The tender, close moments Lowell and I shared did help me forget about…whatshisname. Albeit temporarily. Then again, the dreams and nightmares were easy to forget upon waking up in a warm bed to the sounds of your boyfriend, lying beside you and huffing as he beat his meat under the blanket covers.

 I yawned, causing my wolf to pause his motions. A chuckle erupted from my throat, “Mmmm, hehe…good morning, Low.”

 “Morning, Adam.” He answered one second later. “I uh…was just checking for ticks.”

 “You were checking for ticks?” I repeated between hard blinks.

 The crust in my eyes were annoying to deal with when they stuck to the fur on the bridge of my nose. However, my primary focus remained on something else I’d woken up with, now hard and leaking between my legs. A wry grin formed against my muzzle, and I turned to the equally horny canine.

 “Well, I think it’d be a good idea for the two of us to check for ticks, now that you mention it.” I teased him across the bed, my horny expression now mirroring his. “Mind if I inspect you first?”

 Pushing and kicking the blankets away to the floor revealed Lowell and his stiff cock, dribbling with wolf cum over his fingers. His tail swished eagerly between his strong legs.

 “Well, what’re ya waiting for? Approval from the Pope?” he asked. “We can’t exactly take all our precious time in the world here. It’s almost ten past eight.”

 “Fifty minutes isn’t that long.” I mused aloud. “Do you think there’s time for…?”

 “I got quite the confidence in your talented lips, Adam.” He snickered with a twitch of his nose in the dark, still giving off that cocky, goofy, wolfish smile. “However, it’d take more time to get cum out of your ass than it would outta your breath.”

 “You’re such a romantic, aren’t you?” I wiggled my rear towards him under the covers, though the act appeared more awkwardly than I’d envisioned, “Sorry, I’m being a weirdo.”

 “Shhhh.” Lowell effortlessly turned me around to provide a deep kiss. His arms wrapped around my torso, and he pressed my naked body down on his equally naked, equally hard length, our parting breaths cooling the other’s lips and making me shiver against his luscious gray fur. The charisma in his comforting voice and the sounds of our thumping tails, entwining and unwinding between our thighs.

 “We’re both being weirdos.” He murmured between two cute licks of my whiskers. “Now,” one of his paws placed itself on a shoulder, “less talkin’ and more suckin’, okay?”

 I lightly smacked his thigh at the canine’s laughter. “Fine, but you better return the favor later tonight, alright?”

 A glint of mutual lust glinted in his auburn eyes. “You’re damn right.”

 Dominant as he could ever be, Lowell always melted like pleasured jelly as I kissed down his neck, trailed my tongue around his sensitive, shivering nipples and teased the wolf’s stomach abs until my whiskered lips eventually wrapped around his wolfcock. He especially stifled some vocal moans when those same whiskers tickled the trimmed skin underneath his pubic fur. As I used one of my free paws to grasp his and the other to furiously stroke my leaking member, ass raised high in the air and lusting tail thrashing wildly behind me, my feline tongue tasted and lapped at his musk coating the underside of his shaft, which intensely throbbed.

 “Oh fuck, fucking hell…Mmmmm!” Lowell panted back a louder moan than we could ever raise our voices to. However, his caressing grip on one of my ears told me how much he appreciated the attention. “I love you so much, Adam.”

 If only we were in a farther away world. If only the Maverick’s walls were built with more than visual privacy in mind. If only either of us could let go of our inhibitions and be as vocal as we wanted. I could slurp his wolfcock much louder, he could moan my name to Heaven itself, and we could chorus our beautiful orgasms like a choir. I could adore the meat of my boyfriend even more than I already was in the short timeframe.

 Sadly, with gritted teeth and a stifled tongue, our climaxes were restricted to an intense yet quiet groan. I ejaculated onto the sheets around the same time that Lowell ejaculated his salty, tasty seed into my maw.

 After swallowing his load in three gulps, Lowell checked the time and slowly guided me to my feet.

 “We gotta get ready now.” He told me without losing that goofy, spent grin. His warm tail also would not stop wagging in satisfaction, when he suddenly paused at the bathroom door. “Ya coming Adam? No pun intended, heh.”

 “Hahaha.” I rolled my eyes and stuck a cum-covered tongue out to the wolf. “I’ll be there in a minute. You just get the shower ready, ok?”

 Lowell shrugged a second later. “Okay, if ya say so…” he ventured inside, partially closing the door behind him.

 I swallowed the rest of his seed, wiping my chin. Without much more hesitation, I brushed aside the headfur obscuring my vision and then knelt in front of the bed, forming the sign of the Cross on my forehead, chest and shoulders. My tail curled against the carpeting as I clasped my paws together and sighed in content.

