Zootopia: File #2

by Empress Imperia

Summary

Mysteries get mistier in this sequel to the hit movie Zootopia. What starts as a calamity at the Greener Grass Mall becomes a race against time to stop a budding terrorist group with Zootopia's most famous celebrity in their sights. Judy and Nick's second big case leads them to the infamous Casel family... a family bearing a dark history with the ZPD's Front Desk Officer.
Savanna News - December 16, 2016

BELLWETHER BEHIND BARS

Dawn Bellwether is now behind bars after being found guilty of masterminding the savage predator attacks that have recently plagued Zootopia. The verdict was announced at 5:00 in the afternoon yesterday at Zootopia Superior Court.

In the main lobby of the Savannah Central Police Department, Chief Bogo confirmed in a press conference that the former mayor has been sentenced to thirty years in prison for her conspiracy to discredit the predator minority through the use of a toxin produced from a plant known locally as 'Night Howler'. A local chemist, Doug Ramses, and two former convicts, known only as Walter and Jesse, were also arrested for their involvement in the conspiracy. In addition, ZPD Officers Shawn Woolworth and Barry Ramsbottom were discovered to have secretly hindered the ZPD's efforts to uncover the truth of the savage attacks.

"So far as we know, Woolworth and Ramsbottom were the only two officers involved in the Night Howler attacks." Chief Bogo stated upon being questioned about the possibility of other, unknown corrupt officers. "The data gleaned from Bellwether's personal computer suggests that the individuals we detained were the only people under her payroll, and the majority of City Hall were unaware of their mayor's activities. However, our investigation is still ongoing, and we are thoroughly exploring every lead until everyone involved in this conspiracy is exposed and put behind bars. It is our top priority to ensure that our city streets are once again safe to live and work in, for predator and prey alike. In any case, we must give our thanks to Officer Judy Hopps and her friend Nicholas Wilde for solving the case and preventing one of the worst atrocities in the history of Zootopia."

Chief Bogo proceeded to call Officer Hopps to the stage to answer further questions. Having suffered a laceration to her right leg in the process of obtaining evidence of Bellwether's guilt, Officer Hopps was carrying a crutch as she assured the community that the antidote procured for the Night Howler toxin has successfully cured one hundred and three of the one hundred and fifty four afflicted predators, with the remainder being scheduled to receive the antidote within the next two days. Before leaving the stage Hopps also apologized for her comments at the press conference for the missing mammal cases three months prior.

"I was being thoughtless and narrow-minded when I spoke at the conference several months ago. I have no excuse." Hopps stated. "If it weren't for a certain fox named Nick Wilde, I never would have been able to fix my mistakes, and I am eternally gratefully for his assistance and his friendship..."

Saharaside - September 22, 2017

FIRST FOX ON THE FORCE

Yesterday afternoon, Zootopia's first fox police officer received his badge at the police graduation ceremony.

Nicholas Wilde, 33, has graduated as valedictorian of his class, defying widespread expectations from the more narrow-minded members of our community. Wilde is well known in Zootopia for assisting ZPD Officer Judy Hopps in solving both the missing mammal cases and the Night Howler
incident of which Mayor Bellwether was convicted of instigating last year, which has made him a popular figure within the city's fox population.

However, there were those who objected to the idea of a fox joining the police department.

"They must be out of their minds letting a fox into the academy." Said Jerry Jumbeaux Jr., owner of Jumbeaux's Cafe. "If they have any sense they'll send him back to whatever rip-off artist's retreat he came crawling out of."

Despite some negative reactions to this new development the majority of the reception has been overwhelmingly positive, especially that of Officer Hopps.

"I always knew he could do it." Officer Hopps stated after the ceremony was over. "All my life I've heard of how foxes were only ever good for sucking people dry or how rabbits could never become anything more than carrot farmers, but now I know it's all bat droppings. No offense. Anyway, what I'm saying is that sometimes all you need is a chance to prove yourself. I await his assignment as my new partner with great anticipation."

"I can't even begin to tell you how proud I am of what my son has accomplished." Wilde's mother, Veronica Wilde, stated upon being approached by this reporter. "I am well aware that he has made some mistakes. Who hasn't? But he has pulled through in the end and become the fox I always knew he would be. God bless him, and God bless Judy Hopps."

Two days before the ceremony, Officer Hopps and Chief Bogo both confirmed that Wilde has no prior criminal convictions...

---

Rainforest Weekly - October 2, 2017

MAYOR ANNOUNCES THE THIRTEENTH DISTRICT

On the front steps of City Hall, Mayor Hornbull has announced the secession of Outback Island and the south of Savanna Central in a move that could lead to the birth of Zootopia's thirteenth district. Though the exact date is currently undetermined, the major construction is slated to begin next year, and will not only involve building a border to separate the land from the upper area of Savanna Central but will also include its complete renovation into an environment specially designed to accommodate mammals from the Austroalan Outback.

The construction will be overseen by the Casel Corporation, just like Sahara Square, Tundratown, the Rainforest District, the Nocturnal Caverns and six other districts were designed and constructed by this thriving company. After the mayor made his announcement, Chairman Elgen Casel stepped forward to explain the plan in more detail. In a design bearing similarities to Sahara Square, the natural rivers and foliage would remain largely unchanged but with the latest in terraforming technology they will construct an artificial desert for those desert mammals struggling to adapt to the warmer climate of Sahara Square and the Canyonlands.

"The ten districts my family's company has designed and built over the last several decades are ten of my family's finest accomplishments, and I am honored to be overseeing the birth of our new district." Elgen Casel said in his final statement. "After much deliberation, we have decided to name this new district the 'Tirari Town.'"

The announcement was met with general approval by the community, including the famed pop singer Gazelle who was present when the announcement was made...
VELTRO PROTESTS PERSIST

At approximately 2:30 P.M. yesterday afternoon, the Zootopia Police Department was called after a protest by the organization Veltro threatened to turn violent. A group of about sixteen mammals were picketing the Greener Grass Mall, due to reopen in two months after a major renovation, when troublemakers began to escalate the situation. Fortunately the ZPD arrived in time to prevent a riot and no arrests were made, but it was not the first incident where a Veltro protest nearly ended badly.

Veltro, meaning 'Greyhound', was formed soon after the announcement of Tirari Town in protest over its construction. With an estimated one hundred and fifty-seven members, Veltro has fiercely opposed the Casel Corporation and its plans for Tirari Town, claiming that the inclusion of an Austroalan environment would drastically promote disease and become a haven for criminals. The Casel Corporation has so far dismissed these claims, stating that there is no scientific evidence to suggest that Tirari Town would prove detrimental to the city, especially now that it has been confirmed that they will not introduce insect species native to Austroala for that very reason.

Gazelle, pop singer and predator rights activist, has publicly condemned the organization as blatantly bigoted against Austroalan mammals and promised to continue lending her support to the thirteenth district...

Tundratown Times - November 1, 2017

BELLWETHER APPEAL CONFIRMED

To the surprise of many, Dawn Bellwether, former mayor of Zootopia, has garnered an appeal for her conviction last year. Bellwether was convicted of instigating the Night Howler Incident in which more than a hundred predators were infected with a madness-inducing toxin with the purpose of discrediting predators as a whole. The grounds for her appeal have not been made public, leading many to believe that Bellwether was somehow able to bribe a high ranking official into allowing the appeal to go through, but with no evidence of wrongdoing the Zootopia Police Department has not begun an investigation.

Police Officers Judy Hopps and Nicholas Wilde, who put a stop to Bellwether's crimes, were unavailable for comment, but Police Chief Bogo has called a press conference for later today. The appeal has been slated to begin on December 10th at Zootopia Superior Court, coinciding with the reopening of the Greener Grass Mall...
"Marely was dead to begin with."

Behind the curtain, Kurtis Catmull began a creepy tune on an old piano as Cotton Hopps stepped onto the stage in a grey Victorian-era dress with lots of frills. In her small paws she held an equally frilly home-made parasol made of paper.

"There is no doubt whatever about that. The register of his burial was signed by the clergyman, the clerk, the undertaker, and the chief mourner. Scrooge signed it. And Scrooge's name was good upon 'change, for anything he chose to put his hand to. Old Marely was as dead as a doornail. Mind, I don't mean to say that I know, of my own knowledge, what there is particularly dead about a door-nail. I might have been inclined, myself, to regard a coffin-nail as the deadest piece of ironmongery in the trade. But the wisdom of our ancestors is in the simile, and my unhallowed paws shall not disturb it, or the country's done for. You will therefore permit me to repeat, emphatically, that Marely was as dead as a door-nail."

Cotton had fought tooth and claw to get that entire opening speech in the script. In the midst of the bemused audience, Bonnie and Stu were speechless as their granddaughter spoke words far beyond her age range. Whether she actually knew what they meant, only she could say.

Cotton stayed on the side as 'Scrooge' stalked in from the other side. The piglet's top hat and cane were a smidge too big for him, and a chortle or two could be heard in the audience. Cotton continued her narration, as Kurtis's tune increased in earnest.

"Scrooge and he were partners for I don't know how many years. Scrooge was his sole executor, his sole administrator, his sole assign, his sole residuary legatee, his sole friend, and sole mourner."

"Scrooge' turned his wide eyes and wide sneer to the audience. "But he was a tight-fisted hand at the grindstone, Scrooge! A squeezing, wrenching, grasping, scraping, clutching, covetous old sinner!" As she spoke, Cotton twisted the parasol in her paws, loudly tearing the paper and contorting the cardboard pole beyond repair. She threw the ruined parasol from the stage and pulled out a jagged rock. "Hard and sharp as flint, from which no steel had ever struck out generous fire." Next she pulled out a bike chain. "He was secret and self-contained," Finally she pulled out a shell."and solitary as an oyster."

Her aunt Judy Hopps snorted with amusement. The home video had captured perfectly the bewildered looks on the audience's faces, while her parents, Bonnie and Stu, just looked stunned. This had to be even stranger than Judy's 'blood, blood, blood! performance back when she'd been a little older than Cotton.

Then she heard Stu mutter, "I knew we shouldn't have let her take cues from Judy's talent show." And doubled over with laughter as she sat on the edge of her bed. Sweet cheese and crackers, her niece could be so cute at times.

Alas, the opening of the DVD her parents had sent her of Cotton's A Christmas Carol play was all she had the time to watch for now. If the film had arrived a day earlier she could have watched the whole thing before the appeal.

Her happiness faded. The appeal.

She turned off her DVD player, putting the twenty-inch flat screen television back on the news channel.
"The Greener Grass Mall is slated to be reopened by our very own Mayor Hornbull at ten am today, two hours before Dawn Bellwether's arrival at Zootopia Superior Court for her appeal. As I am speaking, mammals from all four corners of the city are gathering at the front steps in protest. Whether they are protesting Bellwether's potential acquittal of the charges placed against her, or the fact that she was charged in the first place, we can't yet say..."

Judy pulled the plug on her twenty-inch flat screen television that sat at the foot of her rickety bed. She'd be leaving soon and the last thing she wanted to be worrying about was racking up her electricity bill.

"There's no way she's getting off." Nick's reassuring voice from several weeks ago echoed in her mind as she put on her black stab vest. "Our evidence against her is concrete. The judge and jury is seventy five percent predator, and the judge's buddy was one of the Night Howler victims. She doesn't have a chance in hell."

Supposing she did get out... Judy mentally responded as she strode to the plain rectangular mirror near her door, just as she had done verbally the day she learned of the appeal.

"Then we put her right back in. We busted her once, we can do it again." She envisioned the smile on Nick's face.

Judy sighed as she wiped a bit of cobweb from her glimmering golden badge. "I'm scared, Nick. I don't know what she's going to do if she walks free..."

"What can she do?" Nick's voice took on a hard edge. "She has no power in this city. Not anymore. The Night Howler serum can't be used to frame predators now. We made sure of that. Her minions are all in prison, and most of Zootopia hates her. And there's no way she'll be let back into City Hall after all the crap she pulled as mayor."

Nick... what if she comes after us?

"Then we taze the wool off of her and drag her to Benjie's desk in a plastic donut. In case you haven't noticed, you dumb bunny, I'm not exactly the pencil-necked pawpsicle hustler I was a year and a half ago." She imagined him flexing his arm at her, the mental picture making her feel unusually warm.

Nick...

"Carrots, don't worry about it. If it comes to that, we'll stop her. Now turn that frown upside down and get Game of Horns on!"

NokNoknoknokNokNoknoknokNokNoknoknokNokNoknoknok...

Speak of the Drowned God... Judy opened the door and there he was, standing in the dully-lit hallway with his fist still in the air, the other behind his back. She crossed her arms. "I know you've developed an obsession with Game of Horns since I got my new TV, but is that any reason to use the theme song on my door?"

Nick lowered his paw and shrugged. "Knock-knock-knock gets boring after a while. You ready to go face your arch nemesis?"

Of course Nick was exaggerating, but Judy was almost certain to encounter Bellwether again today. She and Nick had been assigned as crowd control, which basically meant that she and dozens of other officers had to stand in an impassable line separating the crowd of protesters from the sheep that had nearly ripped their city apart.
Judy smiled at his choice of words. "Nick, this is real life, not Criminal Animal Minds. At the end of the day she's just another criminal who got sloppy."

"Yeah, she's a big fluffy ball of cotton candy who got served good." Nick said. "Look, there's something I gotta tell you. I won't be crowd controlling with you today."

"What? Why not?" Judy asked. She tilted her head slightly towards Nick's paw, which was still being held behind him. Was this sly fox hiding something?

"Mayor's request. Me and Chief Bogo are personally escorting Former Mayor Smellwether to Superior Court."

"What?" Now Judy was truly stunned. A Police Chief and a rookie escorting a high-profile convict? That was very unorthodox.

"It's because we're the heroes who brought her down and saved the city. He thought it would be good publicity if one or both of us personally delivered her to the appeal. He wanted Chief Bogo there too because he was the one who actually made the arrest. He wants us to put on a show that we're not afraid of her, and the citizens of Zootopia shouldn't be afraid of her either. I figured you wouldn't want to go near her with a ten-foot carrot so I volunteered."

Judy didn't know what to make of this. "What did Chief Bogo say?"

"He said it wasn't normal procedure, but he didn't really protest. Unless Bellwether has miraculously grown a pair of horns during her stint in the clink, and it would put her gender in serious doubt if she did, there's no real danger here."

Judy believed him. His bright green eyes were full of confidence, but none of that false arrogance he'd borne back when they'd first met. "Okay. Just be careful around her, promise?"

"Scout's honor." Nick smirked. "No more talking about crazy sheep, okay, Carrots? Now close your eyes and hold your paws out. I've got one more surprise for you."

Judy glared at him half-heartedly. "I hope for your well being that this isn't like that trick or treat stunt with the fish eggs on Halloween."

"This surprise is nothing like that surprise."

"How?"

"Because this one isn't gross."

Judy sighed and closed her eyes. There was a pause, and then she felt Nick's warm paw bring her smaller left paw closer to her right. Something hard and cylindrical appeared between her palms and she instinctively gripped the object. Nick's paws came away, and she felt the its weight. "Now open."

Judy opened her eyes and found herself holding a bare, but satisfyingly thick and genuine pine tree the size of a flower bouquet, its trunk nestled perfectly in a clay pot wrapped in holly-patterned paper.

"Merry Christmas, Carrots." Nick said, beaming at the look on Judy's face. "You kept forgetting to get one, so I took the initiative. Make sure you only pick the best baubles."

Judy wordlessly set the Christmas tree down by the foot of her bed, her heart swelling. It was
moments like this that made her glad she'd met him. Once the appeal was over, she was going straight to the Greener Grass Mall to find a sufficient present. Maybe she could find a necktie with the same holly pattern that was on the pot-wrapper.

"Thanks, Nick. I love it." She checked her watch. It was ten to six. "We should get to the station."

"Juuuude the Duuuuuuude!" Came the overly loud cry of her father. Nick spun round, and Judy saw her father and mother standing in the corridor behind him, bearing suitcases and comforting smiles. The moment they'd learned of Bellwether's appeal, they'd both vowed to be there for Judy on the day, to comfort her if Bellwether walks or to celebrate if Bellwether falls.

"Hey, guys!" She ran into their arms, glad they were here on one of the tensest days of her life. "I didn't think you'd get here so early!"

Her parents let go. "Neither did we, sweetheart. The traffic was lighter than we expected."

Then Judy got her second surprise of the day when Cotton leapt out from between her grandmother and grandfather and hit her chest with the force of a kit-sized cottonball. "Aunt Judy!"

Judy's arms wrapped around Cotton instinctively before her shock became affection and she lovingly returned the hug. "Cotton! What on earth are you doing here?"

Stu mouthed some words to Judy. *Don't mention the appeal.*

"Her parents have some grown-up business out of town to take care of this week." Bonnie said. Cotton was an only child, a very rare occurrence in Bunnyburrow. "When Cotton heard we were coming to see you, she asked to come along so she could go to the reopening of that Green Gloss Mall."

"Greener Grass, Mr. H." Nick said quietly.

"Greener Grass Mall!" Stu said loudly. "There's this new Pixar store she really wants to check out."

"And donuts!" Cotton said excitedly, dropping down from Judy's chest. "I wanna try a donut!"

Judy crossed her arms. "The Greener Grass Mall. Is that where you're going to be today?"

"Yep. It's right across the street, so if you need anything, just call and we'll be there in a jiffy!" Stu said, huffing his chest and grasping his dungaree straps in an attempted show of toughness.

Bonnie released Judy first and held out a thick paper bag. "We brought you a little care package to make you feel better." She opened the bag and stuck her paw inside. "We have some hot chocolate... some treats from Gideon Grey, and here's a little something from Pop-Pop!"

When Bonnie pulled out a Taser, Judy blanched and glanced sharply at Nick. "Mom! What the heck?!"

"Oh it's not that!" Bonnie's smile faded as she realized the misunderstanding. "It's not a Fox Taser, take a look."

Judy reluctantly took the Taser and looked at it. Instead of the cartoon image of a fox wearing a bandit mask, she saw a taped on crude drawing of a very familiar sheep, albeit with red eyes, sharp teeth and devil's horns.

Nick looked at the Taser and chuckled. "Let me guess. Crazy Sheep Taser?"
"Just in case she tries anything today, you know?" Stu said. "Speaking of which, how're you doing?"

"Scared." Judy admitted.

There was genuine worry in their eyes, but Bonnie and Stu smiled and hugged her again. "Don't you worry. Together, we're stronger than her."

Nick glanced at his watch. "We should go."

Judy's fears eased a little when she felt her mother's warm lips touch her cheek. "Don't forget, we're right across the street. Just call if you need anything, okay?"

Judy squeezed her parents tighter. "Okay, mom."

"That's a mighty fine tree you've got there." Stu had spotted the tree over his daughter's shoulder. Cotton was currently admiring said tree and stroking its thick green branches.

"Nick gave it to me just now." Judy said.

Stu looked at Nick. "Glad to know you've got one of the good ones."

"Good fox?" Nick smirked.

Stu shook his head. "Nope. Good man." Both Nick and Judy blinked. "Come on, girls. We don't want to be late for the reopening."

Hundreds of mammals were gathered on the pavement across the street from Zootopia Superior Court. The air was filled with the sounds of indistinct chatter from the crowd and traffic from the street. Distanced from the crowd, snow leopard Fabienne Growley made her report in front of a large handheld camera.

"As you can see behind me, hundreds of mammals from all four corners of Zootopia have arrived to attend the Grand Reopening of the Greener Grass Mall, which was closed for renovating roughly three years ago. If you look behind me..." She pointed at a black car coming to a stop on the side of the street. "Mayor Hornbull has just arrived to perform the ceremonial cutting of the ribbon, which is scheduled to happen fifteen minutes from now..."

Benjamin Clawhauser still couldn't believe his luck that he'd snagged the day off on the Grand Reopening of the biggest, greatest mall in all of Zootopia. For one day he'd swapped his blues for a pair of jeans, a black t-shirt overlapping a long-sleeved red shirt, and an empty satchel in which he would stuff as many edible products as he could carry.

Standing near the front of the crowd gathered in front of the Greener Grass Mall, Benjamin took another thorough look at the leaflet in his paws. The building in the image looked just like the building in front of him, including quarter-sphere shaped front wall constructed entirely of glass panels and the mall's name displayed in huge golden letters surrounded by green swirls. The only difference was that the real life building had a great big Christmas tree in front of the entrance, complete with tinsel as thick as an elephant's trunk and a shiny red and gold star at the very top.

Inside the leaflet were a map of the building and a complete list of the three hundred and twenty store and restaurants that were separated into different wings, just like the districts of the city were separated. According to the map there were four wings; north, east, south and west, a feature included in the redesign so they could apply a different aesthetic style in different areas of the mall. The front entrance where Benjamin was waiting was in the west wing.
Benjamin had his eye on three stores; Toys R Us, a toy store near the front entrance where he could hopefully add more merchandise to his Gazelle collection, Primane, a European clothes store just recently expanding to the USA, in the north wing where he would hopefully get that new duffel coat, and Randy's Donuts, a donut store in the center garden. The leaflet promised a twenty-five percent discount for everyone visiting on the day of reopening and Benjamin was going to take full advantage of it.

The two sets of large entrance doors were blocked by a big green ribbon, waiting to be cut by none other than Mayor Horace Hornbull. He was currently standing on a raised stone platform in between the doors, quietly conversing with a yak representative of the Casel Corporation, the organization that owned the Greener Grass Mall. The Mayor was supposed to make a speech before cutting the ribbon with a large pair of golden scissors he was currently holding. As Benjamin began munching on a breakfast bar, the Mayor stepped up to a podium to do exactly that.

The crowd began to quiet down, and that was when Benjamin heard the mantra of protest.

"Release Mayor Bellwether! Release Mayor Bellwether! Release Mayor Bellwether!"

_Velho_, Benjamin thought, his heart sinking a little. Of course they'd come to picket. Being one of the smaller big cats, he couldn't see either the Veltro supporters or the signs they were probably carrying, but he noticed that they didn't sound very close. It was likely that they were on the other side of the street, ignoring the reopening in favor of demanding Bellwether's release. There were other shouts, coming from opposing protestors demanding that she go right back to prison where she couldn't hurt any more innocent predators. Benjamin already knew which side he was on. The Mayor began to speak, ignoring Veltro and their opposers.

The Mayor's speech wasn't anything special. He first thanked everyone for coming on this very special day before going on to explain the history of the Greener Grass Mall, from its construction fifty years ago to its recent renovation. It wasn't a very busy or exciting history, so Benjamin went back to reading his leaflet. When he took another look at the list of stores in the west wing, his eyes widened.

Number one hundred and thirteen: Alec Chocolatier.

"O. M. Goodness!" A huge grin spread across his face and he felt a warm sensation of pride in his chest. _Why the heck didn't you tell me about this?! Was this meant to be a surprise? A Grand Reopening and a Grand Opening all in one day? Oh my gosh, I'm so proud of you! This I've just gotta see!_

The crowd began to get restless and loud again, for Mayor Hornbull had just finished his speech. With his golden scissors, he strode to the green ribbon. After stopping to shoot a flashy white smile at the crowd, he slipped the ribbon in between the blades of the scissors and snipped.

The crowd went wild, and Benjamin went wild with it. The Mayor stepped aside and the security guards came forward to ensure that the crowd entered the mall in a safe and calm manner. Benjamin put the map in his satchel, keeping a mental note of Alec Chocolatier's location, and followed the crowd inside. This day off was getting better and better, and it had recently been leaked that Gazelle herself would be visiting the mall today. He hadn't seen her so far, but there was still hope for this devoted little fanboy...

In a brand new Snarlbucks cafe on the end of the east wing of the Greener Grass Mall, Fabienne Growley and Jeff Tusker, her camera-warthog, ordered a mocha and a black coffee respectively, desiring a little hot refreshment before continuing their report on the reopening. Growley took tiny
sips of her mocha to avoid getting any stains on her crisp purple pantsuit, debating mentally where to start. They could visit Primane first, to talk about how it would be the first Primane store to open in Zootopia, or instead they could go to the beautiful central garden to show viewers just how much the mall had changed. Then she remembered overhearing a security guard saying that the Mayor would be sticking around for a while to visit Alec Chocolatier, a chocolate store and cafe owned by that prodigious young dessert designer she'd once interviewed. if they hurried with their drinks, she might be able to catch the Mayor at the store and get a comment.

A part of her envied Peter Moosebridge, her partner whenever they were speaking in front of the green screen, and his assignment to the Bellwether appeal across the street. It was the biggest story of the year, or at least what was left of the year, Growley reminded herself upon noticing the tinsel decorating the walls. At the same time, covering a Grand Reopening on the brink of the jolliest day of the year was infinitely more enjoyable than dealing with dozens of angry protestors and the mere existence of the sheep that had prosecuted thousands of predators like Growley. Rot in Hell, Bellwether, Growley thought, finishing her mocha just as Jeff made a disgruntled snort. "What's that guy's problem?"

At the table next to theirs, a yak in a bluish-black suit was ignoring his iced tea and looking very agitated. He was slightly twitchy and he was shooting strange, wide-eyed looks at the other customers. He was looking at his phone, which looked like it wasn't working. Growley frowned. It was the Casel Corporation representative from the ribbon cutting, and the expression on his face looked pained. Growley tried to remember what she knew about seizures as she stood up. "Stay here, Jeff." She said before approaching the yak and bending down slightly to him. "Sir, are you okay? You don't look so good."

The representative grimaced, but Growley sensed that it wasn't at her. "You're that reporter from the news, aren't you?"

"Fabienne Growley, Zootopia News Network. Are you okay? Would you like me to get someone?"

"I'm fi- I dunno." The representative slurred his response. Now convinced that this yak needed help, Growley called for a member of staff to come handle the situation. She wanted to stay, but they had a Mayor to catch and the ZNN would turn her into a throw rug if she neglected her duties. The representative reached inside his jacket. "You're one of the decent ones... Could you do me a favour?" He pulled out a small white envelope. "I know you're gonna speak to the Mayor, so when you see him... give him this. It's important."

He held it out to Growley, who despite her confusion agreed and reached for the envelope, mentally promising herself to resist temptation and not look at its contents. As she took the envelope between her grey furry fingers, her keen eyes caught something out of place on this immaculately dressed mammal; a smudge of dark blue paint on his outstretched hoof.
Four hours earlier, Judy and Nick had been dropped off at the police station at six on the dot by her parents, before they drove off in the truck to relax in the hotel they were staying at for a few more hours.

Judy had been surprised to find a lion at the front desk in place of Benjamin, until she'd remembered that he'd taken the day off to attend the Grand Reopening just across the street from the Zootopia Superior Court. The same one her parents and niece, who knew about Benjamin from Judy but had yet to meet him, were visiting. Judy wasn't worried about the possibility of them meeting, despite the fact that Benjamin was a cheetah that would tower over the other rabbits; unlike Nick, you only had to spend five minutes with Benjamin to know that he wouldn't hurt a fly, let alone hustle you out of twenty bucks.

They'd greeted the lion politely and arrived at the Bullpen seconds before Chief Bogo had waltzed in through the side door and stood behind the podium at the front of the room. "Alright, everybody sit!" As usual, the rowdy mammals had settled down, allowing the cape buffalo to speak. "I've got three items on the docket. First, don't forget that the annual ZPD Christmas Get-Together will be happening at the Palm Hotel at six-pm, Christmas Day. Not that that I care."

"So... no Secret Santa for you this year?" Nick had said with his perpetual smirk, sending chuckles rippling through the room.

Bogo had given him an ominous look. "I will bury you with a stake of holly through your heart if you don't shut your mouth, Wilde."

"Spoken like a true Scrooge."

"Humbug." Bogo had then returned to his clipboard. "Number two; as you know, today marks the Grand Reopening of the Greener Grass Mall, and City Hall has requested foot patrols to ensure that the mall's first day open goes smoothly. Assignments will be given for this priority in a moment, which brings me to number three: also happening today is the appeal for Dawn Bellwether's conviction."

The good humor that had been bred from Nick and Bogo's brief verbal combat had evaporated. The atmosphere had become suddenly tense, and it wasn't helped by the cold looks on every predator present. "Let me make this clear. No matter how you feel or how you were affected by her actions last year, you are to behave like you would with any criminal plucked from that prison. You will not do anything that constitutes as police misconduct. No harm is to come to her, unless she literally has a knife to your throat. Do you understand me?"

They had all nodded wordlessly.

Higgins had then handed Bogo a set of files, and the buffalo put on his rectangular black glasses. "We've been over this already, but for the hell of it I'm going to do it anyway. Assignments: Officers Trunkaby, Fangmeyer, Wolford, Pennington; you will provide added security for the Greener Grass Mall reopening. The four officers had then taken their leave. "Officers McHorn, Delgato, Higgins, Anderson, Rhinowitz, Jackson, Snarlov, Krumpanski, Trumpet, Hopps, you will provide crowd control for the appeal." Judy had stood up slowly, keeping her eyes on Nick. His face had betrayed nothing, even when Bogo spoke his name. "Officer Wilde, you will meet me in my office in half an hour. Dismissed."
McHorn suddenly raised a hoof, stopping the buffalo from leaving the podium. "Sir? I want to ask you something that's on everyone's minds."

"What?"

"Why are you bringing her in through the front entrance? Prisoners always go in through the back."

"You think I don't know that?" Bogo replied patiently. "The straight answer is that there are a dozen predators high up in City Hall who almost lost everything because of Bellwether, and now they want her to be made an example of. Our job today is to make sure that doesn't blow up in their faces."

He had wasted no time leaving the room after that, not caring that Judy had lagged behind. She patted Nick's arm. "Are you sure you're okay, facing her?"

"Are you kidding?" Nick had said as they left the Bullpen and made a beeline for the breakroom where the coffee machine resided. "I'm more worried I'll get written up for unnecessary handling of that fluffy ball of wool on her head."

Judy had shaken her head, smiling at his cheek, as they entered the breakroom. "Just be careful, okay? Don't listen to anything she might say to you, 'cause it's all wrong."

"Carrots, it's a one way trip."

"Are you kidding?" Judy had said as they left the Bullpen and made a beeline for the breakroom where the coffee machine resided. "I'm more worried I'll get written up for unnecessary handling of that fluffy ball of wool on her head."

"Are you kidding?" Nick had said.

Judy had taken the mug and added two sugars before sipping. "Thanks. Sorry, Nick. I'm just worrying over nothing."

Nick had set his own mug to fill and leaned against the coffee-stained bench. "You bunnies. So emotional."

"You bunnies. So eidetic."

"Nick... shut up."

Four hours later, Judy found herself as part of a long chain of officers holding an excited, clamorous crowd at bay at the base of the steps leading up to the front doors of the superior court, with the help of the steel crowd control barriers set up in front of them. She, Fangmeyer, Rhinowitz, Trumpet and McHorn had been stationed on the left hand side of the steps, the side of the protesters wishing for Bellwether to stay in prison. The others were forming a line on the other side to hold off those wanting Bellwether to go free, leaving a clear path from the curb to the courthouse. All they had to do was hold the mammals at bay until Nick and Bogo arrived with Bellwether and brought her through the doors. Standing apart from both crowds, Peter Moosebridge from the ZNN was speaking before a camera-wolf. Judy couldn't hear what he was saying, but she assumed he was maintaining a neutral stance on the situation.

It was a freezing cold winter's day, and there was muddy grey sludge everywhere, including between Judy's toes. The constant shouting was murder on her ears, but she supposed she should count herself lucky that she was literally on the side of those opposing Bellwether's potential release. It was a comfort to see that they greatly outnumbered the other side, and one or twice she'd caught a glimpse of two giraffes she had seen amongst the hostile crowd at Gazelle's peace rally last year, holding up signs declaring that Bellwether should rot in prison for what she did. Change starts with
That was more than she could say for the minority demanding the sheep’s release, especially those whose signs declared that they were speaking on behalf of Veltro. The name itself unnerved Judy more than the fact the organization itself had seemingly been formed for the sole purpose of supporting Bellwether. As stereotypical as it sounded, 'Veltro' sounded more like a foreign terrorist group than a local group of narrow-minded bigots. Only time would tell what their ultimate goals were.

There was a loud ding as the clock tower at the end of the block struck ten, drawing Judy's attention to the happier crowd formed on the other side of the street. The reopening of the Greener Grass Mall had begun. There was no sign of Benjamin or Judy's family, so they were likely in the middle or front of the crowd. After a minute the crowd starting cheering loudly; Mayor Hornbull must have cut the ribbon. Sure enough the crowd soon surged forward and gradually disappeared through the large glass doors.

"Have a good time, guys." She muttered happily before turning her attention back to the protestors. For the most part they respected the established boundaries, even those standing right in front of the tiny little rabbit forming part of the line, but that would very likely change once the object of their attention arrived.

"Don't go astray! Bellwether must stay!" The protestors chanted.

The owner of Alec Chocolatier wasn't there when Benjamin arrived at the chocolate store, but he had apparently informed the manager of the cheetah's coming.

"There's been a mistake with one of the deliveries, so he's had to go and take care of it." The manager, a cougar, politely told Benjamin from behind the black cash register. "He should be returning before twelve, Mr. Clawhauser."

"Oh, okay. I'll come back." Benjamin replied.

"Wait, before you go, Alec told me to give you something. I'll be right back." The manager disappeared into the back room, and Benjamin took the time to have a good look around the store.

The overall theme of the store was gold, with the exception of an ebony brown wall on the left hand side devoted to displaying every edible product the store had to offer on long shelves protected by glass. In the bottom right hand corner were half a dozen circular glass tables with four seats apiece. In the opposite corner stood a Christmas tree decorated with large gold and bronze baubles. If Benjamin ever decided to re-decorate, he was going to ask Alec for the name of the mammal who designed this place. He strayed over to the ebony wall and looked at the scrumptious displays; there were exquisite brown roses. Chocolate covered strawberries that Benjamin was seriously thinking of getting for Chief Bogo. Fruit balls made of dozens of chocolate lines squirted over a mould and left to set. A set of yummy brown dominoes. Tiny cheesecakes with cherries on top. Chocolate bars bearing the store's logo. Donuts.

He looked up at the large photographs hanging above the shelves. It was every chocolate sculpture Alec had won an award for; an edible chess set. An Easter egg sculpted to look like a bunch of daisies. A bird's nest with a hatched egg and a baby bird inside. A freaky looking gargoyle. A-

"What kind o' clock is that?" A little voice drew Benjamin's gaze downward. By his feet, a little rabbit kit was staring in wonder at a photo of a balanced set of chocolate clockwork gears.
He fought to keep from freaking out over how adorable she was. "That's not a clock, little lady." He bent down so he didn't tower over her too much. "It's a chocolate sculpture called The Gears of Big Ben. It won an award last year."

The child tilted her head, incredulous. "That won an award?"

Benjamin giggled as he imagined the look on Alec's face if he was here. "Yep. First place in the annual Christmas Dessert Contest." He looked around. "Um, where're your parents, miss?"

Right on cue, a pair of adult rabbits came rushing into the store. "There she is!" The mother cried and rushed over to her daughter. "Cotton, thank heavens you're alright!"

"Don't you ever run off like that again!" The father said sternly, panting as he caught up with his wife.

Benjamin blinked. He knew these parents. "Mr. Hopps?"

The father's ears twitched beneath his cap. "Do I know you?"

It was them, Benjamin realized to his growing delight. "Omigosh. You really are Judy's parents. What?!" He cried, startling the rabbits.

"He sounds familiar..." Bonnie spoke, her eye widening. "Wait a moment, you're the officer who picks up the phone every time we call the station!"

"Officer Benjamin Clawhauser. It's a pleasure to finally meet you!" Benjamin grinned from ear to ear and held out a paw.

Stu hesitantly took it and gave a timid shake. "Stu Hopps. This is my wife, Bonnie, and my granddaughter, Cotton."

"Bonnie and Cotton. That's some really nice names." Benjamin said sweetly. He hadn't failed to notice the rabbit's apprehension with such a large predator, but it did little to dampen his mood. "I didn't expect to see you here."

"We thought we'd check out the mall while Judy was busy with the appeal." Bonnie said. She looked him up and down, taking in his casual clothing. "If you're friends with her, you'll understand that she's more than a little nervous over the whole thing."

"Don't you worry about a thing, Mrs Hopps." Benjamin noticed the manager emerge from the backroom carrying a shiny gold package. "That mean old sheep has as much chance of walking free as I have as being classed as underweight!"

The manager reached them. "Mr. Clawhauser, this is for you, on the house."

"Thank you." Benjamin replied, and the manager nodded and walked away.

The package was wrapped in glossy gold paper. Benjamin carefully unwrapped it from the top until he unveiled a circular flat object covered with a note:

*Merry Christmas, Ben. I wouldn't have made it this far without you.*

Heart swelling, Benjamin lifted the note to reveal that the object was a round box with a sprig of white and dark chocolate holly on top. From the smell and color alone he could tell it was made entirely of milk chocolate. Mouth watering, he lifted the lid to reveal a dozen miniature donuts.
"What's that?" Stu asked.

"It's a Christmas gift from the owner of this store. He's a friend of mine." Benjamin wrapped the chocolate box back up and put it in his satchel.

Stu lifted his cap, stunned. "Sweet cheese and crackers. You're friends with the Alec Chocolatier? That young lad who won all those awards for his sculptures?"

"Yeah, I've known him since graduating from college." Benjamin said. He checked his watch. "I should probably get going now. I want to check out that Pixar store before most of the stock is gone."

"Oh, we're going there too!" Cotton piped up. "Wanna come with us, Mr. Bubbles?" She grabbed his index finger with both paws and tugged, trying to drag him from the store but not getting very far. "Oh please, please say yes!"

Benjamin really, really wanted to say yes so he could get to know Judy's so far delightful family. "Oh, um, that's really up to your parents, I guess."

Stu and Bonnie looked at each other. Bonnie chuckled kindly. "This mall is gigantic. We could do with a taller set of eyes to get around. Could you assist us, Officer Clawhauser?"

Benjamin beamed. If he had a police cap, he would tip it. "Ma'am, it would be my pleasure."

For the second time that day, Nick searched every nook and cranny of the patrol car as Chief Bogo had instructed before striding into the prison to retrieve the prisoner. He checked the fuel and oil levels; check. He checked the ignition system; check. He checked that the tires were sufficiently inflated; check. He checked that the car was equipped with all the appropriate items; check. He checked that there were no bugs, hidden weapons or anything suspicious; double check. As Nick had already confirmed, the car was ready for transport. He glanced at the other two patrol cars in front and behind of his car; the officers of both cars emerged and gave each other the thumb's up. All that was left to do now was to wait.

He sat down in the back seat and relaxed, wondering what was taking so long. There was paperwork involved, he knew that, and an obligatory pat down of the prisoner to make sure they weren't carrying anything they shouldn't. A part of him was beginning to wonder if something had gone wrong when three mammals emerged; a sterner-than-usual Chief Bogo holding the required documentation, a female pig warden bearing the name 'Swinton' and Dawn Bellwether.

Nick felt his expression go cold as he stepped back out the car to greet them. The last time he had seen Bellwether in the flesh, she'd been dressed entirely in dark blue. Now she bore the ugly bright orange of a convict, with a pair of shiny grey handcuffs to match. Even her glasses were orange, he realized as the three mammals came closer. He looked past the glasses and saw her lime green eyes narrowing in contempt and anger at the sight of the fox in blue. She did not look happy to see him, and that feeling was entirely mutual.

"Fox." She addressed him frostily, keeping her eyes on him even as Swinton started another pat down. He'd been warned beforehand to never assume that someone else has searched a prisoner prior to them being placed in his custody. There was something else in the sheep's eyes besides contempt; disappointment. Disappointment with what? That the ZPD had stooped so low as to hire the same fox that had ruined her plans?

"Sheep." Nick replied calmly. He put the smirk back on his face as Swinton finished and gave the
nod that everything was still okay. "Now that we've gotten the bleeding obvious out the way, please step inside the car."

Bellwether didn't move, her eyes filled with loathing, prompting Swinton to grab her shoulder. "Do what he says."

Bellwether wordlessly climbed into the car as Nick reentered the other side. The sheep stiffened as he attached her seatbelt. Chief Bogo gave a curt nod to Swinton, signaled to the other cars and went into the driver's seat. One by one the three cars came to life and set off down the road towards inner Savanna Central.

"Don't take you eyes off her, Wilde." Bogo reminded Nick as the small convoy moved steadily through the thankfully quiet streets, with Nick wondering how far they would get before Bellwether started spouting psychopathic poppycock.

It was a thirty-five-minute drive to the courthouse, and they were two minutes into the journey when Bellwether spoke.

"So... how's Judy doing?" She had that wide-eyed cheery expression that had fooled Judy and the entire city, and it sickened the fox sitting next to her.

Nick raised an eyebrow. "You're not her friend, Bellwether, so don't try pretending that you are."

"And whose fault was that?" Bellwether asked with false sweetness.

"Yours." Nick replied. "You said you liked her and then you tried to kill her."

"She left me no choice. I tried to make her understand, but she wouldn't listen. If she were here, I would have tried again. Probably succeed."

Something clicked in Nick's head. Bellwether wasn't disappointed that Nick had become a cop, not massively. She was disappointed that Judy wasn't here for her to play mind games with. "Nah, she'd just turn her Crazy Sheep Taser on you." He put one leg over the other, putting on a show of contentment.

"She's trying to screw with you, Wilde." Bogo made a turn at an intersection near the Lemmings Bank. "Just ignore her."

Nick nodded, falling silent but keeping his eyes on their prisoner. Bellwether looked right back at him, her eyes looking him up and down like a sci-fi x-ray. The master manipulator was looking for anything she could use to get under Nick's skin, but she was dealing with the same fox that had tricked her so thoroughly in the museum. Nick maintained his enigmatic smirk, refusing to let anything slip past his mask, at least not anything the sheep already knew about him. Bellwether remained perfectly still. She didn't reach for anything or look out the window. She just stared back at him with that creepy fake smile.

"How did you do it?" She finally asked.

"Do what?" Nick crossed his arms to match his legs.

"Change her mind." Bellwether looked genuinely curious. "She was my white queen. The hero who exposed the savage predator pandemic. With her as the face of the ZPD, I would have kept the mammals of this city happy while I worked behind the scenes to cleanse it. Then out of the blue... she abandoned me." With that last sentence, her cutesy smile disappeared. "She turned against everything she and I had worked for. If you hadn't taken her away, she would have become far more
than the hero of Zootopia. How did you convince her to throw it all away?"

Bogo shot Nick a warning look through the rear view mirror, but the fox had a few more things to say to her before shutting up.

"I didn't."

"Excuse me?"

"That day when we busted your fluffy sheep's butt, that was the first time we'd spoken to each other since the press conference. Whatever made her resign, it wasn't me."

Though surprised, Bellwether let out a sharp laugh. "So you're saying that you didn't mean all that much to her?"

If that was true, she wouldn't have come back to me.

Nick rolled her eyes in disdain at Bellwether's comment. "I'm saying that Judy resigning was her own decision. She's not my puppet, and she's sure as hell not yours either. You may have forgotten but you're not exactly the big cheese anymore, so you can stop pretending that you're better than everyone else."

Bellwether's face darkened, and there it was; the little cottonball of pure evil that Nick knew. "Everything I did, I did for every smaller creature that gets demeaned and trodden on every second of the day!" She hissed through gritted teeth. "I wouldn't expect a gutter rat like you to understand! I did what I did to protect this city! Protect it from those damned savages that lord over us from the top of the food chain! Those rich fat cats are all the same! Lions and tigers and bears-"

"Oh my!" Nick cried, cutting her off. "A gutter rat, you called me? That's very offensive to rats, and they're even smaller than you!"

"Wilde..." Bogo growled.

"Just one more minute, sir..." Nick casually pointed a finger at Bellwether. "You say you care about other small prey, but how come I don't believe a word of it? I'll tell you why. While I was pretending to be a bunny-eating whackjob, I distinctly heard you admit that the whole point of your little conspiracy was to put you and only you on top!"

Bellwether scoffed. "A fox like you would say any-"

"'So that's it?'' Nick interrupted again, raising his voice to a higher pitch to mimic Judy. "'Prey fears predator and you stay in power?' He then adopted the arrogant look Bellwether had born when she'd answered that question. "'Yeah, pretty much.'" Bogo let out a deep sigh of exasperation as Nick continued his speech. "You know what I think, Bellwether? I think you just didn't like not being in control." He relished the insulted look on her face. "At the end of the day, you were just using everyone's fear to drag all those predators from the top of the pyramid so you could put yourself in their place. You don't know how many innocent prey got hurt in those savage attacks you instigated, and you don't care. You say us little guys need to stick together, but you don't even know what that means. If you ask me you're the real savage."

If Bellwether wasn't belted in and her hooves weren't cuffed behind her back, she very likely would have jumped on him.

"Wilde... enough." Bogo cut through the tension in the backseat. "You too, Bellwether."

"Sorry, Chief." Nick said. "How much further?"

"Twenty minutes. Once we get there, get her straight into the building. Don't stop for anything."
"Yes, sir."

The mammals in the back fell silent once more. Now too busy seething with rage to Sherlock-scan Nick, Bellwether turned her gaze to the window to watch the buildings go by.

After visiting the Pixar store and nearly every other toy, game, art or food store in the Greener Grass Mall, Benjamin and his three escorts found an empty bench in front of a store selling electronics in the west wing and sat down to enjoy a large size pack of Randy's donuts. While Stu and Bonnie discussed how they were going to fit their dozen and a half bags in the truck with Cotton, Benjamin pulled out his phone and switched on his Gazelle app. With the volume low, he watched and smiled as a speedo-wearing tiger bearing the cheetah's face danced alongside his idol.

"Wow, you are one hot dancer, BENJAMIN CLAWHAUSER." The digital Gazelle praised as she wiggled her tail.

He giggled and took a bite out of his donut. Cotton stood up on the seat and strained to see the screen. "What're you watching?"

Benjamin lowered the phone so she could see. "It's Gazelle. Are you familiar with her? Greatest singer of our lifetime? Angel with Horns?"

"Gazelle?" Cotton tilted her head at him. "Aunt Judy likes her music, but I've never heard it."

Benjamin gasped so hard he dropped his donut. Unbelievable!

He then pulled out some earphones. "Well, sweetie, it's your lucky day." The earphones were far too big for Cotton's lovely little ears, so Benjamin put one in her paw so she could hold it up to her head. He then put on his favorite song; Try Everything.

Within seconds Cotton was smiling and tapping her foot with the beat. "Awesome."

"There's plenty more where that came from." Benjamin set the phone to play the entire Gazelle playlist and went back to eating his donuts while Cotton bounced her head beside him.

"So you're a police officer like Aunt Judy?" She asked.

"Yep, like Aunt Judy." Benjamin replied.

"Do you kick butt too?"

"No, but I can organize the heck out of some case files. You see, I work as the Front Desk Officer and dispatcher."

"A dispicture is someone who takes calls and sends cops out to save people, right?"

"Right." Benjamin giggled. He didn't have the heart to correct her.

"So you still fight bad guys like her, right?" Cotton pointed at the window full of TVs in front of them. On the many screens was a report from the MHN, bearing live footage of a wildebeest standing on the side of the road opposite the courthouse.

"Only one hour remains before the scheduled appeal of former Mayor Dawn Bellwether begins, and it's like the Winter War out here! On one side, Veltro and its brainwashed supporters demand the release of the terrorist Bellwether from the local prison where she's been kept for the past year and a half! On the other, the good mammals fighting to ensure that the hellspawn sheep goes right
back to jail where she belongs!"

Benjamin swallowed and looked at Cotton. "He meant frogspawn, Cotton."

Cotton pursed her lips. "I know what he meant, Mr. Bubbles. Pop-Pop used to say 'hellspawn' all the time."

"Cotton!" Stu cried, aghast. "We've told you not to use language like that!" He glared at the wildebeest on the screens. "That punk should know better!"

"He reports for the MHN, Meadowlands Hoedown News." Benjamin explained. "That guy's pretty infamous at the precinct for blowing things out of proportion."

Stu harrumphed and started texting on his phone along with Bonnie.

The report changed, the screen bearing an image of Gazelle from her most recent concert for a few seconds before returning to the wildebeest.

"Meanwhile, right across the street, pop singer Gazelle, the jewel of Zootopia, distances herself from the rabble to get the latest in designer footwear. She's taken a step out of the spotlight since announcing her support of the Tirari Town project, but this reporter hopes to locate her inside the newly opened Greener Grass Mall to confront her over recent rumors that she is retiring from singing to become a full time politician..."

Benjamin went numb and nearly dropped his donut again. "What?"

"What could have driven her to abandon her many devoted fans? Is she losing her touch? Is fame and fortune no longer enough for her? Or has Veltro succeeded in getting under her exfoliated skin?"

Benjamin crushed the donut in his paw as anger surged through his body. How dare this reporter talk about Gazelle like that!

"That slimy little bovine! Now Veltro knows where she is!" On a bench behind Benjamin's, an attractive doe in black trousers and a white dress shirt hissed furiously as she glared over his shoulder at the screen. Her livid expression turned sheepish when she turned her head and saw the cheetah looking at her. "Oh, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to..."

"Don't worry about it. I don't like him either." Benjamin assured her. "Do you think it's true? Do you think Gazelle might really quit being a singer?" He stared at her anxiously.

"No idea. It's the first I've heard of it." She tugged on a twisted sleeve. "The mall looks pretty great, doesn't it? The architecture... the Christmas decor alone makes me hate my own tree." The doe tilted her head upwards to admire the large crystal chandeliers covered in frost and golden chains. "I'm so glad I decided to come here instead of going to that circus across the street. It's getting a bit crazy over there."

"Well it is, like, the biggest appeal of the year," Benjamin replied. "The Night Howler Incident was one of the biggest cases to ever cross our books."

"'Our' books?" The doe replied curiously. "What're you, a cop or something?"

"Why, yes. Yes I am." Benjamin showed her the badge in his wallet. The doe stared at the golden object. "I got the day off so I could come here. I'm actually waiting to visit a friend who opened a store here."
"Oh, me too..." The doe looked at her Rolex watch. "But he won't be here for a while yet. I think I'll go explore the mall so more." She grabbed a dark brown bag and stood up. "Good day to you, officer."

She smiled and gave Benjamin a nod. Benjamin and Cotton gave her little waves as she walked off.

Once the well-dressed doe was gone, Benjamin looked back to the MHN report with new concerns. If Gazelle retired from singing, he had no idea what he would do. She and her music meant everything to him. Also, the lady deer was right; now that the reporter had revealed Gazelle's location on live television there was no telling what might happen...
A group of elephant frat boys enjoying some expensive Snarlbucks coffee passed a sleek dark purple limo that was parked in the corner in between the west and north wings where civilians were forbidden to go. There was no chance of being harassed by Veltro and their supporters from here, but inside the mall itself would be a different story. Gazelle was not having a very good morning, and despite his well-meaning intentions her manager wasn’t doing much to help the situation.

"Who the Sam Hill let it leak out that she was here?!" Simon Ombidia, an Animerican Bison in a dark blue hundred dollar suit, thundered at the head security guard, a porcupine, and ZPD Officers Wolford and Fangmeyer who were currently sitting across from them in the vehicle. Near the back, the two tiger dancers who were accompanying Gazelle on her shopping spree silently stayed out of the tense conversation. "Gazelle came here to enjoy herself but now those far-right idiots are out there stirring up trouble! This is the last thing she needs right now, so get them out of here!"

Barry, the slightly taller of the two tigers, held onto the pink coat with the white faux-furred collar that would get Gazelle from the limo to the mall without getting frostbite. Even though she would be spending most of her time here indoors she'd picked out some of her warmest clothes, including a pair of black jeans and a pale red turtleneck sweater. "Simon, calm down. It's not their fault."

"You're right, Barry, it's not." Ombidia replied politely, despite the furnace still raging in his grey eyes. "It's that quack reporter from the Meadowlands, and if I ever get my hooves on him he'll regret ever going on TV!" He turned back to the guard and officers. "But never mind that, just get rid of them now!"

"Have you thought about arresting them?" Ian, the second tiger asked. Ombidia looked at the officers expectantly.

"Mr. Ombidia, we don't have grounds for arrest." Fangmeyer spoke calmly. "They haven't done anything illegal yet."

Ombidia threw his arms up in frustration. Gazelle put a hoof on his arm to try and calm him. "Simon, it's okay. I can just come back some other time." She assured him, even as her heart ached with disappointment. She'd been looking forward to this for weeks, especially after the trouble started. One whole day of exploring brand new stores, trying on new clothes, checking out the new restaurants and admiring the Christmas decorations. Now because of that reporter from the MHN, all that would have to wait. And then there was the potential fallout from that little tidbit about her retiring from singing...

"Actually, you shouldn't be too much at risk once you're inside the mall." Wolford said. "They're well within their rights to protest, but only if they do so outside the building where they can't cause too much of a disturbance. Inside the mall, Gazelle should be alright, and we'll stick close by just in case any Veltro supporters slip past the guards. The only trouble is getting her out the limo and into the building."

"May I make a suggestion?" The head security guard asked. "So far as we know none of the protesters are watching the fire exits. There's one not far from this car that will take her straight into the center of the mall."

Ombidia stood up furiously, forced to bend his back in the limo's cabin. "Absolutely not! I will not have the jewel of Zootopia skulking through a side door like a deadbeat weasel! No-one is leaving this car until every single one of those idiot agitators have been dragged off the premises!"
Five minutes later, Ian stepped through the fire exit first. A second later he gave the all clear, and Gazelle and Barry followed him inside. A disgruntled and defeated Ombidia stayed behind inside the limo to answer an unexpected phone call from the Mayor.

Her anxiety vanished when she saw the centerpiece of the central garden; a great vibrant Christmas tree glowing with a thousand electric candles surrounded by hanging crystal baubles the size of beach balls. The mall was alive with shoppers travelling in all directions, their arms laden with discounted products, most of them emanating an aura of holiday cheer. Gazelle felt a smile spreading across her face; this was going to be great.

Fangmeyer and Wolford entered the mall and shut the fire exit behind them. "Okay, Veltro and its supporters can't come in here without getting arrested so just relax and enjoy yourselves." Wolford said. "Remember we'll be close by if anything happens."
"Thanks, but me and Ian can look after her." Barry replied. He meant no disrespect towards the police, but his and Ian's muscles weren't just there to impress the ladies. "You just worry about everyone else."

The two officers nodded and resumed their patrol.

Gazelle hadn't eaten since six in the morning, so their first stop was a fine dining restaurant in the central garden. After an exquisite brunch on all sides and a ton of compliments from the delighted owner, Gazelle and her friends stopped by a lady's boutique to try out the latest trends; a classic shiny bronze bomber jacket. A Pepe Mono long sleeved dress. An off shoulder red top with black shiny pants. A floral print scarf she wound up wearing upon leaving the store.

Now it was Ian and Barry's turn to try out some nice things. There was another store exclusively for men's wear further down the west wing, and that was to be their next stop. The only problem was that it was near the entrance, where a group of protestors would very likely spot them through the glass. She spied the great curved glass wall at the end of the west wing and saw the small square shapes of the signs. She took a deep breath, reminding herself that even if the protestors saw her, they couldn't do anything to harass her without being placed in cuffs by the security guards watching the entrance doors. Even if one or two of them got past, they'd have the ZPD to deal with, and her two friends were no pushovers themselves. If worst comes to worst, there was the special item she kept in her purse for emergencies.

Gazelle needed to relax and enjoy herself. It was Christmas. Everyone was fine.

"Raja's should be this way." She led the way down the west wing, a bag on each arm, fighting her growing apprehension. Her friends followed, carrying a bag each. Halfway down, she spied the well-spoken snow leopard from ZNN, standing beside Alec Chocolatier with her camera-wielding colleague. Gazelle inched away towards the other side of the mall, in no mood for making any comments. Soon she could see Raja's entrance, and the mannequin outside dressed like a sultry Mrs. Claws...

"Mr. Bubbles, look! The pretty lady!"

Gazelle stopped dead when she heard a child's voice from her left. A little rabbit kit was propped up on the backrest of a bench facing away from them, pointing excitedly at Gazelle and her startled friends. At the girl's cry, an ample cheetah sitting next to her looked up sharply from his soda bottle and spun round in his seat, the bottle's straw protruding from his mouth like a frog's tongue. His eyes went comically wide and he appeared to have a minor seizure as the child's grandparents looked and gasped in shock at the sight of the celebrity. "It's her, Mr. Bubbles!" The child was still crying and pointing at Gazelle. "The pretty lady! The pretty lady who called you a hot dancer!"
The cheetah's expression went from gobsmacked to mortified in the space of a nanosecond, but the straw remained in his mouth as if it had been glued in place. Gazelle might have laughed at the sight if Fabienne Growley of the ZNN hadn't been within earshot. "Miss Gazelle? Could I have a word?"

Gazelle resumed walking with her friends as Growley and her colleague caught up to them. "I'm sorry, Miss Growley, but I don't want to make any comments at this time."

"Just one question and we'll leave you in peace." Growley insisted, keeping a respectful distance as she held her microphone out. "Less than an hour remains before Bellwether's appeal; what are your thoughts?"

Gazelle stopped walking and sighed softly. One question. One answer. "That if this city is to have any chance of fully recovering from Bellwether's actions, then it must not let her escape justice."

Growley smiled, whole-heartedly agreeing with Gazelle's statement even as she verbally remained neutral. "Thank you and Merry Christmas." True to her word, she stopped following Gazelle to directly address the camera for a final speech. Feeling grateful, Gazelle lifted her bags a little higher and was almost to the store when she was stopped in her tracks.

Three mammals, a pig, an armadillo and the wildebeest from the MHN, were approaching her and her friends with intense determination. All three of them were holding cameras.

Mierda.

Ian put himself between Gazelle and the three mammals, adopting an equally icy scowl. "Unless you want to get your butts kicked, put down those cameras and get out of our way."

Gazelle fought the urge to facepalm. She'd spent all day worrying about Veltro and Bellwether that she'd forgotten about the one disease that all public figures suffered at least once in their lives; those maltdopaparazzi. She stayed behind Ian and kept her expression blank. It was her reaction they wanted on camera, not Ian's.

The tiger went ignored as the pig moved to the front of the trio of harassers. "Gazelle, do you still feel safe around these predators after those savage attacks a year and a half ago?"

"No comment." Gazelle replied coolly.

Slightly disappointed, the pig tried again. "Is it true that mammals consider you to be the most attractive female in Zootopia?"

"She said no comment, now back off!" Ian snapped, baring his fangs.

The armadillo stepped forward to have a go, camera poised to strike. "If it's true, then why are you still single?"

"One more word out of you and I swear I'll throw you through a window!" Ian was now looming menacingly over the three mammals. "For the last time, get out of our way!"

"Gazelle, do you really intend to abandon your fans by retiring from singing?" The wildebeest demanded.

"We're done here!" Ian said with finality, stepped forward to brush the paparazzi aside.

"Hey!" Barry suddenly shouted from behind, making Gazelle turn around. Her second tiger friend had grabbed someone by the wrist as he was approaching the group. It was the cheetah who had had
the straw in his mouth, and he was holding something in his entrapped paw. Not another one! Gazelle thought, now in the verge of losing her temper. Why couldn't they all just leave her alone? "Thought you'd get a cheap shot, did you?" Barry growled, but his threatening glare slackened when he saw that it wasn't a camera the young mammal was holding, but a wallet. Barry released him, apologetic. "Sorry, kid."

The cheetah shook his paw and opened his wallet to reveal a police badge, and Gazelle bit her lower lip in dismay. This day was becoming more disastrous by the minute. "Officer Clawhauser, ZPD. I'm off duty but I can't let this situation escalate."

That was when Fangmeyer and Wolford appeared behind the paparazzi and cleared their throats. "We're reporters. You can't arrest us, copper." The armadillo snapped arrogantly.

"Photography is not allowed in this building." Wolford gestured to a sign stuck to a pillar in between stores. "You three need to leave right now."

"You can't throw us out!" The pig insisted.

The head security guard broke through the crowd to join them. "Oh yes, they can!"

The paparazzi were outmatched in more ways than one. They looked from their cameras to Gazelle, weighing the odds of getting one last unwanted picture, but Ian and Barry were in front of her, blocking their shots with equally intimidating looks. Then the trio gave up, allowing the head security guard and Fangmeyer to escort them to the exit.

Wolford stayed behind to speak with Gazelle and her friends. "You three okay?"

"Yes, thank you." Gazelle replied. "If you hadn't come along there might have been a fight."

Wolford turned to the cheetah. "Did I see this tiger grab you, Clawhauser?"

Barry grimaced. Gazelle's heart sank.

"It's okay." Clawhauser said. "He didn't know I'm a cop and I don't want to press charges. Just let him go."

Her heart leapt right back up and she felt a rush of gratitude towards the officer.

Wolford nodded and shot a stern look at Barry. "You need to take it easy. I could have arrested you for battery."

"I know, I'm sorry. I'm just sick of these idiots harassing us all the time." Barry put a protective arm around Gazelle's shoulders. "Can we go, now?"

"Yeah, you can go. If something like this happens again, call for security." Wolford then turned to Clawhauser. "I didn't expect to see you here, buddy."

"I wouldn't miss today for the world." Clawhauser spoke, beaming. "Guess what, I met Hopps' parents! They're right over there with her niece!"

He turned to point at the bench where the three rabbits were sitting, and that was when they saw a hyena in a denim jacket staggering in the general direction of Growley and her colleague. There was a black strap around his neck, the kind that usually carried a camera.

Wolford grimaced and strode forward to confront the sneaky photographer. Curiosity kept Gazelle
rooted to the spot as she and her friends watched Wolford quickly close the distance between himself and the hyena. Clawhauser gave Gazelle a strangely sad and disappointed look before making his way back to his rabbit friends. Halfway to the bench, he stopped to watch Wolford reach out and grab the hyena by the collar, making him drop a cup of Catsta coffee.

The hyena whirled round and sank his teeth into Wolford's shoulder.

A wave of frigid shock struck Gazelle at her core. Clawhauser froze, his jaw dropping as the little girl who had spotted Gazelle let out a piercing shriek.

*He bit the cop.*

The current of shoppers froze like Gazelle's blood as they saw what was happening. Wolford howled in agony as he struggled with the hyena, crimson spreading across the blue fabric of his shirt.

*Mierda, he's biting the cop!*

Gazelle saw spots of blood forming on the tiles beneath the predators and staggered away from the horror. "What- what's going- what..."

The air rapidly filled with screaming as the surrounding shoppers dropped their bags and ran for their lives. Fear and panic swept through the crowd like a plague, and within seconds the entire west wing was in chaos. The two older rabbits grabbed their granddaughter and fled, forgetting their bags in their panic, disappearing from view almost instantly.

Ian charged forward, grabbing the hyena and tearing him away from the wounded officer. The hyena skidded across the floor, scattering a group of terrified oryxs, and leapt up on all fours.

Clutching his bloody shoulder, Wolford pulled out a tranq gun and shot the mad mammal square in the chest, bringing him right back down again.

Wolford fell to his knees, dazed. Ian stayed beside him as Clawhauser overcame his shock and rushed over to help his coworker. "Oh gosh, oh my gosh!" The cheetah cried over and over as he pulled a gauze from Wolford's utility belt and pressed it to the wound. "Was that hyena savage?!"

With his good arm Wolford grabbed his radio to report what had just happened.

"RUN!" Growley screamed from the other side of the wing and pointed.

Barry swore and shoved Gazelle, sending her to the floor. A second later, a rhino on all fours slammed into him. "BARRY!" Gazelle screamed. Barry went flying into the open door of a bar. The rhino continued on her way, upending trashcans and ripping benches from their foundations. The rhino was the second savage mammal Gazelle saw. Then she saw a maddened otter fly at a lion and start scratching wildly at his face. A bull smashed his way out of a china shop, bringing a tidal wave of glass and china shards with him. A lion pounced on the rampaging rhino's back and began clawing at her grey flesh. A tiger plowed into Ian as he tried to run back to Gazelle, and the two cats grappled with each other as they rolled away from her, As Gazelle turned around on the floor, the full horror of what was happening sinking in like a knife, she saw more and more savage mammals, prey and predator alike, appear from the direction of the central garden and other wings.

Whatever was going on, it had affected the entire building.

*No. Nonono. No, no. This can't be happening. This is supposed to be Christmas!*  

A wolf leapt at her, howling.
Chief Bogo turned the final corner of their journey and they saw the Zootopia Superior Court. On the far side of the street was the Greener Grass Mall, bustling with life and Christmas joy. A far cry from the agitated protestors chanting and hollering at the front steps of the courthouse.

"Well, would you look at that..." Wilde leaned forward as he examined the crowd. "Your haters outnumber your supporters ten to one."

Bellwether bore a facade of indifference. "Speak for yourself. Do you believe that the ZPD accepts you? I mean, truly accepts you?" Nick looked at her, and she smiled sweetly at him. "You may have climbed a few links on the social food chain, but you're still the same cowardly, tricky little vulpine from the museum aren't you?"

"I know what you're trying to do." Nick replied coolly, even as he felt a strange pang in his gut. It was a worry that had gnawed at a tiny little bit of his stomach every since he'd started at the academy. "But you're wasting your time. Once this appeal falls through, you're going right back to prison and then I won't have to listen to this drivel."

"You don't know that." Bellwether sneered. "There's still a chance I'll go free, and you know it. If I do, I know the first person to go to to celebrate."

Nick crossed his arms, incensed, finally letting a scowl cross his features. "If you do anything to hurt her, you know what I'll do, Smellwether?"

"I can hear you, you know." Bogo said gruffly as they approached the courthouse.

"Sorry, sir." Nick shut up, realizing he'd gotten very close to the line. Bellwether crossed her unchained legs, looking smug.

"And Bellwether, if you so much as look at Hopps the wrong way don't think for a second that I won't personally defluff you."

Bellwether glared at Bogo, but didn't try to taunt him.

They started to pass the first of the protestors, who pointed and cursed at the car carrying the sheep they despised. Bellwether pointedly ignored them, keeping her cold eyes on the back of the seat in front of her.

Nick turned his own eyes to the Greener Grass Mall and the magnificent giant tree in front of the west entrance. Two years ago he wouldn't have given a crap about missing the reopening, but now he wished that he and Judy could have gotten a day off like Benjamin had and spent the entire break going in and out of the three hundred or so stores laden with discounted merchandise and pretty decorations. Right now they'd be spending quality time with Judy's parents and her adorable little niece, having carrot cake and blueberry muffins, hot chocolate with cream and coco powder, coming up with Christmas gift ideas as they gaze deeply into each other's eyes...

Basking in the warmth of our glorious platonic friendship of course, Nick reminded himself, feeling warm around the ears. As he felt the car begin to gradually slow down, he curiously took in the new features of the refurbished mall. A half dome shaped wall of glass that must be about twenty inches thick, the mall's golden name surrounded by green, the bull elephant Officer Pennington flipping the squad car behind them and charging at their own car on all fours... wait, what?

The next thing Nick knew, a six-ton elephant hit their car with the force of a rusty train car. Glass flew past the fox's face and his entire world literally tilted to one side with an earsplitting crash as the car ended up lying on its side. The seatbelt dug into his waist as he dangled sideways above a
stunned Bellwether. In the front, Bogo partially slipped out of the upper strap of his own belt and had to grab the steering wheel to keep from going upside down. The side of the car had caved in where Pennington had hit it.

Pennington struck again. The entire car jolted and toppled, the roof hitting the tarmac with a screech as the car was completely upended. Nick, himself upended as the seatbelt held him in place, shook his slightly bleeding head and wondering what the heck the crazy pachyderm was playing at.

Somewhere close by, Pennington roared. He didn't trumpet. He didn't scream. He roared like a monster from a sci-fi disaster movie. Nick had thought that Finnick's rapping was the scariest sound in existence, and holy crap was he wrong.

There was a thump beside him, almost inaudible over Pennington's feral roar. Bellwether had somehow managed to slip out of her seatbelt and was now on the roof of the car, pulling her cuffed hooves under her legs from behind her back. Beside her was a window that had been broken by the first assault.

"Hey, hey!" Nick shouted and scrambled to find his belt buckle, but it was already too late. Bellwether now had her hooves back and was climbing out the window.

"Hang in there, fox! See you soon!" She gloated as she crawled to freedom.

"Get her, Wilde!" Bogo shouted as he struggled in the front seat. He'd unbuckled his seatbelt but his lower body was still stuck at an upward angle. "Ugh, the steering wheel's got me pinned!"

Nick found the belt buckle and fell to the roof, becoming aware of screams coming from outside. He saw dozens of legs racing past as the protestors tried to get as far away from the maddened elephant as possible, but no sign of Bellwether. He was almost to the window when something stomped hard on the upended car, nearly flattening one side. Nick curled into a ball and Bogo cursed in the middle of shouting into a radio that the prisoner had escaped. When Nick looked again at the window, it was now as thin as a letterbox.

He was trapped. If Pennington kept stomping and ramming at the wrecked car like he was doing right this second, he was also totally screwed.

Judy couldn't believe her eyes. One minute the car carrying Nick, Bogo and Bellwether was approaching her position, the next a savage Pennington had flipped the rear support car like a cheap picnic table and was trying to crush the middle one into a metal paste, making unnerving prehistoric sounds Judy never knew an elephant could make. The officers in the front car were trapped, unable to open their doors due to the many, many panicking civilians racing past it like a flash flood.

It wasn't the sounds that terrified Judy; it was the fact that her cherished Nick was still inside that crumpled car.

While the protestors and bystanders dropped their signs and ran away from the danger Judy ran toward it, screaming at the top of her lungs. "HEY! HEEEEEEY! GET AWAY FROM THEM!"

Either not hearing her or ignoring the tiny mammal in favor of demolishing the larger object, Pennington kept stomping on the car, which was becoming flatter and more deformed with each blow. The larger police officers were being pushed back by the panicked crowd, unable to aid their endangered coworkers quickly enough.

Her tiny tranq gun would be useless against that savage. Judy spun round on the spot, trying to find something to get Pennington's attention. Her small voice wasn't enough. She needed the sound of
something bigger. She spied an abandoned green car meant for a large mammal and ran to it. Pennington roared again, the sound sending another chill down Judy's spine. She leapt onto the door, pressing her legs against the adjoining rear door as she pulled on the handle. The door popped open and she swung herself inside, landing in the driver's seat. She proceeded to pound on the center of the steering wheel with all her might.

The sharp, loud beep of the horn carried over the cries of the crowd, reaching the ears of Pennington as he reared up to deliver another crushing blow to the helpless car. He dropped back down and turned his fierce, wild, darkened eyes to the green car. Judy gulped but kept punching the horn, praying that the elephant would turn on her and leave Nick and Bogo alone.

Pennington let out a more conventional trumpet and charged at the car. Judy kept hitting the horn, waiting until he was almost upon her before throwing herself out the car. She heard metal being rent as she hit the ground and rolled under another car. She lay flat on her stomach in the freezing cold sludge, watching as Pennington actually stepped onto the car and pounded it into the road. She climbed out the other side and ran to the ruined police car, praying that Nick and Bogo were still alive.

She knelt down beside the first window she reached. "Nick. Nick!" She saw him curled into a red and brown ball with his arms around his head on the roof of the cabin, which had shrunk to nearly half its original size. "Oh my gosh, Nick! Are you okay?"

Nick uncurled and lowered his arms. His green eyes shone with relief when he saw her. "Judy!" He crawled to the tiny window and stuck a paw out. Judy took the paw and hugged it with both of hers. "Judy, what's going on?"

"Pennington has gone savage, Nick. I managed to distract him, but..." When she looked at Pennington, she saw the rhino and elephant officers finally escaping the front support car rushing forward with nets and tranq rifles to subdue the elephant. "It's being taken care of. Are you okay?"

"Do I look like a red pancake?"

"No." Judy giggled despite herself.

"Then I'm fantastic."

"What about Bogo?" Judy searched for her boss and saw him absolutely stuck in the front of the car. He didn't look significantly injured either, she was happy to see.

"I feel like a sardine in here, but I'm fine too." Bogo grunted. "Never mind us, you've got to go after Bellwether!"

With a sinking feeling, Judy realized that Bellwether wasn't in the car. "Where is she?"

"She escaped! You've gotta go after her, Carrots!" Nick let go of her paws and pushed gently at her.

"Nick, I can't leave you in here!" Judy protested.

"We can't let her get away with this, now go!" Nick yelled. "We'll be fine, I promise!"

Judy swallowed. "I'll come back, Nick."

When she stood up, she saw that Pennington had been caught and sedated by the fast-acting officers. She ran up to them. "Bellwether's escaped! We have to split up and find her!"
"What about Chief Bogo and Wilde?" McHorn demanded as he held an empty rifle.

"They're okay! Chief Bogo wants everyone to spread out and find Bellwether! Now!"

They scattered, with two officers staying to watch the unconscious Pennington and answer Peter Moosebridge's questions when he ran up to ask them about the recent incident. Judy sprinted across the street in the general direction of the mall, thinking that she may be trying to use the thick, terrified crowd to slip away. She was convinced that the sheep's escape was the worst thing that could have happened today, until she saw an exhausted and distressed Growley standing near her news van, sounding like she was reporting in a warzone as she spoke before the camera, and overheard the big cat's report.

"I'm reporting live from outside the Greener Grass Mall, which has just now descended completely into chaos." Sporting a torn and bloody sleeve, Growley gestured to the throng of shoppers pouring out the mall. "I have just witnessed a paparazzo attack and wound a police officer while he was attempting to stop him from taking unwanted pictures of pop star Gazelle, and many more attacks are occurring throughout the mall as we speak. I must warn everyone who is watching; do not enter the mall! If you inside and watching this, get the hell out of there!"

Judy slowly turned her head to the west wing entrance as dread froze her from the inside, and she forgot all about that sheep that had slithered out of the ZPD's custody.

Her parents, her niece and her friend were in there.

*My friends and family are in that frickin' building!*

She began to sprint for the entrance, only for something infinitely worse than a single savage elephant to block her path.

Benjamin couldn't believe what was happening around him. Mammals were running and screaming. Those that had gone savage were attacking everything in sight. Judy's family had disappeared.

This was no accident or reverting to primitive, savage ways. Benjamin had heard of this happening, but had hoped to never experience it first hand: *terrorist attack.*

Once the bleeding had completely stopped he helped Wolford to his feet. Wolford pushed him away and reloaded his tranq gun. "Get out of here, Ben!"

Benjamin gaped at him. "I can't just leave you! You're hurt!"

"I have to find Fangmeyer!" Wolford growled from the pain. "You go find Hopps' family and get out of here!"

Wolford staggered away in the direction Fangmeyer and the head security guard had gone before the terror started. Benjamin tried to follow, but a frantic rhino bumped into him and sent him falling back. By the time he recovered from the collision, Wolford was gone.

Benjamin spun round on the spot, trying to find a familiar face amongst the sea of strangers. "Gazelle?" He cried. If it weren't for the screams and howling, he would have been able to hear his pounding heart. He remembered Judy's family taking off towards the central garden and started moving in that direction. If he let anything happen to them he'd never forgive himself.

"Mr. Hopps! Mrs Hopps!" He cried, his desperation threatening to turn into hysteria. "I've got some carrots for ya!" He dodged a wounded savage wolf that was nursing what looked like a broken high heel protruding from his arm.
There!

He saw them near a restaurant, cowering in fear as they tried to find an escape. Heart leaping, Benjamin ran for them.

Something grabbed his arm, stopping him dead.

Gazelle stared up at him pleadingly, bleeding from claw marks on her thigh. One of her high heels had been broken off. "Please. I can't find my friends."

Benjamin stared at her, amazed at finding himself in the position of assisting his greatest idol. Feeling torn, he looked to where he'd seen Judy's family, but they were gone again. *Aw man!*

He turned back to Gazelle and helped her up. "We'll find them, but first we have to get you out of here."

The ground began to tremble beneath them. Benjamin and Gazelle looked at each other, then at the chaos around them. It wasn't the crowd, which was strangely now running *away* from the exit when previously they'd been running for it. They heard strange sounds coming from the west wing entrance. Above the heads of the crowd, visible through the thick glass of the mall front, a dozen savage frat boy elephants were stampeding towards the mall.

No amount of donuts would have been able to make Benjamin feel better after what came next.

The giant grey bulldozers smashed through the glass of the mall front, bellowing and swinging their trunks like lethal rubber hoses. The screams of the shoppers grew louder than ever. Then the domino effect kicked in; massive glass shards as thick as phone books fell to the ground, some embedding themselves in the floor like strange crystal sculptures. Metal beams and rubble from the ceiling broke away and joined the growing mess of debris as the elephants continued their rampage, smashing pillars like toothpicks and swatting shoppers and savages aside like insects. The giant Christmas tree came crashing down through the ruined glass wall into the pile of wreckage that had once been the mall front, shattering the star and sending large baubles rolling across the tiles like boulders. Benjamin grabbed the stunned Gazelle and pulled her into the closest hiding place, a small, empty repair store for electronics, and they ducked down behind the door. The ground shook and their ears ached as the elephants thundered past, heading deeper into the mall to continue their path of mindless destruction.

When they were gone, Benjamin and Gazelle stood up and looked through the door's window to see a grey, dust filled wasteland. The west wing's mall front was gone, in its place a barrier of glass, metal, stone and fir. Savage beasts prowled the wing, alternating between attacking each other and stalking the ruined hall looking for more victims.

"Oh my god." Gazelle whispered, her hooves gripping her throat.

Benjamin turned away from the carnage and gripped his head. He must not panic. He had to think. He had to find another way out of here. He had to find Judy's family. He had to help Gazelle.

How the heck was he supposed to form a strategy when he hadn't been out in the field since he'd first become a police officer?

He saw a plain door behind the counter at the back of the shop. On it was a sign; *employees only.* That door led to the employee area of the mall, where the staff rooms, offices and first aid room were located. It could be safer in there.

"Come on." He took Gazelle's hoof, gently leading her away from the front of the shop. "We need to
find somewhere safe until help comes."

There were tears in Gazelle's eyes. "What about my friends?"

"I know, but we'll die if we go out there." Benjamin replied, lip trembling in anguish. With Gazelle slightly limping from her injury and missing heel, they made their way to the employee's door.

He had to stay strong for her. She didn't need an obsessed fan right now. She needed a cop.
The sun descended early over the Greener Grass Mall as the lockdown began.

Numerous eyewitness reports had claimed that probably over a hundred savage mammals were prowling around the building, including entire herd of multi-ton elephants that had already proven themselves capable of destroying a car. The ZPD was not equipped to deal with such a disaster, and so half an hour after the disaster began the decision was made from higher up to seal off the entire mall until the Special Forces could arrive.

With that, the ZPD began the task of ensuring that nothing dangerous could escape the building to create more havoc. With the west exit already blocked off thanks to the elephants, three blockades were quickly set up for the others. All fire exits were closed, and far as they knew the savages did not know how to open doors. Nevertheless all the fire exits were closely watched by armed officers. Finally a tall wire fence was put up all around the building to keep mammals out as well as in, with harsh floodlights all aimed at the building and its doors and windows. A crowd had formed all around the fence, both to watch the action and to wait in fear for news of friends and family still trapped inside as officers held them at bay.

With his friend and coworker Fabienne Growley in an ambulance receiving medical attention, Peter Moosebridge had taken over coverage of the incident. He maintained a neutral face as he held his microphone and faced the camera. "The Zootopia Police Department has completely locked down the Greener Grass Mall in the wake of the worst savage attack the city has ever seen. Among those who managed to escape the mall before lockdown are ZPD Officers Fangmeyer and Wolford, who were patrolling the mall at the time of the attack. Wolford was allegedly the first victim of the savage attacks but his hospitalization has prevented me from getting a comment. Pop star Gazelle is believed to be among those still trapped inside but her condition is unknown, and authorities have refused to comment on the condition and whereabouts of the convicted sheep Dawn Bellwether, who disappeared after an elephant attacked the police car she was being transported in..."

In a large tent set up beside the fence nearby the west exit, Judy was curled up on a chair, hugging her knees and glaring at the telephone on the cheap plastic table before her.

Five minutes ago, her fourth plea to be allowed to infiltrate the building to locate her family had been rejected. It was too dangerous, they said. Only Chief Bogo could authorize such a mission, they said. Well Chief Bogo was still trapped in a mangled wreck of a patrol car along with Nick, and it would take the Claws of Life to get them out. That was the news Judy was so anxiously waiting for; the news that Nick and Bogo were free and unhurt. She had returned to them after the west wing entrance was destroyed, preventing her from rushing into the mall. All the windows had nearly been crushed in pinholes, so even the tiny rabbit couldn't get inside. With the fading light, she'd only been able to see Nick's bloody face and arm. He'd told her that it wasn't as bad as it looked and she'd struggled to believe him. Then the rescue services arrived and had her leave the scene, promising to inform her the moment Nick and Bogo were free. She hadn't left this tent since.

With every minute they spent delaying a rescue mission, the chances of her family being dead increased. And Benjamin... of all the innocent mammals to get mixed up in this, why did it have to be him? The idea of his family being somewhere in the crowd outside, wondering if he was alive or dead, was too painful to think about.

She heard soft footsteps as someone entered the tent and looked up. It was Nick. Nick! "Nick, you got out?!" Nick was leaning against a tent pole, bearing nothing but a Band-Aid above his eyebrow.
"Did I get out of a car wreck with nothing worse than a few cuts and bruises?" He grinned at her, looking just as happy that he was alive as she was. "Yes. Yes, I did."

Judy threw herself at Nick and hugged him so fiercely she almost succeeded where Pennington couldn't and broke the poor fox's body. "Carrots... Carrots, you're turning me into an hourglass here!"

Judy let go, apologizing profusely. "Sorry, sorry, Nick! Where's Bogo?"

"Still in the car. It's taking a little longer to get him out, but he's fine so don't worry about it."

Judy cupped his face, relieved. "You sure you're okay?"

Nick turned a little pink from her tender touch. "The paramedics gave me a good looking at after I was procured from the car. If they say I'm okay, I'm pretty sure I'm okay."

"That's great, 'cause we're wasting time here. Come here..." She led him to the table, on which lay a blueprint of the mall. "I've been trying for the last hour to get permission to stage a rescue mission, but they say I can't do anything without Chief Bogo's permission."

"I'm sure he'll listen, Carrots." Nick patted her shoulder. "Your parents have modern cellphones, right?"

Judy swatted his arm away. "They may be country bunnies but they're not nineteenth century, Nick!"

Nick rubbed his paw. "The point is, have they called you since this started?" Judy felt a stab in her gut and wordlessly shook her head. Nick swallowed, visibly taking care in choosing his next words. "I'm not assuming the worst, Carrots, I'm just asking if you know where they are. This mall is like, the size of a theme park. Without your family's location it'll be like looking for a needle in a haystack. A haystack full of crazy, homicidal mammals hopped up on Night Howler."

Judy's knees weakened and she sat back down. Nick was right. Of course he was right. "You're sure it's Night Howler?"

"Wolford didn't turn crazy after being bit, so I'm sure."

Right again, Judy pulled out her personal phone and stared at it. She felt tears spring in her eyes as the stabbing in her gut worsened. "Tell me they're going to be okay, Nick."

Nick put on his best grin, knelt before her and took her paws in his. "They're gonna be okay. Your parents, Cotton, Benjamin, they're gonna be okay."

Judy wiped her eyes. Once again, she struggled to believe him. "Okay."

That was when her phone rang.

Earlier, the dangerously loud clicking of Gazelle's high heel on the plain grey tiles, added with the limited mobility of the other heel having broken off and gotten stuck in a savage wolf's arm, drove Gazelle to make a small sacrifice.

"Wait." She said, stopping them as they began to walk through the corridor of the employee area of the mall. With its grey-scale color, harsh lighting and minimal cheap Christmas decor, this place was a stark contrast to the beauty and joy of the public area.
"Are you okay?" Benjamin asked, looking down at the claw marks on her leg with concern. They weren't very deep and bleeding was minimal, but the fact that his idol was hurt was abhorrent.

Ignoring the sting of her injuries, Gazelle pulled off her shoes one by one and tossed them in the corner. "I'm better off without them right now." She explained. "Do you have any idea where we're going?"

Benjamin shook his head and spoke quietly. "I don't know. I've never been in this area before. I don't even know if they do have first aid offices here." He bit his lip, looking ashamed of himself. It looked like the reality of their situation was only just now beginning to sink in. "I'm not even a field officer. I just work the front desk and send people out to do the real police work. I don't know what I'm doing."

Gazelle looked down the length of the long, ominous looking corridor and the corner at the end. It scared her to think that there may be a savage mammal hiding just out of sight, but it scared her more that the corridor was literally the only direction they could go; the way they'd just came only led to certain death. If it weren't for this young cheetah here with her, she may have already succumbed to fear and curled up into a tiny, bleeding ball. This young cheetah, who back when they'd first met had initially incited her anger when she and Barry had mistaken him for a Paparazzo, now stood there looking as hopelessly lost and afraid as she was even as he tried to do his duty as a police officer.

"Don't know what you're doing?" Gazelle looked at him quizzically. "I thought the point of coming here was to find somewhere to hide until help comes."

"Um, yeah." Benjamin scratched his cheek. Only now did Gazelle notice the familiar big-eared symbol amongst his black spots. "It's just... I wouldn't know where to look. We don't even have a map."

Gazelle stepped closer to him and pointed at the next door along the corridor. "Then we'll check the rooms one by one."

Benjamin looked nervously down the corridor. "Wish I had a tranq gun right now." This reminded Gazelle that she had a weapon of her own, and she pulled the black Taser from her purse.

The corridor was unsettlingly quiet as they approached the first door. Like everything else it was grey and plain, except for the black plastic sign with white letters; Raja's Clothes Store. Gazelle hoped that Ian and Barry were still alive. She and Benjamin pressed their ears to the door and heard the distinctive growl of a bear on the other side. "We probably shouldn't go in there." Benjamin muttered. As if to prove his point something big slammed into the door from the other side. Gazelle and Benjamin leapt back, but the door remained sealed even as the savage struck the door again. "Let's try the next one along, shall we?" Benjamin asked with a nervous giggle.

The banging stopped before they reached the next door on the other side of the corridor, one that had a glorious red Fire Exit sign above it. It was bulging inward, as if something big and heavy had punched it, but they had to try to get it open. They rushed over, shoved at the panic bar and of course it was jammed. They looked through a small opening where the metal had been warped and saw that the flipped SUV that had caused the inconvenient damage. They could hear the cries of a crowd in the distance, but the fierce whiteness of a floodlight made them recoil from the door. So much for the easy way out.

They continued on, reaching a turn midway that led to a far shorter, narrower corridor.

Third time's the charm, and sure enough the door at the end of this corridor bore two promising signs; Security Office and First Aid Kit Inside.
Begging to God that the door wasn't locked, Gazelle let Benjamin 'take point' and push on the door. It wasn't locked, but once again there was something blocking the other side. "For heaven's sake!" Gazelle hissed, both from frustration and the pain still coming from her thigh.

"Wait, it's just a cabinet." Benjamin said, looking through the gap in the door. "Come on, I think we can push through this." Gazelle limped up beside him and together they gave a good hard shove. Sure enough, there was a metallic screech as the fallen cabinet blocking the door shifted. "Again." They shoved again. With another screech the door opened a little more. With a third hard shove, they burst right through the door and into the office.

The first thing Gazelle saw were seven huge screens bearing dozens of smaller images of the mall. The second thing she saw was a brown and blue shape throwing itself at Benjamin. "Look out!" She yelled too late as the boar security guard knocked Benjamin to the ground and pinned him there. Crying out in pain and surprise Benjamin barely managed to grab the boar's razor sharp tusks as he thrust them down at his face. With eyes wide with shock and terror he held the tusks at bay, forcing the boar's head upwards even as the maddened mammal beat at him with his hooves.

Gazelle didn't hesitate. Before she was rich enough to hire bodyguards she'd brought down muggers three times as big as this brute. She lunged at the boar and pressed her crackling Taser against the beast's neck. There was a loud squeal. A hoof lashed out, knocking Gazelle back as the boar toppled off of Benjamin. The terrified cheetah scrambled away and spotted an open closet full of boxes. "That closet! Hurry before he recovers!"

They grabbed a leg each, dragged the dazed mammal into the closet and closed the door. Seconds later they jumped in fright as the boar began ramming the door over and over, squealing and screeching with rage.

It looked like the door would hold. Benjamin smiled softly at Gazelle. "Thanks."

Gazelle smiled back. "Someone has to look out for the police. He didn't gore you, did he?"

Benjamin turned around on the spot as he checked himself. "Nope, just a few bruises. Ah, perfect!" He'd just spotted the green first aid kit hanging on the wall. "Come on, let's get that leg seen to!"

Gazelle sat down on the office chair a guard would sit on while watching the monitor. When Benjamin approached with the box, she held up a hoof. "Hold on. Turn around, please."

Benjamin looked puzzled. Gazelle smirked and pointed at her ripped jeans. His eyes widened. "Ooooh..." He spun around and covered his eyes. Once Gazelle had pulled down her jeans and covered her hips with her coat, she gave him the go ahead. "Okay, I'm decent now."

When Benjamin turned back round, he was rubbing his paws with paw sanitizer. He put the little bottle back in his satchel and knelt down before her. He quickly browsed the kit's guide to refresh his first aid knowledge then reached back into his satchel. "First time I've shared a drink like this." He giggled again as he pulled out a bottle of sparkling water. Gazelle wondered how much of his giggling was part of his trying to cope. As he began rinsing her claw marks, Gazelle turned her gaze upward, self-conscious of having a stranger touching her bare thigh even though he was helping her. She noticed that even though the boar was still snorting the banging had stopped; he had either given up or exhausted himself.

There was soon a small puddle beneath the chair. Benjamin looked at the puddle and then at Gazelle with a sheepish expression. "I probably should have put a bucket under there first."

Gazelle laughed softly. "Probably."
The antiseptic came next. The pain grew worse, but Gazelle did her best to ignore it. "I'm sorry."
Benjamin sounded surprisingly weak.

"It's okay. It's not that painful." Gazelle replied.

"No, I mean about all this." Benjamin paused, looking crestfallen. "It's our job as the police to protect you, but we've let you down big time."

"Officer Clawhauser... Benjamin... I don't think there was anything you could have done." She didn't know how much truth there was in her words, but she couldn't bear to see his guilt. A part of her suspected that he was a fan of hers, which very likely has made that guilt worse.

Benjamin didn't answer her, instead wrapping a thin bandage around her leg to protect her injury until she could get a professional to look at it. She pulled her jeans back up and looked again at the closet where the boar was still sounding agitated. "I don't feel safe with him in there. Maybe we should find somewhere else to hide."

Benjamin paced in the room for a minute before suggesting a barricade to make doubly sure the boar wouldn't get out. There were three metal cabinets in the room, and it took all their effort to stack them up in front of the door. Now the boar couldn't escape even if he figured out how to use a door handle. Gazelle felt bad for imprisoning someone in such a manner but the authorities would soon let him out and get him the attention he needs.

Now all they had to do was wait.

They each sat down on an office chair and watched the cameras. The savage mammals didn't care about little black machines in the ceiling, so every single camera was intact and allowing them to see the entire mall. The west wing was the area in the worst condition, with rubble, glass and twisted metal strewn all over the place. There were not as many animals in the halls and central garden. As the cameras revealed most of them had wandered into the three hundred or so stores that filled the building. There was some blood but no bodies, and Gazelle didn't know whether to call that a good sign or not. The bigger stores and halls were crawling with those mad elephants. If any survivors had any sense they would stay far away from those places. It would take a literal army to quell this.

One of the keyboards beneath the screens had had coffee spilled on it, but was still functional. There was a radio beside it, and when Gazelle pointed it out Benjamin excitedly picked it up.

"Hello?" He spoke into the radio. "This Officer Clawhauser of the ZPD, please respond!"

To his and Gazelle's pure amazement and delight, someone responded.

"This is the head of security, Officer Pines. You have no idea how glad I am to hear another voice!"

"Me too. Where are you?"

"I'm making my way through the Carrot Store with two other guards and some survivors. Where are you?" They searched the camera feeds for the Carrot Store. Sure enough they eventually find Officer Pines, two guards, and a group of survivors standing near a display of laptops, having stopped upon receiving the call. "We're in the Security Office in the west wing. We can see you on the cameras. Wait..." Benjamin gasped softly when he saw three rabbits amongst the survivors. "Omigosh. Is that the Hoppses?!"

"Hoppses?" The bedraggled porcupine on the screen glanced at the three rabbits. "You know these here bunnies?"
"I was with them when the attack started! Thank the dickens they're okay!" Benjamin actually leapt to his feet and danced on the spot. He might have done a cartwheel if Gazelle wasn't giving him an odd look. "Look, that store isn't too far from where we are and we've got it more or less secure. Why don't you come over here and we'll hide out together until help comes?"

Pines looked straight into the camera and grinned in appreciation. "That is a brilliant idea. Keep that radio switched on and we'll see you soon, Clawhauser." With that he lowered the radio and began leading the guards and civilians to the back door leading to the employee's area.

Benjamin tucked the radio into his belt and fell back in his seat, exhaling heavily with relief. Gazelle felt exactly the same way; she'd recently begun to fear that she and Benjamin were the only mammals to survive the attacks. It gladdened her to know that there were others, especially the sweet little rabbit girl who had so innocently called her out as the 'pretty lady', had made it. The memory of that little incident brought a giggle out of her.

Benjamin had always wanted to meet Gazelle and get to know her backstage, but this wasn't exactly what he'd had in mind. It was still better than that unpleasant incident with the Paparazzi. If Gazelle hadn't been so upset from the harassment, he could have asked for an autograph, not that he could ask for one now.

He heard Gazelle laugh and looked at her curiously. "What?"

"I'm just remembering that little girl you were sitting with." Gazelle replied. "What was her name?"

"Cotton. She's Officer Hopps' niece." Benjamin cringed as he remembered Cotton's mortifying proclamation.

"What was it she said? That I called you a 'hot dancer'?" She eyed him with amusement.

Oh cripes. "That was your app. Remember that app you made where we could put our face on a backup dancer and dance with you?"

"Oh, I remember that. That app made a bigger profit than I thought it would."

"My boss has it too. You know Chief Bogo, from Precinct One? I work for him."

"Chief Bogo is a fan of mine? I never would have guessed!"

"Yeah. He's not as hardcore as he likes to pretend to be." Benjamin giggled. "Maybe you'd like to meet him after we get out of here." He felt his blood warm as he imagined the look on Bogo's face once he got his surprise.

Gazelle narrowed her eyes and looked down at her legs. "Actually I was thinking of speaking to him anyway."

Before Benjamin could inquire further they heard noises, and it wasn't the boar trapped in the closet. Outside the office, someone was banging and muttering curses.

Benjamin stood up. "You stay here. I gonna check it out."

Gazelle grabbed his arm. "Be careful, Ben. It could be one of the people who caused all this."

Benjamin felt a stab of fear. He hadn't considered the possibility that the animals that instigated this terrorist attack, if it was indeed a terrorist attack, could still be in the area. All the same, he had to
check it out. "I'm just going to take a look. Lock the door behind me just in case."

Gazelle nodded and gave him her Taser.

He snuck out the door and waited until he heard the click of the lock before starting up the short, narrow corridor. He held the Taser out in front of him like a dagger as he approached whoever was sounding so frustrated. Whoever it was it sounded female, and very, very familiar...

He looked around the larger corridor and saw a sheep in orange shoving furiously at the blocked fire exit.

"Bellwether!"

Bellwether froze and stared at him through her large glasses. "Crap!" She whispered and took off down the corridor.

"Hey, stop right there!" Benjamin had no idea how she had managed to escape Chief Bogo and Nick, but there was no way he was going to let her get away. Her handcuffs clinked as she ran through the door Benjamin and Gazelle had came through earlier.

There was a grunt, a sickening sound like a watermelon being chopped, and a cry of agony.

Benjamin went completely cold and numb for the second time that day. He sprinted to the door, ignoring his rapidly growing exhaustion and praying that he wasn't already too late.

A large shape with horns leapt through a broken store window just as Benjamin entered the store. It had gone so fast that he hadn't been able to make out what kind of prey mammal it was. His foot brushed something that turned out to be Bellwether's cracked glasses. As he bent down to pick them up, he saw her lying flat on her back beside a toppled speaker, a crimson stain forming on her chest.

"Oh sweet Charles Dickens." Benjamin scrambled over to her. She was still alive, but she was completely silent and stiff as a board, her eyes staring blankly up at the ceiling, her arms draped over the gaping, ghastly gash on her chest. He pressed a paw over the wound, cringing at the feeling of warm blood and torn flesh beneath his fingers, but she didn't react at all.

This sheep was as evil as Rudolph Hitler and Genhorse Khan. She had persecuted hundreds of innocent predators and endangered thousands of mammals with her Night Howler serum. She had tried to tear the city apart and had 'thought it would be better' that a predator such as Benjamin wasn't at the front desk of the ZPD.

Despite it all, Benjamin couldn't just walk away and let her die. Even if he wanted to, it wasn't what Chief Bogo would have wanted.

He lifted her into his arms like a baby and rushed back to the Security Office as fast as he could without jostling the wounded convict.

Gazelle gasped when she unlocked the door and saw them. "Is that Bellwether?"

"She's hurt real bad." Benjamin panted, seeing Gazelle's gaze turn icy. "I know she's a horrible person, but we can't just..." He faltered and stared at her pleadingly. "Please."

Gazelle sighed and reopened the first aid kit.

Judy picked up the telephone and listened anxiously to the calm, authoritative voice on the other end.
The news she received both relieved and disappointed her. "Well?" Nick asked as she put down the telephone.

"They've extracted Chief Bogo and they're examining him right now." She replied. "Come on, Nick. We have to talk to him."

They found him a short distance from the wrecked patrol car that had almost become his and Nick's tomb, just as he was climbing out of the ambulance. There was a tear on the seam of his sleeve, but unbelievably he didn't appear to have any injuries. "Hopps. Wilde." He spoke upon spotting their approach. "It's good to see you two are alright. Any sign of Bellwether?"

Judy shook her head, fretfully anticipating his reaction. "She got away, sir. We lost her in the crowd after the savage attacks started."

Bogo turned away and clutched his skull. He clenched his teeth and counted to ten under his breath. When he turned back to them his expression was stony but he was thankfully calm. "Tell me you've got units searching for her."

"We've got ten units, plus units from the other precincts searching the city for her." Judy answered. "The rest are either dealing with unrelated incidents or holding the perimeter here."

Bogo looked at the fence and floodlights. "So we still have the situation under control, that's good to know. What's the situation inside the mall?"

Judy hesitated, thinking of her parents. "Reports suggest that over a hundred savage mammals are inside, both predator and prey. Some did manage to get out, including Officer Pennington, but we have all of them apprehended and on their way to hospital for treatment."

"Casualties?"

"No fatalities, thank goodness, but many are seriously injured. Officers Trunkaby, Wolford and Fangmeyer made it out with as many civilians as they could before the place was locked down." Judy continued the report as the three of them made their way back to the tent. "However, we believe that there are still several survivors trapped inside."

Bogo grimaced. They entered the tent and stood by the table. "Do we have names?"

Nick must have sensed Judy's growing distress, because he stepped in front of her and took it from there. "Stu and Bonnie Hopps, and their niece, Cotton Hopps. The head of security, Officer Lawson Pines and two guards, Richard Bronson and Pierce Brennan." He glanced at a clipboard on the table and his frown deepened. "Officer Clawhauser."

Bogo had the same look on his face he'd had at Judy's first press conference after she'd just triggered an avalanche of anti-predator sentiment. "Clawhauser's in there?"

"Y-yes, sir." Nick said. "According to the news, Gazelle's in there too."

Bogo slowly sat down. He was actually turning pale.

"Sir, I am requesting a rescue mission to retrieve these survivors." Judy drew herself up to her full height. "If we wait for Special Forces, it could be too late by the time we find them."

Bogo held a hoof up, looking regretful. "Hopps, unless you know their location it would be like looking for a needle in a haystack. We don't have the resources to deal with over a hundred savage predators, a fair fraction of which are bigger than your apartment."
"That's more or less what I told her." Nick looked at the upset bunny apologetically.

Bogo's phone, which had survived Pennington's attack with nothing worse than a long crack across the screen, started ringing. "Excuse me." He strode to the back of the tent as he answered the call.

Nick guided Judy to another seat and lifted her onto it. "Nick, I can't just abandon them." She whispered.

"You're not abandoning them. Trust me, I would know." Nick would have said more, but then Bogo was storming back over to them.

"It's Clawhauser!" He said. "He says your family is with him."

"What?!" Bogo shouted her name when Judy suddenly leapt up and snatched the large phone from his hoof. "Ben, it's Judy! Are you okay?"

"Yeah, I'm okay." Benjamin's tinny voice replied happily. "And your family's okay too! They would have called themselves, but they forgot their bags in the panic."

Judy could have leapt right through the roof of the tent. "Let me talk to them!"

"Hopps! Give me back that phone!"

A second passed, and then the wonderful sound of her father's voice reached her ears. "Judy! Sweet cheese and crackers, it's good to hear you!"

"Hopps!"

"Dad, mom, I'm so happy you're okay!" Judy sobbed as she gripped the massive black phone.

"Hiya, Aunt Judy!" Cotton cried, sounding like she was further away from the phone than her grandparents. "Guess what! I'm in a police station just like the one you work in!"

Judy laughed. "What police station?"

"Hopps, if I don't have that phone back in five seconds I'm demoting you to meter maid!" Judy handed back the phone. "Clawhauser, what police station are you talking about?"

"She means the Security Office in the west wing. That's where we are." Benjamin spoke.

"Is anyone else with you?" Bogo asked.

"Gazelle's here. Yes, that Gazelle!" Benjamin giggled madly. "She got clawed on the leg but it's not serious. We've also got three security guards and a whole group of survivors here."

"Clawhauser... Clawhauser!" Bogo cut him off. "Names, if you please."

"Oh, okay." Benjamin listed off the names of the mammals sharing his hiding place, most of which matched the names of mammals that had been unaccounted for. When he got to Dawn Bellwether, Judy nearly broke Bogo's phone.

"Bellwether's with you?!"

"Yeah. Don't worry, she's not going anywhere."

"Clawhauser, don't underestimate that sheep." Bogo warned. "She's as sneaky as a fox. No offense, Wilde."
"None taken, Buffalo Butt."

"Touché."

Benjamin interrupted them. "Sir, Bellwether's hurt. She got gored by a savage prey mammal before I could catch her."

The irony was so delicious that Judy could almost taste it. "How badly?"

"She's in no condition to be running off, I'll tell you that much, but there's a few people here looking like they want to finish the job. You really need to get over here ASAP."

Oh, that could be bad. "Ben, she may be a criminal but she's still our responsibility. Make sure nothing else happens to her, okay?"

"Ten-four."

Bogo lifted the phone to his face. "Just sit tight and we'll get you out as soon as we can."

"See you soon, guys. Don't take too long." Benjamin hung up.

Judy embraced Nick again, letting her tears go. Her family was alive, and she was coming for them. Nick patted the back of her head and whispered 'I told you so' into her ear.

Bogo put his phone away and scanned the blueprint on the table before turning to Judy and Nick. "Hopps... Wilde... don't mess this up."
Within four minutes Judy and Nick had gathered their best available officers for their spontaneous rescue mission. Officers McHorn, Fangmeyer and Delgado the lion surrounded the table while their smaller coworkers stood on the table itself and pointed out important parts of the blue print with pencils as long as their arms. Chief Bogo had left to speak with Gazelle's manager, Mr. Ombidia, who was demanding to speak with the buffalo concerning the missing singer.

The obvious solution was to enter the building through the fire exit mere meters from the Security Office, except there were two things wrong with that strategy. "I checked out that fire exit soon after things went to pot." Fangmeyer spoke. "There's a messed up SUV blocking the exit, and even if there wasn't it's so banged up you'd need the Claws of Life to open it."

"And that would make too much noise and draw a gang of savage mammals straight to Clawhauser's doorstep." Nick drew an imaginary cross over the exit on the map. "Got it. That way's a no go."

"We have to find a route that will take us past the least amount of hostiles," McHorn pointed at the four wings and central garden, the most dangerous areas of the building. "So the main entrances and all fire exits leading into the public areas are out of the question."

"What about the roof?" Delgado stroked the mane beneath his chin and traced an invisible line on the paper with his finger, starting from the North Wing stairway. "There may not be as many hostiles on the upper floors. Look, the roof entrance leads to a stairway here that would take us within fifty meters of the Security Office."

Judy went down on her paws and knees to take a closer look. "That could work. The stairway gives us more options if something goes wrong."

After the gathered officers unanimously agree that the roof would be their best means of infiltrating the mall, they began to form the next stages of their plan. By the time Chief Bogo returned, they had planned out what Nick had called 'Operation Pick Your Difficulty'. When Bogo furiously inquired about the stupid name, an exasperated Judy explained that it was named because the stairway had three doors on three different floors. Plan A was the 'easy' route through the bottom door into the corridor where the Security Office was located. Plan B was the 'medium' route through the next floor up, leading straight into the north wing. Plan C was the 'hard' route through the top floor, taking them into danger right from the beginning.

"Easy, medium, hard." Nick pointed out each door. "Just like a video game."

Bogo glared at the fox. "Makes sense. We're still not calling it that."

Nick shrugged. "Suit yourself."

Judy shook her head. Nick was only trying to bring some optimistic humor into the situation, but Bogo was right. 'Operation Pick Your Difficulty' was just plain stupid.

"If you're going to do this, you'll need more than one helicopter." Bogo addressed the group as a whole. "Fortunately Precinct Six is lending us one of theirs to aid in the rescue effort."

"What about medical supplies?" Fangmeyer asked.

"You'll be taking a kit to treat any wounded you find." Bogo replied. "Delgado just had a refresher in first aid, so he'll be in charge of the supplies."
"Yes, sir."
"And weapons?" McHorn asked.

"Standard issue tranq guns, plus rifles to deal with larger hostiles. McHorn, Fangmeyer and myself will be in charge of the rifles."

"Big guys with big guns. Figures." Nick smirked, but then he realized what the buffalo had said. "Wait, what?"

It wasn't up for discussion. Bogo had let Bellwether get away and he was going to help them get her back. In the meantime Officer Higgins was in charge of the containment effort.

It was Nick's first time in full combat gear, and he was already envying Judy's ability to wear her own gear on a daily basis. The stab vest was hot and unwieldy, and his gauntlets felt like giant manacles on his arms. The helmet pressed his ears to his head, a sensation he wasn't used to. As for Judy, she was wearing a helmet of her own and had swapped her usual stab vest for a darker one that covered more of her torso. The other officers were similarly dressed.

All six officers sat in tense silence in one of the two helicopters as they took off and began the short journey to the roof of the Greener Grass Mall. They passed the time checking their weapons, adjusting the gear strapped to their bodies, and thinking about what they were going to find in there.

As they soared over the fence surrounding the building, they heard a commotion below; a clawed and bloody rhino had found its way out of the building and was bellowing as she charged for the fence. A dart quickly brought her down, and four officers raced forward to secure the beast.

"How do you think they did it?" Nick broke the silence in the wake of this minor incident. The others looked at him quizzically. "Over a hundred animals turned savage in a short period of time, in the busiest building in the entire city. That's hardly something a latte-loving sniper is capable of."

"We'll worry about that once Special Forces have cleared the building." Bogo said. "Speaking of which, it would be preferable if we evacuate the survivors before Special Forces move in."

"Get into the mall, find the survivors, get them back to the helicopters, do it quickly." Judy nodded. "Got it."

By then they were hovering over the roof. The mammals held on to their seats and their weapons as the helicopters carefully descended. The second the vehicles touched down, all six mammals leapt out and gathered beside an exposed air duct. Bogo gave a thumb's up to the pilots inside the helicopters, and they responded with salutes. They would stay where they were until their colleagues returned with the civilians in tow. Delgato checked himself, making sure he had the first aid kit on his person.

Bogo took point, leading the team to the door not far from where they'd touched down. A little less than a decade he'd spent behind a desk, but he carried himself like a sergeant of T.U.S.K. He paused at the door, listening carefully. Then he signaled the all clear and opened the door.

They weren't expecting near-complete darkness, or the shiny white claw marks on the other side of the door. A quick glance upwards showed a shattered light dangling precariously by one wire. Bogo shone the flashlight on his rifle over the rail down into the stairway. His subordinates watched with baited breath before he signaled for them to head down. Their footsteps on the metal stairs echoed softly in the pit-like room.

*It's quiet. Too quiet.* The clichéd phrase provided no comfort to Nick as he began his descent. In his
short experience with savage mammals, they tended to make a lot of noise even when they're not trying to rip your throat out. The fact that it was silent meant that there weren't any savages lurking nearby, or at least that was what he hoped. They reached the door to the top floor and passed by it; Plan A was the 'easy' route straight down to the bottom floor. They continued down, Nick making sure to stay by Judy's side. If something was going to go wrong, he didn't want to be separated from her when it happened. His flashlight shone a cold bluish white, illuminating signs, claw marks and blood. *Not a lot of blood, thank God.* They passed the second door, which had been rammed open and nearly bent double, and continued on. Nick wanted to say something funny and stupid, anything to ease the tension within himself, but he knew that this was neither the time nor the place. A lot of lives, Judy's especially, depended on his ability to stay focused and silent. Nick decided then and there that he was never going to join T.U.S.K.

They reached the bottom floor door. *Aw crap,* Nick thought when they saw the shutter, a corrugated barrier of cold grey metal blocking the quickest, safest route to the Security Office. Bogo snorted, irritated but undaunted.

"Looks like we're taking the 'medium' route." Nick said.

"I told you we're not calling it that." Bogo growled. "But... yes."

Benjamin gently swayed his legs as they dangled from the officer chair he was sitting on, anxiously watching the monitors for any signs of rescue. Sitting right next to him, Gazelle reluctantly kept her eyes on Bellwether, who was lying face up on a clear area of the desk. They'd used the last of their bandages to patch up her grisly laceration, leaving her dignity intact even though her plain orange and red shirt was wide open like a jacket. There was a horizontal ragged tear where the prey mammal's horn had ripped through her chest, and a clean vertical cut where Benjamin had opened her shirt with a pair of scissors. By now she had more or less recovered from the initial shock of the attack and was watching the cameras with an unreadable expression. As for the others, they were all sitting by the wall in frightened silence, waiting and praying for rescue as the security guards maintained calm. Officer Pines had a makeshift bandage around his leg, which had been badly injured when his group had encountered a savage cougar on their way to the office.

It had been a tense situation when they'd arrived at the office and discovered Bellwether. Many of the civilians immediately blamed the sheep for what was happening, certain that it was her Night Howler serum that had turned everyone savage, and to a certain extent Benjamin agreed with them. However, vigilante 'justice' was out of the question, especially since Bellwether was currently injured and defenseless. With Gazelle's influence and Pines' support he was barely able to convince them to leave the convict alone, and they settled for pretending that she wasn't in the room with them. The other two security guards stood by the door, keeping an ear out for sounds of help or savage mammals. As for the savage boar, it was still trapped in the closet.

Benjamin absentmindedly wiped his bloodstained paws with a hankie from his satchel as he watched the cameras. In the North Wing, two lions were brawling like Simba and Scar from *The Lion King.* In the West Wing, an elephant had just knocked over a Christmas tree and was now stomping on the helpless evergreen. In the South Wing things were relatively calm, with a lone otter rummaging through a toppled trashcan that reminded him of Mrs. Otterton. The East Wing was being ransacked by a pair of frat boy elephants and a hippo. The Central Garden was empty but bore the scars of the initial attack.

Benjamin turned his attention to the cameras watching the North Wing stairway. His heart leapt. "Look!" He gasped, pointing at the screen. Six mammals in full combat gear were making their way up down the stairs. He'd worked with all of them long enough to know who they were, even though
Feeling giddy, Benjamin spun round in his seat to get the attention of the Hopps family. "Look, guys! It's Judy!"

Stu, Bonnie and Cotton looked and gasped when they saw their daughter. "Oh my word!" Stu cried. "See that, Bonnie? She's coming for us!"

"Aunt Judy!" Cotton ran out of her grandmother's arms to get a better look. Glad that she didn't appear to be too badly traumatized, Benjamin lifted her onto the desk so she could clearly see her favorite aunt pass by the camera alongside Nick. "Woah, she looks awesome."

"Yeah. See that buffalo up front?" He pointed at Chief Bogo. "That's Chief Bogo."
The little girl stared at the tall, dark and muscled bovine with wonder. "He looks like those hot guys from that magazine!"

Benjamin felt a rush of searing hot mortification and gaped in dismay at Cotton. Gazelle turned pale, and even Bellwether had sat up to stare at the girl with shock.

"What're you talking about?!" Stu shot up along with his wife, horrorstruck. "Young lady, have you been reading R.J.'s magazines?!"

Cotton's ear tilted in her confusion. "I was talking about OK magazine. It's the one with all the stars that mommy likes." She peered down at her grandparents. "What're you talking about?"

Stu and Bonnie looked at each other, having just put their feet in it. "... OK magazine." Stu finally answered, chuckling nervously.

Bellwether rolled her eyes and lay back down with a wince.

Still reeling from the misunderstanding, Benjamin looked back at the cameras to see his coworkers and boss approach the door to the middle floor. He swallowed and pleaded for them to be careful.

As they started back up the stairs, Nick ran Plan B through his head; they would make their way through the employee area of the North Wing to the West Wing stairway and head down from there. The increased risk came with the increased time it would take to reach the Security Office, in which they were more likely to run into trouble. Nick didn't like trouble. It's why he preferred traffic duty.

They reached the door and went through it, and that was when they first came into difficulty. Further down the corridor, a wildebeest janitor looked up sharply from a puddle of spilled water and then charged at the officers. Judy was the first to react. She aimed, fired, and brought the unfortunate creature down with a single dart. "Good work, Hopps." Bogo spoke. "Let's keep moving."

Judy's despondent gaze lingered on the unconscious janitor as they stalked past his body. Nick put a paw on her shoulder and smiled at her, giving a wordless reminder that the janitor and every other victim of this incident was going to be okay.

They reached the West Wing stairway. Just like he'd done earlier, Bogo listened for anything on the other side and then turned the handle. Nothing happened. He thrust his shoulder against the door to no avail.

"Must be another shutter." Delgato said, scowling. "Who puts shutters on stairway doors for Pete's
"From what I heard, it was a last minute addition. They were worried about troublemakers and terrorists sneaking in through the roof." McHorn replied. "We must have set an alarm off when we opened the rooftop door."

"I did hear a slamming noise before." Judy brought up. "You don't think all the stairways are blocked, do you?"

"Aw jeez, what do we do now?" Fangmeyer groaned.

"What about going through the public area?" Nick asked before he could stop himself. "What're you saying, that's suicide! His mind was already screaming at him.

"The public area? Are you mad?" Bogo glared down at him. "That area is crawling with hostiles, including those elephants!"

"I know it sounds stupid, but just bear with me." Nick replied. "You remember Raja's, that clothing store in the west wing? It's made up of two floors; this floor and the bottom flo-

"Nick, you're a genius!" Judy gasped. "We can use the stairs in that store and head through the back!"

Nick grinned at her, feeling a twinge of pride. McHorn looked to Bogo. "What do you think, sir?"

Bogo gave the blocked door a half-hearted punch. "What choice do we have? Let's find this Raja's."

A cynical, selfish part of Nick that had been with him ever since the Ranger Scouts incident asked the fox why he was risking his life for this sociopathic sheep. It would be more than she deserved if the stranded civilians decided to take revenge on her, he told himself, especially after what she had tried to do to him and Judy. It was true that at the time he'd only been pretending to be savage, but supposing they hadn't thought to swap the pellets with blueberries? Bellwether would have for all intents and purposes murdered the greatest girl Nick had ever known, with Nick himself as her murder weapon. He would never tell Judy this, but if he had been there when the savage animal had come after Bellwether, he would have happily stepped aside.

He wasn't doing this for Bellwether. At the end of the day, he was doing this for Judy. He didn't want to save that sheep, but she did, purely because it was the 'right' thing to do. Her parents and beloved niece, a trio of truly delightful bunnies who were more than willing to put aside their prejudices and accept him, were trapped, scared, and possibly injured. Benjamin, the first mammal to treat Judy like a real cop even before she'd met Nick, was also in there risking his neck to keep Bellwether alive. They all needed his help, and he would have helped even if they weren't important to Judy. But at the end of the day, this brave, smart, compassionate young woman was the only reason he was even trying to save Bellwether as well.

As they continued down the corridor in search of the way to Raja's, he promised to himself that he wouldn't let her down.

Judy soon found the way to Raja's and trained her flashlight on the unassuming door. "Sir, I found it."

"McHorn, take point." Bogo ordered.

McHorn approached the door and tried the handle. There was a soft click and a creak as the door slowly opened. McHorn took a step inside and scanned the immediate area. "Clear."
"Go straight for the stairs and stay quiet." Bogo ordered as they crept into Raja's.

The male clothing store, a place of wooden furniture, ring shaped clothes stands and an ambiguous exotic theme was ominously dark. The circular stands looked like massive wreaths as the folded clothes faintly stood out in the black. Any one of them could be hiding an unpleasant surprise. Nick kept well away from them, staying in between Fangmeyer and Delgato as they carefully made their way through the mess. He kept glancing at Judy, making sure she was also with him and protected by the much larger mammals. It was a mess because there were clear signs that the savage animals had been there. There were claw marks and crumpled clothes. Shredded fabrics and stains of blood. Splintered clothes stands and dismembered mannequins. Halfway to the stairs, Nick got a horrible shock when his flashlight suddenly illuminated a mannequin head lying on a fallen blood red skirt.

A small paw touched his forearm, bringing back memories of their heart-to-heart on the sky tram more than a year ago. His light caught the amethyst glint of Judy's eyes, filled with concern. Nick patted her paw and faked a smirk. *Don't worry, Carrots. I'm not going to snap any time soon.*

Judy brought her paw away, seemingly satisfied by what he told her through his silent gaze. Nick looked again at the head and skirt, quietly chuckled to himself to alleviate just a little of his anxiety, and continued on.

They reached the stairs and looked down at the bottom floor. It was empty. *Looked* empty. They all scanned with their lights, but there was no sign that they weren't alone. The damage here was even worse, and the front doors had been completely ripped apart. The work of the elephants, no doubt. Nick swallowed at the sight of the carnage and wondered again why he was even doing this.

*Stu, Bonnie, Cotton, Ben, Judy... Stu, Bonnie, Cotton, Ben, Judy... Judy, you keep shaking that fluffy little cottonball at me and I'll have a mind to ask you out...*

Benjamin watched as their rescuers made their way into Raja's feeling a strange sense of dread. Judging from the looks on their faces, this wasn't part of the plan; going into Raja's must have been an unintended detour after their original route was found to be blocked by shutters, a detour that could very likely lead them to their deaths.

He felt a presence as Pines came forward to watch the team's progress. "This isn't good." He spoke quietly.

"What? Why?" Benjamin stared at him.

"They must be planning to reach us through the back door. It's locked."

"Oh poop."

Pines held up a ring of keys. "I've got emergency keys right here, but we're stuck here while they're out there."

Benjamin watched his friends approach the stairs, beginning to feel slightly nauseated. "But... then someone's gonna have to go out there! That door's probably the only way they can get to us! We have to go and unlock it for them!"

Pines grimaced and looked down at his leg. "Well, as much as I'd love to, there's no way I'll make it with this leg."

"Yeah, you wouldn't want that cougar to come back for the rest of you." Bellwether replied snidely, one arm draped over her chest as she gazed up at them coldly.
In the nearby corner, Bonnie scoffed. "You might want to remove that giant stick up your butt, considering it was a savage prey animal that almost killed you."

Bellwether scoffed back and propped herself up on one arm. "Not really surprising that a drugged up prey got me first. We do outnumber the true savages ten to one."

Cotton stood by her grandmother and crossed her arms. "It's nine to one, you idiot!"

That shut Bellwether up.

During her and the Hopps ladies' brief and hostile exchange, Benjamin had been keeping his eyes on the camera. His friends had no idea they were walking into another dead end. He sensed Gazelle beside him, also watching them make their way through Raja's. He turned in his seat and looked at the civilians gathered in the office. Every single one of them looked scared to death. He came to a decision that he might soon regret.

"Officer, give me the key." He held his paw out to the porcupine. "I'm going to go get that door unlocked."

Pines looked at Benjamin's paw, and then at him. "You sure about this, kid?"

"If we don't get that door open, we could all die." Benjamin said. "It's the only way."

Gazelle watched in fear as Pines picked out the key to Raja's and handed it over. He also wrote something on the back of a receipt and gave it to the cheetah. "There might be another shutter blocking the way, but that passcode should open it."

Benjamin nodded and thanked him. "Keep them safe, okay? And make sure no-one hurts Bellwether."

Pines nodded grimly and took Benjamin's place in the chair beside the wounded sheep. Before the cheetah could walk to the door, he felt Gazelle grab his shoulder. He turned around and Gazelle put her Taser in his paw. "Keep it." She smiled supportively. "Come back alive and I'll sign it for you."

It took all of Benjamin's will to not faint on the spot. "Um... er... thanks... I... just in, ugh... just in case I run out of juice... is there something else I can use as a backup weapon?"
Alone in the Dark

The bottom floor of Raja's appeared to be devoid of hostiles, to the partial relief of the rescue team, but every one of them knew that appearances could be deceiving. Everyone except Judy, perhaps. She wasn't anywhere near as inexperienced as she'd been when she'd first come to Zootopia, but she still had an unfortunate habit of taking things at face value. Not all the time, and not with the ingrained prejudice she'd harbored before, but she still had a long way to go before Nick could call her his equal in judgement.

Bogo signaled for them to get moving. "Keep away from the front."

One by one, they descended the wooden stairs. Judy was the second to reach the bottom, with Nick close behind. They moved along the side of the stairs, avoiding the middle area where something was likely to spot them through the windows up front.

Nick let out a shout, both from surprise and pain when he felt something rake his shoulder. As the others reacted, he leapt away from the stairs and aimed his tranq gun at a square shaped shelf he had been passing by at the precise moment he was attacked. The deranged looking two-toed sloth reared his arm back to strike again.

Judy leapt in front of Nick and fired, knocking out the sloth instantly, then whirled on her partner. "Are you okay?"

Nick checked his shoulder and found a shallow scratch. "I'm fine. Remind me to never push Flash too far."

"Quit joking around, Wilde!" McHorn muttered furiously.

They heard growling nearby. Bogo quickly switched off the flashlight on his weapon and the others followed suit, but it was already too late.

"Oh, holy crap." Delgato muttered, staring at the windows up front. On the other side of the glass, all hell was about to break loose. Drawn by Nick's cry of pain, a pride of ten, twenty, maybe thirty lions were fast approaching the store.

"To the back door, now!" Bogo shouted.

They ran, weaving through the debris towards the cash registers at the back of the store. Fallen fabrics and severed fake limbs threatened to trip them and the wide stands slowed their progress. They weren't even halfway to the counter when they heard the sound of broken glass being scattered. The lions had reached the store.

"McHorn, Delgato, slow them down!" Bogo ordered. The two mammals whirled round and started firing. Nick didn't look back to see if their efforts weren't in vain.

"Look out!" Fangmeyer shouted suddenly. Nick looked behind him. His heart stopped when he saw a male lion in a jersey pounce through the gap between McHorn and Delgato, teeth and claws aimed for the fox. Before he could even think, his arms shot up in front of his face and he pulled the trigger. The mad lion passed out in midair and crashed into a piled of crushed wood that had once been a clothes stand. Nick kept his tranq gun on the beast, heart pounding. He'd literally just stared death in the face.

"Nick, keep moving!" Judy yelled from right behind him, and he felt her grab the back of his stab
vest and drag him the rest of the way to the cash registers. Bogo and Fangmeyer were at the door by this point, cursing and ramming at the door to no avail.

Locked? Crap!

Just when things couldn’t get any worse, they heard a tortured trumpet in the distance.

One of the survivors, a well-off kudu who owned a short chain of confectionary stores, donated a heavy wooden cane that Benjamin now held along with Gazelle's Taser. In exchange, he gave Gazelle his satchel for safekeeping. With his primary and secondary weapons in paw, he stepped out into the darkened corridor.

Something had happened to the lights while they had been hiding in the Security Office. Perhaps a savage mammal had come across the switch and accidentally nudged it. In any case the corridor outside was now as dark as the Nocturnal District, and eerily quiet.

The only sound Benjamin heard was the soft, nervous breathing of the two civilians behind him. Despite her injured thigh Gazelle was braving the pain to see Benjamin out, and to silently provide comfort and encouragement to her admirer. Beside her, Stu Hopps watched with bated breath as Benjamin slowly left the safety of the Security Office, knowing that his daughter's life may depend on the cheetah's success. When Benjamin was fully outside, he looked over his shoulder at his companions. Gazelle gave him a nod, not wanting him to leave their sanctuary but also acknowledging that it was the only way. Stu looked at him with wide, scared eyes, half-convinced that Benjamin wasn't coming back.

Benjamin did his best to smile convincingly before turning his gaze back to the darkness ahead. He saw the main corridor up ahead, barely visible with an almost luminous navy blue hue. There was a little squeak as the door behind him began to close. He remained fixed in place, refusing to look back. There was a click as the door closed, and then a second, louder one as someone locked it.

Oh Dickens, what am I doing?

Now alone, Benjamin looked down at his suddenly meager looking weapons. On the top of the cane was a carved strawberry cupcake. He sighed wistfully. "If only you were real."

He held the cane out like a sword, clutching the tiny Taser with his other paw, and began making his way down the short corridor.

All signs of life seemed to disappear the second the office door had been closed and locked. He couldn't hear anything from the room he had left behind, nor could he hear anything from the corridor ahead of him. Even his own footsteps were silent. The only sound in existence was his own breath, coming in and out in a calm rhythm, a facade that masked his inner terror. The air felt so cold that it ought to be visible.

"Is anyone there?" He spoke softly, too afraid to speak any louder. He'd hoped that Bogo's team had managed to get through the back door somehow while Benjamin had been preparing for his suicide mission, but that hope was quickly quashed. "No answer... just like in the movies."

He fought to remember what the academy had taught him about handling a situation such as this. But what exactly was the situation? He wasn't making any arrests. There were no hostages at risk, unless you counted the people hiding in the office behind him. He wasn't conducting a raid and clearing the building of threats either... wait, what's the procedure for clearing a building?

"Rule number one; never pass an unclear area! Rule number two; communications are necessary,
but keep them short and sweet! Rule number three; always be prepared for change! Stay on your feet, keep it simple, or you’ll be dead!"

The drill instructor's words rang in Benjamin's ears as he drew closer to the main corridor. Clearing a building... that procedure could work for him. He wasn't actually clearing a building, but he could still use that training to watch out for threats.

He reached the end of the short corridor and paused. The faux cherry on the cupcake cane looked almost purple in the bluish dark. Then he steeled himself and peeked around one corner.

The end of the corridor, roundabout where he had witnessed Bellwether's assault, was empty and quiet. Benjamin turned his head to look the other way, where he needed to go. So far he was clear. He stepped into the larger corridor and continued on. In a typical situation he'd be part of a team, splitting up in both directions to make sure all areas were cleared. But Benjamin wasn't part of a team. He was on his own. He longed for the front desk, his donut shaped workplace basked in the warmth of the early morning sun, where there was always someone around to have his back if a visitor or arrested felon became too aggressive.

He reached the corner and peeked again. Clear. So far, so good. Don't jinx yourself.

He spied the next turn up ahead, past the employee's bathroom and a general break room. After that turn was the security shutter Pines had told him about, and after that, the door to Raja's. And Chief Bogo.

*If he and the others haven't shown up by now, then they must be in trouble. He's probably trying to break the door open right now while the others are trying to hold off a whole pack of savage animals, his hard, rounded shoulder ramming the stubborn metal again and again, a bruise forming on his massive, rippling muscles...*

Benjamin stopped to shake the distracting thoughts from his silly skull. Now wasn't the time to be absent-minded. Before setting off again, he looked down at the Taser and quickly pressed the button to doubly make sure it had power. A little blue arc flashed above his paw.

That was when he saw the footprints.

They were big, rounded, and essentially resembled a deformed three leaf clover. Benjamin had never seen a footprint like it, especially one that had been formed with moist, shiny blood.

His rapidly growing fear manifested itself as a sharp ache in his chest. It was growing harder to draw in air, and his breathing quickened. Benjamin stepped to the side, away from the trail of strange footprints. He almost checked his own feet to see if he'd stepped in the blood. He held the cane and Taser to his chest and closed his eyes, inwardly screaming at himself to turn back. Not for the first time since this all started, he felt the urge to burst into tears. Why the heck was he even doing this? He wasn't like Bogo or Judy or McHorn; he was just a soft hearted, simple minded receptionist wearing a shiny gold badge that just proved he worked with the ZPD. His first three months on the force could attest to that. Bogo and the others were strong where he was weak. They could surely get through a single door by themselves.

*But what about the high-tech super strong security shutter?*

That single question was enough to get Benjamin off the wall and continue on.

He reached the next corner without further incident and peeked once more. Almost halfway down this long stretch was a closed security shutter. So far, Benjamin's side looked clear. There were doors
on both walls, but Benjamin had no intention of opening any door that didn't have the word Raja's on it. He edged closer to the shutter and looked through the letterbox shaped holes. He couldn't see the names of the doors on the other side from his position. He quickly became aware of a vicious banging sound coming from yet another corner on the other end. A savage animal trashing everything in sight, or the rescue team trying to break down Raja's door?

Benjamin spied a keypad to the left of the shutter and pulled out the receipt with the passcode written on it; 1973. He pressed the buttons and was rewarded with a blinking green light.

The shutter was surprisingly quick and quiet as it rose, clearing the way in less than a quarter of a minute. Benjamin smiled in relief. That had gone a lot better than he'd thought it would. Maybe it wouldn't hurt to go the rest of the way to Raja's and get that door unlocked.

There was a crashing sound from the direction the banging had come from, wiping the smile from the cheetah's face. He straightened and stared at the distant corner, gripping his cane and Taser. *Smack the hostile, taze it, then run like the wind.* He told himself over and over as the sound of dull footsteps met his little black ears. Louder and louder they grew as the walker drew closer. *If it's Bogo and the others, put the cane and Taser down before you take someone's eye out.* His paws quavered slightly as he was torn between optimism and caution.

Black and blue in the darkened corridor, a great rhino came around the corner and stopped, fixing his small, dilated eyes on Benjamin.

Benjamin felt his ears flatten as he froze. A primal terror filled his entire being, the terror that came with realizing your fatal error of trespassing on a larger animal's territory. The understanding that you had just condemned yourself to a grisly end.

The rhino snorted loudly, the mere existence of the cheetah getting him riled. And then in an instant, he charged.

Going naught to thirty in under five seconds, he rapidly narrowed the distance between himself and the cheetah.

Managing just barely to break out of his stupor, Benjamin charged straight for the nearest escape route; a wide metal door bearing a wolf in a wheelchair. He rushed into the larger bathroom and slammed the door shut. From the other side the rhino struck the door with all his might, knocking Benjamin to the floor. Adrenaline dragged him back up, allowing him to reach the door lock and turn it.

Wide eyes fixed on the door, the cheetah scrambled backward on all fours, waiting for the door to break apart. The rhino struck it again and again, bellowing like a demon. There was a horrible sound as he scraped his horn on the steadily bulging surface.

Benjamin had dropped the cane at some point, but it was of no use to him now. He moved to the side, not wanting to be directly in the rhino's path once he broke through. Sending out a small prayer, he pressed both thumbs onto the button of the Taser, filling the room with a soft crackling. After a short eternity the wounded door was still and silent. The rhino must have given up.

