During my time fighting alongside the Defiant, I thought I’d seen enough surprises. I thought the truths long suppressed by a controlling government couldn’t make me further question the lies taught to me not just in school, but by society itself. Heterosexuality being the only sexuality. The Defiant being responsible for nameless dead and destruction taken out of context. Our own neighbors being everything except spies employed by the secret police, including my own former best friend. I thought I’d learned all the harsh truths out there.

Nothing prepared me for knowing my boyfriend’s name though.

“Gabriel Lowell Farthing.”

I said the three names aloud, feeling as if all but one of them belonged together.

“Y-Your last name is…is Farthing?” I asked the wolf, still struggling to feel my legs at the weight of such a disbelieving statement. “You’re a…a member of the Farthing family? I mean, the Farthings. Those Farthings?!”

“Keep it the fuck down, will ya?” He hissed at me, then heaved a massive sigh, his ears still folded and his back hunched. “Yeah…I…I am. Or rather…an extended member of the Farthings.” He turned back to me, struggling to look up at me, instead down at his paws clenching and unclenching. “It’s all fucking true…Grandpa Alex was David’s older brother, the one who disappeared not long after the Republic states seceded. That makes me his…his grandnephew.” He spoke the word as if it contradicted everything about him existing.

“Grandnephew?” I parroted him, then shook my head. “My God, you’re…you’re serious.”

“Yeah, I am.” He replied in a blunt manner. “I fucking am.”

“Are you…” I paused my question, then chose another one. “Do you like, have any…y’know—”

“—proof?” Lowell finished, glaring directly at me. “You don’t believe me?”

I waved my paws at his accusation, and told the wolf, “No! No, of course I believe you, but…” My trailing sentence said everything I didn’t want to say, lest the gap between us from before grew again into a canyon.

“Goddammit. Of course, I know it’s a wild claim!” He growled, making me flinch back. He realized his mistake, and muttered, “Sorry…I’m sorry for snapping at ya like that.”

I gathered my next words carefully. I wanted to know more, but at the same time, didn’t want to create another divide between me and my wolf.

“If…” I stopped myself again, then leaned forward to hold his shaking left paw in mine. “So, your name is Gabriel Farthing, huh? How...Where did ‘Lowell’ come from?”

“Well, I can’t exactly advertise myself, so—oh!” The casual wolf snickered for a short while, then composed himself. “Ya meant why it’s my middle name?” I nodded, to which he answered, “Well, the story goes like this. Mom chose to name me Gabriel after her father on her family’s side, while Dad named me after a fox friend he met while studying abroad in France. I think my folks mentioned him being at their wedding.”

“Speaking of your parents, Lowell…” The next question had to be the hardest one to say. “Can you…tell me how you wound up here?”

Lowell smiled warmly and relaxed somewhat. A melancholic gaze could be found in the iris of his beautiful eyes, as if he were remembering tainted memories.

“Long story short?” He explained, “I take so much from my Grandpa Alex. He and my grandma were probably the biggest critics of the Farthings…while being Farthings. Heh.” He chuckled dryly, then cleared his throat before returning to the story. “I hadn’t even gone to kindergarten yet. We…We’d been estranged from Great-Uncle David and his family long before the Revenants came to power, or even before this civil war started. When it did break out, and every protester tried being a rebel, David tricked them—my grandparents, my parents, me and my older sister, her name’s Sienna, into fleeing to a remote compound somewhere. To flee all the angry rioters and mob violence on the streets. At the time, I thought we were going on a fucking vacation…”

The puzzle pieces from the months we spent together began fitting into place. I started to see a clearer picture of the mysterious wolf who rescued me but refused to say anything about himself before the Defiant.

“The vacation turned into a nightmare.” He revealed further. “They beat us, locked us in rooms, did horrible shit if we got out of line. Nobody could leave, even if we wanted to. The guards, the Archangels, they burned all our possessions and made it seem as if we were killed by anarchists. Then, they manipulated everything—media, public records, disappeared our old neighbors, spread contradicting rumors to muddy the waters…until it looked like we never even existed in the first place outside that compound…”

I stared disheartened at Lowell. Any conflicting emotions I felt earlier receded fast.

“I told ya I’m not a believer, but…if Hell ever does exist, then I grew up in there.” He shrugged, noticeably suppressing a tremor in his right paw. It went still as soon as he said her name. “I lived there for ten years, and until now…the only person I’ve talked to about it is Johanna.”

