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

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

“Uh…” I tried to relax, even in her presence, “J-Johanna.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Johanna turned off the TV.

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

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I gasped in utter disbelief, “…what?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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