*“Mfh, ah…yes…oh, Stephen, like that…”*

*“Hold it tighter…Mmmm, stroke it a little harder…oh, Adam…”*

*“Ahhh, oh…Ahhhhh!”*

*“Shhh, be quiet or—”*

*“Your mother’s wondering if either of you—Oh my God! Adam? Stephen?”*

*“Ack, shit, uh…oh no. Shit, this is bad!”*

*“Dad! I-It’s not what it looks like! Please, where are you going?”*

*“Oh shit! Oh, no, no, no! H-He just…He just saw us—”*

*“I gotta get back to my Dad, Adam! He-He’s gonna call the Archangels if your—”*

*“Stephen, wait! Wait, don’t go! M-Maybe we can—”*

*“He saw us jackin’ it, Adam! There’s nothing we can do to make him think we aren’t defiants! If I talk to my Dad, maybe he ca—”*

*“Stephen don’t go! Please don’t go, please!”*

The memory of that day, now in the context of what I finally knew, almost made me fall to the ground. Lowell had to keep me standing with an arm around my shoulder, the body’s own knees feeling like fresh jelly.

“Stephen,” I eventually said the truth aloud, “Stephen is a…a *tithingman*?”

“He is…” Johanna’s voice seemed distant, as if her echo came from across the continent rather than a small, outfitted hotel room. “And according to the List’s records, your parents didn’t report you to the Archangels the day of your arrest. He did it. His membership to Project Parish and the other tithingmen across Devout America goes as far back as three years.”

Three years. Had I really known a betrayer that far back?

“I still…I still don’t get why he can’t be in the field to help catch this fucker,” Lowell commented to my left. “Adam’s a little new, but he could—”

“Catch?” I muttered vacantly. “Catch…him? Wait…so what do you plan to do to him?”

What was I kidding? Even I knew the answer already before it finished leaving my lips.

“Cracking open the List was one stage of Operation Crucible,” either Johanna or Lucius told me. “The next step is to capture a tithingman, do everything to make him confess on camera, then leak the footage and everything on this file to the Internet. The rest will be history.”

“We’ve determined that Stephen will be the best candidate,” Lowell understood it as much as I did. “And Adam was to help out?”

“Adam,” Johanna told me as I continued having my crisis, “at first, you were going to provide watch for Lowell, Hector and Blu as they captured a tithingman in the field. Given this new information however, I can’t trust your judgement in the field. Donald will take over your role instead. I am sincerely sorry, Adam, but you know what I said.”

I understood completely; it would be a conflict of interest, given I literally grew up with the target and even considered him my best friend at one point. He was my honeypot.

Lowell then asked another important question, “Why snatch that fucker though?”

“Because it will help us kill two birds with one stone,” Lucius graciously told the wolf and I, “Capturing an on-duty tithingman where they least expect it…”

Johanna finished the raccoon’s thought for him, “And convincing a certain medical doctor and his wife to join the Defiant. They’ll have a good reason too. The same tithingman we’re kidnapping, the same one watching them for years, also sent their son away.”

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I wanted to be alone. Johanna and Lowell understood that more than anybody else. So, the former gave me the rest of the day off while the latter begrudgingly followed her order to continue training with the rest.

I sat in our hotel room, lying on the bed we slept in with only the faint cum indicating something happened the night before. Lying on the made, fresh bedsheets provided by housekeeping, I tried closing my eyes to imagine what my wolf did with the others. Were they in a soundproofed room somewhere in the Maverick, kicking the crap out of each other and imagining the other as a tithingman ready to be taken?

*Are they imagining him as a red fox now?* I wondered grimly, worriedly then, running my fingers into the fabric as I squeezed my eyes shut to let a couple of tears stain the new sheets. *I can’t believe it…Mom and Dad…they didn’t turn me in, but…but they did let them take me away. How could those fuckers let the Devout take their only son away??*

I silently chastised myself for thinking those thoughts.

