Chicago’s nightly outline gradually disappeared as everyone breathed pure relief. Our hearts had been racing before, eyes staring out between the murky waters and the city’s twinkling lights retreating behind us.

It didn’t take until dry land disappeared that everybody calmed down though. Everyone expected a barrage of helicopters or speedboats to teleport from nowhere, then sink our vessel. Having spent countless months and days in the confinement of hotel rooms made us all feel uneasy, especially with little lighting as we sped off into the middle of Lake Michigan.

I fell asleep on the stern with my parents. The adrenaline had been too much for us, as well as the rest of the yacht’s other passengers, who either searched for a place to power nap, or simply fought against the exhaustion. During my sleep, in which I’d taken over a whole couch while my mom and dad figuratively crashed together on an opposing couch, Lowell had returned topside. He likely didn’t want to disturb me, because I woke up to peeking rays of sunlight and feeling the timber wolf’s head lying against my stomach. Stretching my limbs, I sat upright while carefully guiding him to lounge beside me on the makeshift bed.

My paw held him closer to my chest, our tails wagging together as he tiredly yawned into my neck, cuddling me close. “Looks so blue,” I murmured to the awakened canine.

“Huh?” He cracked a stiffness in his neck, then followed my gaze. “Oh, yeah…it is.”

Oftentimes, I forgot Lake Michigan existed unless I saw it with my own eyes. It looked so vibrant and blue, like the ocean. It looked like a wonderful place to swim in. The only signs of life were an occasional flying bird in the distance or the foam being produced by the yacht’s engine’s by the bottom of the stern. Had the yacht not been traveling at what felt like top speed, let alone the Devout government trying to hunt us down, I would have felt like diving in with Lowell. After all the stress of the previous night, it didn’t hurt to imagine a mundane thing for kids our age to do. Feeling him breath against my chest, inhaling into my neck and nuzzling into my jawline as we stared out the back of the quiet yacht reinforced it for me.

“Whatcha thinking about?” Lowell asked me tiredly, finally resting his chin on my smaller shoulder. “Worried about the future?”

“Worried about many things,” I confessed after mulling the options. My left paw snaked around his lower back as I held onto his paw with my other. “Mostly wondering if we’ll ever get to act like men our age.”

“Our age?” He perked an ear up. “Like how?”

“Worrying about paying college loans, getting a job, bugging our parents about moving out soon, looking for apartments we can actually afford in the city,” I listed them off. “Stuff like that, I guess. Never honestly thought I’d be all the way out here at this point…y’know, in life.”

“Me neither, but I figured it’d happen at some point,” Lowell sighed, then gave a small chuckle. “At least we’ll no longer be dealing with bland walls and keeping our voices down anymore, eh?”

I held back a snicker. “Not sure about being as loud as we want, but sure.”

We fell back into comfortable silence, watching the yacht’s rear as it produced foaming waves through Lake Michigan. For all either of us knew, quiet moments wouldn’t be found easily in the near future, and we appreciated as much as we could. I enjoyed feeling Lowell’s warmth cuddle against my body, his steady breath on my neck, our fingers caressing each other in reassurance not to worry. We were going to make it to Canada. We were all going to survive.

However, the cozy peace needed to end at some point. It did when Johanna appeared on deck from behind us, wearing military-grade pants, a tactical shirt, along with a radio and semiautomatic rifle hanging from her shoulders. The determined doe’s loud cough got our attention enough for us to hurriedly stand up like teenagers caught in a compromising position.

“J-Johanna, ma’am!” Lowell stammered out.

“Ma’am!” I spoke up behind him.

Both of my parents stirred from their deep sleep on the neighboring couch, but my father stood up while Mom stretched her arms. “Mrs. Cardinal,” Dad greeted with worry. “Elizabeth, time to get up.”

“At ease,” she told us. “I just wanted to check up on you four. The others are gathering upstairs, and I thought you’d want to know. We’ll have breakfast.”

Those words roused my mother further awake, around the same time I felt my stomach growl at the thought of some food.

“It’s no banquet, but it’s better than algae,” she motioned her head towards a flight of narrow stairs leading to the upper decks. “Better hurry before we head out.”

“Where’s Stephen?” Mom suddenly asked.

