We arrived at the correct hotel room at 8:00 a.m. on the dot, then knocked a few times before the occupant unlocked it on the other end.

The moment Lowell closed the door behind us, Johanna stood there waiting in front of the door leading into her bedroom, wearing a used red blouse and pair of blue jeans that clashed against the surrounding wallpaper. Her arms were crossed as she stared directly at me, not blinking even though I could clearly spot the lack of sleep under her eyelashes.

“Uh…” I tried to relax, even in her presence, to no avail, “J-J…Johanna...”

She didn’t say a single word. Not one syllable. She just marched directly to the two of us and yanked me forward into a death-gripping embrace, which I gladly returned. Safe to say, even after transitioning into a female all those years ago, Johanna still maintained the upper body strength of a former Archangel of Devout America. Ready to snap my spine in two if she suddenly decided to do so. Frankly, I think the doe was halfway there.

“H-Holy moly…” I gasped at how she managed to lift me up to my toes. “S-Seriously, I missed you too!”

I felt her nod into my shoulder, my ears twitching at the sound of Lowell’s snickering behind us. Pulling away from our hug, Johanna smiled at us in a strange mixture of proud exasperation. The same expression my mother used to give me when I told her about passing my exams by staying up until the morning to study.

“You are probably the luckiest cat in this entire city—no, the state, for surviving that damn thing,” Johanna clicked her tong. “I’m sorry I had you wait until this morning, but it was late. Anyway, I’m glad to have you back in the fold with us, Adam.”

I stood somewhat straighter, thanks to Vox the Fox’s demand for austerity.

“Thank you, ma’am,” the word came from my mouth, quite naturally. “I’m glad to be back here as well.”

“Heh, at ease there, soldier…” Johanna waved a paw, to which I relaxed once again. “I can see that Vox left his mark on you.” She motioned a finger to each of my arms. “You gained some muscle there. I can tell under the shirt.”

“Yeah, I did,” my tail wagged reflexively at her complement, brushing against Lowell’s feet without noticing. “Blu helped me out.”

Lowell scoffed near the door beside me, “Pff, commie bastard.”

“Anyway,” Johanna did not so much as acknowledge his snide remark, “you have been through quite the ringer the past couple months. Hector has already debriefed me on last night’s success. Excellent work, as always. Lowell, you managed to work in the field without either you or Hector or Olivia killing each other, and Adam,” she beamed, “not only did you keep your cool in the field, but you gained experience too.”

*It isn’t like I did much of anything*, I thought to myself, one of my ears falling at the inner doubt. *Not like Lowell or the others did…*

She seemed to be a mind reader, because the doe suddenly added, “Don’t worry. You are still training, and I want you to continue to do so. We will need it now more than ever, Adam. Especially after the stunt we pulled. Come see this.”

Holding the door open for the wolf and I, Johanna led us inside of her bedroom. It remained a chaotic but coordinated mess of clothes, papers, electronics, knives and weapons, like its inhabitant was ready to take on the world. However, the three of us were drawn to the television screen opposite the bed. It was tuned to FaithTV’s 24/7 news network. Lowell chuckled smugly and I stood fixated, my eyes immediately drawn to the displayed video of massive craters in various airport runways.

“—Homeland Security Agency has confirmed suspicions that the plotters behind last night’s attacks are indeed Deviant terrorists, likely aided by foreign governments. Already, this is being consider one of the most coordinated widespread terrorist attacks since the Easter Day blackouts conducted earlier this year, as well as the early days of the Deviant States’ continuous rebellion against the will of God. According to White House officials, President Nessen plans to give a nationwide statement as casualties are still being counted—”

“Bullshit!” Lowell growled beside me, glaring daggers at the hapless newscaster onscreen, “Nobody died last night. We didn’t kill nobody!”

“Let them lie, it won’t change the results,” Johanna waved a paw and turned the volume way down to a whisper. “They won’t bother to say this in the news, but the Canadian and Western Republic militaries have been ruthless lately ever since last night. The Disputed Zone’s been seeing heavy fighting, particularly in the Alberta and Saskatchewan provinces. Rumor has it that there’s also an ongoing naval siege happening in the Gulf of California.”

