It felt strange to see everyone in the Maverick livelier than ever. Not that I could blame them or myself.

For twenty-two years since the Revenant Party took over, the Defiant were nothing more than a thorn on their regime’s side. They did nothing but merely subvert the system and save victims while recruiting and networking from the shadows. Nothing could stop Devout America from conquering its enemies, but rebellion would never die here. Finally, this thorn in their side was going to transform into a serious knife wound.

Everyone prepared over the next two days, with Lowell and I preparing for our first mission together. Given my lack of clothes besides a few smuggled for me by the hotel staff, I did not have much to pack, though Lowell went thorough on what I should do.

“Is it me or is everyone too eager to go to war?” I mused aloud, catching Lowell’s attention as he filled a backpack. “Earlier, I saw Donald and Hector grinning.”

“Whoo, that’s never a good sign,” the wolf faked seriousness, then smirked directly at me. “Can you blame ‘em? We’re finally gonna be doing bigger shit! Even bigger than the clinic rescue, and we’re gonna be hitting the Devout where it hurts! Aren’t you excited?”

“I…I guess, but it feels weird. I’ve never ‘resisted’ before…”

What if I did something wrong?

“Hey,” he paused packing and wagged his tail against my hip, grinning again, “don’t worry about it. The fact we exist is resisting in of itself. And by next week, we’ll be doing more than ‘resisting’…”

It was a week before the Fourth of July. For now, our first objective involved sneaking out of the Maverick Hotel and rendezvousing with a Defiant sympathizer somewhere in Chicago, who’d give us refuge in their home between missions. Lowell and Johanna wouldn’t divulge much information for my sake until we personally got to the hideout, but it didn’t lessen my anxiety by much.

The only luggage I had with me was a few random pairs of clothing, a burner flip phone (I didn’t think they made them anymore) and a bathroom bag for my necessities, all in an ordinary, grey backpack. I had the hotel staff to thank for getting me some decent underwear as well, and couldn’t thank Matt the bellboy bear for buying me some deodorant between his shifts.

“You didn’t have to, ya know…” I told the bear. “Thank…Thank you.”

“Don’t thank us. We aren’t the ones risking it all,” he glanced to the cracked door of my now-abandoned room and winked. “I’ll have a housekeeper sent up, to remove any trace. Good luck you two.”

Lowell stood by the elevators with his backpack strapped around his right arm, obviously antsy about going to see Oscar. I didn’t hold up and eagerly joined him, despite his crude jokes about how I was looking at Matt.

“I wasn’t!”

“Aw, aren’t I enough for you? You wound me, Adam.”

“And you’re annoying me, Lowell.”

“Heh, you’re not the first to say that, and you won’t be the last. Besides, I’m just teasing you. The big guy’s got an online girlfriend over in New York. He’s as straight as can be.”

I widened my eyes in slight disbelief, only for us to become distracted when we went into the hacker central. A lanky otter sat in a wheelchair on the other side of the second room, not bothering to look at us as he continuously typed at his keyboard. No, *keyboards*.

“You’re here for the codes, Lowell.” He stated matter-of-factly. “Do me a favor and don’t lose them like you did last time.”

“Hey, that was *one time*, nerd!” the wolf growled, annoyed already. “And you’re—I”

“If you make another crack about me trying to ‘run’ from Archangels while in the field, my sister will cut off your tail and use it as a cleaning mop.”

Lowell immediately silenced himself.

“Good boy. Now then…” Oscar cleared his throat and yanked three flash drives from his computer, one red, the other white and the last one blue. Very subtle. “Adam, I want you to keep these in your backpack.” He grabbed a plastic bad and placed them inside. “And whatever you do, don’t look at them on a computer. Not until we give the word.”

“Huh?” Lowell groaned, “Why does he get to carry them?” I glared sharply at him as Oscar handed me the flash drives in the bag. “Are you still harping me over that mistake, nerd?”

