“I’m telling ya,” Old Nick laughed behind the wheel of his taxicab, “the last two furs I drove wouldn’t quit talkin’ about that stunt you all pulled at Navy Pier with the sign!”

“It wasn’t a ‘stunt’,” Lowell clarified to the elder mongoose, “so much as us telling the government to go fuck itself after pulling back their troops from Canada.”

“Whatever you were saying, it certainly got their attention, boy!”

“We should be proud about it though,” the wolf goofily wrapped an arm around my shoulder, pulling him close to me. “Especially Adam here. He’s done his fair share as much as I did.”

“Lowell,” I rolled my eyes, ignoring for the moment how his gray-furred left cheek nearly caressed mine, “you’re acting like we flied all the way to the moon.”

“Well, maybe we did!” he snickered, “And the next place to go is to fuckin’ Mars, right?”

And further beyond, I surmised.

In less than two hours, it seemed all of Devout America had gone nuts. All over Dove, citizens shared their own recordings of the audio broadcast each Defiant cell leader played in their respective states. Some differed but all shared the same traitorous message of rebellion. The news stations did their best to cover it up and focus more on the Independence Day celebrations, calling the country-wide broadcasts ‘minor incidents’, but it couldn’t be helped.

“Uh oh.”

My ears perked at the mongoose, who stared out the window down the street.

“What is it, Nick?” Lowell joined my concern.

“You’re gonna need to see this…”

Motioned by Lowell to look slowly out the windshield, our eyes traveled down the street to see a sight I thought I’d never see since that fateful day. The day…they…snatched me from my home and my old life. A few houses down the street, parked right outside the Lange residence, was a white-and-black van with the symbol stamped on its sides and the back doors.

A white cross with a sash wrapped around it.

Then we saw who it belonged to. Lowell pointed his finger down to the front doors of the Lange’s and even from this distance, nobody could mistake who they were and why they were here. No God-fearing soul could mistake the furs’ clothes; a long black overcoat and a black muzzle-shaped gasmask with protective eye goggles that fiercely pierced your souls. And although their backs were turned to us, we knew they also wore a white pastor collar. One could mistake these cold-blooded enforcers of God’s law as the modern plague doctor.

Johanna once mentioned to Lowell about what the ‘wings’—basically, half-cloaks that draped from the shoulders down to the left and right elbows—meant from each color. Pure white indicated the Archangel was a recruit who never killed an enemy, though rare it may be. Crimson red indicated experience. The latter always meant their wearer wouldn’t hesitate to kill.

“Nick,” Lowell cautiously told the ferret, who gripped his steering wheel with equal terror, “turn around and park us on the road that’s behind the house. They haven’t spotted us.”

“A-Alright,” the ferret nodded, backing us up. “What are you going to do, Low?”

“We can’t panic, and we can’t just leave those two behind.”

I suddenly regretted asking aloud, “D-Do you think…Mary and Kevin…turned us in?”

“If that were true, Adam,” the wolf didn’t blink or react to my statement, “then they would’ve waited for us to go into the house before barging in. The fact they’re parked outside must mean they’re under suspicion and being guarded in case we come back, that’s it.”

Old Nick proceeded to drive us to the nearest intersection connecting to the street behind the Lange residence, parking to the side of the mostly dark row of houses. The few pedestrians walking about was a housewife grabbing her mail down the road, but that didn’t cease my adrenaline from lowering. Lowell told Nick to keep the engine running while he went to sneak Kevin and Mary out the back and through the property between their house and us.

“If I’m not back in five minutes or you think you’re spotted, leave without us, got it?”

The fur on the back of my neck immediately raised up. “No! No, Lowell you can’t—”

“Trust me, Adam, it’s only a precaution,” he smiled softly, keeping one paw on the taxi cab’s open door. “I’ll be careful. You stay here and keep an eye out for me, okay?”

I gripped his sleeve. “B-But—”

He didn’t even give me another chance to voice my concern. Instead, the wolf leaned forward…and kissed me.

“Oh for…” Nick groaned in his seat. “Is this the time, you horny mutt?”

Lowell pulled his lips away, leaving mine vacant of the wonderful sensation beating in my chest, and then traded a determined smile with me before stepping out of the taxi and into the backyard of the neighboring house. I couldn’t even say his name when the cocky wolf’s tail disappeared into the tree line.