High up on one wall was a line of wide windows that filled the room with light during the day. One of them had a handle. Feeling a small hope, Benjamin released the button, climbed up onto the toilet and peeked outside. He saw the deathly white light of the floodlights and the crowd in the distance, held at bay by the fence. He pushed on the handle. It didn't budge. Of course it didn't budge. Trapped in a disabled toilet, stalked by a crazy rhino, while his friends and favorite boss were risking
their lives to save his helpless keister? This was the worst Christmas ever.

The cheetah relented and sat down on the toilet, deciding to wait a few minutes to make sure the rhino was really gone. As he leaned on his knees, he saw a small, reddish brown puddle that nearly made his heart stop again, until his nose caught the unmistakable scent of coffee. Soon enough, his eyes fell on the source of the spill; a fallen Snarlbucks cup lying on a cluster of deep claw marks.

For some reason, his paw reached out to grab the cup. It was relatively clean and part of the bottom was deformed, as if the holder had dropped the cup before finishing it. He tilted the cup upright and peered inside, spying a little trace of blue staining the-

BAM!

Time seemed to go into overdrive as Benjamin spun round and saw the door slam open, spilling a three ton wrinkled grey wrecking ball with a horn. The crazed rhino crashed into the opposite wall near the sink as Benjamin flew off the toilet. As his bloodied feet left clover-shaped prints on the tiles the rhino recovered quickly and turned to search for the cat that had invaded his territory. His wild eyes locked on the panicked Benjamin as he raced around the bathroom towards the door. No longer thinking straight, Benjamin threw the cup uselessly at the rhino and it bounced off, leaving brown spots on his grey skin as he charged again. In his rush to kill Benjamin the rhino missed by a meter and struck the wall-length mirror, shattering it into a hundred shining pieces. Benjamin jabbed him with the crackling Taser, making him recoil with a howl and giving the cheetah the precious seconds he needed to reach the door. He grabbed the handle as he went, pulling the door with him as he spun back into the corridor. The door slammed shut, muting the rhino's bellowing. The beast wouldn't be contained for long. Benjamin spun round, meaning to flee back to the safety of the Security Office, only to find the barrel of a rifle pointing at his nose.

Benjamin gasped and froze, staring at the large figure aiming the rifle. A second passed, in which he became aware of other figures in the corridor with him, and then the figure lowered the rifle.

"Clawhauser?"

Benjamin blinked. "Bogo?"

He heard a clang and then something flat and hard slammed into his back with the force of a speeding train, throwing him into Bogo's chest. Wracked by pain in his back and numbness everywhere else, Benjamin felt himself being spun round. With the wind knocked out of him he gasped for air and listened as the other members of the rescue team and the rhino leapt into battle. He heard shouts and bellows, then a scuffling sound as McHorn and Fangmeyer grappled the rhino and pinned him to the floor, allowing Delgato to step forward and knock him out with a dart.

"Holy crap!" Nick cried. "Clawhauser? You okay, buddy?"

"Cripes, he hit that door pretty hard." Judy whispered. "Ben? Come on, talk to us!"

Benjamin didn't feel like he was seriously injured, but he couldn't get enough air in his lungs to answer. Above his head, he heard Bogo speak, his voice unexpectedly soft. "Clawhauser. Benjamin... are you alright?"

As Benjamin regained his regular breathing pattern and the pain and numbness eased, he was able to feel the buffalo's arms wrapped around his limp body. His muscles were hard, but with that little bit of give that made them comforting, and his hooves were taking care not to press into Benjamin's sore skin. Benjamin slowly lifted his arms, even though his body didn't want to work at that moment, and reluctantly and gently pushed on Bogo's vested chest. He felt Bogo's body relax as he released him. "I'm okay. Just had the wind knocked out of me, sir." He breathed.
"You sure, kid?" McHorn asked as he and Fangmeyer got up and carefully pushed the sedated rhino to the side of the corridor.

Benjamin nodded, smiling. "I'm fine, guys. Really."

Judy stepped forward and softly patted Benjamin's knee, making him look down. "Ben, where's my family?"

The moment Judy entered the Security Office and spotted her parents, she dropped all pretense of being a hardened officer and threw herself into their arms, sobbing and thanking God for sparing them. Her reunion with her niece was equally as joyful.

Meanwhile, Delgato quickly found Bellwether and began examining her, deliberately ignoring the look of helpless frustration on her face while Fangmeyer tended to Gazelle and the other wounded. McHorn was keeping an eye on the barricaded closet where the boar was still trapped. Benjamin was in an office chair, still feeling sore from the rhino incident.

As for Nick and Bogo, they were watching the camera feeds to try and find a safe route back to the rooftop. Raja's was no longer an option, what with a pack of lions prowling about the place, and Nick and the others had used up a lot of ammo holding them off until they'd managed to break the door down. In fact, nearly all of the stores were full of hostiles, having been driven from the halls by the elephants that now wandered the wings looking for more intruders. From the looks of it, the only remotely safe way back was up the stairs... which were still blocked by shutters.

"Looks like we're up a stinky creek without a paddle, sir." Nick spoke. "Unless there's a way to open the door shutters from here." The two of them looked at Pines.

"The stairway shutters use a different system." The porcupine explained. "They were a last second addition so I don't know everything about them, but I do know that they require a key."

Nick recalled how there'd been box-shaped keyholes beside the stairway doors. "Please tell me you have one."

Pines shook his head. "The guy in charge of the North Wing had one, but I haven't been able to contact him."

Nick turned back to the camera feeds. "What does he look like?"

"He's a wolverine, the only one working as security here. He should still be in his uniform."

Nick and Bogo searched the camera feed, Pines stepping in between them. Almost a minute went by when Pines suddenly pointed at one of the images. "There he is!"

A wolverine in a ragged uniform was prowling around a fancy looking chocolate shop in the West Wing.

"That's Alec Chocolatier." Pines said. "It's not far from here. We get that key and it's a clear shot to the rooftop."

"I don't like this." Bogo growled. "It's too risky. We've reached the civilians and given them medical attention. We should probably just sit tight and wait for Special Forces."

Delgato stepped forward with slightly bloodstained paws. "Sir, Bellwether's hemorrhaging again. She may not have that long."
Nick pouted. "Great."
Bogo paced in the office, searching for a better option.

"Does anyone know how much force those shutters can withstand?" He asked.

Pines shrugged. "You might be able to lift it if you work together, but it's on the other side of the door. You'll never break through them both."

Bogo glanced at the cameras. "And you're sure there's no way to open them from here?"

Pines nodded irritably.

"Set up a separate security system at the last minute, set it up in an stairway needed in a fire escape, set up a single key to unlock them in an emergency..." Nick trailed off, scowling as he leaned against the wall beside Judy and her family. "That's great. Great work, guys."

Pines' glower prompted Benjamin to stand up, despite Bogo's concerns about the potential injuries the door had inflicted on him. "Nick, that's not fair." He spoke sternly.

Nick shifted his posture a little and looked away. "You're right. That was uncalled for." It hadn't escaped Bogo's notice that the fox had been tense ever since their close call in Raja's, and the buffalo had a few ideas as to why.

"Nick, what happened back there wasn't your fault." Judy spoke gently. Nick didn't reply.

Suddenly, Bellwether sat up and shouted across the room. "Oh for crying out loud, why don't you just call someone to unblock that fire exit?!"

There was a pregnant pause as the gathered police officers all traded looks.

"Oh. Okay." Nick muttered.

Bogo huffed, feeling a strong desire to smack his forehead as he picked up his radio. *Leave it to the chess master to come up with the simple solution.*

"This is Chief Bogo. We've located the survivors and cleared the area. You're clear to unblock the fire exit."

"Understood." Higgins replied on the other end. There was a long pause. "ETA one and a half hours at best."

"One and a half hours?!"

"That vehicle's elephant-sized, sir, and it hit the door so hard they're practically welded together. There's also the matter of finding enough people to protect the rescue workers. Removing the car and opening the doors is going to take time."

"Time Bellwether doesn't have."

"Sir, that woman isn't worth it. You know that."
Bogo's eyes narrowed, even though Higgins couldn't see it. "I will not let our personal feelings get mixed up in this, Higgins. Not this time."

Higgins didn't reply for a few seconds. "We'll work as fast as we can, sir, but if you want to guarantee her survival you may have to find your own way out."

"Understood." Bogo sighed and put the radio away and turned to his team. "Looks like we're going after that wolverine after all."

Judy stepped forward. "I'll go. I'm the smallest, so I can just sneak past them."

Nick gave her a dirty look before moving to her side. "Don't even think about going without me, Carrots."

Stu and Bonnie leapt to their feet. "Absolutely not, young lady!" The father cried. "How can you risk your life after what that woman did to you?!"

Judy's expression in response to this was stern. "I'm not doing this for her."

She slightly twitched her arm towards Benjamin, who had slumped back in his chair and was now breathing heavily as his adrenaline wore off. There was no telling how bad he was truly hurt until they got him to a hospital. Bogo grew more worried the longer he looked at him.

Bonnie swallowed and grabbed her daughter's paws. "We just... being a police officer is dangerous enough, but this... this is too much."

"Grandpa. Grandma." Cotton whimpered and tugged on her grandmother's skirt, the reality of the situation having finally broken past her innocence. "I wanna go home."

Bogo grimaced. If there was one thing he hated more than interfering politicians, it was children being collateral damage.

Bonnie sighed and let go to comfort the little girl. "We will, sweetie. We'll be going home, soon."

Nick knelt down as granddaughter and grandmother hugged each other. "It's okay, Mini-Carrots. Your aunt and me are just going to get the key so we can get out of this place without running into more of those crazies. We'll only be gone a few minutes. In the meantime, suck on this." He flicked his wrist and a blueberry-shaped lollipop materialized in his paw. Cotton mumbled a tiny 'thank you' and accepted the sweetie.

"Son, where the heck did that come from?" Stu asked.

"Put it in my utility belt. You know... just in case." Nick shrugged innocently. "Want one?"

Bogo pinched the bridge of his nose. "We need to have a talk about appropriate equipment, Wilde."

"Later, sir. We have to get that key before that wolverine wanders off." Judy spoke. "Is he still in Alec Chocolatier?"

Bogo looked at the camera feeds. "Yes."

"I'll go with them. McHorn loaded his rifle. "I can provide cover and distract hostiles if I have to."

"That we can both do." Bogo checked his own weapon. "Pines, that passcode you gave Clawhauser works on all the shutters, right?"
"Other than the stairway shutters, yes."

"Then we can go around through the employee areas." Bogo brought the memory of the blueprint to the front of his mind. One corridor, then exit near the blocked main entrance. Cross hall to door and enter second corridor. Find back door to Alec Chocolatier. He looked again at the camera feeds. There were fallen benches, trash cans and huge piles of debris that could provide cover. A feasible plan formed in his mind, but they had to act quickly while there were a minimal number of savage animals in the area. He recalled the ammo count they had done after escaping Raja's; Bogo had three darts left. McHorn had two. Nick had two and Judy had one. Altogether they had enough darts for eight mammals, and that was if every dart hit its mark.

He quickly relayed his plan to the others, and it was met with general approval. "Fangmeyer, you cover us using the cameras. Delgato, focus on keeping Bellwether alive." He went to the door and checked that the coast was clear. "Let's move." He ordered. He mentally cursed Bellwether for stupidly running right into a savage animal, getting herself injured so badly that he and his officers were being forced into yet another dangerous situation just so they could get her to a doctor in time.

"Be careful, Bogo!" Benjamin called as the four mammals filed out of the office. Bogo didn't look back, keeping his eyes on the corridor ahead even as something stirred in his chest, like a fire being stoked by a gentle poker.

With a keycard given to him by Pines, Bogo unlocked the black door separating the employee area and the public area, then lifted his radio. "Fangmeyer, report."

"No animals within a hundred and fifty yards, sir." The tigress replied.

"Let's hope it stays that way." Bogo opened the door, and one by one they emerged into the public area.

As Nick looked upon the nearly deserted West Wing, he felt the same unease he felt when playing Resident Weevil with Judy's younger siblings tutoring him at his side. With its ornate architecture, weak lighting and telltale signs of a recent calamity, the West Wing brought back memories of decadent police stations and creepy mansions.

Farther down the West Wing, near the Central Garden, several lions were darting in and out of a store. Bogo motioned for Nick and the others to keep quiet and they crossed the hall to the other black door. With the keycard they unlocked the door and entered the second corridor.

"There's a couple of wildebeest around there, you'll have to be careful." Fangmeyer reported through the radio. They soon found the two wildebeest upon turning the first corner, and McHorn was given the okay to take care of them. He took out one before the unfortunate creature noticed their presence, provoking the second into charging. Having two decades of experience under his wide belt, McHorn reloaded and tranqued the second wildebeest right before he reached them.

"I've got one dart left, sir." McHorn said after the second wildebeest hit the tiles.

Bogo lent one of his darts to his officer. "If something happens, make that dart count. And leave the smaller animals to Hopps and Wilde."

McHorn nodded.

"Looks like the corridor's clear now, sir. The wolverine's still in the chocolate store." Fangmeyer reported.
"Good." They carefully moved past the downed wildebeest and continued on in search of the door to Alec Chocolatier.

*It's a shame about your store, Mr. Casel,* Nick thought. *Then again, it's nothing your daddy's trust fund can't fix.*

They found the door, and Nick was almost surprised to find that it was just as plain as the other doors. They heard something scratching and growling on the other side. Bogo silently counted down with his fingers. Three. Two. One. He opened the door.

The storeroom was empty and clean. Judy's ears twitched and she pointed at the open door ahead, where the sounds were coming from. The lights in the next room were out, leaving it in near-complete darkness. Bogo pointed at Nick and Judy, then at the doorway. Their darts had a safer dosage.

While Bogo and McHorn covered the back door, the partners ran up and flattened themselves against the wall on either side of the doorway. Nick watched Judy's ears swivel as she estimated where the wolverine was in the room ahead. Her eyes narrowed slightly and she mouthed to Nick; *front of store.*

Nick nodded. He tilted his gun slightly, indicating that he would take the shot. He peeked around the doorframe into the room, letting his natural night vision substitute the artificial lights. He spotted the wolverine tearing into a chocolate Christmas pudding near the tables. He silently stepped into the room and aimed. A tipped table partially blocked his shot, so he stepped closer. He sensed Judy enter the room behind him, having his back as usual.

The wolverine paused. He slowly turned his head, his wild eyes shining like pale moons as they fell on the fox and rabbit. He twisted round and advanced on the officers.

"Take the shot, Nick." Judy whispered. Nick stared down the barrel of the tranq gun as the wolverine's speed picked up. *Keep it together. It's just facing down an angry Mr. Big. An angry Mr. Big bigger than you and more likely to eat you alive.* The wolverine snarled. It was now genuinely running at them with intent to kill. "Nick!" Judy yelled. Nick fired. The dart flew and sank into the wolverine, sending him to the floor. The creature hissed and squirmed until the drug took full effect and sent him to sleep.

When the wolverine stopped moving completely, Nick and Judy cautiously snuck up to him. An unnerving thought occurred to Nick and he checked the animal's pulse. The wolverine stirred slightly in response to his touch, but otherwise was out like a light.

"Got it." Judy's head popped up on the other side of the wolverine's body, holding up the key they were looking for. She was beaming brightly as if she had won the golden carrot in a vegetable competition.

"Good work, you two." Bogo spoke, turning their heads to where he stood in the doorway. "Hopps, the key."

"Horns up." Judy tossed the key. It flashed in the darkness as it flew through the air until Bogo snatched it.

He put the key safely in one of the pouches in his utility belt. "Now let's get back to the office and get the hell out of here."

Nick chambered another dart, feeling a grimace on his face. He wouldn't feel nearly as satisfied until
he and Judy were back outside the mall with their friends and mortal enemy. Other than his blunder in Raja’s, the mission had so far gone pretty smoothly and he was thankful for that. With luck it would stay that way, and Judy would soon be safe.

That was when a bench cannonballed through the front window.

Lethal shards of glass the size of plates spilled towards Nick and Judy as they dragged the wolverine behind a fallen table, shielding the three of them from the deadly shower. There was a tremendous bang as the bench struck the doorway all the way across the chocolate store, sending Bogo falling on his butt as he leapt back to avoid the missile. Then a bull elephant as big as a bus stormed in after the bench, making crap really hit the fan.

The Goliath collided with the counter, stopping right between Nick and Judy and their escape. He shook his head, knocking off bits of glass and debris, while Nick and Judy remained frozen by the table. Then he seemed to take offense to the counter stopping his charge and began trashing everything in sight. Nick's fur stood on end, pressing against the inside of his clothes. He was really starting to hate elephants today.

His mind screamed at him to move and he obeyed, grabbing Judy’s arm and dragging her out the store. He was taking them out of the frying pan and into the fire, he knew that, but where else could they go?

They found a fallen column, broken off by God knows what, and ducked behind it.

Only then did Nick notice that he was sweating. His mouth was dry in contrast and he kept glancing at Judy. She looked composed, but her little pink nose was twitching like crazy. Like Nick's heart rate it twitched faster when they heard the elephant, or Goliath as Nick decided to name him, burst out of the chocolate store.

The noises Goliath made- oh my God, the sounds- sounded like a T-Rex on steroids as he thundered around the room. He was rampaging aimlessly, or so it appeared, but Nick had a horrible feeling that he was, in his own way, hunting. Both smaller mammals jumped at the loud sound Goliath made when he swatted one of the Christmas mall carts like a football.

There was a loud crunching sound, and suddenly Nick no longer felt the cold stone of the column behind his back. "Oh crap!" Judy screamed. Nick looked around and had the exact same reaction when he saw the column rising in the air with Goliath's great trunk coiled around it.

Judy fired a dart, but the smaller dosage had no effect. Nick and she leapt to the side as the column came crashing down, barely avoiding being turned into red and grey patties. The column began to roll down the slightly sloped floor, coming to a stop against a mall cart. They looked to Alec Chocolatier and saw that during Goliath's rampage a stack of shelves and half of the counter had been shoved up against the doorway.

"Wilde! Hopps! Run!" They heard Bogo shout. They didn't need telling twice. The black door leading back to the Security Office was their only hope.

They were in the hurdle race of their lives, vaulting over debris, trash bins, everything that had been knocked over or destroyed. "Go, go, go!" Nick yelled. He didn't need to look back to know that Goliath was chasing them. He heard Judy shout into the radio to go on without them and get her family out of here.

Goliath's footsteps shook the earth as they grew louder. Then Judy kicked Nick to the side. He fell on a puddle of spilled milkshake and slid across the floor, coming to a stop halfway across the wing.
Feeling a bruise forming on his arm and hip, Nick skidded in the slippery mess as he got back to his feet and ran further up the wing, wanting nothing more than to get away.

Then it occurred to him that Judy was no longer with him.

"Carrots?!" He turned back round towards Goliath, who had his back to the fox as he thundered around the hall for the mammals he'd been chasing. His trunk waved in the air and his ears flapped as he turned.

When he saw his partner, Nick nearly died of heart failure then and there. "YOU DUMB BUNNY!"

"NICK!" Judy shrieked as she clung helplessly to Goliath's left tusk with all four limbs. Goliath shook his head wildly, moving around too much for Judy to drop down safely. He hadn't noticed her. Not yet.

"Judy, hang on!" Nick yelled at her even as her legs slipped, leaving her dangling like an earring. *What do I do, what do I do, whaddido?!* Even altogether his darts wouldn't be enough, so he grabbed his radio. "Bogo, pick up!"

"Wilde, where are you?" Bogo demanded, to Nick's relief.

"Judy's in trouble! She's stuck on an elephant!"

"Stuck on what?!"


There was a pause. "We're on our way. In the meantime, distract him!"

"How?!"

"In his current state, he'll be intolerant of any noise. Find a music player or something to divert his attention!"

Oh, thank God. Nick had a music player right here in his pocket. He whipped out his phone, turned the volume up to full and turned on the first song he found.

*Let it Goat* filled the air as Nick bent down and threw the phone across the floor. He ran behind a trashcan and hid as the famous song reached the ears of the mad elephant. With Judy still clinging to his tusk Goliath stomped over to where the phone had disappeared among several piles of rubble. Goliath finally came to a halt as he started digging around for the source of Queen Otsa's singing.

"Nick!" Judy cried. With Goliath distracted, Nick ran to the elephant's side and held out his arms. "Carrots, let it go!"

She let go and fell into his arms with a quiet thump. Even though the impact nearly made his knees buckle, he felt a rush of joy at having her back. Without pausing to put her down Nick fled to the nearest hiding spot, a large mall cart selling small electronics. He set Judy down and sat down beside her. "Thanks." She spoke softly, slightly trembling. On the other side of the cart, Queen Otsa suddenly stopped singing.

Nick rubbed his arms. "You're heavier than you look, did you know that?"

Before Judy could scowl, the mall cart rocked. *Oh crap, he found us! And now my phone is resting in pieces!* "Bogo, where are you?!" He hissed into the radio.
"We're on our way, hold on!" Bogo retorted. Goliath hit the cart a second time. Small boxes rained down on Nick and Judy, and the fox realized that Bogo and McHorn may not get here in time.

The cart rocked again, knocking Judy off balance. After falling on her side she seemed to notice something. It was a triangular wheel chock. "Nick, I'm gonna make a decoy."

"How? You didn't bring your phone!" Nick whispered furiously. The cart rocked harder and Goliath bellowed.

"There's a built-in stereo on the cart!" Judy stepped onto one of the large wheels. "When I say, pull out that chock!" She barely managed to hold on when the cart was hit again.

"Are you nuts?!" Nick whispered.

"Trust me, Nick."

Nick sucked in air through his nose and put his paws on the chock. The cart rocked again. At any moment it could go right over and crush them both.

He spoke again before he could stop himself, speed-talking to get the words out while he could. "Carrots, you know you love me, right?"

Judy smiled encouragingly and touched his cheek, the only part of him she could reach. "Yes, I do. What about you?"

Nick blinked and felt his cheeks grow warm. "Let me put it this way; if we make it out of this, I'm taking you for an early Christmas Dinner."

"And a Christmas Movie." Judy replied shakily. "I want Snow White and the Seven Lemmings." She reached over the top and pressed a switch on the stereo, filling the air with Jingle Bells.

At her cue, Nick pulled the chock. Judy landed beside him and threw her arms around Nick's waist. Before he knew it his own arms were cradling her head and shoulders. He bent over Judy as his tail curled around her whole body, as if he could possibly protect her against the elephant trying to kill them. There was a gentle rumbling sound as the singing mall cart rolled away, leaving nothing between them and the raging behemoth.

Nick closed his eyes, focusing on nothing but the feel of Judy's quaking body and her paws squeezing his torso. He hugged her tighter, waiting for the plan to go wrong and for them to die. If they were going to die, he didn't want the last thing they felt to be the underside of Goliath's foot.

The singing grew fainter as the cart continued to roll down the sloped floor. Something brushed Nick's right ear, a tusk or Goliath's trunk, and then the tiles shook. Nick braced himself.

He heard and felt footsteps, which moved on in the same direction as the singing. Nick slowly raised his head, not daring to believe it, but Goliath was indeed following the cart as it rolled onward.

"Nick?" He heard Judy whisper. He leaned back, and she raised her eyes to meet his.

Nick gave a short, nervous laugh as realization set in. They were going to have an early Christmas Dinner after all.

He heard the poof of a dart being fired, and soon after the hard thud of an elephant collapsing. He and Judy looked to see Bogo standing nearby the second black door, lowering his rifle. He turned towards Nick and Judy and scowled. "Feeling a little Christmas spirit, are we?"
They let go of each other and stood up. While they were making their way down towards their boss and coworker Nick let out a chuckle. "Snow White and the Seven Lemmings, huh? In what universe is that a Christmas Movie?"

"It was released in December."

"... I'd still rather watch Die Hog."

Bogo stared in silent astonishment. *I knew rabbits were good at multiplying, but those ones outnumber the ZPD!*

When the helicopter touched down in the middle of the empty parking lot, the first animals to disembark were Nick, Judy and her family. They were immediately greeted with an uproar of elation from Veronica Wilde and the hundreds of rabbits gathered on the other side of the fence. Stu, Bonnie and Cotton joyfully ran over to their extended family, the wire fence doing little to dampen their happiness. Nick and Judy stayed behind with the helicopter. Their responsibility was with the survivors. An ambulance stood nearby, with paramedics waiting to collect Bellwether. The sheep had managed to regain much of her strength since Delgado had worked his magic on her, so the blood loss must not have been as severe as they'd thought it was, and her initial shock had been from being attacked by a prey animal driven mad by her own creation. In fact she was able to climb out of the helicopter without assistance. Her gash still needed stitches, of course.

One by one the other civilians climbed out and were escorted towards a nearby tent by Higgins and other officers. Judy insisted on escorting her parents and niece herself once they'd had a little time to assure their family that all was well. Bogo had the tremendous honour of assisting Gazelle as she also exited the helicopter before lifting Benjamin and setting him down on the ground. The cheetah was so sore he could barely walk properly; his ribs had almost certainly been damaged. Bogo wasted no time radioing for a second ambulance.

The paramedics from the first ambulance approached. "Take Clawhauser." Bogo ordered as he stepped forward to greet them, while Fangmeyer kept a firm grip on Bellwether. "He was hit by a rhino and may have internal injuries."

"Do you think he'll be okay?" Judy asked as the paramedics began to escort Benjamin to a waiting stretcher.

"How long ago was he injured?" One of the paramedics, an antelope, asked.

"About a couple of hours ago."

At the front of the crowd behind the fence, Ian, Ombidia and Gazelle's mother were calling her name. "Mother!" Gazelle cried upon recognizing the purple dress and horns, unusually long for a female just like her daughter's. Gazelle had tears springing in her eyes as she started to limp towards them.

"He's not in shock, so even if he does have internal bleeding he should be fine once we get him to the E.R." The antelope replied. Bogo let out the breath he'd been holding.

Bellwether crossed her arms. "Pity. It'd be one less predator to worry about."

Gazelle froze. She turned round and strode back to the helicopter. She stopped before Bellwether and slapped her so hard both the sheep and her glasses hit the frozen tarmac.

"Zunga!" She snarled through gritted teeth. "Neither of us would have made it out alive if it weren't
"for him!"

While the speechless Fangmeyer helped Bellwether up from the ground, Gazelle turned her heel and walked over to the stretcher Benjamin was being strapped to. Bogo smiled a little when he saw her slip a Taser with her name on it into his paw before Higgins escorted her to the tent.

"Oh God!" yelled a voice Bogo hadn't heard in years. He turned to the fence and saw an animal in a red dress shirt and black coat with two burly rhinos at either side of him. He was a hybrid, a rarity in Zootopia. With large polished horns, big brown eyes and flawless caramel fur, he was the perfect combination of elk and deer.

"Oh cripes, is that Alec Casel?" Bogo heard Stu Hopps speak in awe, having spotted the chocolatier over the heads of his massive family.

"Omigosh, it is!" Bonnie gasped. "What is he doing here?"

"Castle? Where?" Cotton looked around curiously.

By this point, Nick and Judy had joined them at the fence. "Must be upset about his store. Who knows how much that place cost his daddy to build?" Nick answered drily with crossed arms.

Somehow Bogo felt that Nick didn't like the super-rich.

"Ben!" Alec yelled, having spotted Benjamin being taken into the first ambulance, while a second ambulance drove up to receive Bellwether. He grabbed the chain link fence, as if he was planning to try and tear it down. "Ben, please tell me you're okay!"

Bogo strode up to the fence. He spotted a well-dressed doe by Alec's side; Christine Antlaire, whose picture Bogo had seen on a tabloid cover at a gas station declaring their relationship. "It's alright, Mr. Casel. They say he should be okay."

Alec visibly relaxed. "Oh, thank God. Chief Bogo, what in God's name happened here?"

Bogo sighed. "I wish I could tell you. They're taking Benjamin to Zootopia General, but you may not be able to see him right away."

"Is Gazelle okay?" Christine asked, her voice as well spoken as her boyfriend's.

"She's receiving treatment for a leg injury, but nothing serious. She'll soon go to the same hospital, but she'll just need stitches."

"Okay, let's go." Before taking off with his girlfriend and bodyguards, Alec gave a grateful smile. "Thank you for getting him out of there."

Bogo merely grunted in acknowledgement. As Alec and his companions disappeared into the crowd, the buffalo turned around to find Nick and Judy staring up at him.

"Sir, what was that all about?" To Bogo's amusement, Nick's look of confusion was genuine. Seeing the usually unflappable Wilde thrown for a loop was one of the buffalo's smaller pleasures in life.

"I was just assuring Mr. Casel that Clawhauser is going to be fine." 

"Yeah, but... why was he asking about Clawhauser?"

"Because, Mr. Nosey, they have been friends since graduation."
There was a long period of silence as Nick and Judy looked at each other.

Nick looked from the spot where Alec, the youngest son of one of Zootopia's founding families, had been. Then he looked at the departing ambulance carrying Benjamin, the humble Front Desk Officer of the ZPD. Finally he looked at Chief Bogo like he had just told a very inappropriate joke.

"Say what?"

Chapter End Notes

And so ends Act One of File 2.

I guess you could call it an extended prologue. Several things have been set in motion by this one event, and we'll just have to wait and see how it all turns out. Feel free to ask any questions you like, so long as the answers don't involve spoilers.

Also, I wouldn't mind some constructive criticism on my writing so far, aside from the obvious like spelling and so forth. I don't want to do a Meyer or an E.L. James now, do I?
GAZELLE DELIVERS A POP STAR SMACKDOWN

In the aftermath of the Greener Grass Mall Incident, pop star Gazelle has been cautioned for slapping convict Dawn Bellwether in the face.

The famous singer was allegedly provoked when Bellwether made a bigoted comment towards one of the other survivors of the incident, an off duty police officer named Benjamin Clawhauser. Both Gazelle and Clawhauser had been attending the Grand Reopening of the Greener Grass Mall yesterday morning and became stranded inside the building when it was suddenly attacked by animals poisoned by the Night Howler Serum. Bellwether, who on that same day had been on her way to an appeal, became stranded herself when she fled into the mall in an attempt to slip away in the chaos. All three individuals, along with an estimated dozen other survivors, were safely extracted shortly before Special Forces infiltrated the building, after which Gazelle committed her assault. Chief Bogo and Officers Judy Hopps and Nicholas Wilde were allegedly among those who commenced the rescue.

Gazelle has so far been unavailable for comment, but her manager reported that she does not regret her actions, and that she had acted out of anger at Bellwether's lack of gratitude for Clawhauser's efforts in aiding their survival.

Judy laughed when Nick showed her the picture beside the text, capturing Gazelle, Bellwether and Fangmeyer in the split second after the slap. He folded up the paper and sat up beside Judy on the ring shaped desk beside Benjamin's precious snow globe. He dangled his legs over the edge as he grinned at the cheetah on the other side. "I think she likes you."

"Oh please!" Benjamin waved away the suggestion with a sheepish giggle as he poked some painkillers into a donut and swallowed the thing whole. "I'm just glad she didn't get worse than a caution."

"I'm just shocked that you're back in the donut office already." Nick requested a donut from the pink box, and took one with white icing after that request was granted. "How many bruised ribs have you got? Three? Four?"

"Two." Benjamin held up the appropriate number of sprinkled fingers. "They said I could have gotten a spinal injury from a hit like that, so lucky me, huh?"

"Yeah. Lucky." Fangmeyer said dryly, grimacing when she saw the picture on the paper. "God, I look like I'm trying to kiss air."

"Still looks better than Smellwether, though." Nick chortled, pointing out the distorted look of shock on the sheep's face as she hung frozen in midair. "So, what did the hospital say?"

"She suffered a single laceration to the chest from a horned prey mammal that couldn't be identified. It needed a lot of stitches, but because she received medical attention immediately after the attack, blood loss was minor. She'll spend a couple of days under observation before they take her back to prison." Fangmeyer spoke quickly and without pause, like she was repeating what the doctor had told her.
"I take it the appeal has been put on hold." Judy replied, unsure how to feel about this news.

"Yeah, but it's a lost cause at this point. After what her serum did yesterday, there's no way they're going to let her walk now."

"Yeah, speaking of yesterday... what's the news down at the mall?" Judy and Nick hadn't stuck around after Special Forces moved in, so all they knew was that the cleanup had been a success. On the other hand, millions of dollars in damages had been inflicted on the mall.

"We still don't know how many casualties we have, if any." Fangmeyer leaned against the desk. "Hundreds of injuries, though. Clawhauser, you'll be pleased to know that they found Gazelle's other friend. He's hurt pretty bad, but no permanent damage."

"Oh thank goodness!" Benjamin gasped and clamped a paw over his chest. "What about all those poor people who were poisoned?"

"They're being treated as we speak, but it'll take time to cure all of them. More than a hundred different animals turned savage yesterday."

"While we're on that subject, how did they do it?" Nick asked. "How did whoever did this pull off such a crazy stunt?"

"That's what Chief Bogo's going to talk about once we're all in the Bullpen." Fangmeyer replied. "Speaking of which..." She excused herself and strolled off to the Bullpen.

"Yeah, we should get going." Judy nudged Nick's elbow. "Come on, Nick."

"Hang on a sec." Nick waved her away as he scrutinized Benjamin. "Why didn't you tell us you were BFFs with a Casel?"

The cheetah shrugged, and then winced from the movement. "Sorry, I guess I never got round to it. But yeah, Alec Casel is an old buddy of mine."

Nick scratched his chin. "Huh. So that's where the fancy Rolex came from."

Benjamin looked down at the shiny watch he was wearing. In a split second his eyes widened. "Hey, it's not something I usually brag about!" He held his paws up defensively. "We're friends, yeah, and sure he's really rich, but we don't hang out as much as I do with you guys. But he never forgets to get me something on my birthday. He's spent a lot of time preparing for his business, you know." He rubbed his wrist, looking uncomfortable. "I didn't specifically ask for a Rolex, you know."

Judy nudged him again, this time painfully as anger smoldered within her. "Nick. The Bullpen!"

"Ow. Okay!"

They dropped down from the desk, waved the still uneasy looking Benjamin goodbye and began the short walk to the Bullpen.

"Our spotted friend is just full of surprises, isn't he?" Nick spoke cheerfully.

Judy crossed her arms and glared at him. "Nick, what is wrong with you?"

"You'll have to be more specific."

"Nick, you implied that Ben was taking advantage of his super-rich friend!"
Instantly Nick's facade evaporated and his shoulders slumped. "I know, Carrots, I know. That totally came out wrong."

Judy moved in front of the fox, stopping him in his tracks, and jabbed him in the chest. "Once we get our assignments, you're going to go right back there and apologize!"

"I will, I will." Nick gently grabbed her pointing paw and pushed it down. "I promise."

What Nick was too afraid to admit to Judy was that his words hadn't come out wrong. They had been misinterpreted.

As the two partners took their seats in the Bullpen, he remembered what he knew about Alec Casel from the newspapers. Aside from being a prodigious chocolatier he was the youngest of four children, the son of the Chairman of the Casel Corporation, a certain Elgen Casel, and his wife, a socialite named Selke.

The dictator of a mega-corporation and a pretty gold digger whose name sounds like an evil Bond girl; their kids rarely turn out well. I wonder how many diamond earrings it takes to get that doe to sleep with him.

"Wilde. Wilde!" Bogo's sharp bark snapped Nick to attention. The cape buffalo, now back to normal in his blue uniform and black undershirt, strode up to the podium at the front of the room. "Now that I have everyone's attention, I'll get right to it. Unless you've spent the last two days in hibernation, you'll recall the incident that occurred yesterday afternoon." Most on the animals in the room nodded. "Special Forces have taken care of the situation, but there are still a lot of questions left unanswered. It's up to us to answer those questions." He tapped the red files on the podium that Higgins had left for him. "But before that, there are two items I need to get out the way. First, I wish to congratulate Officers Hopps, Wilde, Fangmeyer, Delgato and McHorn for the successful rescue of Officer Clawhauser, Gazelle, Bellwether and a dozen other civilians from the Greener Grass Mall. This may be the last time I ever say this, but you made me proud last night."

Nick felt his head lift a little higher. That felt a lot better than he'd thought it would. Beside him, Judy's entire body seemed to rise with her radiant little smile. "You make me blush, sir."

"Save it for your partner, Wilde." Bogo retorted. "Number two. I've just received news that Officer Pennington has just been treated for Night Howler poisoning and will be returning to duty after the holidays."

There was a happy murmur from the crowd of officers. Nick remained silent, but made a mental note to pay Pennington a visit and let the pachyderm know that there were no hard feelings. Oh, and also don't forget the brownies.

Bogo cleared his throat to quell the noise. "Save the celebrations, we still have an case to close. Assignments..." He put on his glasses, with one lens partially cracked from the Pennington incident, picked up the files and stepped out from behind the podium. "Officers Higgins, Rhinowitz, you will pay Bellwether a visit and find out whether or not the attack occurring on the day of her appeal was just a coincidence." The hippo and rhino accepted the file and left. "Snarlov, Trunkaby, McHorn, Delgato, Fangmeyer, Grizzoli, Anderson, you will escort Forensics to the Greener Grass Mall and assist them however you can."

The seven officers stood up and left.

"Hopps, Wilde..." Bogo paused to unfold a bent page corner. "You have two days to dig up as much
information on Veltro as you can before coming back to me."

Judy leaned forward on the table, intrigued. "Sir, what makes you think Veltro is involved?"

"Do as you're told and you'll find out." Bogo replied sternly. "I suggest you start by reading the news. Dismissed."

---

**Gazelle, pop singer and predator rights activist, has publicly condemned the organization as blatantly bigoted against Austroalan mammals and promised to continue lending her support to the thirteenth district...**

Judy put down the paper and leaned back in the chair with a loud yawn. "Uuuuggghhh, sweet cheese and crackers that took forever!"

"Shhhhh!" Came several quietly angered voices from all around the Savanna Central Library.

Feeling a little warm around the collar, Judy muttered an apology before returning to her notepad to write down another bullet point. To her chagrin, Nick's snickering didn't receive any chastisement. He put down the last of a pile of papers that Judy had assigned to him and clicked on his pen. "Carrots, can I borrow your notepad again?"

"Nick, haven't you thought about getting your own?"

"Yeah, but it's too much of a hassle."

"It's too much of a hassle to get a pile of lined paper held together with a tiny metal coil?"

"I'll have you know that after mistaking me for a reporter a guy once fought me over a notepad."

"Seriously? That's insane."

"Tell me about it. He called off the fight three times to go to the bathroom."

"... wait, what..."

Nick seized his chance, dragging the notepad to his side and scribbling something down. "Okay, let's see what the papers had to tell us."

Judy scooted her chair over to his side so they could read their collected notes together.

- **Veltro- means greyhound- could meaning be clue?**

- **Also anagram for revolt. Sounds so much cooler than greyhound.**

- **Made themselves known after plans for Tirari Town (thirteenth district for Austroalan animals) were announced, but may have been around for longer than that.**

- **Claimed reason for opposition and open support for Bellwether suggest they are a supremacist group. More haters? They're coming out the bleeding woodwork!**

- **They also strongly oppose the Casel Corporation, the organization in charge of Tirari Town's construction, but their reasons are unknown.**

- **They probably just didn't want to be slaves of capitalism. Some activists who turned to the dark side.**
No mention has been made of Veltro's leader or their goals. Will have to investigate further.

I bet a million bucks Bellwether's the leader.

So far they've done nothing more than picket events, but there have been incidents where riots nearly broke out. Could they have taken the next step?

It could have been an accident when Bellwether got hurt. A breakout that went bad. If that's true, then we're probably dealing with the three stooges here.

Gazelle's been getting a lot of flak from them for supporting Tirari Town. Could the leak about her being at the reopening have been part of the reason for the attack?

Attempted assassination? Evil ex? Crazed fan with access to natural insect repellent? :s

Judy looked up from the table and glowered at the fox. "Nick, when you get home you are going to rewrite those notes professionally, do you understand me?"

"So Bogo won't go all 'The Black Death' on our butts? Yeah, I understand perfectly." Nick proceeded to tidy up the newspapers and take them back to their rightful place, all the while ignoring Judy's hushed ranting about how offensive that term was to cape buffalos.

"It's not actually." He cut in when Judy stopped to breathe. "There's a wrestler in Sahara Square whose stage name is 'The Black Death' and no-one's griping about it. It's not like being called cute or shifty, Carrots."

"Oh." Judy rubbed her skull, deeply thankful that their present location forced them to be quiet. "Sorry. Guess I jumped to conclusions."

Nick patted her shoulder, a move that somehow made her feel not so bad. "You're learning, Carrots. You're learning."

They left the library with their notes and made a short six-minute drive to a Snarlbucks in eastern Savanna Central. They ordered expensive coffee and sat down at a circular table beside the front window. "Now I know why Bogo wants us to investigate Veltro." Judy stated after her first sip. "They had a pretty good motive for ruining the reopening."

Nick lifted up three fingers systematically. "A grudge against the company that renovated the mall... a grudge against Gazelle for supporting Tirari Town and publicly dissing them... and a non-grudge for the crazy sheep whose appeal was happening right across the street. You're damn right they had motive."

"But a few notes from a few papers isn't enough. We need more than that before we confront them. Any ideas, Nick?"

Nick rubbed his neck. "We could check in on the mall and help our buddies out. We might find something tying Veltro to the attack." His head jerked up as another thought came to him. "After we dig up info on the Casel Corporation. Maybe they did something to tick Veltro off. Something they really shouldn't have done."

Judy pointed her carrot pen at him, getting the idea. "You mean something illegal." Nick nodded. "That's a great idea, but we won't get much on paper or online, and I doubt the company would appreciate us investigating them without a darn good reason."

"No..." Nick admitted, even as a smile began to form. "But I have a friend in the Rainforest District
who might."

Ten minutes later, a satisfied Nick hung up and stuck his phone back in his pocket. "Honey’s busy
doing maintenance right now but she says we can come round at six, provided we don't bring any
tracking devices, radios, weapons, handcuffs, chewing gum, cigarettes, perfume, food, drink or the
Duke of Bootleg."

Judy almost asked Nick to repeat himself so she could write the list down. "Tell me, what does she
do again?"

"She's technically an information broker. It's how she makes a living. In her spare time she's out to
prove whatever whacky conspiracy's presently occupying her whacked-out mind. I've been working
my magic on her for months, trying to convince her to become a police informant."

"Are you having any luck?"

Nick waved his paw in a seesaw motion. "I'm getting there, but she's gotten pretty stubborn since her
theory that Bellwether's got spies in the ZPD was confirmed. She's been slowly coming round
though, ever since I took the blue."

"Do you really think she'll help us?"

"If we do as she says and prove we're not out to arrest her, she'll help us. She doesn't like Veltro any
more than we do."

"Good to know." Judy didn't feel entirely convinced, but maybe meeting the honey badger in person
would change that. "While we have time, I want to go check on my family."

"Sure, whatever you say," Nick guzzled his now lukewarm coffee.

"We'll stop by the police station on the way. Remember, you still have an apology to make."

"Yeah, you're right, Carrots. Afterward, I've gotta start looking for a reservation."

"Reservation?" Judy tilted her head.

"For the Christmas Dinner, you dumb bunny! In case you have forgotten, I'm not Gordon Ramsay
and you're not Chef Remy. I know this restaurant in Tundratown that does great Christmas Dinners.
After that we can watch your movie at home."

Judy smirked, her coffee lying cold and half-full before her. "I like the cut of your jib, Mr. Wilde."

Nick leaned back and smugly rested the back of his head on his paws. "Of course you do."

When they stepped into the ZPD lobby some time later, Benjamin had his back to them behind his
desk. By now the smugness had left Nick as his guilt returned. He walked up to the desk and cleared
his throat to get the cheetah's attention. "I have to call you back. See you tonight, Alec." He lowered
his phone and greeted the fox cheerfully. "Hi, Nick!"

"Benji, I just wanted to apologize for what I said about the watch. I didn't mean it like that, it just
came out wrong."

"Hey, don't worry about it. I can't say I blame you for wondering." The sunlight flashed white on the
face of the watch. "Like I said, he does give me expensive gifts, but only once a year on my
birthday. He actually called me just now to see how I was doing."

Nick crossed his arms on the desk. "Did he say what he's going to do about his store?"

"He's going to set up shop in the mall again once Forensics are done and the building gets fixed up again. The Casels aren't going to let some extremist jerks push them around, I'll say this much. By the way, I don't know if anyone called you but your dad's here."

Judy facepalmed. "Oh Lord, I told them I would come see them later!"

"That's not it. You see, your dad thinks he knows who turned all those animals savage."
When they reached Chief Bogo's office, Nick had to restrain Judy from barging through the door without knocking first. A combination of astonishment and anxiety had made her even more hyper than usual. "Carrots." He cautioned. Judy stopped, took a deep breath, and knocked.

A second later, Bogo called them in. Taking up a small fraction of the large chair in front of the chief's desk was her father, dressed in a blue and white checkered shirt and brown dungarees as he held his cap to his chest. His ears were droopy and his shoulders were hunched as he sat before the much larger Bogo.

"So you've heard, Hopps." Bogo spoke bluntly.

"Dad, what's this about you knowing who instigated the terrorist attack last night?" Judy demanded as she strode up to her father.

"J-just a hunch, sweetheart." Stu stammered. "Something that occurred to me while I was thinking about that gosh-awful fiasco."

"Please continue, Mr. Hopps." Bogo requested graciously.

"Oh, um, as I was saying..." Stu scratched his head. "Mr. Chief Bogo, have you ever heard of the Kingfisher incident?" Judy had heard of that unpleasant scandal, but the buffalo shook his head. "Well, a couple years back, this fellow called Carl Kingfisher got served a cup of Snarlbucks coffee that had been tainted with lye."

"Holy crap." Nick muttered, and for good reason; lye was PH fourteen.

"An industrial cleaning solution used for the dispensers somehow got into the coffee. It hurt his windpipe pretty badly, poor fellow." Stu went on, stroking his throat with a grimace. "He survived, thank goodness, and sued the Dickens out of the company."

"For three million." Bogo muttered. "It was on the news, I remember now. But what has that got to do with yesterday's incident?"

"I'm getting to that, sir. A little before it all started, all that walking around had me hankering for a coffee. So I popped into a Snarlbucks to get a coffee, but then I noticed that someone had knocked a cup over on a table and left it there. The cup was empty save for some dregs, but the funny thing was that there was some strange blue stuff staining the bottom." Bogo leaned forward on the table, his gaze suddenly intense. Judy and Nick stepped a little closer to the older rabbit. "Needless to say, the Kingfisher debacle came to mind and I got the heck out of there. It was only after the savage animals showed up and you saved us- thanks for that by the way- that it occurred to me that the blue stuff might have been *midnicampum holicithias*. The folks who grow the coffee use it to protect their produce, just like we do down in the burrows."

Nick crossed his arms and scowled. "Are you saying that the whole thing could have been caused by negligence?"

Stu shrugged. "I dunno, maybe."

Bogo turned to his phone and pressed the intercom button. "Clawhauser!"

"Yes, sir?"
"Call our people at the mall and tell them to collect all the discarded coffee cups they can find and bring them in for testing. I also want all security footage from the reopening to the beginning of the attacks. We may have a lead as to how those mammals were poisoned."

"Consider it done, sir!"

"And remember, I want you to inform me at once if you start having trouble breathing."

Strangely there was a giggle on the other end. "Yes, sir!"

Bogo released the button and turned back to Stu. "Thank you for this information, Mr. Hopps. It might be just what we need to solve this."

"You're most certainly welcome, Chief Bogo." Stu put his cap on. "Is there anything else, or can I go now?"

"That's everything for now, Mr. Hopps. If something comes up, your daughter knows how to reach you."

"I should hope so, my train leaves tomorrow at three."

"Hopps, escort your father back to his hotel before returning to your assignment."

"Yes, sir. Come on, dad." Judy took her father's paw as she and Nick led him out. The farmer's paw was hardened, warm, and most preciously alive.

Judy waited until they were in the elevator before speaking to him. "So you're going home, are you?"

"After your sister and brother in law heard what happened, they wanted Cotton back as soon as possible. We promised to take her back home as quick as we can, so we're taking the train home tomorrow after we do a little sightseeing."

"How're they doing, by the way? I mean Cotton and your wife?" Nick asked.

"They're okay. Cotton's a trooper, but I think the missus and I will be needing a bit of therapy after all that."

"I can't say I blame you." Nick said. "Don't worry about it, I'm sure come Christmas Day you'll be feeling a whole lot better." He didn't mention the new garden gloves and wool scarf that were still in his apartment, waiting to be wrapped and delivered.

There was a ding and the elevator doors opened, allowing them to stroll into the lobby. Stu led the way, opting for Benjamin's desk rather than the exit. The cheetah had just come off the radio after issuing Bogo's new orders before turning round to see the three smaller mammals. "Oh hi, Mr. Hopps! How're you doing?"

"How're you doing?" Stu asked back, eyeing Benjamin's torso.

"Not that bad, actually." Benjamin replied. "I'm just happy you and your family got off without getting hurt."

Stu was once more holding his cap to his chest. "Um, it just occurred to me that we never really thanked you for helping us. I mean, when you helped Judy get to us. It was really brave of you, what you did back there."
If it weren't for his ribs, Benjamin might have puffed his chest out with pride. "I'm glad you think so... because I am never facing off with a rhino in the dark again."

Stu chuckled. "Well, it's good to see you're okay. Cotton's been frettin' about you, you see."

As Benjamin unleashed a prolonged *awww*, Judy and Nick looked at each other. "Do you really think that whole mess could have been caused by negligence, Nick?"

"That's what I'm hoping, Carrots. Heads would roll for this, but it would be a hell of a better alternative to terrorism."

"Speaking of which, we still need to find out if Veltro is connected. We should leave it to our friends at the mall to decide if dad's theory is right and get ready to meet this honey badger."

"Honey badger?" Stu asked, startling them out of their hushed exchange.

"J-just an old friend of Nick's, dad. We're gonna pay her a visit later today."

"Well you can tell her that her foxy friend here's a real hero!" Stu surprised Nick with a smack on the lower back, the only part the rabbit could comfortably reach. "You ought to get a medal, the pair of you!"

"Here, here!" Ben raised his pink *I love Gazelle* mug in a toast.

"And this fellow, this young fox right here..." It was as if Benjamin's near-perpetual cheeriness had infected the capped rabbit. "He's living proof that the word sly doesn't always mean bad! I mean, the way he sacrificed his own phone as a decoy to save my little girl from a psychotic elephant!"

"Dad..." Judy started, for her father was raising his voice and turning a few heads in the massive lobby.

"Let me tell you, if anyone deserves my little Jude, it's this..."

"Dad... *dad!*"

"Yes, dear?"

"Weren't you planning to take Cotton sightseeing?" Judy asked through gritted teeth.

Stu looked around, seeing the peculiar stares of the police around them. He bashfully scratched his cheek. "Sorry, sweetheart. Guess it's only just sinking in just how lucky we all are." He swallowed, his ears falling flat. "If it weren't for you lot, we- we would have died in there."

Judy felt herself soften. "But we didn't, and that's the important thing."

"But when we watched you on those security cameras... when we saw how you and Nick and all those other officers look out for each other... I'm glad to know that we can start worrying a little less."

It had to be the best thing Judy's father had told her since the revelation of Gideon Grey's partnership. She beamed like she was nine years old again. "Look, I just want to say I'm sorry for all the
"Codswallop I said while you were growing up."

"It's okay, dad. It's okay."

Stu's ears shot back up and he began rummaging through his pockets. "I almost forgot. I've got a little something!" He pulled out a blue envelope covered in snowflake stickers. "Cotton wrote a thank you letter for everyone who was in the rescue team." He handed it to a pleasantly surprised Judy. "I've gotta go now, but I hope you'll be able to see us off tomorrow."

"Don't worry, dad. We'll be there."

With a final wave, her father was gone.

The next thing Judy knew, a dark brown paw was snatching the letter from her own. "Dibs!"

With Nick calling dibs on reading the letter to the others, a night out at the usual bar was arranged with McHorn, Fangmeyer and Delgato. But first, they had to get some info from their local conspiracy theorist.

They left the station at four, passing a familiar looking tiger on their way out, and drove to a local cafe called *The Bronze Bean*, a small gem Nick had discovered when he moved into the apartment building across the street. Halfway to the cafe, they received a call from Delgato; Forensics had followed Stu's tip and discovered hundreds of discarded coffee cups, most of them containing suspicious blue traces. Several had already been brought back to the station for testing, but by then there was little room for doubt as to the source of the numerous Night Howler poisonings.

With different theories forming in their heads, Nick and Judy reached *The Bronze Bean* and ordered their usual drinks. Over a blueberry smoothie and a hot chocolate, they began to exchange their deductions.

"Carrots, what do you make of all this?"

"On the surface, it looks like a breakout gone wrong." Judy scooped the whipped cream from the hot chocolate like it was ice cream. "Veltro or whoever was behind this knew that Bellwether had a very low chance of winning that appeal. So with her serum, they arranged for a distraction. While savage animals were wreaking havoc in the mall right next to the courthouse, they would get Bellwether out the police car and slip away in the chaos. By the time we got the mall under control they would be long gone." She looked out the window at the line of parked cars outside the cafe. "But it didn't go quite as planned. They didn't count on Officer Pennington breaking out the mall and attacking the car before they could get to it. Bellwether was lucky to make it out of that alive, and she was lucky that Benjamin was there to help her when she was attacked again in the mall. To sum, it was a very misguided, stupid plan that almost got her killed twice."

Nick sucked on his straw thoughtfully. "You said 'on the surface.'"

"That's exactly what I said. This plan was too stupid. They could have intercepted the car at any point during its journey, instead of setting off a massive incident that could have not only gotten Bellwether killed but themselves killed. It just doesn't seem... plausible."

"Carrots, you're right about one thing. It could have gotten Bellwether killed." Nick propped his elbow on the table and locked eyes with her. "What if that was the idea?"

Judy froze with the spoon in her mouth. "Wud?"
"Carrots, Bellwether had a low chance of succeeding, but it was still a chance. What if the plan wasn't to break her out before the appeal, but to make sure she doesn't live to win it?"

Judy pulled the spoon out and stared at him. "Nick, if that's true then who would do such a thing? And why?"

"I don't know. But maybe Honey can shed some light on this."

Her phone rang. She picked it up and held it to her ear.

"JUDYGESSWATJUSTHAPPENEDTOMEAFTERYOUANNICKLEFT?!"

Judy yelped and thrust the phone away from her ear like it was a grenade. "Benjamin... what happened?"

"You know Cohen, one of Gazelle's dancers?!" Benjamin's voice poured out of the phone. "He came in just now with an invitation to Gazelle's dressing room at the Animalia Arena! Gazelle wants to see me again, isn't that awesome?!"

"Benji, that's amazing!" Judy beamed at the phone. "You saved her life, you've earned this!"

"It gets better! She's invited Chief Bogo to come along, too!"

"Wow, if that didn't make him crack a smile I don't know what will!" Nick chortled.

Benjamin chortled back. "I didn't see his face, but since then he keeps laughing at random moments for no real reason."

"Well, I hope you enjoy yourselves." Nick replied. "Hey, could you do me a solid and get her autograph for me? I kinda like her since she gave Smellwether a wooly smack down."

"Sure thing, Nick. I'll get one for both you guys! See you tomorrow!" Benjamin hung up.

Nick looked down at his nearly empty smoothie cup. "What do you say we head to Honey's now?"

Judy had been expecting a small residence. A bungalow, a studio apartment or even a trailer. What she hadn't been expecting was a derelict.

Nick had brought her to a small apartment within a hollowed out tree, an abode that looked like it hadn't been used in years. Dust covered everything in a cool grey layer, including the empty floor and cupboards of the single large room, which was a living room and kitchen combined. On a single three seat couch beside the window sat a honey badger in camouflaged pants and a black tank top, with sticks and nuts in the spiky white fur atop her head.

Judy looked at Nick, hoping that the expression she gave him was enough to convey the question she was too polite to ask in front of Honey. He leaned in towards her. "You'll have to fully earn her trust first before you can know where she really lives. Let me do the talking, okay?"

"Okay."

Honey didn't look conventionally crazy, but there was a clear air of suspicion and mild hostility about her and Nick stepped forward to greet the badger. "Honey, honey, honey! Must be funny!"

"In a rich man's world." Honey replied. With that the worrisome aura evaporated and she beamed at the fox. "Merry Christmas, Nicky!" With that, the two predators embraced each other. Judy tilted her head and watched as the two predators embraced each other.
head at the sight, feeling the same sense of disappointment and surprise she had felt the first time she had met Mr. Big.

"So, Honey." Nick said upon letting go. "What're you investigating this time?"

Honey looked him dead in the eye. "Bigfoot's out to get the Casel Corporation."

_and there we go_, Judy thought with a smirk.

"Bigfoot?" Nick asked with fake curiosity.

"Hold on!" Honey bent over the back of the sofa and yanked out the biggest red bag pack Judy had ever seen. Digging tools poked out of gaps in the zippers, and a stereo of all things was precariously roped to the top. Honey plonked the bag on the dusty floor, dug her arm deep inside, and yanked out a strange grey plastic rod. "Hold still." With heavy footsteps she strode over to Nick and held the rod before the fox's body. As she slowly lifted it up and down the rod beeped gently, and it soon dawned on Judy what the strange woman was looking for. Seemingly satisfied, Honey moved on the Judy and did the same to Judy. Fortunately Judy had respected Honey's wishes and so the rod found nothing. Honey shoved the rod back into the bag and pulled out a laptop laden with skull and biohazard stickers.

"You know I've never trusted the company, right? Well I have proof that its chairman is involved in something!" She wiped the dust from the coffee table before putting the laptop on it.

"You mean Elgen Casel?" Judy asked.

Honey seemed to notice something in Judy's tone. "You don't know much about the Casels, do you, fluff?"

"She didn't grow up in Zootopia, Honey." Nick defended. "Perhaps we should start this little info dump with a history lesson?"

Judging from the look on her face, Honey didn't seem to like that idea. Nevertheless she switched on her laptop and clicked on a file bearing the Casel family name. As the file opened, she shot Judy a look that could stop a buffalo dead. "One more thing; no-one... no-one... touches my baby except me!"

Judy nodded quickly. She and Nick sat down on either side of the honey badger as the file opened to reveal a plain white document laden with text.

"Fluff, what do you know about Zootopia's founding?" Honey asked gruffly.

"We-well I know the city was built on a watering hole."

"But do you know who built it?"

"No, I do not."

Honey scrolled down to a large map of a smaller, older Zootopia. "You know how Zootopia has twelve districts going on thirteen? Well, back when it was founded it had five. Savannus Square." She pointed at the southern area. "Fauna Forest." She pointed to the east. "Little Rodentia." A tiny area west of the square. "Noire Nocturnal." The northern area. "And Casel Central." The area in the center.

"Their names are all different." Judy noted.
"Things were changed and rearranged a lot as the city grew." Honey replied. "Once upon a time your hometown was no bigger than this district. Speaking of which, I didn't know you were one to go for the white picket fence type, Nicky."

Both fox and rabbit stiffened.

"Were the Casel family the founders?!" Nick replied loudly.

"One of them. Once prey and predator started to finally get along five families came together and out of the blue decided to build a city."

Still feeling hot in the face, Judy read the names, each with a bullet point and a picture of the family crest; George Savannus, Frederick Fauna, Roosevelt Rodentia, Nathaniel Noire and Acles Casel. She began to get an idea of how the city was run during that time. Beside 'Acles Casel', Honey had typed 'top dog'.

"Right from the start, the Casel family was more or less the rulers of Zootopia. They spearheaded the construction, took control of the central district and issued the other four families their own roles in running the city. Up until about half a century ago every single mayor of the city was a Casel."

Honey scrolled down to a list of Zootopian mayors over the decades. "Then Elgen Casel's grandfather, Lucas Casel, lost the mayoral election to an anteater called Pinocchio Longnose."

"Seriously?" Judy stared at the name on the document.

"Of course not, that name is way too stupid!" Honey exclaimed, bringing a laugh from her and Nick at the look on Judy's face. "It was actually Anthony Hawthorn. Anyway, five or so years back Elgen decided to try and take back the family legacy by running for mayor."

"You mean Lionheart's reelection?" Judy asked. "Mr. Casel lost, didn't he?"

"Obviously." Nick confirmed dryly.

"Casel got a lot of unexpected support at the start, but near the end his campaign became a train wreck." Honey went on. "One scandal with the Chief of Precinct One was all it took."

"Chief Bogo?" Judy and Nick exchanged looks over Honey's head. "What happened?"

"One of the Casel kids got drunk and attacked him with a broken bottle. Even though daddy managed to cover up which one of his kids committed the assault, it was already too late. The bad publicity cost him both the election and his family's reputation. His contributions to the city over the last couple of years managed to repair that reputation to an extent, but he never got over it."

"Probably for the best." Nick added. "I never liked the guy."

Judy scratched her chin. "Do you know if Casel was connected to Bellwether in any way?"

"Bellwether reached out to him after becoming mayor, but he refused to lend his support." Honey replied. "Without knowing she was behind the savage attacks, he saw right through her nice girl act."

"Did you find anything suggesting that the company is doing something illegal?"

"No. Not the company anyway." Honey looked disappointed by her own answer.

"Oh, is this where we get to Bigfoot?" Nick asked with a tiny smile.

Honey shot Judy another look. "If I tell you, will you put me in cuffs?"
"If it helps us with the case, we'll overlook it." Judy promised.

"Fine. For the last couple of months I've been staking out the Casel's mansion, looking for proof." Honey opened a digital folder full of videos. "I didn't do any trespassing, I promise."

"What did you see? Is Bigfoot living in the guesthouse?" Nick asked.

"No, but a couple of nights ago I realized that I wasn't the only one watching the house." Honey opened a video.

Judy and Nick had a clear view of the Casel's Chalet-style mansion, framed by the dark green leaves of the tree Honey was spying from. The house was occupied; most of the windows were lit and two sleek black cars were sitting in the driveway. The camera panned from one end of the massive estate to the other as its wielder searched for something suspicious.

Honey abruptly turned the camera away from the house as she sensed something below her hiding place. The floor of the forest surrounding the estate was almost pitch black, and Judy could barely make out the ornate metal fence that formed the border.

As she drew her face closer to the screen, she saw something move. In between the dark trees, it was impossible to determine what species or gender the figure was, but she knew that it was tall, probably as tall as Chief Bogo. Unaware they were being watched, the figure crept up to the fence, and Judy managed to catch a pair of arms snaking out and touching the fence's foundation. Honey whispered under her breath, asking herself who they were and what they were doing. After a few seconds the figure drew away from the fence and disappeared into the darkness. With that, Honey stopped the video.

"After that, I waited a few minutes then climbed down and checked out the fence." She spoke. "Turned out it was a small camera disguised as a stone."

Nick leaned forward, narrowing his eyes at the frozen footage. "Do you have the camera?"

"I didn't touch it. I didn't want whoever planted that to realize someone had seen them, and even if I had the footage would be no different from what my own camera was seeing. It might still be there if you check it out."

"And we will." Nick said. "Is it okay if we have a copy of this information? We need everything we can get to find those terrorists."

"I suppose." Honey pulled a flash drive from her pocket and plugged it in. "But I want to remain anonymous, you get me?"

"Loud and clear. But what has this got to do with Bigfoot?"

Honey merely smirked as she opened another folder, this one full of photographs. She scrolled down to the bottom of the folder and blew up the very last image. "I managed to get the best frame of the spy and enhanced it as best as I could."

The image was still very dark and nearly indistinguishable, and the figure was being filmed through a cluster of crooked, bare branches. Judy saw lifeless, black, doll-like eyes. Mangy fur with dark stains. Protruding, monstrous teeth. Large hands with evil looking curved claws.

"And there's your Bigfoot!" Honey crossed her arms smugly.

Judy and Nick merely stared at the creature in the image and wondered what kind of case they had
gotten themselves into.
"If that's Bigfoot then I'm a minotaur." Bogo growled after setting eyes on the enhanced image on his private laptop the very next day. "It's obviously a costume."

"Obviously." Nick replied, nodding.

"We have to call the Casel estate and warn them." Judy said. "If the suspect is a member of Veltro, then the same people who committed the terrorist attack on the Casel Corporation's property could be after the Casels themselves."

"We have no evidence that Veltro is involved with both incidents, but all the same I'll call Elgen Casel and tell him about the hidden camera."

"It's too dark to see in the film, but our informant said the camera's been disguised as a small rock on the fence's foundation." Nick pointed the spot on the fence that the strange creature had touched. Bogo dialed a number on his desk phone. Judging from the conversation that ensued, it was the estate's butler who picked up. Bogo got straight to the point and explained about the hidden camera. When asked about how he knew, the buffalo replied that an anonymous paparazzo had been spying on the estate and spotted the suspect who planted the camera. The butler and his master must have decided to heed Bogo's warning, for he looked more or less satisfied when he hung up.

"Alright, you didn't just come here to show me 'proof' of Bigfoot's existence." He pushed the laptop aside and leaned towards the fox and rabbit sharing a chair before his desk. "What did Forensics have to say?"

Nick opened a very recently updated case file. "The blue traces in the coffee cups are in fact Bellwether's special concoction, which confirms that the source of the poisonings are the assorted coffee shops within the mall. Every single employee connected with those shops and the delivery stores are being questioned right now, and the companies have begun conducting internal investigations."

"The more I think about it, the more ingenious this plan was." Judy spoke thoughtfully. "Coffee is a hot beverage, often so hot that you can't drink much of it right away, and someone used that to ensure that when the attack started the entire mall would be affected. At some point they poisoned the coffee, probably in the coffee seeds delivered to the shops or in the dispensers, focusing on popular chains like Snarlbucks where more coffee would be sold. After buying their drinks, most of the unsuspecting customers would walk out and take the coffee to a different area of the mall. Once the coffee had cooled down enough the victim would drink it, until they ingested enough of the serum to turn savage."

"More than a hundred animals all over the mall fell victim to this trick." Nick added bitterly. "And according to the reports nearly fifty died because of it."

"All the more reason to catch the scum who did this." Bogo replied icily. "Did Bellwether provide any leads?"

"She claims she had no knowledge of the plot." Judy answered. "In fact, she said she had no idea that anything would happen on that day. If she's telling the truth, it supports our theory that the terrorist attack was intended to cause her death."

"That's if the motive had anything to do with Bellwether." Bogo tapped his desk with a pen. "For all
we know, the mall attack occurring on the day of the appeal could be a coincidence. We need more evidence than this, Hopps."

"And we will get it, you have my word on that." Judy stood up on the chair, eyeing the buffalo intensely. "What about the mall footage? Did you find anything?"

"Nothing." Bogo admitted. "No-one broke into the mall before the reopening or did anything suspicious with the dispensers and supplies. There was no sign of the footage being altered either."

"Meaning the tampering must have occurred before the supplies arrived at the mall." Nick spoke. "Maybe during the delivery or at the factories or warehouses."

"They're being investigated right now." Bogo replied. "It looks like all we can do for the time being is wait for the results of that investigation." He removed the flash drive containing Honey's copied data from the laptop. "But if you two are desperate for something to do, you can find out who planted that camera at the Casel Estate."

"While you and Benji go fulfill your wildest dreams?" Nick quipped.

Bogo's mouth curled downward. "Not another word out of you, Wilde."

"We'll go over right now, sir." Judy leapt down from the seat.

"No." Bogo stopped her with a raised hoof. "Mr. Casel wants to investigate this himself before we step in. They'll contact you once they're ready to hand in the evidence."

"Is he allowed to do that?"

"He and the ZPD have been on bad terms for a while. I wouldn't advise upsetting him by sticking your nose where it's not wanted."

When the Casel estate called back, roughly one hour later, they reported that the disguised camera had been found and was currently being examined. They also added that while Nick and Judy weren't permitted in the Casel residence just yet, they could still scour the surrounding forest for any trace of the mysterious 'Bigfoot', and that was exactly what they did the second Chief Bogo dismissed them.

It was cold in the forest, even colder than it was in the city. The snow was whiter and more solid here, and the trees were almost black in contrast. Nick and Judy donned thick cotton coats after they parked the police car on the side of the long road that cut through the forest to the Casel mansion, several feet from the front gate. Nick had known that the Casels' patriarch and matriarch didn't live in the city itself, but he didn't think they lived this far out.

Upon exiting the car, Judy pulled out a Pawpad and read one of the documents Honey had duplicated for their benefit. "According to the data Honey collected, the Casel Estate is roughly ten miles in square diameter and was built around the same time as Zootopia's founding." She looked further up the road, where the entrance gate stood. Nick was almost surprised that the metal bars were bronze instead of gilded. "It's actually pretty fascinating, Nick. It's not just one massive house, most of the forest is a nature preserve for birds. There's also a winery, a conservatory and a metal workshop. Heck, there's even a cathedral around here somewhere."

"A what?" Nick stopped in the middle of putting on his mirrored sunglasses.

Judy read a bit more of the document. "The Casels were devout Christians back in the day, so they also had a small cathedral built on the estate. It fell into disuse after the family eventually renounced
their faith, and now the map doesn't even show where it is."

"A small cathedral? What, a big chapel wasn't good enough for them?" Nick muttered, putting on the glasses to hide his narrowed eyes. "Mom only ever had a cross and altar in the closet, but did she ever complain?"

"Nick, try not to mouth off like that when we actually meet the Casels, okay?" Judy retorted and put away the pad. "Now whereabouts was the camera planted?"

"They said it was five miles up the west side of the fence. It's the best place to start looking for clues."

"Let's head to the gate first. We should use the intercom to let them know we're here."

Nick kept a couple of feet from Judy as he allowed to her to approach the little intercom beside the gates and press the button. "Hello? This is Officer Hopps and Wilde. We're here to investigate the location where the camera was planted."

After a few seconds someone answered in perfect English. "This is the butler. Please wait there and I will come to escort you to the location."

"Alright, thank you." Judy stepped away from the intercom and return to her partner's side. "Nick, when he gets here I want you to let me do the talking this time."

"Whatever you say, Carrots." Nick kept his eyes on the house on the other side of the gates. Almost the entire western side and part of the southern was enshrouded in frosted ivy, like a green and grey beard. The size alone made him set his jaw. The place must have fifty rooms at least, but only six mammals made up the family that lived there.

"Nick, if it's too cold you can go back to the car. I can check out the fence by myself." Judy offered, having spent the last minute watching him not too subtly twist his face.

"We're partners. I'm not letting you freeze your lucky feet off by yourself."

Judy moved herself in front of Nick and looked him in the eye. "Nick, we're dealing with some very powerful people here. Can I trust you not to tick them off?"

"No." Nick replied before he could stop himself.

"Then get back in the car."

"I told you, we're sticking together. I'm not leaving you alone with these people."

Judy's bright purple eyes stared at him. "I'm not even meeting them, Nick! What's gotten into you?"

"It's nothing."

"Nick, you've been acting like a passive aggressive jerk ever since the Casels got involved in this case. You even suggested that Ben was a moocher right to his face. You have five seconds to tell me why you hate the Casels so much or I'll drag you back to the car and cuff you to the steering wheel."

Nick bit his lip. Judy couldn't possibly understand. Her family wasn't rich but they'd never come close to knowing true poverty.

Then Judy asked, "Did they do something to hurt you?"
Nick swallowed. She had the same face she'd had on the gondola, after he'd told her about the muzzle incident. Now here she was, worrying that she had unwittingly opened some old wounds by bringing him here. Nick sighed. If her three-month long funk after the press conference was any indication, she was just going to keep kicking herself until he set her straight.

Nick put his paw on her shoulder and leaned down to meet her face. "They didn't hurt me, Judy. Not directly, anyway. But those Casels in there? They're entitled fakes."

"Nick."

"It's true, Carrots. Elgen Casel only made 'contributions' to the city because he wanted to take over. He says he saw right through Bellwether, but it's not like he's any better."

"Wasn't that because one of his kids assaulted Chief Bogo and disgraced the family?"

"Obviously. Reputation means everything to these people. They act like Bruce Mane and Prince Charming on the outside but inside they're as sleazy as Mayor Quimby and that guy from Family Goat with the colossal chin. I've seen it before, and I guarantee that in our line of work you'll see it too."

Judy scowled half-heartedly. "Nick, I'm sure not all the super-rich are like that. Gazelle is nowhere near like that. You saw how she defended Ben the other night."

"It's not the same. She's what they call 'new money.' She got an agent and worked her way up. These guys? They were born with it. If and when you finally meet them you'll see what I'm talking about."

Judy glanced at the mansion. "Alec isn't like that. When he showed up at the mall, he definitely was more upset that Ben was hurt than that his store was destroyed on its first day open. The fact that he showed up at all must mean something."

Judy had a point there, Nick had to admit, but he'd lived in this city far longer that she had. The gates slid open as the butler, a perfectly groomed horse, finally showed his face. Before the horse could come within earshot, Nick leaned further towards her. "The point is, it's not you or Donuts. It's me, and I've got a feeling that one way or another, the Casels are the key to solving this case."

Judy nodded in agreement. "Speaking of Ben, have you given him his present yet?"

She frowned at the sudden smirk on her partner's face.

"Oh my gosh... what did you do?"

Benjamin had gone all out in order to make himself look presentable for Gazelle. He'd groomed and washed his fur. He'd sprayed breath freshener in his mouth. He'd staved off donuts for the entire morning to ensure that there were no sprinkles in his fur.

And Bogo? Bogo just put on a fresh red shirt.

"That's the first time I've seen you wear red, sir. You look nice." Benjamin praised when they met up in the precinct's parking lot. In his personal parking park sat the unmarked car they would be borrowing.

"So do you." Bogo replied, taking in the cheetah's shiny fur and smelling the subtle cologne. "If only you made this much effort at the station."
Benjamin paused to think on it. "Nah, too much work. Besides, it's substance that matters more than style, right?"

"Right. I'm surprised you're not freaking out over this." Bogo himself was struggling to remain professional. After all, they were still in the precinct and he had a reputation to uphold.

"Well, would you want a fan going crazy on you in your dressing room after what happened the other day?"

"Fair point. Have you spoken to Alec since that night?"

"He came to see me soon after I was treated. He's a little upset about the store, but he's happy I'm okay."

Bogo hesitated. "Did he mention his father per chance?"

Benjamin's mood visibly dampened. "Mr. Elgen's not happy about the mall. That's all Alec said."

"I imagine he wouldn't be. How're your ribs?" Bogo asked as they finally made for the car.

Benjamin confirmed that other than a twinge every now and then, they were okay. He handed Bogo the keys as they stopped on either side of the vehicle.

"Good." Bogo replied as he opened the driver's side.

A snake leapt out at him, maw open wide.

The buffalo's heart skipped a beat and he leapt back with a shout, quickly losing his balance from sheer shock. He fell back on his rear and felt the serpent head-butt him in the stomach. Benjamin called Bogo's name from the other side of the car as the snake's long body followed its head out the car and draped itself over the stunned police chief's legs. Bogo didn't pause to think. He grabbed the snake by the neck and tail and flung it away... right towards Benjamin as he ran around the car to see what had happened.

"Ben!" Bogo yelled in horror at his mistake, yanking out his weapon and aiming towards the...

Bogo froze like the ground beneath him...

Towards the large yellow felt spring snake in Benjamin's paws.

Benjamin stared down at the joke toy he was holding in astonished silence for a few seconds before breaking into a fit of giggles.

Bogo lowered his weapon, barely aware of the frost on the ground melting and dampening his pants. "What. The heck. Is that?"

Benjamin examined the snake. It had a simple, cartoon like head with big plastic eyes and a wide-open red felt mouth. "He-he-he..." He kept giggling as he procured a small card that had been attached to the snake's mouth and read it. "Sir, promise me you won't flip out."

"Clawhauser, what is that thing?" Bogo could already feel his blood beginning to boil.

Benjamin let out one last giggle. "It's the joke snake I asked Wilde to get me."

Bogo released a cloud of mist from his nostrils. "I'm going to shoot him." He holstered his dart gun and got to his feet. "I'm going to shoot him and demote him and promote him and decorate him and shoot all his medals."
"Oh come on, sir. He obviously meant to get me with this!" Benjamin held the snake by the head so it faced his boss. He smiled innocently up at him just above the snake's overly shiny false eyes, his own genuine warm brown eyes gazing at Bogo almost pleadingly. His fingers pushed on the snake's jaw, and he spoke for it in a comically high voice. "It's Christmas, Mr. Powice Chief! Can you find it in your holly-staked heart to cut that silly dum-dum fox a break? Please?"

Bogo wished he could stay angry, but he couldn't. He exhaled loudly and brushed stray snow and frost off his pants. "Text Wilde and Hopps and tell them Wilde will be spending the entire New Year's Day writing parking tickets. Now get that thing in the car before I claw its eyes out."

Halfway to the location where the camera had been planted. Judy felt her phone vibrate. She quickly read the text, scowled, and looked to Nick. "Nick? Bogo got caught by your prank. You're dead."

"Rats."

Outside the dressing room, Benjamin was welcomed with open arms. Gazelle hugged him loosely, having likely been informed of his ribs, but was so excited that she had slipped into her mother tongue as she expressed her happiness at seeing him again. Bogo watched with mild envy, well aware that Benjamin deserved every second of this.

"I'm glad you're okay too, Gazelle!" Benjamin replied, looking a little pink in the cheeks from his idol's affection.

With a leg in bandages, Gazelle had donned a pair of sleek black leggings to go under her red sequined skirt. "I'm been worried about you since you were taken away in that ambulance." She breathed after letting go. "I see Cohen got my invitation to you okay."

"Yeah. How're your other dancers doing? Are Ian and Barry okay?"

"Yes, but I'll have to perform this year's Christmas concert with two dancers, I'm afraid. And this must be Chief Bogo."

"I'm honored that you invited me as well, Gazelle." Bogo spoke as calmly as he could, feeling almost giddy in the presence of the celebrated singer.

Gazelle offered a hoof and he shook it. "I want to personally thank you for rescuing us, Chief Bogo. I know you and your officers took a lot of risk coming into the building."

Bogo held up a hoof, inwardly appreciating her gratitude. "Just doing our jobs, ma'am."

Gazelle smiled coyly and eyed his shirt. "I've heard a lot about you. You know, for a mammal with a supposed heart of stone you look rather dashing."

Bogo's heart leapt and his ears grew hot. He must have had a very amusing look on his face, for Benjamin was quaking on the spot as he fought down another giggling fit. Having succeeded in breaking the ice surrounding the normally stony-faced buffalo, Gazelle chuckled.

"Come inside." She opened the door and led them into her dressing room. The room was expansive and warmly lit, with a soft red carpet and a mirror framed by round light bulbs. In a circle of leather sofas sat two mammals; Ombidia, Gazelle's Manager, and the doe that had accompanied Alec Casel to the mall.

"You?!” Benjamin gasped and pointed at the doe.
"You've met?" Gazelle looked between the two.

"I met her in the mall right before the incident. She threw a fit after a reporter badmouthed you on TV."

"He could have led every tabloid reporter and Veltro member right to her." Christine replied and got up from the sofa with a non-alcoholic cocktail in hoof. "Alec has told me a lot about you, Mr. Clawhauser."

"Alec?"

"Officer, this is Christine Antlaire, an old friend of mine." Gazelle moved to Christine's side. "She's been dating your friend since moving back here from France two years ago."

"You're Alec's girlfriend? Alec has a girlfriend?" Benjamin's jaw dropped. "Why didn't he tell me?!"

Christine gently held her glass with both hooves, looking slightly forlorn. "We've been keeping it a secret. Alec and I thought it would be best if we waited until his family sorted itself out before we told them. They're been under a lot of strain since..." She glanced at Bogo. "The incident."

Benjamin seemed to visibly deflate and he slowly sat down on the sofa opposite Ombidia, who was in the middle of texting on a shiny silver phone.

Bogo sighed, feeling a very slight ache from the thin scars on his eyebrow and snout. Of course they are.

"Anyway, it's good to meet you, Officer Clawhauser!" Ombidia leaned across the glass coffee table and shook the cheetah's paw. "I heard that you were of some assistance to my star the other night."

"Er, I..." Benjamin swallowed and didn't fully reply, still feeling down. Gazelle and Christine sat down beside the bison, the doe looking upset herself.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Clawhauser. I shouldn't have brought it up."

Benjamin mustered a smile. "Just Ben, thanks. Gazelle didn't mention that I would be meeting you too."

A smile returned to Christine's face. "Actually I'm here on Alec's behalf. He would have given it to you himself, but he's got a lot on his plate between his family and the loss of his store."

"I bet he would- wait, what 'it'?" Benjamin asked.

Christine procured a white and gold card from her handbag and gave it to him. The longer Benjamin read the words on the card, the wider his eyes grew. When he was done, he stared at Christine.

"You're inviting me to a Christmas party weekend?"

"At the Casel estate, yes." Christine nodded. "The entire family's going to be there."

Bogo crossed his arms, drumming his fingers on his forearm. "The entire family?"

"You know what I mean." Christine replied with the smallest of scowls. "Oh, and Gazelle will be there too."

Benjamin looked at the card again. "It says it'll be a costume party."

Bogo looked over the cheetah's shoulder. "And it's two days from now. Isn't that a little on short
Gazelle and Christine glanced at each other. "It is." Gazelle acknowledged.

Bogo looked at them both, his eyes narrowed as his police instincts kicked in. "Gazelle... why did you really bring us here?"

Curiously, Gazelle appeared to be relieved that he had caught on. She gestured towards the empty cushion beside Benjamin. "Sit down and I'll explain everything."

Ombidia scowled, pausing in the middle of a text. "Gazelle, are you sure about this? If the news gets word of it your image could...

"I'm not changing my mind, Mr. Ombidia." Gazelle replied sternly as Bogo sat down. "Christine, could you get the box out, please?" Christine got up and strode to a cupboard.

Benjamin looked at her with worry. "Miss Gazelle, what's wrong?"

Gazelle took a long sip of tea. "I'm just going to get right to the point... I'm being stalked by Veltro."

"YOU'RE BEING STALKED?!" Benjamin leapt to his feet, then immediately gasped in agony and dropped back down, clutching his torso. There were a tense couple of minutes while Bogo made sure that pain was the only thing Benjamin had inflicted on himself. "You're being stalked?" He repeated softly but with the same outrage.

"Yes."

"You're sure it's not just some reporter overstepping his bounds?" Bogo asked. Personally he wasn't very surprised; a celebrity being stalked was a stereotypical but unfortunately very real problem.

"I thought so too at first, but then these letters started coming."

Christine sat back down with a small box in hand. She lifted the lid to reveal a small cluster of letters with the words clearly cut out of magazines.

"May I?" Bogo asked. Gazelle nodded, and he took some of the letters out the box to read them. He soon found one thing they so far had in common. "I can see why you think Veltro is doing this. In every one of these letters the sender is demanding that you withdraw your support of the Tirari Town project and to change your mind about retiring from singing to become a full time politician."

"It's not just that." Gazelle replied quietly. "I sometimes get photographs of myself along with the letters, taken without my knowledge. They're in the box as well, as you can see."

"Did these letters come in envelopes?" Bogo asked upon noticing that said envelopes were absent.

"No. They've been showing up outside my dressing room once every two weeks, ever since I announced my support of Tirari Town, so I'm certain it's Veltro."

"That announcement was months ago. Why didn't you come to us sooner?"

"Mr. Ombidia advised me to ignore the letters, since I've received strange letters before and nothing came of it. But over the last month the letters have become more threatening. This last letter came the day of the mall's reopening, just after I got home from the hospital..."

She picked out one of the letters that Bogo hadn't yet read and showed it to him.
"You've ignored us for the last time, Gazelle." Bogo read aloud. If that wasn't a death threat he didn't know what was. "If we can confirm that these letters came from Veltro, then they've just implicated themselves as suspects of terrorism. We'll need to take these letters to have Forensics look at them."

"Of course." Gazelle took back the letters, put them back in the box and handed the whole thing to Bogo.

"Do you know of anyone else who might have sent these letters? Do you have any enemies other than Veltro?"

"None that I can name." Gazelle replied nervously. "After that last letter, I know it's only a matter of time before they make good on their threats. With the Casel estate being so isolated, it would be as good a place as any."

"Is that why you want me at the party?" Benjamin asked.

"I suggested to Mr. Casel that we have an officer or two attend the party to keep an eye out for trouble." Ombidia spoke. There was a faint whoosh as he sent another text. "Considering Officer Clawhauser's history with both Gazelle and the Casels, I thought he would be the best option."

"Clawhauser hasn't been out in the field in years." Bogo replied. "I strongly recommend that you have more officers present during the party. I can recommend two more."

"Wait, would Mr. Casel be okay with that?" Benjamin asked.

"I'll text Alec now. His parents may not approve of having cops running around their estate, but they won't refuse." Christine spoke, quickly typing and sending a text on her own phone. "If anything happens to Gazelle on his property, his reputation probably wouldn't survive."

There was a sudden sound, like a vacuum cleaner powering down, as the lights suddenly went out.

There were a few small gasps and curses of surprise in the pitch darkness, until one by one they turned on the lights of their phones, filling the room with beams of white tinted light.

"Alright, which idiot forgot the electric bill?" Bogo demanded once his own flashlight was activated.

"Must be a blown fuse." There was a rustling as Ombidia got up from the sofa. "I'll go find a maintenance worker."

"I'll go with you. The rest of you should go find a room with windows to wait this out." Christine got up with him. With their phones to guide them, they crept out the dressing room.

"Gazelle, where's the nearest room with windows?" Bogo asked, recalling how the corridor outside was all doors.

"That would be the staff room. I don't think they'll mind. Follow me." They left the room as Gazelle called Christine to let her know where they were going.

In the darkness and silence, the corridor was more unsettling than when they'd last walked through it. Bogo and Benjamin walked side-by-side, keeping Gazelle between them. "Stay between us, Gazelle." Benjamin spoke a little shakily. Bogo couldn't blame him, considering what had happened the last time he'd been in a dark corridor. They heard distant footsteps from up ahead, probably just Christine and Ombidia.
There was a jingle from Gazelle's phone. "Christine says she'll meet us in the staff room. Ombidia's just sent someone to check the power room, so the lights should come back on soon."

The instant Gazelle finished speaking, Bogo's ear twitched. It wasn't so much a sound as it was a sixth sense. All he knew was that there was something coming at them from behind. Like a person. Like an attacker. He didn't think twice before sending a spinning back fist flying over the heads of his two companions.

His fist struck the bone of a furry wrist. A metal object as cold as ice bounced off his arm. Hurried footsteps faded away into the darkness as something small and thin clattered on the floor.

"Sir?!" Benjamin turned round to see why Bogo had just thrown a punch, but it was too dark. He looked down and knelt to see what had fallen. "Oh my gosh, this is a knife!"

Gazelle clapped her hooves over her mouth, looking like she'd just witnessed a murder.

Bogo knelt down besides Benjamin. "Are you okay, you two?"

Gazelle nodded wordlessly. Bogo shone his phone's flashlight on the knife. It was clean, sharpened to perfection, and bore a very familiar crest on its glossy black handle.

"Oh my gosh." Benjamin repeated numbly when he also spotted the crest. "This knife... it's Alec's."
Alec's Alibi

Alec Casel came quietly.

They'd found him in his favorite cafe and asked him to come to the station without telling him why, only explaining that there had been an incident at the Animalia Arena. By the time Judy and Nick had returned from the Casel estate with little to show for it except for the stone camera, their coworkers were questioning him in one of the three interrogation rooms within the precinct.

As they followed Officer Higgins and McHorn into the building, they quickly spotted Gazelle, her manager and Christine Antlaire sharing one of the stone benches in the lobby. Benjamin wasn't at the front desk, which meant that it was currently his turn to have his statement taken.

"Hello. We came back as soon as we heard." Judy spoke as she approached the three witnesses. 
"Are you okay?"

"We're fine, thank you." Gazelle replied, though her expression said otherwise.

"Where's the chief?"

"He went to his office to call Alec's father." Christine said. " Didn't you tell him while you were at his house?"

"We were driving into the city when we got the call." Nick said. "Where's Alec Casel now?"

"In the interrogation room, I think."

"Okay. If you'll excuse us we've got to talk to-" Nick cut himself off when Benjamin materialized before them, an uncommonly stony look on his face.

"Alec didn't do it." He said.

"Buddy, we heard what happened. How're you doing?" Nick asked.

"Alec didn't do it." Benjamin repeated in earnest. " He was at a meeting with his staff all day. He didn't do it."

"And you're right, one hundred percent." Nick replied, putting a smirk on his face.

"Huh?" Benjamin's cold expression faltered.

"When we heard what happened, we made a few house calls on the way here to try and track Alec down." Judy pulled out a disc.

"Against my advice, I might add." Nick added with faux indignation. "I didn't want her taking on a case without Bogo's permission after what happened last time. Not that she cared, of course."

"Anyway..." Judy shot Nick a look. "His staff all confirmed he'd been at the meeting right before the blackout at the arena. The security at the building where the meeting was held even provided footage."

"We've also called our friends in Precinct Four." Higgins spoke, subtly startling the fox. He hadn't realized that Higgins and McHorn had stopped to join the conversation. "Turns out that three days ago, they'd received a report of a break in at Alec Casel's apartment. His knife case was one of the
"Items that had been stolen."

"It's also impossible for him to travel from the meeting in time to commit the crime. His alibi's perfect." Nick patted Benjamin's elbow. "You can breathe easy, Ben. Alec didn't do it."

Benjamin's entire body seemed to slump as he relaxed, his scowl becoming a smile. "I knew it. Oh thank goodness. You should tell Bogo."

"Tell me what?" Bogo thundered from behind the two partners. They jumped, did a full one-eighty in mid-air, and landed to face their boss. He did not look happy.

"Woah." Nick muttered, taking in his red shirt and the rest of the ensemble. "You look like a Spanish tap-dancer."

Judy held out the DVD, speaking quickly before Bogo could trample the fox. "Sir, we have proof that Alec Casel was not capable of committing the crime. We can also give you a list of witnesses who can testify to that."

Bogo narrowed his eyes at the disc as he took it. "I don't remember authorizing you to investigate this..." Judy's ears dropped like dead leaves. "And you know what? So long as this keeps Alec's father from making life hell for the ZPD, I don't care. But Alec will have to stay in custody until we've examined this evidence."

Benjamin opened his mouth, as if to tell Chief Bogo to get a move on, but stopped himself just in time.

"When can I see Alec?" Christine got up from the bench.

"When he's released from custody. Miss Antlaire, Mr. Ombidia, we've taken your statements and established your alibis, so you can go whenever you want to. I'll take this evidence to Forensics." Bogo turned to Hopps and Wilde. "In the meantime, I want you two to wait here for Mr. Casel. When he arrives, take him to my office immediately."

Nick grimaced, not looking forward to meeting the Casel patriarch face to face, but it was Higgins who spoke up. "Sir, with all due respect, isn't greeting visitors the Front Desk Officer's job?"

Even Nick was surprised by Benjamin's subsequent reaction. "No, it's really, really not!" He threw his paws up defensively and stepped back, as if the very idea had terrified him. "Well, it is, but... I... Sorry. I can't greet Mr. Casel. Not after what happened."

Bogo huffed and rubbed the scar on his eyebrow. Higgins blinked at Benjamin before sighing ruefully. "Aw jeez. Sorry, I forgot. The break room's quiet if you want to sit this one out."

Benjamin shook his head. "No, I don't want to hide from him. Besides, I'll be seeing him at the party in a couple of days, so-"

He was stopped by the weight of Bogo's hoof on his shoulder. "It's for the best, Clawhauser. You can face him when he's in a better mood."

With that, Benjamin acceded to joining Bogo in the elevator. Nick and Judy waited in silence until they heard the distant ding of the elevator doors closing before turning to their larger coworkers. "What was that all about?" Judy asked.

McHorn shook his head. "Sorry, Hopps. Not our place to say."
There was no music in the plain silver elevator, just a soft steady hum as it slowly ascended towards the floor where the Forensics lab was located. Benjamin and Bogo leaned against the wall on either side of the small space, staring down at the scuffed metal floor. Though old, the elevator wasn't as old as that of the rest of the building, having been added a decade or two after elevators were invented. Was it the nineteen-thirties? Forties? Benjamin didn't know. Maybe he'd just gotten his facts completely wrong and a quick Internet search on his phone was in order.

Thankfully, so far as he knew, the facts they'd gathered so far on this case were for the most part straight. Someone was stalking Gazelle, and there was a strong possibility that the stalker is connected in some way to the terrorist attack at the mall. They'd used Alec's knife, but Alec had a perfect alibi. Benjamin worried about him, all alone in the harshly lit interrogation room being questioned over a crime he did not commit. Nearly everyone in the ZPD knew of Alec's past, but Benjamin could only hope that whoever was doing the questioning wouldn't use any tactics that would bring back... some unpleasant memories.

He still remembered the day he'd first met Alec Casel, as clear as day. He'd just graduated from the Police Academy and rented an apartment in the heart of Savanna Central. It was a similar beginning to Judy's, now that Benjamin thought about it. The apartment had had more than one room and a much better view, but the bed had been creaky, the wallpaper looked like it'd been peeled from the walls of a haunted house, and he'd been naive enough to not see the clusterfudge he'd been about to wander into until it was too late.

Alec had been living in the apartment next door for about half a year before Benjamin came along. That was one of the very few things Alec had told him when they'd first bumped into each other in the outside hallway. Benjamin had been carrying the last of the cardboard boxes when he'd spotted Alec trying to get into his own apartment without been seen. Benjamin had said hello, did everything his parents told him to do when meeting someone for the first time, but in the end had been unsuccessful in breaking the ice. After two awkward minutes, Alec had quickly said goodbye, went into his apartment without another word, and shut the door. Some people just didn't like socializing, and Alec had appeared to be one of them.

At least until later that day when Benjamin had heard someone enter Alec's apartment without knocking. And the day after that.

And the day after that.

"You don't have to go to the party." Bogo spoke suddenly, snapping Benjamin out of his reverie. He suddenly realized that the elevator had stopped, but the buffalo had made no move to leave. "You know that, don't you?" The doors slid back shut, leaving the elevator in silence.

Benjamin raised his head to meet Bogo's eyes. "What else can I do?"

"Leave it to Hopps and Wilde. Mr. Casel won't object to having the heroes of Zootopia attend his party. You could just stay here and we'll update you every time something comes up."

Benjamin set his jaw and shook his head. "If someone's really out to get Alec's family, then I have to be there for him. Besides, who in their right mind would turn down an invite to a party that Gazelle's going to?"

Behind the concern, he saw a flash of light-hearted envy cross Bogo's eyes, and the buffalo smirked. "Good point. Have you decided what you're going to dress up as yet?"

"Nuh-uh."
"Well, you'll have plenty of time to think about that in the break room. We'll radio you when Casel's gone."

He pressed a button, reopening the doors. As he turned to leave, his shirt caught the gleam of the elevator's lights. The gently shining crimson fabric brought up images of raspberry iced donuts and Gazelle's trademarked concert outfit, and to look at it warmed Benjamin's heart.

"You look nice."

Bogo stopped in between the doors. "What?"

Benjamin felt himself warm up a little in the rest of his body. "I said you look nice." He twiddled his thumbs. "I just didn't want this morning to end on a bad note."

"Oh. Thank you."

He left the elevator. The second the doors shut, Benjamin reached out and pressed the button for his own desired floor.

As the elevator began to ascend, Benjamin felt the same thing happen to the corners of his mouth and he looked around at the cabin. The memory of the first time they'd been in the elevator alone was a bittersweet one, but it made him smile all the same.

While waiting for Elgen Casel's arrival, Nick had been expecting one of two things; an insensitive sleaze with a skinny doe under his arm, or an overbearing, stonehearted mammal unhappy about having to miss his 'very important meeting'.

What came through the door was definitely leaning towards the second thing. There was bitter coldness in every line on his face, and there wasn't a single crease in his bluish grey suit. A lion in a black suit stood by his side, his gaze even icier as he watched for signs of trouble. Elgen stopped when he emerged from the swivelling door, his eyes on the unmanned front desk.

His face betrayed nothing, but Nick would bet his tail that this was a mammal that was still sore over losing a mayoral election. Judy nudged his arm to get him moving, and together they walked over to greet the Casel Corporation Chairman.

"Elgen Casel?" Judy spoke up, making the moose look down. His eyes narrowed just a little, but other than that his expression remained unchanged.

"Officer Hopps, I presume?" Just like his son, Elgen spoke in perfect English. "I heard you arrested my son earlier this morning."

"We've already established an alibi." Judy replied quickly, her ears drooping as if weighed down by his gaze alone. "They just need to review the evidence before they release him."

"And how much time will that waste?"

"An hour, two at the most. Shall we escort you to Chief Bogo's office?"

"Don't bother. I know where it is."

Elgen strode between them and made a beeline for the elevator without another word towards either of them.

"Wow." Nick spoke with a sneer. "It took him less than thirty seconds to establish himself as a jerk."
"That's got to be a record."

"He's got a lot of reasons to be bitter, Nick." Judy muttered, her gaze tilted towards the floor. "This time two years ago, you were the same way."

"So he lost an election. Go over there and tell him to build a bridge and get over it."

"Nick, according to Honey's data that loss was a major blow for his family." Judy pulled out her notebook, in which she had written the most important points of Honey’s data for reference. "His wife, Selke Casel, lost her status in her social circle after the scandal with Chief Bogo. His older son, Edward Casel, told his father that he didn't want to inherit the corporation, and things have been tense between them ever since. Then there's what happened to the sister."

"Kate?"

"Lake Casel."

"Cripes, they're like a convention for celebrity kids. 'Cept maybe the older one, lucky guy."

"She'd gotten married to one Carlos Elkervera during the mayoral race, but after her father lost the election, the marriage soured. They're still together, but Elgen considers him to be just another black stain on his family. The only good point is that soon after the election, Alec blossomed as a chocolatier. The popular opinion is that he's the Casel family's golden child. I wonder what the other kids think about that?"

"Maybe we'll find out when we talk to them. We should find out where they live as soon as possible."

"Um, they may not appreciate that, officers." Christine spoke up. Nick and Judy had forgotten that she, Gazelle and the manager were still sitting on the bench. "I've met all three of them. Edward might be happy to cooperate, but the others won't like you prying without a very good reason."

"Okay, quick question." Nick scratched an itch on his back. "Is Alec's dad always like that?"

"He's always been a very serious person." Christine replied with a nod. "But if he seems worse than usual, it's because of the fallout from the election. He's having a lot of trouble moving on, you see."

Nick and Judy looked at her quizzically. Elgen Casel was one of the most powerful mammals in the state. The loss of a mayoral election he didn't really need shouldn't still be hurting him after five years.

"Excuse me, but are we missing something?" Nick asked. "Just how much harm did the scandal do?"

Christine clasped her hooves together. "More harm than you think."

Nick and Judy were still brooding on Christine's answer two hours later as they strolled across the park outside the precinct towards the Zootopia Central Station.

True to their word, the footage they'd collected confirmed that Alec had an indisputable alibi and he was released not long after. He left along with his father, Christine, Gazelle and Mr. Ombidia.

Judging from the pieces of conversation Nick and Judy had managed to catch during their departure, the recent attempt on Gazelle's life meant that they had a lot to discuss concerning the Casel estate's security. The moment they were gone, Benjamin returned to his desk and informed Nick and Judy that Bogo wanted to see them in his office. The first thing he did after ordering them to sit was to tell
them everything Gazelle had told him and Benjamin in her dressing room about the stalker, including the possibility that they were affiliated with Veltro and had a hand in the mall incident.

"I've just spoken with Mr. Casel." Bogo had spoken with a cold glare. The discussion must not have gone smoothly. "Two days from now, he and Alec will be hosting the Casel family's annual Christmas party at their estate, and this year Gazelle will be attending."

"Security will look after her, right?" Nick had asked.

"Yes, but that's not all. Alec has invited Officer Clawhauser to attend as well."

"Well, lucky him."

"It's not just as a guest. Gazelle, Alec and Miss Antlaire all feel that it may be safer if a police officer is present at this party. I took advantage of this to request that two more officers be invited as added protection."

Judy had put a paw on her mouth. Nick had felt his smirk disappear as he too realized where this was going.

"Sir, you didn't."

"You're both considered heroes in Zootopia. That reputation makes you the most plausible candidates to pose as guests. It's also the only reason Mr. Casel accepted my request."

"His reputation's so low that he's mooching off of ours, huh?"

Bogo had then gripped the edge of his desk and loomed over the fox. "Don't you dare mouth off like that again, Wilde. Especially if Mr. Casel is within hearing distance." He had sat back in his chair with a creak. "One more thing. This is a costume party, so I want you to go straight to the nearest store first thing after you leave."

"Greeeeeaataat..." Nick had moaned and slumped in the chair, nearly knocking Judy off it.

"By the way, dress in anything inappropriate and you can scrub the precinct toilets in it."

Nick had stroked his chin as he thought on this. "So, I guess Tod, Tarzan and Jessica Rabbit are off the table."

"Dis-missed."

Now it was two thirty, half an hour until the train would leave for Bunnyburrow. The army of rabbits that had stormed to the city after hearing about the mall incident had already left the day before, leaving only Stu, Bonnie and Cotton left to say goodbye. Nick and Judy found them standing just inside the main entrance, all packed and ready to go.

"Judy!" They cried and ran to hug their daughter upon spotting her.

"Thank gosh we got here in time!" Judy spoke after kissing both their cheeks.

"Us too." Stu replied, beaming. "So did my tip do any good?"

"We can neither confirm nor deny, Mr. Hopps." Nick spoke. "Sorry, but we can't discuss the case with you."

"Of course, I understand. Also, after what you did for us I can say that you've earned the right to call
"Okay... Stu. How're Cotton's parents holding up?"
"They're feeling a bit better now, so far as I know. I think it helped that Cotton didn't get hurt in that whole kerfuffle."

Nick felt something small and warm tug gently on his tail. "Mr. Nick, have you read my letter yet?" Cotton asked.

"Not yet, kit." Nick knelt down to speak to her. "But me and the other guys who helped save you and your grandparents are gonna get together soon and we'll read it together."

Cotton seemed okay with that, as she gave him a thumbs up before returning to Bonnie's side.

"We should go join the queue now." Nick addressed the older rabbits, jerking a paw at the queue outside the ticket booth. "If it gets any longer it could be twenty minutes before you get tickets."

After they joined the queue, mercifully just in time before a small herd of zebra showed up to get their own tickets, Nick felt Judy gently elbow his arm. "Nick, shall we tell them about we're going in a couple of days?"

Stu and Bonnie's ears pricked. "Where are you going? The north pole?" Stu chortled at his festive joke.

"They're your family, you tell them." Nick replied.

"Fine. We've been invited to a Christmas party weekend by this friend of Benji's, and it's gonna be in costume."

"Oh that's wonderful!" Bonnie exclaimed. The group shuffled forward in the line, now five mammals away from the booth. "Have you two decided who you're going as?"

"I'm guessing a police officer is out of the question now that you are." Stu added.

Judy shrugged. "I haven't decided yet, have you, Nick?"

"I've got a few ideas."

"Oh, oh!" Cotton bounced on her toes, giggling with delight. She loved costumes. "You've gotta be Robin Hood and Maid Marian!"

"A fox as Robin Hood? Isn't that little cliché?" Nick teased kindly, even he mental conjured up the image. He wasn't sure about wearing a costume without pants, but an all-purple dress would bring out the color in Judy's eyes.

Cotton tapped her thought and thought for a moment. "What about Ariel and Prince Eric?"

Nick thought about that. He would rock the white shirt, but Bogo wouldn't approve of his officer roaming the Casel estate in nothing but a shell bra, even if Nick personally didn't mind. "A little impractical, isn't it? Sure, your aunt might be able to pull off the flippers with those feet of hers-ouch!" Judy had punched his arm.

"Yeah, you're right." Cotton replied in mild disappointment. "Aunt Judy looks gross in green."

"Hey!" Judy lightly tapped her niece's ear.
"What about Beauty and the Wildebeest?" Cotton looked Nick up and down. "Nah. Aunt Judy's pretty enough, but you're not ugly enough."

Nick wasn't sure if he should be flattered or not by that statement. "Er, what if I was the prince after the curse is broken?"

Cotton looked him up and down again, like a stylist analyzing a model. "Yeah, that could work!"

"Oh sweet cheese and crackers." Judy put a paw over her face. "Cotton, do you have ideas that are not a romantic couple?"

Cotton paused to think again. They were now two mammals away from the ticket booth. "Uuuuuuuuuuuu... Christian and Ana?"

"What?!" There were incredible reactions from all three rabbits. Stu's ears shot up so fast his cap fell off. Bonnie gasped loudly and clapped her paws to her mouth. Judy got halfway between the 'cr' word before stopped herself with a paw over her own mouth.

"You know, from Fifty Shades of Prey." Cotton looked around at her family in bewilderment.

"I know! But are you telling me that you've seen that movie?" If their granddaughter said yes, Bonnie and her husband would surely faint.

"Ew, no!" Cotton stuck her tongue out. "Aunt Judy said that it's full of people beating each other up like those slaves they talk about in history class! She says that they do loads of gross experiments, like a lady and a guy getting together to make a beast with two backs!"

"Judith!" Bonnie yelled, eyes blazing.

Judy turned bright red and pulled on her ears. "Oh my gosh, I had no idea she'd heard me!"

This was getting too much for Nick. If he didn't change the subject now, he was going to crack up and cause a scene. "Change of topic! Change of topic, please!"

"Next!" Called the hippo manning the ticket booth.

"Oh thank God!"

Nick, Judy and Cotton stepped aside, so the booth wouldn't get too crowded as Stu and Bonnie stepped up. Judy was now speechless, holding her ears in front of her face, leaving Nick to get the conversation back on track. "So, Cotton. Take Judy out of the equation for a second. Who do you think I should dress up as?"

Cotton once again scrutinized him. "You could pull off Mr. Foulfellow, but his character's kinda offensive to foxes. What about Eugene?"

Nick's ear twitched. "Eugene who?"

"Eugene Fitzherbert."

"Sounds like his parents had an obsessive love of sherbet lemon."

Cotton seemed to lift her entire body off the floor a couple of inches as another thought came to her. "Wait, I've got a cool idea! What if..."

"If?" Nick gently egged her on.
"What if Mr. Benji and Mr. Chief Bogo were Beauty and the Wildebeest?"

Judy let go of her ears and they shot straight up, revealing wide eyes and a wide-open mouth.

"Oh my gosh..." Nick murmured as he pictured them in his head.

"Cotton, cheese and crackers!" Judy cried, drawing looks from her parents and other mammals.

"What? They look cute together!" Cotton crossed her arms defensively.

"Cotton, Chief Bogo isn't even going to the party!"

"Awwww..." Cotton moaned as Stu asked if everything was alright. Judy quickly replied that it was, even as her face turned redder than ever.

Nick was smirking. He still couldn't get that image out of his head... Benjamin in a poofy gold dress and gloves... Buffalo Butt all decked out in seventeenth-century blue... "They do look cute together..."

"Quit imagining it!" Judy snapped him out of the vision. "I'm sorry, sweetie, but I don't think they're like that. They're very different people after all."

So are we, in a way, Nick thought and shrugged. "Eh. Still a better love story than Twilight."
"Eugene Fitzherbert. " Nick muttered the very next morning as they made the final stretch towards the station, his ears erect as gears grinded together in his skull. Judy ignored him. "Eugene Fitzherbert." He muttered as they stepped onto the lush green grass of the central park. Judy glanced sharply at him. "Eugene Fitzherbert." He muttered again as they passed the fountain. Judy pressed her lips together and exhaled through her nose, irritated. "Eugene Fitzherbert." He muttered yet again as they approached the stone steps leading to the precinct. Judy's ears dropped for the umpteenth time that day. "Eugene Fit-"

"Oh for crying out loud, she meant Flynn Rider from Wrangled, Nick!" Judy snapped, stopping them just at the foot of the stairs. "You saw the film, remember?"

Nick paused, with a small sly glint in his eye that suggested he meant to wind her up. "Don't know him."


Nick shrugged. "Nope. Doesn't ring any bells."

Judy rolled her eyes. "The hot guy with the faulty smolder."

"Oh him?!" Nick's eyes brightened. "Now that's my kind of guy. I'll see if I can find a costume before we meet the guys tonight. What about you? Any ideas yet?"

"Mulan."

"Wow. No hesitation."

"She's been one of my role models since I saw the movie. The only thing I haven't decided on is which outfit to wear."

"Why? How many outfits does she have?"

Judy proceeded to list the outfits with the fingers on her paw. "Her green dress, her bride dress, her soldier disguise, her training outfit and her blue outfit at the end."

Nick pulled out his phone. "I've got an idea. Wheel Decide."

"I figured we'll decide, Nick."

"No. Wheel Decide." Nick started tapping on the screen.

"Of course we'll decide which outfit I'll wear."

Nick's ears lowered a bit. "No, I mean-" He paused as he got the app on. "I mean we'll use this app to decide which outfit you'll wear for the party."

Judy snapped her fingers. "And that's how we'll decide."

Nick grimaced. "No! The app itself is called-" He stopped when he saw her giggling. "Okay, now you're the one having me on!"
Judy snorted with laughter as Nick sighed and began typing the names of Mulan's outfits into the different sections of the wheel on the screen. "Okay, let's see what you're going to wear tomorrow." He pressed the black button beneath the wheel. It spun for three seconds before slowing to a stop. Judy leaned towards the screen. The arrow was resting on Bathing Suit. "Nick, there weren't any bathing suits in Ancient China."

"But Mulan was bathing in the movie." Nick replied slyly. "Wasn't she?"
Three seconds later, it dawned on Judy. "Why you little-"

She chased him all the way through the front entrance up to Benjamin's desk, where the cheetah had been replaced by a female ocelot going by the name of Officer Ceolot. That didn't bother either Judy or Nick; like them, he had been given the day off to prepare for the party.

Once Judy caught up to Nick and punished him with a smack to the back of the skull, she stepped up to address Ceolot. "Good morning. Are there any computers we can borrow? We need to review some information for the case we're working on."

"The only one would be Officer Pennington's." She replied. "He's still on medical leave."

Nick's response to this was more than a little sarcastic. "Noooo... I thought he was on paid migration."

"Nick." Judy snapped before thanking Ceolot, and they strode into the elevator to ascend to the next floor up.

Inside the elevator, Nick turned to Judy with a raised eyebrow. "Remind me again why we're spending a lovely winter's day in a over-air conditioned police station?"

"With my laptop being repaired and the PDA on charge, this will be our last chance to go through Honey's information before the party. We can't take the flash drive with us, Nick."

"Didn't we go through everything?"

"Everything that is obviously relevant to the case. I want to look in the rest of the files. There might be something, a small detail that could be a lead."

The elevator stopped and opened, and they walked into the office. Officer Pennington's desk wasn't far, being in the near left corner of the large room. They could see the massive screen with its screensaver full of photographs of various events in Pennington's life.

"Carrots, the main priority at this party is to make sure Gazelle and the Casels stay safe. We should save the sleuthing for afterwards."

"I just want to have a look." Judy replied stubbornly.

They reached the desk, and took turns climbing onto the chair before raising it so they could see the top of the desk. That was when they saw that beneath the monitor was a keyboard three times bigger than Judy's bed. Nick and Judy fell silent, taking in numerous buttons the size of dinner plates. The touchpad was as big as a dining table.

Nick's smirk faltered. "Anyone else see the flaw in your plan?"

Judy pursed her lips, cracked her fingers and clambered onto the desk. "Uh, Carrots, what're you doing?"
"Using the computer." Judy replied matter-of-factly.

"You can't be serious. That keyboard's so big a bunch of us could probably play twister on that thing! This I've gotta see!"

Judy did her best to ignore the fox as he leaned back against the back of the massive chair. She pressed a button, taking off the screensaver, and plugged the flash drive into the side of the screen. "See? It's not so hard." She said happily.

"You still have to use the giant metal yoga mat."

"Whatever." She went down on all fours before the touchpad and slid her finger over the smooth surface. Nothing happened. She tried again with both index fingers. "Uh oh." Nick teased. "Is there a problem?"

"No, there is not, Nick!" Judy tried using her entire paw, and thankfully this time the arrow followed the movement, allowing her to click on the flash drive, opening up a menu of different files. Judy felt her tail twitch with triumph, but before she could choose one a small box with Honey's skull drawn in the corner opened up demanding a password.

"What did Honey say the password was again, Nick?" Judy asked. "Nick?"

She turned her head. Nick was staring at her with a small, amused grin on his face, but he wasn't looking at her face. Judy stared back, glancing behind her to see what had caught his attention. Nick's eyes darted to her. He snapped out of his stupor, chuckling nervously. "What was that, fluff?"

Judy narrowed her eyes at him. "What's Honey's special password for her flash drive?"

"Erm... 'The magic word.' No capitals."

"Ok. Thanks." Judy stood up and began rapidly stepping on the buttons on the board.

"I didn't know you could tap dance, Carrots." Nick spoke with amusement, having gotten over his prior embarrassment.

"Shut up, Nick!" Judy stopped typing and prepared to move the arrow over the 'open' button on the screen.

"Woah, hold up!" Nick yelled suddenly. "You didn't spell that right!"

Judy looked at the screen. "What do you mean, I spelled it perfectly!"

"Honey may be a little nuts, but she's not stupid. She wouldn't make a password so simple."

Judy hadn't realized. Every time they'd looked at the flash drive, it had been Nick who typed the password. "Okay, how did Honey spell it?"

"T, then for the H she uses the bracket above zero, the little dash next to it and the bracket above nine."

The bewildered Judy deleted the entire password, retyped W, then held her foot on shift while she typed the three symbols to make up )-(.

"Oh, now I get it." She marveled. "Now I suppose E is the £ sign."

"Right in one."
Judy frowned, her heart sinking a little when she saw the £ symbol above the number three, more than halfway across the board. Keeping one foot on the shift, Judy crawled on her paws across the board, stretching her body out until it could stretch no further. She reached out for the button, her arm aching with the strain. She was painfully aware of the amused smile on Nick’s face.

She strained. She stretched. Alas, her slightly twitching finger fell short.

"Carrots, that is impossible to reach." Nick replied bluntly.

Judy shot him a dark look. "Would you kindly get up here and press that button for me?"

"Alright, I'll help you out. But I won't do it kindly."

Nick climbed up and strode over to the other side of the board. He scrutinized the numerous buttons before stepping on one beneath the capital button.

"Nick, what're you-" Judy stopped when Nick bowed down and nonchalantly pressed on the three symbol. He released both buttons and stepped back.

_She'd forgotten the other shift button._

"Oh, you poor, dumb bunny." Nick sighed regretfully.

Judy jumped to her feet, seething. "Ok, I admit it. This time it was my fault."

"So, you're not currently plotting any petty revenge schemes?"

"Not. Yet."

"The sooner we get these extra files read, the sooner we can go shopping." Nick typed the rest of the password, substituting A for , I for ! and C for in the process, and pressed Enter.

They sat down before the touch pad. Nick allowed Judy to have control over the little arrow on the screen. There were three folders full of files that had been deemed irrelevant to the case, and Judy meant to read all of them. Beside her, Nick pulled out a notebook, ready to write down a list of names of files that provided something interesting.

She clicked on the first folder, named _Family Histories_, and found that each file was a lengthy info dump on each member of the Casel Family. Judy and Nick spent nearly an hour reading them from top to bottom. Honey had written everything down to the finest details.

After going through the entire folder, Nick held up the notebook.

"Not much in this one, aside from possible motives." He muttered. "Aside from the master of the family losing a mayoral election that he believes he's entitled, everyone in the family lost something from the Bogo scandal. For a while, Selke Casel became a pariah in her social circle. They said it was her and Elgen's fault for being crappy parents. Like they're any better."

"What about their children?"

"Edward Casel is a huge fan of Gazelle, and I mean huge. It said in his file that he completed his collection of Gazelle merchandise two months ago, and used her favorite color to paint his car. Who knows, maybe he took it too far and started sending threatening letters."

"We'll have to prove that he's connected to Veltro, first." Judy spoke.
"Lake and Carlos were only married for two weeks before election day. Maybe one or both of them blames daddy's failed campaign for their ruined marriage."

"Possibly. Out of all of them, Alec's the only one who didn't lose anything from the election."

"Finally, so far as Honey can tell, Christine Antlaire is not affiliated with the Illamanati or any government agency and secret society that she knows of. She did have a MUI charge during her freshman year."

"Migrating Under Influence is hardly relevant, Nick."

"Ok, so overall everyone except Alec and his girlfriend has a potential motive, provided they can even be considered suspects. Christine and Alec both have alibi's, and aside from Edward I can't see why any of the others would target Gazelle."

"Potential motive isn't enough, Nick. Let's examine the next folder."

The next folder, named Casel Corporation, was full of files of information concerning the Casel Estate, their business empire and their various properties and construction projects. A zoogle map image of the Casel Estate had several circles drawn on the surrounding forest, possible locations for the Casel Cathedral. It was soon apparent that the information had been gleaned from a variety of Internet sites, but there were also files full of Honey's notes concerning theories of the properties being a front for black market dealings, secret government research facilities, Veltro targeting the properties because of a personal vendetta against the Casel Family...

"That's interesting." Judy murmured. "It seems Honey thinks the attack on the mall was less about getting at the Casel Corporation than it was getting back at the Casel Family."

"She may have a point." Nick hurriedly scribbled the file's name. "Alec's store was in that mall, and someone tried to frame him by using his knife to attack Gazelle. We need to find out if he has any enemies."

"And if any other Casels have been victims of crime in the last few months. Let's check out the last file."

Nick took over the touch pad, opening the final folder named The Chief Bogo Incident. In it was a digital copy of every article ever written about the scandal, and they all told the same story: on December tenth, near the precinct's private parking lot, a Casel smashed a bottle into Chief Bogo's face, causing facial injury. The combination of lack of witnesses, no photos and the culprit escaping arrest meant that it was never revealed which Casel committed the assault. However, the fact that it was one of Elgen's Casel's children had dealt a crippling blow to his family's reputation, and by extension is mayoral campaign.

"I wonder why Bogo didn't tell the press who did it?" Judy asked. "You talk to him and find out. I'll check the rest of these files."

And so Judy took the elevator up to the top floor and soon after knocked on the door to Bogo's office. "What is it now, Hopps?" He called.

Judy didn't bother asking how he knew it was her as she entered. Bogo was at his usual spot behind the desk, but what wasn't usual was that he wasn't reading or writing anything. Instead he was gazing silently at an empty spot on the desk, absent-mindedly rubbing at his wrist.

"Something wrong with your hoof, sir?" Judy asked.
Bogo blinked and laid his arms down on the desk. "No, Hopps. I'm just thinking about what almost happened to Gazelle yesterday."

"She was really lucky you were there, sir."

"Yes. She was lucky."

"Sir, is something wrong?"

Bogo scowled slightly, but not at her. "It's probably nothing. What do you want, Hopps?"

"We wanted to ask you about the scandal a few years ago. When a Casel hit you with a broken bottle." She wasn't entirely surprised when Bogo's scowl deepened.

"And why are you asking me about that?"

"The flash drive has a folder full of articles about that incident, but none of them mention which Casel committed the assault. We were wondering why you didn't tell the press, sir."

Bogo rubbed the bridge of his nose. "Because the Casels have suffered enough from that whole fiasco without one of their own going to jail for it, and because Elgen has vowed to do everything in his power to make our lives miserable if I tell anyone."

"I see. And if we get proof that it's relevant to our current case..."

"Get the proof. Then we'll talk."

Judy's phone buzzed at that moment. "Excuse me, sir. It's my partner."

"Put it on speaker." Bogo ordered.

"We've been doing that a lot, lately." Judy muttered as she obeyed him. "What've you got, Nick?"

Nick's voice was tinted with bewilderment as it blared from the phone. "Carrots, you're not going to believe this, but there's a sub-folder full of information on Benjamin Clawhauser."

"What?!" Judy looked at Bogo, who stiffened in his desk chair.

"And it's not just a mini-biography like the Casels." Nick went on. "There's a list of all the addresses he's lived at, including the current one. Date of birth. Criminal record, or lack thereof. Cell phone number, everything you can acquire through legal means. It's a freakin' smorgasbord here."

Judy looked at the office window, in the general direction of the front desk. "Why would our informant gather information on him?"

"It wasn't her. All this info was collected by someone else, one Detective Basil. It looks like someone in the Casel family hired him to do a background check on our buddy."

"But why would they do that?"

"Probably when he got chummy with Alec. Maybe they didn't like having a commoner hanging around one of their kids."

"Color me surprised." Bogo growled.

"You'll be happy to know that whoever hired that detective was wasting their time. I did a little
digging to see why our informant thought that information was so important, and I am pleased to inform you that our front desk officer is as clean as a whistle."

"Nope. Still not surprised." Bogo put on his glasses and started digging through one of his drawers. "I would appreciate it if you could keep this from Clawhauser until further notice. I don't want him going to their estate with this hanging over his head."

"Understood, sir." Nick said. "There's one more thing. All this information was collected five years ago according to the dates."

"Roundabout when he joined the force."

"That and there's no mention of which Casel hired the detective."

"Just like with your assault." Judy glanced at Bogo. He glared back at her.

"I've told you before. If I tell you and somehow it reaches the news, Elgen will absolutely make our lives hell."

Judy swallowed, partially understanding that this stonewalling was for the best. For now. "What if it's relevant, sir?"

Bogo repeated his earlier words with an icy voice.

"Get the proof. Then we'll talk."

Judy nodded. "Sir, I have one more question. Why did you keep Clawhauser out of the way when Mr. Casel came by yesterday?"

Bogo remained silent for a few moments as he mentally deliberated. "Because as far as he is concerned, that feline is the cause of his misery."
Ever since the revelation in Bogo's office, the question of why Mr. Casel held Benjamin of all mammals responsible for his failed campaign gnawed at Judy's gut like a persistent maggot, but right now she and Nick had more time-pressing matters to attend to.

The Arandelle Costume Store was a large store on the outskirts of the Meadowlands, and it was on Veronica Wilde's recommendation that Judy and Nick drove there first thing after they'd finished reading the last of Honey's accumulated files. When they entered the store they followed the signs until they found the Disney section in the nearest right corner, fortunately right next to the fitting rooms.

As they walked, Judy sent a quick text profusely thanking Veronica for sending them here. Aside from generic costumes for princesses, super-spies and the like, there were other sections with themes such as Game of Horns, Shakesbearean plays, and video game characters. "It's like Castco for costumes." Judy muttered.

Once they found all the Mulan costumes in the second aisle, Nick put on his Wheel Decide app once more. "Okay, let's try this again. No jokes, I promise."

Judy's gaze panned the entirety of the aisle, until something at the end caught her eye and made her breath catch in her throat. "Actually, Nick, I've got a better idea."

"You want to do a costume test montage, don't you?"

"Nicholas Wilde, you know me all too well." Judy allowed herself a small chuckle. "But that's not what I'm talking about. Look."

She pointed to the two elk-deer she had spotted browsing through the large size costumes in the aisle next door.

"Is that… Alec Casel?" Nick asked for the sake of it.

"Yep."

"And I'm just going to assume that the big lug with him is his big brother."

"Yep."

"Are we going to waltz over and start asking them questions?"

"Ye-I dunno."

"Come on, I can see it in your face. You want to know what Ben did to upset their dear old dad."

Judy forcibly turned her attention to one of the Mulan costumes and started feeling the texture of the cloth. It looked very expertly hand-stitched. Yes, coming here was definitely an excellent decision.

Nick's paw touched down on her shoulder. "This time tomorrow, we're going to be having dinner with these guys. The least we can do is get to know them beforehand." Personally he'd prefer not to, Judy knew that, but she appreciated that he was still willing to approach those from the opposite end
of the urban food chain for the sake of their mission. She only hoped that Edward was as decent as his brother seemed to be.

"Okay." She spoke, steeling herself. "Let's go meet some Casels."

Alec and Edward were admiring a line of Pig Hero Six costumes when the two smaller mammals reached them. Judy stopped several feet from them, feeling her anxiety spike as she tried to think of the best way to greet them. She wasn't usually this shy, not when she had three-hundred-siblings worth of experience, but these mammals were of a completely different class. She had no idea how they said hello. If she got it wrong, it could lead to monumental embarrassment and an unpleasant fifteen minutes in Bogo's office.

It didn't help that she was aware of Nick behind her, staring and waiting for her to start speaking. She opened her mouth. Lost her nerve. Closed her mouth again.

"Hi. You'd make a pretty good Wasabi." Nick finally called out, making the two Casels look down. *Oh crap, Nick!* Judy fought the urge to grab her ears as her internal scream rang inside her skull.

Alec's eyes glinted with recognition, while his older brother paused in the middle of admiring the costume he was holding.

Edward Casel was a solidly built elk-deer with horns sanded and polished to perfection, and also the first Casel Judy had seen that looked more like an elk than a deer. His green baseball shirt hung loosely off his body as he put the Wasabi costume back, and responded to Nick's comment with a smirk. "And you'd make a pretty good Hairy Baby."

Nick's slight tilt of his head suggested that he hadn't expected that comeback.

Edward slowly raised a hoof to point at them. "You're Wilde and Hopps, right?"

"Yeah…" Judy swallowed, waiting for his reaction.

"Darn, it's good to finally meet you guys!" Edward bent down to shake Nick's paw. When he next shook Judy's, nearly enclosing her entire arm in the process, she noticed that his grip was firm but not uncomfortable. "Alec told me you got his buddy out of a real fix a few days ago."

"We would have done it even if there weren't lives at stake." Judy replied. "Ben is our friend, too."

"Yeah, he's a great guy. I'm glad he's okay. And don't worry about what happened with Alec the other day. We're cool."

Alec, who had been visibly tense since Judy and Nick had made themselves known, relaxed. "You know, my brother suits Wasabi more than you think. Do you know why everyone calls him 'Belch'?"

Edward looked up sharply. "Al, don't you dare!"

"Our dad set up a fundraiser a few years ago, and Edward drank a little too much fizzy pop. I swear he burped so loud he almost woke the dead!"

Nick blew a small raspberry as he fought back laughter, while Judy snorted into her paw. Edward glared at all three of them. "It was one time, people. One! Time!"

That was all Nick needed. "That settles it. Wasabi it is."
"Oh yeah, and who're you going as? Dopey?"

Nick looked to the small size costumes, his eyes zeroing in on one in particular. "I spy a Dopey right there. What do you say we head to the fitting rooms right now and see who suits up better, Belch?"

Edward grinned. "You're on, Chestnuts." Concurrently they snatched up a costume and disappeared into the fitting rooms. There was an audible rustling as they started to change out their clothes.

Judy and Alec stared at the closed curtains. "What the heck just happened?" Alec asked.

There was only one way for Judy to explain it. "I think Nick made a new friend."

"Oh. Well, good for them." Alec pulled a Jebidiah 'Cookie' Farnsworth costume from the rack. "Well, what do you say we join them?"

Judy quickly browsed the small costumes until she found a pretty Snow White costume. "Sure. It's why we're here, isn't it?"

Just as they were about to enter the next two empty rooms, the first two rooms opened. Judy took one look at Nick with his oversized purple hat and frumpy green 'dress' and captured the potential blackmail material with her phone.

While Nick wallowed in his humiliation, Alec looked over Edward in his form fitting green and black Wasabi costume. "Nice. Very nice."

This didn't satisfy his brother. "I appreciate the flattery, Alec, who looks better?"

"You, definitely."

Judy nodded in agreement. Nick scowled at her before snatching another costume. "Best two out of three."

Edward grabbed another costume. "You're so getting roasted."

"Not again." Alec sighed as his brother and Nick went back into the fitting rooms. "Come on, Officer…"

"Call me Judy." Judy offered as they too entered their rooms and began to change. "Has your brother done this before?"

She could hear Alec clearly from the room next door. "With video games, sports, chocolate designing, you name it. He's real fun to be around, but at the same time my brother's the most competitive guy in the world."

"I heard he's the reigning food eating champion in Zootopia." Judy didn't mention that she'd found out from Honey's data. "I wouldn't have known that just from looking at him."

"Yeah, he's the best in pie eating. It's an annual thing, so it doesn't really hurt his figure."

"I know you're starting a chocolate shop. What does he do?"

"He's the curator of the Meadowlands Car Museum. He loves the current models, but he admires the older cars more than anything. He keeps a Hudson Super Eight at the family estate for if he wants a drive around the grounds."

"Hudson Super Six!" Edward called from his own room.
Judy finished first and stepped out. Nearby was a large mirror in which she happily examined herself. With her bright colored dress with big round sleeves and a headband, she looked like a little girl. As lovely as the costume was, she wanted something a bit more mature looking for the party.

Alec soon stepped out himself. He was the opposite of Judy, looking older than he really was with his fake beard, bowler hat and food-stained dungarees. He stood beside Judy and examined himself. "Hmmm… maybe I'd rather have something from the classics."

Judy glanced at the other occupied rooms. "Sounds like they're gonna be a while yet. Let's try something else." And get some answers about Ben while I'm at it, the natural born detective part of her advised as she picked out another costume and returned to the fitting rooms with Alec.

"So how did you and Ben meet?" Judy asked, genuinely curious at this particular topic. She didn't imagine any place where someone like Alec and someone like Ben could meet other than the public streets.

"It was right after college. I moved into an apartment right next door to him."

Judy paused in the middle of pulling on her snake-hair wig. "That place is only two steps up from mine. What's a rich mammal like you doing moving in there?"

"Long story."

"Come on, we're going to be spending two days with each other and I want to get to know you."

There was a pause. "You know about the Wool Street Crash of '29, right?"

"You mean the Great Depression? Yes."

"Well, as you know all the wealthy mammals who kept their assets in the bank lost everything."

"Like your family?"

"No. The Casels were one of the families who had assets outside of the bank. We had a lot of land that we were able to sell to keep our fortune."

"Oh. Our family was the same. We didn't remake our fortune from it, but it was enough to keep up afloat. The one time he had brought up the Depression, Judy's Pop-Pop had told her how they had sold three hundred acres out of the five hundred they had owned at the time.

"It was the Depression that made my great-grandfather set up this new tradition. According to my father, the incident had taught him that being rich doesn't make us invincible. He survived the crash, but it could have gone very differently. So he set up this family tradition to make sure the Casel family were prepared in case something like that happened again. Basically after we graduate, we would be given a small trust fund and made to set out on our own. We'd move into normal homes, get normal jobs and get normal salaries, with only a little help from our parents. The idea is to make sure that we'd still be able to provide for ourselves if anything happened to the family fortune."

"Your great-grandfather sounds like he was a wise mammal." Judy spoke with a bittersweet smile. If all the rich and powerful held such wisdom and common sense, then the world would be a much better place.

"Yeah. Father looked up to him at lot."

There was a rustling nearby as Nick and Edward left their rooms.
"Do you ever get to use the fortune?"

"Once we've proven we can support ourselves without it."

"What did you do to prove yourself?"

"I started out in Chef Gusteau's as an assistant cook and eventually got promoted to pastry chef. That was how I found my calling as a chocolatier. What about you? What made you decide you wanted to be a police officer?"

"Bullies. That and wanting to make the world a better place."

Judy and Alec finished changing, respectively becoming the Medusa-like Celia Mae and Governor Ratcliffe. They stepped out of their rooms and spotted their companions standing before the large mirror. Judy stopped dead and felt a familiar heat rising within her as she took in Nick's torso-bearing brown loincloth. Beside him, Edward was wearing a long green tunic and no pants.

"Tarzan and Robin Hood, huh?" Alec spoke while Judy remained speechless. "Shouldn't you guys be the other way round?"

"Not really." Nick replied pleasantly. "Considering he's not Robin Hood."

Edward gave him a teasingly coy look. "What, I need red fur and a bushy tail to fire an arrow?"

"Belch, my good mammal, I regret to inform you that you are Little John."

"You what?"

Judy suddenly realized what was wrong with the costume. "Oh dear." She chortled.

"Dark green tunic, minus the pot belly." Nick pointed at Edward's significantly less ample stomach. "Little green hat. Belch, you are Robin's Hood's loyal sidekick."

Edward stared down at himself silently for a few seconds. Sheepishly he took the hat off. "At least my costume's more than a little brown hankie covering your chestnuts, Chestnuts."

