Dinner was tense and deadly quiet most of the time, with Mary and I exchanging small talk between bites of dinner. Mostly, it involved complementing her cooking. Chunks of ham, broccoli and other spices were mixed gradually in, giving each of our portions a unique taste in flavor. Mary mentioned how her mother, widowed shortly after her birth, married a herbivorous rabbit to raise them, and she mixed vegetables and meat in the food to help him feel included.

Otherwise, she wouldn’t say anything about her family.

“Is there anything Mary can get you two?” Kevin asked us midway through the meal. “We got some ketchup, or do you need drinks?”

I shook my muzzle that I was good, but Lowell had alcohol on the mind.

“Actually, yes,” he chirped, looking around, “Do you got any liquor around here?”

“We don’t have that high amount of alcohol around here,” Kevin sighed, like he expected “Thanks to the United Nations and NATO, countries had to stop exporting liquor to the Devout States. We can only make our own now, and even those are expensive for each bottle…”

“Surely you got some vodka though, right?” Lowell pondered to them, “What about rum? Brandy? Whiskey? Even tequila?”

“Have you even heard how much Mexican State tequila costs?” Mary chuckled, shaking her head and eating another bite off her plate. “I heard from my book club that it costs almost sixty-two dollars for a single bottle of gin at J-Mart.”

“Don’t even get us started on the price of tonic…” Kevin said between chews. “If you need to get drunk so badly, then go suck down all the beer.”

Lowell jokingly shrugged. “If you wish.”

“Mary, can you go get him some beers then?” the cougar asked. I couldn’t help but notice how the wolf rolled his eyes, and before the mountain lioness could willingly get up, my wolf comrade beat her to the punch and set his utensils aside.

“Don’t mind, but I can get it myself,” Lowell rose from his seat. “We’re already asking a lot from you and your husband, Mary. Mind pointing where the beer is though?”

He came back minutes later from the garage with two cans in his paw and a content smile. Kevin retained some annoyance at the wolf’s comment. An hour later, Lowell and Kevin retreated to the study while I stayed behind to help Mary with the dishes. She told me I didn’t have to, but I wanted to.

While drying a plate, I cleared my throat and asked, “Mrs. Lange?”

“Yes, sonny?” she hummed between scrubbing and cleaning. “Is there something on your mind?”

“Uh,” my voice wavered on the subject, and my tail curled along my leg protectively. Yet I finally managed to mutter out, “Why do you support us? You know…me and Ben’s friends?”

Mary paused her cleaning and stared out the window. The way she stood there, having temporarily forgotten the dish washing and instead looking out into the twilit yard, reminded me of times whenever my mother spent short amounts of time deep in her own thoughts. Except her eyes seemed sad yet hopeful, with Mary’s tail curling in visible melancholy.

“Daniel…” she murmured softly, then smiled wide. “It’s for Daniel and Katherine’s sakes.”

My ears perked up. “Are they your kids?”

“Was. Daniel was our son. He’d be about your wolf friend’s age by now.” She sighed, “Anyway, keep going. These dishes can’t stay dirty forever.”

I wouldn’t fully understood the vagueness behind her words until after we were finished cleaning, and I walked into the splendor family room. God, seeing how expensive everything looked made me thankful for being able to eat full meals growing up.

Part of me wondered why I hadn’t noticed it before, but the mantle over the fireplace had more than just family photos (one of them showing Kevin, Mary, a taller son and a young teenage daughter) and random nick-knacks. On the right side sat a picture frame of a mountain lion in military uniform, smiling proudly just in time for the camera shot. Beside the frame also rested a triangular glass display case of a folded red, white and blue flag. The Devout States flag, complete with the white cross amidst stars and stripes.

The case’s plaque read: *Daniel W. Lange, Private First Class. Devout States Army.*

When Mary’s footsteps could be heard coming into the family room, I pretended to stare down at the fireplace. She turned on the TV nearby and tuned to a FaithTV segment about arrests in annexed Canadian territories, and whether she genuinely believed in the broadcast’s version of the truth, I couldn’t tell. Instead of sitting beside her on the couch and watching it with her, I decided to go find Lowell.

