Midnight came and went, yet nobody wanted to go to sleep. I couldn’t sleep, and neither could a stoic Johanna or the usually chipper Olivia at the table. Not even Jordan felt the need to relinquish his sixth cup of coffee. So, I asked permission to return to my suite.

“I see no problem in that.” Johanna exhaled under her breath, tiredly leaning into a chair without looking away from Olivia, still at the screen. She waved me away, “You get some sleep then. We’ll keep you informed of any new developments, Adam.”

After returning to the hotel room, the keycard indenting into the skin of my frustrated paw, I locked the door behind me. Any thoughts of traveling to the empty bed lay dormant on my easily distracted mind. The call for a good night’s sleep seemed more distant than normally found at that hour. Instead of heavy eyelids, they were crusted wide open and blinked attentively to the tiniest sounds, whether it be the way my neurotic tail swished against the carpeting, or a muffled sound coming from another nearby room. Probably a creaking bed, maybe even a flushing toilet, which then coincided with a door opening or closing shut. Whatever noises a hotel occupant made at 2:00 in the morning. They got to the point where I turned off the walkie talkie beside my bed when the occasional conversation or white static became unbearable.

My thoughts still circled from Hector, Blu, the captured Stephen, then back to Mom, Dad, and Lowell (and our fallen comrade Donald, I tried not to contemplate). The latter wouldn’t want me to torture myself by worrying, so I opted for a different, less painful thing to do when wracked with insomnia: watching the news.

Click.

“—scheduled to partially reopen for civilians as early as March.” Said the wolfish anchorwoman as footage showed cement trucks and construction crew on one of the airport’s destroyed runways. “Moses International’s Commissioner James Lee says repairs to the extensive damage will take longer than expected, but with round-the-clock effort from contracted and volunteer workers, domestic flights will—”

Click.

“—local news report, a middle-aged tabby couple were the victims of what might have been a home invasion. Police and Archangels on the scene refused comment at this time, and witnesses have not come forward as to the nature of—”

Click.

“—the 1970s were a depraved decade, looking back at official records and preserved film footage.” Said an older tiger in a business suit, the bottom text describing him as a Chicago historian/professor dedicated to Old American History. Seeing how I’d changed to the Devout History Channel, it had to be a new documentary. “Drugs were rampant, unwed pregnancies were at a shocking percentage; crime was at an all-time high, the…the Gas Recession made it impossible for middle-to-middle-lower class family to afford an automobile and a house at the same time. Heck, I personally recall my own parents struggling to pay auto insurance while providing food for my siblings. You gotta remember that this was before Farthing’s New Eden Deal made the idea of electric cars more appealing, so by the time Farthing came into office, the average American welcomed—”

Click.

Next came the Devout American classic *The Lord’s Not Dead*, with an innocent student telling the atheist, evil professor at her community college, “Sometimes the devil allows people to live a life free of trouble because he doesn't want them turning to—”

Click.

Reruns of old wholesome sitcoms. A channel for 24/7 sales adverts, with the occasional government bond commercial every twenty minutes. The other FaithTV channel dedicated to well-known pundits discussing topics such as the ongoing ‘Deviant States aggression’ (without mentioning any sympathy for them) or what the new Canadian occupation promised to provide for the job market. One pundit went into how the Devout States of America condemned murder.

At least, officially. The harsh truth was that it never became a simplified rule. When it came to sexual deviants, they prayed for us as we slept in medically induced comas until we awakened with our belief in God fully returned. Some walked out of clinics after a small amount of time. Others remained in their beds. Meanwhile, most who went into the Devout military were well-aware they needed to take the Seventh Circle Oath; all who defended the homeland would fight, knowing any future orders they followed would likely condemn them to Hell. That likely included Archangels as well.

My tail curled on the living room couch. My tired vision bore into the muted colors on the TV screen.

As I listened to the faceless pundit talk about the pride of such a ‘sacrifice’ his little brother would take on the frontlines, as their own father did during the early years of Devout America, I couldn’t help myself from frowning. Exactly how did the National Church wish to save somebody like me from sin, while praising the Devout soldiers in knowingly committing sins in the name of God?

Not only that, but how did Johanna—back in her Archangel days—reconcile with such a fate?

**Knock, knock, knock!**

I jumped from the couch to my footpaws, suddenly awake.