“You okay there, boy?”

“Huh?” I broke away from my longing daze. “Uh, y-yeah…I’m good.”

Despite repeated attempts to focus on keeping an eye out from the inside of the taxicab, my thoughts wouldn’t shake away from Lowell. Was he safe? Were the Archangels onto us? Could we all escape from this in one piece? How could we even get away?

Why did he kiss me?

Did he like me?

That thought alone made my stomach flip, in a good way. The inside of my chest contracted and fluttered, like my heart couldn’t even take the sensations of remembering the wolf’s warm, inviting lips. They made me feel emotions I thought I couldn’t feel again since the first time my neighbor fox first kissed me in secret. Except now, nothing could make me shake away the afterglow of the moment. Each time I felt the cushioned seats, shifting inside the cab to look out an opposite window, my mind raced between spotting trouble and wondering what I was going to say to Lowell if he came back.

*No! No! No!* I instantly scolded myself. *He said to trust him.*

He was going to come back. I knew it.

*Bang! Bang!*

I nearly turned my head 180 degrees to see a certain wolf and two mountain lions bolt through the trees, each clustered, terrified feline hauling one suitcase behind them. Kevin’s in particular looked heavier, from how he arrived it for dear life.

“We gotta go!” Lowell shouted. “Just toss it in with ya! Mary, get up front!”

“Halt in the name of the Lord!”

I didn’t even have enough time to fully see the Archangel fire at us, or see the bullet shatter the back window. Mary screamed and hurried inside. All five of us crowded into the car in the span of six seconds, and no sooner did Lowell squeeze himself in with Kevin and I in the backseat—the cougar’s luggage obscuring my vision to the wolf—did Nick stomp on the gas.

The van and two police cars tailed us.

*Bang! Bang! Bang!*

“Go! Go! Go!” Lowell hollered over the screeching tires. One bullet ricocheted past the window, hitting the wolf in the shoulder. “Gah! Ack!”

“Lowell!” I screamed in alarm.

“I’m fine!” he shouted, leaning with me and Kevin as the taxicab made a sharp right turn. “Don’t ever fucking stop, Nick! Whatever ya fucking do, don’t fucking stop!”

“Here,” Kevin tried grabbing his arm, “let me—”

“I said I’m fine!” he barked, pulling it away and clutching his wounded shoulder with a bloodied paw. “We need lose them fast or we’re sitting ducks! If they send out a chopper into the skies, hiding won’t be an option anymore!”

“What can we do?” Mary tried turning her neck to us, regardless of the luggage resting massively on her lap. “Do you have a way we can outrun then?”

“Ha! Not in this old junker!” Nick gripped the steering wheel, “Brace yerselves now!”

We had little time as the taxicab swerved into an intersection, several cars honking at us. A truck barely grazed our backside, but nicked it, causing Kevin and I to grunt when the car scraped another car.

“Easy there!” Kevin growled as he held onto his luggage. “Don’t hit everyone on the road, goddamn it!”

“I’m sorry, but I agree with the cat,” Lowell mock-laughed, “Let’s *kindly* follow the speed limit while the Archangels’re onto us!”

“You two, quit it!” I suddenly yelled, then quickly asked Lowell, “What’s the plan now? We need a strategy to get out of here now!”

“Already got one in mind!” Old Nick spoke up, “Wolf boy, ya remember Christmas of 2014? We do the same thing you did!”

“Okay, works for me!” the wolf groaned, “Find us the nearest parking garage!”

“Parking garage?” Mary asked us, then probably me, “What does he mean by find a parking garage, Adam?”

“I-I don’t know!”

“Christmas of 2014,” Lowell laughed, “We were—ow!” He growled, but still continued as he gripped his right arm, “Couple friends and I were on the run from two Archangels in Peoria, when we decided to s-switch cars in a garage mid-flight!”

“Think that stunt would work twice?” Kevin asked. “We don’t know if—”

“If we don’t try, we’re all dead anyway, Kev!” the wolf shook his muzzle. “Nick, go find us a parking garage before we crash first!”

“Already on it! There’s one a couple blocks away! I can’t guarantee we can—”

More gunshots rang out as a loudspeaker behind us announced, “**Halt in the name of the Lord or we will rain judgement upon you terrorists!**”

A car swerved out of our way.