“You have a good night later, Steve, alright?” Mary spoke up after lowering the TV’s volume. Her reluctant, hopeful smile didn’t match her sad eyes looking at me. “From what I hear, you and your friend have a big day tomorrow. So please be safe? And please make things hard for them, okay?”

I nodded, fully understanding the meaning behind ‘them’. Better than anyone else.

“Sure thing, ma’am.”

“Please, it’s Mary or Mrs. Lange,” she chuckled shortly. “Good night, sonny.”

Walking around the corner, I came to the hallway leading into the study room. Through the door I could make out a muffled voice and opened it before entering inside. Lowell stood pacing while Kevin distracted himself with paperwork on his desk.

“—we do now? Say what you will about Archangels, they’re dumb but they’re not stupid long-term…And what if we have one of ‘em tailing us? If they see me and A—Steve, I mean, as we’re walking in and outta the house after we do the jobs each time we’re out, they’ll get suspicious…Are you sure? Okay…Okay, I’ll tell ‘em…Thanks, Johanna…You too…. Talk to you later…” The wolf suddenly laughed and tapped his knee. “Yeah, I’m sure that’ll happen when I become King of England, J!”

Lowell clicked his phone off and sighed in amusement.

“So?” Kevin spoke up from his desk, sounding half-tired. “What did your boss say?”

“Yeah,” I asked the wolf. “Is the mission still on?”

“She wants us to continue, and stay vigilant as always,” he explained after a moment of collecting himself before turning to the older feline, “but she’ll respect your wishes and have this be the last time you ever host us. Consider your debt to us paid off.”

“You mean that?” Kevin stood up. “Will Kat still be safe in the Deviant States?”

Lowell smirked. “So long as the *Western Republic* keeps on fighting, she’ll be safe. I promise.”

“How can you be sure about that?” the cougar countered.

“Because I’m sure.” The wolf fur tossed his phone into his pocket and glanced over to me. “You ready to go to bed, Steve? We’ll need to get up earlier than usual for tomorrow.”

“Alright, Benjamin…” I nodded firmly. “And thank you for your hospitality Mr. Lange.”

“No problem,” the cougar mumbled. “No problem.”

Kevin Lange escorted us upstairs to a bedroom on the second floor of the townhouse. I couldn’t hide my enjoyment at the fact Lowell carried his second can of beer with him, despite our host’s protests. In the end, they managed to find a compromise thanks to the existence of drink coasters and the wolf’s inability to tolerate spilled alcohol.

The guest bedroom was nothing special at first glance. Four walls, a room, a closet and two beds facing the door. Mary had earlier placed our backpacks by our beds, and as we walked into the room, Kevin commented something that made my blood run cold.

“Have a good night, and don’t do anything unnatural in here under my roof. I’ll know.”

Lowell must’ve sensed my immediate fear, because he then glared at the feline and grumbled, “Sure. We won’t. Good night.” And he managed to close the door without slamming it into our host’s face. “Tch…elitist Devout asshole.”

He went to taking a swig of his beer can like it was nothing, but my thoughts remained on Kevin’s comment. He knew about Lowell’s sexuality? Did this mean he knew about mine as well? Was he semi-seriously earlier today about reporting us to the Archangels? Or was I simply reading too much into that sick joke? Did Mary know this whole time—

“Adam.”

I calmed down when I felt a wolfish paw rest on my left shoulder.

“Hey, you okay?” Lowell murmured to me. Shrugging, I held onto that paw with one of mine. “Don’t let what he said get to you. The guy may still be religious and misogynistic, telling us not to do anything unnatural or making Mary go get us shit during dinner, but he won’t do anything stupid like turning us in.”

My ears perked up. “How do you know?”

“He owes us for getting their daughter out of here,” the wolf answered. “Their son died during a skirmish along the Republic-Devout front about six years ago, and their daughter got herself pregnant on accident. And you can guess what would’ve happened to her and the lion guy she was dating.”