The air disappeared from our lungs for a few seconds as it reoccurred to me what happened the night before. Seeing the fox, him trying to escape, recognize me, then I knocked him down before he was dragged to…somewhere on the yacht. I stared back to Johanna with expectant eyes, demanding to know.

“Stephen’s locked inside a closet downstairs, being watched by Bluford at the moment, so neither of them will be joining us,” she explained straightforwardly. “Don’t go visiting the tithingman without informing me beforehand. This is an order.”

Dad almost argued with her until a sharp glare thinned his lips back shut.

“This is an order.” She repeated, steely-eyed. “You’ll be allowed to speak with him, if you wish, but not without my knowledge. That includes you too, Lowell. I can’t give Canadian intelligence an important asset if it’s stopped breathing…”

“Important asset?” I voice up. “What do you—”

“I’ll explain in due time, but for now, we must survive,” Johanna turned her back to us and began to head towards the stairs. “Hurry up now, before I start the update without you.”

“Yes, ma’am.” We all said, then followed closely behind her up the side stairs.

The upper deck, though smaller and more cramped due to the multiple shoulders and bodies standing around, maintained a façade of luxury no belonging to a resistance cell member. As everyone else gradually awoke from their ‘power naps’, Old Nick greeted us each like old friends, especially to Lowell upon recognizing the older mongoose.

“Long time no see, kiddo.”

“You too, old man.”

They stared for a second, then Old Nick pulled my wolf into a mighty hug, and Lowell patted the older mammal’s shoulders in return. Nick did the same for me when I tried shaking his paw. Although I wanted to ask in detail if he owned the yacht (“Of course, I do! I inherited it from my daddy!”) and what he’d been up to the past few months since we last saw each other (“Laying low, staying outta sight, preparing for today.”), we were all gathered past a sliding glass door and arranged into the charter yacht’s living room. Among them were Abigail, Jordan, Olivia in a makeshift arm cast, and Lucius. A room not as filled with accessories and items like Mr. and Mrs. Lange’s former home back in Chicago, but the default purchases of a luxury boat’s interior. Later, Olivia would tell me Oscar was with Jeannie below deck, looking after her whilst listening in on radio transmissions for nearby boats. Specifically, boats looking for ours.

Christened as the ‘Sunlit Evanescent’, I’d later learn more about the charter yacht and its functions from Old Nick in snippets during our short journey to Canada. She was a 125-foot Prophet-Class charter yacht with a raised pilothouse and two upper decks. It did belong to his late father several years back, who bought it as a wedding present, before his former wife had the marriage annulled to marry another more powerful mongoose. At least they allowed him to keep the yacht as his primary home.

As promised, breakfast in the form of granola bars and juice boxes were provided in large quantities. Nobody, not even Kevin or his picky wife, dared to turn away some food.

“You have chocolate chip?” Dad asked Mary, who frowned at her chosen piece. “I got blueberry if you wanna trade or something?”

She sighed, “Fine by me.”

I mowed down on my singular helping as Lowell shared his juice box with me, which I almost declined until the wolf suggested we save ours for emergencies. Plus, we’d traded fluids like spit already.

“Multiple times, in fact.”

The way he said it aloud certainly for Old Nick cackling as I cringed inward. Mom and Dad did their very best at pretending my boyfriend didn’t say a single fucking thing.

“If you promise to never say that again in front of my folks,” I stressed to the unfiltered wolf as I pocketed my juice box inside a jacket pocket. “I mean it, Low. Promise me.”

He sucked down a conservative sip, then handed the colorful box to me.

“No promises, but I will try for you, Adam.”

“Aren’t you the sweetest?” I rolled my eyes and grappled the bent, tiny straw with my tongue, guiding it into my lips and taking down the rest of the sip. My lips exhaled relief at the sated hydration and hunger. “Thanks though.”

“Anytime,” he smiled at me. When I thought the wolf would say something next, he only stared dumbfounded past my shoulders. “Oh, fuck me…not her.”

“Who?” I glanced behind me and trailed through the bodies. My eyes widened at the sight of a familiar face among our comrades. “Oh…her.”

Memories of the Art Institute flooded back at seeing a red she-wolf clothed in baggy jeans held together by a leather belt buckle wrapped around a thin waist, plus a used Chicago Bears t-shirt the same color as her casual sneakers. The she-wolf’s mature body and youthful appearance suggested she had to be a few years older than Lowell. Maybe even in her mid-thirties. She could’ve easily passed for a substitute teacher in either middle school or elementary, but I knew it to be here. The same wolf who sat beside me in front of the Nighthawks painting as she traded me a seemingly innocuous flash drive.