Nodding in affirmation to the wolf, I sat beside him in contemplation for some time. He either stared at me, the walls, his own paws, or the mirror in the corridor connecting the two rooms of our suite. I could imagine him not wanting to look too long at his own faraway reflection, but it left me silently wondering…how long had he been holding the truth of his heritage from his own comrades in the Defiant?

“Anyway, ten years went by, and I was the only one to get out.” He continued. “I wandered around, avoiding furs as much as I could. I got desperate when it became clear I couldn’t claim to be who I was. For a while, I ate from the trash if I could get lucky. I stole from shops. I robbed an old lady or two. If it weren’t for Johanna seeing me panhandle outside one of the hotels, I’m half-fucking sure the police or a random Archangel would’ve discovered my identity. I’d be either long dead or rotting away in what’s left of that compound.”

The mental image of Lowell, dressed like a panhandler would’ve been amusing on its own. However, the stark reality of picturing him starving, without shelter, begging for change when a policeman or, God forbid, an Archangel in uniform, couldn’t be bothered to try and arrest him. Let alone attempt to if Lowell’s survival to the present day indicated anything.

“Can I ask…” I spoke up, “what they did to you in there?”

“Worse than what they did to you in Cicero, Adam.” Lowell heaved another sigh, curling his tail further onto his lap. “My memory’s a little foggy of the first few years spent in captivity. Fuck, I actually still believed we were still on a long vacation until it dawned on me when I was six. When I saw the Archangels guarding us beat up Dad until one of his fangs fell out…and Mom…then Sienna, s-sh-she…she…”

Lowell’s tremors reappeared in his paws, and I leaned forward to offer a hug. He accepted it easily, prompting me to raise my fingers to softly caress his upper back. The trembling slowed down, somewhat.

“Listen to me, Low: I believe you.” I whispered reassuringly, “I believe your story and I love you whether you’re a Farthing or not. It doesn’t matter. You’re Lowell to me.”

I kissed his cheek, to which he replied with a grunt, “Mhm.”

“Whatever happened to us wasn’t normal, I get that.” I told the wolf still shaking steadily in my arms. “It wasn’t right to you, it wasn’t right to me, and when you feel ready, I’ll be there to listen to you tell me the rest.”

“No. No, wait.” Lowell shook his muzzle against my neck and shoulder. “Just gimme a moment. I promise you. I told ya last night that I’d tell—”

“You’ve told me enough.” I interrupted, then quickly included, “Remember that same night before you left?” He bobbed his head up and down as I felt my ears partly fall downward, and my tail curl around us in slow contemplation. “When you told me you had a bad nightmare, it broke my heart to see you that way. I’m not going to l-let you go through r-repressed memories…just to sate my f-fucking curiosity!”

We remained silent again until a soft chuckle escaped the back of my throat.

“If anything, the curiosity will kill you instead of the cat.” I joked, to which Lowell giggled into my neck. He went so far as to nip it, eliciting a gasping cackle from my throat. “Ah, easy there!”

“That’s for making a bad cat joke.” The wolf I fell in love with returned, grinning, tail wagging again, and wiping some tears from his eyes. Not that he’d ever admit they were tears. “I think I’ve had enough of emotions like that for a day, don’t you think?”

I couldn’t agree more. As Lowell went to snatch the room service menu and read to me the choices for a small lunch together, the mental images of what could’ve happened to my boyfriend, to him and his family, at the compound…it worried me. The Cicero Clinic staff threatened us, physically abused the undisciplined of us, then mentally tortured us in classes before medically inducing us into comas when the magical cure from God never arrived. It certainly left an impact on me, some of the trauma needing to be unpacked in the years to follow.

Whatever the Clinic did to me, it was probably nothing compared to what Lowell or his entire family endured in that compound.

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Lowell decided to spend his dinnertime hate-watching some classic Devout cinema, while I went to spend time with my parents alongside Kevin and Mary Lange. He wished for me to be safe, even if the journey only consisted of going down a corridor of empty hotel rooms, then going down a few stories to another corridor. It wasn’t like going a block down the road.

To that, Lowell nipped my cheek, then told me, “Just go see your fuckin’ parents.”

“Love you too, Low.” I leaned down to peck his lips, which caused the hungry canine to kiss me harder, then lick his chops as I failed suppressing a blush.

“Love you more, Adam.” He cheekily replied, then turned me around and patted my ear as I went to open the door, “See you later tonight.”

I rolled my eyes on my way down the empty, unoccupied hallway. When I called for the elevator, a familiar bear in his late thirties in early forties, wearing the traditional bellhop uniform with black and gold threads, appeared inside gripping a room service cart.

