Simply put, the War Room lived up to its name.

The first time I ever entered the eponymous room linked to Johanna’s was a few days before I left the Maverick Hotel with Lowell. Like some of the units on the second floor, guests could move between the two rooms without going through the hallway. Outfitted from a regular hotel room into a legitimate planning station, it seemed as if the Chicago cell had ripped everything apart and put it variously back together. The normal Queen-sized bed had been replaced with a large, wooden table piled up with paperwork and unfolded maps. In the area where the sofa, the smaller television and the coffee table resided, a massive map of Chicago and its city streets was bolted to the decorated wall, detailing certain drop points, locations-of-interest, police and Archangel patrols. Somebody had removed the picture of Jesus Christ and replaced it with George Washington. And lastly, the wall where the bedroom’s TV screen normally hung had been accompanied by three more lined up along the original to create a larger, sharable screen.

“Jeez,” I wondered aloud, “how much is the Maverick’s electric bill from all this?”

“It’s a miracle the staff get paid anything, really…” Lowell shrugged beside me, accidentally nudging my right rib with his elbow. “Oops, sorry.”

I smiled back at the wolf, “I’m okay.”

“You’d be surprised how much we’ve kept ourselves hidden,” Olivia chirped near the back wall beside the curtained window. “The first year me and Oscar came to this hotel, Johanna wouldn’t even let us go into the gym, the bar or even the lobby.”

“Really?” My right ear perked at him. “Is it true?”

“Yep, completely true,” she nodded.

“*Muy* true,” Hector nodded as well.

With the rest of the Chicago cell—plus Blu and minus Abigail tending to our newest de facto member Jeanie, the Langes sleeping in and not wanting to become involved with operations just yet (Mary practically squeezed me into a hug that felt like a death vice), as well as Oscar being busy with some sort of project—it made the planning area feel intensely crowded, considering everybody touched shoulders. All of us crammed into a single room made everyone present self-conscious about any loud noises made.

“Interesting,” Blu mentioned at the other end of the table across from me and Lowell, who still looked at the Doberman as if he were impeding on territory that didn’t belong to him, “You must’ve gone insane from the isolation.”

An uncomfortable look crossed Lowell’s muzzle, something I initially noticed but didn’t think much of, only to be replaced by a cocky smirk. “You can’t imagine how much begging and begging and begging I had to do to let the doe give us freedom. Hell, Don can vouch for me too.”

“Same,” Jordan added to the conversation, the white ferret wearing some casual pants and a plain green t-shirt that belonged more on a golfer than a dry-humored doctor. “The first time Johanna recruited me into this little shindig, she refused to let me leave my room unless I fully convinced her that I no longer cared for the humiliation of bowing to the wills of the National Church, let alone having them force me to betray the Hippocratic Oath…Four months later and she allowed me to get back to work here.”

“Huh…that is much more time-consuming than how Vox finds recruits,” the Doberman uneasily laughed, then shook his muzzle when I rolled my eyes at him. “Then again, I can’t speak against how this cell hides in the shadows. Unlike you, we actually worked as hotel staff.” I widened my eyes towards Blu, who chuckled deeply, “Yeah, it’s true. We did. Much simpler than pretending to be guests. They don’t even look at you half the time.”

“Not with that ugly mug I bet,” Lowell quipped, so I lightly elbowed him on his side. Blu managed to hide whatever constituted as a laugh by a short cough. “Oof! Hey, that nearly smarted there, hun.”

That quieted me for a moment. Indifferent grins and coy snickering came from the half-dozen or so of us present in the room, while the wolf beside me casually inched his hip closer to mine. Donald and Jordan joined Hector in reviewing over some pages on the counter, Blu looked away from me, his eyes offering sympathy (for what, being with this loudmouthed doofus nobody knew I was sleeping with?) as Olivia walked over to a closed laptop charging in the corner of the room.

Did they know he and I…? No, they couldn’t! Otherwise, they’d all be giving us disgusted looks. Admitting your attraction for men and making sexual jokes happened to be one thing, but actually performing the acts above their heads was another.