“Who the hell put an easily breakable flash drive in their *back pocket*?” the otter snarled back slightly, then returned to typing out some codes on his computer. “Thanks to you, we almost lost valuable info from the New York cell. Thank God I managed to recover the data, but still…”

I tentatively placed the bag in my backpack. “Aren’t you being harsh on Lowell?”

When the otter replied with a simple scoff, Lowell grabbed my paw and led me back out into the hall, though not without flashing a middle finger at Oscar. The last two Defiant members we conversed with before leaving were Abigail and Jordan in the make-shift infirmary. They just needed to do one more physical exam. I still couldn’t sprint long distances, but my lack of needed a cane certainly helped my case.

“Alright then,” Jordan nodded. “You seem to be in physical health. At least, for someone who’s spent several months lying in a comatose state and a few more months in a hotel can be…”

“Now Adam,” Abigail lectured me, “I want you to not push yourself too hard, drink plenty of fluids, and don’t talk to anyone who Lowell confirms isn’t with us.”

“Don’t worry, Abby! I’ll be looking after him.”

Jordan scoffed, “That’s precisely the reason she’s worrying, Jones.”

Lowell rolled his eyes. “Shouldn’t you be jerking your scalpel off or something?” he asked, smirking.

“You two stop it,” Abigail groaned, only for them to ignore her.

“It’s a shame, really,” Jordan mumbled. “A complete shame.”

Raising a confused ear, Lowell asked, “What shame?”

“If you die in the field,” the ferret told him, “I won’t have the privilege of dissecting your bullet-riddled corpse.”

“Dr. Macdonald!” Abigail gasped in shock, then muttered to herself, “It’s like I’m disciplining children.”

“‘Dissecting a corpse’? Isn’t that how you lost your medical license?”

“The thought of you in a morgue sounds more appealing…”

“Ew, do you jack your scalpel off to that thought? That’s sick!” Lowell laughed shortly, still unfazed by her and Jordan’s prominent scowls.

“You’re an immature cub, brat.”

“Guilty as charged!” he clicked his tongue. “Anyway, as much as I love to roast you, Doc, we’ve got a dictatorship to harass.” The wolf casually opened the door for me. “Talk to ya both later!”

“Good-bye, Abigail,” I hugged her intensely, and firmly shook paws with the ferret, waving as I rejoined Lowell outside the infirmary. “Good-bye, Jordan.”

“Good luck, Adam!” she beamed towards me. “Stay safe, and God bless!”

“Make sure that dog doesn’t get you killed,” he commented.

If Abigail weren’t present in the room, Lowell surely would’ve told the doctor to go fuck himself.

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Outside the Maverick Hotel’s back door and delivery bay, two cameras hung from light poles. If anyone grabbed a ladder and looked closely at their casings, they’d think twice about tampering once they took notice of the Devout States flag embedded on them. If they went offline for any reason, an alarm would go to the Homeland Security Agency, and a squad of Archangels would sniff for any perpetrators responsible.

Luckily, there existed a loophole. Some time ago, Oscar managed to put a bug in the cameras that, when activated, would give anyone trying to sneak out about thirty seconds before the alarm would be tripped. Anyone watching the live footage would only see a looped feed.

Once we hurried into the random taxicab outside, Lowell and I closed the door right as the driver sped out into the road.

“How’s life been hanging, Nick?” Lowell asked cheerfully.

Looking towards the front, I could see the driver was a middle-aged mongoose wearing glasses and a tacky Hawaiian shirt, and this bright attire did not match his serious gaze focused on the road.

“Very good, sonny, but it’s gotten better with you in my car,” he responded.

“I see your sarcasm is improving, old man,” the wolf chuckled, turning to me, “Adam, this is Old Nick, our personal chauffer.”

“Ugh, for the last fuckin’ time, I’m not old and I ain’t your chauffer, Lowell,” the mongoose growled as he turned into a busy intersection. I immediately felt his eyes lock on mine through the rearview mirror. “Oh, hey. I remember you. We met during…Easter.”