 “Nancy?” I gasped.

 I felt Lowell’s body stiffen next to me. His tail brushed my leg before curling tightly. As Nancy spotted us, then politely stepped through the sea of shoulders to look at us, I hear my boyfriend awkwardly clear his throat.

 “So, this is more a reunion, huh?” She chirped amusedly, taking a single sip from her juice box and sighing. “I’d seen Low here manhandling that tithingman earlier, but didn’t know if you’d made it too, Adam. Glad to see you’re alive.”

 “S-Same here, Nancy,” I replied, then gladly shook her paw after offering it to me. “I haven’t seen you since the Art Institute. Where…Where have you been?”

 “Laying low like everyone else,” she gave a friendly giggle in my direction. Otherwise, Nancy completely ignored Lowell like a shunned classmate. “After that rendezvous, I actually spent a month or two pretending to be homeless, running things to and from Johanna to Nick on his boat here.”

 Lowell finally chimed in, “Nice seeing you again, Nancy.”

 “Kindly go fuck yourself with a cheese grater, Low.”

 She sipped her box again without so much as flinching from her own comment. That certainly made me choke back a breath, as it did to a few others who heard around us. I’d even caught a glimpse of Hector holding back a disbelieving snicker. Lowell didn’t even flinch at the insult, but instead returned it in stride.

 “I’ll be sure to do that when we’re in Canada, and you do the same then,” he replied with a nervous laugh and an attempt at a shrug.

Nancy remained incredibly unamused by his retort. I almost predicted she would continue to make my boyfriend embarrass himself if it weren’t for Johanna’s loud whistling.

Everyone immediately fell silent as they turned to the center of the cramped room.

“Is everybody present?” She turned to Nick, who nodded. “Good, thank you. It’s great to see all of you here. For those who don’t know, we’re currently several miles west of Lower Michigan, and just an hour ago, we passed by North and South Manitou Islands off the coast.” A few muttered happily but fell silent when the leading doe spoke up again. “We’re nowhere free though. There’s still time for the Devouts to catch us. Our radios upstairs have discovered an announcement sent out to all states bordering Canada and the Western Republic; a two-million-dollar bounty for each Defiant caught fleeing.”

Everybody present broke into concerned murmurs.

“Two million?”

“Fuckin’ shit…”

“They’re broke as is.”

“I never knew we’d be worth that much,” Lowell mentioned to me.

“Trust me, Low,” Nancy commented to the canine, “you’re not even worth that much.”

“She said,” he said without looking to her, “acting like I haven’t contributed longer than her…”

Johanna abruptly craned her neck at a few of the murmuring Defiant in the room, Lowell and Nancy included, who immediately shut their muzzles like two cubs given warnings by their mother mid-lecture. I hid a small laugh at the comparison by coughing.

“Every government-sponsored militia group between Wisconsin, the U.P. and Lower Michigan’s going to be coming after us,” Johanna spoke again as she pulled out and presented a paper map of Lake Michigan on the coffee table in front of her. Besides some scribblings in some areas, what made it difficult to fully see were the shoulders and perked ears blocking some mammals’ views. “First, the Evanescent will go top speed through the Mackinac Strait, then under the bridge into Lake Huron. Once we push past any resistance, they’ll be expecting us to keep going East over to Manitoulin Islandwe’ll then go through the narrow straight between the U.P. and Drummond Island towards St. Joseph.

“To answer your questions, yes we are in contact with Canadian Armed Forces and they are currently fighting with a few retreating Devout military battalions. If we can get through the North Channel and maroon onto St. Joseph Island, we can go northward until we reach one of the towns. There, we can contact the Canadians for an extraction. Everyone’s coming with. Nobody gets left behind.”

“Question, ma’am,” Jordan raised a paw.

“Yes, doctor?”

The older ferret shifted uncomfortable when all eyes turned to him. He persisted, “Will the tithingman be included in ‘nobody gets left behind’? What if he tries to escape?”

