The Highs of living intersperse with the Lows of survival for Owen Conrad Fuchs. A motorcyclist and a hobby photographer, barely making ends meet by dumpster diving.

Now, with a road rage incident gone viral, OC has become a focal point of a ZPD Mammalhunt. For the highly exaggerated charges he's facing, Fuchs finds himself involved in the conspiracy around the 14 missing predators. Circumstances that ultimately lead to him becoming a high ranking member of a tent city for predators as 2015's Savage Summer fragments Zootopia.

He will need all of his situational awareness, all of his tradecraft, and all his luck as it quickly runs out at the epicenter of the city's tensions between predator and prey.

But if there's one thing that the mammals that know OC Fuchs can tell you, it's that he's impossible. In the best and worst of every which way.
You Won't Be Able To Be Sad

Friday. It always kind of starts on a Friday.

Before I make some night moves, while everyone with a job is bumrushing the green lights before the ambers in the morning. They get a little more erratic and less concerned about indicating with turn signals before the weekend, so I've got to read into their driving that much more. It's ok, though, I'd rather deal and be focused on them. So I'll just do what I can on the yellow line. Lanesplitting through this Downtown street to dodge the fools changing these lanes I'm riding in between. I know some Mammals just don't see a Fox on a motorcycle in their mirrors. And I get that most of them wouldn't think much of me being crippled for life or dead, besides a sing-song Good Riddance. It's kinda why my parents cried for me when they found out I bought a Fox-sized bike.

It wasn't just me leaving for Zootopia like I did. But as much as I should care about the danger, I just care more for the mobility. It's not like anyone my generation can afford a car, anyway. Nor could most park or hide a car like I can this Vulpon. Dodge the parking meters and the tickets.

I can circumnavigate with this thing.

And it isn't a dirtbike, but I have knobby offroad tires on a Ranger 75 anyways. They got better grip in the sand and snow, but I try to avoid the Rainforest District. I got a little more reason than the rain or how crazy the roads are, there. I'd rather focus on something else. Like how for a motorcycle it's size, the Vulpon still has the perfect sound. Like a Hoggley, but better. The same snarl, but in a higher tone. And with a two to one pipe without a muffler, it thunders. Sure the thing's loud. That's the point: The first time someone ran me off the road and said that he didn't hear me was gonna be the last. You're so exposed on a bike, that you can't forget it. You're not encased in a steel cushion, but hanging on for life over an engine with two wheels and hopefully enough-but-not-too-much brakes.

But what makes cars so safe leaves room for distraction. There ain't none on a motorcycle. They take your mind off of whatever ugly thing it's on forcing you to try not to die or worse. And that's part of the liberation. Having some more present to worry about. It's not like you can get freedom like this in any other way. Go where you want whenever, and it's nothing else besides life or death all the way there.

It's times like 8:43 this morning, in a sea of horns of every volume and pitch wailing, the distant
swearing over nothing that I can't hear over my parallel twin, that for a brief moment in my life? I can feel so pure and free. I'm not a Fox, not a Predator, just some Mammal on a bike. With a genuine smile on my face. Like a blue moon. I can do a wheelie with maybe a foot of space between me and this traffic, and I feel like I'm winged and soaring, and all those years of accumulated fear and doubt and frustrated depression is gone to pride.

And then they come back around in one split second image in front of me. Because it starts on a Friday and the reason I remember, is the sight of a pickup truck door swinging open in front of me. The smell of my tires burning, as I duck and cower behind the bike's handlebars just in time for the digital watch on my wrist to go from 8:43 to 8:44. I had started to subconsciously brake just in time to save myself from a Pig's door, but only for that Pig's screaming. He shuffles out of the driver's seat with a forced machismo and a haymaker to knock me off the bike. His wild eyed leer, his crazed shouting. As I start to yell, he belches out a stream of consciousness as his cloven fist clutches at my shirt collar.

You know, that typical specist road rage stuff. You preds can't drive, you won't learn, your kind thinks you own the roads, we don't pay taxes just so lowlives like you can road rage around the rest of us while your out of jail, don't you animals ever think about the people you might kill, because I bet you do, You don't scare me, I'm not gonna take it, and on an on and on. It feels like forever. His snout brushes against my cheek. All I can see is his eyes so I close mine. Whatever he had with his morning coffee had onion. And as I start to go from rigid to limp, I begin to just take the abuse to get it over with. You dare not fight back. Not against Prey. Not unless you wanted even more to gang up and beat you, get the cops called on you, get told you started it. They're gonna come anyway. They're all gonna think I started this. But maybe I can get away before they come, if this Pig would just hurry up and stop shaking me around like a ragdoll.

But I feel another presence. Then a lunging forward and a release of that hoove's grip. And I fall back and on the ground. There's two pairs of hooves with weight clapping on t the asphalt, and then the denting of sheetmetal. "GET IN YOUR TRUCK AND GET OUT OF HERE!" echoes against the city walls and now parked cars. I look up to see an Elk releasing his chokehold on the Porcine to shove him back in the cabin with a doorslam so hard it shatters this little Piggy's driverside window. For a millisecond, I dart my eye back down before the Pig can grab hold of the steering wheel. He had the wheels turned towards me. He was prepared to cut me off and crush me, and probably only opened the door in a split second decision on just how much he was gonna ruin his truck to make me pay.

The Boar hurriedly straightens his wheels and follows the Elk's command as I look back up from the ground. His reflection's gasping in shock and humiliation and fear from that rearview mirror. But he can turn it all off tomorrow. Because he doesn't know sorry like I do. Wouldn't get that I live those same feelings. Wouldn't even care. I'm just a concept with an anger over it I can't put a name to. As the Elk's chest puffs out with each inhale, and my attention draws on him. His well-practiced stance loosening back to a relaxed state with a slight crook of satisfaction on his lips. His mid forties attire gave him away as the teacher, not the learner, of some nearby martial arts school. I had noticed it before. It's a youth school that catered to Prey parents' fears of their children needing to defend themselves from Mammals like me. Against these sharp canines and that assumed bloodlust. Whether
or not we want anything to do with them to begin with was a moot point. They had to be prepared for The Day. The day when they got the excuse to be a Hero and beat on a sharp tooth'd bad guy.

Prey should see how we're living. This Elk is feeling real good about himself, thinking that he's done something about what little he saw of it.

That's what burns through my head as I try to get up. His hooves reach out and whatever kind of prey-guilt he's spouting off, I can't hear it through my still-ringing ears besides "...And I'm so sorry, I just want you to-" And the rest of me agrees with that black gloved right paw of mine as it slaps the Elk's gesture away. I flash my teeth, I snarl with all the fire and brimstone I can pack in my eyes. He steps back in a double-take and I help myself up with a forward lurch. My paw didn't care. His blackbelt, his remorse, his anything. He isn't scared, though. He's not threatened. Just shocked. Taken back. He feels betrayed. I don't care, because he was only pretending to care out of a sense of obligation. He doesn't really sympathize and he can't really try. Because he can't understand, and even if he could, then what?

One awkward skiddish Prey guy thinking he can undo what everyone else did. The conceit in it. The Vulpon's engine is still running, but struggles in it's sideways state from having been knocked over during the scuffle. The Elk's shock had given way to disappointment and he turns with a "...Last time I ever..." muttered under rage-heavy breath. I need to get out of here. Pull the bike back up with a slight puddle of gas beginning to develop from the carbs. With a push to roll it forward, I ease the throttle off of a rev with the clutch engaged. And as I climb back on, I catch a flash in my eye when I look back. A phone camera... I don't think anything of it at the time, but in retrospect? I should have considered it. Or something else besides the immediate thought of my own camera: That Laika slung around my neck and under my arm.

I consider for a brief moment to check to see if it was broken but I don't. The only urge I have is to just simply leave. Just ride off, just go before anything else happens. Besides: My head is like an aircooled engine. It needs airflow to cool down. Motion. Speed. So I'll kick it out of neutral and roll my thoughts off to blow away from me. Make my mind shift focus back to the Vulpon, back to trying not to die and just to have a moment where I can't think of anything else. I'm not far now from Marula Tree Park, now. A few more southbound blocks, and I could cut through an alley through the park's side, where I could ride the Vulpon a ways and walk the rest of the rest of it to the courtyard my friends always hang out at. The majority of us are broke and out of work enough to make our own schedules.

Except for the trustfund Bison, that guy literally had nothing better to do than wait it out for an inheritance... And beg me to parties... Like the one I'm sure he's calling me about right as I ride through the park threshold. My brows furrow. I'm a merit badge to him. He can wait. The rest of my morning can't. So I ignore my phone to slip the gears back into neutral, cut the engine so I can coast until I find a spot to hide the bike... And there it is, a solid hedgerow with a space between it and a brick wall. Walking it backwards into that space I slip it into first gear and lock the forks in place. And it's right about now, as I round a corner to see that courtyard, that I can start appreciating Zootopia again. Because 2015's summer is looking like it's gonna get bad, but I came here for a better reason than to get messed with by a different flavor of longneck. There's a beauty to this city. I
don't think it's only because I'm a Country Fox, either. I got so much life to witness here, even at it's worst. Even if I gotta try to force a lot of it off my mind.

The perk of being a rural wallflower all your life, I guess, is that the distance between you and everyone else brings you that much closer. You get to see so much, from so many mammals. One passing glance a vignette of someone else's life. You can tell so very much from the look in their face, the clothes they're wearing, the gate of their stroll. The crook of their smile or frown. I guess it's things like this that made me take up street photography as a hobby. Just to keep myself busy in between tracking down income. This trail I find myself on now is crowded unlike the one I rode in on. A Bear, a group of Sheep, a crowd of assorted Deer and Antelope all herding together. Zebras, Horses and other Equine. And then there is a Deer to my side.

He looks to be an Odocoileus Hemionus. A respectable twelve points held over his head. Well tailored suit. A Deer's prose is in their graceful movements, like walking poetry. A waltz. Maybe it's a little envy, but mammals that say it takes two to tango have never studied a Deer. Even when I gotta to risk assess on them like any other Prey, their prose still strike me. He looks to his phone, with the magic of a wizard studying an ancient scroll. It's such a mundane act, but still so captivating. And with a split second to spare, I start to grab for my camera. I have to decide, right now, if taking this one shot from the angle I'm seeing it from, is gonna be worth someone else yelling at me and throwing my camera into the ground. It's a picture that could be timeless, without any filter needed.

It's also a potential fight or a stern talking to by ZPD. The subject could be captured in this beautiful little moment forever. Or I wouldn't stop lamenting the fact I tried to shoot a Buck for weeks. But eventually, time runs out and decides for me. A delicate gesture tucked the phone into the inside of his jacket and he turns. And so did I, trying to hide the fact that I was about to take a picture. "HEY OOOHHHH!" My tail frizzes out and ears tuck back as the male Coyote comes up from behind and grabs me by the sides. The look on my face must be the perfect blend of fright and irritation. Hey Oh started becoming a thing right around the time this smart aleck moved into town and Andy Howlerson started bringing him to the parks with us.

Now everbody does it. Except the picking me up and carrying me around like a stuffed animal thing. That's just what Wally does. And is doing. Right now. Embarrassing me. In broad daylight. In front of Andy and the rest of 'em I see in the distance, already howling and cackling their heads off and cheering my assailant on while my muzzle twitches and brows furrow into one solid, uniformly level expression of frustration. Andrew, the Wolf, slaps his thigh as Jager teeters on the verge of falling over. The classic image of a Hyena. And Toby, the token prey boy of the bunch, he's doing everything he can to maintain his dignity. A vain attempt at containing his chortle and hiding it under his hooves, but his eyes give it away.

Meanwhile, I can't see it, but Wally must have this stupid smug Look-What-I-Found look on his face. He isn't much bigger than me, not much heavier then me, but I've stopped trying to figure out how he does this with ease. He's gotta work out, but his build doesn't show under his fur. Andy continues laughing as Wallace sets me down in the middle, and it's about now that I get the news. Andrew starts to settle into a snicker, and then stares. Deadpan serious look. "What happened to your
shirt, bro?" I think of my collar, and as I grab it, I don't even have to look down. I feel the already torn silk tearing further. That Pig, he must've torn it as he grabbed at me.

"Ah, cripes... I dropped the bike on the way here. Must've got snagged as I fell." I'm good at facades, and it seems like they buy it.

"Dude, Owen, one Pred to another? You gotta stop it with the riding. That heap's gonna get make you roadkill." I roll my eyes and start unbuttoning the shirt with a "Jager, I'm not gonna stop riding that Vulpon, I'm not a public transportation kind of guy and we've had this talk."

"Oh, this freakan guy..." Andrew trails off. They've all been getting annoyed with me lately about this. I can't really blame them.

"Look, OC, this city isn't bike friendly." Toby has a point that's been proven time and time again.

"I understand what you're saying..." I unsling my camera and lay it down. "...And your comments are valuable..." I peel the torn shirt off, revealing my black slimfit tee. "...But I'm gonna ignore your concern." I stroll over to the nearby trash bin, gazing down at the balled up silk fabric. I just got the thing, too. A collective sigh of frustration with me is had by all. Except Toby Antelier.

"Well hey, at least let me have that. I don't get to work with much silk stock." The Buck has a point. Antelier, opposite of the small terrace, was an artist that couldn't be pinned down to any one outlet. He sang, and was damn good at it. Fairer than Andrew, and pretty consistent with bandmates. He writes, but I tend to feel some undue sophomoric vexation in his words. He paints good abstracts, though, and is amazing with the needle and sowing machine. He even does some embroidery from time to time on laundry shirts. His high fashion take on art nouveau is a stark contrast to his attire of skinny jeans and old western pearlsnaps. A whole lot of me envies just about all of him.

He doesn't completely Get It, but he Got It a lot more than any other prey mammal that I've known. He isn't trying to be a savior, he never patronized us, and he never spoke out of turn. He's reserved, but isn't holding back anything ugly. We trust him enough that we don't have to hold back when smiling, or laughing. It was liberating, when we figured him out like that. Predators have to be so concerned with scaring Prey that they had to learn how to smile and laugh as non-threateningly as possible. As recently as thirty years back, social studies classes in public schools still required pred students to master their Non-Predatory smile to complete the class. It's taboo even today, with Predators like me or Andy and the others trying not to let their guard down in public. Jager still can't pull it off, and it makes him awkward. More suspicious to anyone needing their confirmation bias fix.

A predator has to be so comfortable around prey, so perfectly at ease, it's a show of trust to not hold
back. This is how much my eyes squint when I laugh. This is how many teeth I have. This is my
tongue rolling in between my fangs. This is that look that you think is threatening, but it's not, and I
trust you enough to not be scared that you'll be scared. And Toby has endeared himself so much to
me and the others that I would have given him the shirt regardless. I crack a smile, a sincere one, as I
ball the shirt up a little more and give him my best free throw. The guy doesn't even need a Think
Fast from me: He reads me like a book and hops with poise as I toss it. "You're gonna surprise me
with it about a week from now, aren't you?" And he cracks a knowing smirk to that. Looks good on
his skiddish azz self. I get a little wry, too, hopping on the space next to Andy.

"Anyone else hungry? Got anything besides a beer?"

"I got a cider."

"You always got a cider, Jager, that's a given. Who's got eyes on something not liq-"

...Everyone's looking at Wally present a vine of grapes to go with that grin. The tool. Has 'em give
a snicker off because they know exactly what he's going for, here. I sigh. He's not kidding. Well, he
is, but he's not kidding about kidding. I have to leer a little at him, over this Fox and the Grapes act.
"May I please ha-" A quick toss, and it's aimed in my direction but too high. I still reach, but Andy's
got more. And yeah, it's pretty much nothing we're turning into a big deal, but Toby's been around us
long enough to get it: We kind of need any chance we can give ourselves to joke around. He's easy
to amuse, though. And everyone's been inspired lately to get my goat. Now Andrew's gotten too
comfortable with trying to play me like Wally does. Like he's being right now, dangling his grapes
over my head while I make a face and everyone else chuckles.

Here's the thing, though: I still gotta get him back for doing me wrong like he did last week. All he's
done now is open himself up to the fact I know my way around Wolves. I trail my gaze from the
Grapes and down his arm, past his pit, and at the exact spot he's weakest at. I fold my ears back, let
my grin loose and strike: One hand peeling his shirt up to reveal the side of his stomach, and my free
palm strikes just below his ribcage to pet the ever loving heck out of it. He realizes what's happening,
but it's too late. My quick, rapid strokes gets his tail wagging, and everyone starts to lose their minds
as Andy starts to thump a foot against the ground and pant.

I'm grinning ear to ear. Right now he must be hanging his tongue out the side of his mouth and
making the stupidest cross-eyed face, because Jager's fallen down, Toby's practically squealing and
losing every bit of his composure, and Wally's giving off the best damned horse laugh I ever heard.
The Lupine drops his grapes, and I stop embarrassing him to let em fall straight in my lap. As
everyone proceeds to completely break down and die in agonizing laughter, so he can let it soak in
with his paws over that blush. He's taxed me. And I played him like a friggin' piano. So darned
smugly victorious I can smell my own catharsis and it's stronger than limburger. I'd be gagging if it
wasn't mine.

But it is, so I'll get up with grapes in hand to monologue. Because Toby's crying, Andy's too
flustered, and Wally's the only one to see him.

What I don't.
"And another thing, You don't get to-" "SIR YOU ARE GOING TO HAVE TO CALM DOWN AND KEEP YOUR HANDS IN PLAIN VIEW."

I freeze solid from the turnaround I made when I do see it. That sight of a badge. This seven feet of hippo towering over me. The one and a half ton herbivore cop is the omnipotence trifecta. I do what I can to hide my frustration, and I keep a firm grip on those grapes to hold back the urge to indulge in that tick I have of putting my hands in my pockets. And yet I still look behind to see Andy holding his paws out to his sides, palms exposed. Wolves probably catch more grief from the World than any other predator, and it shows in him. "FOX, EYES ON ME, NOT YOUR BUDDY!" How could I be so stupid? Because I'm scared. He grabs his radio, and he starts to call for back up. Wally, Jager and Andrew must hate me right now.

"Now listen, You and You sit down. You, get up, sit down next to them. Keep at a distance from each other. Further. Further."

We keep our paws out, we're doing everything, but he's still got his hand over his belt like he's a gunslinger. His eyes are darting over us. I'm getting the feeling that he's an overzealous rookie. I'll hope so, if maybe that'll mean he's not completely unhinged. "You, Bucko, what're you hanging around with these guys for? You trying to buy something from em?" I didn't know whether to be angrier or relieved, because him asking Toby that question just obviously telegraphed the fact that he couldn't have graduated academy more than a month ago, and barely graduated at that. The White Tailed is so taken back by the cop that he just sits there, quizzically slackjawed and squinting. "ARE YOU TRYING TO BUY SOMETHING OR NOT?"

I can't even, with this. Neither can Toby, but "Sir... These are my friends? I'm with these people because I like their Company... And no, No I don't smoke, before you ask."

"Let me see your ID... And who does that camera belong to? That one in the middle." Because we're so stupid, he has to point out the one camera in plain view. The only one he could be talking about.

"Mine." I raise my hand slowly, non-threateningly. Trying to reassure him. Maybe I can get him to get his hoof away from the taser.

"Really, Boy? Where'd you get it from?" The suggestion that something I have, that could be considered valuable, was stolen, had stopped phasing me ages ago. But I still pause, because I'm that amazed this joke is writing himself.

"Are you aware that being in possession of stolen goods is a felony, Fox?" and it's a mistake I did.

But Toby butts in before I make another. "Officer, I gave that camera to my friend several months back. It's a Laika 5R Irafas and the last three digits of the serial number is 427." Except Toby's gotten his Drivers License out of his wallet while cutting in and is about to make the stupid, horrible mistake of getting up to approach the Hippo.
But thank god, the Hippo's backup has finally arrived. A bear. Looks to be Ursus Arctos Horribilis. Has the stoll of a veteran. "What are you doing Officer Telt?" That dismissal. This hippo is a rookie and he's screwed up before.

"These mammals were causing a disturbance and I had reason to believe they were intoxicated." But if that was the case, then "Did you ask them if they had any open containers?"

"Sir, th-

"Oh Now you remember to say Sir."

I clinch my jaws and do everything I can not to chuckle. One misstep, now, from any of us, and the tables turn back against our favor. We're all holding it in except Toby who's just a little too skiddish around cops to be amused. "As a matter of fact? You're going to wait for me around the corner because I'm going to wrap this incident up for you. You read me?" Somewhere, I feel a little pity for the idiot. But mostly smug. I feel a whole lot of smugness, right now. "...Sir, Yes Sir." He tries his best to act authoritarian in his shuffling, but he couldn't pull it off.

"So did you folks have any open containers?"

"No sir."

"What's your name?"

"Andrew Howlerson, sir."

"Drop the sirs and tell me what really happened here."

The Wolf hesitated.

"Well?"

"...My friend to the left made me drop my grapes."

Jager snorts. I nearly lose it and Wally and Toby do. The Bear's half amused and half under the impression he was joking. And it almost got him upset, before he noticed them in between me and Andy. "What Andrew means, is..." Toby began to explain, "That Coyote tossed some grapes to him, and he held it over the Fox's head, and then h-."

"I don't need an explanation for this but was anyone fighting with anyone?" A unanimous No was uttered by all to quell the bear's frustration.

"Are you guys gonna cause another scene?" A second unanimous No.

"Good then stay out of trouble and don't make Me come back." No tickets. No cuffs. No muzzles. No county lockup. He has bigger fish to fry. A collective sigh had by everyone. I look to Andrew, trembling next to me. He's still a little more Deer-in-The-Headlights than the Deer to our right. Toby knew about pred profiling. He's seen the videos. But I don't think he's witnessed as much of it right in front of him than just now. He feels a little guilty, only knows better than to say anything, because nothing could make what just happened go away. He ought to be thankful he didn't see that grief, earlier... But I ain't gonna be hungry for awhile, now. I'll sit the grapes down next to Andy, after this and that... We've kind of all had the joking taken out of us.
"...You were saying?" I look to Wally with quiet sobriety. "Hmm?"

"Before the cop interrupted you, you were gonna say something."

"Oh..." That. "Guess it was gonna be some scat talking about... You know, my usual flexing. The point is I only let you guys win when I'm bored."

Andrew's "Brah you making me glad that cop shut your speech down." to get smirking through an "Step off." while I cock a brow an elbow Andrew with a dry laugh, then go to grab the camera. It's only now I get around to checking it after this morning. A scratch or two, but the lens has the same uniform resistance as before in both zoom and focus, and it doesn't sound like anything is loose in the body. I figured. I remember now that it was hanging from my right side and I fell on my left. "Hey oh? What's with this buffalo guy I keep hearing about?" I have to cringe a little, and the Wolf explains to Wally for me. "Buffalo's some tryhard preyboy that thinks he knows Toby. Pretty much."

"And he won't. Stop. Calling me."

"Oh, Owen don't tell me-"

"Yeah Toby He called me again just as I was riding up to here."

"He's that bad?"

"Wally, he's nauseating." seethes out from my teeth.

There were Mammals on this earth that treated basic social interaction like a presidential debate. Treated Preds like me an minorities like others like a commodity to win social interaction with. That talk about things like agency, then decide that they're someone else's representative. That's Buffalo. A podium that speaks for whoever's on it instead of letting them speak. A user. And yet people wonder why I didn't vote for mayor Lionheart. And as I look at my phone and just now notice the small series of cracks on the bottom left of the screen, I look at the voicemail app and consider whether or not I want to get even more upset than I already am.

"He left you a voicemail?"

"Course he did."

"Play it, I wanna see Wally's reaction." Andrew and Jager both laugh. "I'm plugging my ears..." Toby proceeds to cover the sides of his head and hear no evil. I roll my eyes and press play before tapping the loudspeaker.

"Heyoohhhhh we're doing a dress up party tonight at my place at eight and I know you just got through raiding thriftshops so don't give me that 'I got nothing to wear excuse' for the millionth time and hey look I KNOW you think you won't like my friends but here's what I'll do I've got money for
gas AND I'll let you sleep over which means I'm literally bribing you to have fun so be there or be...

My face twists in frustration. I can see the stupid bison making an invisible square gesture with his fingers. He's watched pup fiction too many times. He's done it too many times. He thinks his awkward prey hide can jive with preds and be hip and my eyes roll again with the weight of a metric ton of seething rage behind them because now he apparently knows about Hey Oh.

"...Sooooooohhhhh I guess I'll see you here!"

"Who told him about Hey O-" "I did." "Andrew why did you even?!"

"It came up! You know how he is!" and yeah, sure, but I still gotta press my fists against the sides of my head about it.

With an "urrgh..." in the middle of it.

"Just don't go, Owen."

"No, you know what Jager, I AM just so I can crash his party and make him pay me for the favor. I just need an accomplice. Andrew, what about you?"

"I'm broke, bro. I don't have subway money for this and I ain't asking for a ride from Toby."

I'm genuinely surprised that "Andrew, you're broke?"

"I wouldn't give you a ride anyway. I don't even wanna be on the same block as him."

"Since when?" It's not like him to be broke this soon after the first of the month.

"I lost that job at Snarlbucks the day after I told that angry ram customer to go shear himself."

laughs and chuckles all around.

And that excuse I got to finally force his paw on learning how to be self-employed:
"Alright, Andy, it's settled: You're helping me dumpster dive tonight after I leave Buffy's."

"Owen I told y-"

"Ah, b-b-b-But Nada. You're gonna be my look-out, I'm gonna split the pawnshop profits with you fiddy fiddy, and you're gonna learn what kind of perfectly good wares mammals throw in the trash."

The Wolf groans in frustration. He needs the money to hold him until his next gig, I need a lookout, and he knows both of these things.

I got a "ffiiiiiiine...", but I'm still gonna try to not suffer Buffalo by my lonesome.

"What about you, Jager? You coming to Buffy's shindig?"

"Owen Buffy can't pay me enough to swallow my pride."
Oh. Oh Jager thinks he's cool. "Look at this nerd..." Jager thinks my style has rubbed off on him.

I'm way too amused, but it's good to see Jager beam a little. Hyenas like him don't do it often enough. Always gets confused, when they do.

"Wally?"

"Nightshift, yo."

Which means I'm gonna have to solo this.

"So you guys're gonna leave me all alone with this loser, huh? I see how it is." That noone's gonna volunteer to help me out with a little coping and I'm just gonna have to face it alone.

Something Toby's gotta reinforce with "Maybe you need to re-instate the draft if you want us to take a bullet for you." and a laugh, but it's fine...

I'll give him back that knowing, plotting smirk he gave me earlier to call his bluff with a pointed claw and "Just you wait 'til congress is back in session."

I notice the time though, as I point and see it on my Bullova watch. If I go now, I'll have just enough time to get to the Young Mammals Religious Association in Savannah Central, get to my locker, pick an outfit, and head back up to Downtown in time to be a fashionable fifteen minutes late.

Time to take my cocked thumb and signal my ducking out of here.

"I Ride. I'll debrief you tomorrow if I don't make the news."

That American Bison owes me a spot on the Six O'clock, if nothing else.

This Wolf is looking to me like I owe him something too, though. Andrew getting up to "Let me walk with you." before I can say a word.

He must have something on his mind, but "My bike's not that far, Andy..." yet doesn't change the fact on his face: he's got more than walking on his mind.

"Hey, I'll see you guys tomorrow."

No nos, this time. He's heading my way with a wave to follow behind him.
So I hold my tongue, and accept that he's got business with me that's gonna get conducted, either way. His footsteps are telling it behind me. They are deliberate and purposeful. Looking back to Andrew, I'm reminded of my appreciation for Wolves. It ain't just that sense of community they got. They have dualities to them, and prey folk tend to only see as mixed messages at best. They're not good at hiding their feelings, and their feelings get lost in translation. But there's a sincerity in their aura. Their presence. It's a stupidity that it garners a mistrust similar to what I face, instead of the respect and admiration it deserves. Their biggest fear is being feared. So it's not really a surprise that even among his own kind, a Canis Lupus can be a little awkward, a little timid.

They're cautious, but not immediately concerned like a Vulpes Vulpes is. We hide it well, for most part. They're too honest to hide it. Yet there's still a majestic aire to them, when they choose to present it. They can be a little goofy when relaxed, which is endearing. They're even strangely calming. Yes, they have this stoic quality to them, and that can be intimidating, but they're more than that. They're more than the cartoon trope they've inherited as, if they ever were that in the first place. As I look back, though, what I see first is the frustration in his eyes. His worry. The tell-tale crook of knowing in his frown. He didn't buy what I said about dropping the Vulpon. I can see it in his brows. Just because they're not good liars doesn't mean they're not good at detecting lies.

"You didn't drop the bike."

No I didn't, but "Well, what matters is I'm out one of my nicest shirts in my wardrobe."

"Forget the Shirt, Owen, What Matters to Me is You." I'm taken back by this and reminded of a Wolf's first and foremost quality: If a wolf has nothing else in this world, he or she has The Pack. Wolves are careful of who they befriend. They are afraid of betrayal. They meticulously assemble a closely knit, interwoven fabric of relationships to anchor themselves. They seek social bonds that are earned and bestowed with mutual loyalty and trust. It's a contract in everyone's best interests. They look out for everyone they love, and they truly love. But they expect it back in kind. It's why they like to stick with their own kind. And at this moment? "...I know." he's frustrated in his loyalty to me.

"Do you really? Me, Toby, Jager, we worry like crazy about you."

"I don't need pity, Andrew."

"Well then take pity on Me, Bro! I don't let mammals into my life to watch them throw their own away!"

It's rare, but he is a wordsmith just like me and Toby.

That's when the trouble starts, where I gotta get defensive and I hate it.
I don't look back as I hold court with him to the tune of "Andrew I didn't choose what I need to get by but I got it! I got what I need to keep me in transit an out the deep end. You know what I was like without that Ponda and now I got something even better!"

He doesn't skip a beat either, though, as I swing around to watch him tell me that "You got something that's gonna piss someone off into running you over even quicker!"

And yeah, he's right but "Andy? Andrew we didn't ask for the struggle but we all got our ways to deal." I love and care for him, just as he does me, but I'm frustrated by it too at times. I just need a way to cope. "You have that, I have it, we can't get by without the fight and the hunt for our own peace of mind. You pour yourself into your music with Toby and me?" I turn the wall's corner and point between it and the hedgerow as I look him dead in his eyes. "I ride this therapist like a madmammal because it empowers me. It's the one thing I have to express that need for hope and passion and liberty and the pursuit of happiness."

"You mean that old worn out heap with a parking ticket wedged into the handlebar?"

"Yes, that old worn out WHAT?!!" I snap my head to the bike.

"Oh get the freak Outta here with this!" A ticket. Right there. Tucked under the wire for the clutch on the lefthand side.

"Sixth ticket in the past year?"

"Tenth Ticket." My grimace is so rigid it threatens to pull a muscle.

"Owen-

I snap my eyes back to the wolf with an "Andrew, they haven't gotten me yet, and they never will, but if they do, yes, they are going to hang me. But first they gotta catch me an I'll be damned if I'm gonna let 'em!"

Turning back to the bike, I have determination etched into my brows. "... I'll swap out plates with another bike, someone else is gonna get fined, they're gonna take it to court, the judge will rule in their favor citing an obvious clerical error, and I'll keep riding because it's my one outlet-"

The Wolf crouches down and grabs hold of my shoulders with the most deadly serious look he's ever given me. "You want to be Impossible? Fine. Be Impossible. Do yourself all want but Just do me one favor, One Predator to Another."

"Don't die."

"Don't. Die."

It's like it ain't obvious that I've been trying not to. That it's kind of the whole point to riding in the first place.

But we're not arguing. Maybe we don't see eye to eye, but I can at him and hope it kind of shows.
We're on the same page, here. Neither of us wants him stressing over how ratchet I am.

The Wolf straightens up and loses the serious look. "I mean would you seriously leave your apprentice hanging, bro?"

I smirk, walking under the hedgerow and turning back to look at him as I grab the ticket and crumble it up.

"You Know I look after my employees. Hey, speaking of trash, chuck it for me." I throw it, he grabs it, and I wrap my palms around the grips to push the Ranger out. The complete disregard for traffic laws throw him off-guard. Again. Let's me know he can still appreciate my crazy. And as I come out from the bush with it, I get a sense that he's admiring that old worn out heap. I see cogs turning in his head. The thought that maybe he should get his motorcycle license, too.

"You're making me want to get a Gudaggi..."

Now he's got me concerned.

"You don't got the greenbucks for the valve adjustments. Get a Triumphant."

I see him getting defensive like "I'm not a teasipper, O-." but I gotta cut him off.

I gotta break into song as I hop on the bike because "Somehow I'll! Make a tea sip-per! Out of Youuuuuuuu!"

I'm at least five octaves too low and I don't care. He nearly busts his gut laughing as I stand up and kickstart it like I got Chung-Lee's legs and the engine rattles to life as I roll out. Smug, proud smirk and all.

Buffy is gonna regret this decision.

But that don't mean I won't have a good feeling about it.
I'm not good at bowties. This black silk is just a hair too snug, but I don't dare try to redo it now.

I went for the 50s look of a theater usher without the hat. Some kitsch velvet blazer I found recently in bright red to black slacks with an off-white shirt that kind of blends into the white of my fur's underbelly. Hooves have worn a path through this hall's old carpet, but I doubt the apartment complex is gonna renovate soon. I'm more concerned about how quick Buffalo is gonna wear my patience out. Room 247. I ended up about thirty minutes late. Loud conversation and a Wolf The Moon song echoes through the door. His sound system is terrible. Lousy amp, poorly built speakers. All his stuff is big box circuitboard. Not vacuumtube. I didn't care much for bass, but I distinctly feel the bass wavelength peaking right at the threshold of his door. I have far better stuff, just in caches around the city.

And nothing I'd sell to him, anyway.

I'm halfway expecting to see a Giraffe poking a head through the second story apartment's window, but could I humor the idea that Buffalo isn't high enough up the social ladder to know one. That's petty and this is just stalling, sure, but I'm also trying to lighten myself up before that door flies open. Which it does all too soon, the door yanked open with a "Hhey Oooh-"

Nope, "Buffy you don't get to call me that just yet!"

I have to speak louder over his sound system because it's not crisp, not pure, it's just loud. It's making him a little more embarrassed, but again, noone can hear over his sound system.

I'm practically leering to the fact I'd put up with this from anyone else at any other time, just not him nor now. But I'll break it with a feigned smile with some made up grief like "You know how I am with pronouns, prey boy!" so he can remind me why I put up with him. It's more than the bribes or connections. His guilt complex is way too fun to have fun with. Leaves him a little too gullible to not be mildly mortified at the slight I just made up. "Owen, I am so sorry!" But that's the other reason I can't stand him. He's always apologizing.

Except that maybe, "Well, you can start apologizing with your wallet!" if that's desperate to have me for his clout.

"Oh, yeah, right, the ten!" He fumbles through the pockets of his tailored jeans. Looks like Toby's work, because he's always using contrasting stitching. He leans down and I meet his money half way with a jump.

And he can say it again, as all ten or twelve feet of him kneels down and hunches over to cough a bill up, but "I am so s-" is something I don't need finished if I gotta remind him.
"I told you, Buffy! Sorry is the most useless word in the dictionary!"

I still feel bad, regardless. Snatching up the bill as he presents it. But I gotta talk louder over his stereo set up. He hurriedly opens the door wider to let me in and closes it. It's a fair sized studio, but a little claustrophobic for the twenty or so heads I immediately count. Noone's even dancing, there's just trying to talk to each other. The audio is too distorted, and not clean enough to use an indoor voice. I spot some familiar faces as I walk through the crowd. For a moment, I wonder why there's an Oryx talking to the outside of an open window when it dawns on me why I was expecting to see a Giraffe. Buffalo knows one, and he's poking his head inside for a moment like he's looking for someone in the crowd. Kind of forgot Buffalo was actually friends with someone that he had to look up toward.

I haven't caught his name, before, but he must've brought his own beer, because as he ducks back out and takes a drink, I'm reminded of how much they have to drink to get buzzed: The can is two gallons. It practically counts as a miniture keg to most others and because of the lag in their nervous system, Giraffes have to be careful about getting drunk, because it sneaks up on them. They have to be more careful in their footsteps, more aware of their surroundings, than so many others. A part of me thinks they have it nearly as bad as predators do, but it's not the same kind of hardship either. Noone ever worries that a gang of Giraffes is gonna mug them, or beat them, or stab and kill them. I came to riot. So I try to force my mind off ugliness. I'm surrounded by too many Prey to start getting mad around them.

Yet. Just focus on something else, I'm telling myself.

Like a tall but stocky-not-fat Sus Scrofa, she's pulling a Wildebeast off to the bathroom for a little privacy. I don't know either of them, but I've met that Camelus Dromedarius before... And he's talking to Lola. I nearly chortle from how absurd the scene is, because she's shorter than me and needing to stand on a mildly irritated ram, just barely eye level with someone taller than two and a half of me stacked on top of each other. And even then, that's with the bad posture. He's being so awkwardly goofy, and she's loving every bit of it. She looks so confident, eyes scrunching as she laughs. I'm glad for her, that she's getting comfortable wearing a skirt, but I'm just so much more caught up with the image: An Arctic Fox hitting it off this well with a Camel. One with no idea what to think when I barely do either because It's so absurd, but she's always been attracted to opposites. She's just a little Extra about it, right now. He looks so afraid and unsure of himself, but I know he's got no reason to.

"Hey! Owen!" She waves, I wave back.

"Lola what are you doing up there?!" I'm chuckling as I say this and walk over. She's caught my amusement, and when she's feeling secure in herself, she can make everything so much worse.

She sits down on top of that ram's head. The Camel goes a little slackjawed in his blush, I snort badly trying to hold the laugh back, and the ram gets the look in his eyes like he's about to butt heads. With a point of her claw, she introduces.

"Owen, this is Telly!"

"I um, uh yes, Hello Owen, hey, yeah I'm t-Telly!"
"Heeey guy!" I'm not blackhearted enough to give him any grief, because his mouth has enough trouble trying not to trip over it's shoelaces. "...Lola you need to find a new seat!" He's literally gritting his teeth now.

She looks down at her Wool seat, his clenched cloven fist then back up to Telly with "Would you mind, and..." But she knows he's not gonna take the hint in the state she's worked him up to. And she's the type to surprise when she's happy like this. "Telly, hold your hooves out?" He does so obediently, and she stands up on the rams shoulder and jumps, launching herself into the camel's arms and scurries up to his shoulder. "Much better view!" Telly's on the verge of spazzing out and it's killing me. He's bug eyed and trembling like he's never had a Girl climb on top of him before.

"Lola, You're gonna kill him!" We're both having such a giggle here, we're having so much fun at his expense, that neither me or her are the slightest bit worried about that being taken literally. Predators hardly ever, ever get to joke like that because of it.

"I'm working on it--!

Then she does her worst: Leaning into Telly's hunched over neck for the peck. He nearly faints as his eyes glaze over. I think her smooch hit his carotid artery. I'm losing my mind and Telly's just about lost his as he goes crosseyed. She ain't done with me either, looking to me like "Oh! Owen, I brought a friend! Introduce yourself, I've told her everything about you!"

Oh hell, wait, "What?! Why?! Who?!"

Now she's got me freaking out and she's gonna soak it up to the tune of "You'll know~! Telly, let's move over there!"

A Vulpes Lagopus like Lola is at times like James Maul's saying about Vulguar owners: Not entirely trustworthy but in a really nice, likable way. They can get away with anything, as Richard Cunningham put it. She's a lot like me. Because most Foxes come to one or two conclusions about the world only ever seeing a Fox as shifty and untrustworthy. The first is that there's no point in trying to be anything else. The second is that if that's all it's gonna see, then that's all it's gonna get. It's so much more productive to be the latter, but a lot of Foxes, regardless of species, ends up picking the former. Thank heaven neither me or Lola did. But I can't focus on that. Right now I'm stuck wondering just who she decided to play wing-girl on me with.

She gets me, though. Knows my type so all I gotta do is look for someone that sticks out and is sticking herself out through the crowd with trouble...