"Eh, you still got the wrong costume." Nick waved his paw dismissively. "Sly fox- one, scatterbrained bodybuilder- one."

"Great, now they're tied." Alec leaned down towards Judy and whispered.

Judy blinked, tearing her eyes away from the half naked Wilde. "Huh?"

"I'm saying they're tied." Alec muttered irritably. "If they bump it up to best out of five, I'm going home without him."

"He does this a lot?"

"It once took Belch two days to come back from the Palm Hotel Casino."

It was then that Nick stopped pretending that he couldn't hear them. "Wow, scary."

Edward nudged his brother's shoulder. "Hey, I'll have you know that I won fifty grand on that weekend!"

"I was actually talking about the costume, Schmoopsie-poo." He winked at Judy.
Judy felt irritation overcome her inner heat, and she put her paws on her hips. "Tarzan, you're missing more than a few links if you think you can get away with calling me that when I'm not dressed like the lovechild of Cyclops and Medusa."

"Aw come on. I had to do it."

Two minutes later they had all chosen one more costume to try for the fun of it and went back into their fitting rooms; Judy had found an outfit she hadn't been expecting to find but had wanted to try ever since she had seen the film it had been in. Speaking of trying, it was time to get the answers she really wanted out of Alec.

"So… did you and Ben become friends right after you moved in next to him?"

"Actually, for the first couple of weeks I barely spoke with him." Alec spoke slowly, hesitantly. "Back then I had… had some issues. Let's just say I didn't feel comfortable around other people."

"So what changed?"

"Nearly a month after I moved in, I had a bad dream. A really bad dream. So bad I started screaming in my sleep apparently. Basically I woke up to Ben breaking down my door, holding a rolling pin and yelling 'FREEZE!'" The image Alec's description brought to mind brought a short laugh out of Judy. "Oh my gosh, seriously?!"

"Seriously!" Alec exclaimed, with a chuckle of his own as he too saw the funny side of his story. "Anyway, once he saw that I wasn't being attacked, he made me some hot coco from his own apartment. Then we just talked. I won't go into what we talked about, but I will say that it made me feel that he was safe."

"Safe?"

"It was a couple more weeks after that before I say I considered him a real friend. And by real, I mean someone who wasn't just some pretender trying to take advantage of me."

"Was it you who did a background check on him?" Judy stiffened, kicking herself for what she had just done. For a moment, there was no noise but an occasional curse from the other fitting rooms.

"Background check?" Alec repeated. "What background check?"

Judy bit her lip. There was no backpedalling on this. "We recently discovered that someone from the Casel family hired a detective to investigate Ben. As his friend, I have to ask: was that you?"

"No. That wasn't me." Alec immediately retorted, and Judy found herself believing him. "That must have been one of my parents. They're very cautious about who we get close to. There're worse people out there than gold diggers, Judy."

"Oh, I know." Judy spoke softly, thinking of Bellwether. The small sick feeling in her stomach slowed her down in the middle of pulling on her sleek red dress. "But Ben's nothing like that. He's a lot of things, sometimes a little annoying I'll admit, but he's not a parasite."

"I'm just hoping that things will go okay while he's up at our parents' place." Alec replied tentatively. "They don't like him."

"… Why?" Judy asked. Please, please answer the question, she mentally begged.
There was a soft thud on the other side of the wall, as if Alec had just rested his hoof on it. "Some bad things happened a few years ago that weren't his fault. I'm sorry but I don't want to talk about it."

"I understand, Alec, but I'm worried about him."

"Look, one of us got stupid and attacked his boss and our family fell apart because of it. As far as my parents are concerned, none of it would have happened if he hadn't gotten involved with me and my brother."

"Edward?"

"I'm sorry, but I don't want to talk about it any more! Just try to enjoy the party, okay?"

Judy put on her golden tiara. "I'm sorry. I just wanted to know what Ben's getting himself into. Like I said, I'm worried about him."

She draped the purple translucent scarf with gold stars over her shoulders, completing her transformation into Esmeralda from the Festival of Fools, and stepped out the fitting room. Alec stepped out soon after, looking like a smaller, thinner version of Kronk in gold and blue. He looked as apologetic as Judy was. "I know. I'm sorry for snapping. But I'd appreciate it if you didn't bring it up at the party, especially around my parents."

"Don't worry. I won't say a word."

After that they exchanged silent looks, a mutual acknowledgement that the subject was closed. Then the silence was broken when Nick and Edward emerged at the same time. Edward was decked out in a red overcoat, massive feathered hat and a metal hook hand as Captain Hook. As for Nick…

"Ladies and Gentlemen, I've got a feelin'!" He declared. He too was in a red coat, but instead of a hat he bore a robotic mask with glowing red eyes, and in place of a hook he brandished a plasma pistol. "I'm high on believin' that I've found a winner!"

Judy stared at the ensemble, which she had never seen in any classic Disney movie, but it was Alec who expressed his puzzlement. "Where the heck did you find that?!"

"In the Marvole department."

"Which isn't Disney!" Edward hissed.

"The Marvole Cinematic Universe is owned by Disney, so there."

"Who're you supposed to be, anyway?" Edward demanded. "Starking?"

Nick tapped his foot on the hard floor. "You know darn well I'm Starlord, Captain Kook."

Edward laughed. "Oh, so we're playing the misname game now, are w- well, look at that." He had finally spotted Judy in her silk red dress, and very clearly liked what he saw.

Just as Judy was starting to think she had dressed a little too maturely, Nick turned his masked face towards her. He stopped dead. He very slowly lifted his mask to reveal a look of pure astonishment. "Wow."

Judy found herself liking his reaction immensely. She jutted her hip and twirled one end of the starry scarf with her finger. "Think anyone would call me cute in this costume?"

"No. Definitely not." Even Nick's voice sounded stunned.
Alec's chuckle cut the tension in the air. "Looks like I'm not the only one with a sweetheart around here."

"Not to worry. What we're doing is perfectly innocent." Judy replied. *No, you're not,* a voice in her head spoke otherwise.

"Right, and what me and Christine have is a match made in hell."

Feeling strangely warm in the ears, Judy quickly straightened herself and thought up a diverting topic. "I know I've asked a lot of questions, Alec, to get to know you more than anything, but I've gone one more; do you know who Ben's going as?"

"Nope! Sorry, but you'll have to find out for yourself tomorrow."

Nick slipped his mask back on. "Oh, come on, who is it? Olaf? Baymax?"

Alec merely smirked. "Trust me. You wouldn't want me to ruin the surprise."

Chapter End Notes

End of Act Two...
It was a busy night in the bar when Nick finally opened Cotton's letter.

Dear Aunt Judy, Mr. Nicky, Mr. Maccorn, Mr. Delator, Miss Fangmiser and Chief Bobo.

One by one, the expressions on the faces of the gathered officers, minus Chief Bogo, morphed into surprised annoyance. Judy covered her gaping mouth, while Nick covered his clenched teeth and fought back laughter as he continued to read the letter.

Thank you for saving me and grandma and grandpa. It was so cool when you all took on that big elephant and all those other nutty animals that drank the poisoned coffee. It was really dumb of someone to let Middicampam Hollisifias get into the stuff. I hope Snarlbucks gets sued and loses a billion dollars.

"How did she know about that?" McHorn asked above his sherry.

"She must have heard my dad mention it." Judy answered.

Grandma and grandpa are okay, but they said they would go see that horse therapist who made Gideon Grey all nice. They said I would go see him too if I get any bad dreams from the mall, but I hope I don't get any. Dreaming about spiders and big brothers is bad enough without watching Santa Claws getting gobbled up.

"A big brother spider eating Santa Claws would be truly appalling." Fangmeyer spoke drily, provoking chuckles from the others.

Anyway, thank you so much for saving us. Aunt Judy said you can make donations to the police department, so I've put this month's pocket money in the envelope with my letter. Make sure you get Benjamin a really big box of donuts, please.

Yours sincerely, Cotton Hopps.

Nick dug his fingers deeper into the envelope and pulled out thirty bucks.

"Awww." Judy breathed. "Now I want to send a thank you letter back."

Her squee was far outmatched by the longer, higher squee coming from Benjamin right next to her, complete with bunched up paws pressed to his cheeks. "OOOOOOOOOHAAAAH… That's sooo cuuuuuuuuuuuuuuoollllll…" Even in the heat of the moment he caught himself in the nick of time. "Oh my gosh, I almost did it again."

Judy smiled and patted his arm. "It's okay, Ben. Us rabbits get called far worse than that."

"What's worse than 'cute'?" Delgato asked with a cocked eyebrow. Nick leaned towards Judy, especially interested.

"Floozy."

"What's so bad about- oooh."
There was more laughter from the group, and Nick drank it all up as much as he drank up his beer. He wanted to enjoy this while he could, for this time tomorrow he’d be surrounded by less pleasurable company. Alec and 'Belch' were okay, as Nick had found back in the costume shop, but their father had proven himself to be a hardass and there was no knowing what his wife, daughter and stepson were like.

They would find out soon enough, though. As Alec had revealed after they’d finally chosen their costumes, a car would be coming to collect them from their homes to deliver them straight to the Casel estate. Despite Nick’s initial assumption at the time, this wasn’t how the Casels usually operated. With Gazelle as the guest of honor and her current predicament, there was the matter of heightened security. Even so, Nick would have preferred to drive himself, and he was sure that Judy would say the same.

Speaking of Judy, ever since they’d met up outside the bar a few minutes earlier he hadn’t failed to notice how much her light blue blouse and dark blue waistcoat resembled the costume she had chosen; the dress Mulan had worn for the final battle at the Imperial palace. He didn’t know if she had intended her costume to be similarly colored to her police uniform, but either way it might be something to tease her about once they were at the estate. In any case, it wasn’t often that the country bunny dressed in something so sophisticated, and he secretly hoped that she did it more often. Particularly in red and black.

Resisting the temptation to lower his gaze to her tight fitting cream pants, Nick carefully slipped the letter back into the envelope.

Delgato leaned over his beer. "I've gotta say, and don't think I'm being serious, you're shaping up to be one heck of a social climber, Wilde."

"How so?" Nick asked, deliberately taking the bait.

"It's been what, a few months since you took the blue, right? One day you're chasing down speeding sloths, the next you're having champagne and caviar with the richest big shots in the state."

"Ugh, don't remind me."

"I'll remind you if I want to."

"I wish I had that kind of excitement on my first day." McHorn muttered wistfully. "All I did was write tickets and change a tire. I bet even Miss Hopps here had more excitement than I did."

"She sure did." Nick had suddenly decided to do something silly. "She was investigating a kidnapping."

"A kidnapping?" All four mammals looked to Judy, who looked just as bewildered as they did.

Nick nodded. "Yes. A very big red ice sculpture was being held for a ransom of fifteen bucks against a single father and his little boy. Carrots, delightful little pumpkin that she is, paid the ransom with twenty five percent interest. Most unfortunately despite her best efforts the poor sculpture was melted down and turned into dozens of smaller sculptures that were sold to the unknowing rodent populace for two bucks apiece. In her endeavor to capture the mammal responsible Carrots nearly sank to her death in liquid cement."

"Cement?" Fangmeyer asked with a slight squint. Nick didn't mind in the slightest that none of them were buying it. He just wanted to see the looks on their faces. Judy’s twitchy stare far outshone the rest of them.
"I exaggerate of course. That quicksand myth was busted a long time ago." Nick then leaned slightly away from Judy, waiting for a grey fist to slam into his shoulder.

Judy's stunned expression turned into one of pure mirth, and she giggled into her tequila sunrise. "Nicholas Wilde, you are terrible!"

McHorn snorted. "Hmph. Ben here's come a lot closer to death than you lot ever have!"

"Really? How so?" Nick asked before taking a mouthful of whiskey.

"Come on, kid. Tell them what happened." Delgato pressed.

Benjamin put down his drink and began to speak.

---

Two days after moving into his new apartment, Benjamin was feeling like the stupidest animal in the world.

He had hoped that his first day on the force would go smoothly, but he could hardly call losing his contact lenses down the drain, dropping his reading glasses at some point between the front desk and this table, spilling coffee on his sleeve and having to ask for directions to the bullpen twice smooth. He'd barely made it with a minute to spare and sat down on the end of the back row, right in the corner beside a corkboard of numerous memos. He crossed his arms on the table and made himself as small as possible, simultaneously trying to cover the damp stain on his arm. The fact that his skin had finally stopped stinging did little to put him at ease.

A stern looking hippo stood up and turned round to face the seated crowd. Benjamin almost thought that this was the boss himself, but he already knew the officer's name to be Higgins. The Chief of Police was called something else. What was his name again? Bennett? Boris?

Bogo. Benjamin remembered just as the cape buffalo himself stepped in through a side door. His name's Chief Bogo. For the love of everything sweet and savory, Ben, don't mess this up!

A thunderous sound like beating drums filled the room as Bogo wordlessly strode to the podium; every officer in the room was pounding their fists on the table and chanting. It was surely a daily routine for them, but for Benjamin it was like he was back in high school, a nerd trapped in a herd of rowdy jocks. Except this wasn't high school, and he wasn't a nerd anymore. He was a cop now, just like them, so he had to shake off his disquiet and act like one. He made fists of his own and held them over the tabletop, waiting for the right moment to start-

"Alright, that's enough! Shut it!" Bogo called as he reached the podium, silencing the pounding and chanting.

Benjamin slowly uncurled his paws and set them back down.

In a way, Chief Bogo had surprised the cheetah. On his way to the station he'd built up an image of a large mammal in a complete, flawlessly pressed uniform akin to that of an admiral, his expression perpetually stern as all the gentleness and humor had been beaten out of him throughout the decades he'd spent on the force. The real Chief Bogo was the first officer he had seen with a short-sleeved shirt with the top button undone, revealing the black t-shirt underneath. The only two indications whatsoever that he was of higher rank than them were the stars on his collar, and the way he commanded respect from the others just by stepping into the room. He didn't look like a boss. He looked like a cop.

"I've got two items on the docket." Bogo continued, flipping through a clipboard without reading
the contents. "First, we have a new recruit joining us today…" Benjamin held his breath. After his bungled morning, the last thing he wanted was to have everyone's attention on him. "Who cares?"

A quiet chuckle rippled through the crowd, but Benjamin relaxed. As mean as Bogo's response to the first item was, it gave him a second chance to make a good first impression. Tomorrow was going to be better. It had to.

"Finally, once I leave this room I'm going to attend an emergency meeting at City Hall, so I'll be leaving the precinct to Higgins. Until tomorrow morning, he's top dog. Higgins, assignments!" He took a set of red files from Higgins and put on a pair of black square glasses. "Officers McHorn, Fangmeyer, Wolford…"

Bit by bit, the crowd thinned as red files were passed out and officers set out to complete their tasks. With each file passed out, Benjamin's anxiety grew. One of those files had his name and assignment on it.

"And finally, our new recruit. Officer Clawhauser…" Bogo now had one last file in his hooves. Benjamin braced himself once more. "Parking duty. Dismissed."

"I found out later that that was also part of the routine." Benjamin explained, as his companions in the bar listened quietly. "Apparently a lot of new recruits start out with a sense of entitlement, especially valedictorians and the mayor's favorites, and a few rounds of parking duty was his way of nipping that in the bud." He spotted the look on Judy's face. "Oh. I'm so sorry. I didn't mean you specifically, Judy…"

"No, it's okay." Judy replied quickly.

"She just hates it when Bogo's right." Nick added. "Not that it excuses the forty-eight hours thing."

"That's enough, Nick." Judy scolded gently. "Come on, I want to hear the part where you have a near death experience."

"I'm getting there… I'm finishing a round in Savanna Central, pretty close to the square…"

Parking duty was as thankless as Benjamin had expected. Five times since he'd left the station that he'd been insulted by unhappy car owners. Three times he'd been threatened. Once a poor mouse's car got blown away before he could apply the ticket. And he hadn't even moved on to his second district.

On the other hand there was a silver lining. Citizens must be particularly tardy in this part of town, for he was one ticket away from completing his one hundred ticket quota. In fact, he had just heard the metallic click of a parking meter expiring across the street, two blocks away from City Hall.

It was a very busy street in terms of parked cars. Benjamin had seen it as he was driving down; all the way from City Hall to here the streets were full, with just enough space for moving cars to push through. Apparently there was a new exhibit opening in the museum nearby City Hall, and mammals had come from all over Zootopia to see it.

Benjamin parked his own vehicle across the street from the offending black car and waited. He'd learned from recent experience that drivers were especially ticked off if their car were mere seconds overs, so he thought it worth waiting a moment to see if anyone turned up.

Twenty seconds passed. No-one approached the car. Benjamin started pressing buttons as he crossed the quiet street. By the time he reached the car the ticket had finished printing. He stretched himself over the hood to stick the ticket in the wiper.
That was when Chief Bogo materialized on the other side of the car, clad in a long blue coat.

Benjamin looked at his new boss's scowl. He looked down at the car he was leaning over. Horror froze the blood in his veins as he realized the colossal screw-up he had just committed.

His mouth opened to plead forgiveness, but no sound came out. Bogo just glared down at the ticket in his paw.

Wanted nothing more than to disintegrate, Benjamin backed away from his boss's car, his paw closing around the ticket in preparation to crush it.

"Put it back."

Benjamin froze mid-squeeze. Bogo was still glaring, but he had definitely just ordered him not to dispose of the offending object. "But sir. Isn't this your…"

"No-one's above the law, Clawhauser. Put it back."

Benjamin slowly stuck the ticket back in the wiper.

Bogo's scowl softened into minor displeasure as he looked to the expired meter. "Let's get something straight. I punish my men for a lot of reasons, but doing their job right is not one of them. For the record, I blame the mayor for this."

Sir, I had no idea." Benjamin was still feeling chilly. "It's so far from City Hall."

"I blame the new exhibit, too." Bogo plucked the ticket from the wiper. "I'll pay this once I've had lunch." He looked back up at Benjamin. "What are you waiting for? Get back to work!"

"I'd never felt so relieved in my entire life." Benjamin spoke as he finished his tale. "I was so terrified that he would punish me for ticketing his car, but he didn't. It was a month after that when he bumped me up to rookie patrol officer."

"You put a ticket of Buffalo-Butt's car and got away with it?" Nick grinned, thinking and here he thought lucky cats only came from Japanuki. "If that was me, he'd have me scrubbing air ducts."

"Wilde, you don't give him enough credit." McHorn growled under his breath. "But yeah, he would. Because you'd have done it to be a smartarse."

Judy laughed into her glass.

Nick rolled his eyes and held out Cotton's money. "Carrots, you're the responsible one. I'm trusting you to get this donation to Chief Bogo."

Judy snatched the bills. "Better me than you, you cheeky little- sweet cheese and crackers, speak of the devil!"

They all looked up with a jolt, having never expected in a million years to see the big mammal himself looming over their table, right behind Nick and Judy. Wearing the exact same blue coat Benjamin had mentioned in his tale, Bogo cleared his throat and looked down at the smallest mammals. "Hopps. Wilde. Good evening."

"Sir, what're you doing here?" Judy asked, eyes still completely round from the recent shock.

"Because this is the last chance I'll have before you leave tomorrow. Could I have a word with you
two please? Alone?" He jerked a hoof at an empty table a fair distance from their own. It was in a
booth in tucked tightly in the corner, a good place for private conversation. Nick had half a thought
that he and Judy were about to be discreetly threatened with death if they stepped out of line
tomorrow.

They quickly complied, muttering 'be right back' as they followed Bogo to the empty table and sat
down. Even thought the booth was crescent shaped, Bogo made sure he and his subordinates were
sitting directly opposite each other. Nick caught a glimpse of Judy's expression, and admittedly he
too was feeling perplexed himself. It was completely unlike the big guy to seek them out outside of
the precinct, let alone outside their shift, just to discuss a case. Either something had come up at the
last moment, or there was something he still had yet to tell them.

"Sir, what is this about?" Judy asked the moment they were all seated.

"If it's about how much I hate the upper classes, I've already given my word that I'll behave myself." Nick added. "But I can't say the same for Eugene."

"Wilde, shut up." Bogo didn't stop glaring until the fox was completely silent. "I am well aware of
how unusual this is, but like I said, this is the last chance I'll get. I haven't been completely honest
with you about why you're going to this party."

Now Judy looked even more confused. "You mean we're not going there to keep Gazelle safe?"

"I knew it. You want us to gather info from the inside." Nick stated, pointing his finger at the
buffalo.

"No. Your official objective is to make sure Gazelle stays safe." Bogo spoke. "Unofficially, you're
going to make sure they all stay safe."

"All of them?"

"It's beyond a doubt that someone, whether it's Veltro or not, has committed these recent crimes to
cause trouble for the Casel family. For two days every member of the family is going to be in one
place. Even with the estate's security, it's a perfect opportunity."

"Protect Gazelle, protect the Casel Family, got it."

"I'm not finished." Bogo glanced at the other table with their coworkers, his eyes on Benjamin in
particular. "I'm not okay with him going. If I could stop him, I would. I told you in my office that
Elgen Casel blames him for the campaign and everything that came after."

"We actually ran into Alec and Belch-"

"Who?"

"Edward, sorry." Judy cringed. "They said that after Ben met Alec, it started something that led to
you getting assaulted."

Bogo's gaze hardened. "What else did they tell you?"

"Alec didn't tell us what happened, or who attacked you, sir." Nick replied. "But he did say it wasn't
Ben's fault."

"Try telling that to the Casels." Bogo growled. "I'm not saying that he is in danger, but his presence
is sure to cause problems. I know that Carlos especially hates him for taking away his chance to
make a name for himself by marrying the mayor's daughter."

"Are you saying we've gotta protect Ben, too?" Nick rubbed his temple. He felt exhausted just from imagining the effort from all this protecting.

"That's why you're here, isn't it?" Judy asked, her eyes brightening with realization. "You're worried about him."

Bogo glanced at Benjamin again. "Just make sure he doesn't face them alone."

---

Zootopia, where the motto 'Anyone can be Anything' held more than one meaning…

If Bogo ever spoke to a new recruit face to face in their first week on the force, it would always be to verbally chew their butt off for doing something they shouldn't. The last thing he had expected on Officer Clawhauser's first day on the force was to come face to face with him fearing a verbal chewing out for doing something he should.

It was fair enough that no-one liked getting a ticket, and being an effect Police Chief required respect and perhaps a little bit of fear, but to have his subordinates think that he would be so petty as to punish them for doing their job correctly was beyond unacceptable, and he had wasted no time setting Clawhauser straight before sending him on his way.

He'd thought that was the end of it. He wouldn't speak to the young feline again until he'd proven himself worthy of more dignified assignments, as it was with every new recruit that stepped into his precinct.

The next time they spoke face to face was in the lobby, sooner than he'd expected. Bogo was striding across the shiny stone floor towards the elevator when he spotted Clawhauser pushing his way through the entrance, with the ticket printer in paw. Bogo didn't need to check his watch to know that it wasn't even noon. He stopped where he was, allowing the oblivious cheetah to come to him. He looked up from the handheld machine just in time to stop himself from colliding with the larger mammal. "Sir! I'm so sorry!" Bogo noticed that the cheetah's eyes had dark circles beneath them.

"What're you doing back here?" Bogo asked.

"I know it's early, sir." Looking like speaking to Bogo was the last thing he wanted to be doing, Clawhauser pointed with his free paw at the ticket printer. "But it's this ticket thingie here. There's something wrong with it."

Bogo took the machine without asking. "And what would that be?"

"It's not printing the tickets, sir."

"What did you do, drop it?" Clawhauser frantically shook his head as Bogo checked the screen. "Only six tickets since you started?"

"People've been pretty punctual this morning, sir."

"Good."

"You're not upset?"

"Why would I be? Parking spaces have restrictions for a reason." Bogo turned the printer over in his hooves before giving it back. "I think it's out of paper."
"Oh, I knew that."

"There should be spare rolls in storage. Officer Papyrus will help you."

Clawhauser was starting to annoy Bogo, now. There was no reason for him to look so ashamed of himself. "Wipe that frown off your face, officer, and talk to Papyrus. I want you out of here in fifteen minutes, got that?"

Clawhauser stood up straight and saluted. "Yes, sir."

"And put that paw away, this isn't the army."

Clawhauser dropped his paw. "Yes, sir."

"And for god's sake, don't put 'sir' at the end of every bloody sentence."

"Yes, s-" Clawhauser froze. "Chief."

"Better. Dismissed."

Clawhauser silently moved past Bogo and walked to the front desk. Bogo released a sharp snort and resumed his walk to the elevator. He was still ticked, but not at Clawhauser. He had gotten short with the cheetah, had scolded him for no real reason.

Clawhauser had done something wrong, but Bogo didn't know what.

As he pressed the arrow button beside the elevator, he heard a yawn coming from the front desk. Sound went a long way in the cavernous lobby, so he had no trouble hearing the voices from the desk as he waited for the doors to open.

"You look like you've had a bad night, kid." Spoke the exotic voice of Officer Papyrus. "Noise pollution got to ya, huh?"

"Nah, I was up half the night with a buddy of mine, Mr. Casel. He had a bad dream. Will this take long? I've got thirteen minutes to get out of here."

The moment the name 'Casel' hit Bogo's ears, the buffalo froze in place. Casel. He'd said Casel. Which Casel? What was that boy even doing near a Casel in the first place?

The doors opened. Bogo stepped inside and turned around. He kept his eyes on Clawhauser until the doors slid shut again.

Which Casel had he gotten mixed up with? Did he know the other, too? Bogo hoped to the lord almighty that it was the youngest, Alec. Alec wasn't the most sociable of young mammals, but he was a good kid at heart.

It was that sociopathic scumbag of a sibling he was worried about.

Chapter End Notes

End of Act Two.
Act III: The Casel Family

When she was a little kit, Judy wanted to ride in a limo.

To her young, naïve mind the limo represented the fulfilment of a dream. Nobody rode a limo unless they'd really made it in the world, achieved their dream job, made a ton of money out of it.

Then junior prom came along and her dad treated her older siblings to a rented black limo big enough to carry fifty. After that she watched the news and caught her first glimpse of the senator's sleek normal sized car pulling up before City Hall. Then after that she saw Ricky Swillis from high school tear into the parking lot and get a parking ticket slapped on the windshield of the exact same model of car. Judy never found out what the model was called, but she had seen enough to know that riding a limo wasn't as cool a dream as she thought it was.

So she went back to dreaming about riding in a prison van.

When a shiny black Pawdi slid to a stop in front of the Grand Pangolin Apartment Building, Judy refused to be impressed. She already had a dream car waiting for her at the station once this little get together was over. She glanced at Nick, who had in dressed in a plain shirt as she'd suggested, and saw the distaste in his green eyes. She could imagine the look on his face if it was a limo that showed up. Worse, a pink limo with a bar, a flatscreen tv and a pair of sultry escorts for Nick to feast his eyes on. That last thought actually made her shudder.

"You okay, Carrots?" Nick asked as the stony faced chauffeur pig got out to open the passenger door for them.

"I'm fine. It's just freezing out here." There had been a minor snowstorm during the night, coating the street in a clean white layer that was rare for the city. "Let's go."

The interior of the car was as black as the exterior, and flawlessly vacuumed. In the far seat, chomping donuts and sprinkling sprinkles all over his lap, was Benjamin. "Hey, guys! You excited 'bout the party?"

"Nowhere near as excited as you, at least." Judy replied, for Benjamin was eating at a far faster rate than his usual speed, having shoved five rings into his mouth in the time it took for her to answer his question. He had a frown instead of a smile, making her wonder if it really was excitement that had him speed-eating. She climbed into the middle seat beside the cheetah and declined his offer of a donut. Nick climbs in next to her and shut the door after waving away the chauffeur when he stepped forward to shut it for them. Shooting a look at the mess of sprinkles in the back seat, the chauffeur put their suitcases in the trunk, returned to the front seat and began the one hour journey to the Casel estate.

Judy waited until the car was out the street before making conversation.

"What'd you think the party's gonna be like?" She asked to everyone and no-one.

"Nowhere near as excited as you, at least." Judy replied, for Benjamin was eating at a far faster rate than his usual speed, having shoved five rings into his mouth in the time it took for her to answer his question. He had a frown instead of a smile, making her wonder if it really was excitement that had him speed-eating. She climbed into the middle seat beside the cheetah and declined his offer of a donut. Nick climbs in next to her and shut the door after waving away the chauffeur when he stepped forward to shut it for them. Shooting a look at the mess of sprinkles in the back seat, the chauffeur put their suitcases in the trunk, returned to the front seat and began the one hour journey to the Casel estate.

Judy waited until the car was out the street before making conversation.

"What'd you think the party's gonna be like?" She asked to everyone and no-one.

"They specifically said it was a costume party, so highly doubt it."
"I bet the guys are gonna spend the whole day in the Smoking Room, where they'll disappear into a cloud a smoke as they congratulate each other on being masters of the universe."

"Alright, that's enough." Judy turned beneath her seatbelt to glare a him properly. "We're not going to the Titanic."

"And they don't have a Smoking Room." Benjamin added after swallowing his latest mouthful. "Alec told me when we saw that movie together." He paused to scowl before resuming his eating. "We always skipped the part where Cowledon hits Rose. Jerk."

"Good to know you frown on domestic abuse, buddy." Nick spoke. "I'm still not going to enjoy this party."

"You don't have to." Judy replied stonily. "Just put a smirk on your face and shut up."

They both fell silent. Benjamin put down a chocolate donut and pursed his lips at them. "I hope you're not gonna be this dysfunctional at the party. I told you Alec planned the whole thing."

"Oh come on, she knows she loves me." Nick replied with a chortle.

All the while, the chauffeur kept his eyes on the road and his lips sealed.

They drove out the city and into the forest, taking the same road Judy and Nick had used several days ago. The snow here was cleaner and thicker than it was in Zootopia. After some time Nick said, "The Casels must really like their privacy. I don't remember it taking this long when we were driving." He leaned forward towards the front seat. "Are we there yet?"

Judy saved the chauffeur from having to answer. "We get there when we get there!" She snapped, just before they caught their first glimpse of the Casels' ancestral home. "See?"

A minute later they reached the front gates. The chauffeur poked his head out the window and spoke into the intercom. The gates slid open, allowing the car to continue on its way. The forest road became gravel, which crunched beneath the tires as they approached the exquisite building. They could see three more black cars parked before the front entrance.

It was at this point that Benjamin started speed-eating again, his ears almost completely flat. "Benjie? You okay, buddy?" Nick asked.

"Yes." Benjamin said too quickly. "No. I haven't talked to any of them in years. What if they still hate me?"

Judy patted Benjamin's arm. "Ben, it's been years since whatever happened. I'm sure they don't hate you."

As the car drew closer to the mansion, they saw two figures standing face to face near the middle parked car. She quickly recognised Alec, but had a bit of trouble recognising his companion until she remembered a photograph from Honey's data; a tall elk in a black jacket and pants staggering out of a nightclub in Sahara Square. The other mammal was Carlos Casel nee Elkervera, and currently he looked as though his favourite Ferrari had been stolen.

"Nick, could you…" Judy stopped speaking, for her partner had already rolled down the window so they could hear what was going on.

"You did what?!" Carlos was shouting at Alec as the car continued its approach. "You invited who?!"
Judy sucked in a breath and looked at Benjamin; the cheetah was shrinking into his seat. "Calm down, we don't know he's talking about you."

"This is my party. I can invite whoever I want." Alec retorted.

"This is a family reunion, not a weekend getaway for jelly-bellied home wreckers!" Benjamin promptly started eating again.

Judy mentally cursed. "He didn't say your name, so-"

"Carrots. Carrots, he's not buying it." Nick opened the door the second the car stopped and jumped out. Judy followed, deciding to calm Benjamin down once she retrieved her suitcase.

Carlos and Alec turned their heads at the sound of the door opening. Alec smiled at the sight of them. Carlos looked at them like they were burglars. Nick kept his poker face as he retrieved his suitcase from the trunk and sauntered up to them, leaving a scowling Judy to climb into the large compartment to claim her own. "Top of the morning to you. You guys up for a holly, jolly Christmas?"

Alec stepped forward to shake hands with him. "Hey, Mr. Wilde. I'm glad you could make it. Where's Ben?"

Nick jerked his thumb over his shoulder. "Right now he's stress eating."

Carlos glared at the car where Judy was standing inside the trunk with her case in paw. "As if he does anything else."

"Carlos!" Alec hissed.

Judy didn't hesitate to jump out the trunk, storm over to the three mammals and slam her suitcase down hard enough to scatter gravel. "Don't talk about my friend that way!"

Carlos seemed to lose his fire the moment he set eyes on the little bunny rabbit. He pulled his black jacket further over his shoulders and turned back to his brother in law. "Whatever, just make sure you keep him away from me."

He strode up the front steps and disappeared into the mansion.

Nick cocked an eyebrow as he glared after the older Casel. "That deescalated quickly."

"Believe it or not, he watches the news." Alec said. "Even Carlos knows better than to pick a fight with you two. Darn it, I hope Ben didn't hear too much of that."

"Speaking of which, d'you think we should get him out the car now?" Nick asked. "Oh wait, here he is."

Benjamin meekly walked over to them, holding his suitcase in front of him with both paws. "Hey, Alec."

"Ben!" With a grin back on his face, Alec threw his arms around the cheetah. "I'm really sorry about Carlos."

Alec's hugs must have had some kind of spirit-lifting properties, for Benjamin quickly grew a huge grin of his own and giggled as he returned the embrace. "Don't worry about it. I gotta tell you, this place is even more beautiful than I'd thought it'd be!"
"You've never been here before?" Judy asked.

"Nu-uh." Benjamin replied, shaking his head. Then he pouted, crossed his arms, and narrowed his eyes at Alec. "I'm mad at you, Alec."

Alec crossed his own arms, returning the pout. "And why is that?"

"Because…" Benjamin leaned forward. "You somehow forgot to tell me about the future Mrs. Alec Casel!"

"Oh…" Alec's suddenly went wide as casino coins. "Oh! O. M. G!"

Benjamin was nearly bouncing at this point. "O. M. Goodness, why didn't you tell me about Christine?!

"I don't know!" Alec cried, pressing his hooves to his face. "I don't know, I was so caught up with setting my business, planning this party, dealing with my family, it's been crazy with Lake since dad announced the Tirari Town Project…"

"You guys weren't by any chance separated at birth, were you?" Nick asked.

"Nick!" Judy scolded even as Benjamin and Alec laughed.

"Nope, just BFFs." Alec replied. "And don't worry about Carlos. I'm going to have a word with him, I promise you that."

Judy felt herself relax more with every word. Ever since their last talk with Chief Bogo, she'd fretted over Benjamin's wellbeing. Carlos's blatant hatred for the cheetah had done little to ease her concerns, but with Alec there by his side, they just might be able to get through the party without a big scene.

"Anyway, I'm really sorry I didn't tell you about Christine. Would a free tour of the house make up for it?"

"Really?" Judy's ears pricked. "You'd give us a tour? But this place looks gigantic."

"It's fine, really. You can leave the cases here, they'll be taken straight to your rooms. How about it, Ben?"

"Oh my gosh, I'd love to!"

As they start up the steps, Judy felt her phone vibrate. When she pulled it out, she was half-disappointed to find it was a text from her parents, sending their love and wishing her luck. She would have preferred a new development on the case back home. She had nothing to worry about, she reminded herself. Chief Bogo had been doing this for far longer than she had.

Chief Bogo read the reports three times before slamming it down on the desk, pulling off his glasses and leaning back with a groan. "Not a thing."

No signs of tampering had been found in any sector of the factory that sent the tainted coffee to the cafes within the Greener Grass Mall. No spies or traitors had been uncovered. Nothing unusual had been spotted on the security cameras. No leads of any kind had been discovered.
Bogo drained the last of his coffee and sat in silence, waiting for the caffeine to kick in. This didn't mean the coffee was a dead end, he told himself. It just meant that the location the coffee was poisoned at was not the factory. There were other places where the crime could have occurred. There was the road the truck had taken to deliver the coffee, and his detectives had just received a map of the route that was used. There may have been something they missed at the mall itself. Anything was possible at this point, but all that mattered was getting to the truth. In the meantime he had someone to check up on.

He pulled out his phone and used the speed dial. The phone rang for one second before Hopps answered. "Chief Bogo. What's the stitch?"

"You should be at the mansion by now, right?"

"Yes, sir. We're just getting a tour now, this place is beautiful."

"How is Clawhauser?" This was the question Bogo wanted answered more than anything.

"There was a minor incident with Carlos, but other than that he's okay."

"Good. Has Gazelle arrived yet?"

"Hold on, sir." Her voice grew distant. "Alec, is Gazelle here yet?"

"Not yet." Alec was faintly heard. "But she'll be here before lunch, don't worry about it."

Judy returned to the phone. "Not yet, but-"

"I heard. Look, the factory was a dead end, but we're still good on leads. Just focus on the task at hand and don't distract yourselves by playing detective."

"You can count on us, sir! Nothing's going to happen to them!"

Bogo had yet to get used to the rabbit's optimism. "I know."

He hung up and checked the clock on the wall. It was time for his afternoon workout at the precinct's gym, which he did three times a week to maintain his self-discipline. He always kept a spare black t-shirt and pants in his locker for the occasion, and he was soon on his way to retrieve it.

Twenty minutes later he was changed and walking into the gym, where half the machines were already occupied. He soon spotted McHorn at the far end of the gym where the Dumbbells were located, bench pressing with a hefty set of round weights that looked to be as heavy as a small car. Figuring a few minutes with the smaller weights would make a good start after the warmup, Bogo walked over to join the rhino. "You're late, boss." McHorn grunted, keeping his focus entirely on the weights he was lifting.

"It wouldn't be the first time." Bogo replied as he stepped onto a nearby mat and started stretching. After a few seconds he realised which bench it was that McHorn was using. "Remember to be careful when you put those weights down."

"Sure I will, what'd you…" McHorn paused in between lifts. "Oh yeah, this is the same one where Clawhauser…"

"Yes." Bogo replied sharply. Right now, the day he'd been forced to stop pretending was not a subject he wanted to talk about.
He was soon done with the warmup and reaching for a pair of small Dumbbells. That was when his phone buzzed. It was a text from Wilde and a shrunken photo.

[NOTHING'S WRONG, BUT UR NOT GONNA BELIEVE WHO BENJI DRESSED UP AS :D]

Rolling his eyes, Bogo nevertheless expanded the photo. He stared at the photo and kept staring, his brain threatening to haemorrhage in the face of such sheer cuteness.

Judy stared at her partner and kept staring, her brain threatening to haemorrhage in the face of such sheer sexiness. Just as Judy had chosen the last outfit Mulan had worn in her movie, Nick had chosen the black and white outfit Flynn/Eugene had worn in the end of his movie, and Judy had not been expecting the costume to look so… tight.

The guest rooms had been the last stage of the tour, and they'd been left there to change for lunch. Lunch. Never before had a daily event intimidated Judy so much. Then again, it wasn't every day that they dined with one of the founding families of Zootopia, most of whom may or may not hate her friend's guts. During the tour Alec had explained how the afternoon was going to go- after lunch they would get to know each other with a few drinks in the lounge before playing a few games in the ballroom. After that was dinner in the dining room.

"Yeah, I'm definitely not going to enjoy this party." Nick muttered as he checked himself in the tall mirror beside the dresser. Compared to the traditional public rooms like the ballroom and conservatory the bedrooms had more modern, elegantly simplistic furniture, like a five star hotel in Liondon. This was one of the few things that had cheered up Nick since they'd arrived, other than the discovery that his room was right next to Judy's. Benjamin's room was right across the hall, and Gazelle, Christine and Ombidia's rooms were farther down near the end. Speaking of which, the butler had knocked on Nick's door to inform them that the other guests had arrived, and they would all be gathering outside the dining room at ten to twelve.

"Nick, we haven't even had lunch yet." Judy was already in her own blue and white costume, with only the pink sash left to tie around her waist. When she'd finished her ensemble and turned to Nick once more, she frowned and crossed her arms. "Nick. Why are you wearing a tie?"

Nick looked down innocently at the loose black tie dangling over his black vest. "We're going to a soirée, Carrots. Might as well look swanky."

"No." Judy spoke sternly. "If Eugene Fitzherbert didn't wear a tie, neither should you."

"But Carooooooooотssssss…"

"No!" Judy grabbed the tie and began to undo the knot. She began to try again. And again. She turned the knot over. "Nicholas Wilde, why are there stitches on this knot?"

"Protection."

"Protection from what?"

"Peanuts."

Judy blinked. "That shouldn't make sense, but it does." She shook her head. "You know what, I'm just being uptight. You can keep the tie."
Nick leaned down to her eye level. "Carrots, I do believe you have something behind your ear."

Judy smiled. Nick had done his before, from quarters to small chocolates to her own carrot pen. She stayed still so Nick could do his trick and sure enough he reached behind her ear and pulled out a flower. It took a moment for Judy to realise that it was the large pink lily from the movie, except instead of a comb it was fixed to a clear plastic clip. "I saw this in the accessory section of the costume store and I knew it would look great on you. You like it?" That final question sounded almost hopeful.

"I love it. Thank you, Nick." Judy felt warm in the face as Nick clipped the lily to the base of her ear and she saw how it looked in the mirror. "Shall we go check on Ben, now?"

"Yeah, any idea who he's dressed up as? Bet you five bucks it's the robot from Pig Hero Six."

Judy pulled up her sleeve to check her watch. "Five minutes until we have to be at lunch. Let's go."

They crossed the hall and knocked on Benjamin's door. "Come in!" The cheetah called cheerfully.

Judy and Nick entered the room, which was decorated just like theirs. They stopped dead when they saw the creature standing at the dressing table preparing to apply contact lenses.

Their first thought was that it was Bagheera, the pure black panther from The Jungle Book. Except panthers don't have bat wings, devil's horns, or thick, dark claws.

As Judy and Nick stared, the creature turned around to reveal a pair of familiar chocolate brown eyes in a sea of dyed black. "Oh hey, you guys! You're just in time!" The creature spoke. "Oh my gosh, you guys look great! Not Gazelle great, but great, but then again I haven't seen her costume yet! Hang on, I just need to put on the finishing touches…" As he turned back round to finish with the contacts, Nick whipped out his phone, poised to take a picture. He seized his chance when the creature turned back round to reveal eyes of bright sickly yellow.

Judy just kept staring, unable to speak. Of all the costumes Benjamin Clawhauser could have picked, he picked that?

"What's the matter?" The creature asked. "Are my contacts not on properly or something?"

"No, they're fine." Nick had a similarly dumbstruck expression as he typed a text on his phone and sent it. "We've got four minutes to get to the dining room before lunch starts. I think Gazelle's already there."

"Oh my gosh, then what are we standing around for?! We can't keep her waiting!" The creature rushed past his two coworkers into the hallway, moving faster than they'd ever expected him to run. They shook themselves out of their stupor and followed, only catching up in the lounge next door to the dining room. Most of the other guests were seated on the cream coloured couches that surrounded the ash wood coffee table.

Alec had adopted the Captain Hook ensemble his older brother had tried, and had had the fun idea of eating an apple from his genuine metal hook. Christine Antlaire sat beside him with his arm around her shoulders, looking pretty in Aurora's pink gown. Edward AKA Belch had settled on Prince Charming for his costume, looking regal in gold and red as he sipped what looked to be cider. On another couch sat Carlos, dressed up as Yokai with his white and red mask currently lifted above his face. Next to him sat an attractive female who Judy recognised as Lake Casel, maintaining a strained smile as Cinderella. Finally, on a third couch that stood directly across from the fireplace, sat Mr. Ombidia in a Men in Black style suit with sunglasses and Gazelle as Queen Otsa.
Benjamin was standing near the third couch, looking ready to explode at the sight of Gazelle's exquisitely frosted blue dress. "Oh. My. Gosh! Gazelle, you look fantastic!"

"Ben." Gazelle beamed as she stood up and kissed Benjamin on his blackened cheek, nearly rendering the cheetah catatonic. "I'm so happy you could join us!"

"Good of you to come, Clawhauser." Ombidia said.

The affectionate greeting almost made Judy wish that she'd been inside the mall during the terrorist attack. Almost. She didn't want anything like a kiss on the cheek, obviously, but it would be a dream come true to be friends with the Angel with Horns herself.

Carlos, who had been refusing to look at Benjamin until now, looked at the two of them in astonishment. "You know him?"

"If it weren't for him I wouldn't have gotten out the mall alive." Gazelle said.

Benjamin partly turned away from them in his bashfulness, his wings just missing Ombidia's black sunglasses, and saw the way Judy and Nick were still looking at him. "Guys, why're you looking at me like that? Did my horns come off?"

"No, it's just… You're black." Judy answered slowly.

Nick snorted softly. "He means the party costume, Chernabog."

Benjamin looked down at himself. "Oh, right! How do I look?"

Nick paused dramatically. "Like hell."

Gazelle gently tugged on one of the wings. "I think he looks adorable. What'd you think, Christine?"

"It's like the Nightmare before Christmas." Christine replied, getting a laugh out of Alec. The scarlet dressed pirate stood up and handed the three officers a cream coloured menu. "Here's this afternoon's menu so you know what you're in for."

Judy read the menu out loud. "Starter; Coeur de boeuf tomato tartare with black olive, marjoram and smoked burrata, with Cornish brown crab, lovage and muffins for the predators if they choose it. For the main course we've got Rataouille with courgette and romesco and Norfolk black leg chicken with summer vegetables and wild garlic consommé. Finally for dessert it's lemonade parfait, strawberries and cream, and manjari chocolate delice." She looked to Nick and Benjamin. "Sounds nice, doesn't it?"

Nick's eyes were slightly blank. "I didn't get a word of that."

Judy laid the menu on the coffee table with a sigh. "Yeah, neither did I."

The butler opened the doors to the Dining Room and announced that lunch was served. The guests poured into the dining room, a rectangular room with dark wooden walls and an equally dark table, nicely contrasted with brightly coloured landscape paintings, place mats and light silver cutlery. Two seats at the long table were already occupied; sitting side by side near a grandfather clock were Elgen and his wife, the well aged deer Selke Casel. The moment Judy set eyes on them she knew they weren't wearing costumes; the dark blue suit and blood red long sleeved dress were more formal than fancy dress. Their smiles as the guests entered strongly reminded Judy of the overly cheerful teachers at her old elementary school.
"Ah, at last." Elgen said warmly. "Welcome to the Casel family home."

"Good morning. Your home is beautiful, Mr. Casel." Gazelle replied.

"It was built before Zootopia was born, my dear." Selke said, with a friendly if pompous tone befitting a socialite. She looked to Judy and Nick. "You must be Officer Hopps and Wilde."

"Yes, Mrs. Casel. We're honoured that you invited us." Judy smiled.

Elgen chuckled. "Your reputations precede you, Miss Hopps. The honour is all ours."

It did not escape Judy's notice when both of them failed to acknowledge the third officer in the room.

One by one the guests were seated, with Judy, Nick and Benjamin being seated in the end farthest from the elder Casels. After the starters arrived, Judy took in what she could from everyone gathered. Alec kept glancing at Christine with a warm look that Judy had often seen before on her parents. There was no doubt that their relationship was a good one. At one point Edward gave his little brother a small fist bump over the table over a corny joke, but other than that did little to interact with the rest of his family. When Nick asked Ombidia about his costume, the bison lifted a fist to reveal the word Cobra on his knuckles. Once all the dishes were set down and everyone dug in, Judy was relieved to find herself enjoying her starter, even if it did look like a tomato-pumpkin hybrid. She couldn't say she was enjoying the atmosphere, however. It was a jovial scene, with nearly everyone at the table discussing their plans for Christmas Day, but there was an underlying hostility towards Benjamin. Other than Alec and Edward, not one member of the Casel family made an effort to talk to the cheetah or even look at him, and Carlos especially seemed to be deliberately avoiding it; when Benjamin had asked him about his plans for Christmas Day, instead of answering Carlos had pointedly ignored the question to address Alec. "Don't you have a speech to make?"

Alec made no move to stand up. "Ben just asked you a question."

"We're gonna drink eggnog and open our presents, no big deal." Carlos replied with a non-too subtle roll of his eyes. "Speech?"

As Alec slowly stood up with his drink, Judy locked eyes with Nick. She knew he was thinking the same thing: Chief Bogo was right to be worried.

Alec cleared his throat, quieting the room. He tugged on his collar and swallowed, but it wasn't until he saw Benjamin's encouraging smile that he took a deep breath and started speaking. "I'd like to thank you all for taking the time to come here this weekend. I am especially honoured to have the Jewel of Zootopia herself eating at my table. I'm also happy to welcome Officers Hopps and Wilde, whose successful rescue mission several days ago not only saved the life of Gazelle, but that of my close friend, Benjamin Clawhauser, who displayed some true heroism of his own that day. Before we move on to the main course, I have a small announcement. Winters, could you bring it in, please?"

Winters, an albino tigress, wheeled in a small golden trolley. There were several gasps. On the trolley, roughly the size of a doll house, was a beautiful, flawless, hand sculpted replica of the castle from Beauty and the Wildebeest, made entirely out of chocolate. Benjamin's mouth went agape. "Oh my gosh. Alec, did you make that?"

"Yep, and by the end of the weekend it will be going to one of you." Judy went stiff. She'd just eaten, but already her mouth was watering. She looked around and saw that everyone except Elgen, Selke and Nick looked just as eager as she was.
As Alec took his first sip since lunch began, Nick planted his elbows on the table. "Alright, what's the catch?"

As he set down his glass, Alec opened his mouth to answer. Instead of answering Nick, he asked, "Mr. Ombidia? Are you feeling okay?"

Suddenly there was a loud choking sound from Ombidia as the Bosin clutched his throat with both hooves, his own glass fallen on its side. Before anyone could move, he collapsed from sight.

"Simon!" Gazelle was the first to react, leaping up from her table and rushing to her fallen manager. Judy and Nick were close behind, phones at the ready to call the police and the ambulance. That was when they saw Ombidia lying on the floor, breathing normally and his eyes narrowed in exasperation. All of a sudden he wasn't choking anymore. Judy, Nick, Gazelle and the other guests all raised their heads to stare at Alec.

The youngest of the Casels smiled mischievously. "Oh, and there's one more thing you need to know… First, you have to solve this murder."
A Study in Azure, Viridian and Scarlet

The instant Benjamin emerged from the downstairs bathroom, he nearly peed again when a blue and grey blur leapt out in front of him.

"Clawhauser! EEEEEEEE!" Judy shrieked, as giddy as a schoolgirl as she bounced up and down on the emerald green carpet. "Did you know this was gonna be a murder mystery party?!"

"N-no!" Benjamin shook his head, his fake horns brushing his wings.

"Come on, Benji." Nick came strolling down the corridor after his partner. "There's no point in pretending now."

"I honestly had no idea!"

Judy whirled on Nick. "Oh my gosh, omigosh, I've always wanted to be in a murder mystery party! Holy rhubarb, this is gonna be great!"

"Easy, tiger." Nick planted a paw on her shoulder, stopping her bouncing. "Don't forget we've still gotta return to our rooms to 'calm our nerves.' I've a hunch that our hooked host has left us a present."

Once they'd gotten over the shock of the fake murder, the guests had sat back down and listened as Alec explained; over the next two days they would have to solve a series of puzzles and riddles in order to receive clues that would bring them one step closer to exposing the killer. As for the 'murderer', they would win the game if they could get through the party without someone figuring it it was them. The first puzzle would take place once Ombidia was moved to his room, where he would stay for the majority of the weekend. As it turned out, Ombidia had volunteered to be the dead body so he could focus less on the party and more on his work; he had his briefcase, his phone and his laptop ready and waiting. As he made clear on the floor beside the dining table, the only reason he had come along was that the recent attempt on Gazelle's life had made him reluctant to let her go to the isolated estate by herself.

Just as Nick had predicted, when Judy returned to her room she found a scroll waiting for her on the bed. She picked up the scroll, untied the ribbon, and sat down to read it.

---

You are Judith Hopps, a top assassin for the infamous mob boss Al Clawpone. Known to the public as Zootopia's first rabbit officer, your reputation has earned you a place at the Casel Family's famous Christmas party, where you unexpectedly cross paths with a rival mob boss, Simon Ombidia. Having a personal grudge against Ombidia for ordering the murder of your first love, you immediately send a message to your boss asking permission to ice the bison. Mere moments after permission is granted, Ombidia drops dead at the dinner table.

Even though you did not commit the murder yourself, it's game over if anyone finds out you had been given orders to kill him. Your only hope is to find the true killer before you take the fall.

Your first clue may be acquired in the Study, once the body has been completely moved. Good Luck.

"Sweet cheese and crackers, I'm loving this already!" Judy giggled, nearly crushing the scroll in her excitement. Even better, she didn't do it. If she had to choose between playing the cop and the robber, it would always be the cop.

Nick entered without knocking, rolling up his own scroll and tucking it into his vest. Somehow he
had procured an old fashioned tobacco pipe. Judy quickly tucked away her own scroll. "Hey, Nick. Guess what? I didn't do it."

Nick puffed on his pipe, though no smoke came out. "Miss Hopps, there is nothing more deceptive than an obvious fact."

"Is that Sherlock Howlmes?"

"Who is this Sherlock you speak of?" Nick tilted his head back quizzically. "I am Nicholas Wilde, the true greatest detective of the age, and now I have another puzzle on my plate. And may I ask who you are?"

Judy chuckled and held out her paw. "Judy Hopps. An honest cop with a dirty secret."

Nick shook her paw. "I have been sent to collect you, Officer Hopps-with-a-dirty-secret. We have all been asked to gather in the Study for our first clue. Shall I escort you, my lady?"

"Oh my, what a gentlemammal!" Judy graciously took his arm and allowed him to lead her to the Study, where everyone else was gathered on the black leather couches in the middle of the room. Benjamin was the only one on an armchair, sitting apart from the Casels. Edward slouched in his seat with a brandy. Carlos' eyes kept flicking to the cheetah, as did Lake's when she wasn't reading a botany book. At the far side of the square shaped study, sitting at a large desk in front of a massive glass window, was Alec. On the desk were three silver dish covers without labels.

"Good. We're all here." Alec spoke enigmatically, leaning forward on the desk as Judy and Nick sat down beside Benjamin. "By now you should all know your roles in this little play. Mr. Ombidia's death was a shock, but hardly a tragedy, for he was well known in the criminal... the criminal... Excuse me." He pulled a small set of cards from somewhere in the coat, stuck them on his hook and read from them. "He was well known in the criminal underworld as a ruthless, cold hearted mob boss with many enemies, some of which are sitting among us at this very moment. At this time, every one of you has a motive, but only one used the means and opportunity. You have until tomorrow night to deduce the killer, and your investigation begins here." Judy's paws clenched with anticipation as Alec stood up and switched to another card. Everyone else was relaxing in their seats, waiting for the youngest Casel to finish. "I would like to introduce you all to Nicholas Wilde, a world famous detective. It was he who examined the body and determined that the cause of death was poison. With his keen powers of deduction he has narrowed the murder weapon down to three different poisons, but it is up to all of you to determine which is which." One by one, he lifted the dish covers, revealing three bottles of water. "Cyanide." He pointed to the red bottle. "Phenol." The green bottle. "Tetrodotoxin." The blue bottle. Alec then held up a set of identical battered notebooks. "In this notebook, Detective Wilde has written down the symptoms of each poison as well as the symptoms found on Ombidia before and after death." He set the notebooks on the coffee table before the guests. "And one more thing... Also in this notebook is a brief summary of what Ombidia had been up to today before his death. I suggest you do not ignore it. You have five minutes, starting now."

The moment the grandfather clock reached five to one, Judy leapt up and reached her book first, racing back to Nick's side before he had even gotten off his seat. "Come on, Nick, let's get cracking!"

"Carrots, we're not supposed to work in teams." Nick chastised as everyone else took a notebook.

"Oh, nuts to that." Judy replied. "You know that if either you or me win, we're both going to share the prize."
Nick pretended to pause to think. "Good point. Let's see what I've got."

Judy opened the book.

8:00- breakfast as Tiffany's.
9:00- tanning salon. Went awry, apparently.
10:00- meeting with local pimp.
11:00- arrival at Casel Manor.
12:00- lunch begins.
12:15- collapses from poisoning. Small fire started when candle was knocked over.

Possible poisons

Cyanide-  

Phenol-  

Tetrodotoxin-  

Signs on body-  

"I don't remember any of these symptoms being on the body." Judy muttered.

"It's all in the imagination, carrots." Nick glanced around at the others. Edward was muttering under his breath. Carlos and Lake were reading their own books, while Gazelle and Christine shared a book and quietly discussed it amongst themselves. After a moment Gazelle gestured for Benjamin to come join them, and the cheetah happily accepted. Alec took his place on the armchair and announced that four minutes remained.

"Let's see..." Already familiar with the symptoms of the different poisons, Judy looked to the signs on the body, keeping her voice down to keep the others from hearing. "All three poisons induce seizures, vomiting and some manner of breathing difficulty. Cyanide is the only one that causes pink skin, which the victim has. Phenol is a corrosive chemical, but the only corrosive injury the victim has is on his wrist. The victim didn't salivate or have diarrhoea, but those kinds of symptoms probably don't happen every time so we shouldn't rule tetrodotoxin out just yet. The white substance may be important."

"But it doesn't match any of the poisons. Most of them are powdery." Nick said. "It could be a red herring."

"Alec, is it alright if we write on these?" Judy asked.
"Sure, go ahead."

Judy pulled out her carrot pen. "This could be tricky. The victim displayed symptoms of all three poisons."

"Three minutes." Alec called.

"Except Phenol." Nick jabbed the sentence 'Corrosive injury to mouth' on the page. "If he drank a corrosive chemical there'd be burns in the mouth, not the wrist."

"That's right, there would be. But that doesn't explain the wrist burn." The carrot pen hovered over the word 'Phenol.' "There were candles during lunch, right?"

"It was a pretty dark room." Nick spoke over the loud scratching of Christine scribbling in her book.

"If a candle was knocked over, what are the chances that some hot wax dripped onto Ombidia as he was dying?"

Nick snapped his fingers. "Bingo."

Judy crossed out the poison. "Okay, one red herring down, one to go."

They both stared at the notebook, thinking hard, until Alec declared that three minutes had passed. After that, Edward put down his book and settled himself on the couch.

"Carrots?"

"Yes?"

"I got nothin'."

"Me, too."

"You now have one minute to solve the puzzle." Alec said as Benjamin, Christine and Gazelle put down their own books.

"Carrots." Nick whispered slowly. "I think I got it."

"What? What is it?!" Judy whispered furiously.

"Ten… Nine… Eight…"

"Tetrodotoxin!"

"You sure?"

"Yes!"

Judy circled the word. Lake and Carlos put down their books.

"Three… Two… One…" The clock struck one, sending a single chime bouncing around the Study. Alec returned to his desk. "Alright, raise your hand if you chose this poison." He pointed out the red cyanide. Only Carlos raised his hoof, and Judy dearly hoped that he was wrong. Alec pointed out the green phenol. Christine, Lake and Edward raised their hooves. Finally Alec pointed out the blue tetrodotoxin, and Judy, Nick, Gazelle and Benjamin raised their paws and hooves. Alec picked out another card to read from.
"After several minutes, the guests were eventually able to deduce the final hours of Ombidia's life. After breakfast he spent a little too long in the tanning salon, turning the skin beneath his hair a vivid pink. After a last minute meeting he made it to the Casel estate in time for lunch, unaware that he was about to be murdered. In the middle of lunch, he collapsed to the floor and died, in the process knocking down a candle that dripped burning hot wax onto his wrist as he quickly perished. Cause of death… Poisoned by tetrodotoxin."

Edward scowled and smacked his forehead.

"Yes!" Judy clenched her fist triumphantly. "Nice one, Nick!"

"Oh darn." Christine sighed. "I should have known when the book didn't say the victim had burns in the mouth or throat. I'll have to remember that."

"Better luck next time, honey." Alec replied, smiling. "Everyone who didn't choose tetrodotoxin, please wait in the bar."

Once the other guests were gone, Alec beckoned them all to stand behind the desk. "Okay, in this desk is the first clue to solving this mystery. You can check it whenever you want, but don't take it out the drawer. Understand, guys?"

They all nodded, and Alec opened the drawer. Inside was a sealed enveloped on which was written The Last Will and Testament of Elgen Casel. "It's not a real will, obviously, but like I said don't take it out." He slid the drawer shut. "Okay, the next task will take place in the lounge, once I've talked to mom and dad. See you in a few."

On the way to the lounge, Nick stopped. "You guys go on ahead. I need the bathroom."

"Well lucky for you, there's one right there." Christine pointed to a wooden door a little ways back in the corridor. Nick thanked her and went inside, while the others continued on to the lounge.

Almost immediately upon entering the lounge Judy noticed that something was different. Two small padlocked chests sat on the coffee table, and on the wall above them hung what looked to be two paintings covered in white sheets. Edward was gone, and they were told that he had gone to the bar to get a fresh orange juice. With Nick temporarily absent, Judy went to sit with Benjamin instead, on the couch facing the window. She had a perfect view of the rose garden outside, and the patrolling figure in the distance. "Is that the groundskeeper?" Benjamin asked.

"That's the added security from the company." Lake spoke, lifting her gaze from her botany book. "The incident at the mall really spooked our parents, so they're not taking any chances this year."

Lake was different from Alec, Edward and Carlos in that Judy didn't know what to make of her. On one paw she had made no attempt to acknowledge Benjamin until now, but on the other paw, when she did she didn't share her husband's hostile attitude. In the end, Judy chose to assume that Lake was just apathetic to his presence. "Has any other measures been made?" Judy asked.

"Security cameras surrounding the house and a print scanner at the front gate. Father had them installed as soon as he found about about that costumed trespasser."

"Has he been seen since then?" Judy asked.

"No. They searched the whole forest and didn't find a thing, but rest assured that thug won't be getting in here."

"No, he won't." Judy recognised the voice of Elgen Casel before she saw him in the doorway, in that..."
same unblemished suit. Beside him stood his wife, Selke, holding a fresh glass of red wine. "So relax. Enjoy my son's party. And please, keep out of trouble."

His eyes hardened as they fell on Benjamin, who shrank slightly into his seat. He smiled nervously. "Um… Hello, Mr. Casel."

"Clawhauser." Elgen was rigid. "I never thought I'd see the day that you would be sitting in my lounge."

"It's… It's a really nice house, Mr. Casel."

"It is." Selke said huskily. Judy could tell even without the look in her eyes that she also didn't like Benjamin. "The guest room Gazelle sleeps in now has been occupied by three presidents."

"Wow." Judy murmured. That hadn't been mentioned in Honey's files, but that likely just meant that the badger hadn't thought it important.

"I am honoured that you gave me such a special room." Gazelle spoke, the snowflake pattern on her transparent cape glistening as she stood up and stood beside Benjamin, putting the cheetah on the verge of a freak out. "I assume you know Mr. Clawhauser and what he did for me. And I love your costume, by the way."

"Thanks." Benjamin replied meekly.

"Yes, it suits him perfectly," Selke said, eyeing the cheetah's pear shaped figure. "Though I imagine it might be a little tight."

It took the memory of Bogo's warning and every ounce of self restraint not to make a scene then and there. As she seethed in her seat, watching Benjamin's ears go flat and Gazelle's eyes narrow angrily, she saw Elgen glower at his wife. This was clearly not how he wanted their first meeting with the famous Gazelle and Judy Hopps to go down.

Ultimately Judy couldn't help herself. With a coldness that she usually saved for criminals, she spoke out. "I'd imagine it would be. Chernabog was naked, but I suppose you never saw that film."

"I did in fact watch that film, Miss Hopps."

"You did? So you remember that he didn't wear anything that would require a loosely fitting costume?"

Everyone was looking at her by now, wondering what she was getting at.

"Like you said, he didn't wear any clothing." Selke replied after a sip of her drink. "And your point is?"

Judy knew that if Bogo ever found out about what she said next, he would put her on parking duty for a month. "The point is that Benjamin made a good move putting on a form fitting costume. If only all of us could be so smart thinking."

Needless to say, every single one of the Casel children stared gobsmacked at the hard eyed bunny rabbit as their mother fought back a furious retort. "I completely agree." Elgen spoke as politely as possible, wrapping one arm around Selke's shoulders and extricating her glass with the other. "Alec and Edward should be back soon to begin the second puzzle. You don't mind if we sit and watch, do you?"
"Not at all." Lake said, even though the question had obviously been a formality, given that they were sitting in Elgen's lounge.

Everyone sat down, waiting in silence for the two Casels to return. As soon as Elgen and Selke took the only remaining empty couch, Nick arrived from his trip to the bathroom. His ears fell slightly as he took in the tense atmosphere, hesitating in the doorway before returning to Judy's side. He sat down, pulled out his phone, and sent a text. Almost immediately Judy felt her phone vibrate and pulled it out.

[Would u mind explaining why it feels like a wake in here? :/]

Judy tried to discreetly text back.

[Mrs. Casel insulted Ben, so I insulted her back.]

Nick raised an eyebrow.

[What did you say?]

Judy repeated what she had said to Selke. Nick read the text and grinned.

[Way to go, carrots!]

[What took you so long? A number 3?]

[I didn't go to the toilet, carrots. I got a message from honey. She found some more info for us.]

Judy's ears perked. Someone in the room coughed.

[Well?]

[Honey didn't say how she found out but Lake Casel is a member of Veltro.]

Judy took one stunned look at Lake, who was once more engrossed in her botany book, before quickly sending a message to Chief Bogo.
A Scandal in Benadryl

Even though the potential new lead must have been a surprise, Chief Bogo had made a quick response to Judy's text.

[We'll look into it. Don't try to investigate yourself. Remember why you're there.]

Judy pursed her lips, but she knew the buffalo was making the right call. She replied with an affirmative before putting her phone away. When she and Nick looked up, Alec was standing in between the two covered paintings.

"Mom. Dad. Glad you could join us." His parents replied with nods and smiles. "Welcome to the lounge, which you may have noticed has had some changes done since you were last here. You see these chests on the table here?" He gestured to the small chests. "Inside these two chests are imitations of the next clue. Before you can open them, however, you must first figure out the combination. And the key to figuring out the combination is right in front of you."

With that, Alec removed the covers.

It wasn't paintings that Alec revealed. On each panel were three small rugs of varying patterns, and a blank piece of paper underneath each rug. Already the gears in Judy's head were turning, trying to work out the meaning behind the unusual artworks.

"For this one you will be split up into two teams. Each team will have a panel to work with. Whichever team figures out the combination and opens the chest first gets the clue. Mom, dad, you are not allowed to help." Elgen waved a hoof in acknowledgement, while Selke just sulked and kept her gaze turned away from Judy and Benjamin.

"Do we get to pick our own teams?" Gazelle asked.

"Sorry, but no." Alec pulled out a list. "Gazelle, you'll be teamed up with Belch, Benjamin and Judy." Edward's mouth fell open very slightly and his eyes flitted toward Gazelle.

Judy looked at Nick, her stomach doing a somersault at the thought of working against him. Nick merely smirked back at her before getting up to sit with his opposing team. Once all the guests were in their teams, Alec held up a paper identical to the ones beneath the rugs. "One more thing. Here's a little clue to help you figure it out."

He set it down on the large rug beneath the coffee table. On this paper was a large number 'five.'

Judy eyed each rug on her team's panel. The first rug was checked in black and white, like a chessboard. The second rug was black with brightly coloured rings. The third rug bore a natural brown wood ring pattern, like a tree trunk cut in half. She then turned her attention to the padlock on the chest. There were three dials on the combination lock. Three rugs. Three dials. It didn't take a genius to-

"Um, Judy?" Judy felt a finger on her shoulder, breaking her train of thought. "We're supposed to work it out as a team."

"Oh right. Sorry, Ben." Judy replied. "Any ideas, guys?"

"For one thing, I think we can narrow it down to single digits." Edward said. "Those dials only go
from nought to nine." He yawned loudly.

Selke peered at him. "Honey, it's the middle of winter. You're not taking Benadryl, are you?"

"Naw, just forgot my coffee this morning."

Judy looked to the other team and felt a jolt of alarm when she saw Carlos fiddling with the dials on their chest. When she saw Nick, Lake and Christine discussing amongst themselves, it became apparent that Carlos was merely trying out random combinations.

"What about the clue?" Gazelle had been examining the rug on the floor.

They all looked down. This rug was cream with large chocolate brown lotus flowers dotted all over its surface. The number 'five' rested on one corner.

Just like that, it clicked. "There are five flowers on the rug." Judy whispered.

"The patterns." Edward said. He looked up to the rugs on the wall, at the first one in particular. "Four squares." He looked at the second rug. "Seven rings."

"One ring. Four, seven, one." Benjamin whispered.

Judy's heart jumped when she looked again at the other team and saw Nick reaching for the padlock. She leapt across the gap between the couch and the coffee table and frantically started turning the dials. Four… Seven… please be right… One… click.

The padlock opened. Judy yanked it off as her tall ears caught the click of the other padlock. She opened the chest. "Stop!" Alec called. "Gazelle's team wins!"

"Darn it." Judy heard Nick mutter as he reluctantly removed his paws from the chest.

Elgen and Selke clapped politely as Alec stepped forward to take away the sealed chest. "Now, I'm not completely heartless." He assured the losing team. "So I will say this; inside this chest is the vessel the poison was drunk from. It will be up to the members of the winning team whether or not you find out what that vessel is."

Knowing he had his phone on silent, Judy wasted no time Nick about the champagne glass she had found in the chest, and to arrange to meet up in her room later to discuss what the significance of the glass could be. The fact alone that it was the murder weapon would not be enough to work out who used it. Alec passed the chest to the butler, who brusquely walked off. "The next task's going to be a big one, so would anyone like to join me for a coffee?" He sat down beside Christine as a maid brought in a tray of cups.

"Maybe later. I'm going to go check on Mr. Ombidia." Gazelle stood up.

"Wait, let me come with you." Benjamin stood up with her, and they left together.

"I will be in my study if anyone wants me." Elgen left soon after.

As Judy slowly raised her cup to her lips, she laid her eyes on Lake. Of all the Casel children, the only daughter was the biggest enigma. She had shown almost complete apathy to not only Benjamin, but nearly every other guest in the room, even her own husband. She was engrossed in a botany book, even though Honey's files indicated that she had no interest in plants, and she had a career as an executive in her father's corporation. Then there was the apparent reveal of her membership with Veltro, which brought up enough questions to fill a page of Judy's notebook.
Was Honey's information accurate? If it was, why did Lake join Veltro? Did anyone else in the family know? Did Lake have anything to do with the mall incident or Gazelle's stalker? Was she Gazelle's stalker? Would it be a good idea for Judy and Nick to try and learn more despite Bogo's warning that they weren't supposed to be investigating?

"Judy?" Edward's voice snapped her out of it. Hoping that no-one had noticed that she'd been staring at Lake, Judy turned to Edward. "Yes?"

"I've been meaning to ask, what do you do for a living? I know Nick's a private detective, but…"

"I'm a cop. ZPD's first rabbit officer. What about you?"

"I'm a superstar with my own series of action movies. Four Mortal Wombat films and counting."

"Wow." Nick replied with faked envy.

Edward let out a snort of laughter. "I almost busted a gut when I read that on my card. Still, it's nothing compared to Carloser." Nick cocked an eyebrow at that insult. "Ex-male cheerleader and currently an aspiring poet with a couple hundred love poems to his name. Right now he's trying to invent a word that rhymes with 'orange.'"

"Good luck with that." Nick said.

Judy waited until Selke, Carlos and Lake had disappeared to the bar. "Edward, forgive me for asking, but do you like Carlos?"

"Hell, no." Edward replied, his friendly smile vanishing. "The guy's a money-mooching parasite. The sooner Lake wakes up and divorces his sorry ass, the better off we'll all be."

"I heard he'd also tried to make a name for himself by marrying the mayor's daughter." Nick said.

"Yeah, that was back when dad was running for mayor. They got hitched right when it looked like dad was going to win, but then…” Edward paused, both hooves clutching his coffee. "Then things went to pot."

"What do you mean?" Judy asked, frowning.

"There was some kind of scandal, and Carlos found himself married to a family in disgrace. For a guy like him, that's a pretty big deal."

"Apparently Benji was involved in what happened." Nick said. "What did he do, offend a billionaire at one of your dad's fundraisers?"

"No, nothing like that." Edward replied, visibly wanting a swift end to the subject. "What Ben did… Look, it's complicated, and dad would kill me if I said anything."

"Do you hate Ben?" Judy asked simply.

Edward's eyes flashed. "No. Never. I'm going to get coffee."

When Edward was gone, Judy look to Nick, who looked just as mystified as she was. Ben had done something that had ruined Elgen's chances of becoming mayor, damaged a gold digger's marriage, and tarnished the Casel family name, and yet if Judy and Nick didn't know any better, Alec and Edward at least seemed to be happy about it.

"What the hell did Benji do to them?" Nick wondered.
A full minute passed before Judy had replied that she understood, and then Bogo had cut his workout short to return to his office.

Truth be told, he wasn't very surprised. He had no way of knowing that one of Elgen's own children was part of the organisation that was antagonising him and his corporation, but he had just known that one way or another the famous duo Hopps and Wilde would stumble onto a lead, even though they were not supposed to be investigating anything. The discovery that Elgen's daughter was a Veltro member could be the break they were looking for; if they could get Lake to cooperate with the ZPD, they could determine once and for all if Veltro had anything to do with the terrorist attack or Gazelle's death threats.

On the other hand, once... Just once... Could Hopps and Wilde just do as they were bloody told?!

Look who's talking, echoed the voice of the commissioner, who five years ago had said something similar about Bogo.

That's right. Bogo could hardly complain about Hopps and Wilde's antics after the crap he'd pulled himself. Like that time in the restaurant, a couple of days before the gym incident...

The gym incident.

Bogo felt an ache in his gut as he thought of the gym incident which never would have happened if he'd just done as the commissioner told...

It was a cloudy, a dull grey skyline that Bogo saw out the window behind Benjamin as he entered the police gym and spotted the cheetah jogging lightly on one of the treadmills, five years ago. He wasn't alone; McHorn was at one of the bench presses, lifting tire-sized weights with Snarlov hovering over him as his spotter.

Without his glasses, Bogo had almost missed the cheetah with his dark blue shirt and grey gym pants that blended with the treadmill and the window's view of the city. Benjamin had his back to Bogo, focused on the view before him as he worked his cardio.

Were it any other rookie, Bogo would have ignored him and moved on to the weights. Except with the mere act of befriending a Casel, that Casel, Officer Benjamin Clawhauser had become a special case. The cheetah had no idea what he was getting himself into, especially if their 'relationship' became more than mere 'friends.' Bogo imagined himself making quotation marks with his hooves throughout that train of thought. He should just do what the commissioner had told him to do when he heard about what happened at the restaurant. Forget about Casel. Go on to the weights. Let that naive little fool dig his own grave. Let him learn it the hard way.

And let Casel destroy his life?

Like an armour-piercing round, that small question uttered by his own conscience broke through his hard cynicism. He turned away from the weights and stepped onto the treadmill beside Benjamin.

He started the treadmill at jogging speed, intending to keep it that way while he spoke with Benjamin. Before he could cut to the chase and warn the cheetah to stay away from Casel, he first had to know more. If he misread the signs and screwed things up, he'd have both Elgen Casel and the commissioner tearing him a new one.

After fifteen steps and no acknowledgement from Benjamin, Bogo cleared his throat.

"Sir!" Benjamin exclaimed, nearly losing his footing on the machine. "W-what're you doing here?"
"I'm going for a jog. What'd you think I'm doing?"

Benjamin's ears flattened. He looked Bogo up and down, in his tighter black t-shirt and pants, bit his lip and quickly turned his eyes back to the window. He pressed a button, reducing his treadmill to a slower pace like Bogo's. "Sorry. You startled me, that's all." He looked away from Bogo, keeping his gaze on the view.

Bogo sighed. He should have known that things would still be awkward between them after the debacle days before. "How is Mr. Casel doing?"

Benjamin turned his gaze back to the buffalo. "Sir, you'll have to be more specific."

"The Casel you were with at Gusteau's. He still ticked?"

"I don't know. We haven't spoken much since then."

Bogo took that as a good sign. "No longer friends?"

Benjamin frowned and looked down at the treadmill's control board. "We're not actually friends, sir. It's his brother Alec I hang out with."

*Oh, thank god.* "How do you know him?"

"I moved in next door to him."

"And the other one?" Bogo felt his body begin to protest against his current speed, and slowed down the treadmill.

"I met him a few days ago, when I was hanging out with Alec." Benjamin paused. "I don't think he liked me very much, so I wasn't expecting him to invite me to dinner."

"So…" Bogo wasn't expecting himself to feel a twinge of hope. "You aren't actually in a…"

"Oh no, and I don't think we ever will." Benjamin took a swig of water. "Even before you showed up, it wasn't really going well. I don't know what, but something about him was putting me off."

He brought the treadmill to a complete stop. "Okay, I think I'm gonna stop there, sir. I've got that report to finish."

Bogo scowled. He wasn't finished talking to Benjamin. He took a look at McHorn and Snarlov and got an idea. "Clawhauser, stop."

Benjamin stopped in the middle of putting on his hoodie. "Sir?"

"Have you ever lifted weights before?"

"Yes, sir."

"Have you ever spotted someone lifting weights before?"

"Spotting is helping someone if they have trouble with a barbell, right?" Bogo nodded. "Then no, sir."

"Then you need to learn. Come with me."

He brought Benjamin to the bench press farthest from the other two mammals in the gym. He made
the cheetah wait beside the bench while picking out the weights. "What's the heaviest you've lifted?"

"Never went higher than fifty pounds, sir." He giggled. "Unless it's something sweet and savoury."

Bogo picked out two ten pound plates, slid them onto the bar and set it up on the rack, stifling a yawn as he did so.

Benjamin looked at him quizzically as he pulled his hoodie the rest of the way on. "A bit lighter than your usual lot, isn't it, sir?"

"You're benching first, and I don't want any accidents. Lie down."

Benjamin laid down on the bench. "How many reps do you perform on average, Clawhauser?"

"Eight reps, sir. I only do one set at a time. I never had a spotter before. Honestly, I never thought to ask for one."

The stint on the treadmill must have tired Bogo more than usual, for he had to hold back another yawn as he positioned himself behind Benjamin. "Alright, I want you to watch what the spotter does from the weightlifter's perspective. Do you want a lift off?"

Benjamin stared up at him. "Lift off of what, sir?"

Somehow the innocent question irritated Bogo. "Do you want help lifting the weight off the rack? It's what you should always ask the lifter before you start. Now, do you want a liftoff?"

"I guess…"

"Watch what I do." Bogo put his hooves around the bar, inside of Benjamin's paws. Putting them a little closer than he'd intended, he brushed the cheetah's fur and found it to be softer than it looked. He almost flinched from the unexpected contact, and in return, he felt Benjamin freeze momentarily. One would think that neither of them were used to physical contact. On his own instruction, they lifted the weight gradually from the rack, Benjamin's expression hardening as he set aside his confusion to focus on the heavy bar above his face. On the cheetah's cue the buffalo let go, but didn't take his hooves away from the bar.

Bogo wondered how he hadn't sooner how misleading Benjamin's fuzzy, scatterbrained exterior really was. The young mammal had made mistakes- all the rookies did, but when it wasn't a case of simply dealing with civilians he always approached every task with dedication and efficiency. He could see it in the way Benjamin stayed silent as he lifted the barbell up and down, refusing to distract himself with idle chit chat. For all his naivety and occasional childishness, he was no fool when it came to dealing with potentially dangerous situations.

Situations such as fraternising with the Casels, perhaps?

With that in mind, Bogo waited until Benjamin finished his set, then showed him how to assist someone with putting the weight back on the rack. "Are Alec and his brother the only Casels you know?"

Breathing hard from the previous exertion, Benjamin didn't answer at first as he remained horizontal. "I met his dad when he came in this morning to talk about what happened to his car."

Bogo remembered; not long before he came to the gym, Elgen and his eldest son had come to the ZPD to discuss police protection after Elgen's car was vandalised by a rival supporter. They'd discussed the matter over tea, vermouth in the son's case, but Bogo had found his tea to have a
slightly unpleasant aftertaste, but despite this he'd managed to empty the cup before he left for the

gym. It was a discussion they would have to finish at a later date, thankfully without the son present.

Though he'd put on a face during the conversation, Bogo knew the son was still peeved about the

restaurant. "Anyone else?" He asked.

"No. Not unless Alec introduces me. Am I gonna spot now?"

"Yes. Get up, we're switching places."

Benjamin stood up from the bench and took Bogo's place behind it. "Sir, if I may ask, why don't you

like me being friends with Alec?"

Bogo huffed as he replaced the weight plates with something a little more his size. "It's not Alec I'm

worried about."

"His big brother?"

Bogo paused as he applied the last plate. If he outright called one of Elgen's children a psychopath

and Elgen found out, the commissioner would use his horns for key holders. "He's not right for you,

Clawhauser."

"Um… Sir… I just told you I'm not dating him."

Bogo rubbed his temple, now regretting ever approaching the cheetah. "Alright, that came out

wrong."

Benjamin cracked a smile. It was a pleasant smile, one that wasn't too big or showing too much teeth.

The kind of smile that didn't make Bogo want to wipe it off his face. "Now you've been spotted,

you're going to do the spotting yourself. Don't touch that barbell."

"Sir, are you sure you want to do this? You look pretty pooped."

"I'm fine." Bogo replied, even though he did feel a little drowsier. His throat felt, but that quickly

fixed with his water bottle. "I'm only lifting two hundred pounds, anyway."

He lay down on the bench, aware that McHorn and Snarlov had stopped what they were doing to

watch him and Benjamin curiously. It was a first that their no-nonsense chief was taking a few

minutes of his time to teach a rookie something that wasn't in Police Work for Dummies.

When Bogo reached up to grab the bar, he didn't miss the way Benjamin hesitated to do the same,

for some reason distracted by the buffalo's large arms. "Clawhauser, aren't you forgetting

something?"

"Huh?" The cheetah blinked. "Oh, right. Do you want a lift off?"

"Yes."

There were noises nearby as McHorn and Snarlov started to pack up and leave. Snarlov was the first
to go, leaving McHorn to put away the weights while still sneaking intrigued glanced at Bogo and

Benjamin. Glad to be eventually having some privacy, Bogo gave Benjamin the go ahead to begin

the lift off, but the moment the cheetah let go, Bogo knew something was wrong. The weights felt

far heavier than they were supposed to be. He felt sick in the stomach. Worse, a slight but dangerous
tremor spread through his body, threatening to make him drop the heavy barbell.

"Sir?" Benjamin asked.
"Something's not right. Get this off me!" Bogo snapped. Benjamin quickly grabbed the bar, helping to ease it back above the rack.

Then the next tremor, the one Bogo had been dreading, made the barbell drop. With the weight of thirty bricks behind it, it hit the rack with a horrible clang that echoed around the gym and in Bogo's ears. In the split-second after that the barbell vanished from sight. There was a dull thud and Benjamin also disappeared. Somewhere nearby, McHorn released a strangled yell that barely reached Bogo as his mind struggled to register what had happened.

The barbell snapped at one end, the short end plummeting and denting the floor...

Bogo threw himself off the bench, his mystery ailment forgotten.

As the long, jagged end swung up into Ben's face, dropping him like a flour sack.

Benjamin was on his knees, hunched over with paws covering his muzzle. Bogo didn't see any teeth on the floor. Maybe it wasn't too serious. Circles of dark red on the boards beneath the cheetah dashed his hopes. Damn it, damn it, damn it, damn it, damn it! He mentally cursed as he dropped down before the cheetah, feeling utterly numb except for a churning in his stomach that was nothing like the nausea he had suffered before. He'd heard horror stories of incidents like this. Once an Olympic weightlifter was killed almost instantly when the barbell broke, swinging into his neck and slicing his carotid artery. Benjamin's eyes were squeezed shut, and he seemed to be hyperventilating beneath his paws. Seeing him in shock and agony made Bogo feel like the biggest jackass in the world. This was absolutely the worst thing that could have happened, and it was all his fault.

"Clawhauser!" His voice cracked.

"Are you alright, kid?!" A shadow fell over them both as McHorn rushed over and bent down beside Bogo.

"Yes." Benjamin's muffled voice seeped out through his fingers. Another drop of blood hit the floor. "No!"

The numbness became a chilling terror. Bogo tentatively reached out to the cheetah. "Clawhauser let me see."

Benjamin meekly shook his head, his eyes still shut.

"McHorn, get a towel!" Bogo ordered. McHorn nodded and rushed to his nearby gym bag. Meanwhile, Bogo tentatively brought his hooves closer to Benjamin's paws. "How does it feel? Do you think you've lost any teeth?" Again, Benjamin shook his head. Aside from his sharp breathing, he was completely silent, and it worried Bogo even more than if he were screaming. "Clawhauser. Let me see." He put his hooves on Benjamin's paws. The cheetah didn't resist as his boss eased them down.

At first, it looked as bad as Bogo feared, but the mass of red on the left hand side of Benjamin's mouth was just smeared blood. He soon found the injury; two short, diagonal cuts across both his upper and lower lips.

Bogo managed a hopefully assuring smile. "Huh. It's not that bad, actually."

"R-really?" Benjamin asked in a tiny voice.

"Well for one thing, you don't look like Heath Badger's Joker."
Bogo would have kicked himself for his poorly timed joke, but he somehow got a little giggle out of the cheetah. McHorn returned with a clean towel and they put it to Benjamin's muzzle. The blood stopped dripping then.

"Sir, we gotta get him to the emergency room." McHorn said.

"You're right." Bogo took a deep breath, steeling himself once more. "Get him to the car. I need to find Higgins."

Once Higgins was informed of what happened and placed in charge, the aftermath of the accident was handled with little drama. A thorough examination showed that Benjamin had gotten lucky. As well as the cuts he'd gotten a nasty bruise forming on his jaw, but he'd escaped serious injury. As for Bogo, he wound up being examined himself once he'd explained the mystery illness that had caused the accident.

Except that it wasn't an illness. Somehow, even though he had no allergies he was aware of, he'd gotten Benadryl into his system.

It was a cup of tea that stood before Bogo now, a thick mug of unassuming brown liquid. He could have proved what the little monster had done, with a little time no interference from the commissioner. He was the golden child of the Casels, the commissioner had said. He was the the future Chairman of the Casel Corporation, the commissioner had said. He would never jeopardise all that for petty revenge, the commissioner had said.

Of course, he knew better now.

The voice of Benjamin's substitute front desk officer emerged from the intercom. "There's someone from the ZBI here to see you."

"Let me guess. Agent Yaxley?" Bogo guessed casually. Terrorism was in the ZBI's jurisdiction, so of course they'd taken an interest in the mall incident. Yaxley, a decent enough mammal, had visited Bogo before to inform him that they would be conducting an assessment of the incident to determine if it was a terrorist attack, or an accident born of negligence as Wilde had suggested. The fact that Yaxley was visiting again meant that they'd made their verdict.

"Send her up." Bogo said as he pulled a file from the desk drawer. Deep down in his gut, he already knew the answer.

He'd underestimated an enemy before. He wasn't going to make that mistake a second time.
The Adventure of the Three Games

The hall, like every other room that wasn't a bedroom, was grandiose. A wide staircase sat in the middle of the room, draped with a thick red carpet as it branched into two smaller staircases that led to two different walkways on the upper floor. Filling the hall was a variety of artworks, sculptures and small tables, but not so many as to make the place look garish.

All the party guests, minus the still 'deceased' Ombidia, were gathered in the hall on Alec's instruction. Of the eight guests, only six were still in full costume; for whatever reason, Alec had advised Benjamin and Gazelle to remove their wings and frosted cape for the duration of the third task. What was more, every guest who didn't already have a coat as part of their costume was told to put one on. By the time Alec joined them in the hall, most of them had figured out where the third task was really going to take place.

"Hey, guys. I love your new coat, Chris." Alec kissed Christine on the cheek before continuing. "This is the part where everyone becomes a winner. I'd like to direct your attention to the table to your right."

They strode over to the elegantly grafted table with a large notice propped up behind a pile of six-inch long sticks.

*Into the Winter Wonderland.*

*Serpent in the Traveller's Hand.*

*Vengeance burning in its Heart.*

*Gifted to Slither on Water.*

"A riddle?" Nick barely held back a sigh. Solving old-fashioned riddles was not his strongest skill.

"Of a sort." Alec picked up a stick and tapped it against his palm. "The riddle isn't your task. It's the answer. The answer to this riddle is 'Snake Slide on Pond.' That's the game we're about to go play."

"It's not like Snakes and Ladders, is it?" Edward asked.

"Take a stick each and follow me. You'll find out in a second."

When they took their sticks, Nick saw that each one had a ring of colored tape on it, including the purple ring on his own stick. They followed Alec through the large front doors, grateful for their coats as they continued around the outside of the mansion.

It wasn't an unpleasant journey. The stone pathways had been shoveled clean of snow, and the great thick blanket covering the rest of the grounds was virtually untouched, giving the overall appearance of a painted Christmas card. It was a pretty sight, one that Nick had no doubt Judy would be photographing if it wasn't private property. As they walked he saw a frozen fountain bearing a statue of the Casel family's founder. A crimson rose garden surrounding an iron table and seats. A literal maze of tall angular hedges. Nick quickly understood why Alec decided to bring them outside; perhaps not for Nick, being shown around the mansion grounds was a treat in itself. They soon stopped at their destination; a large frozen pond ringed with black pebbles. Beside the pond stood an otter servant with a paintbrush and plastic palette.

"We're not ice skating, are we?" Carlos asked.
"No, we're not. But for the record, they've checked the ice and it's perfectly safe to walk on." Alec said. "Anyway, all you have to do here is slide your snake across the pond as far as possible. Whoever gets their snake the farthest wins."

"Is that all?" Edward smirked. "This just might be the easiest task yet."

"Alec?" Benjamin spoke up. "Before you said that everyone's a winner in this one. What do you mean?"

"I'm glad you asked, Benji. You see, everyone, this is the part where you find out why everyone wanted to kill Mr. Ombidia. At any point during this task, you can ask anyone about his or her motive, and they have to answer truthfully. You can eavesdrop, take notes, but you absolutely have to tell the truth if you're asked yourself. However, for those of you who have more than one motive, you don't have to give all of them."

Judy rounded on Nick. "Before you ask, Mr. Ombidia had my first love killed."

Nick smiled, making a mental note. "Mr. Ombidia personally killed my fiancé."

"Christine?" Alec gestured with his hook to a flat stone on the edge of the pond, the 'starting point' for the toss. "Would you like to go first?"

"I'd love to, sweetie." Christine stepped onto the stone, bent down, and tossed her gold ringed stick. It skidded to a stop three quarters of the way across the frozen pond.

Alec grinned as he wrapped an arm around his girlfriend and looked to his other guests. "Beat that!" He challenged as the otter walked onto the ice, picked up the stick, and dabbed a mark of gold paint in its place.

Edward was the next one to step forward. "Watch and learn, Chris!" He tossed his light brown ringed stick as hard as possible. It stopped inches behind Christine's, drawing laughter from the others. Edward snorted but like a true Prince Charming took his defeat in stride, stepping aside to let Alec himself have a go once the otter had made the brown mark. After a five second long buildup, his white ringed snake stopped almost halfway. With a sigh, he let Gazelle take the next turn. Her bright red stick stopped in between Alec's and Edward's white and beige marks.

As the otter prepared to make a red mark, Nick looked to Edward. "So… what made you want to wring that poor bison's neck?"

Edward blew on his hooves. "He was using a tape of me hooking up with a producer to blackmail me for cash. Don't get me wrong, I never planned to kill him for it."

"Woah? Did you do her for real?"

"Yeah, when I..." Edward blinked. "Why you little-"

"Yes!" Judy suddenly shrieked and leapt into the air with triumph: while Nick had been snarking, her green ringed stick had overtaken the gold mark by three inches, earning a small applause from most of the group.

Nick wanted to hit himself with a snowball. Judy had become the first mammal to take the lead, and like an idiot he'd missed it.

Not feeling very pleased with himself, Nick grinned with pride nevertheless. "Nice one, Carrots."
"Carlos, you're up." Alec said after teasingly comforting his unperturbed girlfriend.

Carlos tossed his stick, ringed black like his Yokai costume, and it stopped behind the red mark. Looking like he couldn't care less, he let Lake take the next turn. While she prepared to slide her stick, Nick overheard Carlos telling Edward how Ombidia had tormented him when they were kids. Lake's yellow ringed stick passed Gazelle's mark but stopped short of Christine's. That left Nick and Benjamin.

Nick held out an arm to stop Benjamin from starting. "Age before beauty, if you please."

Benjamin shrugged and stepped back. Nick stepped onto the stone, his purple ringed stick ready. Right as it seemed he was going to throw, he suddenly stood up straight and whirled on Benjamin. "Quick question. Why did you hate Ombidia?"

"He keeps having my donut stores vandalized so I'd have to sell him them." Benjamin replied. "What about you?"

Nick told him the same motive he'd told Judy, turned round, and slid his stick.

Like a cliché scene in a sports movie, it stopped right next to Judy's green mark. "You have got to be kidding me."

Judy snickered as Alec and some of the others clapped. "Just like our graduations, huh, Nick?"

Once the purple mark was made, Benjamin stepped up, and after a moment of hesitation tossed his blue ringed stick. It stopped in between Gazelle and Christine's marks.

Alec started clapping. "And it's a tie! Well done, very well tossed!" He made a request to the otter to clean up the marks. "Well, one down."

"One down?" Benjamin asked.

"That's right. While we're finding out each other's motive's we're going to be playing three games I looked up online. I'll give you a minute to guess the answer to this one." With a playful smirk, Alec pulled out a scroll and unrolled it before the guests.

With the spy listener in its claws, it listened quietly.

"A Sea of Crimson Flowers."

A Streak of Silver Soldiers,

Lost in Frigid Ignorance.

Ordained by Frozen Bullets."

"Snowballs." The rabbit said at once. "We're going to be throwing snowballs at stuff."

"Correct!" Alec beamed stupidly. "Come with me. We're going to the rose garden."

Like bees drawn to honey, they followed Alec down the shoveled path. Through the binoculars it watched them walk by. Edward and Alec's tart. Lake and her parasite. The fox and rabbit that took down Bellwether. Benjamin and Gazelle.

It hissed through its teeth. Its chance would come. Its chance would come soon.
By the time they reached the site of their second game, Nick had learned from Gazelle that Ombidia had been harassing her to the point that she had been too afraid to leave her house. According to her fabricated backstory, it had taken a lot of pleading from Christine and Benjamin to make her come to the Casel Estate in the first place. Since his death, she'd felt like a massive weight had been lifted off her shoulders, hence her decent performance at the games so far. Gazelle had also added that she had no hard feelings toward Alec for giving her a backstory that hit so close to home; no-one had told him about Gazelle's stalker.

Waiting for them in the rose garden was a line of small columns of snow, ten in total. Fifteen feet away was a line of nine small piles of snowballs. There were ten in each batch. Standing in between both lines was the otter, carrying a tall, thin bucket that matched the shape of the columns.

"It's like tin can alley with snowmen." Nick mused.

"Let's see if I've got this right." Christine put her fingers on her chin. "We each get a pile and ten shots as the column. Whoever knocks down the most columns wins."

"Got it right in one." Alec nodded. "Nick, Judy, you two won the first game so you get first crack at them."

Nick felt Judy nudge his arm. "After you, slick."

Nick wasn't a particularly competitive mammal. He hadn't even intended to become valedictorian at his police academy graduation. Yet he here was now, hoping that he would get at least seven out of ten of the unassuming white columns. He didn't want to see the look on Judy's face if he screwed this up.

He threw the first snowball. He missed. 

Crap.

He threw the second, and knocked down his first column.

The next three snowballs also hit their marks.

The sixth missed.

He overheard Christine mention how Ombidia had been stalking and blackmailing her.

The seventh, eighth and ninth balls hit their marks. That made seven points. Nick breathed easier and threw his tenth.

Eight points in total.

Judy slugged his shoulder with a laugh as the otter jotted down the result on a notepad and began rebuilding the columns with his bucket. "Wow, Nick! You were great!"

"Try and top that if you can." Nick replied as he rubbed his arm. "Also, thanks."

This time he let nothing distract him from watching Judy take her shot. He watched her skirt expand as her athletic legs went into a wide stance. Her arm, looking slender even under a thick coat sleeve, pitched back then snapped forward. The snowball flew and hits its mark on the third column from the left. Good start, Judy. Keep at it.

The next snowball also hit its mark, but the third missed. "Darn it!" Judy hissed. Her adorable cotton bud of a tail twitched in agitation as she grabbed a fourth and threw it. It hit the column and made it
crumble, putting a smile back on her lovely face.

Lovely? Nick shook his head and looked on, rubbing his chilled paws as she threw the last six snowballs. In the end, she scored seven out of ten.

"Ugh, I'm usually better than this!" Judy was scowling as she returned to Nick' side. "Oh well."

While the columns were rebuilt and Carlos took his turn, Judy pulled out her notebook and examined her notes.

"Okay, here's what I've got so far. He killed my first love and your fiancé. He was blackmailing Edward and Christine, but we don't know what he was blackmailing Christine for. He bullied Carlos when they were kids and stalked Gazelle. As for Ben, he was trying to force him to sell his donut business."

"I'm stating the obvious, but we're missing someone." Nick looked up. "Mrs. Casel? You didn't like Mr. Ombidia any more than we did, is that correct?"

"Correct." Lake replied candidly without looking at them. "He found out I was planning to usurp my father and demanded 'favors' in exchange for his silence."

"Did he ever get those favors?"

"Thanks to the killer, no."

Judy jotted down the information as Carlos scored eight out of ten, letting Lake take his place. "Okay, now we have all the motives. Overall, we can determine…"

"That Mr. Ombidia was a total jerkwad." Nick blew on his paws.

"Cold, Saint Nicholas?" Judy smiled.

"In case you haven't noticed, it's winter."

In the meantime, Lake scored six out of ten. The columns were rebuilt and Benjamin took his turn.

"Come here." Before Nick could react, Judy took his paws in hers. They were warm and fluffy, like a pair of faux fur gloves. Even though it was his paws she breathed on, it was his cheeks that grew hot. It must be the romantic winter setting that was messing with him. First his weird 'lovely' comment, now this.

Benjamin scored nine out of ten. Nine! "Wow, you've got this in the bag, Benji!" Judy let go to pump her fist in the air in her delight.

Over the next ten minutes the rest of the group took their turns; Gazelle scored five out of ten. Alec and Christine both scored six. Edward wound up redeeming himself with a full ten, ending the game.

This time it was the otter that unrolled a sheet of red paper and showed them the riddle.

_A Labyrinth of Everlasting Green._

_Snow white as Bone,_

_Concealing Fur black as Night._

_Enter and seek the Savage Beast._
"The maze, I might have known." Lake said with a chuckle. "So what're we playing this time?"

"Simply put, hide and seek." Alec replied. They walked through the shoveled path until they stopped at the arched entrance to the maze. "Can I have a volunteer?"

Benjamin's paw shot up like an arrow. Alec smirked and picked him out. "For the last stage of this task, we're going to play 'Follow the Yeti.' Ben, when I say go, you head into the maze and try and get as far in as possible, and after a minute we're going to follow you. The game ends when either someone catches the Yeti or the Yeti escapes the maze without getting caught."

Benjamin looked down at his blackened apparel. "Well, I really look the part now, huh?"

Alec rolled down his red cuff to see his watch. "One… two… three… go!"

Benjamin took off like a shot, disappearing into the maze. Alec kept his eyes on the watch, waiting for the sixty seconds to pass.

"So, any ideas yet, Detective Wilde?" Lake asked.

Nick, feeling a twinge of discomfort as being addressed by a possible terrorist, didn't answer right away. "Not yet. All we have to go on is the first two clues and all the motives."

"But Detective, you don't have all the motives."

"We don't?" Judy stared at her notes.

Lake jerked her head at Alec. "Mr. Ombidia was, as you so eloquently put it, a total jerkwad. So one must wonder why Alec bothered to invite him."

Judy looked like she wanted to punch herself as she stepped up to Alec. "Alec, I don't mean to be upfront but we haven't heard your motive yet."

"About darn time." Alec muttered before looking down at her. "I don't actually have a motive to kill him. I had no idea at the time that he was such a horrible mammal, so I tried to do my father a favor and invited Mr. Ombidia so he and father talk business. It was a last minute thing, but father didn't mind. It sure surprised the other guests, though."

"Thank you, Alec." Judy scribbled briefly on the notebook. She suddenly froze like the snow around her, gasping sharply before scribbling something else and rushing back to Nick. "Nick! Nick! Nick, you need to hear this!"

"And what world-changing epiphany have you had this time?"

Judy opened her mouth, sucked in a deep breath and…

"… one! Ready or not, here we come, Benji!" Alec yelled into the maze.

Benjamin stopped dead in the middle of a crossroad, his ears twitching as they caught the sound of his pursuers entering the maze.

Holding a black paw over his mouth to muffle his giggles, Benjamin picked the path leading away from the sounds and started running.

Inside the maze, almost everything looked the same no matter which way he turned. The hedges were all perfectly trimmed and decorated with little clumps of fresh snow. An empty pot of flowers
shriveled by the cold marked every corner. The only different was the condition of the snowy carpet. Sometimes Benjamin would come across an untouched stretch of snow, and sometimes he would come across a line of footprints previously made the last time he'd turned that corner. For sixty seconds he'd been going around in circles, but if he had escaped the maze before his fellow guests had gotten a chance to chase him, then what fun would the game be?

After two turns left he found another path of untouched snow and went for it. It was only a matter of time before he found one that led to freedom. He wouldn't mind it if he got caught, but he wouldn't mind winning either.

*If Bogo were here, he would hunt me down and catch me before I could say O. M. Goodness,* Benjamin thought with a grin. Yes, a game like this would be a cinch for the chief of police, who'd very likely been chasing criminals since he could walk. A sudden gust of wintry wind sent a shiver through his body, and he found himself yearning to feel Bogo's embrace once more, to give warm comfort from the cold like he'd comforted him from the pain of having a savage rhino hit you in the back with a door. Benjamin felt a strange pang of sadness and hugged himself as he continued to walk, only to come across two sets of footprints stretching down the path before him. A lingering look told him that these weren't his own prints; they were too small. The sounds of Nick and Judy's voices close by told him the prints were theirs, and he quickly turned the other way and continued walking.

"… So you're saying the murder wasn't premeditated?" Nick spoke, stopping Benjamin dead.

"Oh, it was premeditated alright. It's almost always the case where poisoned is concerned." Judy replied. "Alec said Ombidia was invited at the last minute, without the other guests' knowledge. That means they couldn't have planned to kill him prior to arriving at the estate."

"Carrots, I really can't be bothered to figure it out myself, so could you get to the point, please?" Benjamin stepped back so he could listen better. He was very likely setting himself up to get caught, but he could be about to hear something very interesting; he really, really wanted that chocolate ice palace.

He imagined Judy rolling her eyes before answering. "The point is that at the time, none of the guests had a reason to bring tetrodotoxin to the party, and tetrodotoxin would not easy to come by in this house. I mean, what use do the Casels have for a deadly neurotoxin?"

"You have a point. Either the Casels did for some reason have the poison in the house and a guest decided to use it to commit the murder…"

"Or they had another reason to bring the poison into the mansion." Judy finished the thought. "Of course this is completely theoretical, but if we keep winning clues, we might be able to confirm a thing or two."

"And narrow down the list of subjects. Excellent detective work, Officer Hopps." There was a clapping sound as they did a high five. "Now let's go catch a yeti."

Benjamin quickly went on the move again, until he could no longer hear his friends. He wished he had a notebook himself so he could write down the sudden brainwave he'd had concerning one of the previous clues. Nick and Judy may be right about one of their theories, and if they were, then they had unwittingly given him a boost in the race to solve the Ombidia murder mystery.

He continued walking quietly, listening carefully to the sounds of the other mammals scouring the maze. Most of them weren't bothering to be quiet, but there was one series of footsteps that Benjamin could barely hear, as if they were trying to use stealth to catch him off guard. More than often he
heard it right behind him, but whenever he turned around the pathway behind him was empty. He assumed that whoever was sneaking around was nearby, but on the other side of the hedges and continued on his way.

He turned another corner. Instead of another path, he found himself in a large square full perfectly packed snow, stone benches and a large Grecian statue in the middle. He’d found the center of the maze. Propping himself on his knees, Benjamin felt a wave of dismay rush through him like cold water. There were three other paths, one for each side of the square, and he had no idea which one to take. A silly thought occurred to him, an irrational fear that he would freeze to death before he could escape the maze. All around him, he could hear the crunching footsteps and voices of the eight mammals searching for him. Two mammals in particular sounded very close; he easily recognized the melodic voice of his dear Gazelle and her friend, Christine. They were getting closer, almost certainly heading for the opening at the opposite side of the square. Benjamin felt only a little bit disappointed. The game was up for him, but better Gazelle than a jerk like Carlos.

As he listened and waited for Gazelle and Christine to show up and catch him, he heard the quiet footsteps again, right behind him. Benjamin sighed, sure that Nick was planning a good old fashioned scare for his costumed quarry. He was prepared to lose, but he didn't want to get a fright.

He turned around and felt his heart drop.

The dark blur of something long and heavy was the only warning he got before he threw himself back, tumbling into the thick snow as an axe as big as his arm sank into the ground before him with a sickening thud. The monstrous creature holding the weapon hunched over the axe, thrown off balance by its own attack, before looking up and locking eyes with the stunned cheetah.

Pure, bloodthirsty, evil intent was all he saw through the eyeholes in the hideous mask.

Benjamin opened his mouth to scream, but no sound came out. He couldn't breathe. He couldn't move. Not even when the antlered hound straightened, yanked the axe free from the frozen ground, and stepped toward him.

"What the-" Benjamin heard Gazelle and Christine gasp behind him as they wandered into the square and stopped dead at the sight of the monster, making the costumed madmammal pause. It hissed at the sight of her, lifting the axe to grip it with both clawed hands. Through the eyeholes, Benjamin saw its eyes narrow as it continued its insidious approach towards the three of them.

"Hey! Stop right there!" Came a shout from the side, and then Judy flew in out of nowhere and landed a fierce kick on the side of the attacker's skull. It grunted, its head barely twisting by half an inch, and lashed out with the axe. It was by some Christmas miracle that Judy was struck with the blunt edge of the axe, and sent flying into hedge. She fell to the ground in a heap and a small shower of snow. The horrified Benjamin called her name and started to crawl towards her.

"Judy! You son of a-" Nick snarled like a savage as he rushed at the attacker, stopping just short of the axe as it slammed into the snow before him. Another ten centimeters and he would have been vertically bisected. Benjamin reached Judy as she struggled to her feet, dazed but not looking hurt.

"Hey, what's going on over there?" Edward yelled from somewhere close by. As a mammal who had memorized every path in the maze, he wasted no time reaching the square and skidding to a halt when he saw the cause of the commotion. "Who the hell are you?!"

The monstrous mammal looked round at the mammals staring at him with a mixture of shock, anger and terror. It growled, whirled round, and fled back the way it'd come.
"After him!" Judy yelled, and took off after the attacker with Nick right behind her. Their footsteps faded into silence.

The whole incident, from the moment Benjamin turned around and saw the axe aimed at his skull, couldn't have lasted thirty seconds. Benjamin sat slumped in the snow, barely aware of his skin becoming chilled at the snow thawed and dampened his costume. He couldn't stop thinking of the axe, or the look in the masked mammal's eyes.

"Where's Alec?" Christine whispered in a tiny voice. "Where's my boyfriend?"

"Call security." Edward snarled at no-one in particular.

"Where is he?!" Christine shrieked despite Gazelle's efforts to comfort her.

Edward whirled around, searching for security guards and becoming livid when he saw none. "Find that mammal! Now!"

Benjamin fought the urge to cry, hugging himself and once again pining for Bogo's warm, powerful arms. He'd almost been murdered. He'd been mere inches from being dismembered like an overstuffed rag doll.

He wanted Bogo here and he wanted him now.
The Mammal with the Twisted Lip

Elgen Casel considered the estate to be his most prized material possession. If the walls could speak, they would tell countless tales of his father, grandfather and all their ancestors extending back to before the Eweropeans colonized North Animerica. In the lounge his grandparents had shared tea with the United States President. His father had proposed to his mother amongst the scarlet bushes of the garden, offering a diamond ring bigger than a rose bud. In the hall, his great grandfather had once shot a lion in a duel. When Elgen was small, a scandal in the Casel Cathedral drove his grandfather to sever ties with the hive of hypocrites called the Church and abandon the once cherished building to the forest. Even Elgen did not know where it rests, and with the Christians in recent years slowly beginning to truly see the light, he was tempted to seek the cathedral out again. Even in his middle age he remembered the ancient beauty of the architecture and what it represented; he was not an especially religious mammal, but like the rest of the estate the cathedral represented history. The history of his family. His city. His home.

The mansion study had been the unofficial seat of the Casel head for generations, a throne room of hard work and knowledge, and the current head of the family was occupying the seat when the head of security burst in and informed him of an intruder in the estate. An intruder that had somehow crept into the maze undetected and attempted to take the lives of Officer Clawhauser, Christine Antlaire and the voluptuous Gazelle.

Elgen first felt shock. How could this have happened? Then he felt anger. How could this have happened? How did his security miss this? How could the attacker have gotten away? They weren't incompetent. He knew this because they'd protected his company for years, and done a marvelous job of it.

No, something had gone wrong. Something happened that no-one could have anticipated. Something that he would have to investigate as soon as he had dealt with his son's guests.

Yes, they would need an explanation, and soon, before Officers Hopps and Wilde could blurt out that it was apparently the same costumed mammal that had planted a disguised camera on the border of his estate. He couldn't let the truth get out. Not yet. Not until the intruder was caught and the initial slip-up could be redeemed.

The Casel family had suffered terribly the last time its name had been disgraced. Because of that fool, that narrow minded, carelessly cruel idiot, they had almost lost everything but the family riches. Worst of all was Elgen's chance at reclaiming what by all rights belonged to his family. It had taken five years to rebuild the family's reputation after that PR disaster, and he would be damned if he allowed one axe-swinging maniac to tear it back down. It sounded narcissistic to the common ear, but that reputation was essential to all his plans for the future.

Soon he was pushing open the door and entering the lounge where the guests were all gathered after the incident in the maze.

He paused in the doorway, his gaze panning the expressions of the mammals sitting on the couches in stunned silence, contemplating how many of them would buy it. As the only two mammals in the room who knew about the disguised camera, Hopps and Wilde wouldn't believe him for a second. Gazelle and Christine would likely wonder if the intruder was the stalker that had almost killed her in Animalia, but the fact that Clawhauser was attacked first would just as likely 'disprove' their own theories. Carlos, Edward, Selke and Alec would likely be assured, but Lake was a smart girl. Elgen's eyes rested on Clawhauser for a moment, scrutinizing him closely. Did the cheetah know about the disguised camera? If he did, then he wouldn't believe Elgen's explanation either.
Elgen sincerely hoped for Clawhauser's sake that he kept his mouth shut this time.

They all looked up sharply when Elgen closed the door behind him. Ombidia had temporarily abandoned his role as the bed-ridden corpse to join Gazelle's side as soon he was notified of what had happened. Selke was also there, with her arms around her youngest son. Understandable, considering how Alec must be feeling about his plan to take the guests outside for some games, even though it was hardly his fault that it had backfired. The young mammal seemed almost plastered to the cheetah he sat next to, as if afraid that Benjamin would be attacked again if he left his side. Elgen felt a strange ache of resentment at the sight.

It was Edward who stepped forward. "Did they find him, dad?"

According to the head of security, Hopps and Wilde had lost the intruder within the maze, prompting security to pick up the hunt. Truthfully, they had also failed to catch him, and he had yet to hear from the guardhouse where the security monitors were situated, but the guests didn't have to know that yet.

Hopps and Wilde were not going to like what he had to say. Well, too bad.

"Yes." He replied calmly, maintaining his cold calm. "They caught the little punk when he was climbing back over the fence."

"Punk?" Hopps asked, already doubting him.

Don't say another word if you know what's good for you, girl. Elgen shot her a dark glare as a warning. "Yes. Obviously they thought it would be a good idea to dress up as a B-movie monster, trespass on private property and scare the life out of us. A stupid prank for stupid kicks, and I assure you that he will be dealt with appropriately.

Gazelle stood up, incredulous. "A stupid prank? He attacked Ben with an axe!"

"And he almost killed my partner!" Nick growled. It was the first time Elgen had seen the fox bear any expression other than smugness. "That was no frickin' prank, buster!"

Elgen bit back a retort. He had to maintain composure if he had any hope of assuaging the guests.

"He panicked because he wasn't expecting anyone to retaliate. I know this because he confessed right after he was apprehended."

Alec stood up, leaving his mother behind on the sofa, and marched up to his father. "Where is he now? And how did he get in without being detected?"

"He's being held in the guardhouse until the ZPD can collect him. They've gotten all they can out of him, but Hopps and Wilde are welcome to come with me and commence their own interrogation if they wish." He eyed the two discreetly outraged officers as he made the invitation. They traded glances and remained silent. "As for how he got in, we don't know yet. However, I can well assure you that it will not happen again."

It will not happen again, he repeated to himself as a personal promise.

Carlos groaned irritably as he slouched in his seat. "Dumbass. What idiot plays a Halloween prank on Christmas? Hey, Benji." He looked at the cheetah snidely. "From what I heard, he got you real good. I bet you'd peed yourself, huh?"

"I dunno." Clawhauser replied awkwardly, cringing. "Maybe a little bit."
Carlos scoffed. "God, you're pathetic."

BANG!

The room was no doubt filled with thumping hearts, judging from how everyone jumped when Alec punched the wall and took a threatening step towards Carlos.

"Don't talk to my friend like that!"

Shocked out of his slouch, Carlos shrank back marginally the sudden outburst. "Okay, okay! Sorry!"

He looked to Lake, hoping his wife would defend him, but the look she gave him was frigid.

Elgen had a glare of his own. He'd disliked Carlos Elkervera from the moment he'd met him, a sentiment that had curdled into complete contempt once he'd proven himself as a gigolo. Why his daughter would ever marry that parasite was as perplexing as the murder mystery Alec was conducting.

He wasn't the only parasite that had plagued the esteemed family. Recurring moochers were among the upper class's more irritating pests, and the Casels had seen more than their fair share of them. Edward had scantily clothed girls leaning on him from left to right, Lake had had three blood sucking suitors before settling on Carlos, and Elgen was fairly sure that Selke had only married him for his money. All of those supposed 'friends' were beautiful, flashy and utterly, utterly false.

In a way, that just made the presence of the plump, plain, utterly, utterly genuine Clawhauser all the more vexing.

Elgen returned his attention to Hopps and Wilde. "If you two will come with me, I will personally escort you to the guardhouse to speak with our 'guest.' The rest of you have had quite a shock, so please rest here and we'll have someone provide some hot cocoa until we return." He turned round, but before he left he looked at Alec. "Alec, I believe there are you planned the fourth stage of the mystery to take place during dinner time."

Alec blinked, before remembering and nodding. "Yeah, it is. Dinner should be served in an hour, father."

Elgen smiled. "We'll be back before then."

He could feel the dubious glares of the two officers as they followed him from the lounge, putting their coats back on as they went. Two guards were waiting in the hall to escort them to the guardhouse. They had nothing to say, meaning that Elgen would have to get answers at the guardhouse, irking the elder elk. It wasn't until they were back in the cold outdoors, approaching a waiting car to deliver them to the guardhouse, that his companions finally confronted him.

"Mr. Casel, you'd better have a darn good explanation for what you just did." Hopps spoke.

"It's better this way." Elgen replied swiftly.

"With all due respect, no it's not! There is a deranged mammal out there, we have to get them back to the city where it's safe!"

"No. We can handle this on our own. All you have to do is watch Gazelle and keep your lips sealed."

Hopps was noticeably restraining herself. "Sir, do you have any idea how close this guy came to killing our friend? You can't just lie to them about this!"
"I can, and I am."

"But why?"

Elgen didn't answer until they were all in the car. It set off down the half-mile long road to the guardhouse. "Officer Hopps, which do you believe is less likely to induce panic? A costumed idiot or a costumed murderer?"

"Sir, this is a handful of adults, not an entire city." Wilde said. "I can hardly imagine a riot starting any time soon."

"Don't patronize me, Wilde." Elgen warned. "It doesn't matter if it's a handful or a legion. Both are capable of fear. Hopps, you should know more than anyone what fear can do to you." Hopps did not answer, but he knew she knew. He had seen the news, had watched the conference and the chaos that had ensued. With both officers silent with contemplation, Elgen got to the point. "Look the last thing we need is someone panicking and doing something foolish. They're all well aware that these guards are here to protect them, but the only reason they're keeping calm is because they believe that there is nothing actually out there to threaten them. So long as they feel they're safe, it will be easier to keep them safe. You understand, don't you?"

Wilde sighed and put a paw on Hopps' arm. "Carrots, he has a point. Think of it like hustling someone into buying a fake protection charm. It's dishonest, but it keeps them calm for a while."

"Hopps, when they're all safely back in Zootopia. you'll be free to tell them the truth, but in the meantime… you will keep this a secret, or I will see to it that you will never work in the law enforcement again."

Hopps did not cower. "Sir, let's get one thing straight. We're here to protect Gazelle and the other guests from a possible terrorist threat, not to assist you in your tremendously misguided efforts to protect your reputation."

"Love the emphasis there, Carrots." Wilde spoke with a glint of pride in his eyes.

Elgen started to rise in his seat, even though the car was still moving, but froze when Hopps continued speaking. "I am well aware of the consequences that carelessly exposing the truth can bring, and because of that, we're going to play along. But if you cross the line and outright impede our investigation, we will arrest you."

Elgen's glare was glacial. Damn that rabbit. Damn her and that fox.

He wanted to retaliate, to promise them that they would pay for their insolence. But they were right. As powerful as he was, there was only so much he could do to keep them quiet.

For now at least, if all went to plan.

"Once we're done in the guardhouse, we're calling Chief Bogo. The ZPD has to know what happened." Wilde said.

"Very well." Elgen replied bitterly.

The guardhouse was a square building that looked unimpressive compared to the mansion, and the head of security was already waiting outside the entrance. They climbed out the car when it stopped and allowed the stern bull to lead them inside. Five mammals usually manned the monitor room at a time, but it now had over a dozen mammals staring at the screens either looking for a sign of the intruder or reviewing the recently recorded footage.
"We've gone through most of the footage, but we've seen no sign of the intruder leaving the grounds. It looks like he's hiding somewhere until things quiet down."

"That's comforting." Wilde replied.

"Do you have any blind spots, sir?" Hopps was already jotting down in her notebook.

"Two." Elgen considered it a mark of professionalism that the bull immediately acknowledged the authority of the two police officers. "One beside the front gates, but it's practically right next to this guardhouse. The second is to the west, when a camera broke last night. We've been having trouble finding a replacement, so we have two men guarding the place at all times."

"Any word from those two guards?" Hopps asked.

The bull swallowed, his stoic expression fluctuating. "I'd just sent someone to check on them. They're dead."

Elgen turned away, seething.

Hopps' ears drooped. "Oh. I'm sorry."

"You two have gotta reputation." The bull glared at the pair of them. "You'd better find that scum before we do."

"We will." Hopps said softly. "But for now, we have some more questions."

"Sure, whatever you need."

Elgen decided that it was safe to leave them now. He would send the car back to ferry the two officers once he was back at home. "Well, I'm of no use here. If you have any news I'll be back in the study. In the meantime, I want the entire grounds searched again. I want to know who is out there."

But did he really?

When they returned to the car, night had fallen and the outdoor lights were lit all over the gardens surrounding the mansion. On the short drive back to the building, Judy was so numb with disbelief that Nick poked her nose to make sure she wasn't petrified and almost got a punched in the face for it.

Nothing. The cameras hadn't even caught the murders of the two guards, yet the bodies had been found in plain sight of camera twelve. According to the footage, they had been patrolling within the range of cameras twelve, eleven and ten all day, disappearing whenever they entered the blind spot. The guards had already determined the time of death to be roughly in between three and four p.m., about the time that Benjamin, Gazelle and Christine had been attacked. The footage showed that around that time the two guards had been patrolling through cameras ten and eleven, nowhere near the blind spot. There was no murder. No antlered hound pouncing on them with an axe. By four they were wandering into the range of camera twelve, alive and well.

Nick didn't have to be a sly fox to know that it didn't make sense.

"Carrots?" He spoke softly as Judy's prolonged silence began to worry him. "Hopps?"

Judy blinked and looked at him. "You haven't used my surname in a while."
"Well, you didn't answer to Carrots now, did you? Are you feeling okay? Usually when you're faced with an overly complex mystery, your foot starts thumping like a jackhammer."

"Not when lives are at stake!" Judy punched the door, making Nick jump. "He was right there! There were two of us and one of him, and I can't believe we lost him!"

"It's not our fault, Carrots. He obviously knows the maze better than we do."

Judy nodded bitterly, her bout of anger fading as quickly as it had flared. "Nick, you're right."

"One hundred percent, cottontail."

"Whoever this guy is, he knows the layout of the maze." Now she had the look on her face she always had when she had a brainwave in a case. "The big question here is... how?"

Another light bulb blinked in Nick's own brain. "Someone who knows the whole place. Someone who may be close enough to the Casel Family to know their home like the back of his hand." Nick unzipped his coat as the car reached the mansion, ready to pull it off the moment he was back inside. "We should stop by the lounge before dinner. It should be quiet enough to call Bogo."

"And if he still doesn't let us investigate?"

"Then we follow the original plan and keep protecting Gazelle, Benji and the jerks. It's not as if we're sitting round doing squat."

"You're right, their safety is top priority either way." Not quite happy, but comforted regardless, Judy patted his arm in thanks. The contact felt like an electric shock on his slightly chilled skin before the warmth set in. "Thanks, Nick. You sure know how to keep me in line."

"You and Benji. He makes up the betting pools."

"Benj? What's he been up to?"

"Believe me, Carrots..." Nick replied, thinking of the strangely named 'Wildehopp' he had heard the cheetah muttering about one September afternoon while he was collecting cash and listing names. "You don't want to know."

Just as they'd hoped, the lounge was empty. Everyone was either in the dining room or the bar, waiting for their return. However, first they had a call to make.

It was Judy who speed-dialed Bogo's number and put it on speaker. Bogo answered almost immediately, sounding tired and irritable. "Hopps, what's the matter now? If you've solved the murder mystery already, I don't care. It's just a party."

"Just a party?" Nick repeated drily. "We've just met a guy who may as well have been Ghostmuzzle."

"Ghostmuzzle? What the hell are you talking about?"

Judy sat down on the coffee table. "Sir, it happened again. Someone attacked Gazelle and Clawhauser a couple of hours ago."

They heard a sound like falling paper on the other end. "Seriously?"

"Dead serious, sir." Nick said. "We were playing hide and seek in the maze when the whacko from the video took a swing at Benji with an axe. We managed to scare him off, but he got away."
"Son of a..." Bogo could be heard slamming a door, probably the front door of his house if the chief had finished his shift by now. "Where is Clawhauser? Is he okay?"

"Me and Hopps are fine, thanks for asking."

"I said is he okay?!" Bogo thundered.

"Yeesh! Yeah, he's fine, and Gazelle's fine, too!"

They heard Bogo exhale sharply. "We'll be there straight away."

"Sir, we've got another problem. Mr. Casel isn't letting us involve the ZPD."

"He isn't what?!" Bogo shouted so loudly that Nick thought he heard the rattling of glass panes.

"He's worried about this incident damaging his family's reputation, so he's trying to keep it under wraps until the attacker's caught." Judy said. "He even threatened us with our jobs. I'm concerned, sir. We don't know how far he'll go to hide this."

"The hell with that."

Bogo growled. Just hearing the cold fury in his superior's voice made Nick thankful that they were on opposite ends of a phone call rather than facing each other in the office. "The. Hell. With. That. First thing tomorrow morning I'm calling the idiot myself, see if I can't talk some sense into him."

Nick felt himself and Judy relax a little. There were no guarantees, but if anyone could put the fear of death in you it was Chief Bogo.

"What do you want us to do in the meantime, sir?" Judy asked.

"Make sure that maniac can't try again."

Nick heard the sound of the call ending, and nudged Judy. "You heard the guy, Officer Fluffbutt. We should get back to Ben and Gazelle."

Judy put her phone away. "Nick, I need your unbiased opinion. Do you think Mr. Casel may have another reason to cover up the incident?"

"Do I believe that Mr. Casel has something to do with the attack?" Nick hesitated. Judy had said 'unbiased.' "No. No, I don't. He has no motive to threaten Gazelle."

"No motive that we know of, Nick."

"Carrots, put yourself in his hooves. The last time a scandal damaged his reputation, it almost tore his family apart and ruined his life. Can you really blame him for trying to keep that from happening again?"

"I guess not." Judy started flipping pages in her notebook. "But there's so much about this case that we don't understand. We've got so many pieces, and I just can't put them together..."

"Carrots, I'm not solving this case on an empty stomach." He embraced her with one arm, missing the stunned look on her face, and steered her towards the closed doors to the dining room. "Once we've eaten, we'll sit down in my room and have a good long talk about all these puzzle pieces that have gotten you in such a tizzy."

Right on cue, Judy's stomach rumbled. The adorable bunny cringed, her face turning red in the cheeks and Nick grinned. "I wouldn't mind a tomato salad."
With one arm still around Judy, Nick pushed open the doors, just as he heard Gazelle's hit song *Try Everything* blurt out from the table. Benjamin, his demon wings back on for the last two puzzles of the night, quickly excused himself from whatever conversation he was having with Alec and Christine and pulled out his phone as he walked past Nick and Judy into the lounge.

While Judy strolled into the dining room to join the guests at the table, Nick hung back in the doorway, his ears pricking when he heard Bogo's name.

"Did Hopps and Wilde tell you?" Benjamin spoke quietly as he stopped beside one of the couches. He listened to Bogo for a few seconds before he suddenly blushed. "No, really, I'm fine. He didn't manage to hurt me… No, no! You don't have to do that, sir. Mr. Casel's bumping up the security, so I should be safe now… No, he didn't say anything to me about… He said *what* to Hopps and Wilde?" He huffed angrily. "Good for you, sir. I hope you can make him see sense. You're totally right, it would be best if we were all back in the city… Okay. They're serving up dinner now, so I should probably go… My ribs feel fine, thanks for asking…" His eyes widened and he looked at himself. "How did you know about my costume? I never… Nick? Oh my goodness, that little… Thank you, sir. I like it, too… Good night… You be careful too, Chief Bogo. Bye."

When the call was ended, Benjamin stood there with his phone held in his paws. Nick stared at him, almost certain and almost a little worried that the cheetah was about to curl up and start squealing. Instead, Benjamin gave a short, happy giggle and tucked his phone away. Nick couldn't fault the cheetah's merriment. Every night he had spent in the academy, he would spend ten to twenty minutes in a muzzletime session with his dear Carrots, gossiping about everything and anything. It hadn't mattered if it was something as mundane as a broken parking ticket record or as outlandish as a gang of naturalists rioting in Tundratown; hearing her voice, making her laugh and gazing into her expressive purple eyes had made the entire exhausting experience endurable. It completely made sense for Benjamin to feel touched that the stonehearted Chief Just-Don't-Care could care enough about him to call his number.

Nick turned his attention back to Judy, who had entered a cheerful conversation with Alec and Christine while Nick had been eavesdropping. If Nick hadn't spent the entire day participating in Alec's brain teasers and winter games he wouldn't have thought that this was the same bunny that had been assaulted by an axe-wielding psychopath mere hours ago.

Nick's smile fell as he remembered that horrible moment when she'd been struck. If the mammal hadn't hit her with the blunt edge of the blade…

The bloody image that came to mind made his mouth go dry, and he had a sudden impulse to go to the bar. To hell with Elgen Casel and his stupid obsession with reputation. They were going to catch that guy before he could have another go at Benjamin or Judy or Gazelle or any other innocent mammal, even if it meant instigating another scandal and bringing down the wrath of Elgen upon them.

"Nick?" Judy called. "Alec's about to start the fourth task. Could you bring everyone else back from the bar?"

"Sure. Alec, you don't mind if I bring back a Fuzzy Navel, do you?"

"Don't you already have a Fuzzy Navel, Nick?"

"Har har, Carrots." Nick rolled his eyes. "Just for that, I'll be getting you a Black Russian with Sex on the Beach."

Benjamin strode in just in time to hear that and cracked up along with Alec and Christine. Judy
blushed furiously. "You try and you won't live to see the next Tequila Sunrise!"

"Oooooo, I'm shaking in my U-Boots!"

"I'm serious, Nick." Judy paused to conjure up some more puns. "Death in the Afternoon by Duck Fart."

Nick guffawed.

"Or an Irish Car Bomb." Alec offered and laughed.

"Oh, I've got one!" Benjamin cried. "Pucker Up for a Rusty Nail in your Angel Face! 'Tis the Bee's Knees!"

Christine blew a raspberry in her futile efforts to hold back laughter.

Nick turned away, feeling better than he'd had before the cocktail puns started. He'd have to come up with some more before he returned with the other guests. "I'll be right back, My Fair Lady. You sure you don't want anything?"

"Actually I always wanted to try The Goldeneye."

Nick just couldn't resist. "Shaken, not stirred?"

Judy giggled. "You know, I never saw that movie."

Alec pointed to the lounge. "You know, we have that movie in the cabinet back there. You're more than welcome to take it to your room later."

Just like that, Nick got an idea. A simple, risk-free idea that would be perfect for easing the tension caused by the day's events, especially for still-slightly stressed bunny. They'd done it plenty of times before. With their backs cushioned by a propped up pillow, they'd snuggle up together on Judy's rickety old bed with a hybrid carrot and tuna pizza and watch a movie. They'd seen every grade of movie from A to B, all the way down to the cringe-worthy Zs. Sometimes Judy would pick the movie. Sometimes Nick would pick the movie. Sometimes Rock-Paper-Scissors would pick the movie. In a way it didn't matter how the movie was chosen, or whether it was good or bad. They'd always end the night with a smile on their faces.

After today, that was exactly what Nick and Judy needed. Nick had it all planned already. A premier A-movie experience in a five star suite with a forty-inch flat screen. A dirty sounding cocktail apiece with a selection of snacks on a silver platter. Judy snuggled against him in a pair of the silky pink pajamas that the Casels had somehow provided to replace the t-shirt and shorts she'd forgotten in her apartment.

Nick didn't like the upper class lifestyle. Not by a long shot. He didn't like that they wouldn't haven been allowed through the gates if Elgen didn't get any benefit from it. However, if it meant that Nick could have one special night with the best thing that had ever happened to him, he would milk it for all it's worth.

"Alec, do you do room service here?"

"Nick, this isn't a hotel!" Judy scolded.

"It's alright, Judy." Alec held up a hoof. "You want snacks for the movie later, is that that it?" Nick nodded. There was a glint in Alec's eye, much like the one Benjamin got whenever he watched Nick
and Judy bicker near his front desk. "Sure, I'll make sure there's some chocolates waiting for you when you go to bed."

"And popcorn." Benjamin added, beaming at the fox. Coupled with his monstrous contacts, the smile was unsettling. "One big box of buttered popcorn for you guys to share."

Nick bit back a groan. Chocolates. Of course dear romantic Benjamin's best friend would send up chocolates. Yet Nick couldn't bring himself to set them both straight. Instead he felt himself starting to sweat and his heart beat faster. "Sure, sounds perfect." He said, feeling his breath becoming short. "Okay, one Fuzzy Navel and one Goldeneye. Got it. I'm guessing we're getting the same for the movie?"

"A Vesper Martini for me." Judy said.

"Gotcha."