“On a side note, here’s the real question for today: can ya still technically stand by that oath of yours if you’re no longer a doctor, Jordan?” Lowell teased him, which greatly annoyed the ferret. Meanwhile, Olivia and I groaned at what would happen next, though I was thankful for him changing the conversation. “You can’t be a doctor without a license. And if I remember correctly, you lost your medical license, a year before we met?”

“Nine months before you and I met, Low,” Jordan crossed his arms and huffed. “As far as I’m concerned, I am still a doctor! The fact I chose not to break the oath to do no harm proves it, correct?”

I couldn’t help but nod to what Jordan said. When Lowell stared at me, I shrugged, “What? My dad is a doctor too.”

“And he never hurt anyone he wasn’t supposed to, did he?”

“Not that I know of,” I shrugged at the ferret’s strange question, “All he did was physician stuff you expect from a family doctor. No surgery or anything.”

“Well, I still say that I’m a doctor, revoked license or not,” he proudly stated. “If a country is as corrupt and biased as ours is, does their authority even matter? “After all, Lowell, you’d still call yourself a wolf even if I decided to cut off your tail, wouldn’t you?”

“I’ll tell you about fuck…!” Lowell glanced at the four walls surrounding the War Room and lowered his voice to an even volume, “I’ll tell you about fucking bias, you bleached rat.”

“Bleached rat? Really? I have heard better insults from playground cubs in my youth, you flea-ridden mutt with an unfiltered mouth.”

“You motherfucking want shitty motherfuckin’ filters?”

“Is anybody going to tell them to knock it off?” Blu offered to speak as they rambled on and on with insults.

“And interrupt the free show?” Donald snickered with interest, “No way, kid.”

“It’s pointless to do it anyway,” I explained to the confused Doberman. “This is just their way of camaraderie, in its own messed up way.”

“Try not to think about it, otherwise you’ll get a headache,” Olivia muttered without looking away from one of her laptops on the table. “Besides, Lowell’s MOM will do it for us.”

Speak of the devil. The moment Olivia finished mentioning her, the bathroom door opened, and Johanna stepped into the room with a used towel in her paw and a displeased look directed at a certain ferret and a certain timber wolf mid-argument. If I weren’t distracted by the black polo dress she wore that went down to her knees, yet accentuated how female she looked in spite of the formerly male build, I’d have laughed aloud at how Johanna huffed in annoyance.

“Is there a problem?” she snarled at Lowell and Jordan, who immediately silenced themselves. “Well? I ask you both a question. Answer it.”

“No ma’am,” they both replied in unison, rigidly.

“Very good,” she sighed, then stepped past Lowell and I to gather some papers, then rest her paws against the table, “Now then…I trust you’re all comfortable?”

Everybody replied with collective nods.

“Good.” Johanna glanced at each of us, a smile spreading across her brown-furred, white-furred speckled lips, “I’ve said it before, but I will say it again…all of you performed spectacularly this past week. Thanks to your efforts and that of the rest of the Defiant cells, we accomplished our objectives, and the Devout occupation up north is starting to show signs of crumbling.”

We cheered at the news by either punching the air, chuckling proudly or snapping our fingers. Whatever kept the silence without taking away our enthusiasm.

“The Canadian resistance already joined forces with the Western Republic and C.A.F. They’re already laying siege on two of Alberta’s larges cities, Edmonton and Calgary,” Johanna glanced down at a laptop that Olivia wordlessly passed to her. “And look here, according to our Republic correspondent, a mole of theirs confirmed what we already know. Montreal, Ottawa, Quebec City and a few small towns already saw an increase in guerilla-styled attacks. A large truck bomb even went off at a checkpoint into Niagara Falls.”

Cue the snapping fingers and chuckles again.

“The results are great, but we are going to do even more to continue the fight,” the doe went further, “And once Canada is freed from Devout occupation, it will only be the beginning. Our Mexican neighbors might be next, then Cuba, maybe Haiti or the Dominican Republic, and hopefully one day us. If it takes us months, years, decades or even a century to bring back freedom and choice, I guarantee you that they will remember what we did. They will.”