 “Dear God,” I said to Him in a low voice, “I thank you for the good night’s sleep and for giving us a new tomorrow. I thank you for this morning and hopefully a brighter evening ahead and ask that you keep giving us sanctuary for the days going forward. I pray that you protect us, that you protect Lowell, his teammates Hector, Donald, and Blu as they’re going out into the field tonight. I pray that Lowell will succeed in saving my parents, that they will not be harmed, and I can…talk to them…and try to find forgiveness. Most of all though, I pray that my love for You will grow to be as strong as what me and my boyfriend share, and that we can live together in a world where the Devout no longer persecute us or drag Your Glorious Name through the mud. I wish for a better world where our love is as true as the hearts of your real followers, not the blasphemers. Deliver us from this evil, and help us end this evil, in Jesus’ name…amen.”

 Lately, I’d noticed Lowell giving me a wary look from the sidelines in the morning and night whenever I prayed. For a while afterward, he’d be quiet before making a crude joke or found ourselves in conversation, leading me to dismiss it.

 We had better things to do, after all. Plus, if he wanted to say something or join me in my twice-daily prayers, he could easily tell me. He did not have to keep to himself, I’d argue to myself, then lament about his secrecy about the past. His past.

 Days had passed. The long, grueling week came and went in the blink of an eye as the Chicago Defiant cell prepared for the next part of Operation Crucible. Lowell returned to me with bruises here and there, but thankfully not too many that made the lovemaking we did in the evening more difficult. News about battles along the Disputed Zone were sometimes contradictory, mostly thanks to misinformation. Oregon and Northern California in the Western Republic had been dealing with strong wildfires caused by a stray missile strike breaking through the air defense system, but no changes had been made to the borders. Mexican resistance and Western Republic somehow managed to hold onto what remained of the Baja California Peninsula, for the moment.

 However, while little progress had been made west, much progress was underway for Canadian resistance in the north. Toronto and Ottowa were warzones. Devout missionaries or citizens in either city tried telling the rest of the D.S.A. through photos through Prayer Post, only for them to be blocked. The JIS Network found itself heavily sanitized of anything mentioning Canada, let alone what was occurring in the new territory.

 I remembered being with Olivia and Oscar as they showed everybody a particular photo taken before the Archangels seized every online copy; the New Toronto Megachurch, a partially constructed four-story building capable of holding five-thousand attendees, consumed by flames like flies around a carcass. Another series of photos and videos depicted a rebellion out on the streets, from masked furs throwing Molotov cocktails to graffiti being painted over pro-Devout occupation signs. Not to mention ultraviolence.

 “I’m jealous.” Lowell commented, pointing to one video of five teens overwhelming a spooked Archangel, beating the snot out of him. “Wish I had the guts to do that.”

 “He’s likely a new recruit,” Johanna muttered as she yanked away the tablet from him. The doe smiled at everybody present in the War Room. “Just think. If we yank enough feathers, rally the people to the correct tune of history, we’ll be seeing the same thing outside these walls. All if Operation Crucible manages to succeed.”

 The thought alone made my paws tremble. I laughed, “Don’t know whether to be excited or—”

 “Terrified?” Johanna finished alongside me, then chuckled softly. “Yeah, you and me both, to be honest. Imagine waiting for fifteen or twenty years. It seems unreal to me.”

 Conversations and discussions about the next phase of Operation Crucible went around. As everyone petered off to their assignments, me excluded due to the conflict of interest, a thought crossed my mind.

 “Johanna, can I go visit Jeannie Holt again?”

 She simply smiled again and said, “Why not? Tell her I said hi. Tell Jordan I’d like to talk to him about the latest argument he got into with Abigail. Again.”

 “Oh, what did he do this time?” Lowell chimed in with a wagging tail. “Tell me, please?”

 “Keep asking me about gossip and I’ll start gossiping about you, Low.” Johanna said without a single beat.

 “I’d like to come too, if I can? To see her?” Lowell asked, brushing off her comment and glancing between me and the quizzical doe. “I mean, I think I’m long past overdue to talk to Jeannie. Don’t ya think?”

 “Sure thing,” she sighed after a moment, “but if I hear you insult her or bother her, and I’ll cut that tail of yours right off. I’ll even borrow a cleaver from the kitchen.”

 “I’ll hold the *maldito* mutt down!” Hector volunteered before

 “You might wanna wait in line, dude.” Blu commented off to the side, already preparing to leave. “I bet the staff would want to get in on the occasion too.”