Of course, they (probably, hopefully?) loved me. They couldn’t have known though that one of our neighbors, my childhood best friend I’d known since elementary school, had betrayed me to the Archangels, then to the government. They couldn’t have known the ‘treatment’ would become desperate enough for them to drug me.

*Did they even sign the papers to let the clinic drug me?* I wondered again while writhing atop the blanket. *Were they even allowed to know what they did to me to make me normal like them? Did they even know I was sedated?*

The ricocheting questions wouldn’t stop torturing me. It forced me to reevaluate everything I supposedly could remember about the McConnell’s homelife. Did Mr. McConnell know his son spent his college years out of state, training to betray his friends and neighbors the moment they started to doubt the Devout States of America? Or did Mr. McConnell, the patriotic widow banker personally fund him to become the most successful tithingman of them all? Did he even step a single damned foot on a UW campus? Let alone go to Milwaukee or Madison?

Anger suddenly boiled over into fury. I punched into the nearest pillow. I felt nothing solid, so I punched again and again until one of my claws tore a significant hole into the fabric. Several chunks of feathers puffed out onto the sheets like spilled intestines and I—

*Knock, knock, knock!*

The intrusive thoughts dissipated.

Wiping my nose and standing from the bed, I slumped to the room’s door and saw Blu of all furs standing behind the peephole. “Adam?” he spoke up. “You there, buddy?”

I opened the door and attempted to smile. “H-Hey…”

Wordlessly inviting him inside somehow led to the Doberman suddenly pulling me into a hug, as he used one of his ankles to shut the door behind him. I returned the hug and sniffled. His arms were comforting enough for my knees to nearly wobble.

“I’m sorry…” He murmured, “The guys told me everything. Are you…Are you feeling alright?”

Instead of being honest in that moment, I nodded and let him guide me to the nearby couch. He scooted down a few feet and patted the spot beside him.

“Lowell asked me to take fifteen and see how you’re doing,” he mentioned.

A folded ear of mine perked as I sat beside the canine. “Lowell had you check up on me?” I asked in astonishment.

“He did.” The Doberman lightly chuckled with a soft, amused smile. “He wanted to go himself, but Johanna insisted he keep training. So, he came to me while I was on break and said, and I quote: ‘Please do me a solid and go make sure Adam’s fine.’” He sighed in amusement. “I think that’s the first time we ever talked without him calling me a communist.”

My tail couldn’t resist the urge to wag after curling for some time. It tapped the ground, the couch’s underside, and both of our sensitive ankles, causing Blu to giggle.

A memory of Stephen flashed like momentary pain across my eyes. It was a week or so before high school graduation. We were sitting in his living room, his fingers brushing against mine on the couch, away from Mr. McConnell’s view from the kitchen as he mixed a martini on the granite stovetop counter. The younger fox and I were watching the season finale of *Game of Crowns*. A very decent pun I couldn’t remember on the TV screen led to Stephen giggling with me, which cascaded down to laughter. Mr. McConnell asked us what we found funny, but neither of us could say a single word.

*Are all of our memories just manipulations?* I wondered once again.

“Adam, you there?” Blu tapped my shoulder and brought me back to the present.

“Sorry…” I spoke to him in apology. “Just forget about it.”

“What’s there to apologize for?” he asked, then answered it for me. “I can’t imagine what you’re going through right now. Learning something like…that…”

“Wh-What’s there to talk about?” I asked him, having second thoughts about having a discussion over it. My eyes hardened to stone. “My best friend was the one who betrayed me. And now…now you guys are planning to torture him for information. Is that right?”

After a careful moment, Blu answered, “We won’t be the only ones interrogating him.” He quickly hesitated on the second to final word in his reply. “Until then, Lucius, Oscar and the other brains are picking apart the List for everything useful they can find. Then send copies to all the other Defiant cells so they can narrow down the closest ones.”

