My head hurt. My limbs hurt. Nothing felt broken or sprained, yet the stiffness in my joints helped remind me I was very much alive.

I blinked up at the ceiling and tried sitting up from the floor, only to wobble as my ears ringed madly. I stumbled backwards into Dad, who pulled me back up and said something to Mom, who was shaken as well. My eyes turned to see Kevin lying on the floor, and Mary desperately shaking him awake. Dad rushed over to look closely.

I could hear some of Kevin’s words, “…little sore, but I’m fine.”

The van’s back door burst open. An armored silhouette pointed a rifle at us.

He didn’t even have time to say anything, not when a flash erupted from Lucius’ handgun and blood splattered from between the man’s eyes. He immediately fell backwards, and that was when sound returned to my senses. Among those sounds were heavy breathing from everyone, and Mary visibly struggling to not hyperventilate.

“He s-shot him—”

“He was gonna kill us, Mary,” he murmured to her.

“He shot him,” she whimpered between breaths.

“We need to go, now.” Lucius spoke up over them, staring at us all. “Grab your things. If we run into trouble, leave ‘em, okay?”

The raccoon didn’t give anyone a chance to rebuke. He peeked out the dented door and jumped down from the van, hurriedly assisting me and my parents while doing our best to distract ourselves from the dead policeman’s body lying a few feet from us. Kevin couldn’t stop himself, however, and ralphed whatever he’d been able to digest all over the back bumper as he and his wife tried stepping onto the asphalt. Mary almost fainted, if it weren’t for my mother whispering something to her. Whatever she said, it pulled her back briefly.

Me? I’d never forget the red blood pooling underneath the armored corpse.

What fortunately pulled me away from the horrifying sight was a sudden clanging noise behind us. Lucius raised his gun again, only for everyone to freeze at the sound of groaning.

Lucius’ eyes widened, as did mine. “Olivia!” We gasped in unison.

I joined him in running around the corner. Our van had crashed into the wall of the yacht club’s main building. A gaping hole made from cracked brick and wall plaster swallowed the frontend of the vehicle, and limping from the structure’s new entrance was a female otter with a dusted jacket speckled in blood. Specifically, there was blood dripping from her forehead and over her bruised left eye. The way she held her left arm didn’t appear good either.

“Oh my God, Liv!” I cried out while rushing to her side. “Are you okay?”

“I’m gonna live—ngh!—for now,” she replied, wincing as Lucius examined her arm and snarling when his finger touched the wrong part of her elbow. “Ow! You’re not helping me!”

“Mr. Grimwald, can you look at her?” Lucius asked.

My father held onto his luggage and mine as he stepped toward us. Mom and the Langes warily watched for incoming vehicles as he examined her.

“Are you in intense pain or feel nauseous?” He asked Olivia in a clinical, concerned tone. “Can you lift up that arm without feeling like you’ll pass out?”

“Well, I’m not dead,” she groaned while trying to move the arm, only to grimace as if she’d sipped raw vinegar. Lucius stopped her from falling over, only for his paw to graze the injury. “Ow, ow, ow…shit, that hurts!”

“Sorry, Liv,” he muttered.

She wiped her forehead of blood. “I can lift it, I just…”

“Don’t push yourself like that,” Dad chastised her and momentarily assumed his role as a doctor. “Use your other arm to keep it from moving too much. Soon as we reach that escape boat, I’ll have a look at your arm. Until then, I don’t want you hurting yourself. Understand?”

“Uh, right,” Olivia instinctively nodded in affirmation. “Yessir.”

After handing Olivia the ripped fabric of his shirt sleeves, Lucius pulled out his gun. He made sure to keep it pointed to the ground. “We better join the others,” the raccoon informed us as our comrade finished wrapping up the cut. “Stay close behind me.”

I made sense of our surroundings. The totaled van stood between the waterfront and a deserted parking lot. Well, deserted save for the lone police cruiser nearby, which flashed red and blue beams all over like the glare of a powerful lighthouse. Seeing them again caused the earlier adrenaline from before to return, and whatever emotions I felt purged as we followed the building’s façade to a metal gate left completely wide open.

“There they are!” Liv pointed across the property, to the piers.

At the foot of the closest dock, through the darkness of a cloudy moonlight, I saw the outlines of boats and the distinct rearend lights of what appeared to be a parked delivery van. I could also make out silhouettes of furs. Hope rushed into my heart as we rushed towards them.