 “You’re damn straight,” Donald chuckled nearby, stifling roaring laughter as the lion scratched under his mane. “Johanna, how many times has he gotten in trouble with ‘em? With the manager?”

 Meanwhile, me and Johanna were biting our lower lips at the exchange. She didn’t so much as acknowledge the question, based on how much our wolf fumed.

 “Yeah, fuck you, ya boob-belchin’ bastards,” Lowell casually flipped a middle finger to Donald, then Hector, before landing on Blu. “and especially fuck you too, commie.”

 Doberman only rolled his eyes before making it out into the hallway. Presumably to the training area downstairs.

 Hector did not do anything other than smirk when he retorted, “Nah, I’m not the one you’re fucking, is that right, Lowell? Adam.”

 All eyes suddenly shifted to me. Johanna death-glared not at me, but at Hector.

 “Alright, we better get going! C’mon, Adam.” Lowell took the initiative and suddenly grabbed me, violently pulling us out of the room and towards the elevator as I died from embarrassment in that moment. Only when we stood in front of the silver doors and he pressed the button going up did my wolf mutter, “Dammit. Remind me to kick Hector off the Golden Gate Bridge. If we ever visit San Francisco.”

 My tail sagged at how long that would be from then. “Get in line.” I whined, ears folded down and blood frozen. “Oh, good God, they know now…they know.”

 “Don’t worry too much…” Lowell tried calming me down. “If they can handle Johanna Cardinal being a transgender woman, they can likely handle you and me being a couple.” The wolf snickered in fear, “Meanwhile, I’m likely gonna get a sex ed talk. Maybe you too.”

 “Ugh.” I groaned.

 Fortunately, we managed to distract ourselves by going to the seddie’s room, permanently converted into Jeannie Holt’s room. Following the traditional knocks, Jordan carefully answered the door and discreetly let us in.

 Jeannie’s recovery continued to be at a methodical pace. Before telling him to visit the War Room, the analytical, pale-furred ferret described how her acute pressure ulcers made long periods of cardio next to impossible. The bedsores on her shoulders and upper back were slowly healing, but some suspected blood clots in her legs and trouble urinating properly left much to be desired. After a couple months of physical exercises and therapy the Defiant cell could offer, Jeannie’s farthest attempt from gurney-turned-bed went as far as four feet.

 (According to Abigail earlier in the week, she suspected Jeannie also suffered from undiagnosed bipolar disorder, likely triggered from the trauma of enduring such a long time in a comatose state. Jordan tried countering it as severe clinical depression, arguing that her mood swings were probably attempts to hide said depression. This was what led to them getting into a verbal fight that escalated into Jordan outright insulting Abigail’s credentials as a certified nurse. Again. Thus, why he was in trouble.)

 The frail tigress voiced frustration and not making much progress.

 “This is better than no progress at all, Ms. Holt.” Jordan assured her. “Trust me. Your case might be more severe than what Adam here went through, but give it more time, and we can have you properly walking again.”

 “You promise?” She voiced skepticism until he nodded. “O-Okay. I believe you. I trust your word. We…We just need to keep working at it, like you said, right?”

 “Correct.” He wrote something down on his notepad and pocketed it. “I’ll get going to see Mrs. Cardinal then. Wish me luck on the dressing down.”

 “Good luck with dressing down,” my wolf joked to him at the exit, “I did not know you and Johanna were into each other like that. Will I have to call you ‘Stepdad’?”

 Jordan refused to even dignify Lowell’s quip with a response. He just closed the door as I offered him an apologetic look.

 The bubbling tigress was ecstatic to see me again. However, she was wary about Lowell until we introduced him as the wolf who helped save us and the others. She repeatedly thanked him as we relaxed and sat in chairs surrounding her gurney. For a good hour or so, the three of us just talked about anything other than the subjects that brought up bad memories. I gave some pointers on how to walk better, Lowell mentioned the different foods she could request for free from room service, at a reasonable extent, and Jeannie listened to our exploits against the Devout outside the hotel. We were careful to omit the more…explicit parts.

 “Why must you speak such foul language?” Jeannie asked the wolf.

 Lowell inanely shrugged. “Why is the sky blue?” he offered a rhetorical rebuttal. “The world may never know.”

 This prompted another round of giggling from the tigress. I glanced at Lowell to give him an earnest smirk, the wolf cheekily scratching one of his ears. However, we turned our heads immediately back to Jeannie when we heard her sniffling.