“Just go to it!” Lowell hollered.

“**You are ordered to surrender!**”

I couldn’t see him roll down the window, but I did hear the wolf shout, “Go fuck yourselves, ya Bible-fucking Adolf Hitler wannabes!”

“Don’t aggravate them!” Kevin hissed.

“We’re Defiant, it’s our job to aggrevate ‘em!” the wolf mock-laughed, then half-groaned, “Nick, how long until we get there?!”

“Just gotta turn down this exit!”

A minivan veered in front of us, either unaware of our predicament or intentionally trying to help box us in. Either way, Old Nick managed to speed around them just as the Archangel van nearly bumped into our backside. The exit intersection neared in seconds. The ferret behind the wheel swerved us right, scarcely hitting another taxicab. The van and two police cars were closing in. Mary then pointed out a roadblock being set up down the road.

“Don’t worry, here we go!” Nick spun our vehicle left, ignoring a red light. “Eesh, aaaaand…there it is!”

There it was. On the left side down the road stood a six-story parking garage, with vehicles aplenty exiting out into a traffic jam. Nick immediately sped through the entrance barrier, sending wooden parts flying into the sides of a few days, and causing a few to shout or honk their horns.

I didn’t even realize I’d been gripping Kevin’s right arm, to the point my knuckles turned white. “Sorry…”

“That’s alright,” he sighed, offering an uneasy smile. “You got yourself a grip there.”

A short laugh rumbled in my throat. “So, what’s the plan then?” I asked Lowell amid the noise. “Do we get out and hotwire another vehicle?”

“For a starter, the van won’t be able ti fit in here,” he half-laughed, half-grunted while the taxicab made its way up to the next floor, “Nick, I have an idea: you take us to the second-to-top floor, then park this on top and join us on the ground floor by taking the stairs. We rejoin before going out with the civilians downstairs and get to the safehouse. Sound like a plan?”

“Better than nothing,” the old ferret snarked.

“Fuck you, it’s all we got, okay? Lowell rolled his eyes.

“W-What about our bags?” Mary asked us. “It’s all we have, surely we can’t—”

“Trust me, ma’am,” he sighed, “We ain’t gonna get another small-as-hell car like this.”

And we didn’t. True to the plan, Old Nick dropped us off on the fifth floor of the parking garage, with the sounds of police sirens closing in on us below. Kevin, Mary and I discreetly followed Lowell through the mostly empty parking garage floor until we found ourselves settling on a dark blue SUV parked near the far-left corner by the elevators.

In the end, it worked. The Langes hastily placed their luggage in the trunk after Lowell hotwired it (he didn’t answer Kevin’s question about how he learned to do this) and we got inside when we suddenly heard a siren and flashing lights nearby. They came onto this floor. Right on time, the four of us ducked down from sight and waited for the police car to pass by us, then Lowell started it up and picked up Nick on the ground floor several minutes later.

“Did you get away?”

“Nah,” the ferret joked deadpan, “I just suddenly felt the need to lead them to you. Now let me drive. I can do it more casual in my sleep than you can.”

Lowell conceded, but not without flipping Old Nick off. Meanwhile, the plan seemed to go off without a single unfortunate hitch. We held our breaths when we spotted the Archangel van parked outside, hiding the Langes beneath some blankets so they wouldn’t be spotted. Luckily, much to our relief, we got away without any trouble.

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Old Nick and the rest of us drove for miles in complete silence. To prevent myself from going mad with boredom even with the receding adrenaline, I kept an eye out for the sound or sight of helicopters or another vehicle following us. Whether it be for the police or a news station didn’t matter. Mary held her left paw back behind her seat for Kevin to hold and comfort while Lowell muttered at himself as he tried applying bandages in the cramped backseats. Old Nick didn’t say anything beyond an occasional comment while driving us to the safehouse.

A couple nights before, Lowell described it to me in some detail.