“Woah, really?” I glanced again at the TV in astonishment. “Oh my God.”

“About damn time the Republic does something useful, if I must say,” Lowell smirked with crossed arms. “We’ve been waiting long enough.”

“Just before you two got here, I got confirmation that the Canadian resistance is already taking advantage of Operation Blackjack’s success,” she smiled agreeingly with the grey wolf, which infected me as the doe continued to explain, “They are going to show the Devout what a real resistance looks like. What a revolution looks like. Not only will it put a strain on nation resources, but it’s also gonna be harder and harder for the President to justify the costs of occupation.”

Johanna turned off the TV.

“Tomorrow night at ten, there is going to be another meeting downstairs. One of the topics will be on maintaining radio silence for the next several days,” she stated. “For now, I would like you two to relax for the day and report in the War Room tomorrow. The same’s already been told to Hector, Olivia and the others. Understood?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“And Adam?” Johanna stepped to a mini-refrigerator I hadn’t noticed by the bed, “would you mind waiting outside for two or three minutes? Lowell and I need to have a little talk.”

I nodded, “Sure thing, Johanna. Is he…in trouble or something?”

“It depends if he should be,” Johanna softly smirked, mostly at Lowell to my left. “Nah, he and I just need to talk about something private. It should only be a moment…”

To that, Lowell patted my right arm (and secretly, the right cheek of my ass), “It’ll only be a moment, Adam.”

Thank God my blush only lasted half a minute once I stepped out into the adjoining hallway, still quiet in the early morning. I awkwardly waited outside of her hotel room’s door.

“Adam!” a form of brown fur suddenly leaped at me and pulled me into a sideways hug, before I realized who it belonged to. Whispering into my left ear, she hissed, “Adam, you dumbass. You lucky fucking dumbass! Everybody was so worried!”

I half-chuckled, nervously pulling myself away from the female otter, still possessive of upper body strength like Lowell. That day, she wore a pair of baggy jeans contrasting sharply with a dark red blouse one size too big for her. Either she needed to do laundry, or the clothes bought and smuggled inside the hotel by staff didn’t have what she wanted. Whatever the case, I couldn’t stop myself from hugging her one shorter time.

“Olivia,” I sighed in relief at the familiar otter. Now, we were almost the same height, “It’s been too long. It’s great to see you again. And before you say it again,” I interrupted her with a raised finger, “Lowell gave me an earful last night. I know how lucky I am and how much of a dumbass I am, so please don’t go ad nauseum on me…”

“No promises,” she chuckled, then relaxed an elbow on my shoulder as we stood outside the hotel room’s door. “So whatcha wanna know?”

“Hmm,” I perked an ear up and twitched my nose one more, remembering how stale and odorless the hallway remained, “How…How is everyone doing? I take it they’re relieved I didn’t die?”

“Ha! You don’t even know the half of it. Let’s see…” Olivia soon fell silent and formed a somber, stilled expression. It surprised me, “Remember…Remember our three seddies upstairs? Two of them, the ones who were still unconscious when you left…they…they died last week.”

My tail froze between my legs, remembering back to the three other seddies who were rescued alongside me all those months back. A Bengal tigress, a white tiger, and a bloodhound.

I gasped in utter disbelief, “…what?”

“I’m so sorry to tell you right now, but it was so sudden and we had the operation to focus on first,” she clarified in uncomfortable seconds of silence, pulling her elbow off my shoulder to cross her arms. “Doc Jordan says it was due to malnutrition, the permanent damage due to the drugs and bed sores…”

“And Jeanne?” I asked Olivia, originally not wanting to even know the answer at first. “Jeanne Holt, the tigress. Is she…Is she okay?”

Mercifully, the otter quickly answered my question, “She’s recovering. Unfortunately for us though, Jeanne’s still unhinged a bit, but she isn’t screaming like she was a few months ago. However, Abigail doubts she’ll be able to fully recover like you did for another several weeks…”

“Did we…bury them somewhere?” I then wondered aloud, then closed my dry mouth.