Cue yet another round of snapping fingers and boisterous, low-volume laughter.

“On a side note, there is something else I must inform everyone,” “Do not be alarmed, he is safe and so is his family and our presence…but earlier last night, I was informed by Mike that he and five other managers of Maverick Hotel-affiliated businesses were…interviewed by police.”

I hitched my breath, as did Lowell, Olivia and everyone else. The wolf next to me especially held back an anxious snarl. Hector seemed to freeze in a momentary, catatonic state, until he returned and returned my concerned gaze with an indifferent glare.

“Is he fine then?”

“Do they suspect us?”

“Is his family safe?”

“He is doing well, as are Candace and his cub,” Johanna answered their questions after raising her paws to quiet us, “He believes it isn’t to do with the Defiant, but he and I are in agreement that all of us need to lay low for a while, bide our time for the next mission. The same has been said to the other cell leaders. So, I am now laying some new cautionary ground rules until we’re certain they don’t suspect this hotel.”

Johanna rifled through the papers until she snatched up a used notebook.

“First new rule,” she carefully read off it, “Before going between rooms, all of you must inform me or someone else where your location will be.” Nobody objected to that, so she went to the next one, “Second, since exercise is important, the fitness room is only off-limits when it is most used by guests, between 9:00 am and 3:00 pm.”

Lowell and I stifled our groans, though he barely managed to.

“Third, and I cannot stress this enough to you, Lowell…and Donald,” she twitched her nose and ears in disdain, “No more access to the downstairs bar, or to the liquors.”

“What?” Lowell gasped, “Are you kidding me—”

“I am not,” she stated, “And I need you to be focused, not drunk or hungover. No exceptions.”

Lowell tried to object to what she said, only for Johanna to jerk her head and stare directly at the talkative wolf, silencing him.

“Now, this doesn’t mean we’re completely grounded to our rooms, it just means extra precaution, so don’t think this will be stay-cation. The Defiant still has work to do,” she clarified to everyone present, “Until I we are ready to conduct another large-scale operation like two days ago, I will be having you all assigned to smaller research objectives for our normal operations, and—should I deem them absolutely necessary—recon missions that will play a large role in the next big op.”

Johanna then proceeded to give some instructions and missions to everyone present. We all accepted them without complaint. Lowell and Hector would be tasked with the recon mission (they must’ve discussed without me present), Olivia would listen to enemy chatter on both the Deep Web and through hacked transmission, Donald would act as a watchful eye with the hotel staff to see if anything happened to be amiss with guests or visitors, Jordan would continue working alongside Abigail to help rehabilitate Jeannie Holt’s trauma as a reawakened seddie.

Lastly, Blu and I would be assisting Oscar and Johanna with the details for the new operation to succeed Blackjack. As the doe quietly led me into the otter’s room, which still found itself cluttered with machine parts, finished pamphlets and an overabundance of illegal books a part me wanted to read all day long, I decided to ask her something.

“Can I…visit Jeannie sometime today?”

Closing the door behind us, Johanna thought it over for a second. Blu awkwardly stepped aside to give us room as he surveyed the books and one of the leftover pamphlets. “Tomorrow, maybe, but I will have to speak with Abigail and Jordan first,” she concluded, offering a sympathetic smile. “I know what you are going to propose, and I personally think it would be a wonderful idea. If Ms. Holt spoke to you and saw how much you’ve grown since you arrived, it could help her significantly. Still, we must be cautious. Ms. Holt’s mental state is not in the best condition since she awoke…”

“I know,” I answered, remembering back to the night that the tigress first woke up, screaming to the Heavens for us to sedate her again. My fur crawled at how close we were caught by a neighboring guest, and it made me wonder how they were able to keep her quiet since then.

“Anyway, I forgot to ask this morning, but how is the condition of the uniform, Blu?” Johanna asked him, “Is it still functional for the second phase?”