I could. Premarital sex meant losing some rights as a Devout citizen. And while shotgun weddings weren’t uncommon in the past, the government had clamped down on rushed marriages in order to weed out illegal pregnancies.

“You won’t believe this, but unlike the other pregnant ladies we’ve smuggled out of this country, the lion freaking loved her. He adored her and was willing to risk his life to help raise their cub together. Even Kevin Lange of all furs approved of their relationship but knew the consequences. So, they managed to contact us and let us help them get the kids to Canada and then to the Western Republic.”

“That’s…quite romantic…” I smiled. “Who knew he was a good father?”

“He’s an asshole, but he does care for his family’s safety, I’ll give him that,” Lowell grinned and patted my back. “Now let’s get to sleep. We’ve got a big day tomorrow…”

“Alright,” I wagged my tail against the bed. “Good night, Low.”

Part of me figured he was implying we were going to be sleeping on the separate beds, but I was mistaken. Just as I started peeling away the left bed’s blanket, Lowell cleared his throat for my attention, and I turned to see him stripped to a pair of black-checkered boxers. He slipped easily under the blanket without losing eye contact with me.

“If you don’t want a wolf pillow to keep you warm, that’s fine with me…” he shrugged playfully. “Come on, we don’t have to do anything…”

I relented in the end and let Lowell wrap his arms around me, our tails curled together and a soft blanket draped over us on the bed. Who could blame my reluctance earlier? In the end though, I got myself a big, hulking wolf pillow to keep me warm in the dark room—to hold me and comfort me as I dreamed.

“I like doing this. I like holding you like this.” He whispered into my ear, “It reminds me that I can still do this, and they haven’t taken that ability, that right, away from me yet. I…I know it’s hard to explain, but—”

“I think I know what you mean.” Lowering my voice down to a whisper too, I could feel my tail curling with his legs and mine. And his own, fluffier tail enveloping around us under the sheets. “Small things like this, holding a person you care about, reminds you things aren’t terrible, and they can be better…right?”

“Um, yeah, you’re right.” Lowell cleared his throat, and I could spot a toothy smile in the darkness of the guestroom. “It feels like…the world out there is a nightmare, and you’re…”

“A dream?” I joked.

“…reality, actually.” The wolf exhaled into my neck, making me shiver and melt further into his arms. “True reality.” Lowell grew silent. “The way the Devout talk about how things are great and the world is theirs to control, after a while it starts to feel like truth is only an illusion. They talk like what you and me are attracted to is abnormal and unnatural to nature, but being close to you, touching you earlier, comforting you…I can’t ever think of something more natural or normal to me in this damned world. To me, when we’re alone…it feels like the world is real, and the outside world is…is fiction.”

My ears twitched. “…are you sure *you* didn’t go to college for philosophy too?”

Lowell snickered, responding to my quip by nibbling my neck in a mock-attack. If the two furs hosting us weren’t in the same house, or maybe even the same floor, I probably would’ve been bolder that night…except we would be busy the following day, and I eventually started drifting off to sleep in that bed; his arms around me, my tail around him, both of us close together in our combined warmth.

“Lowell?”

“Hmm?”

“One last question: Adam and Steve, was that nickname deliberate?”

Laughter grumbled from the back of the wolf’s throat. “Maybe?”

Groaning, I muttered, “Knew it.”

“Sorry, I couldn’t resist.”

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We woke up precisely after 4:00 am the next morning, keeping quiet as we dressed ourselves into regular clothes—Lowell and I in denim shorts and plain grey t-shirts while the wolf decided on bringing his black hooded jacket. He didn’t care about how hot the weather could be, insisting me that he’d be sure to drink plenty of water, and how this was his lucky jacket. In his words, “This baby’s been the reason I’ve looked inconspicuous in a crowd.”

“But in the middle of summer?” I asked him at a low volume. “Won’t you stand out even more?”

“Not if it’s gonna be cloudy with a chance or rain today,” he tossed me another hooded jacket, this one being greyer. “Trust me, it’ll help us stand out less in a crowd, especially with cameras around.”