“Oh, uh, I’m coming!” I muttered not-too-loudly. “I’m coming, I’m coming.”

My alert tail twitched slightly. Already, I missed Lowell’s dirty puns.

Glancing into the peephole, the sight of a tired, unamused Johanna led to me practically swinging the door open. “Adam, you left your radio off.” She informed me.

“Huh?” I glanced back to the bedroom, then chuckled as I looked back to the unimpressed doe. “Ah. Sorry, ma’am. What uh, what’s the situation, ma’am?”

“Not here.” Her earlier annoyance turned into a smirk, pointing her thumb down the hallway to the elevators. For the first time since my recovery, the limp in my leg acted up as I hurried behind her.

 Up in the War Room, Olivia seemed more animated in her chair and Jordan appeared to be less dejected. In fact, the way his leg trembled made me wonder what caused the aloof ferret to get so anticipated.

 “Evening—er, good morning, Adam!” Olivia chirped, pausing to wave at me before returning to whatever she’d been doing. “Did you explain what happened, Johanna?”

“Couldn’t do it out in the hallway, but if you want to tell him—”

“Hector and the gang ditched the ambulance and fled to an ally’s house.” Jordan excitedly interrupted the doe, then froze, and slinked back into the couch. He sipped again. “Eh, sorry, Mrs. Cardinal. Never had this much caffeine and lack of sleep since med school…heh.”

I could barely hide a snicker, as did Johanna.

“You’re correct, McCann.” She clicked her tongue amusedly at Jordan, then turned to me, “We got word from them half an hour ago. Blu, Hector brought Stephen to a safehouse belonging to a Defiant agent near Wrigley Field. They’re in Nancy Wakefield’s basement.”

My tail unwound itself, mostly in confusion over who she was. So, I repeated her name, “Nancy Wakefield?”

 “Yes, Nancy Wakefield.” Johanna confirmed. “Red wolf, twenty-five, works as a part-time grocer. You already met her in the field, actually.”

 Nothing came to mind. Then I felt my eyes widen into saucers. The red-furred she-wolf I met back at the Art Institute. The one obsessed with the “Nighthawks” painting. The same Defiant cell member who I gave the flash drive to, and the one who had ‘bad blood’ with Lowell for a reason I never asked.

 “What did Lowell do to her?” I asked out of the blue, then immediately folded my ears at the quizzical stare from her. “Ah, ma’am. Lowell mentioned to me that they had a, uh…history?”

 “She had a crush on him, but the feeling wasn’t mutual for him.” Johanna shrugged. “Teenage love…simple as that.”

 “Heard anything from him?” I finally asked, then added, “Or my parents?”

 “Not yet, but we shouldn’t lose any hope.” Olivia spoke up when Johanna didn’t say anything, only looking away for a moment with sadness in her cervine expression. “There’s something else you should know. Ma’am? Do you wanna tell him or should I?”

 Shaking her muzzle, presumably at the latter and not the former, Johanna sat down in a chair and snatched a plain mug. Aging warm coffee wafted from it to my feline nose, as did a hint of well-earned bourbon. At first, I thought she had some further good news to share, but then I saw her expression flash sorrow. As if Johanna herself couldn’t believe the facts.

 “I got word from the cell leaders.” She wistfully explained after a needed sip, then carefully placed it down on the table. Whether it left a ring on a paper or two didn’t matter to her. “They encountered some Archangel resistance we didn’t expect. Unfortunately, it appears we weren’t the only cell to lose their own tonight…”

 Johanna later surmised an unofficial policy had been put in place for newer tithingmen to have an Archangel watching over them. A tithingman without much experience doing their job would need an enforcer babysitting them. The sudden policy was likely implemented after the so-called ‘airport attacks’ had been conducted the month prior. The other Defiant leaders weren’t ignorant of the possibility of the List being compromised. Hackers across the Defiant, including Oscar and Lucius, didn’t find any backdoors in either the List documents or the Maverick Hotel’s isolated network, however. If it had been the case, everybody hiding throughout the entire hotel chain would’ve been killed at that point. No way would the Archangels hesitate in catching us by surprise.