“No, not bury…cremated them,” her shoulders slumped slightly, then added, “In the basement. There’s a furnace downstairs, and Zack let us give them a small funeral. All we had on them were the files me and Low snatched back when we…back in Easter…You okay?”

My heartbeat relaxed, as did the hair on the back of my neck. “Yeah, I’m fine…”

*Thank you, God, for at least letting Jeanne live*, I felt immense relief, but also sadness towards the two other seddies I never had the opportunity to know, or help. All I could do was offer a quiet, short prayer. *I pray for them. May God give them peace and salvation. Amen.*

“How else is everyone doing?” I changed the conversation for Olivia and me. If anything, “How are Mr. and Mrs. Lange?”

“They’re doing alright,” “Mr. Lange hasn’t left his room since he discovered he can order food for free—to an extent. As for Mrs. Lange, she’s really opened up to the others. I think she and Abigail are becoming best friends, but they’re still cautious to the wind.”

As someone who’d experienced it firsthand when arriving to the hotel, I completely understood. “And the others?”

“Donald’s doing just fine, Jordan and Abigail are at each other’s throats when Lowell isn’t, Hector is still being Hector. Oscar is still being Oscar. As for Lowell…I take it you know how much he worried, and speaking of which,” Olivia glanced over to the door to our right, “is he in there?”

“Yeah, he is,” I nodded, “Johanna says she wanted to talk to him about…something.”

“Ah,” she giggled suddenly, “Talkin’ to his mother.”

“Huh?” my head jerked left to stare directly at the otter, grinning as if I confirmed something for her. “What do you ‘talking to his mother’? What, did she adopt him or something?”

“Basically, yeah…” Olivia said, “He’s known her longer than me or Abigail. Maybe Donald too. From what’s been gathered, Johanna practically raised Lowell since as far back as cubhood. Won’t say much about those years though…”

Craning my neck back towards Johanna’s door, I thought back to her and Lowell’s few interactions that I’d seen. For being the leader of Chicago’s Defiant cell, and his de facto superior in terms of command, she allowed him much leeway to act like a jackass whenever he wanted to. Swearing openly, casually insult other compatriots or sometimes question her decisions. Even in her presence. Granted, Johanna did not portray as much strict authority like Vox the Fox, though she could definitely wield it whenever necessary, but it made me wonder if she really did raise the wolf. How did they act together when nobody was ever around?

Speak of the devil, Lowell emerged from the hotel room, waving a lazy paw to the otter beside me, “Good morning, Liv.”

“Morning, Low,” she greeted, ruffling my headfur slightly, “I was just reacquainting myself with our resident newbie, hehe.”

“Yeah, yeah, real funny, Olivia,” I peeled myself away from her and turned to Lowell, who I suddenly noticed had a bandage covering the inside of his right elbow. I didn’t bring it up yet, “So then, what now?”

“I dunno, wanna go do a workout?” he suggested, “Hey, Liv. It turns out the commie Doberman trained Adam here a bit while off near Peoria. Interested in joining us? See what he’s got packed under that belt? I certainly wanna know. Maybe I already do? Hehehe.”

“Blu?” she shrugged without so much as batting an eye to his sex joke. It wasn’t like anybody was around to hear us, but it did leave my ears burning lightly in Olivia’s presence, “Nah. I’d like to, but I got some things to do for Oscar. We’ve got some projects of his to take care of, and no doubt the squirt’ll wanna get ‘em done before tomorrow.” The otter lightly punched my shoulder, smirking at us as she walked to the elevator, “Anyway, see you guys!”

I quietly chastised Lowell for making that kind of joke in front of Olivia, except it seemed pointless to argue with the wolf. All in all, I was intensely curious about seeing the hotel gym and what it had to offer. At Lowell’s room (and mine, for the moment, considering I didn’t have any material belongings) he gave me a pair of loose workout shorts and a used white t-shirt he dug out from the bottom of his drawer before escorting me down to the lobby. We both ignored the TV screens showing endless coverage about the rocket attack that killed absolutely nobody the government would name.