He managed to escape the dining room before his growing panic attack could become apparent. Chocolates, a fancy bedroom and an action movie with a dash of romance? Cripes on a stick, he hadn't thought this all the way through.

"Dumb fox." Nick muttered to himself, feeling terrified already. "You dumb, dumb fox."
"Benji. What is the incantation for unlocking a door?" Alec read from a small card.

"Alohomora." Benjamin answered without hesitating.
"Correct!"

Judy shuffled her ten cards over and over as she waited for the final two to win the fourth task, which of all things turned out to be a game of Harry Trotter Trivial Pursuit, a subject that all the guests happened to be interested in. Twenty minutes after a delicious dinner ended and the game began, Judy had come in second after Gazelle, a feat she was happy with. The objective here was not to be the first to complete ten cards, but to be the one of the first four to complete ten cards. Those four winners would be given the honor of seeing the fourth clue.

"Belch. Where does Charlie Weasely live while he is studying Dragons?"

"Bulgaria."

"Sorry, but it's Roarmania."

"Darnit!"

Not wanting to risk any more cocktails before her movie night with Nick, Judy settled for a glass of orange juice as she took mental notes of everyone else's progress. Every remaining participant was tied neck and neck with nine cards, all except Lake. Lagging behind with six cards, she didn't seem nearly as invested in the game as the others. Judy didn't trust her, but didn't know if she should consider this apathetic behavior suspicious.

"Carlos. What is the name of Tomcat Riddle's mother?"

"Merope Goat." Carlos folded his arms, brimming with confidence. He hadn't gotten a single question wrong since starting, and this question was no different.

"Correct and congratulations." Alec set the final card on Carlos' pile. "Only one spot left, guys."

Judy glanced at Nick. He had his poker face on, but Judy could tell that he was vying for that last spot in the winners' group. He'd been tense since they'd arranged to watch Goldeneye later tonight. It couldn't be that he was dreading it, otherwise he never would have agreed to the movie in the first place. It occurred to Judy that he could just be nervous, but then that opened up another possibility. A possibility that filled Judy with an odd mix of fear and hope.

"Lake. What is the core inside Harry's wand?"

"Unicorn hair."

"Wrong. It's a phoenix feather."

Lake shrugged. Alec didn't appear to be concerned with her attitude. Then again, as her younger brother, he was probably used to it. Judy thought of how Lake hadn't been present when the costumed mammal attacked. Then again, Alec, Carlos, Elgen, Selke, Ombidia and the servants had been elsewhere, too. Judy had no reason to believe that the costumed mammal was someone inside the estate, but all the same she and Nick would have to establish some alibis as soon as possible.
"Nick." Alec took a long look at the card. "If you answer correctly, the last spot is yours."

Judy propped herself on the table with her elbows. "You've got this, Nick."

"I know." Nick assured her. "Bring it, captain."

"Albus Dumbleboar has a scar on his left knee that is a perfect map of what?"

Judy gulped. If she had been the one to receive that question, she would be completely screwed. From the looks of it, so was Nick. She could see it in the way his smirk faltered and his eyes widened. He stared at the table surface in silence.

"Nick?"

Nick held up a paw. His brows knitted together and his nose wrinkled.

"Tick tock, Wilde." Carlos swung his finger like a pendulum.

"Zip it." Alec shot him a look. "Nick, I need an answer."

"Underground."

"Pardon?"

"I know it's underground…" Nick took a deep breath. "The Liondon underground?"

Alec smiled and put the last card on Nick's pile. "Correct, one hundred percent."

"Oi."

"Oh darn." Benjamin pouted. "Just one more question and I would have nailed it!"

"Maybe next time, miel." Gazelle said. "Maybe you and I could have another round after the fifth task."

Benjamin brightened. "I've love that."

Carlos scoffed, drawing a curious look from Judy. What the dickens was he ticked about now?

"Okay, Gazelle, Judy, Nick and Carlos, follow me into the kitchen."

In the kitchen, Judy was strongly reminded of Hell's Kitchen, a favorite of two-dozen of her siblings. Every appliance had a silvery steel sheen. A pizza oven lay cold and dark. On the island counter were eight bowls full of small pieces of food. Beside them was a small box made of the same metal as the cookware. Alec placed a hoof on the edge of the lid. "The item in this box is a clue as to a location of crucial importance to the mystery. It's up to you if you want to share this with the losers."

He lifted the lid. Inside was a bar nozzle. Alec allowed them a good long look before shutting the lid and shoving the box under the counter. "Now if you don't mind, I'm going to bring the rest of them in to start the fifth task. Oh, and do not touch anything in those bowls."

Alec left, leaving Judy to think long and hard about the bar nozzle. Somehow, even though it was the dining room Mr. Ombidia had perished in, the bar was of some importance to this mystery.

Sooner than she had expected, it dawned on Judy. She would discuss it with Nick, later. Right now she had another clue to earn.
Meanwhile, Gazelle was absent-mindedly sipping her martini when she sensed Carlos' irate gaze upon her.

"So, you and the secretary are all hooked up now, is that it?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"You and Clawhauser. Why else would you let him hang around you like a hot air balloon?"

"We are not hooked up, and I don't see how it's any of your business, Mr. Elkervera."

"It's Mr. Casel. I married Lake, remember, you dumb broad?"

"Would you mind showing a little respect?" Nick asked snidely.

Gazelle looked Carlos up and down. "I remember. And what she saw in you, I'll never know."

Carlos' eyes narrowed. "It was your friggin' loss, you know. Turning me down was a stupid move, and you know it."

Judy stared at the pair of them, wondering how she hadn't realized it sooner.

Gazelle turned her back on Carlos. "I know a narcissistic gigolo when I see one."

"What did you call me?"

Carlos never got his answer, for Alec returned at that moment with the remaining guests. Carlos and Gazelle both fell silent, moving apart as they mixed in with the group while Nick moved closer to Judy. "Wow." He muttered.

"Not now, Nick." Judy whispered as Alec moved beside the eight bowls.

"Guys, I trust you all enjoyed our refresher of Harry Trotter trivia." Most of them nodded, including Judy. "Good, because our last task for tonight is inspired by another guy we all know and love… Gordon Ramsay."

"Oh my gooosssh..." Benjamin pressed his paws to his cheeks and gaped. "It's a tasting test!"

"Yep!" Alec held up a blindfold with his hoof. "And the clue for this contest is this." He raised his hook. Hooked on the metal appendage was a ring with a large red gem.

"Oh my gosh, it's beautiful!" Christine gasped. "What is it, a ruby?"

"A diamond." Alec smiled bashfully at her reaction. "A very rare red diamond. This ring is an essential piece of the puzzle, but only those who guess right in the taste test will get to know why."

Judy leapt onto a stool and looked over the bowls. She saw what appeared to be an orange mush. A bunch of green leaves. A pile of fat ripe blueberries. Other foods she couldn't identify.

"Judy, since you're already on the stool, you can go first." Judy stayed still as Alec wrapped a smaller blindfold around her eyes. She heard a soft clinking sound of a spoon dipping into a bowl, and then felt the spoon touch her bottom lip. She wasted no time taking in the mystery sustenance.

It was mushy, with a sweet taste that made her immediately think of fruit. Judy probed it with her tongue, contemplating which of the many different fruits it could be. Not all fruits were this mushy. Apples for example had a harder texture. Judy thought of oranges, pomegranates... "Peaches?"
"Correct!"

Judy was beaming as she removed her blindfold and dropped down from the seat, allowing Christine to take her place. When she rejoined Nick's side, he silently offered his paw. Judy bumped fists and watched as Christine was given what Judy now suspected to be mashed carrot.

Christine chewed the substance several times before answering. "Turnip?"

Alec's face fell. "Carrot. Sorry, honey."

Christine removed her blindfold with a sigh and passed it to Benjamin. Alec took a spoonful of cream-colored cereal and fed it to the excited cheetah. "Mice Crispies!" He cried the second the spoon was pulled from his mouth.

"Correct!"

Benjamin passed the blindfold to Edward and moved to stand next to Judy and Nick. "Were those peaches nice?"

"More or less."

"Enjoying yourself?"

Judy shrugged. "It's just pulp, Ben."

"I mean this party."

"Oh. Yes, I'm absolutely loving this." Judy held up her notebook. "I actually have a theory or two in place. I don't know who the killer is, but I think I may know how and where the victim was poisoned."

"Speaking of which, do you think we should go check on Mr. Ombidia? I don't think we've heard from him since he died and went to his room."

"Benji's right." Nick said. "Now that I think about it, we haven't questioned him since all this started."

"Alright, we'll talk to him once we've finished here." Judy said, right before Edward correctly guessed that he was eating lettuce. Gazelle was next, and she wound up mistaking a green bean for a pea pod. Carlos took her place, practically snatching the blindfold from her. Gazelle ignored the slight and moved to lean against the large fridge. Benjamin frowned and approached her.

"Gazelle, are you okay?" Benjamin asked. "You look out of sorts."

"I'm fine, really." Gazelle sipped her drink. "I had a small spat earlier."

"Not with Mr. Ombidia!"

"What makes you think that?"

Benjamin twiddled his thumbs, looking more and more upset. "The rumors about you retiring from singing to become a politician. From what I've heard online, Mr. Ombidia's really upset about you leaving."

"Oh, Ben…" Gazelle sighed.
"Gazelle, I have to ask. Is it true?"

Carlos incorrectly guessed broccoli. Alec declared that it was cauliflower. Gazelle ignored them both and gently caressed Benjamin's face. "No."

Benjamin's eyes widened. "No?"

"No." Gazelle smiled. "I had considered it, but I love singing too much to give it up. Not yet. Don't worry, Ben. I'm not going anywhere."

"OMIGOSH, YES!" Benjamin threw his arms around her and squeezed tight. Gazelle merely laughed at his reaction, even when the others in the kitchen turned and stared at the sight. Benjamin suddenly remembered who he was embracing and leapt back spewing apologies.

Judy laughed along with the others, feeling her own relief growing. "Why haven't you said anything?"

"I only found out about the rumor recently, but I'm going to set everyone straight as soon as I get back to the city. I'm sorry, I didn't mean to upset anyone."

"Apologies one hundred percent accepted, Gazelle!" Benjamin yanked out his phone and started rapidly texting. "O. M. Goodness, I have to tell my fan club! They've been freaking out about this forever!"

"You're part of a fan club?" Carlos said. "What're you, twelve?"

Alec tightened his grip on the spoon. The utensil started to bend. "Carlos, I won't tell you again. Shut up."

"Yeah, whatever, I'm going to the bar."

"Carlos!" Edward snapped, but Carlos was already out the kitchen, through the door leading to the bar.

Nick looked to Lake. "Your husband's a real jackass. I'm not going to apologize for saying that."

Lake sighed. "He's angry that Ben's here."

Benjamin hung his head. "Are you angry?"

"Maybe. I warned Alec that inviting you here was a mistake." Lake drained her glass and left it on the bench. "Alec, I'm going to bed. I'm useless at this challenge, anyway."

"Lake, are you sure?" Alec was clearly disappointed, but nevertheless let her go. Lake left through the door on the other side of the kitchen, the one leading back to the dining room.

Edward watched her go, then glared at the barroom door. "I've just about had enough of him."

"Is he always like that?" Nick asked.

"Only when someone brings Ben up. That guy can really hold a grudge."

Alec slumped beside the counter. "Ben, I'm so sorry about this. I never should have had this party."

"Carlos' just looking for attention, you can't blame yourself." Nick said. He looked around at all the sullen faces, then seemed to have an idea. "Hey, everyone… what do you call a three humped
camel?"

"What?"

"What do you call a three humped camel?"

Judy snorted. Even if they didn't laugh, the effort would still be appreciated. "I don't know? What do you call a three humped camel?"

Nick paused. "Pregnant!"

There was another pause, and then there were chuckles all around.

"That's a good one!" Edward knelt down and slapped Nick's back, nearly sending the fake Flynn Rider on his face. "I'm gonna have to try that with my buds!"

Nick smiled with smug satisfaction. "Come on, we can continue the game without that jerk. It's my turn now, isn't it?"

With the tension evaporated, Alec beckoned Nick onto the stool and handed him the smaller blindfold. When Nick was sufficiently blinded, Alec scooped up a small spoonful of blueberries. Judy shook her head, smirking, as Alec poured the berries into Nick's mouth. Nick chewed and swallowed.

"Alec, you do know that blueberries are literally my favorite, right?"

Alec looked down at his spoon. "I… did not know that."

"Okay, that's everyone. Now what's so important about that ring?"

Alec pulled the ring back out. It glistened blood red from the ceiling lights. Alec looked oddly nervous as he gazed at the ring, glancing between it and Christine. "I'm going to forget what I said earlier and just tell all of you. When my father dies, I inherit this ring. If it helps, it's worth around ten million bucks."

"For real?" Judy gaped at the ring.

"Really, it's worth that much. I did say that red diamonds are rare." Alec pocketed the ring again. "That's your clue, and that's all the games for today. We'll be starting number six tomorrow after breakfast."

Benjamin had removed his Molex watch when he put his costume on, so he checked the time on his phone. "Huh, it's only eight thirty. Alec, do you and your brother wanna have a Hell's Kitchen marathon?"

"Sure, we have Catflix on the lounge TV." Alec looked to the others. "You guys do whatever you want, but please don't leave the house. Father said that creep was caught, but I don't to risk a repeat of this afternoon."

"You mind if we girls join you?" Christine batted her eyelashes. Alec blushed and nodded before walking off with his friends and family.

Judy moved up to Gazelle, not blocking her way but still stopping her in her tracks. "Gazelle, would Mr. Ombidia be up for a talk?"

"I suppose if it'll get him away from that laptop for a few minutes. I think he's been on it all day."
Gazelle found the hinge of her jaw and rubbed it. She then knelt down and lowered her voice. "Do… do you think that that mammal was the same one who's been…"

"We don't know for sure." Judy replied quietly. "It's just as possible that he and the mammal who's been stalking you could be two different animals."

Gazelle shivered. "I keep thinking about his face. That mask. Before I saw the antlers, I actually thought he was some kind of demented hound."

"I can't imagine how scary it was for you…" Nick stopped. "Hound?"

"Yes. Like a big wolf."

"Spooky. Anyway, we're going to go talk to your manager now."

"Try and relax in the meantime." Judy said. "It's being a long day."

Nick didn't reveal his brainwave right away, leaving Judy waiting until they had ascended the stairs in the hall and entered the hallway where Ombidia's room was located. "Carrots, what did you say 'Veltro' meant?"

"It means 'greyhound.'" Judy stopped mid-step. "You don't think-"

"Either we're just grasping at straws here or we've just met Veltro's mascot. In any case, I'm really looking forward to getting home and finding out what our fellow boys in blue have uncovered."

"Me too. Let's this over with."

They reached Ombidia's door and knocked. "Come in." Ombidia called in a tone that strongly reminded Judy of an irritable Bogo. When they entered, they found the bison at a desk in the far corner of the bedroom, shutting his laptop before turning in his armchair. "Is there a problem, officers?"

Nick eyed the closed laptop. "Watching anything invigorating, Mr. Ombidia?"

Ombidia's eyes hardened. "Stop being vile and tell me what you want."

"I apologize for my partner's behavior, Mr. Ombidia." Judy shot Nick a virulent look. "We just wanted to ask where you were when Gazelle, Clawhauser and Miss Antlaire were attacked in the maze this afternoon."

"I see." Ombidia adjusted his tie. "So you believe the attacker may be someone on the estate. One of us."

"Please understand that we're not accusing you of anything." Judy said quickly. "We just want to establish as many alibis as we can to bring back to the station."

"Of course, I understand. I assure you that I have not left this room since my… unfortunate passing."

"Can you prove that?"

"Not exactly, no. I can't prove that I haven't left the bedroom, but if you review the exterior security footage you'll find that I have not left this building."

"He's right." Nick said. "There're three exits, and when we were watching the footage I didn't see him leave through any of them."
Judy made a note in her little book. "Looks like for now we can rule you out as a suspect. Thank you for your cooperation, Mr. Ombidia."

"Your welcome. Now, if you don't mind, I have work to do."

"One more question and we'll leave you alone." Nick said. "What do you think about the rumors that Gazelle is retiring from singing?"

"That I was an idiot for believing them." Ombidia turned back to his laptop.

They left Ombidia in peace, with Judy proposing that they retrieve Goldeneye from the lounge and have their movie night. For some reason, the mere suggestion left Nick looking ready to throw up. Too much booze and haute cuisine she assumed. Nevertheless they made their way back downstairs to the lounge, empty as Benjamin as the others were currently in the bar, and picked out their chosen movie. With Judy sticking to her guns that they were not to treat the mansion like a hotel, Nick volunteered to go get their last drinks of the night. While he was gone, Judy sat down on one of the big couches and opened her notebook. She turned to the page most recently updated.

Edward Casel- witness to attack. No known motive.

Alec Casel- alibi TBA. No known motive.

Carlos Casel- alibi TBA. Grudge against Clawhauser for unknown reason. Grudge against Gazelle for past rejection.

Elgen Casel- alibi TBA. Trying to cover up incident but no known motive for committing assault himself.

Selke Casel- alibi TBA. No known motive.

Lake Casel- alibi TBA. Linked with Veltro. Prime suspect?

Gazelle- victim.

Benjamin Clawhauser- victim.

Christine Antlaire- victim. No known motive but was seen at mall before night howler attack.

Simon Ombidia- was inside building at time of attack. Use security camera footage as evidence. Possible motive anger at rumor of Gazelle's retirement.

Judy groaned softly, wishing she had more to work with. There were also the dozens of servants and security guards to investigate. But for now she had no choice but to leave it to Elgen's people to investigate the matter themselves, and hope that there wasn't a traitor among them destroying evidence at this very moment.
One moment Benjamin had felt his arms being yanked down as the heavy barbell drop onto the rack. The next moment he’d felt something sharp slam into the side of his face and warm blood spilling from the two small cuts across his mouth.

He’d barely felt the pain in his knees as he fell to the side, clutching his bloody mouth. Shock had soon given way to terror, unable to make his tongue feel around for any missing teeth. He’d trembled there on the cold floor, unable to move or speak, until he’d felt Bogo’s hooves touch his paws and heard him gently encouraging the cheetah to show his injury.

It wasn’t until he was lying in the emergency room with Officer McHorn beside him, waiting for the nurse to bring the skin glue to close his cuts, when he understood what he had seen in his bovine superior in the few minutes since the incident. His baritone voice had lost its steel edge. There had been the slightest of tremors in his hooves as he’d eased Benjamin’s paws down. In his dark brown eyes, Benjamin had seen fear. The barbell hadn’t been the only hard thing that had cracked that day.

When the glue was dry and he was free to leave, Benjamin had returned to the waiting room to see if Chief Bogo was still there, while McHorn had disappeared into the men’s restroom. Bogo had been advised by the commissioner to see about the mystery illness that had caused the accident. He’d seen no sign of the buffalo. Instead, in the middle of an empty line of uncomfortable metal chairs, was his neighbor, Alec Casel.

"Alec? What’re you doing here?" Benjamin had rushed over and looked the elk-deer up and down, looking for whatever had caused him to come here. His eyes had soon fallen on Alec's limp arm, being held up by his other arm. "Oh my gosh, what happened to your arm?!"

Alec had grimaced, hesitating as he looked down at his arm. "I fell in the shower and I think I dislocated my shoulder."

"Oh cripes, you didn't hit your head or anything, did you?"

"No, just the shoulder." Alec replied agitatedly.

Benjamin had frowned at the look on his face. "You don't seem happy to see me."

"Do I? Sorry, this really hurts right now."

"Yeah, I bet it would." Relieved, Benjamin had then sat down in the empty seat beside his neighbor, figuring he’d give him some company until the nurse showed up. Did his family know what had happened? "Have you seen my boss, Chief Bogo?"

"You mean the cape buffalo, right? Yeah, he was called in a few minutes ago. Is that why you're here?"

Benjamin had lightly touched his glued up cuts, surmising that Alec hadn't seen them for the fur. Dried glue was less obvious than stitches. "Actually, I had a bit of an accident in the gym. The barbell broke and got me good." He parted the fur so Alec could see.

"Holy crap." Alec had breathed. "You're okay, though, right?"
"Yeah. They ruled out concussion and put on a bit of glue."

"Seriously? Glue?"

"Yep. Apparently they did the same thing with soldiers during battle."

Alec had winced slightly. "Darn, this hurts. Guess neither of us have been very lucky today."

"Me more than you." Benjamin had chortled. His stomach rumbled, making him long for a few donuts. His heart sank with worry as he wondered if eating donuts with a busted mouth would be wise. "More accidents happen in the bathroom than the gym, but you wouldn't believe it with all that heavy equipment."

"Yeah, I've got to remember to wipe the floor after I shower." Alec had leaned his head back and closed his eyes, teeth pressed together as another wave of pain presumably rushed through his disconnected shoulder.

Benjamin had then turned his attention to the distant door, hoping that whatever was ailing Bogo wasn't too serious. In the short time since Benjamin had joined the force, he'd found Bogo to be a good boss. Stern but fair most of the time. A bit of a temper but usually a good reason for losing it. No real sense of humor, except for that Heath Badger joke he'd made earlier. Fearless, except when one of his own was hurt. Bogo had been afraid. Afraid for him. And Benjamin had been afraid for Bogo as he'd waited for the police chief to return.

Until something had come to mind, making him look back to his neighbor.

"Alec." He might have had thought Alec was sleeping if it wasn't for the mild expression of pain. "Alec."

Alec opened his eyes. "Yes?"

"Did you fall in the shower, or did you fall on the floor?"

"… What?"

"Which was it?"

Alec straightened suddenly, tensing like a bowstring before releasing a hiss of agony. "I… I s-slipped out the shower a-a-and fell on the floor. That's what happened."

Benjamin had found himself taking in Alec's appearance. The groomed, dry fur. The three layers of clothing, at least one of which had long sleeves. The conspicuous absence of friends or family…

Why? Why are you lying? Benjamin had thought. He'd wished he could speak the questions out loud but he couldn't, not in a public place like this. Alec had stood up the second his name was called, and left without even looking at the cheetah.

Benjamin had sat there in contemplative silence, his hunger forgotten, until McHorn had returned with two soda cans.

What really happened to you, Alec?

"Benjamin?" Almost immediately after emerging from the bar's bathroom, the one closest to the lounge, Benjamin was greeted by Selke Casel's deceptively soft voice. "Benjamin, come here."
Benjamin gulped when he saw Selke slouching on a sleek black couch in a corner of the bar, a Bloody Mary in hoof. She gazed at him with cold, narrowed eyes she shared with her only daughter.

He'd thought the bar would be empty when Carlos went to bed, but he'd been wrong. He did not want to go to her. As well as Carlos and Elgen, Selke was one of the Casels that Benjamin knew definitely didn't like him.

"Come here, my little demon." Selke requested again with that tender tone.

Benjamin glanced at the other door, wondering if he should risk declining and return to the safety of the lounge with those Casels he knew didn't hate his oversized guts. No, it wasn't a risk that was worth taking. Slowly, warily, Benjamin edged over and sat down on a cushioned stool beside the couch. On the glass table beside the deer, Benjamin saw three empty cocktail glasses and grew more nervous than ever.

"Yes, Mrs. Casel?" He finally worked up the courage to ask.

"Finally, I thought I'd never get the chance to chat with you, Benjamin. You know we haven't properly spoken since…" There was a glint of bitterness in her gaze. "Well, you know."

Benjamin dug his fingers in his knees, knowing full well what she was talking about.

"It's been what, five years? There's so much I want to talk about."

"Like what, Mrs. Casel?"

"Like your heroics in the Greener Grass Mall. Terrible business. Gazelle said you helped her, but she left out the details."

"I didn't do anything super heroic. Gazelle was hurt and she'd gotten separated from her friends. I helped her get to a safe place, and we waited until Chief Bogo and the others came to help us."

"Is that so?" Selke shook her glass, making the cocktail swirl. "How are your ribs, my little demon? You mustn't have been in your safe place to run into a savage rhino."

Benjamin touched his ribs. "Yeah, well, I snuck out. Someone had to open the shutters so the rescue team could reach us."

"Was that when you ran into that vagrant Bellwether?"

"No, that was before. She was attacked while she was trying to escape."

"And you saved her? After everything she had done?"

"I couldn't just leave her to die." Even now, Benjamin found the idea unthinkable.

Selke raised the glass to her red lips and drained the last of her cocktail. She smirked humorlessly as she held up her empty glass, signaling the barman to fill another glass. "Do two! One for me, one for Chernabog!"

"Mrs. Casel, haven't you had a bit much?" Benjamin waved an arm at the glasses on the glass table, but Selke simply planted her fourth beside them with a loud clink.

"You're a perfect little demon, aren't you?" She leered at him, slightly unsteady even though she was sitting. "So sweet. So honest. So adorable. No wonder Bogo came for you."
Benjamin swallowed, perturbed by her demeanor. "He came for Gazelle and Bellwether, Mrs. Casel. Their rescue was priority number-"

"Oh, shut up, you stupid little creature." Selke hissed. "If he wanted them rescued, he didn't have to do it himself. He had the best in the precinct to do it for him. No, he came for you, so stop acting so humble."

"S-sorry." Benjamin glanced again at the door, praying that one of his friends would come looking for him.

Selke chuckled. When the cocktails came, she quickly swallowed half her glass. "There you go again. I just insulted you and yet you're the one apologizing. God, you're a precious little thing. So precious that when the savage crisis got you sent to records, it made Hopps give up her badge."

Benjamin froze before he could sip his own drink. "Hopps didn't resign for that!"

"Don't deny it, you flabby fool. She resigned less than an hour after your demotion. Of course it was because of you. Because you're a perfect, precious little cinnamon roll. If Alec was gay, you'd have no trouble stealing him from his dear Christine."

Benjamin bristled. "I would never!"

"Of course you wouldn't, you're too perfect."

Benjamin bit his lip. "Mrs. Casel, I really shouldn't keep your son waiting."

"You're not drinking, Benjamin."

Benjamin quickly sipped his Bloody Mary and found he didn't like it. "Tasty."

Selke seemed more preoccupied with her own swirling drink. "I liked Bogo too, you know. He was stronger. Sexier. I would have dated him if he'd asked me." Her smile disappeared. "But then I made the first move. Turned out he was gay and I got stuck with the most narrow minded, cold hearted, self-centered scum I have ever met."

Benjamin felt a chill. "You're not talking about your husband, are you?"

"Of course I am. Drink."

Benjamin took another sip, wanting more than anything than to get back to the lounge. "He's not that bad, surely."

"Not that bad?" Selke squeezed her glass so tightly that Benjamin thought it would shatter. "You saw for yourself, he did nothing. You blabbed. You told him what was happening, and he just sat back and did nothing."

"He probably didn't believe me, like you didn't." Benjamin clapped his paw over his muzzle, but it was too late.

Selke fell silent. She downed the other half of her cocktail and put the glass with the others. "That's right, I didn't, did I? That's why you tattled to the chief."

No, no, no. That was the last thing Benjamin wanted to talk about. "Mrs. Casel, please…"

"You should have been born rich. You'd have probably married into the family then. Then maybe that would make your existence bearable. What am I saying, of course it wouldn't. As the… the
'matriarch' of this established family, it would have been be expected of me to smile and accept you, but I would never forgive the mammal that destroyed my family. No matter how perfect you are, you'll always be a inconsiderate, gossipy, donut-guzzling home wrecker to me."

Benjamin squeezed his moistening eyes shut. "I'm sorry."

"Don't bother. It's too late for apologies. Five years too late. I'd tell you to never contact Alec or the rest of our family again, but Alec would never sever ties with you. He loves you too much. If you really want to make it up to us, you should just die." Benjamin clamped down harder on his lip as it started to tremble. His paws were shaking too. "In fact, you almost died twice this month, didn't you?" Selke leaned forward, clearly swaying from the effort. "First you get walloped by a mad rhinoceros, then you nearly get cut up into little pieces. But against all odds, those two failed to kill you. You know what? I wish they hadn't."

That did it. Benjamin managed to put his drink down on the table before taking off, fleeing the bar and fighting off tears. All thoughts of returning to the lounge were gone, replaced by an overwhelming desperation to get as far away from Selke and Carlos and Elgen as possible. He reached his bedroom and managed to slam the door behind him before his tears broke free. He slumped against the door, sobbing, before struggling to his bed. He clambered onto the covers, grabbing a large thick pillow to squeeze as he curled up into a ball and sniffled.

Just one more day until he would be home, away from the hateful glares and cruel words. One more day.

A knock on the door made the cheetah tense up. It opened, and Alec stepped into the room missing a feathered hat and a hook. "There you are, Benji. You okay?"

"Yeah." Benjamin said, even as he wiped a stream of tears from his eyes. Alec's eyes narrowed. "Oh, for God's sake, what did Carlos do now?" Benjamin shook his head. "Dad?" He shook his head again. "Mom?" He nodded. Alec sighed and sat down on the edge of the bed. "I'm sorry. I'm going to have some words with her."

"Don't. It's not like Carlos. You know she's still hurting over…" Benjamin couldn't bring himself to finish the sentence, instead sniffing and hugging the pillow tighter.

"You've bent your wings, you know that right? Hold on, I'll fix them." After giving Benjamin an embroidered handkerchief, Alec reached behind Benjamin, easily bending the metal frame forming the wing's outline back into the correct shape. Benjamin dried his eyes and saw large black stains on the little white fabric. Alec looked at his face. "The dye's starting to run."

"I'll go in the shower later." Truth be told, Benjamin didn't think he could bring himself to repeat the tedious process of applying black dye all over his head. He thanked heavens for the backup costume he had in his suitcase. "Done worry about the stains, the dye will wash out."

He felt Alec shift himself further onto the bed. "Benji, you shouldn't listen to them. You weren't wrong."

"I know, but I just… it wasn't supposed to end like that." Benjamin rubbed his face some more. "I didn't want anyone to actually get hurt, especially not Bogo."

"It wasn't your fault, it was…" Alec hesitated. "… his. It wouldn't have ended that way if dad had listened to you. You did the right thing. He didn't."

"Alec, I can't blame your parents for not believing me. It's not something a parent ever wants to hear.
Sometimes I wonder if I'd been too quick to tell Bogo."

Alec edged right up to him. "Benji, stop it. Sure it didn't exactly go the way you wanted it to. Sure half my family hates you now. But don't think for a second that all that changes the fact that you saved me."

Benjamin blinked and looked at him for the first time. "Say that again?"

"Can I tell you a secret? Back at that apartment, back before I met you, I was…" Alec hesitated again, longer this time. "I was starting to… to think about… a-about ending it."

"Say that again?!" Benjamin's stomach dropped like a donut-stuffed brick. Even through the mist that was his own tears, he could see that Alec was deadly serious. And tearing up a little himself.

"Before you say another word about how badly you screwed up, bear in mind that I might be in a coffin right now if it wasn't for you." Alec hissed. "I don't give a damn how much my mother is hurting. You saved me. Saved us." He took Benjamin by surprise with a tight embrace. Benjamin began to cry anew. He was being a idiot. What was he doing on this bed, crying like a three year old, when the few bad things that happened because of his actions were far outweighed by the good? Benjamin wiped his eyes, blackening the handkerchief more than ever, as Alec continued to whisper into his ear. "And not a goddamn frickin' thing that happened to my family, including my sister knowingly marrying a gigolo to hide her homosexuality from our dad, is going to change that."

Benjamin dropped the handkerchief, jerking so suddenly that he broke Alec's embrace. "Say that again?!"

Alec clapped his hooves to his mouth with a massive gasp. "OMIGOSHWHATIDIDO?!"

Judy tapped the end of her carrot pen on her chin in sync with the ticking clock, before throwing it down and throwing her head back with a groan. "Ugh, there's so much we still don't know about Alec's sister and her connection with Veltro. Where's a light bulb when you need one?"

"Click. Went the hooded lamp above the bed's headrest, casting light over the fox and rabbit on the bed. "Ta-da!" Nick released the chain and slouched on the pillows beside the large box of chocolates that someone, and he had a very good idea who, had thoughtfully left for them to find. "There's your light bulb, Carrots."

"Har, har." Judy smiled and returned to her notebook. "The remote's on your side. Be a dear, would you?"

"Got no antlers, but okay." Nick grabbed the remote from the bedside table and turned on the DVD player. Within half a minute the famous Bone theme was blaring out at them. "Come on, put that away. We've got a movie to watch."

"Nick, I'm trying to work out a lead here."

"Can't you do that when we're back in Zootopia?"

"No."

"Fine." Nick returned to the movie and chocolates. For a while neither of them spoke. Judy's eyes pored over her notes again and again. There must be something. A contradiction, an irregularity, anything that could give them something to work with. By the time the action packed prologue was ended, she had nothing but an overly rubbed temple, a set jaw and a lot of suppressed frustration.
Suddenly the room fell silent when Nick paused the movie. "Officer Hopps, put down that notebook before you give yourself an aneurysm."

The fox recoiled slightly from the icy glare she gave him. "Nick, we need to determine whether or not anyone on the inside had anything to do with the attack this afternoon."

"And we will. When we're back in Zootopia."

"Nick, this is important." Judy's voice was rising.

"Carrots, you know we're not here to dig up dirt on the Casels!"

"I know!" Judy threw her arms up in the air. "But we have to catch this guy! He almost killed Benji for crying out loud! And where were we when this happened? Trying to catch a Yeti!"

"That wasn't our fault. It's the security's responsibility to keep out trespassers."

"That's not the point! We were literally feet away while a maniac was attacking the mammals we were supposed to be protecting with an axe! We failed, Nick! No question about it!"

Nick's response was "So you think we're better off disobeying orders to play detectives, potentially ticking off the richest mammal in Zootopia and getting put on parking duty for the rest of our natural lives, instead of doing our damndest to keep that maniac from getting a second shot."

Judy paused. The title sequence came to an end, fading to a pan shot of MI6 HQ. "Gosh, I so wish I could call you a dumb fox right now."

"And I wish I could call you a sly bunny, and yet here we are."

"Nick, I'm sorry." Judy rubbed the sore spot where the axe had sent her flying. "I'm still a little frazzled, and that ugly scene in the kitchen did not help matters. How can we cooperate with these people when they hate Ben so much?"

"Not all of them, keep that in mind." Nick literally pointed out, as James Bone began his regular harmless flirting with Miss. Honeypenny.

"Nick… do you think any of them would actually try to hurt him?"

The corner of Nick's mouth twisted. "Okay, I'm definitely getting the feeling that you think the culprit is a Casel."

"Half of them have motives. Edward is a big fan of Gazelle, Lake is a member of the organization that's been threatening her and Carlos got rejected by her."

"How is being a big fan a motive? Wait, never mind, I read Misery."

That did not help Judy at all. "I'm sorry, I know I shouldn't be obsessing over this. I just can't stop thinking about how close that guy got. If anything happened to Ben or Gazelle, I…" She painfully bit her lip and wiped her eye.

"Alright…" Nick shifted himself so he was sitting cross-legged on the bed and properly facing her. "I can tell how much keeping them safe means to you. Tell you what. Just forget about the case for tonight and we'll start the movie over, and tomorrow I'll arrange for us to be able to watch the security cameras on our phones so we can keep an eye on things while we're playing the games."

Judy had an overwhelming urge to squeeze him like a stuffed carrot. "Arrange it right now and
we've got a deal."

Nick put down his cocktail and stood up on the bed. "Deal. We'll have to discuss it with Mr. Elk-butt, first."

Judy suddenly felt a great rush of love for her partner. Here she was, beating herself up for letting Benjamin and Gazelle down. Beating herself up over almost doing the same to Bogo by disobeying orders. And yet this fox was so sly as to offer an ingenious compromise right off the bat. That it only a two minutes to get her all figured out. Her heart was pounding. Her eyes were watering again. Without thinking, she stood up, pulled him back down by the tie, and kissed him on the cheek.

On the TV screen, James Bone caught his first glimpse of the film's Bone Girl, Natalya Slothanova.

Judy let go and locked eyes with Nick. He looked as thunderstruck as she was. He slowly raised his paw to his cheek, which along with the other was turning a darker shade of red. "We-we should probably catch Mr. Casel before he goes to bed."

Judy's paws were frozen in front of her as she turned her stare down at them. "Yes."

"Should we pretend for now that you didn't just do that?"

Her stare protruded between her paws to the slightly open vest of Nick's costume. "Okay."

"Should I take it as a token of your appreciation?"

"Alright!" Judy bolted from the bed and the room, praying that her face would lose its redness before she reached the study.

"Terrorism?" Bogo had repeated half a day earlier, not surprised but at the same time not happy. "Are you absolutely certain?"

"Fairly certain. Our evidence isn't concrete, but we've recently made a discovery that has made it unwise to take any chances."

Bogo's chair had creaked as he leaned forward. "And of what discovery do you speak?"

"As you know, Former Mayor Bellwether instigated the previous savage attacks a year and a half ago. Her stated motive was to discredit predators and use the resulting fear to assume power over the city. We have reason to believe that there may more to the story."

"Let me guess. She'd planned to take over the world." Bogo had replied irritably, even as he'd felt a sinking feeling in his gut.

"Probably her ultimate goal, but no. We interrogated Bellwether and Mr. Ramses, which we gave you prior notice of if you'll recall, and he revealed that Bellwether had a partner."

"A partner? She never mentioned a partner."

"She didn't mention them because she didn't know who they were. According to her, she'd never even seen their face. She told us that prior to the incident in the museum, she'd discovered that the name she'd been given, Yokai Nishimura, was false, but she was exposed and apprehended before she could learn their true identity."

"Did Bellwether explain how this partner contributed to the conspiracy?"
"Apparently the partner provided most of the funding, including paying off Mr. Ramses and those dirty cops you caught at the museum. They also provided the abandoned subway as a secret place to manufacture the serum."

"Why does the supposed existence of this partner make the mall incident a terrorist attack?"

Yaxley had procured a file and plucked out a photograph. "I won't waste your time with incessant details, but there have been rumors from other departments in the government that someone in Zootopia has been in contact with Veltro, and we believe it to be Bellwether's partner."

"Why?"

"Because if Veltro is indeed behind the attack, then that partner may have provided the serum to do it. Maybe the main reason he had the serum created was so he could sell it." He'd brought his face closer to Bogo's, his eyes narrowed. "Chief Bogo, do you have any idea how much something as destructive as the Night Howler serum would be worth on the black market?"

Bogo had actually felt a chill. "What, you mean as a weapon?"

Yaxley had nodded, looking more than a little disturbed himself. "Yes. To someone."

Half a day later, Bogo brought himself back to the present so he could stop himself from running a red light. Once he was fully stopped, he turned his thoughts to the next tidbit of information he'd been given.

The photograph had turned out to be a blurred image of a goat striding down a busy street. His name was Billy G. Gruff, a resident of the Meadowlands. There was more to him than met the eye, according to the ZBI. Before she'd been arrested Bellwether had tasked him with investigating her partner's true identity, and now he was a high-ranking but discreet member of Veltro.

If Bellwether had told the ZBI the truth, he'd never gotten the chance to tell her what he'd learned, but perhaps he'd be just as willing to share it with the authorities. That was where Yaxley revealed his main reason for visiting; the ZBI were requesting the ZPD's assistance in apprehending Mr. Gruff. Needless to say Bogo saw no benefit to refusing, and Agent Yaxley left the office as a satisfied and slightly grateful yak.

It was midnight, one hour after Bogo had gone to bed, when he'd been disturbed by an urgent call from the station. A pair of raccoons on a birthday bash had reported the discovery of blood in an alley half a block away from the mall.

By the time he reached the site it had already been taped off, with a police car on either side of the alley. Fangmeyer and Higgins were questioning the two aforementioned raccoons beside one of the cars, while McHorn emerged from the other and strode up to Bogo's car as the buffalo climbed out into the cold night air. "Sorry to keep you up, sir, but we thought you'd want to know about this asap."

"What happened?" Bogo was hoping they'd uncovered more information since he'd been called.

"Those two kids over there were heading home when they saw a blood trail going into that alley." McHorn jerked his thumb at the opening, where there was indeed a large crimson smear trailing into the alley. It looked faded, like it had been partially washed away. Bogo knelt down beside the stain, which was surrounded on all sides by thawing snow. "This stain looks like it was here for a while. How was it not discovered before?"

"The snow must have hidden it until now." McHorn kicked some of the white stuff, thankfully away from the evidence. "Those kids said they'd been messing around when they uncovered the blood
trail. Hopefully Forensics can tell us how old it is."

"Did any of them enter the alley?"

"They were afraid too. Considering how much blood is there, that was probably the smart thing. Before you ask, sir, we haven't found any bodies yet, but we decided to seal off the area before conducting a more thorough search."

Bogo pulled a flashlight from his car. "Let's have a look. Got your tranq gun?" McHorn held it up as Bogo procured his own. "Fangmeyer, Higgins, you're our backup. Make sure no-one else enters without my say-so."

"Got it."

Bogo and McHorn ducked under the tape, aiming their flashlights and tranq guns in front of them as they slowly advanced into the alley.

It was so dark that they had to aim their flashlights low to the ground to avoid bumping into something. It was quiet, too. There was no heavy breathing of a cornered criminal or the dying moans of a victim. Bogo almost expected a savage mammal to ambush them at any moment.

Soon his light fell upon more of the ominous blood trail, leading deeper into the alley. Bogo cautiously followed, McHorn close behind, mostly sure his radio was working perfectly.

For fifty feet the blood trail continued in a straight line. On either side were garbage bags, boxes and pipes, what one usually found in an alley, and Bogo and McHorn checked every nook and cranny as they went. Finally the blood trail curved left, stopping before an innocuous looking unmarked delivery truck that nearly blocked the entire alley. The backdoors were closed and held in place by a broken pipe bent into a C shape.

The next thing Bogo noticed after the pipe was the smell.

"Any large mammal could have done that." McHorn muttered calmly. "I've got a real bad feeling about this, sir."

"You open it, I'll call it in." Bogo holstered his tranq gun so he could pull out his radio. "Fangmeyer, the blood tail's leading to a suspicious looking truck. Get an ME here now."

"Ten-Four, sir." Fangmeyer said after a short pause.

McHorn slowly approached the truck and banged on the doors. "Anyone in there?" He yelled.

The truck was silent. Bogo had an unsettling feeling and a good idea of what they were going to find in there.

McHorn scowled, and being a bigger mammal than Bogo had no trouble uncurling the pipe. He threw it aside and hammered again. "If anyone's alive in there, you come on out with your arms up!"

There was still nothing from the truck. McHorn looked to Bogo, who nodded. McHorn squared his shoulders, undid the latch and threw the doors open.

"Oh, good God."

Bogo stood his ground, even as his mind reeled from the bloodbath that was the truck's interior. He counted three… four… five… six bodies, all of which looked like they'd been locked inside with a
wild rhino and never stood a chance. All of them were dressed in black. All of them were prey. All of them bore Veltro's symbol on their bloodied, gory shoulders.

"Check for a pulse. Now!" Bogo growled, knowing deep down that every single one of them were dead. McHorn leaned into the truck to check the first corpse as Bogo raised the radio again. "Fangmeyer, We've got six bodies here! Where is that ME?"

"On his way." Fangmeyer replied. "By the way, Forensics has arrived, sir."

"Good. Call Agent Yaxley and tell him to get his arse down here." Bogo added, eyeing the stained symbols. "But make sure he doesn't pass the tape until I."

He was cut off when McHorn started coughing. The burly rhino pulled his head out the truck and doubled over, hacking and retching. Up close and personal, the carnage must have been too much for the veteran cop. "Get a hold of yourself, officer." Bogo said on impulse.

"S-sorry, sir. Must be that damn sme-" McHorn fell into another coughing fit, more violent than the first.

Bogo frowned and put away his radio. "McHorn, you alright?"

McHorn straightened, taking deep breaths. "Yes, sir. I…" He doubled back over again with another bout of coughing, so severe he seemed to be convulsing. Bogo's frown deepened and he stepped forward hesitantly, wondering if he should pull the rhino away from the truck.

McHorn finally stopped coughing, yet now he was panting hoarsely, like a victim of smoke inhalation. He was tense, still slightly double and rigid as he slowly turned towards the buffalo. Bogo tensed himself, staring at the rhino, who stared right back with an intense look in his eyes. He was ready to grab his radio a third time to call an ambulance if McHorn didn't speak within the next two seconds. Two seconds came and went.

Bogo was reaching for his radio when McHorn's big hands clamped around his throat.

What the f-

McHorn squeezed viciously. Bogo squeezed his eyes shut from the pain as he grabbed at the rhino's wrists. Try as he might, he couldn't pull them off. He tried to force himself backward, but the bigger mammal held him in place. Bogo forced his eyes open to see McHorn's eyes darkening, his pupils expanding to consume his entire eyeballs. His expression turned savage as he squeezed tighter.

The radio was useless. Bogo dropped his arm, feeling for the tranq gun in his holster. He was beginning to get desperate when his fingers closed around the distinct shape of the weapon. Sorry, Mac. He pulled it out and fired right into McHorn's knee.

McHorn let out a primal bellow that confirmed what Bogo already knew. The buffalo felt his grip weaken, and seized the opportunity to pull his neck free and send the rhino flying back with a kick. The tranquilizer kicked in quickly, knocking McHorn out as soon as he hit the ground, leaving him sprawled out on top of the bloody trail.

Bogo leaned on a dumpster for support, taking long, deep breaths as he held his raw throat.

He decided right then and there that he absolutely hated Night Howlers.

Chapter End Notes
End of Act III.
Act IV: The Hound of the Casels

The coffee Benjamin poured the next morning was nothing like the cheap sludge brewed in Precinct One. *Snarlbucks Rwanda Blue* they called it, delivered all the way from East Afurica. Benjamin had drunk expensive coffee from Snarlbucks before, but it was the first time he'd drunk it for free.

With his expensive free coffee in paw Benjamin was the first to stroll into the lounge that morning, or so he thought. Lake was pacing on the other side of the couches in normal clothing, so absorbed in a phone conversation that she didn't notice him.

"I know. I can't believe it, either… You're sure they were Veltro? Damn… No, I haven't seen the news yet… Looks like we're doing the right thing seceding from them… No, not yet… When I get back, alright? We'll go to the ZNN then… It's time the public knows what's going on with Veltro. It's the only way to clear our names… You're right. It's time she knew the truth. I'll do it this afternoon… Thank you, Lisa… See you soon…"

She put her phone away, pinched her nose and dropped down onto the nearest couch. Benjamin knocked on the wall beside him, making her look up sharply.

"Good morning!" Benjamin tried to keep his voice from going too high. Everyone from his family to his fan club told him that his overly high voice was an obvious sign that stuff was up, and he didn't want her to know he'd been eavesdropping. "I've gotta say, that is the best bedroom I have ever slept in! I hope you slept as well as I did. Didn't you?"

Lake scowled at him. "More or less. Isn't it a bit early for you to be coming down for breakfast?"

"Really? What time is it?" Benjamin checked his watch. "Oh. That alarm clock must be too fast."

"Whatever, you may as well just stay down here." Lake picked up a brand new botany book from a small pile on the coffee table. "I got a delivery this morning. You're welcome to have a look."

"Thanks." Benjamin sat down opposite the elk-deer and read the titles of the remaining three books. There was a book on law and two special editions of *Jurassic Pork* and *The Hound of the Badgervilles*. Having never read a Sherlock Holmes story before, Benjamin decided to give the third book a go.

"Good choice." Lake actually had a small smile when she saw which book he had chosen. "It's my favorite Sherlock novel."

"You're a Sherlock fan?"

"Absolutely, and it's one of the few things I take after my father. When I moved out, he let me take the entire set from the library with me."

"That was nice of him."

"I suppose, considering he bought a brand new set right after." Lake flipped a page in her botany book.

"You're a fan of flowers, too, I see." Benjamin said.

"I'm not a fan. This is research."
"Research? What for?"

"You'll find out when I want you to." Lake paused and did something Benjamin hadn't expected her to do to him. "Sorry. I've got a lot on my plate, and if you'll believe it Christmas shopping is not one of them."

"You mean Veltro?" Lake tensed. "I heard that Veltro's been trying to stir up trouble for your dad's company. It must be hard, considering you're going to take over one day."

"Oh. Right." Lake relaxed, leaning back into the cushions. "Yes, it's true that I am currently the favorite to succeed my father."

"How does Edward feel about that?" Benjamin asked.

"Oh, he got over that a long time ago." Lake flipped another page. "If he had to choose between working with cars or working in an office three hundred feet above them, it wouldn't be a contest."

"Not a fan of heights, huh?"

"As a matter of fact, he's not."

Silence passed between them for a time as they began to read their respective books, and it wasn't nearly as uncomfortable as it could have been. Benjamin began to see that comfortable silence as an opportunity. If he played his cards right, he might be able to make their relationship a little less frosty. It would mean a lot to him and it would mean a lot to Alec, too, especially after his major slip of the tongue last night.

A subtle hint that Benjamin was accepting of lesbians would be a step in the right direction, even if he was gay himself.

"Where did you get this edition?" Benjamin tapped the book's cover. "There's this friend of mine who's looking for a Christmas present for her girlfriend, and I want to suggest this."

"Foallets. You can get it delivered within two days for twenty-five dollars."

Benjamin quickly texted the information to Anna, the friend he'd spoken of. Anna texted back a thumb's up and he returned to his conversation. "You know, my aunt likes flowers too. Her favorite are Cathedral Bells."

Lake looked up from her book. "Cathedral Bells?"

"They're flowers that look like, you know, cathedral bells."

Lake used the book's index to find the page. "Huh. So they do."

"Don't you have a cathedral?" Benjamin had heard of this mythical building that had been abandoned for reasons unknown.

"We do, but it's been abandoned for so long we don't even know where it is. Father is the only living member of our family who had ever set foot inside, but he was too young to remember its location." Lake looked through the large window at the snow-frosted forest in the distance. "But we're sure that it's somewhere between the estate and the city. Father is going to hire a team to find it once he's dealt with Veltro."

"Do you know why it was abandoned in the first place?"
Lake smiled and put one leg over the other. "That's actually why *The Hound of the Badgervilles* is my favorite Sherlock book. The cathedral's abandonment has something to do with an old legend in my family. The legend of the Hound of the Casels."

Benjamin felt a chill run up his spine. "You have a Hound, too?"

Lake sat forward and began her tale. "Many years ago, during the early years of Zootopia's construction, the recently ordained bishop Nathaniel Noire requested a place of worship for himself and his fellow Christians. Normally such an important building would be built inside the city, but Noire was a recluse who preferred being surrounded by nature. So our founder Acles Casel had the cathedral built away from the city, in between his estate and the watering hole the city was being built over. There used to be a road connected to the road you used to get here leading to the cathedral, but the forest has long since consumed it."

"That wasn't very fair on the Christians."

"When you're devout, it doesn't matter how far you have to go." Lake said. "When Noire died, Acles' cousin, Lucian, was ordained and assumed the throne."

"Throne?"

"A cathedral is the throne of the bishop. It's what separates it from the churches and chapels."

"I thought cathedrals were cathedrals because they're bigger than churches."

"Not quite. This cathedral is actually smaller than the biggest church. Anyway, Lucian was not a popular mammal. He was hated throughout the land for his religious hypocrisy, violent tendencies and excessive consumption of holy wine. His appointment as bishop of Zootopia's first cathedral drew widespread outrage, so it came a little surprise when one day, tragedy struck."

Benjamin was glad they were well past Halloween, otherwise he'd be shivering right now. The early winter morning was cold enough as it is. "What happened to him?"

"Lucian began to lust after a regular visitor of the cathedral, a young feline according to the legend. When the feline refused his advances, he did what every obsessed stalker in their right mind does and killed her. In retaliation, the feline's lover stabbed him to death with his own broken bottle before taking his own life."

"My gosh..." Benjamin squeezed a thick square cushion for comfort. He could easily imagine the bloodbath.

"Acles disowned his cousin as soon as he heard the whole story, leaving his bloody corpse for the rabble to deal with. They decided that Hell was too good for him, so they lined his grave with iron bars and put a thick stone slab over his coffin. This was done to keep his blackened soul in, and the devil's minions out."

"Did it work?" Benjamin squeaked, curling into a ball on the couch.

"The caretaker at the time certainly thought so. Two days after Lucian's burial, on a cold winter's night, he was tending to the graveyard beside the cathedral when he saw a figure crouching over the disgraced bishop's grave. He swore all the way to his deathbed that this creature was a hound far too big to be a wolf. It had claws like ravens' feet, and horns like dead branches. Whatever this creature was, it had dug all the way down to the slab and was scratching at the stone when the caretaker had spotted it. When it failed to reach the coffin, it screeched like a banshee, smashed Lucian's tombstone into four pieces, and disappeared into the forest."
A bare branch struck the window. The loud clacking sound made Benjamin jump back into the couch, dropping the book and the cushion. Lake laughed as he clamped a paw over his thundering heart. "That sounds like the Devil's minion, alright." He managed to get out.

Lake shook her head in amusement. "Acles had the entire forest searched, but they saw no sign of this creature. They only believed the caretaker's story when they saw the hundreds of claw marks on the stone slab and the broken tombstone, for the caretaker was far too old and feeble to do the damage himself. The Hound didn't appear again after that, so they assumed that the Devil had left Lucian to his purgatory."

"But that was way before your dad's time." Benjamin said. "So what happened next?"

"Half a century later, Darrius Casel, the patriarch of the Casel Family at the time, was found dead at the cathedral's altar at midnight. An unnaturally large hound with horns was spotted leaving the cathedral by a traveller, leaving a trail of blood and scorch marks in its wake. While older mammals that remembered the Lucian incident believed it to be the devil's minion, there were others who believed it to be the Wendigo, a monster you turn into if you eat the flesh of another mammal of your species. In any case, no-one mourned Darrius' passing. He was a cruel mammal who leached the poor of every coin they had, and the city became a better place after his death."

"I'm beginning to see a pattern here." Benjamin said as he retrieved the items he'd dropped.

"The final straw came another fifty years later, when my father was just a child, when his great-grandmother was gruesomely murdered in the catacombs beneath the cathedral. Initially it was thought that the Hound was responsible, because of the trail of blood and scorch marks leading away from the scene, but it was eventually discovered that the bishop killed her to cover up the drug smuggling operation he was hiding in the cathedral. Needless to say, that was one scandal too many for the Casel Family. My great-grandfather had another cathedral built in the part of the city known today as Tundratown, and left the old cathedral to crumble into dust."

"A hound with horns…" Benjamin shivered, thinking of the maniac in the maze. "You don't think…"

"Benjamin, whatever it was that had attacked you and Gazelle, it wasn't the Hound." Lake said. "Even if the Hound did exist, neither of you are a Casel."

"Oh." Benjamin sighed in relief. "Good to know. Were there any other sightings of the Hound?"

"Other than glimpses by ghost hunters and junkies, there has been no other sighting of the Hound. There is no concrete evidence of its existence either, and there never will be."

"You don't believe in the Hound?"

"No. There is no such thing as the Hound of the Casels, and it's for the best that there isn't. If such a creature did exist, it's not something you should be deliberately seeking out." Lake paused. "I've never told anyone about the legend before. I enjoyed that."

"It's a real spooky story, that's for sure." Benjamin agreed. "I hope we can get along like this more often."

"I know I've been cold to you, and I apologize." Lake sighed wearily. "I haven't felt happy since I married Carlos."

The fact that Lake had just admitted that she regretted her marriage stunned the cheetah. "Why don't you divorce him?"
Lake's lip curled in contempt. "Believe me, I will. But there are complications that I must clear up first. You may know about one of them."

"Me?"

"Alec confessed his slipup. I know you know I'm a lesbian."

Benjamin dropped the book and cushion again. "Lake, you know he'd never do it to-"

"I'm glad it was you." Lake cut him off. "If it had been my parents or Carlos, I don't know what would have happened. Anyway, now you know the truth. Have you told anyone else?"

"No! I swear on my autographed Gazelle CD!"

"Good. My situation is precarious. If I get outed…” Lake glanced at the empty archway. "Do you know why my father is looking for the cathedral?" Benjamin shook his head. "He intends to regain the Church's favor by restoring the cathedral to its former glory. You can guess why he would do that."

Benjamin swallowed. "He's gonna run for mayor again, isn't he?"

"Yes, and he intends to get the Christian vote to win. He wouldn't take kindly to having a homosexual daughter complicating things." She scowled bitterly.

"Lake…” Benjamin hesitated. He had no idea what to say to that. "You… your dad's not a homophobe, you know that."

"I know, but a fair fraction of the Christian population are homophobes, and if losing their vote costs him the election again…” Lake actually shuddered. "I really don't want to know what he would do to me."

"Oh, Lake…” How could Benjamin's heart not go out to her? He crossed the lounge and sat down beside her. "Lake, if there's ever anything I can do…”

Lake's expression returned to its normal frostiness. "Don't worry, Ben. I've got a plan to lessen the damage when the truth gets out. You just keep it to yourself and worry about your own problems, like the savage attack on Chief Bogo last night."

"Ok, I won't interfere. Wait, what?"

One horrifying viewing of the Zootopia News Network later, Benjamin was making his way to Judy's room.

"Omigosh, omigosh, omigosh…” He whimpered over and over as he reached her door and opened without knocking.

The first thing he saw was the television displaying the latter half of the report he had walked out on. A brief shot of the yellow tape blocking the alley cut to a longer shot of the back of an ambulance, with Chief Bogo being examined by a porcine paramedic. Benjamin gasped, drawing the attention of the rabbit on the bed.

"Benji…” She stood up.

Benjamin barely heard her. He was reaching out to Bogo as the pig checked him for signs of petechiae or bruising. "Omigoshomigoshomigosh…”
"Benji!" Judy leapt off the bed and onto Benjamin's stomach, grabbing the front of his shirt and pulling his face down. "I've seen it too, but Bogo's fine! See? The paramedic let him go!"

Benjamin looked back to the screen. Bogo had indeed been released to join the group of officers carrying a sedated McHorn to a waiting armored vehicle. No doubt he was receiving treatment at the nearest hospital by now.

"He's... he's okay." Benjamin breathed, feeling his heart rate slowly returning to normal. "Oh thank goodness. When Lake told me he'd been attacked, I'd..."

"He's fine." Judy stroked his stomach soothingly as she held on to his shirt. "If you're still worried, just call him. I'm going to go tell Nick what happened if he hasn't found out yet."

Judy dropped down from the cheetah and left the bedroom, leaving him alone. As his adrenaline ran dry Benjamin dropped down onto the bed and rang the chief's number.

It took a while for Bogo to answer. "Clawhauser? Are you alright? Did something else happen?"

"Am I alright?!" Benjamin stared at the phone in disbelief. "I wasn't the one who was almost choked out by a rhino! Are you alright?!"

"I'm fine, don't worry about me."

"Oh, thank heavens you're okay! All the news said was that McHorn went savage and tried to kill you. What the heck happened?"

"We received a call last night of a blood trail in an alley close to the Greener Grass Mall. McHorn and I investigated and discovered several bodies in a delivery truck. There must have been traces of Night Howler serum inside, because when McHorn went inside to check for survivors he started coughing and started to turn. You know the rest."

By the time Bogo was finished Benjamin had a paw clapped over his mouth. "Thank goodness you had your dart gun, sir. If anything had happened to you, I don't know what I'd-" Benjamin realized what he was saying and felt his face heat up.

"I-I appreciate your concern. Truly. But I'm fine and what matters now is that we solve those murders."

"Do you want us to come back, sir?"

"No, that won't be necessary, and make sure Hopps and Wilde know that. They're not to have anything to do with the case until all three of you return to Zootopia tomorrow."

"And if they insist, sir?"

"If they insist, tell them they know what I'll do."

"You'll have to sow them back on, sir." Benjamin paused. "You are talking about their tails, right?"

He thought he heard a chuckle. "Maybe."

Benjamin laughed. "Chief Bogo, you are naughty!"

"Make sure they get the message, and I'll see you tomorrow."

"Okay Dokay, Chief! Oh, by the way, if I win, I'll let you have the West Wing."
"The West Wing?"

"Oh, I forgot to tell you. The prize for winning the murder mystery is the castle from *Beauty and the Wildebeest*."

For a time there was silence on the other end. "Clawhauser, what exactly has Elgen been investing his money in lately?"

Benjamin blinked at the phone before bursting out laughing. "No, no, no! It's a small size chocolate sculpture of the castle! Alec's a chocolatier, remember?"

"Oh, of course, what was I thinking? Clawhauser, I have to go. I have six murders to solve on top of a terrorist attack."

"Alright, sir. Again, I'm so happy you're okay. I'll let you get to it, bye!"

Benjamin managed to end the call before bursting into a fit of giggles. Bogo actually thought the Casels had gotten themselves an actual castle? Was such a thought really that ridiculous? Ridiculous or not, Benjamin kept giggling from it. For all his angry lectures and perpetual glowers, even the mighty Chief Bogo could sometimes be absolutely adorable.

When Judy returned with Nick and Benjamin relayed Bogo's orders, the rabbit's reaction was not was he had expected. "It's okay. We can wait."

"You can wait?" Benjamin had been expecting a repeat of the last time they had been refused authorization to investigate the ongoing big case. "Have you had your coffee this morning, Judy?"

"Of course I have."

"Then… why are you taking this so well?"

Judy glanced furtively at Nick. "Well, Nick and I had a talk last night, and we both agreed that keeping you guys safe is what's important right now."

*Translation: Nick stepped in to keep Judy from letting her impulsiveness lead her astray. Oh my gosh, he's so good for her, why can't she see that? Why are they looking at each other like they stole each other's cookies?*

Benjamin felt a sudden jolt as he recalled what they had been doing last night.

*No… no way… they didn't…*

"Come on, let's get downstairs and get some breakfast before I become a literal pencil neck." Nick said a little too quickly, doing nothing but feeding Benjamin's growing suspicion.

The cheetah followed the duo out and back downstairs, keeping a close eye on their behavior around each other. Something about them was definitely different; for one thing neither of them were looking at each other for longer than two seconds. When they did, they'd look like they'd just done something monumentally humiliating before quickly looking away. The only word Benjamin could think of to describe this scene was 'awkward.'

They made it to the dining room just in time for the plates to come out of the kitchen. The mammals not present were Edward, Carlos, Selke, Elgen and Gazelle. It was unlike any breakfast Benjamin had ever had; berry parfaits, savory oatmeal with eggs and porridge covered in fruit slices were the items on the menu. Benjamin, on the other paw, found a plate full of glossy chocolate donuts waiting
for him in front of the chair next to Alec. The cheetah smiled, having a sneaking suspicion that Alec had personally baked the donuts to make up his family's behavior last night. The elk-deer hadn't needed to do that, but the gesture was still appreciated.

Benjamin took his place beside Alec and grabbed his first donut. "Mornin', Al."

"Good morning, Benji." Alec began to tuck into his parfait. "Are you feeling okay?"

"I'm fine. Don't worry about me." Benjamin lowered his voice. "Can you give a hint what we'll be doing today?"

"Nope. Sorry." Alec said. "I talked to Lake. She-"

"I know she knows. I talked to her myself this morning."

"You what?" Alec glanced sharply at his sister, who was sitting at the other end of the table with fruit porridge in front of her. "Oh crap, what did she do?"

"Nothing bad, don't worry." Benjamin said quickly. "She made me promise not to tell anyone, and then we just talked about the Hound of the Casels."

Alec raised his eyebrows. "She told you about the old family legend?"

"Sure. Actually, I think our talk went pretty well." Benjamin picked at the chocolate donut. "I don't think she likes me, though."

"I don't think it's personal." Alec said. "She just finds your personality a bit much for her liking. I think she prefers you as an acquaintance."

"As long as she doesn't hate me." It was time for a change of subject. "Alec, do you think Nick and Judy are acting weird?"

Alec peered at the two mammals, who were nothing but quiet and uncomfortable around each other as they ate. "You don't think they had a fight, did you?"

"No, I don't think that's it."

While they nonchalantly eyed Nick and Judy, Edward and his mother entered and took their seats. Benjamin caught a glimpse of Selke's tired, sullen eyes and turned his gaze down to his donuts. "Good morning, mom." Alec spoke coolly.

"Good morning, sweetheart." Selke replied. "Don't mind me, it's just a hangover."

"Mom, I want a word with you after breakfast."

There was a pause. "Alright, Alec."

"Where's dad?"

"He's in the study taking a call. He'll have his breakfast later."

Benjamin did his best to avoid looking at her, keeping his eyes on Nick and Judy. Judy was now doing something with her phone, and it didn't look like texting.

Benjamin opened his mouth to speak, but Edward beat him to it.
"So, Nick, did you get yourself some Carrot Cake last night?"

Their reactions were identical and incredible. They jerked in their seats and nearly overturned their plates. Their ears shot straight up and their eyes went wide. "Wha?!" Was what came our their gaping mouths.

"No, I did not have some Carrot Cake!" Nick hissed. "All I had was a Goldeneye and don't call her that!"

Edward blinked. "I was talking about the cock-"

"We watched a movie and that's it!" Judy yelled.

"That's it, and stop talking about it!"

"You stop talking about it!"

"It's no big deal, why are you freaking out?!"

"Why are you freaking out?!"

"Just shush!" Nick furiously ended the exchange with a finger on his lips.

Peace fell over the table once more, even though every other mammal present was now staring at the two smoldering animals sitting in between Benjamin and Edward. It took Gazelle knocking and entering to turn their attention elsewhere. "Oh. He's not here either."

"If you're looking for my husband, he's in the study."

"I'm talking about my manager. He's not in his room."

Selke pursed her lips. "Must be in the bathroom. He'll turn up. Now come have a seat, pretty lady." It was only when Gazelle sat down beside Christine that Benjamin noticed the way Selke was looking at her. Her slightly wrinkled eyes looked the other female up and down, taking in her large hips, vivid golden fur and seashell-patterned horns. Benjamin supposed that he shouldn't be surprised that Selke would be jealous of a younger, prettier, more popular lady. If she started saying mean things to her too, however, then he and she were going to have problems.

"Did you see the news today?" Edward said. "They found half a dozen bodies in a van near the mall."

"My god." Selke tore her envious gaze from Gazelle. "Do they know who did this?"

"Not yet, but they think it has something to do with Night Howlers. A cop went crazy and attacked the Chief."

"Not Bogo!" Gazelle gasped.

"He's okay!" Benjamin quickly put a paw on her arm. "I called him earlier, and he said he's fine."

"We're going to join the investigation when we go back to the city." Judy said. "So don't you worry about a thing, Miss Gazelle. We've got it all under control."

"Yes, you keep telling yourself that, Hopps." Selke filled her glass with wine and drained a third of it.
Breakfast was finished on a relatively peaceful note, even though Carlos and Elgen never showed. Lake eventually explained how he was sleeping off his hangover, and hadn't even gotten out of bed by the time she'd gone down to breakfast. Benjamin wasn't looking forward to seeing him again, but at least Selke and Elgen would be staying out the way for the most part. She promised to make sure that he was downstairs by the sixth stage of the murder mystery, which Alec declared after breakfast to be taking place in the billiard room. Once Benjamin was back in his room and had packed away his wings, horns and claws, he sat down beside the bag containing his backup costume and quizzed himself on the more complicated rules of pool.

*It's not a legal break unless you either pot a ball or you get at least three balls to hit the railing... no, it's four.*

*It's a foul if the shooter either hits one of the opponent's balls first or none of the balls hit a rail. Gosh, I hope I don't make a fool of myself in front of Gazelle.*

*If you get a foul, the opponent gets the cue ball in paw and can move it anywhere on the board.*

*If you pot the black on the same stroke as the last ball in your group, you lose the game. I can still remember the look on Bogo's face when he did just that and I explained it to him! It was so funny!*  

Benjamin laughed at the memory. It had been the first time they'd done something together since the gym accident, and it was also the first time he'd seen Bogo do anything for fun. As Benjamin opened his bag and pulled out the yellow coat, he wondered what Bogo would think of him playing pool with the Angel of Horns. He'd probably lose his marbles.

Benjamin put on the coat and checked it out in the full-length mirror. It looked good enough for a pool tournament. He wondered what Bogo would think. After all, he was the inspiration.
The Adventure of Black Eight

The sixth stage of the murder mystery and the first game of the day was to take place in the billiard room. Judy's ears had gone droopy at this news, which Nick didn't comment on until they were returning to their rooms to change into their costumes. "What's wrong? You never played pool before, Carrots?"

"I've played pool before." Judy replied. "But there are three year old kits who can play better than me."

"Well, this should be interesting then."

She would need a knife to cut the tension between them, Judy knew that much. Or at least something she could say to assure them both that nothing had changed between them. Last night they had agreed to pretend it had never happened, but if their shared overreaction to Edward's 'Carrot Cake' question was any indication, it was a promise neither of them could keep.

"Nick, I'm sorry."

"About the kiss?" Nick opened Judy's door for her. He was nonchalant, but Judy suspected a façade. "You remember kissing me on the cheek and not the lips, right? Unless you're worried about getting Mammal Resources on your tail."

"It's just that I don't know what came over me." Judy said. She had been so grateful that Nick had understood her, understood her more than her family had ever done, but it had hardly warranted a kiss. Had it? "Whatever it was, it's definitely made things awkward between us, and I never meant to do that."

Nick shook his head good-naturedly. "You bunnies are emotional. It was bound to happen, and it was just a kiss on the cheek. Perfectly innocent. Besides, I probably made it worse by getting all weird about it."

"Yeah, what were we even freaking out about?" Judy laughed. "Friends kiss each other all the time, right? Right?"

Nick patted her shoulder, stopping her. "Carrots, you're making it weird again."

"Sorry."

Even as she watched Nick leave to change in his own room, Judy knew that wasn't the end of it. When she had impulsively kissed her partner something had awoken within her, something fierce and longing. Something burning. The year and a half she had spent fighting crime with Nick's constant support had given her renewed purpose and made her days brighter. This happiness had strengthened the feelings she'd never known she had until now. The gentle touch of Nick's fur beneath her kiss, the subtle scent of fox and violets, and the brief flashback of that one time she had walked in on the fox undressing. Only now did Judy realize what those experiences meant to her.

But in the end, what exactly did Judy feel towards her fox? What if it was just fleeting lust, like the stereotype all rabbits were known for? Only time would tell.

For now, Judy had a murder to solve.

Doing what she could to push her newfound confusion aside, Judy changed back into her Moolan
dress, retrieved her notebook from the bedside table and flipped to the pages full of notes concerning
Ombidia's 'murder.' For the next few minutes Judy refined her deductions as she waited for Nick to
return. Return he did, back in his Flynn Rider costume. Or was it Eugene Fitzherbert? That didn't
matter. All that mattered was the way the vest hugged Nick's sculpted chest like a-

Judy quickly tore her eyes away and back to her notebook. *Focus, Carrots!*

"Got a breakthrough yet, Detective Fluff?"

"I thought you were the detective, smartbutt."

"Yeah, I thought I'd let you do all the work this time."

"And I assume by *this* time, you mean *all* the time."

Nick sat beside her on the bed and began to count with his fingers. "So let's recap. The clues we've
got are Elgen's will, the glass, everyone's motives for the murder, the bar nozzle and the priceless red
diamond ring."

Nick held up a paw. "Wait a sec, let me see if I can figure this out for myself..." He paced a little bit
as he pondered. "The motive for the murder must have something to do with the diamond ring,
which Alec is going to inherit according to his dad's will. But he wasn't the one murdered, so we're
obviously missing something there."

"What about the glass? The bar nozzle?"

Nick stopped pacing. "Tetradoxin may be one of the deadliest poisons in the world, but like most
poisons it still takes time to take effect. What if Ombidia was actually poisoned before lunchtime?"
He suddenly slammed his fist into his paw. "I've got it! Ombidia drank the poisoned glass in the bar
before going to lunch!"

"Ding-ding-ding!" Judy clapped. "Four out of five, Nicky!"

"The only thing I can't get anything from is the motives. Literally everyone except Alec had a reason
to kill him."

Judy smirked knowingly. "I told you, Nick. The true clue for the third game isn't everyone's motives.
It's Alec's testimony."

"But he doesn't have a motive."

"But he did invite Ombidia at the last minute, meaning that the killer couldn't have known that he
would be at the party until they arrived at the mansion. So why would they bring poison with them?"

Nick snapped his fingers as it dawned on him. "They were plotting to use the poison on someone
else. Either the plan went wrong, or something happened to make them change targets."

"And that makes five." Judy beamed. "You know, I think you'd make a pretty good detective."

He scoffed. "How dare you. I *am* a detective."

They reached the billiard room to find that they were the last to get there. As they'd already found
during yesterday's tour, the billiard room was rather sparse compared to the rest of the mansion.
There were no ornaments, only ornate green couches and rounded end tables resting against the
walls furthest from the pool table in the center of the room. The pool table was vintage; instead of a
flat sleek look the table bore an elegant woodcarving that was in perfect condition. If Judy had to
guess, she’d say that this table was one of the oldest objects here, perhaps even older than the
mansion itself. During the tour Alec had explained that the table was a cherished heirloom from
centuries past.

"Finally!" Back in his Captain Hook ensemble, Alec breathed a sigh of relief.

"Sorry we kept you." Judy said. "Where's Ben?"

"In the bathroom. Please excuse me while I find some cues and balls more your size." Alec strode to
a cupboard in a corner of the room and started rummaging.

The door opened behind Judy and Nick, and they turned around fully expecting to see a chubby
Chernadog once more.

"What the heck?" Nick looked the cheetah up and down.

"Hey, guys." 'Chernadog' greeted, only he didn't look like Chernadog at all. Instead of great bat's
wings he bore an old fashioned coat of bright gold. Underneath was a waistcoat of a slightly darker
cold, and pants of pure white. He looked like he'd taken a time machine and transported himself here
from the nineteenth century, or even a century or two before that.

Judy found herself liking this costume more than the previous one. As stereotypical as it sounded she
physically preferred Disney Princesses and Princes to Disney Villains, even if the villains were
cooler. "What happened to the wings and horns? What happened to the claws and dye?"

"What happened to the leotard?" Nick asked.

"Just thought this one would be more Christmassy." Benjamin sheepishly tapped his fingers together.
"What do you think?"

"You look like a Disney Prince." Judy said, smiling. "But I'm not sure which one. Who are you,
Prince Naveen?"

Benjamin stopped tapping his fingers. "Promise you won't laugh?"

"Scout's honor." Judy jabbed Nick's side when he didn't promise the same right away.

"Okay. I'm Belle."

Most of the mammals in the room snickered at the looks on Judy and Nick's faces. "Belle?" Nick
asked bluntly.

"If Belle and the Wildebeest were gender-swapped, this is what she would probably dress like." Benji
turned his arm to give them a good look of the embroidered sleeve. Now that he'd
explained, Judy could see the similarities between his golden costume and the Wildebeest's iconic
blue getup. She hesitated as she tried to put her next words in a way that wouldn't make the cheetah
feel ashamed. "Benji, you look really great. But why a male Belle?" She was too afraid of repeating
past mistakes to ask if it was a gay thing.

Benjamin turned slightly pink. "I was looking at a gallery of gender-swapped Disney characters on
the internet a few weeks ago. Chi- Someone saw the webpage and said Belle and the Wildebeest
looked pretty good. So when I saw this in that costume store, I thought it'd be a good idea."

"Well, it's no wonder that your name means 'beauty.'" Nick gave what he liked to call a compliment.
"Your looks have got no parallel."

"But behind that fair façade, I'm afraid he's rather odd." The atmosphere in the billiard room dampened immediately after Elgen entered behind Benjamin and they all saw the frosty look on his face.

Judy stiffened along with her fox, suspecting that the conversation with Bogo had not gone well.

"Dad? Is something wrong?" Alec had just turned away from the cupboard with two twig-sized cues and a bag of tiny balls.

"Nothing is wrong. But Ombidia has asked me to pass a message to you, Miss Gazelle."

"Where is my manager?" The costumed snow queen asked.

"Some urgent business came up concerning your next concert, and he'd been forced to return to the city. He would have told you himself, but you were still asleep when he left."

"So he's back in Zootopia?"

"Yes. He'll see you tomorrow afternoon at the Animalia Arena. Apologies for interrupting, Alec. I'll see you at dinner." Elgen shot an ambiguous look at Benjamin and his fellow officers before leaving.

Alec cleared his throat. "Right, where was I? Oh yes… Welcome to day two of the Ombidia Murder Mystery! It has been nearly twenty-four hours since Mr. Ombidia… Ombidia… Ugh. Not again, crap!" Alec set the fox-sized cues and balls on the table heirloom and pulled out his cards, drawing subdued chuckles. "It has been nearly twenty-four hours since Mr. Ombidia perished at the dining table in a clear case of cold blooded murder. Tensions are running high as seven of the remaining guests race to solve the murder, while the eighth races to escape justice for their heinous crime. Five clues found, five clues more in store. During our pool tournament, a revelation will rock you to your core."

Nick couldn't stop himself. "Such a nice rhyme you brought to the fore."

"Thank you!" Alec picked up a long shiny cue and pointed it at a chalkboard on the wall. On it was the following pairs; Ben/Christine, Judy/Nick, Carlos/Lake, Gazelle/Edward.

Edward's jaw dropped when he saw who Alec had paired him with. "G-Gazelle?"

"Who else? Maybe if you'll ask nicely she'll autograph your cue for you."

"Maybe." Gazelle teased.

"I will be the referee. In pairs, the eight of you will play against each other in a game of pool. The winner of each game gets to see the sixth clue." Alec removed the small cues and balls. "Benji. Christine. Pick up your cues." He flipped a coin, deeming that Christine would break. Christine did not look thrilled at the prospect. Meanwhile Judy and her friends sat down to watch, though Judy was more preoccupied with the security footage on her phone. Right now the grounds surrounding the mansion were devoid of costumed lunatics.

Christine failed to pot a ball when she broke, allowing Benjamin to pot a yellow ball to make himself stripes. It took her two turns and five potted stripes for her to pot her first solid. "Great job, Chris!" Alec called. "Come on, beat his spots off!"

Christine gave him a look. "Beat his spots off? Who you think I am, Pop-Eye?"
Edward laughed. "Like this girl could chug a can of spinach!"

"She could if she wanted to." Alec retorted. "If she can chug a beer in one go, why not spinach?"

"Alec, sweetie…” Christine patted his hook arm. "Not on your life."

Overall the first game lasted eleven minutes, with Benjamin soundly beating his opponent. "You did great, honey!" Alec said the second the black was potted. With four fouls under her belt, Christine had potted two out of seven balls before the game was ended.

"Thanks, Alec. Better luck next time, I guess."

Alec circled Benjamin's name on the board. "Nick, Judy, I know you're second on the list, but you don't mind going last, do you?" They both assured him it was okay. It would be a lot easier saving the smaller balls and cues for last.

While the game was being reset Benjamin sat down beside Nick and Judy while wiping his forehead. "That was fun."

"You were amazing, Ben." Judy praised. "How come you never told us you could play pool?"

"I would have told you the next time we went to a bar with a pool table." Benjamin said. "Hey, do you guys wanna hear something spooky?" As Benjamin began his spooky story Carlos and Lake stepped up, with Lake potting three balls on her break and earning herself the solids. Carlos proved himself no slouch with two stripes potted on his first shot. "… And since then there has been no sign of the Hound from that day to this."

"Holy crow." Judy shivered. Nick scoffed softly at her reaction. "Did those murders really happen?"

"I dunno. They're probably in the records if they did."

"I might have to do a bit of research when I get home."

Benjamin leaned over and lowered his voice. "Lake said there's no way the weirdo that attacked us was the Hound, but what do you guys think?"

Judy's response was automatic. "Ben, there's no such thing as monsters."

"And even if there are, that wacko was definitely no Hound." Nick added. "And I have proof."

"Proof?" Benjamin asked, as Lake potted the last solid.

"According to the legend, the Hound has sharp claws and is strong enough to smash tombstones. So why would it need an axe to kill people?"

Benjamin's silence was punctuated by a clacking sound. Carlos had just potted the black, winning the game. His subsequent gloating was pointedly ignored as the game was reset for game three.

"So it really was just a creep in a costume?"

"Yep. Whoever it was must have been targeting the Casels if they dressed up as monster famous for killing Casels." Nick said, and then frowned at his own words. Judy locked eyes with him, coming to the same worrying realization. The more they learned about the family, the more they wondered if Gazelle was really the one needing protection. "But I've lived in Zootopia my whole life. I know a fair deal about the Casels, but it's the first I've heard about a family legend."
"Probably because we keep the legend to ourselves." Judy jumped at Edward's sudden interruption. She'd completely forgotten that the largest Casel was sitting on the couch right next to theirs. "It portrays our family in a pretty sordid light, after all."

"I s-suppose." Judy stammered. "I'm sorry, we-"

"Nah, don't worry about it. It's just an old ghost story dad told us about when we were kids to keep us from going looking for that cathedral. And also to warn us of the dangers of being entitled jerks."

"Lucky for Carloser." Nick eyed Carlos as he sat on a couch farther away from the others. "Any idea what he did before he married your sister?"

"I know he was a male cheerleader back in college." Edward said. "Then he was a musician for a while before he met Lake. He quit music pretty much right after he married her."

"How did she not know that guy was a gigolo?" Nick muttered.

Benjamin giggled nervously. "Yeah, how could she know?"

Alec tapped the side of the table with a cue. "Belch, Gazelle, you're up."

"Okay, wish me luck, guys." Edward took a deep breath and stood up to face his opponent and favorite celebrity. Judy had half a mind to ask if he meant the pool game or his ability to keep from going fan-boy crazy.

Fortunately one of his biggest flaws at this moment became one of his biggest assets. When Gazelle broke and potted two balls, his competitive streak quickly overcame his anxiety, and he fought back with three balls potted in two shots. The game ended with him winning by default when Gazelle failed to pot the black, allowing him to swoop in and do it for her.

"Victory!" Edward thrust his cue into the air like a sword. "Well played, my lady! Very well played!"

"I'm a better singer than a pool player, I'm afraid." Gazelle put her cue away with a sigh. "Gracias, anyway."

"You're welcome to a rematch anytime, you know." Edward said. Looking like he was "Maybe tonight, after the murder's been solved?"

Gazelle smiled. "I've got no current plans, so why not?"

Edward was beaming as he indicated for Judy and Nick to take their turn.

Gazelle sat on the nearest empty seat, right next to Alec's nigh-lethargic sister, well aware that Carlos was glaring at her. She had a feeling that it had something to do with the rematch she had just arranged with his brother in law, but she wasn't surprised that it had upset him. Edward's offer sounded innocent enough, benign competitiveness aside, but try telling that to a narcissistic jerk you had rejected once upon a time.

"Edward wasn't flattering you. Aside from that slipup with the black, you played very well." Lake spoke quietly as Nick and Judy picked up their small cues and Alec swapped the big balls for the little ones.

"Gracias, Mrs. Casel." Gazelle wasn't sure exactly how she felt about Alec's elder sister, but she
could hardly call her a friend. "You weren't so bad yourself."

Lake nodded. "You know, I don't think we've ever had a chance to properly chat. Privately, I mean."

Gazelle peered at the elk-deer. "You want to talk in private?"

"Look, there's something I want to discuss with you while you're here, but I don't want my family hearing it. Do you think we could talk in the conservatory after we're done here? It's empty most of the day, especially in winter."

Gazelle pondered for a bit before answering. "Alright."

"Good. Trust me, you'll really want to hear what I have to say." Lake went back to watching Judy and Nick begin their game.

Gazelle felt a pang of unease at how low Lake's voice had been with that statement, but quickly brushed it off. She didn't know Lake as well as Alec and his brother, but Alec had assured her before that Lake was a good person beneath that cold exterior. Surely there was no harm in meeting with her.
The Problem of Tirari Town

The cause of McHorn's drug-induced attack on Bogo was discovered not long after the hazmat team was brought in to clean out the van. Back in his office with a mug of coffee beside him, Chief Bogo read the reports one by one, each one telling varying versions of the same assumed series of events that had lead up to the bloodbath.

In next to no time all six corpses had been identified. They were all different species of prey. They all had different jobs, ranging from engineer to coffee shop barista. The only connection they had was that they were all members of Veldro, and more disturbingly prey supremacists. Whatever they'd been up to, it had been nothing good. The hazmat team had found traces of Night Howler all over the inside of the van. Especially high concentrations had been discovered in the bullet shaped grenades hidden inside one of the coffee bags. There had been no reports of explosions or any grenades fired during the mall incident, which meant that the launcher they'd also found had never been used. Bogo should be happy that they'd never been able to carry out their plan, but on the other hoof the mystery of who committed the attack would for now remain a mystery.

As for McHorn, an exploded grenade had also been discovered inside the van. Its savagery-inducing contents had settled all over the interior by the time McHorn and Bogo had come across it, and the unfortunate rhino had inhaled some of the residue when he'd gotten too close to one of the bodies. As it was, McHorn was currently awaiting treatment in hospital.

Bogo felt a twinge of pride as he set aside the last report. Not even half a day had passed, and his men had found the answer to nearly every question in the file. To do so without the assistance of either Hopps or Wilde just made it all the more impressive. One of the only two questions that remained was who or what killed the terrorists before they could accomplish their mission. Could it have been an accident? Could the exploded grenade mean that there was a seventh terrorist on the loose, with the blood of his fellow extremists on his hands? Or had something far more insidious happened? The second question was the group's intended target. The only clue they had was a pair of maps found in the front seat, covered in blood that would take time for Forensics to clean up and identify.

Then there was the little tidbit concerning Bellwether's savage attack. Some questions from the surgeon who treated the sheep led to a review of the photographs taken of her wound. She'd been curious as to what species had attacked her, and the photographs she had sent them soon made it clear why. With the blood cleaned away and the wool shaved from her chest, it looked more like she'd been knifed.

Bogo rubbed his temples and clenched his teeth. Why couldn't the whole thing have just been an accident, plain and simple?

He needed a distraction, and quick. He pressed a button on the intercom. "Knightfall, have Higgins and Rhinowitz reached Gruff's place, yet?"

"I was just about to call you about that, sir. They got sidetracked by an assault in progress in the Rainforest District. They've put an end to it, but they won't get to the house for at least another hour."

"Oh, now what?"

"Someone from the Westburrow Baptist Church was talking smack about the Mall incident, claiming that it was divine punishment from God for legalizing Interspecies Marriage. The family of one of the
victims overheard, and you can imagine how well they took it."

Bogo sighed deeply. This was the thing he hated most about major incidents; the aftermath. "We'll need to make sure to have some officers available next Tuesday for the Memorial Service. The last thing those people need is gatecrashers picketing the event."

"Of course, sir. Is there anything else, you need?"

"Yes. Make sure I'm one of those officers." Bogo ended the call and leaned back with a creak and a groan. Some distraction that was. Right now he would give anything, even one of his admittedly impressive horns, to have something he could smile at.

His phone buzzed. Bogo looked at the screen to see that it was a message from Wilde.

[This one's all U, Chief! ;)

Bogo rolled his eyes and unlocked the phone so he could see the photo. His eyes widened. It was Benjamin, looking like he'd just danced his way out of a Disney musical.

Bogo felt the smile coming as he took in the warm gold and white colors of the outfit he vaguely remembered from that website he had once caught Benjamin looking at. The demon costume was impressive in sheer audacity, but this one… Bogo didn't know any other word to describe it except adorable.

Now that's more like it.

He relaxed in his chair, keeping the picture on his screen. From the cheery look on the cheetah's face, things up at the Casel estate were taking a turn for the better.

"Nick, wipe that look off your face. It looks weird on you."

"I can't believe that happened. Fifteen minutes after it happened and I still can't believe it."

"It's no big deal. I'm still gonna tell you what the clue is."

"You hear it happen all the time, but you never imagine it happening to you!"

"So you potted the black on your first shot, get over it!"

As annoying as his persistent griping way, Judy had to admit that the look on his face when he'd first made the blunder had been absolutely priceless. His white had rebounded in the opposite direction of what he'd intended, and by the time he realized what had happened, the black was in the corner pot and everyone was laughing at him. He'd brought it on himself with the way he'd smugly smirked all the way up until the first shot. Judy sniggered on the way to the lounge, where the winners were to be shown the sixth clue. What a way to end a pool tournament. Especially with the buildup. Nick's arrogant smile, the pool cue spinning in his paws as he prepared to pot his first stripe, his shapely butt protruding at her as he bent down to take the shot...

Knock it off! Judy screamed at herself as she felt the heat once again rise within her. Fortunately Nick was too busy steaming to notice the change in her demeanor.

Judy stared down at the images on her phone, hoping the numerous imagines of snowy outdoor landscapes and heavily clad security guards would wipe Nick's butt from her mind.

"Did you send a photo to Bogo again?" She asked a little too forcefully.
"Photo?" Nick looked at her. "Oh, the Male-Belle costume. Yeah, I sent it before the game. Dare I say he actually looks cuter than you, Carrots?"

"Want me to go get that Eight and pot it in your hole?"

"No thanks, I'm good. Anything on the Casel-cams?"

Judy scrutinized all the images before replying. "Nope. No-one but guards on the grounds. Let's hope it stays that way."

In the lounge, sitting in between Edward and Alec, Benjamin was sipping from a cup of tea with his pinky out. Nick shook his head in amusement at the sight. "So dressing up like a prince isn't enough, you're gonna act like one, too?"

Benjamin winced and put his cup down. "Sorry, I just love dressing up."

"Hey, take it easy. You know I'm not mocking you." Despite his smile, Judy could see how suddenly uncomfortable Nick had become. Since giving up his cynical con-artist persona, a tendency to sound mean-spirited was a fault he was becoming painfully aware of, especially around someone like Benjamin. He turned his attention to the large plate of donuts on the coffee table. "Jeez, what did you make the icing out of? It looks like you melted down a gold bar and poured it all over them."

Alec walked in from the dining room with a small photo frame. "Just a little treat I prepared for the winners. You'd better tuck in while you can, they're a thousand dollars per dozen."

Judy's jaw dropped.

"A thousand whathooey?!" Benjamin gasped before grabbing a baker's dozen.

"Wha-" Even Nick looked stunned. "One… thousand… whuh?"

"My own recipe, which is and will forever remain my secret." Alec said, looking proud at how dumbfounded they all were. "But I will say that the ingredients I use are some of the most expensive in the world."

Benjamin was somehow able to bring himself to slow down, to savor the taste of every lavish pastry. "Oh my gawwwssshhh… Alec, these are amazing."

"Al, I believe you have a clue to show us?" Edward said.

"Oh, right! Nick, you'll have to wait outside for this one." Nick grimaced and left while Alec placed the frame on the coffee table with its back to the group. "Where's Carlos?"

"Dad called him to the study to talk about his behavior last night." Edward wrinkled his nose in contempt. "I'll tell him the clue later."

Alec turned the photo around. "Make of that what you will." It was a portrait of Alec himself, his face enclosed in a red circle drawn in ink. Judy grinned. This clue had just added some weight to her deduction.

"What's this supposed to mean?" Edward peered at the photo. "Are you saying the killer's going to strike again?"

"I'll repeat. Make of that what you will." Alec slipped the photo into his crimson coat. "It's the conservatory next, once we've had lunch. Make sure you're there by one o'clock."
Judy tried to hide her smirk as she wrote the new information down in her notebook, sneaking glances at her phone all the while. There was still nothing suspicious going on outside. Dozens of guards, and no sign of the costumed lunatic. They might just be able to get through this without another incident.

Before yesterday's tour Gazelle had seen the conservatory only in pictures Christine had shown her from her first visit to the estate. The almost entirely glass building was held together by a black cage the size of a gas station and attached to the side of the mansion. It had its own state of the art water, heating and air conditioning system to sustain the plants inside. Feeling just a little apprehension from meeting Lake in this place, Gazelle opened the white glass door and entered.

The heat and the jungle immediately brought back memories of the country she had grown up in. Everything but the benches and gravel paths was green, and she had to look up to see the glass shell that shielded the plants from the frigid conditions outside. There were gorgeous flowers everywhere, but no sign of Lake.

"Lake?" She called.

"Over here." Lake called from somewhere further in. "Go left. It's quicker."

Gazelle took the left path, stopping short when she felt something snag her frosted cape. She breathed a sigh of relief when she removed the protruding branch and found the material unharmed.

She held the frosted cape to her body so the branches wouldn't catch it again as she reached the small square in the center of the conservatory. Lake was sitting on one of the metal benches, typing something on her phone. Beside the hem of her dress was a bag full of gardening tools.

"Your conservatory is magnificent." Gazelle breathed.

"I know they call them botanical gardens here, but my grandmother was a traditional mammal." Lake sent her text and stood up. "This was her favorite room in the entire mansion."

"I can see why." Gazelle could see from the way she looked at the plants around her that it was Lake's favorite room too. "I thought you said you weren't a plant lover?"

Lake smiled softly. "I'm more of a liker than a lover. When she was alive, my grandmother would take me in here to help her tend to the plants and talk. We'd talk about school, we'd talk about Sherlock Howlmes…"

"You'd talk about plants?" Gazelle sat down on another bench. It felt damp.

"Yes, we'd talk about plants." Lake said with a small laugh. "And I'd always try to change the subject back to Sherlock."

Gazelle pulled out a tissue to wipe her sweaty hooves. "Lake, why am I here?"

Lake's wistful mile vanished. She locked eyes with Gazelle. "Because we need to talk."

"About what?"

"About Tirari Town."

Gazelle felt her trepidation return with a vengeance. "What about Tirari Town?"

"You want Tirari Town to commence." Lake procured a pair of shears from the bag. "We don't."
Judy told Nick about the clue the second he was allowed back in the lounge. "You were right. The murderer's original target was someone else."

"Someone who wanted that diamond ring for themselves." Judy tapped her pen on the top of her notebook. "But Ombidia did something that made them change targets."

"He probably just showed up. Everyone but Alec has a motive, remember?"

"Nick, remember how much Alec said the ring was worth? Would you really risk losing that kind of money just to kill some scumbag?"

"If you were greedy enough, you wouldn't. Clearly someone decided it was worth the sacrifice."

"And it's not as if they only had one shot at getting the ring."

"Then the more likely scenario is that Ombidia did something to force their paw."

"Or hoof."

"If the motive has something to do with the will, then the culprit is almost certainly one of the Casels."

Edward looked between the duo with bemusement. "You two talk like you're one mammal, you know that, don't you?"

Benjamin sighed whimsically. "Yeah. They really need to hurry up and kiss."

Judy nearly fell off the couch. "Oh cripes!" She'd been so enthralled she'd forgotten that they weren't alone. "Forget everything I just said, it's all conjecture! We don't have a shred of evidence that Alec was the intended target!"

"Carrots." Nick tapped her shoulder, stopping her. "Carrots, just because you're a bunny that doesn't mean you have to dig yourself deeper."

Judy rounded on him. "You were digging, too!"

"Whatever, I'm going for an early lunch before things get sappy." Edward strolled out the room. Alec also got up to leave. "I'm going to see if father's finished talking to Carlos. If you stop by the conservatory early, tell Lake to make sure she finishes before one."

"What is she doing in there?" Nicka asked.

"Smoking carrots. What do think she's doing, she's gardening!" Alec rushed out, leaving only the three cops in the room.

"Is it me, or does Alec seem a little anxious about something?" Benjamin asked.

Judy was paying more attention to the fact that Lake, a member of Veltro and presently their only lead, was alone. She leaned to Nick and whispered. "Nick, Lake's alone. This might be our best chance to talk to her about Veltro."

"Carrots, we talked about this." Nick whispered back. "Until the party's over we protect the guests and nothing else."
Judy felt a twinge of annoyance. "Alright, but afterwards we are definitely grilling her butt off. She may know something about the van."

"Agreed. Speaking of protecting guests, we should probably check on Gazelle."

Judy nodded. "Where is she, anyway?"

Gazelle nearly ran for it, but Lake was standing between her and the quickest path to the exit. For the longest time, there was no sound but the soft hum of the systems that kept the plants around them alive.

Then Lake opened the shears and began to cut at the protruding branches. All the same, the singer kept her body tensed like a compressed spring, poised to flee the instant Lake turned those shears on her. Though the only sound in the room was the snip-snip of Lake's shears, every alarm bell in her head was ringing. "You're with Veltro?"

"Not for long." Lake kept snipping. "Did you see the news today?"

"About that van full of dead Veltro terrorists?" Gazelle hissed. "Yes."

"First of all, I personally had nothing to do with that incident. I didn't even know about their plan until my friend called me."

"You didn't know?" Gazelle glanced at the bag of tools and pondered the risks of gunning for it. "Just how far up are you in the Veltro ladder?"

"Not even halfway. I just put on a disguise and go to the meetings."

"Let me guess. Your father doesn't know."

"If he knew, I'd no longer be a Casel."

Gazelle's eyes traced Lake's figure. She was a lot shorter than the costumed mammal with the axe and her antlers were thinner. "Was it you who attacked us in the maze?"

Lake tensed mid-clip. "No. I had nothing to do with that."

"So you had nothing to do with the terrorist attack or the attempts on my life whatsoever?" Gazelle edged herself along the bench to get closer to the bag. "If you're telling the truth, then why am I here?"

Lake looked down at her shears. "You think I'm here to kill you?" She crossed the square and dropped the shears back in the bag. "That's not my intent. I'm sorry."

Gazelle did not relax. "Then why am I here?"

"So you will know why we're against Tirari Town."

"That's it? You called me here so you can convince me to stop supporting the project?"

Lake sat down. "Truly, I just want to talk."

Gazelle glared at her as she began, wondering what she had gotten herself into.

"I'm going confess something; I resent my father. He did something that I can never forgive him for.
So when Veltro approached me a few months ago, I saw it as a way to get back at him for what he did to us.

"By joining a prey supremacy group?" Gazelle's reply was as icy as the frost outside.

"Believe it or not, Veltro was formed to oppose the Casel Corporation. To expose its chairman's dark secrets and oust him from the top of the ladder in favor of someone better. That was the founder's intentions, according to the flyer they gave me. If I wanted to screw my crappy excuse for a father over, this was the way to do it."

"Veltro's founder has a grudge against your father?" Gazelle wondered what this had to do with the anti-predator sentiment that Velto had been blaring lately. "What did he do?"

"I don't know. I never met the founder. Anyway, now you know why Veltro is opposing the corporation."

"But what about the anti-predator sentiment?" Gazelle snapped. "Explain that!"

"No-one know what happened, by the founder died." At that, Lake's expression turned dark. "Some old goat called Billy G. Gruff assumed leadership, and that's where it went all to hell. He used his power to recruit as many prey supremacists and Bellwether sympathizers until Veltro had become nothing more than a deluded hate group."

For the first time, Gazelle felt sorry for a member of Veltro. "Lake, I'm sorry, I-"

"Many of us saw the bigotry as a betrayal of our original ideals and stopped attending the meetings and protests. Some left Veltro completely. As for myself, I have formed my own group from those of us who oppose Gruff's ideals and are preparing to secede from Veltro."

"You're forming a splinter faction?" Gazelle had no idea what to make of this.

Now Lake was speaking with a twinge of pride and ferocity. "We intend to call ourselves Neo Veltro. Instead of the streets, we will fight from the office. We will expose my father as the selfish louse he is and replace him with someone who wants to help the city, not control it."

Gazelle was almost speechless. She'd been expecting anti-predator propaganda, not a declaration of secession. "But why Tirari Town?" She managed to ask. "Doesn't Tirari Town help the city?"

"We oppose Tirari Town for a few reasons. For one thing, we don't need Tirari Town. It's just my father's way of getting back in Zootopia's good graces for when he runs for mayor. Many would call it a waste of taxpayer's money."

"But many more think Tirari Town is a good thing."

Lake frowned. "Is that what you think?" Gazelle nodded. "There's one more thing I want to show you. Somewhere my grandmother never allowed me or my brothers to go."

"Where?"

"The poison room."

"Come to think of it, I haven't seen Gazelle since we left the billiard room, have you, Nick?" Nick shook his head. "What about you, Ben?"

"She might be in the botani- the conservatory." Benjamin took a bite out of another golden donut.
"What is she doing in there?"

"I overheard Lake asking if Gazelle could talk before the next stage of the murder mystery."

Judy's breath hitched in her throat. Images of monster masks and axes flashed through her head. "Ben, why didn't you stop her?!"

"Why would I stop her?"

Judy smacked her forehead. Of course they'd never told him about Lake's secret. "Lake is with Veltro."

"Lake is what?!" Benjamin leapt to his feet. "Oh cripes, why didn't you tell me?! Gazelle could be in trouble!"

"Come on, we've gotta find them!" Judy pulled out the dart gun she hid in her sash and led the charge out the lounge, nearly knocking the butler off his feet. Nick struggled with his own as he ran, the weapon snagging on something beneath his vest.

They burst into the conservatory to find a lot of plants and no gazelles. "Gazelle!" Benjamin yelled, holding the autographed Taser Gazelle had given him. "Gazelle, where are you?!"

"God, Carrots! How could we be so stupid?!" Nick snarled. With a surge of strength born from frustration, he pulled the dart gun free.

"Search the area! Ben, go left! Nick, with me!" They aimed their guns in front of them as they strode down the path, reaching the square after Benjamin.

"No… sign of her!" The panting, wheezing cheetah was on the verge of tears. "This is all my fault!"

"No, it's ours." Judy was now gritting her teeth. "We should have warned you about Lake when we had the chance."

"Where does that third path go?" Nick pointed his gun at the third gravel path.

"That goes to the room where they keep all the toxic plants." Judy said. "Alec told us during the tour, but it was locked at the time."

"She's gonna try and kill Gazelle with poison plants?" Benjamin gasped.

"Not if there's still time!" Judy raced down the path, her friends close behind. She reached the glass door to the poison room and kicked it open with both feet.

Surrounded by deviously beautiful plants and flowers, Gazelle whirled around with a cry of fright. Lake dropped the garden gloves she'd been pulling on with a gasp. Judy and Nick aimed their guns at the elk-deer. "Step away from her… NOW!"

Gazelle quickly stepped in front of Lake. "Wait! Hold your fire, please!"

"Gazelle, are you okay?" Benjamin cried.

"I'm fine. Please put those guns down!"

"Gazelle, step away from her." Judy ordered. "She's not who you think she is."

"I know she's with Neo Veltro." Gazelle said. "She just told me everything."
Judy’s elbows bent, tilting the gun upwards. "She told you? Wait, what do you mean she's with Neo Veltro?"

Lake tentatively bent down to retrieve the gloves. "Gazelle, it might take a few minutes to find what I have to show you. You may want to take that time to tell them what I just told you."

Judy glanced over Lake’s shoulder. She didn’t see another exit in the smaller greenhouse where Lake could make a break for it. She nodded to Nick. "Alright, but I’m coming with you." Nick said. "Try anything and you’re out like a light."

"Fine. This is where we keep our most toxic plants, so do not touch anything."

"Sure, sure." Nick followed Lake deeper into the poison room while Gazelle began to relay everything Lake had told her before the three cops had interrupted.

By the end, Judy was seeing both Lake Casel and Veltro in a new light. She’d always thought that Veltro had been a hate group from the very beginning, but the discovery that the organization had been tainted by a corrupt new leader was somehow worse. She looked at Lake as she and Nick came back with a bunch of tall drooping flowers in a pot, and felt a growing inkling of respect. This was an animal prepared to set right what went wrong and restore Veltro to what it was supposed to be. Even if its original intent was to bloodlessly settle a vendetta against Elgen Casel.

Lake stayed back a small distance from the others as she warily held the gorgeous white flowers. "Have you explained everything?"

"Yes." Gazelle said.

"We planned to announce our secession from Veltro to the media once the chaos from the mall attack died down." Lake said. "But the discovery of those dead terrorists forced us to change our plans. We intend to announce our secession next week, to publicly separate ourselves from those mammals truly responsible."

"But why talk to me?" Gazelle asked. "Unless you except me to join Neo Veltro."

"I’m not expecting everything. I just want you to understand exactly what you are supporting. Which brings me to this." Lake held out the plant. "Do you know what this is?"

Judy didn’t know, but Gazelle did. "Angel's Trumpet. They're indigenous to my country."

"They’re indigenous to Austroala, too." Lake said. "You know that they intend to create Tirari Town in the image of Austroala. That includes plants like the Angel’s Trumpet."

Gazelle’s jaw dropped. "They're putting Angel's Trumpet in public areas, are they out of their minds?!"

"What does Angel's Trumpet do?" Judy asked.

"Among other unpleasant things, ingesting any part of Angel's Trumpet can cause horrible hallucinations." Lake said. "In high enough doses it can kill you."

"And they intend to plant these in Tirari Town?" Gazelle sat down on a metal stool in the room. "What're they thinking?"

"I already warned them about this blunder and they promised to use a safer flower, but think about it, Gazelle. If the Casel Corporation got a goddamn flower wrong, what else have they got wrong? In
Gazelle didn't answer, but Judy could guess what she was thinking. Tirari Town was supposed to be a good thing. It would make Zootopia more diverse than ever. But if Lake was telling the truth about the Angel's Trumpet, then the designers of Tirari Town were not being as careful as they should be.

"I'm not telling you to pull your support of Tirari Town." Lake put the toxic plant down on one of the tables. "I'm telling you to start asking the right questions. Because of Gruff, we've been branded as a hate group. No-one with an open mind will listen to us. But they'll listen to you. I know how much this new district means to you, but please trust me on this. In its current state, Tirari Town is an accident waiting to happen."
Judy and Nick would learn hours later that the Conservatory Stage was a scavenger hunt taking place entirely within the great glass room, but in the meantime they were partaking in a hunt of a different sort.

They had discovered so much in so little time. They had learned a whole new side to Veltro, including those members who disagreed with the speciest ideology their new leader had enforced on them. They had learned that relations within the Casel family were more complicated than they appeared, with the patriarch being secretly opposed by his own daughter. Finally they had learned that as far as Tirari Town was concerned, Veltro might have a point.

After making her case to Gazelle, Lake had made it clear that they were not tell her parents of her involvement with Veltro, which they had agreed to until further notice. Then they'd asked a few more questions that Lake hadn't answered during her speech.

"Does anyone else in your family know?" Judy had asked the first.

Lake had shaken her head. "Edward would probably understand if he knew, but Alec wouldn't."

"Do you know where Gruff-butt is now?" Nick had asked the second.

"According to our source within the old Veltro, Gruff didn't show up to the Bellwether appeal the morning before the mall attack. No-one has seen him since then."

"And that's not suspicious at all." Nick said. "Can you think of anywhere he may be hiding?"

"Have you tried the Bridge Bunker?"

"The what?"

"A bunker Gruff's neighbors built somewhere near a bridge by Gruff's neighborhood during the war. You could always try there."

"Thank you, we will." Judy said. "Sorry about the dart gun thing. After what happened in the maze, hearing that Gazelle was meeting you alone got us worried."

"I understand. Too many mammals have died for you to trust us. I hope you find the culprits soon."

After that they'd parted ways, returning to their rooms until the time came for the seventh challenge. Judy and Nick didn't know what Benjamin and Gazelle did during the interval, but they were surely pondering deeply about what they had learned. Gazelle especially had much to think about. As Judy passed the time flicking through the many camera feeds on her phone, she found that she might not be able to put her heart into the seventh challenge.

In the end, Judy and Nick never made it to the seventh challenge. Right before twelve, the butler came to inform them that they were needed in the study. When they entered the so-called throne of the Casel Family, they found Elgen at his desk, surrounding by security guards.

Judy immediately got the feeling that something was wrong. "What's going on?"

Elgen's expression was as cold as ever. "My head of security has informed me that they noticed a trail leading from the fence into the western area of the forest."
"The costumed loony?" Nick asked.

"We don't know, but we're sending a team to investigate. If you wish, you may join them." Judy and Nick traded glances. "You wanted our cooperation and now you've got it. You have until half past to decide."

"Our decision is already made, Mr. Casel." Judy straightened like a post and puffed her chest out. "We're going."

Elgen nodded slightly. "Half past twelve. The main driveway. Gather your gear and don't be late."

Twenty minutes later Judy and Nick were in civilian clothes and warm coats as they joined up with the four larger mammals in the frosty driveway. Two boars, a wolf and a big ram with dark grey fur. All four were dressed in black and carrying heavy-duty tranquilizer rifles. Judy tried to ignore the unease she felt at the their sinister appearance. They were private security guards, not mercenaries.

"Where's your uniforms?" The ram, presumably the guard in charge, demanded.

"We weren't expecting to need them." Nick replied. "We came here for a party, not a mammal hunt."

The two boars were eyeing Nick with thinly veiled distaste as the ram responded. "Have you got your gear at least?"

They pointed out their dart guns and the utility belts Elgen had lent them. "Do the other guests know where we're going?" Judy asked.

"All they know is that you're skipping the next two challenges to hand the prankster over to your buddies and make sure there aren't another others lurking around in the forest."

Not for the first time, Judy how long they should allow Elgen to maintain the cover-up.

"Do we really have to bring them with us?" One of the boars finally muttered, his eyes still on the fox. Judy bristled, knowing exactly what he had meant by 'them.'

Judy was taken aback by the fire in the ram's rectangular pupils as he turned to glare at the boar. "Mr. Casel requires that I answer yes."

"They'd just slow us down in the snow. We don't need them."

"Mr. Casel also requires that anyone who is not be willing to work with them is to be removed from the team. So either you can either shut it or stay here."

The boar fell silent.

"Good boy." Nick chirped.

"Alright, enough chit-chat." The ram checked his weapon as he spoke. "We've got a psycho to catch."

"Don't worry about Nick and Judy, Alec." Ben patted his friend on the back, even if he did feel disappointed that his coworkers wouldn't be participating this time. "Knowing them, they'll solve the case even without this clue."

"Yeah, let's get started." Edward said irritably. "I'm sweating buckets in here!"
"Take the jacket off, then. You have your t-shirt." Lake said.

Edward muttered under his breath as he removed his prince's jacket and draped it over a garden chair. He looked visibly relieved with just his white shirt left on.

With everyone but Nick and Judy gathered in the conservatory, Alec began to speak. "I hope you guys know your flowers, because this one's a doozy. Scattered throughout this garden are eight cards. On each card is the alibi of a suspect at the time of the murder, with extra information that may or may not prove crucial to the investigation. But you have to find them first." He pulled out a scroll that had clearly been soaked in tea to make it look aged. "This poem is your only means of finding the location of each card. Each of you will take it in turns to read it and find as many cards as you can within ten minutes. Have you guys got that?" When they all nodded Alec activated the stopwatch app on his phone. "Benji, you can go first."

"Hey, wait a minute! What do the rest of us do in the meantime?" Carlos asked.

"The library and ballroom are just down the hall. You can pass the time there."

"… Great."

Alec led Benjamin to the center of the conservatory while the butler led the others back outside. As soon as the door was shut and they were alone, Alec's smile disappeared. "You and Gazelle are still enjoying yourselves, right?"

"Sure we are. Don't worry, you're doing great."

It was a sign of how much Alec trusted him that he immediately exhaled in relief. "Okay. Good. Earlier when Gazelle met up with Lake… did Lake… say something to her?"

Benjamin swallowed. What Lake had said was so much bigger than her confessing her sexuality. He couldn't tell Alec, but he wouldn't lie either. "I'm sorry but I can't tell you."

"Ben, if Lake said something to upset her…"

Benjamin held his paws up, stopping him. "It isn't like Carlos, Alec. What happened between them is their business and I can't tell you, I'm sorry. But seriously, it's nothing to worry about."

Alec looked at him for a good while before he sighed, letting it go for now. "Okay. If it's their business, I won't pry. Let's get started."

He passed the scroll to Benjamin and held up the phone. "Okay. Your time… starts… now!"

"Golden Goblets on Emerald Stalks." Benjamin read aloud. "Pretty."

Alec smiled and looked proud of himself. "Four… Five…"

"Golden Goblets on Emerald Stalks,
A Sloth's Favorite Treat,
Gloves without an Owner,
Stars that Float on Water,
Dawning Voiceless Trumpets,
Towering Solar Eclipse,

Peter's Damsel in Distress…"

Benjamin blinked at the last line and raised his eyebrows at Alec.

"Liquid flowing from a Crushed Eye?"

Alec smirked. "This is a murder mystery." He looked at his phone. "Twenty one, twenty two…"

Benjamin gasped and took off into the indoor forest.

Golden Goblets on Emerald Stalks… He stared at the first line even as it bounced up and down as he ran. Goblets… okay, Ben, think! What flowers do they have around here that look like golden goblets? Daffodils? Snapdragons? No way, they look like dragons for crying out loud!

"Alec, you didn't put any clues in the poison room, did you?"

"Absolutely not!" Alec yelled back in the square.

"Wait, wait!" Benjamin skidded to a halt beside a patch of tulips. Yellow? Gold enough. Shaped like a goblet? Sort of. Benjamin carefully parted the pretty flowers. He beamed and pulled out the card. With nine minutes remaining he put the card in his pocket without reading it.

A Sloth's Favorite Treat… After thirty seconds Benjamin's mind came up blank, so he skipped the line in favor of the third, which he had already figured out. Gloves without an Owner was surely Foxgloves. He found the card and moved on to Stars that Float on Water. He recalled passing a pond in his frantic race to find Gazelle. He ran back down the path, finding the pond just as Alec yelled, "Eight minutes!"

He found the card perched on a pretty lilac water lily and lost his balance trying to grab it. He didn't fall in, thank the dickens, but his arm was sopping wet as he tucked the third card into his pocket.

"Seven minutes!"

Shaking the drips off his arm, Benjamin used his dry arm to hold up the scroll. He still couldn't think what a sloth's favorite treat could be, so he looked to the fifth line; Dawning Voiceless Trumpets. Aw great, like that's any better!

The 'voiceless' bit was no good as a clue. Unless he was Alice in Wonderland, none of the flowers here had a voice. But what was 'dawning' supposed to mean? Think, Benji, think! Benjamin scratched his head, recalling every phrase he could that had the word 'dawning' in it. Dawning of an era… dawning realization… gradually dawning…

"Six minutes!"

"Let me think!" Benjamin cried back. None of the flowers he'd seen so far had the word 'dawning.' Maybe the word meant something else. He was tempted to use his phone, but he owed it to Alec not to cheat. He paced through the indoor garden, wordlessly passing Alec along the way.

"T-minus five minutes!"

"I don't suppose we're allowed clues!"

"Nope, sorry!"
"Aw, poop!"

Alec laughed. "You know what they say! There's no glory in easy!"


"Morning Glory. I've got it! Morning Glory! Thanks, Alec!" Benjamin dashed off to find them.

He found the blue trumpet shaped flowers and the card in a pot close to the poison room. Compared to that, **Towering Solar Eclipse** was a breeze, but he had to run all the way to the other side of the glass room to find the flower.

With less than four minutes left, he plucked the card from the base of the impressively tall sunflowers and returned to the scroll. **Peter's Damsel in Distress** was the literal next in line, and almost immediately Peter Paw came to mind. He had never heard of a Wendy Flower, but he remembered at one point passing some exotic orange lilies. Unfortunately it took more than a minute to find the Tiger Lilies, and by the time he did he had little more than two minutes remaining. Two minutes to figure out **A Sloth's Favorite Treat** and **Liquid flowing from a Crushed Eye**.

This time Benjamin returned to the square to sit down beside Alec. Alec was passing the time using his hook and a small pile of fallen leaves and petals to make a botanic kebab. He stayed silent so Benjamin could think, but he was coming up blank on both sloth treats and crushed eyes.

"How many cards have you got left to go, Benji?" He eventually spoke up.

"The Sloth's Treat and the Crushed Eye. At this rate I'll be scoring six out of eight." Benjamin pouted. Then again six out of eight was a respectable score, so he couldn't be too disappointed.

Alec stuck a dried rose petal on his hook. "You know what my favorite flower in the garden is? The red and yellow marigolds. The colors make them look like little fireballs."

Benjamin smiled softly. "Yeah. I saw them."

"It's amazing how something so simple to a color combination could make a difference between a pretty flower and an amazing one. Don't you think?"

Benjamin nodded, and then something in his head clicked. What if **Liquid flowing from a Crushed Eye** was a clue about the colors? The liquid was almost certainly blood. That meant red was one of the colors. Obviously the eye itself was white. Should he be looking for a red and white flower?

"Okay, I'm off." He leapt to his feet and took the left path. His hunch would soon pay off when he found the Amaryllis, a flower that resembled a lily. Its petals were pure white and stained with bright crimson. Just like a crushed and bloody eyeball.

"You now have one minute to find all the clues!" Alec yelled.

In stark contrast to his resignation mere minutes earlier, Benjamin was growing frantic. Two cards left was no big deal. One card, especially with one minute left, was something else entirely.

**A Sloth's Favorite Treat**... Benjamin gritted his teeth. There was no such thing as sloth flowers or sloth berries. So what the heck was the poem talking about?!

"Thirty… twenty-nine… twenty-eight…"

Benjamin dug his fingers in his scalp. "**Grrrrr**… come on, think!"
The smidge of dried blood on the bars of the fence surrounding the mansion could hardly be called a trail in Nick's opinion, but then again that was what the wolf was for. He was Fangerson, an ex-cop from Pride City, and right away Judy could see that blood sniffing was his specialty. His nose barely sniffed at the red stains on the bars before he pointed roughly south-west.

"Good work, Fangerson." The ram, who had introduced himself as Woolworth after they'd left the mansion, gave the wolf a sharp pat on the back. "Until I say otherwise you're on point."

"Any idea whose blood this is?" Nick asked.

"If we knew we wouldn't be going on this pleasant little hike," Woolworth replied irritably. Even with his thick coat of wool he didn't like the cold.

"I mean, you never mentioned if you actually engaged this guy." Nick amended. "Unless there's something you and your boss conveniently forgot to tell us about."

Nick was sure he was about to get a defensive earful from the ram. "I don't know what Mr. Casel had told you, but we never engaged the attacker. He got away before we could. If he got hurt, it wasn't by one of us." He tilted his head. "Is that what you were getting at, Wilde?"

"More or less. I'm just saying that we don't know for sure if this trail is going to lead us to the psycho. Did you get anything on the cameras?"

Woolworth narrowed his eyes. "Not a damn thing, and that's not possible. I don't how he's doing it, but he's been completely eluding the cameras."

Judy scowled. "That's twice now. If we don't catch this guy soon, we're going to have to evacuate the guests. If the security system's not working, then they're in danger."

Woolworth didn't respond except for a slight nod. "Alright, move out."

The two boars, Bors and Hoyst, took the rear as they began the long, difficult trek through the forest. It was difficult primarily for Nick and Judy; just as the boars had suggested, the thick snow and the sticks and stones hidden beneath were causing the two smaller mammals no small amount of grief. It wasn't as cold here as it was in Tundratown, but the air still burned if Nick took a sharp breath. Truth be told he wouldn't even be out here if it weren't for Judy. He'd have been much happier staying in the mansion where it was warm and they could still do their jobs of watching over the guests. But Judy wanted to be out here. Out here they were actually doing something about the looming threat, and she wanted in on the action. She could take on a rhino with nothing but her legs, but after the close call in the maze yesterday, Nick would sooner lose his toes to frostbite than let her face the psycho without him.

Some time after they lost sight of the fence behind them, Fangerson stopped dead and sniffed at the ground. He turned his nose further south. The snow began to thin to the point that Judy could lift her legs completely out of it. They held tightly onto their dart guns as they walked, their eyes scanning the surrounding trees for a dark figure with horns and an axe.

"Are the Casel Christmas Parties always like that?" He asked to no-one in particular.

"Like what?" Bors asked.

"Like nice, quiet family get-togethers. I was kind of expecting a mega-soiree. You know, the kind with giant ice sculptures, crystal chandeliers, disco lights and music..."

"You're thinking of those zillionaires from the movies, cop." Bors replied. "I've done guard duty for
the Casels' parties before, and they're a lot more tasteful than that. But yeah, their parties are usually pretty big like that."

"So why not this year?" Judy asked.

"Mr. Casel's got a lot on his plate between the Tirari Town project and Veltro harassing his company. He hasn't got time for a 'mega-soiree.' Besides, it'd be in pretty bad taste if he'd pulled one so soon after a terrorist attack in the city."

"Fair enough." Nick replied. At least the boars were being more civil towards him and Judy. "Is that why they don't even have a Christmas tree in the lounge?"

"Yeah, I wonder what happened to their decoration plans?" Hoyst asked.

"Cut the chatter." Woolworth snapped, for Fangerson had stopped again. He approached a fallen tree and plucked something from one of the branches. It was a small tuft of dark brown hair. Nick tried to remember where he'd seen it before. "This isn't part of the attacker's costume, sir. This is real hair."

"Any idea what species?" Judy asked.

"Elk is my best bet. Still not sure on the blood, sir."

They changed direction again, heading further east.

"Sir, we're heading towards the main road." Hoyst said. "Do you think he cut and ran?"

"Maybe. We're not stopping until the trail goes cold." Woolworth said.

Nick smirked. "Cute."

"What's cute?" Judy asked sharply.

Nick lightly kicked at the surrounding snow. "You know, 'cause it's winter and…" He looked around at all the puzzled looks. "Never mind."

They broke free of the trees, stepping out of thick snow onto frozen dirt. They'd reached the road, close to the last turn before the estate.

"Sir, we've got more blood here." Bors pointed to a spatter of red dots on the pebbles.

"We've got tracks, too." Nick had just spotted the tire tracks in a patch of softer dirt further down the road. "This looks like this was made today."

"Mr. Ombidia went back to the city earlier this morning, remember?" Judy said.

Fangerson materialized by Nick's side, his nose almost brushing the surface of the road. "Sir, the trail goes down the road, away from the estate."

"So he's gone?" Woolworth growled. "Son of a ewe!"

"Maybe not." The wolf stood up. "If he took a car, I would have lost the scent. He may not have gone far, especially if that blood is his."

"Then we continue?" Nick was wishing for the warmth of the lounge's fireplace.

Woolworth checked his rifle again. "Then we continue."
In some ways walking on the road was worse than walking in the snow. At least Nick's feet were cushioned with each step, but here the rough ground and pebbles were borderline torture. It was surely worse for Judy, who had no pads to lessen the discomfort. Thoughts of offering her a foot rub when they got back crossed Nick's mind, but he banished them with a blush.

They didn't go far before they caught sight of their biggest clue yet; a big black car sitting silently in the middle of the road. "Isn't that one of the cars that brought us here?" Nick asked.

"Yeah. Ombidia borrowed one for his return trip." Woolworth said, cautiousness written on his thin features. "Stay frosty, people."

Nick snorted. "Very funny, Wooly."

The ram stared at him. "What's funny?"


When they reached the car, what they found convinced them that something was seriously wrong. The car was empty, the driver's side door thrown wide open. A thick branch impaling the front tire explained why the car had stopped. However, the biggest clue that something horrible had happened to Ombidia was the blood in the driver's seat and spread in a thick trail across the road.

"Oh no." Judy whispered when she saw the grisly smears. "No, no, no…"

Nick felt her anguish, his arms falling loosely by his sides as the realization of Ombidia's fate struck him like a fireaxe. Bogo had trusted them both with the lives of the guests. And they'd failed.

"We never should have let him leave alone." Woolworth muttered. "This is on us. God knows how Mr. Casel's gonna handle this."

Poof!

The sound of a distant firework ripped through the air. They looked up and saw a hissing scarlet light flying up above the tree line south-west of their position. It wasn't a firework. It was a flare.

"Oh, now what?" Nick whispered.

With the phone still clutched in his hoof, stopped exactly at the ten minute mark, Alec looked bemusedly down at the wheezing cheetah lying sprawled out on the stone bench, the eighth card clutched in his paw.

"Ben?" Alec asked. "Benji, are you okay?"

When Benjamin didn't immediately respond, Alec prepared himself to call for the butler. But then the paw holding the card shot up and gave the 'OK' sign. The paw fell right back down, swinging like a pendulum. The race to the last card had been a close one, so close that the poor guy had exhausted himself from sheer desperation.

The memory of his first time dealing with the sloths at the DMV had given the answer to Benjamin with ten seconds left on the stopwatch app. After that it had been a mad nine-second dash to the pink hibiscus the cheetah lay under right now. But the glory of finding all eight cards was worth it. Alec could probably see it in the tired grin on Benjamin's face, but right now the elk-deer looked embarrassed.
Alec cleared his throat. "Benji?"

"Yeah?" Benjamin's head back fell backward over the edge of the bench so he was now looking at Alec upside down. "What? What's wrong? What're you staring at?"

Alec took a deep breath and moved to Benjamin's side. "Benji..." He leaned down and planted a hoof on Benjamin's chest. "There's a hundred dollar donut stuck in your neck."

Benjamin blinked and sat up, at the same time finding the donut and pulling it free from beneath his chin. "Oh." He giggled. "I was wondering where that went."

"So that's all eight cards, right?" Alec asked once the subsequent laughter subsided and the golden donut was eaten. Benjamin responded by pulling out the other seven cards. "You did great, Benji. Read the cards out and I'll write the alibis down."

Feeling prouder with each card, Benjamin read them out loud one by one.

Tulips- During the time of poisoning, Edward Casel was in the guestroom reading the latest car magazine. By then, everything had been set for the big moment he had planned during dinner later that day.

Hibiscus- During the time of poisoning, Judy Hopps was in the downstairs bathroom preparing the weapon for her assassination of Mr. Ombidia.

Foxgloves- During the time of poisoning, Nicholas Wilde was in the bar talking to his mother on his phone. He was sitting next to Mr. Ombidia at the time.

Water Lily- During the time of poisoning, Benjamin Clawhauser was in the library reading Gazelle's autobiography.

"Does this mean I'm off the hook?" Benjamin asked.

Alec finished writing the fourth alibi on the notebook. "Yeah. To be honest, even in fiction I can't picture you as a murderer."

Benjamin giggled and continued reading.

Morning Glory- During the time of poisoning, Carlos Elkervera was in the bar tasting a Grasshopper for the first time. He and Mr. Ombidia had a short argument over Ombidia's blackmail.

Sunflower- During the time of poisoning, Christine Antlaire was in the bar talking to Gazelle. At one point she went behind the bar to assist the server when they cut themselves on a glass broken by Mr. Ombidia.

Tiger Lily- During the time of poisoning, Gazelle was in the bar talking to Christine. She left after slapping Mr. Ombida when he touched her butt.

Amaryllis- During the time of poisoning, Lake Casel was in the conservatory tending to the poison room before going to the bar for a glass of red wine.

Alec finished writing, ripped out the page and gave it to Benjamin. "Here you go. I hope this helps you narrow down the suspect list."

"Thanks, Alec. I really enjoyed that brain teaser."
"Yeah, here's hoping the others enjoy it, too. Could you find Belch and tell him it's his turn?"

"Sure. Do you mind if I tell Nick and Judy the clues when they get back? They're only missing this because they're out there making sure you're safe."

Alec nodded. "Sure you can. Let's hope they stay safe, too."

After a ten-minute trek through bare trees and deep snow, Nick, Judy and Woolworth's team slowed to a stop.

They'd expected nothing at best, and a body at worst. What they hadn't expected was the remains of a small campsite at the bottom of a steep slope. The single camouflaged tent had been ripped to shreds, but it looked to be empty. At first glance a horrified Nick thought he was seeing the charred remains of the camper scattered over the area, but a second look reveled the 'bones' to be charred sticks and ash from the campfire. Nick looked further and spotted a pair of binoculars with shattered lenses. A cracked satellite dish and smashed up radio. A mess of metal and plastic so badly pulverized he almost didn't realize it used to be a camera.

"Looks like we found the psycho's lair." Bors said. He sounded shaken. Nick wondered if he too had initially mistaken the campfire remains for something morbid.

"Can't be. The tent's way too small. I'd say it's the psycho's latest crime scene." Judy said. Her ears were drooping, a clear sign that she wasn't happy that an innocent camper might have fallen victim to the psycho. Nick felt his own ears go flat at the thought.

"But somebody must have fired that flare! Where are they?" Bors snapped.

"Keep it chill, Bors." Woolworth said.

Nick refrained from rolling his eyes. "How does he not hear that?"

"Yeah, that time I heard it." Judy said. Her ears perked as she spotted something at the bottom of the slope, beside a large black crate propped up against the slanting ground. Within seconds, she was holding a spent flare gun in her paws, her expression stricken. "Cheese and crackers, I can't believe this is happening. What do we do now?"

Woolworth answered before Nick did. "We spread out and search the area. Either we find the psycho or we find the shooter. Hopps, Wilde, you stay here and see if you can find out who this site belongs to."

While the bigger mammals began to split up to search the surrounding area, Nick and Judy began their search in the ruined tent. The sleeping bag had been ripped apart, the thick fabric a mess of slashes and tears. Even more damaged was the massive red bag pack at the back of the tent.

Suddenly the discovery of the campsite was worse, so much worse than Mr. Ombidia's imagined mutilated corpse. Nick's gut lurched, and he felt a chill in his veins that had nothing to do with the cold. Judy knelt down beside him, gasping softly as she recognized the bag.

"Honey."
Chief Bogo wasn't surprised when the ZBI made the decision to take over jurisdiction of the Greener Grass Mall case. He was surprised, however, when he got the call just as they'd found the bridge.

It was a little stone arch over a narrow frozen stream more than a hundred yards from Billy G. Gruff's neighborhood. None of his neighbors had seen him since the day before the mall attack or knew where the bunker was located, but they knew about the bridge. Apparently it provided a convenient shortcut to the nearby Meadowland District Park. In any case, that was how Chief Bogo and his four officers managed to find it.

"In that case," Chief Bogo said to the receptionist on the other end. "Tell Agent Yaxley that we've just found the bridge. If we find Gruff, first thing we'll do is hand him straight over to the ZBI then leave the rest to them."

Officer Knightfall promised to tell the yak the news, and the call ended there. Bogo zipped his coat up higher and looked over the bridge at his men below. They were spread out, predators sniffing for suspicious scents and prey lifting fallen trees and stone as they searched for the bunker.

Bogo supposed he should be ticked with Hopps and Wilde. He had given them a direct order to focus on protecting Gazelle and the other guests. He'd warned them against antagonizing the Casels with their habitual sleuthing. But Lake Casel had unintentionally forced their paw by meeting with Gazelle alone, so this time he couldn't be too angry with them. If Lake's tip about the bunker proved fruitful, he might even change his mind about slapping them with parking duty until the New Year.

A low branch caught his horn as he paced along the bridge. He muttered curses and pulled it free, hating the cold. Just square up and bear it. Find Gruff and send him off to Yaxley so we can focus on the stalker case. Then threaten to relieve Hopps and Wilde of their squad car if they complain about being taken off the Veltro case. If Wilde wisecracks, you can take him to this bridge and throw him off it. But you'll be glad you won't have to deal with the Casels anymore after today. You won't have to worry about what Elgen, his wife, or Lake's gigolo might do or say to Benjamin just for being in the same room as them. By this time tomorrow he'll be back behind the front desk where they can't hurt him. He'll be safe.

Him and that adorable male Belle costume.

"Sir, we've found it!"

Bogo spun round but he didn't see Officer Moon, the caramel colored wolf who had called out on the buffalo's radio. He did see Officer Higgins trudging his way through the thick snow on the left side of the stream. "Sir, we've found the entrance."

Bogo stepped down from the bridge. "Are you sure?"

"It's a big wooden door in the side of that slope over there. We didn't want to head in without the rest of you."

"Good call. Just in case, call for backup. We don't know how many hostiles might be in there."

"On it, sir. We also found some old tracks leading to and from the bunker, so be careful you don't step in them."

"Species?"
"All we could tell was that the tracks leading into the bunker were made by a large prey mammal with cloven hooves. The tracks leading out were most likely made by a canine, but the prints are huge."

"Once you've made the call, find out where the wolf tracks lead"

Higgins made the call into his radio while Bogo slogged in the direction the hippo had pointed, at the same time calling for the other two officers to join him. Along the way he found the tracks. Higgins was right. The canine tracks were unnaturally large. It hadn't snowed in three days, so the tracks may not have been made recently. Bogo would have to remember to note that down.

Rhinowitz and Trunkaby rejoined Bogo just as he found Moon. The wolf had his dart gun trained on the bunker entrance. Bogo scowled when he saw that the wooden door was open. "Who told you to open that door?"