...And it doesn't take long for me to look through the crowd to find her. Having so much fun with it I can hardly see her skirt flying up past her dancing. How it's inviting me to join in with a Ferret that
looks like Mustela Nigripes just with something Off. Something beside some Domestic in her that's
made her taller than either that or Blackfooted. Something I can make out even as she dances around
and in between the legs of this Bear she's left a little too conscious of such a small little thing under
him to dance. Holding his legs back from moving because of her. Making her far too amused in the
awareness. Us little guys, we give it back as much as the bigger guys dish it at us in our own ways.
And even as I think to myself he may be watching her just to make sure she doesn't pickpocket, I still
catch myself smiling. A little beside myself by how much I can't ignore how genuinely she's
enjoying herself.

It's charming. Infectiously charming, pushing out any cynicism I could possibly harbor. I feel a little
embarrassed for the Bear, sure. But I feel a warmth, too. She catches me out the corner of her eye.
Looking like I've got something to show someone. If I've betrayed my fascination, there's no point in
hiding it as I come forward.

I'm ready.

So I'm asking if "You know Lola?!" in spite of her height catching me offguard. Now that she's
stopped, and I can tell that the crest of her head must reach above my elbows. As she leans into
asking if I'm "Owen?!"

Because this sound system is horrible.

"Owen Conrad Fuchs! Hang on!"

And I'm more tired of yelling over it than anyone else.

The receiver is low enough to the ground for me to walk over, reach for the volume on tiptoes, and
turn it down. Thank god for long arms. Buffalo starts to come over, but he's aware enough of
everyone breathing a sigh of relief and talking with their indoor voices now for him to not protest
about it. Enough about him, though. "As I was saying, Owen Conrad." without the Fuchs at the end
as a matter of habit.

"H- She's told me so much. I'm Eva!" She slipped.

Must've "Known her a long time?" and since before I've met her. She's only found the confidence to
show herself like that over the past year.

"Childhood friends! ...Don't let her-" "I wouldn't and it's alright. So don't fret." I'm saying like it's the
nothing it ought to be. I wish I could live what I'm about to say but "The more you linger on
something, the bigger a deal it gets. So don't." She still cheers up as she looks behind me and I turn
my head.

Telly is slouched down on a couch, trying to talk it up with Lola, through his stutter as she stands on
that bear that Eva was just dancing around. Alright, now I'll feeling pity on the bear, but she's
enjoying every bit of it and "He's just gonna have to bear wi-" My laugh stops the pun I was about to
make, but Eva caught where I was going, and she lets one out, too.

More than that though, "Have you ever seen such a perfectly mismatched couple hitting it off so well?" comes from me as I nod my head to disbelief.

"Never."

We both had to admire them for a moment. "...She was my first friend when my parents moved here from the tri-burrows. We been besties ever since."

I'd like to hope not for long but "How long she been telling you about me?"

So please say anything but- "Since she met you."

...

...Damn. This Ferret's got more on me than I'd like and I know it.

And yet I'm still reading her as sincere. Something that shouldn't compute but... "One good thing from Buffalo, right?"

Maybe even two. The way Eva's looking like a lifer.

"Is that really his name?"

"Oh yeah... You wouldn't believe his full name."

"I don't wanna." She laughs. I do, too. Good, we feel the same way about him. I can let my guard down as she asks if "Lola never told you about me?" like it's a trick question.

Because it is.

She's quick like that. She's caught on, I can't hide that I dunno who I'm dealing with.

"All she told me tonight was to introduce myself to a friend she brought... I love your dancing."

Something that gets her a little bashful and to apologize with a "Can't help it." but I can be a little quick, too. Taking note of her poise by "You took lessons?"

"Me and Lola took gymnastics in school. We tried to get into Ballet, but... You know."

Yeah, I unfortunately do. I'm only familiar with it a little via my own dancing, but Ballet is reserved for Deer and Antelope. Sheep and Goats begrudgingly accepted from time to time, but until recent they would at least take admittance from other prey, even if just for cheap laughs. But a predator? No. Never. Lola told me what she faced when she tried. It was the same for Eva, I figured. I make a
"So how about them Mammal Inclusion Initiatives?" for a laugh and she gives it. I'm pretty sure most of us with canines in our mouths felt the same way. All the talk in the world didn't amount to any action. Ewe2 could do all the concerts they want, politicians like Lionheart could rally all day, bloggers like Buffalo could flagwave on the internet all they want. They didn't go out in the real world. I'm dwelling too much. I think it's showing.

"Sorry." I catch myself telling her.

"Sorry's the most useless word in the dictionary." She must've been by the door. I'm a little taken back. That or Lola's told her everything.

"Yeah... My words... But why don't we have a better word than Sorry?"

"It's called Action."

And that's caught me off my guard. How Lola's that good a matchmaker. Makes me brighten up in an instant to the honest question of "...How long have we known each other?"

Because I'm not expecting she's been keeping track but "two minutes."

Time to be a little juvenile with that "I'm falling in love way too fast." on my mind. That we're gonna have to slow it down for my sake.

As she asks if "Buffalo wanted a dance party, right?" to make me look around.

Nobody's dancing. "It's not what he wants, it's what he's getting."
But letting up ain't the look she's giving me, though.

With "Do You want a dance?" to leave me showing how I'm way too amused at how quick she is.

And Impatient.

"Buffy!" He's quick to turn his attention to her. "You Mind if I put a song on?"

"Sure! Here, let me unplug my iPaws."

She fumbles with her phone. I'm reminded that I must be the only millennial that runs around with a
Blueberry phone. With a keypad. She scrolls to a band called Los Lobosinos. "I haven't heard from that band since Zootopia College Radio shut down!"

"I know, don't you just hate clear way media, too?!" The ghouls. They bought up Air Zootopia Radio a few months later. "And... There!" I caught the song title before she set it down: You! Me! Pouncing! "I can't reach, can you-"

I'll test her with "Well gee, I don't know! Can I?!" and she got my Pee-Wee Vermin reference. Giggling to it as I reach for the volume and turn it up to three quarters... And get concerned.

I lose some confidence to wondering "Is this supposed to be so quiet?" but this is all she's got to say, before breaking into delicate motion:

"Wait til the thirty one second mark-.."

She's got such grace, and she's just playing along. Why wouldn't they just accept her? Or me? Why can't the world just accept us? But I catch my hand pantomiming the slow guitarist's strumming. And everybody seems to turn their attention to the speakers. It ain't just me wondering the heck she's up to. Buffalo is confused, no small wonder. I look over to Telly and Lola. He's cocked a brow. Murder, she wrote on her face. That horrified expression as she silently mouths an Oh No. Thirty one seconds in, the tone changes. Now I'm realizing what Lola knows. Now that it's morphing. Because it's building up, it's billowing like the crest of a forming wave ominously approaching the shoreline. An oncoming storm of hellfire and brimstone. Everyone's feeling it. The suspense is palpable. That wry look on Eva's face is far too mischievous. She's looking to me and she's pleased. She's seeing me getting swept up in the wave. It's building. It's getting stronger. I'm getting louder in the quake. It's getting more violent like a runaway train and crashing all together now. Every instrument linked together in being pounded on with unspeakable fury. She's trembling. I'm trembling. Heck, I think we're all trembling and we're not even scared, we're just so incredibly tense. "HEY EVA MAYBE WE OUGHT TO TURN IT DOWN-!" yells Buffalo and right on mark, the unmistakable calm before the storm. That says it's already too late turn down because that guitar, what a playful tease it's giving our ears as the drums bang in unison with the picking. We know the tidal wave is about to make landfall, and we're all waiting so anxiously for it, hooves are tapping, my head's bopping, the rest of me trembling, the rest of this apartment dying for it all to come down and it comes down and oh god does it come down, this song this moment like God's come down as judge and jury and has cracked the solid oak podium with a pure lead gavel. And we are that podium broken into dance like our switches got flipped. I'm so overwhelmed. We all are. Everything is fifty shades of brown and tan with the occasional orange and black. The impulse winding up straight into our feet every time we land, through the floor, from the distortion of a resonating cascade. It's a complete blur. I only see colors. Contours, not objects. Intangible spirits not in control of their bodies anymore. White darts across my field of vision. That must be Lola. This must be a wall I'm bouncing off of. The flailing body I saw flying itself off a Buck's horns like a backflip must've been Eva. If I came here to crash a trustfund baby's party then this wasn't the scene I was thinking of. With all of
me airborne and divebomb pouncing these floorboards shook loose with so many others taking off from every touching down, twisting by design to all closed eyes in the throws of natural passion and If I could have thought of anything else, it never would have been this good. I guess that I thought someone wouldn't crash Buffy’s with me this hard. With someone's eyes somehow able to track me and see me like I can’t even think. I don't know what I'm doing but something says they ain't ever seen movement quite like this. Motion like soaring out the whirlpool and back into the flood debris. Sticking out through the beautiful, harmless violence of everything that won't stop crashing down that's not a moshpit, but like how dance depicts mammals in the state of nature. Undeveloped, ignorant, and stupid, but it's happy. Something that hasn't come this hard or felt this good to me to dip into I came to Zootopia. And in the blink of an eye, I regain enough cognition to feel Eva's eyes on me as I catch myself in a matador's waltzing prose, tangoing with the Bull that is this violin, this guitar, the clogging of some wooden blocks? And then I feel the clapping. The apartment doesn't need a prompt to follow what the blown out speakers give and they respond back with their own. And here comes the drummer, he's bided his time, and now with every fiber of his being starts pounding on the drums and every paw and hoof obeys the command. This ballet reject, what magic she's woven. I feel the ground quake, the floorboards creak, as the bigger mammals stomp their feet to the beat of the song's drum. They're swept up like I am. I feel myself suspended in air each time the sticks pound the drums. There's staccato and there's diving off the deep end and if there's one thing, that I could never replace, it's how this girl made me dance. But I know what I'm doing, now. I'm landing on my feet to the tune of a tango, my liquids-and-digits transforming it into a lunging forward that becomes a flare, becomes a somersault, becomes a swipe, becomes a backflip, becomes a whirlwind, becomes an airflare, becomes everything. All at once. An atom bomb. I twirl in mid air as I backflip. My eyes are closed, but I think I just landed on the ceiling, jumped down to the ground, landed on my feet like a feline and I don't care to figure out how I haven't snapped a bone in half because I'm barreling through the crowd in another somersault just to run up the walls and jump again to bounce of something else and I just keep jumping, and spinning, and bouncing and getting on all fours and pouncing like one never ending run on sentence of raw emotion in song manifesting itself in the physical realm through me as it's host. I am an atomic bomb made with ceaseless raw emotion. I'm falling...

And I get confused...

Because the the music's fading...

And I'm still falling and it's almost like...

Oh.

Oh god.
I open my eyes to see the window I've literally just leapt out of and in slow motion. I am watching faces etched with horror flooding through the window sill. I feel the wind. I feel barometric pressure increasing because I've just jumped from a window and nearing the immovable bane dictated by gravity.

A swoosh.

The air around me is disturbed.

I land...

...I land in the Giraffe's arms and he's swinging me to slow my airspeed just enough that he doesn't kill me, himself. His head pokes out from the bottom left of my vision and my eyes make contact with a pair that looks they're just about as ready to pop out of their sockets as mine are. I can't hear him over my own heart thumping, louder than I can remember the feet of all those large mammals thumping. I can only pay enough attention to his lips to get the idea that he's asking me WHAT THE CHRIST WERE YOU THINKING?! He sets me down on my feet. A rolling motion ending in a stumble for him. My ears are ringing. I'm panting so hard I'm nearly dry on breath.

"Hey, You Hear Me? What The Hell were you even Thinking?!"

I wasn't, "You think I was trying to pull something, there? I was just dancing!"

But I'm looking down at his feet for a moment and I can tell he's about to feel how his left one's resting on it's side.

"Out of a two story window! Oh, OH, my ankle. Rolled it. Rolled my ankle Nnggh!" He limps back and begin to kneel down to clutch at it.

And I'm cringing with him to "Ooohhh why did I break your fallAAAAAHH!", practically feeling it right there with him as I take my eyes off him and back up to everyone leaning out of Buffy's open window.

While "You ok?!" echoes from above, when it's not the "YyyeaAHhh This just Hurts So-" Buffalo's focused on.

"I Meant The Fox!"
I kind of mad at myself right now.

"WWHAAT?!!"

But I'm as shocked as the Giraffe and I'm madder at Buffy. Clueless to the fact "I'm standing on my own two feet without pain and you're not worried about the giraffe over here?!"

"I A-"

"Check your lack-of-injuries privilege!"

That didn't roll off the tongue but oh man, if I can manage to laugh all this off later, I'm gonna feel like scat.

"uuURgh I'm gonna be lame for a week and I gotta volunteer..."

I'm hating the fact I'll probably try to.

"I'll have someone else call for an ambulance!"

"FOR A ROLLED ANKLE!?" flies out of both of our mouths.

The distinct sound of a landlord bashing an apartment door open can be heard all the way down here as the bison snaps his head back to "BUFFALO BUFFALO BUFFALO BUFFALO BUFFALO BUFFALO BUFFALO BUFFALO BUFFALO BUFFALO THIS IS YOUR THIRTY DAY EVICTION NOTICE YOU SORRY SACK OF-"

Yeah.

"What!? No, Plea-"

I'm gonna be laughing my tail off when this is over but I'll feel bad afterward.

"YOU NEARLY BROUGHT THE BUILDING DOWN AND EVERY TENANT IN THE BUILDING IS ON MY TAIL! YOU! ARE! GONE!"

Except right now I find myself wondering what Buffalo meant just now when he said he'd have someone else call...

...Oh no.

"Hey! Ho! Wait up, what do you mean someone else?!"

"I mean I'm already on the phone with-"

"No."

"As we speak and-"
"Oh, nnNO!"

"And she says they're-"

"Oh scat on a stick, no you did no-"

"I did!"

"Why did you eve-"

"YOU JUMPED OUT OF A TWO STORY WINDOW YOU CRAZY-"

He stops himself and panics. I still scream in frustration. I'm gonna be sick. I'm clutching my head and I'm paranoid as all get out, now. "You, daddy longlegs, I am... I am so, so thankful for-"

"Just go! AaAH!"

He didn't have to tell me twice.

"BUFFY, YOU DON'T KNOW MY NAME, FRIEND OF A FRIEND, I DON'T CARE WHAT THE HECK EVER!" and then I run. I hear sirens. The response is too quick. They're in the neighborhood for something else. My legs don't care. They move faster through the alleyway then they've moved since that time I nearly got caught with catnip. I cross the next street over just in time to feel red and blue discos glowing over me, my heart skips a beat, but that Cop SUV doesn't stop and just leaves to jump onto the Vulpon with a kick to start and a rev to burn out to.

And yes, that is his name. Buffalo. Multiplied by eight.

Fast forward an hour later, and I'm still shaking as I round the corner. There's not much in the way of hiding places for my Vulpon on this side of town, and the storm drain under the bridge a few blocks behind me was the safest bet. No storms scheduled for Savannah though. Andrew has his back to the wall as I get closer. He's impatiently regarding the intersection. Thank god I brought some food. I whistle out, he turns to me, not bothering to hide his irritation, shock, and then shocked irritation.

"Owen, what the heck happened?"

"I'm that bad?"

"You're thirty minutes late and you're shaking like a leaf on a tree. Now tell me what really happened?"

"...I think I jumped out of a window?"
"Hey, I think I crashed Buffy's party so hard he got evicted! I mean, this ferret chick kinda helped me bu-"

"No, excuse me, run that by me again: You did What?!"

I roll my eyes and repeat. Didn't wanna think "I Jumped Out of A Window." and he didn't wanna hear it either.

He clinches his fist, and it's everything he can do to not punch the brick wall.

"You know what? No. I don't believe you and I'm not gonna believe you. Because I'd be So Mad At You, that I would throw you out of another window! No. I'm not..."

"It's a long story and we don't have all night. Trash trucks start picking up in a few hours, so we gotta move. Here, I brought you some fries from bug-burga."

He's eyeing the bag quizzically with a cocked brow. "You didn't get that out of a trashcan, did you?"

I laugh out loud at how preposterous that is. "You think I'd have you eat out of a dumpster in this part of the city?" and then I get serious with an "I only dumpster dive for food in Tundra Town. No bugs and that place is basically one big refrigerator, so it's not like tossed food spoils over there. And that's not on the menu tonight anyway." I offer the bag again, but he shakes his head.

"I'd rather do this on an empty stomach."

"Your loss." I open up the bag, grab the box, pour a few of the fries in my mouth, and toss the rest in a trashcan to my left by the curb. I've done this enough that there's not much of anything that I can dig through that's gonna make me barf. The Wolf sighs with disgust a little. "Is that anyway to act on your first day on the job? And hey, let's get moving."

"Alright, where we going?"

"Right down that alley." I point with my thumb behind myself. He looks a little relieved that we don't have far to go. "You live right next to a Targoat, right?"

"Yeah...?"

"Well we're hitting it up first. Come on."
Several minutes later, he's taken my velvet jacket and lifted me up into the dumpster. He's started looking around nervously. He's getting second thoughts. "Owen, someone's gonna see us."

"Andrew, for the last time, nobody's gonna care even if they do see us. Ever heard of public domain? And the cops are too busy rounding up drunks right now to be on the prowl for anything else, and we're sober any- OH GOD!"

"What?"

"Somebody threw a diaper in here and it reeks to high heaven!"

He groans with nausea. I hold back from telling him how big it is as I push the trashbag it's in out of the way and "Bingo!"

Just like he told me.

"What?"

I peer out from the top of the dumpster with a smug look and slowly reveal "One thirty inch flatscreen! Display model, they chucked it when they renovated the endcaps."

"It's covered in Soda! It's all over the fuggin screen!"

I roll my eyes and "Well, all the more reason for you to grab it! Come on this thing is heavy and I'm not Sylvester Stallion!"

I heave it forward, he grabs it with a disgusted look and continues the naysaying like "But you said they all drill the TV's in the same pla-"

"EXCEpt," I tell him as I point at him, "Except for the badger friend whose resume I Falsified and pretended to be all his previous employers. And As A Thank You does things like not drill them all in the same place, and therefore giving me the chance to at least sell half of them as good and scrap the res- OH GOD!"

"What?"

"Someone barfed in this bag. Ech."
I grab it and dig it out to throw it outside of the dumpster and it lands with a squish. He dryheaves in his reeling. "Hey! Careful with that! I got another one here." I grab it, he lays the first TV down against the dumpster and grabs the other.

"Set that one down too and be ready for the next OH MY GOD!"

"What! What now!?!"

"It's disgusting!"

"Bro, what the F'IN H is it Now?!"

"A box of unsold Foodfright DVDs and Iggy Marsupialia CDs!"

He's getting tired of his and he's about ready to strangle that smug look on my face as I hold the box over my head labeled TRASH in Sharpei. It's wet though, and it ruptures with melted icecream pouring over my head. He snorts bug eyed, busts out laughing and now I'm the one that wants to strangle a friend. "...I'm going to empty out another box, put them all in that, hand it to you and you're gonna hope I don't find a BRICK in here to throw at you!" He starts to stop himself from laughing, but he's still too amused for his own good. "Ok, ok bro, I got you. Just stop telling me about all the gross stuff you find in there." and I was having a good time with but "Alright. Alright."

I start shuffling around in the dumpster again, find another box, start grabbing all the icecream covered CDs and DVDs and pack them in.

"They thought they were gonna sell this scat? Hah!"

"Yo, speaking of, Owen? How are we supposed to wash this stuff off?"

"Bingo!"

I throw out an unsold T-shirt "And Targoat says they donate clothes to Goodwallaby! HAH! Best one I could find in there. The rest were covered in nacho cheese... We're gonna either find sprinklers at one of the parks or a water fountain. And keep that shirt clean because that's our rag!"

"Got it."

I heave the next flatscreen up "Got another TV, but the screen is cracked. My inside man told me we have one more TV." Andrew grabs the thing, and I go back in the heap to continue digging. It's starting to become a chore, now that I can't humor myself by being dramatic about my disgusting discoveries. I ask myself why so many people eat, drink and bring babies to stores. Then I thank god I don't work retail. How I'm kind of already too messed up to even try. I pull up a trashbag and cower a bit at the diabetic needle poking out of it thats threatening to poke an eye out. I carefully pull it back from my face and toss it out the dumpster so it doesn't come down on me.
"Someone's gonna take these discs?"

"Yeah! You don't go to used cd shops? I do."

"So that's why they all have so much trash..."

I hear him starting to laugh at his own unintended joke, and I'm kinda laughing myself to as I pull another trashbag out of the way and hold back my horror.

A bloody knife. My fingerprints are all over all of these trashbags.

Suddenly, I have a lot more to worry about than Buffy having called the cops.

"...Andy?"

"Yeah?"

"We're just gonna go with the first two TVs. I can't find the other one." I'm lying, of course, because that knife is on top of it.

I know "You said there were four." but I've kind of reached my limit, here.

"He said there was gonna be four, and he lied. Or maybe they chucked it in another dumpster, I don't know. Point is we're done here."

I'm conflicted. What am I gonna do?

"...You coming out?"

"Give me a moment, I'm looking for something."

I curse myself. Why me? I'm shuffling through the trashbags again to look for the one that had all the T-shirts. I find it, reel a little at the smell of rotten processed nacho cheese, and grab it. Why do I have to do this?

"I'm coming out. Chuck that broken TV back in. And those trashbags, too!" I hop out as he piles the trash and TV back in. The knife in my paw is hidden by the T-shirt I'm using to keep pawprints off it. I feel Andrew looking at me, wondering "What is that? Can you sell it for much?"

My heart is a little heavy. It was bloody to the hilt. Someone probably died from a wound that deep. I peel back the fabric to reveal that blade, and Andrew is horrified as I look at him.
"I'm gonna toss it by the road... Like I usually do. Gonna be worth a lot more to anyone that cared about whoever got the receiving end of it... Someone will find it, ZPD's forensics is gonna get it, they'll run tests, and..."

And I remember. How the old Jaguar that introduced to this, showed off the first bloody knife I'd ever seen and gloated about the money he'd make pawning it.

...

"...Damn it, why do I gotta be so honest?"

I'm asking myself, and the wolf understands that. So he doesn't answer. He's not immediately scared for himself or me, either. Not afraid that we'll end up getting sweated in an interrogation room.

I think he's just as sad as I am, and that right now, he trusts my judgment.

"...Grab those two TVs. You couldn't carry four anyway. I can't carry one, let alone two...

He obliges. The Wolf follows as I lead him out. The fear is creeping up on him, though. Because we're two predators in possession of a murder weapon. "Like I said, no cops right now." but there are pedestrians. I'd get made if I dropped it off there, and the sooner it's a deniable distance from us, the better. I meet my morals and my paranoia at a crossroads and chuck the knife against the alleyway brick wall in plain view. I'm keeping the shirt for now, though, balling it up and making note that the black cloth will not show any blood. And it's covered with nacho cheese anyway, but not on the side that had the knife around it, meaning homicide probably won't find it in a sidewalk trashcan unless they're a predator that can smell the blood.

But as I check my pocket for the screwdrivers I'm gonna need to disassemble the TVs, I'm still so frustrated and sad.

A bayonet of that vintage is pretty sought after in the Meadowlands. Someone died and I'm a little sick from the thought of the money.

"Andrew, " I'm not asking myself this time: "Why do I gotta be such an honest Fox? It's not like I'm benefiting from this."

"...Someone's family is, and that's what you care about."

"I don't even know if he had any family, that was just something I said."
"Because that person had someone an the fact would've eaten you alive. I know you, bro. You're not the Pred the world thinks you are. Or thinks I am." It ain't often I'm not the voice of reason. The Wolf has a point.

And as we round the corner and walk out onto the sidewalk, he reminds me "Besides, you wouldn't be my friend anymore if you tried to pawn it anyway."

"But I probably would've got a cool fiddy for it." I'm trying to be a wise crack here, but it's so half-hearted that, as I look to Andrew, he ain't even phased. Only rolling his eyes then readjusting his grip on the TVs.

"...Theres that one park nearby here. I'm not carrying these any further than that."

We look bad enough as it is, lugging them around in the dead of the night.

"The pawnshop I was gonna go to is gonna be on the other side of the street. I'll strap the box to my Vulpon, sell them later, come back to you with money from those, too." He looks thankful, but we walk the rest of the way in silence. My jacket around his neck like a cape or ascot. I'll get it from him after the pawnshop. First I'll have to bath as much as I can in that park fountain, then get it back after drying up some. I'll go back to that YMRA to shower for real, after.

From there, it's going back to Sahara Square. I have a tent under the train line to Bunny Burrow in the Big Dunes area.

"You really make a living like this, Owen?"

"Yeah..."

"...How many times have you found stuff like that?"

I take awhile to answer, as I try to walk the depression off, try find a way to joke about it and maybe I could.

Just not now.

I look up to him, meet his eyes and just say "Often." with a bitterness in my throat.
I shuffle out of the tent panting like crazy, grabbing at the lid of the water bottle and blinded by a mid-day sun.

That's the problem with camping out in Sahara. The only benefit is a consistent wake-up call when the heat gets too much to keep sleeping. Swallowing a gulp, regaining balance from nearly falling over disoriented? I'm looking to my left to the other issue. At the hole I dug out to relieve myself in to leave wonder when I'm gonna have to move camp from under this thin rail bridge. Because it's not like I can squat in any of the places I've stashed my goods, either. I'd raise too much attention, just end up losing what I have and I'd be in lock up. I still risk a loss if someone finds a stash, but then that's why I don't put my eggs in one basket... Then again. If I could find the right connections to send off all those eggs with, I wouldn't need baskets all over town, either.

...I'm still panting as my Blueberry beeps, though it's calmed down from earlier. I'll check it. Try to clear my mind only to see about twenty texts from Buffy. The number says enough and I ain't got nothing to tell him. But Lola texted me a NEVER BRINGING EVA TO A PARTY AGAIN ps she has your number ALSO DO NOT EVEN DO THAT AGAIN uuuuuughasdfkhfkjal!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!! and I'm doubled over laughing at the image of her freaking out. Andrew sent me a thx for the fiddy. The pawnshop broker shortchanged me, but I can lord it over him at a later juncture. Jager's sent me a bunch of terrible puns and I can just see him giggling while he was typing them. Sees me smiling smug at him.

Then there's Toby. Group message to me, Andrew and Wally. 4821 Herd Street, by the station. A Raman Brahman.

Wally asked an hour ago if that was the same place that caught on fire a month back. Same one, Toby replied. It opened back up a few days ago he elaborates. Andrew texted back with an I'm there, and Wally came around with How Does A Soup Shop Catch On Fire? No replies. Everyone's on board, though. They're just waiting for a Yay or Nay from me. 3:30 PM. It's 1:21 right now. Andrew is gonna get there at 3:32 or 3 because he always takes the subs. Wally's gonna bus, Toby's got a Preyus, so they're both gonna be stuck in traffic. Me? I'm tapping on the Blueberry's keys with a Guess who's gonna get there first? THE RACE IS ON *cue horse race trumpet* and hit the enter button.

They don't stand a chance, I'm gonna lanesplit the hell out of pavement and dodge bicycle couriers. There's no such thing as traffic on the dunes I'm gonna be gliding over before then, and the roads leading up to them don't have much traffic either. From there on? It's gonna be bursts of ten or twenty miles over the speed limit with everyone around else doing ten miles an hour. Another drink from the bottle, my eyes squint from the mid-day sun. No cloud cover is wandering over from Tundra Town, and there's none to the west over Savannah Central.
I'm gonna need goggles.

Several minutes later, and I'm blasting sand sky high. Whenever I need a set path to challenge, it's South Canyon Road. But here? The dunes of the Sahara District soothe me so much. They almost never end and I could ride the crests of 'em like they never do. You dare not stop, though. Not in the sand, not if you don't want to get stuck in it. It's everything you can do while moving just to keep from sinking in it. Kind of like how I wish life was and ought to be, you can only go forward. And with so little background noise, the Vulpon's own rings so much louder. Authoritative, but manic. Rabid, even. Every tick and putter and pop and crackle and rattle rings true and resonates as a muse's gospel. Like an old-time song's timeless capture. I'm riding the edge of the world, and there could not be a better soundtrack.

Even with buds in my ears, the engine can drown out music, so I don't even try half the time. The best I can do right now is imagine.

But just the memory of some songs live in my muscle. In my bone and sinew. I can feel 'em manifest in my body with nearly the intensity, sometimes, of hearing them for real. Walter Deergo's Starlight plays in my head with a reverb, and in my back, it feels like a cascading, billowing firefall. The hooks and crescendo in rhythm, in sync, with every dip and bump and rise and fall on the crest of this dune. While I watch the passenger train to my right ferrying people into the city, finding myself zigzagging from one side of the crest to the other. It feels so magical, Criss-Crossing the razor's edge. Finding myself gravitate toward that big fake palm tree, same as the Camels marathon training I see on the other side of the rails.

From here, I'm close to a road I can hop onto and head north for Palm District, then buzz through one of the bridges to Savannah Central. Right now, I'm still panting like crazy, the wind forming ripples in my fur as the hot air passes over it. My Vulpon's engine is air cooled, though. I can't let it idle in this heat, doesn't mean I can't be careful with the throttle, either. But just past this rock formation carved into condos, I'll coast down the dune as it gives way to cement and asphalt. I circle around it and climb up one last crest and glide down the dune. Gliding through the alley between two storefront buildings, I ride off the sidewalk onto the road... And I have to brake for a moment. Then look at the traffic camera to my right at the very end of the street. For some reason, even though I've rode past this one a hundred times before, it's gotten my attention, now.

I don't get where the impulse came to look at it but I feel something. These cameras are just for monitoring traffic. They say they're not being used like telescreens. That we're not being actively monitored, they aren't even used for handing out traffic tickets, or else they'd have a flash. The findings from the traffic cameras are just being used to determine how to keep developing the city. That's what City Hall says. But at this moment, as I pant from the heat and look through my goggles and into the dome concealing that camera, I have the same uneasy feeling I get every time I'd window shop at a store to pass time. Like I'm being watched. Like I'm being Assessed. But then like that, the feeling disappears without discernible rhyme or reason. So maybe my mind's just playing
tricks.

I don't feel it again for the rest of the ride out, anyway. It's now 3:25. My bike hidden for now under a discarded tarp in an alley a block away. The trash trucks have stopped collecting, the homeless are on their corners, and any employee dumping trash is too busy with work to bother it. I check my phone for more texts. There's one I didn't see last night from an unknown number, that I hold off on checking until I can untangle the cords of some sennhowler buds, and put a song on while I wait for the others. Foster The Mammals. Coming of Season. I hit play and go back to the texts to open up one from an out-of-town area code. It's Eva. Some selfie taken last night with Lola yelling at her. My head's boppin', my foot tapping to the song's tempo, and that's when my eyes scroll over the line:

When can I see you again if I needed to five minutes ago and where can we meet that's ground level?

...If I didn't find out how hitting concrete from a second story fall would've felt last night then I have, now.

I lost my balance, my eyes are bulging out, first she had me get Buffy evicted and now she's got the sun making me see white. I'm gonna catch grief for that night the rest of my life and she just turned it around into a good thing. The message still has me throw a smile with half lidded eyes, though. It ain't entirely due to the sun's glare. So I'll steady myself and act like last night actually was a good thing. If I could ask myself who the heck Lola hooked me up with, I guess I'll just have to find out when I see her again. I'll second her motion with Lets shoot for tonight at Peak Street Station in the meantime. My thumb sends it, and I look up to the crowds of Mammals around me as the song plays. Right on time for an Axis Axis Stag to stroll past me in a tightly fitting, bright blue and red paisley suit.

I'm too caught up in the visual to scold myself for leaving my camera at the YMRA. This Grant's Caribou Doe in lime green sequin pants and white tanktop can't believe the sight of him, either. Makes her drop a phone while her world stops as he looks back to her with a subtle smug pride. A Bull elephant, Elephas Maximus Maximus, his quaking footsteps slams her out of Mr. Paisley Suit's world, bringing her back to her senses and cursing herself to "...No, not my new phone..." as the Bull looks down at her. Holding his own by his trunk to his ear while speaking to the tune debtors reserve for dealing with collection agencies. I know it if it's one of the few jobs I've had in the past. I ain't never working another phonebank.

This Maned Wolf ain't wanting to catch the Caribou girl's attention while she squats down to grab the broken phone, but her eyes still betray that fear of something so wolflike and tall. The Chrysocyon Brachyurus pulls his lightweight hoodie up and brings his eyes back forward. The leer he had in his eyes, it scared her when she has no idea what it meant. He wasn't sizing her up, he was being offended obviously enough for anyone to get it. But across the street, an Armadillo and Porcupine couple embrace and kiss. Sure, Foxes are problem solvers, but I don't got a clue how those two jigsaw pieces are gonna fit under the sheets and it's got me slackjawed and amused.
And my mind now off the Caribou completely. Even as her legs stroll past me, the scales of her pants catching the sun and blinding me. The breeze catches my nose, an instinctive sniff catching the tell of musky, oil-based cologne. I don't even have to look as I address it's source.

"You saw all that, Toby?"

"All of it."

"And Prey wonder why we aren't cheerful in public... What are you doing here before Andrew, anyway?"

"Traffic wasn't too bad for once."

"Yeah but you got a-"

"Preyus. Yep. I got a Preyus. Hm... Yeah, Owen, have you ever thought that a car can just be a mode of transportation? No thrills?"

He's gotten so used to me giving him scat about the thing that he can tell it coming.

"Yeah but where's the fun in a soulless appliance?"

He laughs, saying "You need to stop watching High Gear clips on zootube." as if his tone isn't a little too dismissive as he crosses his arms.

I think I've rubbed off on him, that's a good thing but "Why should I?" when this brow's cocked at him? To put it wryly, "The specials are funny as heck, it's hilarious when Jeremy Clopson's tail gets handed to him by James or Richard... And they give good consumer advice." I'll remind him with a point of my finger. Just for Toby's roll of his eyes and flick of his wrist. Then he looks to the intersection crossway, and I see Andy, too. A practiced look of reserve when alone in public that he loses the second he sees us waiting. Purple color Handsome Stoles shirt, brown khaki pants. It's gotta be laundry day for him to be out of his usual acid wash and plaid. It's a rare enough sight for Toby to raise a quizzical eye as I look up to him.

He offers his left hoof as a fistbump for Andrew to return that's got the Wolf smirking a bit at the Deer's gesture before looking down to me.

"Hey Oh, you got here alright? No accidents?"

Then I gotta lose my smile a little at yesterday's reminder.

"I wouldn't have luck that bad two days in a row, Andrew."
"I know, just be careful out there."

"I am!"

Andrew shrugs the protest off, Toby's standing there keenly aware that he's not on the same page, but holds back from asking about that.

Instead, "...Where's Wally at? He should probably be here by now." sees me shrug in sync with Andy. A momentary silence gets broken to the storefront's door swinging open fast enough to alarm me.

And the all-familiar light and dark tan face poking out to ask the three of us "You boys coming in or what? I've been waiting for you three the past half hour!" has my jaw drops in defeat.

"...I've never lost..."

Snickering ensues behind me. No, this wasn't a race in anyone else's head but mine, yet I still gotta feel the burn of Andrew's "How's that second place feel, Owen?" as he follows Toby in.

"It feels like first loser..." I tell him, playing up the defeated shuffle behind 'em as Toby holds the door open. The place still smells a little smokey, the new paint doesn't mask it enough. It's is fairly busy, though I'm left with the observation that me, the Wolf and our Coyote are the only preds here. The menu over the counter only shows Tofu as their one protein option.

Andrew's caught it, too, and it gets him asking "Toby, is this place really that good?"

"Yeah!"

I'm not convinced. Neither is Andrew, it looks like. I have to wonder while skimming over the menu how the place can charge five to ten bucks for something you'd get at BNL for a quarter when you've got less than a one to buy dinner with. Wally's new to city life, coming from the southwest desert, he's accustomed to frybread and chapulines so he's not as phased as Andy is.

"I eat here all the time. The shoyu broth is pretty good, so is the shio." the whitetail tells us as we form in line, with me taking last place to hear what everyone else orders and go from there.

"Uhhh, Toby? The only ramen flavors I know are the silkworm packet and the mealworm packet." Toby snorts, I snicker, and Andrew smirks as is own wisecrack.

"Alright," Toby addresses as he turns his head, "I'd suggest the Miso. It's a bean broth. It should be pretty good with seaweed and tofuyo if you order it rich."
"Look at this friggin' ramen connoisseur over here." slips out of my mouth. Toby rolls his head back as he rolls his eyes in amusement, and the rest of us laugh while trying what we can not to show our teeth too much. We remember our non-predatory smiles, but I'm becoming aware of the bighorn sheep in the corner eyeing me and the other two in bitter frustration as he slurps his noodles up. Andy and Wally see him too, and try their best not to make it obvious, gradually toning down their amusement and faking a toothless smile with wide, non-threatening eyes. Toby didn't catch it, his eyes on the female Impala behind the counter, hers on Andrew. That slight hint of nervous tension in her face says more than "s-Sorry, sir, what was your order again?"

He repeats himself. The Wolf is all too aware of her nervousness and our whitetailed friend is catching on now, as well. The Coyote is used to seeing worse back home so it doesn't even phase him. But I'll keep a good mask on as I fume.

"...Thank you." Toby tells her. "Thank you, too!" Welcome is a dead word, these days. She forces herself awkwardly to act cheery as he turns away to find seating for four and Andrew walks up. "Hello, sir, have you eaten here before?"

"No, Ma'am, but uh..." He pauses briefly, looking at the menu again to remember what Toby said. "...I'll have the miso ramen with..." he repeats Toby's words nearly verbatim. I look to the far side of the corner and catch what must be the owner, a Zebra, eyeing me, Andy and Wally in practiced quick glances both reserved and non-confrontational, but his quick movements speak loudly on his resentment at our being here. Like we're gonna cause trouble.

"...Your order will be right up. Hi, there, what can I get you, sir?"

"Oh yeah, Ma'am, I'll have what my friend ordered. Same thing. The order for the name will be Wally."

"Alright, that'll be eight fifty nine, please."

I keep my eyes forward, to the back of his black nylon jacket. Trying my best to avoid a glance at any other prey that might get scared that I'm eyeing them. Wally looks at his receipt, and I can tell he's upset.

"Excuse me, Ma'am? You got the name wrong." She looks confused, he elaborates. "My name is Wally, it's not Wiley. Wally."

He can put up with a lot, but I can tell he's gotten this enough times that it's become the one hang up he won't let slide.

"Oh, sir, I'm so sorry, I can change the na-"
"No no, it's fine, don't- Look, it's not that big a deal, it's jus-"

"Hey WILEY."

And that's the Zebra's last straw, is acting as if "We have a problem here? If you're gonna give my employees grief, you can go to the Bug Burga across the street."

...Nah.

"Oh no sir, there's no problem."

Wally can swallow this all he pleases.

"Then sit down and wait for your order."

I don't the patience to stand for it.

...I'm looking back to Toby and Andy, seated by the window. I see the look so clearly in the Wolf's face, and feel the phantom sensation of my own face wincing in exactly the same way as him. That mixture of shock and disgust. This scat never gets old, but Toby? His is filled with much of the same, just with eyes giving way to more anger mixed with regret. He feels responsible. A sense of guilt not for the Impala's actions or the Zebra's but his own, for having us come here. Wally walks off to join them, and I pause for a moment to consider how I'm gonna get passive aggressive with the noodle soup shop. I consider the fact that I usually gave my surname for orders in the past, and how Fuchs gets constantly mispronounced. Enough restaurants have busted out laughing for me to be painfully aware of how Wally feels when some idiot doesn't get his name right. I typically go by Nobody because of it, but mammals have gotten smart with that, intentionally, and I'm left wondering just what I'm gonna do.

"Hey, Fox" The owner grabs my attention. "You gonna give the nice girl your order or are you gonna hold the line up?"

...And with one sniff of the smoke in the air, a light bulb goes off in my head. Needs me to hide my amusement at the havoc I think I'm about to wreak behind my most disarmingly non-predatory smile to mask my folded, plotting ears. "Hello there, Ma'am, I'll have Wavy ramen in shoyu broth, no toppings, no veggies, just the noodles and broth."