“The Canadians and NATO will be interested in interviewing Stephen McConnell downstairs, so he’ll be included in what we bring with us,” she said, then clarified, “If the boy tries to pull any stunts, knock him out if you have to. He’s going to be one of the main reasons Canadian Command will want to extract us near enemy territory.”

 “There’s an extra problem to address,” Nick spoke up beside the commanding deer, sharing the same steely expression as she did. “This boat here’s normally capable of sixty knots, but thanks to the extra mammals here, she’s overcapacity, which means her speed is down a third than usual. We’re not going at forty-five knots.”

 “That’s fifty-two miles an hour,” Johanna chimed back in. “If you’re able, I want everyone here to find something that isn’t nailed down to the floor and toss it off the side. I need this yacht to go at least five knots faster. Everyone else, get ready for fighting within the next four hours. Dismissed!”

 Defiant within the room either dispersed or went to join Johanna in whatever she wanted them to do. Meanwhile, Lowell turned to a certain red she-wolf still taking in the information.

“Would it be a little late for me to say I’m sorry?” He asked her.

Nancy gave a haughty scoff.

“Few years too late for that. Besides, we got more important things to worry about than forgiveness.” Sighing indignantly, the red she-wolf staring at me sympathetically before telling Lowell, “Do me a big favor though, for the both of us: don’t break his heart like you did mine.”

 She stormed off to a flight of stairs going below deck, and I made the connection.

 “Wait a minute,” I looked to see him with splayed ears. “Low, did you and her—”

 “She used to work with me in the field for a bit,” he simply stated. “Long story short, she thought it was one thing and I thought it another, but she didn’t forgive me for being quiet about what I liked until it was far too late for her to quit liking me. So, Johanna had her doing street work when it started to interfere.”

 “Oh,” I uncurled my tail, nodding in understanding. “I can’t imagine.”

 “C’mon. We’ll talk about it later,” Lowell motioned for me to join a few others grabbing the coffee table nearby. “We have things to do.”

 The next few hours were among the less eventful, but most important minutes of our lives as exiled resistance. Per Johanna’s orders, Lowell and I worked with everyone in finding anything and everything to be tossed overboard. Furniture like the couch we slept on, the lounge chairs, some coffee tables, ottomans. We watched it all sink or float away into Lake Michigan without a trace. Old Nick didn’t so much as blink each time, watching his property unceremoniously turn into debris littering the freshwater lake.

 The mongoose uttered out, “I never liked this useless shit anyway…”

 Those helping out the most were myself, Lowell, Lucius, Olivia, and Blu, who traded turns with Hector in order to utilize his large muscles for carrying around heavier furniture.

Not everything was considered dead weight. The sole exceptions to what could be thrown off the Evanescent were our belongings in luggage suitcases, the few gathered weapons below deck, plus a certain tithingman red fox being left tied up in the yacht’s makeshift brig.

“He keeps asking to see you, Adam,” Blu mentioned after we’d watched a dresser sink underwater off the portside. “Mentions you by name, species, even eye color.”

“Speaking of that damn fox,” Hector butted in mid-grunt, nonchalantly turning to us after he’d thrown a flatscreen TV to its watery grave. “Adam? I'm impressed how you took him down last night. You did a great job there. Lowell taught you well.”

He patted my back, but I didn’t smile. “Thank you,” I still said. “I’m sorry if he gave you any trouble for the past week.”

“Don’t even get me started on the amount of trouble we went through to get him halfway across Chicago,” Hector shook his head, snarling, “You’re lucky your ex is valuable, or I’d have done us all a favor and put a bullet between his eyes. Save us all the trouble.

Oddly enough, I didn’t wince at the image, which frightened me a little on the inside.

“Personally, I’d be feeling sorrier for that TV, dude,” Blu sighed with a folded ear as he watched the electronic disappear beneath the yacht’s foaming waves. “Looked expensive.”

“*Por el amor de Dios*,” our fennec comrade muttered in Spanish. “Not as expensive as our lives are. You heard the doe, *chicos*, we need to keep throwing stuff out.”

Wrinkling my whiskers due to some airborne lake mist, I nodded strongly. Hector was right with one thing: material items didn’t hold any value compared to everyone else’s safety. So, we continued doing just that until I felt like a haphazard trail of furniture and utensils lined up the bottom of Lake Michigan. When nothing else remained, all people could do was either stand around trying to find something to do or watch out the windows and railing of the yacht, waiting for something to happen.