Gripping our backpacks and nerves, we quietly walked down the stairway (apparently Kevin and Mary were heavy sleepers) until we walked out the townhouse’s back door. We had an hour and a half until sunrise, which gave us plenty of time to sneak out and witness Lincoln Park spring to life. We snatched a bus ride at the earliest time after wandering around for half an hour or so. Lowell wanted to make sure we weren’t being followed beforehand, and from what he observed amongst the few other pedestrians walking around this early, we were in the clear.

This was the first time I ever used public transportation. I didn’t even know riders had to pay to get on until Lowell tossed the bus driver some cash, or even how packed the vehicle grew until we got closer to downtown Chicago. Many furs sat sleeping, reading off their phones or listening to music, barely even looking at each other or acknowledging movement near them.

At last though, we arrived in River North thirty or forty minutes later.

And true to the wolf’s prediction, rainclouds covered the sky in a thin veil of gray.

“Welcome to Downtown Chicago, Adam!” Lowell beamed as we stepped off onto a sidewalk. He ecstatically pointed at the various high-rises and office buildings surrounding us, as well as the Old Willis Tower a couple miles down the street. “Pretty cool, huh?”

Rolling my eyes at the smug wolf, I replied, “Not the first time I’ve been here, Low.”

“Yeah, but doesn’t it feel good?” he asked me, standing close as we navigated the crowded, hive-minded street, “Being around other furs instead of being cooped up in a room?”

I glanced around and took in the sights and sounds of public life. My whiskers twitched at the smell of coffee being served nearby, as well as the several homeless furs lined up along the sidewalk of an unemployment office, despite it being closed that particular day. Not to mention a few brick walls here and there covered up with white paint. No doubt censoring something somebody decided to say through the art of graffiti.

“…yeah,” a small smile formed on my lips. “Yeah, it is good to be out here.”

We made our way through town and across the river bridge as we inched closer into the Loop. As always, Downtown Chicago remained active despite the gloomy weather hovering above them. This included several police-operated drones watching over everyone in the air. This didn’t deter the busy shoppers, businessmen or tourists on the grounds, except for Lowell and especially me. Yet before I could have the chance to worry if they could recognize me, the wolf comforted me by gripping my paw for only an eternal second. Just long enough for nobody to notice right away. It helped.

The first stop in our mission was at the Art Center of Chicago. My objective? A resistance member from the other Defiant cell in Illinois was inside with vital information Johanna needed for us, as did we. Lowell would stand guard at a distance in case anything went wrong while I found our fellow ally somewhere in the art museum. We didn’t get much knowledge of what species he would be, but Johanna had informed us he’d be in front of a certain painting at 10:00 and give me a coded phrase: “God is in every work of art.”

“Seems nebulous to me…” Lowell said to me in a hushed tone.

I shrugged in agreement. “It can’t be helped though.”

“Now, I’ll be right behind you, okay?” he told me amidst the medium volume of those going in and out of the museum entrance. “You got this, A!”

“I’ve always wanted a cheerleader,” I joked, earning myself a pouting but nodding wolf.

We paid our fares separately, in cash no less. After going up a flight of granite stairs to the second level, I went down a couple corridors deep inside the building. I could feel Lowell’s presence behind me. He’d always maintain a distance that didn’t leave me out of his sight nor have us close enough for us to seem suspicious. I needed to seem like any other bored college graduate (ha!) with a slight interest in art.

Many of the framed canvases, landscape paintings and intricate statues were indeed beautiful. Some of them brought be back to when my folks brought me on Dad’s occasional trips to Chicago, and Mom escorted us between the city’s landmarks. On any other given day, I would’ve loved visiting with Lowell to enjoy touring the Art Center, pretending we were merely citizens instead of rebels.

Perhaps that possibility could become reality, one day.

The painting hung from a wall in the middle of a second-floor room. Conveniently, a small bench for visitors happened to be placed directly in front of it, and nobody paid any attention to what was otherwise a familiar work of art. The canvas depicted the glass window of a quaint diner in the middle of the night. No other furs were present outside. Inside sat three furs—a wolf in a fedora with his tail turned to the window, another canine in a suit and what I presumed to be his girlfriend in a bright red dress—as well as a busboy in a white cap behind the diner’s counter.