What made us do a double take was the mongoose standing next to Johanna, warily watching for anybody following our group. He was middle-aged, wearing a tacky captain’s hat and an even tackier Hawaiian shirt as bright and colorful as neon lights, despite this bright attire not fitting the autumn season. The previous time I’d seen him had been when he drove our escape taxicab.

Mrs. Lange seemed to immediately recognize him too. “Didn’t he drive us away from—”

“The Archangels, yeah!” I interrupted in equal amazement. “It’s Old Nick!”

“Old Nick?” Kevin narrowed his eyes to the mongoose, gasping. “It’s him.”

“Who?” Dad spoke up.

“He helped us get back to the hotel,” Kevin tried to explain mid-walk. “We owe him—”

“Less talking, more walking!” Lucius snapped at us impatiently. “Go, go!”

Our hearts were in our throats. Olivia stifled her winces with each growling push to keep up with everybody else. We exerted ourselves between fleeing for our lives and carrying each small luggage or backpacks, all of which contained our only possessions. Still, we didn’t let the weight of them slow us down. If anything, they helped pull us down the sloped concrete hill leading down to the peer. I’d even nearly tripped two-thirds of the way down to the bottom, but regained footing and enough momentum to stagger into Lowell’s elated arms.

“I’m glad you’re safe,” he murmured into my neck.

I never had a chance to reply. Three gunshots suddenly rang out.

“Hit the ground!” Lucius shouted alongside Johanna. “Cops!”

Everyone ducked for cover. Olivia hid with Lucius behind a crate. My parents and the Langes managed to flee behind the other escape van parked nearby as I collapsed next to Lowell behind my suitcase. Rapid thunder erupted seemingly everywhere. My boyfriend’s strong arms and chest surrounded me like a blanket. His haggard growls nearly outmatched his rapid breathing.

“This is Chicago PD! In the name of the Lord and His Law, you’re ordered to surrender!”

“Freedom for America!” Old Nick barked out. Thunderous machinegun fire erupted from where I presumed to be the yacht. More lone pistol firing caused my ears to ring.

I didn’t need to ask Lowell what would happen if we didn’t get to the yacht soon; our cell would be surrounded by too many authorities to escape into Lake Michigan. When I tried turning to see him, the vice-like grip only tightened me further as my cheek scraped at the rough ground. His legs also pulled mine tighter into a ball, doing everything to make us smaller.

“I got you, I got you. I’m so sorry, babe.”

My whimpering turned into his name, “Lowell…”

“Just another minute or two,” he promised me. “I’m not gonna lose you. We’re gonna survive this.”

“Contact!” A distant shout caught my attention.

One of my ears perked slightly at the sound of shouting nearby, followed by separate gunfire. Lucius said something to Johanna over the noise, yet her reply was drowned out as well.

“EVERYONE, STAY DOWN!”

We obeyed Johanna’s commanding voice boomed over the gunfire. We flinched at the sudden lack of bullets flying over us or ricocheting against concrete.

I heard the cops shout, “Jesus Christ! Hit the dirt! Take cover!”

**BOOM! CRASH!**

“We’re clear!” Lucius hollered to us.

“Defiant, grab your shit and get onboard!” Johanna subsequently ordered. “Hector, Blu, get your fuckin’ asses over here before we leave!”

Lowell flew off of me, pulling me back up in the process. He wordlessly grabbed my suitcase for me as I followed close by. I didn’t have time to rub my bruised cheek upon looking at the destruction. Two police cruisers burned brightly where they once stood on the other side of the pier. On the yacht’s upper deck, visible with pierced bullet holes, I spotted Nick on the upper deck, reloading what looked like a military-grade rocket launcher.

No, it really was a military-grade rocket launcher! Pointed back at the pier for any other authority in sight, especially down at three figures approaching me and Lowell as we made our way down to the dock.

Standing between Blu and Hector stood a red fox the same age as me, wearing dirtied pajama bottoms, a bloody matching grey t-shirt with a torn collar, a bandage on his cheek haphazardly placed on, plus a bruised snout. He didn’t notice me at first. Instead, he chose the precise moment to break free from Hector’s grasp, almost push Blu over the pier into the waters below, then grab the shirt of nearest person: me.

“Stephen!” I held my paws up.

The fox’s livid sneer immediately cracked when he fully saw my face. Familiarity softened the rage in his eyes, only to be replaced by sheer bewilderment.

“A-Adam?”