“Needs some ironing,” the dog shrugged inanely, “but it’s still convincing.”

“I trust that Adam is very aware of that,” Johanna chuckled, offering an apologetic look between me and Blu. “I’ll need the uniform to be ironed and cleaned thoroughly, however. An Archangel in the field always tries to look presentable, and creased fabric will not help us sell the illusion if we’re to make it work…”

“Hello, Adam! Good morning, Johanna!”

I turned to see Oscar in his wheelchair, absentmindedly waving to me as he stared at something on one of his multiple computer screens in the other room.

Johanna quipped, “Morning to you too, night owl…”

“Hey Oscar,” I waved back, “it’s been a while…”

“Liv did say you grew a bit of a cheeky side. Lowell’s influence is getting to you,” he snarked, then pulled away from his keyboard to roll his wheelchair into the main room, extending a paw to Blu. “Take it you’re the new guy, correct? I’m Oscar.”

“My friends call me Blu, but without the ‘e’ in it,” the Doberman gripped the pawshake, glancing momentarily around the room. “This is an impressive collection you got here.”

“Thanks,” he said, mentioning, “Took us seven years to collect this many illegal texts.”

“The closest thing Vox’s cell has to a library collection is digital,” Blu replied, “We have about…oh, maybe nine-thousand original downloads. Some’re from after the Republic seceded.”

“Heh, yeah and I’m King Charles of Britain,” Oscar scoffed playfully, then turned himself back into the bedroom and returned to one of his laptops. “Speaking of digital, thanks again for giving us the USB we requested. This information’s definitely a steppingstone for Crucible. We just gotta find an active member of the Project to obtain some evidence from…”

“Crucible?” I asked them. “What’re you talking about?”

“Operation Crucible,” Oscar responded, looking to raise an eyebrow in my direction, “Did Johanna or the others explain to you what the Defiant’s next objective is yet?”

“Not really,” I shrugged in visible confusion, feeling my tail curl as three sets of eyes fell on me, “but I take it I’ll need to know the details, right?”

The wheelchair bound mustelid sighed. “Do you wanna explain to him or should I?”

“Just keep looking the data over, Oscar,” Johanna helped close the door for him, and the doe sat us down on the couch amid the sound of muffled typing in the next room. “Tithingmen. Do you know what they are, Adam?”

Tithingmen?

“N-No I don’t,” I replied. “Should I?”

“Surprising, I thought you majored in Devout History,” she quipped with a sly smirk, earning a short laugh from the Doberman sitting to my right. “Oh, so he told you too?”

“Yeah, he did…” Blu shook his muzzle amusedly.

“Ugh, if you’re all done making fun of my previous life choices,” I asked for them, “can you please tell me what Operation Crucible is and what the hell a tithingmen is? It doesn’t sound like something I’ll be able to look up on Pious or any search engine, will I?”

“Not in the modern usage, you won’t…” Blu clicked his tongue, “But what do you know about pre-American history? Before the Devout States of America, the Revenant Party, David Farthing or even the Revolutionary War? Did your professors at least teach about the Puritan settlers and the Salem Witch Trials?”

Tentatively, I nodded to the Doberman, while Johanna leaned over to snatch a tablet left on the countertop. “Good, but there’s a reason they never taught about tithingmen,” she scoffed not to me, but likely to my professors at the university, “If they did, it’d likely make some citizens question if they existed.”

“Back in the 1600s, the Puritan settlers were incredibly paranoid about the unknown and if witchcraft had followed them to the New World,” Blu explained the rest to me as Johanna brought up a digital scan of an old article on the tablet. It included an old illustration of a Puritan wolf holding what appeared to be a long stick as he sat in the corner of an occupied home, “A tithingman was a fur tasked by the community’s leaders and its church into enforcing the Puritan values however they seemed fit. Patrolling the streets at night, watching over families in their own homes, making sure they paid attention during service, collecting tithes…whatever it takes to prevent Satan from corrupting them before it could happen.”

“So, they’re like Archangels then?” I guessed aloud.