 Dozens were either injured or killed in action. Boston, Connecticut, and New York City suffered the heaviest casualties with thirteen members slain. Neither of the three captured a single tithingman alive. Otherwise, the Defiant managed to capture fifty-plus tithingmen and tithingwomen. A partial success, in hindsight. The next part involved a taped confession from them. Get them to admit to spying on entire neighborhoods and towns while sending dissenters to rot in either conversion clinics or forced labor camps across the country. Then, release everything to the Internet and assist those rioting in the fallout. At least, everybody hoped people would riot in the fallout.

Part of me wondered if fifty or so ‘extracted confessions’ would be enough to get Devout America to fight back. Johanna certainly seemed confident, but then again, I felt certain more plans were being formulated in her head, along with the heads of the other Defiant leaders eager to undermine the Devout narrative.

 *Dear God, please let me see them again. Bring them back to me.*

\*\*\*

 At some point, Johanna convinced me to lie down on the sofa.

“Get some shut eye if you won’t drink coffee.” She said to me. “You need rest.”

No way was I going to sleep in Lowell’s and my suite. Not without him. The place felt empty as a tomb, something I didn’t want to think further on. That prompted me to stay in the War Room until further notice. Jordan was reluctant in giving up his sofa, wanting to be close by case they got word of what injuries Lowell sustained. So, I limped into the suite’s living room and relaxed my tired butt into the old cushions. Sleep finally grabbed ahold of me minutes later.

 My dreams lingered between scatterbrained images and a weighed blanket of darkness. I remembered reliving scenes of Devout movies involving me and Lowell, only he happened to be the antagonist trying to tempt me to debauchery and unrepentant evil. Skipping church services on Sunday, going out into the woods to party without a stitch of clothing on, harassing an innocent celebrity for the crime of holding traditional family values, unrealistically beating them to death with a protest sign despite them being old enough to require walkers. Whatever twisted stereotypes for dissenters, let alone liberal furs with an ounce of critical thought.

It went on and on, only each image and scene didn’t end in my demise. It jumped away before the protagonist of each story gave us an earth-shattering lecture that blended together, and in some scenes…they were my mom and dad. Or, at least, who I thought were my parents. Their fur and muzzles were mismatched, fluidly switching between the heroic college student from *The Lord’s Not Dead* and the praying husband along with his amnesiac wife in *Our Vow*.

“Adam?” A voice broke through the darkness.

Two pairs of arms surrounded me. My eyes blinked back tears as I felt paws tighten around my back, pulling me up from whatever I’d been sleeping on, and instinct alone made me embrace back. They were so warm, so strong, it felt real for a dream.

“Adam, we’re so glad you’re awake.”

“We missed you, son. We missed you so damn much!”

I hiccupped, letting some tears fall. They too felt so real.

“I missed you and Mom so much, Dad…” I nuzzled into each of their shoulders, tiredly, I miss you guys…Miss you and Low so much, I…it fucking hurts.”

A gasp pierced through the presumed pitch-blackness.

Then came a light slap on my shoulder, “Watch your language around your mother!”

 Opening a drenched eye, I peered over a shoulder and saw a familiar wolf awkwardly standing against the other end of the wall beside the TV, smiling and stifling a little laughter. A small bandage covered a cut on his left temple, but otherwise, he wore nothing but a pajama bottom and one of his plain black t-shirts. He also appeared relieved.

The timber wolf snarked, “You heard ‘em, Adam. Watch what you fuckin’ say.”

 I jerked my head away in utter shock, staring dumbfounded at my surprised parents.

 “Mom…Dad…” I stammered out, then felt the tears roll down more quickly. “Oh God!”

 So many emotions boiled over. Ever hugged somebody hard enough to nearly crack a bone? Ever cry hard enough to feel absolutely parched and the skin under your cheekfur feel redder than the worst of sunburns? Ever spend a dozen or so minutes sobbing happily, and loud enough to make your wolfish boyfriend speedily snatch the nearby remote, then turn the War Room’s television screen to an unnatural volume? To the point even Johanna accosted us to lower our voices, despite the entire hotel suite being sound-proofed?

“A day hasn’t gone by where we didn’t think about you or where you were, Adam. We thought you were dead…” Mom muttered into my ear as he slowly pulled away, with Dad still refusing to let me go. “Gerry, you’ll crush him like that.”

Dad half-heartedly laughed quietly, as did I. Lowell continued standing by, watching us.