Blu went on to explain that the captured tithingmen would confess in front of a camera about their roles in Project Parish. It would include their names, ranks, serial numbers, objectives and the number of Devout citizens they’d deceived. All the confessions would be recorded on videos, then posted online with the decrypted data. As much as I wanted to be excited for the massive fallout it would cause, enabling everyday furs to finally realize how fucked our government truly was, I couldn’t stop myself from imagining Stephen’s fate.

I imagined him being executed for his crimes. Next, I imagined him pleading for mercy…or maybe God’s mercy as he wholly believed the cause. He would pray to God for sanctuary from the mobs and revolutionaries taking to the street. Or rather, Devout America’s version of God. The very version of God who told the red fox it was right to condemn me to the clinic. Lastly, I imagined the various faces he’d make if we ever reunited again. Would he even feel some remorse?

“Nobody expected this, Adam…but it’s like Johanna said.” Blu told me. “We know where a tithingman like him is gonna be, sculking around your parents’ house, then rescue them before can catch them doing the wrong thing at the wrong moment. Your friend won’t know what hit him.”

“He’s not my friend, Blu.” I stated with only a hint of anger in my voice. However, it wasn’t directed at him. “Stephen…He’s the reason they drugged me at the clinic. He’s the reason I was sent there to begin with. That makes him my enemy, doesn’t it?”

The Doberman stared for only a few uncertain seconds. He sighed deeply, “Sorry I hit a nerve there…”

I sighed with him. “Why’re you apologizing? There’s nothing to be sorry for.”

“In that case, I’m still sorry you had to go through what they did at the clinic. I’m…also sorry that Vox made me interrogate you back—”

“I told you. I forgive you. It made me remember where my loyalties lie, so I forgive you. Besides, I know for a fact that Lowell’s probably getting his revenge on you downstairs by using the training as an excuse to kick your butt, right?”

That certainly got a laugh out of Blu, who admitted that, yes, my wolf was a little rough with him during practice. Ultimately though, the Doberman had to return to the others downstairs and left, though not without giving me a short hug. I expected the rest of the afternoon to be long, arduous, and uneventful.

However, that changed not one minute after Blu left, when three consecutive knocks led me back to the hotel room’s door. A part of me almost expected to see him again through the peephole.

“Abigail?” I gasped and opened the door for them. “Mr. and Mrs. Lange?”

“Good to see you’re doing well, Adam,” Abigail smiled softly, though it carried a melancholic knowing about something. “Well, for the most part.”

“Hello again, Adam.” Mary politely said, then hugged me quickly as her husband sheepishly followed her and the elderly rabbit inside. He promptly shut the door closed behind them. “Kevin, you should say hello to Adam.”

“Hello, Adam,” he awkwardly scratched the back of his head. “Good to see you again, sonny, uh…” He sighed. “Listen, uh…Abigail here told us what they found out.”

I glanced with wide eyes between him, his wife, and the older rabbit. “You know about Stephen?”

“Unfortunately, yes.” Abigail solemnly nodded, one of her ears folded down on her shoulder. “Mrs. Cardinal informed me about it after you were. I was almost finished doing a checkup on Mr. Lange here. Doctor McCann was checking up on Jeannie Holt upstairs and the three of us were together when she informed me. She wanted me to see how you’re doing.”

It made sense. Then again, it felt so surreal to see Mr. Lange anywhere other than the double room he and Mrs. Lange had been sharing since arriving at the Maverick Hotel. Aside from torturing themselves by watching 24/7 news and (government approved) reruns of the pre-Devout past, I had only heard about Mary venturing to the Truth Committee’s room in order to check out from its illegal library. According to Liv, the middle-aged cougar discreetly loved reading some of the more…risqué novels in the collection. As well as pamphlets on birth control before the Revenant Party reclassified them into illicit drugs.

“Oh, Adam.” Mary Lange suddenly stepped forward to pull me into a hug. “By God, I am sorry about what you just learned.”