The Maverick Hotel & Bar’s fitness center seemed like the typical exercise room of any hotel chain, but to me, it had everything that the Buy-Mart lacked; a locked door only accessible with a key card, which then led into a rectangular exercise room no larger than those occupied by the building’s staff and lodgers. Inside lay an abundance of equipment ranging from a long dumbbell rack to three treadmills lined up and even a bench press station. Lowell was quick to show me around. A potent, male musk, likely originating from someone’s intense workout recently, filled the room. The only other smells came from an anti-scent air freshener spraying in the far corner.

Thankfully, nobody else was inside, so we could speak freely somewhat.

“Towels are in the corner, used towels go into the bin beside it,” he motioned to said towels and used bin to the corner closest to the door. “Bubblers are out in the hallway if ya need to drink.”

“Bubblers?” I asked, “Don’t you mean ‘drinking fountains’, Low?”

“I meant bubblers, blow me,” the wolf chortled, nudging my elbow, “Now c’mon, let’s stretch. I wanna see what the Doberman’s taught you…”

We stretched on a large yoga mat facing a large mirror reflecting a quarter of the empty room. As I started to ponder on how far I’d made it since I awoke from my coma, feeling and watching as my arms and leg muscles popped with each stretch that I mimicked from Lowell, another figure entered the room. An older lion who made up for his stocky body with enough muscle in his arms to probably bench press twice the number of weights by the empty station.

“How’re you doing there, Griffith?”

“Low! Adam!” the older feline chuckled, laughing as he sat down on a nearby bench and wiped his forehead, panting. “Heh, good to see you again, seddie.”

Pausing for a short moment mid-stretch, I waved towards his reflection in the large mirror, “Hey Donald.”

“Been a while since he last saw your ugly mug,” Lowell quipped.

“You tell me,” Donald grunted as he stood back up. As he strolled closer into the exercise room, I could see the older feline wearing some used workout shorts and a blank white t-shirt drenched in his sweat (so that was where the musk came from). “The last time I heard about you, you were actually rescued by THE Vox the Fox, and at the rally no less!”

The glistening hairs of orange furs on the back of my neck bristled.

“Um, is it wise to talk so freely…” I warily asked him, then quickly added, “in here? Someone could walk in and overhear what you’re saying, Donald.”

“Nah, they don’t come this early in the morning,” Lowell commented, “Not on a weekday.”

“Ah, don’t worry your tail off about it, kid…” Donald took a swig from a plastic water bottle in one paw. “I’ve been living in this hotel for five-plus years. Low’s stayed here much longer. You won’t see devoted exercisers line up here unless Manager Mike suddenly decides they should build a swimming pool attached to this thing.”

“Ha!” Lowell chortled, “Wouldn’t that be fucking amazing to have. How much does a pool cost?”

“Probably more than what they can afford,” I suggested, to which the wolf next to me whined playfully, “Though I think Mike’s got more priorities than building an indoor pool for us, Low. Everyone’s more focused on other stuff.”

“True that,” Donald strolled over to bench press station and placed two circular, medium-sized weights on each side of the single barbell When he clamped them shut and laid down on the long bench, he asked, “You mind if you watch me for a bit, Low?”

“Sure thing,” he shrugged.

I looked away when Donald spread his muscular legs for support and provided a view of his lower torso. And that of his bulge. Mostly, I did this out of courtesy and not wanting to imagine what the middle-aged lion looked like without his shorts on.

*Curse my lustful imagination!* I chastised myself, then wondered if Lowell’s lewd behavior had suddenly affected me.

“By the way, ngh, you hear about, mfh, Jeannie Holt, Adam?”

My head cautiously turned to focus mainly on Lowell standing behind the bench press station, paws poised and ready to snatch the barbell at a moment’s notice if he had to. However, it seemed that age did very little to keep the lion from performing twenty reps per set.

“Y-Yeah, I did, actually. Olivia told me she’d been getting better since she woke up.”

“Sorry I didn’t mention it to ya, Adam, by the way,” Lowell apologized, sheepishly scratching one of his ears, “I uh, kinda forgot...”