“We love you.” He quavered into my shoulder, still bawling, and refusing to loosen his grip. “We’ve always loved you, homosexual or not. W-We sh-should’ve stopped them that day, Adam…we should have done more than just watch them take our son away.”

“Your father and I still can’t…still…c-cannot believe it.” Mom whimpered incredulously, her voice shaking. “Stephen…He ratted you out to the Archangels.” The tremble in her words hardened into venom, temporarily. “He sent you to that…that horrible place!”

Dad sighed, “We shouldn’t have just stood by and let them take you, Adam.”

“Y-You would’ve been killed though.” I argued, pulling back to wipe my nose of snot, then absentmindedly wipe it on my jeans. “You would’ve been arrested too.”

“I don’t care.” Dad shook his muzzle, breathing heavily as he stared back at me with sad eyes. “I was a coward though. I was a coward, and just thought they’d either let you go after a month, or they’d let us visit you if it went longer.”

Neither Dad nor Mom needed to say anything for me to figure out they couldn’t visit me for an external reason. It didn’t surprise me, learning the Cicero conversion clinic regularly turned away visitors. Any complaints from civilians would fall on deaf ears too.

“Th-They told us you were kidnapped by the Defiant, then murdered once the ransom was paid,” my mother rambled in disbelief, “and we didn’t know where else you were and assumed the worst. Then your uh, friend here, he got us inside the hotel.”

Johanna would later tell me that morning how sewer tunnels existed below the Maverick connecting to the establishment’s freezer. It helped when the cell needed to sneak furs in and out of the hotel without detection. In fact, it happened to be how Olivia and Lowell got me inside after waking up mid-rescue. Unfortunately, it also explained why I suddenly noticed a faint yet pungent scent on their clothes.

“Did…Did you stay here and wait for me?” I sat surprised, adding, “To wake up, I mean. How long have I been out?” I suppressed a deep yawn, wiping my vision clear. “What time is it anyway?”

“One, yes. Two, they insisted.” Lowell listed off the answers without my questions. “Three, got here not long before you woke up, and Johanna in the next room said you’d been out for several hours. It’s a little…” the wolf peeked down at his watch, “wow, half past nine in the morning. I tried telling your old man and woman to get refreshed, but, heh, I now know where you get your stubbornness from, Adam.”

“We’d spent months thinking our son was dead, kid.” My dad argued with the wolf. “I think a lack of sleep is worth hugging him again.”

“And believe me, we are goddamn tired enough as is.” Mom wrapped me into yet another hug, shaking her head and laughing. “That’s right, I swore.” Dad joined in again, rubbing my back when I released one more joyous sob. “We love you, Adam. We love you so much…”

“Love you too.” I said to them both. “I’m so happy you’re finally here. And Low?”

The wolf stepped away from the wall, curling his tail when we locked eyes. He nervously smiled across the room, but then relaxed his posture.

“Thank you. Thank you so much.”

I meant it too. I really, really, meant it. Had my parents not been there, I would have expressed my thanks in a more physical way. For the moment though, we needed rest. All of us earned it after the long night.

\*\*\*

 Everybody slept an entire day in their respective rooms. Had he not fallen unconscious the moment his back hit the mattress, following a long shower, there would’ve been no doubt Lowell would’ve asked if we could have what he called ‘make-up sex’. I likely would’ve been open to the thought if it weren’t for emotional exhaustion. Reuniting with parents you once despised did that to a person.

Blu and Hector still held Stephen bound and secure under their careful watch. Nancy Wakefield kept them all fed without arousing suspicion from her neighbors. An increase in nightly patrols and police presence further made things difficult, to the point they abandoned the idea of sneaking back to the hotel.

Adding insult to injury, Chicago’s city council already approved further checkpoints with alarming speed. I tried not to imagine how my previous life would’ve been spent living out there in the strangled normal. Imagining it only made me realize how integrated me and my parents were a year previously.

Speaking of whom, they acclimated rather quickly. Both got a hotel suite across from mine, though the management downstairs tried insisting they moved in with another cell member. Rooms and suites at the Maverick Hotel didn’t appear out of thin air, after all. Thank God that Johanna made a strong argument: cramming everybody into a single dwelling would raise the risk of noise, which in turn increased the risk of suspicion from actual guests coming in and out of the building. So, Mom and Dad got a suite across from me and Lowell. Meanwhile, they’d begun chatting if they could with Mr. and Mrs. Lange. At some point as I slept, they were each given a proper introduction to Johanna Cardinal. All I knew was that Dad struggled remembering to use proper pronouns in her presence, much to the doe’s quiet chagrin.