“Why are you sorry?” I couldn’t prevent myself from asking aloud. “You don’t have anything to be sorry for, Mary.”

“I still feel so sorry, Adam!” she hid a snarl in her voice. Not directed at me though. “I mean, somewhere out there, somebody told the Archangels we were harboring Defiant rebels. Out there, one of our neighbors betrayed us too.”

Stephen had been more than just a neighbor, however. He had been a great friend and part-time lover. Somebody whom I let touch me in ways that felt forbidden where we came from.

“What Mary is trying to say, Adam,” Kevin earnestly said, “is that we…well, reluctantly, now have a small inkling of what it’s like to flee your home. To…To leave everything behind and discover where your previous loyalties actually lie. I’m telling you, dear, it must’ve been the Parkers.”

Mary gasped and tried to counter, “Luke and Natasha would have never—”

“We can’t be certain they didn’t either,” he admitted surely. “In the same way we can’t be uncertain if they ever did enjoy our company. If they considered us friends in the first place for being ourselves. Good Lord,” Kevin laughed mockingly to himself, “being in this place for so long, I can’t tell what was real or fake from our lives anymore, Mary…”

She went to place her paw on his shoulder, “I know, honey. I know.”

“Have you considered praying over it?” Abigail offered to the mountain lions. She glanced to me too, her whisker twitching with her formed smile. “Whenever I feel overwhelmed, and I am alone with my thoughts, I pray.”

Mary gave a quizzical look to the older fur. “I thought that Johanna Cardinal told us not to go downstairs during business hours?” she pointed out, to which Abigail giggled where she stood. “What? How can we pray if places like the workout room and the chapel are off-limits?”

“Sweetie, you do not need to be in a church to pray.” She told the mountain lioness with a wry smile on the rabbit’s greying snout. “Why, when Reynold—God rest his wonderful, wonderful soul—started suffering from the nastiest of arthritis, we did not go to church. Instead, our pastor found the time to visit our home, and make an evening of it. No walking down a long nave, no harm done.” She softly smirked, “And this was before the Revenant Party even started gaining votes in the old days!”

“Oh wow, that is fascinating.” Mary mentioned with vibrant nostalgia, “My parents and Kevin’s were old school conservative Christians. There was never a Sunday I could remember where we missed a church service. Even in dreadful weather or a storm. Unless the church itself closed, my parents never had my siblings miss any opening of a service…”

Kevin suddenly gave a short laugh. “At least your church had air conditioning. Mine certainly didn’t. No smartphones either like your generation, Adam.”

My tail curled in amused grimace at the memory of having to place my cellphone in a basket before leaving the dorm hall. Throughout the four years I attended college (or in my case, three and a half), it had always been socially expected for every student on campus to attend church services, whether it be in the university’s large chapel or a local cathedral. For those who went to the chapel, being caught with a non-essential electronic device risked being sent to the dean. I remembered one fur constantly dismissing the rule, only to be suspended for a year.

“So, what do you say we pray for you, Adam?” Abigail proposed. “Kevin, Mary, would you be interested in joining us? I bet you miss this as much as I do.”

“Absolutely.” Mary beamed before turning to her husband. “Kevin?”

“Sounds fine by me,” he replied, “but I still feel we would be closer to God in one of His houses.”

“I’d hardly call a Devout church a house of God though,” Abigail casually remarked without batting an eye. “Anyway, we can’t have a prayer for you without you. Adam?”

I shrugged despite having slight interest. “Sure, why not?”

Abigail’s grin infected me. It made me wonder how she could keep one after enduring so much in her lifetime; losing a husband many years prior, watching the rise of the Devout, being alone in a world carefully watching for dissident citizens like us, reluctantly helping to heal soldiers from the frontlines of a civil war, then joining a resistance group in an uphill battle for freedom. If the country were finally freed, would I be able to hide my scars behind a smile?