"Ok sir that'll be five ninety two and your name please?"

Without hesitation, I give it as I rifle through my wallet to hand out a five and a one.

"Oh and keep the change."

"Sure, your order will be..."
Fast forward a few minutes later, and my back is to the window as Wally sits there to my left with his arms crossed. "I got that every time I walked off the reservation, Andrew. Every diner and bar. And the worst part? THEY get upset like I'm supposed to play along with it like a minstrel."

Toby sits there, opposite of Andrew to my right, not even touching his bowl, pushing it to the center of the table. "Order for Andrew!"

The Wolf gets up with as much calm and reserve he can give.

As the Buck finally passes "Wally,"
"Toby, I ain't even mad at you."
"You didn't know, Toby." I pipe up.

"Yeah, and I should have known, Owen. That's why I'm pissed, I should have... I should have been watching how they treated the other predators that came here. I should have gotten a better feel for the place. I feel like I'm a Buffy."

I can't let that slide, either.

"Ah, hell no, Toby You didn't spam everyone on Muzzlebook and fumblr about Pony 2012, then started screaming at everyone online that bought into it after you told them too. You're not a hypocrite."
"Owen..."
"Toby, listen to the mammal." Andrew must've overheard from the counter. His movements forced and deliberate in trying to contain his frustration.

"You're not Buffy, bro: We Like You. You get out. You got out there with me to march against the death penalty. You write senators, you put up posters about the prison complex, you don't fake nothin' and you go all in."

He just sits there, silently listening. Attentive. The guilt fading as he starts to defer to the Wolf's point of view.

"You don't try to pretend to be a good person. You are a good person. You keep your ear to the
ground and you do what you can."

"It's not enough."

"Hey, Toby, one prey dude ain't responsible for every other prey dude and his grandfather. You're in charge of you."

"Wiley!"

Wally cringes hard as he gets up. Toby does, too, wincing right when I thought me and Andrew were making progress on the Odocoileus Virginianus.

"...I'm too hungry..." has Andrew fumble with the unfamiliar bamboo sticks and start to eat, leaning over to get as much noodle in him as possible to get it over with, and Wally comes back, sets his bowl down in the middle next to Toby's...

...But I'm reminded that my order is coming up next, my prediction's too humorous to hide as my eyes go half lidded. My smirk broadens out of control my ears fold. My smug game is going critical, anticipation levels exceeding meltdown. Wally psssts to grab Andrews attention, his eyes darting to the Coyote, the Coyote's pointing his to me and prompts the Wolf's to follow. His eyes widening, reading me like an open book on Vulpine cunning. Toby knows enough to catch on. "...oowweh?"
The wolf's mouth full of noodle.

"...Owen?" Toby's fear is ratcheting up, as I watch the Impala bring the bowl up to the counter. She reads the ticket. The same confused look she gave me earlier. A new hire, oblivious to the shop's recent woes.

As she calls out a very awkward "f-Fire!"

"What?!

"Fire!"

"Fire?!!

"Fire!" and the Zebra is literally jumping out of his stripes and polo shirt, the Impala too confused, too frightened by her employer's panic to know what's happening and the panic sets in in full force, the Equine fumbling madly for the wall mounted extinguisher like "Where?!"

"What?!" "WHERE IS THE FIRE!" "WHAT?!" "WHEREISIT?!"
He doesn't look, she just points to "HERE, THE ORDER FOR FIRE IS-" that becomes a loud fwoosh, a plume of fire retardant, and a bunch of patrons running out the door with too few knowing better being too busy laughing hysterically to warn them as the force from the extinguisher blows it to the floor, and right on time for a frantic Pig to slip on the broth and fall on his hams.

The Impala's eyes widening in realization at being had, the Zebra coming to his senses to trembling in fury. I've fallen on the floor laughing so hard I can't even catch my breath.

There sits Wally, the biggest damned smile and the biggest eyes I've ever seen.

There sits Andrew, boiling over with so much fire and brimstone in his leer it threatens to burn down the whole block.

There sits Toby, cowering behind his hooves in such shame that his blush is literally making the place glow red.

Here lies one Owen Conrad Fuchs. His hand pointing to the calamity he wrought upon the world. His eyes tearing up as he falls to the floor on his side. Died one sweltering mid-dry season day in manic, maniacal laughter that will be heard around the world for generations to come.

Except not, because five minutes later, I'm alive, still laughing, while Andrew screams his head off to "What were you thinking?!"

"I- AHAHAAAAA, I don't even care it was so freakan worth it!"

Wally's affirmation of "Holy scat, it was!" to get Andy pointing "Don't you dare encourage him, Wally!" with a claw and all Toby's got is denial.

"This is not happening, this is not happening..."

"OOOOHHHHHHHDIDYOUSEETHE LOOOK ON THAT STUPID ZEBRA'S FACE!"

"We saw Everything, Owen! We saw the worst damned thing you could've done! You are supposed to know better you Damn Ratchet Assed Fox!"

Everyone else on the crowded sidewalk seeing all their own need to give the four of us a mile wide girth. The herds of Prey nervously watching the Wolf, the Deer holding his hooves over his head, darting apologetic glances at his flat-toothed folk.

"Hey, Andy, Tell me they didn't have it coming!"
"Owen that's not the-" "EXACTLY! YOU CAN'T TELL ME THEY DIDN'T HAVE IT COMIN-" "IT'S BESIDE THE POINT WHICH IS YOU MAKING LIFE DIFFICULT!" "OOGHH BECAUSE OUR LIVES ARE JUST RAINBOWS AND BUTTERFLIES!?" "YOU'RE MAKING SCAT WORSE!"

"Is anyone ever gonna tell me how a soup shop catches on fire?!" gets the three of us turnin' to the Coyote as we shout in unison "SHUT UP, WALLY!"

"Oohhh this isn't happening," and yeah, Toby's got a point if "That guy's gonna call the cops, they're-"

But "So freaking wha-" "OWEN!"

This is what: Is Andrew staring me down and dead in the eyes, turned me around by a grab my shoulders with enough force it shocks the amusement right out of my face. When there's nowhere else for his leer to go but straight through me and stabbing all the way out. "You wanna put your pelt on the line? You wanna try to get yourself caged up in jail? Do You Want to Get Hunted Down And Killed?" Because that was the last line in the sand I've crossed on him. "Fine. Fine Owen, you ride that bike. You rake that muck up. You put yourself in the crosshairs..." When his grip threatens to pry the fur right off from under my fake moocci shirt. "...But you're gonna do it solo. Without Toby, without Wally and without me."

Then he lets go. Physically and more, just done with me.

This is what it feels like to be thrown out of the pack. When his words sink in in waves as he walks off. Because maybe he don't speak for Toby and Wally... But I've known Andrew longer then I've ever known anyone else in Zootopia. And that's the pain starting to consume. Foxes like me, we struggle for every ounce of companionship we can get. We need something society's scorn and scrutiny denies it at every level, and we have to fight, we yearn so much more for it, with such intensity that the air around us practically buries us. We are seemingly cursed to be solitary mammals. Others have herds to fall back on. They got packs. They know troops, they have community. The thing some Foxes go without their whole life like my mother. That juxtaposition, between us and everyone else, reminds that much more, makes the hunger that much greater, leads us to act out with an intensity noone else can understand or appreciate.

In the world's hatred, we're led, seemingly doomed, to lose any comradery we're ever bestowed.

Just as I have been led to lose the deepest bond outside of my parents that I have ever known. This is what my ancestors felt with four paws to the ground. The isolation. The loneliness. I'm limp. Andrew continues on. I stop. Half obedience and respect. Half crippling depression. Toby pauses. Wally's arm reaches over my shoulders, and compel me to move forward, my body offering no resistance, my spirit too crippled in the fugue. My head low. The coyote's words falling on deaf ears. Something about how everything will be alright. Something about me always having a friend in him. Something
about something and on and on until the words finally give up.

The Coyote concedes to what he can't reconcile. And even when drowning, I'm still so aware of what's going on around me. I can read the Wolf's folded ears ahead of me in the distance. I can read the Deer's stiff posture. I can read the Coyote's head nodding back and forth. All of my want for pride and acceptance, where is it when I need it most? When I have to keep my chin up and hold on them the most, even while two people stand there with me? Maybe Toby doesn't get it like I'd hope and not, that he could. But Wally has to, on some level close to mine. They can be as solitary like a Fox as they can be communal like Wolves, and here he is so far away from his own kind here. We continue silently for a while. Toby regaining his composure, Wally eventually easing his arm off with a pat.

Until the Buck says "...I parked close by..." and has the Coyote admitting "...I need a ride." remarks the Coyote.

Toby looks to him confused and concerned like "...We're gonna leave him here?"

And yeah. They are. If Wally knows his next of kin good enough to admit "We can't do anything. He's got to come out of this, himself."

With him following the Deer looking back behind himself to watch a cold Vulpine statue frozen in grief get swallowed up by the crowd enveloping it.

I find myself some short time later. Still in place, in my back pressed against the alleyway brick wall. Forward stare vacant, a wet warmth stream over my face. Whether we are born inherently crazy, inherently treacherous, or whether we are made this way by circumstance set upon by society, the arguments fall on the deaf ears of the reality. Foxes simply are. And in spite of all the wit and craft we employ to solve the challenges of surviving on a daily basis in hostile environments, no Fox, has seemingly solved the problem in his or her life being one big singular problem. For himself. For herself. For everyone around them. The one to see me press my side against the brick wall and contemplate the apology my mother has always given me.

You Didn't Ask to Be Born.

I reel. I fall over.

I grab at my grimace, and my insides churn.

About an hour passes before I find myself at a Bug Burga.
The alleyway beside it being where I had left my bike. After trying to ride off a grief too big to let go for once has left me feeling glances. The sight of a Fox this overwhelmed, this much of his element gone, is rare and foreign even among other Preds. Their witnessing ain't in some fear or anxiety, though. Just some distant concern in the back of their heads, clouded by their own about their own lives and the shared struggle. Even in the midst of my own misery, I still witness too much. Like how the only pairs of eyes not on me belong to the Cheetah couple in the corner and a breaking up. Between a girl trying to save something and her male being certain it was never earned.

The curse for a Fox is a thing near omniscience. Seeing how the plea in her eyes couple with the depression in his own to say it all. He's penned her as someone over his league and made it mean she deserves more. When he's all she wants and it's left her at her wit's end trying to hold on to him. Against his leaving her on the verge when our eyes meet. She's that desperate to grab for any help. I wish I was. So I'll make it time to distract myself with a turn of my eyes to a TV. Trying to throw myself into ZNN and Don Lemming's stupid, stupid face telling me to watch his show later. The specist goon. I'm dreading the thought of a one minute Gerbilax commercial with fifty seconds of warnings, side effects, and Please Talk to Your Doctor.

But it doesn't happen: ZNN Breaking News, a jarring boom accompanied by flashy attention grabbing visuals. Peter Moosebridge without his Snow Leopard counterpart.

"Reports are coming this evening that Zootopia Police Department have begun a mammalhunt for an unnamed individual following a Zootube video brought to their attention. The clip uploaded yesterday has gone viral with over two million views. The violent road rage altercation shown in the footage occurred in Downtown and ZPD are now looking for two others to question about just what happened. Millions of you have already seen it, and we are going to play it now on air. But we must warn you, that this may upset viewers sensitive to violence."

...Oh, No...

There I am. There's the Pig. There's me being throttled and reeling as he goes from pink to red in fury. The screaming and bleeping's caught the attention of everyone in the place. That's the Elk coming into view from the right and every other word is a bleep. A poor mask of the one word that's at the very top of everyone's head. My eyes white saucers, my pupils are so small inside of them, and the dread to the fears start to sink in. Some start looking back to me then back to the screen. The recognition is setting in at the same time as the disbelief. I'm reeling. The thoughts of No This Can't be That Guy and Holy Scat it's Him are on the tips of everyone's tongue. I'm terrified. More do the same, even the Cheetah couple. I'm feeling hollowed out, while the video goes on, and the Elk charges the Pig to put him in a choke hold with a backward heave.

I'm simultaneously there and here at the same time.
Watching him lift the Pig off the ground by the neck for the first time. I hear the sheet metal all over again, followed by cheering, howling patrons cheering the Elk on and I'm scared. Knowing what's coming and seeing that they didn't show how this all started. I can't help but hear "Sir, are you OK? I can't believe that specist psycho..." as he starts a monologue while I watch myself put myself together. I don't wanna hear what he tried to tell me but I do. Dreading the moment. "...My name is Bruce Hartford. I want to make it up to you. You're welcome to attend my martial arts school in Otterdam. It's called Ken's Haowlin, by..." Because I know everyone here's only dismissing his self congratulation now, if they haven't seen what I'm about to do.

I'm so terrified as everyone around me watches, just to have something to roll their eyes at, because even if most millennials like me don't watch the news anymore, so many in this City are about to see what comes after "...It's mostly Prey but... No, I don't think anyone would mind. If they do? Well this wasn't right and I'm so sorry, I just want you to-"

A swipe of my claws. A snarl. And I'm cringing away from the visual everyone's glued to. Some mimic the Elk's double-take. Most are shocked, some are leering and few understand, when that's with an all Pred audience. And if Ninety percent of the population are Prey, the consensus is an absolute given:

The same one I am seeing and feeling and hearing.

The broadcast cutting back to the Moose's practiced clinical reserve in "Police are requesting that if anyone knows the current location of the assailant they believe started this road rage incident with the Pig before attacking the Elk, they call the non-emergency 611 hotline with any-"

The Phones start getting pulled out, now.

My heart pounds so loud it's about the only thing I hear. My paws trembling, I start to get up when an Ursus Americanus gets up with objection in a booming "Hey, You're not Going Anywhere!" I start to run, he grabs. My right wrist seized by a Bear's left claw. I turn around and grab at it. He squeezes, I yelp. The entire place starts lighting up, they're closing in and a melanistic Panthera Pardus grabs him by the shoulder.

"Let me go Cat, I got reward money to collect!" "Hey What Would You Do, Uncle Yeller?!" "What did you just call me?!!"

An employee cries out "Everyone please remain calm!" but to no avail. Everyone's already up. A couple are blocking the door I could just about grab with my free paw if it wasn't clutching the Bearclaw crushing my captured paw.
"You heard me! I called you a traitor Now tell me you wouldn't do what he did!"

"I wouldn't make the News in the first place!" The Bear jerks his clinching fist to the Panther and I cry out. He can rip my arm off if he's not careful.

"You know it doesn't matter what you do! Prey'll run you off the road 'cause they don't want you on it in the first place! They don't want you on nothing but a bus or sub! They're all the same! They're all scared of us, THEY HATE US, THEY ALL WANT US GONE NOW TELL ME YOU WOULDN'T DO THE SAME!"

The Bear snorts, I'm nearly hyperventilating, he's puffing out his chest in anger...

Yet the Panther's reached everyone else here. The Wolf and the Lion that were blocking the door have stepped aside. All eyes are on the Bear and he feels it. He takes stock. He sees a Polar brother moving in to make his intents clear. And then like that, the Black Bear concedes. A momentary firming of the grip 'til it's released. And I can't believe it, but... That Bear is telling me to "Get your orange juice hide out of here." I jump back and away, eyeing the only phone still up. The joint's manager. That Tiger is calling in the disturbance. An "Everyone, remain calm, the police are on their-" he stops himself from finishing, with every pair of eyes in the place on him. Sure he's a Tiger, but there's also at least three lions, four bears and a squatpot of Wolves. He presses the disconnect button and shuffles back into the kitchen in defeat.

"Hey!"

My attention gets drawn back to the Black Panther. "You gonna stay here after all I did for you?!
GET OUT!"

I oblige wordlessly, ducking into the glass door and darting out.

Before I remember the Cheetah couple and stop dead cold. The way she looked me, at anyone she could...

I am so out of my mind.

I can't even believe what I'm thinking but I'm already doing it. Drawn to that action like a moth to a flame, and charging back through the door and point to them as I cry out "Hey Cheetah guy!"

All eyes are back on me in even more shock and awe than before, but "I don't care what you believe..."
and she don't either because you already earned her, if you can't believe you deserve a lifer like 
her then let 'er god damn prove ya wrong 'cause she got all she needs an it's you!

Then I dart back out before anyone else gets compelled to grab me again. The feeling I get as I run 
out into the night that someone just ran out the door with me makes me run that much harder. 
Making it everything I can do to keep my dignity and not sprint on all fours into the alley. I nearly 
slide to a stop and pray the tarp off the Vulpon with a jump. I grab onto the handlebars and look 
forward.

Right on time for a Cop car to screech the brakes to block me in.

The disco lights are already on me, the Red and Blue strobe washing over the building across the 
street opposite of the alley.

I swear aloud, I roll the bike into the U-turn and hop on to struggle with the kickstart as I look behind 
and get blinded by the spotlight.

They found me.

"No, God Dammit, please just come on hell start go Please Come JESUS GOD ANY-"

A final kick, with everything I got, and the engine finally breathes fire. The linkage for the clutch 
reversed, I desperately tap down. A careless flick of my wrist and I send myself into a wheelie right 
as the Patrol starts to enter the alley. The disco lights drawing nearer, I howl in such terror "NO NO 
NO NO NO COME ON, COME FOR THE LOVE OF GOD, BOTH WHEELS!" and bring all of 
my weight down onto the front forks. Trying to bring the wheel back down while the Cop car blares 
it's jarring amplifier horn, as the obstacles in the alley force it to slow down and as the front wheel 
finally comes down. Just as I'm forced to brake: The alley giving way to sidewalk concrete and the 
road's asphalt, a slide of power veers me to the left.

And into an out-of-body experience as headlights blind me and horns deafen.

I find myself straightening out. To look into the right mirror to see traffic I should have been 
imprinted into the grill of, pieces of me chewed up by the undercarriage of. And I'm not there but 
here, on an old bike that had no business doing what it just did. The engine ain't even warm and 
what it just did was dodge traffic in all four lanes. I'm in between two lanes looking back to see the 
discos flooding out the alley and screeching to a halt. It's occupants blare both the horn and siren and
even with both of those things, my bike's exhaust, my heart beating, and everyone on the road blaring their horns at me and them, I think I can still hear them screaming in frustration.

The intersection up ahead, I can take a right, the next alley I can take a left, that alleyway intersects with another, I can take a right there. I know enough of these streets and alleys, I can zigzag and B-line through Savannah Central until I hit a bridge underpass that has a utility tunnel or storm drain large enough for me to slip into it. I can. I must. If they don't have a helicopter from precinct 1 already in the air, they're about to, and a bird's FLIR is something I will not be able to hide from. A red light, a powerslide to the right, the screeching halt and blaring horn of a delivery van. A powerslide left, my heart too loud to hear the horns as I weave through the headlights and tail lamps of a pre-dusk traffic jam. The Giraffe van I cut off, I somehow miss by inches. The shapes of mammals of every size dodging me as I rocket over the sidewalk and into the alley.

A homeless Goat hugs the wall as I fly past with a look into the left mirror to see no sign of a cop car that couldn't have woven through traffic like I did because it would've totaled half the block if it tried. I'm good. I'm safe. Then I see another flash of red and blue. Dead ahead. Another cop car, a massive SUV three times the size of the cruiser before it barreling down toward me.

"NOOOOOOOOOO!"

A hard brake, rear tire smoking, I'm shifting my body with a jerk of the handlebars to the left sends the bike to the right, the throttle on the right handlebar nearly clipping the corner of the brick wall, the cascading sound of glass announcing that I now have one mirror, my trembling causing the engine to rev in quakes, as the cop SUV comes to a screeching halt and a screeching reverse. I am gasping for air as I chant Oh God uncontrollably. They thought about the alleys. They are prepared for the alleys. I am going to encounter more cops if I keep relying on the alleys. They came prepared, and when they catch up to me, my life will be over. But first, they must catch me. My course of action, as I near the end of the alley, is considered, reviewed, and decided upon in a split instant:

I slow down, regain traction, and I veer left again...

Into Oncoming Traffic.

The terror of headlights facing from inches away. The horns. The flashing brights. The reflection of red and blue in the mirror on my left handlebar. They can't follow me like this. They will have to concede. I've got the irrational, desperate bid for freedom at any and every last cost, now.

I flick my wrist down hard on the throttle, the needle of the tach and speedometer climbing, as the green lights of the intersection ahead give way to ambers. I shriek at the top of my lungs the
desperate plea DON'T GO RED, DON'T GO RED and upshift with another pulling down on the throttle. An eternity passes in a split second's time. Where the yellow lights fade and the reds glow to life and the sight of red and blue discos cascade over the walls around the intersection. I scream through the intersection as loud as the vulpon's engine screams, look to the left, and see the towering face of a police squad SUV like a four wheel drive mountain as it halts millimeters away from hitting the left side of my bike.

A loud horn blazes. I snap my eyes back forward. I spy with my horrified eyes a Moose in his convertible having tried to merge from his lefthand lane into his righthand lane.

Another out of body experience. I find myself milliseconds later in the middle of the road and I can only assume I somehow braked to slow down and veered to my right just in time and leveled back out to the left to find myself in between southbound and northbound traffic on the solid double yellow line. I merge right, then lanesplit between parallel lines of cars and suvs and trucks and vans, seeing another Alley. Seeing the reds and blues behind me again, as I surmise that even the alley ways are a safer bet to my vulpine mind than staying in the traffic that will surely be the death of me. I'm speeding up to cut a Preyus off, to veer right once more over the sidewalk, past the terrified pedestrians, and back into another alley.

One I only realize after the fact is just wide enough for my bike and too small for the ZPD to squeeze through. I then realize why it is. Here's an open air market for rodents not residing in Little Rodentia. With me barreling right through it. I tap up and up and up and up on the gears until I hit neutral to coast through and blare my Vulpon's aftermarket horn. They're panicking below me. I'm panicking above them, watching as scores of tiny Mice and big Rats climb over themselves making way for me in their dodging, a sea of rodents dividing before me. I'm never going to forgive myself for this mayhem, but I'm too consumed by fear to give it any due, besides a desperate out of breath SORRY repeated until I start speaking in tongue.

My eyes dart from the ground in front of my front wheel to the threshold of the alleyway's end in front of me.

A chainlink fence towering over me on the far end of a concrete walkway leading down to the river ahead. I brake hard, I steer left, I go left. With a burnout and a launch, my stomach shifts in my torso and the bike clambers downhill, at the steep angle of decent of a throughway that was never designed for this scat. The angle of the ramp giving way to a level concrete surface nowhere near soon enough, I jerk forward and dryheave. Somewhere in the back of my head, I am so thankful there was nothing in my stomach to decorate my gas tank and cluster with. A storm drain ahead of me spills it's own guts out over the trail beside the river. That's my hole to burrow through. The engine's rattle playing off the acoustic qualities of the sheer concrete wall.

I'm out of breath, my heart pounds, I drive into the tunnel's mouth where the water trails a wake behind my knobby tires. If they were street tires, or racing slicks, I would have either high sided or
low sided by now in this water after hydroplaning. But God, did I need streets or slicks just moments ago. With the tunnel giving way to an intersecting network, I have to stop, unable to indulge in my usual love for how good the engine sounds in a tunnel. Right now, I need to pick up what pieces of myself I can, while I can still make use of this time I have, before the possibility of ZPD figuring out what I did becomes a realization. I turn the ignition off, my left foot dropping the kickstand down as I heave the bike backwards with what little strength I have.

It's everything I can do to not collapse as I find a dry set of steps on the far side wall to sit down at. My height fluctuates in inches as the lungs depress and expand. I dryheave again. I'm so far out of my element right now I can't even begin to think of my next move. I can only collapse against the platform and raspfully grab at every oxygen molecule in this drainage network. I know it's not a sewer network, because this was a standalone system for runoff from the Savannah Central streets above me. I pause for a moment. "Wait... where did I learn that fr-"I get up onto my feet and pry the door open that's next to me on this platform, and I'm overwhelmed by the ceder I stockpiled in this cache of electronic goods to keep roaches out of here.

Even when I can't even think, I still know what I'm doing.

"The police scanner!" I still can't believe I found that thing behind a pawnshop, but I've never needed it more than now. I fumble through the stack of VCRs and Betamax players and amplifiers. There, at the top. I climb over the stack of subwoofers to clutch at the thing, climb back down and set it down on a stack of ceder plants and plug it in. It comes to life immediately. "Where? Where's the chatter?" At one quarter volume, I flick the dial all over the place to find the frequency until I hit the WHERE IS THAT FOX jackpot. "Yes! Ahahaha!" Even when I don't know what I'm doing, I still somehow by the very skin of my teeth just barely pull myself out of the fire.

"Chief, he slipped through the dragnet and traffic is at a cold dead stop. We're stuck and unit 2843 got in a collision with a fresh doe van!"

"UNIT 2843, CONFIRM!"

"...Unit 2843, chief, confirm, we've got one really angry ram-" A bovine bellow of fury roars through the speaker and I bust out laughing.

I got them. I got them so good.

"Officer Trumpet, we got a scurry incited at Remy market, witnesses reporting a fox on a motorbike, confirmed suspect sighting at Remy market. No Injuries repor-" "YES!"

I am so overjoyed that I didn't crush someone I don't even register that he meant Remy market as in the alley I just drove through.
"...I am standing by and waiting for backup, I cannot squeeze through here without causing collateral, please copy!" And then it does register. They're right on top of me.

"Officer Wolfowitz, standby Trumpet, I am discontinuing search at Herd Street station, ETA 2 minutes! Out!"

I've got to go. Now.

"All units in the area, this is mothra 2, I am over the airspace above you and beginning visual search now..."

I curse at the top of my lungs.

It's too late.

I can't get out the way I got in, the chopper will surely catch me. I don't know where the rest of these tunnels lead, I had only ever gone this far down the drains, but there is nowhere else I can go but further down the rabbit hole.

They will find this cache, but they might not find me just yet.

"Aaallll uuuniiittss ssttaaanndddbbyy..."

...

That last voice was so gravely and deep. Like a cross between a younger Michael Wolfcott and Bear Caesar. It resonated ominously with great and terrible authority like a god. But that's not as scary as the fact that I don't think that voice came from the police scanner alone. It sounded doubled over.

Like it also came from somewhere else.

I stop breathing.
I turn to stone like a statue at what it sounded like.

Like the source is just outside the door.

Of all the things it could be, I try to drown the one thing it may very likely be with them. But I know better. Why do I have to know better? My eyes are saucers again. I creep forward to the door, trembling as I mouth out a quiet no. I reach for the doorknob. A crashing boom. I jump out of my skin. The door slams open, I scream out, my eyes barely having time to register a figure in black with tremendous, thick, forward pointing horns of ivory white tipped black. I shout out. The figure is over twice as tall as me, he's got to have over a thousand pounds on me and he's got me cornered in a room with no other exit but the one he's taking up with every bit of his arms and shoulders.

I have only one chance,

I have to dart between his legs.

I make a break.

He breaks me: A haymaker square in my gut that knocks every last bit of air I had in me and sends me flying into the sub woofers. Everything goes as black as him and I can only hear one last final thing I drift out of consciousness:

"...Tthhee ssuusspppeeectt iiss nnoott hheerreee."

"Aannyaoonnee ccaaauuggghhtt ddooowwnn iinnn tthhee ddrраaаиниаггее ssy y s s t t e e m m р р е е п p о o о r r т т s s..."
I snap back to consciousness in an instant acutely left aware my nostrils are on fire.

The burning makes me lunge forward and a black cloven palm pound me back into the floor. It's strength is unmistakable, like the creak my back solicits from the hardwood's give.

My wrists are cuffed over my tail.

"That, is Ammonia. Smelling Salt to be exact."

And that's the halflit face of a black bovine filling my sight. His shifting and the clink of glass against wood denotes the vial he just set down.

This isn't an interrogation room.

It's not a jail cell, either.

I start to mouth out a scream, in an instant he's already wrapped his hooves around my muzzle and pins me down with the weight of his forearm.

I panic and his leer pierces like a lance.

"If I did Not want a two way conversation, I would have gagged you with your shirt and muzzled you."

I can't even squirm against this much pressure. The cuffs dig into my back.

"I could have much easier Killed you, I could have thrown you in the backseat of my squad car. Instead, I went through the trouble of Bringing you here. And this is how you would repay a host's generosity?"

I would nod my head no if I could. I simply cannot move. His face comes ever closer. His breathing is so great in volume, even in it's relaxed tempo, that each inhale is drawing the shirt off my chest. The one he didn't gag me with.
"I am Very particular about who I bring here. You will speak with your Indoor voice when you are Spoken to. And until I say you can, you will not Speak out of turn. Am I Clear?"

I can't nod yes. I have no way to communicate my agreement. He smirks. I snort and shut my eyes and in an instant, the pressure over my muzzle and torso is released. I can feel him getting up by the air alone. Drawing up as he stands on his hooves. I gasp again, breathing in as much air as I can as I roll onto my side and groan from the pain in my back.

"I did not give you a chance to say yes or no, did I?"

"No no you didn't."

"Exactly. You will get the point. I am sure."

I'm confused for a split second before I get it.

"I knew you would."

The realization sends a chill down my neck so strong it frizzes my brush out, and I am now very concerned about where I am. He has perfectly forced the terms and conditions of our dialogue between us. What he used was a level of strategy I have never observed. That scares me more than all the fibers of muscle made apparent in the shifting of his attire I am only now noticing. A black suit, with a black shirt, and a black tie, over his black hide. My eyes dart nervously, over a dark and distinctly well appointed room of wood furnishings. The fine china and other valuables nearly make it an antique shop. Something that makes this no kind of environment someone to get beat or tortured or killed in.

I start to calm down in micrometers as that soaks in.

"...Are you aware that the previous record for a pursuit being called off for public safety was Seven minutes and Forty Three seconds?"

He has had decades of practice on this, and it's becoming clear to me just exactly what it is. His leer is gone, but his gaze still piercing. Probing. He is calm for now, but distantly, the professor's regard in his pose gives it away as his choice of wording soaks in. He's testing me. Not interrogating me. He is not trying to lead me to his conclusion. He is inquiring in earnest.

I answer in kind:
"I wasn't trying to break any records."

The slightest Mona Lisa smirk betrays satisfaction.

"You caused so much havoc that ZPD is expecting a city hall inquiry on vehicular chases, thanks to you. And the new record, they figure, is going to be under three minutes... You may ask One Question."

I have a million. I have so many flying around in my head I can’t grasp them all, let alone pick out the most important one. He sees this in my shock. I see the furrow in his brow. Even in his idea of a reward, he is still testing. Still judging. I have to impress him. I close my eyes, and sample as many questions in my head before the timer I have set for myself runs out. And then they open.

"...How did you get me past the ZPD with a bird over you?"

Another smug crook of his smile.

"I believe you will find that a Fox like you fits Well in a large heavy duffel."

My eyes widen and body tenses.

"And as for how I got you past them in a duffel was simple. Noone would search their fellow officer. Not when I Outrank them. Not as I Organized a search for You in an apartment complex until the Chopper returned to base on Low Fuel. What a shame, that we could not find Owen Conrad Fuchs and his 2008 Ponda."

A knowing smirk. I'm horrified.

"Oh I Remember Now. How you switch plates every time you get a ticket. It's actually a 1971 Vulpon 75 Ranger Fastback."

Noone knows where I am but this Cop. I'm too scared to even appreciate the fact he said my last name right. He senses my flight or fight response, takes one small step back in observance of it. "You see, the officers in Precinct 1 tend to tread lightly around a Spanish Fighting Bull that moved from Homicide to Internal Affairs when he made Captain... Do you know why they fear me?" I can't read him well enough to tell that this isn't a charade, and it's got me too confused to answer. What he said doesn't jive with his interest in me. He's just old enough to plausibly have the rank of Captain, but Internal Affairs is just that. By definition, they are supposed to be the Cops that hold the other Cops responsible.

I'm not a Cop. No Fox has ever been on the other end of the ZPD. By every stretch of my rattled imagination, we have no business together. He doesn't waste his time, knowing full well that I'm too
caught up in the situation to answer to his question. "...Because I made sure the Prosecutor did his Job, the last time one of us tased a pred to death over a Staircase." Lewis Wolfgang. We all thought the Cop that lit him up was gonna get acquitted. We expected it. It had happened so many times before, but the charges didn't get dropped. Instead, he got ten years. Protective custody, but ten years. We couldn't believe it. And this is the guy that made sure of it.

I began to mouth my shock. He's stepped forward and raised a hoof to stop me.

"This is your only reminder to not speak out of turn."

I have to cower a little and curse myself. In my head. With no way of asking him or saying anything else, my mind begins piecing together the fabric he's woven with his tongue. His knocking me out, hiding me from the rest of the force, and bringing me here was somehow in his benefit, yet also an act of mercy. But I don't get his endgame. Even without that knowledge, the terror has ratcheted down. Slowly, with his palm spread out reassuringly, he grabs at something in his pocket. A jingle as he draws it out, to calmly revealing a pair of handcuff keys. "You know what to do with these." he reminds me, throwing them and nearly right into my still handcuffed paws.

I'm kind of not sure if making me work for it is respect or isn't.

I still shuffle backwards and feel around the floor behind me. The keyring hooks around the claw of my left paw and I clutch onto it. Rolling onto my back and onto the left side of my body to give my dominant right paw better movement. Uncuffing myself has been practiced enough times that to do it for real is second nature. A click. A rattling of a newly unlocked cuff. I undo it completely, sitting up to swing my arms around and pause in recognition of the fact that these keys, with the brown primer spraypaint on top, were mine. The ones I had delicately sown on the cuff of my right pantleg to pull off if I ever had to use them in the back of a squad car.

...This Bull was one step ahead of me from the very beginning and the gap's only increased ever since he started.

"I believe that was your Last trick..."

I look up to find him amused again.

"I have made my point about how much I am in Control here, Have I not?"

"Yeah... Yeah you have. You're the scariest damned mammal I've ever known."

"I suppose I am."
For a moment, he gives a forced grin before dropping it.

"But to be fair, Fear can only take a mammal so far. It is a stopgap Substitute at best. What I Covet, what I try to Harvest outside of my line of Work, is Respect. Because Respect is a much more Finite commodity. I trust that this significance is not lost on you, being that you are a mammal that is Feared and not Respected."

I have no idea if this is Stockholm's syndrome that is kicking in right now, but that last thing he said feels like volumes of gospel.

"...But ironically, this has been a one way conversation... You may ask one more question."

I'm at a loss for all those other questions I was grasping at earlier. They'll come back to me, later, but I have only one obvious question, now. The one he's led me to: "...You want my help, but why?" He pauses, but not in thought, as he looks me over again.

"I require an Outside opinion that has been on the street, because I need to figure out Just Who has been sideling me at City Hall. I have been behind a Desk for too long, so I need someone with a little more... Cynicism towards the Establishment." and with that, he passes by me with fluid, battleship momentum, strolling to the corner and towards a victorian styled balloon chair of elm cluster wood and tyrian purple button tufted satin. He does a slow, natural about face, seats himself with a crossed leg, and regards me one last time. "Yours will do. You may speak it freely." Thank god, I can talk now. The relief is like a metric ton being lifted off my head, and I don't care that he sees it in my face or the fact that he's led me to this point by my nose and herded me this whole time.

I spring forward on to my feet and glance around the room to find a baroque footrest I can use, distantly thinking to myself that I've been behind too many furniture stores and antique shops.

"I'm gonna need a chair."

"You will think better on your feet."

For a moment, I'm phased. I try not to look at him so I can hide it, but in the corner of my eye, I catch another satisfied smirk. For a second, I thought it was out of scorn, but it wasn't. He's too calculated for that. No, it's because this whole time, he's been ratcheting me up to where I can't hide my emotions.

"...You got me like an opened book."

"I take every precaution that is afforded to me."
Putting my paw over my head, I get back to thinking.

"Ok, ok... Let me get this straight... You're saying you're Internal Affairs but you're investigating me? That doesn't make sense, I'm not a Cop."

"So you can see exactly Why I am more enraged at City Hall than I am at you, after everything you did."

Everything I did that could've hurt scores of mammals, could've killed dozens of rodents.

"But we will get back to what you did Later."

I have to quietly obey and snap back to now.

"Alright, yeah, back to us." "Me." "You. Ok, you're convinced City Hall moved you around. What's been fishy with the cops, lately?"

"I will get to that, but I must explain everything else, first." he pauses at. Closing his eyes to choose the wording of his recollection, then continues with "Before I was ordered to head your investigation, I was to head a different one I was just starting. That, too, did not involve any officers, but rather missing mammal cases. As I told you, I was Homicide before I was Internal Affairs and well known. City Hall must have factored that when they requested I head them."

"What was special about the missing mammal cases?"

"They totaled fourteen in number and none had witnesses, leads or evidence. All are within the past month."

I'm pretty horrified as the Bull's words sink in.

"Why are they separate? I mean Zootopia is big but... Fourteen? This is a serial kidnapper. Like, you're the detective here, but I can't figure out how they're not related. And no witnesses? No evidence? Why isn't everyone talking about it, this should be on the news, it's a headline story. Some prey family would be screaming about this, and people would be hearing about it."

"You proceed from a false assumption... It pains me to say it Fox, but you know as well as any other predator that Missing Predators do not make headlines." I find myself suddenly frozen in shock as I look to the seated bull. He is lethally serious.
"You're telling me that they're all predators?"

"From all over the city."

"...There's fourteen of them, all of their casefiles are separate, it's all happened this month, and they're all predators... This is a cover up bigger than heck."

"You are not telling me anything I did not know, Owen. I will solve it, I will reveal it, but first, I must contend with who may be behind it because they have disrupted my duties. He or she has Taxed me, Vulpes Vulpes, and I shall have them. With or Without Your help."

The latin caught my attention to drive the threat home and bring me back to city hall. I start to pace again, going over all the details in my head.

Until it hits me that "Theres two different parties in City Hall messing with you." to get him cocking his brow in quiet intrigue out the corner of my eye.

"...Ok, you think City Hall sidelined you first with the missing mammals, then they sidelined you with me again, except you were on to something they didn't want you involved with when you took the missing mammals, which sounds like two interests in conflict, right?"

"Your Point?"

"Where I'm going with this is that one of those interests wanted you to find those mammals, and the other wanted to distract you from it with me. This means someone is using police connections, and that's the missing mammals cover-up creep, but the other... The other wasn't sidelining you at all. Using you? Yeah, but doesn't it sound counterproductive that the one with the police ties would get you involved with the cases in the first place? And was finding the missing mammals given as high a priority as finding me? I mean, the investigation on me got started just today, right?"

He's starting to look a little impressed.

"As of this afternoon."

"That made the news, got kicked off with a mammalhunt for me, everything, but it's 14 missing mammals all over the city that're all predators that takes the backburner? That person, whoever they are, they have the connections that had you drop the missing mammals. So who are the players besides Lionheart? It might be him, but I want t-" Clap.

Clap.
"You want to make sure it is Not the most obvious suspect and cross the others off the list before continuing."

"...No stone unturned, right? I mean how many cases have you worked where the first pick wasn't the right one?"

"A great deal... The Mayor Pro Tempore, that is, the assistant mayor, is a female sheep named Dawn Bellwether. The district counselor for Tundratown is a Eurasian Boar named Dmitri Pasternak. Sahara Square's counselor is Al Safi Harrak, who is a Scimitar oryx. Outback Island has a Kangaroo, one Blair Mulholland... Frank Trunkaby is counselor for Savannah Central and Downtown, A sambar called Luiz Nguyen has the Rainforest District, and... Giulia Topo is counselor for Little Rodentia."

Of course they're all Prey.

"Ok, Lion, Sheep, Boar, Antelope, Kangaroo, Elephant, Deer, Mouse. Whose got the most clout of that bunch besides the lion and the sheep?" "She has None."

I do a double take. "The sheep is vice mayor."

"And her office is city hall's Boiler Room."

I upgrade from double take to slacked jaw. "You've seen it?"

"Over the stacks of file boxes? Barely. Giulia's office is easier to find, and her door is a hole in the wall, Mind You."

He shifts, setting one leg back down to cross it with the other as I start to pace.

"But to answer your question, it is Frank, Dmitri, Al Safi, Luiz, Blair and Giulia."

