“Hey, Adam. Check this baby out.”

“Are you being serious, Low?” I groaned.

“I think this is giving me a boner.” Still grasping the black-painted assault rifle in one paw, Lowell peered down at his crotch. “Yep, definitely got a boner.”

“Lowell, quit your shit.” Olivia rolled her eyes while handing him an extra magazine for the unloaded weapon. “For all we know, the enemy could be coming in.”

“What makes the past ten-plus years any different now?” He asked us.

Olivia didn’t retort the timber wolf, and instead inspected her own rifle. Lowell reluctantly fell into the same silence as well, answering his own question. Mostly emptied boxes of handguns and automatic weapons were strewn across the granite countertop. Meanwhile, I fidgeted while leaning against the wall in what used to be the kitchen, watching them and recalling the previous conversation I had with Johanna minutes prior.

After my talk with Stephen, I followed Lowell with the intent of making myself useful. Not a second that I asked, Johanna pulled me aside, asking me to join her in the yacht’s master bedroom. Well, bedroom could imply there happened to be a bed. Like the rest of the *Sunlit Evanescent*, very little furniture filled the open space. All that remained were the wooden supports that once held the king-sized mattress, as well as skid marks signifying that it and a large nightstand had been tossed over into Lake Michigan.

Old Nick sat in the room, glaring at a tablet as he typed furiously. The mongoose’s gaze didn’t even register when I walked in, or when Johanna closed the door shut. As well as the yacht’s owner, I also noticed another item I didn’t see around the corner. A plastic blue box I recognized from my father’s work at the hospital. It was no bigger than a football, had a shoulder strap connecting each side, and possessed a large cross sticker and another below it indicating the box always needed to stay closed.

“Any word from Canada?”

“Huh?” Nick peeled away from the tablet. “Sorry, I was distracted, Mrs. Cardinal.”

“I said did you get any word yet from Canada?” She crossed her arms at him. “If you’re playing any fucking games on there, I’ll—”

“No, of course, I’m not!” Nick hastily stood up with his paws held high, one of them still clutching the tablet. From an angle, I saw a paused video showing fire. “I just got a little distracted, that’s all. There’s stuff going down near Mexico, but to answer your question: I talked to Lucius and Oscar. They told me to tell you a C.A.F. squad from the 405th battalion’s coming their way from Thunder Bay. They’re just finished with taking back Winnipeg.”

“They’re that close already?” I gasped.

“Yep,” he chirped, “they also can’t guarantee they won’t be held up by locals.”

“Any word from the Springfield cell then?” Johanna offhandedly asked. “Bluford wants to know if Vox and the others made it to the Mississippi. He’s worried about ‘em.”

“No word, ma’am.” Nick shook his head. “Everyone’s still in the dark.”

“All for the best, I guess,” she sighed, then relaxed her arms as she walked over to the box in the corner. “Adam, there’s something I need you to do for me these next several hours. It…involves Lowell.”

I immediately stood at attention. “I’m listening, ma’am.”

“I know you care about him, and I do too,” she brought the box closer to me, and opened it to reveal cold vials holding what appeared to be blood. Lowell’s blood. “I can’t go into the details about it, but whatever happens today, I need you to promise me to make sure Lowell doesn’t get killed or captured. Above all else, he *cannot* be captured. No matter what, please protect him with your life. Do you understand, Adam?”

“Adam?”

I got pulled from my thoughts by Lowell.

“Adam, are you still on Earth?” He asked me, handing me one of the handguns. “Do you remember what I told you? What’re the basics?”

“Keep the safety on unless I plan to shoot, don’t shoot unless I need to,” I mumbled off, forgetting to describe the proper shooting stance that Olivia haphazardly taught me earlier.

“Right, right,” Lowell nodded as I placed the heavy handgun into my back pants. It felt like a ton compared to the stone in my stomach. “Don’t worry, Adam. You won’t need to use it.”

“Liar.” Sighing, I gave an audible trill while standing up, planting a kiss on his muzzle. “Honestly, I hope so too.” Even though we knew it might not be the case.

“Mackinaw Bridge is two minutes incoming!” Old Nick hollered on the radio. “Johanna, do I slow down or keep top speed?”

“Do not slow down, Nick! We’ve already lost the element of surprise,” she hollered back. “All personnel, man your stations immediately. Prepare our counterattack!”

Down below deck were those who didn’t have experience in the field, let alone could expertly use automatic weapons. They consisted of me, my parents, Mr. and Mrs. Lange, Oscar, Abigail, Jordan, and Jeannie, the latter still bedridden and too weak to walk properly. We’d helped sit her in a wheelchair, with Jordan tending to her as Oscar remained at his laptop. Nick’s tablet rested close by, opened to a chatting channel. Reluctantly, Nancy had to join the others up on deck to help defend the yacht, among them being Lowell.

Meanwhile, Blu continued watching Stephen in the makeshift cell. Ready to join everyone else on deck if needed.

“I’m getting word from the C.A.F. They’re still too far from the LZ—wait!” Nick shouted into the radio from the captain’s wheel. “I’ve got one vessel coming from the north, and fast! Two vessels, no—three!”

Outside one of the windows, I could spot it closing dozens of yards away: a large speeder boat decked for naval warfare, complete with the Devout flag flying closely behind it. Over my shoulder, Jordan pushed me to the ground as he told everyone to take cover.

Glass shattered inward. Everyone either screamed or covered each other from stray bullets that didn’t strike anyone. The *Sunset Evanescent* surprisingly possessed a strong outer hull, but the port windows didn’t get manufactured for a sea battle. Only strong waves.