“So ya remember that Oak Park Scare from several years ago?” he’d asked me that day, “Well, it’s bullshit. The Defiant never smuggled some toxic gas into the neighborhoods in there. The Devout government did it so they could cover up the fact the entire families there participated with us. Now it’s just condemned properties rotting away all these years…”

By ‘some condemned properties’, the cocky wolf actually meant two to three whole blocks of abandoned suburb houses lined up along the northern section of Oak Park. Over two dozen houses left behind to nature and an occasional homeless fur, or the wrath of angry teenagers who wanted to unleash their graffiti art on a wall (without being arrested) under cover of darkness. Regardless of the properties being condemned by the Devout government, somebody had cut out a portion of the surrounding fence, and Lowell knew about its location.

The sun had set long ago, yet it did not ease any concern I held about any lurking Archangels searching for us. Old Nick had dropped us off near the fence on the least populated side of the neighborhood, guaranteeing we wouldn’t be spotted by residents. Once both Kevin and Mary hauled out their luggage, I couldn’t help but ask why the ferret wasn’t getting out of the driver’s seat.

“I’m now wanted by the Archangels, and I think I’m pretty sure I don’t have a job anymore…” he half-chuckled, ears folded downward despite having a confident smile across his tan muzzle. “I’m gonna ditch the vehicle as far away from here as possible, then bug out to one of my hiding holes. See what I can do next for Jo and the rest of the Defiant.”

My tail curled against my right leg.

“I’m…sorry about today,” I couldn’t help but sheepishly apologize.

“Don’t be sorry,” he beamed proudly. “I’ve been ready for this day since forever. I’m just glad that if I nearly got caught, it’s for something that will actually change this damned country.”

“You looked like you loved your job though.”

“Eh, don’t worry about it,” he rested an elbow on the driver’s side window. “Sacrificing things you like, tossing away any normalcy you can find, it’s all in the job description. As a Defiant, as a member of the resistance, ya need to make sacrifices to survive. To fight another day.”

“You going to be alright on your own?”

“Of course, I’m gonna be alright.” Amused, he shook his shorter muzzle. “I’m more concerned about you four. Then again, that wolf boy’s got your back.” Nick glanced over to Lowell as he helped shake some broken glass off of Kevin’s shoulders, his paws on his suitcase, before the ferret whispered to me, “Now I ain’t homosexual or nothing, but I wish you two luck out there.”

A hint of blush crept under my cheekfur.

Old Nick laughed once more, pulling me into a short hug through the window. He then patted my shoulder.

“Take care of yourself Adam,” he said, “and keep that wolf outta trouble for me and Johanna, ya hear?”

“Thank you,” I automatically spoke, my tail now flicking against the ground in immense gratitude and embarrassment. “And I’ll...I’ll try.”

“Good then. You folks take care as well!” the ferret waved to the Langes, then told Lowell in a firm, low voice, “Be safe out there, wolf boy! And keep fighting!”

He simply nodded, smirking. “Will do, Old Nick.”

After watching the SUV disappear into the night, the rest of us followed Lowell—flashlight in paw—into the sea of abandoned suburbia, an overgrown playground of unpolished pavement, cracked sidewalks and unkempt front yards protecting decently sized houses. One dwelling barely looked recognizable underneath a heavy layer of spray paint and a few fallen trees.

Lowell settled us into an empty duplex a few houses from the fence opening, prying open the doors free once he was done lockpicking. I wasn’t the only one to notice him wincing at his arm, now dried with some blood.

“That’s it, we’re taking care of that thing,” Mary spoke up first, placing her luggage aside in the kitchen to fully focus on the wolf. “Adam, do either of you have any first aid kits?”

“Got some in my backpack,” Lowell pointed behind him. “I’ll have Adam help me out, you and Kev get settle down in a room for the night.”

“Are you sure, sonny?” the male cougar asked, sounding abnormally concerned. “Mary’s got some experience in first aid.”

“Nah,” he waved, “You two’ve been through enough today. Besides, I have experience too. And I’ll need to talk to Adam about a few things, okay?”

“Sure, alright…” Kevin nodded after a reluctant moment. “C’mon, honey, let’s go find the master bed. See if there’s a bed, okay?”

“Al…Alright,” she sighed. Before leaving us to the upper floor, the female cougar walked to us through the semi-pitch-black kitchen and placed a kiss on our foreheads. “Thank you. For getting us out. And for everything you do.”

They slowly went upstairs, leaving me alone with Lowell, holding a flashlight. I hoped the handsome wolf didn’t see me blush when he pulled his shirt off and handed me the torch in his paw. “Let’s get this over with, Adam.”