“Yo.” He nodded at my presence. “Hey there, Adam.”

“Hey Matt.” I smiled back while stepping inside. “Haven’t seen you in a while.”

“Well, that’s what happens when you work the front door.” The bear watched me reach for the panel to select my floor, only to realize we were going for the same one. “Leo got this flu going around, so Manager Mike’s got me doing a double-shift. In-room dining. Yay me.”

I shook my nose amusedly, then paused. The aroma lingering in the air caused a reminding growl in my stomach. The wafting scent of freshly cooked spaghetti with chicken meatballs and marinara sauce leaked through the plate covers, mixed with steam making my maw water.

“Smells good.” I sniffed it again, feeling my whiskers twitch at the delicious scent. Then, I noticed five covered plates. Three on the top shelf and two on the bottom. “Hey Matt, are you going to Room 305?”

“Yeah, that’s the place?” He enquired in slight surprise, “Why do you ask?”

“I’m going there too.” I said to him. “I was invited there for dinner.”

“Oh, so you’re with the ‘new guests’, huh?” He asked upon realizing. “Relatives of yours, I take it. Not to say that all tabby cats are related or know each other all over, but…”

He made me suddenly laugh, forcing me to push it down when I recognized how too loud it was. “Yeah,” I confessed as the doors finally dinged opened, “…my parents.”

Matt’s ursine eyes widened in slim alarm.

“Ey, ey, don’t tell me too much!” He shushed me, glancing left and right before muttering with caution, “Never know when an ear is around the corner, y’know…Plus, Mike doesn’t want you lot talking about your…activities, if you catch my drift.”

“Got it,” I nodded in understanding.

We walked down the hallway until Room 305 came into view. Matt held his knuckles up and rapped lightly on the wooden door. Movement led to clicking noise on the other side, and it opened to reveal Kevin staring at us through a small crack.

“Adam, you’re here.” It opened wider to show the mountain lion’s relief. “Come in, come in.”

He sighed, then licked his lips towards the covered dinner plates on the cart. “And thank you for sending us the food this early.”

“No problem, sir.” Matt responded with his bearish charm. “Mind if I bring this in?”

“Not at all.” I told him, to which Kevin opened the door wider for us to go in.

I followed Matt inside the two-bed suite with quiet ease. Dad sat on one bed watching the news on a big TV screen while Mary and my mom had been mid-discussion about figuring out the tells of if a newscaster was questioning the report they were giving. Mom said it came down to how much one reporter’s trademark smile twitched while Mary insisted it came down to how his back straightened up and his eyes blinked rapidly. Apparently, their debate began when a breaking news report revealed how a series of bombings in Texas were causing the Covenant Guard to be mobilized. Dad was busy tuning into the development.

When she saw the food cart, Mary stepped forward to thank Matt. “I’m sorry,” she heartedly apologized with folded ears, “but I don’t have anything to tip you with.”

“That’s okay, ma’am.” Matt waved it off. “What you lot do is more than enough.”

“Actually, I think I might…” Mom dug into her nearby purse and rifled through it, while Matt insisted that she didn’t need to do such a thing. “No, no, no. You deserve something.”

My faintest memory of holding pre-Devout money came from when I just turned four or five years old. Some remained in circulation before the new designs were distributed everywhere but seeing my mother hand Matt the paper currency had me unexpectedly wondering if they truly had value anymore outside the borders.

“Thank you, ma’am!” Matt pocketed eight dollars and fifty cents, what was left in Mom’s purse. “I, uh…I know I’m not supposed to even know you’re doing what you’re doing out there,” He glanced over to me, then back to her, Dad, and the Langes already setting the plates on a corner table, “but thank you.”

“No, thank you for letting us stay here,” Mom beamed back. “I hope you have a good night.”

“You too, ma’am.” He gripped the cart and turned it around before pushing it out the door. “See you around, Adam. And tell Lowell I said ‘hi’, will you?”

I reaffirmed the older bear I would, before joining everybody at the table. There were only four chairs readily available, so I opted to simply eat my meal on the closest bed (on the condition I didn’t spill a single morsel, or Dad would jokingly have my hide). Speaking of my father, following a quick prayer led by him, he tried to chastise Mom for giving away some of the remaining money they had.

“Well, what did you expect me to do, Gerry?” She admonished him midway through starting to eat. “The workers in the Maverick do everything for us here. Feed us, give us clothes, hygiene products, and everything else for free. The least we can do is give them something in return.”