My mind immediately gravitates to the one whose surname betrays his species. "Makes sense, Frank's an elephant in charge of the most populated district... What's his connection to ZPD?"

"None, considering he had to go through the mayor to get his daughter on the force."

If he couldn't get his daughter in without the mayor, then that says it all.

"What about Dmitri?"

"There are several cops in Tundratown's precinct on his employer's payroll."

I pick up on the suggestion immediately.

"Crooked. "An insert by a mafioso that dresses up like the Goatfather."

I have to laugh. I can't not.
He waits for a moment before leaning forward with "...Would you still laugh if you watched a corpse being pulled out of an icehole? With pained horror frozen in his face?"

A sobering image. I have to reel from it as he straights his back against the chair again...

"But it can't be Dmitri or Tundratown cops, because there's mammals missing all over the city. Outside of Dmitri's jurisdiction. And knowing they're in with the mob, you've been tracking the cops and where they go." This feels like a given.

"Which has not been outside of Tundratown." It was a given. "What about their control over the files? But no, they don't have control over the records of other precincts, just their own." Even if they shared donkey donuts with cops from other precincts, they couldn't call in enough favors.

"And they are all patrol officers. Away from the records department, which for Tundratown is locked up and monitored after I found their ties to the mob. So if they make a mistake, they will not be able to alter their files, which are brought to me for further safekeeping... For now, they are unknowing pawns in federal investigations on the mob here, which I am their regional liaison. Otherwise? I would have had them in chains." I have to pace around for a moment as I continue, soaking in that this Bull is being as frank as he is with the political landscape. It's putting me at ease. Even if he's a cop, everything points to him being the one honest one I've ever dealt with.

"Do any of the others travel around the city besides to City Hall?"

"Luiz goes to the Palm Tree to meet with Al Safi from time to time, but we have not found anything illegal. Blair stays on Outback Island. Guilia rarely travels outside of Little Rodentia."

"Are any of them not upstanding citizens? Would Lionheart cover for them? He's got the police ties."

"None of them seem capable of anything but traffic violations besides Dmitri and Blair, the latter has a history of drunken fistfights."

"But barfights are impulsive. Spur of the moment. Kidnapping's a huge jump from that. "And Guilia and Blair both only care for their domains."

That feels like it really does rule the rest out.

"And as for Leodore? Even if one of the counselors did approach him to cover their tracks, he would be the first to throw them under the proverbial Bus. He is a career politician. All he has eyes for is the next election."

My brows furrow in thought. "It doesn't make sense, though... Has he ever been suspected of anything?" "Big business bribes, but nothing that can be proven. The taskforce on municipal corruption is separate from internal affairs. I cannot light a fire under their tails."

Every move Lionheart makes is for the longhaul, towards ambitions that are larger than his current seat of power.
"...Do you agree that Lionheart is too methodical to just start kidnapping people out of the blue?"

My question has him diving deep into his thoughts. So much so, that right now, I could make a break for his apartment door. Fumbling with his locks would take too long, but... Something else is stopping me.

"The connection he has to the police precincts and to fourteen missing mammals that are the same food-type as he is are irrefutable. But yes, he is too methodical. And he is a narcissist and manipulator, but..."

And then it hits me.

"...But he wouldn't kidnap mammals just out of the blue unless they threatened his career."

Another pause. Neither of us can ignore the fact that someone needs motivation to do something like this.

"He only acts to advance himself, but these mammals had no affiliation with each other or to him, and no real criminal record or political ties. So the question remains: Why?"

Lionheart is a dead-end, and next to nothing adds up with him, in spite of the fact that he has the power to make fourteen preds disappear, and this conversation has led me to the fact that this Bull won't come to a conclusion without putting all his ducks in a row.

"The only card left to play is Bellwether's."

He nearly scoffs, but stops himself with a realization.

"They do not see Eye-to-Eye, and Lionheart's publicity schedules demands that she acts as his secretary, which fuels further tension."

So that means "Lionheart doesn't keep tabs on her." "No." "So even if she doesn't have political power, she'd have to have access to resources and the time to use them."

His gaze, as he looks at me, the words registering in his mind, have lit a field of fireworks ablaze in his mind. What is happening behind those eyes is a 540 cubic inch supercharged V8 engine roaring and screaming to its redline. The words "Resources like the traffic camera network." come out of him like a possession from a higher being. They bring me to a near backwards collapse as suddenly, I realize just who was watching me through the eye of that traffic cam in Sahara Square. I can clearly
see in my mind's eye, with vivid clarity, the gaze of a caprinae masked by the reflection from her glasses of myself looking back at her through a computer screen.

I was being watched.
I was being judged.

For a brief moment, in our pause, me and the Bull see through each other and at a larger picture still too foggy to make it out. Lionheart is responsible, but Bellwether was involved. Perhaps even pushed the missing mammal investigations on the Bull, but Lionheart went over her and pushed the investigation on me.

"...It was folly of me to not consider her activities and alliances in the Meadowlands..." "What are you talking ab-" "Nothing That Concerns You Any Longer."

He can bellow without even raising his voice, and it takes me back.

"...I guess we're back to me."

In a fluid, powerful, rolling movement, he billows from his chair like a plume of black smoke to look ever further lower from his eight foot height to stare down all four feet of myself fraught with sudden, fantastic fear. Fire is now burning in his eyes, and it burns through my own. Because "Impulses travel through the nervous system at over two Hundred and sixty miles per hour. The only thing that saved the mass of Rodents you nearly Killed was the fact that they have spent their entire lives reacting Faster than the careless feet and tires of those bigger than them."

The guilt manifests itself through me in waves of pain I can hardly withstand. A grimace takes hold on my face and I can barely look up anymore.

"You lanesplit every day, you ride recklessly, without a motorcycle License, without Registration, without Insurance, with stolen Plates on a stolen frame and a stolen engine that you robbed from a junkyard. You have Fourty Eight unpaid parking violations, and Every Last Thing you have gotten away with culminated in resisting arrest, starting a police chase, you caused such Bedlam that the property damage and attempted maleslaughter charges would have sent to a cage and orange prison garb for the rest of your life."

Shallow breathing. A pained gasp. I can't stand any longer and lurch forward on my knees as my judge and jury looms over me like a mountain. Ears folded back, eyes squinted shut. He's got me so hard and thoroughly, and for what I did in the alley, I deserve it all. "And yet in light of your
history and circumstance I can neither excuse nor blame you."

The words are heard, but I'm too overwhelmed by the weight of my sins to listen to them. I'm too swept up in my guilt to moan out anything else but "Just do what you're gonna do. You've got me."

A gust of air and a clinching of hooves around the scruff on the left side of my neck silences and immobilizes at the same time. His grip is searing, and leaves my breaths short and erratic.

I don't look, but I can feel his disgust emanating from him. "Are You So Nearsighted That You Are Blind To My Intent?" With my teeth bare and exposed, I cry out Sorry under my breath.

"SORRY IS THE MOST USELESS WORD IN THE DICTIONARY."

My words. How did he know them? I would cower if I could. The tail tucking between my legs, a reflex more from being held by the scruff of my neck than out of fear.

"In Spite Of All You've Done, I Would Still Be Wasting My Time To Throw You In A Cage. Listen To Me Like You've Never Listened To Anyone Before: I Have Far Bigger Game To Hunt Than You." and with that, an unceremonious release sends me falling to the floor and yelping. I'm fighting every impulse to crawl under his cabinet full of china because deep down, I know it'd only make it worse.

"And Because of that, I am going to Spare you."

"w-What?"

"Are You Questioning My Judgment?"

"No!"

"And in Kind, you are going to keep the Lowest profile you can while I do both of us a Favor and convince my superiors to drop the Fox Hunt. AND UNTIL I CALL OFF THE HOUNDS, WILL YOU CRAWL THROUGH THIS CITY LIKE A ROACH AND HIDE."

I can neither believe nor doubt it, but I know I heard him right. I can only look up at him bewildered.

"I don't know what to say."

"Then for Once, Say Nothing and Get Up."

I hobble over my sore lefthand side and obey. "Your Vulpon is in the cache that you parked it next to. Do not take it anywhere until I get the search called off. I have little else I can do to
keep you out of my hair until this is over." I say nothing, but I'm amazed and grateful. As he moves back to his balloon chair to lean over a small, immaculate wooden tea cart. Procuring a bottle and a rag, before turning back around to face me with the rag now soaked in whatever that bottle contained.

But I know what it was, before I ask "What is that?"

"Chloroform," and he shoves the cloth in my face, holding me up as I lose my legs and my eyes. With the last of my cognitive functions, I think to myself that I should have figured him too great a tactician to allow me to leave in such a way that I could know where he lives.

But chloroform does not render mammals unconscious. The stimuli is just far more distant now, and time becomes abstract.

He is stuffing me back into the duffel.

He is zipping it closed, but leaving it just open enough for fresh air.

The pressure on my back tells me he’s thrown the strap over his shoulder.

The clicking and rattle of locks unlocking.

The thudding of his hooves over carpet.

Elevator music.

The opening of a door.

The sound of the streets.

The chirp of an unlocking car.

Trunk opening.

Thud.

Trunk closing.

Door opening.

Door closing.

Ignition.

Motor.

Movement.

The droning is the last thing.

Unconscious.

Conscious.
I bolt into consciousness again, rattled and nearly jumping out of my fur, wide terrified eyes, my tongue slurring horror, the loudest alarm I've ever heard to my left, a hammer to my right, I grab hold of it and jump up to swing with all of my tension to drive the head through That God Damned Alarm... The alarm that was left on top my police scanner. I am left to stutter in my confusion as I piece together the fact that he left it there to wake me up, on top of my police scanner, and left a hammer next to me in good faith that I would kill both birds with the stone he left for me. His tradecraft and artifice are omnipotent. And I am left with nothing else to do but scream out my loudest, most horrid obscenities.

"T'LL NEVER FIND ANOTHER SCANNER LIKE THAT AGAIN!" I howl, plunging the hammer's head into what's left of that illegal-to-own thing. I can finally start to end my fit, though. Take deep breaths, clutch at my head and turn around. Take stock of my surroundings and the sight of all these stacks of Amplifiers, and VCRs, and Betamax players to my right.

He left me where he found me.

I turn again to look behind, and find the Vulpon leaned against the wall. He didn't take it from me. He did not have it impounded and destroyed. Of all the things I am left with here, I have to take in the fact that he recognized the symbolism of this stupid, incredible thing. This Vulpon is my freedom, and for all the things he did, he did not take that from me. I run my left paw over the indentions of the logo under the gas tank's clearcoat. My touch trailing over the side of it and to the seat I upholstered with new leather, and see them: Fresh cloths. A threadbare pair of gray jeans and an olive drab hoodie. A note on top, printed on a piece of copy paper, reminding me that They will be looking for a fox wearing designer clothes like my moocci shirt and brown corduroys.

"He thought of everything."

The Jeans are only staying on my hips because of the new notch I had to stab through a belt with an Icepick I kept in the cache several yards behind me. The hoodie is just as stupidly loose on me, and I'm left a little irritated, because slimfit cloths afford me some comfort and security in their snugness. Maybe I'm too used to trying to look the best I can and just nitpicking. The tunnel's humidity leaves me dragging the zipper back down to expose my chest fur to get cool air over it. Dawn has broken, and I can tell from the angle of the sunlight, how much it's peered into the tunnel and reflected off the wet walls. I have to squint, as I draw my hoodie up over my head and cross the tunnel's threshold. Lest I be seen and made right when I come out from under the city.
The sun is warm enough to feel a glow from under the cloak. Fresh air, greedy lungs, a weight off my shoulders to a pressure on my forearms when I rest them against the railing over the river below. A water plane skips like a stone on it's take-off from the surface. I haven't seen one in ages. An anachronism, like the wristwatch I left behind me in the cache just to be certain. I still have my phone to tell the time, and I go to reach for it in my pants pocket. 7:48 AM. I have to reflect now. On the Bull. On the missing mammals. On City Hall and how, like Snarl Sagen put it with the Pale Blue Dot photo, I'm kinda just a little pixel in the larger mosaic. Maybe that's a bad analogy. But maybe I been taking my problems a little too granted.

...

"Owen?!"

...That voice from above me, is that "Eva?!" and there she is, leaning on the railing above me.

The Ferret girl from Buffalo's party. The one I didn't get to see last night.

With a smile beamin' in the relief that she can't stop from seeing her ducking under rails to slide down the bank, on her rear and feet and paws in a needy fit.

I don't even have time to warn or scald, just enough to leap into action with and stumble up with open arms to stop her, as she lets slip a squeaking cry.

When she falls into me then sends me on my back and leaves us both rolling down with her momentum.

"You crazy, wild messed up boy!"

And I'd be at a loss of words if she didn't give me something to throw back at her like "Crazy Wild and Messed up?!" If that's exactly why I gotta ask "What're you doing here?!"

What's she's gonna throw right back like "What're you doing jumping out of a window and making headlines?!"

I'm so flabbergasted and confused right now.

"Nuh uh let's not make this about me 'cause first things firs-" becomes a tight hug squeezes the breath right out of me.

I'm not even sure how she did it.
This shouldn't feel like romance if it's doing eighty miles over the posted.

"I was so worried after those creepy texts."

Wait, "What? Hold up, what creepy texts?"

After everything that just happened, I'm still somehow able to worry.

"From your phone! Here," "Hey!"

And there's a joke here, how she's digging through my pant pocket before I can stop her from pulling the thing out. I'm kind off too overwhelmed, right now.

"I can look through my own phone, you know.", the one she's flipped around for me to look into screen of.

But that's where find the Bull's aristocratic vernacular. On the screen, from him texting her with my phone.

He told her to wait exactly where she waited from 7:45 to 8:15 AM.

The alarm, he must have timed with when he texted her to wait for me.

Has her asking out of worry "Who the heck was that?" and no, there ain't no real way to alleviate it.

I have to pause for a moment. Look into her eyes without any guile and consider how much I want to tell her, without outright playing the pronoun game. Empathy for The Demon comes to mind as I think of him, and the song kinda decides my words.

So I'll shoot her straight: "...I think I met the devil."

Without really joking about feeling like I did.

She gets that, just has to raise a brow in disbelief if she still knows I'm being serious.

But I can't really give her much else beside "He wears all black."
Chapter Summary

As a philosophy, it treats breakage and repair as part of the history of an object, rather than something to disguise.

Chapter Notes

I would apologize for the formatting, toward the end of this chapter... Though at times it skips a few beats, I thought it greater than worse to try and do right by that moment. As important as the song is. And maybe it's still too gimmick... Though if I had a choice, that music video moment would’ve already been made into an animation to convey all that emotion through motion. Regardless, it's not friendly to text-to-speech programs, and not immediately friendly to a human reader, either... I just wish text could move to capture all the wild flurry.

...I can't believe her.

I see her right in front of me, I hear her voice, I've felt her touch, but I cannot believe she exists.
She's as real as everyone else I see on this Savannah Central street but she can't be. She went alone in the morning through an alley and waited at a deserted walkway for me to appear. Because a stranger told her to, with my phone, when she knew it wasn't me. And knowing that, she still came for me. That's a picture too absurd and crazy to be anything else but a Vincent Van Goat, and yet she exists beyond the borders of a wooden frame. She's amused at my disbelief and can't shake how bad I look in these baggy clothes. She pops off a stifled snicker and explains it with "That hoodie's big enough for both of us." and I'd laugh, too. But I'm out of my element, though. Last night weighs as heavy on me as the fear that I'm gonna get made.

The image of her slipping into the thing with me still gets a smile to compliment "Where are we going?"

She answers with an alert pause, grabbing me by my paw with tension and pulling me into a storefront. A tea shop, oddly out of place in this predator side of Savanah Central street, but I'm more curious about "Why are we in here?"

"Plainclothes at the corner. Gray Wolf."

Thank god for the extra pair of eyes. Thank god for that paw still wrapped around my own. I'm not gonna doubt her. You can take a Cop out of his uniform, but you can't shake that aura from them, nor the flow and tempo of their body language. It's an unmistakable tell, and the fact she noticed it leaves me aware that she's had her own run ins. I look behind, hoping I won't see a lupine face staring back at me from the other side of the glass. "Excuse me, Miss?" I turn back to Eva's addressing of a badger waitress, with an earnest anxiety on her face as she tells the half-lie "Miss, I don't want to ask but, but there's a large male outside that's looking for us and we really need to leave. Could you..."

She didn't have to say another thing. Moments later, we're out through the backdoor and thanking that waitress as Eva leads me down the alley. And by now, I can't take it anymore. No amount of what Lola could've told her about me could amount to her knowing much more about me than I know about her. She's aiding and abetting, and if I go down, I don't want to drag anyone down with me. I can't take the trouble someone else has got in mind for me coming back around on her. I have to stop and tug her grip back, now. To get her to look into my eyes, and feel exactly why I gotta ask her "Why're you doing this?"

What's more to me than I ever wanted. Than I ever needed to deserve.

She inhales in the shock of my showing that, I took her by surprise, but she doesn't skip a beat: "Because I think I love you."

And now, now this has gotten too absurd for me to not challenge it. My brows slip into a furrow as I
present my case.

"You think you love a wanted deadbeat? Someone you barely know from dancing with at a party?"

She huffs, her grip around my paw tightening. "You know, I take it back. I don't think. I know I love you."

She leans forward and grabs at the collar of my hoodie. Such forcefulness, from such a petite frame, is so unexpected that it's left me paralyzed.

"I love you because of everything you've said and done up until now. And that dancing? That was the most passionate moment I've ever shared with anyone. What you expressed while you were dancing was more than everything all of my exes ever expressed in all of my past relationships."

She tugs me closer to elaborate with a single word: "Combined."

The would-have-been performer's words strike me. But now, in spite of those words, I have to plead. Because "I've never hated someone so much that I wished prison on them and I've never been so needy and selfish enough to want someone dragged through hell with me."

She's leering, now. Coldly, with a matter-of-factly expression.

"What do you know about mustelidae?"

There is a tension in her. An unease that is an undercurrent in every Predator I've ever known. But hers, though like mine, is different in spite of that familiarity. It's a neediness and a desperation that's like a song with lyrics that are gibberish but a clearly defined emotion.

It's behind her eyes, and it's in her stance.

The way I've seen many mustelid carry their arms close to their bodies like a praying mantis.

"...You covet. You yearn."

I was so close to the narrative I can see swelling out of her before she lends it her voice.
"We empty vessels harbor a yearning that will never be sated, before the world starves us to death. We seek a fulfillment that we will always be denied. We're among the world's most sought after commodities and we're robbed of all other meaning. But we covet as greatly as we are coveted, and we covet with such fever that it gives meaningless life more meaning than any other."

Her monologue was like a practiced recital of a gospel. It's force has demolished all of my walls.

"...I think that's some of the most beautiful poetry I've ever heard out of someone's mouth... ", and I'm only left with one last defense: "I just... I just didn't think I was worth-"

Another embrace stops me. I look down below me to sincere eyes that harbor begging.

"You are worth everything I could throw away."

A radiance, like a fire, dances over my back. Black gloved vulpine paws that once suspended in the air around her from the shock reciprocate her own paws' grip around my torso. It's such a delicate moment, so fragile and tender, that I have no further heart to protest. I feel warmth. I feel love. I feel like a train has just hit me. And it has. A small, petite black-masked train with a voice that I'm suddenly aware is beyond her youth in determination and wisdom. Some awkward sound is choked out of me by it, I feel suddenly weak, I feel tears. One little "Owen...", and I shed what's left of dignity and in a heartbeat, I am squatting down and have tucked my cloaked head into her and with nothing to hide or prove, I let my emotion pour over her.

I am wanted. I am needed. I am coveted by the last person on earth that cares for me and understands me and wants to stand there like a pillar I've forgotten how much I wanted in the past.

"I just, I just, oh god I just didn't know how much, how, how much I longed for, for someone like-" "Ma'am, is there a problem here?!"
I freeze. A cop.

"Sir, there isn't a problem."

The one she thought we dodged.

"Are you sure this male isn't a threat?" if it's never that easy.

When a female is alone in an alley with a male predator, it's never that easy.

I can feel how nervous she is. She can feel how nervous I am.

"...My boy is crying and in a lot of emotional turmoil right now, Sir. And believe me, I can defend myself. I'll call law enforcement if I need help. But right now, he needs mine. Please, let me take care of him."

A long pause. I can feel her eyeing him down. I don't dare look up and out from her.

"...I'm gonna give you a verbal warning for a public disturbance. And get back on the sidewalk. Alleys are for commercial offloading."

I can barely hear the sound of flesh padded paws walking away through the hoodie's cloak. It was the wolf from earlier. I must've been downwind of him, or else he could've made me by scent. Or maybe, maybe he was just a good person. One predator recognizing another predator's state of dismay. Badge and all.

I look up, and I find myself in the relieved eyes of this impossible girl.

I look around, we're on the sidewalk.

I look behind, at the frustrated feline taxi driver behind this bus I now find myself on.

I look forward, she's looking back as she leads me down the subway station.

She's a magician like that. Making time a blur, if all I'm left with is vignettes as she asks me about my life. She's blinded my observer eyes to all those countless others we share Zootopia with. I should be worried about cops, but it's like she's navigating me around every big bad badge that could come our way. It's like she's my radar, as long as I'm with her. Like it's noone else's world but hers and it'll do
as she pleases.

I blink and I find myself in a sub with her as it shoots out from it's tunnel, with water in the horizon framed in the leftside window.

It's been so long, I really gotta ask "What line are we on?"

I know we're on the west side of Savannah Central and that's it. "The Zootopia line. You've never taken it to the rainforest district?"

I have to pause and confess halfheartedly, how "...I'm not a public transportation kind of guy."

She scoffs, entertained, "Too many unfriendly faces staring you down?", I have to let out a single chuckle but she's right.

Got me pretty figured for someone I still know so little about. In an enclosed space like this, Prey never let their eyes off Preds for more than a moment.

When I'm on my motorcycle, everyone's rolled up windows are a barrier.

"Well, they're not going to look for you in Rainforest, right?"

I remember now, the subject brought up in the bus of places I hardly go.

"Yeah... Yeah, it's probably my safest bet right now.", in spite of all the traffic cams there made necessary by the density of the vegetation.

"So we'll go there!" comes out of her ecstatic smile. I have to quirk a brow at it, and smile a little knowingly at the realization "You've got something planned."

Her face is so beautifully adorable when it's scrunched up with a tender smile. A part of me still can't believe her, but so much more of me just wants something more to go on and a little of me just wants to go along with it, but the rest of me can't.

"...Eva, I know we've spent this whole day together, but we still know so little about each other."

She smirks with a "You mean you know so little about me." and with that, I'm reminded again, that Lola's told her so much about me, and the Ferret's been asking me to confirm it all this whole time.

"I mean I know so little about you. You're crazy about me and I love the way you dance. That's it!"

She needs to laugh at that, "I wouldn't call it dancing. I'd call it dooking more than anything."
The cheek of her feigned modesty. I don't even immediately process what she said.

"I don't care, it's so beautiful and frantic. Wait, you call it what?"

"Dooking! Ferrets and Weasels tend to... What are you smiling about?"

I can't help it. The thought is firmly planted in my head and I must lend it my tongue.

"Your petname is now dookie."

An egregious, shamed giggle, a punch to my arm beside her.

"Ow!"

"Get the f out, no!"

"I'm serious! Tell me it doesn't make sense!"

It does, I can tell I won the battle, but the war?

"You're still gonna pay for that!"

"Oh yeah, When?" she answers with an abrupt, sudden tickling of my side.

"No! Uh, AACK! Stop it, we're causing a scene dag nabbit AH NO! nnnNO!" comes out of my in between the laughs, "You started it!" she retorts.

A loud, forced disgruntled sigh makes obvious a disapproving Rhino in a business suit as he gets up to move to another car, having had it with these two Predators getting playful in public. We both stop, knowing he speaks for the rest of the prey in our immediate vicinity. An awkward silence. An awareness that having to keep a low profile in public temporarily escaped us.

"...We're not too far from Vine street, anyway. We'll catch the Rainforest District line there, and then we get off at Vapor road."

"What's on Vapor?"

"Not on, but close enough... And you'll see!"

I can't help but remind her again, "I still know next to nothing about you, you know."

She finds herself prompted to reach for her phone for some reason, and offers it to me.
"Want to trade?"

Her invitation catches me off guard and I've got to ask "Wait, what for?" she holds back an eyeroll as she elaborates "You got music on your phone, right?"

"Yeah." I can feel the sub train starting to come to a stop.

"So, what better way to find out more about each other than the music we listen to?"

If this was anyone else, they'd think she was crazy. And maybe she is, but she's in the company of a kindred spirit. When I've had little else, I've had someone else's words. I've had their voices, their guitar, their violins. So I nod with enthusiasm and a brightened gleam in my eye, forking my phone to her without hesitance as the train comes to a stop and we get up.

"Don't look through my picture folder." comes out as an afterthought and sends her into a laughing fit before a cheeky "Don't look through mine either!" is offered up with a coy glance from behind her denim jacketed shoulder. The doors slide open and much larger Mammals loom over us. She clutches my hand and leads me.

It's a scene I can't get over. A small female in complete charge, leading around a much larger male. But I feel no less of a male, but all the more a luckier one.

"The train on the Rainforest line is already leaving?!!" flies out of her, and in an instant, she breaks into a sprint and drags me with her, in between the legs of an Elephant and around so many Equine and Deer and groups of Caprinae and Cervines. A dizzying speed, a frantic pace. If we were any larger, we would be causing a scene, a Cop that's surely stationed here would see us. "Eva! What the H, we can make the next train!" doesn't sway her as she fires back with a "We can make this one, too!" and the doors start to close so far in the distance. I groan, because I know what this means. I have longer legs than her. I can run faster. And on the hunch I can carry her, I pick up the pace and scoop her up in my arms as I run as fast as I can and with a jump.

I fly into the doorway with millimeters to spare as the doors clamp down and I slide over a mysteriously wet floor, jumping up again and spinning to slam my back into the seat's backrest, the force knocking what breath I had out of me. A cough, a gasp for breath, a reminder, as the scene I caused directs eyes to us.

"Keep a low profile, the Bull told me.

"Stay as low as a Roach."

But I haven't been. And I've been too swept up by this ecstatic, giddy Ferret girl in my lap trying to contain a squeal to keep myself reminded of it.
"That was so clutch!"

"Oh god, I could've lost my brush!"

"Your what?"

I halfway feign a frown as I look down "My tail! Foxes call their tails brushes and I could've lost mine!"

She fidgets around in my lap to shift and look around me, "Well you still got it!"

With a roll of my eyes and smile as I hold back the Oh You I wanna sigh out.

But what I really need to say is, "Eva, I ought to be in hiding in some bunker."

My muted, quiet tone stresses that her answer be mutually quiet, and it is.

"I know, but you're safe with me."

"I know, but you're safe with me." but everything in my body is telling me that's what I should be telling her, if there was such a thing as safety in public.

But there's not. Not with me.

"But I'm not safe in public. And you're not-" "Safe with you?"

An irritation boils out of her. I want to explain, but I'm stopped as she shoots out a quietly frustrated "Boy, you think the Cops are only looking for you?"

That question can only have one explanation: "...They're looking for you, too."

She leans in closer to my ears and whispers her reveal.

"Conspiracy warrant... I had to stay with my sister, her boyfriend was dealing product and he dealt to a snitch. I managed to escape when the swat team raided... And she didn't. Then I found out through the grapevine they charged us both with conspiracy since we were living with him..."

They decided she was part of the operation the sister's boyfriend was running, even though it was just him. Not her sister, and not her. But they always do this. They always treat the females like they take part in their significant other's slinging. They always charge them, they always convict, and the minimum sentence for conspiracy is twice as long as dealing itself. And no amount of judges complaining about the system has changed it. Because they're not in charge of the system. The vote-hungry prosecutors and sheriffs and other politicians are. They tow the line, and if she's aware of all that, I'll have to remind "Eva," anyway: "If they catch us, it's two birds one stone."
A sharp leer forms in her black mask.

"Do all Foxes just care about survival at all costs or is it just you?"

A sharp phantom pain.

"Does it matter if my first priority is survival?"

And a leaded crystal clear resolve: "No, Owen, because I'm tired of running. I'm not gonna live forever, and I'm not gonna run forever. I'm not gonna wait out some statute of limitations and let them take my youth."

"But they're gonna take it and more if they catch you."

"I'm not going to play their game, Owen! And I don't want you to, either..." A quick glance over her left shoulder, and she sees something, she hides it, but I can feel her tension.

"But..." no more buts.

She gets up and buries my face in her torso again as she grips it in a hug. I hear the sound of law enforcement footwear. It is unmistakable, her attempt at concealing my face somehow genuine enough that the officer's pace doesn't skip in its tempo as the badge strolls past us. She's tucked her muzzle into my ear, to whisper out such a delicate, emotion heavy truth.

"I want to live. don't you?"

A long pause.

A deafening silence in spite of all the noise this sub has to offer.

She lets go and looks into my eyes with a thirst for life in their gleam.

"Was this the only way to get where we're going, Eva?"

"Lola's working, so I couldn't ask a ride from her, and I didn't have money for a Taxi."

It sounds like money is about as sparse with her as it is for me.
"How do you get by?"

"...I steal cosmetics from stores and pretend I'm one of those door-to-door beauty supply girls."

Any Prey would have a field day with that admission. It would confirm all of their prejudice, and it would all be wrong, because they'd be wrong from the start. They're wrong in thinking it's because she's a Weasel, or because I'm a Fox. Because we're predators, because that's not it and will never be it. When they have no other options, mammals do whatever it takes to survive, and we've always had fewer options than Prey. We have to get by any way we can. We're products of the circumstances that have been afforded and denied to us. Mammals like me and her, digging through trash and shoplifting, we're not like this because of what we are, but because of what they say we are, then dictate what we are to become.

Eva wasn't allowed to be a dancer. I wasn't allowed to be whatever I've forgotten I wanted to be. Toby Antelier knows better. No other Prey I've ever dealt with does.

"You're doing it again. Thinking too much." she reminds me.

"Yeah... I can't help thinking about how screwed up this world is." gets a simple nod from her.

A folding of her paws together against her chest. I'm reminded of her weight in my lap and have to tell her that my legs are going numb. She understands and gets up to seat herself to my right. The rest of the train ride is silent. We're both left with the past-time of mammal watching, dissecting the lives everyone around us, from how they carry the clothes on their backs before we get to our stop. The upper class Babirusa Boar and Tapir Sow opposite of us with wedding rings and doubts about their futures. The bored Capybara in his suit making the characteristic horizontal swipes of a timber user and occasionally glancing at the married female next to him.

The Asian Elephant exhausted from manual labor and a massive hardhat in his lap. The paranoid Neofelis Nebulosa in designer jeans and tanktop, with a female Cuon Alpinus trying to consul the Leopard with her canid paw on the other's lap. The Dhole's trying to tell her it's all gonna be fine. Eva's eyeing the couple, and I think the words They're Not Gonna Stay Together are on the tip her tongue, but she's biting it. The odds of being accepted for coming are all the more diminished when you're endangered... But I'm trying to think. And the sub's coming to a gradual deceleration, anyway. A computer generated Now Arriving at Vapor Road Terminal and "That's us." I say. She nods and gets up in sync with me. We line up behind the crowd behind the massive Gaur bull who'll have to duck, to clear his horns of the door's threshold.

The sight of another large bovine has a little on edge after my encounter with Lucifer.

Something Eva feels, and locks the digits of her paws into my own to fight away my weakness with her own.
I think I get it now.

She needs me as much as I need her in a state like this.

Her selfishness is in her selflessness.

"...You love me when I least deserve it."

"That's when you need it most." she tells me.

She says it like someone wasn't there when she needed them and now she finds herself giving others, others like me, that very thing they denied her.

This is what she needs from me, as she leads me out into the terminal and up the stairs.

The chance she never had.

"You're a Cancer." I observe,

and I've solicited "And you're a Virgo." in kind.

The steps are wet, either from overhead sprinklers or natural precipitation.

"We're gonna get soaked."

"Yeah... I thought this through."

A mischievous gleam in her eyes as she looks back at me. A plotting smirk.

She charges forward with a skip and pulls me forward into the fray of the wet sidewalk's muted hustle and bustle. It's a light drizzle, but the clouds hang low and heavy. High humidity and a hoodie does not a happy fox make, as the rain keeps coming down on us inspite of the occasional shelter of the umbrellas of larger beings. Up wooden stairs, a fortunately covered jungle walkway leading up to unfortunately exposed platforms over the district's ground level. "Eva, you better be taking me to a fur dryer!" I tell her, as we settle into a jogging pace. "That wouldn't be any fun!" is quipped at my expense. I would curse her if I could, but I'm starting to enjoy this silly getting-out-of-your-shell journey she's taking me on.

The twists and turns don't stop, but they still slow us down. The rainfall comes and goes as it pleases, and every time we pass a traffic camera I start to worry, but that's when she grips tighter, and when I realize there's no hateful eyes staring me down as I stare at the lens.
We're across another rope bridge, leading inside of shear cliff side with a road carved through and revealed by the holes in the face of it. If only I came here on my Vulpon. The acoustics would be killer if I could keep control on this uneven surface.

"How much further?"
"Just a little!"

With no traffic to endanger us, she sprints across the road with me behind her to the opposite side and to a door she leaps towards the handle of to unlock with her weight as she lands back on her feet.

"You dragged me all the way here for this?"

She chimes with a nope as the door opens to reveal a tunnel, and the sunlight at the end of it. I gravitate toward it naturally. On my own, without her help. The walls of this tunnel were carved by hand and was as clumsily carved as the roadway behind me.

"...Where did you take me?"
"To my best hiding spot~.

One last flight of stairs and... A clearing. On the edge of a cliff overlooking the border between Rainforest Canal District. Behind it and in the tree line, a shipping container overgrown with brush. The front doors left open, it's inhabitation obvious. And all the signs of it lead to the ferret girl I turn around to in shock. Her feigned modesty betrays her pride. "...I'm still working on the plumbing." She jokes as I walk into the thing, past a cinder block and 2 by 4 table with aerosol paint overspray. A small makeshift bed. A cardboard box here or there of clothes. A couple of trash bags of dirty laundry. There's no plumbing, no electricity, but she's done it: she's found and made for herself a piece of remote island in the middle of the world's largest city.

And in the back, a work space of more cinder blocks and 2x4s with particle masks and neatly lined cosmetics in various states of being sanded down and spraypainted. That's how she manages to trick the females she hawks stolen beauty secrets to. She repackages them. I have to appreciate, for a moment, how well finished her end results look. "...They look fresh out of a factory."
"And not out of a trashcan~.

The singsong burn was so unexpected and sharp in it's sting, I'm left frozen in stomach churning mental anguish for a moment or two while my eyes stare into nothingness. The Ferret wasn't kidding
when she said Lola told her everything about me. I'm suddenly reminded how miserably wet I am. "...Eva? I think you owe me Several towels." and they come flying and draping themselves over my head. I hear her strolling smug outside to excuse herself. She couldn't plan this any better if she did. Several minutes later, and I'm a little less damp and been reminded, as I put my stupidly oversized pants back on, that I have her phone and she's got mine. A swipe here and there, and I'm looking through her music.

She's already looking through mine, seated on the edge of her abode's entrance. I take my place beside her. Then discover, as I read the names of these bands, how much we have in common. Bon Ivery, Cold War Kits, Felis + The Machine, The Hocks, Mouflon Stevens, Interwolf, "... Lupine Fiasco, M. Herd, My Summer Coat, Moossirrey." "Taurus y Moi, The Territorial, They Might be Giraffes, Ottervil River, Simple Kit." The rolcall she's joined me in is growing louder, more excited, so very frantic in ecstasy, we're losing ourselves to an incredible fact that stands against all odds: YOU'RE INTO THE SAME MUSIC I AM comes out of us nearly in sync.

"Oh my God, Eva, You're into The Vigor!"

Her eyes widen ever more. "You too?! AAAAAAH!"

She can't contain herself and neither can I.

"I can't believe it, and not just Bittersweet Melody! You got all their albums, even Richard Howlcroft's solo stuff!"

"...You only got Urban Calls and Onward?"

I am not about to let that dismissal slide and have my love of this band questioned. 

"Hey, just because I don't have as much of their stuff as you do doesn't make me any less of a fan." "Yes it does!"

"Oh wait just right there, Bittersweet Melody kept me sane and alive when I was a teen. That's all the evidence I need to plead my case."

She objects with an eyeroll and pfft as she keeps looking through my phone before stopping and asking me...

"...What's Swan?"

After seeing all the Dashing Buntings albums on her phone, I'm earnestly surprised but still play it up, in a turn to her slow and dramatic, gets her shortling as I reply to her question with my own: "You never heard of Billy Goatan's coverband of his former band?!" The stars in her wild eyed shock say everything before she squeaks out a long, muted "Whhhaaaaaat?" and before I can even start to sass her about what a terrible Dashing Buntings fan she is, her body is flying through the air and clumsily darting all over her front yard. How ditsy, how infectious and horrible and beaming with her wanton display of passion that silly, playful joyous thing she calls dooking is.

If she's blushing, she's not blushing enough, which leaves me picking up slack for her. she recovers her composure in waves.
I just about can't do it at all.

"...I'm just gonna listen to a song or two." falls under her breath.

"Make sure one of those songs is Sincerely! Best song on their whole album!"

My recommendation hopefully registered in her ears before she tucked buds into her ears and ran into the brush. I'm alone. I could easily navigate through her texts and pictures, but I'm not compelled to do it at all. If it were anyone else, maybe I'd be but for once, either because it's her or because I've gone through so much in the past twenty four or so hours? I'm too humble to dare. So I go through her library again, under different sorting options, and find the band ranked highest in plays. Take Me to The Scurry is a song I'm already familiar with, but that takes second place to a song of theirs I never heard of.

The title of it says so much, and feels like an immediate insight on her, but I can't immediate grasp it.

But it's about now, just now, that it's starting to sink in, the brilliance her logic had when we traded phones. I understood it from the beginning, but that's the problem with knowledge. The bulb is not always connected to an on and off switch but sometimes a dimmer. There are layers of understanding. Degrees of it's internalization. And right now, I think I get her. I just can't say I get her like the blades of grass under my paws, or the shadow of this plateau over all that rests below it. She's a lot to take in so suddenly. As the sun sets in this momentary break in the cloud cover. Then the brush behind the treeline shifts, and I watch, as a lightheaded, flutter hearted Ferret full of life stumbles in her bliss.

I recognize it immediately as the same way I get after a song has gotten me high.

I just never thought I'd see it in anyone else.

If we were in a park, she would be in handcuffs. She would be getting searched for product. The Officers would be getting too damned eager and pleased about it. They would beat her the first reason she gave them, and resisting arrest is always a good excuse to God DAMN this city for being so beautiful, so ugly, so flawed an emerald, and god damn my head for constantly pulling me back into reality and out of this beautiful little- "You're doing it again."

I sigh in frustration with myself.

"I know, Eva, I'm sorry, I just... Why does this world have to be so messed up and why do I have to keep reminding myself of that?"

She doesn't answer, but she tries not to let my observer's mind let her down.
"You were right, that Sincerely song was amazing." has a certain weight in her voice as she admits it that pushes away the ugliness in my mind.

"I know. I saw how much it affected you... You felt it."

The words take her back. She knows what I'm talking about it.

"You didn't just hear it. You listen to songs all the time but you don't feel them. But you felt that song. You felt every verse, you felt the treble of the guitar, the keys of the piano, you felt it all like different ghosts with their personalities, their own dance, and they gave 'em inside of you, in different parts and at different depths. They touched you and reached through like spirits because they were alive. That's what songs are. They're life in it's purest form. We manifest music out of thin air, and it dances inside of us."

She's sort of breath, she's trembling, like I've acknowledged something deep inside her that's been rotting for not being known or shared.

And now it blooms.

And now she runs to me, leaping into me, knocking me down, my back pressed into the shipping container's wooden floor.

"You know music like I do! YOU KNOW IT LIKE I DO!"

Her wild eyed relief, her ecstasy. I don't think I've ever seen someone this happy, so genuinely happy.

I'm not alone is the only thing I can say.