“Nighthawks.”

Surprised, I glanced to find a red she-wolf clothed in a conservative dress shirt and casual sneakers. Her mature body and youthful appearance suggested she had to be a few years older than Lowell. Maybe even in her mid-thirties. She could’ve easily passed for a substitute teacher in either middle school or elementary.

“It’s called ‘Nighthawks’…” she told me, then asked, “Mind if I sit here?”

I glanced around. “S-Sure…ma’am.”

She sat down to my right, sighing as she stared with me at the painting.

Lowell had to be as confused as I was.

“It’s a nice painting, isn’t it?” the she-wolf pondered in a low voice. “From what I hear, the artist liked to collaborate with his wife whenever he plans a work of art. She’d suggest additions, ways to make it more fleshed out…makes me wish more artists were open to collaborating…”

“It is nice to look at,” I admitted after a moment of careful thought.

“Enjoy this as much as you can.” The she-wolf sighed, then said, “You’d be surprised how many works of art disappear over the years. The Moral Committee reviews the history and contexts behind everything submitted here. One sculpture was destroyed because of the figure’s nudity. A painting my folks liked called ‘Day of the God’ disappeared off the walls one day after the Committee discovered the ‘God’ in the title wasn’t referring to either Abrahamic religion.”

She became silent when a security guard passed us. Soon as he disappeared down the hallway, I glanced back to the she-wolf in the dress shirt, and she offered me a hidden smirk.

“To me though,” she spoke, “God is in every work of art.”

*She’s the cell member?* I asked myself, feeling very surprised and slightly cautious. *This she-wolf doesn’t seem like an Archangel…*

“As…As is the…the t-truth around us…” I said my code. She nodded back.

“Surprised I’m a girl, eh?” she then chuckled, pulling me from my thoughts.

I nodded hesitantly, flicking my tail at my ankles under the bench.

“You should examine your personal biases, my friend,” the she-wolf smiled before staring back at the oil painting again. Her voice then lowered to a simple hush again, “When I shake your paw, we trade, okay?”

I subtly nodded again, placing my paw into my pocket for the flash drive, to which she stood up and beamed. “Anyway, I gotta take off, but it was wonderful talking to you about art!”

“Same to you,” we shook, our fingers grabbing onto the flash drive in the other’s paw. Fast enough for nobody paying close attention to see. Then again, the only witnesses of this exchange were listening to a bored tour guide across the hall. “God bless you, ma’am…”

“God bless you too.” The she-wolf chirped. “And do please tell Lowell over there he can jump off a bridge.”

Whether it be the Lord’s will or my own, I managed to not have my jaw drop to the floor, and, pocketing the traded flash drive, I went the opposite direction of the she-wolf, though not before seeing ‘Nighthawks’ once more.

Maybe someday, indeed.

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“What can I do you for, young man?”

“Can you tell me where your computers are?” I asked the library clerk, a female Labrador, behind the circulation desk in the building lobby, “I uh, need to print something…”

She pointed to the staircase. “…up to the third floor in the center of the room. Can’t miss it if you were blind. You don’t need to pay or have a library card to use them, but the makerspace is closed indefinitely.”

“Yes, ma’am. Thank you, ma’am!” Gripping my backpack for dear life, I started walking in that direction. “God bless you.”

“And God bless America,” she mumbled before returning to her job.

Harold Washington Library was a beautiful ten-story building made from red brick, grand windows, and a rooftop garden penthouse on the top floor. On any other day, I would’ve loved to go on a guided tour and learn about the history of such a magnificent piece of Chicago architecture, but I grew nervous with each step I made to the third floor. On top of Lowell not being behind me like the last time, I was fully aware of the security guards at the entrance of each floor of the library.

The Children’s Section on the second floor was my first stop. I entered without looking twice at the feline guard, arriving in a world of random colors and bright posters encouraging youth to read books.

The problem?