“What are we waiting for then?” She waved us over, having herself, the Langes and I standing together close. Glancing between the three of us, Abigail motioned for us to lower our heads, which we did, and began to pray, “O Lord in Heaven, hallowed be thy name. We come to you during one of many darkest hours. Forgive us of our trespasses and those who trespass against us…”

Carrying conviction in her grandmotherly voice, Abigail led us through a prayer that caused something in me to reignite. Ever since I woke up to see Lowell and Olivia, the rebellious furs who saved me from that wretched clinic so close yet so faraway in Cicero, my devotion to God had been at the back of my mind. I could no longer even remember the last time I properly prayed to the Lord, let alone read a Bible. Listening to Abigail praise our creator, the higher power testing His true believers, asking Him to grant us mercy as we forgave those who betrayed us to evil…it reminded me why I still found comfort in Scripture. I could feel it in the way my fur prickled in emotional serenity and how I felt my tail curl for an unknown reason.

“We have all been betrayed in some form or another…sometimes more harshly than others,” she continued, “yet we live on as justice is perverted by our wrongdoers. These wrongdoers though…they will never escape their sins. They will never escape their judgements. As it says in Chapter 19 of Proverbs, ‘A false witness will not go unpunished, and whoever pours out lies will not go free.’ As the law that promised to protect us turned its back on us, give us the strength to oppose the true villainous tyrants who corrupted the Holy Word that is Your Name.

“However, let us never forget that forgiveness and love are as more potent of a cure for suffering than hatred or bigotry could ever hope to be. For I have seen such forgiveness and love with the most unlikely of groups who saved me. As have Mary and Kevin Lange, as well as Adam here, all of whom have experienced betrayal from their neighbors and those they trusted the most. I ask that you protect my new family in the days to come, its newcomers, its oldest members, its young and old, its most believing and most reserved of Your Grace. I pray that Adam’s newest companion, the ever-foulmouthed—”

Me, Mary and especially Kevin could not resist laughing. We stifled our interruption as fast as it occurred, and Abigail graciously continued the prayer.

Abigail sighed, “—ever-foulmouthed, ever passionate, most unusual of wolves I have ever met. No matter how reserved he is of knowing Your Name, of trusting the divine plan laid out for us, I wholly trust Lowell for protecting Adam. As for the one who wronged our friend, as it says in Leviticus, Chapter 19, ‘Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against anyone among your people but love your neighbor as yourself. I am the Lord.’ And in the days to come, we will trust in Your Word, our Lord and Savior to guide us through the uncertain fog and to a brighter future for everyone. For every man, woman, child, mentor, pupil, friend, and lover who not only believes, but wants to be free of the evil one masquerading as your servant. Protect us, guide us, and shelter us from any storm. Through Jesus Christ our Lord and only Savior…amen.”

“Amen.”

“Amen.”

Everything bubbled to the surface. I barely saw anything through the serene tears in my vision, running from my eyes, down my cheeks and dripping onto the room’s carpeting. Abigail, Mary, and Kevin noticed it and led me into a comforting hug I reciprocated. Gladly reciprocated, otherwise I felt my limp body would’ve fallen to the floor.

Through heaving sobs, I whispered into their shoulders, “…amen.”

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They left only a half-hour after I calmed down. After convincing Abigail that I felt fine, having some sense of clarity even, she still had me sit on the couch and watch over me as the Langes conversed with us. I listened to Mary question the elder rabbit where she heard of the last Bible verse recounted during the prayer.

“I never heard of that quote.”

“Me neither, Mrs. Foreman.”

“Oh, I do not read the Bibles in this hotel. Not the Devout version. Olivia and Lucius were kind enough to get me a downloaded PDF of an unedited Bible called the New International Version. Courtesy of Europe and the Western Republic, of course.”

“Do you think we could borrow a copy? To see for ourselves?”

“Yeah, can we? It’d be…interesting to see what other verses aren’t in the Devout version.”