Nodding, I replied, “I never got to thank you, sir.”

He smiled back at me. “No worries, kid. I’m just glad you’re walking about.”

“Yeah,” I stared out the window at passing shops. “It feels…weird now, being outside the hotel.”

“Tell me about it,” the wolf beside me murmured. “You’ll get used to it though.”

“I take it he’s joining you outside now, Lowell?” Nick commented to him, sighing as he continued focusing on the road. “I was told you’d be accompanied by a newbie, but I didn’t figure it’d be one of the sleeping beauties. Either way, I hope the doe’s aware of what’s she’s doing.”

“She does!” Lowell lowly growled.

My lips formed a confident smirk. “I’ve been designated as the—”

The wolf suddenly slammed a paw across my muzzle, startling me.

“Uh, uh, uh, zip it,” Old Nick interrupted. “Listen here, kid. I dunno what Lowell or the other brats have told you, but you don’t talk about your shit while I’m present.”

“The less people who know, the better,” Lowell clarified for me.

My eyes lit up in realized alarm, and he lowered a paw.

“Oh yeah…sorry.” I laughed nervously. “I forgot.”

The mongoose glanced back to Lowell. “Ya sure he’s got the guts, kid?”

“Shut up and drive.” He didn’t even hesitate in saying it.

I would have been flustered if I weren’t fixated on the sight of a descending airplane outside the window. The highway was awfully close to O’Hare International Airport, still a hub for travelers unaffected by the wars and sanctions. Roaring engines and shadows of aircrafts still dominated the sounds of traffic around us, and me and Lowell were momentarily distracted by a passing Boeing that went in for a landing.

*It looks easy to just fly away from here*, I mused to only myself. *So easy…*

When Nick drove us away from the Schiller Park, the cab turned silent.

I cleared my throat, and decided for the hell of it, “So…why ‘Lowell’?”

The wolf perked his ears at me. “Huh?”

“Why are you named ‘Lowell’?” I repeated my question. “From what I know, it doesn’t sound that…ya know, biblical…”

“Oh, it ain’t.” Lowell started laughing. “If we’re being honest actually, that’s just my middle name. It’s French for ‘young wolf’, but I don’t know for the life of me why I got it.”

“Really?” He nodded. “So…what is your first name then?”

His smile faltered for a moment. “My name’s just Lowell.”

“Why’s that?” I asked.

“…that’s not something I like to talk about,” he mused after a moment of tense silence, “and I talk about a lot of things. Can we…drop it?”

I folded an awkward ear. “Oh. I’m…I’m sorry.”

“That’s okay…it doesn’t matter really,” Lowell dismissed it, soon changing the subject of our conversation, “Anyway, how long until we’re there, Old Nick?”

The mongoose grumbled, “Fifteen minutes or so. And shut it, mutt.”

Lowell chuckled more as I gazed back to the passing cars and suburbia outside, noticing more of Chicago’s downtown high-rises poking through a thick layer of gathering clouds. The weather said there’d be a slight chance of rainstorms tonight, but I didn’t believe it until I saw darker clouds out in Lake Michigan. Once again, seeing something like this made me glad to finally be outside the Maverick Hotel. To see the sky, the clouds and other furs, even if they saw us as anything but equals or innocents.

Suburbia eventually became the inner city, and I didn’t realize we were in Lincoln Park until Nick drove us over the Chicago River. Soon, we came to a row of residential houses standing opposite a large schoolyard. Cubs either played on the grass or gathered around a classmate carrying a tablet they got for Christmas.

“Here we are.” Nick parked us in front of a three-story townhouse, one with a small courtyard surrounded by an aesthetically-fitting metal gate. “Time for you two to go.”

“Thanks for the ride, Old Nick!” Lowell patted the (irritated) mongoose’s shoulder, then handed him a few dollar bills. “Come on, Adam. Let’s go.”

“Thanks, Nick.” I wagged my tail slightly. “Thanks for everything.”