“Ngh, can’t blame you, mfh!” Donald grunted as he lowered and raised the barbell from his chest. “Place has been…ugh, going nuts since, ngh, last night…” He paused mid-rep, “Ngh, L-Lowell?”

“Huh? Oh yeah,” the wolf helped him place the barbell in its rightful place, then patted the lion’s shoulder. He then brazenly assessed, “Good job there, old man. That’s what? Five more reps than your usual?”

Donald simply scoffed, “Just don’t keep getting distracted by your boyfriend, kid.”

“I’m more distracted by the wrinkles under your eyes, Don,” Lowell teased again while the lion wiped his muzzle with a towel beside the long bench. “By the way, before I forget, did ya know that the commie from the Peoria cell taught Adam here some defensive fighting moves?”

“‘Commie from Peoria’.” He swished his tuft tail along the ground. “Oh right. Don’t you mean that new guy? The Doberman?”

I groaned. “He’s not a communist like you claim he is, Lowell…” My sneakers squeaked against the yoga mat beneath me as I stood up on my toes, then relaxed. “I know it might surprise you, but not every fur who works under Vox the Fox hates capitalism. Hates wealth or anything. The same way everyone in this cell isn’t a vocal dick all the time.”

I almost instead said, “The same way everyone in this cell isn’t attracted to dicks like we are,” but it seemed to have the same effect. Donald Griffith slapped his right knee and guffawed at my rebuke, impressed as much as I was at what I said.

“Holy hell,” he shook his mane in amusement. “Wow, I mean…wow! Didn’t know you got yourself a smart mouth there, Adam! I like it!”

“Ouch. That hurt.” Lowell, struggling not to snicker with the lion and I, simply placed his paws behind his head, boldly claiming, “Whatever, Adam. I’m still gonna keep calling him a commie bastard, ya know.”

“Sure, you will,” I sighed. Curling my tail at the idea, I then mused aloud, “That is, until he finally does kick your ass for antagonizing him.”

“Speaking of an ass kicking though,” Lowell interjected, “I’m really interested to know what ya got from your time over with ‘em. Hey Don, you interested too?”

The lion, now calmed down, smiled at us and shrugged, “Definitely.”

During the intervening month I spent with the Peoria cell, Blu taught me some kickboxing techniques he learned from various furs across the years, as well as how to fight dirty. He made me remember the key weak spots in any opponent; throat, eyes, the liver located underneath your right pectoral, and the tail if given the chance. Most opponents in a 1v1 fight barely remembered to keep their tails from the crosshairs of a counterattack. Regarding the liver, a quick-timed strike there would immediately incapacitate somebody in the middle of a fight, but not forever.

Donald and Lowell visibly looked impressed at what I managed to recall, displaying mock jabs and punches that Blu described to me, as well how to block and redirect someone’s momentum in a fight. However, I still showed a noticeable hobble after enough time circling or dodging strikes.

“Never thought I’d say this, but I do have to agree with the commie,” Lowell considered, “Archangels are trained to predict your moves and find a weakness. Johanna’s told me and Don here plenty of times that if escaping them ain’t an option, we’d have to end the fight quickly. Lucky for you that hasn’t happened yet, but say that ya do encounter one, Adam. And for real this time. I doubt a small hobble will do you any good.”

“That right,” Donald butted in to add, “Make a last stand long enough and the Archangel’ll definitely use your legs as the final blow.” He then proceeded to make me flinch by faking a direct kick to my left knee, chuckling, “Yeah, that’d be a real bitch to deal with, wouldn’t it?”

“I’ve been using them more lately though,” my tail bristled at his laughter. “It shouldn’t be a big deal though, right? All I’ll need to do is keep exercising my legs and the hobble will go away.”

“Oh, definitely,” Lowell nodded, “but until then, it’ll help to give ya some knowledge on some key kickboxing moves,” he cheekily motioned towards Donald, “like what the old cat just almost did there.”

Donald refused to acknowledge him, but did curl his lip, “This old cat does know a few old tricks that helped me in the field. Back when youngsters like Low were still in diapers.”