Me? Call it impulsive curiosity or boredom, but I made my decision.

“Are you sure about this, Adam?”

“Yes, I am.” I glanced back to Lowell as he followed me close by down the small corridor. “Whatever happens, whatever goes down, at least it won’t be with regrets.”

Bluford remained guarding the closet after the previous shift asked for a break, and he tensed when I approached him with my wolf boyfriend standing strictly behind my tail. The Doberman’s eyes narrowed sympathetically to me, but he didn’t move. If anything, his posture stiffened at firmer attention.

“Do you get permission from Johanna?” He asked. Unblinking, I nodded up to the taller canine, and he exhaled in slight relief. “Only one of us at a time though. Call me or Low if anything…”

Blu left the sentence hanging as he stepped aside, then fished out a key to unlock the wooden door. He knocked three times, and we heard slight movement on the other side.

“What now?” A bored, weak voice spoke up behind the barrier.

“You’ve got a visitor, McConnell.” Blu snarled, free paw reaching for the pistol lodged in the back of his pants. “I’m going to open the door. Try anything again, and—”

“Yeah, yeah, I got it!” The fox snapped back, clearly snarling. “I’m ready.”

More movement. Blu didn’t let go of his pistol while using his other paw to unlock the door. When it swung open, I stepped back from the pungent smell of old piss mixed with unwashed fox musk. Granted, nobody else smelled any better given what happened during the previous twelve to eighteen hours, but it never occurred to me how rancid my former best friend had smelled last night until I saw him for myself. Even Lowell stifled a groan.

Stephen McConnell appeared the same as last night, only his wrists were bound behind his back as he leaned on the floor against the small back wall. The makeshift cell seemed no bigger than a tiny broom closet, but it was enough for his duct-taped ankles to be strewn out. A single look at his dirties pajamas made me realize why he smelled like piss. My frown abruptly turned into shock and unease though, as I finally locked eyes with the fox who betrayed me.

Slouching beforehand, Stephen’s posture straightened upon seeing me. His bruises remained, but they seemed secondary to how widely he stared at me from within the dimly lit room.

He exhaled a single breath into a word: “Adam…”

“Stephen,” I acknowledged coolly. We stared for what felt like eternity. Neither of us dared to breathe, until I stated the obvious. “It’s been a while…”

“It—” The fox paused midway through speaking, reflected on something, then narrowed his glares back up at me, and the on-guard wolf standing behind me. “It has…Defiant.”

I tried stepping forward, only for Blu to hold a paw up. I cautiously nodded, returning my attention back to the dumbstruck fox. Fortunately for me, whatever shock in my system was long gone since seeing him try to escape on the wharf. I could imagine how livid my comrades and friends still felt though.

The red fox smiled at me in spite of how pained he looked while doing it. The bandage on his cheek flashed at me alongside his fangs. “I didn’t think the Mexican mutt was telling the truth when he mentioned you being a traitor,” he murmured. “How did they break you?”

“They didn’t break me,” I spoke calmly. “So much as put me back together.”

After the clinic tore me down, I didn’t say.

“Why?”

“Hm?” Stephen raised an eyebrow. The twitch in his lips was noticeable. “Why what?”

“Why did you turn me in?” I ultimately asked. “Why did you inform the Archangels I was a homo when you were too? It’s been on my mind ever since I found out you were a tithingman, but the only thing I can think of is…you weren’t taking your job seriously, until my dad caught us, and you…panicked.” His shocked yet stoic expression faltered, yet I refused to look away from the other canine. “You figured my dad was going to be a good Devout citizen by turning us in, so you decided to do it ahead of time. You were saving your own skin!”

“I was trying to save our skins, Adam!” His exterior melted into a snarl.

“Save our skins?” I hissed. “You call letting me get tortured ‘saving me’?!”

“If you did as they said and not make a fuss, they would’ve let you out in no time!” He insisted, sitting up and about to try to stand. At least, until Blu and presumably Lowell behind me shot him dirty looks. Stephen rolled his eyes, giving a sigh. “Believe me, Adam, I didn’t want you to get sent to one of those clinics, but after your dad found us, I…I did panic. But you weren’t supposed to get seddied. All you had to do was follow their rules, convince them you’re no longer feeling these feelings, then walk out with a clean bill of health—”

“And then what?” I guffawed. “Then, you’d keep seeing me like nothing happened. Is that what you were gonna say?”