Lowell and I didn’t have the much-needed talk yet. Not with so many things going on.

As the other Defiant cells licked their wounds, the ones who captured the other tithingmen thought it’d be best not to wait any longer. They went ahead with the rest of the plan, per Johanna’s reluctant agreement. Nevertheless, all the resistance groups across Devout America went about broadcasting their tithingman’s recorded dirty secrets to Dove. The Defiant’s leaders didn’t care if we still couldn’t extract a confession from Stephen yet, not in Blu and Hector’s predicament. With all the other diverse confessions circulating, however, Operation Crucible could already be considered a success.

The day it all came ahead, unfortunately, the Chicago cell were focused on mourning.

Olivia and Oscar with the help of Lucius already went about making a small memorial wake for Donald in the barest corner of the Illegal Library. The only visual evidence of his existence came in the form of a photograph taken from a vacation camera, sometime in the past. Likely in the earlier days of resistance. His only possessions were placed in the funeral, one of which was a wallet, some crumpled pictures, and a pair of military dog tags.

 He hadn’t been the first soul taken away from the Chicago Defiant. Far from it. I didn’t know why I hadn’t noticed them before, but next to the small memorial were four other small memorials. Each one depicted a past Defiant. One looked to be no older than a teenager, and another appeared old enough to have grown up during the 1950s of Old America. All of them were long gone.

 Everybody (sans Jeannie, and the others outside the hotel) gathered one by one into the Illegal Library, as to not attract attention. Our breathing was respectful enough not to interrupt the solemn silence, while Johanna stood in front of his erected photo.

 “Donald Griffith was a…” Johanna cleared her throat, straightening her skirt as she formed her words. Her expression tried remaining neutral. “He was a brave soldier…representing the best of us. We’re all gathered here today to remember his memory, and never forget that his sacrifice hasn’t been in vain. In the coming days, we will figure out what to do about Stephen McConnell, but know this: we are not judge, jury, or executioners. We are not the terrorists that FaithTV claims we are. This is no different. When the day comes, whenever that will be…he will face legitimate justice for his crimes.”

 The entire packed room crackled with frustration, which everybody controlled.

 “Another time, another place. Right here, right now, we’re all here to remember the best of Donald.” Johanna wiped something from her right eye, smiling. “I still…remember the day he first joined us. Back then, me and Lowell were still steadily growing our ranks. Then one day, a cell based in Gary, Indiana contacts us. It mainly consisted of Old American veterans who wanted to undermine the pro-Devout agenda. Especially regarding their treatment of veterans who survived the Caribbean Conflict. Donald was not only a member of this cell, but its last surviving member. An Archangel raid on their former hideout left him forced to flee the abandoned sanctuary. All he could take were his few possessions. By some stroke of luck and another few weeks disguised among the homeless, he managed to make the trek to a rendezvous point across the state to us without getting caught.”

 One by one, furs went up to reminisce about Donald. One by one, I learned about the older lion in a way I never knew. Johanna finished her speech by mentioning his ancestors being proud of him. It was elaborated further when Abigail spoke about how he never acted like it, but Donald’s lineage could be traced all the way back to the American colonial era. She spoke further about how an ancestor fought in the War of 1812, whose descendants in turn fought in the first civil war in 1861 as a Union corporal, followed by more descendants going on to fight for the United States in almost every war that occurred. Lowell spoke up about how Donald loved talking about the stories his grandfather told him, especially the relief he felt in learning the Japanese finally surrendered. Donald told him and Hector about how he especially liked carrying on this tradition by going on to fight in the Gulf War of ’91. Lowell had been more than eager reciting how much of a badass he’d been enduring the ungodly desert climate and burning oil fields.

To Donald, it’d been, “…the last justified war America ever fought again. Before they asked me to take that damned Seventh Circle Oath and I refused.”

I only learned about the Circle Oaths when in early college. A Devout Army recruiter arrived to inform every student and watchful teacher what being a soldier meant gaining as well as sacrificing. One of those sacrifices was the possibility of being rejected from Heaven. The Bible explicitly forbade murder; thus, a loyal soldier of the Devout States of America needed to fight and sometimes kill for their country. To commit such violence without having a military of explicit pacifists, a private or ensign had to sigh the Seventh Circle Oath. The doctrine-approved document only solidified their loyalty to God and Country but informed graduated recruits their actions could possibly land them in the Circle of Violence in Hell.