"...I knew you had something in you." she tells me, and I have to ask her: "Since When?"

If it's been whole reason she's been head over heel to me, I've got to know.

"Since the party. It was how that song turned you into a bottle rocket."

But I still don't.
Because it did, "But I jumped out of a window." and that's the part that's getting me.

There's so many other reasons, but the fact I was that out of control cements the idea I'm not good for her.

"Did you mean to?" gets a quick "I didn't even know I did until I opened my eyes." and she acknowledges it with a "But you did."

So where is the argument? "Yeah, I flew out of a window." I have to remind her, as if it's not already as established as 2+2=4

She looks at me dead in the eyes as she brings it all back with "And that's when I knew I wanted you."

I can't even think straight when confronted with the absurdity and the feeling on my face is mutual. She wants me, I want her, but I know where I'm heading. With a warrant and my crazy.

She wants to have me, to live beside me, but it's going to be her undoing.

"Eva... I know you want me. We've known each other for no amount of time, but I get you know enough about me to think you want to stick around me... But this isn't gonna end well. You know that, right?"

I've forced her to become serious again, to make her next words to ring true like an arrow in the bull's eye.

"I don't care how long we stay together, Owen. I just want to have you for as long as I can."

I can't.

I cannot understand.

"Why? Why do you want to throw it all away for me..."

I have to pause, holding her by the side. I'm desperate to understand...
"...How can you think like that?"

She doesn't hesitate to answer my question with her own question: "Do you believe in the gospels songs can instill in someone?"

I believe in it with every fiber of my being.
More than faith in God above, "Yes."
I got faith in us and what he gave.
I believe music can save my mortal soul.

And I think the sentiment in all of me has registered...

"...Then you need to hear a song."

...I just don't believe I'm quite ready.

If I'm lost for words and actions, then she'll take action in the absence of my own.

Grabbing her phone out of my hand to navigate her library, "You saw what my most played song was?" and I don't have to think back far, just reply as quickly, "Yeah... Something by a band called Suns."

She pulls her earbuds out of my phone and grabs something else from her denim jacket. An auxiliary splitter.

Couldn't plan this any better if she did, if she's been waiting too long not to have it all sorted out.

Caught me offguard enough "Your buds?" still has to come. With an open paw to receive the end promptly plugged into the splitter along with hers before the cords are all jacked in to her phone. She nods as she puts her buds in her ears, and I do the same. I'm ready. Without knowing what's going to
happen next, it feels like light pouring out the threshold of a pitch black room.

Then she presses play.

It starts with the heart.

Through the steady pound of a drum machine like one. The ghostly melody of one synth slipping through before the quiet sudden strokes of keys from another.

And all at once, somehow, I already know this song's gonna connect.

*There’s Been a lot of talk of Love,*

Pattering through as rain.

*But that Don’t amount to Nothing.*

The way she taps a claw on my shoulder.

*You can Evoke the stars above,*

Playing alongside the drum machine.
But that doesn't make it something,

She's getting involved like she's about to sing and,

And the Only Way to Last,

And the chorus,

And the Only Way to Live it,

The longing in a hymnal coo,

Is to Hold on when get love,

The exposure in it on repeat,

And Let go when you give it.

That frailty rolling parallel to the spine around the stereophonic spin of a synth.

Give it.

And the sticks pound,

I didn't even feel it when it happened, when the drums exploded but it comes around, after digits over strings, it's piercing me, the guitar, the reverb of it, that echo of life, that grand adventure in daring pursuit, the guitar's cutting odyssial journey into me to thread through both shoulders and...
Oh god,

*It's a pretty melody.*

The thunder of it all echoes.

*It might help you through the Night Time,*

That smug smile I can him singing through,

*But it doesn't make it easy*

It's not condescending, just the same knowing one as hers,

*To leave a party at the Right Time.*

Like bombs in their shockwaves inside of me.

*If I'm frightened, if I'm High,*

Looking down without spite,

*It's my Weakness, Please forgive it.*

The coo and synths encircle me.

*At Least I Hold On When I Get love.*
The words haunt me.

*And I Let Go When I Give It,*

It's encircling,

*Give it,*

I'm rolling in place,

**GIVE IT!**

She's easing herself into this,

And I'm being pulled and thrown by drums billowing from up and over us to penetrate in waves of explosions,

An arching stretch of her back because she's gonna lean into it,

The key strokes patters against the whole of my back like a downpour,

"*What Do I Do When I'm Loneleh-h-e-y-e-y e-h~ h h~ ~ ?!*",

This ain't performing if there's no deceit,

"*What Do I Do~ ?!*",

She's looking up with eyes closed addressing

"*What Do I Do When I'm Loneleh-h-e-y-e-h h h~ ~ ?!*",

like she's sending it to anyone,

Anyone that'd realize
"What Do I Do ~?!"
with her, from the rock of hips to the shift of shoulders,
The coo from the roll of a head over shoulders rocking side to side toward the shift,

"What Do I Do When I'm Loneleh-ey-ehhh~ ?!",
The way strings cut past keys and carving through me like brushstrokes with a scalpel and,

Oh, God,
It's all hailing down:
The way she's looking down in the middle of a release of emotion like a corona, she's lighting up
over me like a star, like a bomb, like a nebula, like I could have an answer when I couldn't. I don't
have it in me. It's like, it's like that movie Meeting, I'm Doedie Foster, and I'm living that moment
when she saw some celestial event and I just am, I am tearing up, I'm choking, I just am.
Overwhelmed and hysterical and thinking that fate should have sent her a poet. Anyone it could've
been to find the words that'd do right by what she's given.

The World Won't Listen to This Song,
I wasn't ready, I couldn't be.

And The Radio Won't Play It,
It's all come crashing through and threaded in and out of me and it still...

But if You Like It, Sing Along!

This is her at her most exposed and it's devastated me.

Sing Cause You Don't Know How to Say It.

What's all rings 'round me like Saturn's has reduced me.

Take the weakest Thing in You,

And I don't know how she's done this,

And then Beat the Bastards with it.

But I think that's redefined living to me.

And always Hold On when you get love.
What it is and survival never was.

So you can let Go when you Give It.

I'll try to embrace it.

Take the Weakest Thing in You,

She's been opened up the whole time without a single lie,

And then Beat the bastards With it,

And it's only now gotten into me,

And Always Hold on When You Get LOVE,

When it's everything I can do to put paws on her thighs.

So You Can Let Go When You Give It,

When I'm trembling,

Give IT,

And it Burns,

Give IT!
IT GOD DAMN BURNS,

IT ERUPTS SO SUDDENLY I'M BEING HELD DOWN OR I'D BE FLOATING, I'D BE FLOATING LIKE OF CUPERTINO AND THE MELODY IN HER ASKING IS A PLEA SHE'S GOTTA DIG AGAIN FOR BECAUSE SHE'S BEGGING, SHE KNOWS IT'S THERE,

"What Do I Do When I'm Lonelehh-ey-ehhh~?!

THE ANSWER IS HERE,

"What Do I Do~?!" "H O O L D O N W H E N Y O U G E T L O O V E !"

She heard me giving her her all,

"What Do I Do When I'm Lonelehh-ey-ehhh~?!

Just to roll through with the sentiment,

"What Do I Do~?!"

Lighting her eyes up in the affirmation,

"H O L D O N W H E N Y O U G E T L O V E !"

I can barely keep up with I wouldn't realize,

"What Do I Do When I'm Lonele hh-ey-ehhh~?!

What I will when I still can't believe,

"What Do I Do~?!

"What Do I Do~?!
Trying to dive through the tears,

"Hold On When You Get Love..."

This laughter out of pain,

"What Do I Do~?"

The kind that's never been defined,

The song is flashing and the whole thing is lighting up,

She's feeling it on top of me and I'm feeling stars and I can't,

It's a sea of lightbulbs and the whole thing's flashing up...

It just came.

It's finally just come.

Through the priceless agony of feeling a moment in waves, in explosions, in the flourishing, bursting growth of a vine, the guitar's reverb, the ethereal likeness of a river in a synth flowing 'round me, the thundering billow of the drums... That beautiful chorus of mourning angels.

The love that just is, over everything, the one that's just there, what's colorfast and unburdened and has become. Where I'm not ugly and it doesn't matter what's best.

"Forget The Sun:"

There is something so ominous in the line

"Things Will Go On, though I Can See You From The Dark,"

but the song is so beautiful,

"With You Above Me."

It's so beautiful, so beautiful, beautiful, beautiful and now, Now, Now I get it and I get her So clearly.

"I Know, it's True, At least I Think I Do~!"
Bruce McGrowlen once said that To Do Something Well is So Worthwhile That to Die Trying to Do It Better Cannot Be Foolhardy. And that's what she's doing: She's taking the weakest thing in her, and making it her revenge on the world.

She's manifesting her own life in spite of all they done to stop her, and in this moment, I can tell it: She don't care if she flies too high like Icarus. She's trying to live because god damn them, she'll reach for one measured in Results not Numbers. If that's what it takes, if the world tries with all of itself to take years and achievement from us, through all that want and need she's fighting back with every tooth and every claw, beating the bastards with her very lust for life and at this very moment, with her over me, singing along to the lyrical moment,

"Take the Weakest Thing in you,"

Of clarity,

"And Then Beat The Bastards With It,"

For a boy she wants,

"And Always Hold On When You Get Love,"

More than any peace,

"So You Can Let Go When You Give It,"

Any quiet,

"Give It,"

I'll commit.

"Give It,"

"Give It,"

"Give It,"

"Give It,"

"Give It,"

"Give It."
I'll give commitment to everything she's got to pummel their arrogance to the ground.

As the song repeats, and repeats again, and over and over. Until her battery dies.

Until the dead of night, with the welcomed full moon over a clear night sky.

Because I get it now.

As crazy, as absurd, as so against everything the world taught me as it is, I understand now completely.

That the only way to survive and to live at once, is to hold on when I get love so I can let go when we both give it.
She did so good when she bought this old thing.

Back then I wasn't thinking she'd hear me out on getting one, but I can tell it from behind: Lola knows security with the steering wheel of a Vulguar. Even in the midst of all this big and small traffic. She's surefooted, she's still confident, even with me and Eva rioting in the backseat of this long wheelbase sedan. If she's playing chauffeur to two folks with warrants, it's somehow nothing. I just got through telling Eva about the alarm and the racket coming out us both makes no difference. A little bit nervous but not afraid, while Eva goes like "You want me to believe that Lucifer just assumed you'd use the hammer? That doesn't make sense. It's a huge plot hole!"

The Bull never told me his name, she decided on the archangel's own to pin on him and I can nevermind how accurate it is. "Eva, he probably knows what my mother's father's aunt's maiden name and favorite color was!" and the night before the last one is so behind me, I can't even admit with a straight face that "The guy is straight from Donkey's Inferno!"

And maybe "You're playing him up too much to be believable!", but that's the thing, is "I wasn't saying that he was believable! I was saying that's what made him so scary!"

And I'm laughing with her over what happened a little less than forty eight hours ago. It's that behind me now, I can't even talk about it with a straight face and it bears repeating. What's like a pleasantly distant memory of some terrible thing I can now laugh about. And I am. I'm laughing along with her, to follow her example of living in the closure of Here and Now. I feel a warmth. I feel this thing and I think they call peace. As I look to that Ferret to my left, while starting to think about the future. The mutual kind, with a girl that... "Seriously?" I gotta ask? Looking to Eva with a cocked brow and smirk that catches her attention? "My Pheromone Romance?"

I can feel that blush all the way from the other side of the car.

"I only have Black Migration on my phone!"

Yeah she can say that. But the protest falls on deaf, amused ears cocked back in mischief.

"Oh, and that's so much better than me having Passion Kit on my phone!"

She knows I'm only kidding on the square as Canal Franken put it, and she's playing along with an "Hey!" that she shoots off in a mock huff to remind me "It's still better than Lincoln Bark!"

Oh. Of course she would use the gold standard in her defense, "Oh isn't everything? An even they made a decent song, eventually!"

"They did NOT!"
"They DID! What I've Dug? First Lincoln Bark song I could enjoy after years of wanting the lead singer to stop screaming!"

We both grew up at a low point in pop culture, "ooo, I hated Gnu Metal!" she's seething with from the very thought of that genre. "I couldn't stand the scat, either! Oh god, I thought that stuff was gonna kill me in high school and everyone around me loved the slop!" I'm stewing in my catharsis left over from public education, and she's not even put off by it. I can feel the pent up frustration escaping her slender little body in relief. One more pet peeve I've acknowledged and shared a mutual grief with. Something she can slink into the afterglow of. As she looks to me with earnest eyes and asks me this: "Owen, where were you when I needed you?"

Probably in trouble... "Probably staying out of trouble and dreaming about moving to Zootopia."

And how naive I was. Soliciting a snort out of her, and she's about to say something before Lola chimes in with "But more than likely doing his Grouch impersonation in a trashcan."

The mental image sends Eva reeling into a fetal position and hysterical laughter.

I'm fuming, I'm livid and ashamed and resoundingly bootyflossed with the Ferret beside me falling without getting up. "You Freaking Judas, you told her, didn't you!?" The Vulpes Lagopus can't hold back her gleeful smug giggle any more and goes full diabolical on me in her cackling with paws in the air. Turning my Pee-Wee Vermin around on me with "It was me it was all me I did it all!" and Eva can't breathe, she's fallen down onto her side on the driver's end rear seat. I'm wallowing in a bottomless pit of eternal shame and death ain't coming quick enough. My ears splayed limply as the head they're attached to sinks into a shroud of upturned paw pads to shield my face from this cruel, cruel world full of terrible awful mammals.

"oooooOOO Evaaaa look at that shame LOOK AT IT!", Eva's looking, I feel it, then I hear an adoring squeal and cracks off to "He's so Cuuuuuute when he's ashamed AAAAAAA!"

The laughs at my expense continue, I sink further in the shame pit with no release in sight. Until the backseat shifts with her weight as she gets back up to seat herself in the middle right beside me. Pressure on my cheek, the sound of played up puckered up lips in a pecking smooch to soothe me. My ears stand up in alertness as my paws slide away from my ears to confirm her kiss. "...You're forgiven for calling me Dookie... Grouch."

I can't risk getting made, so I still had to change my attire up with a sportscoat, tank top and linen pants. The colors conflict and don't mix well with my fur at all, but the fact I look terrible, even if in
slimmer fitting threads, that was enough to put me at ease about going out: The cops are still gonna look for a well-dressed fox, and I don't fit the descript to anyone but the colorblind. Yet in a way, it still works with what Eva picked out for herself. "We're gonna look terrible at this show." I pipe up. "Yeah... But at least we're not going in candyrave pants." My nausea is only halfway feigned at the thought. Why was that even a thing? "Who's even playing besides Bleat Radio?" I have to ask, since Eva sprung this on me out of the blue.

"The opening act is some guy called Toby Ant-" "TOBY FREAKAN ANTELIER!" booms out of me and Lola in an instant.

Eva's so confused and it's cute, but Lola's gotta explain and ruin it, "We know that guy! Toby's friends with OC and I met him through Buffy-" "Get out!" is her reply as she throws her hands up in disbelief. "The Vixen ain't lying, though! That stupid azz prey boy is like, the social networking clearinghouse. Idiot knows everybody... Even if they don't want him to." with a brief pause as I regard my disgust with the American Bison. And Lola laughs a bit if she's one of those everybodys while I catch Eva out the corner of my eye thinking about something that's not the fact I know a local up-and-coming. Deep enough in thought about it that I gotta ask "Oh, oh you're not doing that thing you're always on my case about are you?"

"No!" accompanies the playful backhand to my side so "AH! Okay, alright... Then what are you doin'?"

I can't hold back the smirk as she does that thing she doesn't like me doing "...Ok, the party, remember when Buffy's landlord stormed in?"

"...Well I technically wasn't in the room." We all gotta laugh at the wisecrack fact, but she has to push it away to get to her point.

"Ok, well... You know how she yelled his name out over and over?"

I can't.

I can't hold back the snickering and neither can Lola. My Ferret girl can only start to mouth out What before she stops and just waits. Oh. Oh thank god there's no prey folk in the Vulg to get scared at my pointy exposed chops, thank god I can let em all shine, cause there ain't no holding back what I'm about to reveal. "E-Eva, ooohooohohhhh, Oh girl, you think miss eviction notice... Ahaahaaa... You think she was saying his name over and over?" That bug eyed look over her masked face is so good. She's not aware of what I'm saying, noone possibly could, made obvious by the question that preceded me and Lola starting to lose it even further. Lola's been prompted to pull over for this, because it was just gonna be that good.

"What? Wh- Why are we pulling ov- What is happening?!!" That nervous, legitimately concerned smile on her face, "What do you mean she didn't say his name over and over!?" and she's starting to lose it because we already have:
"BECAUSE HIS NAME IS BUFFALO BUFFALO BUFFALO BUFFALO BUFFALO
BUFFALO BUFFALO BUFFALO!"

I've doubled over, Lola's banging on the steering wheel and Eva's hysterics got the perfect blend of
disbelief with reality sinking in as she yells out "I KNEW I DIDN'T WANNA KNOW HIS
NAME!"

What's transpiring in the parked Vulguar must look like, to the pedestrian and vehicular traffic, three
completely stoned out of their mind predators that just heard the lamest you-wouldn't-get-it-without-
being-high joke of all time. And I can't leave good enough alone, but I struggle to get it out between
my bouts: "OH, OH IT GETS BETTER, IT GETS SO MUCH BETTER BECAUSE THE
SECOND, FOURTH, FIFTH, SIXTH AND EIGHTH BUFFALOS AREN'T SUPPOSED TO
BE CAPITALIZED AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA" an the entire car is one big long string of As
and eventual Hs followed up by more As. We're going deaf, we're losing it so hard. Everyone on
foot and in a car must be getting terrified and no, No, for once, I don't even care if someone calls the
cops about it.

I can't even begin to care. I'm having fun in public and I cannot think at all about the consequences.

Eva can't deal, she's on her back in the rear passenger footwell with her head propped by the
driveshaft tunnel as she starts to recover, but still reels, as she opens up the most beautiful pair of eyes
I've ever laid my own on.

"oohhhhh I'm going to helllll!" She shrieks out as she scrunches her upside down face up and grabs
at her pained sides. And I'd tell her that she isn't because I'd come down to save her, but I can't. I
can't even get it out that she needs to breathe, and the scenario in my head of yelling out to Lola that
we're losing Eva just broke something. I'm laughing so hard and then some, that I can barely register
that Lola's actually crying from the catharsis. Nobody can blame any of us for hating Buffy's guts,
but especially not Lola, for all the times the idiot used her like a trump card to win his arguments
instead of letting her win her own. But I'm not gonna let anything negative touch me, for the second
time in my life, as I recover from the most juvenile laugh I ever had over someone's name.

"woooo... Lola, freakan... Oh Geez Louise we gotta get back on the road..."

She acknowledges with a sniffle and a nod of her cheeky head as she grabs at the J-gate shifter and
flicks the left turn signal. Eva needs help getting up and I give it, but I almost can't: That visual of her
looking up at me again, now able to hold her gaze a little longer, is so beautiful, I want to hold onto it
forever. She's Zootopia like a former me thought this city was. If only I had taken my camera with
me, instead of leaving it at the YMRA. I wouldn't have to say "...The photo that got away from me."
to myself as I reach and she extends her arms out. A soft pull sends her slinky body over the driveshaft tunnel and back onto the seat. She's amused with herself and her boy, though she still gotta give the quizzical look.

"If I took a picture of you just now, you would've made Territorial Geographic."

"Get out!"

"It's true! And for want of a camera, the Photo of the Year was lost!"

She has to softly elbow my side for my theatrics, but I've got no remorse for telling the truth.

"Lola, you could have told me this girl was punchy!"

The feigned look of betrayal is so perfect on Eva's face as she protests with an "I am not!" before settling back down, gets a real smug smirk on her face, and elbows me again.

"AAAAH!"

Harder.

"Alright!", Lola can't take this anymore and yells out the parental advisory "If you kids don't settle down back there I'm turning this car around and we're going nowhere!"

And the only thing Lola gets is more snickering from the two of us in her backseat.

"Also Eva elbow him one more time for me."

"What?"

"Got it."

"AAAAHHHH!"

They're both laughing at my expense as I jokingly clutch at my side, "You both're so dang cruel!" gets Lola to remind me "And you love us for it." with a cheeky smile on her face. I can't argue about that, nor how much I kind of deserve to have my own kind of bonding returned back to sender. Some of the best bonds always have a challenge to them to keep them interesting anyway, but still... Laying back into the seat and settle down into my Ferret girl getting touchy feely and clutchy, I gotta address if "You ever listen to Hot Hot Bleet?" and I need a "Yeah?" back because it bears reminding for a later date, "You owe me an I.O.U.~!"

She's squeezes me in reply with a bubbly scrunched up face. I can see our driver congratulating herself in her matchmaking, and with a little bit of giddy anticipation, too. It's obvious who she's thinking of.
"...Telly?"

"Yep!"

"You sure he's gonna be able to handle it? Bright lights, loud noises, tons of mammals losing their mind?"

"He's been through worse... Like Buffy's party." and I love it when she lets her grin loose. Like right now, "After what you and Eva did?" as she darts her eyes to the rearview mirror and at my reflection.

"He can handle this~."

Eva's too busy cuddling to protest against her role that night, so the conversation's all me and her.

Meaning Lola can get the obvious back off her chest, when "The real question is... Why are you going out, tonight? You ought to be hiding, Owen."

I don't skip a beat, "It's out of character for me, ain't it?" and neither does Lola.

"The All Points Bulletin or you being more insane than usual to stick your neck out like this?"

...I have to pause for a moment. Only to get the wording right.

"Well what's changed for me since yesterday and who convinced you to give us a ride?"

"... Eva."

The Ferret releases her grip to raise a paw, she's "Guilty on both charges." "But, Eva..." she has to pause. But Eva gets her foot in the door. "Lola, How long have I been dodging the popo?"

"Long."

"Months. Maybe a year at this point and Lola, I know the risks... I don't wanna just survive and I don't want you or Owen to either-" "Owen,"

Lola's not bothering to mask her frustration, "Tell me this is crazy."

"It is."

I'm being pretty asking for it.

"Thank you!"

But that's the thing...

"Would playing it safe really make a difference? If I was law abiding, you think I wouldn't have to
worry about being beaten or tased or convicted anyway?"

...The one I didn't even wanna bring up. It's on the news all the time, even if it doesn't make ZNN, because it still makes the news sites. Getting chased, getting beaten halfway to death, getting tased almost the rest of the way to death, getting put in a coma for resisting arrest when you weren't, and half of the time by undercover plainclothes cops as though it doesn't matter. You were just expected to comply with any prey guy's orders because they might be a cop. Getting pulled over, if not flat out ran over, and being beaten, tased, maybe even killed for something as stupid as speeding over 5 or loitering...

...

...I didn't want all this in my head. I didn't want to put it in Lola's, but I see it in her eyes from the rearview mirror. I can feel it in Eva's grip, as it loosens and she retreats back into her own experiences, the same as Lola, the same as me. I have to take a deep breath. I messed up going there. Eva taught me better last night than to not know better.

So I'll try to power through it.

"...I loved my Vulpon made me take my mind off of that. I mean, I still got it but when I wasn't on it, I was just standing in a void. And yeah, riding is great, but... I don't wanna be a glass half full. I needed something more this whole time. Live just as much off it as I do on it and I don't want to just exist anymore in between the two. I don't want to just breathe or make some ends only meet... I wanna live now, Lola."

A long pause. Three minds lost in thought. Scenarios playing through our heads. Possibilities wholesome and ugly. Fragile dreams, sound reality. We could last forever. It could end in a wail of sirens and orange garbs. But at the end of it all, there is a certainty, in my mind's eye: I am going to live more than I ever had before. It's something I see in Lola's face, as she stares forward, watching the distance between us and the car ahead of us. Her words are so quiet, as she spills forth "Eva..." to get the attention she's got now: "...Take care of my friend."

The rest of the drive's silent. Reflective with me and Eva watching the city around us as it passes by. The sights I'm usually too busy trying not to crash through on my bike, I'm taking in for the first time in a long while. Looking right, we're on one of the bridges heading toward Palm district, Sahara Square. I get the feeling I've never seen the sun's reflection over the water this vividly. Helps to have my grip on Eva's loosen up. She's there. I don't need to be insecure about it.

Slot Street's a pain to get to by car while following traffic laws. By the time Lola found parking, the sun was nearly down. The last glimmer of it was seen off the leaves on the Palm Tree before the spotlights came on. Even on Mondays, they signal for the start of club crawling for the night life at
Sahara Square. I was reminded of a song on her phone before Eva even started singing it to herself, the three of us walking down the sidewalk. Without the fear it went along, that The Night Starts Here, The Night Starts Here, Forget Your Name, Forget Your Fear.

Then I'm there with her with Lola in front, and me pausing for a moment to read the sign. SheePGB 2. AnFug Tierra del Fuego.

"What's up, Owen?"

"I don't know, Eva. Kinda get a feeling this place shouldn't be here."

Lola has to snicker a bit to herself, "Well of course it shouldn't. You read the slogan?"

"Yeah... But-" A quick grab of my hand, and Eva pulls me past Lola. Through a gap in the traffic. It's a Monday so the line is small. The bouncer's working quick, leaving a Hippo, a few Wolves, some Sheep with Goats and a Eurasian Boar in front of us. We're through it and past the threshold quick, but he still hesitated for a moment to let Lola in.

Nevermind though. The place is crammed in spite of it being the start of the week.

Those Wolves are some of every kind, knowing every one of their own and a few across species, but they act as one all the same. A pack to stake a shared claim at the bar, without it being like they forgot how scary that's taken every time. Just that they don't care about how a Sitka buck & Key doe couple take it. The sheep had flocked over to the side and joined together with other herders instead. Eyeing the scene at the bar from a safer distance, as herd mammals do. And nothing about all that bothers me for once. With a Rhino to block my vision and remind how I ought to be taking in better sights. Regardless of enough mammals being here that my four feet and two inches can barely see the decor.

Some kinda late 70s aire of anti-jetset grit mashed with the avant garde of futuristic haut couture to have my nostalgia by.

It wasn't intentional, just a modern take on the former club's established feel probably. Though the place feels like an 80s anime, anyway. Like the one about the biker gang and the psychic children that I saw too young, and if my father blamed it on me wanting to get a bike myself... Well, he should've minded his own stories. Besides, Eva has this giddy hope of approval to her face I'll only pretend not to notice, now. Let her hang for a moment on whether this was worth going out in the open, before I give her just the cocked brow and smirk. "...You did good, Dookie." She rolls her to scoff, then gets cut off by an awkward, stuttering calling out of Lola's name. And that gets the Arctic Fox jumping out her white fur with glee and a squealing out "TELLY! AAAAA!"
What happens next, I can't help myself.

She's wagging her brush and rushing her Camel with nothing or anyone to jump off of. She's jumping up and onto his knee to cling for dear life and hug the hell out of the highest part of him she can reach. And I bust out laughing. Her brush is beating the heck out of a disgruntled Pig's rear, Telly's blush is threatening to singe all the hair off his face, the Boar is leering at her, then darting up at Telly, he's so embarrassed and it's too perfect of a scene. I can't not laugh over how beautiful they go together. Even as the Pig mutters some toxic thing, I'm having too good of a time to let my ears hear it. Same as Lola's got it too good to let her own hear it, wrapped around and clinging tight to the start of something so pure and wholesome that she won't let the world take it from her.

I'm seeing her future with Telly even if he can't. That it's gonna last, it's gonna be good, they're gonna settle down and forty years from now, it's only gonna get better and stronger for them. It's so good a scene of love so against the world around it, it's only after Eva's sermon last night I can be this sensitive about the right thing. It's blinded crashed into me. I can't even feel the tears on my face until they're halfway down and spilling over. Eva's clutching me as I crack up, wrapping her arms around my torso, I've caught her as much off guard as Lola an Telly did. "Ahaha I'm good, I'm good Eva, it's alright. I'm fine, I'm fine." in the midst of joyous crying. But too much is happening all at once for her.

"Are you really?"

"Eva you know what I'm doing right now?" spits fast out of me because I'm losing it.

I'm living, right now.

I'm breathing, laughing, crying, so what if I'm overreacting because "I'm watching a beautiful little moment unfold and oh, god, God DAMN I'm alive."

She's a little scared, and that's alright. It really is to be scared sometimes, Lola's made a scene and I made it worse but there's a time and place to put ugly little things like that aside. With a brush of the side of her face, I'll cast 'em off with the high tide of my palm. Leaning down, surrounded by mammals that could make me, call the cops at any moment, I'm leaning in with my paw resting on my A-Team's shoulder and I kiss her. To part her lips with mine and hold it, surrounded by strangers in public, embracing life and myself inside of her to recognize our combined potential to cast a world aside that will not accept us and replace it all from the very foundation.

We're painting a new world and it's just us. No hate, no confusion, no anger, only something straight out of a Bob Possum nature painting full of happy mistakes and boundless potential for beauty.

Everyone's looking at us in a distant universe. Everyone's wishing they had a Hubble telescope to
preserve this moment forever, but they can't have it. It's mine, it's hers, it's ours and noone else's. Maybe, just maybe if they stick their heads out from under their tails someday, maybe then they can learn something from it. I hope they do. That just maybe they can hold onto this for now until it's time for them to let it fly free into their own mixed up god forsaken world.

But all good things, right? All good things.

We go back into their world, and god, I don't wanna. Everything fades back in. The noise of it. The song on the PA, the bodies pressing against us from time to time, it all comes back and there's only enough bittersweet afterglow to make it tolerable. There's a dampness over her face to match my own. We're both coming back from the frailest I've allowed myself to be, and there's a shock in her I need to placate. "You did this to me, Eva... Thank you." She glows. Around an affirmation of endeavor casting peace over her. And the kinda smile I've always wanted to see on Lana Doe Ray that I'll never need to, now. It wouldn't be the same. If she'll ever smile in a music video, it wouldn't be like this beautiful little moment.

The one interrupted by the cutting off of the playlist over the PA and Mic feedback.

I can't see the stage with all these mammals between us and it, but the commotion is calling forward and I'll oblige.

Wrapping my grip gingerly into hers, I'm reminded of how good it is to be as small and nimble as I am, being able to slip through the crowd with relative ease. I'll lead her for now, through the thick and thin of this crowd I'm getting to the bottom of who's on stage. In the abrupt clearing, I pause. He's wearing his own work. Deep forest green jeans, ochre yellow stitching. An embroidered laundry shirt he'd never wear off stage. Just enough nervousness in his posture as he sits there on a stool to make it characteristically him. Toby Antelier. Flanked in the spotlight by a couple fellow cervines on guitars with a drummer behind them. It's funny, but I've never made it to one of his shows before.

These guys aren't his bandmembers, but I've seen him practice with one of these guys before. He'll do this from time to time if it's short notice or one of his regulars couldn't make it. Guitar in his lap, he starts to lean into the mic with a smile, his eyes panning across the crowd. And then stopping. On the sight of a Fox he's always invited to his shows but would never make it. The one that's made the news and ought to be anywhere but here and with a Ferret girl by his side. Whatever he was gonna open up saying, I'm here an I'm changed but he still recognizes me, genuine smile, ladyfriend and all. I've caught him completely off guard. He's got to pull himself back and straighten up as he soaks the fact in that I've finally come.

Picked a hell of a time, didn't he, that's what he's thinking up until "HEY BUDDY YOU GONNA PLAY SOMETHING UP THERE ARE YOU JUST GONNA SIT AND LO-" "I'm playing when I'm ready!"
Anger is something I have never seen before from Toby. I actually jump back a little bit.
And he ought to be. More about me than a heckler.

But that's the thing, is I'm still here, and that's a reminder of an agreement he said he'd oblige.

Another lean into the mic, "I've gotta get with my friends, hang on, everyone." leaves everyone onstage and offstage confused. Toby gets up and has his bandmate stand-ins huddle. The commotion mutes him, now getting angry looks by his deer friends up there. I can make a conversion out by their body language going something like this: Can you do it? Yes. Then you're going to. On such short notice? They're not meaning to, but their movements and gestures are giving away what I thought was going on. "...Eva? This is gonna be good."

Meeting adjourned, Toby's decision is final and the guys on stage are all working themselves back up into character, my whitetailed friend working himself back into the happy-go-carefree-lucky character he wants to project with a confident smile, eyes half-lidded.

"So, I would normally open with an original by my band. But I made a promise to a good friend of mine awhile back, that if he ever made it to a show of mine, that I would play one cover for him."

"IT BETTER NOT BE FREEBOAR!" "Hey Security, that Donkey in the back says something again boot him!"

The tremble in his hoof pointing to the far end of the crowd accentuating the livid boom of his voice, I can't get over how alien it feels to see him with a spine.

But on the second viewing? I've kinda warmed up to it.

"So we're gonna do a cover, follow up after that with what we were gonna play first second here we go one two three four." The guitars riff, the drums follow, then the tambourines.

My body starts giving way, Eva recognizes the song in disbelief, trying to ask me Is He Really Playing Let Her Dance for You?

My smug curtsy and courting of her paw with my own had cut her off to tell her Yes, This is Really Happening.

"WELLLL THERE'n SHE GOES WITH HER BRAND NEW LOVE AFFAIR, DANCING
WITH HIM LIKE SHE DON'T EVEN CARE! WELL LET HER DANCE WIT HIM, LET HER DANCE ALL NIGHT LONG!

In a chaotic flurry of movement captured in sound does my own body flow in unison. A jangling bop of my head, a tap of my foot, I find myself started to duck and slip into a flourishing twirl with a snap of my fingers, Eva breaking out into a barely controlled dook.

"LET HER DANCE, LET HER DANCE, LET HER DANCE, DANCE, DANCE LET HER DANCE, LET HER DANCE, LET HER DANCE DANCE DANCE!"

I'm diving and springing forward like a drunkard bottle rocket, she breaks into a full blown twirl,

And to hell if someone calls the cops.

I'm flying into sideways somersaults and crouched landings with a spin and a spinning backflip jump and for this brief respite, there is no Me. No awkward compromises and half victories in life for either of us. It's just this dumb, silly, catchy, brilliant feeling 4th dimensional being of a song possessing 3rd dimensional entities and manifesting itself in a chaotic explosion of pure, wild animal craziness. As I fly through the air with my eyes closed and land every jump on every surface. I get this feeling that I must be a cross between a ricocheting bullet and a kangaroo and a runaway train all over again. I'm not bumping into anyone, and neither is she. Against all odds, as everyone all around us takes our cue and loses it.

"WELL WHO'D KNOWN THAT JUST YESTERDAY-AY-HAY, SHE DANCED WITH ME THE VERY SAME WAY WELL LET HER DANCE WIT HIM, LET HER DANCE ALL NIGHT LONG!"

I'm flying in the dark with my eyes closed in mid-air and upside down while casually aware of my partner's telemetry on my mental radar as six o'clock high at lower altitude. Performing airshow maneuvers for the ground targets below us. A hop, a skip, a jump over a lazy dingo, a touchdown landing and lift off, arms extended out, legs tucked in, springboarding back down for my feet to slide over the floor, towards the bar threatening to smash a my face in but my feet have other plans. Like climbing up the hardwood side of it to backflip off of a vertical surface.

"WELLL LET HER DANCE WITH HIM ALL NIGHT LONG, LET HER DANCE TO OUR FAVORITE SONG, wWELLL LET HER DANCE WITH HIM, LET HER DANCE ALL NIGHT LONG!"

I'm ducking into a roll, into a cartwheel, into a somersault, Eva's plotted course on the dance floor
running parallel to my own, immutable, unmistakable smile through this forest of tall mammal legs. We've lost our minds. And I can't even see Toby, but I can feel, truly feel, how much of a wouldn't-you-know beaming smug grin is on his face from the sound of his voice. From the sound of everyone's voice on stage. They're having too good of a time, nearly on the verge of wisecracking with each other in the middle of a performance.

It's so infectious that as I catch my breath during the song's bridge, I can't help but think everyone's caught it. Everyone has broken out into dance around us, noone is paying us any mind because they've lost it nearly as hard as we have.

That's how I'll know that right now's become the safest I've ever felt.

It's impossible, it's absurd, this is just the opening act's first song. This can't be happening but it is, around me, around her, starry eyed and bewildered before looking back to me, making it known with a lifted paw what she wants.

A waltzing, jangling tango. To throw each other into the air in between the head bopping and rehashed mock twisting.

I go to grab her paw again, we're gonna do this together now. We're gonna hold on without letting go.

She's so caught up in our aura that she doesn't even see it and neither do I.

A navy blue sleeved wrist attached to a white wool cloven hoof.

A vicegrip latches on my own and pulls me over with the force of a car crash.

I can feel my eyes widen in an instant as my smile fades and churns into wide mouth'd horror.

I have been ensnared.
Her face twisting in slow motion on the corner of my line of sight fixed to an immobile arm twisting to wrap around a Sheep Cop's own.

"OWEN CONRAD FUCHS, YOU ARE UNDER ARREST, ANYTHING YOU SAY CAN AND WILL BE USED AGAINST YOU IN THE COURT OF LAW!"

My free arm swings around, my left hand clutching around the sheep's righthand wrist. Everyone starts to clear around the scene. They're still playing on stage, Toby is oblivious.

I cry out, I'm screaming, my tail is tucked between my legs, it's happening.

They've caught me and the dream is over.

The nightmare will begin, now.

Eva is lunging forward, I'm trying to pull away, struggling and helpless.

His grip is too strong, I can't pry him off of me.

Her voice is cracking in it's shrill calling out of my name while I scream No over and over and louder and louder and longer and longer.

"STOP RESISTING, YOU ARE RESISTING ARREST, PAUL, GET THE MUZZLE OFF MY BELT, HE'S GONNA BITE!"

"TAKE ME, I'M EVA BELETTE, I'M WANTED FOR CONSPIRACY CHARGES!"

"EVA, NO DON'T YOU DARE!"

"TAKE ME IN INSTEAD, YOU WANT ME, YOU-" a haymaker. A blow to her face by the other sheep cop.

"STAY OUT OF THIS YOU WEASEL BITCH OR WE'LL CHARGE YOU WITH INTERFERING!"

My blood boils, I charge forward, he yanks me back, I spin into the air.
"YOU'RE MAKING THIS WORSE, BOY!"

I'm clutching around his hoof latched onto me, I'm on the ground, I've thrown him off balance, I'm doing everything to pry him off of me, he's stumbling forward and leaning over me, he's going to wrestle me, I roll to my left, on the ground, away from him and pulling him down first.

"UNIT, AAH, UNIT EIGHT FOUR SEVEN TWO, BACK UP AT SHEEPGB NOW!"

"LANCE, DON'T LET THAT FOX GO!"

"I'M TRYING!"

"YOU BASTARDS PUNCHED HER!"

"HE'S GONNA BITE, GET THE MUZZLE!"

Before the Cop latched on to me can recover I spin to the right and unwind a spring of vulpine muscles to go airborne.

I land on my feet, I have traction and he don't.

The claws in my feet dig in through the hardwood section of floor, the other cop is charging forward, his horns are down, he's going to headbutt me an it's gonna hurt.

On pure adrenaline and dragging the cop grabbing me forward, I shift direction and in the blink of an eye jumped with a sideways somersault to my right with both of them behind me.

The arm of the cop on the ground trips the one charging me before he can recover from his sprint to send him flying in the air and land like a ball of yarn tumbling.

The force of a coiled thigh against an elbow jolted the grip around my right arm loose and it slides as the sleeve of my jacket tears and in freefall, I'm spinning, landing onto my right shoulder and face, blacking out and feeling myself crawling back onto my feet and running by the time I regain a blurry sense of vision.

"EVA WHERE ARE YOU?!"
I can't see her, I can't find her, I'm just hoping like hell she hears me over a still oblivious Toby and the panic in the crowd. The sleeve of my sports coat has been torn off, I think the cop's still got it in his clutches, and for some reason, I'm peeling the rest of the jacket off of my shoulders and getting rid of it instead of running, leaving me with a pink tank top.

"WELL I'LL FIND ME A NEW LOVE AND THEN SHE'LL SEE-EE-HEE,"

I've hit my head hard enough to black out, and I'm concerning myself this much with a jacket?