"I didn't. The door was open when I found it." Moon said quickly. "Sir, we may have to call backup. I smell blood, but not a lot of it."

Not again.

"It's being called now, Moon." Bogo checked his dart gun to make sure it ready for a fight. "Trunkaby, you can't fit down there. Stay out here so our backup can find us quickly."

"Yes, sir." The elephant replied.

Higgins ran up, his own gun at the ready. "There's a squad car on its way, sir."

"Good. Higgins, take the rear. Moon, you're on point. Now let's find that goat."

"Honey!" Nick jumped to his feet with the red bag still in his paws. He rushed back out the torn up tent, followed closely by Judy. "Honey!"

Woolworth and Hoyst ran in from the right. "What're you shouting for, Wilde? Do you know whose campsite this is?"

"Honey Badger!" Nick snapped. "She must have come here to find Bigfoot!"

"Bigfoot?!"

"It's a long story." Judy quickly said. "Woolworth, we have to find her!"

"Wait a second, is she the mammal who tipped you off about the hidden camera?"

"Never mind the camera!" Nicked hissed. He started digging through the pack. All he found were rations, several felt pens and a map of the forest. There was a circle drawn in red ink that he ignored in his growing panic. "Damn it, I should have known she'd come back to find this creep! I should have told her to stay away!"

Woolworth grabbed his radio. "Bors! Fangerson! We have a missing camper. Her name is Honey Badger, she's a honey badger and she may be close by. Finding her is now top priority!"

"Wait, she's a conspiracy theorist. Being hunted by private security might freak her out." Judy said.

"Of course she is." Hoyst groaned. "Is there anything we can do to make us trust her?"
Nick gritted his teeth. "There is this one thing, but I don't know if it'll help. It's a phrase we use so Honey knows I'm not some spy disguised as me."

"What is it?"

"'Honey, honey, honey. Must be funny…"

"In a rich man's world!" Yelled the large black crate.

Nick's heart skipped a beat. He ran over to the crate and rapped his fist on the side. "Honey! Is that you?"

The voice was muffled, but it was undeniably hers. "Yeah! Get me out of here before my tail falls off!"

"Oh, thank God!" Nick undid the latches and threw the lid open. "It's empty! Where are you?"

"Try looking behind the crate, you dummy!"

"Carrots, help me lift this!" Judy rushed to Nick's side, and together they began to lift.

Bogo lifted the latch on the door at the bottom of the stairs. He pushed it aside while Moon kept his aim on the doorway. When he opened the door and took a good look at the bunker interior, his blood ran colder than the winter air.

The bunker was empty, and as cold as it was outside. A bare light bulb dangled over the single square table in the room, lit by the generator at the back of the room. What it illuminated was not what they’d hoped to find.

The table was covered in gouges, and the bare beds had been ripped up so viciously they were more stuffing than mattress. Papers were strewn all over the place, much of it ripped into snow-like pieces. Then there was the blood. There wasn't much, nowhere near as bad as the van, thank God. But if the spatters on the floor and table were any indication, then it was unlikely that they would find Billy G. Gruff alive, and that was if he was the victim.

"What the hell is going on around here?" He growled.

"Sir." Rhinowitz had knelt down to examine a discarded dart gun and two darts. "These darts look like they'd been fired. I think we may have missed a gunfight."

"But who were they fighting?" Moon asked.

"Wasn't much of a fight from the looks of it."

Bogo turned to Higgins. "Higgins, go back up top and report this to the ZBI. On that note you'd better call the ME, just in case we find a body."

"Yes, sir." Higgins started back up the stairs.

Bogo rubbed his temple, a habit that comes with the stress, and gestured for the rest of his officers to spread out. "Moon, Rhinowitz, we've got bodies to look for. Spread out and don't touch anything unless you have to." He thought for a moment of McHorn's hands around his neck. "There could be Night Howler traces, so don't put your faces near anything either!"

Being the smaller, faster mammal, Moon reached the back of the room first, making a beeline for the
generator. Bogo followed him with his eyes until he saw what had peaked the wolf's interest. Beside the generator was a long, open black case, hidden in the shadows outside the bulb's circle of light. He bent down and shone a flashlight on the case.

"RAAAAAAAH!"

Then threw himself back with a curse when the face of a screaming goat shot up from behind the generator and pointed a gun right at his face.

"STOP RIGHT THERE!" Bogo roared and aimed with his own weapon.

"PUT THE GUN DOWN!" Rhinowitz did the same.

The gaunt goat spun his gun, his eyes wild as they flicked from one mammal to the other. Moon backed up against the side of the table, staying silent as he too aimed his gun. For the longest time, there was no sound but the quiet hum of the generator.

"Help." The goat whimpered as his spurt of strength ran out and he collapsed behind the generator.

Bogo holstered his weapon and rushed over to shove the machine aside. He recognized the pale, bloodied face from Yaxley's photo. "Gruff! What happened here?"

"This is Gruff?" Rhinowitz asked.

"Yes. Get the med kit from the car and get Higgins to call an ambulance. Now! Moon, keep searching the area. There may be other mammals down here!"

Moon nodded and resumed looking.

When Bogo knelt down and got a better look at Gruff, he grimaced. The goat was in bad shape. He was shaking like a leaf. His leg was at an odd angle. There was a bloody tear in his green sweater that was eerily similar to Bellwether's gash.

"What happened here?" Bogo repeated sternly as he carefully pulled apart the edges of the tear. When his hooves touched the chest beneath, he found that the goat's skin wasn't ice cold, but burning hot. Not hypothermia. Bogo examined the gash itself. The skin surrounding it was intensely inflamed. An infection. That explained the shivering.

Seeing that the goat was still holding his gun, Bogo wasted no time relieving him of it. After he'd put it down out of Gruff's reach, Bogo took a closer look at his wrist. Gruff was wearing one of those watches that also told you what day it was. It was smashed beyond repair, but he could still see the day it had been broken.

If the watch had been accurate, then the attack had taken place the day before Benjamin, Hopps and Wilde had left for the Casel Estate.

Coincidence, I think not.

"You've got to get me out of here." Gruff begged weakly. "You've got to get me out of here."

When they pulled Honey from the hole in the slope, they found her to be in better shape than Nick had hoped. He'd expected her to at have some scratches on her, but other than the dirt that coated her fur and hiking clothes, Honey was unscathed. She patted the dirt off her coat and shook the rest from her fur. "Thanks."
"Honey, are you okay?" Judy asked.

"I'm fine."

"Good… so what in the sweet chocolate covered raisins are you doing here?!" She hissed.

"What do you think? Finding Bigfoot."

"Looks more like Bigfoot found you." Woolworth did not look amused. "You tipped the ZPD off about that camera, didn't you? What were you doing so close to the estate?"

Honey grimaced. "That's none of your business."

"It's our job to protect the estate from trespassers. It is damn well our business!"

"Cool it, Woolworth." Wilde snapped. "Honey, there's a psychotic lunatic out here, so you'd better start talking."

"Does this lunatic by any chance dress up like a horned wolf on steroids?"

Nick was sure the color had left his face. "Yes!"

"That's the whacko who tore my camp apart!" Honey jabbed a claw at her tent. "I figured Bigfoot would be a little wild, but this guy…" She whistled.

"Honey, what happened here?" Nick asked with as much patience as he could muster.

"Can I have my bag back, first?" When Nick obliged, Honey knelt down and began rifling through its contents. "Last night I set a trap for Bigfoot. Not a 'trap' trap, in case that's illegal. I figured he wouldn't show up until he was sure I was either away or asleep, so I dug out that burrow to hide in while I used my camp as bait to lure Bigfoot."

"Only it wasn't Bigfoot that showed up." Judy said.

"Nah." The disappointment in Honey's face was obvious. "He showed up around two hundred hours. I realized he wasn't Bigfoot when I saw the axe, but it was definitely the guy who planted that camera. He opened my tent all quiet-like, it was pretty obvious he was planning to kill whoever was inside. When he found the tent empty, he started going through my stuff, but when he got to my crate things got really crazy. He must have been expecting something else, 'cause when he found the crate full of my stuff, he went bat-crap crazy. He just started tearing the place apart. At some point he threw the crate and it blocked my burrow, so I was stuck there until you found me."

"At least he didn't find you." Nick said.

"Yeah, I suppose. I could still see just enough to see him pull that mask off."

The ruined camp went very quiet. "Did you see his face?"

"Not fully. I did see enough to know that the horns were real. What I did see of his face looked nasty, like he'd gotten shot in the face with a shotgun full of bird pellets."

"Do you have the footage?" Woolworth asked.

Honey tensed up. "Maybe."

Woolworth held his hoof out. "Give it to me. Now."
"Why? So you can destroy it and keep the Casels' dirty secrets hidden?"

Nick stepped between them before things could get heated. "No. That footage is very important evidence and it needs to go to the ZPD. Honey, give me the camera."

Honey looked down at her camera with a grimace. Then she held it out. "Fine. But only so no-one else can get hurt."

Judy smiled in appreciation as she took the camera. "You're doing the right thing, Honey."

"Is there anything else on that camera?" Woolworth asked. "Have you been spying on the estate again?"

"Nope, just the camp. I'm here for Bigfoot, not Bluebloods."

"Yeah, you're still coming with us."

Honey puffed up. "Excuse me?"

"Honey, please trust me on this one." Nick said. "It's not safe out here. You drove out here, right? Tell us where you parked your truck, then we'll take you there and you can go back to the city."

Woolworth stepped forward. "Just a moment, you can't just-"

Honey frowned and cut him off. "No way, I'm not going back without proof!"

"Honey, please." Nick was still feeling rattled from earlier, and he let it show. "I'm not trying to cover anything up. I just want you safe." He gestured to the ruined tent. "Five minutes ago, I thought you were dead."

That struck Honey. She looked at the tent herself, suddenly looking guilty. As crazy as she may be, she'd never meant any harm. She'd definitely never wanted to make Nick panic, and that was a very rare occurrence.

"Fine." She muttered. "If it'll make you feel better, I'll get outta here."

"You've got to get me out of here!" Billy G. Gruff gasped again. "You have to protect me! He wasn't supposed to survive!"

Moon appeared beside Bogo. "Sir, I've searched the whole room. There's no-one else down here."

"Alright, put some gloves on and start picking up those papers. I don't want the paramedics stepping on them when they get here."

"Yes, sir!" Moon set to work as Rhinowitz returned with the med kit.

"Sir, the ambulance is on its way. ETA nine minutes."

"What's the ETA on our backup?"

"Three minutes."

"Good. Get me some gloves and gauze, then move that table. The paramedics will be wanting a clear path."
Rhinowitz knelt down beside the buffalo and started rummaging through the bag. "What'd you think he was doing down here, sir?"

"Look at that case." Bogo said as he received the nitrile gloves and pulled them on. "See that foam insert? It's the same shape as the weapon we found in the van. This must be where they planned the attack on the mall."

"And we're saving this goat why?" Rhinowitz growled, though he already knew the answer.

"Because he's a key witness. Like it or not, we need him. Where the hell is that gauze?"

"Here." Rhinowitz passed him the gauze. Gruff moaned as Bogo pressed the gauze to his gash.

Bogo leaned over the goat. "Gruff, what happened here?" He asked again, but he may as well have been interrogating a topiary.

"Sir, did Gruff's file mention anything about a heart condition?" Moon asked.

Bogo shook his head. "Why?"

"I've found a broken bottle in a briefcase. It's not booze. It's got a label with…" He paused as he examined the label. "Digoxin on it. Sounds like some kind of medication."

"He wasn't supposed to survive!" Gruff groaned at nobody in particular.

"Get that bagged asap. Anything else?" Bogo asked.

"Yeah. The case had more stuff that you'll really want to see." Bogo didn't look, but he heard the footsteps as Moon and Rhinowitz rejoined him, kneeling down and holding the large sheet in front of his face. "It's a map of the Superior Court. See how this room's circled?"

Rhinowitz stared. "That's the courtroom where Bellwether was supposed to have her appeal. They must have planned to bust her out."

"I don't think so, sir… look at these." Moon showed him another large sheet. It was a schematic of the mall's ground floor, with a route drawn out in green. Bogo recognized the starting point as one of the more inconspicuous staff entrances. The line stopped at a stairway close to the entrance.

"It goes to the next floor, sir." Moon showed him the schematic of the second floor. The line carried on from the stairway through the staff's corridor, all the way to a generic boutique store situated close to the mall's main entrance. The window in the staff room was circled.

"Then there's this." Moon's tone was lower as he showed Bogo the final sheet. It was expertly hand-drawn map of the mall, the courthouse and the street in between. There was a red line stretching from the boutique's window to the front steps of the Superior Court.

Bogo glared at the empty weapon case as he put the pieces together. "So that's it. That's what happened. They never intended to attack the mall. Their plan was to assassinate Bellwether once she arrived at the courthouse."

"Only someone massacred them instead." Rhinowitz chuckled darkly. "Damn, karma's a real-"

"HE WASN'T SUPPOSED TO SURVIVE!" Gruff howled.

Moon peered down at the goat. "What's he talking about, sir?"
Bogo heard the distant sound of approaching sirens. "We'll have to leave that for the ZBI to find out. All we can do now is keep him alive long enough to get answers."

"You've…" Gruff cringed. "You've got to get me out of here before he comes back!"

"Who, Gruff?" Bogo raised his voice. "Who is going to come back?"

"He… he's coming for me! He's coming for all of us!"

"Who, Gruff?"

"He's after Veltro members! You have to stop him!" Gruff's eyes rolled back as he passed out.

"Gruff?! Stay with me! Gruff!"

"Bors, Hoyst, stay here and secure this camp. Make sure this badger's not hiding anything else from us." Woolworth said. The two boars immediately started searching the tent.

"Hey! Get your filthy hooves off my stuff!"

Honey started towards them, but Nick held her back. "Leave it. You've gotten into enough trouble."

They started to walk, leaving the two boars behind for the time being. Honey was still shooting dark looks behind them as they trudged through the snow, likely convinced that they were tearing the place up even more than the costumed psycho did. Nick kept looking forward. He would never say it to her face, but Honey had no right to be angry. She shouldn't be here, and the sooner they got her out, the better.

They reached the main road, close to the empty car that made them remember Ombidia. Judy turned to Honey. "Honey, have you seen a bison named Simon Ombidia? We have reason to believe the psycho took him."

Honey shook her head. "Nope. May God rest his soul if that whacko got to him."

It was barely three in the afternoon, but the sky was beginning to darken. They needed to get Honey to her truck then get back to the estate. "Where's the truck?" Fangerson asked.

"In this old road I found when I was driving up here. You know, the one our ancestors took to get to the cathedral."

Woolworth stopped and whirled on the badger. "You found the cathedral?!"

"Yeah, so? What, didn't you know where it is?"

Woolworth glared daggers. "No."

"Seriously?" Honey burst out laughing at the same time Nick and Judy pinched the bridge of their noses.

"Honey, just stop." Judy muttered.

As her laughter subsided Honey's grin turned into a sneer. "Elgen Casel doesn't know where his family's own cathedral is, but his arch-enemy Veltro does?"

Nick looked up sharply. "Veltro?"
"I saw them sneaking around the outside of the cathedral the other day, trying to get in. Their camp's a coupla miles from here, why don't you go bother them for a change?"

Woolworth and Judy exchanged troubled looks. The ram pulled out his radio. "You better not be pulling the wool over our eyes."

"I'm not lying. You'll find the proof on the camera."

Judy pulled open the screen in the camera's side and quickly found the film. Woolworth and Nick looked over her shoulder as they watched the footage. Honey must have been perched in one of the trees when she shot the footage, as she had a high angle on the black clothed mammals prowling around an ancient looking stone building. From what little they could see of the cathedral itself, it must be magnificent.

"You seem like the military type." Fangerson was seething, but it wasn't Honey he was furious at. "Do you have co-ordinates on the camp?"

Honey puffed her chest. "Darn right I do."

Woolworth and Fangerson's radios suddenly crackled to life.

"Sir, come in!"

Woolworth frowned at the urgency in Bors' voice. "Received. What's the situation?"

Along with the faint static, Nick thought he heard popping sounds. "Sir, we're not alone out here! Find that truck and pick us up ASAP! Over!"

"What? Who's out there? Over!"

"Multiple hostiles! Looks like Veltro, sir! Over!"

Suddenly Nick realized what the popping was. "Oh crap." This was the last thing he wanted to deal with. Judging from the look on Judy's face, she felt the same way. They were armed with tranq darts, and from the sounds of it, the 'multiple hostiles' were using bullets.

Woolworth looked just as vexed as he turned to Fangerson. "Fangerson, go on ahead with the badger! Find that truck and meet us at the main road!" He turned his attention back to the radio. "Copy that! Are you still at the camp? Over!"

"Yeah, but we're pinned-" The gunfire was cut off by another sound much like a firework bang. "What the hell?"

"Come in! What happened? Over!"

"Some kind of explosion where the hostiles are situated! It's like… what the hell is that?"

"Come in! What is going on?"

"It's… it's like blue mist!" There was an ominous pause. As they waited in the tense silence, Nick noticed that the afternoon light was dimmer than ever. Before long those without night vision would have to use flashlights. Bors responded just as Nick finished that thought. "Sir… I hear savages."

Now that was the last thing they needed.

Woolworth swore. "We're on our way, just hang in there! Out!"
The Forest of Fear

Nick had learned a lot from the Night Howler Incident, one of them being that sheep weren't all the cotton-candy pushovers he'd thought they were. That made it easier for his respect for Woolworth to grow as the ram effortlessly began dishing out orders.

"Fangerson, you and Honey find that truck and wait for us on this spot! Tranq anyone walking on all fours!" He turned to Nick and Judy. "Alright, it's gonna be a straight shot to the camp. We'll pick up Bors and Hoyst then head back here on the double. Wilde, you're on point. Hopps, you stick with him. I'll take the rear and cover you. Move out!"

"Come on, Mohawk, shift it!" Fangerson yanked Honey back by the collar to get her moving as they crossed the road and into the trees. Nick hoped she wouldn't do something crazy.

As for him and his teammates, they took off right back the way they came, the last direction he wanted to take. It was so dark now that Nike had to use his superior night vision to ensure they were taking the right route. It was colder, too, the snow nearly unbearable to his bare paws. He would be wearing socks tonight.

They stopped by a massive fallen tree they had passed twice before when they heard the sound of distant gunfire. The radio called for attention. Bors sounded out of breath. "Sir, the camp's overrun! We're making our way to you, over!"

"Bors, is that gunfire?" Woolworth looked up sharply when they heard more gunfire. "I thought you said they've gone savage!"

"We lost our dart guns, but we got our hands on some of the enemy's weapons!"

"They're not shooting to kill, are they?!" Nick didn't look at Judy, but she sounded appalled.

Woolworth scowled. "Those terrorists may have information the ZBI could use. Do not shoot to kill unless you have to. Over."

There was curse on the other end. "Copy that. Shooting seems to scare them off for the most part, anyway. Over."

"Remember the downed big tree we passed on the way to the camp? Head in that direction. Hopps and Wilde will meet you midway. Out." Woolworth lowered the radio and glared down at the smaller mammals. "You heard me! Go!"

"Wait, what about you?" Nick glared back.

Woolworth held up his rifle. "I'll be right here to cover you. Now move!"

"Come on, Nick!" Judy gave a brief tug of Nick's arm before taking off, the reluctant fox following.

They moved quickly through the pines, Nick moving in front of Judy so he could lead the way and they wouldn't have to attract attention by breaking out the flashlights. As they ran, Nick wondered how Woolworth was planning to provide cover. Maybe he had a pair of night vision goggles handy, just like the ones Judy were putting on right now-

"Where the hell did you get those?" Nick stared at the abnormal looking accessory on his partner's face.
"Best birthday present ever." Judy's furry pink mouth smiled beneath the goggles.

"What idiot coughed up the cash to buy you that thing?"

Judy smirked. "You did, Nick."

"… Fair enough." Nick muttered. He was embarrassed, but at least it wasn't some smoldering, rich schmuck. "Wasn't that the year you got me that birthday hamper?"

"The one with the Hopps' famous blueberry pie, apple cider and stuffed chicken? Yes. Yes it was."

There was more gunfire, closer now. Judging from the distance, they'd meet with the two boars in less than two minutes. Nick stopped along with Judy, taking a moment to listen. Aside from the periodic gunfire, there was the sound of his own breathing. Sighing from Judy as she caught her breath. A slight swish from her black-tipped ears as they swiveled, also listening. The snow and twigs softly crunching beneath their feet. Nick came to realize that was it. Without so much as a breeze, the forest was completely silent. No tweeting of birds. No chirping of insects. It was as if the forest itself was completely dead. Sure it was the middle of winter, but it shouldn't normally be this quiet.

Back in the mall, the Nighthowler serum had swept through like a plague. It had turned some mad and scared the rest away, leaving the building for the most part as silent as the grave. And now it had happened again. Whatever disaster had occurred back at the camp had scared off the wildlife. Perhaps on some level they were afraid of turning out like the Veltro terrorists that had somehow fallen victim to their own weapon. Nick was sure as hell afraid. He sniffed the air. He smelled pine, dirt and a tiny hint of blood, but mercifully nothing strange enough to be Nighthowlers.

Judy picked up her radio. "Bors, Hoyst, come in. What's your location?"

There was more gunfire. "Hoyst's hurt bad! I can move him, but ETA's gonna be at least two minutes! Over!"

Judy's brows knitted together when they saw a distant flash that could be the firing of a gun. "We can see you. Keep moving! Out!"

"No, wait! We heard something up ahead. I think they're heading for you!"

Nick groaned. "Just one thing after another, isn't it?"

Judy being Judy forsook complaining for action and lifted her dart gun. "Nick, stay with me!" She focused her aim on the direction of the gunshots. As they grew closer, they heard the sound of bellowing and growling. The forest was coming alive again, but in the worst way possible. "I'll cover this direction. You watch my back in case they move around us!"

"Yes, sir, Hopps, sir!"

"Just do it!"

Nick turned his back on Judy and surveyed the area for signs of savages, at the same time wondering what could have happened.

The boars had said something about an explosion of blue mist. That meant the explosion of a Nighthowler weapon, just like what Bogo had found in the Van of Death. But the real question here was how. Was it an accidental detonation, like a misfiring bazooka? Or had someone taken the weapon for themselves and turned it on its makers? If the weapon belonged to Veltro, then they'd
almost certainly been plotting an attack on the Casel Estate. But if that were true, then why did they risk blowing the whole plan by launching an assault on a small team of security guards who could all too easily send a warning to the estate? Nick shook his head. There were dangerous fanatics and there were idiot fanatics, but clearly these fanatics were dangerous idiots.

There was a shriek from Nick's side, from a cluster of bushes. Suddenly a dark shape covered in spikes erupted from the darkness and knocked the two cops apart.

"Nick!" Judy screamed when the maddened porcupine in black went after her first and dragged her down. In her maddened state she had completely forgotten her quills and the machine pistol dangling from a strap around her body in favor of tearing at the bunny's uniform with her claws and teeth. If Nick shot her while she was above Judy, the beast could fall on her quills first. He charged forward and grabbed the porcupine's arm, one of the few body parts not covered in quills, and yanked her away. The machine pistol fell from the mammal as she spun into a tree. With Judy clear Nick took the shot, taking the porcupine out with one dart.

"Carrots!" Nick rushed over to Judy as she was propping herself up on her elbows. Her uniform was ripped all over, with bloody scratches here and there.

"Are you okay?" Nick asked frantically, searching for bite marks as he reloaded. If the porcupine had sunken her large, powerful teeth in the bunny, he was dragging her straight to Zootopia General Hospital.

"Yeah, but I lost my gun." Judy winced and rubbed at the bloodiest scratch on her arm. Her jaw dropped suddenly. "Incoming!"

Nick spun around and fired wildly at the bigger shape rushing at him. By pure luck the dart found its mark, bringing down the savage wildebeest.

Heart pounding, Nick turned back to Judy and knelt down. "Did she bite you?"

"No, but she got pretty close. I owe you one, Nick." Judy's ears swiveled as she corrected her lopsided goggles. "I think that's all of them. Keep an eye out for Bors and Hoyst. I need to find my dart gun."

"Okay, boss."

While Judy started to search the snow-covered ground for her weapon, Nick reloaded again and aimed in the direction of the gunfire. He could see more flashes. The boars were getting closer, and so were their pursuers. He could hear both getting closer by the second.

"Nick!" Judy hissed suddenly. "I was wrong. There's something coming!"

"Where?"

"My ears aren't that accurate!"

"Then use your fingers and point!"

Judy pointed and then shrieked. Nick heard a rustling behind him and spun round, firing frantically at an even taller horned figure that burst out from between two pine trees. He fell on his back and rolled under a propped fallen tree trunk. He rolled back to his feet on the other side, barely dodging the claws that raked the ground beneath the trunk where he'd just been.

Nick's blood ran cold. Not him again.
As the supposed Hound of the Casels straightened, Nick whirled and ran. He dug around for another dart as he went, hoping to God that the lunatic would pursue him and leave Judy be. He heard a *ratatat* and saw bits of bark explode from a tree in front of him.

*Oh crap that's a GUN-*

The ground beside him erupted, stopping him for a fateful second. In an instant something struck him in the gut and knocked him to the ground. He gasped in agony and looked up to see the Hound above him. His eyes were wild as he silently aimed a massive assault rifle right at his face.

*Sorry, Judy,* was Nick's only thought.

*Ratatatatat!*

The Hound recoiled with a snarl and clutched his chest. He turned his glare to Judy, who was standing a few meters away with a smoking machine pistol in her undersized paws. Nick couldn't see her eyes due to the goggles, but her gaping mouth made her horror clear.

"Hey!" Woolworth came charging through the trees, taking aim with his rifle and firing. The dark struck the Hound in the shoulder but failed to knock him out. Still holding his bullet-ridden chest, the Hound gave Nick one burning look before fleeing into the darkness.

Nick scrambled to his feet and raced over to the frozen Judy, who had turned her gaze down to the weapon she was holding.

"Oh gosh… what have I done…"

"Carrots?" Nick bent down to her eye level.

"I saw that freak heading for you and I followed." Woolworth growled. "Are you two alright?"

Judy shuddered and dropped the machine pistol. "I… I didn't think… J-just picked it up… thought it was m-my dart gun… oh my gosh…"

Nick's heart sank. "Oh, Carrots."

Bors came barreling in at the moment, supporting Hoyst. The second boar was bleeding from a gore wound in his thigh, but he wasn't at death's door yet.

"Back to the road, now!" Woolworth shouted.

Nick grabbed the stunned Judy and ran, keeping Bors and Hoyst in front of them while Woolworth brought up the rear. Behind them the sounds of the remaining savages grew louder and more insistent.

Nick turned and fired, his shot going wide. Dark shapes of all sizes flitted through the silhouetted trees. At least two of them were rhinos. Another had the long mane of a horse. It just goes to show how little the Nighthowler madness truly imitated true primal instinct that they all ran toward the threat rather than away from it. Nick continued running, the sound of another dart gun firing hitting his ears as he reloaded. He had no idea hippos could be so fast.

Nick spun and fired again, hearing a feral grunt from one of their pursuers before they could catch up to Woolworth. Woolworth yelled into his radio, demanding where Fangerson and Honey were with the truck. Nick didn't hear the answer.
Bors and Hoyst spun round and aimed. "Covering fire!" They fired at the same time, deliberately missing with their machine guns. They turned back and continued running once the others caught up.

_How many of these things are there?_

Judy turned to fire, dropping on one knee to properly aim the oversized sidearm she'd borrowed from Woolworth. She fired, hitting what sounded like a smaller mammal. Hoyst turned and fired again, peppering the ground behind the others. "Just frickin' leg it!" Bors dragged his fellow boar after him.

Those savages were fast, faster than Nick could have ever imagined. As he turned and fired again, missing by a long shot, he saw another rhino join the chase. There was a good chance they'd run out of darts.

"Keep going!" He dragged Judy up and took the big gun, trading it for his smaller sized weapon. Judy fired and brought down the horse before grabbing Nick's arm and running. Nick fired and hit one of the rhinos. It bellowed and kept running. Nick dug around for another dart and came up empty pawed. _Crap!_

"The road!" Bors roared up ahead. Nick could see it through the thinning trees. His heart leapt, especially when he felt Judy slap a pack of spare darts into his empty paw. Lung burning as he sucked in the frigid air, he reloaded and fired behind him. He heard a sound like a bear, but it was a hippo that he had hit.

One by one they barreled through the edge of the forest and onto the road. Nick's foot hit a frozen puddle and he slid into the middle of the road. He saw the truck first, recognizing it as Honey's, as it sped toward him.

"Stop!" Nick threw an arm out, squinting his eyes against the headlights. The bulky camouflaged rustbucket screeched to a halt right before his open paw.

The driver's side door flew open and Honey's wide-eyed face stared down at him. "Get in the back! Hurry!"

Nick spotted Fangerson in the passenger seat as he stood up. The wolf threw himself out and raised his weapon to provide covering fire as they all ran for the truck.

Judy reached the rear bed first, leaping up to bring the door down so Bors could hoist Hoyst into it. They piled in beneath the netted back cover, Judy jumping in last and helping Nick to slam the door shut.

Honey stamped on the pedal just as something struck the side of the truck. The vehicle took off, reaching naught to fifty in seconds. The bellows and shrieks of their pursuers grew fainter the further they sped down the road. By the time they passed Ombidia's empty car, the forest was silent once more.

They'd made it. Bors and Woolworth patted each other on the back before tending to Hoyst's leg. Fangerson relaxed in his seat up front, muttering a quiet thanks to the stony faced Honey.

Nick silently wrapped an arm around the bunny beside him. There were no words to describe how grateful he was that once again they'd both escaped with their lives.

"Could he be alive?" Judy meekly asked. The truck slowed down when they caught sight of the front gates.

"What?" Nick asked back.
"Could that guy be alive?"

Nick tensed. "He almost killed us, Carrots. Why do you care?"

His anger evaporated when Judy sniffled. "I didn't want to kill him. I didn't mean to."

Nick chewed on his lip. "That machine pistol was tiny. The wounds might be superficial, you don't know."

Judy wiped her eyes. "I hit him in the lung. I saw it. I-I knew as a cop I was probably going to use deadly force one day. But I never meant…"

"It was him or me, Judy." Nick wrapped his other arm around Judy and hugged her tighter. "Him or me. Ten bucks says Bogo'll tell you the same."

When the gates opened, Woolworth jumped out first and minced no words when he told the guards what had happened. They dropped Fangerson, Hoyst and Bors off at the guardhouse, with Honey as their prisoner. Nick didn't like his friend being behind bars, but they couldn't bring her into the mansion. After what happened to Ombidia, they sure as hell weren't going to let her drive back through the forest on her own either. Judy declined to go with them despite her own injuries, citing the scratches as superficial.

Woolworth stopped the truck beside the black cars and got out along with Nick and Judy. "I'm going to talk to Mr. Casel. You two get some rest. You've earned it."

They nodded silently. Once back in their rooms, they found that neither of them could bear to spend the rest of the evening cooped up like hospital invalids. They needed a distraction, a fun one, especially Judy. They needed a case that didn't involve near death experiences or savage mammals.

The camera evidence could wait. They came here for a party, and they were going see it through.

Nick showered and changed back into his costume before entering Judy's room to find her in a white tank top and applying bandages to some her scratches. With the blood washed away and the wounds cleaned, they didn't look as bad as they did before. "You're going to need help with that one." He pointed to the one on her upper arm. Judy was a certified first aider, but she was incapable of bandaging arms with one paw.

Judy didn't protest, merely holding out a roll. Nick wrapped up her arm, never taking his eyes off of the adorably crestfallen look on her face. Only time would tell if she would need counseling after her mistake with the gun, but he would be there for her if she did. He would always be there.

He stepped outside and waited for Judy to change into her own costume. At some point the butler passed by and informed Nick that the eighth challenge was currently taking place in the ballroom if he and Judy wished to participate.

When Judy emerged, there was a smile on her face. It looked genuine, but Nick had been hustled by her before. "You feeling okay?"

"Not fully." Judy admitted. "But I think I will be eventually. You were right. It was either him or you…." Her fingers briefly fiddled with the lily clip Nick had gifted her. "… and you mean everything to me."

Nick's heart fluttered, but he could only manage a small thank you before they made their way to the ballroom, stopping outside the biggest set of doors they had seen yet.
"What do you think the challenge is this time?" Judy flicked open a peach colored fan and started fanning herself.

"Whatever it is, I doubt it'll be anything as exciting as what we've been through tonight." Nick smirked as he opened the door.

They were greeted by blaring Christmas music and the amplified tones of an amateur duet.

"Rockin' around the Christmas tree
At the Christmas party hop
Mistletoe hung where you can see
Every couple tries to stop..."

The ballroom was reminiscent of the ballroom from *Beauty and the Wildebeest*, but with silver architecture and a majestic Christmas tree beside a dark grand piano. On a stage at one side of the massive room, Alec and Christine were dancing and belting their hearts out before their friends and family with wireless microphones.

"You will get a sentimental feeling when you hear
Voices singing let's be jolly
DECK the halls with boughs of holly..."

"Hey guys!" Benjamin came running over. "You're just in time! The two teams that get the least lyrics wrong will win the clue!"

Nick and Judy looked up at the stage. Nick felt Judy wrap her arm around his. He looked down and saw her eager expression. If she needed a fun distraction, this would do it.

"Rockin' around the Christmas tree
Have a happy holiday
Everyone dancin' merrily
In the new old fashioned waaaaaaaayyy..."

Nick smiled and looked back at Benjamin. "We're not too late to sing *White Christmas*, are we?"
Alec was ready with a copy of the song's lyrics and a pen to note down any mistakes. Judy gently swayed with the music, gazing into the glistening green eyes of her partner as he began to sing the penultimate verse.

"I'm... dreaming... of a white... Christmas..."

"Just like the ones I used to know." Judy smiled up at him above her microphone.

"Where the treetops glisten..."

"And children listen..."

"To hear sleigh bells in the snow..."

Judy spared a glance at their audience. Benjamin was swaying with them with a massive grin on his chubby face. To Judy's joy Gazelle was bobbing her head, looking like she too was enjoying the show. Edward, Alec and Christine seemed to like it at least. As for Carlos, he was still AWOL. Unlike Ombidia he wasn't missing presumed dead, but rather holed up in the bar away from the others, muttering about one of Lake's films. Judy's smile faltered. Some time soon, perhaps after the party is over, they were going to have to break the news to Gazelle.

"I'm... dreaming... of a white... Christmas..." Nick gave her paw a gentle tug. Judy plastered her smile back on for the final duet.

"With every Christmas card I write..."

"May your days be merry and bri-i-i-ight..." Judy sang with him, vaguely aware that they were still holding paws.

"And may all... your... Christmases... be... whiiiiite..."

They parted and stepped down to unanimous applause. The best was saved for last as Gazelle and Benjamin took the stage and began to sing It Feels Like Christmas. As Gazelle's flawless tones filled the ballroom, Edward inched himself beside Judy and Nick. "Not bad." He whispered.

"I'd say the same to you, but we were sorta late for your turn." Nick whispered back. "What was it you and Lake sang?"

"I saw mommy kissing Santa Claws. Total classic." Edward looked Judy up and down as he noticed the scratches and dressings. "What the hell happened to you?"

"It's a long story. Actually..." She cursed herself and pulled her phone out. "I have to call the chief. I should have done this sooner, I'm sorry. I'll be fine, Nick. I'm just going to tell him what happened. Just stay here." She added when Nick offered to come with her.

"Sure." Edward looked nervous, but he didn't stop Judy from making her way to the exit. She stopped just outside the ballroom, where it was quiet enough that she could make the call.

"Hopps? What's the matter now?" Bogo answered. "Unless it's something bigger than the recent apprehension of Mr. Gruff, I don't care."

"Sir, there's been another savage attack."
There was a pause as Bogo took this in. "You're joking."

"No. That's something Nick would do," Judy tapped her foot. "It happened in the forest some miles from the estate. Some Veltro terrorists ambushed us while we were looking for Ombidia, but then they were attacked by their own weapon. We all got away, thank goodness. I don't know how many there are, but they're still on the loose."

"Damn it all to hell. What do you mean you were looking for Ombidia?"

Judy took a deep breath. "Ombidia left early on business without telling us, but it looks like he was attacked on the road. There was blood. A lot of it. I'm not sure he's still alive, sir."

Judy heard a sound like a fist on a desk on the other end. After Bogo calmed down, she told him everything else, including Honey's unexpected involvement and Veltro's intriguing interest in the cathedral. She saved her shooting of the masked lunatic for last, her heart pounding as she recounted the attack and her grievous mistake.

"It was him or Wilde. Don't beat yourself up for saving his tail."

Judy made a mental note to pay Nick ten dollars before the end of the night. "You said you apprehended Gruff, sir?"

"Yes, but someone got to him before we did. He's a mess, but he should recover enough to tell the ZBI what they need to know."

"Good."

"Hopps, listen very carefully. Gruff said that whoever attacked him was targeting Veltro members. That means it may be the same mammal who turned those terrorists savage. So keep a close eye on Lake Casel. A very close eye. Got that?"

Judy rubbed her temple. "Should I tell her? She needs to know."

"Permission granted. Then tell her that if she accepts, we can take her into protective custody tomorrow. We're not pressing charges. It's for her own safety."

"I'll run it by her, sir."

"Good. Leave the investigation to the ZBI. You two see what you can do about Ombidia, but do not act without informing me first."

"Yes sir."

"And one last thing. About Ombidia. If he left the estate without informing you first, then there was nothing you could have done. So don't blame yourself for what happened."

He hung up before Judy could thank him.

When Judy returned to the ballroom, the final song was over and the results were in; not one of them had made a mistake in their lyrics. Alec was very happy to declare all of them winners and present them with the eighth clue; a collage of photographs of the possessions the guests had arrived with. There was Judy's phone, Nick's coat, Gazelle's frosted cape, Benjamin's bag of sweets, Lake's bracelet, Carlos' black jacket, Edward's wallet and Christine's jeweled tiara for her Aurora costume.

"Make of that what you will." Alec placed the collage on the piano seat. "The ninth challenge will
take place in the library in fifteen minutes." He kissed Christine before presumably setting off to make sure everything was ready.

While their fellow guests passed the time in the bar, Judy and Nick took that time to pay Elgen Casel a visit. He was still at his desk in the study, but now he had a bottle of whiskey and a full glass in front of him. The only other sign that he was deeply disturbed by Woolworth's report was the wrinkling in his nose.

"Mr. Casel?" Judy asked tentatively.

"Woolworth told me what happened in the forest." Elgen was rig as he took a long sip. "And what happened to Ombidia. Rest assured that I've got every available mammal in the forest looking for him."

"What about the savage mammals?"

"They're also being taken care of. I've given orders to dart every mammal they find and imprison them in the guardhouse until they can be transported to the city for treatment. I can't say I'm sorry that they'll be cured."

"Me neither, sir." Nick admitted. "And Honey?"

"Being interrogated as we speak. And before you kick off…” He snapped when Nick scowled and opened his mouth. "They're not doing anything to hurt her. They're not thugs. You see, that map she provided was falsified."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that the supposed location of the cathedral on the map is a lie. We're trying to coerce its true location out of her, but without success. Apparently she doesn't like authority." He spat.

"Let me talk to her, then." Nick said. "She's probably scared that you'll kill her once you get what you want out of her or something."

Elgen rolled his eyes and drank some more whiskey. "Where does she think she is, Burrow Fifty-one?"

"Cripes on a stick, I don't know how many times she's tried to get in there." Nick blinked and gulped. "I probably shouldn't have said that out loud."

"I have a hearing range of five city blocks and have no idea what my partner just said." Judy spoke directly to Elgen. "Mr. Casel, he convinced Honey to cooperate before, he can do it again."

Elgen sighed deeply. "Do whatever you want to, just don't fail. I'm not done!" He snapped when they turned to leave. "I must insist that you wait until tomorrow before telling the other guests about your… excursion."

Judy's eyes narrowed, but he wasn't asking them to cover it up completely so she chose to hear him out. "And why should we delay something like that? We have to warn them what's out there."

"Are you aware of how much work my son has put into setting up this murder mystery, Miss-"

"Officer."

"Excuse me?"
"It's Officer Hopps."

"Alright… Officer… as I was saying, Alec put a lot of effort into setting up this party on such short notice after recent events forced me to cancel my original plans for this Christmas. He actually cancelled his own plans to do this? Have you asked yourselves why yet?" They shook their heads. "Alec has big plans for tonight. Very big plans. I ask for his sake that you don't spoil it."

Judy was more than a little curious when she and Nick arrived in the library. On one of the blood red couches were Alec and Christine, doing… when Judy realized what they were doing, her face heated up and looked away. Nick merely smirked and cleared his throat. As if they were attached by ropes and pulleys to opposite ends of the couch, both boyfriend and girlfriend flew apart. "Guys! Way too early!" Christine gasped. While she quickly composed herself and straightened her tiara, Alec seemed torn between sorting out his disheveled pirate coat and looking for his missing appendage.

"Your hook's under the coffee table, buddy."

"Thank you!" Alec found the hook and put it back on. "But you're still early, guys!"

"Shall we come back later and let you get back to it?" Nick asked.

"Nick!" Judy covered her face and lightly smacked his arm.

"No! No, we're good now." Christine moved to Alec's side and sat down prim and proper. "We're good. Why don't you read a book?"

"No thanks, we're fine." Judy declined, even as her eyes pored over the hundreds and hundreds of books that lined the walls of the library. There was an entire shelf on recipes that her mother and her Zootubing twin brothers would probably kill to get their paws on.

"Well, the challenge will begin in two minutes so you might as well have a seat."

Judy and Nick sat down and were treated to a tray of tea and biscuits from the butler. The other guests soon joined them as they entered the room and sat down. Judy stopped in the middle of stirring her tea when she saw the looks on their faces. All four of them looked livid.

"Is Carlos still not coming?" Alec frowned when he saw their faces. "Okay, what happened?"

Edward drummed his hooves on the couch's arm. "He's guzzled."

"What?" Judy asked, even though she already knew the answer.

"From the sounds of it, what kind of underwear she's wearing, among other things." Edward said. "I
don't care what he's talking about, but that had better be a blackmail charge right there, officers."

Nick stirred his own tea. "We need evidence to arrest him."

"He mentioned a DVD. He was so drunk he got stupid."

"Well, that's different."

"Good. Nobody threatens my sister and gets away with it." Edward punched his hoof. "If he resists, just say the word and I'll lay him flat."

"Only if we say the word." Judy pointed at him waringly.

"I think it's safe to say he's officially off the case." Nick put his smirk back on. "Look, let's deal with him tomorrow when he's not wasted. Alec, I believe we still have to solve Ombidia's murder." He dropped the smirk again and glanced at Judy, who felt a sting in her gut as she remembered the bloody black car. She was dreading the moment she'd have to tell Gazelle about her manager.

Alec cleared his throat and stood up while Nick whispered a suggestion into Judy's ear. She nodded in agreement. With one hoof entwined with Christine's, he began to speak. "Well, it's been a long two days, and they'd not gone the way I'd hoped. Fortunately it will all be over soon. I have recently a discovery that could be the key to solving this murder once and for all. Somewhere in this very room…" He paused with an enigmatic grin. "Is the entrance to a secret passage!"

"Get outta town!" Judy yelled before she could stop herself. Nick stifled his chuckles as the bunny cringed and gulped down the rest of her now lukewarm tea.

"It's true." Alec looked over the surprised and excited looks on his guests' faces. "It's no big deal. My mother told me about it. It's just a second entrance to the basement that was covered up when the library was renovated around a hundred years ago. But we have reason to believe that the killer has used this secret entrance to conceal a crucial piece of evidence. You find this passage, you get one step closer to solving the murder."

"Wait, how come mother didn't tell us the entrance was here?" Lake asked, frowning along with Edward.

"The passage was covered up long before she came to live here, so she actually has no idea where it is." Alec tried to pick up a biscuit with his hook but only succeeded in breaking the thing in half. "But I looked over the old plans for this mansion, and I believe that the entrance is hidden somewhere in this library. You see, I found this along with the plans." Alec procured an aged piece of paper with swirling handwriting from his pocket. "It appears to be a series of clues to find the second entrance so it wouldn't be forgotten."

"Wait a sec." Nick held a paw up. "Are you saying that you don't know where the entrance is, either?"

Alec shook his head. "Nope, and it's up to you guys to find it for me. You're all working together on this, so no trying to trip each other up." He put the paper away, set eight other papers down on the table and returned to the couch. "And your search starts now."

Judy was the first to reach the table and snatch her copy. Heart pounding, she hopped away from the table and read the first clue.

"Wait a minute, the handwriting on these clues are different." Nick spoke.
"That's because I wrote the rest of them myself." Alec replied.

"The rest of them?"

"The clue I'm holding is the original and the last. To earn it, you have to find and solve the other eight."

"What?!"

Alec crossed his arms and looked smug. "You didn't think it was going to be that easy, did you?"

Nick grumbled as he strode to Judy's side and started looking over her shoulder. "Nick, can't you just pick up your own paper?"

"What's the point? We're going to end up partners either way."

Judy smiled, shook her head and returned to the clue. "At the throne room of Casel Manor, the unseen compass points to the star."

Nick stared at the clue for two seconds before coming up with the answer; the study. They took off like a shot, followed closely by the others. Alec had convinced his father to take a break, so the study was empty when they got there. Alec leaned against the door and watched as his family and guests looked around for a compass. "Hey, is this it?" Christine was standing before the desk. There was a large paper on the surface with an image of an old fashioned compass. The others gathered around the desk, taking care not to disturb anything on it. The paper was taped down, and there were no letters to indicate north, south, east or west.

"So we have to figure out which way points north?" Edward asked.

"What makes you think we need to look north, Belch?" Lake asked.

"The clue says to point to the star. I just figured it meant the North Star."

Judy crossed her legs and read the clue thoroughly. "'Unseen compass.' Do you think the letters may be concealed somehow?"

"I don't think, I know." Nick picked up a small metal device that looked out of place on the desk. "Because I don't remember this UV light being here before."

He pressed the switch and held the UV light over the paper compass. Sure enough bright white letters emerged under the purple aura. The large letter N hovered over the point aiming at a star shaped metal wall decoration, which Lake quickly discovered had another piece of paper hiding behind it.

"Above the cushions, the reclining hands rise at noon to grasp enlightenment." She looked at Alec with a smirk. "You really know your way with words, don't you, my dear brother?"

"I'm better at finding my way around chocolate, but thank you."

Nick peered at the paper. "It's the clock on the lounge, isn't it?"

Alec stiffened and glared at the fox. "Why don't you give the others a chance to figure it out next time, okay?"

Nick winked and gave him the OK sign. "Aye aye, captain."
Alec pursed his lips. "Smartypants."

Judy lightly tapped his ear with her fan. "Nick, he will split your bones with his hook."

The fox clapped a paw over his heart. "My dear, to die would be an awfully big adventure."

When Edward moved the cuckoo clock hands in the lounge up twelve, the little door opened and revealed the next clue, which he soon guessed led to the kitchen. They arrived to find Selke sitting alone at the counter, dining on what looked like the leftovers of yesterday's meal with a large glass of red wine. It didn't escape Judy's notice when Benjamin moved himself to the back of the group.

"Mom!" Alec swallowed. "I wasn't expecting you to be here."

"Oh, Alec, honey." Selke set down her fork and drink. "I forgot you hid one of your puzzles in here. I'm not in the way, am I?" Judy had to give the woman credit for at least treating her children with respect.

"No, it's okay. We'll be out your hair once they find the next clue. Enjoy your meal, mom."

Nick sat down in an empty wooden chair. "So we don't disturb your mother for too long, how about I give the answer for a change?" Alec sighed and gave him the go-ahead. Nick cracked his fingers.

"Obviously the 'oriental treasure chest' is that vase over there."

Christine strode over and very carefully reached inside the vase decorated with plums and Chinese calligraphy. "Huh, so it is." She unrolled the paper and read it out loud. "Among flowers of red, yellow and blue sits a flower of papyrus."

Nick snapped his fingers. "Origami in the conservatory!"

"Shut up!" Alec hissed.

Edward crossed his arms and drummed his fingers as he glared down at the fox. "You know what, two can play at that game. I bet I can guess the next clue before you can."

"And I bet you'll burst a blood vessel trying. What're the stakes?"

Edward bent down to look more intimidating. "One of our maids is a fox, just like you. She's on vacation right now, but we still have her uniform here at the house. If I get the most clues by the end of this challenge, then you have to spend the final challenge wearing that uniform."

Nick grinned evilly. "If I win, you have to spend the final challenge dressed as Tarzan."

"Too bad, Wilde. I don't have the loincloth."

Nick's eyes narrowed further. "That's not my problem."

Edward stopped drumming. "Alright. It's a deal."

"Oh, Edward, not again." Selke sighed.

When they travelled to the conservatory and inevitably found the origami flower hiding among the tiger lilies. Benjamin delicately unfolded the flower into the next clue. "In the silver chamber, seek the course of the crystal river."

While Nick tapped his chin and puzzled, Edward grinned and strode out. He came back faster than Nick could say 'it's called a hustle' with the clue in hoof. "If you'd paid a bit more attention to the
architecture, you'd know that the ballroom floor has a river pattern that led me to find this under the Christmas tree."

Nick snorted. "Yeah, it's still three-two to me. Catch up with me if you can."

Edward read the ballroom clue for two seconds. "To find your next cue, open the Sign of the Eight. The billiard room, duh. "We've got an old magic eight ball we use to hold the chalk. Am I right, little bro'?"

Alec was visibly chewing the corner of his mouth now. "Yes."

Edward bent down to look a stupefied Nick in the eye. "And that's three-three. You may be the slyest guy here, but I know the family home like the back of my hoof. Take back the lead, if you can."

As they filed out the room to retrieve the billiard room clue, Judy giggled at the adorably scared look on Nick's face and entwined her arm with his. "Don't worry, Slick. As much as I'd love to see you dressed like a character from Clawdo, that's not gonna happen. Not if I can help it."

Nick tilted his head at her. "Are you suggesting an alliance?"

Judy nodded. "Just trust me."

Nick's gaze travelled down her legs, his nervous expression slowly melting. "I always do, Carrots."

Judy looked back and forth from her legs to his face and started to feel hot under the collar. "Nick. Nick? Look at the eyes, not the legs."

Nick looked up sharply. The rest of his face was as cool as a cucumber, but his eyes were like saucers. "Don't tell Bogo."

Judy laughed. "I'm just messing with you. Come on, let's catch up with the others."

They reached the billiard room just as Edward was opening the magic eight ball. "Hold up!" Nick called. "Let me see it, too! Make it fair!"

"What about us?" Christine asked.

"This isn't about us anymore." Alec sat down and put one leg over the other. "Find a seat, this one could take a while."

Judy expected him to be proved wrong any second, but the longer Nick and Edward stared at the little piece of paper, the more pronounced became their scowls. "The hall?" They spoke. It sounded more like a question than a declaration.

For the next five minutes, their companions sat on the stairs and watched as Nick and Edward wandered around the room like bees in their search for the clue. Nick searched the umbrella stand, then passed by the front doors and turned the coat stand upside down. In the meantime Edward rummaged through the closet under the stairs until he emerged holding an oil painting the size of a dinner tray. The painting depicted King Arthur Penlion drawing the sword from the stone. "And that's three-four to me." He reached behind the painting. His triumphant smirk narrowed. He felt around the frame, but eventually gave up and shoved the painting back into the closet. "I don't understand!" He went back to reading the clue, while Nick's attention was drawn to something high
"Did you ever have a camera in here?" He pointed up at four tiny holes drilled in a square formation, as though something had once been fixed up there.

"As a matter of fact, we did." Lake said. "Mother had them put up after an attempted burglary a few years ago, but father objected to having cameras in the house. The cameras outside work just fine, anyway."

"Well?" Judy asked. "What's the clue?" They kept glaring at the paper. "Oh for Pete's sake..." She stepped down from the stairs and hopped up to snatch the paper from Edward's hoof.

"Hey!" He yelled, but she was already reading the clue aloud.

"In this hallowed hall, Excalibur rises above another fine mess." She grinned from ear to ear and turned to Nick. "Detective Wilde, is this the only hallowed hall?"

Nick stared at her for a few seconds before his entire face seemed to light up. He took off like a shot. Judy sat back down and waited for his return. Edward looked like he didn't know whether to stay or follow. When Nick returned, he had the clue in paw and his biggest smirk yet. "Three-four to me!"

"But where?!" Edward snapped.

"The little painting in the dining room, AKA the 'mess hall'. You remember, right, Mr. Casel? The one with the Lioness of the Lake raising Excalibur from the waters?"

"But isn't Excalibur the sword in the stone?"

"You pinhead!" Lake lightly clipped her brother's head. "Didn't you learn anything from grandfather? King Arthur received Excalibur after the sword in the stone was broken in his battle with Polarnore!"

Edward's mouth became a thin line. "Yeah, whatever. I guess you won that one fair and square, Wilde."

Gazelle giggled at his expression. "To be fair, I didn't know they were two different swords either. That doesn't make you an idiot."

Just when it seemed they were going to have to deal with another moody Casel, Gazelle's assurance seemed to do the trick. Edward perked up almost immediately. "I know. The game's not over yet, pal! Hurry up and read the next clue!"

Unfazed, Nick unrolled the clue "Six points. Eight points. Ten points. Of the three stars that stand in this next room, only the one with eight points hides the key."

Edward snapped his fingers and raced to the umbrella stand before Nick could blink. He yanked out the red and white umbrella with eight sides and unrolled the clue from the tube. "Four. Four. To me. It all comes down to this."

"Hold up." Alec stepped between them. "We should wait until we're back in the library before reading that one. And I want it to be a team effort this time."

"Got it." Edward turned to the group. "Lake, Chris, you're with me. Gazelle, you can pick whichever group you want."
"I'll stick with you, if that's alright." Gazelle replied, getting a grin from the elk-deer.

Alec did a double take. "Wait, that's not what I..." He paused when he saw Judy and Benjamin moving to Nick's side. "Oh, fine. Just don't get physical!"

Lake starting ascending the stairs. "I'll join you in a sec. I just need to powder my nose."

Judy frowned at her. There were two bathrooms on the first floor. "So do I. Nick, you'll be find without me, right?"

Nick watched Lake reach the top of the stairs. "Sure. Don't take too long."

Judy caught up to Lake around the corner from the stairs. "Lake, wait! What is on that DVD?"

Lake scowled down at her. "That is none of your concern."

"It's about Veltro, isn't it? Something you don't want us to see?"

"It's nothing to do with Veltro."

"Then why won't you tell me what's on it?"

"Shut up and get in the bedroom!"

Lake ushered the bunny into the nearest empty bedroom and locked the door behind her. "Look, remember what my brother said about us having cameras inside the house at one point? I checked the footage after they were taken down, and the camera in the lounge caught me kissing Lisa."

"You're having an affair?" Judy hissed.

"It was a one time thing! Besides you've seen what Carlos is like, can you blame me?" Lake snapped. "I threw the footage away, but apparently Carlos took it from the trash and put it on a disc." She slumped down in a cushioned chair. "And now he's trying to use it against me."

Judy looked into Lake's eyes. They were the eyes of a mammal remembering something dark and painful. Judy stepped toward her. "That's not all, is it? What else is on that disc?"

Lake tugged at the black choker of her Cinderella dress. "I can't."

"Lake, you and your family may be in danger. We found evidence in the forest and in the city that that lunatic is targeting Veltro members. If there is crucial evidence on that disc, we need to know."

Lake sucked in a deep breath and wiped her eyes. "I knew it. What happened in the maze wasn't a prank."

"No."

Lake pointed an accusatory finger. "Father told you to lie to us."

"We didn't want to cause a panic. We were going to tell you the truth when you were safe in the city, I swear."

"What did he do? Threaten to ruin your careers unless you kept your mouths shut?"

"Lake!" Judy shouted, stopping the elk-deer short. "What else is on that disc?"
Lake dug her fingers into her skirt and from the looks of it, her flesh as well. "A few years ago, a little before the house cameras were taken down, there was this… this monster. From the time we were kids, he made our lives hell."

Judy felt her stomach fill with ice water. "He abused you?"

"… Yes. Alec more than anyone. Probably was jealous of Alec's talent."

Judy gently put a paw on Lake's knee. "Did he hit you?"

"Only when he got angry. He was smarter than he looked. Always made sure he hit us where our parents couldn't see it." Her face contorted. "Other than that, he used his words. He ridiculed us every chance he got. Sometimes he'd play these sick pranks that made us think we were stupid or insane. He always… always made sure me and my brothers remembered that he was better than all of us put together. It got better for me and Edward after we moved out, but Alec… when he came back from Oxford and moved to the city, that scum did everything he could to keep Alec under his thumb. I did everything I could to keep him out of my life after I found my own place, so I had no idea. Neither did Edward. I don't know what I would have done if I'd known."

Judy had researched domestic abuse extensively for her police training, but she felt like she had to ask anyway. "Why didn't you say anything to your parents? Did he threaten you?"

"Yes. Among other things."

"So what happened?"

"Benjamin Clawhauser happened." Lake sniffed. "He moved into the apartment right next to Alec, so it was only a matter of time before him and that monster crossed paths. It was only a matter of time after that before he figured out what was going on. That monster got scared. He did everything he could to get him out of the way after I found my own place, so I had no idea. Neither did Edward. I don't know what I would have done if I'd known."

Judy looked Lake straight in her moistened eyes. If she was lying, she deserved a Foscar. "Lake, I'm so sorry."

"Be sorry for Alec. He got the worst of it. He only finished therapy last year."

"Who did that to you?"

"Unless you have undeniable proof that it's relevant to your case, I will not say his name."

"But it's obviously relevant to the disc."

"There was a camera in the study that caught Ben talking to father about the abuse." Lake's voice was rising now. "If Carlos shows that film and my family sees it, it will reopen twenty years of old wounds!" Lake returned to the door and unlocked it with fervor. "I have to get it back and destroy it!"

Judy rushed over and grabbed the hem of the silver dress. "Lake, stop! Don't do anything rash!"

They were both stopped by a hammering on the other side of the door. "Lake! I know you're in there!" It was Carlos, and he was irate.

Lake glared at the door. "What the hell do you want? My father's trust fund?"
There was more banging. "Where's the disc?!
Judy frowned. Lake burst out laughing. "Don't tell me you lost it already!"
"I know you took it! Where is it?"
"Hell if I know!"
"Don't think for a second that this changes anything! We're not getting a divorce!"
Lake was suddenly eerily calm. "We will once they find out about Lisa."
"Who?"
"The mammal on the film. Adultery is grounds for divorce, you know that more than anyone." Lake leaned against the door. "After I tell them about my affair, I can finally wash my hooves of you. Divorce settlement aside, you won't touch a cent of my father's fortune."

There was hollow laughter from the other side. "I know you're not alone in there, Lake. Whoever that is with her, you considered me a user before. But now you know who the true user is."

There were footsteps and a bang as Carlos stormed back to his own bedroom and slammed the door behind him.

Before Judy could fully process what had just happened, Lake stepped away from the door and called the speed dial on her phone. "Lisa?" She spoke with a slight shake in her voice. "It's over. I'm divorcing Carlos. I'm up for a second date, if you want it."

She listened to Lisa's answer.

Judy had never in her wildest dreams thought she'd ever be okay with an affair, but the smile the spread across Lake's attractive features proved the bunny officer wrong.
The Final Problem

Chapter Notes

A/N 1: The winner of the murder mystery was determined via Wheel Decide.

A/N 2: I'd also like to take this opportunity to recommend an original story by someone I only know as 'Fel.' This author has written a variety of stories, ranging from fantasy to science fiction, but the one I was informed about, 'Kit,' takes place in Modern America and tells the story of a disowned fox struggling to escape the machinations of his pathetic excuse of an 'old money' family. So far as I know, none of these stories, including 'Kit,' are fan fiction, but a series of online books probably on par with The Lord of the Rings.

To find Kit and other stories Search: Worlds of Fel - Weavespinner . net

Please give it a shot, and as always, R&R, thank you.

Nick scratched his skull as he read the last of the clues, one of several photocopies Alec had provided while he looked after the original. The first of the verses was separate from the others, clearly written recently on a post-it note at the top of the aged page.

"In this Hall of Learning lies a mystery.

Are you a gumshoe or a slayer?

A secret seeker or a secret keeper?

Are you a Soldier from the east, seeking home and peace?

If so, beware the German misdirection,

For the tiniest detail can yield a multiplicity of information.

Are you a Consumer of that which once was legal?

If so, seek the lady with the yearly pearl,

But shirk the fiend with the wooden leg.

Are you a Devil whose crimes were lost in the admiration of your skill?

If so, a dumbbell holds the clues you seek,

At least more than the fool who lost his face.

Are you a Beast of Hell, a devourer of blackened souls?

If so, your quarry lives beyond the deathly marsh,

Having his way with a reluctant maiden."
Are you the Keeper of these Four Tomes?

If so, take them all and lay them as one,

Then all will know the path to God.

Even as his mind was competing with Belch's to decipher the poem, part of it wondered why the clue had to be so complicated. It was as if whoever wrote it wanted the secret passage to be as difficult to find as possible.

"Alec, if you don't know where the passage is, then how did you hide the next clue inside it?"

Alec was the only one sitting down. Everyone else was searching every nook and cranny of the library. "It's not in the passage, silly." He said bluntly as if it was obvious. "It's in the cellar, where the passage leads to."

"If you're done asking stupid questions…" Edward spoke from the top of a ladder in front of an entire section on biographies. "Oh, your bunny's back."

Nick turned to the entrance to see Judy and Lake walking in. Judy looked troubled, but Lake seemed to be in high spirits.

"Tell me she's not suing us for misconduct."

"No, Nick. She's not suing us." Judy replied. "Are you going to tell them, Lake?"

Lake looked to her brothers. "It's over. I'm divorcing Carlos."

Edward dropped the book he'd been examining. "You're kidding."

"No. The moment he threatened me, my choice was made. I had a fling a few years ago that will be grounds for divorce. He'll get away with at least half of what I've got, but he won't touch a cent of the family fortune."

"Lake, that's great!" Edward slid down the ladder as Alec leapt up from the couch, and they rushed over to embrace their sister. Gazelle and Christine looked on smiling, while Benjamin looked like he wanted to be happy.

"I can't say I'll be sorry to see the back of him." Alec added when they let go. "But you had an affair and that is not cool."

Lake sighed. "I know. But we don't know many women Carlos may have been seeing behind my back, so whatever."

"Yeah, screw him." Edward grinned. "Come we can celebrate with the chocolate castle after I win this thing!"

"You'll have to find the passage, first." Alec sat back down. "Come on, I don't have all day."

Nick bent down to Judy's ear under the pretense of reading the poem with her. "Everyone's happy except you, what's going on?"

"The DVD's gone."

"So Carlos grew a brain and hid it?"
"No, it's missing. That's what caused the fight. He went to Lake to see if she stole it. She denied taking it, and I don't see why she would lie."

"So we've lost our evidence. Crap. Well, maybe the ZBI can obtain a warrant to search for it if it may help with the case."

Judy traced her finger over the last verse. "Lake insists it has nothing to do with Veltro. It just has camera footage of her affair and..." Judy's eyelids fluttered as thought she were fighting off tears. "Nick, it's better if we finish this discussion elsewhere."

"Sure, Carrots." Nick agreed, wondering what the hell had happened upstairs. "Any idea on what this poem means?"

"Well, the first verse was obviously written by Alec himself, so we can just ignore it. The last verse is the key." She pointed again to the verse in question. "It mentions 'four tomes', which means we have to find four books in this library. That's what the middle verses are for."

"Could the first one be a war book?" Nick suggested. "The 'German misdirection' could mean the Axis or the Nazis."

"Maybe, but the last line sounds familiar. For the tiniest detail can yield a multiplicity of information." She recited the line slowly, her finger on her mouth as she thought hard. In the meantime Nick read the next first. There were a lot of things which once were legal. The 'yearly pearl' was likely a reference to the sea, and then there was the 'fiend with the wooden leg.' A pirate story perhaps?"

"Got it!" Lake barked.

Alec jerked in his seat. "Seriously?!!"

"Just most of it, brother." Lake sat down beside him with mirth. "Don't worry, I'll give the others a chance to catch up. Three hours, give or take."

"Gee, thanks." Edward muttered.

"The Hound!" Benjamin gasped. Judy and Nick spun round and reached for dart guns they were no longer holding, but the cheetah in yellow was merely staring at a book he was holding. "The Hound of the Badgervilles! That's one of the books, I'm sure of it!"

"Are you sure?" Gazelle asked.

"A quarry living beyond the deathly marsh having his way with a reluctant maiden? That's talking about the ancestor Hugo Badgerville who started the whole thing by kidnapping a lady! The marsh is the Grimpen Mire, it all fits!"

"Is he right, Lake?" Alec asked.

Lake nodded. "One down. Ben, bring that book here, please."

Benjamin put the book on the table and went back to reading his copy of the poem. He then made a beeline for another shelf.

Nick strolled over to the cheetah. "What're you looking for, Benji?"

"Books on World War Two. I'm trying to figure out the first clue." Benjamin bent down to examine
the shelf full of books in question. Nick tilted his head. Most of the titles on the spines didn't give an indication that they were about the Second World War.

"Are you sure you haven't been here before?" Benjamin paused in the middle of pulling out a biography on Hitler. "For someone who's never been here before, you seem to know your way around this library."

Benjamin grimaced. "Okay, maybe I made that up just a teensy bit. I didn't want you Judy mentioning anything to Mr. Casel and his wife."

Okay, now Nick was curious. "What did you do, clear out the walk-in freezer?" Benjamin pulled out the Hitler book and hugged it to his chest. Nick became worried. "I'm sorry. That was too far."

"No, it's okay. Look, I came here before just one time, and it didn't go well. If you mention anything to Mr. Casel or his wife, they will absolutely flip their poop so please don't say anything."

"You got my word, buddy. Remember you're on my team now, so come to me with anything that could help us beat Team Edward."

"You got it, Chief."

Nick snuck a glance at Edward as he started looking through the World War Two section himself. The brawny elk-deer was lingering around the science section, looking as lost as Nick was.

"That's a lot of books on sea stories." Christine was checking out an entire bookcase full of them.

"Our great-grandfather was an avid lover of the sea. Here let me show you something." Alec ducked into a cupboard beside the bookcase and pulled out a ship in a bottle. "This here is the Pequod. It's a miniature of the real thing he owned when he was alive."

"Wow." Christine peered into the bottle, and Nick stepped closer to have a better look. He wasn't a fan of models, but even he had to admit that the tiny ship was an impressive piece of craftsmanship.

"Nicholas, do you know what the Pequod is named after?" Christine asked. Nick thought for a few seconds before shaking his head. "It's Captain Ahab's ship. You know, from Moby Dick?"

"Moby what?"

"The white whale, you dumb fox!" Judy yelled from the top of a second ladder.

"Oh. Never read it."

"Most haven't. It's like A Christmas Carol. Everyone knows the story, but most haven't read it. I'm one of the lucky few."

"You'd normally need a PHD to read something like Moby Dick. Christine doesn't have one but she's smart. Really smart." Alec spoke with pride. "If there's one thing she can do better than me, it's reading classic literature."

"Not to mention I can speak English, German, Spanish and Russian." Christine said.

"Don't forget you're learning Latin."

"Ita Vero."

"Why the hell would you learn Latin?" Edward asked.
"Gazelle's been teaching me. Back when we first met, I even paid her to teach me Spanish so I'd pass my tests. You see, I'd taken a small course in college to pad my resume." Christine frowned. "Wait… wait…" She rushed over to the crime section and searched it, eventually pulling out a book. She scowled at its modern appearance. "Alec, do you have an old edition of A Study in Scarlet?"

"Yeah, in the safe behind that painting over there." Alec pointed to a painting of a ship in turbulent waters. "We have a lot of rare and very valuable first editions here, so we keep them locked up. My parents will kill me if I give you the combination now, so you'll have to wait over there."

"Now?" Nick wondered as Alec revealed the safe and discreetly entered the combination.

"What makes you think it's that one?" Gazelle asked.

"The last line of the first verse was clearly a reference to that book." Christine said. "And after that, I figured out that the 'German misdirection' is referring to 'Rache', the German word for revenge left at the scene of the crime. Holmes deduced that it was left there to mislead the police."

"You guys are mopping the floor with this thing." Alec muttered. "I feel dumb." He pulled out two aged book straight out of the Victorian era. "Is this what you're looking for, honey?"

"Yes, yes it is."

"Okay. I got out the first edition of Hound of the Badgervilles, but you have to be very, very careful when holding these books. If so much as a page corner gets damaged…"

"I'll be careful, I promise." Christine brought the book to the table with the other book and started comparing the two, and Gazelle soon joined her.

"Your great-grandfather, did he love detective stories, too?" Judy asked.

"Yes, I think he did." Alec said. "Grandfather said he always bought two copies of each book; one for his family and one for himself."

"Could this be something?" Gazelle was holding A Study in Scarlet and pointing at the bottom of the spine. "Someone drew something on the spine."

"What?" Christine asked, picking up the other book.

"This line. It doesn't look like part of the cover's design." Gazelle was pointing out a horizontal line drawn in faded ink.

"She's right," Christine said. "There's an X on the Hound book here."

"I think I've got it." Judy had the look she always had when she had cracked a case. "We're looking for Sherlock Howlmes novels."

"I think we figured that out already, Carrots," Nick said.

"Not stories, Nick. Novels!" Judy was grinning now as she read the poem for the umpteenth time. "Sir Arthur Cowman Doyle wrote dozens of Howlmes stories, but only wrote four novels. We've already collected two of them."

"Of course!" Christine breathed. "In The Sign of the Four, Mary Morstag was receiving a pearl once a year."

"And the 'devil' the poem talked about was referencing Roariarty, who was involved in the crime.
in *The Valley of Fear.* Judy added. "It all fits. We need all four novels and figure out the rest of the clue from there."

"I'll get the others." Alec retrieved the last two books from the safe and put them down with the others. Everyone gathered around the table. "Okay, now what?"

Lake shrugged. "You got me, I only figured out the first part."

Gazelle examined the spines of the last two books. "*The Sign of the Four* has a horizontal line, and *The Valley of Fear* has an X."

"Two lines, two X's..." Edward was rubbing chin. "What could they mean?"

"Roman numerals, perhaps?" Benjamin asked.

"Say what?"

*Star Furs* marks its films with numerals. Isn't an X like a ten or something?"

"You're right. If these are numerals, then the lines make sense." Christine picked up *A Study in Scarlet*. "When you place a dash over a numeral such as X or L, it multiplies the value of that numeral by a thousand."

"So X times a thousand is ten thousand." Benjamin snapped his fingers. "Got it."

Lake drew the assembled numerals on the back of her copy of the poem to display the following image:

```
'   '
'X'X'
```

"That's twenty thousand." Christine said. "What could that mean?"

"Maybe it means another book." Judy said. "The only book I know with twenty thousand in the title is *Twenty Thousand Leagues under the Sea*. Where is it, Alec?"

"Right up there." Alec pulled the ladder along the wall until it was right next to the antique book, high up on the top shelf. He climbed up and pulled it out. "Hey, there's a switch here!" He reached in and a clicking sound was heard.

There was a louder click and the entire bookcase beside him moved, swinging slightly like a door. Edward ran forward and pulled it completely open, revealing a dark stairway going down.

"Yea-heah!" Edward pumped his fist. "Team Edward Wins!"

"Hold the phone, we figured it out, too!" Nick snapped. "You were just standing to one side twiddling your thumbs!"

"So were you! I don't remember you contributing!"

"Yeah, it was us who did all the work." Judy said. "Me, Benji, Christine, Gazelle and Lake. We all figured it out. What have you two been doing?"

Nick and Edward traded glances, the atmosphere in the library suddenly becoming very awkward. "So everybody figured out the clue except for us?"
Lake crossed her arms and smirked. "We'll wait here. It's time for the pair of you to change costumes."

Dressed respectively in a maid's garb and a loincloth made from an old dishrag, Nick and Edward morosely returned to sniggers and full-out laughter.

"Nicola, I think the windows could do with a clean!" Judy hissed in between giggles. She couldn't help herself. That uniform was a perfect fit.

Nick looked down at his new apparel and grimaced. "Miss, it wouldn't be overly hard for me to just shatter that window and cut you all up with one of the shards."

"What're you gonna do, head-butt the thing to smithereens?"

"No, I'll use yours!"

"Har, har."

Lake stepped up to Edward and pretended to try and lift the loincloth, eliciting a yell from her big brother. "Just kidding, brother! Come on, do the yell."

"No!"

"Come on, for me?"

"Not on your life!"

Alec stepped between them. "Hey, we can make fun of Mrs. White and the Missing Link later. Right now we've got a case to close."

Nick and Edward took the rear as they descended the dark steps of the secret passage. Judy had moved herself up to the front with Alec and Christine; she had no choice, since she cracked up every time she looked at the fox. It wasn't the lady's uniform that gave her the giggles, but the look on her fox's face. Mouth pressed shut, eyebrows practically straight lines, it was the spitting image of his expression when Finnick slapped that badge sticker on his shirt. Judy would treasure that memory for the rest of her life.

At the bottom of the stairs was a plain wooden door that Alec giddily opened to reveal the back of a shelving unit. He and Edward worked together to push it aside, so they could all file into the basement.

The basement was gargantuan, far bigger than any basement Nick had ever been in. At the same time it was cramped as hell, with dusty crates and boxes stacked all over the place.

"Nicola, you didn't forget your feather duster, did you?" Lake asked.

"I'll dust you in a minute. And knock it off with the 'Nicola' crap!"

"Jeez, take a joke."

"Don't take it personally, he just hates losing a bet." Judy said.

"Ummm..." Benjamin stared at the room before them for a good while. They couldn't even see the other walls. "Where exactly are we?"
"From the looks of it, we need to go this way. Follow me." Alec led them through the maze of crates, eventually crossing a point where it was apparent that everything had been recently cleaned. They soon discovered why when Alec stopped at a large metal container. Before any of them could ask, Alec opened the hatch in the side. There was a rush of cool air, and then they saw the chocolate castle stored inside. Alec started feeling the inside.

"What're you doing?" Christine asked.

"Just checking for moisture." Alec replied. "All dry, good." When he turned back to the others, he was holding a small wooden box and visibly bristling with anticipation. "Alright, guys, this is it. The final piece of the puzzle."

He opened the box. At first Judy was unsure as to what she was looking at. It looked like a little blue plastic box that had been broken in one corner. Then she realized she was looking at a fake gem. A translucent fake gem that was covered in little droplets on the inside.

Judy had seen that gem before. She was sure of it.

"Sir, I have the sheets." Most of them jumped when the butler materialized behind them.

"Thank you. Hand them out, please."

The butler handed out a crimson sheet of paper to each guest. On it was 'CULPRIT' and a blank line at the top and three blank boxes marked respectively with 'MOTIVE,' 'MEANS,' and 'OPPORTUNITY.'

"So, this is the part where we deduce the identity of the killer?" Nick asked.

"Indeed it is." Alec said. "But it's not going to be that simple. You also need to deduce their motive, their means of committing the crime, and the opportunity they had to pull it off. Whoever gets the most right wins the chocolate castle."

"Tell me you're not expecting result now." Edward said almost pleadingly.

Alec chuckled. "No. By completing the final problem, you've been granted the right to see every clue that you've missed. You've got twenty minutes to look at the clues scattered throughout the house, figure out whodunit and fill in those sheets. Meet me back in the library when the time's up. And don't worry about getting ties; the castle's built from separate pieces that are pretty easy to divide."

Ten minutes later, Judy had photographed every clue in the mansion with her phone. She was now back in the lounge, flicking through the nine photographs, jotting down speculations in her notebook and filling in the sheet.

"How's it going, Carrots?" Nick sat down beside her, holding a sheet already filled. Judy refused to look, not wanting the sheet to influence her own deductions.

"I've just about cracked it." Judy set her pen down. "Everything I've written down so far fits… so why do I feel terrible?"

"Terrible?" Nick asked, scowling.

"I feel like everything I'm doing here is wrong." Judy could feel it, an ache in her gut. A part of her felt guilty for being so fixated on solving this made up case. The forest outside was crawling with savage mammals, the instigators of a terrorist attack gone wrong. Ombidia was dead, and unless Judy
had inflicted fatal wounds his killer was still out there, Gazelle's stalker was still on the loose, unless he was either the killer or one of the Veltro members turned savage. All was not well in Zootopia, and Judy was sitting in the grandest building in the state vying for an edible Disney castle. "I know we're not allowed to work on the Veltro case, especially now that the ZBI's taken over jurisdiction, but I still feel like a jerk for putting so much effort into this murder mystery when Veltro is putting so many mammals in danger. If only we'd solved the case sooner."

"Oooh, Carrots, Carrots, Carrots…"

"Oooh, what, what, what?" Judy retorted, irked by his snooty tone.

"Not every case gets solved in forty-eight hours." Nick propped his back against the arm of the large couch and put one leg over the other. "Besides, how can you suggest we let them down after everything we've done?"

"… Keep talking."

"Let's see, we rescued over a dozen survivors from the Greener Grass Mall attack, including Gazelle, your family and our illustrious friend Officer Clawhauser..." Nick proceeded to count each instance with the fingers of his paw. "We proved Alec Casel's innocence when he was implicated in Gazelle's attempted murder at the Animalia Arena, we got a ton of info on Veltro from his sister, Lake, including the location of the Veltro leader... and last but not least we singlehandedly fought off our second psychopath in less than a decade and potentially put him out of commission... have I left anything out?"

Judy smirked. "Well, we did outsmart a savage elephant with nothing but a mall cart and 'Let it Goat.'"

"Thank you." Judy finished her sheet and folded it neatly, feeling yet another rush of affection and gratitude towards her partner. "Thank you very much."

"Anytime. You're sure you've got it all worked out?" Judy nodded. "Good. May the best mammal win." He held out his paw.

"I wouldn't mind if he does." Judy shook it with a smile.

They returned to the library to find themselves the first ones there. Nick checked his watch. "Five minutes 'til accusation time. I think you've got enough time to tell me what happened between you and Lake."

"I don't know if I have the right to tell you that, Nick."

Nick frowned at her pained tone. "Did you at least find out what was on that disk?"

Judy jumped up to close the door. "It's footage from the indoor cameras Lake told us about. There's some footage of her fling with Lisa, and some footage about what happened between Ben and Mr. Casel."

"She said that her dad's planning on getting the Christian vote." Nick said. "She's scared that he'll disown her if he finds out she's a lesbian."

Judy stared at him. "Why on earth would she think he'd do that?"

Nick made a very unconvincing shrug. "No idea." He then lowered his voice to a whisper. "Nothing we should be theorizing when the Casels are around. Wouldn't want to start something."
Judy made a mental note to press him later. "Anyway, she's also worried that her family seeing the footage with Ben and her father will reopen some old wounds."

"So we've gotta find out who stole the disc before it causes a crap-ton of family drama. Great. More mysteries."

"Hold your horses, Nick." Judy spoke as Alec walked in, followed by Benjamin and Christine. "We're about to be one mystery less."

"Two, actually." Nick was giving Alec a knowing look. Alec looked apprehensive, shooting furtive glances as his girlfriend. "I think I've just solved a mystery of my own."

There was excitement in the air as the rest of them soon came and gathered on the couches and chairs. One by one Alec took back the sheets and retired to a cozy chair and table in the far corner of the room. As he began to compare the various deductions, the butler entered with a lighter. With silent grace he lit every candle in the room and dimmed the electric lights before leaving again. No one commented on the butler's actions, but it was clear that they were curious as to what was going on. Perhaps it was to create a creepier atmosphere for the closing of this grisly case.

Alec stood up and slowly walked back to the others, leaving the sheets behind on the table. Everyone except Lake and Nick waited with bated breath. Curiously, Alec looked even more nervous than they did.

Alec stuck his hoof in his pocket, cleared his throat and smiled. "Judy… Benji… would you like to do the honors?"

Judy gasped, feeling like a child who'd just won a snowmammal competition as Benjamin let out a cry of victory. "Just as I'd thought…" While Nick looked on with both disappointment and pride, she jumped into her best detective pose and rounded on her fellow guests. "Christine Antlaire… you're the killer!"

"Damn it!" Edward punched the arm of his chair.

Christine burst out laughing and threw her hooves up in defeat. "You got me! I did it! I poisoned Ombidia! But tell us, how did you know that it was me who did it? All eight of us had a motive to kill him."

"Let's start with the motive, shall we?" Benjamin stepped in with his chest puffed out. His costume shimmered in the candlelight. "It's true, you had a motive long before that fateful night, but that wasn't the reason you brought poison to the party. It was that ring!" He pointed to the pocket Alec had his hoof in. "That ring was supposed to be yours, wasn't it? With the amount it was worth, you would have been set up for life. But Mr. Casel wound up bequeathing it to his son, Alec, instead. You got mad, didn't you? So mad that you'd poison him at his own party. You probably would have pulled it off, too… but then Ombidia figured out what you were planning. That creep had a long history of blackmail, and your wicked plan was no different. He probably demanded a cut of the money you'd get for the ring, or he would tell the police everything. You had no choice but to switch targets."

"You seized your chance in the bar right before lunch." Judy continued from there with a massive grin. "When you went behind the bar, you secretly spiked Ombidia's drink with the poison you had originally intended for Alec. The Tetrodotoxin didn't kick in until we were all seated at the dining table, and by then it was too late."

"You smuggled the poison into the mansion using your tiara." Benjamin stepped up to Christine and...
tapped one of the fake gems. "One of the gems was hollow, and was open in one corner. If you'd bent
down beneath the bar, it probably wasn't hard to remove the gem, slip the poison into the glass
meant for Ombidia and then put the gem back without anyone noticing."

Judy crossed her arms. "If this was a real life case, all we'd need is one swab of the inside of that gem
and you would be going away for life."

"And I would be saying that you are a real cold bi-"

"Nick!"

"I did it! The castle is mine!" Benjamin danced on the spot for a bit before stopping with a small

giggle. "Well, half of it, I mean."

Alec slowly clapped his hooves. "Congratulations, you two. You've solved the case." He turned to
Christine and put on a deliberately exaggerated look of betrayal. "Christine, how could you do this? I
thought you'd loved me."

"Of course I love you, Alec." Christine gave him a short but gentle kiss. "If the circumstances behind
this murder were true, I wouldn't have betrayed you even if that ring was worth 100 000 000 000
dollars."

Alec beamed. "Is that so? Well, in that case…” Nick nudged Judy's shoulder. Before she could
nudge back, her heart skipped a beat as Alec pulled the priceless red diamond ring from his pocket
and got down on one knee. There were gasps all around, while Christine herself remained
speechless. Judy clapped her paws over her mouth, the romantic candlelight, Alec's excessive
praising and Elgen's earlier request suddenly making sense. "Christine Antlaire, will you…”

The rest of Alec's words were drowned out by the screaming in Judy's head. Say yes, say yes, say
yes, say yes, say-

"Yes." Christine whispered.
The phone came to life, jerking Chief Bogo out of his thoughts as he sat on an uncomfortable chair in one of the hospital's many halls. "Chief, Agent Yaxley's here to see you."

The yak had promised him an update on Billy G. Gruff. "Tell him where to find me, Higgins." He put the phone away and tried to make himself more comfortable.

By now the ZBI was aware of what Hopps and Wilde had encountered in the forest surrounding the estate. Casel's private security was currently doing everything in their power to round up the savage mammals until the ZBI could provide assistance, but that hardly made the buffalo feel better. It didn't change the fact that those savages were Veltro, and they had obviously been up to no good.

The head of security, someone who called himself Woolworth, had tasked himself with keeping Bogo up to date. In the last update, one hour ago, they had darted and imprisoned six prey mammals and found their camp. The camp was largely untouched compared to Honey Badger's, but that wasn't very surprising. The entire Veltro group had left it to ambush Casel's security. The only intriguing thing about the camp, however, was the lack of a chemical weapon. They'd found dart rifles, nets, even a metal detector. To Bogo, that didn't sound like a terrorist attack.

More like a mammalhunt. He found himself scribbling that down so he could remember to run it by Yaxley. If his theory was correct, then who were they looking for? And why?

"He wasn't supposed to survive!" Gruff's words echoed in Bogo's head.

Yaxley turned a corner and found Bogo just as the buffalo finished writing. "Shouldn't you be at home now, Chief?"

Bogo glowered at the unflinching agent. "That goat turned the Greener Grass Mall into a slaughterhouse and caused dozens of deaths. I don't care if this case is under your jurisdiction, I'm not going anywhere until I get some answers."

Yak nodded with genuine sympathy. "We're not the ZIA, Chief Bogo. You'll get your answers, you have my word on that. All the same, we should wait until tomorrow and talk in your office where it's more private."

Bogo pointed to the empty day room right across the hall. "We'll talk in there. With all due respect, I've waited long enough."

"Fine, but I still want to have that meeting tomorrow." They turned on the light upon entering the day room, revealing a bland room with two aged couches, a shelf full of books and board games, and a television that likely hadn't been used in days. "They've just moved Gruff into a private ward. We've got a team keeping watch on him right now."

Bogo gestured for him to sit at the table in the middle of the room. "How is he?"

Yak explained as they both took a chair facing each other. With a light shining directly above them, Bogo was reminded of the interrogation rooms back at the precinct. "He was in shock by the time they brought him in, but the trauma team managed to get him out of the danger zone. They reckon he should be ready for questioning within three days, maybe less."
"Good. I actually have a couple of questions I want to run by you. It concerns what happened near the Casel Estate."

"And there's something I want to run by you as well. How is the operation coming along?"

"They're rounding up as many as they can, but they don't know exactly how many there are. Your people must have found information of what they were up to by now. They must have had a list of the members of their team."

Yaxley nodded. "We found it. I can tell you that you are looking for eighteen savage prey mammals, not including that masked psychopath."

"I'll get that information to Woolworth right away." Bogo pulled out his phone, on which he had recently added the number for the Casel estate's Guardhouse. Yaxley waited in silence until the call was made. Bogo finished, listened to Woolworth's response, and put the phone down. "Woolworth had some news of his own, they found the Veltro camp."

Yaxley frowned and sat forward. "And?"

"It doesn't look like they were planning another attack."

"Another attack? I thought what happened at the mall turned out to be an accident."

Bogo gave him a look. "Their real intentions were to fire that weapon at the courthouse once Bellwether arrived. I'm sure an assassination of a major public figure counts as an attack."

"You're right." Yaxley chuckled ruefully at his own lapse. "So what makes you think they weren't planning another attack?"

"There was no chemical weapon or any information indicating that they were planning to target the mansion."

"The information we found more or less indicated the same thing, but the lack of a chemical weapon confirms it." Yaxley opened his suitcase and pulled out the information in question, a couple of papers and a map Bogo remembered seeing in the bunker. "They were looking for someone."

Bogo didn't bother mentioning his coming to the same conclusion. "Who?"

Yaxley showed him a paper with one half burnt off. "We don't know. Either Gruff destroyed the evidence or his attacker did."

Bogo lightly punched the table. "Damn. I'm betting it's the same mammal who killed their people at the mall. Whoever it is, they're targeting Veltro members. Gruff must have figured they would be going after the Casel family, too."

"Speaking of which, I want Casel's daughter brought in as soon as possible. There may still be something she's not telling us, especially since she's started this Neo Veltro. We may even need to place her in protective custody."

"I'll make sure Hopps and Wilde bring her in quietly."

"Good. Look, there's one more thing I want to run by you, Chief."

Bogo frowned at the last thing Yaxley pulled out; a diary. "Where did you get that?"

"In Gruff's house. There's an entry here that I want you to see."
"He wrote about his crimes in his own diary?"

"He's got a poor memory, according to his neighbors. Keeping a record may have been necessary for him." He opened the book to one of the later entries and handed it to Bogo. "The left hand entry. It concerns you and Bellwether."

Bogo cocked an eyebrow before reading.

_Bellwether has no idea what she's done! Even worse is she that doesn't care, either. She was only ever in this for her own ambitions._

_It's bad enough that she ticked off Chief Bogo by going over his head, but why, why of all the predators in this polluted city did she target that one?! Bellwether knew damn well that the Veltro head wanted that one for himself. I have no-one to blame for myself for this, I trusted her too much, and now she's crossed the line._

_And that's not the worst of it. He knows, as well. I will not let that stupid woman burn the bridges I've built since I co-founded Veltro. First thing in the morning I will go up to her office and make her fix this._

_I cannot imagine what he will do to her if she doesn't…_

Bogo looked back up to see Yaxley intensely examining his reaction. The buffalo looked back at the diary with a scowl, not liking this at all. It was bad enough that it brought back undesirable memories of those three months since the press conference. To realize that Bogo himself may be unknowingly involved in some way was seriously raising his temper, especially if he wound up becoming a suspect.

"Whatever he's talking about, it sounds a lot like a motive." Yaxley said. "Does this mean anything to you?"

Bogo shook his head and replied through gritted teeth. "I'm not sure. Bellwether did a lot of going over my head when she assumed power. The date of this entry was a few days after Hopps resigned, but I can't see what she's got to do with this."

"In that case, I'll have to ask Bellwether myself tomorrow. I'll tell you how it goes when I stop by your office afterwards." Yaxley took back the diary and packed everything into his suitcase before getting up to leave. "By the way, how is the stalker case coming along?"

"Not much progress." Bogo admitted as he stood up himself. "With Gazelle under Mr. Casel's protection, that case had been put on hold while we passed on jurisdiction of the Veltro investigation."

"Well, don't you worry. We'll be out your way come tomorrow." Yaxley held out a hoof, and they shook. "Thank you for everything you've done, Chief Bogo. I hope your hunt for that stalker goes more smoothly."

The library exploded with sound as the mammals around them made their elation clear while Lake merely clapped and smiled. Judy bounced on the spot beside her cucumber-cool partner as Alec slid the rarest diamond in the world over his fiancée's finger before they embraced. What she wouldn't give to be in Christine's place, grinning like a jack-o-lantern as her beloved Nick bestowed a beautiful flawless gem on a glimmering metal band.

Judy paused and frowned; not because it was Nick that she imagined giving her the ring, but the fact
that the part of her that denied what it implied was not as strong as it once was.

Judy leaned over to Nick. Only now did she smell the cologne she had gifted him last Christmas. He must have put it on to try and make up for his feminine outfit. "How did you figure out he was planning to propose to her?"

"He wouldn't stop touching that ring." Nick said. "Plus the romantic candlelight kind of cinched it."

Judy and Nick stepped back, allowing the others to close in on Alec and Christine and entrap them in a group hug. Judy sighed in content as she watched them. "What a way to end this party. We're still gonna have to tell them about Ombidia."

"Save it for tomorrow, Carrots." Nick patted her shoulder. "It's their night. Let's follow Casel's advice for a little longer and not spoil it."

With that, Edward picked the right moment to pull out a bottle of champagne. Judy eyed his loincloth and decided against having some. "This calls for a celebration! Let's give those two spouses a soaking before we hit the bar!"

"Don't you dare pop that cork in here!"

Edward froze just as he grabbed the neck. They all slowly turned to see Selke glowering at him from the doorway. Edward nervously chuckled at the daggers she was shooting his way. "Sorry, mom."

Selke dropped the glare as she turned her attention to her other son. "Alec, have you… made the offer yet?" Christine beamed and held up her hoof. Selke actually smiled. "Congratulations, you two. However, there are two rules you are to follow if you are going to be wearing that ring, Miss Antlaire. First rule, if anyone asks, that is a ruby. They're worth less than a red diamond and they're a dime a dozen. Second rule, if you lose that ring, I will personally have your guts for garters."

To her credit, Christine merely smiled back. "I will protect this ring with my life, I promise."

"Good. You don't mind if I steal my only daughter for a while, do you?"

Lake frowned, but nevertheless followed her mother out the library.

"Meet us in the bar when you're done!" Edward yelled after them. "In the meantime, let's get this show on the road! I'll see you all once I get out of this loincloth?"

They filed out of the library, lead by Edward and the newly engaged couple, and strolled down the hall towards the bar. Edward eventually broke away from the group to get changed up. Judy slowed her stride when she caught sight of Selke and Lake slipping into the lounge as if they didn't want to be seen. When she caught the angry look on Selke's face, she stopped and grabbed Nick's arm. She waited until the others had disappeared into the bar. "Nick, wait. I think Selke may be on to Lake."

Nick's ears twitched when the lounge door slammed shut. "Are you sure?"

Judy nodded. "Did you see the look on her face? Unless you're not as good a teacher as you think you are, all those 'mammal reading' lessons are finally paying off."

Nick glowered at her. "I am as good a teacher as I think I am. Let's listen in on them."

"Wait, Nick, are we even allowed to do that?"

"We're guests. It's not like we're trespassing without a warrant. Come on."
Judy shook her head but followed Nick anyway. She wound up overtaking him and reached the
door first, pressing her ear to the cool wooden surface. At first she didn't hear anything. Then she
heard Selke speak first.

"Sweetheart, is there something you want to tell me?"

There was a pause. "No. Why would you think that?"

"Because I know Carlos is trying to use something against you to get out of a divorce."

Another pause. "You heard us, didn't you."

"I've been telling you since you were four years old to stop yelling loud enough to wake the dead."

Judy's vision was suddenly clouded with red and cream as Nick pressed his own ear to the door with
his face turned toward Judy's. Judy looked from his eyes to his nose, which was millimeters from
hers. The scent of Christmas cologne was stronger than ever, and beneath it, the natural scent of
violets.


"Eavesdropping. " Judy could feel his warm breath on her face. Their mouths were only a littler
farther part than their noses were.

"Turn… your… face… around!" Judy hissed, barely stopping herself from adding before I get
freakin' turned on!

"Alright, alright, keep your lotus on!" Nick turned his body round. Judy had a second of satisfaction
before she felt his tail brush up beneath her skirt and between her ankles.

Judy clamped down on her lip, tried to ignore how fluffy the thing was and went back to
eavesdropping.

"… Lisa?" Selke was saying at that moment.

"We had a one time thing, but I'm thinking of pursuing a better relationship once my divorce is
finalized."

"Thank God for that. I had that mammal pegged for a gold digger from the minute I set eyes on
him."

"Me too. It's why I married him."

"Using him as a beard wasn't the only reason, was it?"

"… Isn't it?" Lake sounded genuinely uncertain.

"Admit it. You knew it would tick off your father."

Nick put a paw over his mouth to stifle his chuckle. "What, wasn't joining an organization that hated
your dad's company wasn't rebellious enough?"

Judy lightly smacked his arm, shutting him up.

"I don't know what you're talking about." Lake replied sharply.
"Honey. I see it in the way you act around him."

There was another long silence. When Lake replied, the venom in her voice was so chilling that it made Judy back away from the door.

"... Did you think… that I would ever forgive him for what he did?!"

"I hate him too, Lake. But I didn't believe him either."

"What are you two doing?" Judy and Nick jumped and whirled around. Neither of them had even heard Elgen Casel walk up behind them.

"Mr. Casel!" Judy gasped.

"I said what are you two doing?" Elgen glared down at them both with his arms folded. He looked livid, but Judy had no idea why. Had something else happened in the forest? Or had Judy and Nick done something to anger him? Judy couldn't think of anything they had done.

"We're looking for your daughter, sir." Nick replied, smooth as silk as usual. "She's a bit late for the engagement celebration."

Elgen's scowl deepened. "Coincidentally, I'm looking for her, too."

He brushed past them and opened the door without knocking. Lake and Selke were caught off guard, spinning toward the door with loud gasps as Elgen strode in.

Elgen barely paused. "Lake, your husband has been caught going through Clawhauser's things."

"What?" Lake looked genuinely infuriated.

"With some persuasion from security, he admits that he was looking for something." Elgen slowly approached his frozen daughter. "Do you know anything about a disc?"

Eyes so wide they shimmered, Lake shook her head. "No, I do not."

Elgen slightly tilted his antlered head. "Is that so? So if I ask your mother to hand over the disc she very likely swiped from Elkervera's belongings, she will not have the disc on her person?"

Selke's jaw dropped. "How did you know?"

"You were nearby when Carlos revealed the disc's existence in his alcoholic stupidity. That and you were leaving entering his room while he was preoccupied in the bar." Elgen held his hoof out. "In case you've forgotten, we are currently being harassed by a potential terrorist group. Any secrets that may threaten this family will not be tolerated. Selke, please give me the disc."

Judy glanced sharply at Lake. She had never seen Lake this scared before, and the bunny had a good idea why.

Selke remained still. Elgen took a deep breath. "Selke, give me the-"

"I had an affair!" Lake yelled.

Elgen stopped dead."A what?"

"I had a fling a few years ago." Lake's fists were clenched. "Carlos threatened to destroy my reputation by making the affair public if I filed for divorce. That disc contains footage of me kissing
another mammal."

Elgen slowly turned back toward her. Judy and Nick tensed, ready to do their job if things turned ugly. "It's that Lisa girl, isn't it? The predator you brought here five years ago."

Lake swallowed but stood her ground. "Yes, father."

"Lake, what in God's name is wrong with you?"

Judy's heart plummeted. Lake actually seemed to blanche. "I can't help it, father. I love Lisa far more than I've loved any male. If you can't accept that, then-"

"Never mind Lisa! What were you thinking, marrying a male when you're not even straight?!" Elgen shouted. "For years, for five bloody years we've treated Carlos like the gold digging fake he is, when all this time you've been using him as beard! That is not the way you treat the opposite sex!"

Lake was baffled. Afraid as she was, this was clearly not how she intended this argument to go. "I never meant to-"

"You lied to us, all this time!" Elgen went on, ignoring Selke when she tried to interrupt. "You lied to us, and you used your own husband! If the media ever got wind of this, it would be worse than any affair!"

"I-"

"How long were you planning to keep this up, Lake? Tell me! Were you ever going to tell us the truth about yourself?"

Lake bit the corner of her mouth. "I'm sorry, father."

"Damn right you're sorry." Elgen pointed to the doorway, where Judy and Nick were watching the scene. "Lake Casel, you are going to go to the bar right now and you are going to tell your brothers the truth."

Lake lowered her head. "Yes, father."

"When I say right now, I mean right now."

Judy the faintest sigh of relief from Lake as she walked out, followed closely by her parents.

Nick scratched his scalp. "Wow."

"I never even considered Selke being the disc thief." Judy said. "I figured she cared about her kids at least a little, but still."

"At least the old man took Lake being a lesbian a lot better than we thought he would. Even if the family reputation was the only thing he really cared about. Let's go after them."

They walked into the bar just as Alec, Edward and the others were reacting to Lake's declaration. As it turned out, neither of her brothers were surprised. Edward had guessed from prior parties they had gone to together, and Alec had already known. Benjamin pretended to be astonished as he happily accepted her sexuality, while Christine and Gazelle both assured her that it made no difference. Lake showed very little reaction to theirs compared to when she had faced her father, probably because none of them had to power to disown her.

All in all, it was turning out to be a good night. Aside from her Veltro affiliation, Lake no longer had
to hide her true self. In his own reputation-obsessed way, her father had accepted that his daughter was a lesbian, and her mother had shown no opposition so far. Alec had ended the murder mystery with a romantic bang with his surprise proposal, and Christine had said yes. Best of all, Judy had tied with Benjamin in solving the case and won half a chocolate castle.

All they needed now was to catch that costumed maniac in the forest, round up the rest of the savage predators and take down the old Veltro to make this the best Christmas ever.

Judy's good mood darkened when Elgen abruptly stepped between Lake and the others. The truth was out now, so why was he still angry? "Now that we've got that out of the way, is there anything else you wish to tell us?"

Lake frowned, as did Judy and Nick. "No, father."

"No? Tell me, where did you meet this Lisa?"

Oh, my gosh. Judy held her breath with dread. I think he knows.

Lake's face did not betray her this time. "A nightclub, where do you think?"

"Really?" Elgen held up the disc he had presumably convinced his wife to give up. "So if I put this disc in that DVD player over there, all we'll see is your one time fling?"

"Yes, father. There's nothing else, really!" Lake said quickly, and Judy could feel her own desperation growing. Like Lake, the last thing she wanted was for old wounds to be reopened, not in front of a fiancé and a celebrity. She highly doubted Benjamin would appreciate it either.

"Is that so?" Elgen strode over to the large flat screen fixed to the wall opposite the bar. On a shelf below it was the DVD player.

"Father, trust me, you don't want to do this!" Lake started forward, but stopped when her father shot an icy stare.

"And why not? What else are you hiding, girl?"

"Sex!" Lake snapped. "We had sex in the storeroom under the stairs and Carlos filmed it!"

"I'd love to see how he pulled that off in a room without windows." Elgen replied drily.

Judy hopped up onto a barstool beside the elk. "Mr. Casel, maybe we should leave this be. It's an invasion of your daughter's privacy."

"Yeah, I'd rather not see my sister playing with scissors." Edward said, cringing.

"I highly doubt that's what we'll be seeing." Elgen replied frostily as he slid the disc into the player and switched the television on. "This is your last chance, Lake! Is there something else on this disc?"

"Father, I'm serious!" Lake stormed right up to him. "You… do not… want to play that disc!"

Elgen leaned forward and whispered furiously but quietly, so Judy could barely hear what was said. "Carlos suggested that your loyalty was not with the family. Now we do this the hard way." He picked up the remote and pressed play.

"No!" Lake hissed as the flat screen displayed the first image; an overhead view of the hall. The front doors opened, and in walked Elgen and Lake in formal wear, as though they were returning from a gala. Selke looked happier, and Elgen looked a little less cold. The butler approached from the other
side of the screen, audibly greeted them and took their expensive coats.

"I remember this." Edward sat down on a sleek couch opposite the screen, leading Gazelle, Selke, Alec, and Christine to do the same. "We were coming back from a gala that was part of dad's mayoral campaign."

"I heard about that." Benjamin said. "It gained him a lot of support according to the news."

"That it did." Elgen said bitterly.

Lake stayed silent as the grave, standing to the back of the group as she stared at the screen.

Elgen lost patience and fast-forwarded until the footage changed to an empty lounge. He continued speeding up the footage until Lake and a lioness entered the room, shutting the door behind them. They sat down on a couch and almost immediately began a make out session that had Lake's brothers awkwardly covering their faces and looking away.

"That's Lisa?" Benjamin asked. "She seems nice."

"In more ways than one." Nick said, making Judy groan.

"Father, turn it off." Lake growled as her father starting fast-forwarding again.

"Why?" Elgen asked as the footage changed to the conservatory. "What's on this disc?"

"You don't them to see this, trust me!"

"I don't."

"Dad, what's going on?" Alec asked as the footage switched to the dining room. Elgen stopped the fast-forward when Lake entered the room with a hot cocoa. "Are you accusing Lake of something?"

"Perhaps. Whatever she is hiding, I want to see it."

They watched as Lake sipped her drink, at the same time staring at her other hoof. They saw the golden glint of her wedding ring.

Lake gritted her teeth. "I'm a former member of Veltro! Happy?!"

"What?!" Everyone except Judy, Nick, Gazelle and Benjamin turned their heads to gawk.

Lake rushed back up to her father. "I was angry, alright? I hated Carlos and I hated myself for marrying him. And I hated you for liking him best! I thought joining Veltro would make me feel better, but it turned out to be a predator hate group so I left!"

Elgen stared at her. "So that's it? You joined a group of gutter-crawling trouble makers just to get back at me?"

"Yes. Now turn off that DVD!" Lake grabbed at the remote. Elgen swung his arm away, the movement making them both lose their grip. The remote flew and fell into Edward's lap.

The footage changed once more. Now they were watching Elgen sitting in the study, writing at his desk. There was a knock on the door off-screen.

"Come in." The Elgen on the screen called in a manner not dissimilar to Chief Bogo.
They heard the door open. The Elgen on-screen looked up and frowned.

"Officer Clawhauser? Why am I not surprised?"

Judy's stomach lurched. Lake was too late.

The Elgen outside the screen stiffened and shot a look at Benjamin. The cheetah merely stared at the screen, eyes wide with horror.

The past Benjamin stepped onscreen, dressed casually in a shirt and jeans. He looked nervous, but not nearly as nervous as the present Benjamin. "You were expecting me, Mr. Casel?"

Elgen locked eyes with Lake before he quickly turned to the mammals on the couch. "I've seen enough. Where is that remote?"

"Selke told me what you told her in the billiard room. She didn't mention hitting you, however."

The onscreen Benjamin rubbed at a bruise on his cheek. "Technically she slapped me. I won't arrest her, I promise."

Alec glared at his stunned mother. "You hit my friend? Why the hell would you do that?!"

Selke didn't answer, eyes fixed on the screen.

"You realize that this is a very serious accusation, Clawhauser." Past Elgen said coldly.

"Edward, turn it off. Now!" Present Elgen barked.

"I'm not accusing, Mr. Casel, honest! I'm just worried that he's not being a very good influence on Alec. Alec's terrified of him. He tries to hide it, but I know he's terrified."

Judy winced when she saw the blank shock on Alec and Edward's faces. Lake seemed to visibly shrink. Benjamin inched away from the group, speechless as he watched his past self continue to speak. "Please, you have to believe me. I think Alec may be in real trouble."

Present Elgen started searching for the power switch on the DVD player.

"I believe you." Past Elgen said.

Present Elgen froze. The bar fell silent.

"... You do?" Past Benjamin asked, astonished.

Past Elgen stood up behind his desk. "He has always been a temperamental little fool. I should have known he would take it this far."

"You mean you knew?"

"Of course not, and neither did Selke! But I should have known!"

Past Benjamin sighed in relief. "Then you know we've gotta do something. You're the head honcho. Maybe you can lay down the law, keep him away from Alec until he learns how to treat him nicely."

Past Elgen cut him off. "I can't. Not now."

Judy saw the mammals on the couch frown, frown out the corner of her eye. She couldn't believe
what she was hearing either, and neither Nick from his own expression.

Present Elgen remained still as he watched his past self, looking as though he’d just confessed a murder. Present Benjamin backed into a table.

The relieved smile slid from Past Benjamin's face. "What do you mean not now?"

"The mayoral election is in one week. If I lose focus now, it will be half a decade before I get another chance. I will deal with my children once the campaign is over."

There was a long silence, both in real life and on the screen. "Are you kidding me?" Past Benjamin asked.

"Until I've dealt with the elections this will stay between you and me, understand?"

Past Benjamin rushed right up and slammed his paws on the desk. "Are you serious?! Your youngest son is being abused and all you care about is your flippin' victory speech!"

"I told you I will deal with it!" Past Elgen snapped.

"And by the time you do, Alec could be in a body cast! If you won't do something about it, then Chief Bogo will!"

Past Elgen grabbed Past Benjamin's arm, stopping the cheetah cold. "Don’t even think about it. We built Zootopia, and I will place it back into the hooves of the Casel family, do you understand? If you tell anyone about this, especially Chief Bogo, I will make you regret it for the rest of your natural life. Which will not be very long. Are. We. Clear?"

Past Benjamin seemed to have lost his fire, except the look of quiet fury never left his pudgy face. "Yes."

Past Elgen let him go and sat down. "Good. Now get out of my house."

Chapter End Notes

End of Act Four
Past Benjamin rubbed his arm where Past Elgen had grabbed him. Without another word he walked back out of the camera’s view. They heard the door slam, and then the silence fell heavier than ever.

It was so silent they couldn't even hear each other breathing. When the footage changed once more, switching to the guestroom hallway, no-one moved to turn it off.

Nick braved a look at the larger mammals on the couch and around it. Gazelle and Christine just stared at the screen, unable to move or speak. Alec's jaw had dropped at some point, his eyes moist. Edward was glaring at the screen from beneath his eyebrows, mouth a thin line. Selke's expression was more difficult to read. As for Nick himself, for the first time in a very long time he had no idea what to say.

"It's not what it looks like." Elgen broke the silence as he approached the couch. Edward didn't move when his father retrieved the remote and switched off the DVD player. "I was trying to scare him off. Isn't that right, Clawhauser?"

When he looked at Benjamin, the cheetah ran from the room without closing the door behind him.

Looking ready to vomit, Lake sat down. Selke wordlessly stood up, walked round to the bar and started pouring herself a vodka and orange. No-one tried to stop her, their eyes entirely on Elgen.

"I'm going to have a word with Carlos. He's obviously doctored the footage." Elgen's voice was low as he started towards the door.

Alec stood up and blocked his path. "Doctored footage? It that all this is?" He sounded devoid of emotion. "Yes. Obviously. He must have edited the footage to make it seem worse than it actually was. He may still have the original footage, I need to talk to him."

Judy stepped forward to say something, but Nick stopped her with an arm and shook his head. Alec looked at the screen. "I just saw you threatening to kill my best friend."

"And you thought that was real?" Elgen asked calmly. "When he told me what was going on, I just didn't want to believe it."

"Why did Lake try to hide this from us?" Edward asked, still as a statue. Nick knew it was only a matter of time before he exploded.

"Because she believes it's real, doesn't she? Alec, get out of my way." He tried to go around, but Alec blocked him again. "Alec, for God's sake! I didn't mean a word of it! I was trying to scare him away until I could find out the truth on my own. I admit, I handled it poorly, but now I need to talk to Carlos and get this all straightened out."

"Let's watch it again." Alec reached for the remote. Elgen quickly jerked it out of his reach. "I want to see it again."

"Probably not a good idea."

"Why not?"
"Alec. Let me pass."

"Give me the remote!"

"Alec!" Elgen snapped, stopping his son short. "Do you really think I would do that to you? Me, your own father?"

Nick could sense Alec's anger rising. "Dad, put it back on!"

"There's nothing to see! Lake, you've seen the original footage. You know it's been edited."

"Dad, give me the remote!" Elgen backed away when Alec grabbed at the remote again.

"It's edited! Tell him, Lake! Just tell him!" Elgen yelled.

All eyes fell on Lake. Nick steeled himself for the fallout. He'd seen enough of Zootube to know that the footage was as original as his fur color.

Lake bit her lip as her own eyes fell on Edward. Edward stared back, waiting for her to admit the inevitable. Alec stared pleadingly at his sister, silently begging her to say what their father wanted her to say.

A single tear ran down Lake's cheek before her eyes narrowed at her father. "I've lied enough."

Alec stepped back as if he'd been punched. Elgen grimaced and threw the remote on the shelf. "I can prove it! Carlos knows the truth. I'll wring it from hi-"

A glass flew past his head and shattered the screen.

"You believed him? You knew?! I'LL KILL YOU!" Selke screamed and ran at him. Judy leapt between them and grabbed Selke's arm as she went to punch him. She used her momentum to swing the arm behind Selke's behind her before propping her feet on the deer's back. Gazelle and Christine leapt up to assist in holding Selke back as she descended into hysterical sobbing. Edward jumped up and staggered out the door. Alec backed away, holding his arms up to ward Elgen off as he approached him.

"Alec, listen to me!"

"Keep away! Stay the hell away from me!" Alec rushed out as his brother had done.

"Alec!" Elgen ran out after him.

Nick stayed where he was. When she was sure Selke was not going to rush at her husband again, Judy dropped down and rejoined him. Gazelle and Christine collapsed beside Selke, quietly comforting her.

Nick and Judy slowly walked to the open door, stopping in the doorway. They couldn't see Alec and Elgen, but they could hear them.

"Alec, I got rid of him, doesn't that mean anything?"

"How could you do that to us?" Alec sounded on the verge of tears now.

"Alec…"

"No, don't you dare! And if you ever touch my friend again, I will fricking kill you!"
A door slammed from somewhere in the Hall.

"Oh gosh…" Judy sniffled. "I should have stopped it. I should have turned it off myself."

Nick stopped her with a hug. "Deep breaths, Carrots. This isn't anywhere near your fault."

"I should have told you, Nick. We should have stopped it."

"Wait, you knew Casel knew?"

"No, I swear!" Judy pushed her arms up between Nick's arms to dry her eyes. "Lake said the disc contained footage of the time Ben talked to Elgen about the abuse and that's all!"

Nick patted the soft fur on her head, taking care not to dislodge the flower clip. "Look on the bright side, Carrots. Now we have probable cause to ask Chief Buffalo Butt about his assault. What do you bet that Benji decided to tell the chief what was going on despite that jerk's threats? What's to say it really was a Casel kid who assaulted him?"

Judy stiffened in his arms. "That's right. If someone was thrown out because they were abusing Mr. Casel's kids and Bogo helped expose them, that's motive right there. This might be the connection we're looking for."

"Best not to talk about it now, Carrots."

They heard approaching footsteps and broke apart to move away from the door. Elgen stopped in the doorway, looking like he'd just lost the family fortune.

Gazelle stood up, eyes blazing. "I hope you're satisfied."

Elgen didn't look at her. "Where is Edward?"

"Hell if I know!"

Elgen cursed and stormed off.

Nick straightened his stitched up tie. "Okay, time for damage control. We've gotta split up before someone does something stupid."

"I'll talk to Lake." Judy said. Lake had shifted to a chair in the far corner of the room, still and silent. "You go find her brothers. And put some proper clothes on!"

Nick looked down at his maid's attire and groaned.

He didn't find either Alec or Edward upstairs, but he did find his green sweater and brown pants in his room. Not feeling better at all, he returned downstairs and entered the Dining Room.

Edward was standing beside the clock, hyperventilating and gripping his head as if he was trying to rip out the memory of the footage.

Nick cautiously approached him. "Belch? Buddy?"

Edward shook his head, refusing to look at him.

"Edward, do you want to talk?"

"No!" Edward hissed in between breaths.
"You've gotta talk to your dad, buddy. You've gotta make sure you've got the whole story." Nick reached for Edward's elbow. "Trust me, you don't want to jump to conclusions on this one. I made that mistake when Judy had her first press conference."

"I don't want to talk to him!" Edward growled. "I want to talk to Carlos. Where is he?"

Nick grimaced. "That is not a good idea. You're in a really bad place, Edward. You've gotta calm down first, trust me."

"Where is he?" Edward spun round and stormed past Nick. Cursing, Nick followed him into the Hall just as Elgen and Gazelle emerged from the bar.

"Edward!" Elgen called and grabbed at his shoulder. "Edward, listen to me!"

Edward threw him arm off with a wordless shout as he thundered upstairs.

"Mr. Casel, where's Carlos?" Nick asked.

Elgen looked up the now empty stairs. "He's being held in the Guardhouse where he can't cause any more harm."

"Don't you go pinning this entirely on him." Nick retorted, no longer able to hide his contempt. "He'd already lost the second Selke stole back the disc. None of this would have happened if you hadn't decided to humiliate her in front of her entire family."

"I wasn't trying to embarrass her!" Elgen growled at him. "I just wanted her to do the right thing!"

Nick snorted. "Really, Mr. Casel? Really? 'Do the right thing?' Let me tell you my take on this mess. A successful entrepreneur from an old money family decides one day to take back what he thinks is rightfully his. He becomes a mayoral candidate, gets tons of support, and more or less guarantees his place in the big office, but then a close friend of Alec's tell him straight up that someone is abusing his kids and he didn't have a clue what was happening."

"Hold your tongue!"

"Uh, no. Anyway, being too obsessed with his family legacy to back out now, this entrepreneur decides to wait until after he's won before doing anything about it. He even threatens to kill this close friend of Alec's if he tries to go to his boss for help, only whoopsie, since he wouldn't do a damn thing to help, Ben decides to tell Chief Bogo anyway. Whoopsie number two-sie, by the time the entrepreneur decides to act, it's too late. Someone snaps and glasses Chief Bogo, one of the most respected mammals in the city. Whoopsie number three-sie, the media gets wind of this, claims it was one of the Casel kids and the resulting backlash causes our entrepreneur to lose the election anyway."

Gazelle shook her head. "You self-serving meapilas."

Elgen sighed grimly. "I take you will no longer be in support of Tirari Town."

She folded her arms. "I will continue to support your project, but know this; I wasn't doing it for you, and I'm sure as hell not doing it for you now."

Nick was sure Elgen's shoulders had lowered a little by this point. "I still have to talk to Carlos." He rather hurriedly left through the front doors.

Judy emerged from the bar. "Christine's looking after Lake and Selke. Did you talk to Edward?"
"Tried, but he'd rather talk to Carlos. Finding out his dad knew really hit him hard."

"So what do we do? Are we gonna arrest him?"

"Arrest him?"

Judy glared. "We just watched him threaten to kill Ben on video."

"Yeah, we should probably get on that…” Nick paused when he saw Edward making his way back downstairs. "After his kids are through with him."

"He's not upstairs." Edward's eyes were wet but narrowed with fury. "Where the hell is that gold digger?"

"He's in custody right now." Nick said quickly. "Are you sure you want to try getting answers from him? He'll just say something to tick you off even more."

Edward stood at the bottom of the stairs, silently seething.

"He's right." Gazelle said. "I know Carlos. He's a spiteful jerk when he doesn't get his way."

Edward seemed to consider this. "Ben knows the truth. Where is he?"

Judy stepped in front of him. "Edward, wait! Let us find him. I promise we'll get his side of the story and tell you, okay?"

"Carrots is right. You need to calm down before you go grilling anyone." Nick said. "Seriously, I've been down this road. Get some fresh air, cool down, and we'll come find you later."

Edward gritted his teeth and pressed his hooves into his head again. "I'm trying to cool down… I really am… but how can I calm down when I just found out via a freaking DVD that my own father actually believed Ben but chose to do nothing!"

"Buddy… Belch, you're hyperventilating again. Get some fresh air, okay?"

Gazelle gently held Edward's arm. "I'll come with you, if you like. We'll get out of these costumes and take a walk around the rose garden. I'll even bring some hot cocoa."

"Wait, Nick." Judy turned to the fox. "Are you sure they should be going outside with…" She leaned in and whispered. "You-Know-What creeping about if he's still alive?"

"There's a balcony big enough to run laps in. You know which one I'm talking about?"

Edward rolled his eyes, a significant improvement to devastated betrayal. "No, I've only lived here eighteen years. Of course I know which balcony you're talking about!"

"Good. Go take a breather with Gazelle, maybe get an autographed shirt. We'll make sure Alec's okay, get some answers from Ben and then we'll talk," Judy said.

Edward took some deep breaths and wiped his eyes. "Okay. Okay, okay, I'll go get changed."

"I'll get changed too and get the cocoa made." Gazelle said. "I'm assuming it's the balcony in the west wing."

"The room that looks like the enchanted rose room from that movie?" Edward asked. "Yes."
"Good. I'll meet you there. Hang in there, Belch." Gazelle patted his arm and went up the stairs.

Edward looked to Nick and Judy, his expression hard. "Make sure me and Carlos never cross paths." He then went up the stairs himself.

"Gosh, I hope they come through this okay." Judy said, her eyes shiny and ears droopy. "I knew Mr. Casel was a cold mammal, but… gosh."

"I'd use a stronger word, but yeah. Gosh." Nick's ears were feeling flat themselves. "But now we've gotta split up again. I'll find Alec and make sure he's okay, you go find Ben. I don't think anyone's seen him since we watched that film."

It was cold in the rose garden, so cold even the thorns had thornicles. Yet it was nowhere near as cold as the feeling in Benjamin's gut.

They knew. It was the most painful secret he had ever kept, and now they knew. Even Chief Bogo didn't know that Mr. Casel had actually believed him when he'd told him what was going on. Benjamin had wanted to tell the truth. He hated lying more than he hated sugar free donuts. But more than anything he hated tearing families apart.

Benjamin sat on a stone bench, barely aware that it was freezing. His ribs were aching again from the long run he'd just had, all the way from the bar. Behind his ribs his heart was pounding. The frigid air burned his lungs as he struggled to get his breathing under control.

He'd never wanted any of this. After he had managed to convince Alec to admit what was going on, Benjamin had tried to keep it within the family. His first plan of action had been to tell the parents and hope they'd believe him. Selke had made her denial very clear. Elgen's reaction had been even worse. To this day Benjamin was still aghast that Elgen would postpone any plan to put a stop to the abuse. Alec's own father. What choice did Ben have but to talk to Chief Bogo?

Benjamin sensed a light turning on upstairs and looked up to see Edward passing by the window. He felt sicker than ever. He'd figured all this time that Alec's siblings had been completely in the dark as much as their mother had been. If their reactions to the footage were anything to go by, then in truth they had been victims, too. Elgen hadn't just ignored the plight of his youngest son, but all his children, even if he hadn't known it at the time. And now the truth had come out in the worst way possible.

*Darn you, Carlos. You'll do anything to come out on top.*

Benjamin heard hurried footsteps crunching in the snow and looked up. Edward stared back, wearing his Prince Charming pants and a normal turtle neck sweater that looked like it had been pulled on in a hurry.

"Found you." He said hoarsely.

Benjamin swallowed back bile. "I'm sorry."

Edward stalked up to the cheetah. "Was that the way it happened? Was that footage really edited?"

Benjamin felt hot tears begin to bead. "$N-no…"

Edward's face contorted. "You lying little punk."

Benjamin's gut lurched again. "$No! I-I didn't know what to do!"
He cringed when Edward loomed over him. "You could have told us he believed you!"

Benjamin stood up. "It would have destroyed your family! I didn't want that, I only wanted the abuse to stop!"

"And you thought hiding the fact that our own father abandoned us was the better option?"

"He didn't..." Benjamin held his stomach as the churning got worse. "He was going to put a stop to it. He just wanted to wait until the campaign was over-"

Edward grabbed his golden coat by the lapels. "AND THAT MAKES IT BETTER, DOES IT?!"

Benjamin clapped a paw over his mouth and didn't answer. Edward grunted furiously, let him go and spun round to leave the garden.

Benjamin dropped to his knees and threw up into one of the elk-deer's footprints.

He wiped his mouth, still feeling sick, and didn't see Edward stop and turn round, only hearing the crunching footsteps stop. "Ben?" He returned to Benjamin's side, and the cheetah felt a hoof on his back. "Ben, are you alright?"

Benjamin retched, but nothing more came out. He wiped his mouth again, even though he was ruining the costume. "I was scared." He admitted once he was sure he wouldn't throw up again. "After what happened to Bogo, I was so scared of making things worse."

"I know. I know, I know, I know..." Edward's arms wrapped around Benjamin as the cheetah began to cry anew. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry, Ben. It wasn't your fault." Edward sounded on the verge of tears himself. "It was him. Him and that waste of mammalian life."

"I didn't know." Benjamin said meekly. "I didn't know he was hurting you, too."

They kneeled there in the snowy garden, weeping silently. In the distance, there was a steady crunching of gravel and a flash of headlights as a car drove up the main driveway to the mansion.

Edward slowly returned to his feet. "It's okay, Ben. It's okay."

Benjamin looked up for the first time since he'd lost his lunch. "What're you going to do?"

Edward's voice and expression were hard again. "I'm packing and I'm going home. I don't care if I have to steal one of these cars, I can't stay here another minute. If you want to come with me, you're more than welcome."

Benjamin looked up at the house. "Yeah. I think I'd better leave. But not until I see Alec."

Judy ran into Gazelle on the outside steps to the entrance with a travel mug; after changing into a normal sweater and jeans, she'd seen Edward run out the front doors in a hurry. They searched the grounds close to the mansion until they found Alec near the frozen pond. "Judy! Have you seen Ben? He's not in the house."

"He won't have gone far." Gazelle said. "I'll look for your brother and Ben. You should go back inside, Christine's worried about you."

"I have to make sure Ben's okay!" Alec insisted.

"And he will be. He's a cop, remember?" Gazelle said.
They heard the sound of a car coming up the driveway and returned to the entrance to see a seething Elgen emerging from one of the black cars.

"The talk with Carlos didn't go well?" Judy asked, not surprised in the slightest.

If looks could kill, Judy would be ash right now. "He insists that the footage we saw is the original. One way or another, I'll get the truth out of him."

Judy snorted. "Good luck convincing your kids when you do." She would have said more, but then she spotted Benjamin and Edward walk round the other side of the mansion, illuminated by the garden lights. Alec rushed over to Benjamin, stopped him with a hug and spoke quietly into his ear. Edward kept walking, his already hardened eyes narrowing when he saw Elgen.

"Look. The father of the month."

Elgen started towards his elder son. "Edward…"

Edward ignored him, storming back inside. Elgen raced after him, followed by Judy, Benjamin and Alec. "Edward, please listen to me!"

Edward whirled round. "Listen to you? Listen to what? How you abandoned us? Put your precious election first? Or how you treated us like an afterthought year after year?"

"That is not true!"

"Is it not?! He made our lives hell for years, years, dad, and it only took him…" He pointed at Benjamin. "Two goddamn months to figure out what was going on!"

Lake emerged from the bar, drawn by the shouting.

"He's a police officer!" Elgen said. "He's been trained to see the signs! I had no idea, no way of suspecting anything, and you never gave us a reason to!"

"And you're our father! You're supposed to see the signs way before the cops do! Or have you had your head stuck in the sandpit all this time?"

"You could have told us!" Elgen shouted back. "If it was that bad, why didn't you say anything?"

"How could we? He had us all too scared to say anything! Every day he said he would kill us in our beds if we so much as told the servants! We didn't know if it would have made a difference if we told you, dad! Now that I saw that film, I know that it wouldn't!"

All the while Judy stood there, rooted to the spot. She shouldn't just be standing here. She had to do her job and stop this from escalating, but her body was unwilling to move.

Elgen had completely lost his fire, indefensible under Edward's onslaught. "I'm sorry."

Edward punched him in the mouth. Elgen's head snapped to the side, but he made no move to retaliate.

"Now you know. Now you have just the teensiest idea of what that waste of life put us through!" Edward snarled. "Don't bother seeing me off, just get out of my life! I never want to see your face again!"

Bleeding into his suit, Elgen disappeared into his study.
"Ben, are you coming?" Edward asked as he fought to get his temper down.

Benjamin wrung his paws, visibly shaken by what had just transpired. "Yes."

Edward turned to Judy and the others. "Once we get our bags packed, we're taking one of those cars and we're going home. Is anyone else coming, or are you going to wait 'til tomorrow?"

Judy opened her mouth to warn Edward against leaving, that the forest surrounding the road was probably still crawling with savage mammals. Then Nick appeared at her side and cut her off. "That is not a good idea."

"And why not?" Edward shot back.

"Because there's been another Night Howler incident."

Judy could have clipped him for being so blunt. The larger mammals looked at each other in shock, including Lake.

"What?" Christine asked.

"I'm sorry, we were going to tell you once we were back in the city." Nick said, cool as a kiwi. "A campsite near here was hit. More than a dozen mammals were turned savage. Your security's rounding them up as we speak."

"Oh my God." Alec whispered.

"The bottom line is that until we're given the all clear, it's too dangerous to take the road." Nick said. "Where's your mom? She'll need to hear this, too."

"She stormed off soon after you did." Christine said. "I think she went out the back door."

"I'll go get her." Judy immediately volunteered. She had to get out the house, just for a little longer. After all of that horrible drama, she was in desperate need of fresh air.

She found Selke on a stone bench in the center of the rose garden. She was hunched over and hugging herself tightly. Whether it was from the lack of coat or the shock of what she had just discovered, Judy wasn't sure.

"Mrs. Casel?"

Selke flinched and looked up sharply. When she saw Judy, she didn't relax. "Hopps."

"I know you're not okay, so I'm not going to ask." Judy said, feeling sorry for the socialite for the first time since they'd met. "But you need to come back inside. There's something we have to tell you."

"It's Veltro again, isn't it? Of course it is."

"Wait, what-" Judy jumped when Nick appeared at her side again. "Nick! What're you, Nightcrawler?"

"Sorry, Carrots, but I have to ask you something. When we went into the house after Casel came back, do you remember if the Angel with Horns came in with us?"
As it turned out, Gazelle hadn't.

Everyone had been so preoccupied with watching Edward and his father argue and worrying that they would descend into violence that none of them had noticed that Gazelle had not followed them into the mansion.

When Judy and Nick rushed back to the front steps, there was no sign of her. Elgen had been the only mammal in the car when it had driven up to the mansion, and there were no guards around the main entrance.

That bothered them. Gazelle wasn't the kind of celebrity who thought herself important enough that she could just run off willy-nilly. They went back inside and told the other guests to look for her before going back out to search the grounds. With the path being shoveled clean of snow they didn't find any tracks, but when they neared the maze Nick claimed that he caught a faint scent. It was a scent he had smelled twice before; once inside the maze, and once in the forest. It was the scent of a murderer.

Feeling a cold dread, Judy followed the fox into the maze. The snow here still bore the footprints of their previous adventure in the maze. Now they saw thin drag marks, too, as if something or someone had been hauled. They ran faster as they followed the tracks. They ran faster still when they heard the sound of scraping stone from somewhere within the complex of hedges. Their worst fears were confirmed when they reached the center of the maze. The tracks entered at the feet of the stone mammal in a toga. At the end of the tracks was a smaller statue, a grotesque looking wolf that snarled at the fox and rabbit as they approached. Propped on its legs was a travel mug that emanated the sweet scent of hot chocolate.

Within minutes they were out the maze and sprinting back to the front entrance. Alec rushed out to meet them at the bottom of the steps, as worried as they were. Inside the mansion, Gazelle was nowhere to be found.

Next they burst into the study, interrupting Elgen as he was tending to his bleeding lip. Elgen wasted no time contacting his security, alternating between informing them of Gazelle's disappearance and berating them for letting the intruder get past them again. The Head of Security reacted with total confusion. He had guards posted all around the border. He had an eye on every camera. There was no possible way the masked mammal could have entered the estate undetected.

Upon overhearing the heated conversation on the phone, Judy returned to her phone and searched the recorded footage from the last hour. The Head of Security was right. There was no sign of the intruder or Gazelle on any of the feeds.

She felt Nick's warm breath on her arms as he looked over her shoulder at the footage. Feeling more than a little warm herself at how close he was, Judy put her phone away and sat down on one of the cushioned footstools in the study.

Elgen finished his phone call with a furious order to search the entire grounds and slammed the receiver into its cradle.

When he turned to look at the two officers, he found both eyes widened with worry and anger.

"We shouldn't have listened to you. We should have involved the ZPD right from the start." Judy
said hoarsely, unable to contain her anger. Not all of it was directed at him, however.

"We have the best security in the country, second only to the United States Government." Elgen dropped down in his own chair, utterly bewildered. After a few seconds he punched the desk. "I don't understand!"

"Me either." Nick grabbed Judy's shoulder, making her look up. "But I think I may know someone who does."

"Who, Nick?" Judy pleaded. First Ombidia, and now Gazelle. Every second counted. If Nick's hunch saved the singer Judy would kiss him full on the mouth, and she knew she would.

"Honey. She was tracking this guy, thinking he was Bigfoot. I'm not saying she's a suspect, but she may know something we don't."

Judy's ears shot up. "She may even know something about the gargoyle in the maze!"

"First of all, that is not a gargoyle." Honey said irritably when Nick presented the photo on his phone. "That is a grotesque. Also, I have definitely seen it before. It came from the old cathedral in the forest."

They'd planted Honey in a plain metal chair in one of the rooms in the Guardhouse and provided two others for Judy and Nick to use while they talked to her. Woolworth stood in one corner, keeping an eye on the badger. Honey was in a foul mood when they greeted her, but she showed no hesitation in cooperating when they told her about Gazelle.

Before they'd started the interrogation, the bull from before invited them to watch the camera footage from the camp they had just finished analyzing. No-one who had seen the footage so far could identify the mammal after he'd taken his mask off, including Judy and Nick. However, thanks to the camera's night vision, they could confirm that the mystery mammal was indeed an elk, or part elk at least. What they had seen of his face was brutally scarred, just as Honey had stated. It really did look like he'd been hit in the side of the face with buckshot. It was a distinctive feature that could help them identify the suspect in the future, and Judy added it to her notebook.

"Do you think he left that statue there as a message?" Judy asked.

"Yeah. The whole thing practically screams 'You want her? Come and get her.'"

"He's using her as bait?" Nick frowned. "Why? What is he really after?"