Johanna later commented how Donald refused to take the Oath, losing a lifelong pension and his military record in the process. A month spent on the streets eventually led him to the Defiant.

By the time Lowell finished and returned to my side, I saw the wolf wiping something from his eyes with a sleeve. A pair of fingers slid around mine, and I grasped his paw. Part of me worried my folks would take notice. If anything, I was surprised neither of them brought up the fact Lowell’s and my suite only had a single queen-sized bed.

*Maybe they’re waiting to bring it up?* I thought to myself. *There’s no way they’re not suspecting we’re an item.*

 As the wake went forward, Jordan spoke about Donald’s injuries, and how much he would miss chastising the lion about taking care of himself. As did Abigail too. Oscar and Lucious (the latter taking the time to look away from his computer, tears in his eyes) recounted a hilarious time when both of them tried teaching Donald how to write out code, only for the lion to give up when he’d been so close to making a strand of it comprehensible. Mr. and Mrs. Lange spoke very little, as did my parents in the corner watching and praying during the proceedings, but the mountain lions took the time to mention how friendly, outgoing, and snarky the lion had been to them. He left some impression on them beyond being another member of the Defiant.

I talked about the time Donald quipped at Lowell’s teaching methods of systema, back when the exercise room was still accessible to the cell. Olivia talked about how much she’d miss Donald’s nostalgia, and how he made the period before Devout America sound not as bad, from mall culture and video stores to the fact freedom of speech still existed outside the Maverick’s saccharine façade.

 Whatever memories they brought up, it had common elements; Donald Griffith would really be missed by everyone. He had his own story, and we’d make sure not to forget it.

 The entire time, my parents remained quiet. They never knew Donald, but I bet they too would have had some words to say, if he’d survived. We were almost ready to give a moment of silence when Dad’s paw suddenly shot up.

 “Um, er…excuse me?” He spoke at an even volume. “Johanna? May I…may I say a few words for Mr. Griffith?”

 A few people in the room looked at Dad as if he’d intruded on a personal moment. As if he had no right to say anything about him. However, it didn’t surprise me to see Johanna give an affirmative nod, then see Mom gently nudge him forward when he hesitated.

 “I uh, never knew him. I never knew Donald, but by God, I wish I did.” He began, inhaling and exhaling. My father always did have a mild case of stage fright, unless he wore a surgical mask. “I wish my wife and I did. It’s thanks to this brave man’s actions, and that of Lowell right here,” he gestured to said wolf, who broke out softly smiling, “that me and Elizabeth reunited with our son again. Neither of us can express how thankful we are for his role in saving us and having…having Stephen be held responsible for his crimes against our family. I grew up in an orphanage, and never had a family. After the in-laws passed away, all I had left were my wife and kid. As a father, and a reluctant patriot, I admire how he risked everything to do what was right. He expressed more bravery than I ever could…he refused to sign the Seventh Oath all those years ago. Meanwhile, there’s no doubt I would have signed it without a second thought…May…May Donald rest in peace.”

 After comforting Dad, Mom volunteered to give a short speech.

 “I cannot admire Donald enough for his valor. If…” She spoke, “if I had the chance, I would tell him how much his role in our rescue means to me. My baby boy was stolen from me by a young man I…I once considered a neighbor. Stephen, I…I’ve cooked him meals, treated him as if he were a second son, helped him cope with his mother’s death…and yet he betrayed my boy…” Mom paused mid-speech, then exhaled calmly. She continued, “I never knew Donald, but from what you’ve all said about him, I regret that we never got to meet. I’m never going to have the chance to hug him, thank him, tell him his actions won’t be forgotten. Ever.”

\*\*\*

 Slowly but surely, once everyone said their condolences or funny stories about Donald, the Chicago cell trickled out of the Illegal Library. Some members stayed to grieve longer like Abigail or Johanna, while the rest returned to their rooms. Before refocusing on their work, Oscar and Lucius mentioned confirmed reports that a joint mission between the Canadian Armed Forces and Western Republic broke throughout Saskatchewan and Manitoba. Conventional warfare and aerial bombings were also occurring throughout western Ontario. Whatever riots were occurring couldn’t be extracted from news coverage or databases yet.