He smiled back. “Good luck out there, kid.”

We quickly grabbed our backpacks and stepped out Nick’s taxicab, watching him speed off before drudging past the gates. Not only were the flowers and plants blooming this summer, but the sight of a rustic bird fountain in the middle of the small courtyard made me wonder more about the Defiant sympathizers.

As if on cue, the front doors swayed open to reveal two hulking figures—an apprehensive cougar couple—standing together in what the Devout considered ‘traditional clothing’. The man in a dark blazer, trousers and an undone white tie, with a small cross pinned on the right side of his chest. And for the lady, a red, conservative blouse clashing against a dark blue skirt that covered her knees. She wore the same pin on her chest, but I also noticed her brown headfur braided into a ponytail.

“Come inside, boys,” she spoke up first. A small, welcoming smile adorned her lips, and it somehow didn’t seem forced. “It’s good to see you again, Benjamin.”

“Likewise, ma’am,” Lowell replied, much to my surprise. When I gave him a confused look, the wolf mouthed, “Go with it,” to me while we went up the steps.

When we entered, I was taken aback by how spacious and ordained the house looked on the inside. Paintings of every kind hung from the ivory walls, while expensive furniture, a couple china cabinets and several photographs stood perfectly positioned in the rooms on either side of a grand staircase dividing the lower floor. Around one corner, I could make out an equally-splendor family room and what I assumed was a kitchen counter.

Just how influential were these supporters? “And who is this young man?” the husband asked ‘Ben’, motioning over to me. “Another friend of yours?”

“Yep,” he wrapped an arm around my shoulder. “This is Steve. He’s new to this, and the folks thought it would be perfect for him to get new experience after college.”

“That’s good, good…” the wife turned to her husband and smiled. “I’m gonna go take their things to the guest room and check how the casserole is doing, okay, honey?”

“Sure, Mary,” he half-smiled at her. “I’ll catch up with our guests in the study.”

The wife beamed at me and Lowell once more before I reluctantly gave her our backpacks. I was hesitant to give them easily away until Lowell nodded to me that it was okay. And once she disappeared around the corner hallway, I trailed behind Lowell as we silently followed the husband across the living room. A single hallway later brought us to a door, but before we even stepped near it, he held me and Lowell back.

“Not yet,” he stated, placing his touchscreen phone in a basket resting atop a nearby table along the wall. “Even walls have ears.”

I nodded hesitantly, placing my burner phone into the basket while Lowell was visibly reluctant. Instead, he and cougar opted to argue about it through glares, eye movements and gestures, until the wolf finally conceded.

“Stubborn old cat…” he muttered to me in annoyance.

“I’m thirty-four, mind you. And you can’t be no more than ten years younger.”

Lowell laughed shortly. “Fair point, but you’re still stubborn.”

The husband eventually held the door open for us, and we found ourselves standing in a room of bookshelves with a mahogany desk in the center, facing towards a window covered in silky, emerald drapes. And in the far-left corner stood what looked like a model of a slim building, proudly presented in an alcove.

This had to be the cougar’s personal study. And I could not find a single electronic in sight. Not a laptop, computer monitor, phone or even a dated landline.

“You don’t have to be that paranoid, you know.” Lowell sighed in relaxed relief, leaning casually against the desk. “Burner flip phones only get spybots if we use the internet browser on them. And our tech guy removed the option before we left.”

“Being paranoid is the reason Mary and I aren’t being interrogated right now,” he countered. “And can you please get off of that, Ben or whatever your name is?”

“Oops, sorry,” Lowell jumped off and instead relaxed into a nearby adjacent chair. “And we plan to keep it that way. The last thing anyone wants to wake up to is a fuckin’ Archangel breaking down your door.”

“How many times have I told you to watch the language, kid?” As he walked towards us and behind the desk, I could spot the feline holding the wedding band camouflaging into his tan-furred ring finger. “This is my house, and we’re risking our lives to let the Defiant send their lackeys, so the least you can do is told that tongue of yours.”