He continued trying to insist, “I didn’t want you to get disappeared, Adam—”

“Fucking shut it!” The anger in my veins coursed through me. “It’s sure easy for you to say it when you’re not the one being punished!”

“I didn’t know if you were dead when they took you—”

“I didn’t know either, Stephen!” I hissed at him again. “All this time, I thought you were taken by the Archangels too, until I discovered by accident you worked for them! How many of us—how many of your own kind, people like you and me—did you betray and rat out so you wouldn’t share in our own fucking fate!?”

“Nowhere near enough!” He finally barked, snarling again. “Adam, you were my best friend! My only friend, growing up! You were supposed to be different from the other faggots and deviants and look at you now! You’re with *them*! Our enemy!”

“No thanks to you!” Lowell growled over my tense shoulder.

Something other than recognition crossed Stephen. “You must be the ‘boyfriend’ then.”

“Fuck yeah, I am!” He answered with pride. My tail stilled at hearing him speak next to me, as well as feeling his comforting paw rest on my other shoulder. “I’m the bastard who pulled him out of that same Hell, you got him thrown in.”

“It’s the reason I became a defiant, Stephen,” I said.

“What he just said,” Lowell chuckled as his tail wrapped around my torso. If not protectively, then possessively. “In a fucked-up sense, I have to thank ya for being a murderous Devout cocksucker.”

“Shut up.”

“No, I won’t.” Lowell kissed the side of my neck. “It’s a fact: you deciding to sell Adam down the river is the reason I got the chance to fall in love with him and meet his lovely mother and father. So, thanks for being a shitty friend, a turncoat, and an evil Devout cocksucker eager to give HJs to his theocratic overlords—”

“Shut up, heathen!” Stephen visibly writhed at what Lowell said, and how I didn’t flinch from it. Because it was true. “All of you are going to burn! My superiors only wanted me to watch certain targets for potential treason. I don’t destroy buildings or spread fear through terrorism. My job is necessary in the eyes of the Lord, because I cure the cancer of this count—”

“Was I a cancer cell then?” I almost stepped forward, only for Blu to silently block me with his arm again. “Were my parents potentially cancerous by just living their lives? Was Donald Griffith a cancer cell when he got murdered that night?”

“That old lion, you mean?” The smirking fox shook his bruised muzzle. “Are you going to give me another lecture about how he was an amazing soul, who got killed because I wouldn’t come quietly, and that I don’t have the right to say his name? Believe me, that Mexican mutt wouldn’t let me forget about the old cat’s existence since that night.”

“I can do it again if you keep talking like that,” Blu spoke up.

“Thanks, but no thanks,” he replied indifferently with a quick glance behind me. “I’ll take that wolf’s offer about having a dip in the lake over another boring interrogation, please.”

“Don’t tempt me, dude.” Lowell clutched around my shoulder again, steeling himself from acting on impulse. “Act cool all ya want, but it’s not gonna change things. We’re making our way to Canada right now. You’ll be tried for real crimes.”

 “Funny,” Stephen mock-laughed, “…that tranny deer you all listen to told me the exact same thing this morning. It told me like it or not, I’m a traitor for letting myself get captured.”

 “*She* is right,” Blu confirmed, emphasizing on the first word. “She also gave me a time limit on how long we can talk to you. The next time we see you, you’re getting knocked out.”

 “C’mon, I want to talk longer with my best buddy!” Stephen complained sarcastically. “Adam, you’ve got to tell me more about what you’ve been up to. How’s the family now?” When I didn’t answer the fox, he asked again, “Adam?”

 The red fox I crushed on and befriended during childhood either never existed, or no longer existed as I knew him. Whatever the case was, I didn’t give the tithingman the satisfaction of looking back. Not even after Lowell whispered something scandalous about me to the fox, and all I could hear after a sharp gasp, then a slamming door, was Stephen McConnell screaming in the yacht closet for me to come back to him.

No. Rather than that, I just walked down the corridor.

 Eventually, Lowell caught back up to me wearing a smug grin.

 “What did you tell him, Low?”

“Nothing too important,” he shrugged. “Just that I got to deflower you before he did.”