On the plus side, it was relieving to know Lowell wouldn’t be the one interrogating Stephen. On the minus side of things, the thought of my brash, unapologetically atheist boyfriend introducing himself to my folks in a mission like we found ourselves in…it worried me.

 “This is L.”

 “And this is D.” Donald murmured into his earpiece, “H and B are geared up. The streets are clear. Permission to commence the dual operation, ma’am.”

 Johanna murmured into her radio headset, “Permission granted. Let’s get to work.”

 The War Room remained silent as we watched the screens connected to two cameras, one set to Donald’s point-of-view, a few strands of his mane covering the view of a cracked sidewalk until he wiped it aside. The other screen displayed Lowell’s view as he rushed out of the faux ambulance, then maneuvered into underbrush I remembered exploring in as a kid surrounding the rear of my childhood home. Watching the feed occasionally shake between quick, planned strides from the wolf, I presumed the path leading to my home hadn’t changed a day. Not since I became a teenager and especially after my abduction from the Archangels.

Speaking of whom, the lack of contact between us and Blu likely meant he’d gotten into position, and the Doberman was casually waltzing out of the ambulance to walk down the street to the McConnell’s residence. Meanwhile, Donald’s camera showed him weaving between the hedges that bordered the fox’s property, eventually revealing the covered backyard pool and garden of dying flowers signaling autumn had started to return. The faint sounds of a few crunching leaves only confirmed it.

“Goddamn…” Donald exhaled, clearly impressed when he saw the McConnell’s backyard, whispering, “Remind me to become a banker after the resisting goes stale.”

Johanna rolled her eyes next to me, as did a tired Jordan nearby.

Reflections of the past started to swell in the foreground, meanwhile. They started to emerge from the back of my mind; Stephen showing off the empty ditch that eventually became their swimming pool, then inviting me over one morning to see workers putting in the linoleum tiles. Then, the fox’s father inviting the whole street over to a barbeque party. Me and Stephen enjoyed it alongside our parents, who eventually got bored and dried off to discuss boring adult topics. It had been the first time I ever saw Stephen wear swimming trunks. Seeing the covered pool, likely emptied as well, made me remember how much I tried not to look at him for too long back then, not when the adults were nearby watching.

*Did Stephen ever think of betraying me, even back then?* I thought in frustration.

Any memories between me and Stephen McConnell were…tainted. They were wrong. They were forever stained by the fact he turned me over to the conversion clinic years later. His smile, wagging tail, laughter and endearing voice telling me we were having fun, it felt all wrong. No matter how much I tried remembering our fun in that backyard with rosy lenses, I could never look at the pool the same way again. The image of Stephen’s adventurous grin only transformed into a twisted, condescending sneer, the well-off fox and his older father glaring back at me with darker intent.

My stomach felt like it wanted to do a somersault. I shook my head, drowning my senses on the audio from the big screens. Johanna glanced at me in visible worry, yet I flashed her an uneasy smile, which seemed to work for the doe. Well, almost.

“You doing good, soldier?”

“Yes.” I cleared my throat. “Yes, ma’am.”

“If this is too much for you, or you need to use a restroom, don’t hesitate to ask.” She sighed, turning with me to the right screen to view Lowell already navigating out of the underbrush. “Olivia, can you filter on thermal imaging?”

“On it, boss.” The otter said, her finger scrolling on a laptop and clicking something on its monitor, which turned the right screen into a purple landscape. A few feathery orange dots, birds heading south, hovered on the house’s roof in clear view, only for them to fly away. “Done and done. Should we have Adam on standby, Jo?”

“I’m ready when you are.” I announced, expecting an affirmative Grunt from Johanna, only for our eyes to be drawn on the left screen. “Al…Alright.”

Donald just finished setting up the jammer. Appearing at first glance as a regular briefcase, when opened, nine black antennas were vertically pointed upward. The machine connecting them together hummed loud enough for Donald’s camera to pick it up. Olivia mentioned earlier how the jammer frequency had a range of four-hundred feet, just more than a whole football field, which would knock out any form of electronic communication within reach. That included action cameras like the ones Lowell and Donald wore.

“This is D. It’s set up, ma’am.”

Johanna held a paw up to her earpiece, “Do it.”

The left screen turned into sharp static within seconds of the lion flicking a switch on the jammer. I inhaled a fearful gasp, almost irrationally expecting the right screen to go the same route. It did, if only for a moment, then slowly disappeared into the thermal landscape.

Lowell had just gotten from the jammer’s range by sneaking up the back porch, then knelt to reach in a pouch from his tactical vest, pulling out two metal picks. A torrent of rustling mutters and hushed swearwords filtered from the foul-mouthed wolf’s lips as he toyed the lock.

“Fuckin’ dipshit locks. Made by a buncha Bible-thumping, boob-belching locksmiths with their cocksucking…They better not have any goddamn alarms...”

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Movement could be heard descending from overhead. Lowell instantly knew it had to be the staircase. A light suddenly turned on, and the purple landscape became a>>>>>>>>>

Corridor, kitchen

Mom almost broke into hysterics, “No—”

“Don’t talk, and don’t make a sound,” Lowell said to her. “I need you to listen carefully. I’m here to help.” She might’ve been trembling or on the verge of hysterics, because he hastily added, “My name’s Lowell. I’m with the Defiant, and we came here to get you back to Adam.”

“Adam?” Mom muffled the word through his paw.

“He’s alive.”

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“Donald’s down! I repeat, Donald’s K.I.A.”

 They don’t expect an archangel living with Stephen? A fight breaks out and one of Lowell’s comrades is mortally injured, even after subdue the Archangel and capturing Stephen while getting the parents out.

Lowell and

 Hector, Donald and Blu (in Archangel uniform) catch Stephen by surprise to trick him into going into van. Successfully taken to secluded building.

 Adam reunites with parents in awkward but teary-eyes reunion.

 “Gabriel Lowell, I am ordering you to survive this!” She pleaded at the monitor, though neither Lowell nor my whimpering, hysterical parents could hear her.