 “What’s the point of even helping me?” she pondered. “Why does it matter? It is not like I will live long enough to use my legs, not until the Archangels track us down and take me…”

 I sensed Lowell’s fur bristle with tranquil anger. I did too.

 “They won’t ever take you, Jeannie.” He told her bluntly. “I will make sure of that.”

 “It doesn’t matter…None of that matters anyway…” she shook her stripped muzzle while leaning back in the bed, staring up at the ceiling. “You and I…no, all of us are doomed to Hell.”

 “Bah!” my wolf rolled his eyes and scoffed dismissively. “You can’t be doomed to a place that doesn’t even ex—”

 “We’re not going to Hell, Jeannie.” I interrupted Lowell before he could finish his statement. “None of us will go to Hell for who we are. Our Lord would never do that to any of His followers.” When I felt my boyfriend glare confused daggers into the back of my head, I folded an ear and corrected myself, “I mean, His true followers. The ones who would never torture us or do something this barbaric to us. God would never advocate for our destruction.”

 Jeannie wiped her eyes and stared up at me. “How do you know that?”

 My thoughts returned to the number of my sins and the property damage we’d caused to interrupt the status quo, pondering over my pain and the disappointment I had for my parents seemingly abandoning me to the monsters at the Cicero Conversion Clinic. Then, I started imagining the mindset that Jeannie’s aunt and uncle held, justifying their behavior as they too left her to those same monsters in that wretched facility.

 “I just…I just believe it.”

 “That is so strange of you to say…You still believe in Him?” The tigress scratched an itch on the side of her head. “I thought that homosexuals stopped believing once they indulged in their sins?”

 It turned again into déjà vu. In that moment, as Jeannie looked up innocently at us, I froze still in semi-catatonia while Lowell started snickering at my reaction.

 “You’re both homosexual lovers, aren’t you?” she asked us bluntly. “You look at each other the same way some of the boys did at the clinic. And Adam, you talk about Lowell like he is the most important thing in the entire world.”

 “Awww, is that so?” My wolf teasingly wrapped an arm around my torso and pulled me close, releasing me from my shocked and stunned stupor. I felt myself blush rose-red under my orange fur, thankful it hid most of it, as Lowell boasted, “Yeah, we’re homosexuals. We’re sinners. We’ve dabbled in the love that dare not speak its name. Ya got any fucking problems with that?”

 Jeannie slowly moved her head side-to-side. “…no, I don’t, if I can be frank.”

 She sat back up and held her paws close to her chest.

 “If I said it did, then I would be committing a sin. I would be a hypocrite too. I’m just…confused how you can still be both. A believer and a sinner.”

 “You mean,” I slowly began to understand, “how can I be a Christian?”

 “And homosexual?” she queried, and I nodded firmly. Her tail curled under the blanket onto her lap, twitching in deep thought. “Christian and homosexual. Is…Is such a thing even possible out there?”

 A small smile crept under my whiskers. “I think so.”

 Minutes of casual talking later, and Lowell mentioned how we needed to leave. He needed to go train and practice further with the gang, and I needed to do some things before everybody involved in Crucible went to bed early. She expressed sadness at first, but Jeannie understood. All she requested was that the three of us hung out again sometime.

 We hugged her, wished her a nice afternoon, and left to go to our room. Lowell needed to change into some long pants and blacker clothes for some in-the-dark training. As he changed and I casually sat opposite him on the bed, watching his ass jiggle a bit beneath his underwear (it still looked so toned), Lowell dropped one massive bombshell question.

 “So,” he mentioned, “you’re a believer again, huh?”

 My tail curled slightly, then relaxed back in a casual sway off the bed.

 “I lost faith for a while,” my voice remained even, unassuming about what he’d tell me next, “but I think I’m starting to believe in Him again. Abigail and I’ve also been reading an international version of the Bible. One not approved by the National Church.”

 A part of me hoped it would be enough for the wolf. Unfortunately, citing the illegal version of God’s Word did little to sway him from asking, “So that’s why I saw ya praying when you thought I’d been asleep?”

 There we were. In truth, I felt uncomfortable praying in front of him in the morning and before we went to bed, already well-aware of Lowell’s thoughts on not just the Devout government’s state-sanctioned Christianity, but the entire religion. He did not care for it, if our time together indicated anything I’d learned about the mysterious wolf who possessed a mononym.

 “Why are you making a big deal about this?” I

 My wolf finished putting on his black jeans, complete with a dark hoodie jacket and t-shirt underneath. “Because I feel like this kinda thing is something you should have told me before going around, talking about ‘God this’ and ‘God that’.”