“We got more boogeys at ten o’ clock!” Nick muttered over the radio. “

“Attention all passengers of the Sunset Evanescent,” a stern voice barked through the radio, “By the authority of the D.S. Ninth District Coast Guard, you are ordered to slow your vessel down! On behalf of Devout America and her citizens, you will receive God’s wrath!”

“They’re turning around to tail behind us!” Nick hollered, “Mrs. Cardinal, I recommend we go radio silent!”

“Agreed!”

Before giving everyone the order, Lowell growled onto his own radio, “Oi, Biblefuckers! On behalf of the actual United States of America, and her own citizens you’ve murdered, I am ordering you to go fuck yourselves!”

The speeder boat’s captain retorted, “You are traitors to the Devout—”

“Go make oral fuckin’ love to your own guns!” Lowell snarled back, just as bullets flied from above deck. “If ya believe in God so much, I’ll help ya meet him!”

“Lowell!” Johanna then informed us in electronic tandem, “Everyone, forget the radios from now on. Blu, bring everyone to safety. Cardinal, out!”

We did just that, dropping our pairs on the floor without thought. Discarding the radios would be easy. Communicating throughout planned to be much harder, but it didn’t stop Blu from shouting for everybody to come inside the main corridor, since the bedrooms proved unsafe. Reloading his weapon, the dark-furred dog switched between scoping his rifle from the top of the yacht’s narrow staircase to keeping a close eye on the closet. The same one where Stephen tried speaking to us.

“You will all burn in Hell, heathens! We will all die in flames!”

Lucius elbowed the wooden barrier. “Shut up!”

With help from me and Jordan, we helped guide Jeannie into the hallway alongside everyone else, gently sitting her down as she held our shoulders in death grips.

“I’ve got her, Adam. You go be with your parents,” Jordan craned his neck to Abigail, carrying a bag with medical items. “Don’t worry, Jeannie. We’re going to be safe.”

“How do you know?” She whimpered.

“I just do,” he muttered. “You just focus on breathing, try not to have a panic attack.”

Doing my best to ignore the irony (of avoiding a panic attack in the middle of a gunfight), I knelt beside my folks huddled near the closed bathroom door, and we sat beside the Langes as gunfire echoed outside the yacht. Mom squeezed my elbow, Dad held his arms around her, and Kevin caressed his wife’s ear. For all any of us knew, an explosion could send us sky-high.

Suddenly, something struck the yacht’s port side. We yelped at the impact. Then, loud thunder bellowed from up the stairs, and Blu screamed. The scent of blood sent a jolt of fear up my spine, until the Doberman stepped down the staircase, grasping his bloodied arm. As well as his side, which stained the blue jeans crimson.

“Blu, you got hit!” Abigail scurried between bodies with a huge roll of tape. “How deep?”

“It’s a scratch, Abby,” Blu tried saying, only for the rabbit to pull the Doberman closer to her line of sight, and she meticulously examined it. “Fuckers out there got too close…”

**BANG! BANG! BANG!**

We all ducked down from a slew of bullets. One of them did ricochet into the ceiling, causing a spark to startle everyone. We expected a hail of more until loud pops came from the top of the stairs, and Lowell’s handsome smirk appeared as he shot back at the vessel.

“Fuck me on a flagpole, they’re stubborn!” He fired several rounds before replacing the magazine, then shouted without looking down at us, “Blu, let one of the others watch over Fox McCrap in the closet and help me out here!”

“Ngh,” Bluford held in a growl when Abigail poured some iodine in his bullet wound. “I ain’t gonna do much with a fucked shoulder, Low!”

“Shit,” he hissed after quickly stepping down a few steps, huffing at his side being dressed up, as well as his right shoulder “Tell me that ain’t your shooting arm, please.”

“It’s my shooting arm, mutt—yeow!” Blu bared his fangs to the ceiling, knuckles whitening against his bloodied thigh as Abigail wordlessly worked to dig out a few scraps of metal. “Easy there, Abby.”

“Quit your bellyaching and let me help you.” She turned to my father. “Dr. Grimwald, how good are you at getting bullet wounds out without letting the patient bleed to death?”

“I did it for a living,” he stood up, but not before kissing my mother and whispering reassurances. He addressed Lowell, “Abigail’s right son, he’s in no condition to fight.”

“Can I get permission then to let Adam help me?” He asked, then quickly explained before anybody could object, Nancy’s with Hector, and Johanna’s with Olivia and Nick in the captain’s seat, so I’ll need another to help watch my flank up top!”

Mom tried objecting either way. “No, you’re not going out there, Adam—”

“I can’t do anything up there without having someone watch my back, ma’am!” He interrupted her, firmly nodding at me. “You’re the only one here who knows how to work a gun. Remember my instructions. Let’s get going, we don’t have much time!”

“Here, take this, Adam!” Abigail tossed me a roll of bandaging tape. “I’ve got plenty down here, boy! You and Low might need it!”

Snatching it in the air, I placed it in my back pocket. “Thank you!” I tried to say.

“Let’s go!” Lowell didn’t let me.

I squirmed past the other bodies to the protest of my mother, and momentarily my father, but I didn’t stop. Before returning up on deck though, I glanced one more time inside the yacht, seeing huddled family, friends, and loved ones. Many tried ignoring the gunfire and shouts outside by either curling close together, or by watching Blu get treated for the gunshot wounds. Quite a few onlookers seemed queasy, including Mr. and Mrs. Lange, while Dad quietly helped the elderly rabbit in retrieving the bullet.

Hopefully, the Devout government wouldn’t provide one for each of us.