"I don't know that, now that I know he's not really Bigfoot. Sorry, Nicky."

"This creep got past the security system twice now." Nick said. "Something's going on here, and I don't think it's incompetence. You're the savviest mammal I know, Honey. How did he do it?"

"The cameras were being looped." Honey said immediately, surprising even Nick. "In two different instances during the last two days."

"You mean the maze attack and the kidnapping."

"No and yes."

Nick blinked. "No and yes?"

"You're wrong and you're right."
Nick glared at her for the first time. "Honey. Get to the point."

"I was watching the border during the time of the maze attack. I even had my own cameras all over the place. If your cameras didn't see him, neither did I. And I highly doubted our hacker knew about my cameras or how to get in them. Your guys didn't see him set up the trail leading to that bison's car, either, but I did, so your feed was definitely being looped then. It was probably looped when your Gazelle was kidnapped, too."

"Now I get it." Judy was already updating her notebook. "They didn't find any looping at the time of the maze attack because there was none. The intruder wasn't anywhere near the fence." She tapped her chin with her pen. "But then how did he get in?"

"Now that I don't know." Honey said. "Look, I'll hand over the footage from my cameras if it'll help you find Gazelle. I'm no fan of hers, but I hope she's okay."

"Thanks, Honey." Judy said, meaning it.

Nick leaned forward. "Honey, the coordinates we found on the map were false. If we're going to find Gazelle in time, we need the real thing."

Honey rolled her eyes. "Did those idiots by any chance go over the thing with a UV light?"

There was a heavy silence.

"Okay, now I feel stupid." Woolworth muttered.

A similarly embarrassed Judy stood up with her phone. "I'm going to call Bogo, now. "Sweet cheese and crackers is he gonna kill us."

Nick called out to Judy as she walked out the room. "Don't be so melodramatic, Carrots! Once we catch this guy, Bogo might forgive us!"

"These guys." Honey said frankly.

Nick turned back to her. "I beg your pardon?"

Honey's arms were crossed. "Just what kind of guy do you think you're looking for?"

Fortunately for Nick, profiling was one of his strengths. He couldn't say the same for Honey, so he explained it in the best way he could. "We're looking for a psychopath. Someone with homicidal tendencies with a grudge against the Casel Family. Their creepy wolf costume is clearly a reference to the Hound of the Casels legend, intended to taunt members of the family. They also must be really, really good with computers in order to hack the security system and…" Nick blinked. "Wait a second."

Honey smiled, encouraging his sudden epiphany. "You're the slyest fox I know, Nicky. Take a look at me. You know how good I am at hacking myself. I'm a pretty good survivalist, too. But do you think that I would be capable of creeping around the forest wreaking bloody havoc and hacking one of the best security systems in the world in two days?"

Nick groaned and rubbed his eyebrow. "No. But if you're right, then that means…" He stood up. He had to tell Judy. "There's an accomplice here."

Bogo's phone started buzzing just as he made it through the front door of his house. It was Benjamin.
"Clawhauser?" He answered.

His heart sank when he heard the tears in Benjamin's voice. "Chief."

"Clawhauser, what's happened now?" Bogo pictured another attack, or worse a murder.

"He's got Gazelle."

A kidnapping. God damn it. "Gazelle's been abducted?! How the hell did that happen?!"

Benjamin sniffled. "Stuff happened. Really bad stuff. Some of us went outside. Gazelle disappeared. They think he's taken her to the cathedral. Security's on their way to get her back."

"So we know where he's holding her, at least." Bogo breathed a little easier. "Don't worry, Clawhauser. We'll get her back."

"It's my fault, sir. I ran away."

Bogo scowled at his phone. "What do you mean you ran away?"

"... I ran away."

"While an axe-swinging lunatic and a pack of savage terrorists were on the loose? What the hell were you thinking?"

"I didn't go far, I swear! Just the big garden with all the roses!" Benjamin paused. "I didn't think at all. I just had to get away."

"What did they do?"

"Carlos had this video." Benjamin spoke in short sentences, audibly weeping. "He was gonna blackmail Lake. Elgen found out. Made us all watch it. They saw me talking to their dad about Alec being abused... I'm sorry, sir. I lied to you."

"Lied to me? What do you mean?"

"When I talked to you about helping Alec, I told you Mr. Casel didn't believe me. But he did." Benjamin sobbed.

"He believed you and he did nothing?!" Bogo growled. The cheetah sniffled again, reminding Bogo to calm down. He didn't want to take anything out on his already distraught receptionist. "Why did you lie to me about that?"

"If word got out that he was turning a blind eye, he would have lost the election. I was scared of what he'd do to me if I told you the truth."

Bogo sighed. He could imagine what Elgen would have done. "I understand. So you've been hiding that all this time?"

"I-I couldn't bear to be around Alec and the others. Not when they found out their dad knew about the abuse and that I kept that from them. I ran out into the garden. They went out looking for me. It's my fault Gazelle's in trouble!"

"No, Clawhauser!" Bogo snapped at the phone, now holding the device with both hooves. "None of this is your fault! It's Elgen. It's always been that stubborn old fool. To him, his reputation has always been priority number one, even at the expense of others. Well, that stops now. I'm calling the ZBI."
"Okay. Great." Benjamin took a deep breath. "What do you want us to do?"

"Stay in the mansion and keep the family safe. That's all you can do, for now. When the ZBI get there, they'll take over the rescue."

"Yes, sir."

"And Clawhauser?"

"Yes, sir?"

"We will get her back."

Bogo hung up and immediately after dialed Agent Yaxley's number. Yaxley did not sound happy in the slightest when he heard the news, but took it with a professionalism that assured the buffalo. He said that the ZBI would be at the estate within ninety minutes before hanging up. When they got there, they would take charge of the situation whether Elgen liked it or not. No sooner did the call end that he received a call from Officer Hopps.

Bogo didn't give her a chance to speak before telling her that he already knew. Once she got over her surprise, Hopps proceeded to apologize profusely for her failure. Bogo stopped her with a sharp "Shut your tiny mouth, now!" before explaining the situation with the ZBI. When he finished, it was Wilde who responded, having taken the phone from his partner while the chief was talking. Bogo would have torn into the fox for not paying attention if he hadn't quickly explained that he'd put the phone on speaker so they could both listen. So Bogo shut his own mouth and listened as Wilde explained what he'd just learned from the honey badger. It was likely the camera feed had been hacked and looped, explaining how no-one spotted the intruder crossing the fence. It didn't explain how none of the guards had seen him with their own eyes, however, as Bogo irritably reminded him.

Then the possibility of an accomplice came up as he was turning on the light.

"Are you kidding me?" Bogo snarled into the phone.

"It makes sense, sir. We're talking about hacking in real life, not Swordfish." Nick sounded dead serious. "There is no way that guy could sneak into the estate twice, attempt a murder, blast a camp full of terrorists with their own weapon, kidnap a pop singer and still have the time to hack into one of the best security systems in the world. He's got to have a helper. Someone who did all the tech-work to cover their buddy's butt."

"For crying out loud, what next?" Bogo collapsed into a chair he had wandered next to.

"I dunno, maybe Halle Bearry showing up topless at our front door?"

Bogo wasn't going to dignify that with a response. "I have other calls to make, so you can tell the ZBI this yourself when they get there."

"Sure thing, sir. Do you think we can get Honey a lighter sentence for her assistance when this is over?"

"As it is, the worst she'll be getting out of this is a fine. In the meantime, you, Hopps and Clawhauser will continue to do your jobs and keep the Casels safe."

"You're still trusting us with their safety after what happened to Gazelle?" Judy asked.

"I don't have much choice, do I?" Bogo said. He would have shouted, but he right now he was just
too tired. "We'll discuss parking duty when you're back at the precinct."

"Oh, joy."

"Can it, Wilde! Just try not to lose anyone else!"

He hung up before either of them could respond. Only then did he notice the headache. It was a mild pounding that accentuated his quickening heartbeat as his anxiety grew. In the quiet, dimly lit atmosphere of his living room, it began to sink in. Gazelle, the singer who took up the majority of his phone's music list and was the face of his favorite app, was in the clutches of a complete lunatic. There was no telling what he was doing to her at this moment, or if they could find her in time. Bogo couldn't even bring himself to make those few calls, which now that he thought about it were pointless. He didn't even remember whom he had wanted to call.

He thought about calling Elgen and let him know just how badly he'd screwed up and how many ways he'd done it. Then he thought better of it. What good would it do?

Then he thought about calling the precinct, but kidnapping was the ZBI's jurisdiction. Besides, they had enough on their plate with the crap that went on in the city on an hourly basis.

Before he knew it he was tapping a name on the speed dial.

"Hello, sir?" Benjamin sounded a little less upset and more confused.

"Clawhauser, how're you doing?"

"... Not good."

"Me either, to be honest." Bogo sighed. "I can't believe this is happening."

"I'm sorry, sir. I'm so sorry."

"I thought I said this wasn't your fault."

"I know, I know, but I feel responsible! If she'd stayed inside, that guy might not have gotten to her."

"He had the security system fooled, Clawhauser. You can't blame yourself." Bogo said, before a thought came to him. Maybe Benjamin wouldn't feel as terrible if he could provide some assistance. "Do you think you can tell me what happened in between when you watched the disc and when you first realized Gazelle was missing?"

"I think so."

"Start from after you ran off. Did you go straight to the big garden with the roses?"

"Sort of. I ran straight out the house. I guess I just found my way to the garden and stayed there until Edward saw me from his bedroom window and confronted me."

"He confronted you?" Bogo started writing the information down on some convenient scrap paper on the coffee table. It was odd, performing a witness interview over the phone.

"He wanted to know if what he saw on the disc was what really happened. I told him the truth, and he got really mad. I threw up."

"You what?" Bogo felt a painful lurch.
"I threw up in the garden." You only had to listen to know that he was mortified.

"You didn't do it on the roses, did you?"

"Sweet sugary sprinkles, no!" Benjamin's response was so loud and kid-friendly Bogo couldn't help but chuckle. "It’s not funny, sir!"

"You're right, I'm sorry." It took Bogo a minute to continue. "So you did not throw up on the roses. What next?"

"Edward decided he wanted to go home and offered to take me with him. I felt I'd done enough damage, so I took him up on it. On our way back into the house, we ran into some of the others."

"Was Gazelle with them?"

"Yes, sir."

"When exactly was the last time you saw her?"

"Right before we went back into the house."

"Any idea why she didn't follow you inside?"

"No. Edward and his dad got into a huge fight. We got distracted making sure it didn't escalate."

"So it's likely that Gazelle was snatched outside the front door. Do they have any security in the immediate area of the house?"

"They did after what happened in the maze. But then half of them got sent out to deal with the savage mammals in the forest."

"So how many guards were surrounding the house at the time of the kidnapping?" Bogo asked, nearly crushing his pen as he felt his anger bubbling again. If Elgen had failed to keep guards posted in the immediate vicinity of the house, where half a dozen viable abductees were currently residing, horns were going to start swinging.

"Not sure, I'll have to ask Mr. Casel."

"When you find him, put him on the phone. I'd rather I talked to him than you."

"Thanks, sir." Benjamin sounded relieved.

"Just one more question, Clawhauser. You said you met some of the other guests outside the main entrance. Who was absent?"

Benjamin paused to think. "Nick, Christine, Lake and Mrs. Casel. I think they were all in the bar at the time."

"We'll need to confirm their alibis, then. Now if you don't mind, I want to talk to Mr. Casel, now."

"Okay, sir. I hope this information will help the ZBI."

"It will. You did good."

Bogo slowly set his pen down and listened to Benjamin's footsteps as he searched for Elgen, feeling better than he had before the call. With the ZBI having taken over jurisdiction of the case while he
sat alone in his house fretting over the fate of his beloved Gazelle, he was feeling useless. It felt good to do something about it, even if it was some as minor as an interview.

Bogo stiffened when he heard a knocking on the phone. After a few seconds he heard a door opening.

"Mr. Casel?"

"What do you want, Clawhauser?" Elgen's voice had lost its cold edge. Bogo couldn't but feel some satisfaction from hearing it.

"I'm sorry to disturb you, but Chief Bo-"

"You've got some nerve showing your face." Bogo heard Selke snarl suddenly. He felt his blood freeze a little, knowing how much the socialite hated the cheetah.

"Mrs. Casel!" Benjamin was startled, as though Selke had come up behind him.

"Haven't you caused enough trouble?"

"Chief Bogo wants to talk to your husband." Benjamin sounded scared, and for good reason.

"The hell with Bogo and the hell with you! I never should have let Alec bring you here! And don't call that beast my husband!"

"Selke!" Elgen yelled.

"I want you gone, do you understand me? I want you and your friends out of my house and off my estate!"

"But Mrs. Casel!"

"Get out! Do you hear me? GET OUT!"

"Mrs. Casel, ple- hey, let go of the phone! Stop it! Get off me!"

"Selke, that's enough!"

"GET OFF MY PROPERTY!"

Bogo shot to his feet. "LET HIM GO! RIGHT NOW!" The phone fell silent. The buffalo glared at the phone, resisting the urge to drop it and rush to his car. "Clawhauser, put the phone on speaker."

"It's on speaker, sir." Benjamin sounded more than a little freaked.

"Thank you." Bogo sighed deeply. "Mrs. Casel, I understand that you are having a difficult time right now. But if you ever touch my officer again, I will cuff you myself."

"... I want him gone, Bogo."

Bogo drummed his fingers on his waist. "The ZBI are on their way to deal with the situation. If you really want him gone, I'll give them a call. If they permit it, I'll send a car to pick him up. But I'm only doing this because I'm concerned about what you will do to him if I don't. Count yourself lucky I haven't put out a warrant for your arrest yet."

He wasn't surprised when Benjamin spoke up. "No, sir! It's okay, you don't have to do that!"
"So long as she doesn't assault you again, I won't. Clawhauser, give the phone to Mr. Casel."

"Okay, sir."

There was short period of silence before a soft clunk of the phone being put down. "So, have you called to gloat, Chief?"

Bogo was irked. "I beg your pardon?"

"I know I screwed up, and I don't need you getting on my back about it."

"Yes, you screwed up when you lied to your guests and stopped my officers from doing their job properly." Bogo said with a scoff. "But that's not what I'm calling for. Where was your security when Gazelle was abducted? Did you have anyone watching the grounds outside the house?"

"Of course I did. I had four guards patrolling the mansion at the time."

So Elgen wasn't a hundred percent arrogant. "Where are they now?"

There was another pause. Bogo was getting tired of them. "We don't know."

Bogo's headache was worsening by the second. "You mean they're missing, too?"

"Yes. The cameras showed nothing, as usual."

"Have your people found the loops, yet?"

"For God's sake, they're security guards. Not computer experts!"

"Good point. You should hand the footage over to the ZBI as soon as they get there."

"I'll have to, won't I?"

Bogo scowled at Elgen's tone. "It's in Gazelle's best interests that you cooperate with the ZBI."

"My men have just located the cathedral and are preparing a raid as we speak. We can handle this ourselves."

Bogo clenched his teeth. "Like your security handled that costumed slasher? Like you handled your family issues?"

He was sure he could hear Elgen grinding his own teeth. "If you ever, ever, ever bring that up again, I will-" He grunted when a ringing phone cut him off. "Excuse me!" There was a click as he picked up the other phone.

There was a scuffling sound as the phone was picked up and his voice faded into nothing.

"You shouldn't have said that, sir." Benjamin said quietly.

Bogo snorted. "He had it coming for a long time. I regret nothing."

"Mrs. Casel just ran out looking like she wants to murder the three of us."

"Oh... I still regret nothing."

"GOD DAMN IT!" Elgen suddenly roared in the background. Even Bogo was startled.
"Mr. Casel?" Benjamin asked.

"I'LL KILL THAT CREEP!"

"Mr. Casel, what happened?" Bogo shouted into his phone.

"HE WAS WAITING FOR THEM!" Elgen bellowed. "THEY HAD THE ENTIRE CATHEDRAL SURROUNDED! FIFTY FOUR FRICKING ELITES ARMED TO THE TEETH AND THAT FRICKIN PYSCHO JUST NIGHT HOWLERED THE LOT OF THEM!"
Fifty-four elite security guards had been sent to the cathedral to retrieve Gazelle, and only three made it back.

Sporting cuts, bruises and teeth marks, they explained what had happened as their fellow guards assisted them from the truck. When they had arrived at the cathedral, they'd found all the conventional entrances sealed from the inside. For ten minutes they had hollered through a megaphone for the kidnapper to release Gazelle and surrender, only to be met with silence. Then they'd made the decision to attempt an infiltration through the stained glass windows.

The attack happened as they were making preparations. From somewhere high up in the cathedral, the first grenade had hit the thirteen guards north of the building. In the chaos that followed, two more grenades had rained down to the south and west. Within a minute the entire area surrounding the cathedral had been enshrouded in a blue mist, inflicting violent madness on everyone it touched. The three guards had been furthest from the cathedral when crap hit the fan, and had barely escaped with their sanity and their lives.

When the details had been relayed to him, Elgen forbade anyone from speaking to him and shut himself up in his study. When Judy tried to speak to him regardless, she found the door locked.

"Unbelievable." Nick was sitting at the bottom of the entrance hall stairs when she walked back to him. The hall was quiet now, as the other Casels, Benjamin and Christine had disappeared to their rooms. Judy couldn't blame them for wanting some peace and quiet to deal with their turmoil.

"I agree, but be fair, Nick. He'd probably having the worst night of his life right now." Judy said, even as she felt her growing contempt churning inside her.

"Nothing he didn't have coming."

"Really? He deserved having an innocent gazelle abducted on his estate and his own men turned into mindless savages?"

"That's not what I meant!" Nick glowered at her. Judy saw that he was holding a dart gun. "He lied to us all. He stopped us from getting his guests to safety when we had the chance. He abandoned his kids when they needed him most. It's about damn time it all caught up to him."

"Worst possible time if you ask me." Judy replied. Nick nodded in begrudging agreement. "Any word on the ZBI?"

"They won't be here for another half hour."

"What? Those savages could be all over the forest by then!"

Nick's ears flattened. "Not much we can do about it, Ca-"
He jumped when she suddenly punched the stair rail. "For God's sake!"

"Woah, langua-"

"Never mind my language!" Judy thundered. "Mr. Casel's hiding in his study while two thirds of his security are running around mad as loons! Gazelle's in danger and the ZBI's not even here yet! And to top it off, none of this would have happened if we didn't suck so much at body guarding!"

"Look, I know you're upset, but we're in over our heads. The best thing to do right now is stay out of the way…"

"The hell with that!" Judy spun on her heel and stomped towards the front doors. "There's no way I'm just going to sit on my butt all night and do nothing! That's all we've done since we got here! Nothing!"

"Well, Chief Bogo did order us to do nothing."

"No, he didn't! He ordered us not to do any investigating and focus and keeping them safe!" Judy retorted. "And I couldn't even do that!"

"But you were trying to keep them safe, right?" Nick asked. Judy stopped at the doors. "You don't get it, Nick. I disobeyed him. Keep our noses out of their business and focus on guard duty. That was our job. But I kept digging up stuff I shouldn't. I didn't even stop Mr. Casel from playing that film. I wanted to, but I didn't, and it started that huge fight and now the whole family's been torn apart. If it weren't for the distraction, that creep wouldn't have gotten to Gazelle."

"You don't know that." Nick muttered, feeling crappier than ever. They'd both disobeyed Bogo, and he had a feeling that the chief knew it.

"He warned us to stay out of their business. He warned us. And warned us." Judy paused and turned to the fox. "And now I have to fix this. I'm going find a way to help Gazelle myself, and I'll start by going back to the maze to take a closer look at that gargoyle!"

"You mean that grotesque, Carro-"

"Whatever, Nick! What! Ever!" She kicked one of the heavy doors open, an impressive feat for a rabbit, and stormed outside. With only thirteen guards left to protect the estate, nine had been assigned to keep watching the fences, two to guard Carlos and Honey in the Guardhouse, and two to guard the house. Judy passed one on her way to the maze, ignoring the uneasy look he sent her way.

Nick caught up to her just as she reached the center of the maze, grabbing her arm and stopping her. "Carrots, stop! You're not thinking straight!"

"And how do you know I'm not thinking straight?" Judy fired back at him.

"You ran into a dead end six times before getting here! Chief Bogo's fired you for insubordination before, Carrots. You have to stop and think this through."

"This isn't the same, Nick!"

"You almost got fired twice during the Otterton Case-"

"WE'RE DEALING WITH AN INSANE MURDERER, NICK, THIS IS NOTHING LIKE THE
Nick stepped back, stunned. Judy froze like the snow around them, her blood turning to ice in her veins as shock and guilt overcame fury.

"Nick… oh gosh… I'm so sorry." She sniffled, feeling hot tears begin to spill. "I just… I feel like such a failure!"

Nick's features softened and he took her paws in his. She welcomed the warmth. "It's okay, Judy. It's okay. I feel like crap, too, believe me. I just want to crawl into a hole with a beer and a can of whipped cream and die."

Judy looked up to see him smiling. "You have a very funny way of showing it." Even as she spoke, she knew the fox meant what he'd said. Whipped cream and all.

"I know. I'm sorry if I made you think I didn't care about her."

"I just want to set things right."

"And we will." Nick bent forward and wiped away Judy's tears. His touch was so gentle she was feeling the urge to kiss his cheek again. "But we've got to be smart about this, Carrots. We're not equipped to deal with the situation. The best thing for Gazelle is for us to step back and let the ZBI handle this."

Judy nodded and wiped away the last of her tears. "You're right, I'm being an idiot again."

"No, you're just being a dumb bunny. There's a difference."

"Can- can we at least figure out how he got past the guards?"

"Of course we can, sweetheart. Come on, let's check out that gargoyle."

"… You just told me it was a grotesque."

"It sure is, Carrots. It sure is." Nick stepped up to the statue and began to circle it, regarding it like a judge scrutinizing a sculpture. "But I have a feeling that behind this hideous stone exterior lies the key to solving our riddle."

"Yeah, something doesn't add up." Judy started running her paws over the cold stone statue. "This thing came all the way from the cathedral. It weighs a hundred kilos, give or take… Bogo couldn't carrying this in without getting caught. What's this?" She had just moved round to behind the grotesque and spotted something drawn in red on its back.

'_'

'X''X'

Nick followed Judy's gaze and saw the markings. "You've got to be joking."

"Okay… either these are totally not Roman Numerals…" Judy locked eyes with Nick. "Or we totally missed something in that library poem."

Within five minutes they had retrieved a copy of the riddle from the library and were now knocking on Alec's door.
When Alec opened the door, he looked like he'd been sick. "What's going on? Did you find Gazelle?"

"Not yet!" Judy said. "Your family has two copies of the Sherlock Howlmes novels. Do you have two copies of Twenty-Thousand Leagues, too?"

"Sure? Why?"

"You know those numerals that led us to the book? We found them on that gargoyle in the garden!"

"You mean the grotesque?"

"Yes, I mean the grotesque!" Judy threw her arms up. "We think there may be more to that riddle than we'd thought. Do you think you could get the other copy of that book for us?"

"Sure, it's in the safe with the others." Alec narrowed his eyes as a pale Christine and a puffy-eyed Benjamin joined him in the doorway. "But how is this going to help Gazelle?"

"Look, that creep left the grotesque as a clear message that he had taken Gazelle to the cathedral." Nick said. "He was baiting us, and we fell for it hook, line and sinker. But he left an extra clue on the statue, something he knew we'd miss the first time around. I think there may be another way to get to the cathedral."

"The cathedral?"

Nick lifted the paper with the riddle and read the final verse.

"Are you the Keeper of these Four Tomes?
If so, take them all and lay them as one,
Then all will know the path to God."

Alec's jaw dropped. "The path to God… Oh God… how did we not see it?"

"Alec, you oughtta open that safe again." Benjamin said.

They raced back to the library. Alec opened the safe, not even bothering to hide the combination this time, and carefully pulled out the book. "You really think there's another clue in this book?" Christine asked.

"Only one way to find out." Judy said. Her heart raced as she watched Alec place the fragile book on the table and carefully turned the pages one by one. They had to be right. There had to be something in this book that could help them save Gazelle. Then Alec turned the final page before the back cover and froze when he saw the other side of the paper. "This isn't in the other book."

What would have been a blank page in the other copy had had a map drawn on it. The map consisted of a single room with an X crossed over a part of the wall.

Alec gaped at the image. "There's only one room in this house that fits the shape. The basement."

There was fear and excitement in the air as they raced to the basement, scouring the room for signs of an X or a passage. "Guys, I think this is it!" Christine yelled beside a large statue identical to the one in the maze. "It looks like something's behind this statue!"

They gathered around the statue and grabbed a part of it, but even the strength of an elk-deer, a deer,
a cheetah, a fox and a rabbit was not enough to move it. Nick grunted and kicked the statue light enough to avoid injuring his foot. "Alec, get your brother and sister."

Alec quickly retrieved Edward and Lake from their rooms and brought them to the basement. Both of them looked ready to smash something. "Would you mind explaining to me why we're doing this again?" Edward growled. "How can we worry about puzzles at a time like this?"

"This isn't about the murder mystery anymore, Belch." Nick said. "Just trust us and help us move this statue."

With two extra pairs of hooves, they were able to slowly inch the statue away from the wall. Now Judy could touch the suspiciously deep groove in the stone. She followed the groove's path up, a meter to the left, then back down to the floor.

Before she could say anything, Nick started to push at the large rectangular shape. "Please be a secret door, please be a secret door, please be a secret door…” He muttered as he and Judy pushed and pushed, but nothing happened.

"Try pulling. I'll help you." Edward grabbed the groove and started to pull with them.

Nick made a small noise of excitement as the secret door opened. "Please be a secret passage, please be a secret passage… Yes!"

They all gaped at the pitch-black passage the stone door opened up into. "Holy crap… do you think mom and dad knew about this, too?" Alec asked.

"I doubt it, otherwise they wouldn't have let you look for it." Judy said while Nick activated the flashlight on his phone. "My guess is that when your great-grandfather abandoned the cathedral, he was hoping to let this secret die with him."

"Carrots, I'm not so sure this is a secret. Look." Nick was down on one knee, his light illuminating the dirt floor of the tunnel. They saw large toeless footprints going too and from the door.

"Oh my gosh." Judy felt a chill of horror. "That creep tried to get into the house."

"And he would have succeeded too if it weren't for that statue." Nick looked up with a scared grimace. "God, we had no idea. Thank God for that statue."

"Thank God."

Edward breathed, looking ready to throw up. Judy could tell he was visualizing what could have happened to his family, and it wasn't pretty.

"We need to tell your father." Aside from a tremor in her voice, Christine was holding it together.

"He has to know about this. I'll do it."

"Thank you, Chris." Edward muttered as she rushed back to the stairs.

Judy activated her own light. "We have to see where this goes."

"Too right." Nick agreed, shocking Judy after their talk in the maze.

"But you said-"

"I said that we need to be smart about this." Nick said. "And I suggest that the smart thing to do is to find out where this goes, but do not engage the suspect unless absolutely necessary. Then we come back, tell the ZBI, and let them take care of the rest. Use our brains to find the missing mammal, find
the perp, and let the brawn handle the arresting bit." He winked. "Just like the Otteron Case."

"Nick, I…"

Nick checked his weapon. "I want to fix our mistakes just as much as you do, Carrots. Let's do this."

Benjamin stepped up behind them. "We'll need some gear before we go."

Judy and Nick blinked up at him. "We?"

Benjamin gave them a very Bogo-like look.

"This could be an extremely dangerous mission, Benjie." Judy said softly. "There's no need for you to come along."

His scowl deepened. "I'm just as much a cop as you are, Judy. I'm going with you."

Within ten minutes the three of them were dressed in jackets and dark pants. Beside the stone door, Woolworth supplied each of them with flashlights and dart guns on the condition that he would accompany them down the tunnel.

"No thanks." Nick held up a paw when the ram offered him a flashlight and tapped the temple beside his eye. "Natural night vision."

Elgen watched them check their gear with sullen eyes, looking like he didn't want to be here. Christine had to coerce him from the study. His three kids were standing nearby, refusing to look at him. "I can't believe I didn't know about this."

"I believe it." Nick said. "It's not like it's the only family secret you've been blind to."

Elgen tensed. "I do not know exactly how long I'll be incarcerated for breaking a police officer's nose, but I will be more than happy to find out if you don't shut that hole in your face!"

Nick rolled his eyes. "Oh yeah, go ahead, keep threatening to assault me. We've already got you threatening to kill a cop on tape."

"That's enough, Wilde!" Woolworth snapped. He'd gotten moodier since the cathedral catastrophe. "I'm bringing two radios with us. The minute we get a call that the ZBI's here, we turn back, understood?"

"Understood." The three officers nodded.

"Good."

"I'm going back to the study." Elgen said with a flippant wave. "Do what you want, just don't mess this up."

Woolworth and Benjamin were the only ones who watched him leave. "Poor sod." The ram muttered.

"And?" Nick asked dryly.

"If word gets out, he's gonna lose the election before it's even started." Woolworth said. "Can't really blame him for shutting down."

"Whatever, he brought this on himself. Can we go, now?" Nick demanded.
"Sure. I'll take point." Woolworth said.

"Are you sure you don't want us to come with you?" Edward almost begged.

"We're sure." Judy said firmly. "Just stay here and look after each other."

"At the very least, I'm keeping an eye on the entrance here." Edward crossed his arms and sat down on an old chair.

Judy saw nothing wrong with that. "Sure, go right ahead. Just make sure someone's with you. I don't want any of you being on your own, not even inside the house."

Lake pulled up another chair and sat down with her brother. "I'll stay with him."

"Just don't expect us to bring Gazelle back." Nick said. "We're scouting ahead, nothing more."

One by one they entered the tunnel. The walls were all dirt, held up by thick wooden beams. It was cold down here, even colder than it was outside, and Judy at least was grateful for her jacket. Even so, she worried about her partner. He'd been nothing but hostile to Elgen since they'd watched the video, and Judy doubted it was purely righteous fury.

He hadn't been this angry since the press conference.

They walked down the tunnel with their guns trained on the path ahead, their flashlights their only source of illumination. Judy took the rear, her ears listening for signs that they weren't alone. For the time being, there was nothing. While she listened, she watched Nick's back. Her eyes were slightly irritated from her earlier tears, but she could clearly see that his ears were flat and his tail was agitated.

Judy got her chance to get him alone sooner that she had expected when they came across a narrower side tunnel. "Hopps, Wilde, you check that path." Woolworth said. "Call us when you find where it leads." He and Benjamin continued up the straight path.

Judy waited until she and Nick were some ways into the tunnel. "Nick, do you remember what you said to me about needing to calm down?"

Nick slowed his pace. "You're going to ask me why I'm being such a jerk, aren't you?"

"You're not being a jerk." Judy assured him. "But you seem to be taking this thing with Mr. Casel and his kids pretty hard. Is there anything you want to talk about?"

"Is now really the right time?" Nick asked. Then he tripped when the floor suddenly sloped upward. "Now we're getting someplace." They ascended the deep slope, stopped at a dead end littered with snow. A metal ladder led up a short shaft. Judy climbed the ladder first, reaching the stone trapdoor on top. When she failed to open the trapdoor by herself, Nick climbed up beside her and they pushed together. When his body rubbed against hers, Judy yet again felt heat surge through her. This is so getting old, she thought as the trapdoor lifted.

They were carefully to only lift the trapdoor just enough so they could peek, but they needn't have bothered; they were back in the center of the maze, some feet from the statue.

Nick shoved the trapdoor up fully and poked his upper body up through the hole. "Well, now we know how he got past the fence."

"Yeah, and the camera looping was probably to cover up the actual kidnapping at the front doors."
Judy said. "I'm starting to think that Honey's right about the accomplice."

Nick grabbed his radio. "Woolworth, Ben, we've reached the end of the tunnel. It leads directly to the center of the maze."

"So that's how the dirtbag's been getting in!" Woolworth growled. "We've found those missing guards on our end. They're both dead. He must have took them out and hid them down here before going for the girl."

"Well, that answers some of our questions." Nick said. "How about we answer some more?"

"Absolutely. Come meet up with us, and we'll keep moving."

"Got it."

Nick put away the radio and looked down at Judy. "So. Do you want to hear my Life Story Volume Two?"

"What?"

His gaze was calm but melancholy. "I'll tell you when we get off this ladder."

They left the trapdoor open as they descended back into the shaft and started back down the tunnel. In the flashlight's beam, Nick looked like he was in his own sad world. "Nick, it's okay if you don't want to talk about it just yet. I was just worried about you."

"It's okay. It's not like the muzzle, Carrots. It's not something that happened to me." He shivered in the cold air. "When you start hustling on the streets from the age of twelve, you meet a lot of mammals. A lot of homeless, vulnerable, broken mammals. I got to know some of them. Found out why they were homeless in the first place." Judy bit her lip. "Turned out that not all of them were thrown into the streets 'cause they lost their jobs or anything like that. Some of them were runaways. They ran away to escape their pathetic excuses for homes to escape their pathetic excuses for parents and guardians. There was this one girl I remember. Couldn't have been more than fourteen, fifteen…" He paused. "She never straight up said what happened, but she did say that the night she ran away, she tried to tell her mom what was going on. And do you know what she said her mother said?" Judy swallowed and shook her head. "She said… 'It's not as if you didn't deserve it.'"

"Crackers." Judy breathed.

"People who deliberately turn a blind eye to abuse, especially when it's their own kids, are pieces of dirt. No, scratch that! They're lower than dirt!" They reached the main tunnel and stopped. "When my mom found out about the muzzle incident, she did everything she could to get those kids punished for it, but they either didn't believe her or didn't give a damn. Whenever I hear about someone ignoring stuff like that, it just… I can read anyone like a book, but I can never, ever understand mammals like Casel!"

He fell silent after that. Judy had to nudge him to get him moving down the main tunnel so they could regroup. They walked in silence, trying to ignore the cold. Judy had no idea the revelation with the disc had affected Nick that deeply, nor that he'd felt so strongly about abuse in general. Then again, someone so negatively stereotyped probably experienced abuse himself on a daily basis.

"Nick, this isn't right." She said.

"You're damn right it's not right." Nick glowered at the footprints illuminated in Judy's flashlight. There were now two more sets of prints along with the prints belonging to the psycho.
"No. It's just not right." Judy was scowling.

"It's obviously not right!" Nick paused, then looked down at her. "What's not right?"

Judy dropped her scowl and looked up at him. "Your left foot."

Nick blinked, his bitter glare giving way to astonishment. Then he burst out laughing.
The Path to God

Chapter Notes

Here's Part 2. If you like dark AUs, try giving my new fiction Rain of Blue Petals a shot? Don't let the three short prologues at the start put you off.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Benjamin stopped, his ears perking. "Do you hear something?"

Woolworth stopped. "Is Wilde… laughing?"

"He probably just told a joke. He does that a lot."

Woolworth's rectangular pupils glared at him. "He's telling jokes during a high profile kidnapping case?"

"To be fair, most of the time they're so bad they're funny."

"Most of the time?"

"Well, yeah."

Woolworth wrinkled his nose at the response. "How ever did he graduate?"

Benjamin pouted. "Hey. He just tells jokes because he's Nick. That doesn't mean he's not taking this seriously."

Woolworth dropped his scowl, humbled. "You're right. I shouldn't have said that."

Benjamin huffed and started checking his weapon to pass the time, but also to let off a little steam. "You know, sometimes I think he tells jokes to make himself feel better. I know they're feeling bad about Gazelle. We did everything we could to keep her safe, but it wasn't enough."

Woolworth looked down the tunnel for signs of Nick and Judy. "Is that how you had felt? After the incident?"

Benjamin tensed.

"What?" He asked.

"You know, what happened back in the city with you and the Chief."

So much for letting off steam. "Well, they never almost got their boss blinded!"

Woolworth's radio beeped. "Woolworth here."

"This is Agent Yaxley, ZBI. Where are you?"

"We're seeing where this tunnel goes, and we've made a couple of interesting discoveries. There's a side tunnel leading into the maze. That's how the kidnapper's been getting into the estate. We also
found the bodies of the guards patrolling around the house."

"Good job. We've just reached the estate and we're making preparations to quell the savage crisis and retrieve the hostage."

Benjamin grimaced and leaned towards the radio. "Her name is Gazelle!"

"Gazelle, my apologies. Anyway, stop what you're doing and get back to the mansion. We'll take over from here."

"Got it. We'll see you in the basement. That's where the main entrance is."

The fox cop's laughing could not be heard on the camera.

The Hound was sure that if it could be heard, his laughter would grated on its ears as it stared at the laptop its 'friend' had provided for it. Under the guise of rocks, the cameras watched and waited for the mammals in blue to reach the 'safe points.' What the cameras saw, the Hound saw too. And it had yet to see what it wanted to see most.

It crouched on the floor beside the altar, surrounded by flickering candles. With claws stained with the drying blood of the guards it had slaughtered prior to taking the female, it stroked the red button at its side. It didn't know what the correct term was for the safe point. Either that or it didn't remember. Either way, it didn't care. All that mattered was the moment its quarry crossed the safe point. Once he crossed it, he would far enough away that he wouldn't be killed when the Hound set its trap. A quick death was not what the Hound wanted. Not for this one.

Wait. Did the Hound even want death for its quarry? Or had it been a moment of madness that had overcome the creature the last time it had approached him? It would figure it out once it had him, it was sure.

The camera spying on the maze entrance had just caught the first pair finding the entrance, the slum-dwelling fox and the interfering bunny- the Hound growled and rubbed its chest where the bullets had struck it. The bullets had been tiny, and the layers the Hound wore were thick. Somewhere in its miasma of madness and hate, the Hound knew it was lucky none of the bullets had gone deep.

The two cops had finally put two and two together and realized how the Hound had gotten past the fence. No matter. If all went to plan, the Hound would never have to use that passage again.

It turned its eyes back to the feed displaying the second camera inside the main tunnel. The other pair would be crossing the safe point any minute now.

Then it spotted them in the camera, stopping right beside the false rock. They stood and talked, likely waiting for the other pair to meet up with them. The ram picked up his radio and listened into it. The Hound recognized him with some amusement as the ram who had shot at him in the forest. The Hound didn't remember his name. Either it had forgotten after its transformation, or it had never bothered to learn it in its past life. The Hound imagined how it must have burned at the ram that it was the tiny, cute little bunny who had caused the most damage.

The ram lowered the radio, said something to Benjamin, and they started back down the tunnel. The Hound looked to the other camera and saw that the fox and rabbit were no longer at the entrance. It looked to the third camera at the fork in the tunnel, and found the two officers there, waiting for their allies.

They were being called back to the mansion.
The Hound snarled behind the mask.

No. No, no no, no, no. No. It would not be foiled again.

The Hound pressed the button beside it. Five seconds later, the cameras quaked as the explosives detonated at the two entrances. The tunnels didn't cave in, just as it had expected, and the explosions were so far away there wasn't even any dust blocked the cameras' vision, other than the camera at the maze entrance. The Hound could clearly see the two officers stagger, with expressions of shock on their faces. They yelled silently into their radio as the ram and Benjamin finally rejoined them. The Hound checked the maze entrance. The view had cleared enough that it could see guards and ZBI agents racing onto the scene and discovering the collapsed mass of dirt and rock that had been the statue. There was no getting into that tunnel without a very big machine. The same would apply for the basement entrance. The four mammals ran off camera to check it out. The Hound waited with a smile, perfectly aware that there would be no escape there either.

Eventually, inevitably, they returned to the fork in the tunnel. They didn't bother checking the maze entrance. Even they knew there was no point. They spoke into the radio. They spoke with each other. The Hound growled and scraped its claws across the ancient stone floor, willing them to get moving. When they finally decided to continue down the main tunnel, it smiled and sat back against the altar.

Such careless, simple minded fools. They didn't even realize they were being watched. When they passed the third camera, the Hound slammed the laptop shut and made for the catacombs beneath the cathedral. It had three hours at most to get everything ready for his arrival.

Soon. Its second chance would come soon.

Judy didn't stop ranting until they stopped for their first rest, one hour into their trek down the tunnel. Benjamin was exaggerating of course, but even he was finding her frequent bouts of angry self-deprecating a little excessive.

"I can't believe this! Just how stupid can we get?" She kept going even as her friends and Woolworth sat down in the frigid earth. "How did we not realize this was a trap! How can we be so-

"We screwed up again, we get it!" Woolworth shouted. "Just sit down and shut up!"

Judy sat down and shut up.

Benjamin sat down with her, wishing he had a few donuts right now. All this walking was making him sore and hungry.

"Maybe going down this tunnel was a bad idea. Who knows where we are now? We don't even know what's waiting for us at the end." Woolworth said.

"Well, we don't have a 'hole' lot of options, do we?" Nick asked.

Woolworth groaned. "Very funny, Wilde."

Nick groaned back. "Really?! You miss all those cold puns in the forest and you get that one?"

"What cold puns?"

Nick stopped in the middle of throwing his arms up, sighed and slowly lowered them back down. "Really, why do I bother?"
Benjamin and Judy laughed. Nick leaned against the dirt wall and rubbed his forehead. "Anyway, the reason we're continuing on is that we're at risk of being buried by a cave in if we stayed put. The farther we are from the site of the explosions, the better."

"But do we really need to be this far?" Woolworth asked.

"The longer we stay stuck down here, the more air we're possibly using." Nick said. "And the other exit can't be that far away. We find the other exit, get out, and maybe even save the day while we're at it. And it's not like we can't just go back."

"He's right." Benjamin agreed. "Besides, Gazelle could be at the other end of this tunnel, and I want to help her if I can."

Woolworth pointed a warning finger at him. "Hey, no matter what we find down there, don't go rushing in guns blazing."

"I won't. Don't you worry about that."

They got up and resumed their trek. Benjamin was glad to have had brought a watch with a luminous face, allowing him to see how long they've been walking. They'd walked an hour so far, and that equaled roughly three miles, maybe less than that. He'd learned that while training for the Police Academy.

After another half hour, Benjamin looked up at the ceiling. "We've probably gone past the fence by now."

"How do you know that?" Judy asked.

"I just figured. We've been walking for a while, now."

As they kept walking, Woolworth called for an update on the radio. There were no digging machines on site, and they were considering just using shovels to dig out an alternate exit. The ZBI were making final preparations to deal with the savage security guards. There had been no word from the kidnapper, no ransom demand, nothing.

Then the radio exploded with noise.

"DO... NOT... TELL ME... YOU ARE DOING WHAT I THINK YOU ARE DOING!"

Chief Bogo had come to retrieve the guests, just as he'd promised.

"I won't!" Nick quickly said. Woolworth held the radio away from his head as they all rubbed their ears.

"WOULD YOU MIND EXPLAINING TO ME WHY THE GODDAMN HELL YOU FOUR IDIOTS ARE BURIED ALIVE?"

"Chief Bogo, I can explain!" Judy started.

"ONE THING, HOPPS! YOU COULDN'T DO ONE THING!"

"To be fair, we were only checking out the tunnel, not attempting a rescue mission."

"AND THAT MAKES IT BETTER, DOES IT?"

"We were heading back when the entrances got blocked! We weren't planning to go all the way! I'm
"Sorry, sir. We didn't expect the tunnel to be booby-trapped."

The radio fell ominously silent. They all stared at the device with steadily growing fear. At any moment they could hear the dread two words; 'you're fired.'

When Bogo spoke again, he was eerily calm. "Are you all alright?"

"Yes, sir." Benjamin said. "We were all far away from the explosions when they happened."

"Clawhauser, what were you thinking going in there? I thought you knew better than that."

Benjamin's heart ached. "I'm sorry, sir. I want only trying to assist."

He heard a sigh. "Look, this had been a trying weekend, for all of us. One thing after another, it's a disaster. But we can't just keep doing whatever we want, even if it is to solve a case."

"I know, sir. I can't tell you how sorry I am for meddling in their business." Judy said.

"I'm sorry, too. I should have better explained why you shouldn't do it. I was concerned it would only encourage you."

"You know, you're probably right." Nick said. Judy scowled but said nothing. Benjamin knew that she knew that Bogo was right.

"You're better not being a smartass again, Wilde."

Nick held his paws up. "No smartassery, I swear."

"I don't thing he's being a smartbutt, Chief." Benjamin said, hoping he was being helpful.

"Hmph. I've just overheard Yaxley speaking with the Head of Security. The area with the two blocked entrances is too unstable to risk digging while you're in the area, so don't bother going back there. My advice is to keep moving."

"Are you sure about that, Chief Bogo?" Woolworth asked.

"It's too dangerous down there. One wrong move could cause the entire tunnel to collapse. I hate to say this, but the safest place is the other exit."

"And if there's an axe-swinging maniac on the other size?"

"Use your own judgment. That's all I can say. Do not engage until you're sure you can do so without endangering Gazelle's life."

"I can work with that."

"Good. I'll contact you when the ZBI begins their operation. Stay safe, and remember, do not engage unless you have to."

"Yes, sir." Benjamin said.

Three hours had passed since they'd first heard from Chief Bogo. Fifteen minutes after the first call, Chief Bogo called again to inform them that the ZBI's operation had begun. The signal was poorer here, but they could make out just enough to get the gist of what was going on. At this moment they were flying across the forest to confront and tranquilize as many savage mammals as they could.
before storming the cathedral to rescue the angel held inside. With luck, they would have completely dealt with the situation by the time Benjamin and the rest of the team were out of the tunnel. Benjamin felt slightly disappointed at that. The fanboy part of him dearly wanted to be one of the mammals involved in saving Gazelle. Helping her to safety in the Greener Grass wasn't enough it seemed. While he listened to the radio, Benjamin reminded himself that he was a cop above all. Let the ZBI handle the case. That was all he could do for her, now that they had solved the mystery of how to kidnapper had infiltrated the estate and made sure he couldn’t do it again.

"Will you be going with them, Chief?" Judy asked.

"I'm just... to get the lot of you... in Zootopia... as possible."

"Speaking of which, how're the others doing?"

"Not good. From... hearing, those kids... hell of a drama bomb... off on them."

"What about Selke?" Judy asked.

"A drunken... shut herself up in her room... talk to anyone."

"I've been thinking about something she said when I last spoke to her." Judy reached out, requesting the radio. Woolworth passed it down to her. "It was right before we realized Gazelle was missing. I found her outside in the rose garden, not too far from where Gazelle disappeared. I was about to tell her about what happened in the forest, but she seemed to guess that it was Veltro. Sir, I think she's hiding something."

Bogo was quiet for a while. "I'll... word with her. You... on getting... tunnel."

"Yes, sir. This signal is getting worse by the second." Soon they wouldn't be able to communicate at all. "We may be out of contact for a while."

"Remember... not enga... be careful. Out."

Judy was proven right roughly eight minutes later, when the radio crackled violently.

"Chief Bogo?" Judy called, having held on to the radio since the last call. "Sir, is that you?"

Benjamin thought he could hear Bogo's furious voice within all the white noise, but there were no distinguishable words. The voice got louder for a few seconds, allowing them to catch a few words. "Do... Get hi... It's Ver... Be..."

That was all they got before the signal was completely lost.

Now they were on their own.

If Benjamin's luminous watch was accurate, it was three hours and forty-eight minutes later when they reached the end of the tunnel.

Their legs were sore. The cold had penetrated deeply into their clothes and fur. Their eyes were feeling irritated from being up all night. But they had finally made it.

The exit wasn't much to look at, but there were clear signs that it had been used. It was identical to the basement entrance, and the stone door was ajar, leaking amber light into the tunnel.

"Bet ya fifty bucks we're under the cathedral." Nick said.
"Hell no." Woolworth snorted. He tried the radio one more time, but still there was nothing but static.

"So what now?" Judy asked. "Do we stay here and possibly get buried alive or freeze to death, or do we head up and catch a Hound? What do you think, Ben? Benji?"

Benjamin had moved in front of them to stand in front of the door.

"You okay?" Nick asked. "It's the ribs again, isn't it?"

"I've just got a bad feeling." Benjamin said.

"About what?"

"That we're walking into a trap."

"What the heck are you talking about, Benji? It's obviously a trap." Nick checked his watch. "We've got about two more hours until sunrise."

"We could just see what's beyond the door." Judy said. "Maybe see if Nick would have won fifty bucks or not."

"No." Woolworth glared at the three of them. "You're already in the crap house for disregarding the chief's orders to stay out of the Casels' business. We'll sit tight and wait for the ZBI the give the all-"

Another explosion, a fair distance but just close enough to make dirt fall from the ceiling.

Woolworth's ears went so flat they disappeared into his fur. "Never mind."

They pushed through the door, entering a corridor of ancient brick. Immediately they knew that this place had been inhabited recently. There were flickering wax candles all over the place, except for a clear path going all the way up to the spiral staircase visible at the far end.

"Great. Crawl out of one creepy hellhole and into another." Nick muttered. The beam of Judy's flashlight fell on a sealed stone sarcophagus right in front of them. "Called it, by the way."

"Yeah, you're still not getting fifty bucks." Woolworth said. "Now shut up and take this seriously."

With the third blast, there was no doubt that they were being watched somehow, and refusing to go any further would warrant another explosive warning. So they checked their weapons one more time and crept down the path of candles. They kept their flashlights switched to look out for anything not visible in the candlelight. There were more sarcophagus, some open, some shut. They were definitely in the catacombs beneath the cathedral. Judy checked the radio again, but received nothing but static.

Benjamin saw the camera when he shone his flashlight upwards. It was a tiny little thing fixed to the ceiling with what looked like duct tape. There were no telling how many others were hidden in the building, diminishing their chances of taking Gazelle's kidnapper by surprise. Why did he even bring them here in the first place? The beam illuminating the camera flickered and went out. The batteries were dead. Benjamin sighed, feeling worse than ever as he put the flashlight away.

Despite the small warmth from the candles, Benjamin shivered. Nick was right. This place was creepy, way more creepy than that dark silent, corridor in the mall with the bloody rhino footprints. This place had haunted written all over it, and he didn't just mean ghosts. A monster far worse than the savage mammals lurked within this place. A monster that had crept right up to a half a dozen mammals when they weren't looking and kidnapped a pop star. A monster with an unknown,
insidious agenda. It was clear now why he had kidnapped Gazelle. She was being used as bait. But bait for who? What did he want?

They reached the spiral staircase. As the smallest target, Judy scouted ahead, returning quickly with the report that there was nobody at the top. There were more candles in the alcoves surrounding the spiral staircase, dribbling wax down the walls. The air was beginning to get warmer when they came across the first window, a tiny slit in the stone that allowed them a peek outside. The forest was pitch black, but not silent. They heard growling and bellowing from unseen savages, nothing that indicated the ZBI had begun their assault. Judy tried the radio again, to no avail. But they were above ground again. Why were they still getting no signal?

They reached the stop of the stairs to receive a nasty surprise. Benjamin recoiled in horror when Judy's flashlight caught a small figure hanging from the ceiling above their heads. Another look revealed that it was nothing more than a disheveled stuffed animal. It was covered in a suspicious dark red substance, and so badly mutilated that only a blue shirt, a curved horn and one ear remained. Judy and Nick traded disturbed looks, while Benjamin just stared. Something about the poor little doll was making his skin crawl and his fur stick up.

Please be okay, Gazelle.

There was only one wooden door, a door that had been scratched to heck. Among the scratches were what looked like words; names perhaps, but there was no way to make them out. Woolworth very slowly pushed the door open.

Oh cripes.

The sheer size of the room left no doubt that they were in the main body of the cathedral. Even the beams of their flashlights were unable to reach the blackest edges and corners of the hall, or whatever the architects called it. There were more candles on the long dusty pews, on the floor, even grouped beneath that massive set of boarded up doors to one side. It would take three rhinos and a mid-sized horse to break through that, and even then they'd need a battering ram. Considering that there was something big scratching at the doors on the other side, that was a good thing.

And that wasn't the worst of it. Dozens, maybe hundreds of strings dangled from somewhere in the dark ceiling, and dangling from them were more disfigured old dolls, like a mockery of a mass execution. They were hanging low enough for Woolworth to walk face first into a doll with nothing but a short tufted tail hanging beneath it.

"Oh sweet cheese and crackers." Judy whispered. Nick edged closer to her, for his sake or hers Benjamin didn't know. He would have squeed either way if not for the current situation.

He turned back towards the door to see more scratches in the other side of the door and the wall around it. These weren't random scratches, he realized with a chill. Words had been scratched into the wood and stone, over and over and over, until it was impossible to make them out fully. All he could decipher from the door were the letters NJA, AM and INBE. He didn't bother trying to read the walls. He would save that for the crime scene investigators if they ever got out of here.

"Chief Bogo, this is Hopps. We're inside the cathedral." Judy was trying the radio again. "Sir, can you hear me? Darn it!"

"Try again when we're outside." Woolworth suggested. "I'll check the other end with Clawhauser. You two stay here and watch out for that creep."

Benjamin followed Woolworth between the pews, the only part of the floor not littered with candles.
The rows of pews ended before a stone step, which they cautiously stepped over. Now in place of pews, golden candelabras stood in a line on either side of them, leading up to a red curtain that seemed to go on forever, blending into the darkness behind the candlelight. Woolworth reached the curtain first, found a parting, and pushed it open.

"Clawhauser, it's her!"

Only Woolworth's outstretched hoof stopped the cheetah from charging through the curtains. The ram peered through the parting, searching the area on the other side. "Looks clear, but we'd best be extra careful. We'll check on her once we've secured the area."

On the other side of the curtain were yet more candles surrounding a large altar on which laid Gazelle. Benjamin's heart leapt at the sight of his idol, especially when he saw no visible injuries on her. He suppressed the urge to run to her to search the area with Woolworth. A closed laptop attached to an inactive generator lay beside the altar, but Benjamin made no move to touch it. The dolls, less numerous here than in the area with the pews, looked different here. For one thing they weren't hanging from the ceiling but arranged beneath the altar and the candelabras. They also had no horns and their tails were different. Repulsed by the blood and filth that covered them, Benjamin refrained from looking at them too closely.

Other than Gazelle and the dolls, the area was empty. Benjamin checked under the altar before checking on Gazelle herself. She was breathing steadily, and appeared completely unharmed. When Benjamin spoke her name and shook her gently, Gazelle murmured and opened her eyes. "Ben?"

"Oh, thank goodness!" Benjamin helped Gazelle into a sitting position. "Are you okay?"

Whatever drug the kidnapper had given her had almost completely worn off, which made it easier for her to regain her senses. "I'm okay. I think."

Meanwhile, Woolworth called for Nick and Judy before taking a closer look at the dolls.

"Gazelle, what happened?" Benjamin asked softly.

"I… I remember Edward getting into an argument with his father. I was following you into the house, and… and…" Gazelle squeezed her eyes shut and pressed a hoof to her head. "Ugh, my head. What is this place?"

"The Casel Cathedral, I think." Benjamin said. "Come on, we're getting out of here. Can you walk?"

When he helped her off the altar, she was able to stand on her own.

At that moment Nick and Judy burst though the curtain, breathing sighs of relief when they saw Gazelle alive and unharmed. "Oh, thank God she's okay!" Judy beamed. "Come on, we need to find a place to hide until the ZBI clears out. Woolworth?"

Woolworth was on one knee, staring at the dolls beneath a candelabrum. "Clawhauser…” He stood up and stared at the cheetah. He looked like he'd seen a ghost. "These dolls… they're all…"

The warm, candlelit air filled with the most horrible growling laughter that had ever assailed Benjamin's ears. The laughter seemed to come from everywhere, every inch of the darkness that surrounded them, the echo giving the voice that spine-chilling edge. They tensed and aimed their weapons, searching for the source of the laughter but seeing nothing but darkness and tiny flames quivering in a nonexistent wind. Before the last echoes faded away, the unseen being spoke. The voice was harsh and tinged with glee and malice. It made Benjamin's blood freeze.

"I knew you would come for her… I knew you would…"
Something swung over Benjamin's head, striking Woolworth in the side of the head, knocking him to the floor. When Nick spun round to fire, the candelabra struck again, sending him skidding into a pile of dolls. Judy rushed to his side while Benjamin finally saw the costumed lunatic crouched on the altar where Gazelle had lain, lit from beneath by a dozen weeping candles. He rushed in front of Gazelle, arms stretched out to shield her. Woolworth pushed himself up from the floor, dazed and no longer armed. Nick groaned, wiping blood from his eyebrow while Judy stood over him with her dart gun pointed at his attacker.

The Hound of the Casels lowered the bent and twisted candelabra and slowly aimed a bloody claw at the officer and the singer.

"… Benjamin…"

All the warmth was sucked from the air as all heads turned to stare at the cheetah.

He tried to speak, but only a soft gasp came out.

Chapter End Notes

Oh Poop.
The Lost Casel

**Five Years Ago...**

Life was good. Life was great. Life was as sweet as the three sachets of white granulated sugar swirling about in the elk's Snarlbucks hot chocolate as he rode the grungy little elevator up to Alec's floor. Alec couldn't have picked a worse place to move in after graduating. Big brother could still remember his first apartment, a sweet penthouse overlooking the southern half of Savanna Central. He'd had a roommate, too. That the lazy lout wound up in rehab soon after could hardly be traced back to him.

The elevator gave no indicator other than a rickety jerk as it stopped and opened on the desired floor. He stepped out into the aesthetically dull corridor and made his way down towards Alec's apartment. It had been a few days since his last visit, before he'd gone on vacation to a gorgeous five star resort in Cuba. It had been a true delight, countless cocktails in the sun, surrounded by countless women. Too bad they were all false. In any case, Alec was nearly a week overdue for a visit from his loving older brother. He'd been careful to make sure his parents didn't know about his numerous visits. Father might think he was trying to help Alec cheat. This 'right of passage' was Alec's to take and his alone. It was big brother's personal mission to make sure he stayed alone. No Belch. No Lake. No friends. No-one to give him any illusions of grandeur. Not like all the 'friends' who surrounded big brother every night he went out on the town.

He reached Alec's door, raised his fist to knock, and then stopped. He smirked, deciding it would be better to surprise his little brother before dispending the usual brotherly advice. After all, it had been a few days since he'd last visited.

Alec was definitely at home. He could hear his stupid music coming from inside. He pushed the door open.

And then he saw... him.

**Who the hell are you?**

This was what he'd almost said out loud when he saw the portly cheetah sitting on an armchair in Alec's living room, leaning over a chessboard lying on the coffee table. The first thing that came to the elk's mind was disgust. Never before had he seen a typically speedy feline as round as this. He was a bigger slob that the elk's first roommate, he could deduce that much. The elk wouldn't be seen within ten feet of this cheetah in public. Then he saw the cheetah's face. Fluffy golden fur. The cluster of spots on his cheek that looked like Mickey Mouse. Large oval eyes, brown like the hot chocolate in the elk's hoof. In an alternate universe where he was thin, the cheetah could be a rival in physical beauty. The elk stared in silence, hot chocolate slowly cooling, and wondered why the mere presence of this oversized, slovenly, inferior creature bothered him so much.

Back then, he had no way of knowing that this first meeting would prove to be the beginning of the end.

The spotted feline looked up from the black chess pieces, blinked when he saw the visitor, then formed a wide smile. "Oh, hello. Are you one of Alec's brothers?"

The elk frowned. How could this cheetah not know who he was? "Yes."

"Edward, is it?"
"... My name is Vercus. You may have heard of me."

The cheetah snapped his stubby fingers. "I thought I saw your face! A gossip magazine, I read so many I've forgotten which one!" He stood up, approached Vercus and held out a paw. "I'm Benjamin. I'm Alec's neighbor. It's nice to meet you."

Vercus hesitated before putting on a happy face and shaking Benjamin's paw. Better to act friendly. For now. "I'm assuming you know my brother. Either that or I've just caught you red handed."

"Nope! Alec's showing me how to play chess. He's just checking on the dessert in the kitchen."

Vercus managed not to scowl, despite this news. So Alec's doing that again, is he? "Have you ever tried one of his... delicacies?"

"Yeah, aren't they great?" Benjamin was now beaming with unquestionable pride. "He's gonna be an amazing chocolatier. You must be so proud."

"Yeah. Really proud." When did Alec and this fat moocher get so friendly? Why hadn't Alec told him about this? What else did Benjamin know?

Vercus glanced at the kitchen door, where his brother was doing God knows what. It was time for damage control. "Look. You seem like a smart guy, but how much do you actually know about my brother?"

Benjamin scratched his chin. "I know about his family. He works in a pretty fancy restaurant. He wants to open a chocolate shop sometime. Other than that, zip."

"So he hasn't told you about..." Vercus paused. "His episodes?"

The cheetah blinked. "Episodes?"

"I don't know if I should be telling you this, but if you're going to be living next to him for a while, then you should probably know." Vercus paused, giving time for the fear and doubt to set in. "He's an okay guy most of the time, but sometimes he has these... moments."

Benjamin glanced at the kitchen door. "Violent moments?"

"Yeah, you could say that." Vercus made a show of rubbing the back of his neck.

"He had a really bad nightmare a while ago. Is that what you're talking about?"

"No, it's a little worse than that. Could you excuse me, I want to say hi to my brother now."

"Sure, I'll just wait here." Benjamin sat back down with the chessboard while Vercus strode into the kitchen without knocking. His little brother had a lot of explaining to do.

Alec was at the counter, checking on what looked like a chocolate cheesecake. When he turned round to see who had walked in, his eyes went wide. "V-Vercus!"

Vercus kept smiling as he closed the door. He liked the fear. It kept the others in line. Kept them from blabbing. "I'm back, baby brother."

"Hi." Was all that Alec could get out. He pushed the cheesecake into the corner, away from his brother. "How was C-Cu-Cuba?"

"Fantabulous." Vercus took a sip of his hot chocolate. "Damn. Cold. Be a dear, would you?"
Alec raced to the kettle.

"So…" Vercus paused as Alec opened the cupboard above the kettle and grabbed the biggest mug he had. "Who's that in the next room?"

"He's… he's just a neighbor." Alec poured a spoonful of powder into the mug along with two teaspoons of sugar.

"It's three sugars. Must I always remind you, Alec?"

Alec quickly applied a third and stirred the mixture.

"Seems more than just a neighbor to me." Vercus dropped the smile. "What have I told you about friends, Alec? When you come from the richest family in Zootopia, you don't get friends. What do you get, instead? Moochers."

Alec poured the kettle into the mug, head hung low. "M-Moochers. Yes."

"And what are moochers?"

"… False."

"Good. Now you keep telling yourself that, because the last thing this family needs is another parasite leeching off of our fame and fortune. Like that showboating bottom-feeder Lake's saddled with. Do you really want someone like mooching off of you?"

Alec stopped in the middle of stirring. "No."

Alec finished the drink with milk and brought it over. The hot chocolate was good, but Vercus wasn't going to let Alec know that. "That's right. Now go out there and tell that flabby fake that your little chessboard lesson is over."

Wringing his hooves, Alec looked to the cheesecake. "I sh-should at least give h-him that. He's been a-a-a good friend and I don't w-want to end on bad terms."

"And encourage him to come back for more? How dumb can you get? Just tell him to beat-"

There was a knock and the door opened. Benjamin poked his head through the door. "Hi! I just wanted to see how that cheesecake's coming along." He opened the door fully. "Er, is everything okay?"

"Everything's fine." Vercus quickly answered before Alec could. He put a smile back on and edged himself closer to Alec. "But Alec's not feeling so good, if you know what I mean. You should probably go."

Benjamin looked Alec up and down. "He seems okay to me."

Vercus tensed. "Maybe you didn't hear me. You need to leave."

Benjamin was taken aback. "D-Did I do something wrong?"

"No!" Alec snapped. Vercus shot him a look. His younger brother took a deep breath and composed himself. "No, it's not you, I swear. I'm just not feeling up to cheesecake today."

"Oh, okay." Benjamin pouted. "Do you need anything, or-"
"I've got it covered." Vercus interrupted. "You can go now."

Benjamin looked to Alec with concern. "Well, if you need anything I'll be right next door. Goodbye."

Vercus breathed a sigh of satisfaction after Benjamin left the kitchen, and he heard the sound of the front door closing. "Good riddance. Now about that cheesecake."

Alec froze, backing into the counter. "It was just for the two of us, I swear!"

Vercus strode past Alec, lifted the delicious looking cheesecake, and dumped it upside down in the sink. "Chocolate making's for greedy pigs and substandard cooks. How many times have I told you this?" Alec didn't answer. "I asked you a question!"

"I don't know."

Vercus smashed a fist down on the cheesecake, squishing it into a dirty baking tray. "Don't make me tell you again, Alec. It will not end well."

The next evening, Vercus made sure to finish his Snarlbucks hot chocolate before entering the elevator. He hadn't intended on seeing Alec today, but seeing that cheetah had changed things.

Vercus had it good. He had passed the Casels' right of passage and now had the Casel billions behind him. He had a bright red Furrari waiting for him outside. He had a bright future as the heir to the Casel Corporation, which would be his once his father won the mayoral election. The last thing he needed was Alec thinking he could impress father even more with his own so-called talents. If Vercus so much as saw a chocolate bar in Alec's kitchen, he would make his little brother regret it for the rest of his life.

Vercus left the Snarlbucks cup inside the elevator as he stepped out and strode to Alec's door. He entered the apartment to find Benjamin sitting in the same puffed up armchair, looking over the same black chess pieces on the same fricking chessboard.

When the cheetah looked up, he put on the same wide smile from yesterday. "Oh, hello again! It's Vargas, right?"

This time, Vercus did not smile back. "It's Vercus."

"Oh, I'm sorry. Vercus. Gotta remember that."

Vercus was glad he no longer had the paper cup, otherwise he might have crushed it and gotten liquid chocolate all over his silk yellow shirt. What the hell was he doing back here? "Where is Alec?"

"He's gone out for some cheesecake." Benjamin patted a clear plastic tub full of raspberries sitting beside the chessboard. "I came round to check on Alec after yesterday, and brought some raspberries to go with the cheesecake he made. But he'd dropped it into the sink by accident so he's gone to get some more."

"And left you here alone?"

"He'd lost his key, and until the apartment manager gets a new one he can't leave the apartment. I'm just watching the place for him till he gets back."
Vercus bit back a curse. He couldn't wait for Alec to come home, because he was meeting his father in an hour. At the same time, he couldn't just do nothing as this flabby false friend made himself comfortable in his little brother's crappy apartment. At the very least, he had to know more.

"So, do you have a surname?"

"Clawhauser. Would you like a raspberry?"

"I hate them."

"Oh. Well, suit yourself." Benjamin took one of the bumpy little red berries for himself. Vercus was surprised he ate fruit at all.

Vercus leaned against the doorframe. "So what do you do for a living, Benjamin Clawhauser?"

Benjamin licked some berry juice from his fingers. "I'm a police officer."

"You're a what?" Vercus's blood ran cold. Police officer. That was the absolute last thing he wanted to deal with. If this kid had been anything else, a receptionist or a Bug Burga worker, Vercus would have had no trouble doing everything in his power to get rid of him. But no. No, it had to be a god damn cop! Vercus hoped to God he wasn't from Precinct One. If he had to deal with that holier-than-thou buffalo from the gutter one more time…

"What's the matter? You don't like the police?"

Vercus's mouth became a thin line to hide his clenched teeth. "It's not that. I just wasn't expecting someone of your… stature to be a police officer."

Benjamin rubbed his neck self-consciously. "Yeah, join the club."

Vercus checked his Roarlex. He couldn't stay much longer. His eyes lingered on the number seven, reminding him of the dinner reservation his family had had to cancel the month before. The fine-looking elk grinned. He had an idea.

"I can't stay and wait for him. Could you tell him I stopped by?"

"Sure thing." Benjamin said,

"You know, if you're going to be hanging out with my brother from now on, I wouldn't mind getting to know you a little better. There's this snazzy place in Sahara Square where we could hang out tonight. What do you say?"

Benjamin looked unsure. "I don't know. I need to be up early for work."

So he was playing hard to get, was he? Vercus stepped further into the room. "Look, I don't mind you hanging out with Alec, so long as you can deal with his episodes. But my parents are a different story. They're rich, really rich, and they're always wary of anyone who gets chummy with their kids."

Benjamin stretched his stumpy legs. "I suppose gold diggers can be a bit of a problem."

Vercus nodded. "And they're not going to be happy to see someone from the lower class hanging out with their youngest son, police officer or not. That's why we should have a night out to get to know one another. It'll help put them at ease."

Benjamin snagged another raspberry. "Well, if it'll make your parents feel better, I guess I could
come out with you tonight."

Vercus beamed. He knew the little moocher couldn't resist. "Perfect. I'll pick you up at eight."

"Oh, there's no need. Just tell me where the place is and I'll meet you-"

"I insist. Eight o'clock. See you tonight."

He left the apartment, feeling better than he'd had when he'd walked into it. Life was good. He was still in control. Once he'd learned what made the cheetah tick, he would make sure he never darkened Alec's door again.

Vercus had no reason to fear Officer Benjamin Clawhauser.

He was nothing more than a lowlife scrounger, just like all the others.

Benjamin Clawhauser, in the end, was false.
Vercus had dined at Gusteau's many times before, but never with someone of the same sex. A night with the flabby false friend Benjamin Clawhauser was bound to be interesting.

He saw no reason to take any car other than his Furrari to pick the cheetah up at the apartment block. He didn't see Alec as he waited. He'd texted his younger brother earlier to make sure he was staying in the apartment, making sure he didn't cross paths with Benjamin tonight. If tonight went to plan, Benjamin would never get his proverbial claws in Alec again.

Fighting the urge to honk his horn, Vercus instead vented his impatience by drumming his fingers on the steering wheel and taking regular sips from the cup of hot chocolate on the dashboard. He drank the sweet stuff several times a day, but he'd hardly call it an addiction. More like compensation. Every night his lady friends would whisper sweet words, such sweet words. Vercus did not mind them too much. A few words, like 'handsome,' 'clever,' 'witty' and all their synonyms were true, but every other word was false. Just honey-glazed lies intended to seduce, placate, or otherwise deceive their super-rich friend. But Vercus was no meal ticket. He was a Casel. He saw right through the moochers and gold diggers and reveled in beating them at their own game. All the while he would drink his hot chocolate, which had sweetness far truer than most things that came out of his friends' mouths. Especially when a few sugar sachets were included. He rarely if ever drank tea or coffee. The first was bland like dishwater, and the second was bitter like the words of a disappointed father. He avoided both like the plague.

Vercus had put on one of his more fetching outfits, even though he had no intention of seducing Benjamin in the conventional sense. His outfit was also one of the most expensive. The black silk and golden belt buckle was sure to catch the adorable spotted idiot's eye.

When Benjamin emerged, Vercus nearly laughed at his attire; a cheap cotton shirt dyed in pink, amidst a plain black jacket and pants. At least the kid was wearing a black tie, as well. Vercus took some enjoyment in the cheetah's astonishment when he saw the car. "O… M… Goodness."

"I bought this pretty thing in Sahara Square." Vercus patted the steering wheel. "What model have you got?"

Benjamin faltered. "I… I don't actually own a car."

Why was Vercus not surprised? "Get in, or we'll be late."

Benjamin climbed into the car. Vercus tried not to flinch at how close the fat cat was as he started the engine and took off. If Benjamin caught on to the elk's true feelings, drawing his weaknesses out would be near-impossible. Vercus felt a sudden but strong pang of doubt, but quashed just as quickly. He put on a smile that he passed on to the cheetah as he turned up the speed. His father drew out and exploited the weaknesses of rival and ally alike on a weekly basis. He could do this.

They arrived at Gusteau's with five minutes to spare. Benjamin gaped at everything from the sparkly chandeliers to the entrees as the headwaiter whose name Vercus never bothered to remember led the pair past the line of waiting customers to their best table, the round one beneath the biggest chandelier. Only the best for a Casel. They sat down opposite each other, and Vercus wasted no time picking up the menu to find a dish that would best impress the cheetah. Something with fish, extra-expensive preferably. All the better to upset the parents when they find out how much Vercus has spent on his new plaything.
As he looked over the short list of appetizers, it occurred to Vercus that this was a first for him. Snaring 'friends' were for the nightclubs and penthouse parties. First dates were for the fancy restaurants. He'd never before tried to snare a friend at a fancy restaurant before, even if the sole purpose was to destroy said friend at a later date. This didn't faze him in the slightest. All he had to do was lay on the charm, and he'd get what he wanted.

First thing's first though…

"Hey, head waiter!" The headwaiter strode over, pen and pad at the ready. "I'll have a tomato crostini and fajitas. My friend here will have crab cakes and warm lobster. We'll both have Mexican doughnuts for dessert."

Benjamin looked up from adjusting his tie, frowning. "Er, I think I'd rather…" He trailed off, for the headwaiter had already taken the menus and left. "Never mind."

"Come on, don't tell me you've never had lobster before." Vercus smirked.

Look on the bright side, Benji. At least you'll get to try some lobster and fancy doughnuts. Vercus has already promised he's paying for everything. You would have paid for your meal yourself. You did bring your wallet after all. But there's no way you can afford any of this. Why couldn't he have taken me to the Sahara Bistro or something?

With that in mind Benjamin leaned back in his chair and tried to relax. Everywhere he looked, he saw shimmering gowns and flawless suits. He was sure he'd seen a fair few of the faces here in his gossip magazines, and that was almost certainly Leodore Lionheart dining in the far corner. Vercus himself looked like a superstar, with muscles nearly bulging through the sleeves of his shiny black suit. He looked down at his own attire, suddenly feeling hot in the face. He should have insisted on knowing where they were going to dinner so he could have put on sometime fancier. He would have looked less out of place in the Sahara Bistro or the Cheesecake Factory. Why did Vercus have to bring him here of all places? Benjamin was just a rookie from the ZPD. There was no need for showing off.

"So, what's the lobster like?" He asked. The elk raised his eyebrows. "Er… I mean from the reviews. I didn't know where we were going, so I didn't look it up."

"They say it's good." Vercus said. "But I know for a fact that nothing beats the doughnuts." The headwaiter returned with a bottle of red wine and poured into both glasses. Benjamin didn't remember Vercus ordering that, too. Then again, being one of the restaurant's most frequent customers must mean that the staff were used to certain things. "That's a nice suit you have. Cotton, is it?"

"Yes. You have a nice suit, too." Benjamin wished he could have come up with a better compliment. "You come here a lot?"

"Yes."

"With a lady, perhaps?"

Vercus drummed his fingers on the table. "I'm not currently dating, but yes."

So Vercus was straight. Now Benjamin didn't need to concern himself with how gorgeous the elk was. He was quite sure that Vercus didn't really like him either way. "No wonder. This place is beautiful."
"I'm glad you think so." Vercus propped himself on an elbow as he smiled at the cheetah. "So you work at the ZPD. Rookie right? I'm just asking because you seem a bit…" Vercus's eyes flicked down the cheetah's body. "… young to be a lieutenant."

"Yeah, I'm a rookie." Benjamin said. "I recently got promoted from meter maid to patrol officer."

"Which precinct?"

"Precinct One."

Vercus's mouth twisted. "Precinct One. Of course. You should feel lucky."

Benjamin didn't dare ask if he'd been arrested by a Precinct One officer at some point. "So what's your job?"

Vercus straightened, suddenly looking very smug. "I'm Head of Security in my father's company."

"Get out of town!" Benjamin gasped, the muscles suddenly making sense.

"Yes, and this is my last day on leave before I resume my duties."

"Head of Security…" Benjamin repeated. "That sounds really important."

"It sure is. It's up to me to make sure no-one steals our company's secrets. No-one has, so far."

"Alec said your sister works in the company, too."

"That's right, but she's just in administration. Nowhere near my rung in the career ladder, at least." He took his first sip of the wine. Benjamin took a sip of his own glass, and was immediately reminded of why he stuck to sodas. He tried not to wince at how it burned his tongue. "Okay, enough about me. We're here to talk about you, remember?" He lowered his propped arm to drape it over the other as he leaned forward. "You graduated recently, didn't you?"

"Yes. The Zootopia Police Academy."

"Top ten?"

"No, but I was above average."

"How on earth did you manage that?"

"I scored high marks on all my written tests, and I was one of the best sharpshooters."

"But the physical side?"

"I may be round, but I manage. I can still hold my own in the ring."

"And you got into Precinct One?"

"They needed new recruits."

"Well, that's understandable."

Benjamin wasn't sure if that was a dig or not, but before he could think any more of it the appetizers arrived. Unsurprisingly, the crab cakes were exquisite. "How're your crab cakes, Ben?" Vercus asked after swallowing some of his own meal.
"Delicious."

"Only the best for a friend of Alec's. So what do you do when you're not being a cop?"

"Mostly Gazelle stuff." Just talking about the Angel with Horns made Benjamin brighten up. "Are you familiar with her? Greatest singer of our age? Beauty without equal?"

"I've listened to her music. She's good."

"Good?! She's fantastic! And she's so kind, too! Did you know she performed a concert in Tundratown last week? And it went straight to charity."

"How… charitable of her. Anyway, as admittedly good looking as I am, I can't be the only one with a few dates under my belt. A cute thing like you must have had your fair share of action."

"Er…" Benjamin bit his lip. He'd only known Vercus Casel for a day and a half, and there was no way he was going to tell this near-stranger that he was gay. However, there was one female, a cheetah he'd dated in high school twice before he realized that he wasn't into girls. "One girl, in high school. Her name was Maria Fasta."

"Only one?" Vercus tilted his head, maintaining that wide smile. Benjamin nodded. "What a pity. You can do way better than that."

He leaned further over the table as they continued eating. Benjamin paused in the middle of raising his last piece of crab cake when he saw three cape buffalos being led to a table framed by a pair of thick red curtains. The tallest of them had a build that made Benjamin's heart race, and reminded him strongly of Chief Bogo. Other than roll call, he hadn't seen much of Bogo since the day Benjamin had written him a parking ticket. Then again, Benjamin had been warned beforehand that Bogo was not the most outgoing of bovines. He very rarely spoke to anyone, even his own men, unless he had to. Sometimes the cheetah wondered if Bogo had any friends.

"Did you hear me, Ben?"

Benjamin looked back to Vercus, who wasn't smiling now. "Sorry, I got distracted." The cheetah circled his finger around the rim of his glass, embarrassed by his unintentional rudeness. He tried to refrain from looking at Bogo again. "What were you saying?"

Vercus scowled as he repeated what he was saying. "This Maria girl. What was she like?"

"She was sweet, but not big on studying. I think she just wanted to get into college to find a good husband."

"A rich husband?"

"Do I look rich to you?"
"No."

"She just wanted to find a man. I don't want to sound mean, but I think she watched way too many old Disney movies. Anyway, we broke up just before graduation?"

"Any particular reason why?"

" Classified." Benjamin tried to joke.

"Fine." Vercus seemed the opposite of amused. "So anyone important in your life? Family? Friends?"

"Well, there's my parents. I'm an only child, by the way. I've got a fair few friends, though I doubt you'll want to hear me blather about them."

"True. Where did you grow up?"

"Right here in Zootopia."

"And what do your parents do? Are they retired?"

"Right now they're both bakers. They're not ready for retiring just yet." The headwaiter took their empty plates away while they continuing speaking.

"Is there a special place you like to hang out?"

"I…" Benjamin hesitated. The whole point of this was for Alec's family to get to know him better, but this was feeling more like an interrogation than a friendly get-together. It was like being under the hardened gaze of Chief Bogo, except he had no idea what he was in trouble for. Benjamin sneaked a glance at Bogo table. His heart jolted when he saw his boss glancing back. "Why would you want to know that?"

"My parents won't want Alec hanging out with someone from Happytown."

"Oh, no! Nothing like that! There's my Gazelle fan club, and some guys from the ZPD invited me to a bar next week."

Vercus's hoof curled inwards. "Which guys?"

Benjamin counted with his fingers, trying not to feel uncomfortable at the confused look Bogo was shooting towards their table. "Well, there's Fangmeyer… Wolford… I think there's something going on between those two… Trunkaby… Rhinovitz, though I might have got that name wrong… that's it."

"So no go with Bogo again?"

Benjamin blinked. "Huh?"

Vercus chuckled coldly. "Sorry, I've just been too used to the idea of Bogo having nothing to do with his underlings outside the station."

Something clicked in the cheetah's head. "Is that why you've been acting strange? Because you found out I'm working under Chief Bogo?"

Vercus scowled in silence. Neither of them spoke as the headwaiter arrived with their main courses, planting the expensive dishes on the table before striding off.
"I don't like Bogo. There, I said it."

"Why not? Is it because he's a grumpy goose most of the time? I can see why that would put you off."

"It's because he's a self-righteous pretender who thinks all rich kids are scum."

Benjamin blinked again and looked to Bogo's table, only to see the buffalo's seat empty. "What do you mean he's a 'pretender?!' He's the Chief of Police!"

"Who is supposedly the most competent chief in all the twelve districts, yet has a record of trying to ruin my life with trumped up charges! You can take my word for it, he's a prejudiced punk with a shiny badge. No matter how much he polishes that golden shield, he can't hide the stink."

Benjamin shook his head, his appetite gone. "That can't be right. That can't be. He made me put a parking ticket back on his own-"

"With the minimum fine. I appreciated that."

Benjamin first saw the look of shock and anger on Vercus's face before they both looked up to see Bogo at their table, aloofly looking down at the pair of them in his flawless black suit. Benjamin froze stiff, paws tightening around his glass of wine. "Chief Bogo! Hi!"

"What are you doing here?" Vercus was almost polite.

"Treating my mother to a fancy dinner like I do every birthday." Bogo gestured to the other two buffalos at the other table. "I thought I recognized you, Clawhauser. And Vercus Casel? Normally I'm not surprised, but I hardly expected to see you two at the same table."

"Well, what can I say? I have a natural attraction." Vercus was trying to get back to his nonchalant self, but so far he was still as tense as a defendant in court. "Don't you have parents to get back to? I'm assuming they can take of the bill by themselves."

"I'm taking care of the bill. Like I said." Vercus had said he didn't like Bogo. From the tone of Bogo's voice alone Benjamin was convinced the feeling was mutual. "I just thought I'd say hello to the rookie."

"Hello." Benjamin shyly waved.

Vercus managed a smile and slouched against his chair. "And now you can say goodbye. I'm talking to him."

"And he's obviously enjoying the conversation."

Benjamin plastered on a smile and held up his glass. "The wine's great, Chief Bogo. Want a taste?" Bogo eyed the cheetah. "Oh, why not?" He took the glass and sipped. "A bit sweet for my liking."

"I never took you for anything other than dry, Bogo."

"Hmph. I've never heard of you enjoying any treat other than tarts." Bogo turned to Benjamin. "So what were you saying that couldn't be right?"

Benjamin cringed, too afraid to look at Vercus. "I…"

"Was it the part about me being a self righteous pretender, or the part about me trying to ruin his life?
Which was it?"

Benjamin turned his eyes down to his lobster, which he no longer had an appetite for. His heart thundered as he waited for Bogo to demand an answer. First thing in the morning, he was going right back to writing parking tickets. He was sure of it.

"I see..." When the cheetah looked up again, Bogo was smiling in a way that unnerved him even more. "While Mr. Casel was telling you about those trumped up charges, did he mention that the first time I arrested him was for domestic violence against his now ex-girlfriend?"

Benjamin sharply turned to Vercus. "What?"

"Yes. Domestic violence. I wound up arresting him twice."

Vercus's smile no longer reached his eyes. "Hey... Chief... Be glad I didn't mention that you got hustled out of arresting a lowlife fox on your first day as a patrol cop."

Benjamin looked around. So far they weren't attracting attention, but he was desperate for the two larger mammals to stop.

"Appreciated." Bogo replied, maintaining that humorless grin. "Allow me to show my appreciation by not telling Clawhauser that if he went on the database, he would find that you have raised over ten thousand dollars in unpaid fines."

Wishing he were back at home right now, Benjamin grabbed his knife and fork. Maybe his first taste of lobster would make him feel better, he hoped.

Vercus wasn't smiling anymore. "You performed a background check on Benji here before he joined the force, right? How do you think he would feel if he did a background check on you and discovered that you grew up in a lovely little place called the Savanna Slums?"

Benjamin's jaw dropped. That was low. Way low. He prepared to speak up, but Bogo beat him to it. "How do you think he would feel if he learned that your special place was in the red light district?"

Mortification flooded Benjamin's entire upper body like fire. A similar fire blazed in Vercus's eyes as he got up from his chair. "What are you trying to pull?" He asked quietly.

Bogo stood firm, somehow looking down on Vercus even though they were more or less the same height. "I might ask you the same thing."

"Cut the crap, you lowlife!" In a short, deft movement, Vercus smacked the wine glass from Bogo's hoof. Benjamin leapt up and away from the table as the glass smashed on the edge of his plate, spilling wine and shards all over his lobster. Ignoring the mess he'd made, Vercus jabbed the silent Bogo's chest, all politeness gone. "I don't know why they let you and your slum dwelling family in here, but if you don't get the hell out I swear to god I'll send you back to the ghetto in twenty goddamn pieces--"

"Mr. Casel, please!"

Vercus stopped and glared at the distressed headwaiter. Then he glared at the surrounding diners staring at his table. Finally his eyes fell on Lionheart as he watched the scene from afar, just as shocked as his fellow diners. Vercus seemed to remember where he was, for he lowered his finger, moved away from Bogo and pulled a wad of bills from inside his jacket. "Split the tip between yourselves. I'm leaving." He tossed the money into the headwaiter's chest and stormed away from the table.
Benjamin stayed where he was, staring at the mess of glass and wine on the table. The worried murmurs returned to normal conversation as the other diners returned to their meals. Benjamin felt a growing coldness in his stomach and saw that some of the wine had splashed him.

"Aw man." He plucked a clean napkin from the table and tried in vain to wipe away the stain, a sickness growing in his gut as the shock of what had just happened subsided. His first time in one of the grandest restaurants in the city, trying to impress the older brother of his rich and famous new friend, and all he had to show for it was a ruined shirt, ruined lobster, and quite possibly a ruined career.

Bogo gave a small, smug smirk of satisfaction at Vercus's retreating back until the elk was out the door. Then he noticed the crimson mess that had been Benjamin's plate. His eyes travelled upward as his smirk fell, past the red stains on the cheetah's shirt before stopping at his face. Benjamin tried not to look too humiliated as he gave up on the stains and put the napkin back where he'd taken it.

"I'll see you tomorrow." Benjamin meekly saluted the buffalo and walked to the exit without another word. Now he knew he was going to get demoted or worse for this. His companion had belittled, threatened, and even assaulted his boss, all before dessert. This evening couldn't possibly get any worse.

He walked out the door and saw that Vercus and his Furrari had gone.

Benjamin couldn't bring himself to go back inside, to face all those rich and classy people who had witnessed that disgraceful scene. Thank goodness for the subway entrance just around the corner…

The Precinct One elevator was like a sauna, but Benjamin felt a chill up his spine when a black hoof stopped the closing doors and Chief Bogo stepped inside. He pressed a button and leaned against the wall opposite the cheetah, seemingly refusing to look at him. Benjamin pressed himself against the other wall as the elevator began his ascent, almost trembling with anticipation.

The elevator stopped at Bogo's floor first, but the buffalo made no move to step outside when the doors opened. The doors closed again, and the elevator made the short descent to Benjamin's floor. The doors opened again, and Benjamin felt the sudden urge to run for it. Fear kept him in place, and the doors closed. The elevator was now as still and as silent as its passengers.

"I'm sorry."

Benjamin's surprise gave him the courage to look Bogo in the face, and what he saw wasn't what he was expecting. Instead of anger, he saw… well, he wasn't sure if it was what he thought it was. It wasn't something he'd expected the infamous Chief Bogo to be capable of. Whatever it was, it made the buffalo's features softer.

"Pardon me, sir?"

"I said I'm sorry. For what happened last night. For the way I acted."

Benjamin twiddled his thumbs. "But-but you were the one that got assaulted, sir."

"I provoked him into it. No matter what grievances I have with Mr. Casel, I had no right to put you through something like that."

"Oh. Um, okay. A-Apology accepted."

He could have sworn Bogo looked relieved for a second or two. "Good. If you see Mr. Casel or his
siblings, please give them my regards." He pressed the open button, opening the doors once again. "Dismissed."

Benjamin quickly left the elevator, feeling less misery than he'd had when he'd left Gusteau's.

In retrospect, five years later, the first clue he'd been given as to the Bogo he would fall in love with had been when he'd forgiven the lowly meter maid for writing him a ticket. The quiet apology in the elevator had been his second clue. The third clue would be come only days later, when Vercus's first attempt at revenge did not go quite as he had planned.
Revenge is a dish best served cold, or so the old Klingon proverb went. Whatever Klingon said that obviously never knew how much Chief Bogo liked his hot drinks.

When Vercus Casel first started taking Benadryl to deal with his hay fever symptoms, he had no idea that it would come in handy in other ways. Other ways such as punishing a certain buffalo from the ghetto who had the audacity to interfere with his plan.

His father could hold a grudge, but at the same time he was not a vengeful mammal. Revenge is an ugly thing, he'd told Vercus once. It corrupts and destroys, like a flesh eating bacteria. When Vercus had questioned the comparison, Elgen had reminded him of everything they had, their wealth, their power, and warned him that one mistake borne of anger and pride could cause just much carnage as a rotting sickness could inflict on the mammalian body. Vercus had understood the comparison then, but he also happened to understand something his father didn't; revenge was only a mistake if you got caught.

The opportunity came sooner than expected, when some hoodlum who didn't agree with his candidacy for Mayor of Zootopia ravaged his father's car. Elgen Casel had decided to visit the ZPD himself to discuss the matter with Chief Bogo. He'd thought nothing of it when Vercus offered to come along.

As soon as they'd entered the lobby, Vercus heard the call of nature and excused himself to the handicapped restroom while his father strode to the front desk. Once he relieved himself and washed his hooves, he looked in the small square mirror. He smiled at his reflection as he felt the bump of the pack of Benadryl in his coat pocket. He knew how the meeting would play out. Bogo would be hospitable and offer some tea, a beverage his father would not resist. Vercus would play the part of the subservient Head of Security and prepare the tea himself, while slipping a little pink surprise in the buffalo's cup. Vercus was also aware of Bogo's schedule in regards to the precinct's gym. He would be going straight there once the meeting was done and most likely focus on the weights. It would be around that time that the Benadryl would kick in, and then…

Vercus took out the packet and held it up so he could see himself holding his secret weapon. Bogo may have come from the slums, but his current status would make him newsworthy if anything unfortunate happened to him in the gym. If he was lucky, Vercus would get to read all about it tomorrow morning.

He pocketed the packet and left the restroom to find his father waiting for him. Elgen was smiling in a way that unsettled the younger elk.

"Vercus, I ran into a friend of yours just now. You never told me you and Alec were friends with a police officer."

Vercus grimaced and looked around, but the cheetah was nowhere to be seen. Elgen had that look he always had when he was trying not to show his displeasure at something. What had that fat cat told him? "It slipped my mind, sorry. And I'd hardly call him a friend. I've only known him for two days."

"But apparently Alec has known him for longer. Can you think of a reason why Alec would keep him from me?"

Vercus's brain worked. Maybe there was an opportunity in this. "I honestly don't know. Maybe he
was worried you wouldn't like him. We all know how you feel about moochers."

Elgen crossed his arms. "What was your impression of him?"

"He seemed okay enough. Seemed very interested in Alec being a Casel, though."

"Is that so? He didn't look like the gold digging type." Elgen's lip curled, and Vercus knew he was thinking of Carlos. Another parasite he would have to exterminate eventually.

"No, he doesn't." Vercus admitted. "But after the other night, I-"

"What happened the other night?" Elgen barked.

Vercus froze. His father's chances of winning the mayoral election depended on reputation, and his dedication to maintaining said reputation bordered on obsession. The incident at Gusteau's hadn't shown up on the news, but if his father found out there would be hell to pay. There was a lot at stake, in between succeeding his father as Chairman of the Casel Corporation and remaining the favorite child. Vercus couldn't tell him. "The other night… he was dressed a tad too fancy for just lounging around at a friend's place. I think he might be sucking up to him."

"Lounging around? I thought he went to Gusteau's with you."

Damn.

Did Benjamin tell him? He must have.

"He was dressed up at Alec's place, alright. I invited him to dinner to find out more about him."

"And you chose a five star restaurant?"

"No. *He* chose a five star restaurant."

Elgen scowled, but before he could think on this, the riff-raff running the front desk declared that Chief Bogo was ready to see them now. Vercus followed his father into the elevator, his blood boiling with thoughts of Benjamin and the hooks he was latching onto his family members. The sooner he got rid of the little pussycat, the better.

Vercus wasn't all that worried about Bogo potentially telling his father about what happened at Gusteau's, for the buffalo was in a similar predicament. The commissioner was a notorious suck up concerning Elgen, and he would not take kindly to the chief doing anything to damage Elgen's campaign. Sure enough, Bogo made no mention of the incident during their time in his office, but he and Vercus shared nothing but venomous looks that Elgen paid no mind. He was well aware of Vercus and Bogo's mutual enmity, but as long as they didn't go after each other he couldn't care less. After the first domestic violence arrest, Vercus had requested that his father take steps to have the buffalo fired. He'd gone ignored, even after the second arrest, but he'd at least possessed the fatherly love to pull a few strings and have the charges dropped both times. Despite this, Vercus had never forgotten Bogo's transgression.

Vercus had taken great care to make sure Bogo's accident wouldn't be traced back to him. No-one knew he'd brought his Benadryl with him. No-one suspected a thing when he offered to pour the tea. No-one noticed him slip something small and pink into Bogo's cup before he brought the tray over to them.

As the discussion ended with a promise that the ZPD would provide extra protection to prevent future vandalisms, Elgen finished his own cup and eyed the Chief of Police. "Tell me about that new
officer of yours, Benjamin Clawhauser. Apparently he's gotten quite friendly with my son."

Bogo's eyes narrowed above the cup as he sipped. Vercus watched him drink and resisted the instinct to smile. The stupid bovine didn't have a clue. "He's a good officer. He works hard and always does as he's told. Why, does he bother you?"

"I just want to make sure he won't cause trouble for my family. You understand, don't you?"

"Yes, but personally I don't believe you have anything to worry about concerning Officer Clawhauser."

Vercus pretended to check the time on his phone. He didn't want to keep Bogo from the gym for too long. He needed to be handling dangerous equipment when the Benadryl kicked in. "We should go, father. You have another meeting."

Elgen checked the time for himself. "You're right. Call Goyle and have him bring the car around." He turned back to Bogo and held a hoof out over the desk. "Thank you for your time, Chief Bogo. The ZPD's assistance is most appreciated."

Bogo set down his teacup and wordlessly shook hooves. Vercus sneaked a glance into the cup and saw it almost empty. He turned away to hide how wide his grin was.

"Is there a problem, Mr. Casel?" Bogo asked icily.

Vercus put on his best poker face and turned back round. "No problem, Chief Bogo. I'm just happy that the ZPD is showing the proper respect."

"Yeah, yeah. Just don't expect us to kowtow to you if your father wins the election."

*Sanctimonous little cow…*

Vercus saw no harm in showing his smile this time. "I wouldn't dream of it."

He took one last look at Bogo's empty cup as he followed his father out the office. His revenge was now just a question of time… and how badly it would hurt when it did. It wouldn't hurt as much as a flesh-eating bug, but he would take what he could get.

Back in the car, Vercus's pleasure faded just a little as something came to him. Something that almost got him in very big trouble. "Father, who told you about Gusteau's? Forgive me, but I didn't want to tell you until I got a better idea of Benjamin's character."

Elgen tapped his finger on the plastic surface beneath the car's window. "Alec did. He talked to the cheetah when he came back."

Vercus discreetly clenched his fists as they lay draped on his lap. He'd warned Alec about shooting off his trap. "Could you drop me off at Alec's place? I really need to talk to him."

Alec dislocating his shoulder had been a genuine accident, but Vercus sure as hell wasn't going to let him tell anyone who had shoved him into the bathtub. He didn't let Alec go to the Emergency Room until he gave his word that he wouldn't tell a soul, especially their parents.

The morning after, Vercus got into his shiny red Furrari and took a leisurely drive around the park in front of the ZPD. Chief Bogo would be arriving at the precinct around this time, but this time Vercus was not expecting him to show. Since he hadn't gotten round to checking the news, this was the only
way to know for sure if his plan had worked without drawing suspicion upon himself. When Bogo showed looking none the worse for wear, a fuming Vercus decided that a trip to the spa was in order. He called some of his false friends as he made his way to Palm Springs. Sure they only existed to use him for his money, but they had uses of their own. In this instance, he was in desperate need for someone to vent his frustration to. Besides, it wasn't as if he couldn't just drop them as soon as their usefulness was finished.

And if words didn't get rid of them when the time came, fists would.

A willowy cougar from the Swan Lake Club, a bovine heir to a four star restaurant and his favorite doe masseur surrounded him at the shallow pool as he complained and complained about Bogo, Benjamin, Alec and all the grief they'd given him in the last three days. It was just as the doe was getting started on rubbing Vercus's shoulders when the walking fleapit, the inexplicable owner of Palm Springs, blithely interrupted.

"Hey, you're Vercus Casel, right?" Yax asked.

"Yes, I'm Vercus Casel." Vercus replied with a deliberately exaggerated eye roll. He refrained from pinching his nose.

"Had to ask. My memory's like a broken strainer." Yax shook his head, quivering his filthy dreadlocks and scattering the flies that hovered around them. At least Benjamin had the decency to look presentable. "Anyway, your dad's lookin' on the warpath. He's waiting for you in the private room."

Vercus frowned. There had to have been a security breach back at the company headquarters, or a break in at Vercus's penthouse. Anything Elgen could be angry at other than him. Vercus had thought of everything in his revenge plot, which had failed so miserably probably no-one even knew Bogo had ever been drugged.

He looked to his false friends. "Excuse me."

"Hurry back. I can't do anything without something to rub." The doe batted her eyelashes as Vercus climbed out the pool and grabbed a towel. Vercus flashed a grin, looking forward to it.

Within five minutes he was relatively dry and dressed as he entered the private room, a candlelit lounge with dozens of cushions and only one window looking out into the street outside. The room was hotter than the artificial desert, making Vercus long to return to the pool.

Elgen spun round, tranquilly furious as he held up a newspaper. "What were you thinking?"

Bewildered, Vercus stepped forward to see what was on the newspaper. On page three was the following headline:

**LEODORE LIONHEART WATCHES VERCUS CASEL THREATEN CHIEF OF POLICE**

*Oh. Hell.*

Vercus took a moment to pray for Lionheart to suffer an early, slow and painful death before addressing his father. "Father, I can explain."

"What is there to explain?" Elgen was eerily calm. "The only reason you're not behind bars right now for issuing death threats is because the ZPD knows better than to tick me off."
"Lionheart's a sleazeball, father." Vercus tensed his entire body to keep from freaking out. "You know he's just blowing this out of proportion to damage your chances of winning."

"Do I? I guess I'll know for sure once I've asked the three dozen other witnesses to your stupidity."

Vercus clenched his teeth. Disappointing his father was one of many things he despised. "Alright, so I lost my temper. But that beefcake was provoking me!"

"And that lessens the damage, does it? Do I need to remind you of what is at stake here?"

Vercus sighed. "Father, you remind me every day."

"Do not talk back to me." Elgen wandered to the side opposing the window. He hadn't raised his voice. Not yet. "Winning this election is important to me, you know that. It's just as important for you, you know."

Vercus nodded, thinking of the big glass office at the top of the Casel Corporation Headquarters, the office that would one day be his. Someone had to take over after Elgen moved on to City Hall.

Vercus decided it was time to end this argument before his father got any madder. "I know. I'm sorry, father."

Elgen's features softened. "You are forgiven. Stay away from Chief Bogo and we will say no more about it."

Glad that the matter was resolved with minimal damage, Vercus sat down on the pile of cushions beneath the window. "If I may ask, father, how is Chief Bogo doing after that business in Gusteau's?"

Elgen kicked a small fat cushion aside as he strolled about his side of the room. "As a matter of fact, he was involved in a nasty accident at the precinct gym yesterday."

Vercus's heart leapt. "What happened?"

"The barbell broke while he was bench-pressing. Clawhauser was spotting him at the time and was struck in the face."

Vercus had to bite the inside of his mouth to keep from grinning like a loon. Even if his plan had failed, there was some vicious satisfaction to be had in the flabby gold digger getting his just desserts. And they would never know who was responsible. "How bad is it?"

"Nothing too serious. Just a bruise and a couple of cuts that won't even scar."

"Thank goodness for that." Vercus breathed, wiping some nonexistent sweat from his brow. Sometimes he thought his acting skills deserved a Foscar. "Do they have an idea how it happened? A barbell doesn't just break, does it?"

Elgen frowned at something above Vercus's head. "Apparently Bogo had some kind of dizzy spell and dropped the barbell. That's what caused it too-" His frown deepened. "What are they doing to your car?"

It was then that Vercus became aware of a clanking sound coming from outside the window behind him. A horrible feeling coursed through him as he shot his feet and spun round. Through the double paned glass he saw the driver of a tow truck attaching a bulky hook to the bumper of his sleek red Furrari. Standing on the pavement, watching the cow work with silent approval, was Chief Bogo.
The hot private room became a furnace. A red haze clouded Vercus's vision as he tore from the private room, barely aware of Yax's stench as he barged past him. On his way out his antlers got caught in the beaded strings before the exit, and he ripped half of them from the thin beam above. His entire being was boiling like the magma chamber of a volcano as he burst out the front doors of the building too late to stop the tow truck from making off with his vehicle. Instead he charged toward Chief Bogo, who awaited the enraged elk with cool amusement.

"WHAT THE HELL ARE YOU DOING?"

"Kowtowing."

Vercus stopped right in front of the buffalo, huffing with rage. "How dare you! You disrespectful, disgusting little fool!"

"No, you're the fool if you think you can get away with not paying your fines. I thought that as a Casel you would be better than that." Bogo's cool smirk became a frigid glare as he lowered his voice and leaned in towards Vercus. The elk felt something being pushed into his fist. His fingers instinctively uncurled and closed around the object. "Pull a stunt like that one more time and I'm coming back with a pair handcuffs. And I doubt even your daddy's precious campaign could survive that."

With that he turned to walk away, leaving Vercus to look down at the object in his hoof. It was an empty teacup.

Vercus would have gone after Bogo, but at that moment he realized that his father was watching the scene from the Palm Springs entrance. He turned his fierce glare to the older elk. "Father! You can't let him get away with-"

"Vercus, you are the heir to our family's legacy!" Elgen hissed. "You should be ashamed of yourself!"

With that, he turned on his heel and strode toward the nearby black car.

The teacup shattered in Vercus's hoof. He clenched his jaw as he glared after Bogo. The buffalo walked towards a squad car without looking back and climbed inside, driving off in the same direction that the tow truck had taken the Furrari. It would all too easy to follow him to his home and make him beg for mercy. Him and his saggy, interloping lackey. He had the bloodlust and the combat training to do it. But his father was furious enough as it is. If pushed too far, he could even choose someone else to take over the company. That Vercus could not abide.

And so he forced himself to calm down. He stood rooted to the spot, breathing in and out until the red haze cleared, leaving him with a mild migraine.

*Be calm, Vercus.* He thought. *You'll get another chance.*
Over the next six weeks, Vercus managed to make up for his mistake for the most part. He paid his fines and got his car back, though he made sure he was nowhere near Chief Bogo when he did. He made a public apology to his father and Bogo for both the embarrassment and the poor conduct, only managing to do so convincingly because he didn't have to say it straight to Bogo's face. The buffalo hadn't pushed the issue, thank God. 

The only mammal he didn't make 'amends' with was Benjamin, since doing so would mean revealing his part in the cheetah's accident. To add insult to injury, his injuries healed without any scarring. Bogo should have picked a heavier barbell. 

So far as Vercus knew, Bogo was the only mammal who knew the truth, and the only reason for this was obvious; he had no way of proving it. That made the elk feel just a bit better about the situation, but just a bit. He was still in the doghouse with his father, who had decided to keep a closer eye on him since his conduct at Gusteau's had become public. His work shifts had been increased, and bodyguards had been hired to watch his every move even though he was proficient in hand-to-hand combat. That made it near impossible to visit Alec or his other siblings, which meant his predicament with Benjamin was worse than ever. He was also no longer able to go on night outs with his sycophants, who just as he expected never attempted to call.

Benjamin, on the other hand, could call on Alec whenever he pleased, and that ticked Vercus right the hell off.

Six weeks after his humiliation in Sahara Square, Vercus got to see his siblings for the first time since the bathtub incident. Alec, Lake and Edward had kept their distance for the last month and a half, not wanting anything to do with their older brother's bad publicity. Vercus would may them pay for their desertion in due time, but right now he had to enjoy a night out with his family.

He was back in Gusteau's, and expected to be on much better behavior than his last visit. He could feel Elgen's eyes boring into him as he graciously thanked the waiter pouring his wine. Carlos Elkevera had a greedy glint in his eyes as another waiter poured him the most expensive wine in the restaurant. It was just more evidence of the stupidity of his siblings that Lake even gave the mammal the time of day. Vercus was going to enjoy ridding the family of this parasite once he was gone with Benjamin.

When the family was alone at the table, his mother was the first to speak. "God, I can't remember the last time we had the entire family together for dinner."

Vercus nodded, smiling at his mother. Selke had been the only member of his family to stick by him, even if she too felt that he had behaved poorly toward Bogo. He suspected that her secret and misguided affection for the buffalo had something to do with it. "Neither can I, mother. The rest of my family has seemed a bit distant as of late."

His siblings tried and failed to hide their discomfort.

"What did you expect, Vercus?" Elgen snapped. "You embarrassed us all."

"That's enough, Elgen!" Selke snapped back. "And don't bring that up again. We're having a nice family dinner."

Elgen drummed his fingers and looked in the direction of the kitchen. Vercus looked down at his
glass as he shook it, the liquid inside swirling like his turbulent emotions. This was all Benjamin's fault. Him and that upstart buffalo.

"Alec, isn't there something you wish to tell the rest of the family?" Elgen asked.

Vercus looked up sharply, narrowing his eyes at Alec. He'd warned him.

Alec nearly knocked over his glass, only Belch's quick reflexes preventing an expensive spill, and put on a smile. "I got promoted."

The quiet table came alive with happy exclamations and praises while Vercus merely put his thumb up and gave a smile like a blunt katana. Let Alec enjoy what applause he could get. Vercus would earn much, much more once Elgen became Mayor. The happy noise wouldn't have annoyed him nearly as much if he himself didn't have most of the family upset with him.

"Congratulations, Alec." Lake said when the clamor finally started to die down. "That's quite a surprise considering that shoulder put you out of commission for a while. So what rank?"

"Pastry chef."

"And what do they do?" Selke asked.

"I'm working on the desserts and pastries. I do better at them than I do proteins."

"Proteins?"

"Bug Meat and fish, Carlos. For the predators and omnivores, you know?"

"How would I know? I went to a different college."

*I'm surprised you went to college at all, Vercus wanted to say, but he didn't dare say it with Elgen still watching him. The only reason Elgen hadn't gotten rid of Carlos himself was because of how the press might take it. Sometimes Vercus wondered if Lake was only marrying Carlos to get back at their father for not choosing her to succeed him as chairman.

"Speaking of knowing, how come I didn't know about this cheetah friend of yours, Alec?" Elgen asked.

Alec stopped smiling as all eyes fell upon him. As it seemed, nobody in the family except Vercus and Elgen knew about Benjamin. If Vercus played his cards right, he could use this to shape their opinion of him.

"You got a new friend?" Selke asked.

"Yes. His name is Ben." Alec said meekly.

"Benjamin Clawhauser is his full name, I believe." Elgen said. "He lives in the apartment next door."

"That old place? No offense, Alec."

"None taken, Edward." Alec took a big gulp of his drink. "I'm so sorry. I kept forgetting to tell you. I didn't think it was a big deal anyway."

"Was this the same cheetah they talked about in the news? You know the one about-" Edward saw the looks Vercus and Selke were giving him and stopped talking.
"Tell us about this guy, Alec." Carlos said. Vercus would later come to understand that Carlos, who didn't know Benjamin's orientation at the time, had insisted out of worry of a rival in his secret quest to get the Casel inheritance.

Alec fiddled with his napkin. "He's about my age. He's a police officer. We hang out in our apartments most of the time."

"A police officer?" Selke leaned forward. "Which precinct?"

Alec answered Precinct One. Vercus only half-listened after that. He already knew everything about Benjamin Clawhauser. Midway through the past six weeks he'd hired a private investigator to dig up what Vercus couldn't. He'd been greatly disappointed to learn that there were no dirty secrets the detective could find using legal methods. When Vercus had offered extra cash to use less legal means, the detective had refused.

When Vercus sensed that Alec had reached the end of his info-dump, he decided it was time to start asking the crucial questions. He started with something completely innocent.

"Would you consider him to be your best friend?"

Alec bit his lip. He was reluctant to admit that Benjamin was his *only* friend if he could even call him that. "I guess. I've only known him for a couple of months."

"Do you think he would call you his best friend?"

Alec paused. "I don't know."

"When do you usually decide to hang out together?"

"When Ben has free time, mainly. He works pretty long hours as a police officer."

"Do you go anywhere to hang out? Surely you don't spend all your time in that ghastly building." Vercus pictured nightclubs and other expensive venues.

"We went to see a movie a few times. We couldn't really do anything physical when my arm was in a sling."

"And he paid for his own tickets?"

"Of course he did!"

"He came here with Vercus last month." Elgen said with his usual abruptness. "Were you aware of this?"

"Yeah. He told me the next time I saw him." Alec glanced at Vercus for a split second. Vercus glared back. "He agreed to go because he wanted to make a good impression on the rest of you."

"Why would he need to do that?" Carlos asked crossly.

"That's partly why I didn't tell you about him, other than forgetting." Alec twisted the napkin into a rope-like shape. "I didn't think you would approve of me hanging out with him. You're always warning me about moochers and gold diggers."

Vercus bit the inside of his mouth. He knew, just from the way Alec said that, that his foolish younger brother was very against letting Benjamin go.
"You know we do that because we worry about you." Selke patted her youngest son's arm. "We just don't want anyone taking advantage of our children." She made sure to glance at Carlos when she said this.

"Does he often ask you for money?" Vercus asked, thinking of his own friends.

Alec surprised him with a scowl of his own. "No. He's only asked for money once."


"Just a few dollars to top up his cab fare a couple of weeks ago. He paid me back the next day."

Vercus slowly raised his glass to his lips, hating Alec's answer. As far back as he could remember, not one of his own friends had paid him back a single cent, but that had never bothered him before. So why now all of a sudden?

Their appetizers arrived. Vercus waited until the waiters left before shooting his next question. "Did Ben enjoy himself at Gusteau's the other day? God knows I paid a pretty penny that evening."

"Actually he never told me how it went." Alec ate his first forkful. "I only found out what you did when I got out the hospital and read the news."

Selke rubbed his temple and chastised him for bringing up the scandal again. Meanwhile, Vercus's mood grew sourer than ever. There had been something troubling in Alec's eyes and tone; resentment. He was angry at Vercus when he should be afraid. Vercus grinned to hide his bewilderment. Alec never showed defiance toward his older brother. Not ever.

Alec put down his knife and fork. "Look, I know what you guys must be thinking. But I've been friends with Ben for months and he has never once taken advantage of me. When I was off sick with my shoulder, he came to see me every day and helped me with chores. He knows all your names, and the only reason he has never met you is because I don't want him to. Not after how his night with Vercus went. He knows I'm a Casel. He knows I don't have access to the fortune yet. But he doesn't care. He's been there for me even after I told him I was technically poor. He even broke down my door when I had a bad dream and he thought I was being attacked."

"Is that why you changed the locks?" Vercus demanded.

"Yes! If you want to meet him, I'll tell him. But I'm begging you. Please give him a chance."

There are two kinds of mammals in the world. The mammals that are true and the mammals that are false.

As the years passed, and money and passed from Vercus moved on from one frivolous friend after another, he'd come to understand the downside of being a Casel; everyone around you was false. True was a word he used to describe the sweetness of sugar, his lovely reflection in his ceiling high mirror, or how much money was currently in his bank account. True mammals were a rarity in his world. False mammals, on the other hand, were so common it almost depressed him. False friends. False promises. False affection. False love. False hope.

Immediately after Alec's monologue, Vercus had excused himself to go to the restroom before they could see his composure waver. The dusky red restroom was empty when he entered, pleasantly lit with golden glass lights shaped like tulips. He made a beeline for the third of five oval mirrors fixed to the wall above the marble sinks. He slammed his hooves on the cold rim of the middle sink as he stared into his reflection. His image was immaculate, as always, but tonight the image was different.
There was a shadow over his eyes. His mouth was curled downwards in an ugly frown. This wasn't right. Vercus was a Casel. Casels had everything they ever needed. They were rich. They were powerful. They could have whatever they wanted, friends included.

"He doesn't know what he's talking about." Vercus growled at himself. "That fat cop doesn't give a damn about him. No-one does."

Yet he couldn't get Alec's words out of his head. *When I was off sick with my shoulder, he came to see me every day.* When Vercus had been stabbed in a brawl with a mugger, where had all his friends been while he'd recuperated? *He knows I don't have access to the fortune yet. But he doesn't care.* Vercus's friends didn't start sticking around until he'd earned his trust fund. *He even broke down my door when I had a bad dream and he thought I was being attacked.* When was the last time Vercus's friends had showed that they actually cared about him and not his money?

Benjamin was a cop, Vercus furiously told himself. Serving and protecting was what he was being paid to do. It had nothing to do with caring. He didn't really care about Alec. He was greedy and stupid. He couldn't possibly care enough to figure out their secret.

Vercus didn't know how long he could keep telling himself that.

_____________________

The next day…

Chief Bogo waited beside Benjamin Clawhauser's desk for a full ten minutes until the cheetah returned from his lunch break.

When he'd noticed that Benjamin's normally cheery attitude was becoming more forced over the past seven days, he'd attributed it to being down over having a barbell smack him in the face and needing his mouth glued back together. Then he'd strode into the offices in search of Officer Wolford and his overdue report, glanced at the computer on Benjamin's unoccupied desk, and saw the screen.

There was no one else in the office. When Benjamin returned with an iced white donut and saw his boss standing next to the computer, his eyes widened and he stopped dead, the donut inches from his mouth. "Sir. Is something wrong?"

Bogo tapped the top of the monitor the cheetah had forgotten to turn off. "Nothing is wrong, Clawhauser. I was just looking for one of my other officers concerning a report. I know he isn't on patrol today, so I decided to take a stroll around the station to find him. I haven't found him yet, unfortunately. Instead I found your computer left switched on and saw the screen."

Benjamin bit his lip, clearly wishing that Bogo wasn't here. "It's research, sir. For investigating domestic disputes."

Bogo had left his glasses in his office, so he had to bend down slightly so he could read the heading. "*Possible Responses to Relationship abuse – Center for Relationship Abuse Awareness & Action.*" He looked back up. "That's not the only tab on here." He grabbed the mouse and clicked, ignoring the pleading look on Benjamin's face. "*How to Help a Friend…* 'Five Signs of an Abuse Relationship…' 'Five Ways to Help Someone Being Abused…'"

"Please don't tell anyone," Benjamin peeped.

Bogo straightened and turned off the monitor. He said his next three words as softly as possible. "My office. Now."

Benjamin stayed quiet as a mouse all the way to the officer, his donut seemingly glued to his paw.
like the edges of the wounds on his face were glued to each other. Even now it ached at Bogo that the cheetah never would have suffered if the buffalo had never provoked Vercus into causing mischief. Granted nobody had anticipated that he would spike Bogo's drink. Almost a week after his retaliation, Bogo still felt that embarrassing the elk in public by having his fancy car towed wasn't enough, but with no hard evidence it was all he could have done. One of these days, Vercus would get his, and when that day came Bogo would be right there with a pair of steel bracelets and a very, very wicked grin.

Once in the office, Bogo shut the blinds on his inner window before taking his place behind his desk. Benjamin hung his head as he sat down in the smaller chair, completely scared stiff.

"First thing's first; you're not in trouble." Bogo draped his arms over each other as he rested them on the desk. Already he was wondering if he was out of his depth. Chewing out officers and placating civilians was one thing, but this…”But I expect nothing but the truth out of you. Why were you really looking up those websites?"

Benjamin looked up and swallowed. "Is it insubordination if I tell you to promise me something?"

"Not in my opinion."

"Please promise me you won't start an investigation into this. Not yet."

"Tell me why, first. If you're starting your own investigation without my knowledge-"

"I think someone I know is being abused!" The cheetah looked distraught instantly after he said this. The answer was utterly obvious, but Bogo felt a pang of dread at the confirmation of his suspicions. He could only hope that Benjamin wouldn't do anything rash. "Who?"

"I can't." Benjamin started to unconsciously squish the donut. "I'm sorry, sir. I can't say. The website said you shouldn't say stuff like this willy-nilly. It's not fair on the victim."

"That's understandable. Let's start from the beginning. What makes you think your friend is being abused?"

Benjamin ate his crushed donut first, holding his other paw beneath him to keep crumbs from falling on his boss's carpet. "He's nervous all the time. He was really withdrawn when I first met him. He dislocated his shoulder the same day we had the gym accident and he lied about how it happened. I have to push him to talk about his personal life- not literally!" He yelped. "He really doesn't like talking about Ve- the abuser. I met the mammal a few times. He was saying weird stuff, like the victim having episodes, but I've never seen him have anything other than a night terror. I didn't think anything of it before, but after looking at those websites I think he was manipulating me to isolate Al- the victim!"

Bogo's sense of dread steadily grew stronger. The symptoms Benjamin had just described could be due to many other conditions, but his gut was telling him that this was not the case. "Do you still see him? The victim, I mean?"

"Of course I do!" Benjamin looked like Bogo had said something absurd. "And… the abuser?"

"I don't know what happened, but the abuser hasn't been able to see the… the victim these last few weeks. The victim's been getting better since then, but he's still nervous all the time."

"So there is a connection between the suspected abuser and the victim's mood? That doesn't sound
good."

Benjamin nodded. "I've been trying to figure out the best way to talk to him about it. But I don't even
know where to start. Where do I even start? It said you could say you're really concerned, do you
feel safe right now, I just want to make sure you're safe, but which response do I start with? Which
one can I make a not-response?"

Bogo held out a hoof. "Clawhauser-"

"What if I'm wrong?" Benjamin blurted out suddenly. "What if he just has some kind of disorder?
What if I confront him and I get it wrong and he freaks out and I lose him?" His chest was heaving,
his breaths becoming short and sharp. Bogo realized he was watching six weeks worth of anxiety
spill out all at once. "I want to help him but if I've misunderstood I could lose my best friend but if I
don't do anything he could get worse than a dislocated shoulder or he could even get kill-"

"Clawhauser!" Bogo barked. Somehow he'd ended up on the other side of his desk, a hoof on the
distressed cheetah's shoulder. "Calm the hell down! Flipping out isn't going to help him."

Benjamin fell silent and wiped his eyes. Then he turned his eyes to Bogo. "Chief, what do I do?"

Bogo took a deep breath as he worked out what to say.

He never forgot a new recruit. He just didn't care. He didn't care if they were the class clown or the
valedictorian, so long as they did as they were told and behaved like civilized officers. And yet he'd
never met another new recruit as agonizingly engaging as Benjamin Clawhauser. That fluffy round
face was almost contorted in fear for Alec, chocolate brown eyes pleading to his infamously cold-
hearted boss for help. Yes, Bogo knew Benjamin was talking about Alec, but he would let the
cheetah admit that fact when he was ready. With churning disgust he suspected who the abuser was,
but yet again he had no evidence.

Beneath the buffalo's hard hoof, the cheetah's soft shoulder was stiff with tension. There were so
many emotions fighting for dominance inside Bogo that even he had gone quiet. Along with disgust
there was anger at the situation Benjamin had gotten himself into. Fear that Benjamin would do
something stupid if Bogo didn't say something helpful. A rarer feeling, appreciation of the cheetah's
determination to do the right thing. It was yet another endearing thing about the younger mammal
that his strive to do good extended beyond his duties as a police officer. There was a strange flutter in
his belly at the thought of what else he didn't know about the big ball of spotted fluff still waiting for
his response.

"What do I do?" Benjamin begged again.

"Keep doing what you're doing."

Benjamin stared at Bogo. "Keep doing… what I'm doing?!"

"Show him you care. Abuse victims are manipulated into believing that they're alone. That nobody
will care if they reveal the truth or not. Nearly everything the abuser does is about control. They will
deny, manipulate and shift blame." Bogo gave a small smile. "But it is clear to me that you see right
through him. You're not as powerless as you think you are, and neither is your friend."

Surprised flashed across Benjamin's face. "What do you mean by keep doing what you're doing?"

Bogo returned to his office chair. "Keep being his friend. He'll need that more than anything,
especially if his abuser comes back."
"Keeping being his friend. Yeah, I can do that. But how can I get him to open up? Where do I start?"

Bogo thought on that for a moment. "Ask him if he's okay."

"And if he says he is?"

"I would suggest letting him know you are worried about him. You're compassionate and you're not quick to judge. Use that. Use the information from those websites to help you get through to him. They say listening without judging is a very important thing. They're right."

"I'll listen every second, sir."

Bogo nodded. "Just remember that this is a process. He won't magically get better overnight."

"That's what most of the sites said."

"Then you know it's true. No matter how frustrating it might get, don't give up on him. And above all, don't try confronting the abuser yourself." Bogo smirked. "Unless he breaks the law. Then you can bust his arse so hard his bank account will feel it."

Benjamin giggled, a sound that triggered another flutter in the bigger mammal's stomach. "Sir, can I ask you a question? Have you gone something like this before?"

Bogo nodded. "Yes."

Benjamin didn't pry, for which Bogo was thankful. Instead he gazed at Bogo a mix of empathy and gratitude. "The thing is, this isn't like a romantic relationship, sir. What if I'm reading the wrong information?"

"You're not. Abuse comes in many kinds of relationships, but there's always an abuser and a victim. It's a common tactic to blame the victim for the abuse, but it's never their fault. Make sure your friend knows that."

"I will. I'll do whatever I can to help him."

"I know you will." Bogo procured his glasses and began to clean them, needing something for his hooves to do to avoid missing the feel of Benjamin's warm shoulder. "But be careful around the abuser. I'm serious, Clawhauser. Make sure he doesn't know you know."

"I will, sir. I will. And promise you won't start an investigation into this? Not until my friend is okay with it?"

Bogo scowled. "Fine. But if something gets the ZPD's attention and we find clear evidence of abuse, it won't be up to either of you."

"I understand, sir."

Bogo slipped his glasses on. They were back to being the Chief and rookie. "That will be all, for now. You may go back to your research, but do not forget your reports."

Benjamin stood up. "They're all done, sir. I'll bring them right up."

"Good. And if you see Wolford, tell him to get his report and his sorry tail up here asap."

"Yes, sir!" Benjamin saluted him with his biggest smile yet. Sprinkles and bits of icing fell onto the buffalo's desk. The instant the cheetah saw what he had done, he started streaming apologies as he
pulled out a clean tissue and started sweeping them off again.

Bogo shook his head at the mammal's antics, amused more than anything. "Just chuck them in the can, Clawhauser."

Once the desk was clean again, Benjamin did just that, his face like a record-breaking tomato and showing a mortified forced smile. "Sorry, sir! O, M, Goodness, that was embarrassing!"

_That's the Clawhauser I know._ "Thank you, Clawhauser. You may leave, now."

Benjamin saluted him more carefully this time. "Yes, sir. And sir…" He dropped his paw and gave a wide, appreciative smile that had the buffalo's heart racing. "Thank you."

After the engaging cheetah left his office, Bogo groaned, fell back against his chair, and wondered what the hell he had gotten himself into.

He wasn't just thinking about the abuse scandal with the Casels.
The First Rejection

The serpentine, quiet streets of the Canyonlands were ripped to dust by the merciless tires of the red Furrari as it roared across the dry dirt and tarmac. No matter how loud it roared, or how fast it glided through the artificially hot air, the Furrari gave no comfort. The paint was so shiny it reflected the dirt and rock around it. The tires were pitch black and brand new. But the car was tainted, now. Now it was a symbol of Vercus's failure. Three months ago, when people would spot the car as it sped by, they would stare with lust and envy. Nowadays that would appear to still be the case, but behind those lustful and envious looks they would think of the day it had been towed like a broken lemon. How its owner had been humiliated and treated like a lowly delinquent. They never voiced these contemptuous thoughts, but Vercus knew they were thinking them. His friends were thinking them. Hell, his family was thinking them. Even Alec was too secretly scornful to be afraid these days.

The Furrari had been tarnished. He had been tarnished.

Vercus would never forgive Bogo for this. Never.

But he would overcome this. He would prove once again why he was the Casel's golden child. He already had several options going through his head as he approached civilization and slowed beneath the speed limit. By the time he reached the first of the sandy colored buildings that made up the Canyonland's main street, his mood had become optimistic.

The first option was simple; get a new car. It would have to be different, the polar opposite of the Furrari but just as glamorous. Gold, perhaps? No, way too tacky. Maybe blue or black. Definitely anything but red. No matter what color he picked, it would definitely be a Mewcedes. A smart looking model like that would be a perfect match for the suits he had taken to wearing. It was a car fit for a Chairman.

And that brought his thoughts to the second option. He could briefly see the Corporation Headquarters in the distance through the gap in between a dime store and a bakery. In one week the votes would pour in and the post of Mayor of Zootopia would be back in the hooves of the Casels where it belonged. Elgen had planned everything. He wouldn't give Vercus the details, not yet, but he had plans to keep himself in power long after the two four year terms ended. The city would be his for decades, and one day, he had promised, it would be Vercus's. That wouldn't happen for a long time yet, but Vercus was fine with that. Until that time came, he would be content ruling over the Casel Corporation. He had a few ideas as to who would replace him as Head of Security, but that could wait. His newfound status would wash away the taint Bogo had put on him, and that was all that mattered.

The third option was, and the irony was not missed here, Benjamin. According to the police scanner, he was close and getting closer. He had been sent to question the owner of a bookstore that had suffered a break in. Who still reads books these days? It might cause trouble is Vercus interrupted in the middle of questioning, so he would park his smeared Furrari around the corner and wait. He quickly found the store in question, took in the smashed window and the empty police car stopped outside. Benjamin was here, just out of sight. On the downside the store was right in the middle of the block. The nearest corner was three stores down. Vercus had to drive a little further, and to add insult to injury, found that the street had a parking meter. Nevertheless he parked the car, paid the meter, and walked back the way he'd came. On the plus side there was a bus stop with a convenient bench close to the store. He sat down, twisted his body so he was facing the door beside the broken window, and waited. He almost though he could hear Benjamin's voice emanating through the spike hole in the window, asking questions and spouting false assurances.
No. Not false. Vercus knew that now.

He pictured the pretty doe, the bullish heir and the willowy cougar surrounding him with brown noses, simpering smiles and false veneration as he bathed in the sapphire waters of the Palm Springs pool. Was that the hidden mickey at his side whispering sincere compliments into Vercus's ear? No, it was Benjamin, the cheetah who found his way into the hearts of Alec, Bogo, and who knows how many other underserving cretins. If they would have his admiration and love, why couldn't Vercus? He was on the verge of becoming one of the most powerful mammals in the country, perhaps even the world. Wasn't he entitled to Benjamin's admiration more than them? It had taken him weeks to see it, but the cheetah's interference in his life had been a blessing in disguise. Vercus's eyes had been opened. He was wasting his life with his sycophants' bloodsucking and his siblings' cowering.

Vercus Casel deserved better than that.

The door opened. Vercus grinned as he saw Benjamin in uniform for the very first time, decked in blue with a notebook in paw. He spoke something into the store, a final assurance to the unlucky owner, and started towards the car.

Vercus stood up, and under the pretense of an innocent stroll down the street, strolled up and blocked the cheetah's path.

"Ben! Fancy seeing you here!"

True his nature, Benjamin's surprise was clear in his expression and posture. He was stiff as a flat tabletop, his notebook gripped like a Taser. Vercus felt a twinge in his stomach. Was he still upset about Gusteau's? He couldn't be, that was months ago. Did Bogo tell him what Vercus was the reason he'd nearly lost some teeth? The cuts Elgen had told him about were gone now. The unmarred black lips formed an uneasy smile. Benjamin had always made his true feelings clear, ever since the day they'd first met. Vercus enjoyed that. "Mr. Casel! I haven't seen you in weeks."

Vercus saw a crushed can and kicked it into the road. "I'm in the dog house with my dad."

Benjamin tilted his head. "Dog House, huh? I didn't think you and your dad did disco."

"Not the club, you air-headed-" Vercus stopped and sighed. "I mean he's still ticked off at me. I embarrassed him big time in Gusteau's."

"That was three months ago. He can't still be mad about that!"

"Mad's a strong word. I'd say he's worried I'll do something else to hurt his chances of winning the election." Vercus heard bitterness in his own tone, and was glad his father wasn't around to hear it. Whatever negative feelings he held towards Elgen had to be quashed, and quick.

Benjamin's posture relaxed very slightly. His eyes softened with sympathy. Vercus began to feel hope. He'd caused so much damage. Angering his father. Losing control of Alec, Lake and Belch. Failing to punish Bogo for his transgressions. With Benjamin he could fix everything, if only he could gain control. Appeal to his niceness. Using money wouldn't work here.

"I'm sure things will be better when the election's over." Benjamin said, keeping a gap between himself and Vercus. "Speaking of which, what are his chances at the moment?"

"He's getting a lot of support. Why? Who are you planning to vote for?"

"I haven't actually put into thought into that. I've been busy getting settled into Precinct One."
Vercus tried not to let his grin waver at the mention of Bogo's workplace. Was his grin too wide? He didn't want to look like a fake. Benjamin must have seen a change in Vercus's expression, for he tried to cover up his sudden discomfort by putting away his notebook and pen. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have brought that up. Won't happen again."

For the first time in weeks, Vercus felt powerful. This was the kind of mammal he needed in his life. Compliant. Honest. Given a little molding and a crash diet, and the cheetah would be perfect.

Benjamin tipped his hat. "I really should be getting back, Mr. Casel."

"Call me Vercus."

"Vercus. Right. Guess I'll see you later." He started to walk around Vercus to get to the patrol car.

"Hold on, I want to say something." Vercus chose the nicest thing he could think of. "I'm glad I ran into you, because I wanted to apologize for what happened in Gusteau's. Bogo was being a jerk. I admit I could have handled that better, but I understand why you couldn't stick up for me."

Benjamin nodded, looking guilty, just like Vercus wanted. "Thank you. Apology accepted. I'm sorry I couldn't stand up for you, but I really need to get back."

"Hold on." Vercus said again. "I told you that my parents might not approve of someone like you hanging out with Alec, do you remember?"

"Yeah." Strangely Benjamin flinched at the mention of Alec.

"Well, they've been hearing nothing but good things about you from my brother, but they still need a little convincing. What do you say we try again? We'll go somewhere better than Gusteau's."

"I don't know." Benjamin said, looking like he didn't like that idea in the slightest. "I couldn't afford anything in Gusteau's. Is there somewhere that isn't that fancy?" He snapped his fingers. Vercus hoped to God he wasn't about to suggest McDonkey's. "I know! If your family still isn't sure about me, maybe I should go and meet them!"

"That is a bad idea." Vercus said sternly. "For one thing they won't go anywhere that's four stars or under. And you're right. No way you could afford anything like that." He laughed a little. Benjamin didn't laugh. Why didn't he laugh?

"Mr. Casel, I'm working. I'll see you later." He reached the car and opened the door.

"Benji, wait!" Vercus blocked the doorway with a muscled arm clothed in grey. "Personally I think that you are a wonderful mammal. I truly do. I just don't want the rest of my family making you think you are less than that."

Benjamin looked up from the arm blocking his way into the car. "Alec doesn't make me think that."