Most of the low-lying shelves lay barren and replaced with taped posters. Some contained random biblical verses while others encouraged children that God or Jesus loved them. One play area was littered with Legos, several popular Bible Boy and Bible Squad action figures (thinking that aloud made me question why the fuck I loved playing with them as a cub…) as well as randomly incomplete puzzles around the carpeted floor. Books that did remain were spread out across the shelves, many of which were just simplified Bible stories or Devout propaganda.

Thankfully, there weren’t too many furs inside the room. The largest group was surrounded by an energetic hare reciting the life story of Joseph to a group of elementary schoolers in the corner of the room. None of them noticed me searching for a picture book about the story of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. Nor did they see me subtly placing four informational pamphlets inside for any rebellious families in the Chicago area to find, provided they were aware of such traitorous knowledge.

I did this with other books throughout the building. Five in total to be exact, any of which could be found between various pages. Sexual education pamphlets were placed in the teen romance (in the Devout States, teen romances fell into two categories: tragic horror stories of girls foolishly falling for a rebel only to endure suffering and death, or saccharine stories of soldiers and their wives enduring their separation for God and country) section, and illegal knowledge about the Western Republic could be found in books under ‘History’ while bookmarks containing the names of executed Defiant members were mixed into piles of other bookmarks. Lastly, printed photos containing straight and homosexual pornography were hidden in the long-unused thesauruses and dictionaries of Chicago’s public library. However, I had a feeling they were still used for less-than-pure purposes.

My final objective of the day was as anticlimactic as could be. I simply went to one of the public computers, uploaded the malware and virus files, did a few searches on Pious and left Harold Washington swiftly. By next morning, not only would librarians and technicians be locked out of the system, but every screen throughout the building would project a message for everyone inside to see:

**Knowledge sets you free. Devout America does not.**

**Resist and fight for your right to think. Join the Defiant!**

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Lowell rendezvoused with me at our checkpoint, a quaint café that served really good food, and just so happened to have few customers.

“I…I can’t believe I did that…”

“You sure did it!” the wolf laughed in our corner booth. “You did it!”

“Were you afraid?”

“No, I was terrified!” my ears fell. “I thought I’d be a goner any minute…”

The wolf wagged his tail against my leg under the table. “But you aren’t, Adam!”

“Couldn’t have done it without your confidence, Low.” I couldn’t prevent myself from smiling like a massive idiot. I swear, the wolf could see my teeth brightly. “You…You really helped me feel like I could do this…and I did!”

My grin and wagging tail seemed to infect Lowell. “Johanna’d be so proud, Adam.”

“You think so?”

“I know so!” he chirped. “You may be a noob, but you’re gonna make a damn good *office worker*, my friend.”

Lost for a moment at what he said, I didn’t realize until someone coughed beside me. I glanced to see a foxy waitress tapping her footpaw while carrying a tray of our food.

“Oh, uh sorry!” I moved my elbows out of the way.

“Enjoy your lunch, boys,” the vixen jovially told us. “God bless you.”

Lowell and I mumbled a ‘And bless Devout America’ before devouring our sandwiches.

“So who was that she-wolf earlier? At the museum. How do you know her?”

“Oh, Nancy?” he paused, then smirked while cowing down on his sandwich. “An old colleague, and let’s just say she and I have bad blood. Or at least, she has bad blood with me.”

“I’d say I’m surprised, but then again, this is you.” I laughed while wiping some mustard off my whiskers, “There’s probably not one fur back at the hotel that you haven’t angered.”

“Since when did you get this sassy attitude?” he asked me quizzically.

My ears perked at the wolf. “Sassy attitude? I’m only stating the obvious, Low.”

When nobody was looking, the wolf flashed a wink towards me across our table.

“I never said it was a bad quality. And I meant what I said earlier.”

My tail could not resist wagging any more. Over the course of several hours, not only did I become a traitor by associating with the Defiant, our country’s enemies, but I executed espionage, distributed illegal pamphlets, uploaded a virus onto a government-owned public computer system, spread sexually immoral content, committed ‘terrorism’, treason and sedition.

Officially, I was now a Defiant. And damned proud of it.