Both experienced furs went on to describe and demonstrate a few key techniques that utilized the legs (showing each one at incredibly slow speeds, the impacts nothing more than gentle taps so as to not injure each other, or when I practiced on them). Strike downs involved keeping your arms close to your head whilst lifting the right or left leg, then striking the opponent’s knee sideways with half as much force as one could muster. Knee bends required rolling your hips and turning your shoulders up and across, generating energy to give swift kicks to the back of the knee, which would instantly make an opponent bend their knees and set up an opening for further strikes. If I ever encountered a stronger enemy, and he tried to deliver a punch to my muzzle, the best way to deflect it involved using one paw to block it and the other to strike at his nearest joint, then repeatedly strike along his arm in split-second intervals before delivering a final blow to his chest with your elbow as you inch closet.

The last movement I just described came from something that Lowell called ‘systema’, a martial art that focused on disabling multiple opponents by targeting pressure points, while remaining freeform in battle. Break the enemy’s focus so he cannot counterattack.

“Where’d you learned that?” I asked him during a break, trading Donald’s water bottle with him and the wolf. “Tha…That seems too pro…even for you.”

“Johanna taught me, and I’ll take that as a compliment,” he smirked. “She says systema is one of the key martial arts that Archangels are trained under at some kinda secret academy of theirs. It’s from Russia, back when they were still the Soviets…”

“A Russian martial art is taught to American secret police…” I mused at the thought, “Meanwhile, you’re harping on Blu being from a socialist faction as you’re teaching me something from a communist country?”

Donald started to use the treadmill nearby, laughing, “Haha, he’s got your money where your maw is, Low! Hehehe!”

“I mean…Well…” he sighed in semi-defeat, rustling his annoyed tail at the yoga mats, “I mean, yeah, but they’re no longer communist, so I’m not a hypocrite, am I?”

I clicked my tongue amusedly, “Sure, you aren’t.”

“Hey, I said I ain’t a hypocrite!”

“And I said you aren’t.”

“A…Anyway…” flustering, Lowell returned us back on topic, “Johanna told me that the key to systema’s that, unlike boxing or kickboxing, ya need to be fluid and flexible in a fight. Tension can be the mother of all evil. Her words, not mine. Tension is good, but it can be a bitch if ya meet multiple fighters…”

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Donald later left to take a good shower, leaving Lowell behind to give me a couple more pointers. And after convincing the wolf I memorized the systema and kickboxing forms and whatnot, I spent a good half-hour jogging on one of the treadmills. Lowell focused on lifting some of the dumbbells nearby. We didn’t speak to each other when, to our surprise, a she-bear in her thirties barged into the exercise room to use one of the treadmills beside me.

At first, I managed to make good distance, yet I found myself…distracted. Between the awkward steps still present in my legwork, as well as Lowell (intentionally?) spreading his shorts-clad legs open apart as he lifted weights with either arm, providing me a full view of his bulge resting over the long bench, it was another miracle I didn’t sport a raging hardon. A miracle that the she-bear next to me didn’t see it, roar at me for being a pervert and scream to the manager. Maybe I had God to thank, or more likely the large smartphone hypnotizing her from her workout. The only way I could make readjusting my erection down seem unsuspicious was by slowing down to change the speed, then turn around to wipe my forehead with a towel. She barely even looked my direction, either way.

My arms and knuckles and knees felt like spaghetti by the time I limped behind Lowell up to his hotel room, a sheen of sweat covering us like layers of snow on a windshield. Afternoon arrived faster than we expected, so we decided to call it a day.

“I saw your boner, by the way,” he spoke into my ear before we walked into the lobby. Crimson blush spread up my neck and into my cheeks at his comment, making my tail curl in embarrassment against my leg. “Hehe, you should see your face, Adam.”

“S-Screw you, Lowell!” I shook my timid muzzle, hissing at him, “And please don’t say that so loud, okay?”

“Relax, will ya?” he chuckled as he pressed the elevator button, “Jeez, you might be getting more bust, but you’re still as paranoid as everyone else…”

The droning audio of the lobby’s TV screen still broadcasted updates on Moses International’s status. Flights to Minneapolis, New York, Miami, Houston, and New Bethesda (formerly Mexico City) were all grounded until further notice. Once commercial flights did reopen to the public, the news pundit surmised with a patriotic smile, necessary security would be raised across every airport in the country. Also, the President was currently considering a proposal to ban hooded clothing across Devout America and its annexed territories.