“Yes and no,” Johanna scrolled down the rest of the article, “The Archangels you know aren’t like the average tithingman. The tithingman back in the 1600s was elected while nowadays, they don’t wear uniforms.”

Her last sentence caught me off-guard, making my ears tremor at her words.

“You said that in present tense,” I realized slowly. “You mean…?”

She sighed again, only her voice carried more reservation to it.

“I mean that the tithingmen of back then did exist,” Johanna clarified for me, “and a new version of them do exist now. During my…” The doe paused, looking down at her paws before grasping them onto her dress, “…my years of service, before I was disavowed, I had heard rumors between my superiors and…no, not comrades, my *colleagues* at the time, of a mass clandestine operation called Project Parish. The details were sketchy, but it essentially comprised of employing loyal American civilians—nicknamed tithingmen—to act as undercover agents within Devout States borders.”

“Not in enemy countries?” I asked, to which Blu answered my question for her.

“No, those’re what spies are for. A tithingman is different,” he spoke up, “Their missions revolve around acting as moles within the nation to weed out the usual undesirables, an enemy spy, Republic or Defiant sympathizers who weren’t careful about hiding their tracks. And until a recently, we hardly considered the idea of moles within the country to be a real thing. We thought it was just another conspiracy theory, like what Val liked to talk about…”

“Two years ago, one of our cells in D.C. found a pattern,” Johanna continued for the Doberman, “Their hacker placed a backdoor into Homeland Security Agency computers and managed to copy some files before getting caught. They confirmed the conspiracy theory; not only were Project Parish and the tithingman moles real, but the Agency’s files also spoke about a list that details private and public individuals considered ‘high risk to national and congregational security’. This would be determined through their social media presence and what the spybots found they searched for online. Frankly, we weren’t shocked that Pious’ CEO had been giving the collected data to the government, but still…”

“Once a fur or multiple furs in a neighborhood were placed on the List,” Johanna finished the explanation, “a tithingman would be integrated somehow into their daily life. They could be a background character watching from afar, a new acquaintance, a friendly coworker, whatever helped them father evidence of you being a seditionist. Some of the intel gathered from D.C. was redacted, but additional information gathering has us believing that a good 1/7 of Devout civilians are or have been on the list. And the number of tithingmen employed by the Archangels through Project Parish might range…between seventy and one-hundred thousand.”

My eyes practically became saucers, as something else crossed my mind. Johanna seemed to read my mind and added one final bit of detail.

“This might concern you as well,” the doe sighed, offering an empathetic look that tried to reassure me about my parents’ safety, only it did not, “because family relatives of defectors and rebels are no exception to the List either. Maybe friends too if they do not put up a good enough performance to the police…”

My parents. Former classmates. Friends. Stephen. They could’ve been under surveillance by tithingmen even as I lived in the safety of the Maverick Hotel’s walls.

*I mean, I did get captured by the Defiant*, my thoughts became a whirlwind. *The news never confirmed I’d been killed or that I survived recuperating from my time under. Oh God, is Stephen okay? Is he still safe in whichever conversion clinic he’s imprisoned in? Has a tithingman been watching over my parents since I was taken? Do they suspect?*

Johanna and Blu insisted I try not to ponder on the implication for now. Instead, they had me assist them in looking through the data that the Peoria cell managed to scramble from another backdoor hack done months prior. While it hadn’t been taken from the Homeland Security Agency itself, it did get stolen from one of their top field agents, one who was unfortunate enough to have booked himself into a double-bedroom suite within a Maverick Hotel. It allegedly took Peoria’s hackers a mere hour to crack it without detection.

The data ranged between file documents, spreadsheets detailing transactions and budgets for classified projects, and records of noted traffic violations. Sure, some of the data was plain and uninteresting, but Johanna and Oscar each insisted that any of it could matter in the future.

To make it further interesting, the D.C. cell had actually managed to find the so-called ‘List’, except the file itself—even a copy of it—was heavily encrypted. Password and all. It had the type of high-level encryption which required time, patience, some electronic and hacking skills from across the Defiant. To quote Oscar’s dry sense of humor, “Adam, picture this. Decrypting this file’s the practical equivalent of performing heart surgery, blindfolded and without the proper equipment or the tools.”