"SOMEONE ELSE WILL BE DANCIN' WIT ME,"

I'm looking for her, everyone's looking at me. I'm cornered and all I can do is yell "EVA!"

"WELL LET HER DANCE WITH HIM, LET HER DANCE ALL NIGHT LONG!"

Dead ahead, the crowd splits wide and panics, laser sight activated.

"I'M FUCKING YOU UP YOU BITCH BOY FOX!"

Taser drawn, I'm in it's sights.

I don't have time, I can't dodge.

The front pops open, the dust of a mild explosive charge.

The glistening of needles and the wires between them in the battery pack.

They've punctured into my neck and over my trachea.

This is it, in slow motion, as he starts to pull the trigger down right as a green beer bottle flies in from the left and erupts into shards of glass against the ram cop's horns and over his face.
The grip loosens, the taser slipping out of his hooves and twirling backwards by the trigger guard as it falls.

He screams out and I grab the wires and pull the needles out of my throat.

I look to my left and it's her, standing on the top of the bar.

"COME GET ME CREEPS!"

"EVA WHAT ARE YOU DOING!"

"BOY FUCKING GO!"

"YOU'RE NOT DOING THIS!"

"YOU'RE MINE, YOU BITCH!"

"OWEN, RUN!"

Mister Taser's buddy is going in for her as she jumps off the bar and into the back.

I start to run for her.

Until the window of opportunity slams its head into the wall right in front of me.

And like a coward, a total coward, between a blocked path, falling backwards the ground floor shakes from the ram's impact,

I have to accept in a split second the fact that we were too optimistic and we're too selfishly selfless.

Neither of us would've let the other to go in either our places.

And that if all of this didn't just happen, we would both already be in handcuffs and muzzles.

Two cops, separating and chasing their next victim down alone, is the best we could have hoped for.

To be able to observe, decide then react in one motion is just another sorry perk that comes with the
benefit of being defined dangerous, unpredictable, untrustworthy, and a red-furred sub-mammal boogeyman under their bed.

And now? Now is the time to run.

As the ram cop snaps back from missing me and banging his head into the wall to show a dazed bloodlust in his eyes that says he's going to get me, all by himself, if it's the last thing he does. I turn around, I turn around and I run. Past the leering eyes and slackjawed mouths. Past the cellphones out taking videos and the stage where a newly disappointed friend's heart sinks. Unable to believe what I done, now. The taserless ram is gaining on me as I make for the front door and when he gets me, he is going to beat me until I am dead. But first he must catch me, and I'll be damned as I sprint through the threshold and into the sidewalk, towards the open passenger door of a sedan.

I do not skip a beat and stop to ask why, because it is my only hope. He's nearly on top, the millisecond I jump and fly inside. The ram slams the door shut so violently with a headbutt meant for me it rocks the car back to the tune of a safetyglass window cracking. The recoil of impact guides me in on an empty driver's seat, the sheep cop is panicking, trying to open the door he's just bashed into but the thing is jammed shut.

And it's about now, as I'm wondering why he's panicking, then start to notice the laptop, the police scanner, the cage in the back and the driverside spotlight.

That I realize just why the car I climbed into was left running with a door open.

"GET OUT OF MY CAR!"

I don't and do not and can not hesitate on the opportunity and it's execution's in the blink of an eye.

Lock the drivers door, put the shifter into drive, spin the steering wheel to the left and slam the gas pedal.

The wheels cry out in pain, The cop bangs a fist to the glass in a last ditch effort too late. I'm already burning out into thank god light traffic without an idea what the buttons in the center console and dashboard do.

I won't need to press any of them. I remember Slot Street's topography and features. The plan is being formed. They will expect me to turn back around at the dead end. An alley coming up on the lefthand side leads south and directly into the dunes. They will set up a roadblock at the other end of Slot, it will take time for them to establish it up and then end it. I will drive this cop car down that alley to the left and drive up and down the dunes with the lights off for as long as I can and hope that they won't start GPS tracking municipal property for the five to ten minutes it'll maybe take for me to ditch it in the Palm District, where they will think I went westbound and I will keep heading south to whatever subway station is down there and leads to the industrial sector of Savannah Central.
I gotta couple caches there. I can hide in one of them like I shoulda been, I need to change
clothes, could probably try to get to my tent under the Bunnyburrow line but that'd take too long.

Yet everything will be fine.

And everything will be alright.

I will make it through tonight and in an hour or two from now I'll start calling Eva over and over and
over and send texts and leave voicemails and I'll be begging for her to pick a phone up that'll be in an
evidence box while two cops beat her until she doesn't have enough of a mind left to be able to know
what they're doing to her when they start getting bored.

The tears will begin, now.
The right fist will curl into a ball and will now proceed to bash itself into the steering wheel, the images in my head of the battered love of my life will send the most blood curdling howl of agony I have ever let out my mouth and I ask myself why I allowed her to play hero and split the cops up.

I'll regret ever crashing Buffy's party and finding my one true love and allowing her to suffer for me.

I will curse her for having gotten involved and not running off while they were focused on me.

I won't ever forgive myself, turning into that alley, for having not stayed terrestrial and jumping as high I did for grapes I never deserved.
Run

Chapter Notes

I'm not entirely confident about the end of this chapter... I should come back to at a later date.

I am so exhausted and still they're coming.

These sidewalks are empty and there's no more crowds to hide behind. It's an industrial ghetto so there's no unlocked storefront to duck into. There is no traffic to slow the cop SUV down, and no set of wheels to help me get away on. My lungs are cauldrons of cherry red hot iron in my chest. This may as well be an open battlefield but what it really is is a hunting ground. Without cover. Without anywhere to run to. My everything feels like the shards of glass are embedded into them but nothing's giving way to the pain's sway. I can only run forward. One is on foot, the other is behind the wheel and under the discos. Two Rhinos. I have speed. They have stamina, they have wheels. I have fear. They have will and they have gas.

They got the relentless means to chase until they get me and I am losing the adrenaline to keep running.

They are gaining resolve and inches on me. It's been all night. It'll be the rest of it if they get me and they're getting closer still. I feel it in the quaking of the cement behind me, the footsteps of the Rhino running behind me like the wardrums of some army. I am panting so hard. I cannot keep it up but I am. My body's pegged past redline and on the verge of grenading but it's run away from me and I am not in control, anymore. The throttle's stuck wide open. I almost want to stop and I can't stop, I can't stop, there is certainty, there is conviction, there is something else here in my body and it's not letting me stop. I ran and I've been running and the running's gone for so long I can't tell when it began and I can't see where it'll end.

The one in the SUV could jump the curb at any moment, and pin me, run me over and crush me and kill me. They will tase me until the EMTs come, if they come, if I'm still alive after all I've done to get away if they don't kill me with the patrol car.

I am on the verge of falling apart and yet so far from letting them get me.

They are yelling at me, even the Cop in the SUV and on the loudspeaker.
Some distant radio chatter I can barely hear getting repeated on the loudspeaker, it's telling them to not use the squad vehicle to crush me.

There is only one reason the dispatch would tell them not to: Because the driver told him he was going to do it.

The sound of creaking suspension, the telltale thud of a tire climbing up a curb.

I feel the glow of the headlights on me until I don't.

Until I'm under it and then the beam's over me.

I feel the reverberation of that engine's rev,

Through the fan blades behind a radiator.

The tire is nearly,

It's nearly on my

Tail and I just,

I just felt the

Bumper

Touch

My

Ears

. Then I feel myself jumping as if someone else jumped for me with my own legs.
I am no longer aware of where I am, my eyes don't register anything but the closeness of the walls around me and the crunch of metal bullbars against brick walls closing in like the wardrums were closing in.

I think I dodged just in time for them to think I didn't.

I must be in an alley now, I have the impression that the Cop driving just blocked the other on foot from entering the alley to continue pursuit when he sees me.

Another wall. Against me.

Blocking a straight path. I carve into a corner like a river's flow is dictated by the peaks of mountain range.

I've smashed into something. I have fallen onto my side.

I cannot scream. I cannot get up. My eyes register lupine shapes.

Wolves. A pack of them.

The classic Prey fear is finding one's self in an alley and confronted by a group of young male
Wolves on a dark night and past bedtime. It's something I've never felt, because up until now, when I just led two Cops to them, I have never done anything that would've antagonized a Wolf gang.

I hear the word Help so distantly that I cannot immediately realize it came from my mouth. That I'm asking for it from the Wolves I've just led the cops to.

I am out of my mind, and then everything is a blur. I am in the air being thrown then grabbed.

A thud. A slamming of heavy grade plastic against plastic. Pitch blackness.

Two sets of heavy feet pounding on the concrete, getting closer, rounding the corner of the alley and stopping dead in their tracks.

I can't see anything, but the freezing of motion is unmistakable: The Cops are scared. Because even Megafauna get caught off guard by the sight of a large Wolf pack.

It doesn't matter that they're both Rhinos: It matters that they're all Wolves.

And I'm not stirring, if it's so damned stupid but the specism still works in my favor, it's everything I can do to not gasp for breath too loud.

I have to hold out.

The conversation is muffled, but I can make it out,

"WHERE IS THE FOX?"

And this is either going to be quick and violent with a reply like "Fox?" or it's gonna be long but quiet.

"DON'T PLAY DUMB, BOY, WHERE IS THE FOX?"

A short pause.

I'm starting to panic.
"Hey, BOYS, have we seen an Orange Juice around here?"

"An Orange Juice?"

"Yeah, you know, one of those ginger colored runts that's always finissin' everyone."

Oh... Oh thank god.

The Wolves are doing that pack mentality thing where the Alpha drops suggestions on the sly then the rest of the pack follow through to feed off what the others say.

"Psh, I wouldn't know, I ain't ever been scammed by a ginger runt."

This is the trickiest Wolves can get an I'm not even sweating how specist the whole Ringer Runt thing is.

"Bro shut the fug up, one sold you catnip last week."

...Did he just, in front of two co- "Yeah man but he said it'd change my life."

"BRO, YOU AIN'T A CAT."

"So what?"

"SO YOU AIN'T A CAT!"

"But I know some guys that are cat-" "THAT OJ SOLD YOU A BAG OF OREGANO!"

At this point, the laughter is defeaning.

The Rhinos gave the Wolves complete control of the situation and they're reveling in it. Knees are being slapped, someone's on the verge of falling over and others are having to lean on others for support. I know this scene. I'm nearly dead, on the verge of being arrested and beaten when I've had just enough time to worry about Eva and I'm still on the verge of cracking up from the visual up until that moment I hear the sound of two tasers being unholstered and charged.

"YOU BOYS START TELLING US WHERE THE FOX IS OR SOMEONE STARTS FRYING!"

A long silence. You can feel the Alpha's leer burning into the Rhinos from a mile away. Even in my exhaustion, I can feel it like a fire. Because that's the other thing about Wolves. They can be funny, they can get playful, they can show fear in private and be downright goofy in their timidness in public. But when you threaten a group of Wolves? When you corner them among their own, you've forced their paw. They will stand resolutely poised to live up to expectation. They will wage the bloodiest attrition without quarter and no care for personal survival. Because it's not about winning, but a shared principle. A point is what's at stake here with a line in the sand defined in the most seething growl as the alpha maintains his eye contact with the cops.
You always keep eye contact with a Cop. They get nervous when you look at them, they get nervous when you don't, but looking away will always give them an excuse to shoot first, and looking at them will allow the stronger willed to intimidate them. The Wolves cannot let them get gutsy again.

"Hey, Boys, any of you seen a Fox?"

"Nah, I ain't seen a fox. Anyone else seen a Fox?"

"Hold up though, makes them think we hang with 'em?"

"Yeah, yeah, the heck would we want with one?"

"I'M ABOUT TO START COUNTING TO THREE IF I DON'T GET THE FOX, BOY. IF YOU KEEP TRYING TO PLAY DUMB YOU'RE NOT GONNA BE PLAYING DEAD!"

...As exhausted as I am, I can't believe someone could make that little sense in a threat that unintimidating.

"...Officer Hornady? You need to count to Sixteen."

I should be hearing tasers firing, now. Wolves howling out. But I'm not.

"Excuse me?"

I am distantly amazed that the Cop can form sentences without saying Boy.

"Because I haven't seen any Fox here, Officer, but I see sixteen of us Wolves."

The barometric pressure in the alley is greater than the ocean floor.

"ARE YOU MAKING A THREAT OF PHYSICAL INJURY ON A LAW OFFICER!?"

It's actually feeling like it's physically crushing, it's that intense.

"Hornady, I am not threatening you, Sir. I am only reminding you that your guidelines prevent you from taking any kinda action against a party of sixteen suspects."

"WHAT ARE YOU TALKING ABOUT?"

"Your manual on police guidelines. You can't do jack, Officer. Because according to your manual, groups of four or more require you to call in back up equal to their size. That's four more patrol units you need here before you can touch us and you're only carrying four cuffs between you both, AND you need two times the usual amount of back up in high crime areas, AND you gotta call in a gang unit, AND you got to stay in your car for your safety until that backup comes."

...oh my christ he's got 'em good...
"...So in other words it's gonna be about a half hour before you can start detaining us is what I'm saying. Since you're not in pursuit of us and we're cooperating here."

If I wasn't getting weaker from running out of fresh air, I would be so much more invested in just how much this duo just got told the hell off.

"And I don't know who you're looking for, but none of us are Foxes. That means the Fox you're going after is getting away... You think you can explain that to your super?"

I want to clap. I want to congratulate and cheer for the Wolf that just put cops thrice his size so firmly in their own place. He played their own rulebook so perfectly. The cops can harass predators all they want, they can cycle them through the correctional system for all time, but they cannot keep us down without us picking up what little codes of conduct they have through osmosis. And noone, not even a Fox, is more subjected to police state oppression than Wolves. Noone has to deal with cops more often than Wolves.

Noone.

And this pause, where noone is screaming, tasers aren't being fired, this pause with nothing to show for it can only mean that the Wolf has gotten that through A Rhino's thick skull.

It takes jackhammer logic, and a century's patience, but Hornady and his partner know enough about how much scat they're in to know there's no good way out of this for them.

A radio chirps, a voice booming voice so baritone it's almost half of Lucifer's own voice:

"All units to Cliffside Hospital I repeat, all units, Cliffside Hospital, S.W.A.T. team enroute, the helicopters are dispatched, maintain radio silence and I WANT EVERY
I have this distinct impression, in this pitch blackness, that I've just been witness to history. I think we all were. The two cops in this alley, you can nearly feel their metric ton black hearts drop to the floor. You can tell they haven't gotten this call before. Nothing ever this big. Whatever it is, it's a game changer. They hesitate for a moment, and then they run, the ground quakes from the thundering stampede back to their wrecked patrol vehicle because it's their turn to run, now. Run to whatever crazy thing is about to happen at a place I remember distantly. I think it's the old art deco building on a dam, from all the times I've taken my Vulpon out to blast through South Canyon.

I'm about out of oxygen in here, but I still have to start smiling at the memory I took up and down that road.

Then the lid of the garbage can they threw me is flown open and I'm yanked out the trash by the scruff of my neck.

I try to gasp for what breath of air I can with a windpipe kinked by the pelt over my neck and it's not enough. Because I'm staring in to the most livid sets of eyes I've ever deserved. They're all on me, Every pair in the alley attached to a set of paws waiting on the quiet nod, that greenlight, that'll have them pummeling me to death.

This is that moment every Fox fears. When they have no more guile and no more charm at their discretion.

"Who's the hell is this scrawny piece of scat?"

Someone in the back, he must rank just below the shotcaller who should be the one holding me up.
"I don't know, but this runt in my grip better have a good reason why he ain't dead yet."

I'm out of my mind more than I am out of breath, to say the first thing that comes to mind without thinking through it that I "...didn't know you were here..."

A disgruntled scoff, "That makes you breaking up my deal that much better, right?"

A quick glance and damn it, I can see it. Seven Eurasians, one Iberian. Four Northwesterns, four Great Plains. One of them is making the I-just-swallowed-several-balloons gag reflex.

I have to think quick and I can't if "Nah it don't!" but damn it, wrong answer, "Damned right it don't, skinny! Now give a good reason or we gonna break bones."

They're starting to hunch over and preparing to come at me.

I can't think of a way out of this and mutter "they've been chasing m-" "Wrong answer!" "SINCE SAHARA SQUARE, THEY'VE BEEN CHASING ME SINCE SAHARA SQUARE!"

...Slacked jaws and bulging eyes all around.

Everyone has straightened up. I just presented the impossibility to them that anyone could run from the cops for that long and still evade them.

Like the ones that hopefully didn't just hear me scream, and they're thinking that, too.

Maybe that's why they haven't started pounding me but "L-look," I'm starting to stutter. "It's been off an on for hours an they found an lost me more times than I can count an I'm exhausted I'm out my mind desperate-" "How?"

"How what?"

"How'd you run from them for this long?"

I got an angle for my saving grace I think, I'm just terrified and it shows in the insecure laugh I make. Like I would absentmindedly throw my paws up in the air if I wasn't limp in a viceclamp grip.

The short of it is I'm a Fox but "Well, uh... Heh...", if it'll stall and stall and stall and keep scat under a lid then it's a "Long story, you see-" "Wait, HOLD UP..."

Oh...

"...That's him!"

...Oh, no.

"Who?"

Oh, please.
"HIM!"

Oh, dammit.

"Don't you pronoun game us Randall now who's who?"

Oh, for god's sake, don't- "That's the Fox they had on the news! The wanted dude from the police chase!"

Oh this is not the way I wanted to get famous if I ever did.

And my neck isn't in as much pain as it was when Lucifer's hoof was clutched around it but it's starting to get there.

All the other Wolves are now coming in for a closer look, behind the Northwest Alpha still holding me up in the air by the side of my neck.

He's cocked an eyebrow, I can feel the realization soaking in before he says it, that "I can't believe it. It really is him."

Someone starts mouthing out the word Holy before trailing off. Whoever Randall is, he's damned me, he just damned me so hard. I watch my celebrity status fade away in the faces of all these Wolves as the reality sets in.

I'm worth something to someone: I'm worth a large sum of money to the police.

Paws are reaching for pant pockets.

Cellphones are being pulled out.

Screens are lighting up.

I want to flail.

I want to kick and scratch but I can't so "WAIT!", quick, think of something.

"Wait what, basic ass mark?" Laughs all around at my terrified expense.

Think of anything.

"...what makes you think you got the right Fox?"

But I'm completely out of ideas.
"Ah, this fool..."

And they're not buying it, but it's the last thing I got to sell.

"No no, I'm serious I mean we all look alike am I right?"

Some of them are starting to crack up. I must have the sorriest pleabargaining look in my eyes.

"This guy did just...?"

There is nothing more pathetic than a Fox out of wits and trying to squirm his way out of trouble.

"WHAT MAKES YOU THINK I'M OWEN CONRAD?!" and I look so freakan dumb right now.

One of the Wolves that ain't spoken up yet, he's gone quizzical with a cocked brow.

"Because they said on the news they were looking for a guy called Fuc-" "THAT'S NOT HOW YOU SAY MY NAME!"

Oh,

Oh my freakan god,

Oh lord if I wasn't about to get called in to the popo I'd be laughing just as hard as all these Wolves are at just how beautiful that was.

I've never messed up this bad before but it's nearly playing in my favor. The wolf holding me starts to loosen his grip.

I can nearly move. I can move just enough to lean my muzzle into his wrist and bite it, and I'm starting to make the move to do it as he starts to recover from laughing his tail off enough to see what I'm trying to do.

He regains that grip back around my neck and it's tighten than before, now.

My yelping in pain from the clinching around the side and back of my neck is interrupted: A haymaker. To my face. Hard as a brick.

I scream out in pain and watch as that fist cocks back to send another blow down on me when I see
another Wolf rush up and hold the Alpha's wrist back back.

"THE HECK YOU DOING, BACK OFF OF ME!"

Please let them start fighting over who collects the reward money.

"LET HIM DOWN, GONZALO!"

"ARE YOU KIDDIN' ME, LOWE? THIS GUY JUST TRIED TO BITE ME!"

"FOX, WHAT'S YOUR NAME?"

I've given up. "FUCHS, IT'S FREAKAN FUCHS! FEE! YOOKS! FYEWKS!"

The Wolf that just held back the alpha's barrage, his eyes light up like firecrackers, "THIS FOX IS ANDREW'S HOMIE!"

And I'm just as wide-eyed in shock that Andy knows these guys, as these guys are that Andy knows me. Gonzalo, holding me in excruciatingly painful grip, I can see disappointment starting to form. He's feeling cheated.

"...Lowe, you gotta be joking me, right now."

Lowe, letting go of his grip on Gonzalo's fist, comes up closer.

"Owen, what's your full name?"

It's getting harder to talk. "Owen Conrad Fuchs an friends call me OC!"

"You know Andrew Howlerson?" "y-Yeah." "How long?" "Five, Six Years I can't remember!"
"Do you got a job?" "How am I supposed to got a job!" "What do you do?" "Dumpster dive!" "How do you get around town?" "I ride a motorcycle, a Vulpon a Fox motorcycle I GET 'ROUND ON A RANGER!"

"Gonzo this guy is Andrew's-" "Oh, DAMMIT WHY'D IT HAVE TO BE THIS PIECE OF
"...We gotta call it in, Gonz!"

"I KNOW THAT, LOWE! AND THAT'S WHAT YOU'RE GONNA DO. You got his number? You call him. He gonna get down here and scope this dude out. He says he don't know the punk then we beat him 'til he passes out and collect. If Andrew says he know him... The Fox is his problem."

The neck.

My pain.

"LET ME GO FOR CHRIST'S SAKE THE PAIN GET OFF MY NECK!"

Gravity. Weightlessness. The asphalt of the alley touches my feet but my legs give way then I fall to my right side. I yelp. Both of my trembling paws hovering over the side of my neck and face. From my sideways point of view I see 'em above me closing in anyway, I back away, I crawl on my side to press my back against the wall and I'm too weak and hurt to start running again. They're watching and reacting to all my motions. Even among Predators and especially to a species with a devotion to loyalty like Wolves, a Fox can never be trusted. A Fox's potential for good can never be overestimated. His or her potential for less can never be underestimated.

I'm too hurt to be hurt. If anything I'm as confused now as I am thankful later for a respite I can't tell the reasoning behind.

Whether or not I know Andy should be a moot point.

I ought to be getting held down while one of the Wolves without a warrant calls it in to collect the reward money then disperse it afterwards but that's not happening and Why?

Why is Lowe dialing a number in on his smartphone that's longer than three digits?

Why is he walking away and putting his phone to his ear to call someone that ain't the one that would pay to have me in their possession?

"Hey Andy it's your boy, Lo. Get to Prairie four place. Letter A, See and traffic signal... We got a known of yours here."

It's easy enough to translate, but most phone monitoring is keywords and algorithms. That's too
generic. Cops would dedicate malepower to manually listen in on a person of interest but gangs would know better than to have anyone being watched pass out information this easy to decrypt over cell traffic. What just transpired is speaking volumes on how regimented and organized these Wolves are.

It's also making me ask what the hell did Andy never tell me, that would explain why he'd know code talk from this gang.

It's making me forget that I should be pretending I ain't overhearing this.

They've noticed.

One of them swiftly puts their foot down over head to plug my ears for me. I cringe out of pain, every part of me aching. The running, my neck, every part of me an ember in a fire. I cry out. One of the Wolves has a heart, I can see it in his eyes before he turns and pushes the one stepping on me aside. He's acted out of turn, the alpha turns on my supporter. There's violence looming over my head as the teeth gleam and claws fly. It's swift, the rest of Gonzalo's pack gives way while the other pack distances itself to stop a feud from starting between each other. It's over in an instant, anyway: The Alpha has got the one that helped me pinned down, and the one that stomped me limp on the ground and reeling.

"DID I WANT YOU TO STOP HIM, RANDALL?"
"I-" "NOO!"
"THE FOX HAS HAD ENOU-" "DID I SAY YOU COULD STOP HIM?!"
"NO!"
"EXACTLY, RANDALL! I DIDN'T SAY YOU COULD DO A GOD DAMN THING!"

I could feel the blow Gonzo throws down on Randall all the way from here. Any resentment I had for the guy just got knocked out of his face. Everyone is tense.

Lowe is looking back at me and the chaos that's followed me, ending his pause by bringing his phone back to his face.

"You heard that, An? Scat's going downhill. You need to be here before it hits the fan... Yeah... Gonzo, he's gonna be here in about fif to thirty."

It's about now that I notice the remorse in the Alpha's eyes. Turning his head around and looking up at me, he didn't want to beat the hell out of Randall but they say he had to. Like it was only how
he knew to keep a sense of order. That strikes me like some trap of authority. Leaving Randall limp with his tail between his legs, he didn't resist. The one that was stomping me feels remorse, too, somewhere as he's getting up. Not for me, but for Randall and Gonzalo. I'm just a factor in them stepping out of line. What's a fact reminding of the omnipresent truth of my entire existence: I am a problem. Predators are all the world's problem. We are Prey's unsolvable riddle. They don't know what to do with us but they have to do something.

And maybe it's just experience, but Foxes are the physical form of Pi. We can't be trusted, we can't be accepted, we can't be afforded anything. Leaves me guessing why we yearn for friendship with such fervor. Why the pursuit of it tends to only make our lives and the lives of those around us even harder. Because I am a Fox. My entire life has been one big problem for myself or everyone around me. For these Wolves, and for one mix between Lobo Mexicano and Canis Lupus Nubilus I lost the friendship of. I'm right back to being his problem again. It's not whether or not I can escape when I probably can't and it's not whether or not Andrew is gonna pull my tail out of the fire when he has no reason to...

It's that I have no right to make this any harder on him than it already is.

Wolves can read others about as well as Foxes can. They have to. It's a matter of survival, same as it is for me.

And right now, they can tell most of what's going on in my head.

They can tell a sense of duty. That I am thinking less of myself and more about him. They can see what Lowe's coming to me and kneeling down to ask. Asking if I'm gonna try anything is just a formality for the Alpha and everyone else. He's doing it on their behalf.

I can barely nod no. My remorse is draining me of whatever strength I got left.

They understand me.

But I don't understand them.

"...Lowe, right?"

"Yeah, that's me."

"You know Andy?"

"We all do."
I could ask how, but I got a more important question: "You guys are holding back from turning me in, just because I was a friend of his?"

Yes.

"Why does it matter if I know him?" leaves him silent for a moment, looking to each other as Gonzalo and the Wolf that stomped me helps Randall up.

Lowe's answer is simple, if a little muted: "We have rules. We follow them before anyone else's."

These past few minutes have been one endless chain of revelations. I thought I knew it all when it came to Wolves and I've been proven wrong.

This is all new and none of it is making sense.

"Andy told you about me."

"He's said a lot about you, yeah."

"Like what?"

"None of your business. That's between him and us."

Quietly stern. I lean my back into the wall and sigh. How much did I not know about Andy is something I can't press any further, and I already know everything they would tell me anyway. The seven Lupus Lupus depart with their Italicus, Lowe and Randall follow them out of the alley. Probably to apologize and reschedule their business while Gonzalo and the rest stick by me to make sure I don't pull anything. They eventually stop eyeing me down, or trying to read any tells out my body. I settle in and try not to think but I can't help but think. Every messed up thing that's come my way or that I invited. How stupid I've been. I should have put my foot down with Eva, but I was weak.

Why did I have to be so weak?

The more I dwell the less I start to care for myself, less even for Andrew, and the more I start to beg myself the question of just what happened to Eva after I ran off.

If she escaped.

If she's in a cell.

An ambulance or...

...

...I still have my phone somehow, after all this but when I can't use it, now. I so much as put my paw
in my pocket, it'll ratchet up the tension. I pull out my phone, look like I'm snitching, they'll have me unconscious before the Cops even get to me. Regardless of Andrew. Regardless of how much I wanna know she's alright.

Did the cops get her?

Is she alive?

Can I just use my god damn phone now that I finally have a chance that won't let me take it?

Why didn't I listen to myself?

Why didn't I listen to Lola?

I was smarter than to go to the club but too cowardly not to.

The Wolves will jump me if I go for my phone.

Why couldn't the night before with Eva had been enough?

By the time Andrew gets here, I'll be consumed. Ate up with with how absurdly easily so much could have been avoided.

Never moving to Zootopia.

Never building my Vulpon.

Never lashing out at a well meaning prey.

Never careening through traffic and into a crowded rodent market.

Never going to a club to dance with a Ferret girl that stole my heart.

Never asking Wolves to save me.

Never trying to live above the means the world gave me to live by.

There is an image in my head:

I am stopped at a 3 way intersection in the country and two cops in a highway patrol car are barreling towards me with a murderous gleam in their eyes and I'm just sitting there on my bike waiting for them to ram and kill me.

It's so vivid and I want it to be real.

It can't come quick enough, I think to myself.
Something catches the attention of the Wolf pack, I'm too ate up with remorse for my stupidities to look. The distance between my mind, my body and all stimuli around me could not be greater as my eyes distantly register Andrew looking down at me.

That's how he finds me. Worse than any wreck he's seen before.

"You know this Fox?" Gonzalo asks.

"Yes." says Andrew.

"He your friend, bro?"

"...was."

"Cops were chasing him. Broke up our deal with Downtown. News said there's a reward on 'im."

"I know. I saw the news."

Here it comes, and it couldn't come quick enough.

"...You know we can't touch him until you give the greenlight, Andy."

Please give me the greenlight.

I'm hoping for it.
"...I can't greenlight him."

I'm bewildered and a little upset, looking up at him looking down at me while everyone else gives him the wild eyed look of surprise.

"What you mean by can't, bro?" Gonzo says for me and everyone else.

"I said he was my friend and he still is. I couldn't even if he wasn't."

There's a resentment in Andrew's eyes, but it can't mask the pity and the remorse. I can even see some relief. Like he's actually glad I'm here.

"So what happens now, Andrew? The cops are still gonna bust him."

"What happens is I take him in, Gonzo."

I don't know what's happening, but his brethren aren't taking it well. They're murmuring to themselves and looking at Andrew like he's a freakin' idiot overstepping his bounds.
"Andrew," Gonzo's about to lay into him. "You're gonna take in some Runt Ass Ginger with heat coming down on him?"

I could ask the same thing if I wasn't so confused.

"Don't call my friend that Gonzo and yeah, I'm taking him in. Because the Alpha wants to see him, anyway."

I don't get it. Andy always acted like he lived alone.

"You already took in the Coyote."

"Yeah Gonzo, I took Wallace in and Wally's gone. He didn't cause any trouble. You wanna argue with what the old guy wants, you take it up with him. I've got orders."

Gonzo wants to push it but Andy isn't breaking his look at me.

"...Lowe, Randall, everybody we're going back and... Andy, whatever scat this Fox star-
"Whatever my friend here does Gonzo, it's on me, I know. Don't spit tradition at me like I don't know better than you, Bro. There's a reason I ain't slingin' with your crew."

Squarly put in place. A protest with Gonzo's paws tossed up in the air. And Andrew's still leering at me. Reading me like a book, like I'm reading him. I'm Four foot Two, He's Five foot Five, towering over me, with me laying on the asphalt with my back to the wall.

He just about wants to deck me.

His right shoulder is tensing up to do it, but the pity is still there.

I've been through hell. He sees it.

He sees that nothing he could make me pay anymore than I already have.

I am such an idiot, I am such a terrible friend, "I've been such a bastard." And Eva, "God this girl, I've gotten her in so much scat, I don't even know if she's-" "Can you get up?"

I have to stop myself.

I gotta stop, now.
It won't do Andrew any favors for me to stay here in my sorrows.

"Yeah."

"Get up."

I climb up onto my feet with a groan.

"Can you walk?"

"I can walk."

"Then let's go."

"Where are we going?"

"We're going where I live."

He turns and follows the rest of the Wolves. I follow, the weight of every messed up thing I've done on my shoulders as I trail behind and get to thinking.

It doesn't make sense, and I've got to ask.

"You don't live by that Targoat we grabbed TVs from, do you?"

"Owen."

"Yeah?"

A quick spin, and I'm looking straight into Andrew's clenched fist. It hits hard enough that it'd send any other Fox down on his back, but after a moment of stumbling, I'm still on both feet, with a little blood coming from my nose and enough pain to get me holding my paws over my muzzle.

"I deserved that."

"...You good?"

"I'm good."

"Then keep up."

I'm looking up and I can see it in him. He's a little angry with himself that he lashed out... But that smirk is full of pride. Not for himself, his eyes are too gentle for that.
He's proud of how I took his hardest and I'm not about to argue against what's too relieving when I need relief the most.

So I smile right back with my bloody nose and the reminder in "You know I will, bro."

To join up with the rest of his people, and think that little moment they just saw has gotten me a little admiration and understanding. I can't be bothered to care for it right now, but I think I see it in them.

And whatever anger Andrew finally got out his system can let him be amused at something.

"Buffy's moved into his new place."

Oh god. Buffalo exists. How could I forget?

"No scat?"

"Yeah, told everybody he's gonna try to take your ass to court after what you pulled with that girl."

That dance me and Eva started.

I'm laughing at the memory of his landlady chewing him out. I'm tearing up at the joy I felt when I danced with her. I needed to be reminded of it after how bad I've had it, tonight. I'm holding at my sides because my body's already struggling.

"Oh god, he told you everything?"

"Some girl put a song on and the next thing he knew you and her were bouncing off walls with everybody losing it around you."

Eva.

Love of my life.

The wholesome memory that's been wounded by the fact she's not here.

But I can't dwell. I can't pick up my phone, either.

I have to push it back with an "And I got into the song so hard I flew right out of a window!" as he's cracking up too hard for the lie he's trying to prepare himself to tell.

"I'm not impressed, Bro!"

It's working. I don't know how.

"Psh, don't gimme that horsehockey!"

For a moment, I have to think on how manic I can be at times. Before I get the feeling that I'm such a traumatized mammal, with so much I've gone through, that I'm just desperate to be happy. I'm desperate to find any ecstasy and jubilation I can latch onto like every other predator. When I wasn't
on my Vulpon trying everything I could to live. While I had Eva and everything was certain. But I think he's seeing what I'm thinking. Something's on his mind, yet he'll push it back for now. We'll all keep walking down the sidewalk like everything is nothing. While the Wolves we're with stay alert while pretending not to eavesdrop on me and Andy. They're curious. Wolves don't usually mingle with Foxes. This is kind of a rare insight.

"Hey Oh, you remember that shelter?"

"The one I met you at?"

"Yeah, it's gotten even worse since we left it."

I get the feeling that this is exposition for the audience around us.

"Get out. They were already giving me grief just for the Ponda bike I used to have."

"The one that got clipped and ran into?"

"Yeah."

"They'll refuse anyone with anything but a bicycle and they want you turning in at least three job applications."

"How the heck do they expect you to get a job if y- Wait, they want you to make copies and turn those in?"

"Yeah, bro."

"They're crazy."

"They're running out of room. heck, even when Wally met all the requirements he still couldn't get a cot to sleep on."

They can say the stock market is doing great, that it's reaching new highs, but it's no correlation to, no proof of how well the rest of us are doing. It's getting even harder for Preds. Even without some big damned news cycle about us being scary.

"What's Wally doing, now?"

"Joined up with some group set up in old subway stations... Says they've only been kicked out of Banyon street."

"Freakan cops."

"That's the creepy thing. They got chased out by some militia dudes in uniform."

"Prey supremacists?"

"Beat up a few of his peeps bad enough they had to check in at an ER."
"...The heck do meadowlanders want with Banyon Street?"

"I don't know bro, but he said the guys weren't cops. Acted like it, though."

"Goddam hick azz longnecks..."

And then it dawns on me in a quickly swelling motion.

Lucifer's living room. Bellwether. How he trailed off about her and the Meadowlands. The implication he made of her being involved in something over where most prey militia are. All that to couple with the nonsense of some wannabe saviors of their own, to operate in a neck of our own woods. In a Pred dominated part of town like... It doesn't really make sense but then again, yet it does. It's a stretch too plausible to ignore. That if whatever you're doing's bad enough, that you'd want the plausible deniability of having it that far away from you... The connection between a detective being sidelined, a bunch of preds missing, and an oddly protected subway station... I could say I'm crazy, out my mind because I've had it chased my mind out of me... But no. No... No, even if, "I've got to tell Lucifer." anyway.

Everyone's taken back.

"...What?"

"About Banyon, Andrew."

"What do you mean Tell Satan?"

"I mean I owe it to the Bull that saved my ass from the others the night before last night!"

He's trying to put two and two together, he can't. I don't blame him. When the rest of them are and I ought to be afraid of that.

"You're saying the devil helped-" "Lucifer's just what I call him. Scariest damned Prey dude I ever crossed, never got his name, said something about City Hall keeping him from checking into some missing preds and-" "Owen, what the hell are you-" "I'm saying a Cop pulled my tail out of the fire and I gotta tell him about Banyon because Look, I don't know what I could tell you but there's something really big happening and I don't know how big, I don't even know if Lucifer knows how big it is, but it's towering!"
And if everything I said before I dropped the C word, was already a million times worse than just grabbing for my phone...

Then I gotta try to placate "Gonzalo?" before he acts on the fact I said Cop and made them all as concerned and twitchy as they are.

This is incalculably more important, "You heard the radio chatter from those two Rhinos. All Units, cliffside hospital, those two could've busted all of us, but they freakin RAN, THEY RAN HARD. Tell me that doesn't sound like it could be connected!"

But how could they?

Why am I even doing this?

"...Owen, I love you like a brother. But if it didn't come from someone else to bring you in, you'd be bodied and getting collected on. First you were running from 'em, now you want to undo us going out on a limb to save you from them? Are you too damned crazy to see what it looks li-" "IT'S NOT LIKE THAT! PLEASE!"

But I shouldn't have raised my voice.

The atmosphere around us is getting so claustrophobic.

The crew that nearly turned on me before Andy got his name dropped? Now they're on the verge now of turning on dropping us both.

With Gonzalo looking at him with unmistakably murderous intent.

"Your boy's threatening the den an nobody will think twice when me and my crew tell him we did what we had to."

"Gonzalo, bro, the Fox is just crazy an he don't mean scat!"

"He is talking about SNITCHING OFF TO A COP THAT AIN'T ONE OF OURS!"

Teeth are starting to flash.
They're starting to flash in the way prey mammals use to justify the use of muzzles.

"Owen isn't like that! He's god damn insane but I know he wouldn't-"

"What's stopping us from dumping your omega self in a river and collecting our reward on him?"

They're about to act.

Andrew can't begin to.

I am so ashamed and afraid but I cannot stop my mouth. I yell it all out. All the details I remember.

Lucifer is Internal Affairs.

He's a spanish fighting bull.

Wears all black.

Sent the one that killed Lewis Wolfgang to jail.

He was investigating fourteen missing predators.

City hall sidelined him by having him lead the mammalhunt for me.

He saved me when he shouldn't have and the missing predators are all connected.

He needs my help and I've got to help him because he's not a pred killing cop, he's busting them and he needs my help.

Because there's a conspiracy happening right now and it's on every last predator.

I'm surprised I had that much breath left in me after running all night.

They're surprised enough by everything I just screamed out that it's stopped them dead in their tracks.

Andy's surprised that he's not in pieces and that I got to say all that without being interrupted with a scuffle.

Randall's looking at his phone, having taken in everything I said and taking in everything he's reading on his screen.
"...Gonz? Larry's texting hysterical. He just messaged everyone to call a general meeting."

"...The hell he calling a general for?"

Randall's looking at his screen in disbelief.

"Cliffside."

If I wasn't on the verge of emptying my bladder onto the sidewalk, I would be thanking god for his sense of timing.

"...Andrew? Your ginger gets to talk to Espada after Alpha's check him out for us."

I'm wondering who the heck Espada is and Gonzo's already read my mind: "That Bull you call Lucifer? That's Espada Del Toro. If you let him know you got his name, I'll cut your tail off. Are we clear?"

"We are."

A moment of silence.

"Are you sure?"

"I only know him by Lucifer."

All the Wolves except Andy are looking at Gonzo, who nods his head in a silent gesture that he's OK'ing our privledge to keep breathing.