 “Hey.” I frowned at his apparent hypocrisy. “Don’t even think about suddenly giving me a lecture on keeping secrets, Low. Oh, wait. That’s right, I only know your first and middle names. Meanwhile, I’ve been open up to you about everything lately while you flinch at me so much as wanting to know what your family was like.”

 He whirled around to face me across the bed. Frustration flared in his eyes.

 “That’s different, Adam.” He insisted with a mirroring grimace. “My personal shit is mine alone. It ain’t my fault you’re so transparent.”

 “And you can’t be?” I countered, turning to face him. “Why can’t you tell me who you really are? All I know about are the things you want me to know. Or think I can handle knowing. I’ve told you everything about my life before the Defiant, but I don’t even know your last name, for God’s sake!”

 “Back on topic now.” Lowell ignored my comment without so much as barring an eye. “So, what’s next? Are you suddenly going to start praising David Farthing? President Nessen? The Revenant Party and all the motherfuckers obsessed with keeping control. What does it mean for you now?”

 “What does it mean now?” I echoed his final words with disgust. At him and the implications of what he meant. “Is that what you think I am? You think I would turn traitor?”

 Lowell instantly tried backtracking, “That’s not wh—”

 “No, I get it now. You look at me like I’m an abused wife that likes to get beaten to a pulp. You don’t think I want to see justice for what I went through. What Jeannie and countless others survived through. Am I just a broken fur you wanted to fix and fuck at the same time?”

 “No!” Lowell snarled at me. “You once told me ya stopped being loyal the moment that they tried making ya disappear. Now ya want to reembrace the same bullshit that wants to make people like us disappear?”

 Of course, I did. I knew that many Christians, Devout or not, still thought of gay people as lesser than the rest of the heteronormative population. Yet, as much as history proved to me, the fact that furs like us still survived despite hundreds of years in the shadows, it had to mean something. I couldn’t describe my beliefs to Lowell at the time, but I knew God did not make mistakes. He must have known Lucifer would become a fallen angel, then tempt Eve to eat from the Tree of Knowledge and be cast from the Garden of Eden. He must have known all the strife, madness and destruction wrought by His creations as civilization flourished on the Earth. If God were all-powerful and made all furs in His image, then why would I be attracted to men?

 “Where are you going with this, exactly?”

 “I just…I’m trying to…” he finally found what to say moments later, “I’m concerned about ya, Adam. I’m just really, unnaturally concerned.”

 “Concerned about me believing in God again?” I scoffed in utter frustration. “Lowell, I am not a traitor for having faith. You know I would rather die than ever betray you or anyone.”

 “And I know that!” he growled back, “I just can’t figure out how ya can buy into that bullshit all over again.”

 Like that, we were going in circles for several minutes.

 “You really think the world would be better off without any form of religion? At all?”

 “Yes, I think it would. For one, this goddamn civil war wouldn’t even be fucking happening.” Lowell snorted at the window, pointing a finger at the surrounding buildings and few pedestrians walking outside, due to the grim weather. “Look at all the good the so-called Good Book did for America, Adam. Don’t forget what it did for the Middle East and Europe. I doubt kings and queens would have all that power without sayin’ their sovereignty was ‘God-given’.” He mimicked air quotes for that last phrase. “For fuck’s sake, Adam, the Founding Fathers fought against a king who claimed God gave him permission to subjugate and control people across the ocean, and Farthing and the Revenants used the same excuse to rule over us, and now you’re suddenly bowing down to the same tactic that led ya to that clinic? Some proof God must really, really care about ya, Adam.”

 I hissed under my breath, “Shut up!”

 “What? Did I touch a nerve?” Lowell raised a mocking eyebrow. “Did I suddenly make you realize it’s all bullshit? You Christians are all alike. You love being victims. You love saying you’re persecuted while being on the top of the food chain. Christianity and every other religion’s just nothing more than the world’s longest marketed, best-selling fanfiction of how they thought the world started six-thousand years ago. And you’re turning into just another intern salesman.”

 I could feel the blood boiling under my fur. “Lowell, stop—”

 “I’m just telling you the truth. The truth about how much religion does nothing but fuck the world over.”

 I hissed under my breath, “Shut up!”

 “And if ya can’t see that, you’re more asleep than you were as a seddie.”

 We both stood in stunned silence. As instant as he said it, a look of immediate regret washed over the wolf’s face. He just realized how much he went too far. He wanted to apologize, but we both knew it was far too late. Far, far too late. I didn’t even give him a chance to take back what he said or revise his atheist arguments. I told Lowell to go.

 He did, and I locked the door behind him.