“Various senators and even David Farthing’s eldest sons are also pleading that President Nessen go so far as to sign an executive order banning the import and manufacturing of facial masks…”

The elevator door shut itself closed, giving Lowell the opportunity to voice his frustration, “Is my brain melting, or did she really just fucking say that?”

“I think she did.”

“Damn,” he asked, “How am I gonna find another motif for myself?”

Seconds later and we silenced our snickering when the elevator opened to a silent hallway on the second floor. Minutes later and we were back in his room, undressing and glancing lustfully while pretending to act casual. Then again, how could I even try to act casual as Lowell and I shared a shower together, lathering each other in soap and shampoo and sporting shameless boners? Safe to say, we didn’t act casual, yet our sore muscles prevented us from getting too frisky. Anytime I moved my legs up or down resulted in a jolt of short pain aching up my spine and tail. Lowell’s soreness was more pronounced in his arms.

Yeah, those were the consequences of an excellent workout. However, the warm water and surrounding steam helped soothe us from the minor pain.

Luckily though, it didn’t stop us from drying up and cuddle on the bed—wearing only our boxers for the moment—with the TV playing an old rerun of *Game of Crowns*. Specifically, an episode where the young, inexperienced King Jeffrey suggested something as radical as separating the power of the church from his rule.

I didn’t notice it earlier until that morning, but on the wall to the left of the hotel room’s hallway door, I discovered an indent that cracked about half an inch into the plaster. Dark splotches dotted the wallpaper, more notably in the deepest parts of the hole. I started wondering what caused this until I remembered the healing cuts on Lowell’s right knuckles, from the very prior night.

Before I could bring it up amid the comfortable quiet surrounding us, or maybe it involved us cuddled in the other’s arms, something else grabbed my eye. Someone had used marker to write a sentence on the wall beside the TV.

“‘Whence spring these inclinations, rank and strong? And harming no one, wherefore call them wrong?’” I read it aloud, which caught Lowell’s attention, “What does that mean?”

“It’s a line from Howl, an old poem from the 1950’s,” he stated with an underlying enthusiasm, “I found the book amongst the stuff we got in the illegal library of ours…It’s really good.”

“And you wrote it there because…?”

He shrugged, “I like that phrase and didn’t have a notepad with me to help me remember it.”

“Huh.” My tail flicked against the bed, surprised by his statement. “I knew you like reading banned books, but I didn’t know you were into poetry too.”

“Hey, I may be bullheaded, but I can read,” he stuck his tongue out teasingly, which I mimicked back and chuckled. “Plus, that one is special…It’s supposed to be a poem that’s a single entire sentence. And get this: the author was homosexual, like us.”

That certainly earned my attention, making me shift into a slight sitting position, “And he got published?”

“Yep,” he grinned, explaining over the medium volume of the TV’s commercials, “Name was Allen Ginsburg, a sand cat from New York. From what I managed to gather on our network, even requested info on his biography back when smuggling things from Canada were easier, the guy got arrested a few times for publishing Howl. There was even this big trial that ruled in his favor. Ginsburg was insanely vocal about his right to fuck dudes. Even continued protesting long after he should’ve retired from the picket lines.”

“Wow, really?” I wagged at the image of someone like that.

“Yeah…He was kinda like a gay grandpa or sorts…”

My eyes traveled towards the blinded window. Rays of sunlight crept into the dim room, indicating that the sun would be setting in a few short hours.

“What happened to him?” I asked, already surmising the answer at the back of my ever-so-optimistic mind.

“I dunno,” he sighed somberly. “Pious only lists what he wrote but not what he lived like or what he stood for. I once asked a few comrades out west what they knew and all they could find was that he ‘disappeared’ out of the blue sometime after I was born…”

One of my ears perked up. “When was that?” I curiously asked.

His ticklish tail brushed against my fingers, “November 5th, 1994. And you?”

