now,” the wolf handed me the computer. “Go ahead, it won’t bite.”

 Sighing at first, I thought about it before typing in something.

 “‘Naked male’? Well,” he snickered childishly, “aren’t you the true anarchist? But all the pics you’re seeing now are softcore compared to the stuff they have on the Republic’s Internet.”

 I widened my eyes. “Can we—”

 “Nope, we can’t sadly…The Devout’s firewall keeps information like that from coming to computers here. You can search for hot, sweaty homosexual sex all you want, but you’ll only get links about deviants raided by the police and legislature mumbo-jumbo banning it.”

 My tail flicked at the bedsheets in disappointment.

 “But,” he licked his lips before fishing something from the nearby drawer, “they do smuggle us USBs that have photos and videos on ‘em, like this.”

 Lowell lifted up a flash drive to me that had some numbers etched into the metal, then inserted it into the laptop. Dragging the arrow onto the folders in the drive, he clicked on a video file titled ‘0059’ that popped up to reveal the interior of a bedroom. At first, I was confused what this was leading to, until two shirtless, muscular felines—a leopard and jaguar—in pairs of tight blue jeans walked into frame from the right corner.

 Their kiss caused a gasp to escape my lips.

 “Mmm,” Lowell panted next to me, “Tobias and Dyson are two of my favorite porn stars from the Western Republic. They’re also married to each other, believe it or not…”

 On the screen, the two felines flexed and devoured each other’s tongues before stripping their jeans away, revealing two endowed members. They were the largest ones I’d ever seen in my life, and the sight alone caused all the blood to rush to my cheeks. And a certain part of my own crotch, as I watched.

 I started rubbing myself absentmindedly at some point. It was only when I heard panting did I realize Lowell was sitting right beside me, and I pulled it away in shame.

 “No need to act like that, Adam,” he huffed, eyes still trained on the action, “Nobody can blame you for it. They’re both fucking hot!”

 I partially laughed.

 “Come on, do what you gotta do, man,” the wolf unzipped his fly. “I’ll join too…”

 “O-O-Okay…” I stammered with twitching whiskers, my ears now feeling like they were on fire. Soon, all resistance fell and I fished for my dick out of these constricting pants. “O-Oh…Mfh. Oh, fuck…Oh yeah, that’s…wow…”

 I refocused on the two stars in the video, with the jaguar moaning and writhing underneath the leopard’s pounding thrusts. However, my eyes couldn’t be distracted enough from glimpsing at Lowell. More specifically, the hardening manhood Lowell’s fingers were eagerly stroking. Soon, I was stroking my cock too.

 This…sensation hadn’t been felt in so long. The last time me and Stephen ever released our inhibitions, from jerking together or each other, it led to us being caught and me imprisoned. In that moment though, the horrible memory burned away to be replaced with something more wonderful. Something more primal and expressly satisfying. The ability to simply admire another male’s form without retribution felt like breathing outside a drafty room, then appreciating all the air in your lungs.

 Our pants and whimpers started growing stronger, and the pressure started to build further. Tobias and Dyson in the video had already begun nearing their climax when a radio crackle suddenly interrupted our mesmerized staring.

 “Ugh, fucking hell, it’s my radio. I’ll get it,” Lowell jumped off and snatched it from a counter opposite the bedroom. He tuned it to his earpiece and barked, “What is it? It better be important!”

 I’d forgotten all about the laptop screen and instead watched the wolf’s auburn eyes grow sharper and serious. But also hopeful. “Is she alright? Mmmm…That’s good, that’s good. Thanks for telling me, I’ll get him up right away, Abigail!”

 “What’s wrong, Lowell?” I asked.

 “You need to get to the seddies’ rooms pronto, now! One of ‘em is awake!”