"Because he's too nice. Have you noticed that you are the only friend he has? For mammals like us, friends who aren't just with us for our money are not easy to come by." He propped himself fully against the car, putting his body closer to Benjamin's. The cheetah's body, which usually quivered with each movement, went completely still. There were donut sprinkles on his paws. "The point is, I want to feel like more than just a meal ticket, Benji. Ever since Bogo falsely accused me of domestic violence, twice, things haven't been the same. No one wants to get close enough to see that I am more than just a spoilt rich kid. You see that… don't you?"

Benjamin smiled and nodded, but his eyes and quickened breath betrayed him. "I see it. But I can't
"You saw how acted three months ago. He's always hated me."

"You were hardly cordial with him yourself. Will you please move away from the car?"

Vercus didn't budge. He was finding it difficult to maintain the smile. "Tell me, then. What do you see in him?"

"He always says he doesn't care, but deep down he does." Benjamin said. "He's surly a lot of the time and he doesn't really have a sense of humor, but he's really a good mammal. Like that one time in the gym. When the barbell broke and hit me in the face. He personally took care of me and brought me to the emergency room." Benjamin seemed to blush at the memory. Vercus ground his teeth behind his lips. If he didn't know better, he'd have said the cheetah had feelings for that grouchy old beast.

"He had my car towed, the other day. Did you know that?"

Benjamin nodded. "I heard. To be fair, you did have a lot of unpaid tickets."

"Did Bogo give you that excuse?" Vercus growled through his response. He realized his mistake, but it was too late. What little friendliness Benjamin was willing to show evaporated before his eyes the moment he saw the ugliness Vercus had let slip past his smile. He tried to step back, but hit the open door behind him. Even with the door blocking him physically, he was slipping away. He was slipping away.

"I n-need to get back, M-Mr. Casel." The cheetah stammered. Vercus's arm dropped from the doorway, giving him the chance to clamber inside.

"I get it. You choose him."

Benjamin refused to look at Vercus. "I can't talk about this right now. I'm sorry."

He slammed the door and locked it. The car sped away, taking Vercus's hope and power with it.

In the middle of writing his victory speech in the comfort of his private study, Elgen Casel received a phone call two weeks later.

"Yes?" He spoke into the elegant black receiver.

"Mr. Casel?"

"Chief Bogo?"

"I believe you're aware that your youngest son is friends with one of my officers, Benjamin Clawhauser."

"Yes. And?"

"... We need to talk."
"Oh, good God. What did that boy say to you?"

"Nothing he hasn't told you."

"That feline has no business slandering my children like that!"

"Don't you dare get all high and mighty on me, Casel! He told me what you're doing!"

"I've doing nothing!"

"Precisely."

"You… If that cheetah is not fired by the end of the week…"

"Make one more threat and I swear to God I will make sure you won't set one foot in the Mayor's Office."

"You dare…"

"Yes, I dare. Because he came to me to help Alec, and so help me that's what I intend to do. I'll start by forcing you to give him the help he needs."

"Why you-"

"That scandal with the death threat in Gusteau's was just the start. I still have the case files on the domestic violence incidents he was involved in. I also have some evidence of that stunt he pulled with the Benadryl. Not enough to ensure a conviction, but enough to produce a warrant for his very public arrest and a day in interrogation. And last, but certainly not least, at least four counts of harassment of Officer Clawhauser in the Canyonlands over the last two weeks."

"Harassment?"

"We have indisputable evidence that he has harassed Clawhauser multiple times. Loitering in places frequently visited by Clawhauser. Spying on his apartment building. Constantly calling him even when he's working, even though Clawhauser insists he never gave him his contact information. Trying to pressure him into severing ties with Alec. We've been able to keep him from getting close to Clawhauser so far, but certain things need to start happening now! If they don't, I will make sure the press knows everything after we arrest him. When your voters find out your pretty boy Vercus is an abuser and a stalker, they're going to wonder why you're not doing anything about it. By the time I'm done, winning the election is going to be the least of your problems."

"… You wouldn't dare. The Commissioner would have your guts for garters."

"The hell with the Commissioner. I have an officer to protect. If you know what's good for you, you'll get your head out of the sand and protect your youngest son."

"I was going to, Bogo!"

"'Going to' is not good enough, and you know it."

"Look, just let me deal with him. I'll make sure he puts an end to this."

"You'd better, or I'm arresting that punk myself?"

Elgen had barely been able to hold it together in between the call ending and his private meeting with Vercus in the mansion's lounge. He'd chosen to keep Selke out of this, on account of her absolutely
refusing to believe that the lowly Clawhauser had been telling the truth about her beloved sons. Vercus, oblivious to his father's smoldering emotions, sipped expensive hot chocolate from a hundred dollar teacup. Something about his son was different. His clothes were not as flawlessly pressed as they used to be. There were dark circles under his eyes. He didn't appear to be enjoying his drink. Elgen suspected a hangover, and his anger grew. Casels did not get drunk enough to get hangovers, not unless they wanted ugly photographs gracing the tabloids.

"I noticed you've not been training as frequently as you used to." It was the only thing Elgen could think of saying without exploding.

Vercus slowly placed the cup on the table. "I've been tired."

Elgen drummed his fingers on the arm of his chair. "Stalking obese cheetah cops would be undoubtedly exhausting."

Vercus froze, before he scowled defiantly. "I see Bogo has been spewing vicious slander again."

"I know for a fact that this is not slander." Elgen grew still himself, so quietly incensed that one could imagine a sparkling fuse where his tail would be. "Did Alec really dislocate his shoulder by accident? Be honest with me."

Vercus was still for a long time. "He wouldn't keep a secret."

"He's your brother, for god's sake!" Elgen slammed his own cup, spilling tea all over the table. "You will never behave like that again, Vercus, do you understand me?"

Vercus shot to his feet. "I wouldn't have had to if you'd just listened to me when I advised you to have Alec put in another apartment! I warned you that cheetah would be trouble, but you listen?"

"I listened!" Elgen grabbed Vercus by the lapel and pulled himself so they were face to face. "I listened, I learned! You were just scared that he would be trouble for you! You were afraid he would expose the truth about what you've done to Alec!"

Vercus narrowed his eyes. "And here you are now, afraid that he will expose the truth about you. An oblivious old fool who was so obsessed with reputation that you had no idea what was right under your nose. If you'd seen us as more than just pawns, just once, you would have known."

Elgen tightened his grip. "That is not true."

"Isn't it? Tell me, when was the last you talked to me like a son?"

They fumed at each other in near-suffocating silence, the only sound the distant ticking of the big clock in the nearby dining room. After what felt like an eternity, Elgen let go.

"There is no excuse..." He snarled. "No excuse for what you have done. What you've been doing. The next time... you hurt Alec, Clawhauser, or anybody else... or disgrace this family in any way... will be the last time I call you my son!"
"The next time... you hurt Alec, Clawhauser, or anybody else... or disgrace this family in any way... will be the last time I call you my son!"

Vercus simmered in his new Mewcerdes, its shiny black pain camouflaging the vehicle in the dark corner farthest from the ZPD building. The investigation by the private detective he'd hired had been a dead end. There had been nothing. No criminal record. No dirty secrets. Absolutely nothing that he could have used to usurp control over Benjamin Clawhauser. Not without invoking his father's wrath.

"The next time... you hurt Alec, Clawhauser, or anybody else..."

It was maddening. Bogo was a burly cockroach. A lowlife thug. Even his horns were ugly. So why in God's name did that idiot cheetah like him more?

To hell with his father and his twisted priorities. Vercus would not let this stain linger past tonight. One way or another, Bogo would know who was the better mammal. Vercus just had to find him first. He had no idea where the reticent buffalo lived. The ZPD was a no-go for what he had planned.

"... will be the last time I call you my son!"

Vercus punched the wheel, barely missing the horn. His heart ached at the memory of Elgen's expression during their last confrontation in the lounge. The disgust. The disappointment. The condescension.

Had Vercus ever been a son to him?

He gulped some more of the massive bottle of cheap brandy he'd bought on impulse at twilight. Cheap brandy. A new low for the supposed golden child of the Casel family.

_Maybe I don't want to be your son anymore, Elgen._

Vercus's breathed hitched at the sudden thought. That wasn't true. He very much wanted to be Elgen's son. Being Elgen's son was everything to him. It was Bogo. It was Bogo who had called Elgen and turned him against Vercus. Just like he had done to Benjamin and Alec.

The front door of Precinct One revolved, spitting out a spotted feeling in blue. Benjamin had taken a late shift today. He turned and made his way to the empty parking pot besides the colossal building.

Wait. Vercus had been wrong. There was one thing, one little thing that he could use to turn the tide.

He stumbled out the car, taking the bottle with him.

There had been another break in. Someone had forced his or her way into a house in the Rainforest District, only to be forced to flee without taking anything when a nocturnal neighbor got curious. Benjamin was the only available officer who could take such a low priority call, and Bogo had seen no harm in sending him alone. This wasn't a domestic violence call or anything that would indicate that the suspect was still in the area. Benjamin would simply comfort the tenants, take their statements and then head back to the precinct to make the report.
At least, that was how he'd thought his evening was going to go until he'd heard someone approach as he was sliding the key into the cruiser. He turned around to greet what he assumed to be a last-minute partner, only for his blood to run cold when he saw the black hooded jacket and the nearly empty giant bottle in his hoof.

Under the white beams of the lamps overlooking the parking lot, Vercus didn't just look drunk. There were dark circles under his eyes, the eyes themselves red from constant rubbing. His clothes hadn't been ironed in days, and his antlers were dull and grubby. Reddish brown liquid swished in the big bottle of what Benjamin could now see was brandy. Benjamin pressed himself into the side of the cruiser, fingers crawling across his stomach towards his holstered dart gun and his radio.

"Benjamin." Vercus spoke, the word not as slurred as Benjamin had thought it would be. "About damn time I got you alone."

Oh gosh.

"Hey, take it easy. I just want to talk. If I was here to hurt you, I wouldn't do it right next to a police station."

Benjamin saw sense in that, but he didn't move his paws away from his equipment. What did he want, really?

"We need to talk. Me and Bogo. Whatever this crap is… that's going on between us… needs to stop. It needs to stop tonight."

Benjamin wished he had a partner right now. "Do we have to do this now? You know they're preparing a restraining order against you. If they see you…"

"Screw the restraining order." He sneered.

"Vercus, please. Think about what you're doing. How is this going to make your dad look?"

Vercus smirked in a way that spoke screw-my-dad-too. He clamped his jaws around the bottle's deck and swallowed deep. Brandy dripped from his chin as he lowered the bottle and wiped his mouth.

"Sorry about that."

Benjamin plastered on a smile, wondering why no-one had shown up yet. "It's fine."

"It's not fine. It's a mess." He raised the bottle as if to smash it on the tarmac, but then thought better of it. After all, it wasn't empty yet. Instead he took a step forward. "Everything's been a mess since you came along."

Benjamin's fear escalated. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to cause any trouble. But you need to leave before I call my coworkers."

Vercus put a hoof on his hip. His eyes glinted white under the parking lot lamps. "No, you won't. You know what I am."

"I know you're a Casel, but that won't matter if you continue to break the law."

"I'm also Head of Security of the greatest corporation in the world. I have combat training more advanced that anything the Police Academy spits out." His eyes trailed down to the radio Benjamin was reaching for. "Go ahead. Try to call them. Or pull out your dart gun. I dare you."

Benjamin didn't dare. He was a cheetah, but he wasn't that fast. And beneath his mildly annoyed
demeanor, Vercus was angry, drunk and unpredictable. "What do you want, Vercus?"

"I don't like what you've been turning into, Benji. You used to be so outgoing. So reliable. But these last few weeks you've been pushing me away. Tell me… is it Bogo? Is he turning you against me?" He growled Bogo's name with contempt.

Benjamin glanced up at the ZPD building. Bogo would be leaving the building himself in a few minutes, and he'd walk right into his unstable nemesis. He had to get Vercus to leave before that happened.

Vercus continued. "I told you before. He's always hated me. Jealous of what I'd been born with, I suppose. No matter what I do he just won't let it go. If you're careful, he's going to drag you down with him."

Benjamin shook his head. "No. He's not like that."

Vercus ignored him. "Of all the precincts you could have been assigned to, it was Precinct One. Ever since then you've been a thorn in my side. Dad's ticked off at me. Everyone looks at me like I'm a joke. Alec doesn't even do what I say anymore. You know what I think? I think it was no coincidence that you moved right next door to my brother. So who planted you there? Bogo? Is that what he's been up to? He knew you would befriend Alec, didn't he?"

Benjamin felt sick. Either Vercus was drunker than he looked, or he was absolutely delusional. He had to get him out of here before Bogo showed up. "Listen to yourself, Vercus. How could he possibly have any influence on where I live? Please, you have to go before my coworkers find you."

Vercus took another, unsteady step. He was now close enough that Benjamin could smell the brandy. "Why are you defending him?"

"Because you've got it wrong. What you're doing is harassment. As a police officer, it's his duty to put a stop to it. He's not doing this because of a petty grudge, can't you see that?"

Vercus bared his teeth. "He embarrassed me in a five star restaurant! He abused his power so he could steal my car! He even called my father and accused me of abuse! And you're stupid enough to tell me that this isn't personal?!"

Benjamin hissed under his breath. How dare this horrible mammal try to pin everything he'd done on Bogo? "But he had every reason to do those things, didn't he? Personally, I think the only reason he's hated you for this long is because you never showed him you were anything more than a spoilt rich kid."

Vercus went ominously still. "Is that what you think?"

Benjamin's fingers brushed his dart gun. "It is what I think, especially after the way you behaved in the restaurant. Bogo was out of line-"

"So you see my point."

"Which you lost the minute you insulted his family, assaulted him, and threatened to kill him!" Benjamin snapped.

"I was reminding him of his place! He never learns, does he? He never, ever learns! Everyone else knows their place, so why can't he?!"

"Because he already knows his place!" Benjamin retorted. "He's the Chief of Police, and a better
mammal than you could ever be!"

Vercus leaned forward, planting his arms on either side of Benjamin, trapping him against the cold metal of the cruiser. It was both astonishing and unnerving, considering that he must have drunk almost the entire bottle in his hoof, that Vercus hadn't blown his top yet.

"Do you think I'm stupid? Don't think I didn't hear the way you talk about that beefcake. Don't think I don't know how you feel."

Benjamin's mouth dropped open. Vercus knew. Even worse, he was about to use it against him.

Vercus leaned in further, never breaking eye contact with the cornered cheetah. Benjamin was shaking now, as it occurred to him then that Vercus might have been trained in ways to kill. "How did he do it, Benji? How did he make you like him more than me?"

Benjamin shook his head. "It's not like that."

"You are such a crappy liar, you know that? Or do you really believe he's just a boss to you?"

Benjamin thought of his Taser, tucked in a pouch to his left. If he could keep Vercus distracted, he could end this without Bogo being put in danger.

"I gave you a chance to be my friend, Benji. I'm not too mad right now to give you another. Your ill-advised crush has been cutting into my business since day one, and one way or another, I'm gonna cut him out. Like a spleen. Without anesthetic, Benji. Unless you change sides and make him back the hell off."

Benjamin's terror threatened to overwhelm him. Vercus was serious. Deadly serious. Casel or no Casel. He had to be taken down. Benjamin raised his voice to keep the elk's attention on his face while he reached for the Taser.

"If I do what you want... will you promise not to hurt Bogo?"

Vercus grinned and nodded. He stepped away from Benjamin. The cheetah stiffened the arm by his side, his paw inches from his Taser. "Sure." Vercus said.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?!"

Benjamin gasped softly as he saw Bogo for the first time, car keys gripped tightly in his hoof as he stood ten feet away, draped in his blue trench coat, his blazing reddish brown eyes fixed on Vercus. Relief and horror surged through him, fighting for supremacy.

Vercus turned his head and sneered. "There you are."

Benjamin ran around Vercus to Bogo's side, out of the elk's reach. "Did he hurt you, Clawhauser?"

"No, sir."

"Good." Bogo went back to glaring at Vercus. "Clearly your father hasn't gotten his warning through your thick skull. Give me one good reason why I shouldn't arrest you right now."

Vercus held his hooves up, the remaining brandy in the bottle making a soft noise as it swished. "Because Benji and myself have come to an agreement. Tell him."

Benjamin held the radio by his head, knowing it may not make a difference if calling for backup provoked the elk. By the time backup got here, it might be too late. "If you stay out of his business,
Vercus will stop bothering me."

Bogo stared down at him. "You don't seriously believe him."

"Chief, please." Benjamin gripped his arm, feeling hard muscle underneath the sleeve. "We don't know what he's capable of. Please just leave it. Leave it, and Vercus will leave, too. Isn't that right?"

Vercus was silent, his eyes filled with loathing as they remained fixed on Bogo.

"Right?"

Vercus's fingers tightened around the neck of the brandy bottle. "All he has to say is, 'I'll back off.' That's it. I'll back off.' He says that, and I'll do the same."

Bogo narrowed his eyes. "And what about Ale-"

"Say it!"

"No." The buffalo growled, to Benjamin's horror. "I won't say it, and I'll tell you why I won't say it; because I don't believe for a second that you'll keep your word. You couldn't even keep a promise to your father to save your image."

Benjamin watched Vercus in terror. Everything about the elk, his fists, his jaw, his stance, was clenched and tense.

"I don't know what I ever did to you, Chief Bogo, to deserve this. To have you keep trying to ruin everything I have ever worked for."

Benjamin, who had just finished calling for backup, put away his radio and stepped in between them. "I told you, it's not personal."

"None of this happened until he butted in!" Vercus snarled.

Bogo stepped forward, pushing Benjamin behind him. "Why don't you grow up and take some responsibility, Casel?"

Vercus waved the bottle at Benjamin. "You don't deserve his admiration. He'll realize that. I'll make sure of it.?"

Oh gosh, he didn't. Benjamin couldn't see Bogo's reaction to this, but he could hear a derisive snort. What did it mean?

"You'd be wasting your breath. You're just an immature, entitled, self-centered bully trying be daddy's little favorite and pretending to be the number one mammal in town. Tell me, Vercus, how does it feel to be a disgrace to the family name?"

Vercus's eyes widened. He titled his head slightly, as if he was considered how to react.

When Benjamin and Alec had started hanging out, one of the first movies they'd watched together was *Paw's Labyrinth*, a film that had them learning the hard way that a child protagonist did not necessarily make a film family friendly. One scene in particular had left them both cringing behind trembling fingers; the main villain emotionlessly beating a hapless prisoner senseless with a glass bottle. Even as the wolf's face was red with blood and his nose was crushed to nothing, the bottle never broke.

What happened in the blink of an eye was the reverse of that shocking scene. The brandy bottle
shattered into glistening shards and red droplets when Vercus swung it into the side of Bogo's face. Whatever sounds the buffalo made were lost under the initial smash and the tinkling of broken glass as his head snapped sideways and he dropped to the ground.

Benjamin tried to scream, but no sound came out. He stared down at the wounded chief as he kneeled among brandy and glass, both of them too stunned to do anything else. Benjamin saw at least three cuts. One bisecting Bogo's eyebrow, the other two on the bridge of his snout. There was too much blood to see anything else.

Benjamin slowly turned to look at Vercus, who released a sigh of fulfillment and tossed aside the neck of the bottle. He looked to Benjamin.

"Maybe now he'll get the message." He muttered. "Now, Benji, let's put this nonsense aside and-"

Before Benjamin knew what he was doing, he was going red with rage as he drove a Taser into Vercus's gut.

The events after that went so fast they were like still images to Vercus as he tried to remember them hours later, while he sat in his car as it stood parked on the side of the forest road outside of the city.

The charge hadn't been set high enough to keep Vercus down for longer than a few seconds, after which he'd looked up at Benjamin's face. The cheetah hadn't made a single sound. He hadn't even bared his teeth and claws. His eyes, however, had radiated with a rage that far surpassed Vercus's own. The elk was sure that only the unexpected distraction of two passers by that had witnessed the attack had prevented Benjamin from doing more than knocking the elk on his rear. When Vercus had taken off to evade the approaching officers, the cheetah didn't go after him in favor of staying with the concussed Bogo.

Benjamin's choice had been made.

One hour after that disastrous confrontation in the brightly lit tarmac parking lot, Vercus found himself in a whole other environment. The car was surrounding by darkness on all sides, poorly lit on the inside by a single light above the front seats. Rubbing the spot on his abdomen where he'd been shocked, Vercus looked in the rear-view mirror at the sparkling lights of the city behind him, feeling such a profound sense of loss that it brought tears to his eyes.

It was over. He'd been seen assaulting the Chief of Police. The eldest son of Elgen Casel had been seen smashing a bottle in a police officer's face. Without meaning to, he'd struck a fatal blow to his father's campaign. Such an act would never be forgiven.

"The next time… you hurt Alec, Clawhauser, or anybody else… or disgrace this family in any way… will be the last time I call you my son!"

His father was a mammal of his word.

Vercus stomped on the pedal. The Mewcerdes tore down the road away from the city for the first and last time. It was all he had. Elgen would no doubt have taken everything else by now.

If… no, when Vercus returned to Zootopia, he would laugh in Elgen and Bogo's blank, bloody, mangled faces as he took it all back.
Chief Bogo found Selke Casel in the lounge, sitting alone on a couch across from her three children and Christine Antlaire. The room was as silent as the grave. When Alec looked up, his eyes widened as he recognized the Cape buffalo and he leapt to his feet. "Chief Bogo! Thank goodness you're here!"

"Where's your father?"

"Still in his study. He won't talk to anyone. Are Ben and the others okay?"

Bogo felt some inappropriate satisfaction at the thought that this latest blow had broken the stubborn old fool. That satisfaction didn't last long when his eyes fixed on the well-aged doe sitting alone with a large glass of wine red as blood.

"I don't know, Alec. I'm sorry." He was also sorry for what he was about to do, but lives were in danger.

The children and the fiancée watched, slightly confused as he slowly walked over and eased himself on the cushion to Selke's right. The doe didn't even stiffen. Even the wine in her glass looked untouched.

Bogo drummed his fingers on the arm of the chair for a short time before he spoke to her.

"I know this has been a horrible night for you..." He tried to be as soft as possible, despite the anger and fear inside urging him to unleash his bad cop persona on the female. "But if there's anything that you're hiding... now's the time to say." He ignored the puzzled expressions from the four mammals sitting across from them, focusing himself on the stony expression faltering on Selke's face. "Anything that could help us close this case. Anything that could prevent more attacks from happening."

Selke swallowed, her eyes flicking left and right, anywhere but him and her family. "There isn't."

The hell there isn't.

"Mrs. Casel, do you know who's behind these attacks?"

"No!"

"We've got lives on the line, here!"

Selke looked terrified now, especially when she caught glimpses of her now suspicious and angry children. They'd already discovered that two members of their family had lied to them so far. Why wouldn't they believe a third?

She looked up at Bogo, who responded with a hard stare. "Those officers... Gazelle... will they be alright?"

"I don't know." Bogo admitted. "So long as that psychopath is out there, they're in danger. And this might be the last chance you'll get so I'm asking you again... who is behind this, Mrs. Casel?"
she looked away, Bogo's arm shot out. Instead of grabbing her shoulder, he grabbed the cushion behind her.

"Tell me!" He half-shouted. "Who is behind this, Selke?!"

She spoke so softly and quickly he almost didn't catch it. "It's my son."

Bogo glanced sharply at Alec and Edward, who looked as thunderstruck as he was. "What? But they both have alibis!"

Selke's face reddened. "No… no! You know which one I'm talking about!"

She planted her glass on the table hard enough to spill, shot up and started for the door. Bogo was about to pursue when Edward jumped up and stormed to the door, blocking it.

Bogo stared at the mammal and his mother uneasily. He'd heard that Edward had taken his father's betrayal so badly he'd punched him.

"Liars…" Edward snarled. "I'm surrounded by god damn liars."

"Edward…"

"No, mom. I'm done with this crap. All of it. You're going to stay right here and tell this guy everything you know."

A tear ran down Selke's reddened cheek as she backed away from the door and faced the other mammals in this room.

"Hold up." Edward opened the door. "I'm bringing dad here. I want the truth. All of it."

Edward wasn't gone long. In the meantime, a train of thought ran through Bogo's head, his gut growing colder by the second. The scars on his eyebrow and snout tingled. It couldn't be. Edward returned less than two minutes later dragging his father by his suit. "Sit down. Mom's got something to tell us."

Elgen stared at his wife as he sat down on the armchair.

All the while Alec had a haunted look on his face. "Tell me it's not him, mom. Please. Please tell me it's not Vercus."

Elgen gripped the arms of the chair.

Selke sniffed. "I'm sorry, Alec."

Everyone who had been standing when they heard the confirmation sank back into their seats, everyone except Bogo. Alec hugged himself, rocking back and forth as years of dark memories bubbled to the surface. Christine said nothing, only embracing her fiancée as he wordlessly waged war against hysteria. Edward looked ready to pick up Selke's glass and throw it at the farthest wall. Elgen looked like he'd been turned to stone. As for Bogo, he just felt sick to his stomach, fighting the urge to lift his hoof and touch his scars.

Only Lake was keeping her head. Bogo had to admire that. Even so her voice trembled as she spoke. "You and father told us he was dead."

"We thought he was. They told me he threw himself overboard on that cruise three years ago."

"How long, mother? How long did you know it was a lie?"

Selke propped herself against the wall. "Since the truth about your father came out. I was so angry. I was a mess. I went outside for some air. I was walking through the garden when I... I saw him." She sobbed. "He had just killed one of the guards. He had that ghastly mask, but I knew it was Vercus the moment I saw him. I'm his mother."

"So it is Vercus." Elgen looked older and weaker than he'd ever looked before.

"That son of a-" Most of them jumped when Edward punched the wall. He gritted his teeth as he rubbed his bruised hoof. "I should have known he was behind this!"

"What happened after you spotted him?" Bogo asked.

Selke paused. "I couldn't help it. He's my son. I approached him."

"And he didn't attack you?" Bogo looked her up and down, astounded. Selke didn't have a scratch or a bruise on her.

"I'm his mother!" Selke glared at the buffalo through her tears. "But yes, I was surprised as you are when he didn't attack, especially when I got a closer look at what he did to that guard."

"And you're sure it was Vercus?" Bogo asked.

"He took off the mask when I asked him. I'm sure." Selke sobbed again, her body shaking from sheer emotion. "I saw what had happened to him... oh god!"

"What did happen to him?"

"His face... he'd been hit with buckshot. He's gone savage. Or at least part savage." Selke said. "He's lost many of his inhibitions, but he remembers things. He remembers his combat training. He remembers the mammals who made him this way. And those who cast him out." She glared hatefully at Elgen. "And it's all Veltro's fault! None of this would have happened if they hadn't-" She had to stop when a fit of sobbing escaped her throat. "If Veltro hadn't betrayed him."

"Betrayed him? You mean..."

"Yes. Vercus Casel is the founder of Veltro, and its leader until those monsters Gruff and Dupont usurped him."

"Dupont?" Christine hissed.

"Who?" Elgen asked.

"He was a Commandant in my home country. He was fired from the force for police brutality against predators, but disappeared before he could be tried and convicted."

"Sounds like an ideal Veltro candidate to me." Bogo said. "So Vercus started Veltro to get his revenge, is that it?"

Selke nodded. "That's not the worst of it. He was Bellwether's contact outside the city during the Night Howler Incident."

"And you know this how?"

"When he recognized me, he calmed down." Selke gave a small smile that was not shared by her
family. "I think it's because I was the only one who didn't abandon him after he was disowned. I used to call him in secret while he was gone, give him money so he could live comfortably. I swear I had no idea he was using it to form a terrorist group!"

"I believe you." Bogo said. "Did you know he was planning to kidnap Gazelle?"

"No, I swear to god!" Selke yelled. "I tried to convince him to stop this madness, but he wouldn't. He's too insane. He ran off, I think to abduct Gazelle. But before he left, I managed to convince him to tell me what happened to him…"

Finishing what Bellwether had started, getting rid of the predator population once and for all, had always been Veltro's goal. It was Vercus's goal, too. Or so they'd thought.

It had taken most of three years, but they had managed to get Vercus to let it go. The elk had the experience and skill to be a good leader, and it had showed ever since he'd formed the organization four years ago. More than once, however, his obsessions had gotten in the way. Gruff didn't know how many times he'd had to talk Vercus out of exacting bloody revenge on one or all of the mammals responsible for ruining his life as any one of them could have complicated the general plan. Eventually their mutual friend, Yokai Nishimura, had recommended a psychiatrist, Dr. Arianna Fauna, to assist them with their dilemma. The psychiatrist had worked miracles, helping Vercus to let go of his obsessions and focus on the bigger picture. But then Bellwether screwed up. She did the one thing Vercus had told her not to do, and Vercus had a complete relapse.

Thanks to that relapse, the truth of Vercus's motives had gradually become apparent to Gruff and Dupont in the months since Bellwether's arrest. He'd claimed he was trying to protect the people of Zootopia from the tyranny of the Casel Corporation. He'd promised to destroy all predators in the city.

As it turned out, he only wanted one.

Gruff couldn't describe how disappointed he'd been when he'd come to this realization.

Gruff had means and motive, but opportunity came sooner than expected when Vercus sent him out the bunker for drinks. It had been far from his most outrageous demand, especially since his relapse. They should be preparing an attack on the Corporation Headquarters right now, not interrupting Bellwether's appeal with a Nightfall grenade. There was no need to kill her. Gruff didn't even want her killed in the first place. She was his friend. But Vercus was adamant. She'd disobeyed him, and she had to be punished for it.

Dupont had made sure that Vercus would be alone while he set out with his team to infiltrate the mall. Dr. Fauna had suggested the Digoxin to make it look like natural causes. It was up to Gruff to do the rest.

He stopped at the top of the stairs leading underground. He popped the lid off the hot chocolate. Steam erupted from the drink like phantom fire as he dropped the Digoxin inside. He waited until he was sure the tablets had dissolved before making the descent.

He only hoped he wasn't taking himself straight to hell.

In a bunker deep in the Meadowlands, protected from the chill by a long dark coat, Vercus glowered down at the schematics for the Greener Grass Mall. His smoldering eyes moved along the surface of the table to the hand-drawn map of the street separating the mall from the courthouse. His finger
pressed into the paper like a blunt dagger, sliding along the red line that would be Nightfall's trajectory. How fitting that Dawn Bellwether, the mammal who passed the first prototype around like poisoned candy, would be the first to witness its power first hand.

She'd brought this on herself. When they'd first started working together, he'd made his one condition very clear; Benjamin Clawhauser was his and his alone. Neither she nor her fashionably challenged sniper was to do anything to him. Whatever happened to that cheetah would be Vercus's decision.

She'd disobeyed him, double crossed him like the false, two-faced witch she really was. She'd had Benjamin removed from the front desk. Then Officer Hopps had blamed herself, quit the force, and went on to undo years of planning. His overwhelming desire to make Bellwether pay for what she had done had provided the inspiration for the first attack.

An attack on Bellwether on the day of her appeal, right across from the grand reopening of the mall his father had spent so long renovating. What a fitting beginning of the end for the illustrious Casel family.

He didn't look up when Billy G. Gruff returned from his errand and held out the bigger cup. The hot chocolate had gone from scalding to warm by this point, so Vercus gulped half of his down before going back to poring over the plans. There was an unusually bitter taste beneath the sugar that made his eyes narrow. He'd told Gruff to go the Snarlbucks. Was every creature with wool this stupid?

"Dupont should be on his way to the mall right now." The goat said shakily as he set his suitcase on the floor by the door. He was right to be nervous. There would be hell to pay if anything went wrong.

"Does he remember where we planned him to go?"

Gruff tapped the room on the map from where Nightfall would be launched. "Right here. He knows, sir."

"Good." Vercus turned away from the table to open the black plastic case in the back of the bunker. He admired the half dozen vials nestled in the case, each one a beautiful dusky blue. It was this serum that they'd spent four years perfecting, and three months testing on the ignorant predators.

He had to hand it to 'Nishimura'. Using *Midnicampum Holicithias* was a stroke of genius. Vercus consumed some more of his drink, even though he despised the bitterness. The vials were small, like dying stars against the black. An alternate image flashed across his vision. For a split second, the vials and the case became black spots on golden fur. He'd been seeing that pattern a lot, lately.

"When do you expect he'll reach the mall?" He asked.

"Dupont will call when they get there. After that, it'll be radio silence until they reach their target." Gruff hadn't touched his own drink since they'd arrived. Instead he seemed more interested in watching Vercus. "Bellwether doesn't stand a chance of winning the appeal, you know that. It's not too late to call this-"

Vercus whirled on Gruff. "No-one disobeys me and gets away with it! No-one!"

Gruff froze. He backed towards the door. "Of course, sir. Will I be seeing you tomorrow?"

"If you're asking to go, just get out already. Just don't expect to see me tomorrow."

"Of course, sir… Goodbye."
Gruff was unusually quick in leaving and closing the door behind him, so quick he'd forgotten his tatty little suitcase.

Vercus turned back to the case, pulled out one of the pretty vials to admire it closer, and heard a click.

The elk spun round. Did Gruff just fricking lock the door on him?

He stormed over to the door, vial in hoof, and tried to open it. He had locked the door on him.

He began to feel sick, even though he was too livid by Gruff's sudden betrayal to feel fear.

He didn't pay attention to the way his nausea worsened by the minute as he kicked and slammed at the door, until he doubled over and vomited.

He'd vomited. Something was seriously wrong.

The suitcase Gruff had left behind. Vercus might find answers in there. His vision blurred as he dropped to his knees and grabbed at the case. He struggled to see the latch as he fiddled with the damned thing. It flopped open, spilling useless papers and a small bottle of tablets. Vercus's head swam as he picked it up, and it took him a lot longer than it should have to make out the word Digoxin.

The bitterness of the hot chocolate was suddenly much more significant. He wasn't just being betrayed. He was being murdered!

Vercus roared and threw the bottle with all his might. It bounced off the open black case and rolled out of sight.

Goodbye, Gruff had said. Goodbye? That was a goddamn farewell! How could he do this? They had formed Veltro together! Vercus had trusted him!

"I'll get you for this, Gruff!" He screamed through his growing delirium. The bunker and the stairs beyond the door were quiet. Either Gruff was long gone or he didn't care enough to answer. Vercus threw his entire body at the door. It dented very slightly. He could get out in a few hours, but if he knew anything about Digoxin, he didn't have a few hours.

He should be terrified. He was dying alone in a cold bunker, separated from anyone loyal enough to help him. His revenge would never be satisfied. Bogo would get away with everything he'd done. Benjamin would never be his.

Vercus slumped to the floor, his back against the door. His hoof came to rest on the floor… and that was when he felt the smooth warm glass of the vial he was still holding.

It was his last chance. His greatest risk. His ultimate weapon.

He held the vial up in front of him like a dumbbell, and squeezed. The vial shattered. Its blue essence draping his hoof like a veil was the last thing he remembered.

Bogo gaped in disbelief at the weeping doe.

"He used the Night Howler serum on himself?"

Selke nodded. "Digoxin slows the heart rate. He'd hoped the serum would counteract that."
The beast strode through the frozen streets of Savanna Central, moving with stealth and purpose as he searched for the van, the snow around him so heavy it shrouded him like a veil. Close to the mall, he found half-buried tire tracks leading him into an alley.

He stepped inside. Spotted a large mallet leaning against a dumpster. He already had a serrated garden sickle on him, procured from a garden shed after he’d escaped from the bunker, but he picked up the mallet with his other hoof, the one covered in cuts and blue stains. The warthog, Du Pont. He and Gruff worked closely together when they weren't working with their master. He had to have known. He would die for this.

The beast found the van just as two mammals in black were pulling out large bags. There was something important about them, but the beast didn't know what. The mammals turned and spotted him as he approached. They recognized him, and asked what he was doing there and why he was carrying a sickle and a mallet. The beast didn't answer, striding forward until he was close enough to strike. Strike he did, slicing their throats with one swing.

The snow would cover the blood soon, so the beast paid it no mind as he tossed the bodies into the van. They landed hard on the bags, which crunched as though they were carrying glass. The beast smelled blue essence. There were yells and curses behind him. The beast turned around and saw two more mammals in black, standing at the entrance to the alley. That had been the plan. Two to watch the van, two to smuggle the bags from the van to the coffee shop close to the boutique where they would launch Nightfall in the morning, and two to make sure security didn't catch on to their operation. Dupont was the seventh, the one who would hide in the mall until morning, then pose as a security guard as he brought the launcher the rest of the way to the boutique.

The second pair raised their guns and fired, but the beast was faster. He ducked down and to the side, so the darts missed completely. Amateurs, part of the beast sneered in contempt before he made his own move.

The mallet spun through the alley, striking the left mammal in the forehead, killing him before he sank into the snow. The sudden death of his companion scared the fourth stiff. The beast was sure there was a dark stain forming between his legs as it slew him.

The bodies joined their companions in the van. A voice emerged from the hip of the mammal with the dent in his forehead. Dupont, demanding to know why four of his men weren't responding. He would be getting a response, all right.

The beast stared down at the radio, listening to Gruff’s partner in crime as he called for his men.

"Is it the police? For crying out loud, answer me! Speyer, Forrest, get back to the van and find out what's going on!"

The beast retrieved the bloody mallet and left the alley. There was a blind spot on the pavement beside the mall. Nobody was around, not even a hobo. The beast crouched beside a pillar and waited until it heard the footsteps of its next prey. When a leg came into view, the beast lopped it off with the sickle. Finished the fallen mammal off with a slash to the back that severed his spine. Felt a small pressure on his back as the sixth mammal fired a dart that failed to pierce through his thick clothing. He retaliated with a much more effective mallet to the temple. Had he'd known how effective a mallet was, he would have insisted on using it in his training.

The fifth and sixth were dragged back to the alley and thrown in the van. Ignoring Dupont shouting from the six radios, the beast slammed the doors shut and wrapped a pipe around the handles.

Now it was Dupont's turn. The traitor sealed his own doom when he mentioned the coffee shop. The
beast slipped the sickle and mallet beneath his cloak, concealing them from any cameras hiding in the shadows as he crept to the mall, slipping in through the same fire exit his victims had used.

He found Dupont in the coffee shop, just as the ibex was placing the smuggled coffee bags containing the disassembled launcher and grenades in the storeroom among the normal bags. He turned and saw death standing in the doorway. His face slackened in shock.

"Oh god, you're still alive."

The beast snarled and pulled out his club and claw.

Dupont pulled out a dart gun and fired. The dart hit the beast's chest but just like the others failed to pierce his coat and vest. The ibex's face became a mask of terror. He backed against the sacks. He screamed like a banshee as the beast pinned him against the sacks and began to play.

"He doesn't know exactly how the coffee got contaminated. He believes the grenades got damaged while he was killing Dupont, causing the serum to leak."

By now Selke had returned to her wine, and consumed nearly every drop. "By the time he was finished, the first staff members were arriving to get the mall ready for opening. He had to hide in an elevator shaft with Dupont's body until the chaos started. He managed to escape with the launcher when night fell."

Bogo fell back against the wall beside Edward. "We didn't find Dupont, just the bodies of his men. Do you think he could still be in the shaft?"

Selke nodded.

"Was he the one who had been sending Gazelle those threatening letters?"

"I don't know. I never thought to ask. I only cared about what had happened to him."

"Did he say what happened to his face?"

"After he escaped the mall, he tracked Gruff back down to the bunker. Gruff shot him in the face with a small shotgun. Vercus cut him up and left him to die slowly. He didn't think you'd find the bunker in time, you see."

Bogo turned on his side and propped himself against the wall by his arm. "So we were right. What happened at the mall was no terrorist attack."

"He did all this just to get revenge on us?" Elgen asked.

"Not all of us. Just you. But things have changed since Veltro betrayed him." Selke emptied her glass completely. "Now he's after Veltro. He's not going to stop until every single member in Zootopia is dead or turned savage. He'll destroy the whole city if that's what it takes."

"Not if I can help it!" Bogo growled.

"If that's true, then why has he been attacking our security?" Christine demanded. "Why did he murder Ombidia? Why did he kidnap Gazelle?"

"Because doing all those things makes it easier for him to get what he's wanted more than anything else. Something that has haunted him ever since that night when he scarred Chief Bogo." Selke looked up at Bogo with scornful eyes. "I told you I wanted him away from my estate."

But Bogo was already feeling cold panic. The incident at Animalia. The attack in the maze.
Kidnapping Gazelle and using her as bait. It was all coming together.

What Vercus wanted more than anything else was control. Control over his siblings. Control over his father's company. Eventually, control over the city. He'd lost that control when Bogo and Benjamin had exposed his wrongdoings and Elgen had disowned him in response. Then he'd lost control over his own terrorist organization when Gruff and Dupont betrayed him. At the end of the day, that was what this was all about. Control. Vercus was trying to take it back by any means possible by getting revenge on everybody responsible for his downfall.

The buffalo rushed to the door, ignoring the others as a hit list began to form in his mind.


Ben.

Chapter End Notes

End of Act V.
“Benjamin…”

Illuminated from beneath by the many candles around the altar like an infernal demon, the Hound of the Casels whispered the cheetah’s name like a curse.

Gazelle stared over Benjamin’s shoulder at the costumed maniac and the claw he was pointing right at the cheetah’s face. Gazelle tightened her grip on his shoulders. Woolworth moaned as he pressed a hoof to his head, his white wool turning red with blood. Judy and Nick simultaneously looked between Benjamin and the Hound like a pair of non-identical twins.

The Hound chortled, an unpleasant sound that frightened the cheetah in more ways than one. The more Gazelle heard the creature’s voice, the more he realized she’d heard it before.

It couldn’t be. It couldn’t be. Selke said he was dead.

Still chortling, the Hound lifted his claw and tore his own face off.

Except the face was a mask, just as they’d always thought. The face beneath was less hideous, but it was still far worse than the monstrosity that had concealed it. Part of his face was covered in scars, but it was him.

Him.

“Vercus.” Benjamin breathed.

Vercus’s grin widened, like he was glad Benjamin recognized him.

“Oh nuts.” Nick whispered.

“You know him?” Judy asked.

“Vercus Casel.” Benjamin said. He and Vercus never took their eyes off of each other.

“Casei?” Judy gasped. “No-one told us there was a fourth!” She collected herself and aimed her weapon. “Vercus Casel, you are under arrest!”

“The little hairball that ruined my coat with her peashooter.” Vercus sneered. “Stay out of this.”

“Drop the candlestick and get down on the ground! Now!”

Vercus pulled out a remote detonator. Judy fired, the dart sinking into his arm but doing nothing. His clothing was too thick.

“Better start screaming, cottontail.” He muttered as he pressed the switch.

A split second later, the massive front doors, the only thing keeping the horde of savage mammals outside, blew apart.

“Nick, get up!” Judy yelled, somehow yanking the fox to his feet despite their size difference.

The dust hadn’t settled before they started hearing snarls and bellows. The savages were coming.
“Come on!” Gazelle was pulling Benjamin towards an open door behind the candles. The cheetah barely felt her, unable to take his eyes off of Vercus. “Move your freaking butt, officer!”

Benjamin blinked, breaking whatever spell Vercus had on him. “Guys!” He called out to his friends.

“We’ll hold them off! Get her to safety!” Nick yelled and waved him toward the door.

Benjamin grabbed Gazelle by the hoof and ran.

“Oh no, you don’t!” She heard Woolworth holler. Right before they reached the door she turned her head to see the ram run to intercept Vercus as he pounced down from the altar. Gazelle pulled him through the doorway before she could see what happened next.

In this room was an elaborately carved baptismal font overlooked by a statue of a lioness with wings and a staircase leading up.

“How many darts do you have?” Gazelle asked.

“I don’t know, ten?” Benjamin asked. “Block the door, hurry!”

They shoved a wooden table in front of the door, just as something struck it from the other side, making them both leap back and recall a similar scare back in a dark corridor in the Greener Grass Mall.

“We shouldn’t have left them.” Benjamin whimpered.

“I know.” Gazelle glanced upward. “How good is your aim?”

“Pretty okay.” He jumped when the door and table trembled again. “Why?”

“I saw balconies above us in back in the hall. Maybe we could find our way up there. You could shoot them from above.”

Benjamin nodded, to get a hold of himself more than anything. “Okay. Okay. Good idea. But first we have to find somewhere safe for you.”

“Next to you is safe enough.”

Benjamin shook his head. “No, Gazelle! He’s after me! I’m the last mammal you should be around right now!” There was another bang. The table shifted. Benjamin hoped it was just a savage. “Up the stairs. Come on!”

They raced past the font and up the stairs. They went higher than they’d thought. Benjamin was panting by the time they’d reached the top. From where they’d came, they could hear not just the banging on the door, but the sound of what must be at least half a dozen savage mammals tearing at each other.

Benjamin was still wheezing as he pulled a radio from his belt. “Guys! Guys, can you hear me?!”

There was a frightening pause.

“We’re okay!” Nick yelled. “Me and Judy managed to get to climb to one of the balconies. Woolworth...” He didn’t finish the sentence.

“What happened to Woolworth? Where is he?”
“He’s gone. That Vercus guy used come kind of sickle on him.”

Benjamin’s shoulders slumped. Gazelle covered her mouth and felt her eyes grow hot and wet. Woolworth had gotten killed because he’d stopped Vercus from catching them. She would never forget that sacrifice.

Gazelle had known Vercus since before she’d become a star, and she was ashamed to admit that a long time ago she had fallen for his charms. They’d only had that one night, thank god, but after she’d learned the truth about him it had become a night she never wanted to remember. To discover that everything that had happened, the tragedy at the mall, the attacks at the estate, her kidnapping, had been all his doing, made her sick to her stomach.

And now he was after Ben.

“Look, we just got a call from Bogo. The ZBI are gonna be moving in any minute. Find a room with a heavy door, lock it, and sit tight. Don’t try to take those savages on, there’s way too many!”

“What about… Vercus?” Benjamin asked.

“… Take Gazelle and find somewhere to hide. He’s coming for you.”

Just as Nick finished speaking there was a nasty crunching sound from back down the stairs, like a wooden door being broken down.

Benjamin pulled Gazelle behind him and pointed his dart gun down the stairs. Heavy footsteps could be heard, growing louder until the mammal making them came into view. It wasn’t Vercus. It was a massive rhino on all fours, dressed in the ragged black clothing of a terrorist who’d had his own weapon used against him.

“Not again!” Benjamin yelled. “Gazelle, run!”

He fired once as Gazelle fled, glad that she’d taken off her heels before her abduction. The corridor had two doors, a small one in the middle and a pair of doors at the end. She ran to the middle door and shoved it open. Her heart sank when it opened into a small dusty storeroom, not the balcony as she’d hoped. She nearly screamed when something grabbed her shoulder, but it was only a panicked Benjamin. “There’s more coming and I’m out of darts! We have to find somewhere to hide, and quick!”

The storeroom was too small and cluttered for the two of them, and they could hear more savages coming. They burst through the double doors and entered a darkened room full of books, no windows and a spiral staircase blocked by a wrought iron gate.

Benjamin looked back through the doorway, gasped, and slammed the doors shut and pressed himself against them. “Ben?!” Gazelle asked in terror.

“You don’t wanna know, just find something to bar these doors!” Benjamin yelled, just as something slammed into the doors on the other side, nearly throwing him to the floor.

Gazelle saw metal torches on the walls and grabbed the nearest one. She had to prop her knee up against the cold stone to get the leverage she needed.

“Hurry!” Ben yelled as some bellowed on the other side.

With the bolts being weakened from age and neglect, the torch was ripped free. Gazelle raced back to Benjamin and twisted the metal rings until they were vertical. Then she jammed the torch into the
rings and pulled Benjamin away.

The door shuddered, but the improvised bar held. Gazelle was doubtful it would hold for long though, as the sounds on the other side indicated that there was more than one savage trying to get in. Breathing hard, Gazelle looked to Benjamin. “I’m sorry, Ben.”

“For what?”

“For letting myself get caught. For getting you in this mess.”

Benjamin opened his mouth, but whatever assurances he was about to give died in his throat when the bellows turned to bleats. The door stopped shuddering. There were thuds, then a sickening tearing sound. Then silence.

Then a voice that had Gazelle breaking out in beads of sweat.

“Benji?”

Benjamin stifled another gasp.

“Benji, open the door.”

“Stay away!” Benjamin yelled. “Just stay away!”

The doors tried to open, but the torch held them shut. Gazelle didn’t want to know what that monster done to the savages that had been trying to get in mere seconds ago.

There was an unpleasant giggle. “You’re hysterical, Benji! You’re not thinking straight. Don’t you want to hear me explain myself?”

“He’s not interested!” Gazelle yelled.

“I never took you for a coward, Gazelle.” Vercus hissed.

“I never took you for a terrorist!” She retorted.

Then out of nowhere came the shouting of sane mammals, coming from far away, outside the cathedral. An explosion as a tear gas grenade was thrown. Then there was the hissing and popping of numerous tranquilizer rifles being fired. Gazelle gasped in relief, as did Benjamin. The ZBI raid had begun.

“The ZBI is here! It’s over, Vercus!” Benjamin yelled at the doors.

The doors jolted in response. There was now a small curve in the torch.

“I can still escape. There are other ways in and out of this basilica.” The door shook again. “But I’m not leaving without you, Benjamin!”

“I’m not going anywhere with you!” Benjamin backed away towards the iron gate. He tugged at the bars, which were held in place by an old fashioned padlock. “Find the key.” He whispered.

Gazelle started to search the books and boxes as Vercus continued to speak.

“Can’t you understand? I did all of this for you.” His voice was softer now. “It hurt didn’t it, when you were taken from the front desk just because of what you are. When Bellwether told Bogo to move you to records, you must have felt so alone. No-one to stick up for you. Not even your beloved
buffalo. When I heard what she had done, of course I had to make her pay. She’s going to have a hard time getting laid with a scar like that.”

“You attacked the Greener Grass Mall just for that?! I never wanted her dead!” Benjamin shouted.

“But you wanted her to pay! How can you deny it?”

“Because I’m not a vindictive bully like you, Vercus! You’re the one who was working with Bellwether turning predators savage, weren’t you? What, torturing your own family wasn’t enough you have to hurt the city too?”

The door shook. The torch bent further.

“Torture? You don’t understand, you still don’t understand, do you, I was making him stronger! Him and his obsession with chocolate and confections was a one way ticket to nowhere and I had to stamp it out of him before he opened his stupid store and ran it into the ground!”

“Are you gonna use that excuse with Lake and Edward?” Benjamin fired back. “They told me everything! I know it wasn’t just Alec you were abusing!”

“You don’t understand, I was making sure they grew up knowing what was important-”

“They’re your family! Your own brothers and sister and you made their lives a living hell! How could you do that to them?” Benjamin was shaking now, his empty and useless dart gun held tight in his paws.

Nearing her wit’s end, Gazelle waved her hooves at him. “No key. There’s no key!”

The doors pressed against the torch. Vercus was putting his weight against them. “Has it ever occurred to you that I had problems of my own, that there was a reason for my actions? Has it occurred to you that you rejected me because you were turned against me? Bogo has always had it out for me, you know that!”

“What has that got to do with it?”

There was a pause. “Why is it that after all these years, speaking to Bogo through that intercom day after day after day, that you and he are still apart? Why, you haven’t even asked him out? Maybe it’s because of that night, five years ago. Maybe deep down, you know that this is all his fault.”

Benjamin’s jaw dropped. “His what…” He took a step towards the doors. “HIS WHAT?!”

“He brought this on us all!”

Fangs bared, Benjamin stormed up to the doors. “Don’t you dare turn this on him! You’re the one who scarred him for life!”

“You still don’t understand! You don’t know what it’s been like since Elgen disowned me! Do you have any idea what lengths he’d gone to, what he would have done had my mother not made sure I didn’t end up in the gutter! He had my name struck off the records of every building in Zootopia, he had my old bedroom turned into a second library, he promised to fire anyone who so much as mentioned my name! He made the city forget about me, Ben!”

“Yeah, total jerkwad, I get it!” Benjamin growled. “That justifies what you did, does it? Turning yourself into the Hound of the Casels and killing dozens of innocent mammals?”
“There are no innocents! Just true and false! Even Gruff and Dupont and that two-faced shrink! First chance they got they turned on me, poisoned me and left me for dead! I had no choice, I had to use the serum!”

Gazelle felt another lurch in her stomach. Just when she’d thought the nightmare couldn’t get any worse.

“It serves you right for playing around with terrorists!” Benjamin spoke with contempt.

“And you’re absolutely right! Veltro was a mistake, I see that now! This is why I need you, Benji! You alone are true!”

“So! What! Huh?!” Benjamin holstered his dart gun, stormed over to one of the other torches and started to pull it free.

Vercus struck the doors with renewed vigor. The torch wouldn’t hold for much longer.

“I could have killed you in that maze! But in that instant, the split second before I plunged that axe into your back, I realized I was making a mistake!”

Benjamin stopped in the middle of tugging. “What the heck are you talking about, huh?”

“I thought I had everything, Benji! I was rich! I was weeks away from taking over the company! In a decade or two I would have been the mayor! But you opened my eyes, Benji, you showed me how empty my life really was! All anyone, all my so-called friends ever wanted me for was my money! But not you, not even when I offered you everything you could ever want! You never would have gotten close to my brother had Bogo not tricked you into moving in next door!”

“He had nothing to do with that! Stop turning this on him!” Benjamin yanked the torch off the wall.

“That’s what he wants you to think! He’s taken everything from me, everything! But I’ll show him! He doesn’t deserve you! He’s going to regret everything he’s ever done to me!”

Benjamin held the torch like a Billy club, a fluffy ball of flaming fury. “You brought this on yourself!”

He strode over to the gate, gesturing for Gazelle to step back, then swung with all his might. The padlock broke off and he shoved open the gate.

They ran up the dark, spiraling, claustrophobic passage, just as they heard the rending sound of the torch finally giving up the ghost and the doors wrenching free. They seemed to run for an eternity, and it wasn’t until Gazelle’s legs started to burn that it occurred to her that they were ascending up to the towers. Before they knew it they were bursting through a door to find themselves face to face with a starry night sky outlined by carved stone. In the weak daylight, they could barely see the savage mammals down below, and the heavily armored ZBI taking them out one by one. Gazelle and Benjamin looked up and saw that they were on the long stone balcony beneath the towers, specifically right beneath the tower on the cathedral’s right. That meant there was another door beneath the other tower.

But when they reached the other door, their guts somersaulted. The door was trembling as something rammed into it other and over. Something big enough to ram it open any second.

Gazelle screamed as Vercus grabbed her by the back of her sweater and lifted her off her feet. Then she screamed again as he threw her over the stone railing.
She was caught in mid air, her body painfully hitting the stone wall beneath the rail. She looked up to see Benjamin hunched over the rail, his grip on her arm tight enough to leave a nasty bruise, but the not-falling was all she cared about.

If she somehow made it out of this alive, she would get this cheetah a permanent VIM pass. She swore on it.

Benjamin turned his frightened gaze away from the female dangling from his paw as Vercus approached them both.

“That was your last chance, Benji. Now we do this the hard way.”

There was a loud crunching sound. The savage had broken through. Gazelle begged it to go after Vercus first, and her prayers were answered. The mad elk was dragged out of sight just as he was reaching for the cheetah.

“Pull me up! Quick!” Gazelle shrieked. She couldn’t see what was happening behind the rail, but she could hear the fierce struggled between Vercus and the savage.

Benjamin clenched his teeth as he struggled to pull her upwards. “Geez, you are really-”

“Don’t answer that!” Gazelle snapped, as he raised her high enough to grab the top of the rail. “Don’t even think it!”

When she pulled herself up she spotted the bloody sickle lying on the filthy floor. It wasn’t until she was back on the safe side of the rail that she and Benjamin looked to the two mammals struggling nearby.

“Hijueputa.” Gazelle breathed.

Vercus was growling like a beast as he struggled to fend off the buffalo that had his arm around the elk’s neck. Benjamin stared in stunned silence at his boss before he started forward to assist.

Gazelle saw Vercus reach out for the sickle. His fingers closed around the weapon. She sucked in a breath to cry out in warning, but it was too late.

The sickle flashed. Blood splattered on stone.

“Mansa!”

Benjamin’s cry drowned out Bogo’s roar of agony. He bent double on his knees as he pressed his hooves over the growing stain above his left hip.

Benjamin pulled something from his pocket as he charged at Vercus. His bloodlust rendering him oblivious to the cheetah, Vercus raised his sickle like a dagger above Bogo. Benjamin plunged his fist into Vercus’s side just as the sickle plunged.

There was a crackle, and Vercus staggered back, clutching the spot where Benjamin had thrust the autographed Taser. Having had herself getting chased by a mass murderer and nearly falling to her death, Gazelle was too terrified to move.

Vercus growled, malice in his dark eyes as he advanced on Benjamin. Hissing through his teeth as he held his wound, Bogo looked up and saw his officer being threatened. Gazelle could see he was fighting through the pain as he threw himself up and grabbed the arm holding the sickle.
Their struggle had them pressing against the rail as they fought for control of the serrated blade, until Bogo found an opening to sock Vercus in his disfigured jaw.

The elk tumbled over the railing.

“Oh gosh!” Benjamin rushed to Bogo’s side and stared over the rail. Gazelle hesitated before she did the same, afraid of what she would see.

Vercus pulled himself up onto the stone gargoyle beneath them and glared up at Bogo. The gargoyle was far down enough that he couldn’t climb back up, and judging from the infuriated look on his face Vercus knew it.

“Who do you think you are?” Vercus grabbed part of his coat and pulled it up to intercept the dart Bogo fired at him. “You thought you could use him against me and get away with it? You thought wrong!” He lowered the coat just enough so they could see the hate in his eyes. “He may be yours now, but one day, he’ll be mine…” He giggled and grinned. “To do with as I please.”

Out of the corner of her eye, Gazelle saw Benjamin grip Bogo’s arm.

Vercus crawled down from the gargoyle and disappeared into the darkness beneath the cathedral.

“Malparido.” Gazelle cursed.

“What you just said.” Bogo snorted, shortly before collapsing.
Benjamin had half a mind to give Bogo a strongly worded lecture on the importance of REM sleep. When the chief had suddenly passed out from a combination of exhaustion and minor blood loss, Benjamin had nearly fainted himself at the thought that he'd lost him then and there. Then the medic confirmed that he'd suffered a Slash to his side, not a stab wound as had been feared. In any case, Bogo's case was not so major that he needed an immediate airlift back to Zootopia.

Unlike Woolworth.

The second bit of good news in all this mess was the discovery that Woolworth had only been *playing* dead to avoid getting mauled and gored by the savage mammals that had invaded the cathedral.

Benjamin tugged the blanket tighter around himself as he watched Woolworth being carried to the waiting helicopter than stood in the thick snow near the guardhouse, Judy and Nick at his side.

"You gave us a real scare there, buddy." Nick was saying. He was grimy and sweaty from running for his life, but the blood had been scrubbed away and he'd been cleared of a concussion. "You're gonna be okay. Hang in there."

"I can't believe you never told us you were Vercus's former instructor." Benjamin wondered if it was the right time for Judy to be scolding the ram, but he was feeling too numb to scold her in turn.

"You kidding?" Woolworth's voice was still strong despite his condition, a good sign if any. "I'm not even allowed to say his name. It's not like it's something to brag about, anyway."

"Fair point." Judy said. "I'm sorry. I just can't believe that there was a fourth Casel kid and I didn't even know about it."

"Believe it, 'cause that's the idea."

They moved far enough away from the car that Benjamin could no longer hear them over the helicopter blades. The two officers were gently but sternly pushed away so Woolworth could be lifted on board. The side door slammed shut, and everyone not still in the car backed away as the vehicle took off and began its journey over the trees.

Once Nick and Judy were back in the car, it took them the rest of the way to the mansion, where Agent Yaxley was waiting for them on the front steps. He looked livid, but his expression softened a little when he saw Gazelle emerge from the car first, draped in a blanket herself. The rest of them soon followed, except for Benjamin who was unwilling to leave the weary Bogo's side.

"Well, one good thing's come out of all this… are you alright, Miss Gazelle?"

"More or less." Gazelle said. "Tell me you got that monster."

"I'm sorry, ma'am. There's been no sign of him since his attack on Chief Bogo. We think he slipped away in the chaos of the raid.

Benjamin felt colder than the winter snow and slumped in his seat. Beside him, Bogo cursed and punched the car door.

Yaxley's breath turned to mist as he continued to address Gazelle. "You've just had a very traumatic
experience, so you may rest in your room until we're ready to question you."

"I don't think I will be much help to you. I was out of it until these officers found me."

"Nevertheless, we'll still need your statement." Yaxley replied with compassion. He looked through
the car window and spotted Benjamin. "Officer Clawhauser, we'll need to question you first."

Gazelle scowled. "With all due respect, he's probably more traumatized than I am."

Yaxley frowned. "That's right. He's the one the suspect was using you as bait for. He was the real
target all along." She nodded, looking pale in the car's headlights. "We'll need to arrange a safe
house for him as soon as possible. Is that Chief Bogo in the car with him?"

"Yes, but he needs medical attention, not an interrogator."

"That's not what I meant, but I'll have someone tend to him right away. Officer Hopps, Wilde, you
two come with me. Everyone else but Chief Bogo should return to their rooms."

Benjamin poked his head out the car. "With all due respect, Agent Ashley-"

"Yaxley."

"Sorry. Agent Yaxley, I'd like to stay with Chief Bogo for the time being. At least until I know he's
-going to be okay."

He felt a cool hoof slide over his arm. He looked to Bogo, who was grimacing as he pressed his other
hoof over the dressing covering his injury. "Clawhauser, I'm fine. Go to your room where it's safe."

Benjamin shook his head. "You almost died because of me, sir. I'm not leaving your side until you're
better."

"Clawhauser, please don't disobey me."

Benjamin was struck with an idea. "Why don't you come up to my room with me after you've been
seen to? After all, we won't be going anywhere until the ZBI gives the all clear. When you've gotten
that cut looked at, I'll take you up and get you into bed. How does that sound?"

He felt a pang of dread when Bogo scowled, until he realized he wasn't glaring at Benjamin, but the
source of the sudden bout of snickering outside the car.

"Shut your mouth, Wilde! That was not even remotely what he meant!"

Immediately after that, the impatient Yaxley stepped between the fox and the car and ordered them
all into the mansion.

Benjamin was greeted with a constricting hug by a very relieved Alec, while Gazelle received a
similar reception from Christine and Edward. The rest of the family had retreated to their rooms, with
the exception of Elgen who had once again retreated into his study, in a deeper state of depression
since the revelation that his own disowned son was behind everything. Together they waited in the
dining room in complete silence, other than the ticking of the clock, awaiting news on the buffalo in
the adjoining lounge, while Yaxley debriefed Nick and Judy in the library nearby.

When the medic strode in, everyone straightened up in their seats, tense and chilled.

"Is he okay?" Benjamin asked quickly. As minor as Bogo's injury was, he still feared for him. As
selfish as it was, nothing else mattered to him now. Bogo had risked his life for him. Once again,
he'd protected Benjamin and suffered for it. No donut would ever make him happy again until he knew Bogo was going to be alright.

The medic, a ram, nodded. "I've done everything I can to clean the wound, so it should be fine until he can get to a hospital. For the time being I've packed the wound and put him in your guest room as requested. I recommend he stay in bed until the time comes to drive you all home."

"So he's going to be okay?"

"Absolutely."

"Can I go up and see him?"

"Maybe later, when the morphine wears off."

Benjamin felt another jolt of fear. "You gave him morphine?"

"A very small dosage for the pain. It's mostly fatigue that's knocked him out. It was a very deep cut. An inch or so deeper and he could have been eviscerated."

Benjamin didn't hear the shocked reactions of Alec and the others. He was too busy striding past the ram into the entrance hall and ascending the carpeted stairs. He had to see Bogo for himself. He had to see him alive and well with his own eyes.

"Vercus Casel?" Yaxley peered at the two smaller mammals across the rug. "He's supposed to have been dead for some years. Are you positive it was him?"

"Clawhauser identified him as soon as he took the mask off." Judy stood with her back straight, eyes narrowed and alert. Nick just slouched against the armrest beside her, apparently seeing no problem with letting his own tiredness be known. "We're positive."

"If we acquired a photograph of Casel before his disappearance, could you use it to make a confirmation?"

"Part of his face was quite badly scarred, and freshly so, but I believe I can."

Satisfied, Yaxley typed down the information on his PDA.

"Sir, if I may, who exactly is Vercus? I asked Chief Bogo, but at the time he wasn't in any condition to tell us much. All he told us was that Mr. Casel cast him out a long time ago."

"That's true. I had a file sent to me as soon as Chief Bogo informed me of the Hound's identity. I also have Bogo's statement right here." Yaxley typed on his PDA. "Here's everything deemed relevant to this case. Vercus Casel is the oldest son of Elgen and Selke Casel, and the Casel Corporation's former head of security. He disappeared five years ago after his father disowned him."

"That was roundabout when Chief Bogo was assaulted." Judy gasped as one by one, the facts of the case became clear as glass.

"Yes, Bogo has confirmed that it was Vercus Casel who assaulted him with a broken bottle. As you know, the incident cost Mr. Casel his reputation and his mayoral campaign, so he disowned his son, and tried to make the city forget he ever existed." The wrinkle in Yaxley's nose showed just what he thought of this.

"He went that far to save face?" Judy gaped at the callousness of it all.
"It would explain why we found no information on him in the library's newspapers." Nick said. "What a jerk."

"That's putting it lightly." Yaxley admitted. "On the other hoof, he may have done the right thing getting Vercus away from his family." He glanced at the door. "My men found a room in the cathedral, and you should count yourself lucky you never found it yourselves. There was a lot of blood… and items we suspect may have been used for torture."

Judy leaned back. "There's a torture chamber in the cathedral?!!"

"Not in that sense. All the items are modern age. Drills, kitchen knives, tucker telephone, you name it. And there's something else." The yak's face went grimmer than ever. "We found a watch with Mr. Ombidia's name etched into it."

"Good god." Nick moaned.

"That evil freak tortured him to death." Yaxley growled. "We didn't find the body, but there's so much blood there's no way Ombidia could still be alive. It's likely Vercus disposed of him once he got what he needed."

They all fell silent for a moment.

"We're not telling Gazelle. Right?" Judy asked.

"She has to know what happened, but I think we can leave out the details." Yaxley said. "When we apprehend Vercus, we'll need to get the whereabouts of the body from him to confirm his death."

"And then what?" Nick demanded. "Do you think he'll go to jail or the nuthouse?"

"He's part savage from Night Howler serum." Yaxley said. "He'll need to be given the antidote before we can determine just how psychotic he really is, but if his recent actions are any indication, he's managed to regain some level of self control."

"For one thing he remembers his combat training, which is real good news for us." Nick said. "You know, this would be a lot easier if he'd just gone full savage. At least then he'd be predictable."

"And there's his accomplice to worry about." Judy said. "We're still in the dark about who's been hacking the security system."

"You let us worry about that from now on." Yaxley finished typing on his PDA and put it away. "I'll leave it to Bogo to decide what you should do from here."

Judy leapt to her feet on the cushion. "Wait, you're taking us off this case?!!"

"This is bigger than a few missing mammals, Officer Hopps." Yaxley replied calmly. "Terrorism is our jurisdiction. The only reason you've been involved up until now is because we didn't know the Casels and the mall incident were connected."

"We've gathered most of the information on the case!"

"Against your superior's orders, I might add."

Judy's protests died in her throat.

"He's got us there, Carrots." Nick said. "Isn't there anything we can do to assist you?"

"Turning over all the information you've gathered would be a first. Other than that, it will need to be
discussed with the chief."

"Carrots, you put everything in that notebook. Hand it over."

Judy unwillingly handed over the little item. Yaxley smiled as he accepted it. "Don't get me wrong. I appreciate everything you've done up to now, truly. I promise that when this is over, you will get your due credit."

Judy smiled back, as did Nick. "You know, for a ZBI agent, you're not nearly as arrogant and condescending as I thought you'd be."

Yaxley chuckled. "I'll take that as a compliment. That will be all for now, and I'll let Bogo keep you updated on the investigation."

Their first stop once outside the library was the dining room. "Where's Ben?" Judy asked for the sake of it.

"Gone upstairs to see Chief Bogo." Alec said. "They said he'd gonna be okay. He just needs to go to hospital for stitches."

"He's gonna need staples for a hide that thick." Edward said. "But yeah, what my brother said."

"How're you doing, Belch?" Nick asked, with a hint of compassion that Judy found endearing.

Edward tapped the lip of a large glass of golden alcohol Judy hadn't noticed until now. He looked like all the fiery overconfidence he'd held up until now had been drenched and deadened. "That vile animal that's supposed to be my big brother is still alive and giving us hell. How do you think I'm doing?"

Gazelle squeezed his hoof with hers.

"We're going to stop him, Edward. I promise." Judy said.

Edward shook his head. "You don't know him like I do. That is a promise you cannot keep. But you can promise me this. Make sure he never gets to Ben. It won't matter if he doesn't get his revenge on us. If he gets his filthy hooves on the mammal he really wants, he still wins."

"I promise." Judy said instantly, her resolve like a fireball in her chest. She would do everything in her power to protect Ben, even if Edward hadn't just made her promise to do it.

Edward nodded and downed most of the contents of his glass.

"I've just got one question." Christine said. "Did you know about Vercus? Before you met him in the cathedral?" Alec looked at her. "I'm only asking because you never told me about him. No-one did, not even mammals outside your family. It's like no-one knew he even existed."

"They knew." Gazelle said resentfully. "They were too afraid of what Mr. Casel would do if they mentioned his disgraced son."

"I can't believe I never knew about him." Judy muttered.

"You lived in the burrows for most of your life, Carrots. It's not that improbable." Nick said.

Judy frowned. Her ears rose up. Something had just occurred to her, and she didn't like it. "Wait a minute. Nick, you've lived in the city for all of your life. There's no way you didn't know about Vercus."
Nick's suddenly tense posture did not help the unpleasant feeling growing in her gut. "Must have slipped my mind."

"Nick."

"Okay, Carrots, I did. Please don't taze me."

Judy stared up at him, the larger mammals forgotten. "Why didn't you tell me?"

Nick stepped back, conveniently out of punching range. "I didn't think it was relevant to the case. He's officially deceased, or he's supposed to be."

"You could have mentioned him while we were collecting information! How come Honey didn't bring him up?" Judy froze. "You told her not to bring him up, didn't you?" Nick's guilty silence told her all she needed to know. "Why, Nick? Relevant or not, you could have told me!"

"And risk you letting it slip and ticking off one of the most ruthless mammals in the city? It wouldn't be the first time!"

The moment Nick snapped back, he stared in shock and shame.

Judy stared back, nearly turning red with rage.

"Kitchen. Now."

Mansa Bogo slept, feeling itchy and hurt. His lower left side stung beneath the tight gauze and warm covers. He didn't dream. There was too much discomfort to dream. In place of dreams were memories. Memories of shiny cars and elk-deer. Gargoyles and metal claws. Blood and broken glass. Then there was new warmth, like a microwaved wheat bag cooled to lukewarm, caressing his arm with a tenderness he never knew he'd wanted. He faltered in his sleep, wishing to identify the comforting object. Then he heard a whispered apology not too far from his left ear, and he realized it was a feline's paw patting his still limb. Vercus hadn't gotten to him. Benjamin was safe. Bogo adjusted himself on the bed, the knowledge that he'd succeeded lulling back into deeper sleep.

In the kitchen Judy drained a small brandy glass of water to help herself cool down before turning to face Nick. "I'm not going to yell at you, Nick. I just want an explanation that won't make me want to shave your tail with that potato peeler over there."

"Okay, I think I can do that." Nick said. He didn't just scared now, just guilty, which made Judy feel better about how she was feeling.

"First thing I want to know. How much did you know about Vercus before the cathedral? Did you know he was the Casel kid who attacked Bogo?"

Nick settled himself on a short stool. "I didn't know for sure it was Vercus. His dad covered that up, if you'll recall. All I knew was that he was the golden child of the Casels. Everyone thought he was this stereotypical gorgeous, charming rich kid. No-one knew about what he was really like, or what he was doing to his own brothers and sister. There were tons of rumors as to why Mr. Casel disowned him out of the blue, but none of them came even close to him being an abuser. Most people thought, and rightly so, that he was the one who attacked Bogo. But they were too scared of Mr. Casel to say that out loud. He got really nasty after he lost the election, and made an example out of anyone who so much as mentioned Vercus's name."
"That's why Bogo forbade us from investigating." Judy said, her anger fading slightly at this revelation. "He was trying to protect us from Mr. Casel."

"Yeah. Good ol' Elgen's mellowed out a bit since then, but it figures that Bogo wouldn't take any chances."

Judy frowned at the fox. "And what about you?"

Nick sighed. "I was worried you'd let something slip, and please don't drop kick me for saying this, but like I said, it wouldn't have been the first time."

"Excuse me?"

"I was going to tell you at first, but then you brought up the background check to Alec. It reminded me of that time you ticked off Mr. Big and nearly got us iced, and I got worried. I decided we'd both be better off if you didn't know Mr. Casel's deep, dark secret. Bogo would feel the same. You are a very impulsive rabbit, and a bit of a motor mouth. The last thing he needed was a sharp-suited jerk biting his head off because two cops didn't know when to keep their noses out. I was going to tell you when we were back home, I swear!"

Judy stepped up to him. "I can't believe you didn't trust me! We're supposed to be partners!" Nick looked away, ashamed. "And you know what the worst thing about this is? You're probably right."

Nick looked back, stunned. "I'm what?"

Judy hopped up and sat on the stool beside him. In truth, she'd suspected all along that this was the reason by Nick had kept Vercus's existence from her. "Nick, I'm the dumb bunny who screwed up the most precarious press conference in a decade. Of course it'd have been safer if I didn't know about Vercus!"

"Hey, never mind 'of course.'" Nick scolded. "I just said I was worried. Inside this brave, dashing fox beats the heart of a cowardly lion."

"But there was still a chance."

"Maybe." Nick admitted. "But there were times when I nearly brought him up. I don't distrust that you'll look out for us, Carrots. I know you'll always have my back. I distrust that you'll look out for yourself." Judy pursed her lips. She'd had a similar discussion with her parents in the past. But yet again there was a ring of truth to Nick's words.

"Do you take me for a fool?"

Nick smirked. "I take you for a cop. Cops lack the caution of common street mammals. My apologies if I've given offense."

Judy shook her head at Nick's subdued snickering, even as she began to smile a little herself. "Why are we ripping off the first episode of *Game of Horns*?"

"It's not ripping. It's referencing. There's a difference." Nick covered his mouth until he finally stopped sniggering. "I'm sorry, that was totally inappropriate. It's just that when you said that, I knew where this was going. I couldn't help it."

Judy rolled her yes. "Yes, you could."

Nick ran his paw over his face, like he was trying to literally wipe off his smirk. "Still, I shouldn't
have kept it from you. We are a team."
Judy shifted herself along the stool and surprised the fox by leaning against his side. "Apology accepted."

"But I haven't said it yet."

"You were thinking it."

"Oh, so you can read minds now?"

Judy laughed. "No, but I can read you, Nick."
She felt Nick's body relax completely against hers. "So am I officially forgiven?"

"Officially."
Judy shifted against him. "You must be fed up by now. With giving me all these pep talks."

"I'm not a hustler anymore, Carrots. I've gotta make use of my sensational social skills somehow."

"One of these days it's going to be the other way round."

She felt Nick's arm wrap around her body, pulling her closer. She welcomed the embrace, and found herself hoping that the other arm would be coming around any minute. "What about today?"

"Today?"

"We almost died. A lot. I wouldn't mind a little verbal pick-me-up right about now." He looked at her hopefully.

"Nick, you don't have to give me the puppy dog eyes." Judy spoke sweetly as she patted his arm.

"Good, because there is so much more we need to talk about."

"Like what?" Judy asked, frowning at how nervous Nick looked.

"Like… like whatever the hell is going on out there." Nick frowned back at her as the sounds of shouting became more apparent by the second. Some of the voices sounded like Casels.

"Ugh, what now?" Judy spoke through gritted teeth as she dropped down from the stool. "Come on, Nick!"

Nick dropped down after her and followed her out the kitchen.

"Yeah, sure." He muttered. "Neither the time or the place anyway."
The Color Red

Gazelle and the Casels had all gathered in the bar for some much needed alcohol when out of nowhere Alec started to weep.

Having been comforting Gazelle over her kidnapping ordeal at the time, Christine apologised to the singer and rushed to Alec's side. "Alec, honey, it's okay. It's going to be alright."

"Not, it's not." Alec was hunched over his own drink, seemingly oblivious to his fiance's hooves on his shoulders. "It was supposed to be our big night! I was going to propose to you, you were going to say yes, I was going to ask Ben to be my best mammal, but then… he…” His utterance of the last word was guttural. "… has to come crawling back here and ruin our lives all over again! He was supposed to be dead! We were supposed to be safe! Ben was supposed to be safe! Why couldn't Vercus leave us alone?! Why can't he leave us just the hell alone?!"

Christine opened her mouth, but she just looked lost.

It was Gazelle who gave the answer. "Because he's a monster."

"Don't call him that." Selke hissed from a nearby chair.

Gazelle narrowed her eyes at her. "It's true, Mrs. Casel, and you know it."

Selke leapt up from the chair, nearly knocking over her wine glass in the process. "How dare you-"

"Shut up! Just shut up!" Alec snapped, stopping his mother dead. "This is all your fault!"

"What?"

"If you had figured out what Vercus was doing to us and stopped him before Ben did, none of this would have happened! So what're you going to do about it now?!

Selke stood there, speechless.

"There's your answer, Alec." Edward spoke coldly from the other side of the barroom. "Nothing. Just like her selfish useless husband that she's whined about every day for the last five years, all the while shutting herself up in this stupid mansion like that old bat Miss Havisham, ignoring her three other children like she's always done and hating Ben's guts for being right about her precious firstborn being an evil scumbag." He looked his stunned mother right in the eye. "So we'll ask you again. What're you gonna do about it now, you old drunk?"

"I… I…"

"Aren't you forgetting someone?"

Gazelle felt her blood boil the instant she heard Carlos's voice, and she was sure the feeling was mutual from the looks on everyone's faces when they looked to the doorway to the entrance hall and saw Carlos, looking slightly disheveled since his incarceration in the guardhouse. He had his hooves cuffed behind him, and it looked like the ZBI lion was escorting him past the room when he'd spoken up.

"What is he doing here?" Lake demanded.

"He's a member of the family, and with most of the security guards out of commission we're moving
"Hold up!" Lake stood up and held her hoof out to stop them both. "I want to know what he's talking about."

Carlos looked unbelievably smug. "Do any of you know a crazy badger called Honey?" No-one answered. "Well, I've had to spend most of this eventful evening listening to her babbling about the mysterious accomplice who helped Vercus get past the security systems."

"Accomplice?" Selke breathed. "But that could be anyone!"

"What's a badger doing in our guardhouse?" Alec wiped his eyes.

"Hell if I know, but whoever she is, she's managed to narrow down the list of suspects pretty well in the time we were cooped up together. Whoever helped Vercus had to know what kind of security this estate was using."

"Meaning?"

"Don't you get it, Lake? It's so obvious." Carlos said dryly. "The only mammals who know what kind of security system is used are all right here."

"What're you saying, you little parasite?" Edward asked. "That there's a traitor in our midst?"

Carlos smirked. "Yes."

"Quiet." Gazelle blinked when Agent Yaxley stepped into view and through the doorway past his subordinate and Carlos. How long had he been standing there? "I hate to say this, but Mr. Casel has a point. All of you stay here while I fetch your father. It's time we got to the bottom of this." He looked to the officer. "Sit him down here, and make sure no-one goes near him."

"Yes sir." The lion marched Carlos to the farthest empty seat and pushed him down.

It didn't take long for Yaxley to return with Elgen Casel, who looked more morose than ever as he too sat down, even as a glint of fury flashed across his eyes. "What the hell this about a collaborator, agent?"

"Please try to stay calm, Mr. Casel." Yaxley said. "But we have reason to believe that someone supplied Vercus with the information he needed to infiltrate this estate and commit these attacks."

Elgen looked like a fuse had been lit inside him. "And you believe it was a member of my family?"

"I said stay calm, Mr. Casel. I need to know which of these mammals know about your security system."

"Everyone in my family knows. Even Carlos." Elgen said. "The only member of my security force who knows is the head. None of the servants know.""Have you told any of the guests?"

"Only Mr. Ombidia. I wanted to assure him as much as possible that Gazelle would be safe here."

"And a fat lot of good that was, wasn't it? Considering that Ombidia's dead."

"What?!" Gazelle gasped at Carlos. Her stomach dropped. "No, you're lying!"

"I'm sorry, Miss Gazelle." Yaxley said gently.
Gazelle turned away, hooves clasped to her mouth. Tears sprung in her eyes. She'd never considered Ombidia a friend, but he'd been the best manager she'd ever had. "Was it Vercus?"

"It appears very likely." Yaxley said carefully.

A sob escaped Gazelle. A shade passed over her, and somehow she knew it was Edward. She whirled round and flung her arms around his large form. Edward held her as she wept, whispering in her ear that Vercus would pay for everything he'd done.

"So everyone in this room knows about the security system except for Miss Gazelle and Miss Antlaire?" Yaxley asked.

Alec nodded. "I never told Christine, I swear."

Yaxley nodded, seemingly believing him. "I'll have your head of security questioned as soon as possible. Do Officer Hopps, Wilde, and Clawhauser know about the system?"

"No. None of us told them a thing." Alec said.

"Enough of this!" Christine shouted, sending her chair crashing to the floor as she leapt up. "It's my fiancé's family that's being targeted! Stop treating them like suspects!"

Carlos snorted. "Oh, like you're hardly above suspicion."

Christine turned her glare to him. "What?"

"I know all about it!" He shouted as the ZBI lion held him down on his seat. "I know Veltro approached you about joining them!"

Everyone stared at the shocked deer, Gazelle included.

"And weren't you in the Greener Grass Mall right before it was attacked?" Carlos added snidely.

"Chris, is this true?" Gazelle asked.

"Yes." Christine spoke as she glared daggers at Carlos. "But I was just waiting for Alec. Ben can confirm this. I even met him and Officer Hopps's family just before I left."

"And what did you say to Veltro?" Alec asked.

"I turned them down! I know whose side I'm on, and it's yours!" She proceeded to kiss Alec full on the mouth.

"Give me a break." Carlos muttered. Suddenly a splash of red splattered across his head.

"And you can just shut that hole in your face!" Selke slammed her empty glass on the counter. "You've always hated that cheetah, ever since he ruined your chances of marrying a mayor's daughter!"

"He should have kept his fat nose out!" Carlos growled as he blinked wine from his eyes. "And besides, you're the one, 'mother,' who's drinking herself into an early grave over losing Vercus! You had plenty of motive to hurt that lardass, too!"

"Alright, settle down!" The lion snapped.

Out the corner of her eye, Gazelle saw Nick and Judy appear in the doorway, drawn by the sudden
shouting.

"And your other kids are no exception, either!" Carlos continued undeterred. "Take Belch for example! Vercus tormented him since they were kids while you useless parents treated him as the favorite! And then when you finally realized the truth and disowned his sorry ass, you passed your attention over to that pathetic youngest kid of yours!" He turned to Edward. "I bet you were practically frothing at the mouth when your dad made Lake the heir to his company instead of you!"

"I never wanted that damn job in the first place!" Edward roared back.

"And not only that…" Carlos turned his soaking wet head to Alec. "You got the worst of it, didn't you? You must have hated how your own parents were so oblivious to what he was doing to you, you would have done anything to make them pay for it…"

"Shut up!" Lake and Christine grabbed Alec in the nick of them when he lunged at Carlos. "You don't know jack about how I feel!"

"And last but certainly not least…" Carlos looked to Lake as she held Alec back. "You were the only one who knew that your own father had been told about the abuse but did nothing to stop it! Everything you've done since then you've done to make him pay!"

"And you think I'd put innocent mammals in danger to do it?!" Lake yelled.

"THAT'S ENOUGH!" Judy shouted louder than Gazelle had ever expected from such a small mammal. Everyone fell silent and gawked at her, including Nick. "As soon as the road is deemed safe enough, you will all be taken back to Zootopia and put under protection! After that, it will only be a matter of time until Vercus is captured, and then the identity of his accomplice will be revealed! Until then, all of you will get a fricking grip!"

Nick swallowed. "You heard her. With the utmost respect, Agent Yaxley, I think bringing Carlos in here was a bad idea."

"I think so, too." Yaxley admitted. "Clawsoto, take him back to his guest room and make sure he stays there."

The lion, Clawsoto, dragged Carlos out.

Elgen stood up. "Unless you have any further questions, I'm going back to my study."

"Just one," Yaxley said. "Do any of you know a Yokai Nishimura?"

"No, I haven't." Elgen replied before leaving the room himself. Everyone else shook their heads.

"Alright, if anyone needs me, I'll be in the guardhouse questioning your head of security." Yaxley said. He began to pass the two officers.

"Hang on, Yax." Nick said. "What do you think of this possibility?"

"Go on." Yaxley said.

"Since we're talking about motives here… do you think it could have been Ombidia himself who was the accomplice?"

Gazelle gaped at the fox. "What?!"

"Gazelle, you remember that rumor about you quitting singing, right? Did your manager believe it?"
"For a time, yes." Dread filled her already heavy heart.

"Then as your manager, Ombidia probably would have done anything not to lose you. So he approached Veltro, made them take him to their leader, and offered Vercus a deal." He deepened his voice. "I'll pay you whatever you want if you scare Gazelle into changing her mind."

"You can't think…" Gazelle hesitated.

"Since Ben's your biggest fan, Vercus figured targeting you would be the best way to draw him out. So he accepted Ombidia's offer, sent you threatening letters, and had Ombidia tell him the information he needed to hack the security system. When Ombidia was no longer useful, Vercus lured him out into the forest and killed him, then later used you as bait to lure Clawhauser to the cathedral."

"I'm not listening to this!" Gazelle stormed out the other door, paying no attention to the others when they called out to her.

This was too much. It was all too much for her. She'd been stalked, kidnapped, and nearly thrown off a cathedral to her death. Her manager couldn't have been that monster's accomplice. He couldn't have.

When Chief Bogo awoke, he made the mistake of touching the raw spot on his side. He hissed and pulled his hoof away. He carefully ran his fingers over the tight band of fabric holding in place what he would eventually realize was gauze. After that he lay there in the bed, staring at the ceiling, trying to remember what had happened after his blackout, and why his body felt so heavy. He clearly remembered being in a car by Benjamin's side being taken back to the mansion, but everything else was like a light fog. He'd come round on the cold cathedral floor with Benjamin and a ZBI medic kneeling on both sides of him. It could have been Yaxley who had helped him back down the stairs and into the car. As Bogo thought, he became sure that he'd protested being brought into one of the mansion's guest rooms for immediate treatment when he'd only been slashed, not stabbed. He had to get back out there, he'd said. He had to find Vercus before he could come after Benjamin again. Then he'd ended up in bed, been given a shot of some sort, then drifted off after they'd finished patching him up.

The room was different from before. The ceiling light had been switched off, and the gentler tableside lamp with the red shade was switched on in its place. Bogo remembered being irritated by the bright ceiling bulb glaring down at him and wondered if this was someone's way of helping him sleep better. There were two full cups of tea on the table beside the lamp, but neither of them looked hot.

Now that Bogo was awake, he had to find Benjamin. He had to make sure they were giving him sufficient protection. He was pushing down the covers when the door opened and Benjamin entered with a third cup, his spotted golden fur damp and spiky. He froze in the doorway when he spotted Bogo.

"Chief!" He breathed. A goofy grin spread across his face as he rushed over as fast as he could with the cup in his paws. "Oh, thank goodness!"

Bogo looked him over. The dirt and grime the cheetah had accumulated during his stint through the tunnel and that hellish cathedral had been washed away, so the buffalo could see that he didn't have a scratch on him. "Thank god."

"Sir?"
Bogo turned his gaze up to Benjamin's eyes. He had to make sure. "Did he hurt you?"

"Who?"

"Vercus." Bogo growled.

Benjamin shook his head furiously. "No. You didn't give him the chance."

"Gazelle?"

"She's pretty shaken up, but she's okay too. Here, I got you tea."

"Don't you mean teas?" Bogo gestured to the ice cold drinks beside him.

Benjamin chuckled sheepishly. "I wasn't sure when you'd wake up."

"Well, thanks anyway." Bogo shifted himself into a sitting position as best as he could without aggravating his injury and accepted the cup. He paused at the first sip. "Clawhauser?"

"Yes, sir?"

"How much cream did you put in this?"

"Just a lot."

"How did you know?"

"I've seen you make your tea before. Lots of cream but only one dose of sugar. I'll just get rid of the others."

"Wait." An inexplicable surge of panic made Bogo reach out. He stopped himself just before he grabbed the cheetah's wrist. Benjamin stopped in the middle of picking up one of the cold cups and stared at him. "I don't want you going anywhere on your own."

"Sir, the mansion is secure. Now that the ZBI are here and we know the security cameras were being hacked, Vercus has zero chance of getting back into the estate."

Bogo was the Chief of Police. Benjamin's superior. If it were anyone else, he would have either relented or responded with an order.

Instead he said, "Please."

Benjamin's eyes blinked went a little wider, almost completely baring the irises of his eyes. They looked like glossy reddish caramel in the glow of the lamp. He slowly set the cup back down. "I'll clean them up in the morning."

He sat down in a chair beside the bed and twiddled his thumbs. By now his smile had faded. Bogo continued to drink his tea, but the silky taste could not wash down the discomfort aching in his chest, like a pulsing force field separating him from the maddeningly sweet feline by his side. It was a feeling he had grown accustomed to since the night he received his scars, but since their first concert together it had weakened little by little. The return of Vercus Casel had brought it back full force.

"I'm sorry." Benjamin's voice was as soft as his fur and eyes.

Bogo lowered his cup. "This is not your fault."
"But it is. Sort of. This all started because I tried to help Alec, and I got you involved when going to his parents didn't work. I did it so I wouldn't make things worse, but I did. And now you're hurt. Again." He wiped his eyes.

"Clawhauser, no.‖ Bogo growled. "This was my doing. You only wanted to help a friend in need. I just got involved so I could get under Vercus's skin. I allowed this to escalate. If anything, you should be blaming me."

He was blaming himself right now. Stupid, stubborn Chief Bogo who gave a rabbit two days to solve the smallest case file in Precinct One's history because keeping her on Parking Duty for the rest of her life wouldn't cut it. Essentially called her entire species cowards after her run in with a savage jaguar then seconds later blew off Wilde's testimony on account of his species. He couldn't even go into a five star restaurant without letting his spite get the better of him.

The curious and earnest look Benjamin gave him made his stomach do a flip-flop. "Sir, if that's true, then why did you try so hard to protect me?"

Bogo blinked and stared down at his creamy tea. The last time Benjamin had said something that had left him at a loss for words was nearly two years ago, in the early hours of the morning after returning from Hopps's perceived false alarm in the Rainforest District. He'd found the feline in the break room hyperventilating into an empty donut bag, guilt ridden over his delay in answering Hopps's call. Bogo's response that the call had been bogus had been met with disbelief; Benjamin hadn't believed that Hopps would put her job at risk any more than it already was with an obvious false alarm. Then he'd said that he'd spoken with one of the officers who had accompanied Bogo to the Rainforest District. Then he'd asked what Bogo had meant by 'two days to find the otter.'

Bogo would have been ashamed to admit that he'd tried to excuse what he'd done, pinning the blame on Hopps for not being cut out for police work. But Benjamin had seen right through him, just as he'd seen through Vercus Casel. He'd said something that was impossible to argue against, and not only because of how respectfully and sympathetically he'd said it. He'd never raised his voice or shown anger, not even when he'd figured out the truth.

"I understand that Mayor Lionheart has been putting a lot on your shoulders with the missing mammals and the inclusion initiative, and I understand that Officer Hopps isn't entirely innocent in all of this. I really do. But I'm no longer sure you're doing this for the right reasons."

Needless to say, Bogo hadn't been able to do anything but send Clawhauser back to the front desk and shut himself in his office for some much-needed alone time with his Gazelle app.

"You're right. That's not entirely true.‖ Bogo sipped some more tea to steady his nerves. "I didn't intend to tick Vercus off until after he pulled that stunt with the Benadryl and got you hurt. The truth is, I wanted to keep him from hurting you. When I found out you were friends with Alec, I got worried. I knew what kind of mammal his brother was, and I was worried that you would cross paths."

"You knew he was a monster?"

"I knew he was a nasty piece of work, but back then, I had no idea how far he would go. Then I saw you with him in that restaurant, and I got very worried. He wouldn't have been seen dead with a lower class mammal like you unless he was playing some kind of sick game. I tried to put an end to it then and there, but Vercus didn't appreciate the embarrassment. He tried to get his revenge, but ended up getting you injured instead of me. Then I got angry." Bogo put down the cup so he wouldn't crush it in his hooves. "Because I knew that I was partly responsible."
Benjamin gasped. "Is that why you had his car towed?"

Bogo smirked at the memory of Vercus's tantrum. "He'd raised a small fortune in unpaid tickets, so I was well within my rights to do that. I couldn't prove what he'd done, so I humiliated him instead. I don't regret it, and I never will. That barbell could have killed you."

Benjamin's reddish brown eyes went wider. "You mean you did that for me?"

"Yes."

Benjamin opened his mouth to speak and then closed it again. Bogo suddenly felt hot discomfort and looked away from the feline's stunned expression. He reached for his pants pocket and felt something small and hard. He'd had it made years ago, but his gut had told him to bring it with him to the mansion tonight. He pulled it from the pocket but kept it hidden in his fist under the covers.

"Even after all that, I still underestimated him." The buffalo went on. "I underestimated his depravity, and his stupidity. I never suspected he'd waltz right into the precinct's parking lot to confront you."

"I think he was desperate, sir." Benjamin's response was barely above a whisper. He was still stunned from Bogo's confession.

"I never, ever, imagined how far he would go. I never even suspected he was behind these recent attacks until Selke told us."

Benjamin patted Bogo's arm. "We all thought he was dead. You can't blame yourself for that."

Bogo had been trying to tell himself that for the last few hours. It heartened him that Benjamin felt the same. The buffalo's chest wasn't aching so much now. "I had something made for you a few years ago, after Vercus fled the city. I was going to give it to you before, but I thought I was being ridiculous. Now I see I was wrong."

As he pulled out his fist, he slid his other arm upwards under Benjamin's paw until it was lying in his hoof. How convenient it was that despite their significant difference in height, their hoof and paw were almost the same size. Benjamin tilted his head at the Gazelle head key ring Bogo placed in his palm. "It has a state of the art tracking device inside. With it I can find you anywhere in Zootopia, just in case Vercus came back to settle old scores. Keep it with you at all times. It'll help us to protect you until that damned Hound is in a cage where he belongs."

Benjamin beamed at Bogo and hooked it onto one of the belt loops of his pants. "Thanks, Chief."

It was as if by holding Benjamin's paw, reaching out with his gift, and having that gift accepted the force field holding Bogo back had been vaporized. There was more to say, and he was no longer afraid to say it.

"I have another confession to make. After he fled the city, I was afraid Vercus would come back one day. So I abused my power a little and had you reassigned to the front desk, where there would always be officers to watch out for you. I guess you could have called it paranoia back then, but I had to protect you from Vercus's parents as well. I wasn't going to take any chances after what happened in the parking lot. But then we heard that Vercus was dead, and you didn't need to stay at the front desk anymore. But I let you stay."

"Why?"

Bogo paused. "Because it made you happy."
It was the cheesiest thing Bogo had ever said, short of outright saying 'I love you.' But it was all Benjamin needed to hear.

Gazelle had reached the top of the stairs when Edward caught up to her. "Gazelle, wait. I'm sorry about what Wilde said. I'm sure he wasn't actually accusing your manager of helping a terrorist."

"It's okay." Gazelle brushed her thick lock of hair from her eyes. "He's a police officer. It's their job to consider all possibilities."

"For what it's worth, I don't think Ombidia betrayed us. He didn't seem like the kind of mammal who'd be stupid enough to trust a bunch of extremists, even if he was worried about losing you."

"Thank you, Edward. I appreciate that." Gazelle and Edward slowly ambled down the hallway, taking notice of an open door. If Chief Bogo and Benjamin were awake, she'd step in for a moment and thank them both for saving her. She would make them VIMs for life after this. "I just can't believe he's gone. I'd only known him for three years, but he was the best manager I'd ever had. I can't even think how I'm going to replace him."

Edward walked slightly ahead and turned slightly sideways as he walked with her. "I've got some connections. I can help you find someone when you're ready."

Gazelle sniffed. "When is this going to end?"

"When Veltro and their godforsaken Hound are put down. That's when."

Gazelle nodded. "At least with the ZBI protecting us, this weekend can't possibly get any worse."

Edward scowled as they neared the open door. "Famous last words, Gazelle. You do realize that every time someone says things can't get any worse they usually-"

He stopped dead, and so did Gazelle. They stood two feet from the doorway and stared into the warmly lit room at the bedridden buffalo and the caring cheetah. Bogo was sitting up and Benjamin was leaning forward toward him over the edge of the bed. The bedside lamp was aglow in the background, red and gold like a candle behind a thin curtain. They were not particularly vigorous in what they were doing. They were still and quiet, yet like the lovely lamp illuminating their sacred act they were glowing in their own way. Eventually they parted, but their faces lingered so close together Gazelle thought for a moment they were stopping to catch their breath. Their eyes locked, the red light of the lamp shimmering in their reflection.

"Never mind." Edward whispered.

Her heart soaring in her chest, Gazelle silently pushed him past the open door and continued on down the hallway.
Judy had expected that they would all go their separate paths the next day, and it was for the best that
they did, but even so she felt a little sad. She’d spent the past two days getting to know Gazelle and
the Casel family, playing Alec's games, solving the murder mystery and witnessing their wonderful
engagement. She wished she could have spent more time with them, and met them under better
circumstances.

Elgen and Selke Casel were staying in the mansion, under ZBI protection. Their children, not
wanting to be anywhere near their parents after all the shocking revelations, were being escorted
home where they would also be placed under guard. As a former member of Veltro and a founder of
Neo Veltro, Lake was taken into ZBI custody to undergo questioning. Judy doubted anything would
come of it. Now that it was clear that she was no longer Veltro's target, Gazelle also returned home
under ZBI protection, but was forbidden to tell anyone of Ombidia's death until the case was closed.
Better safe than sorry, Yaxley had explained.

Benjamin was accompanying Bogo to the hospital to get the buffalo's wound cleaned and stapled.
Yaxley had been reluctant not to take Benjamin into ZBI protection right away, but Benjamin had
been adamant. Eventually the yak had agreed, but a van would be waiting outside the hospital to
collect him as soon as Bogo was discharged.

As for Judy and Nick, there was someone they needed to see. So far as they knew, Billy G. Gruff
was the only mammal still alive who knew the true identity of Yokai Nishimura, but the ZBI was
having trouble getting the truth from him. But there was still someone else who could help them.

The big question, however, was whether or not she would.

In the empty visiting room of Zootopia Penitentiary, the two officers watched and waited for the
guards to show up with the prisoner they needed to see. While they waited on one side of the square
table, Judy's phone rang.

"Yes, Chief?"

"Have you talked to her, yet?"

"Not yet, sir."

"You might be there a while, so I'm keeping you up to date. We're almost at the hospital, and Lake's
soon to be ex-husband is coming with us."

"Why, what happened?"

"That idiot took a tumble while he was calling his lawyer, and now he's going in with a possible
sprained wrist. He'll be put in ZPD custody as soon as he'd treated."

"He'd better not try suing for police brutality."

"It happened in front of a dash cam. We've got nothing to worry about. We should be back at
Precinct One by the time you're done, so go straight to my office."

"We will, sir." The call ended there.

Chief Bogo had called the prison in advance to let them know that this visit was of the utmost
importance, so Judy and Nick didn't need to wait for much longer. The far door opened. In walked a lion and a polar bear guard, and in between them, the orange-clad, bespectacled Dawn Bellwether.

"Come here to gloat, did you?" She sneered as soon as she entered the room. "Took you long enough."

Judy could see bandages peeking out from beneath her collar. "I think being gored by a savage prey mammal was a fair enough punishment, don't you think so, Nick?"

Nick smirked. "Absolutely."
"But we're not here to gloat." Judy gestured for Bellwether to sit. When she didn't budge, the lion guard persuaded her with a nudge and a hard stare. The guards cuffed her to the table and walked out. "We're here to discuss Veltro."

Bellwether's sneer faltered. Judy decided to begin by telling her the truth. If Bellwether understood the reality of her situation, that increased the chances of her cooperating. "That organization that's been singing my praises?" Bellwether smiled for the first time. "What about them?"

"Their founder is Vercus Casel. You know him?"

"Yes." Bellwether answered immediately, to Judy's surprise. "He helped me out a lot back when I was darting all those preds."

"What happened at the mall happened because he tried to have you killed."

Bellwether's eye widened behind her massive glasses. "He did what?"

"He tried to have a newly developed Night Howler weapon fired at you while you were going up the courthouse steps, but it didn't go quite to plan." Nick said.

"Let me guess." Bellwether's voice and face turned bitter. "A loose end to be tied up."

Nick shook his head and folded his arms. "More like a disobedient minion to be punished. Do you remember if Vercus gave you any conditions? Anything he told you not to do?"

Bellwether frowned. "Just that I wasn't allowed to dart that corpulent cheetah, Clawhauser."

Nick raised his eyebrows. "Did he actually say 'dart'?"

"No, he-" Bellwether groaned and pinched the bridge of her nose. "Don't tell me he ruined my appeal just for that!"

"Says the cotton candy criminal who persecuted hundreds of predators because her boss was a jerk."

Bellwether lowered her hoof to glare at him. "You got lucky with those blueberries."

"Never mind the blueberries." Judy would have stepped between them if it weren't for the table. "The plan went wrong because some of the high ranking members betrayed him. He survived and killed one of the conspirators as he was preparing the attack. Long story short, the mall got Night Howlered instead."

"If you already know who's responsible, then why are you talking to me?"

"Because Vercus wasn't the one who masterminded the whole thing. Does the name Yokai Nishimura mean anything to you?"
Bellwether's ears perked. "Yeah, but it's a fake name. I had a friend look into it, but I got arrested before he could get me the results."

"Billy G. Gruff?"

"How did you-"

"He joined the conspiracy to try and stop the attempt on your life. Vercus tracked him down afterward and nearly killed him." Judy was surprised again at how shocked Bellwether looked, but pressed on. "He's in the hospital right now, and he's refusing to tell the ZBI anything."

"Hence why we're here." Nick said.

Bellwether stared at the table. "I don't know who Yokai really is. I just told you I got arrested before he could tell me."

"Sweet cheese and crackers." Judy muttered. This was looking more and more like a waste of time. "Vercus is still out there, you know." Nick leaned forward. "And he's probably still got some of those Nightfall weapons handy. Chances are he's gonna try again. Maybe fire a grenade right in the middle of the courtyard while you're doing your push ups." Bellwether was silent as the grave. "It would be wise of you to tell us anything that could help us catch this guy. Carrots here quit the same day Clawhauser got demoted, and we all know what came after, so as far as Vercus is concerned it's your fault the first conspiracy failed. He's not gonna stop until he's made you pay for disobeying him."

Bellwether cursed under her breath. She very slowly pulled off her glasses and set them down on the table. "How many conspirators did he get?"

"Two. Gruff and Dupont." Judy said. "Why?"

"Vercus is very big on revenge, so I won't be the only one he's after. If he's not after me right now, he'll be after one of the others."

Benji, Judy thought.

"Are you sure he's only attacked those two?"

"Yes…"

"Then chances are he still has at least one more to kill." Bellwether said. "I don't know if she was actually involved, but she's also a high ranking Veltro member with a reason to kill Vercus. Since I'm currently out of his reach, he'll probably be after her right now."

"Who?"

"A psychiatrist called Dr. Arianna Fauna. A horse. She's been scheming to usurp Vercus for years."

"Fauna?" Judy asked. "As in a descendant of Frederick Fauna? One of the founders of Zootopia?"

"Uh huh." Bellwether said. "Before Mayor Hawthorn took over, the city had always been under the Casels' control, even the other founding families. The Faunas have resented them for generations."

"And with Gruff currently in the ICU, Arianna is in prime position to assume leadership of Veltro and plot her own takeover of the city." Nick said. "But if she's half as bright as she thinks she is, she'll know that this merely means that she is next on the hit list. Finding her might not be easy."
"Then we'd better start looking." Judy dropped down from the chair. "Guards, we're done here." The guards walked back in and escorted Bellwether from the table. They'd just reached the door when Judy called out. "Bellwether, I have one more question. Would you have told us any of this if you hadn't lost your last chance at getting out of prison?"

Bellwether smiled ruefully and slipped her glasses back on. "Never."

The guards escorted her through out. Judy spun to Nick. "If Dr. Fauna and Veltro know that Vercus is carrying weapons of mass destruction, it could drive them into a panic. We've gotta find her before they do anything drastic."

Benjamin couldn't help it. The moment the surgical stapler was brought to Bogo's skin, he gagged and looked away. Bogo chuckled at his reaction and held up a hoof to keep the doctor at bay until he was sure he wasn't going to chuckle again. Thanks to the anesthetic and his own pain tolerance, Bogo didn't make a sound as the gash Vercus had inflicted with his sickle was sealed shut. Benjamin was relieved that he wasn't being put through too much pain.

Before Benjamin knew it the procedure was completed. Bogo pulled his shirt over his fresh dressings and tapped Benjamin's shoulder to let him know it was safe to look. Benjamin looked the buffalo up and down. He looked much better than he did last night. He'd slept soundly after their heart to heart, and he'd had a change of clothes before the ZBI brought him to the hospital. He was standing strong without even a wince. With his shirt covering his injury, he looked like he'd never crossed paths with that monster.

"All done, Ben." He said.

"How do you feel?" Benjamin asked the important question before sipping the last of his soda.

"Hurts when I move, but I'm fine. I just need the discharge papers and then we can go. Since I'm at my desk most of the time, I don't even have to take medical leave."

"That's great, sir!"

Bogo smirked and sat down beside the feline as the doctor left to get the discharge papers. "We're not in the precinct right now. Call me Mansa."

"Okay…" Benjamin felt his face grow warm. "Mansa."

Bogo looked to the door to make sure it was shut and the doctor was gone. "You remember the plan, right? The ZBI will take us straight to the precinct, and you'll stay there until a safe house can be arranged."

"Where I'll be confined until Vercus is caught." Benjamin finished.

"I prefer the term 'safe.'" Bogo said. "But yes. It'll only be for a little while. The next time Vercus shows up, we won't let him get away."

"I thought this was the ZBI's jurisdiction now?"

"It is, but with the number of men they lost at the cathedral, they're relying on us and our resources for the moment. We've already got an APB out on Vercus and every member of Veltro. It's only a matter of time until we draw out all the members who were involved with the Nightfall plot."

"What about that Yokai guy?"
"We'll let the ZBI take care of that one. Your safety is our top priority." The look of intense resolve on his chiseled features had Benjamin's heart doing somersaults. "Do you still have your key ring?"

Benjamin held up the gazelle key ring still hooked on his belt loop. "Right here, sir. Mansa."

Bogo chuckled. "You're learning. Believe me, I don't like putting you on a leash, but if you keep that on until we catch Vercus, it'll give us both peace of mind."

Benjamin paused. "Speaking of mind, how do you feel about…" He pointed at Bogo and himself. "This?"

Bogo looked down at the finger aimed at his chest. "What do you mean?"

"I'm still not sure if what we did last night was a moment of madness."

Bogo snorted. "I'd imagine if it was a moment of madness, it would have involved a lot more madness."

"Good point." Benjamin fiddled with his ear. "So do you have any idea where we go from here?"

"I can't think of a thing." Bogo admitted.

Benjamin steeled himself to ask the million-dollar question. "When we kissed last night… how did it make you feel?"

"It made me wonder why I hadn't done it sooner."

Benjamin was sure he was blushing furiously right now. "How long have you… have you wanted to?"

"I can honestly say it wasn't from the first moment we'd met. You were just a new recruit for me to order about. But then I found out you had gotten involved with the Casels, and that was the moment you became different to me. I told you before I got involved to protect you from Vercus."

"And to get under his skin. Your words, not mine."

"Yeah, yeah. The point is, I think it started when I saw you trying so hard to help Alec. I expect all my officers to serve and protect, but you went above and beyond. Even when Vercus began outright threatening you, you never gave up." Bogo's expression turned prideful. "Inside that big spotted ball of fluff beats the heart of a true cop. That's the part of you I fell for."

Benjamin now felt like he was on fire. "Mansa-"

"Chiiiiiiieeeeeef!"

Bogo started snorting again, this time in his efforts to suppress his laughter. "I'm sorry, I just couldn't resist!" Even as he laughed, he gritted his teeth and held his side. "Ugh, laughing hurts so much! Remind me to tell the others to keep Wilde as far away from me as possible!"

"Don't worry, sir. I'll handcuff him to his desk if that's what it'll take. Not much I can do once I'm in the safe house, though."

Bogo lowered his hoof from his side. "Gazelle offered to let you stay at her place, since she'll under ZBI protection regardless."
Benjamin's breath hitched in his throat. "Whud?"

Bogo chuckled at whatever look Benjamin had on his face. "You saved her life. Twice. She insists it's the least she can do."

Benjamin started fanning his face. He was feeling faint. He jumped to his feet and started pacing about the room. "Oh gosh. Oh gosh. Oh sweet sprinkly sugary gosh."

Bogo snorted with laughter. "I just got my guts stapled, stop making me laugh!"

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry!" Benjamin was hyperventilating as he strode to the door. "I'll just step outside for a bit!"

"Clawsoto is in the waiting room outside with Elkervera. Do not leave his sight."

"Yes, sir. Mansa. Sorry."

"Don't worry about it, Ben. I'll just wait here 'til I get those papers."

"Okay." Benjamin paused at the door. "Mansa, are you doing anything between Christmas and New Year's?"

"I've got no plans."

"If this is over before Christmas, maybe after you've spent Christmas with your family we could hang out. Just the two of us. Even if it's just for one day."

Bogo smiled and relaxed on the bed. "Gusteau's is doing a Christmas special that'll be on the menu until New Year's Eve. Maybe I could pull some strings. Make a reservation."

"That would be awesome."

The waiting room wasn't as busy as it could have been, so Benjamin very quickly spotted Clawsoto and Carlos sitting on one of the rows of chairs. "Hey, Mr. Clawsoto!"

Carlos shot the cheetah a glare that he ignored as he threw his empty soda bottle in the trash and approached. "Mr. Casel here was just discharged. Turned out his wrist is just fine. How is Chief Bogo?"

"He's okay, just waiting to be discharged himself. So we're going straight to the station when we leave?"

"That's still the plan, yes. We just have to wait for your superior."

Carlos cleared his throat, looking agitated. "D'you think you could let me use the bathroom?"

Clawsoto grimaced. "You really need to go?"

"Really, really."

"Fine. Clawhauser, you should come with us so you're not out of my sight."

"Is that a good idea?" Benjamin asked. "Chief Bogo said we shouldn't leave the waiting room."

"The hospital security has Vercus's description and they're watching all the exits. He's not getting anywhere near this place. We'll be safe."
He pulled Carlos to his feet, since the elk was cuffed. "Hold up, could I make a quick phone call?"
Carlos asked. "I need to let my lawyer know to wait for me at the station."

Clawsoto rolled his eyes, making Benjamin wonder exactly how many demands Carlos had made
since being put under the lion's watch. "Fine. Make sure it is quick." He escorted Carlos to one of the
phones and removed one of the cuffs. Carlos used his free arm to pick up the phone. The call was
quick, much to Clawsoto's relief, and the lion put the cuff back on again. "The nearest bathroom is
down that hallway. Don't do anything stupid."

They went down the long quiet hallway, turned a corner and found the door to the male's bathroom
near the end, close to an external emergency exit. Benjamin glanced back down the way they came,
hoping that Bogo wouldn't come out while they were gone, see them absent, and worry. Carlos,
meanwhile was glancing at the nearby emergency exit. "Why don't you go first? I can't exactly open
the door with my arms behind my back." With a firm paw on Carlos's shoulder, Clawsoto muttered
under his breath and push the door open.

When the lion suddenly collapsed, Benjamin thought for a split second that Carlos had somehow
attacked him. Then he saw the dart protruding from his chest.

"What the-"

From the bathroom burst two mammals, one an ox, one a hippo. Carlos stepped aside, giving
Benjamin a brief glimpse of the inside, and the motionless form of a hospital security guard.
Benjamin tried to run, but he was too late, the ox too fast. The ox grabbed him from behind and
clamped a hoof over his mouth. The cheetah struggled hopelessly as the hippo shoved Carlos to the
floor and pushed open the exit door. He saw the ox lift a syringe he suspected was full of tranquilizer
and lashed out, knocking the object out of his hoof just in time.

In the small parking lot outside was a black van with the rear doors open and the engine running.
Benjamin kept struggling as the ox dragged him through the doorway and the hippo ran ahead to
jump into the vehicle and grab another syringe from an open plastic box.

Halfway to the van, Benjamin managed to sink his teeth into the ox's wrist and break free. He ran for
the open emergency exit. Framed in the doorway was Carlos, his cuffed hooves now in front of him.

Carlos sneered, triumphant. "This is what you get for screwing me over, lard butt." And shut the
door before Benjamin could reach it.

"Carlos, gosh darn you!" He slapped his paws uselessly against the door before the ox retrieved him,
dragging him inside the van as the hippo reached past them to slam the doors shut.

Then Benjamin felt a painful sting as the spare needle entered his arm.
Bogo frowned when he entered the waiting room and saw none of the three mammals he'd expected to see. He didn't immediately assume the worst. There was a bathroom nearby. He should check there before calling it in.

He was almost to the hallway when he heard hurried footsteps coming from behind.

"It's this way!"
"Everyone please stay in your seats!"

"Sir, return to your sea-"

The first of three security guards stopped dead when Bogo turned around and they saw his badge and the gold stars on his collar.

"What's going on here?" Bogo asked.

The first guard, a polar bear, signaled for the other two to continue running down the hallway. "Our cameras caught something happening at the emergency exit down that hallway."

Suddenly there was shouting coming from the hallway.

"Help! Security! Someone get security!"

The other two guards raised their Tasers at the cuffed mammal sprinting around the distant corner and in their direction. "Hold your fire!" Bogo shouted when he recognized Carlos Casel.

"Hurry, they're getting away!" Carlos panted as he stopped before them.

The two guards raced past him.

Bogo looked over his shoulder down the hallway. There was no sign of Clawsoto… or Benjamin. "Make sure he doesn't go anywhere!" He ordered the first guard and he raced down the hallway past the others, ignoring the mild pain in his side.

When he reached the bathroom, he saw one guard bent down over the tranquilized body of Clawsoto. The other guard had opened the emergency exit doors and was standing just outside, radioing for someone to call the police.

No.

Bogo rushed into the bathroom, but he only found an unconscious security guard, the one who presumably had been watching the exit.

Oh god, no.

He raced back to Carlos and the first guard and pinned the cuffed elk to the wall with one hoof.

"Where is Ben?" He spoke through clenched teeth. "What happened?"

"We were attacked!" Carlos stared up at the taller, buffer mammal with pure terror. "After I called my lawyer we went to the bathroom back down that way! These guys, they darted the ZBI guy and dragged him- Ben into this van and took off! I couldn't do anything with these cuffs on!"
"He's gone?!" Bogo glared at the guard. "You were supposed to be watching all the exits!"
"We were! And the cameras!" The polar bear fired back. "We came running as soon as we saw the van show up! It couldn't have been there for even a minute!"

"Did you see the attackers?"

"Yes, again on the cameras." Bogo felt Carlos stiffen beneath his hoof. "There were two of them, an ox and a hippo. They came in through the main entrance. They didn't look and act suspicious, so we didn't pay them much mind. But then someone saw them come out the bathroom and knock out that ZBI guy. By the time we got here, it was too late."

There was a crackle from the bear's radio, and she turned away to answer.

Bogo was going red with rage, but only a fraction of that rage was directed at the security. Benjamin had been his responsibility. He never should have let him leave.

He turned back to Carlos. "I'm surprised they didn't leave a scratch on you."

"I'm cuffed, and they were obviously in a hurry." Carlos said with a shrug.

The buffalo's fingertips dug into the elk's chest. "You don't seem that bothered that he's been abducted."

"Why should I? You'll get him back."

The polar bear materialized beside them, eyes blazing. "Confess. Now."

"Huh?"

"They just watched the footage of the incident in full. You neglected to mention how you trapped the cheetah outside with the kidnappers when he made a break for it."

Bogo seized a handful of Carlos's rumpled shirt. "You did what?"

The elk looked from the bear to the buffalo, eyes wide. "I panicked! I'm sorry!"

Bogo's phone started to ring. He used his free hoof to answer. "What?"

"Sir, it's Higgins. There's a lawyer here claiming that Carlos Casel is one of his clients. He wants to know why Casel hasn't called him back."

Bogo was about to tell him about Benjamin, but a thought struck him. "When was the last time he contacted his lawyer?"

"Last night."

Bogo could see from the look on Carlos's face that he could hear both sides of the conversation.

"Alert every officer in the precinct. Officer Clawhauser has just been abducted from this hospital."

"He's been what?!"

Bogo lowered the phone for a moment to ask the guard for the van's description. "I want every available unit searching the city for a black van without windows, being driven by an ox and a hippo. I want all traffic camera footage within the current three hours examined thoroughly. I want Ben found!"
"Yes, sir! We'll find him, count on it!"

Bogo hung up and glared daggers at the elk currently at his mercy. "Did you plan this?"

Carlos looked ready to pee his pants. "Of course not! I've got nothing to do with Veltro! Just because you won't admit that Ben's been nothing but trouble-"

"WHAT HAS HE GIVEN ME TROUBLE ABOUT?" Bogo bellowed.

"YOU KNOW AS WELL AS I DO THAT THIS IS ALL HIS FAULT! HE INTERFERED WITH THE FAMILY AND THIS IS WHAT WE GET! IS IT ANY WONDER VERCUS IS STILL OUT TO GET HIM?"

Bogo brought his fist up, stopping Carlos's tirade dead. Shaking, raging, it took all of Bogo's self control not to render his face to mulch. The trembling fist pointed at the elk's snout. "You have got guilt written all over your face!"

"And we have the footage to prove it." The bear growled. "You can take him away if you want. We'll secure the crime scene and get a copy of the camera footage ready for you."

"Do it quickly." Bogo shifted his grip on Carlos's to the elk's shoulder. "You're coming with me."

According to the tracking monitor Bogo had given to the ZBI to follow the key ring Benjamin was wearing, the van was taking Benjamin north. They went out of range soon after leaving the city itself, but it was only a matter of time until they caught their scent. Or so Bogo hoped.

The buffalo watched silently through the one-way window as Yaxley tried to coerce the truth out of the elk sitting across the table. Whether it was denial or terror, Carlos was refusing to crack. The lawyer, a swine, was at his side, quietly advising him to stick to his guns.

By the time Carlos had finished lying through his teeth for the fifth time since being dragged into the room, Yaxley's face was pure pitiless contempt. "I can keep asking you questions all day, Mr. Casel. It's for your own good that you answer them truthfully."

Carlos didn't reply, leaving the room in silence. The silence was soon broken by a door opening and closing. Bogo looked away from the treacherous elk to see Nick treading through the dark observation room with a bovine sized coffee mug in both paws.

"Wilde?" Bogo hadn't spoken to his two smallest officers when they'd raced back from the prison, having immediately accompanied Carlos and Yaxley to the interrogation room. He didn't even know what they'd learned from Bellwether yet.

With an obviously forced smirk, Nick held up the mug. "Thought I'd find you here. Figured you could use a pick me up."

"Thanks." Bogo took the mug and sipped, returning his gaze to the silent Carlos.

"If you're wondering where Carrots is, she's looking up every possible location in the north where Veltro could be holding Benji. With her track record, finding them is only a matter of time."

Voices in the next room. Yaxley was trying to coax the truth out of Carlos again.

"You know, as a fox I've seen my fair share of interrogation rooms, but this is the first one I've been to with a one-way window like in the movies." Nick rambled.
"I'm not in the mood for small talk, Wilde."

"I'm just trying to wind you down, sir. With all due respect you look like a powder keg."

"I'm not winding down until we get Ben back."

"Fair enough. Just so long as you don't charge in there and wallop the guy." Nick hopped onto an empty plastic chair. "I think I know who Carlos sold Ben out to."

"Go on."

"When we talked to Bellwether, she said she suspected that one more Veltro member was involved in the conspiracy to kill Vercus. Dr. Arianna Fauna. A horse. She's a descendant of one of the other founding families of Zootopia. Bellwether reckons that with Gruff out of the way, Dr. Fauna has taken over Veltro herself, and knows that this just puts her on Vercus's hit list."

Bogo held the mug with both hooves as he watched Carlos. "Have you spoken with her, yet?"

"We stopped by her office. Apparently she disappeared the morning after the news announced the discovery of that van full of bodies, and no-one has seen her since."

Bogo narrowed his eyes. Carlos again insisted that he had no idea who was behind the kidnapping.

"If he won't say it, I'm just gonna guess." Nick said. "Veltro kidnapped Ben because they're scared." Bogo nodded. It had made sense the moment Nick had said it. "Their plan to do away with their founder backfired, and now a costumed psycho possessing a weapon of mass destruction is out to get every last one of them. The one thing he wants more than revenge on Veltro is possession of a single cheetah. More importantly he wants him alive. My guess is, the good doctor is hoping that having Benji in her clutches will give her some leverage."

"Which increases our chances of getting him back alive." Bogo sighed into his mug. "This might be just what we need, Wilde. If we name drop Dr. Fauna, it might make him realize the jig is up."

"Good idea, sir." Nick said. "I say we imply we have evidence that he was in contact with her."

"If we do, we'll have to make it convincing enough that the lawyer won't catch on." Bogo paused. "You'd better do it, Wilde. Tell Yaxley I sent you in with new evidence."

"I thought you'd never ask, boss." Nick walked out the room. Seconds later there was a knock on the interrogation room door, making all three mammals frown. Nick waltzed inside, and Bogo could sense that he wasn't nearly as relaxed as he was pretending to be. His friend's life was on the line.

"Chief Bogo sent me."

"This had better be good, Officer Wilde." Yaxley said.

"It is. We've uncovered the identity of the third conspirator in the attempted murder that turned Vercus Casel into a costumed supervillain." He turned to Carlos and dropped the bombshell. "Does the name Dr. Arianna Fauna mean anything to you?"

Carlos blinked. "N-No."

"Is this relevant, officer?" The lawyer asked calmly.

"It is, if you'll let me explain." Nick said. "We did a little digging, and we also found out that you're a former patient of hers. The fallout of your father-in-law's failed election had left you with anger
management issues. She's probably one of the few mammals outside of the Casel family that knows just how much you hate Benjamin Clawhauser."

"I guess..." Carlos looked more nervous than ever.

"We know you haven't contacted him since last night." Nick went on. "We looked at your phone and found a number different from your lawyer's. And guess whose voicemail we heard when we called the number?"

"Dr. Fauna's." Yaxley said. Both Carlos and his lawyer seemed to deflate in their seats.

"The last call to her was made right before Clawhauser was kidnapped." Nick stepped up to the table, his arrogant smirk turning into the furious glare he'd managed to suppress up to now. "You weren't calling your lawyer. You were giving the signal."


Carlos set his jaw. "You think you're so smart..."

"Mr. Casel." His lawyer warned. "Calm yourself."

Nick cut him off. "With all due respect... Mr. Attarnay, is it?"

"How did you know that?"

"I know everybody. Look, I know you're doing your job but the evidence is stacked against him and stonewalling us could jeopardize our chances of saving an innocent mammal. One of our own friends. Just a little something to think about."

Mr. Attarnay fell silent. Bogo didn't know whether or not he should reprimand the fox later. "Mr. Casel..." The pig repeated himself and hesitated. "Think very carefully about how you answer the next few questions."

Carlos's face contorted.

Yaxley nodded in satisfaction. "We have everything we need to prove that you arranged Benji's kidnapping. Why did you do it?"

Carlos clenched his fists as he rested them on the table. "I've been part of the Casel family for five years! You saw them! You saw how they were with me! No matter what I did, they never accepted me! They call me a gigolo and a gold digger and a parasite right to my face!" He bared his teeth. "That cheetah nearly tore the family apart, but he was treated more like a brother than I ever was!"

"I wonder why that is." Nick muttered. "But only one thing matters at this point. We need to know where they took Benji."


In a flash Bogo was out the door and racing to enter the interrogation room. In his blind rage he collided painfully with Officer Fangmeyer, spilling the stack of files she'd been carrying.
"God damn it!" Bogo snarled. He glared at the interrogation room door, but the sudden shock of the hallway collision had knocked the bloodlust out of him. He kept his glare on the door, seething, while Fangmeyer picked up the files. He only looked at her when she stood up, blocking his line of sight. "Sorry, Fangmeyer."

"It's alright, sir. What happened to Clawhauser has put us all on edge."

"What are those files?" Bogo asked. He needed a diversion, anything to get his temper in check.

"Records on every case in this city involving hacking. Hopps suggested that we check out every hacker who doesn't have an alibi at the time of the mansion attacks. We're also looking into Carlos Casel's associates, see if any more of them connect him to Dr. Fauna."

Bogo nodded. His anger had almost faded, replaced by a fire of a different sort. "Good. Is Hopps at her desk?"

"Yes, sir."

"Tell her I want to see her and everything she's uncovered so far in the bullpen in ten minutes."

"Yes sir." Fangmeyer prepared to stride past him.

"Wait. First knock on the interrogation room and tell Yaxley I want him and Wilde at the meeting. If I face Mr. Casel, I might do something violent."

Fangmeyer nodded in understanding. "May I ask what you're planning, sir?"

"I'll explain once we get Yaxley out here."

Fangmeyer nodded and knocked on the door. She poked her head inside and told Yaxley to come out. The yak came outside along with Nick.

"The sellout's a dead end, sir." Nick said. "He doesn't know where they took him."

"The hell with him. We're going to take a GPS device and take it to the area where the van went out of range. There's a chance we may be able to pick up the bug from there."

Yaxley put his hooves on his hips. "You don't seriously think that's going to work."

"No, but I'm not going to sit around here and wait for someone to come in and tell me they've found a body!" Bogo retorted. "Clawhauser's in the hands of a pack of anti-predator terrorists and we have to get him out! You know what, I'll call Hopps myself!"

Fangmeyer frowned as Bogo pulled out his phone. "You have her number? Why?"

"No reason, Fangmeyer!" Bogo barked.

The feline leaned forward slightly and caught a glimpse of the screen. "Why does her number have the name Gazellover B?"

Bogo slapped the phone to his chest. "Just go get the bunny!"
Benjamin opened his eyes to see the world tilted almost completely on its side. He soon realized why when he felt a pain in his neck. He lifted his throbbing head from his shoulder and tried to remember what had happened to him. There had been an ambush in the hospital bathroom. A van waiting in a small parking lot. Then that traitor, Carlos, shutting off his one chance of escape…

And now Benjamin was sitting in a dining room. Was he back in the Casel estate? Were they responsible for this? That terrible thought was quashed when he realized that this dining room was different. It was opulent, but not to the same extent as the Casels' dining room. Three brass candelabras illuminated the room with candlelight. The windows however were a lot smaller. He saw a wide field of snow and overgrown grass outside, a line of trees, what looked like a chain link fence, and beyond, the distant Zootopia skyline. He looked around and saw he was the only one sitting at the table.

Where were the kidnappers? The cheetah tried to get up, but found himself held to the chair by some kind of cord tying his paws to the wooden backrest. His bruised ribs ached from the lack of painkillers. When the door at the other end of the room opened, Benjamin flinched with sudden terror…

Thank goodness. The elk who looked into the room wasn't Vercus. He spotted the feline and disappeared again. A few seconds later, a middle-aged filly in a dark green pantsuit and frameless eyeglasses entered the room and smiled at him.

"Welcome to Fauna Manor."

It was a strained smile, and as the horse came closer Benjamin noticed bags under her eyes. "Hello. Um, excuse me, but who are you?"

"Dr. Arianna Fauna." Fauna held out a hoof. With his paws tied behind his back, Benjamin stared befuddled at the gesture. Fauna blinked, chuckled humorlessly and retracted the hoof. "Forgive me. I haven't been sleeping very well of late."

"Apology accepted." With his heart beating at a fast but steady rate, Benjamin couldn't think of any other way to respond. "Am I the only one you've kidnapped?"

Fauna appeared bemused by the question. "You were the only mammal not yet sent to a safe house. The only one we could get to."

So Bogo, Alec and the others were safe. That made Benjamin feel a little better. Just a little. "So, Fauna Manor, right? Lovely place."

Fauna looked wistful as she gazed around the room. "It was built around the same time as the Casels' mansion. But then the Wool Street Crash of twenty-nine ruined the family, and we were forced to abandon the estate. When Vercus returned to the city a year or so ago, he bought the estate to use for Veltro's headquarters. Now that he is no longer in charge, the estate is mine." She smirked. "Just as it always should have been."

"Fauna… you must be from one of the other founding families."

"The last of the direct line, to be precise." With a dark look in her eyes Fauna sat down a couple of seats to the left of Benjamin. "Not unlike that close-knit bunch of gluttons hoarding all the publicity."
"You mean the Casels?"

"Who else?" Fauna spat. "I've been meaning to thank you for indirectly ruining Mr. Casel's chances of retaking the city. Thank you."

"... You're welcome. But I still want to know why you've brought me here."

Fauna tilted her head. "I thought that was obvious."
"Are you the fake Nishimura working with Vercus?"
"Hell, no. I'm the new leader of Veltro. You've heard of us."

Benjamin gulped. "V-Veltro? Yes. Yes, I have."

"Then you'll understand why it's in your best interest to cooperate with me."

Benjamin scowled, incredulous. "You're kidding, right?"

Fauna wiped away a glob of melted wax that had dripped on the table's surface. "I wouldn't refuse too quickly if I were you."

Benjamin cringed at the edge of threat in her tone. "Look, you're gonna need to do a little explaining before I make a decision. You haven't even told me why I've been kidnapped yet."

Fauna tapped her hoof on the shiny wood for a good long while before she answered. "Fine. It'll be a while before 'Nishimura' comes back, anyway."

Benjamin's heart skipped a beat. The mastermind of this whole Nighthowler madness was coming here? Before he could dwell on this bit of news, Fauna started speaking again.

"The hard truth is, I need your help. I thought getting rid of Vercus would secure my own seat of power, but now I've got a real live Hound of the Casels breathing down my neck, and he has at least one Nightfall bomb left. The only way to stop Vercus is to draw him out."

Benjamin gulped. "With me as bait."

Fauna nodded. "Precisely."

The cheetah slumped in his chair. "Why me?"

"Didn't I just tell-"

"That's not what I meant! Why is Vercus obsessed with me?! Why can't he just leave me alone?! Why could he have just stayed away?!!" Benjamin grew angrier with each question. It was so unfair. Why did everyone have to suffer because he'd tried to help a friend in need? Why couldn't Elgen and Selke have listened to him when they had the chance? Would the power-hungry horse who'd had him abducted even answer his questions?

"Anyone with half a brain will tell you it's about revenge." Fauna procured a small flask and sipped from it. "That's very true with his feelings toward his former family and your boss. But with you on the other hand, I believe it's more complicated. Let me begin by telling you that Vercus is... was a malignant narcissist. When he was a Casel, he hid behind an idealized self-image that served to suppress his feelings of insecurity and vulnerability. To that end, he mercilessly sought out to crush anyone who in his own mind threatened his place as the favored son and heir to the Casel Corporation, especially Chief Bogo. He even went to far as to secretly abuse his own siblings in order to keep them from surpassing him. He irrationally tortured Alec more that the others, because..."
of his prodigious talent in dessert making."