“I agree with her, Gerald.” Mary interjected, her fork digging into a meatball. “Then again, I do understand where you’re coming from. Kevin and I managed to smuggle a small portion of our savings with us from our house, and there’s no telling if we’ll ever need it.”

“We can’t just give tips to everyone, honey.” Dad further argued. “If we tipped every bellboy or server who came to our door, there’s not going to be anything left.”

“I’m not saying we should do it every time.” She counter argued. “I’m just trying to say that doing it once in a while. Not every day, all the time.”

“And I agree with you, but I just wanted to remind you.” He started chewing on a few strands of the delicious food.

“If that’s the case, then why are we arguing?” She pondered aloud, to which Dad chuckled. He tried saying a witty remark. “Gerald. Don’t speak with your maw full. And don’t laugh while chewing either, Adam.”

I heeded her motherly advice and licked a dollop of sauce back into my maw. For the first time in months, we were having a seemingly normal family dinner. The conversation steered back to debating about the tells of finding out if a newscaster was lying onscreen, then to the delay of new movies in recent times, followed by a weird discussion with Kevin and Dad reminiscing about old movies they used to watch from pre-Devout days. They somehow even roped me into discussing how it felt being in the field as a resistance fighter for the Defiant.

Of course, Mom worried as I described sneaking illegal pamphlets around a library, then placing that massive banner on the side of Lake Point Tower, without getting caught no less!

Dad went nearly over the Moon when I described being captured, then interrogated and beaten by who I presumed to be an Archangel, until the ruse led to me discovering Vox the Fox. The glare in my father’s emerald eye made me pray Vox the Fox himself never set foot in the same room as either of my caring parents.

*Note to self: make sure I stand between Dad and Blu if they ever meet.*

Still, Dad expressed much pride in hearing about my recovery from mild muscle atrophy, his proud voice laced though with anger towards the Cicero Clinic for what they did to me and the other patients.

“I’ve been talking a bit to Dr. McCann, that ferret fellow.” Dad mentioned midway through his meal. “I seriously owe him one for helping my son out with getting his muscle strength back. Maybe we can share a beer or something from downstairs.”

“Whatever happened to saving money, Gerry?” Mom teased him, to which the older feline scoffed and muttered something about it being the ‘least thing to do’. That really amused the other four of us. “You’ve always been a hypocrite, sweetie. When I spend money, it’s a waste. When you spend money, it’s got a purpose. Like buying a new TV or remodel for the bathroom.”

“Meanwhile, you spent money on more pairs of shoes to compare with the girls at church,” Dad counterargued right back, causing Mom to break out in an annoyed smirk. My father glanced to me and the Langes, “Adam, care to tell everyone else here how many shoes you saw your mother ordering?”

Swallowing a bundled fork full of spaghetti, I surmised, “Somewhere around one pair a month?”

“One pair a month?” Mary gawked, then giggled after taking a sip of water. “You should have seen my habits, Elizabeth. Last year, I donated my entire closet to charity when it started overflowing. And don’t even remind me how many shirts Kevin used to buy.”

“Please don’t tell them, dear.” Kevin quietly pleaded to his wife.

“Thirty or forty a year.” She revealed, much to our surprise. “Don’t forget the number of new knick-knacks you liked putting in your office, when you weren’t rearranging it.”

“Well, we weren’t effectively homeless then, were we, dear?” Kevin pointed out, “We had a house, we had jobs and disposable incomes. Then we had to give it up.” The mountain lion visibly sensed the awkwardness in the air, because he then commented, “I do miss those luxuries, but I don’t regret giving it up. Not if it means seeing our daughter and grandson again someday.”

“Me too.” Dad affirmed, as did Mom, Mary, and me. “What would you do with Katherine and her boy, if—no, *when* you get to the Republic?”

I could practically see the serene smile behind Kevin’s whiskers, even with his back facing me. It could be spotted behind Mary’s whiskers as well.

“If it’s still standing by the time the war’s over,” the mountain lion shrugged, “I’ve always wanted to relax on a beach in Hawaii. Maybe even visit one of the volcanoes…”

“I’ve always wanted to go to Alaska and sees humpback whales, even as a little cub,” Mary confessed with a nostalgic sigh, “but we could never have the time to go there. The farthest we’d ever gone West is to Seattle, back in ’95.”

“How ‘bout you, Gerald?” Kevin asked next, curiosity getting to the feline. “If you could go anywhere, where would it be?”