At the same time, the Defiant’s hackers needed to make haste. They couldn’t even send the file copy to the Western Republic’s top hackers, not since they themselves experienced a mole problem in their ranks and were still weeding out potential spies. According to Johanna, if the Devout’s Homeland Security Agency suspected the List had been compromised, they’d immediately pull the tithingmen from the field, therefore making the next part of Operation Crucible impossible to achieve. We would have to start from the beginning all over again.

A few days passed. Lowell and I slept together in the same bed, woke up early in the morning, asked permission from Johanna to use the exercise room below, juggled between flirting and helping each other to improve our limits and my hobble, showered upstairs a couple hours later, then split up to do our respective assignments.

On the fifth day into combing through the data and new incoming data, either assisting Oscar or spending my breaks in the Illegal Library, reading whatever gauged my interest. The pre-Devout literature ranged between some history and science textbooks that survived the early purges, the pamphlets made by us and other Defiant cells, as well as some fiction. If I weren’t immersed in some of the gay romance books smuggled into the country, I’d have probably complained about the lack of involvement everyone was giving me. Of course, they saw me as a member of the cell, but I wanted to do more like I did. Like when I was in the field with either Lowell or the Peoria cell. I wanted to endure something more thrilling than watching Oscar and some other Defiant hackers converse on a Dark Web-based video chat, speaking technojargon that flew over my feline ears.

Then again, maybe I was slowly becoming a masochist. Regardless, one evening later into the week, Abigail informed me how she and Jordan believed a certain recovering teenaged tigress was ready for visitors.

Making it to the top floor, I delicately knocked on the door leading inside the seddie’s room. Minutes later and Abigail quickly opened it to lead me inside, her eyes carefully watching for anyone in the hallway.

“It’s empty,” I said.

“You can never regret a little paranoia in these times, Adam.” The shorter, elder rabbit promptly locked the door shut. She then sighed, leading me past the empty beds lined up against the room’s left wall, none of which seemed to faze her. “She is waiting in the next room…”

The knowledge that two other furs died in that room, on the beds stripped of their pillows, blankets and sheets, left an uncomfortable shiver under my furred skin, like I happened to be walking in a graveyard or a mausoleum made of plaster. However, the feeling slowly dissipated when Abigail softly patted my right shoulder, giving a knowing melancholy smile.

“They went peacefully, my boy,” she reassured me, “There was absolutely nothing any of us could have done to save them, but we can still save her. Don’t spook her though.”

I slowly nodded, then cautiously entered to find the familiar tigress, still emancipated from her years under the supervision of a fucked-up system. Jeannie Holt didn’t look at either of us. Instead, her attention was dedicated entirely towards a laptop propped up on a table besides her medical gurney. She was listening to some kind of audio recording on Pious. I immediately recognized the thumbnail of a masked doe in the foreground of an American flag—the original American flag, and had my suspicions confirmed when I noticed the podcast’s overhead title: The Mother of Exiles Ep. 943.

Jeannie paused the episode and slowly craned her head towards me.

“Uhm, hello?” I shyly waved across the room. “It’s nice to finally meet you.”

“H-Hello,” she slowly waved back, staring at me as if she were trying to recognize me, while also trying to figure out what words to say. “I think I know you from somewhere…Do I…Do I know you?”

I scratched my right ear. “Yeah, you do.”

I scratched the back of my head. Following Abigail’s instructions, I slowly stepped forward and tried not to surprise her with any sudden movement. My tail twitched at the lack of baby fat in her cheekbones, as well as how frail her arms looked at this close distance. Then, I had to mentally remind myself she had been a seddie for far longer than me.

Over four years. Could you imagine falling asleep at twelve years old, then waking up a year shy of adulthood? I couldn’t imagine such change.