"..Good."

We all start walking again, and Andy can't take his eyes off of me.
I am such a horrible friend.

And a one to someone I don't deserve that can't stop feeling hurt, can't stop thinking I'm a hopeless cause, and I can feel it like I couldn't know it, and it's killing me so hard that when he finally says "You're fuggin' impossible.", it's a relief hear it come out of someone else's mouth besides mine.

But I don't think again. Mine just start's to sputter "...Sorry's the most useless word but-" no, "No Owen, why, Why is it you can't turn the trill down for Five Seconds? Why are you always pulling this scat like you don't know better because you do Owen, but just... Why do you gotta be like this? Why I have to pull your ass out of the fire? I nearly died this time and it's all on you and just... Just tell me Why I'm trying, Owen..."

Somehow, I'm still his friend after all these things I've done. How, I don't know. I don't get what he sees in me. I don't see what Eva or anyone else ever has.

He asked though. I owe him something.

...

...Distantly, in the back of my head, there's a thought that's probably an excuse but it might be a reason: That maybe all of these things I've lived through, that I've managed, the things I've done, the fact that I always come back like a rock after the tide has come and gone...

Maybe all of those things made me who I am.

Maybe that's why he's beside me. Why everyone's around me like they are...

"...I been through enough I don't even know anymore. Why I'm this or what I'd rather be... Maybe I'm just this and maybe that's the closest I can come back from everything."

And distantly, somehow, the fact I'm still alive to dwell on all the things that should've killed me, I would've killed myself over, somehow, it could be more than just another white flag. As if maybe it ain't enough of a surrender to change the fact I still got Andrew. Why I had Tobias, and Jaeger, and Wallace, and why I might even have Eva to come back to, still. Maybe that's the reason I got what I have. because it's cost all it has to survive but I've survived maybe that's really it.
That as much as the world's robbed from me, my mode has been to take back what it took right back every time the world's let their guard down.
There hasn't been a single black and white spotted but south Savannah Central's supposed to crawl with 'em.

That's so uncanny it's kind of scary.

Something big enough really has gone down to send them out of here and off to somewhere else. Everybody's quietly had their eyes and ears on swivels for awhile anyway because it's that unreal. Gonzalo's kept up a good facade of swagger, of indifference yet the cracks are visible and it ain't put his pack at ease. Yeah, the cops sometimes won't make their presence known until they come down all at once and with S.W.A.T. in tow to top it off. But the streets are calmer than that. The tension isn't there. Hasn't stopped them from feeling apprehensive out of instinct, Gonz has only kept 'em muted and although Andrew's a little worried like the others... He's a little more relieved than 'em.

I think I am, too, but only between my bouts of worrying about Eva.

I think Andrew's playing more off my own passing moments of relief than his brethren's fear, but I can't hold on to them. We've already walked past the corner nearby the Targoat to answer my question, earlier. I'd try to think of something else to break the silence with to distract with anything but it wouldn't help.

I can't stop thinking about my Fighter Girl Ferret.

I can't get that image out of my head of her jumping off of a bar with a cop in pursuit. I can't let go of the fact she's probably been caught or killed. I can't stop for a moment to just admire the fact that she broke a beer bottle on a cop's face or came back from being punched that hard, that she's been on the run for as long as she was,

I was too weak after Saturday's chase, after Lucifer to tell her no on the club, I was too swept up off my feet and I couldn't...

I couldn't...
"You can't help her." has me looking up and nearly grabbing at my phone to try to call again like I tried all through the hours of being chased.

Things are calm enough I almost could but I'm only now aware of the look on my face that says I would.

"What's her name?" he asks and I can barely keep the stutter at bay, "Eva. Tall as Ferrets get and the best thing to ever." "What's she done beside hook up with your crazy ass?"

Before I can protest, he's already on it like "I ain't saying crazy's bad, bro. I'm just saying you're crazy."

But he was. But it's gotten some chuckles from the rest of them, and it's lightened their moods.

I guess mine, too.

Enough to let him have it known she "Tried to get the Cops to take her in for her warrant to get them off me."

His eyes roll to compliment his "She's that crazy for your D?"

I don't mind, though.

It's helping me to take the pride over the fears.

Over how livid it got me when I saw her get decked because she got 'em right back:

"Then she threw a bottle on one of their faces to stop me getting fried and made them split up."

Andrew's feet skip a beat along with all the other lupine paws on the ground.

Breaking glass in public is already just about treated as a felony.
Breaking it on a Cop's face?
"...Bro?"

That's just straight up Capital.
"You know how to pick em."

Though he's only saying that when he couldn't fathom the truth.

I never could, I couldn't be so brave and "I didn't pick her bro, she picked me up like a carpet ride then swept me off to see another world an-" "OC are you high or just making scat u-?"

"Imagine if I was, though!"

It's so good to hear his laugh. I didn’t even think that out, it just came and they all teeter. They can’t believe how teenage starstruck and swept up I am because it’s real,

"That Ferret wove magic like she had it for days!"

"You're further out of your goddam mind-" "I ain't finished, Andy! She's the best damned thing that happened to me and..."

And I didn't listen.

"I didn't listen to myself, I didn't hear Lola out and..."

And I'm starting to lose it again.

"Owen, If she's half of what you're saying she is, she can take care of herself."

"No, you don'-" "I'm telling you you can't help her, bro. And no amount of you going off the deep end is gonna change that."

I want to fight it just on principle But I can't. It's got me throwing my paws in a frustrated sorrow.

Even though that won't change a thing.
We keep walking to round a corner. Prompts Gonz to pull his phone out for a short text. With a face
lit up to a genuine smile of safety like we made it. Everyone's getting more confidently into character.
Andrew, too. Like we're on the home stretch to where they live. The thing is, nothing about here
says residential. There's an old apartment complex mixed in with these warehouses and rundown
factories, but the scaffolding, plywood and tarps to the sign up front that says Woolsey
Construction say it's a construction site.

I have a feeling, though.

As I look up to "Andy," because I shouldn't ask but "How much further?" is what I do, to have him
catch a cold glance from Randall while his superior's phone lights up.

He starts off vague enough with "You know what it means? That I'm taking you in with me?"

I can't quite catch it after everything I've been through tonight, so I gotta guess "...You trust me?" but
no.

"We all have to trust you. Everyone's gotta trust the judgement you're in too deep enough, you're
never gonna tell anyone where you've gone or what you saw. That you're never gonna lead the cops
here, never gonna talk about this place."

I have no idea why he wouldn't just answer my question, but I answer back with a "You know I
wouldn't." that won't change the fact "They don't, bro. You're going somewhere that I gotta ask the
questions for everyone else."

That last comment has me cocking a brow for a moment.

A few paces later, it hits me, as we're crossing the street and heading closer towards the construction
site.

"...You're that responsible for me..."

"Owen, if anything happens, I'm not just that responsible, it's that I'm the one that gets killed first."

The gangbanging, the drug deal, this hierarchy, that mafioso speel Andy's spouting off, it's enough
scary scat that I have to ask directly while we slip into an alley:

"Andrew, where the heck do you live?"
Gonzalo pulls out a key from his pocket and grabs at the lock and chain securing the chainlink panel perimeter.

Around the apartment building I thought no one was living in.

"That answer's your friend's questions, Andy?"

I could ask how they live in a construction site, but Andy prompts me, puts me on the spot to say something.

"Owen?" "Yeah, yeah it answers them..."

Lowe, Randall and the six others duck in with Andrew waiting for me. I take my slip in though it then he follows, Gonzo pulls the fence panel back into place and reaches through the other side to re-lock it.

On the inside of the apartment building, fresh paint, stacks of tile and drywall with unopened paint buckets here and there in the first floor hallway.

There's a few other Wolves, wearing hard hats and safety vests, but they're not contractors. I can tell that much immediately, watching them eyeing me as the odd one out of faces they're already familiar with.

They're security.

"He's Andy's. He's cleared." Gonzo tells them. So they'll dismiss my presence and go back to being less obvious guards. Randall sticks with them and the rest of us round a hallway corner to take an elevator big enough for two elephants and whoever else can fit between them. It wasn't here before, the way the wall's been cut around it. The way so much of this city's infrastructure's been scaled then rescaled to accommodate larger Prey tends to make me feel smaller than I already am, but the size of things never helped to make my orange color stick out any less. Lowe presses the button for the highest floor, and yeah, I want to keep asking questions that'll be answered soon enough.

I don't know better though, but would just leave it up to small talk with Andy I'd tell myself.

If it didn't feel like I was going catatonic from all the stress building up.

Anything would help to get my mind off of everything else like Eva.

Ward off the curiosity I'm trying to focus on instead with some question like how things are going
with his music.

But the hesitance would answer it before his mouth would. I know things would've been bad enough for him before he got the call to make me.

And even if I wasn't Orange, I'm still obvious because the stress is building and I'm highest pressure mammal in here because I've been through what I have but what about her, what about Eva, what about whether or not she's- "What's going on with the Bike?"

And that's my cue to take to change the topic that was obvious on myself.

"Got left in one of my caches. I can't get to it until this all blows over."

This smalltalk is a godsend. Even if it's making me want my therapist.

"...You holding up without it?"

"Without my therapist? Not really."

I get some amusement from Andrew's folks and I can tell Andrew's rolling his eyes without looking up. It's not really sincere, but I'll be a little wry about it with a scat eating grin. Because he can afford the taxation in "I'm not embarrassing you in front of your friends, am I?"

"You? Ah, nah bro you're a regular shining example of sanity." gets a snicker out of me.

I don't think I've ever argued that I was well adjusted. But with the way the world around me is, I don't think I'd ever want to be well adjusted to it.

I've had to take pride in the fact that I'm not.

But I'll try to ward off the worst of it as we near the top. Let Andrew and everyone else feel relieved even if a little skittish. Wolves get like that around authority they respect. It must be the Alpha that Andy mentioned earlier. So I'm left for a brief moment to think, that what's gonna to greet us when the door opens, is some lieutenants to escort us to some Capo di Capi shotcaller's office. It would be a scarier prospect under any other circumstance, but it's still unnerving.

All the while Andrew is calm and even a little happy. Like neither me or him have anything to be worried about.
It's comforting me.

It's like he's coming home. Coming to sanctuary.

...

"Andrew?"

I've really just gotta ask.

"Whats up, Owen?"

"You know how I said that us slipping through the fence answered my question?"

"Yeah."

"It didn't, and you're acting like you're home, but-" The doors open, then the din of so many conversations and the smell of so many Wolves comes pouring into the elevator.

I should have kept quiet.

Andrew smirks as we exit out into a hallway filled with Wolves. Nothing but Wolves. They're all Wolves, they all know each other and so intimately, they converse with the ease of a well-loved friend. Every One. And it feels alien, feels foreign to a solitary species and a lonely person like me yet I get what it is. This place is like home because that's exactly what they made it. A community like somewhere I never seen up close but I get it now. I get why Gonzo & Co didn't want me here. Why they only allowed me to come because Andrew said their Alpha wanted to see me. The one that really is, in the literal sense. Because this is a Den by the actual meaning. I am surrounded by a genuine Pack.

A Pack of Wolves that isn't even seeing me over their own affairs.

Something so amazing I still gotta ask "What is this place?" if I've already seen.
Andrew starts to explain to my exhausted afterglow stupor, but holds his tongue for a moment.

I need soak all of this in for awhile before he tries to tell me.

Get so immersed to drown in it he's gotta guide me by my shoulder until I point in the right direction to follow Gonzo's crew.

"...You know how young Wolves could never afford to rent apartments in this city? How I had to lie to you about living at that apartment next to the targoat?"

I'm too dumbfounded by all this kinship surrounding me to answer. He figured I'd be. Almost too mesmerized to notice how dismissively amused Gonz and the gang are of how dumbfounded I am.

"This is what a Den looks like, bro. This is how we get by."

All of these studio apartments are being used as Dorms.

There's scores of Wolves in each one and there's not a single door closed, they're all open.

A secret commune, living in a construction site.

"...This breaking so many zoning laws, housing laws..."

"City laws, bro. Not our own."

The feeling I had of this place being a community was not unfounded. It's real. This is honest. A study in how Lupines live like other Communals try to, and I've never found myself envying the life of someone else quite like I do, now. I'm trying to keep my bewilderment in check, I really am, it's just that I can't help but quietly mutter to myself that I wanna be a Wolf. I don't think anyone heard it though. As I follow Andy and Gonzo, trying to keep my head from swiveling, my ears from picking up too much conversation. I can't, though. Everyone knows everyone and where everyone stands and with all the intimacy of a family that a stranger like me would never know.

Wolves are coming and going from one apartment to the other, Cots and secondhand mattresses...

I was so wrong.

This ain't some kingpin's lair. Not even a halfway house.
It's a home for Wolves with a disciplined bustle of domestic upkeep made apparent when we pass a doorway, and I see one chew another out for not tucking in the sheets of his cot. With an openness to what's-mine-is-all-of-ours, I watch several dipping spoons into the same tray of food as we pass another. It's a sense of safety that couldn't exist for anyone else but a Wolf. A castle on it's own to be beholden to noone else but itself. So drunk in the celebration of kinship, they couldn't notice me enough to dismiss the presence as a visitor. Everyone's so at peace that there ain't a single nervous Non-Predatory Smile or practiced blank expression. A few look twice, just to briefly take note, before returning to their business.

I'm not even sure if it's from not recognizing me from the news or from not bothering to question why I'm here.

If they know anything about what's happening out there or if they don't care, right now.

And if I'm on the repeat, it's just 'cause I'm still tryna make my mind up. Am I seeing this or am I out of it?

But anyone that's ever said Wolves all look the same needs to be slapped in the face.

Not one of them do.

The fur patterns, the bone structures in their faces. They're half Northwestern and half Great Plains but there ain't one of them that's identical. Andrew's Mexican visage makes him the odd one out, but they're all the same two subspecies right down the middle.

...This can't be the only place like this.

"How many of these places are there?"

The fact there's only two here must mean there's other packs with their own dens for their own kinds.

But I shouldn't have asked, if I feel a little tension from my friend when he replies with "A lot. Only the higher ups know the number."

Because "Andy, is your boy gonna keep asking these questions?" is something we already agreed on.

"Nah, Gonz, he ain't."

I'm overstepping my boundaries, but I don't keep it in mind while we pass another apartment, and I
see it full of females listening to one recalling her Prey boyfriend's parents walking in on 'em.

"I looked at Buck's specist ass father and said Sir, eat him? Your son was eating me!"

The moment my eyes brighten, I'm about to bust out laughing with all the girl Wolves?

Andrew wraps his paw around my muzzle to leave me making an awkward snort.

Crosseyed with my tongue sticking out from my clenched teeth.

"Don't snoop on the girltalk, bro."

He's dragging me forward by my muzzle and the dorm behind me breaks out in gut-busters. I think it was at her punchline. I want to believe it was at her punchline and that they didn't see me getting corrected. I should have known better though.

I think I do, but that's a different topic than Lowe's "Andrew, homie, that 'yote did the same thing, what's with you and your Outside friends?"

In Andrew's best hushloud voice, "Lowe your thirst is half the reason we gotta keep the rooms segregated so don't you even start and Owen I swear to god if you don't keep your eyes forward-" "Awhll bu gud!" "Am I gonna have to micromanage your scrawny orange ass?" "Nhuh!"

A letting go comes with a shove pushing my face to the right before I swing it back forward. We turn a corner to enter a stairway without me making another incident. Two flights later, and Gonzo opens the door to the massive open space of a multi story penthouse suite. The one we're on lined with rows and columns of cots. There is a single young Wolf, he can't be more than eighteen or nineteen. An undertone of skittishness and apprehension that paints him being straight out of his parent's home. He's facing a much older Wolf and looking up to him in every sense. French cuff shirt and tie with a suit jacket laid on the side of the cot they're standing by, warmly reassuring his charge with an echo.

"We look after our own, pup. Nobody else might give a damn about us, but a Wolf always has a pack."

A gingerly raised paw, a folded bill, a timidly grasping hand.

"Forget everything else the World taught you. So you can remember that one thing when your turn comes to act on it."
And there ain't no mistaking it. That old male's the one running all of this.

"...I guess that makes my one a one twenny." a teenager'll admit before the reminder comes, "A hunnid an twenty you'll pay back when you can but not a moment sooner..."

The old Wolf's warmth is so bright I don't even feel it fade. With him looking to his left and seeing us. Seeing me. There's almost a tinge of relief I can read, but he's the most confident mammal in the room. It feels like he has to be, against how natural it comes anyway.

"Get out of here. Head back downstairs for now."

The young one heads out without even looking at us. This Wolf with the undone tie is unmistakably the Pack's Alpha: He's maintained this calming, scrutinizing gaze on me without breaking it once.

It says as much as "You're the Fox I've been hearing so much about." does

I'm trying to hold back the embarrassment, but I know he's caught it because I'm catching that amusement.

I'll try to play it off like "Good or bad, sir?"

Then realize I haven't said Sir in sincerity for as long as I can remember.

"...Depends on who I hear it from. Gonzalo says he nearly got himself in trouble." Gonz's temper flares immediately at the wordplay. That casualness bringing him to haste.

"I said he interrupted a deal and nearly-" "He interrupted what I told you to get out of, Gonzo."

The slightest gleam of ivory whites under tensing, pulled up chops.

I feel a little bit nervous but I'm not afraid. Neither is Andy.
Not by the Alpha. Nor by Gonzo's tucking back of ears to telegraph his resentment.

The kind their superior isn't gonna have when "You forgot that some of ours wear badges? Lupe is being transferred to narcotics, and you still sling?"

"Yeah, I'm slinging if it makes paper when I'm not getting messed up by-" "The Cops following this Fox to your paper chasing, the way folks in other packs conduct their business? All of that's null and void to the fact you're threatening our own! And making your brothers choose between policing or ignoring you and your thugging!"

"Well what am I and my boys supposed to do for money?!"

"You ask me that after the scene you just made in front of Andrew's boy? I'm done with you, here. All of you, pack your stuff back out of that apartment! You're sleeping up here again!"

Gonzalo and his ilk are fuming. He's distinctly aware of how much face he just lost, if most of them are more ticked off at him than Mr.Tie. That's why they'll turn around and leave me with Andy behind, without another word to anyone else but Gonz. So Mr.Tie can start regaining some composure to come back at me like he wanted. Pulling the curtains back down over his teeth, he was angry at them not us, and there's something in his body language that kept me at ease the whole time. Even while eight other Wolves next to me and Andy had their hairs raised. The kind of presence Lucifer would project if he could, when this Wolf has had to. I need to admire that ability to lead a little more naturally, as he sits back down on the cot.

"...Can't blame you if you thought Gonzalo represented all of us." he laments as if he even had anything to apologize for.

I only have to think on my phrasing for a moment as I come closer.

"Everything going on downstairs shows he don't. That's a community. Not a racket."

"But he still gave you that initial impression of the rest of us, before you came out of that elevator."

"...Well maybe he did but all I know now is, this is a den for Wolves."

Saying that out loud makes me realize how primal the concept is. How natural it must feel.

"You still have questions, though."

I kind of hesitate for a moment, but he's right and knows as much. It's uncanny that he's reading me
Yet I know why: "You knew a Fox for a long time."

I hit it right on the head. 
Caught this pack Alpha by surprise and gotten him to let off a chuckle.

"The best friend I ever had outside of a pack."

He pauses for a moment. Reminiscing. Laying down his defenses for a moment, to allow himself in his bitter age to be a little delicate to emotion.

"But are gonna let your curiosity eat away at you? Go ahead Kit, ask away."

... 

"...Why did it matter that I knew Andrew? Gonzalo could've come back here with a jackpot."

"And he would have gone against everything we stand for."

I realize the implication immediately.

"All Wolves. Not just you guys."

With how well organized and established this one Pack is, how adjusted they are to this, living like that would've been impossible if there wasn't a pre-existing structure to work off of. He nods his head ever so slightly to confirm my realization. Because Wolves were never allowed to fully integrate. They were never given equal participation in society. So their workaround to being ostracized was simple: They had to conduct their own in secret, to be kept so carefully guarded in order to survive in the prey dominated world around them... Noone even knows.

That "...You guys have lived like this for ages."

"Centuries."
There's no immediate bitterness in admitting it, how the injustice around them forced their entire kind to close themselves up and turn inward. It's just been a fact for them for generations.

The sun rises, crops come and go, noone gets any younger, and Wolves are the scum of the earth.

But if Wolves can only preserve themselves by a Genus-wide effort to survive at all costs... "...Then why'd you let Andy bring me here? My presence has this whole pack at risk."

A tinge of shame comes off of Andy, as his Alpha takes a moment to leer at him before bringing his eyes back to me.

"Because we look after the mammals that help us. Which is a fact I had to remind Andrew when I told him to bring you here."

After every thing I've put Andy through, I could understand if he didn't want to bring me here. It's the fact it was a total stranger, responsible for wellbeing of an entire community at stake who did I'm hung up on.

"...Why'd you make him do something like that?"

"Because he owes it to you and you needed it." he tells me.

Before his phone pops off a notification, with Andrew's phone follows suit as his elder checks his own.

And with a stern look on his face, he'll tell it to himself:

"Larry better have a good reason for this assembly."

The sound of commotion from the flight of stairs then through door swinging out behind me. A great mass of bodies, padded footsteps echo from the other side the threshold and out comes flooding in what's going to be every last Wolf that's here. I'm not done with the pack's Alpha, I don't even know his name, but I'm going to have to wait. We're enveloped by a tsunami of Wolves. Muffled conversations betray an uncertain nervousness. They make me ask Andy "How often does the pack do this?"
"Only when it's something big, bro. And unannounced like this... It's bad. It's gotta be."

"That ain't setting my mind at ease."

I know it's not about me, even if it was. But it's not.
It's about Larry, the Cops and a mental hospital. My mind is churning to how that all adds up.

But as a very scared, shaken up, exhausted and wild eyed Wolf in a pea coat and military khakis stumbles past me?

I get the feeling that I couldn't have a clue how it would.

The Lupines are still pouring in, but he's spotted and is shuffling through the crowd to get to Mr.Tie like he just came back from war.

I'm starting to worry. Hard.

"...Was that peacoat guy Larry?"

"Yeah, bro. That's him."

"What's with that henchman look?"

"I don't know. He's a Cop, but he's been out of uniform and acting weird for the past month."

I don't know why, but the amount of dread I felt from all of that is starting to settle into me.

Through layers from Lucifer, and that dark room where I helped him unravel who called for hunting me. And those layers are splitting themselves open. Larry's a cop, But he's dressed up like an underling. He's been acting strange for a month and he's not at Cliffside with the rest of the Cops.

Because he just came back from there.

Mayor Lionheart. His connections to the ZPD.

Fourteen missing mammals. Distraction.

All Predators
A remote location.

Owen, what the hell are you freaking out about?"

"I don't know if you get it yet after all this, but Larry ain't gonna cuff you. No cop living here is gonna-" "I know what Larry's been doing."

He has to pause for a moment to put it together.

"...What?"

Then he gets more upset.

"Alright Sherlock Hooves how the hell you figure Larry's got a thing to do with the longneck militia on Banyan street?"

"He doesn't. That was Dawn Bellwether. This is Lionheart."

The more I catch him off guard, the more fed up Andrew gets.

"You know what Owen, if Woolsey telling me to bring you here blows up it ain't gonna be in my..." He can't afford to raise his voice in the presence of his kin. "it ain't gonna be on me." Not when everyone's already on edge and those passing by us are feeling the tension coming off of me and him.

"if larry gets up there with nothin' to say that relates to Lionheart? i'm a paranoid ass idiot."

"You're a paranoid idiot with an APB that's been on the run for three days."

"Randall!" The Alpha's booming voice snaps me and Andrew out of it.
"Yeah, here!"

"How many are still coming in?!"

"About a few dozen, sir!"

"Alright We're starting once that door closes, everyone!"

I've caught it I think but I'm still gonna ask "Andrew, the pack leader's name is Woolsey, right?" just to make sure I get a hesitant "Yeah." out of him.

"Good, I don't want to keep calling him Mr.Tie in my head."

"Oh my freakan-" The door bangs shut loud enough for me to hear it over everyone else's conversations. The entire room starts to squat or sit cross-legged on the floor or over Cots. Then it looks toward a table I saw earlier. With Woolsey standing on top of it as a makeshift stage. As I sit down with Andrew, I'm painfully reminded of how sore my legs are and how worn out I really am.

"One of ours that's on the force called for general assembly! Larry's assured me this doesn't just concern us! This is every pack in the city, and every last predator! He has't explained any further, but has promised me he's not wasting our time! He'll explain himself without any interruption, then I'll say when it's time for questions!"

Using a chair as a step, Woolsey comes down and up goes Larry. Taken off his coat, still panting out of nervousness, he's looking to a crowd of mammals he knows intimately. Coming off like he's finally fully realizing the magnitude of whatever it is. I'm feeling his remorse all the way from the back of the room. While he starts to try at forcing himself toward a breakdown to tell us as it is. As gut wrenching as it's leaving him.

He still can't believe it's happened, but the proof is in the way it hurts to say it:

"...Mayor Lionheart has been arrested."

Every ear in the room is slowly raised alert when on it dawns on us, too.

"Some of the other Wolves running security for him got busted, too. They took in my friend from Tundratown."
Every set of eyes in the room is wild in shock. Every jaw is gaping like my own. The Mayor's been arrested. Everyone is quietly panicking. A bunch of Wolves, too.

"Theodore peeled a bunch of us from the precincts off the force to run a black op for him..."

Some are murmuring until they cease out of self-awareness.

"...We had fifteen Predators in an abandoned hospital while Lionheart tried to run containment on an outbreak. It started with two Wolves about a month ago. Then other Preds started getting it. The doctor he had running the place didn't think it's contagious, but we don't know."

The tension in the air is reaching a fever pitch and some start to freak. They mutter to themselves then each other out of shock, out of turn, and Woolsey has to cut in with a howling "Larry isn't finished and has the floor until I say so, keep your mouths shut and let him finish!"

His voice echoes. Larry doesn't continue until it stops.

"Noone's been able to explain it but for the past month... They won't talk or respond... All they'll do is walk around on all fours and maul anyone they can. It's been everything we can do with Lionheart to keep it off the news, but they've had victims. They attack prey first but... It's been everyone. The two Wolves had been the least aggressive, but that's only been around security. Like they recognized us as some of their own kind. But they don't react to any way we tried to communicate, None of them do, there's nothing behind their eyes and they all act like... Primal. Not even stone age. No higher function, I mean we can't even approach them without sedating them for the medical exams or they'll try to kill us and the doctor's run every test she could. But she can't figure it, can't even tell us or Lionheart that it's a pathogen or not and it's been getting worse... Last night, I had to net a Jaguar with Gary after he nearly got a meter maid and some civvie..."

...If any part of me wanted to be right. Even if I still couldn't imagine how much worse this all was... I want to take it back.

I want to take it all back when everything I just heard that was so much, so very much worse than all my cynicism could have accounted for.

Because what's about to come down over every predator in Zootopia is the storm of the century.

The one that noone in this room wanted to believe could happen.
But Wolves live on trust, and this is what the truth looks like.

"...And we did everything we could to catch these crazies before they caught attention, we covered our tracks the best we could and then... Then tonight, there was a breach. Someone started a howl. By the time we stopped and swept the perimeter, we traced them to a drain. They were already in, They were pros. They found the patients before we could find them, then they got out before we could catch them. It was all over, the Chief called in a raid we heard on a scanner, Lionheart told us to evacuate and he stayed behind with the Doc to take the fall. We tried to split up but they still got some of the security team... This is gonna be all over the news tomorrow and with us out of the picture... I don't know how bad it's gonna get but... This could be it. An outbreak, a riot, I don't know but... Us, Lionheart, we tried to defuse a landmine and somebody had to go step on it."

This is that thing Prey have always feared we were capable of.

That specist understanding that beneath some assumed facade, we were one excuse away from revealing how unevolved, how instinctive, how inherently violent we really were. This is that excuse for every unmentionable savior-complex wetdream of safeguarding the civilized and decent from murderous, predatory savages.

It's real. It's happening.

And all that Lionheart had attempted, with an over-publicized mammalhunt for me, was just keeping the levy from falling apart on us as long he could.

Tomorrow, the news is gonna break it for all the ratings and the profits.

Tonight, the first floor of this penthouse suite is reeling in terror.

We're not alone.

If the Wolves Lionheart pulled off the force for this, if they live in dens like this one, if they made it to their own,

Then they're telling their packs the same things he just told us.

What'd be like the second coming of rabies, if it was even half as bad as Larry made this out to be. What I can see that's left Woolsey wild eyed and afraid like the rest of us. Standing on the staircase to the second floor of this penthouse. The worst he's ever heard. The fact it's even gotten to him but yet he's got to snap his face out the shellshock. Break his fear off of himself because he's got to be the Alpha, right now. For the Pack he's responsible toward. To pick himself up while he tries to
fighting to ward off a fugue from disbelief. Walking forward to the table Larry's on top of. Looking up to for a moment, then back to us. He raises his hand to signal everyone to be quiet, and they obey. They'll understand perfectly that there's nothing any of us can say, anyway.

"Larry's gonna be held in my office upstairs for tonight. While I make some phonecalls to the other Alphas, confirm our situation with all of them. I don't know what I'm going to do with him, but you are all going to have to limit your travel in and out of the den. You all know how the City will react to this. I'll give more orders when I can, but if your cot's up here then get ready for lights out in ten. Everyone else go back to your dorms. Because that's everything I got to say to you."

...Then I'll look to Andrew on my left, while everyone starts getting up. Feeling somewhere, under all that shock and anger he's got alongside the rest of the room the frustration on how I nearly called it perfect. On Lionheart and Cliffside and almost all the scat I spouted off in a panic when Gonzo and his crew were about to kill him and turn me in. I was only off by one missing predator, from what a black Bull in an all black suit told me. The one Gonzo confirmed was real.

He's still gonna ask "How much of this you pieced together before Larry got up there?" though.

Not enough and too much, "I didn't want to piece together what I did."

He brings his paws to his face and under his breath, I can hear it coming out of him: "i didn't want you to be right."

My ears have been folded back this whole time along with his.

A quiet moment. I stare down blankly for a sec then back up.

The reminder's there through a gap in the crowd, in Woolsey escorting Larry up the stairs to his office.

It's brazen, but I'll stumble up to slip through the mass. Andrew's following, maybe I'm stepping out of line, here...

But I got to tell Espada what I know.

"Sir! Woolsey!"

He looks to me with a cocked brow, "I know this sounds crazy, but I need to get with a guy tomorrow."

I know better right now than to say a cop after everything Larry just laid out.

I'll know better than to let it slip I know Espada's name, all the same. Except a "Lucifer looking Bull that wears all black." is too much all the same not to send Larry reeling toward a backward
creep. Not to make it mean Woolsey's gotta grab him by the shoulder to keep him firmly in place when no, "It's not about Larry, ain't nothing to do with him, that Bull saved me from the cops, had me in his apartment and was investigating the missing preds-" But get it right, that's not the point I tell myself,

"Point is I think the assistant mayor's doing something with a longneck militia from the Meadowlands. I got to let him know I got a feeling. He thought Bellwether was involved with some of this and there's some shady scat on her I think he doesn't know about."

Something Woolsey needs to dwell for a moment before replying.

Less out of confusion, though. More like reminiscing on "There's only one Bull you'd be talking about. He saved my tail and I owe him."

He'll guess I do, too.

That "I'd be in a cage or dead if it wasn't for him."

"...And it's only because we'd both be, I'm gonna allow you. You're gonna be set to meet him in the morning. So be there thirty minutes early. Depending on what he wants, you're taking Larry with you... You get that this is the last time you're leaving here for awhile?"

"I get you, sir."

It's just dawned on me, but I think tonight's been one of the first times in my life I've ever said Sir in the way it's meant to be said. With true respect and without obligation or dishonest patronizing.

Like this pack's Alpha deserved it more than anyone else I've ever known.

Woolsey recognizes it, and so does Andrew.

I have one last thing gnawing at the back of my mind before I let up, though.

"About me..."

"Yes?"

"There was more to you having Andrew redlight me and having me brought here, wasn't there?"

Another pause.

He's reminiscing again and following it up with brooding.
"You and Andy remind me of my own friend. That and how tight the two of us were, before he had to shut his tailor shop down."

He's not used to exposing himself bare. In the position of authority like his, he can't really afford to. Especially not now.

"The best tailor in town, and he had to go down south for oil field work when there wasn't a job left in this town for him to raise a family with."

"...You never heard back from him."

"Been twenty eight years, now. He wouldn't have disappeared like he did if he had a say in it. I knew him better."

A moment of silence. A quiet acknowledgement by me of the unspoken truth: He either never made it, or never made it back.

"...But I did what I could for his wife and kit like I said I would."

I could keep asking, but I've got to stop.

"Thanks for everything Woolsey."

I think he said all he did to himself and Andrew more than me, anyway.

"Don't thank me. You're waking up in three hours to get ready to meet him."

And with "Let's go, Larry." the two go up the stairs.

Leaving me with Andrew. Leaving him with the insight Woolsey gave about his old Vulpine friend to make him reflect and feel guilty for having to get told to save my hide.

"Hey Oh, look."

I already have, "He chewed you out after I made the news, right? Before Lowe called you up?"

"...Yeah."

"Andy, I don't know what I would've done if I was in your place and you were just as crazy as I
was. I mean I can't really say I know scat about the Lupine code of conduct, but I can't blame you. That's what I'm trying to say. I know I'm a liability, here. I can't say I wouldn't do the same or that I hold it against you."

"...I appreciate it bro, but I still feel like scat."

"Hey, I don't know if Eva's alright, I've been running from the cops all night, nearly ran over, got chucked in a garbage can, punched in the face multiple times, almost got turned in, and lord knows what's gonna happen tomorrow when this Cliffside thing breaks out. I got three hours to sleep and I just need to know where I'm gonna do it."

...It took everything the past ten minutes gave me, just to keep my mind off of whether or not Eva is-
"Yeah, about that, you're gonna have to sleep on a cot with me."

Hard blush and my eyes go wide as saucers.

"What?"

"Like we used to do at the shelter. We don't have enough beds and cots for everyone here, anyway. Wally had to do it, too."

After all I've been through tonight, I'm too exhausted.

"It's either that or the floor, bro."

I couldn't protest even if I wanted to.

"You cool with it, Owen?"

I'll just roll with it, I guess.

"Yeah. Yeah I am... You're not gonna make it awkward, are you?"

The amusement on his face gives it away before he says it,

"I mean we don't have to spoon or anything."
He's gonna make it awkward.

I'm too tired to do anything more but sigh.
Dichotomy

Chapter Summary

Parts 1 & 2

I couldn't be well-rested enough to abide by this, even if I had a solid twenty four of sleep.

Because it's not the fact I woke up to someone snickering and the feeling of Andrew's left arm draped over me. That might've been an hour and thirty ago. Wasn't even awake enough to get phased over spooning happening like he said it wouldn't. Nah: What's eating my grapes are the only spare clothes they had that'd fit a Fox. I'm wearing the Den's leftovers from when a single mother stayed for a brief stint. If the cops are still looking for me, they're gonna make me anyway, but regardless? I needed to change clothes out. And maybe I look ridiculous enough that it'd throw the bacon off long enough for me and Andy to evade 'em. Maybe that'll turn this around into a godsend.

Because it's not that I'm ungrateful.

It's that I'm wearing a some Pup's hand-me-down pair of youth sized cargo shorts and the print on the front of the same size of shirt says BIG WOOF WANNA FIGHT ABOUT IT?

...But if Andrew would just stop teetering on the edge of cracking up at the sight of my stupid azz lookin' self?

I wouldn't have the agitation that's keeping him on the brink of bursting out laughing.

I'm not even mad. Just running on two and a half's worth of sleep, coupled with a fear of the immediate future on my mind on top of not being able to stop worrying about Eva. Wolves are as good at reading emotions as they are bad at hiding them. He gets me, but he can't help it so I can't blame him. I look like an actual joke. Only I don't have the patience for this and that's what makes it harder for Andy to get a grip on himself. But I don't feel like catching this 22, right now. So before this vicious cycle repeats, he starts laughing again for me to tell not to? I'ma be the responsible adult here that brings it to an end. Dramatically. Throw my paws up in the air to looking at him with the angriest pair of eyes I can conjure up.

And yell out "What?!" with 'em to make Andrew finally bust like he wanted to.
And he does.

"What?! What?! Ya skinny azz twig! Ya fat azz pizza zit! What?!"

He can't walk upright.

"Owen...! OC could you just-" "Could I what?! You stringbean! You chubbaloid!"

He can't walk straight now either.

And he just turned his back to me?

I'm gonna go hard, now.

"Turn around and say it again! Turn around and say it again, I dare you, ya dang azz goof troop mo fugga!"

I just felled him like a lumberjack. Got him falling over himself in the middle of this alley. He can't get up, he can't breath, he needs Life Alarm and crap I can't help it, either.

I can't maintain character like Sasha Bear Cohen. Gotta laugh at myself with him, too.

He can barely gasp out "Owen, what the freak?!" and I can hardly let this out either: "Andy... AHAH HAH HAH... We're not going nowhere 'til you get all 'em hyuckles out yer system!"

"Fox, please."

He can't.

"Please, Fox, no."

He don't wanna but I'm gonna make him, "So help me god, we'll spend the next hour here if we have to!"

He's still reeling as he blurts out "I can't- Ok, ok, I'm over it!"

The thing is, "You're still laughing! We're not moving an inch until you can look at me straight."

It takes a few minutes, but by the end of it, we can both look at each other with a straight face and I help him back up.

"...Would've stopped laughing eventually, bro."
I'm dusting off the back of his plaid shirt as best as I can while retorting "Yeah but you're over it now and I ain't meeting up with a Bull while you're trying to stop yourself!"

"Whatever, Owen. You remember where Mister Tie told you Larry's at?"

Oh, he wants to make it like that?

I can dish it out, too, and with a better scat eating grin than he can cook up.

"You forgot, Andrew?"

"Owen-" "Ah, na-na-na-na-Nah. Nah nah, you're telling me. I know I know where Woolsey told me to direct Lucifer but I don't know if you know. You wanna come at me with things I call people when I don't know their names? Burden of proof is on you."

He tosses his paws up with a groaned "Please." and I gotta follow it up with "Hey, what if we get separated or the Cops bust me?"

I can tell he's gonna put it on me before he even shoots off "What if you could stop running around in public?" but I ignore it for now.

"So you know where in the world is Larry San Diego or not?"

A quick "That's not his last name, bro." and I'm starting to get flustered, "You gonna answer my trick question?"

A sigh later and he relents:

"Under the northwest pillar of Lionsgate bridge to Outback Island. Can I go now, teach? Did I pass the test?"

"Yeah but where's your homework assignment?"

I couldn't let that opportunity go.

"Oh this freakin fool over here."

"Yeah, this fool." I'll confirm with a smug pointing of my thumbs to myself as he follows up with "Yeah, the one that won't wait a warrant out." to put it back on me.

Like "The punk that don't know when to stop pressin' his luck." is all my reason to stick my neck out
like this.

And it's right now, as I'm starting to grasp my deeper motivations, that I give voice to the ones on the surface.

"I can't backburner what I know, Andy. I gotta interface with someone on it. Lucifer needs to hear me out an even if I had his contact info, this scat ain't phoneline material. So you're tailing me in case I gotta pass the baton."

"'Kay, why didn't you just get someone else to tell him for you?"

I fire off an immediate "Because..."

...

"Because what?"

I think I got it, I just didn't know how to rightly put it at first.

That "I need to bounce ideas back and forth on him. What you told me about Wally and Banyan street has something to do with Bellwether and I wanna see where that relates with him to what's all happened."

...But it's more than that.

And he's more frustrated than dismissive as he turns his head to me like "First porkchop to act halfway friendly and you wanna play Waterson with him?"

Though I get it, just riles me a little as I continue while the two of us round the corner of this alley to hit the sidewalk.

"...Whether or not he's got a badge ain't the point. This whole Cliffside thing can set us back a hundred years."