“Riiiiight,” my wolf friend chuckled. “Anyway, *Steven*, I’d like you to meet Mr. Kevin Lange: professional architect, part-time engineering entrepreneur and one of the rare elitist Devouts who give a fuck about our cause.”

The cougar growled lowly.

Lowell held his paws up defensively. “Okay, okay, I was just f…*joking* with you. I didn’t mean any harm, alright? Alright.”

Mr. Lange sat down at his desk. “Did anybody follow you two?”

“Would we have come?” Lowell pointed out to him. “So anyway…you’re not the kind of elitist fur who likes to have conversations with us sinners, so what do you want, Kevin?”

“Snarky and observant as always, mutt.” The elitist fur exhaled dejectedly. “I’ll be blunt about it: after you two do your things and cause all the ruckus you want, we don’t want you to return here.”

I widened my eyes, not knowing what to make of this. Lowell didn’t say a word at first, but I could tell he looked surprised by this as well.

“How many times did they show up? The Archangels?”

My right paw absentmindedly grabbed onto a nearby desk for support.

“Two stopped by our place after going door-to-door last night,” the cougar answered after a tense moment of thought. “They said they had reason to suspect someone in this neighborhood was committing illegal espionage. They wouldn’t say who were suspects, but the neighbors are already preparing for a witch hunt of sorts.”

“Do they suspect you?”

“Not that I know of,” he sighed. “I had this room set up so we can’t be listened in on, and no bug’s signal will get out of here, but we can’t be sure with the spybots. When they asked about you two coming over, I went with the usual story, but I’m…I’m always uncertain…”

“Usual story?” I asked Lowell.

“I’m a son of an old college buddy up in Northern Michigan and they send me here whenever my folks are struggling with money,” he robotically explained. “And you are Steve, my best friend who always wanted to see Chicago. Simple enough.”

“Try not to act like you’re too close though,” Mr. Lange commented.

Lowell’s eyes darted immediately to him. Accusingly. “Of…course.”

“Anyway, we need to be even more careful than usual,” he continued while placing his curling tail in his paws, twitching nervously between his shaking claws, “I tried contacting Cardinal through the usual channels to warn you all about it, but…”

“…but?”

The cougar growled shortly. “I was scared…that they broke into my home and tapped my phone.”

Lowell groaned, clearly irritated. “Oh my God…”

“I couldn’t risk it, alright?!”

“And you decided it was better to not still warn us ahead of time?” Lowell accused the elder feline in slight annoyance. “Having Archangels in your neighborhood kinda hinders our own operations, doesn’t it? And the fact we don’t know if the spotlight is on us complicates things! You should have taken a risk and just warned us. Johanna would’ve—”

“Yeah, well that bitch never answers my calls unless it’s for your operations!”

Lowell suddenly sprung from the chair and leaned over the desk. Sensing his anger beforehand, I’d already placed a paw in front of him to keep the wolf from lunging over the paper-littered desk.

“Never.” He enunciated in low fury. “Insult. Johanna Cardinal. In front of me.”

The only sounds came from our hitched breathing and Lowell grunting as he dug his claws into his palms. Even he knew not to scratch up the mahogany. Not if we wanted to escalate things and make them worse.

“I…apologize. I…get emotional when I’m hungry.”

“Sure, whatever.” Lowell leaned back, glancing at me and giving a soft smile. Then, those same grateful eyes flung imaginary daggers in Mr. Lange’s direction. “I’ll contact Johanna and see if she wants us to abort.”

I couldn’t prevent myself from folding my ears at the thought. After all this time, I wanted nothing more than to follow this timber wolf to hell and back, to help him and the Defiant fight against the same society that imprisoned me. And we were going to go back?

*Knock! Knock! Knock!*

“Dinner is ready, boys!” Mrs. Lange spoke up through the wooden door.

All three of us exchanged awkward looks before relenting at the smell of casserole.