Mom and I stared at my father sitting deep in thought. He replied, “The U.K.”

“Really?” Kevin blinked at the answer. “Even with how tense Europe is?”

Dad scoffed, “I’ll take that over this any day.”

Kevin shook his muzzle in laughter. “Valid point there.”

“For our honeymoon, me and Gerry traveled up North to this wonderful remote hotel right alongside the Wisconsin and Michigan border,” Mom mentioned sweetly, interlacing her paws with Dad’s and beaming at him. “That was the most magical two weeks of our life, but due to the world falling apart, we never got the opportunity to go beyond the Midwest.” Mom told us, “Remember when we talked about going on that trip to Havana once?”

“I remember.” Dad stilled suddenly. “We were going to bring the McConnells with too.”

I momentarily dropped my fork on my plate, as did Mom. Mr. and Mrs. Lange shifted in their seats at the discomforting silence, before returning to their dinners. If tension could kill, then my father would have mutilated Stephen to pieces.

“So, Adam,” Kevin thankfully changed the subject after some moments, “if you had the chance, where would you like to go to in the world?”

The first idea to come to mind was, “California.”

“That was quick.” Kevin clicked his tongue. “Why California? Where specifically?”

I shrugged, “Not sure. The Pacific Ocean would be cool to see.”

It didn’t matter where I went to in California or Oregon or anywhere in the Western Republic. So long as Lowell saw them with me, I’d be completely content.

An hour later, Mom and Dad, and to an extent the Langes, cleaned up around the table before settling down to watch the ongoing news about Texas. Reporters near the annexed Mexican border avoiding using phrases such as ‘Defiant’, ‘resistance fighters’, or ‘warzone’ and instead focused on the supposed destruction of a government building, as well as showing clips of a continuing siege happening at another building.

Once in a while, the news would mention how the Farthing family members each responded to such news, giving their own ‘unscripted’ viewpoints in-between. As my family and friends watched in boredom or slim interest, I began wondering what their reactions would be if they found out Lowell’s real name.

A scenario popped into my head of my parents being shocked by the revelation, then condemning my continuous relationship with him. Another scenario amusingly went towards them not only accepting his heritage but exalting him as being an (in)famous extended member of the Farthing family. God, I tried not to imagine how Lowell would feel if the latter occurred.

“The Farthing’s started off as royalty like the Kennedys,” I remembered hearing him tell me once, “but now, they’re the same kind of royalty as the Romanovs. And I’m the Anastasia.”

Correcting him about actual Russian history was a headache, but he wasn’t wrong about the first part. To a certain degree, the Farthings were American royalty. They practically ruled the Revenant Party which ruled the Devout States of America. By theoretical definition, that made my cocky, foul-mouthed wolf boyfriend…a prince.

“Where’s Lowell at, anyway?” Kevin mentioned sleepily on his and his wife’s bed. “I never see you two apart for long.”

“He wanted me to spend time with my parents,” I told him without thinking. “He’s just in our room doing whatever.”

“You ought to get your boyfriend to come to dinn—Ow, Mary!”

Mary pulled at her husband’s ear, “Kevin.”

Dad perked up at the word ‘boyfriend’ alongside Mom. I blushed hotly, almost feeling the blood drain to my cheeks, curling my tail and wishing I were somewhere else.

My dad groaned where he sat, leaning against the bed’s headboard and sighing.

“I knew it right from the start.” Mom announced with a victorious clenched fist.

“Looks like you were right on the money, Liz.” He said, then turned to me as Mom smiled confidently. “Son, care to tell me and your mother why you never bothered to tell us why you’re in a romantic, and presumably sexual, relationship with that crass wolf?”

“W-Well, y’know…” I stammered. “Look, I didn’t mean to hide it from you. It-It’s just that, well…I didn’t know how you’d both react to learning how me and Lowell—”

**BANG! BANG! BANG!**

All five of us in the hotel suite jumped a foot in the air. Muffled screams and shouts, followed by a honking horn echoed from off the street and into the windows of the Maverick. I rushed from the lounge couch straight for the window. Parting the curtains for a singular moment led me to witnessing a scene that would never leave my memory.

An Archangel, his Hellfire gun drawn, pointed directly at three writhing furs. One held a bat while another held what I presumed to be a protest sign. Blood gushed from their wounds, and they tried crawling away. Except the Archangel anticipated it, producing a club from their belt and striking one of the furs repeatedly in the head. Gasping at the sight from the window, I stepped away right as my parents and Mr. Lange witnessed it as well.