Abigail chuckled, “Don’t get my permission. Dear Lucius, he will be more than happy to let you have a tablet to read the PDF on. Besides, they’re for anyone to look at.”

They eventually needed to leave, the Langes to the Illegal Library for their copy and Abigail to her infirmary to speak with Jordan. However, neither left without saying good-bye or pulling me into their arms and wishing me a good night.

Prior to walking out the door, Abigail gave me a kiss on the forehead and looked up at me. “I hope you feel a little better now, Adam?”

“For the most part…yeah.” I admitted with a small smile. “Thank you.”

The afternoon miraculously transformed into early evening within a blink of an eye. I could feel his eyes bore into the back of my head the moment he closed the door. I turned around expecting to see him angry, towards Johanna, towards the Devout and the red fox I thought I trusted long ago. To my surprise, he only pulled me into a bone-crushing hug. The shock wore off long enough for me to return it as he nuzzled my neck with his black nose.

“Listen,” he murmured through shaking teeth and a trembling voice, “I’m sorry I wasn’t here for you after we found out. I’m so sorry.”

“Why are you sorry, Low?” I asked him, feeling a sense of déjà vu.

“Because…Because I kn-know what it’s like to be betrayed…” he answered, then bit his lower lip and flared his nostrils.

How the cocky, outspoken, and angry wolf controlled himself in that moment, I barely knew until much later. Part of me already knew though; his past, whatever it was, involved deceit too, except his was more traumatizing, more lasting than I ever could imagine.

Lowell changed the topic before I could ask anything else, giving me his own question. “When we get that fox bastard…what do you want me to do to him?”

“If…If you’re really going to catch that ba…” An exhale forced its way out instead of another word I wanted to call him. The pit in my stomach almost threatened to consume me entirely, like an angry storm. “If you’re going to catch Stephen, please…don’t kill him. As much as I want him to pay for what he did…I’d rather see him tried for his crimes…Please.”

Lowell stood stiffly in my arms, then pulled back to reveal uncertainty in his face. We exchanged glances, then his expression hardened and softened between. He wanted to murder Stephen. I could spot it in the way he stared down at me like a victim, then to space, imagining all the ways he wanted to torture the fox. I felt it too.

“I…I can’t promise it’ll be that easy,” he offered to me, ears folded, and tail curled as he clasped my paws in his, “…but I’ll…I’ll at least try, Adam. I’ll try.”

I purred contentedly. “Thank you.”

He leaned forward to peck me on the lips.

I instantly forgot my troubles for the rest of the night. Alas, it did not stop Lowell from making a fuss over finding a pillow ripped open on the bed. He went so far as making horrible cat puns until long after we cleaned up, had dinner, fucked, and showered. We lay nuzzled together, naked under the sheets and warmly cuddled on our sides when:

“Have a paw-esome sleep, Adam.”

“Stop it.”

“You’ll need to be purr-suasive with me.”

Eyes closed and frowning, I half-elbowed him behind me. “I mean it.”

“Haha, what? I’m just pointing out those feathers looked like snow.” He playfully gasped. “Do you think Santa Claws is gonna visit tonight? Oooh, do ya think he’ll gimme a purr-fect present?”

I groaned. “It’s autumntime, we’re living in a hotel, and you’re awful.”

“Hehe, don’t you mean ‘claw-ful’?”

“…I love you, but you can be impossible. And if you say ‘paw-esome’, Lowell, I swear to God, I’m gonna go abstinent until the Devout falls.”

Part of me meant it too. Then again, the wolf knew my threats were mostly half their worth.

“Alright, sweetie. I’ll stop, I’ll stop...” Lowell quietly cackled into my bare shoulder, kissing it. “I love you too. Good night, Adam.”

Despite how annoyed I’d been earlier, I felt myself smiling to his wish. It started off as a wonderful morning, then an awful day, and a comforting night in my loving boyfriend’s arms again. The Lord worked in mysterious ways. “Good night, Lowell.”