Benjamin bristled, remembering the frightened look on Alec's face when he had lied about his dislocated shoulder. "What about me?"

"From what Vercus told me during his sessions, everything started to go wrong when you, a police officer of all mammals, moved in next to Alec and befriended him. As part of his endeavor to keep Alec under his thumb, he kept his brother as isolated as possible, so imagine how he felt when you ignored his attempts to manipulate you into ending the relationship. As a psychiatrist, I am inclined to believe that deep down he feared you to an extent. His greatest fear during that time was that you would discover the truth about him and tear down everything he held dear." She smirked at Benjamin. "Those fears were well founded."

"I never intended to ruin his life, no matter how horrible he was." The feline insisted. How come Bogo was the only one who could see that?

"Try telling that to a narcissist." Fauna replied. "Anyway, you should by now have realized that Vercus had ulterior motives for inviting you to Gusteau's after your second meeting. He'd intended to discover any weaknesses he could use to get rid of you, but instead he attracted the suspicion of Chief Bogo, the one mammal he despised more than anybody. You already know how that ended."

"But why did he have to do such horrible things?" Benjamin demanded. "Why did he have to hurt Bogo? Why couldn't he have just used his wealth and influence to get me out of that apartment and away from Alec? Or had Alec moved himself?"

"Believe me, he tried." Fauna sneered. "When he tried to get Alec moved, his father saw it as a violation of their 'rite of passage' and forbid it. When he tried to have you evicted, his father saw such a scandalous act as a threat to his mayoral campaign and forbid it. He did everything he could to separate you and Alec, but Alec was so lonely and desperate for affection that he couldn't bring himself to sever ties with you. I suspect that in his own way, Alec had become obsessed with you himself."

Benjamin shook his head. It still sounded like nothing more than a sick revenge scheme. "Doctor, get to the point."

Fauna raised an eyebrow at his forceful attitude. "The point is, no matter what he did, Vercus couldn't get rid of you like he got rid of everyone else, and because he couldn't get rid of you, his feelings towards you began to change. Where most mammals see other people as good or evil, Vercus sees other people as true or false. Mammals who truly mean what they saw and do, and those who are putting on a mask. Being the kind of mammal that he is, Vercus saw practically every mammal as false, except, ironically for himself. But he tolerated their presence, so long as they gave him what he wanted. If they didn't, he got rid of them by any means necessary."

Benjamin thought it best not to point out that for someone who held a narcissist in contempt, Fauna seemed very fond of her own voice. "Like me?"

"Especially you. But you were a special case. He couldn't get rid of you, no matter how hard he tried. And because he couldn't get rid of you, for the first time in his life he was forced to face reality."

"Reality?"
"You weren't false. You were true."

Benjamin stared at her. Where was she going with this?
"Meaning?"

"Meaning that you aren't like the shallow moochers he surrounded himself with in his attempts to maintain his delusions of grandeur. You love Alec for Alec. You're one of a kind. You're the only one who can give Vercus what he really wants."

"L-love and affection?" Benjamin felt his skin begin to crawl.

Fauna chuckled. "It's safe to say that he wants you as a friend, and nothing more. After he realized the 'truth' about you and what he really wanted in life, Vercus changed his plans. He doesn't want to get rid of you anymore. He wants to steal you. In his current state of mind, he thinks possessing you will make up for everything he has been missing. But the traditional method of stalking you ended disastrously. He was cast out of the family and forced to flee Zootopia."

By now Benjamin's jaw had dropped. "He founded Veltro just so he could get to me? That's insane!"

Fauna shook his head. "No. He founded Veltro to take revenge on the mammals responsible for ruining his life and the city that had forgotten he'd ever existed, under the guise of a prey-supremacy movement. But after five years of exile his obsession with you had made him unstable. The purpose of my sessions with him was to make him let go of that obsession, to make him focus on Veltro's established goal to take over Zootopia with the use of Bellwether and her Nighthowler Serum."

"The Nightfall prototype!" Benjamin blurted out.

Fauna seemed amused by his sudden epiphany. "I was making excellent progress, too. But then Officer Hopps resigned and subsequently exposed Bellwether's scheme. It was only supposed to be a minor setback. The serum was a success, and we were on our way to fully developing the Nightfall weapon. But then Vercus discovered why Hopps had resigned in the first place."

Benjamin's blood went cold. "Are you saying that-"

"Beforehand, Vercus had told Bellwether that under no circumstances was she to target you. But that stupid woman misunderstood. She'd thought he'd meant that you weren't to be turned savage, but he'd really meant that you were to be left alone period. When she had you demoted to Records, Vercus saw that as a betrayal and decided to fire the first Nightfall bomb at her appeal. Even worse, when he discovered that you were once again responsible for foiling his schemes, his obsession came back with a vengeance. Even his takeover of the city had become second priority."

"So you decided he needed to be replaced." Benjamin hissed with disgust, even as he reeled from everything she'd told him so far.

"Even you can't deny that the world would be better off without him, Clawhauser." Fauna scolded. "But yes. With extreme stress, he'd have died of heart failure in Gruff's secret bunker and no-one would be any the wiser. But we'd never suspected he'd use the Nighthowler serum to counter the Digoxin. And you've seen the result. A full-fledged homicidal lunatic with access to a WMD. He's killed Dupont, maimed Gruff, massacred dozens of my own men and torn his former family apart."

She stood up, walked over to Benjamin, and loomed over him. "There are only three targets left now. You, Chief Bogo, and myself. And you are the only one he wants alive."

Benjamin stared at the table, speechless, as Fauna's phone buzzed and she read the screen. He twisted his paw until his could pinch his skin. This was madness. That Vercus was doing all this because he was fixated on one little fat cheetah was pure insanity. So why wouldn't he wake up?
"He's back." Fauna slapped the phone on the table and tilted Benjamin's chin so he was staring into her tired, hardened eyes. "This is your last chance, Clawhauser. Going along with the plan willingly will increase your chances of getting out in one piece. So will you help us or not?"

Benjamin hesitated. "I… I don't…"

"Something else I should mention about my sessions with Vercus." Fauna interrupted harshly. "Before we enacted our coup d'état, he mentioned that he'd been researching a variety of brainwashing techniques, only he wasn't talking about recruiting more mammals to our cause. He knows deep down that after what he'd done to Bogo you won't give your affection willingly, so once he's got you in his clutches he'll have something in the works to make you more… submissive."

Benjamin bit his lip, terrified. "Like what?"

"Cooperate and you'll never find out."

Fauna released his chin, making his head drop on his chest. With his gaze turned downward, Benjamin spotted something that made his pounding heart leap with hope. It was still there, on the belt loop. Bogo's gift.

Benjamin looked back up at the waiting Fauna. Tied to a chair, he was completely helpless. Untied, however, and he could try and buy some time.

"Ok. What do you want me to do?"

Fauna smiled, told him he'd made a wise decision, and walked out, closing the door behind her. Benjamin heard voices coming from the other side, but they were so muffled Benjamin wouldn't be able to tell who was speaking even if he knew the speaker.

"Did you find him?" A feminine sounding voice asked. Benjamin assumed it was Fauna.

"Not his location, unfortunately." Said a masculine voice. "But I have the information we need to contact him."

"Perfect. We'll make the demand and work out the plan for there. We'll need Clawhauser to speak so we can prove we have him."

"May I suggest taking him to a room where one could easily see through the windows? In his state of mind, hearing Clawhauser's voice may not be enough to convince him. Besides, I have a feeling he may be watching the house right now."

Benjamin glanced out the little windows and felt a chill run up his spine.

"We'll take him to the master bedroom's balcony. He's agreed to cooperate, so he shouldn't cause trouble."

"An excellent idea. Now, if you don't mind, I'm going to check on the laboratory. We may need the antidotes if things go south." Footsteps faded into silence as the mammal walked away.

"Goyle, go get him."

The door opened. Benjamin was disappointed when he saw Fauna standing in the hallway outside, alone. The elk strode into the dining room, untied Benjamin and dragged him into the hallway by the arm. Benjamin began to get the impression that the entire mansion was made of wood. They followed Fauna down another hallway. Halfway down Benjamin spotted a large figure disappearing
down a darkened set the stairs leading down to the basement. He was taken up two sets of stairs, down another hall, then into a large bedroom decorated in several shades of green. Fauna started dialing a number as she directed Goyle to take Benjamin through a set of light green curtains to the small balcony overlooking the overgrown grounds of the Fauna estate.

"Hello? Vercus Casel?" She paused. "Oh, that's right. You're not a Casel anymore. Sorry about that." She listened for a good long while. The longer she listened, the more pronounced became the fear in her eyes. When she spoke up again, she was struggling to maintain her composure. "I had nothing to do with what happened in that bunker. Why would I? I'm the one who tried to help you. The one who helped you let go of this unhealthy obsession on yours... but I can see that we're not going to agree. Before you finish that threat, take a look at the master bedroom balcony. I know you're watching. Go on, take a look."

Benjamin bit his lip and tried to keep from shaking as he stared at the trees beyond the grounds. He saw nothing but bark, leaves and shadows.

"Now that you understand what's at stake you're going to shut up and listen to my threats." Fauna sounded bolder now. "I know you have one Nightfall bomb left. If you fire it at this mansion, or if you make any move on us of any kind, you can kiss any chance of having the one 'true' mammal goodbye. I can have Goyle toss Benjamin here over this balcony, or I can get my gun and put a bullet in his adorable face the first chance I get. Hell, I'll even throw him to the savages if you fire that weapon. Either way, you won't be taking him alive. Not unless you pay for him." The phone exploded with garbled obscenities and curses. Benjamin looked back into the bedroom to see that Fauna was smiling again as she waited for Vercus to stop. "I want the last Nightfall bomb, and the launcher. I want every weapon and explosive that you've accumulated since you rechristened yourself the Hound of the Casels. Bring it all to the front gate in half an hour. You do that, and the cheetah's yours. Do we have an agreement?" She looked at Benjamin. "Of course you can talk to him."

She walked up to Benjamin and handed him the phone. Benjamin took a deep breath and brought the phone to his ear. "Hi."

Vercus's voice was low and livid. "They're gonna kill you once they've got me. You know that, don't you?"

Benjamin gulped. "I know."

"You know I'm right. Even if you weren't a chomper, you've seen too much! Famous Dr. Fauna is perfect, a pure paragon, and you're the only one who can tell them different. There's no way she'll let you go. I'm the only hope you've got. Not even your Byronic Bogo can save you now. I don't know what you ever saw in him."

Benjamin bit his lip and thought of the key ring. You're wrong, Vercus.

"That prissy little quack doesn't know who she's messing with! I let her into my circle! I let her into my bed! And what does she do? Screw me over, that's what, that little trollop! And now she thinks she can just bait me into a trap like some backward pigeon? She's got another thing coming! She's going to die in that dollhouse, and she's going to die squealing like a hogtied piglet!" By now Benjamin had screwed his eyes shut, flinching under the vicious onslaught. The phone suddenly fell silent. Benjamin was about to give the phone back to Dr. Fauna when Vercus spoke again. "I'm not done!"

"Have you got it all out of your system, Vercus?" Benjamin asked.
"There's no use being patronizing, Benji. I have you already. Yokai's got his own agenda. In thirty minutes, you'd best be thankful I want you unspoiled. Be ready."

The line went dead. Fauna took the phone from Benjamin's shaking paw. "What did he say?"

Benjamin shivered. "He said you're going to regret using me against him. More or less."

Fauna scoffed at the forest beyond the grounds. "We shall see, won't we, Vercus?"

Judy burst into the bullpen like a little grey ball of pure energy. "Sir, I think I know where Ben is!"

Bogo, Nick and Yaxley looked up sharply, startled by her loud and sudden entrance. "Well don't just stand there, Hopps!" Bogo snapped.

"About a mile south east of the area where we lost the signal is the old Fauna estate!" Judy panted. "It's been abandoned since the Depression destroyed the Fauna family fortune, but someone called John Smith recently bought it! But I looked him up and there's no-one in the country with that name who's rich enough to do that!"

Nick nodded. "Sounds like a prime location for Veltro HQ."

"Good work, Officer Hopps. It'll take the ZBI an hour to get there, and it'll add thirty minutes on top of that to get ready for the raid. I'll call you in a few." Yaxley stood up and strode to the side door.

"We'll need some reinforcements before we go." Bogo said.

Yaxley stopped in his tracks. "We?" Bogo narrowed his eyes at him. "Chief, this is ZBI jurisdiction. There's no need for you to come along."

Bogo stepped forward. "You lost too many men raiding that cathedral, Agent Yaxley. You need us."

Yaxley glared at him. Bogo and his subordinates glared back. Then the yak grunted. "Fine. Let's saddle up."
Benjamin nearly tripped as Goyle shoved him back into the bedroom and dragged him to the four-poster bed. Dr. Arianna Fauna watched impassively as the elk forced him onto the mattress and attached him to a bedpost with a pair of handcuffs.

"Aren't you going to take me to the front gate?" He dared to ask.

"Not yet. Not until it's time to make the switch." Fauna said.

"And how do you plan to stop him?" Benjamin asked.

Fauna smirked and pointed to the ceiling. "A sharpshooter is waiting on the roof at this very moment. The moment Vercus shows his face, he's dead."

Benjamin shot upright, his arm stretched straight by the restraining cuff. "You never said you'd kill him!"

"Every second he's breathing, he's a danger to us all. Tell me, would the police be any different?"

Benjamin hesitated. "… It's not the same!"

Fauna closed the glass doors of the balcony. "I don't have the time or the care to discuss moral hypocrisy with you. I have less than an hour to prepare, so you can just lie back and relax until then. And just in case you somehow escape that bed, the entire building is crawling with Veltro's people. The grounds are patrolled day and night. Also, the fence is electrified. So if you do get out of that cuff, do yourself a favor and stay put. Behave and you might even get a blackberry pie when this is over." She walked out, followed by Goyle, and the door was closed and locked behind them.

Benjamin sighed and lay flat on the bed. If anyone else were still in the room, they'd have thought he was bored. On the inside, he was terrified. He had no idea what Vercus was up to, or what would happen to him if the assassination was a success. Would Veltro kill him quickly? Or did they have something worse than death in mind? Even though Fauna had admitted that Veltro's supremacist ideals were nothing more than a sham, most of the mammals here truly did desire the persecution of predators such as himself. With his free paw he gripped the key ring Bogo had given him and tried to convince himself that everything was going to be okay. Bogo and the others were on their way. In a matter of hours, every mammal on this estate would be behind bars. He just needed to stay put, just like Fauna had said.

But Vercus's last words still haunted him. *Be ready*, he'd said. Fauna had a plan, but so did Vercus. Fauna had brains and a sniper, but Vercus had brains, brawn, and a bomb. As he stared up at the bed's canopy, he couldn't shake the feeling that something was going to go horribly wrong. Benjamin looked up at the cuff holding him to the post. He couldn't stay stuck on this bed if something did go wrong. He may not be able to leave this room, but he could at least try to get free.

The cheetah didn't bother trying pulling off the cuff, instead turning his attention to the wooden post. It was almost as thick as his arm, and carved with an intricate hoof pattern at the base. He didn't have a chance in heck of snapping the thing, but he remembered his parent's home having a modern version of this bed. He'd helped to hold up the canopy railings while his mother fixed the posts in place like a peg in a hole. Maybe this bed had the same weak point.

Benjamin stood up on the mattress and tugged the cuff up the pole until he could grasp the corner of the canopy rail with both paws. It was a lot bulkier than his parents' bed, but it was a heck of a lot...
older. He pushed up at the rail, and initially nothing happened, but he tried again with all the force he could muster. With a scarily loud crack the corner popped free.

Benjamin glanced sharply at the bedroom door. He heard footsteps. He dropped down onto the mattress just as the door opened and Goyle glared into the room. He looked at Benjamin, then around the room. The curtains must have been concealing the damage to the canopy railing, for Goyle eventually gave the feline a threatening look and shut the door again. Benjamin exhaled, stood back up, and pulled the cuff free of the rail. Now he could run or defend himself if Fauna’s scheme went awry. He was careful to put the rail back in place before sitting back down on the bed.

He lay on the bed, hoping the ZBI would get here in time as he constantly checked his watch, which looked like it had been cracked during his kidnapping. When there were ten minutes left before the trade-off, he got up and went to the balcony doors. A quick tug on the handles confirmed they were locked, but at least he had a perfect view of the front gate. Much like the Casel Estate, a long gravelly road stretched down from the house to the front gate. Near the front gate and the small building that housed the gate controls was a parked black car. If Benjamin had some binoculars, he could easily spy on the front gate, but all he could see for now was a rectangle of bars and at least three indiscernible figures.

Benjamin heard the growl of an engine and brought his face further to the glass. A massive semi crawled into view, stopping on the snow and grass beside the road midway down. The massive red words on the side said ‘Rodentia Apples,’ but Benjamin was quite sure they weren’t carrying fruit. A car trundled down the path, and Benjamin caught a glimpse of Fauna’s mane and pantsuit through the rear window. He watched the car drive all the way down the path and stop a short distance from the front gate, and watched Fauna and two other mammals climb out. They slowly approached the closed gate. He didn’t appear to see anyone on the other side. Benjamin checked his watch; seven minutes left.

"Be ready." Vercus had said. Be ready for what?

Benjamin watched and listened, but he saw no squad cars smashing through the gates, heard no sirens. He checked his watch again. Six minutes left. "Where are you, Mansa?" He murmured. Another semi crawled into his line of sight, stopping slightly closer to the building. Veltro must be preparing to flee the city as soon as Vercus was dead. With one leader dead and the other in ZBI custody, it was only a matter of time before Fauna was exposed as the new leader. Her family estate would be one of the first places they’d look.

He checked his watch once more; five minutes go-

He saw the explosion before he heard it, a flash of white and orange followed by a plume of smoke rising high above the tree line. Benjamin clapped his paws to his mouth, the cuffs jingling as they dangled from his wrist. "Vercus." He whispered.

Muffled by the closed doors, the sounds of cursing and confusion filled the air. Fauna and her two companions, mere blobs in the distance, started back towards their car. Then there was a louder bang and another flash of color as the car’s engine exploded and combusted the entire vehicle. The three mammals were knocked to the gravel but lucky that they weren’t close enough to be outright killed by the shockwave. Even so, Benjamin was sure they were hurt. Then the front gate slid open.

Someone emerged from inside the small building beside the gate and quickly approached the small black car, a large mammal dressed in a coat and hat. Benjamin couldn’t recognize them from behind, but he could see whoever it was carrying a metallic briefcase.

The mammal he was certain was ‘Yokai Nishimura’ clambered into the small car and went tearing
through the snow like a street racer, speeding in between the burning car and the fallen mammals, through the open gate and disappearing into the forest.

There was a slamming from behind. Benjamin spun round to see that Goyle had flung open the bedroom door, his eyes wild with panic. He stomped over and grabbed the feline by the arm, dragging him away from the balcony doors. "What the hell is going on here, predator?"

Benjamin stammered as he pointed outside. "Di-did you see that? Someone just ran off with a briefcase!"

Goyle paused. "They what?"

"Someone in a big coat and hat took off after the explosions!" Benjamin cried, desperate to keep the large, angry elk from putting the blame on him.

Goyle snarled, his grip tightening into a painful vice. "Damn it. Damn it! I warned her! I warned her we couldn't trust hi-"

The world disappeared with a bang.

Bogo brought the car and the line of cars and armored vans screeching to a halt at the first explosion, coming from the left above the tree line. "Oh god, what now?" He growled through gritted teeth.

Judy saw the way her boss stiffened in the driver's seat. "Sir, it's okay. The estate isn't in that direction."

"Then what the hell is it?" Bogo demanded.

"I don't know. But we're going to find out." Yaxley grabbed the radio and gave orders for two cars to go and investigate while the others continued on to apprehend Fauna. The line started up again, picking up speed when they heard two more explosions. Judy felt sick. Those two explosions had definitely come from the estate.

Before anyone could speak, the radio crackled.

"Sir, we've found the site. Looks like a bomb went off in the middle of a campsite."

"That was quick. Any casualties?" Yaxley asked.

"No, but it looks like Vercus Casel was here. Either there was an accident or someone tried to off him. There's no sign of Vercus, so we'll have to assume that he's unharmed."

Bogo punched the dashboard and stomped on the gas pedal. Yaxley put a hoof on his arm to calm the buffalo and responded to the radio. "Any ideas where he might be?"

"My best guess, sir, is that he'll be looking for blood."

That was when they all heard the biggest explosion yet.

Fauna watched, the cold gravel pressing into the side of her face, as the gate slid open. She clenched her teeth and moaned in agony. She knew her right arm at least was broken. Boris was dead, his neck broken when he hit the gravel. Kennedy was moaning somewhere nearby. A black car sped past their bodies, escaping into the forest.
The semis, two of five scheduled to vacate this place, exploded. They didn't disappear into massive fireballs like in the movies, rather the secret cargo they were carrying appeared to suddenly combust, setting two thirds of the massive vehicles aflame just like her own car. There go the weapons, Nightfall, Daybreak, spare parts and stockpiles of *Midnicampum holicithias*. There was still the lab itself, and all its equipment. The serum vials, the antidotes, everything that was supposed to go into the remaining semis.

Another explosion. The roof of the mansion. Her sharpshooter, dead. More explosions coming from inside the building. The exterior wall of the dining room disappeared in a cloud of smoke and debris. Her birthright, her rightful inheritance, gone. How could this have gone so wrong?

Crunching footsteps. Fauna had to roll her entire body to see who was striding through the open gate, moaning in agony all the while. She stiffened, her pain almost forgotten in her terror when she saw Vercus approaching her. Kennedy blocked his way, sobbing and squirming. Vercus silenced him with his sickle and kicked him aside. Instead of killing Fauna right away, he looked up at the ruined, burning building. "Not a pleasant thing, is it? Being betrayed by the ones you'd trusted?"

Fauna was almost surprised. His question was so guttural it was almost a growl, but at the same time it sounded so normal. He'd resisted the most adverse affects of the serum better than she'd imagined. It probably helped that he was aware of his own insanity, and what the serum was going to do to him when he used it. Helped him resist. "The first explosion. What was it?"

"My campsite." Vercus replied, with the edge of malice he'd had on the phone. "I was already on my way here, lucky me. Not so lucky for Nishimura when I sever his tongue. See if he can still talk his way out of an excruciating death. How do you think I should do it, Ari? Make him run into my knife ten times? Or should I pin him on his back after I take his tongue, and make him drown in his own blood? If you have a better idea, I'd love to hear it."

Fauna nodded, chuckling bitterly. It was so obvious. She'd known she couldn't trust Nishimura completely, but how was she supposed to know he knew explosives? "Honestly, I'm not very surprised."

"Oh?" Vercus crouched down before the wounded mare, his sickle red with Kennedy's blood. Strapped to his back was the Nightfall launcher. She could see the rage burning in his eyes now.

"Nishimura must have been laughing at us all this time, wasting the night howlers on petty grudges," She shakily raised her good arm to point at the weapon Vercus was carrying. "Do you have any idea what is *that* is worth? To the right buyer?"

"I know." Vercus snarled. "I was his first customer when he advertised Bellwether's serum."

"And all this time he was using us to make the serum a true weapon of war." Fauna winced and clutched her abdomen. "He even had us develop a new antidote to sell with the serum as a set. You and I aren't so different, really. For one thing, we were both played for fools."

"No." Vercus sneered, his eyes flashing with the insanity he'd buried under that scarred mask so he could speak with her civilly. He was speaking in shorter sentences, as if it was taking more effort than usual to speak coherently. "Did you really think I would trust someone so false? I knew he would betray me eventually. Call it a seventh sense, if you will. It's what you get when you've been betrayed before."

Fauna lowered her head. So this was it. "Just do it already. I'm probably dying anyway."

Vercus grabbed her chin and forced her to look into his blazing eyes. "Not yet, you lying little tart!"
Where is he?"

Fauna answered quickly. "Master bedroom. It's where we left him. Just kill me already."

Vercus shoved her head into the frozen gravel and stood up. "No. I think leaving you here to freeze and suffer is more karmic. In the meantime I'm going to leave a little surprise for my old friend Scarface. Then I'm going to look for Benji. If I find him dead, I'm coming back for you. Pray you'll bleed out by then. Here, let me help you along." Fauna could only brace herself and clench her teeth as the elk-deer put down his sickle, pulled out a small knife with an even shorter blade and pressed the tip into her forehead. The mare whimpered as he slowly carved something into her flesh. When he moved the sickle away, she shakily touched the carving with her hoof. It felt like the letter V. "That's from the one you betrayed." He cut two more letters in both of her cheeks. "And that's from the two-faced slimeball who betrayed us both. We will see if the ZBI's smart enough to figure it out. Now, if you'll excuse me, I have a cheetah to retrieve."

Fauna giggled as Vercus stormed off in the direction of the small building that housed the gate controls. It was astounding how well Vercus was able to keep himself from going completely savage. How did he do it? How did he fight off a substance that turned even the most disciplined elephant into a howling lunatic?

Slowly, as she watched the gate close again, a dozen thoughts pieced themselves together and became a theory. The howling lunatic had been inside Vercus all along, tempered by a privileged upbringing and everything that came with it. Wealth. Security. An obligation to uphold the family's good name. When all of that was taken from him, he had no more reason to hide. The night howler serum had only taken away what few inhibitions he had left. Benjamin Clawhauser, the cheetah he'd irrationally obsessed over for the past five years, was the only reason Vercus was still putting on a flimsy mask. The elk-deer needed a lucid mind for what he had planned for the unfortunate feline.

That was if he reached Benjamin alive. If Nishimura's intention was to steal the Nightfall weapon and its data and destroy the rest, then the lab must have been blown up as well. And considering the serum is gas based…

"Good luck with that." She sneered as the world grew dark and colder.

The world was strangely quiet when Benjamin opened his eyes and found himself lying on his side on the aged carpet. Goyle was gone, and glass, wood and other bits were strewn all around him. He slowly pushed himself up on aching arms and felt a cold breeze wash over him. He turned around and gasped softly. The balcony doors were a wreck, every glass panel blown out. A plume of fire and smoke filled the air beyond the balcony.

A horrible slicing pain struck his side when he started to get up. His heart plummeted when he looked down and saw a blade-like piece of glass protruding from his sweater, ringed with a small dark stain. "Aw crap." He whimpered. Another sudden stab of pain had tears beading in his eyes. His first instinct was to take it out, but he'd been warned against removing embedded objects on your own. He looked around the ruined room, growing more distressed by the second. Maybe there was something in here he could use, a towel or some other small cloth, to make a donut ring around the shard and keep it stable. A little something he'd learned after the time a repairmen fell on her screwdriver while fixing Precinct One's air conditioning. But this was broken glass, much, much sharper. Sharp enough to cut through cloth like it was paper.

He made the agonizing move of rolling onto his front, taking care to avoid the other shards of glass all over the place. Then he became aware of sounds from somewhere underneath. At first he thought it was screaming, but then he heard screeching. Howling. Bellowing.
Benjamin stared at the open bedroom door. He scrambled to his feet, groaning from the sensation of his side being sliced over and over, and evaded the broken glass as he raced to the door and slammed it shut. He didn't have the key to lock the door, so he made his way to the dresser and shoved it across the room and blocked the door with it. By the time he was done, he was panting with both exhaustion and pain. He staggered back to the bed and eased himself down to check on the shard of glass in his side. It had shifted during his mad dash to secure the bedroom, slicing through an inch of his flesh like a filleting knife. It had gone slightly deeper, too. The strain had grown bigger and redder. Sucking air through his teeth, Benjamin stared at the dresser blocking the door. If a savage rhino tried to get in, that dresser wouldn't hold for long and then the cheetah would have to run for it. God knows how much damage the shard would do to him if it came to that.

Benjamin gripped the covers beneath him, bracing himself for the colossally stupid and torturous thing he was about to do. His only comfort was that there tons of fabrics in here he could use to stem the bleeding, and his pudgy body combined with the small size of the glass panels made it unlikely the shard had pierced any organs.

*Take it out.*

*Don't take it out, you don't take it out, you idiot!*

*If you have to run or fight, keeping the glass in will make it worse.*

*Don't do it, you could bleed to death!*

There were no sirens, no flashing red and blue lights, and the sounds of savages were getting louder. Benjamin pulled a clean-looking cover off a pillow, folded it into a thick small square and held it close to the red stain, read to apply pressure the second the shard was out. If he pulled it out. He may not have a choice in a few minutes. The lethally sharp piece of glass would tear his body wide open if a savage mammal so much as nudge it.

Then something slammed against the door, shaking the dresser and making the feline jump. They struck the door again. And again. They knew he was in there, and the dresser would not hold forever.

There were still no sirens.

Benjamin braced himself and pinched the shard between his fingers. Then he let go, still unable to bring himself to do something so risky. The banging stopped. The feline sighed in relief and started looking around for something to stabilize the shard.
Bogo brought the car at the front of the line to another halt when they reached the front gate. The gate was sealed. Blocking the way into the old Fauna estate were the backs of three massive semis, the rear doors sealed and dented.

"What the hell is this?" Yaxley hissed.

"Vercus is trying to keep us out." Nick said. "According to the old blueprints we found, this is the only way into the estate that doesn't involve climbing over the fence. I'm just saying 'cause those explosions are totally his doing."

Bogo grabbed his radio, but he all got was an abnormal noise. "Something's jamming the signal. Damn it, they knew we were coming!"

"Or they had a jammer just in case we found them." Judy suggested. "Sir, I think Vercus is setting a trap."

"I think so, too." Bogo snarled. "And that may mean he already has Ben." He punched the dashboard again, this time hard enough to crack the plastic.

"Take it easy, Bogo." Yaxley said. "We'll get him back. If we can't use the radio, we'll just have to communicate the old fashioned way. Hopps, Wilde, when we get out this car go to the other vehicles and tell them I want a perimeter set up around the fence and make sure this gate is the only way in and out of the estate."

"Yes, sir." Judy said. They got out of the car, and Bogo and Yaxley took cover behind the vehicle while the smaller officers made their way down the line to give out the yak's orders. Bogo glared anxiously at the bulky semis blocking the way into the estate. Through the fence he spied two more semis wreathed in flame, the source of the smoke they'd seen on their way to the estate.

"What're you planning, a siege?" The buffalo asked, his voice thick with tension. "We're securing all exits until we find out what the hell is going on in there." Yaxley already had his gun out. Despite being on the verge of being overwhelmed with fear and rage for Benjamin, Bogo felt a twinge of dread when he saw that the gun wasn't a model that fired darts. "Something about this whole mess stinks, and it's not the smoke."

"I know what you're thinking." Bogo agreed as their men piled out the vans and cars, fully decked out in body armor, and set out to surround the estate. "All those bombs went off inside the estate. Only someone on the inside could have pulled that off."

"I wonder what that means for Dr. Fauna." Yaxley checked that he had a full magazine and slammed it back into the gun. "If she's dead, that leaves Gruff as the only one we know who can identify 'Nishimura."

"Aren't you forgetting someone?"

Yaxley swung his gaze down to the radio in his possession. "What the- how the hell did you get on this channel, Casel?!"

There was a loud bang, and a flash of sparks out the corner of Bogo's eye. There were shouts from the officers as they took cover behind cars and trees. Bogo turned his head. There was a black dent on the surface of the hood of the car they were hiding behind. The mark of a ricocheting bullet.
The next primeval moron who calls me that will get his brain liquefied!" Vercus snarled through the radio.

Judy and Nick, who had been returning to their superiors when the shot was fired, quickly joined them behind the front car. "My guess is that he acquired one of our radios during the raid on the cathedral." Nick said.

"Clever fox. Give the radio to Mansa. I know he's with you."

Yaxley quickly passed the radio. Bogo did his best to keep a cool head as he held the device to his ear. "Where did you get a sniper rifle, Vercus?"

"From the sharpshooter who got his face caved in when the chimney blew up. Why don't you take a look, see if you can see where I am before I put one through your muddy brown eye."

"Where's Ben?" Bogo snarled.

"Safe and sound, until I can get the damn door open. Alec's not the only one who can throw a murder mystery. Maybe I'll pay him a visit afterward. Show him how it's really done!"

Bogo nearly crushed the radio in his hoof. "You need to turn yourself in before we put you down like the rabid animal you are."

"Rabid? Says the upstart gutter ox who has hounded me since day one. The party animals can help you lighten up, I reckon. Spilling your intestines and ripping our your spine will take the pounds right off."

"Party animals?" Judy asked, frowning.

"Alright." Bogo sneered into the radio. "If it gets me closer to you, I'll play your sick games. Who's the murder victim?"

"The good Doctor Fauna. Unless you can get to her in time."

"She's alive?" Yaxley's ears perked.

"The mystery tonight is whether or not you can gather up all the clues and save Fauna before she loses her head and the whereabouts of the infamous Yokai Nishimura, and still have time to stop me from reaching Benji. Maybe you'll even catch me before I take my remaining grievances up with Tirari Town, but I wouldn't count on it."

"We'll see about that." Bogo retorted. "What's the first game?"

"The first game is an all time classic! A dancing competition! You see these big trucks blocking the gate? Inside is the competition. Once they open, you'll have to compete to determine who is the best dancer. The last team standing wins the game and gets the first clue to Fauna's location! Understand?"

"I understand, you little creep."

"Good. You can come out of hiding now. I've got work to do. You have two minutes before the game begins."

A few seconds later the gate slid open, leaving the semis the only things blocking their way into the estate.
Bogo tried the radio, but he heard the same strange noise. The frequency had been re-jammed. "This is crazy, even for him. What is he up to?"

"He's buying himself time." Judy said. "He's not just after Benji. I think he's doing something else in that house."

"And if he's telling the truth, our only chance of catching both him and Mr. Sushimura is to find Fauna." Nick said. "Couldn't we just ditch the dance party and go over the fence?"

Just then a ZBI officer joined them by the car. "Sir, we've got the entire estate surrounded, but the fence is electrified. The only way in is past those semis."

"Crap." Nick muttered. "Couldn't we just push the trucks out of the way?"

"See those explosives?" Yaxley pointed to the tiny white blocks beside the padlocks holding the semi doors closed, and the slightly bigger blocks fixed to the tires.

"Again. Crap."

Judy's ears swiveled. "Sir, I can hear something moving around in there."

"How many, Hopps?"

"A lot."

Bogo readied his weapon. "We have less than a minute before that semi opens! Everyone get ready!"

With the radio out of commission Yaxley had to yell out his orders. With most of their men surrounding the estate, only ten were available to assist in fighting off whatever came out that semi, including Fangmeyer and Higgins. To Bogo's relief Yaxley acceded to his request to put his gun away to use a less lethal dart gun in the fighting.

When fifteen seconds were left, they were ready. Every gun was pointed straight at the semis. Bogo hoped to God it was enough.

Fifteen seconds came and went. The little block detonated, blowing off the padlock. The doors swung open.

And then all hell broke loose.

Judy gasped in terror when more than thirty savage prey mammals poured out of the three semis, howling for blood.

Nevertheless she took the first shot, taking down a goat. In the blink of an eye the rest followed suit, demonstrating just why each of them had made it to Precinct One and the ZBI. But the beasts were too fast, the dart guns' firing rate too slow, their marksmanship not perfect enough.

"Retreat and keep firing!" Yaxley bellowed. They didn't need telling twice, backing back down the path through the forest.

Judy felt a frightening sense of déjà vu before her back hit a tree, just as a rhino took noticed and charged. She fired her weapon, but she'd run out of darts. Her mind went blank and her body went stiff as she watched death racing right at her. "Carrots!" She heard Nick scream from behind the rhino. That was all she needed. She bent her legs and leapt, her body doing a one-eighty in the air as the rhino skidded beneath her and hit the tree hard enough to rip the roots from the frozen ground.
She land behind the fallen mammal, miraculously ended up right beside Nick. His arms were stretched out, his empty dart gun pointed right at the rhino's dart-ridden hindquarters.

Judy's heart was pounding. "Okay, we're sticking together from now on!"

"Isn't that always the case?" Nick replied before they continued the fight.

They reloaded and fired and fought, but it did not look good for them. Three more rhinos pulled an elephant officer to the ground and nearly beat him to a bloody pulp, only some well-aimed darts from Bogo and Fangmeyer saving his hide. Yaxley had to clamber onto one of the armored vans to save himself from a vicious goring by a boar, having already taken a gash to his thigh. Judy ran out of darts again just as a beaver attacked, buck teeth gleaming red with blood. This time she took him down with a roundhouse kick and a dart to the shoulder. Nick seemed to hear something coming up behind them, for he spun round and threw a punch, catching a woodchuck square in the mouth.

"Wow!" He gasped as he shook his paw. "This is actually getting cathartic!"

"Nick!"
"Hey, you can't deny these guys deserve this!"

"Just stick to darts alright?!"

"I will if they stop running out!"

"BOTH OF YOU SHUT UP AND FIGHT!" Bogo roared. A bison tackled him, sending them both tumbling through an open car door and into the front seats. Judy and Nick were already on their way to assist when there was a colossal bang. They caught a glimpse of Bogo swinging an arm and the bison went flying back out the car. Bogo clambered back out, looking slightly dazed with a piece of something white stuck on the point of his horn.

"Are you alright, sir?" Judy asked.

"Damn airbag went off!" Bogo grunted. "When I get my hooves on that son of a-" He suddenly fired his dart gun between Nick and Judy, taking down a horse. "No more talking 'til they're all down!"

The bunny and fox nodded and resumed firing, racing along the road to assist the others however they could. Judy was no longer sure there had been thirty mammals in the three semis. Once again she kept firing until the gun ran empty. She reached for more darts, but this time her pouch was empty.

Nick noticed her predicament. "Hold on, I've got more here-"

"No time, Nick!" Judy had just seen three beavers, two sheep and a porcupine coming right at them from different directions. She reached behind and pulled out a retractable metallic baton.

She'd hoped she wouldn't have to use it.

The first swing swept the closest beaver's legs from under him, buying Nick time to take out the second and one of the sheep. The second swing smashed the buckteeth off the third beaver as it lunged to bite her throat, but it wasn't a fatal blow. The third batted the porcupine away from Nick when he tried to render the fox a ruddy pincushion. The last sheep succeeded in barging into the fox, knocking some darts from his paw. Judy raised her baton to break the maddened mammal's nose, only for the toothless beaver to knock her down and pin her to the ground. With one arm holding the sheep's horns at bay, Nick grabbed one of the dropped darts and stabbed it into his attacker's neck like an ice pick. He grabbed a second dart and plunged it into the back of the beaver tearing at Judy.
He checked her over, but Judy had only suffered a few scratches and a missing stab vest. Nick himself would likely be sore for weeks. He offered a paw and helped her up.

"Could I have one of those?" He asked. The fight went much easier after that. Even as they lose three of their own to injury, the officers whittled down the marauding savages until only one remained, the rhino trying to knock Yaxley off the roof of the van. He loaded his last dart, reached over the side in the split second the van stopped shaking, and took the beast down. Panting, he looked around the battlefield. "Is that all of them?"

Nick took a look around himself and gave a thumbs up. Yaxley exhaled and carefully made his way down. "Excellent work, everyone! Fangmeyer, Higgins, our radios are still jammed so you'll have to go around and tell our sentries what happened here! The rest of you, tend to the injured and get every last one of these mammals cuffed and muzzled!" He then turned his furious gaze to the semis. "That sick little freak! Take a look!"

Judy and Nick raised their flashlights and looked. A second later they had to turn away so they wouldn't throw up. The semis weren't entirely empty.

"Did you see those grenades in there?" Yaxley said and he leaned against the front car for support, practically squeezing his injured leg in his rage. "He must have rounded up the survivors. Forced them into those vans. Chucked a nightfall grenade in each van and locked those sorry souls in with them."

"Oh god." Judy whimpered. She was grateful for the one armed hug Nick gave her. "How could he do that?"

"Who cares, Hopps? All that matters is that he's gone too far. Where's my sharpshooter?" Yaxley barked. A wolf came running up. "Take your rifle and get up that tree over there. The instant you catch sight of Vercus Casel, kill him."

The wolf nodded grimly and rushed to one of the vans to retrieve the fifty-caliber gun. Judy couldn't bring herself to object to such lethal measures.

"In the meantime, some get the bomb disposal to see to those explosives still on the trucks!" Bogo ordered.

Their bomb disposal experts, three mammals from the ZBI they'd brought along in case they ran into a situation such as this, cautiously approached the semis. After a few minutes the one in charge returned to Bogo and Yaxley. "Sir, they're all attacked to a keypad on the center truck. We'll need a code to disarm it."

"Maybe it's the first clue Vercus was talking about." Yaxley said. "Everyone spread out! Search everywhere and everyone!"

"I don't think we have to." Nick had knelt down beside the beaver missing some teeth. "There's something drawn on his fur. Two, six, four, six."

"Sir, that same number is on this rhino, here!" A bear called from further down the road.

"They all have the number!" A rhino yelled.

The bomb disposal expert shrugged. "The keypad wants a four digit code. It's our only clue."

"Hang on, it could be another trap!" Judy said. "What if that code just triggers the bombs?"
"And risk Mansa dying a quick death?"

This time Bogo snatched the radio from Yaxley. "We know you're just buying time, Vercus. What are you up to?"

"That's for me to know. And you to die trying to find out."

"You seem upset that we won the game."

"Don't get cute, beef cake! You're only just getting started! You think I did all this on my own? The survivors found out who I really was. That their rightful leader is still alive. Realized Fauna lied. Most of them joined my side. Put the dissenter in the trucks. Helped me set up the party. Now they're waiting. On the other side. They've got guns. Real guns. Take them out. Then they'll lead you to Fauna."

"And if we just forget about Fauna and force our way through that entrance?" Bogo asked.

"Then you'll get your face blown off." Vercus hung up.

"You think he's telling the truth about the code?" Yaxley asked.

"He's obviously got plans for me." Bogo grunted. "And he's not going to risk those bombs blowing those plans out the window. I think it'll work."

"Did you notice the way he was talking?" Nick asked.

Bogo thrust the radio at Yaxley when he requested it back. "Whatever happened here must be making him lose his grip. We have to get in there and find Ben."

Just then the sharpshooter shouted down from his perch. "Sir, I think I see Clawhauser!"

Judy's heart leapt. Bogo raced up to the tree. "Where is he?"

The wolf peered through the scope. "In the bedroom with the balcony, sir. He blocked the door. That must be what's keeping Vercus from getting to him. He looks hurt, sir. I see blood on his left side."

Bogo tensed, digging his hooves into the tree. "How bad?"

"I just see the one wound. He's got a piece of glass in him. Looks like he's doing the smart thing and not taking it out."

Judy clenched her fists. "How is he doing?"

The wolf paused. "He's sitting by the drawers. He's put some kind of cloth around the glass shard and now he's taping it in place."

"He is smart." Yaxley said.

"He's going through the drawers again. Looks like he's found some papers and a book. Could be evidence." The wolf paused again. "What the hell is he doing?"

"What is it?" Judy asked, alarmed.

"He's unblocking the door! He's leaving the bedroom!"

"Benji, no!" Judy cried.
"What the hell is he playing at?" Bogo yelled.

"It must be whatever was on those documents." Yaxley replied dourly. "He's learned something important enough to make him come out of hiding."

"He's out the door!" The sharpshooter called. "He's gone."

"Damn it!" Bogo growled. "Any sign of Vercus?"

"None, sir. I don't think he knows Clawhauser has left."

"Then we'd better get in before he finds out." Nick said.

Bogo glared down at the fox. "What's that smirk on your face?"

Judy smiled along with Nick. She knew that look all too well, and it only grew wider as the fox spoke. "This is starting to remind me of Bellwether. She thought she had all the cards too. If we're gonna be playing more of his games, then I say we throw some cheaters into the mix."
Daybreak

When Arianna Fauna had followed Nishimura's advice to take Benjamin to her bedroom, she must have figured that no harm would come of it since she'd planned to kill the cheetah once he'd served his purpose. It was the only explanation that made sense to Benjamin when he found the documents in the chest of drawers. A lot of it was scientific mumbo jumbo, but years of administrative work enabled him to get the gist of it; they were regular reports from the laboratory concerning the progress of the Nightfall and Daybreak grenades.

Daybreak? That was new. Benjamin found all the papers relating to Daybreak and started from what appeared to be the beginning. The development of Daybreak began after Bellwether's plot was exposed, and an antidote had been successfully synthetized to cure the savage predators. Nishimura had immediately recommended that they begin development of a grenade that could quickly disperse a Veltro developed variant of the antidote in gas form. He'd argued that Daybreak could be useful should their Nightfall weapon get out of control, or should the need to hold the city to ransom arise. It acted quickly to neutralize the blue gas, and also worked as an incapacitating agent to sedate the victims until the antidote did its job. It could either be triggered by hand or fired from the launcher. Benjamin quickly skipped past the scientific stuff he had no chance of understanding, and learned that Daybreak had been perfected a mere day ago, too late for the Veltro members who had been ambushed in the forest between the city and the Casel estate. But perhaps not too late for the officers fighting for their lives at this very moment.

Wincing at the sharp pain of the glass in his side, Benjamin set the papers down, stared at the wall behind the drawers and for the second time this evening contemplated the stupid thing he was about to do. When he'd spoken with Fauna outside the dining room, 'Nishimura' had said something about an antidote in a laboratory. He must have been talking about Daybreak. If the cheetah could get his paws on those grenades, dozens of lives could be saved. Benjamin was already forcing himself to his feet. It was a stupid decision, but an easy one as well. It took some pain and effort, but he unblocked the door and peeked into the hallway outside. After the explosions the place was a wreck, with parts of the wall broken off and littering the floor, but it was also empty. The stairs weren't too far from here. The hard part would come when he reached the lower floor, where he would have to find the stairs to the basement lab. At the very least he should take a weapon. Benjamin returned to the bed and completely broke off the bedrail he'd damaged earlier. Then he left the bedroom before he could change his mind.

Nick leaned against the side of the first armored van with one paw. "Before I explain my brilliant plan to cheat Vercus's game, please confirm one thing for me. You're certain these vans are bulletproof?"

Yaxley nodded. "The bullets can punch through the windows eventually, but they can't get through the armored metal."

"Perfect." Nick rubbed his paws together. "All the ways to the lower floor are a no go, 'cause Vercus's loyal followers are waiting there."

"He's right." The sharpshooter called down from his perch. When they'd learned that there were mammals with guns on the other side of the gruesome semis, he'd moved to a tree with better cover. "I can see about two dozen hostiles taking cover behind the burned vehicles in front of the mansion. I also see five in the dining room windows, wearing hazmat suits. They've put duct tape over the interior doors and barricaded them for some reason. I don't see anyone in the upper floors."
"There might be too much damage up there to take the risk." Judy said.

The easiest way into the mansion is through that bedroom Benji just left."

"Easier? Are you certifiable, Wilde?" Bogo snapped. "That's on the upper floor! How the hell are we supposed to get there?"

Nick gestured to Judy and himself. "Officer Carrots and myself are footballs to you bulging behemoths. We'll use the van to get close enough for someone to give us a boost. Once we get on the balcony we'll be out of reach of those bullets. Then we'll find Benji, hunt Vercus down and put an end to this whole... whole... whatever it is."

"So we're literally throwing some cheaters into the mix?" Yaxley chuckled. "I see what you did there. Wilde. What do you think, Bogo?"

Bogo nodded. "When we clear that gate, we're going to have hellfire raining down on us. If the rest of us return fire, we can keep them distracted until I can get Hopps and Wilde up on that balcony."

Nick blinked in surprise. Bogo responded with an evil smirk. "Oh yes, Wilde. You don't know how long I've wanted to pick you up and throw you away."

To his credit, Nick merely smirked back. "Yeah, yeah. Just don't miss."

Yaxley opened the driver's side door and climbed inside. "I'll bring the van to a stop facing the building, so you'll be under cover the entire time. And when you get in there, find the radio jammer and destroy it. We need communications restored as soon as possible."

"Yes, sir." Judy said. "We'll call as soon as we can."

"Higgins and Rhinowitz will stay here and guard the gate. Alright, the three of you get in the back before I decide this is a stupid idea." Yaxley gave orders for every mammal to return to the armored vehicles in preparation for the raid, and for three biggest and strongest mammals to push the middle semi out the way on his signal before shutting the door and starting the engine. Nick, Judy and Bogo entered Yaxley's van, and the buffalo closed the doors behind them. They heard the faint crunching sound of massive tires on gravel as the middle semi was pushed forward.

Then the hellfire began.

There was a jolt as the van got moving. Nick didn't have to look outside to know they speeding. He cringed, trying to focus on replenishing his ammo supply along with Judy instead of the frighteningly loud sounds of countless bullets striking the van. They can't pierce the armored plating, Nick thought to himself over and over. They can't pierce the armored plating. They can't pierce the armored-

"It's going to work, Nick." Nick was snapped out of his mental mantra when Judy touched his forearm. "Chief Bogo's going to throw us over the roof of the van. All the terrorists will be aiming for the sides of the van. They won't be expecting anyone to go up. This will work."

Nick nodded, not entirely convinced, and looked up at Bogo. "Sir, can I have a baton, please?"

Bogo rolled his eyes. "Take two if it'll help you man up."

Nick gratefully took two retractable batons from the van's supply and attached them to his belt. They clung to the seats for balance when the van came to a sudden stop. Yaxley yelled from up front. "Now, Bogo!"

Bogo approached the doors and glared down at his officers. "You two ready?"
"Ready, sir!"

Bogo exhaled slowly, steeling himself. "Just get Ben back alive."

With that he flung the doors open and leapt out.

As Nick and Judy were picked up like little dolls, they caught glimpses of the other vans, and the officers pouring out to return fire at the terrorists defending their headquarters. Bogo shouted at them to brace themselves. Nick stared up at the stone balcony above them. Maybe this wasn't such a good ide-

Bogo threw him without warning. Nick nearly screamed his head off as he soared over the van roof and the bullets. He cleared the railing and landed hard on the balcony. Bogo's aim had been true.

The fox was so relieved that when Judy landed on the balcony next, she caught him kissing the stone floor. "Nick?"

Nick looked up sharply, eyes widening when he saw her face. "Carrots?"

"What are you doing?"

"What am I doing?" Nick grew hot with mortification as he got up. "What are you doing, just standing there? We've got a city to save again!"

They made a beeline for the open bedroom door, leaving the terrible gunfire behind them. Nick sent a small prayer that they would all make it out okay before he and Judy entered the corridor. "Clear."

The fox confirmed, and they retreated back into the bedroom. "So what, do we head downstairs?"

"Let's go top to bottom and check the roof first." Judy said. "The radio jammer will likely be somewhere high up, and we need to restore communications."

"Okay, the roof it is. So how do we get up there?"

"Let's figure it out while we look."

"Okay. Lead on, Macduff."

Judy paused. "Lay on. It's 'lay on, Macduff.'"

Nick clicked his tongue. "Shakesheare was some playwright if he couldn't even write properly."

"Stop being uncultured and find a way up."

"The roof got blown up, too. What makes you think we'll find anything up there?"

There were five other doors in the hallway, and the stairs leading down were almost completely gone; it looked like the source of the hallway's destruction was a bomb planted somewhere on the steps. Most disturbing of all was the faint trace of blue mist seeping from the debris blocking what was left of the stairs, and the two closest doors. Nick and Judy backed away, glancing at each other with worry. The explosions had not only decimated Veltro's headquarters. They must have also unleashed Veltro's supply of Nightfall. It explained what their sharpshooter had said about the duct-taped doors. It did not bode well for Benjamin, or for them.

"You know what? You're right." Nick pointed his gun at the dangerous debris despite the stupidity of the action. "I haven't been on anyone's roof since I stopped melting jumbo pops."
They approached the next door along, and tensed when they heard crunching sounds coming from the other side. Nick motioned for Judy to cover him while he turned the knob and slowly pushed the door open.

The room was eerily dark, so dark they almost missed the figure hunched over the bed. When the shaft of light from the open door hit the figure's face, it looked up. Nick caught a glimpse of antlers, a big red smear covering the mammal's mouth, and more red covering the bed covers. Before the fox could have time to feel sick, the mammal bellowed and launched itself at the two officers.

A shot from the fox brought the elk crashing to the floor halfway across the bedroom. Too afraid to look at the bed just yet, Nick cautiously approached the fallen mammal and checked the crimson stained face. It wasn’t Vercus. Not only that, the red smear wasn’t the right shade to be blood. It also smelled too sweet.

"Oh, thank goodness." Judy breathed from beside the bed. "It was just a pie."

They did a quick sweep of the room, finding several black hazmat suits in a wide variety of sizes in the walk in closet, but no radio jammer.

"They must have had those in suits in something like this should happen. I'll give them credit for one thing, they knew what they were dealing with." Judy said. She pinched the sleeve of one of the smallest suits between her fingers. "Nick, how do you feel about wearing an oversized suit?"

"It'd be a step up from an oversized clown vest, that's for sure."

Nick found himself in a humiliatingly baggy suit that would have better suited a pig or other wider mammal, while Judy had the fortune of finding one fit for a bunny. They both agreed that a jammer powerful enough to cover a half-mile wouldn't be small enough to hide easily, and left.

Holding the mask in his paw, Nick froze when they stepped back out into the hallway. He'd caught a whiff of something that wasn't blackberry juice. "Carrots."

"What?" Judy already had her head covered, her voice sounding strange through the mask. She looked like an alien from a fifties movie.

"I smell blood." Nick put the mask over his head, almost immediately finding it stuffy under there.

They slowly stalked down the hallway, aware of the sounds of gunfire coming form outside. Nick wondered how Bogo, Yaxley and the others were doing, and hoped they would be careful enough not to storm the lower floor without protection. They checked the fourth door along the way. An empty bedroom. Nick lifted his mask and with his sniffer he traced the scent to the set of doors at the end. He pushed one of them open. They found themselves on the upper walkway of what they assumed to be the entrance hall, which looked relatively intact compared to the hallway… other than the massive hole in the ceiling dripping rubble and dust. They could only see the top half of the front doors above the blanket of Nightfall covering the floor below. Nick swiftly slipped the mask back on. When they saw the half dozen mammals crawling on all fours through the mist, Nick and Judy ducked down, keeping low to the floor in case any of the savages looked up.

"Oh, this is bad." Judy whispered. "We've got to disable that jammer and warn Bogo."

Nick didn't reply, instead kneeling down on the walkway's carpet to examine a circular stain on the ground. Blood. Please, please don't let it be Benji's. He looked for more traces and saw trail taking him and Judy across the entrance hall. They crawled on all fours along the walkway, the carpet cushioning their movement. When they mercifully reached the double doors on the other side
without being seen, Nick grabbed one of the doorknobs and opened the door by a crack.

In the hallway there were more spots of blood. Nick followed the scent to a plain wooden door. He turned the knob, and scowled. The door was locked this time. He braced himself for trouble and knocked.

"Anyone in there?" He asked quietly.

"Nick?" Came fearful voice.

"Benji!" Judy barged past Nick and knocked on the door herself. "Ben, it's us! Open the door!"

There was a click and the door opened. The smell of blood strengthened, and Nick's heart sank when he saw the cause of it.

"Oh sweet cheese and crackers." Judy clapped a paw over her mouth when she saw the shard of glass in the cheetah's side, stabilized with a bloody ring of cloth. "What happened?"

"The glass doors blew out when the semis blew up." Benji bit back a whimper as he backed away from the door and lowered himself onto an old fashioned bed. He'd been in the middle of slipping on a hippo-sized suit of his own, it was clinging to his hips. "You don't know how glad I am to see you guys."

Judy hopped onto the bed and wrapped her arms around the feline's neck. "You're going to be okay, Benji. Bogo's here. The ZPD and the ZBI are both here. They're going to bust in at any moment and put an end to this once and for all."

Benjamin relaxed at the mention of Bogo, but his expression was pained. Judy lowered herself to the embedded shard to see what she could do.

"If they bust in here now, they'll be bursting into a slaughter." Nick said. "We need to do something about that chemical hazard down there."

"Daybreak." Benjamin said with a grunt of pain.

"You're suggesting we wait 'till the sun comes up? Just how much blood have you lost, Spots?"

"It's a grenade designed to dispense a gas that can neutralize the Nightfall and safely incapacitate anyone caught in it." Benjamin replied. "Veltro developed it in a lab just like Doug Ramses did. I tried to get to it to neutralize the gas spill downstairs, but I ran into a savage elk. I managed to lock myself in here."

Now that sounded like a solution. "Where is this lab?"

"In the basement."

"Damnit." Judy grunted even though they would doubtlessly go down anyway. "The first thing we should do is to disable that jammer. I'll go."

Nick scowled. "We'll go, Carrots."

"Someone has to stay here with Ben! He could go into shock any minute!"

"Guys, guys!" Benjamin quickly put an end to their argument. "I think I know where the jammer is. It's in the attic. There's a stairway two doors down. I would have disabled it myself if I knew what it was."

"You sure?"
"It looked military. I'm sure." Benjamin closed his eyes and held his wounded side. "Be careful up there. The attic floor took a lot of damage. If the jammer survived that, it might take the both of you to stop it."

Judy lightly smacked his arm. "Don't be ridiculous, we can't leave you here on your own! What if Vercus finds you?"

"And what if the floor collapses while you're up there? What will you do if there's no-one to save you?" Benjamin retorted as he slipped the black hazmat suit the rest of the way up. It was very wide, even for him, so he could pinch part of it and hold the fabric away from the shard. It wasn't like he would be doing any more running around in the meantime. "The stairs aren't far from here. You'll probably be five minutes tops. Just leave a gun. A few darts. Some donuts if you have them."

Nick shrugged. "I would have given you a blackberry pie if a savage hadn't beaten us to it."

Judy tapped her foot. "I'm not going to convince you to let me go alone, are you?"

"Nope."

"Fine. If we don't disable the jammer in two minutes, you come back here and stay with him until I'm done. That's final."

Nick nodded, satisfied. "Sorry, buddy, but I don't have spare gun. If a nutjob shows up, poke him in the eye with this." He handed Benjamin one of his batons.

Nick and Judy stepped back outside and waited until they heard the door lock before making their way to the door the cheetah had told them about. They found the stairway, a narrow wooden filthy set of steps leading to a wide attack draped with cobwebs.

"There it is." Judy used her dart gun to point at the large device in the center of the attic, as well as the massive hole from before. As they edged closer, they spied the entrance hall walkway below.

"Military, just like Benji said." Nick added. "Where the hell did Veltro get hardware like that?"

"We'll ask the survivors when this is over." Judy said. "If we removed the antennae from that thing, would that work?"

"Worth a shot." Nick took a step forward, and stiffened when he heard a crumbling sound coming from the ceiling beneath. "He was right, this floor isn't stable. Let's go one at a time, shall we?"

They made it to the jammer without incident. Nick boosted Judy onto the device, and she started to pull at one of the antennae. "Cripes, this thing is fixed tight!" Nick climbed up to help her. With great effort on both their part, the antenna ripped free. They pulled out the rest before Nick tried the radio.

"Chief Bogo, come in! We reached the jammer and disabled it. Come in, Buffalo Butt!"

"I ought to put you on parking duty for that, fox!"

Nick and Judy beamed at each other. "Sir, the radios are officially unjammed."

"Where is Ben?!" In the background they could still hear gunfire.

"He's hurt, but okay for now. How's the firefight, going?"

"Do you want the good news or the bad news first?" They heard Yaxley shout. "Good news is we've found Fauna. Our sharpshooter spotted her locked up in a bedroom at the end of the east wing."
"That's at the end of this!" Judy exclaimed.

"The bad news is that we're running out of firepower to fight these guys! We can call for reinforcements, so that's something. Have you apprehended Vercus?"

"There's been no sign of him since we got in here. Sir, do not break into the house!" Judy warned. "The entire ground floor is flooded with Nightfall. You'll need hazmat suits to make it through there!"

"We'll make sure our backup brings some along!" Bogo said. "You need to find a way to dispel that gas!"

"Veltro built a device called Daybreak that can neutralize Nightfall, but it's in the basement la-" Suddenly Nick grabbed her around the waist. "Judy, look out!"

Ratatatat!

Sparks exploded across the jammer as Nick and Judy tumbled to the floor. Bruised and sore, they looked up to see Vercus standing in the doorway, machine gun in hoof.

Nick had lost his dart gun in the short fall. Judy leapt to her feet first, gun aimed at the elk-deer's chest. "Stand down! I won't tell you again!"

Vercus snarled before pulling the trigger. Judy leapt to the side, drawing the hail of bullets away from Nick. Before she hit the floor they heard the dry click of the machine gun running out. Vercus tossed the gun aside, pulled out a sickle, and threw himself at the bunny. Judy dodged his attack again and fired a dart into his shoulder.

Nick felt a rush of relief. It was over. The Hound was down.

But then Vercus raised the sickle to his own arm, and sliced through his own sleeve and skin. He hissed through his teeth and glared at Judy with pure hate.

He fought off the tranquilizer.

Vercus struck quickly, pinning Judy to the floor before she could snap out of her stunned state.

"No!" Nick pulled out his other baton and charged at the mad mammal. He struck Vercus in the head. "Get! Your mitts! Off of her!" At the third strike Vercus turned on the fox, grabbing the baton in the middle of the fourth swing. Pretending to struggle with the weapon, Nick lowered his free paw to the pouch of darts on his belt.

The floorboards somehow decided that that was the right moment to give up the ghost. With a great crunching crashing noise, Nick, Judy and Vercus plummeted amidst a rain of splinters, rubble and dust, hitting the tiled floor of an old fashioned bathroom below. Stars danced in front of Nick's eyes. The only thing on his dazed mind was his partner's name. He turned on his side and saw her lying atop the toilet lid. Vercus had landed in the bathtub, and was already clambering out with look of pure bloodlust on his scarred face.

Nick heard the click of a door opening. He turned his aching body to the bathroom door behind him.

Of all the goddamned luck. They'd landed in the adjoining bathroom of Benjamin's room.

Still holding the excess fabric over the place where his shard was embedded, the cheetah gasped
when Vercus spotted him. Eyes of madness locked with eyes of terror.

"There he is." Vercus whispered.

There was a creak from above. The heavy jammer, teetering on the edge of the new hole in the ceiling, tilted just enough to plunge into the bathroom after them. Nick cursed and rolled out the way just in time. The jammer hit the tiles with the force of a wrecking ball, sinking six inches. Nick had a premonition, cursed again and grabbed the exposed pipe beneath the sink just as the floor collapsed once more.
Benjamin was either lucky or very unlucky. He was lucky in that he'd fallen on a large couch laden with thick cushions.

He was unlucky in that he and his friends had plunged into a cloud of Nighthowler gas full of savage prey mammals.

He'd lain there for a bit, trying not to scream from his ribs and the shard in his side. He didn't know how Judy and Nick had landed, but they were quickly up and firing, bringing down mammal after mammal. A bison had pinned down Vercus nearby, and he was holding it at bay by rapidly punching its face with both fists.

Benjamin felt for the shard, at first finding his own blood and noticing how warm and damp it felt even through the fabric covering his fingers. Where was the shard? He looked down. His heart dropped to his stomach. The shard wasn't in his side anymore. It was stuck in one of the cushions, soaked in crimson. He looked at his body and saw the small slit in his suit, ringed with red.

Oh no.

Other than the pain he didn't feel anything wrong. Not yet. He stared through the plastic visor at his friends. "Guys! My suit's torn!"

They didn't have much time to show anything other than looks of horror. "Ben, the glass!" Judy cried.

Benjamin knew. He was already pressing a paw to the tear and the wound underneath, but he was sure it was already too late.

Sure enough, as he watched Vercus force the bison off him and immediately get accosted by a ram, he caught a whiff of a floral scent.

Daybreak. It was his only hope.

He didn't know if it was sheer terror or the toxins already suppressing his common sense, but the cheetah staggered for the only door in the lounge. Nick and Judy called out to him, but they only got a hiss in response. They tried to run to him, but were held at bay by the very savages that had been drawn by their aggression. Benjamin pushed the door open and forced his way through.

Down. Down. He needed to go down. There was fire in his lungs now.

There was nothing in hallway. Nothing that could threaten him. He couldn't go to the stairway near the dining room. That was past the entrance hall, and that place was a no go. He'd seen the savages as he'd crept past the walkway. He needed to do down. A place this big must have more than one way down. He needed to go down.

He had to reach Daybreak.

He tried the door straight across from the lounge. Only bathroom in there. Empty, too. Good. Bad, too. Nothing to eat in the bathroom.
Benjamin smacked his head as he made his way to the next door. The poison was not coming quick enough. Not enough to make him go mad quick. But he had so little time. So much fear. So much pain. So little time.

Fight it. Get more time. The fire in his lungs was spreading.

He smacked himself again as he reached the next door. He heard Nick call his name in the distance.

Or was it the rabbit?


He hissed in anger. He needed to stop thinking like that. The darkness was strongest at the other end, almost black. So black there didn't seem to be a floor.

Maybe there was reason for that.

The fire inside was almost everywhere now. His brain was fuzzy.

He stalked forward, finally seeing the steps. There was a bare bulb halfway down, smashed in half. A door at the bottom marked with a blue symbol.

If the horned monster showed up, Benjamin would kill him.

No, he wouldn't.

Yes, he would.

He would have to.

The monster would hurt him.

He would hurt Mansa more.

Not if Benjamin hurt him first.

Stop thinking like that!

He reached the bottom. Shoved the door open with a bang.


The lab. He'd made it.

Find Daybreak.

What does it look like?

Gold. Like sunlight. Fauna's documents said so.

Grenades.

Not these ones. Need these ones.

Friends will die without them.

Everything hurts.

Need to eat.

_Fight it, Clawhauser!_


The cheetah made his way over.


The label on the ruined cabinet was still intact. Daybreak shots.

For emergencies.

Not grenades. Next best thing.

The cheetah unzipped his suit and pulled one arm free.

Blood underneath.

Somewhere above he heard a loud crash.

He can't remember his name anymore. Almost out of time.

Daybreak is what matters now.

He reached past broken glass. He pulled out a syringe. He pushed the needle into his forearm below the elbow. It stung but he kept it there. He pulled the trigger. The gold vial turned clear.

The cheetah dropped the syringe, a sudden convulsion sending him falling back against the charred wall. Was it working? Was he turning? Manchas had convulsed before he'd turned. Judy had said it in her report.

He convulsed again. He'd made a mistake. Daybreak wasn't his salvation. He hoped Mansa wouldn't see him like this. Maybe he'd bleed out first.

His body hurt so much, but the fire inside was dying. His eyelids grew heavy. The hunger was changing. He wanted sweet stuff again. Killing Vercus wasn't acceptable anymore.

He could remember his name now.

Benjamin Clawhauser slid to the floor, shrouded in blue mist. The flowery smell was still everywhere, but it didn't burn him anymore.

He was tired, now. So, so tired. The documents said Daybreak acted as a sedative too. It didn't look like he would be going anywhere for a while.
There were footsteps coming from the stairs, too heavy to be Nick and Judy. Benjamin felt a slight pang of fear, very slight, as the Hound of the Casels stepped into the room.

The Hound grinned as he saw Benjamin.

He stalked forward.

Benjamin couldn't move his body.

"No more running." The Hound said softly. "No more hiding. You're coming with me."

As he drew closer he lowered himself on all fours. Closer and closer he crept forward, as Benjamin struggled to widen the distance between them.

"True or false." He was so close he reached out for Benjamin's face. "Bogo is false... Beneath his shiny stars... and golden badge... he is nothing more... than a filthy street rat. I alone am true. Why can't you understand?"

"I... I understand." Benjamin managed to say. "But you are false."

The Hound's fingers froze just inches from the feline's cheek. "What did you say?"

"This isn't you." Benjamin pleaded. "It's the serum. That's what made you this way. You're Vercus Casel, not the Hound of the Casels. Please. You have stop this."

The False Hound's half-scarred visage contorted. "I'm not a Casel anymore! Elgen made certain of that. Not that I still give a damn!"

"You don't have to be a Casel, but you can still be you." Benjamin gestured with his head to the cabinet of Daybreak shots. "The antidote's right there. You can be true again."

"I know." The Hound replied, calming down. "Daybreak is what I came for... But I know what it'll do. I can't take it. Not yet. Not here. Not until we are far, far, far away, and I have completed my revenge. Everything that survived here is coming with me. And so are you."

With that his fingers closed around the fabric of Benjamin's jacket.

In his slightly dazed state, Benjamin didn't initially understand what had happened when the Hound suddenly receded from him.

Huh?

Then he realized that someone was throwing the elk-deer back into the stairway, and it wasn't the fox or the rabbit. It was an immense being so black it could have been a silhouette. As the creature shoved the Hound into the steps, Benjamin saw horns clothed in shiny black, curved like sickles. In its wake it left smeared black footprints.

For one Daybreak-addled moment, Benjamin thought that the true Hound of the Casels had come to claim another sinner. Then the being turned its head and locked eyes with Benjamin. Its mouth was a filter. A visor shimmered above it. Behind the visor stared two reddish brown eyes.

No. Not the Hound.

"Ben." It whispered.

The creature in the black hazmat suit turned back to the Hound and raised a dart gun to put him
down. The Hound's hoof shot out and grabbed the barrel, tilted it up, and with his other hoof knocked his assailant back with a punch. The Hound threw the dart gun to the floor, shattering it to pieces, and stormed back into the misty lab.

There was a name for the creature in black, Benjamin thought as it blocked another punch and tried to put the Hound in an arm lock. The Hound squirmed out of the hold and kicked the creature in the knee. The creature grunted, but stayed standing. As the fight continued, Benjamin tried to remember what the name was. The creature shared the same name with a terrible event that happened in the middle ages. The nickname came from its infamous capacity for violence in its home continent thousands of years ago, long before predator and prey evolved enough to discover fire. Nowadays it could be considered a slur in a certain context.

What was it, Benjamin wondered as he watched the creature punch the Hound into a metal cabinet, knocking them both to the floor with a crash. The Black Demon? The Black Beast?

*The Black Death.* Yes, that was it. The Black Death had come.

Benjamin groaned and rubbed his weary eyes. Daybreak must be really doing a number on him if he was letting himself ponder over such silly things. There had to be something he could do, something that could help Bogo stop this maniac.

The Hound, *Vercus* as Benjamin reminded himself rolled away from the cabinet, which had fallen open in the fall. Inside was a case of silver cylindrical grenades, scattered in a heap inside the cabinet. Vercus got up and slashed with his sickle, forcing Bogo to back away. Vercus advanced, drawing them both away from the cabinet. Now was Benjamin's chance to see if those grenades were full of Daybreak.

He rolled onto his front, his arms and legs frustratingly heavy, but the shock and relief of Bogo showing up had given him the strength to start crawling. The top half of his hazmat suit trailed behind him, along with a faint trail of blood.

It was hard to see through the blue mist, even when he tried to blow it away. He couldn't tell if he was making any progress, but he could see Bogo and Vercus above the mist, trading blows. He hoped Bogo would be able to get through the fight without tearing his suit.

Then Vercus kicked Bogo over a fallen stool, sending him to the floor. The False Hound pounced, pinning Bogo to the floor, and tried to plunge the sickle into his throat. Bogo caught the fiend's arms and tried to keep the serrated blade from piercing him. Vercus persisted, snarling as he tried to force the blade down. Bogo grunted as Vercus's knee dug into his side. He was pressing on the stitches. Benjamin crawled faster.

His fingertips touched the warm metal of the cabinet. He dragged himself closer and pulled out one of the grenades. On the side was D-BRK.

"Fight this off if you can, Vercus." It may have been a residual effect of Nightfall, but Benjamin felt a vicious satisfaction as he pulled the pin and threw it in the corner farthest from the three.

In a few seconds there was a loud hissing sound as golden gas spewed from the grenade, quickly filling the corner of the room. Vercus looked up from his attempt to skewer Bogo when he heard the sound, giving the buffalo the edge he needed to throw him off and into the side of a bench, knocking off a half dozen glass beakers. Holding his side, Bogo started to get up while Benjamin reached into the cabinet for more grenades. The elk-deer grabbed a small cage and swung it into the buffalo's face, striking him down again. A crack formed in his visor. As Daybreak continued to spread, Vercus stood up and spun on the spot, looking for his sickle. Failing to see it in the blue and yellow.
mist, he pulled out a short knife and advanced on the fallen buffalo. As he descended on Bogo the
suited mammal repelled him with a kick, sending the knife skidding across the floor and under a
distorted metal table. Wiping blood from his mouth, Vercus seemed to spot something on the other
side of the stool.

It was the sickle.

Vercus reached over the stool, but Bogo grabbed his shoulders and dragged him back. Vercus
elbowed him in the side, making him reel back with a shout. Bogo fell against a bench and looked
briefly stunned before he grabbed Vercus's tail, dragging him back again when he tried to retrieve his
weapon. The buffalo lunged past him and grabbed the stool before scrambling to his feet. Vercus
grabbed the sickle, stood up and started stabbing at Bogo. Bogo fended off each blow with the stool
until he saw an opening to whack Vercus in the face. As the deformed stool fell to the floor Bogo
grabbed the sickle and wrenched it from Vercus's grasp. As the elk-deer staggered back, Bogo
slipped the bloody blade into a thin gap in a cabinet and twisted. There was a chink as the sickle
snapped in two.

Bogo threw the useless handle aside and raised his fists in preparation as Vercus recovered.

They glared at each other from opposite sides of the destroyed laboratory as Daybreak swirled all
around them.

"It's over, Vercus." Bogo said. "Nightfall's been neutralized and Veltro's being taken down as we
speak. There's nothing left to fight for now."

"That's where you're wrong, Bogo!" Vercus snarled. "I have everything to fight for right here!" He
gestured to Benjamin. Benjamin shrank back, hoping that Daybreak would hurry up and subdue
him. It certainly seemed to be having an effect on the elk-deer's mind. He wasn't speaking in broken
sentences anymore. "I'm glad you're here actually! Now I can kill you right in front of little Benji!
Watching you die screaming and spilling your guts will be the first step in breaking him! His
admiration, his affection, everything you take for granted, I will have it all! His adoration belongs to
me! Ben is mine!"

Bogo snorted. His eyes flashed behind his cracked visor. "'Ben is yours?' Guess no-one teaches life
lessons like Gaston."

He braced himself as Vercus charged, and Benjamin gasped when he saw the elk-deer pull out yet
another blade from somewhere in his coat. Bogo grabbed the wrist of the arm holding the long knife.
Vercus grabbed the knife with both hooves and tried to push it towards the buffalo.

Holding the knife at bay with one arm, Bogo reached toward a cone shaped bottle labeled Pepper
Spray Mix.

The False Hound never saw it coming until it smashed into the unscarred side of his face.

There was no pause. No moment of silence. Vercus started screaming the instant the painful
concoction splashed into his eyes. He staggered away from the buffalo, clawing at his soaked fur and
streaming eyes. Cursing and howling, Vercus was helpless as Bogo stalked forward and shoved him
into the largest open cage, barring it shut with the remains of the stool.

Benjamin felt a chill up his spine. Vercus's screams were horrible, and almost unnatural in the way
they filled the room. Resting his hooves on the stool, Bogo stared at Vercus for a good long while as
the elk-deer thrashed inside the cage, screeching vile threats, in too much pain to even attempt to
break out. The sound of his limbs striking against the metal bars filled the room along with his
screams.

Bogo turned away from the slightly shaking, noisy cage and walked over to Benjamin. The cheetah could barely keep his eyes open, or keep his hold on the Daybreak grenades he'd taken just in case Bogo needed them. The buffalo reached him and bent down. Then Benjamin saw that his cracked visor had a small jagged hole in it. He tried to point that out, but even speaking was too much for him. He felt two big arms slide under his back and knees, then felt the floor disappear as he was lifted into the air.

Vercus's screams were growing fainter. Either the blinded psychopath was finally beginning to succumb to Daybreak or Benjamin was about to pass out. The cheetah suspected it was both.

Bogo brought Benjamin to the exit and nudged the door open. He paused, and turned his head one more time to look at the source of the bellowing, cursing and clanging. Benjamin couldn't see Vercus for Bogo's large form, and didn't care. He never wanted to see that mammal again.

Bogo turned his gaze back to the steps ahead and walked out the lab with the bleeding, drugged up feline in his arms. With the remaining Daybreak grenades nestled in his own arms, Benjamin realized then that it was truly over. No more Hounds. No more Nightfall. No more Veltro. With that final comforting thought, he rested his head against Bogo's shoulder and drifted in a deep and dreamless sleep.

Chapter End Notes

End of Act VI.

Stay tuned for the Final Act!
Act VII: A Christmas Case Closed

When Vercus finally fought off his attackers and raced out the lounge in pursuit of Benjamin, Judy had truly thought it was the end for her and Nick. They’d been surrounded and completely cut off from the exit, and they were both on their last dart. As the five hostiles stalked toward the cornered pair, Judy’s gun arm had been shaking with terror. Her other arm had stretched out, searching for a broken plank, anything she could use to defend herself once her last shot was fired. Instead she had found Nick’s paw, recognizable even through the gloves of their hazmat suits. She’d instinctively tightened her fingers around his thumb, and his larger fingers had enclosed around her paw. They’d locked eyes through their scratched and dirty visors. A silent message, a wish, a prayer, a farewell, had passed between them. Then they’d both aimed their weapons at the closest savages to begin their final stand.

Then there had been an earsplitting crash that even made the savages pause. The large windows had shattered inward, drawing their attention to the back of the armored van that had collided right into the side of the mansion. Before they could have even comprehended what the hell had just happened the doors had flown open and poured out three large mammals in black hazmat suits of their own. They’d made short work of the remaining savages in the room before turning their attention to Judy and Nick. They soon learned that two of their ominously dressed saviors were none other that Rhinowitz and Higgins, who were the only mammals who could fit into the hazmat suits they’d found in the guardhouse beside the gate. The rest had been explained in the Bullpen the next day; with the radio jammer destroyed they’d been able to contact Bogo and Yaxley to inform them of their very useful discovery. They’d immediately broke away from the fight and drove their van back to retrieve the two, and fit Bogo into the third suit.

When the three had identified themselves, Judy had turned away for a minute to face the corner, wishing she could have removed her mask to wipe the tears from her eyes.

When Bogo had demanded to know where Benjamin was and Judy told him he’d likely gone in search of Daybreak to cure his Nighthowler exposure, the buffalo had ordered the four of them to clear the mansion before taking off like a shot. For the next five minutes Judy and her comrades had done just that, sweeping through the lower floor and taking down anything that moved. At one point, Yaxley had radioed in to give the good news that the remaining Veltro members had finally been taken out. By the time they cleared the final room on this floor, Bogo returned, his visor broken, and a motionless Benjamin in his arms.

"Oh my gosh." Judy gasped when they all gathered in the entrance hall and she saw Bogo.

"He’s asleep." Bogo said. He gave Benjamin a slight jostle, and the cheetah mumbled. "Daybreak worked, but it sedated him as well. If a helicopter's not here to get him to a hospital when I get out of here, there will be hell to pay."

"And Vercus?" Rhinowitz asked.

"In the lab downstairs, caged like the animal he is. We should wait until backup arrives with more hazmat suits before collecting him."

"Good."

"What're those things Benji's holding?" Nick asked.

"Daybreak grenades. Ben released one in the lab to help subdue Vercus, and thank god he did. In
case you haven't noticed my visor broke in the struggle."

"Is that why you're not going crazy right now? You breathed in Daybreak?" Nick pouted. "Darn, I've been hoping to have a good reason to shoot you."

"I ought to demote you for saying that, Wilde!"

"You know you love me."

"Can we please get out of here, sir?" Higgins asked before Bogo could retort.

Bogo kept his eyes on Nick. "Yes. You and Rhinowitz go upstairs and apprehend Fauna. Remember she's at the end of the east wing." The two officers immediately made their way upstairs. "The rest of you come with me."

They exited the way three of them had come in, through the lounge windows into the back of the armored van. Once the doors were shut, Yaxley drove them back across the snowy grounds until they were near the gates. Along the way the three of them removed their masks, allowing Judy see just how banged up they all were. Her cheek felt like it had a severe bruise, the corner of her mouth was smeared red and there was a cut above her brow. Nick had actually bloodied his nose at some point, and Bogo looked significantly beat up. The next time she called her parents she would have to avoid using muzzletime, lest she give them both a heart attack. Even Benjamin, with his face dirty but undamaged, wasn't much better off, what with a stab wound in his side that Bogo was applying pressure to as he continued to hold the unconscious feline. The buffalo had a dazed look from his own exposure to Daybreak, but there were something deeply heartwarming in the way Bogo looked down at Benjamin, and how peaceful Benjamin looked as he slept, even with his left side covered in blood. Judy was beginning to understand why Gazelle had wished them a happy Christmas with such a big smile before they'd parted ways.

Furtively she looked through the corner of her eye at Nick. The fox was holding a piece of torn fabric to his bloody nose, and the rabbit had to fight the urge to touch him. He'd had her back throughout the entire ordeal, refusing to leave her side even when the battle in the lounge had looked hopeless. He'd held her paw when she'd thought she was going to die. That kind of friendship and loyalty was priceless. She turned her eyes again at Bogo and Benjamin and wondered if maybe, just maybe, she and Nick could have that kind of relationship someday.

The van came to a stop. Judy heard the sound of approaching helicopters before the others, and when they opened the doors she saw two coming to land. Bogo stepped out with Benjamin still in his arms. He strode over to the first helicopter that landed. Judy watched him go, tears close to beading in her eyes now that Benjamin was finally safe, before Nick tapped her on the shoulder.

"Heck of a Christmas, huh, Carrots?"

Judy chuckled. "Tell me about it. Still doesn't beat Christmas in Bunnyburrow."

"I'll have to see that to believe it." Nick winked.

Judy beamed, getting the hint. "I'll call my parents when we get home. They would be happy to have you even if you hadn't helped save their lives."

Nick stuck his paws in his pockets. "You know, while we're on the subject of Christmas, I still haven't fulfilled that promise I made to you if we survived the Greener Grass Mall."

Judy giggled. "My choice is still Snow White."
"Darn." Nick never stopped smiling. "Carrots, when the paperwork's done, how about we go out for dinner first? Big fat Christmas dinner with turkey and trimmings. I'll spare no expense at-"

"We've got another patient!"

A second armored van pulled up, and out came Higgins and Rhinowitz, carrying a pale Arianna Fauna with them. She looked unconscious, and there were letters carved into her cheeks and forehead. They carried her to the second helicopter and explained the situation; internal bleeding from a car exploding beside her. It was unclear if she would make it to hospital.

Judy and Nick turned away, embittered by the reminder. There was still one last loose end to tie up.

"Nishimura's probably long gone by now." Judy said.

"Along with one of the deadliest chemical weapons ever built." Nick added.

"You're not helping."

"Sorry."

They sat down in the armored van, legs dangling over the edge, and watched silently as the cavalry came in to finish cleaning up Nishimura's mess. They heard snippets here and there, such as Vercus being out cold from Daybreak by the time the reinforcements had gone to arrest him, and finding the remains of his campsite. A couple of blocks of unarmed explosives, a mask and a mallet had been the only items to survive intact. A phone had been found on Vercus's person, but the battery had died.

They should be happier, they knew that. Veltro had been taken down, Vercus had been stopped, and Benjamin and the Casel Family were safe. But with Nishimura getting away scot-free their victory felt too bittersweet for them to enjoy.

Yaxley stepped out of the driver's seat and approached the two. "Where's Bogo? We need to talk!"

Bogo returned at that very moment, without Benjamin. The helicopter with him inside was already taking off. Judy sent a small prayer after it. "What's going on, Yaxley?"

"We need to go! Now!" Yaxley snapped.

"I said what's going on?"

"When my people at the hospital told Gruff what had happened here, he finally talked. It seems that every single one of us have been played for fools."

"What're you talking about?" Judy, Nick and Bogo followed Yaxley towards one of the squad cars.

"Nishimura. He's not Japanese. He's not even dead!"

"What?!" Nick stared at Yaxley like he'd lost his senses.

"God damn it!" Yaxley clenched and unclenched his fists as he walked. "He was right under our noses this entire time! The blood was a match, but I should have figured something was up when we didn't find the body!"

"Are you saying that..." Bogo trailed off.

As for Judy, she was thinking hard about the letters she'd seen carved into Fauna's face, no doubt inflicted by that evil elk-deer. A V in her forehead. An S in her right cheek. An O in her left.
It hit her like a giant snowball.

It must have hit Nick at the same time, for his jaw dropped. Even Bogo was speechless.

They entered the car with Bogo and the wheel and sped off, Yaxley shouting into his radio for every available mammal to search the city and surrounding areas. Nick sat silently next to Judy, deep in thought, until he asked Yaxley to call the ZBI mammals protecting Lake Casel. He didn't explain it yet, but Lake may be just the mammal to help them catch the scumbag in time.

All the while Judy didn't stop thinking about the letters.

V.

S. O.

V for Vercus and his sadistic message.

S. O. for... for...

"It can't be..." She whispered softly.

"Yes, it's me."

Simon Ombidia identified himself as soon as he confirmed the identity of the mammal who had come into contact with him almost immediately after he'd left the city limits.

He hadn't expected to find a buyer so quickly, especially one so close to the only daughter of that narrow minded old dolt. Yes, Elgen Casel was a dolt. So much of this was his doing. If he were here, Ombidia would have thanked him for being so stupid as to cast out his oldest and most unstable son. He'd practically handed Ombidia's biggest asset on a silver platter.

"I admit, you are the last mammal I expected to hear from, Miss Leogard, especially so soon. I suppose you must have gotten your intel from your girlfriend.... Excuse me, ex-girlfriend."

He listened to the female on the other end. Apparently Lisa Leogard had doubts as to Lake Casel's commitment to her and their shared goal of taking down the Casel Corporation. It seemed that despite their respective founders claiming the contrary, Veltro and Neo Veltro were not so different.

"You don't say." He said. "Well, you won't have to worry about being powerless anymore. When the sun rises tomorrow, you will be the only organization in possession of Nightfall and Daybreak. There will be no greater advantage in negotiating Elgen Casel's ultimate downfall. I hope you understand that the cost of such power will be quite significant."

The winter breeze made the thick hair around his head shake as he clicked open his briefcase. He smiled at the fruits of his labor safely tucked inside. There was the DVD of every news report of every savage attack Dawn Bellwether had instigated. It was a pity Vercus and Veltro had failed to kill her. If he hadn't been certain that she did not know his true identity, he would have taken steps to have her finished off. There was also the small laptop containing the last remaining data for the development of both Nightfall and Daybreak. The rest he'd ensured destroyed in the old Fauna estate.

As for Nightfall and Daybreak, he had samples of both nestled beneath the laptop. The grenades and
launcher were currently in the trunk of the car he was leaning against.

"Don't you worry, Miss Leogard. Everything has been taken care of. All that's left is the meeting place. There's an old warehouse just outside of Bunnyburrow. Zoocell formerly used it before the corporation expanded, so it will be completely empty. We will meet there two weeks from now at three. Will that suffice?"

It would certainly suffice for him. Two weeks was more than enough time for him to do some research, and to figure out if this was a trap. He had yet to figure out how Lisa Leogard had managed to get his number when he'd destroyed his other phone, but at the same time he was reluctant to turn down a potentially legitimate customer. Not at the price she was offering.

"Good, good. Don't forget, there will be extra payment required for the launcher and grenades. They're the only ones of their kind in the entire world."

That may not be entirely true if the bombs he'd planted in the laboratory and the semis that were intended to smuggle the lab equipment out of the city did do as much damage as intended, but Leogard didn't need to know that. If it did turn out that Nightfall or Daybreak had survived the explosions, he could always find some other organization with scientists who could do some tweaking, and make any antidote that may have survived useless to the mammals at the ZBI. He would have to then destroy their data afterward of course. Ombidia would have to be very thorough if it came to that, but he was confident he could pull it off.

"The old Zoocell warehouse outside of Bunnyburrow. Three pm. Two weeks from now. I'll see you there." Ombidia paused.

He hung up, pocketed the phone, and locked the case shut.

At last, he thought. Five years of hard work, right under Gazelle's slender nose. He'd been accompanying her on a tour in France when he'd met Vercus Casel, a mammal in exile, who would do anything to take revenge on the mammals responsible and the city that had seemingly forgotten all about him. He'd already amassed a small organization of prey supremacists by the time the bison had run into him, putting up an act of despising all predators when in truth it was prey that was his true enemy. Ombidia had been only too happy to assist, for he too had a need. He had a pretty little blue flower with incredible potential, and Veltro were the perfect mammals to help him realize it.

Ombidia stepped away from the car and leaned on the sturdy wooden railing of Zootopia Overlook. Past the pine trees, pure black at night, stood the sparkling skyscrapers of the city. He wasn't sure whether he would ever see Zootopia again, or if he could ever come back at all. He'd decided the time had come to cast off his day job as Gazelle's manager when Fauna had called him in his office a week before the Greener Grass Mall incident. Daybreak was ready, and Ombidia had the other half of his set. Vercus had been the only one to know of his plan to fake his death, and had been to one to help hide the bags containing Ombidia's blood until the time was right. Ombidia had been impressed and relieved when, despite his already volatile personality and Nighthowler induced insanity, Vercus had followed through with the plan to prepare a makeshift torture chamber and paint it in Ombidia's blood. Then he'd handed the rucksack of supplies over to Ombidia for the hike back to Zootopia, leaving his car in the forest road to make the ZPD think he'd been kidnapped and murdered, as had also been planned. Ombidia had almost regretted planting a bomb at the elk-deer's campsite, but it was for the best. If Vercus had been given an antidote, with his unique state of mind, there was no guarantee it would be fully effective. Vercus had been very useful but he still had to be put down, just like the rest of Veltro.

Ombidia checked his watch. It was six am, but the sky was still dark. He needed to get into his car and put as much distance between himself and Zootopia as possible before the sun came up. He'd put
a lot of work and literal blood into his faked death, but the ZBI may suspect that something is up if they don't find his body soon. Better to get out while he still could. The bison pulled his sleeve pack over his watch, turned his back on the city he was leaving behind, and started back towards his car. Just as he put his hoof on the handle, a blue car drove to a stop in the middle of the road. It stopped diagonally, blocking both lanes.

Bison grimaced at the driver's drunken stupidity as they and their companion stepped out. "Do you mind?! You're blocking the road!"

"We just wanted to meet the cause of our misery." Spoke the driver.

He saw in the headlights that said driver was a rabbit.

Ombidia glanced at the passenger. It was a fox.

Rabbit. Fox.

*Oh fudge!*

Ombidia froze in blank shock for two seconds before he drew out his handgun and aimed it at the pair as they approached, their own weapons pointed right back at him. They both looked beat up, probably from storming the Fauna estate.

This was bad. This was very, very bad! How? *How?!* He'd thought of everything!

"Hopps! Wilde! It's not what you think!" Ombidia quickly realized the foolishness of what he said, what with his gun already out and the safety off, not to mention the incriminating case on the hood of his car.

"You're right. It wasn't." Hopps said as she and Wilde came to a stop. "I admit, that bloody torture chamber had us convinced."

"And we would have stayed convinced if it wasn't for Billy Goat Gruff." Wilde added. "You weren't as careful as you thought you were, 'Nishimura.' Gruff figured out who you really were during the Nighthowler incident, but Bellwether got put in jail before he could tell her. He'd kept his mouth shut since then to protect Veltro, but when he found out what you did to Fauna he sang like a canary."

Ombidia quickly grabbed the case and flung open the car door to give himself a shield, but he wasn't sure he could get inside without getting darted. He needed a way to distract them somehow.

"How did you find me?"

"You'll love this!" Wilde said. "Vercus survived your backstabbing, enabling us to finally capture him, and guess what was on his person at the time? Yeah, a phone with your number on it!"

Ombidia felt his heart sink. "Leogard."

Judy nodded, looking as smug as her partner. "Yes. Neo Veltro are nothing like their terrorist counterparts, but their co-leader was only too happy to put on an act to help us catch you. We got a trace on your signal almost the minute you picked up the phone, but she kept you talking just long enough for us to catch up."

Ombidia held up the case and pressed the gun to it. A bluff was his only chance. "I'm warning you! One bullet through this case and you'll lose all the data on Daybreak! You two can appreciate its value I'm sure, what with your own experiences with Nighthowlers! Now I am going to get into this car and-"
"No, you're not." Came the voice of Chief Bogo, and the sensation of a gun barrel pressing into Ombidia's back.

Ombidia almost wet his pants, but kept his trembling gun on his case. His years of planning couldn't end like this. "I... I'm warning you, Bogo... This is all that's left of Daybreak..."

"Wrong. Ben, do you remember Ben? He cured himself with Daybreak and saved every other sample that survived your bomb. We don't need what's in that case."

The bison knew then that it was over. Wilde was right. He hadn't been careful enough. Feeling like the most miserable mammal in the world, he dropped his gun at the buffalo's command. He felt the case being wrenched from his grip before Bogo ordered him on his knees. Hopps and Wilde lowered their guns and approached, followed by several other officers that had stayed hidden in the shadows until now. As Ombidia's arms were forced behind him and he felt the cold metal of cuffs being clamped around his wrists, he heard Bogo whisper into his ear with pure violent hatred.

"Oh, and one more thing before I hand you over to Yaxley... a very Merry Christmas to you."
All Wrapped Up

T'was the two days before Christmas Eve when Yaxley climbed out the car and walked up the ramp into Zootopia General Hospital. The minute he stepped inside the massive glass lobby Agent Hobson got up from a bench, walked up to him and explained the gist of what was happening upstairs. Several ZPD officers who were close to Benjamin had just left after dropping off some donuts and Christmas presents, allowing the Casel children to visit the cheetah themselves. Also with the Casels were Judy, Nick and Bogo, who had been by Benjamin's side all day. The doctor in charge of the feline's care said that he would be discharged tomorrow morning. Yaxley nodded, thanked Hobson for the update, and continued on to the elevator.

He got out on the third floor, identified himself at the reception desk and made his way to Room 302. He showed his badge to the two officers guarding the door and entered.

It was like a Christmas party in here. A little cardboard Christmas tree with a string of multicolored lights stood perched on the windowsill. The television was displaying a music channel, filling the sterile air with *Rocking around the Christmas Tree*, and everyone was gathered around Benjamin's bed, chatting and laughing. Even a bespectacled Bogo chuckled at the joke Nick had just said as he scribbled on a newspaper crossword puzzle. Alec was sitting on the bed beside Benjamin, an arm around his shoulder.

Yaxley didn't want to disrupt them, but he told himself it was only temporary as he knocked on the doorframe.

They all turned their heads, and several smiles vanished when they saw Yaxley. Yaxley spied an empty chair in the corner, pulled it over to them, and sat down. He'd planned the timing of his visit so that Benjamin's family wouldn't be here. They weren't relevant enough to the case to know such delicate information. The mammals that were in the room stared at him, waiting to hear if the news were good or bad.

"Simon Ombidia confessed everything." He said bluntly. "He also provided the equipment for Ramses to develop the original Night Howler serum. He even referred Bellwether to Vercus to assist in his plans. His real name is Gregory Bisoning, an Animercian immigrant who used to work for an arms dealer in China. He saw potential in *Midnicampum Holicithias* after witnessing an incident involving the flower, so he severed ties with the dealer and immigrated to Animerica to set out on his own.

"To accomplish his goal, he needed both buyers and mammals with the scientific means to develop the Nighthowler into a viable weapon. So he assumed a new identity, got a job as Gazelle's manager, and sold Nighthowler to Veltro so they could go on to create Nightfall. He didn't get the idea to sell Nightfall as a set with Daybreak until the serum was discovered and an antidote was made.

"As the manager of a celebrity whose job involved international travel he could seek out potential buyers and friends in high places. That was how he came across Assistant Mayor Bellwether and her ambition to usurp Mayor Lionheart. Though she didn't know it, all those savage attacks she orchestrated were demonstrations staged for Ombidia's benefit. Advertisements disguised as news."

Beneath the instrumentals of *Let it Goat*, there was a long, heavy silence.

"That little sack of filth." Edward Casel growled under his breath. "So many innocent mammals exposed to that serum, and all for the sake of money."
"He must be the hacker then." Lake said. "He spent all his time in his room on that laptop during the murder mystery. It makes sense now."

"And we trusted him." Alec added bitterly. "Does Gazelle know?"

Yaxley nodded. "She's taking some time to come to terms with the truth, but she told me she will be coming to visit soon."

"O. M. Goodness." Benjamin clapped his paws to his mouth. Bogo was visibly trying to not look excited as he patted the feline's shoulder.

Yaxley. "I understand there's a patient limit, so I will take my leave. I have to oversee your brother's transportation out of the city-"

"Don't call him that!" Edward snapped.

"Apologies. You should at least know that Daybreak has cured him to a certain extent, but what that extent is we don't really know yet. If you wish, I will give you updates on his condition."

"Mother will want to know but don't bother telling us." Alec said. "He can rot for all we care."

Yaxley nodded. It was sad really, how coldly Vercus's family members were turning their backs on him, but he'd brought this on himself. "In any case, I'm going to leave before Gazelle arrives."

"We'll go, too." Nick said as he got up along with Judy. "We're going to pay Bellwether a visit later. She should know the truth… if that's okay with you, Agent Yaxley."

Yaxley waved his hoof. "Go ahead. There's nothing she can do with the information, anyway. Just don't go into details about Nightfall."

"And I'm going to see our parents." Lake stood up, too. "We've got a lot to discuss and I might be the only one willing to talk to them right now." She looked at Edward as she said this. In the days since they'd seen the footage revealing the shocking extent of Elgen's selfishness, Edward had repeatedly shown how serious he was in cutting his father out of his life. He'd already set up an account separate from his trust fund.

Yaxley stepped aside to let the three mammals leave the room, leaving Edward, Alec and Bogo left surrounding Benjamin's bed. He then bid them a Merry Christmas and left himself.

While Bogo watched Yaxley leave, Benjamin fell back against the raised bed with a groan. "You're never going to forgive your dad, are you?"

"Never." Bogo gave Edward credit for keeping calm. "But I forgive you for not telling me the truth. You only didn't so people wouldn't get hurt, I get that."

Benjamin sniffed. "I'm so sorry I didn't realize Vercus was hurting you, too. If I had, I would have done everything I could to help you."

Edward chuckled and lightly punched his shoulder. "You already did, Ben. It's mom and dad's fault for not listening to you." He paused, his hoof resting on the cheetah's arm. "I guess it's our fault too, for not having the balls to speak up when we had the chance."

"Don't!" Benjamin grabbed the hoof fiercely. "Don't you dare blame yourself! Vercus is the bad guy, not you!"
"Ben, watch the stitches!" Bogo scolded. "Do you want to get out of here before Christmas or not?"

"You don't want to miss my Christmas Charity Concert tomorrow night, do you?"

They all looked sharply to the doorway. Decked in red and white was Gazelle, beaming at the cheetah on the bed. Beside her was Christine, who initially hadn't visited with the Casels because of the patient limit. Alec walked over to her and planted a kiss on her cheek before showing her to Lake's former chair.

Bogo grabbed Benjamin's shoulder just in case the stunned feline fainted. Gazelle sat down in the chair Edward had sat in and put a slender hoof on Benjamin's paw. "Hi, Ben. How're you feeling?" Benjamin blushed at her touch. "A little sore every now and then, but otherwise A-okay! I'm gonna be going home tomorrow!"

"Thank goodness. You've done so much for me, For Zootopia." She smiled at Bogo, who swallowed and tugged at his collar. "Where are Wilde and Hopps?"

"They're dealing with some unfinished business, but they're fine too." Bogo laid his crossword puzzle on his lap and took off his glasses. "How are you feeling, Miss Gazelle? I believe you were informed about…"

Gazelle held up a hoof, stopping him.

"I'd rather not talk about that if it's all the same to you." She said softly.

Bogo hadn't been there when the news of Ombidia's true nature and faked death had been broken to the singer, but he could imagine how hard it had hit her. He nodded solemnly and gestured for her to continue.

"I came to express my gratitude for everything you've done. I've gotten VIP tickets for the four of you, Nicholas and Judy included, at my expense, and everyone else who played a part in taking down that horrible organization will be getting a seventy five percent discount on their tickets."

"Omigosh." Benjamin said, gaping at her with an expression that made Alec laugh. "Omigosh, that is amazing!"

"You call that amazing?" Edward scoffed and stood up. "Let me tell you something I was going to say before Gazelle came in. The night we found out the truth about my dad may have been one of the worst nights of my life, but one good thing did come out of all this…" With that he walked over to Gazelle, whose smile grew wider as she slipped an arm around his.

"I've only known him for a few days, I know." Gazelle said. "But everything I've seen, I've liked. We're going to dinner again tonight."

Benjamin stared at the pair of them for a good long while before collapsing into his pillows in a dead faint.

"Now look what you've done." Bogo said, while Alec got up and started fanning the cheetah's face with an enveloped Christmas card.

Ex-Mayor Bellwether was as silent and stony as a gravestone by the time Judy and Nick had nearly finished explaining everything. Her hooves, relaxed when they'd initially entered the visiting room, were now curled into tight fists. One hoof reached up and tugged at the white dressings on her chest, peeking out under the orange shirt.
"You didn't know it at the time, but you had been put in charge of Advertising." Judy said. "We found a DVD among Ombidia's belongings containing recordings of every news report of the savage attacks you instigated. He even had footage of the Greener Grass Mall incident. We think he was intending to use this footage to safely demonstrate the weapon's power to potential buyers."

"And that's it." Nick was almost too relaxed in his hard metal chair. Judy didn't have to look at him to know he was enjoying the chance to rub the cruel irony in the sheep's face.

Bellwether's hoof moved from her bandages to her large glasses and adjusted them. "So I was just a tool to him. I was used."

"Gee, I wonder what that feels like?" Nick asked dryly.
"Go on, rub it in." Bellwether retorted. "I can see how much you're loving this."

"You have no idea." Nick replied.

"Nick's the one loving this." Judy gently elbowed the fox, and he adjusted himself into a more professional position. "I decided to do what Gruff couldn't and make sure you knew the truth."

"And I just wanted to see the look on your face when you found out you were being played for a fool!" Nick added.

Bellwether hit the table. "Why didn't he just come to the prison and tell me? Veltro could have stopped Ombidia before he betrayed them!"

"And you, Miss Gullibellwether." Nick said.

"He didn't know Ombidia's ultimate goal, only that he was the true identity of Yokai Nishimura." Judy said. "He said that after you were arrested, he decided to keep his mouth shut for Veltro's sake, and break you out of here once the organization was strong enough."

"That way you can continue being a tool in more ways than one!" Nick said.

Judy rounded on the fox. "Nicholas Wilde, you are well on the way to a thick ear!"

Nick shut up, allowing Judy to continue. "He couldn't risk Ombidia or someone on the outside finding out if he told anyone the truth. But then he heard that Ombidia had betrayed them, and the ZPD had taken down the last of their forces, so there was no point keeping quiet any longer. You know what happened after that."

Bellwether fell back against her chair. "So it's all over, then. Veltro is gone, my appeal failed before it even began, and now I'm stuck here for the rest of my sentence." Judy nodded. The sheep smirked humorlessly. "Well, I did oust Lionfart from power, that's something."

"Yeah, I never liked that guy either." Nick said. "He smiled too much."

"This might be the last time we ever see each other." Judy leaned forward on the table. "Is there anything else you'd like to say before we leave?"

Bellwether looked right into Judy's eyes. "Just two things. First, screw you for putting me in here in the first place." Judy rolled her eyes and got up to leave along with Nick. "Second, if you hadn't put me in here, Ombidia probably would have had me killed eventually. Just so I don't end up regretting not saying this later, thank you."

Judy paused, then nodded in acknowledgment, bid the sheep farewell and left with her fox.
It wasn't until an hour later, when they were having a Christmas style dinner in a small restaurant smothered in decorations, that she spoke what was on her mind.

Before going out for dinner they'd returned to their respective homes and changed out of their uniforms into something nicer. This evening, Judy had been inclined to choose her most revealing outfit, a sleeveless black dress that stopped above her knees. A sparkly green shawl made for a more festive look. She'd wanted a reaction out of Nick, and hadn't been disappointed by his wide eyes and slack jaw when they'd reunited outside the restaurant. He himself was looking dapper in a dark green suit and that same darned tie he'd stitched up and worn with his Flynn Rider costume.

"Nick, do you remember when we were in that pit, and Bellwether that she'd liked me?" Nick said he did. "Do you think she meant it?"

"Probably, but that was right before she tried to make me gobble you up." He said. "She deserved everything she got, scars and all. Forget about her, Carrots."

"I know that, but if it wasn't for her my first week as a cop would have been my last." Judy's ears went flat. "It's silly, I know, but a part of me still wishes things had gone another way."

Nick slowly stirred his turkey gravy. "I don't blame you."

The main course came and went, and Nick took up Judy's suggestion of sharing cheesecake for dessert. Judy looked past the single red candle and watched her fox scoop up chocolate orange mix, trying to think of another conversation starter that didn't involve what was on her mind now. The fox looked deep in thought himself.

"I talked to Bogo this morning." She eventually said. "He's given us a week's leave starting the day after the concert. We can be in Bunnyburrow by Christmas then come back home after the New Year."

"Good. Good." Nick stuck the spoon in his mouth. When he pulled it out again, he looked Judy in the eyes. "Carrots, what is going on here?"

Judy looked at the desserts between them. "What do you mean?"

"You're the one who suggested we dress nice. Don't say it's for Christmas because one, it's not Christmas yet, and two, we didn't do this last Christmas."

Judy scowled. "Why are you making this a big deal?"

"Because I'm getting the feeling that things aren't the same anymore. Not between us." Nick stuck his spoon in the remains of his slice and left it there. "I know for a fact it's not the same for me."

Her breath caught in her throat. Her own spoon came to rest on the edge of the plate beside her slice. Was this really happening? Was she getting the wrong idea? Why now, mere days after the biggest battle for their lives?

Nick continued. "I feel it every time I see you in trouble. I feel it every time you save my life. I feel it every time we escape a sticky situation. I've been feeling it ever since the day you pinned that badge on my chest and it's been getting stronger every time. It's getting to the point where I see you in that dress and want to tell you that you look beautiful, but I don't say it because I'm afraid you'll get the wrong idea and say you don't feel the same way and I'll ruin the great thing we already have." He turned his gaze to the cheesecake. "It only happens when we nearly die, so how do I even know what I'm feeling is real?"

Judy stared, her face tilted at just the right angle for her breath to gently shake the candlelight. What
would she say to that? What would happen if she said anything at all?

"What's brought this on, Nick?" She finally whispered.

Nick rubbed at a bit of cake mix that had dripped on the tabletop. "Ben and Benji. You'd have to be a really dumb bunny not to have seen it by now."

Judy nodded. "I've seen it, and I get what you mean. If they can do it, why can't we?"

"They've had five years to figure out what they want. We've had nowhere near that time." Nick replied. "And that's the million dollar question I'm struggling to ask. Is this what we both want?"

Judy took up her spoon and scooped up some more cheesecake, to have something to do while she pondered her answer. In the candlelight, Nick's bright green eyes had assumed a shimmery golden tint.

"Say my name, Nick."

"Carrots?"

"I can't remember the last time you said my name. Say it now."

Nick looked puzzled and nervous, but he obliged. "Judy."

She felt a shiver that somehow fit with the sudden burst of heat in her heart. Just like that, she knew. And just like she'd helped him tough it out in the academy, she would help Nick figure out if he felt the same.

"Let's think on it." She said. "We have a week in Bunnyburrow during the most wonderful time of the year. Let's see if we can get caught up in the romance of Christmas."

The realization that Judy was warming up to the idea at least expressed itself in the form of Nick exhaling hard enough to nearly blow out the candle. He laughed a little and turned his eyes to the window as he reached for his glass. "Wow, will you look at that?"

"What is it?"

"Look out the window and look at the sky."

Judy looked, and gasped softly. "Oh my gosh. Have you ever seen a star that bright?"

"Yeah." Nick said.

"Where?"

"Pinocchio."

Judy laughed. Nick laughed with her. She remembered having the DVD at home. "It's the movie that comes right after Snow White. When we get home, why don't we make it a double feature?"

"Definitely." Nick tapped her wrist. "Well, what’re you waiting for? Make a wish!"

Judy closed her eyes. "You said before that you mostly feel something towards me during times of danger. That's actually kind of the same for me. I wish that the next time we feel something towards each other, it will be someplace… a little more normal."
With eyes still closed, she felt Nick's warm paw slide over hers.

"That is a good wish."
Bogo hadn't had a Christmas tree put up in his living room since he was a teenager. The plastic trees had always looked too ugly in his eyes, and the real trees tended to leave a mess of needles in their wake. He'd never imagined it would take a boyfriend to make him take up the tradition again.

Even so he was a little embarrassed by how it turned out. The tree was slightly shorter than his jawline, and the baubles and tinsel were older than the Precinct One building. Even the star at the top looked like it had seen better days. After placing the tree on an old rug to catch any fallen needles, he'd decided to prepare another surprise for Benjamin. He'd never baked anything like a round Christmas pudding before, but after everything he'd been through his sweetheart of a cheetah deserved a treat. He'd been discharged this morning, so he would finally have something to look forward to other than cheap hospital food. Just as he'd run a tight ship at Precinct One in spite of the occasional antics of his officers, he prepared the Christmas dinner with precision in spite of the gradually worsening state of his kitchen; he'd had no idea baking could be so messy! Even so he persevered, and by the time Benjamin came knocking on his door he had the main course staying warm in the oven and the pudding in the microwave.

When he heard the knocking, Bogo removed his apron, turned on the radio to the Christmas music channel, straightened his red shirt and opened the door. He smiled at the sight of Benjamin standing in the doorway, holding a covered dish in each paw. Instead of a bloody hazmat suit or a flimsy hospital gown, the cheetah was dressed in a traditional ugly red Christmas sweater with a mistletoe pattern.

"Hey, Chief!" He said cheerfully. Unable to properly hug the buffalo with his paws full, Benjamin instead curved his arms forward and pressed himself to Bogo's body.

"We're not in the station, Ben. Call me Mansa."

"Sorry, sir- Mansa."

"Don't worry, you'll get the hang of it." Still holding his apron, Bogo gave the feline a one armed embrace. He only hesitated for a second before kissing the feline between the ears as well. "What've you got there?"

"Turns out Christine fit the yin to Alec's yang more than we thought. She makes some mean starters, and made a couple for us as an early Christmas present. I've some potato cakes with poached salmon for me and an endive salad with yoghurt dressing for you."

Bogo liked the sound of that. "Remind me to send a thank you card."

"Chiiiiiiieeef." Benjamin's nose started to twitch, and he soon saw the source of the smell. "Oh my gosh. Is that a wellington?!"

"Two small wellingtons, actually." Bogo felt chuffed at the cheetah's awe. "A fish for you and a mushroom and chestnut for me. The second one is my mother's recipe."

"Oh, that reminds me! My mom's invited you and your family to our Christmas party tomorrow. Can you come?"
Bogo tried not to frown. "Ben, what exactly have you told her about us?"

"Nothing yet. She just wants to thank you for saving me thrice. Is there something wrong?"

"No. I guess I can come. I'll have to run by my parents first." He took the covered salad from Benjamin. "Let's get this eaten before we're too late for the concert."

They sat down at the table, on which Bogo had already placed a pretty pinecone centerpiece inherited from his grandmother. After two bites the endive salad turned out to be absolutely divine, reinforcing his plan to send Christine a Christmassy thank you card.

"How are Alec and Christine planning to spend their Christmas?" Bogo asked as they continued to eat their starters.

"After tonight they're gonna spend a week in Paris, then Gazelle's taking Edward to a resort in the Czech Republic and they won't be back until after the New Year. I guess they're all taking a break from Zootopia for a while."

"So are Hopps and Wilde." Bogo said. "I gave them a week's leave to go to Bunnyburrow for Christmas."

"Oh, that's nice!" Benjamin said before devouring an entire potato cake in one go. After swallowing, his expression became less happy. "Did you hear about Alec's dad?"

"That he's passed the management of the Tirari Town project over to his daughter? Yes."

"That's passed the management of the Tirari Town project over to his daughter? Yes."

"Not that. His wife's thinking of filing for divorce. Lake's trying to talk her out of it, but even if she pulls it off I don't think their marriage will ever be the same again."

Bogo dwelled on this as he sipped his wine. "Honestly, I don't feel sorry for them. I just hope that Mr. Casel's learned something from all this. He needs to face reality and understand that Zootopia is not his by right." He finished his salad and laid his fork to rest in the bowl. "If it's any comfort, Carlos is facing some serious jail time for the part he played in your kidnapping. He won't be causing trouble for you or Lake's family again."

"Well, good! He was a jerk!"

Bogo chuckled, finding that Benjamin's annoyed face was more adorable to him than his happy face. "If you're done with your starter, I'll go check on the main course."

"Have you ever had a traditional Christmas Dinner?" Bogo nodded as he picked up the empty dishes and set them on the bench to return to Christine later. "My parents are preparing one for tomorrow. I'll let them know to prepare some vegetarian options."

Bogo looked through the oven window, and to his relief the wellingtons were as beautifully cooked as ever. He glanced at Benjamin, who was practically bouncing in his seat with anticipation. The buffalo put on his oven gloves and pulled out the wellingtons. As he set the trays on the stove he glanced at the microwave. Ten minutes remaining, then he had to leave the pudding to stand for a further ten minutes. More than enough time to get the main course eaten.

He put two slices for each plate along with some potatoes and served up. To his great relief and pride Benjamin beamed at the first mouthful, and his own wellington was so delicious it was as if his mother had made it herself. He used his phone to take a picture to send to her later before continuing to eat. Much of the conversation that followed consisted of Benjamin gushing about Alec's talents in chocolate making after Bogo had set him off by mentioning the Beauty and the Beast Castle currently sitting in the feline's apartment. After the cheetah calmed down they began to talk about...
their own lives. Bogo had indeed grown up in a poor area, but it was nowhere near the diseased slum Vercus had made it out to be. In fact, after becoming Chief, scourging the district of all the gangsters and lowlifes had been the first thing Bogo had done, and now year by year was becoming as prosperous as the outer limits of Sahara Square. When it was Benjamin's turn he told Bogo all about Alec's murder mystery party. Bogo was impressed by the thought and planning Alec had put into his riddles at such short notice, and laughed at Wilde's epic fail in the billiard room. The feline was admiring the vintage baubles on the tree when the microwave finally beeped.

"What's that?"

Bogo stood up. "I have a little surprise for you, Ben. I baked you a Christmas pudding."

"In a microwave?!"

"I didn't have time to cook it the traditional way. Not to worry, I used the recipe in this cookbook." He picked up the small cookbook and held it up on his way to the microwave. It was stained from when he'd spilled cranberry sauce on the pages while mixing it with the honey syrup. He set the book down, grabbed a dishcloth, and pulled the door open.

He blinked when he saw nothing but a speckled wall of brown and black.

Bogo initially thought that the mixture had somehow exploded, covering the inside of the microwave, but the wall was all the way to the edge of the opening. It was as if the entire pudding had blown up and filled the interior space until it could go no further. His heart sank when he looked a little closer and realized that was exactly what happened. Bogo glanced at Benjamin, who had leaned forward over the table to see past the buffalo. He looked even more flabbergasted than his dinner companion. He saw the side of the basin poking out of the bewildering mass and tentatively reached in with the dishcloth protecting his fingers. Slowly, carefully, he extricated the gargantuan cube, what was supposed to be a round pudding with grated apple, dried fruit and mixed spice. He carried it the short distance to the table and set it down in front of the feline, who by now was trembling, his eyes wide with shock even as he uncontrollably giggled behind his paw. He took a deep breath to calm himself.

"Is it supposed to look like that?" Was all he managed before his cheeks puffed up with pent up laughter.

Bogo shook his head, completely speechless at he stared at his 'pudding.'

"What ha-happened?!" The cheetah struggled to say.

"I don't know!" Bogo slapped the cloth on the table and grabbed the recipe book. "I followed the instructions precisely!"

He stared at the cranberry stained page. Benjamin appeared by his side and read the recipe with him.

"I don't understand it!" Bogo snapped. "It says here to add two eggs, eleven ounces of dried fruit, thirty one ounces of flour-"

"Thirty one ounces?!" Benjamin unsheathed a claw and scraped away the bit of dried sauce partially staining the list of ingredients. Beside the number one, he uncovered a slash and a two. "Chief! It's three and a half!"

With that he became paralyzed with laughter, leaning on the table for support while Bogo glared at the cube, resisting the urge to just smash it to kingdom come. So much for running a tight bloody ship.
Then again, it was good to know that Benjamin could still laugh.

Benjamin was still giggling as he proposed that they try the pudding anyway, even picking up a knife to cut it himself.

"This is a surprise, alright!" He said while Bogo retrieved the cranberry and honey mix to drizzle over the slices. "We're probably the only mammals in all of Zootopia who will be having a *square* pudding this Christmas! Please let me take a picture!" He clapped his paws together.

"Please, please, please, please, please, please, please!"

Bogo narrowed his eyes at him. "Do you promise that you will never post this on social media?"

"I promise, Mansa!"

"Do you also promise that you will never, ever, ever, ever, *ever* tell Wilde what happened?"

The cheetah held up the paw already clutching his phone. "I solemnly swear on Santa's sleigh!"

"… Go ahead, then."

Three hours later, he was giggling at his phone screen again after the concert ended and they were being escorted to the backstage dressing room. In a satchel he was carrying slices of Bogo's Christmas pudding to share with the others, even it had taken every ounce of pleading and a repeated promise not to tell everyone about the flour blunder to convince the buffalo to let him do it.

Speaking of which, the concert had been spectacular. Five massive Christmas trees with red and gold baubles had surrounded the audience and a boulder sized disco ball had reflected white speckles of light all over the arena in the image of a snowstorm. The centerpiece, of course, had been Gazelle herself, dancing and singing in a sexy Santa outfit while her tiger dancers showed their stuff. There were only two this time, with the other two still recovering from injuries inflicted during the Greener Grass Mall, incident, but that didn't stop the performers from giving it all they got. After all, seventy five percent of the profit made here was going to go to the mammals that had been affected by the events of that harrowing day.

The security guard brought them to the dressing room, gave them both a curt nod and opened the door to let them through. Benjamin froze in the doorway when he saw Gazelle, Christine and Selke Casel on one shiny couch, and Elgen and Lake Casel sitting across from them on another.

Bogo flinched as though he was stopping himself from leaping in front of Benjamin. "What the blazes are you two doing here?"

"There's no need for hostilities, Chief Bogo." Elgen looked like he hadn't slept in a while. "My wife and I want to talk to your officer before the others get here."

"That is absolutely out of the question." Bogo replied.

Benjamin held his arm. "Mansa, it's okay. If they were going to do anything, they wouldn't have come here of all places would they?"

Bogo grimaced, and then pointed a threatening finger at Elgen. "Try anything and I'll put you on the floor. That goes to you too, Mrs. Casel." Selke didn't reply, seemingly more focused on refusing to look at her husband.

Benjamin stepped past Bogo, and Elgen stood up. They faced each other in the middle of the room.
"I'm listening, Mr. Casel." The feline said.

"I'm going to start by telling you that you were right." Elgen's mouth twisted as he said this. "If I had listened to you five years ago and dealt with my son when I had the chance, Veltro likely never would have even existed. It's true that I was too concerned with my mayoral campaign at that time, and I knew Vercus was an arrogant and impulsive child, but I didn't want to accept that he would be capable of such vicious things. I'm a proud mammal, but not too proud to admit that I've brought this all on myself. Edward for one will never forgive me." Selke sniffed. Elgen glanced at her before continuing. "You may have heard from Alec that I have handed the Tirari Town Project over to my daughter. Tirari Town is the company's biggest project to date, and I refuse to let the recent controversy put a stop to it. The ZBI is keeping Vercus's involvement a secret for the sake of my family, but if word gets out…"

"I won't say a word about it. I promise." Benjamin said.

Bogo stepped between them. "If you've come here just to make sure Ben will keep his mouth shut then this conversation is over!"

"Chief Bogo, please!" Christine said. "You said your wife wanted to speak to him, too. Well, what is it, Mrs. Casel?"

Unlike her husband, Selke stayed seated. She was having trouble looking Benjamin in the eye. Her eyes were wet when she finally spoke. "They won't let me see him. They won't let me see my boy."

"It's for your own safety, they told you." Lake told her mother. "Until they know to what extent the antidote cured his madness, it's too dangerous to arrange a visit."

Selke took a long drink from a wine glass. "They're keeping Vercus in a hospital in an undisclosed location. They said he was badly hurt when they found him. They'd found him in a cage!" She glared at Benjamin and Bogo. "Apparently he'd been hit in the face with a glass vial of homemade pepper spray!"

"That was me, Mrs. Casel." Bogo said. "My visor broke during our struggle and I inhaled some Nighthowler gas. If Ben hadn't released the antidote, I would have done far worse to your son. If anything he's the reason Vercus isn't in the morgue right now."

"Damn them." Selke whispered venomously. "Damn Veltro."

"Vercus is not the victim here!" Bogo snapped. "He's brought this all on himself! It's about time you realized that your son isn't the maltreated goody two shoes you think he is, Selke!"

"Go to hell, Mansa!" Selke shot to her feet, glass in hoof. "Do you think I don't know that by now?! That's what I hate about this more than anything!" She sobbed and stared at Benjamin. "Why did you have to be right about him? Why?"

She collapsed on the table between the two couches, her wine spilling to the floor as she broke down in tears. "What do I do? What am I going to do?!"

She became incomprehensible after that. Everything stared at the blubbing female, unsure about what to do themselves. Lake stood above her, her arms held out, but she seemed unsure about embracing her mother.

So Benjamin sat down beside Selke and did it for her.

Selke looked up, and her weeping eyes blinked in confusion when she realized who was holding her. When she didn't push him away, his confidence grew and hugged her tighter.
"Vercus isn't your only child, you know." Bogo said. "You've got a daughter standing right in front of you and two other sons who will likely be here in a few minutes. How about you forget about Vercus for a while and worry about your other kids. Set things right."

Selke frowned and looked up at Lake. Lake looked away.

Benjamin looked at the pair of them and made a Christmas wish that they would be able to work things out.

There a jingling of bells, and Christine looked at her phone. "Alec and the others will be here in a few minutes."

Elgen zipped up his coat. "We should go. I don't think either of them are ready to talk to us yet."
Selke didn't say anything, but appeared to agree when she put down her glass and stood up with him. She and Elgen stopped at the door when Benjamin called out and walked up to them with two slices of pudding wrapped in colored paper.

"Want some pudding?" He asked.

Elgen and Selke looked down at the slices, then nodded and accepted one each. "Thanks, and Clawhauser, I am truly sorry for everything we have put you through."

With that they walked out. Benjamin wished the best for them both and turned to Lake. "How's the divorce talk coming along?"

"I've talked her out of it for the time being, but she's going to be living in our summer house for a while." Lake said. "As for my divorce, my attorney told me that with the charges being filed against Carlos I'm pretty much guaranteed to get everything."

"And... how're things going with Lisa?" Benjamin clasped his paws together.

Lake smiled for the first time. "Getting better now that I'm not pretending with Carlos anymore. We're considering disbanding Neo Veltro now that Tirari Town is in better hands."

"After what Veltro turned into, I'd say that's for the best." Bogo said.

Benjamin looked at him reproachfully. "Chief, can you stop believing the worst in mammals for one minute?"

Bogo smirked and wrapped an arm around his blushing feline. "I'm don't believe the worst in you."

"Chief!" Benjamin covered his eyes in embarrassment while the girls on the couch giggled. Desperate to change the subject, he reached into his satchel and pulled out three more slices. "Pudding, anyone?"

Gazelle happily accepted one first, then curiously examined the slice. "Why is it shaped like a square?"

Bogo tried to look nonchalant as he looked away. "No reason."

"No, seriously. Why does the pudding look like that?" Bogo and Benjamin turned to see their friends in the doorway. At the front of the group dressed in a Santa costume of his own was the fox who had asked the question. "Come on, we're all waiting!"

Benjamin shook his head. "Sorry, but if I tell you something terrible will befall Santa's sleigh."
"What do you mean, Santa's sleigh? I am Santa!" Nick held up a small sack as a cheekily grinning Alec walked up beside him, also carrying a sack. "And Santa and his giant helper need your help to find his missing presents!"

"Missing presents? What're you talking about, Wilde?"

"Take it down a notch, sis. It's just another one of Alec's puzzles." Edward said. "And we couldn't find a Santa costume in his size."

"Don't worry, it'll take ten minutes at most!" Alec said. "All you guys have to do is take a Christmas card out of these sacks, solve the riddle and find the presents!"

Christine giggled. "What am I going to do with you?"

"Plenty once we get to Paris, which is why I'm doing this tonight." Alec held up his sack. "Nick, you give your cards to Ben and Chief Bogo. I'll handle the rest."

"You're the boss- er, I mean helper." Nick held his sack out to Bogo first. "Well? What're you waiting for, Chief?"

Bogo eyed the fox. "Why am I getting the feeling that this is fixed?"

"Just play along, Mansa." Benjamin reached past the buffalo and took out a bright red envelope. Bogo muttered under his breath as he took out the only other card.

Benjamin opened his card, which depicted a frozen river and a little robin on a branch. He glanced at Bogo and saw that his card was identical. The feline read the short riddle inside.

"Merry Christmas! A holly jolly surprise lies in Store."

Bogo raised his eyebrows. "That's the riddle on my card."

"Huh. Mine's different." Judy had just opened her own card, which displayed a snow-covered mountain. "And it's pretty obvious that my gift's hidden behind the trash can outside."

"My riddle's different too." Gazelle said. "Alec, are Ben and Chief Bogo the only ones with the same riddle?"

Bogo peered at Alec. "Like I said. Fixed."

Benjamin shook his head, smiling at Alec as he took Bogo's hoof. "Come on, play along, Chief! Let's check out the storeroom!"

"The nearest one is next to the men's room." Gazelle said. "When we all find our gifts, let's meet up back here and open them while we try Chief Bogo's pudding."

Having used the men's room the last time they'd come to Animalia, Benjamin and Bogo quickly found the door. The last time they'd come this way the power had been cut, and a certain psycho had almost knifed one of them in the back, but tonight the lights were lit, and plastic snowflakes had been stuck to the walls. Benjamin exclaimed in delight when he spotted the storeroom door, and raced forward to open it.

He froze in the doorway. "Where's the prezzies?"

He stepped inside and started looking around the boxes and cleaning equipment. "Chief, help me look! I'm sure the riddle meant here!"
"Maybe you'll find it if you put on the light- gah! What the- pah! Puh!"

The moment he stepped inside, Bogo had suddenly started cursing and spitting. Holding a broom he'd been about to move out the way, Benjamin spun round. He couldn't quiet see what it was in the semi darkness, but Bogo was struggling with something on his head. The buffalo pulled and pulled, but it was clinging to his horns. It looked like… like…

"Whatever you are, get off him!" Benjamin yelled. "I mean it! Get off him, you brute!" He swung the broom, smacking the thing dead on.

"Ow!" Bogo shouted and backed out into the hallway where he finally yanked his attacker free.

The hallway fell silent. Bogo and Benjamin stared at the thing in Bogo's grasp.

"Mistletoe." Bogo held the branch closer to his face.

For the second time that evening, Benjamin's cheeks puffed up with suppressed laughter. "S-sorry, sir."

"Mistletoe." Bogo repeated frankly. "I nearly got smothered by mistletoe. If Alec weren't your best friend I'd kill him. Wilde, if you put that video on the Internet, you're fired."

Back down the hallway, Nick slyly pocketed his phone as a groaning Judy shoved him back into the dressing room. Then she and Alec stayed outside, beaming behind their slices of pudding.

Rubbing the spot on his head where the broom had hit him, Bogo held the mistletoe branch like a bouquet. "Attacked by mistletoe, walloped by my date, shamed by a square pudding… this has to be the most humiliating Christmas ever."

Benjamin blushed and gently took Bogo by his snazzy red collar. "I think I know how to make it right again."

Bogo smiled coyly as he bent down.

Benjamin paused before they made contact. "You know, I've never kissed someone above a mistletoe before."

"Well, we might as well be the first, won't we?" Bogo replied.

Nick poked his head back out just in time, phone held out before him. Edward, Gazelle, Lake and Christine would watch the video in delight later that evening.

"You took the words right out of my mouth." Judy squeed as she watched them kiss.

Chapter End Notes

Just the epilogue to go, now!
Epilogue: And to All a Good Night

Tundratown Times – February 29, 2017

GREENER GRASS MALL REBORN

The city of Zootopia can finally put the past behind it as the reconstruction of the Greener Grass Mall was completed last afternoon, two months after the horrific events that befell its reopening as a result of a botched attempt to assassinate Dawn Bellwether on the morning of her appeal. Lake Casel, the daughter of the mammal initially behind the restoration, Elgen Casel, will attend the reopening and personally cut the ribbon. This is half a month after her recently divorced spouse Carlos Casel received a five-year prison sentence for his role in the kidnapping of ZPD Officer Benjamin Clawhauser. Her younger brother, Alec Casel, has a chocolate store set up within the complex and will also make an appearance…

Little Rodent's News – March 2, 2017

EDWARD CASEL GETS OFF FOR PUMMELING PAPARAZZO PEST

Edward Casel, currently in a relationship with Zootopia's resident pop star Gazelle, has been released without charge after assaulting a photographer who had trespassed on Gazelle's estate. Frank Reeler, a notorious paparazzo, had climbed over the fence of Gazelle's back yard while she was sunbathing and attempted to take photographs of her topless. Edward Casel had allegedly caught him in the act and demanded the camera, and when Reeler refused, he was punched in the ensuing struggle.

"I don't condone violence, but that mammal had no right to creep into my back yard and try to take obscene pictures of me." Gazelle stated on the morning of his release. "I am grateful that Edward has intervened on my behalf, and am looking forward to attending his brother's upcoming wedding…"

Savanna News – March 10, 2017

ALEC AND CHRISTINE TIE THE KNOT

This time last afternoon, Alec Casel and Christine Antlaire married in the newly restored Casel Cathedral on the outskirts of Zootopia. The cathedral has been overseen by the Casel family for generations before its abandonment, but now a new bishop has taken residence; Francis Oatmeal, a horse who was recently discovered to be a descendant of the Fauna family one of the other founding families of Zootopia. Elgen Casel announced that his appointment was a gesture of goodwill to repair bridges between the founding families after another descendant of the Fauna family, Dr. Arianna Fauna, let her burning resentment drive her to co-found the disbanded terrorist organization Veltro.

The wedding of Alec and Christine, the first to be hosted by the Casel Cathedral for decades, was attended by his entire family along with pop star Gazelle, Chief Bogo, and his officers Judith Hopps, Nicholas Wilde and Benjamin Clawhauser…

Rainforest Weekly – April 11, 2017

WILDEHOPPS… COULD IT BE?
Exciting rumors are abound that the ZPD officers responsible for solving the Nighthowler Case, and also partially involved in the downfall of the terrorist organization Velto, may be partners in more ways than one. A sighting of the pair last evening may have just confirmed those rumors.

An anonymous witness posted on Facebook this morning a photograph apparently showing Officers Hopps and Wilde in a romantic embrace on a park bench in Savanna Central. Due to the darkness of the photograph and the fact that neither mammal was in uniform, it is unclear whether or not the mammals in the photograph really are the famous duo. Officer Wilde's family refused to give a comment, but an attempt to interview members of Officer Hopps's family revealed that the pair had kissed at least once while they were visiting in Bunnyburrow…

Saharaside – July 13, 2017

UFO SPOTTED ABOVE ZOOTOPIA

On what is believed to be the hottest summer in a decade, numerous civilians have reported seeing an unidentified flying object flying over the sky at approximately 11:20 PM last night. Though none of the witnesses were able to identify the object, their descriptions are the same: a metallic shape with bright orange lights consumed in fire, shooting across the sky like a comet. The ZPD have insisted that the object was very likely just that, a comet, and not an actual alien spacecraft as some are insisting…

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!