“My name is Adam, Adam Grimwald…” I offered a paw, which she hesitantly shook with just three trembling fingers, and I wagged my tail against the carpeting. “I’m a Defiant too. We uh, you and I were rescued from the clinic together. I was put under for little more than nine months though…”

An understanding crossed her confused muzzle.

“You too?” Jeannie asked, to which I nodded sympathetically. Emotion flashed across her eyes, and I could notice her tail faintly swish against the blanket covering her lower half. “Praise the Lord Almighty. I…I thought I was the only one…”

“Actually, we’ve met before.”

She raised an eyebrow, “We did?”

“We did,” I nodded, smiling at her as I sat down on a lone chair against the wall beside her bed. My knees had already began shaking at the memories of struggling to sit up, let alone stand on my two footpaws. “Do you remember the night you first woke up this summer?”

An expression that bordered between remembrance and shame—deep shame, which surprised me—crossed her face. Wincing as she shifted slightly in her bed, Jeannie then stared at me with wide eyes. Except unlike that night, they weren’t begging me or the others to put her back under again.

“Oh yeah, I-I remember you…” she sighed mid-reminisce, “You and that…that *vulgar* timber wolf, you were both there the night I…uh, well…o-overreacted.”

“I honestly couldn’t blame you,” I laughed shortly. “The first time Lowell pulled me out of my stupor, I almost felt the urge to go asleep again. But he kept me awake.”

Jeannie Holt and I talked for hours. Time flew by us unaware. We discussed things such as how her recovery process had started off excruciatingly slow and painful (“The bed sores a-are just the worst.” I completely agreed.), sometimes resulting in Jeannie trying to convince Abigail to give her a dose of morphine. Even if the rabbit were willing to offer her a small dosage, considering what little they’d smuggled into the Maverick, she and Jordan didn’t want the young tigress to become addicted.

I understood how Jeannie felt though. I felt it in the days following our rescue.

Abigail and Jordan had mentioned on some occasions what her clinical file said, but I didn’t get the full picture until talking to her. After her biological parents were the victims of an unsolved murder, Jeannie had grown up with an aunt and uncle in rural Joliet, who cared more about their cubs than her. They gave their older daughters more food, better clothing and less arduous chores to perform. In-between, she liked to dress up in boy’s clothes that would occasionally come her way through the donation box at the local church.

The file didn’t say much for the reason she’d been admitted other than ‘Gender Role Betrayal’, but from what little Jeannie said to me or Jordan, we had the basic picture: her uncle tried inappropriately touching her private parts, and after tearfully confessing to her aunt what he tried doing, they immediately sent her to Cicero. Both dragged her screaming and begging inside the lobby, claiming to clinic officials she’d been caught crossdressing in boy’s clothing (“They’d known about it for a long time. They didn’t care, until I…I…”).

They even signed away permission for them to sedate her the moment they wanted to.

Whiskers twitching, I almost let out a horrified snarl.

Fuck.

Fucking fuck.

Those goddamned fuckers.

Those goddamned, un-Christian, unholy motherfuckers.

For a few minutes of angry silence in my seat, I completely understood why Lowell loved saying curse words so much. Seeing Jeannie stare sadly down at her lap made my fists clench and my toe curl with unyielding anger. However, I didn’t show any more of it. Instead, I distracted us by changing the topic to what she thought about Johanna Cardinal and her infamous pirate podcast.

“She is inspiring…” Jeannie smiled. She actually smiled brightly, if only for three small seconds. “I have met her. At first, i-it felt weird to think that…you know, she was a buck once…”

“Me too,” I shrugged, “but Johanna deserves to be whatever gender she wants. And you deserve to wear boy clothes if you want to.”

“You really think so, Adam?”

“Absolutely,” I firmly nodded once more. “Nobody deserves to go through what we did.”

The encounter afterward left me emotionally drained, despite how well I got along with the tigress. Why did the rest of the world sit back and watch our home turn into a nightmare where unforgivable things like that happened to her?

Suddenly, after bidding farewell to Jeannie and promising to see her again, I felt an incredible urge to join Lowell downstairs in sneaking a bottle of booze.