 Mom and Dad each strongly hugged me, promising to visit my suite later that night for dinner. I gladly accepted the invitation. Lowell did too, albeit awkwardly.

 “Can’t wait to get to know you more,” he mentioned, “since Adam’s told me a fuck ton about you guys.” He widened his eyes and bit his lower lip at how my mother stared blankly at him. “Sorry, uh…force of habit. Hehe.”

 The previous wolf would have been unapologetic.

 We left moments later. Upstairs in our suite, Lowell closed the door behind us as we went from the living room into the bedroom, where the TV continued playing on FaithTV. Onscreen were various pundits juggling between feel-good news stories and coverage of an ongoing insurrection within occupied Toronto. They made great emphasis of it being ‘dealt with’, then discussing the nebulous reasons for such a small rebellion. If it even could be considered small from our perspective. They only bothered showing videos of explosions and the armed Canadian fur angrily pointing their scope at the camera. Nothing else.

 “Do you think it’s happening out there?” I muttered aloud.

 Lowell sat down on the bed, facing my turned back.

 “What’s happening out there?” He asked, then clicked his tongue in understanding. “Ah, you mean the riots and protesting? I…I think they are. Can’t always trust the news channels.”

 “I know, I know, but still…” I mused over it, staring at the TV screen. A stilled image of tanks rolling down Montreal’s main street comprised the entire foreground. “If a tree falls, and nobody’s around, does it even make a sound? In this case, if a protest happens, and nobody sees it, did it really even happen?”

 “Of course, it happened, Adam.” He said to me. “They kept talking as if that massacre at Wrigley Field didn’t happen, but it did happen. I took photos of it happening, and we were both there as it was happening. If anything, us being there solidified it did happen.”

 “It’s still so quiet out there.” I made my point, stepping towards the closed blinds to keep outside. The afternoon sun shone down on cars and passerby as if nothing happened in the previous day, weeks, or months. “Out there, I don’t see the country being toppled over.”

 “Give it time.” Lowell grabbed my wrist and pulled me to stand beside the bed, wrapping his arms around my flank. “‘The revolution won’t always be televised.’ Donald told me that was a song he used to love listening to. Fuck, I still miss him.”

 “Yeah…me too.”

I wrapped my own arms around him, patting his slumped shoulders as I sat beside him. Our tailed swished against each other’s. After a few minutes, Lowell pulled his paws away and rested them on his lap, staring down at the floor with folded ears.

“We…really need to talk.” He said, then corrected, “No. I need to talk. I uh, spoke to Johanna this morning, and she really wasn’t happy how I treated ya that night. I’m not happy how I treated ya that night.”

My fingers laced into one of his paws, and I squeezed it.

“I’m just so thankful you’re alive, Low.”

“You’re gonna hate me.”

I cocked an ear up at what he said.

“Huh? Why in the world would I hate you?” I asked, completely confused by his statement. “I mean sure, you were a jackass saying I’m still brainwashed by believing in God…”

Lowell proceeded to hold down a shameful snicker. What did he have to be ashamed about exactly?

“But you showed me later that you really regretted it.” I told the slouched wolf. “You’re passionate about your beliefs. It just so happens you’re an atheist. I don’t care, you—”

“That’s not—That’s not why you’re gonna hate me, Adam.” He interrupted, being quick to blurt out, “That night, the night I left, I didn’t wanna leave us with regrets. You’re my boyfriend. You deserve to know.” He made a deep, careful breath. “I promised to tell you why I’m so fuckin’ secretive about my past, and here’s why: it’s Farthing.”

The world started grinding to a steady halt. My tail stopped swishing, stilled against the wrinkled blanket and my toes brushing on the carpeted floor. I practically felt my breath in each of my feline lungs being swept away.

“What…What are you saying, Lowell?”

“My full name…it’s uh...” He started to confess, looking at me straight in the eyes with the same determination I fell in love with. “My grandfather is…was Alexander J. Farthing. The bastard’s older brother. Adam, the reason I never told you anything about my past is that…”

One heartbeat. Then two, followed by three and an astonished gasp.

“My full name is Gabriel Lowell Farthing. I’m a motherfucking Farthing.”