“My b-birth…” I blushed at how ticklish it felt, then shook my muzzle and finished, “My birthday’s September 3rd, 1996.”

“What was with that pause there?” he chuckled teasingly, letting his tail trail down to my legs and dram over them like an ashen quilt, “Don’t you remember your own birthday, Adam?”

“Shut up,” I feigned insult. Lowell coyly placed his chin on my shoulder, looking at me with puppy dog eyes only he could pull off. “What?” I asked, looking at him.

“Nothing,” he murmured, “I just find tabbies like you adorable.”

“Pff, whatever…” I jokingly scoffed at the wolf, “I bet you say that to all the guys you meet…”

“Mmm, not really…” he admitted while placing a paw around my bare stomach, which elicited a giggling moan from my throat when he pulled me closer. Now, we connected hip to hip and torso to torso, “I mean, I’ve hooked up with a couple homos in the Defiant, but I’ve never been in, ya know…a relationship with someone before.”

My heart seemingly stopped, only for me to realize it skipped a beat instead. I stared in hopeful shock at the wolf. Mainly as I gazed into his softened, auburn eyes.

“Are we…in a relationship?” my voice found its way. “I-I mean, I think we are too…aren’t we?”

Lowell’s normal cockiness and flirtations faltered for a lost moment alongside mine, only for them to be reignited when we shared another slow kiss. Seconds later and the kiss turned ever so passionate, our tongues soon dancing against the roofs of our maws as we moaned at each other’s touches. The way Lowell’s blunt claws traced their way through my shoulders’ fur sent shivers along my back, especially when I felt his erection press into my thigh when he straddled atop me, my back huddled firmly into the mattress and its soft sheets.

His unapologetic humping against my crotch drove me wild. It made me purr and bite my lip as the wolf’s grinding motions and lingering touches trailed all over—

“O-Ow, ow!” I flinched when his weight put pressure on my sore knees. “Ow…”

“Oh, shit—sorry!” he stumbled off for a bit. “Uh, hehe, sorry about that…forgot that your knees are sore…and not in the good way we were hoping for, hehe?”

“Mmm,” I shifted back into a sitting position and sighed. “I’m okay…”

“Are you sure?” he knelt forward to get a better look at my legs. A moment of awkward silence later led to him relaxing beside me, the mood from before already shriveled and died out for now. “Alright then. Look, I’ll…admit we got carried away there.”

I looked at him, “Downstairs or a few minutes ago?”

“Both,” he laughed awkwardly, “but mainly in the gym. If you’re too sore to do, well anything, for now, like I am…what do you wanna do to kill time until tomorrow?”

I tilted my head at the wolf, eyeing for a moment at the quote on the wall written in marker and smiled softly. “Mmm, do you still have that poetry book by…Ginsberg?”

The same grin I associated with Lowell appeared on his muzzle. His fangs flashed from the overhead light. “I sure do,” he proudly stated. “You don’t mind long and drawn out, do you?” I shook my whiskered nose, and it seemed as if the wolf’s grin somehow grew into a crescent moon that shone as vibrantly as his own tail wagged. “Fucking A. Just gimme a little moment!”

Reaching over to the nightstand, I turned the TV’s volume down to its lowest setting, the final minutes of the Game of Crowns episode all forgotten. Afterward I set it aside and curled up closer to my wolfish companion for warmth.

Lowell reached over to his nightstand and snatched up an old book the size of a paw, which distinctly had a faintly torn cover and marks to show how much it’d likely survived through the censors. Much like the pamphlets and USB drives the Defiant distributed with glee, who knew such a small book could be considered a threat to our government?

“Hmm…Let’s see…ah. Here,” Lowell skimmed back to the first page, leaning against my shoulder to give me a view of what he read slowly and aloud, “I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness…starving hysterical naked, dragging themselves through the streets at dawn looking for an angry fix…angel-headed hipsters burning for the ancient heavenly connection to the starry dynamo in the machinery of night, who poverty and tatters and hollow-eyed and high sat up smoking in the supernatural darkness of cold-water flats floating across the tops of cities contemplating jazz…”