I almost cracked into a million pieces too, then recalled Johanna’s prior words spoken on the radio: *Don’t hold back, because it’s them or us.* Them or us. A law-abiding Devout citizen or myself, the one who threw me to the monsters.

The red fox’s shaken composure and loosening grip gave me the opportunity to deck him in the face. Lowell didn’t even get the chance to drop my luggage and lunge for me.

“Ack!” Stephen yelped in confused pain. The sneer returned in full momentum. “Grrr!”

When one of his fists tried blindly connecting to my ribs, a few weeks of Lowell’s systema training back in the hotel’s fitness room kicked right in. I didn’t stop the punch. Otherwise, he would’ve been given another opening to strike. Rather, my wrist connected to his and it swiped his clenched one downward.

The motions became instinct. His redirected punch caused him to lean forward. A precise punch to his throat caused him to gag. A backhanded strike to his head came next. My left leg tripping against his sent the fox falling backwards onto the ground. I didn’t give him an opportunity to get back up and kneed him in the side of his chest. I had my elbow pushed against his vulnerable throat when three other figures rushed to help me restrain him. Specifically, they were Lowell, Blu, and a recovered Hector.

I backed up in time for Lowell to punch my attacker. Again, and again. “Get off him, Low! We need him alive!” Blu snarled while pulling my boyfriend away from the cowering fox.

Johanna made her way to us. “Bring him below and make sure he stays there!” She barked at us like animals. She pointed down the dock leading to the yacht, “Adam, onboard!”

“Yes, ma’am!” I complied.

“Get up, *cabrón*,” Hector forced Stephen to a standing position. “Low, Bluford, help me! We’re not letting this Devout fuck free again!”

I dared not to look behind me as the trio surrounded my former friend. Instead, I followed Johanna orders by grabbing my suitcase by both paws, stepping off the dock and onto the lower deck of the yacht, helped out partly by Johanna and then my father, who wordlessly grabbed my luggage. He then motioned for me to join Mom, who sat fretting next to the Langes and Abigail on a few couches encircled around a modern fireplace.

“Are you okay, sweetie?” My mother stood up to hug me tightly. In the corner of my eye, I could see Dad handing my suitcase to Jordan, placing it in another room. I grew distracted though by Mom’s trembling arms pulling me closer. “I-I heard the gunshots, then saw you on the g-g-ground, then get attacked and thought—oh, God! Oh, Lord. I thought y-you’d been—”

“I’m fine, Mom,” I returned her hug tenfold, nodding into her shoulder. “I’m okay. Low pulled me down in time. I’m okay, Mom. I’m okay.”

I felt Dad’s arms and tail wrap around us both. However, I did feel him tense suddenly, which coincided with Stephen being pushed onto the deck. Hector and Blu became quick to hold his arms together behind his back.

“Try anything right now,” I heard Lowell inform the fox whilst towering over him, “I’ll pull your tendons out, tie your limbs together and toss you the fuck overboard.”

“What he said!” Hector growled, pushing him forward.

I glanced upward in time to see my father’s enraged face. It only required a second or two, but the moment the red fox noticed my family, particularly how Dad’s frown darkened in his direction, he lost all breath. Stephen practically shrank back against Lowell, who guided him down a staircase with Blue and Hector ahead of them. Dad’s anger didn’t dispel though. It remained, despite my former best friend no longer being in sight. It matched my mother’s too, who looked like she’d wanted to see Stephen more than just beaten and battered. Let alone restrained in a room somewhere below deck, wherever it was. Unfortunately, or perhaps fortunately for my parents, something else caught our attention almost immediately.

Police sirens. Helicopters. The full Devout government-funded might of Chicago’s law enforcement agencies, desiring the blood of rebels. As soon as Lucius helped Olivia make the wide step across the gap between the dock and our escape yacht, then slinked aboard himself to lie down on the nearest cushioned seat, Johanna waved above deck.

“That’s everyone, Nick!” She hollered upward. “Get us out of here, now!”

“Aye-aye, ma’am!” The mongoose revved the engine to a purr. “Good-bye, Chicago!”

The yacht suddenly lurched forward. It pulled away from the pier, snaked through the rows of stationed or abandoned boats, and I still hugged close to my parents. We silently stood on the lower deck, helplessly watching as our home city, our former country, its enforcers, and all that we ever knew…slowly disappeared at top speed into a sea of white, red, and blue flashing lights surrounded by an imposing skyline.