The sidewalk's got traffic, but not like a Gnu York sidewalk ought to have. Up until now, we'd taken a taxi driven by one of Wolves living in Woolsey's den, and had otherwise kept to alleys to be safe.
"You think you can put a lid on Preyfolk stampeding over us about the new rabies?"

Now, I'm on the home stretch to a Bug Burga with insider knowledge and there's mammals out, but the crowd feels strange.

"No Andrew, I think Lucifer might an if I can help even his odds? Then I owe it."

The neutrality isn't there and every other mammal is more dazed than guarded.

Like they've just been in a car crash. "You owe me a break, bro!" Lionheart made the morning news cycle. "You're getting one when I do!" Andrew is too caught up with me to have it as he continues. "Then when're you giving yourself one?"

And I want to tell him I wish he hadn't even gone through all the grief over me that he already has.

That's beside the point, though.

But I don't really know when this is gonna end.

I got nothing defined enough to tell him.

So he's just gonna have to take the remorse for him on my face and run with it on his own.

"Owen, You've got more awareness than the rest of us about all this. You proved that last night and I get it... I just want to make sure you know what you're getting us into."

...Me having to meet up with Lucifer though. It's more than just telling him about Banyan.

And I think I know what more is, now.

Something to tell "Andy..." before it can sink in, inside of my head: "You remember Marula Park the other day?"

"Yeah, that dumb trigger happy hippo cop?"

"No. You telling me not to die, about being impossible and everybody worrying about me while I was more worried about my stuff than myself."

"You got a habit of that."

"Well, I still don't care enough about myself. I get that, too. But I care too much right now about
everyone around me to change that just yet. Because I'm too tired of watching scat happen to everyone around me."

I'm ready to risk getting burned if it means pulling everyone else out of the fire.

Something to make him do an about face to stoop down to eye level with me in a sudden "You know what, Owen?" that catches me offguard. Gets the hairs of my brush standing on end to leave me quietly muttering out the "What?" that he'll holds onto for a moment.

For the sake of tension, while the crook in his developing smirk gives away why his eyes furrow, before telling me in his best deadpan tone,

That "I still can't take your trill hide seriously with that shirt on you."

Gives the both us a good laugh as he straightens up, doing his best to keep his non-predatory smile on, like the stereotypical Lupine he is. I won't have it, though. Flashing my canines since he won't show his own off, I punch the side of him and I'll make him bring his own out. I'll tax him for that burn, if it feels like it's gonna be awhile until things calm down. If we'll have to worry more than ever about showing what's in our mouths, without preyfolk fearing we're reverting. Besides, all this, and all my efforts to exacerbate the situation, is still only just enough to keep me from losing it about a broken phone. About it still powering on, but the screen being too cracked to light up. About Eva's area code and not being able to remember the rest of her number.

Andrew's abiding by all the grief I'm putting him through because he knows it's the only thing keeping me sane.

It's a short while later, but we're coming up to the address with nothing worse than more quick nervous glances by prey pedestrians than usual. The news stands along the way confirmed the reason I already knew for the alertness of prey on the sidewalk. That extra bit of rigidity in their tensed bodies as we slipped from their gentrification to softcore pred ghetto in the span of a few blocks. I try to keep my mind off it, but I can't ignore what I'm feeling from the preds we're sharing the cement with. Theirs are better informed fears than preys'. Mirror my own insight and Andrew's on how much more precarious our existence became overnight. Their reminder has that internalizing at the forefront of our minds.

They make the two of us take stock of our surroundings one more time, before ducking into the smell of grease and bug juices wafting through the open door. I can immediately identify the scent of grilled roach. They're pulling their limited time only nonsense with the bib burga again, like Snarlbuck's does with the manufactured scarcity of carrot spiced lattes. I'm scanning the dining area and the contents of a diner's paws beside my left confirms it. A slightly overweight African Lion whose body language makes him the textbook definition of a stress eater. An apprehensive Lycaon Pictus at a table close by with two other African Wild Dogs. She's trying her best to distract herself from our collective new world, watching the Panthera Leo while her kin quietly panic at each other.
Before turning her eyes to me and Andrew, while a quietly exhausted Arctictis Binturong on my right in his convenience store attire zones out to the top 40 on the PA. As a lupine father and his boy have fun a little too loudly behind him and-

Him.

Toby Antelier.

The token prey boy Buck.

Looking at me nervously.

Looking at him in complete shock.

Sitting at a table at the far side of the dining area I am now quietly rushing towards as he get now rushing to.

"Toby!" I can't keep my voice hushed enough for Andrew to not shake his head like I'm sure he's doing right now. "What're you doing here, boy?!"

He's so out of place, here, and he's showing it in his nervous posture.

"Owen? You told me to come here."

An earnestly cocked brow and tilted head from me.

Nervousness gives way to tensed concern in Toby's lanky form, like I'm duping him.

"You told me to come here, Oh. Get to this address by 6:45 sharp and I'll be there at seven. That's what you texted me at 5:32."

I'm brought back to the feeling of my broken Blueberry that's in my front left pocket. It hasn't left that pocket since I got dressed in this wolf pup's attire. I know, I know I was barely even awake at 5:30 to begin with.

How could I have texted him with a broken phone?
I'm supposed to meet the scariest damned cop I've ever bore witness to, and I have someone else with me? When it was clear it was just supposed to be me and Andrew following me that'd meet with black on black on black lucifer? I know better than that, but I know Toby better than to lie and there's a reason he's here.

My phone is broken.

How is he here?

"...I didn't text you, Toby. My phone's-" "Owen, I don't care. I would have come anyway. Just please... What the heck happened?"

Pleading eyes. Wit's end. He cuts me off before I can even start explaining. Quietly hushed tone, hoping that the din of the kitchen and customers will drown his words out. "I know you weren't responsible. The news barely said anything about the Pig that started it. I know you're not a villain, but what happened?"

I take a wild guess: "...Me lashing out at the Elk."

"Yeah, Owen. ZNN wouldn't even let him on to explain that he wanted the Police called off. That and last night's show... Last night more than anything."

I have to look a way for a moment while my hindsight kicks into overdrive to lay my sins bare before me. When I look back at him, it's just as quiet in acknowledgement as his gaze is in judgement.

"I'll start with the Elk." I tell him, before I seat myself.

"Alright. I'm listening." He says with a forward lean. Vexed. Impatient.

"I'm buying for me and Owen while we're waiting for Satan to show up. Hey Oh, what you want?"

Toby's inquiring look to Andrew at the namedrop I can't explain, but "...Two number ones, sandwich only." as I seat myself and the Wolf leaves us with a leering frown for me to feel.

It'd take too long to tell him about Lucifer.

So with a resting of elbows on a tabletop and a moment, I think I'm ready to pour myself out through my mouth. The pause is only there to get the wording right, but it doesn't help to soften the facts: "...I could barely hear anything coming out of that martial art instructor's mouth. That Pig was screaming right in my ear."

I have to pause, because another thought just occurred to me, "Even if I could hear him, then what? The only thing I could get from him was that he had as much prey guilt at that moment as Buffy does on a good day."
Toby wants to say something, but he doesn't have enough to go on just yet, so I continue with "Like what, that makes it all better? Even though he caters to paranoid prey folk? When half of his instructions are about the day their kids, fawns and calves are gonna have to go knock out a gang of kits, cubs and pups?"

God, yeah that sounds bad, but I think it's the truth my instincts had subscribed to at that moment.

I can feel tension in Toby, but he's quick to tuck it back in. Feeling like genuine inquiry when he completes my thought with "Nothing he could say could make up for the things that Pig said."

"No."

"He still represented to you, everything that made that Pig who he was."

He's got it right.

There's more to what I did but "Yeah.", I think that's the jist of it.

Another pause. Halfway for the caution of making sure our hushed tones haven't been translated by the other patrons. Prey are obvious when scanning their surroundings around preds, but I think Toby did a good job at concealing it as he straightens up while musing "Alright. I get that. I can't blame you. It's still screwed up but I get it."

This is the part where Toby stops and Buffy would have gone on justifying it like a butt patting, paw holding idiot. I'm going to flat out admit it though: "I was still wrong for swiping at an open hoof. After everything he did to put his hide on the line to bust that Pig's chops."

Alright. Friday morning covered. Toby's quick to move on.

"So what about last night?"

This is the part I can't soften. Maybe it's for the best. Maybe I don't need to ease this blow: "I didn't know you were playing until we were already halfway there." "But why did you go in the first place?"

I can feel it in him that he's still miffed at my slight for crashing his show, but I think it's more that he's concerned about me than himself, because as upset as he is for the show getting crashed, it's more that the stakes were infinitely higher for me. That he's not a pseudo-pushover like Buffy, but that he's frustrated with someone he's emotionally invested in.

"Let alone the fact I was playing, why didn't you go into hiding after Saturday night?" declares it truth.
Dictates that I state the obvious of "I should've known better, right?"

Frustration pulls the curtains half over his eyes "Yeah. You've never done something that stupid before. What gives?"

The girl.

"The Girl."

He's about to sigh in anger, and what I've got to say next won't make it better for him.

"She convinced me to shed my species' modus operandi."

"To get yourself in a jail or morgue?"

No, he doesn't get it. I still get it, but I'll never say it as convincingly as she did.

"No... To live life. Not to run from it like Foxes do in self preservation. But to pursue it, because even in failure, she still sees the virtue of trying."

That's if she still sees, dependent on if she still breaths.

My beautiful masked dancer.

My ship of priceless fools floating adrift in my head.

Her eyes. Her smile.

My undoing I'd give anything to repeat, now clouding my mind to brew a storm in her absence.

But my ears still register the tempo of Andrew's footsteps.

I still feel his closing proximity as he walks up to deadpan me with "...I swear to god if your crazy Fox ass was a Wolf then a couple years of being the pack pinata would learn some discipline on you."

Toby wants to laugh. I do, too. But I can't so neither can he. The buck is too emphatic to disregard
The Wolf leans forward as his face contorts into the personification of Are You Being Serious Right Now. I don't immediately respond to it, but merely offer to challenge it with a blank expression for confirmation.

He could huff and puff, but replies instead with "Okay, Owen, explain to my Wolf azz why your problem isn't discipline?"

In the back of my mind, I'm revisiting that Elk. I should be focused on defending my position.

But I'm going to multitask instead.

"Because my real problem is cowardice."

Cowardice doesn't explain me lashing out at the elk, so what was it? Fear, and by extension, cowardice?

"Owen, bro, you've done stuff not even a Bull or Horse has the stones for."

No. Something else.

"Out of fear and the necessity I felt for running."

I... What was it? Rage? Rage. Anger. Must've been.

But why lash out at the Elk instead of the Pig?

For what else than what I've already explained to Toby?

Because there must have been something else.

"Which you wouldn't have to if you had the discipline not to do stuff like clear out the ramen house."

I'm so caught up between my rage at the Elk and defending my stance to Andrew that I'm not even paying attention to Toby. I'm so disconnected from everything around me right now.

Anger, but for what else?
"That's different. That and risking my azz to keep a cheetah couple together was courage."

But it was something else, too.

"Cheetah couple?"
"Long story."

"Whatever. Point is that ramen shop act was stupid. Almost as stupid as telling Gonzalo and his crew that you had to talk to a Cop after they saved you from some. Just like you telling Toby to come."

No, not discipline.
Responsibility? No.
Agency? Wait.

That's it.

"I didn't though."

Agency. I didn't lash out at the Pig, but the Elk.

"Didn't what, bro?"

And I lashed out because he did what I couldn't.

I couldn't lash out at the Pig, because I would be punished, but the Elk could, because he was prey, and I couldn't because I was a predator.

"Tell Toby to come, Andrew."

I had no agency to bring my claws out and slice into the fat around that porcine stomach.

The Elk had to beat him for me, instead of me doing it myself.

Because I would have been gone to jail for what the Elk did for me, who I'm sure got clean away with because he was in the privileged position to defend my honor like some knight I never wanted.

"Yes you did. Yes. You. Did. And you lack discipline so much that you can't even own up to hitting up Toby to come down here."

I'm so fed up with this texting Toby thing that I know that I didn't do that I can't let it linger any longer.

"My phone is freaking broke! How could I even.-" My attention shifts from Andrew and my own thoughts to "Toby get your phone," and the fact he can prove I..
I'm so speechless I can't even finish the thought.

I'm just as wide eyed as Andrew is. As every predator is. Every pair is on the buck we been ignoring all this time. Who's got his hooves wrapped around one of our burgers. One of our predator azz, made for sharp-tooth'd consumption, meat substituting, 100% all cricket patty bugburga sandwiches. With a gratuitous, perfectly round bite wound straight through to the center. The entire world has stopped to marvel at history in the making. Toby, an absent minded buck, just swallowed and is only now realizing the weight of an action noone could've been prepared for. Who's too self conscious not to know what a center of attention he's made of himself, too timid a person to not blush so bright he's painting half the city block red with embarrassment.

Dead silent. Dead still.

And then, to the left of us, a loud, curious, prepubescent "Is he a predator now?"

Everyone but the Pup and Toby The Predator explodes. We're laughing so hard we're all screaming, reeling, we're crying, we're threatening to blow our diaphrums asunder and if space wasn't a vacuum, not even the biggest star going supernova could make this much noise. There's gonna be at least several tables smashed from the pounding of pawpads and claws and fists pounding on them. Nobody has laughed this hard. Ever. We haven't needed to like we had to, this morning. Everything else as uncertain as imposing as it around us.

And noone's ever had a better reason to crawl in a hole an die than Toby does right now.

I'm so lost in laughing, I can't even pay attention to whether or not he actually has.

I'm so distracted, I'm not aware of the rage burning up the place. Until the legs of a chair have slammed hard enough against the floor, the impact claps like thunder with the aftershock of a food tray being slammed down on our table. The entire storefront's silent in a split second. He's commanded that it be without a word. With action alone. He manifested himself without one single clack of hardened keratin against the tile floor. He just as silently seats himself beside me and opposite of Andrew. And it's now, when I can see him in proper light, that I can see the musculature of his frame. I don't even have to gauge his muscles through his suit.

His neck ripples with them. bending to the right while he lets off a crackling of ligaments like the
pops and staccato of a nearby warzone that'll go on from the end of his rightward leaning of his head and into the leftward roll. Another firefight, a deeply meditative warding off of hellfire and brimstone in his stiff forward posture. He could charge, right now. He could gore this entire place but he's trying not to. Everyone knows better than to break this silence. To be the first one that speaks then draws his ire. I haven't noticed, until now, just how many burgas he has on that food tray, until he unwraps the first of two full sized, three patty burgers.

With one set of hooves, he takes the thing to decimate half of it like a dreadnought class battleship with a mouth. Another bite, and it's gone to free both hooves up for another as he continues to ignore me, to leave my conscience to work on me before he starts. He doesn't have to say a thing. He doesn't even have to turn his leer to me. The power of his presence is all it takes to make me take stock of everything I did he told me not to. I didn't crawl. I didn't hide, keep a profile low enough to not get spotted and I didn't even try. I disobeyed resoundingly. And with a newfound fear, I am starting to respect the scale of my folly. Everything he must've done for me.

With everything I could do to spite better judgement.

I'm going to be the first to speak.

Noone else deserves it more than I do.

And I'm the only one here that has an idea of how bad it's gonna be.

With another bite of half a burger in his mouth, I start to mutter out the beginning of an apology.

The springing of muscles to the billow of shoulders like a wave of fire.

The barely chewed mass of patty and bread flies out of him to ricochet like a bullet off the table as it misses Andrew and Toby.

They're stumbling backwards in their seats from the fright.

I would be, too.

"You will Speak when you are Spoken to and if you ever inteRUPT A MAMMAL AGAIN WHILE HE IS EATING, I WILL  PRY YOUR HEAD OFF OF YOUR SHOULDERS WITH NO REMORSE! DO YOU HEAR ME, FOX?!!"

But I know something else, now, as the waves of dread wash over me like the reverberation of Lucifer's atom bomb voice. In the presence of a burning ball of fire with a diameter of millions of miles, it will do no good for me to go fugue again. Like I did with the Pig. Like I have so many times before. I know better than that, now. I fight off the limpness with tension, look past that hoof pointing at me, into his eyes, and without fear, without anger, I stare calmly into the depths of his
horizontally slanted pupils to nod my muzzle up and then down to confirm.

Because I remember what he said about fear, about respect, and as a godlike figure, he'll have the respect in me he expected of me.

Respect that Andrew doesn't know, nor Toby, if they can only know fear in their first encounter with the devil. They're trembling on the floor, but I can see it in him that he knows I'm starting to give what he wanted out of me.

He's not done, though. I know better than that, after my trespasses.

In one fluid motion, he moves his gaze to "You there. The father with the pup." while revealing a hundred dollar buck in between his cloven hooves.

"Your son does not need to see what I have in store for this Fox beside me. Leave here, without recollection of what has transpired before you."

Without a word, he gets up, dodges the spat out burger beside his chair, cautiously takes the payment, and turns around.

"Let's go." he tells the child. Obedience.

The storefront as still as a painting as they walk out the door, quiet as mannequins at 3AM. Ram Smith's Not The Only One plays quiet on the PA. The song and the single parent were seemingly the two things beyond his control, in spite of the control he still holds over the situation. He doesn't even move but to keep his head transfixed on them until they're out of sight. Out of mind. Then devours the rest of his second burger, unwraps his third. Bite. Chew. Swallow. Bite. Chew. Swallow. The point has been proven that Toby is not the first prey mammal to eat a predator's foodstuff, but not just yet has the point been proven of how omnipotent he is.

That, he's going to make clear right now: He takes my burger first. I cannot and will not challenge the act when I deserve worse. It's gone in an instant. Now Andrew's burger, and I have to hold my left paw out to Andrew to communicate that he needs to let it happen. It's gone just as quick as mine, anyway. And finally, in spite of the bite already taken out of it, he takes in kind the burger Toby took from us. His frightened cervine grip too loose to offer resistance. It's not a temper tantrum, but a Samual L. Catson act straight out of Pup Fiction. Dominance. Control. The way he leered at all three of us as he took our food and claimed it.

I got the image in my head of him having done it before. To murderers and cops, both. And now us, as he consumes that small burger in one fell swoop of a methodical chew and swallow. Staring at Toby as he does so. Mentally dissecting him, like a science class frog.
Neatly laying out all the metaphorical organs that comprise the summation of that Deer's being: "Antelier, Tobias. Age twenty Four. Five foot Six. Applied to Goatelins immediately after Graduating from Zootopia University with an art major. Your parents nearly disowned you when you switched from Journalism and Marketing majors to pursue Art. Your father's executive position at Zootopia Times guarantees you make rent every month for your Herd street Studio apartment."

Lucifer...

"Owen did not bring you here. I did."

...How?

He's reading the confusion off of me with a glance, but continues to address Toby. Even though it's actually me he's talking to me when he tells the frightened buck "You may ask me One Question."

Because he knows I'm better able to handle him, now.

That would mean one less ounce of control he would have.

He's better than a master of Chess, because he knows the only winning move is to not play at all. The Buck is terrified, but I'm seeing him think back to his investigative journalism courses. By some miracle, he has the gumption to ignore the Why, and use his newsman son's wit to express "How?"

The Bull isn't showing it, but I know he's pleased.

"...Have you heard of Aetobatus Laticeps?"

The deer thinks for a moment before being stunned. The assumption that the Deer remembered his latin was correct.

He'll try to hide it, but the telegraph has already been received.

"...You do. Like an advocate against the surveillance state that does not know when to stop prying."
No point in the Buck hiding it, now.
When I don't know what Lucifer is on about, and neither is Andy.

As Toby becomes a little more horrified.

"...i-I'm a law abiding citizen, sir-" *And I am not here to Arrest you. Regardless of whatever degree of Aiding and Abetting I can get you on in spite of your defense.*

It doesn't put him at ease, because that statement wasn't designed to.

It was a test and Toby failed it.

"*Your paranoia causes you to freeze up. The psychological profile from C.A.F.I. is correct. I could run you over right now. You would not even begin to Flinch until I made impact.*"

Lucifer is baiting him.

It's working.

A hint in the angry reaction of "What version of Eagle Ray is it, sir?", and I finally get it.

Eagle Ray.

The catch-all name for cellphone surveillance software.

My blueberry was being monitored the whole time.

It didn't matter if the thing's a prepaid burner, that's how they found me last night.

The amount of precautions I took to keep my identity and my cell number, my SIM data separate makes my horror that much more profound.

They found me regardless.

The Bull's slightest understated satisfaction.

The dread me and Toby feel is rubbing off of Andrew, as Espada entity leans forward to reveal that Laciteps is "*The most comprehensive version to date. It allows for all currently known forms of Triangulation. It can also search for data from all networks and devices. Allowing me to find the name Owen Conrad Fuchs as it was stored in the contacts of a loathed Bison Bison.*"
I am crawling in my own orange pelt.

A simple innocent act of never thinking to tell someone to not save my number under my name was all it took.

The omniscience of a Rawiellian distopia I never know could be this all encompassing, let alone exist on this scale.

"I can even trick a cellular phone's CID to display that you are receiving a text message from a number you had never thought to be skeptical of. Like one belonging to a Vulpes Vulpes with an All Points Bulletin on him."

"...my phone..." slips out of me.

"Of Course Your Phone, Fox! YOU DID NOT THROW IT AWAY! YOU KEPT IT ON THIS ENTIRE TIME! YOU ALLOWED YOURSELF TO BE FOUND LAST NIGHT! YOU NOT ONLY DISOBEYED MY COMMAND TO HIDE IN THIS CITY LIKE A ROACH, BUT SHINED A LIGHT ON YOURSELF IN DOING SO!"

The violence of his mouth is so great, I think the windows of the place flexed. Toby has fallen on the floor and he's trembling. Andrew is, too. Their mouths are both loosely agasp. But I don't fear what I deserve. For all the dread in me, and the shock of big brother's ability, I know I do.

"Four Hours. Thirty Seven Minutes. And if a new recruit had not discovered Lionheart's covert Operation, IT WOULD HAVE CONTINUED BEYOND MY CONTROL UNTIL THEY CAUGHT THEIR PRIZE! ALL OF MY EFFORTS TO END THE FOX HUNT WERE FOR NOUGHT! THEY WERE WASTED ON AN INGRATEFUL FOOL! If I had not had the Due Diligence to turn off my radio while observing Cliffside Hospital from downwind, Your Disobedience would have distracted me the entire time!"

That blacksmith Bull regards me from on high as he gets up like a hydraulic press on the methodical upswing,

"CAN YOU EVEN BEGIN TO FATHOM HOW UNPRECEDENTED YOUR INSOLENCE IS TO ME?!

Readying to strike down.

"WHAT CAN YOU DARE SAY FOR YOURSELF!?!"
My ears are long past ringing, and it wouldn't surprise me if the decibel count means permanent damage. I've just survived a hurricane. Pressure this crushing couldn't be found on the bottom of an ocean. But I can't allow the grief to have me falter. It's more than just deserving it. I know that, now. Some part of me is sure this ain't what he wants out of me. But for what feels like the first time in my life, I'm going to allow myself to be cornered. Of my own free will by something out of my control with nothing left to gain or hold back, I'll tell him the truth, and it'll come out...

"...That I'm here when I don't give a damn about my homeless ass so whatever you do after I tell you why is fine, but there's an angle to what's been going down at City Hall an it ain't me. I think it's bigger so I gotta be sure you know if you don't already because I should've known better but my life is hell and for a second? For a second I cared about it getting better when I was shown something else but now I don't. There ain't a damned thing I can have for myself and if what's been brewing that I got used to cover up can be kept from blowing up on everyone else? Then that's it. I've been so tired of scat coming down on others, so done now with doing nothing about it, if I can tell you something new and it'll keep the worst from escalating.... That's it. A Girl I didn't deserve an everyone else I'll worry about. Long as you can do something with why I had to see you, then what comes after don't matter."

...I want better for noone else but everyone else...

...I think that turned something around on him.

What I didn't even think could happen but it's there.

Leaves me caught off guard like I caught him.

From the proof of being more honest with myself than I ever have, to him staring at me blank and right through it. Trying to hide something while his eyes glass over before he looks away.

Making connections he wish he wouldn't, with the whole place silent an still enough, I think I feel a single tear I can't see coming out.
And that's what got everyone in here surprised.

Somehow, that's what left them more shocked than everything else that had happened up until this point and I don't get it.

Why isn't there a single phone out to record all this or call the cops? Why hasn't anyone spoken up or ran the hell out of here and why are they all acting like this is the most unfamiliar thing they...

... The Grizzly Bear I've just crossed a glance with, with what remains of her fear for an attacker already exiled.

... The reformed gangbanger's remorse from the stress eating Lion.

... The quietly relieved gratitude of the African Wild Dogs for a loss of life that had been reconciled in the court of Espada's law.

"...You filled up this entire place with folks you knew."

He's got aces on his aces up his sleeves.

He managed to pack a fastfood joint overnight in the pre-dawn hours.

His taser must have tasers mounted top to bottom.

He could say he really is the Devil and I'd believe it.

All the control he expected to have, all the precautions he took, "That Wolf with the Pup was the only one you didn't." but he was still ready to deal with that.

Just not with something he didn't wanna accept.

Something feeling more than just "But could ever believe who you are to some of them?" and more like a reason to him, because he's looking back at me now and I can feel it.

But I can't get what's behind that overwhelmed, softly craned smile or those placidly plotting eyes.

That's the scariest thing, now.
Because I can't pin down a damned bit of "What the hell could I be besides reward money?"

And that's what get him back to mad.

Only not callous.

I guess that I thought, I had him figured out, "**Do you understand why I agreed to this with your charge?**"

I guess not, if I can only tell this much: "...It wasn't just where Larry's waiting on you."

When it's obvious enough he had another agenda between his black tipped horns. Whatever he's got in mind, now, I don't get it.

I'm just pliable enough to "**Stand up**." and do what he says like he expected all along.

I tried every other path but Espada's and I'll take it, this time.

If what I said had him put whatever was his first point to make on the backburner.

Couldn't be what I came to tell him out of guilt or a need.

Threw him off like it did about me.

**About "Lidia."

The screeching of a cheap chair in backward motion from the egress.

**Taxidea Taxus. Female, Mid thirties.**

Badgers aren't violent by default, American or not.

**No Predator immediately is like we're figured.**

It's only when they're cornered that they fight the same as anyone would try to and she comes forward, with the two of us lock eyes, I'll feel that nervous regard of flight and a weariness for the fight.

Before she looks to Espada, making a play in asking her "**Do you know who I brought here, before you?**"
Knowing I couldn't begin to think of what it is we have in common.

"No.", if she don't know the Bull's endgame, either.

A quiet pause.

Come what may.

"...This is the mammal who found the hammer, that convicted his murderer."

...What comes to her like an infected wound torn open for the salt.

To retake bone and reset it as it ought to be.

Relief like what I'm watching, it's too intense to register all at once.

He's just peeled back in her a hurt someone else inflicted.
Give it a moment.

A death that left her hollowed out in the half life of what came after.

Her body was still a husk, up until now.

After everything else was said and done, there was still this one thing left she needed.

Though it registers, now: That closure he just made with one final bit of suture.

Filled to the brim overflowing with gratitude.

The same as her eyes flying up to mine because she's shaking, she's breaking up and charging forward to throw herself at me.

Reeling back's a nervous habit undone by a lunge and grappling.

The hammer's struck, now the turn's mine.

Giving it a moment, while She cries and laughs through a loss like she couldn't afford before now.

She couldn't shout Thank You louder with her throat than she's screaming it, in her shaking, weak, relieved frame and it overwhelms me.

In between her finally getting out through her mourning, and me turning 'round to see that Bull looking someone else dead in the eyes.

With a nod toward confirming "He found Officer Chloriform's knife." and even in his bold tongue, I could faintly hear him over this Badger.

Or the second voice crying out agonized relief.
Past a second shove coming from the side that I only know is the Grizzly from the fact we're in the air.

This bearhug is trembling like I am, in my embrace of the Badger like she is, the same as all of us are from the burning relief of letting out rotten blood.

A levy has been broken through by a lightening storm of tears.

What was lost to the flood, the two of them gained back in what he finished.

What started in the mending I began.

And it's not like I'm absolved...

...Then it resonates that "You have resolved more murders and lesser sins than any detective has on the force in five years."

With the tears of a survivor pouring over me.
Then it connects.

How I thought the evidence never would, thinking what I'd leave out wouldn't mean enough.

Like it does for the several more too overwhelmed not to reel in their seats.

When it makes sense if "I had brought every soul I served to bear, so that a point could be made on you of my Control."

But with me and Liddy getting thrashed left to right, the sweeping swell finally catches up to me while the others watch this.

It's understood "How unlike You they Devoted themselves to the Respect I Commanded." and knew the reward.

The same as what I was to folks I never met, against what could never be replaced.

Sees me crying over what I meant, though still I'd argue I don't deserve this, "....I see the correlation that declares you past my plan of crucifixion now," And I can feel this,

The thing that could never be defined. 

"That leaves me knowing the truth of why you had done all you have." would fail to have me realize.
I learned a lesson, here.

Something he didn't have to say for it to still get felt.

    That I'm not a Fox.

In a kind of moment he won't stop.

    Where it doesn't matter if I'd ever make amends.

With all this in-between I'm in and bars my shame.

    When What else I've given could never be dichotomized.

Watching with the rest of them,

    The undefinable and absolute.

If it needs to linger long enough to ride itself out of our systems,

    He knows.

If this didn't happen like that, then it wouldn't have happened at all.

...If mammals are indeed the keepers of their lesser brothers,

    To uplift and make equivalent,

Then I get him now.

And keeping what he showed, I'll know what's mine.
Trying to hold back laughter out of relief while riding out the high after the moment's passed.

Still not actually believing what I gave Andrew lip service to with the Knife really did amount to anything.

Maybe I don't have to, sitting back at the table with Espada when I nearly could have crawled back, feeling that weak.

Thinking I may have known pride like this before.

Just not the value of it, on my own.

With both of my friends still trying to catch up.

But if I'm still sinking, at least I'm synched, now.

Younger than before when I was brittle, I was older, had to fall to it, I was hardened and too callous.

"I would not have wasted my authority on a lesser male, had I not known him as instrumental to my time in Homicide and Gang as you."

Espada holds the rest of us to higher standards than could be believed. This Bull's projection of his voice only meant to reassure of it with a certainty like Do Not Fear Me Child For I Am An Angel.

I did not respect him, only feared and fear waned.

Something I can't believe I held in the first place.

"Do you see that, now? The luck you had in being so wrong?"

All of it.

"I figure you planned on turning me in, too."

Like what he had in store when he came in from the back.
A heavy fate that couldn't even touch me, right now.

With a smirk on him that says I just reminded him "...The hunt for you was called off over the course of the night. Not due to my efforts, mind you. Suffice it to say, ZPD and City Hall have far more chaos to contain than yours for the time being. Considering why Theodore pushed for your capture in the first place."

For all the control he wields, he's too much a control freak to have it all instill any rot in him.

"If I owed that Bear and Badger any less than you owed me, I would still have taken my toll."

I owe so much and yet will all the hell I raised last night even make the news?

...Last night.

"You are running out of luck and beyond my means. No matter what your empathy meant to others."

"I can only have anyone spared from so much for so many times."

Eva.

"So know this,"

Did she make it out from last night?

"Keep yourself reminded of what you owe of your possibility to everyone you meet."

We got work to do and it's time to begin.

Espada doesn't have to beckon for it.

Because even though my love for her is so limitless, "...Even the limitless can only stretch so far,
Except she keeps coming back to my mind and he's caught it, "You mean those words for more than just my own."

I'm thinking of something besides him and here and now and "Yeah, I guess it shows..."

Yet I could try to make it wait.

But this Bull can read me like the open book I keep forgetting I am to him.

"...I will grant you two questions, and then you must voice the reasons for my being summoned." I have a million and he already feels the gist. Is she ok? Did she escape? Is she alive? Did they hurt her? What Precinct? Which hospital?

But I have to play the game by Espada's rules, and all my questions about her boil down to one:

"What happened to her after we ran?"

Him taking a moment to think to read my face, that alone tells me things I don't want to hear.

When he figures out who I'm talking about, he confirms it: "I was concerned with you. Not her. I have not looked into her situation."

A slight tremble for the want of good news he can't give me.

How she comes and goes from me in brilliant hot flashes.

"That Mustela Nigripes has you." and I can't let her go when "She has my everything" I didn't know I held "and I would fight death and all of his friends for her until the end of time."

He'll regard my overwhelmed body for a moment.

Clear as day how my own redemption is something I'm grateful for but it ain't enough to make up for any grief that'd come her way.

"As far as I can tell, Fuchs, her incident reports were filed separately from yours."
"Your arrest took greater precedence. Whatever happened to her, the force will be motivated to find her for an assault on a police officer."

I have to hold on.

"And because of her warrant for conspiracy, they will be much less than kind."

Have faith.

I have to get it right and deal when I could nearly lose it right now "But because she means as much to you as she clearly does, will I fight for her. In the meantime, I shall give your friend's Alpha sitreps to relay to you. But mark these words of mine, those Caprinae will face my fire and brimstone for abandoning their posts, only to have their patrol car get stolen."

Sheep.

"They caused enough for me to pummel them into dust."

Bellwether.

"No matter what they accomplished, it will be for naught after I am through with them."

It's a stretch, a prey boy would call it Reverse Specism but I'm starting to think on how just plausibly, there's a connection between those two cops and herself, too.

"Now Cease with her. No More. For Your Sake."

Bellwether has access to the traffic cam network, and somehow, I know that it was her I was looking at through the lens of that camera last saturday afternoon. It's just a feeling, but it leads me to my final question:

"...Who sent those cops after my cell's signal?"

Whatever tension was built up by my girl fixation, it's been defused to give way a cocked brow and a shift of his jaw.

"Bellwether."

I knew it.

"So it's not just traffic cams..."

Why did I have to be right?

"I had successfully lobbied to reduce Eagle Ray's usage in ZPD's investigations and"
monitoring. It is only used now by me, to keep track of department supplied cellphones that officers are issued. But City Hall managed to retain their log in.

What City Hall would need it for is beyond me if "It wasn't you that tracked me last night. I know that much. And we know it was her if she's the only one that'd find the time to paint my whereabouts for them."

His perfect upright sitting position is not phased by the probing. I'm not meaning to dodge his two question rule by giving him confirm or deny statements. It's just coming naturally into the discussion, and he knows what I'm capable of after Saturday night.

"Laticeps allows users to see the activities of even the administrator, of which the only such account left is City Hall."

I really don't want to be right.

"...But lionheart started the mammalhunt for me, to begin with."

I just have to be certain I am.

A boxer's shifting, as his muscles tense. Lips pressing tightly. "I know you came here to help me, Owen. I suppose you feel indebted, which I cannot argue against. But I will make it known good and well that the less you are aware of these affairs, the safer Eva will be. Safety for yourself and her that I already cannot completely guarantee."

Something has changed since Saturday. Ain't something I'm aware of, might not have happened yet, but I can tell it from a Mammal that plans his moves twenty turns ahead, calculates all variables, and deals in absolutes for everything, he's seeing the coming months with uncertainty with things I can't.

What he can see just at the edge of his mind's eye.

It won't deter me, Like I said before, "I just want to be sure it's not on me if the city blows up after Cliffside, last night. That's it."

He lets it sink in. Chews on it for a moment like cud. And he nearly, just nearly chuckles through the crook in his lips as he tells me "That is the closest anyone has come to arguing with me for some time."

So be it,

"With what I have gathered so far, I must theorize that Bellwether was motivated to end
Lionheart's Charade. Certainly you already know this, but it seems that Lionheart's orchestrated attempt to tie up the media and police with you was a falseflag operation to conceal Cliffside."

Another shift with a different tone. His posture hinting at him sitting on knowledge that doesn't jive. Facts that demand inquiry.

"A curious thing, though. The mammalhunt did not prevent City Hall's council members finding out about their missing constituents. The Chief of Police was pressured into forming searches for them after you were put on the news."

All that effort from the Lion, and for what?

But also how?

"...That doesn't make sense...

"Neither does the fact that this too appears to be Bellwether's doing."

I'm wearing my disbelief on my face.

It doesn't make sense.

If it was Bellwether that approached Espada about the missing mammals, then she got what she wanted anyway when the rest of City Hall found out about them.

"...She tried to get me out of the way, even after the other cops started handling the searches she tried to get you on."

Why?

Why was Bellwether so invested in these missing preds?

How did she even know about them in the first place?

He sees that I'm trying to figure out connections I haven't given voice to yet, but the Bull's patience has worn too thin.

"I am just as puzzled by her antics as you are, Owen Conrad, but now you must tell me what you came here to tell me."
As stuck as I am on the whys concerning Bellwether, I have to oblige with it.

With me feeling it's still not a change of topic to say "There's some prey militia operating at an abandoned subway station in South Savannah Central."

The absurdity of that strikes at him. He knows the geography of the criminal underground as well as I do. Prey Supremacists operate in the meadowlands. Savannah is all pred gangs. Rainforest has the cartels that deal with both, and Tundratown's mobs bicker with them but that's neither here or there. The point is that there is no strategic advantage for either trailer trash longnecks nor hood chompers to stomp and rattle sabers within the other's border.

"How do you know this? Where? What can you tell me of them?"

He's not gonna like that I'm not a witness.

Not when he deals with absolutes and the trouble is the lack of it for what he's already got that needs more.

"I'm hearing this thirdhand."

A clinched hoof to a deep inhale.

"Who heard it secondhand?"

I have to hesitate.

Without looking at Andrew, probably overwhelmed with fear and shock by everything that's happened so far. I wouldn't know because the Bull's dedicated all my attention towards himself.

It's an old habit, snitches get stitches, I know I should trust the Bull, but I don't want to give up the Wolf and he's catching it.

"Tell me, Fox. Whoever He or She is, whatever they have done, means nothing to me when compared to what you just told me!"

That tremble in his face, I don't even think, just point to Andy without looking and the Bull wastes no time on "Him."

"You are the second hand source?" and "Yes sir." comes out of Andrew with such fright, it's like he's still seeing the devil that I used to see in him.

But the Bull isn't patient like Saturday night, when he had the time to tinker to tailor my experience with him.

"Does this Fox know everything you know?"
"Yes, sir."

Andrew is so scared.

He has to be sure "Did you tell him everything?"

He's not dismissing it, the Bull knows better, it's just so absurd for them to be down here.

"Yes sir."

Sir is getting frustrated with the Yes Sirs, and he snaps back to me because he's done with Andrew's fright.

"Then tell me what you know. Everything. The smallest detail."

I only look for a brief moment to Andrew to make sure he's getting relief from the pressure being taking off of him.

I look back to Espada with "They were all Sheep."

To eyes gone wide from a moment of clarity and near certainty.

"Were you informed of what they were wearing?"

He's making connections, and now they need confirmation.

"Matching outfits. Uniforms."

Too vague. I can tell already in him.

"Of course but what were the uniforms?"

If only there was more give but just "I don't got anything else for you besides that they didn't look like police uniforms, and that the group my source was with got beat up by them."

Pieces are falling in place for Espada, "What was the group? A Gang?" and "No, not a gang, vagrants, homeless folk living underground, they're not doing anything besides trespassing on municipal and surviving."

The Bull is running scenarios through him.

"How badly were the vagrants beaten?"

Putting himself there, but he needs more.

"A couple had go to the ER."
He tenses for a moment at the vivid scene I'm giving him to work with. Then puts it aside.

"...Whatever affairs these survivalists are conducting, are being done outside of the meadowlands for plausible deniability. Not only that, they are invested enough to beat anyone away from it... I suppose the vagrants went to the police about this."

"Why would they?"

In altercations like these, it's always us that get punished more than them, like that transgender Wolf that ended up going to prison when a bunch of drunk goats attacked her. I don't even have to explain, because Espada shows that he gets it with a sigh one would give for the way of the world, as opposed to what it did directly.

But there's something else, there, too.

"Their silence is a double edge sword, though the assumption that they would keep quiet is likely what saved them from being killed. But that is not what troubles me. This degree of forethought and tenacity is a tell specific to one single group. Though I must say... If this really is their work then I must be uncertain for the rest of us. Should the connections I have made be the truth of these matters."

The implication is right there, in what must be the closest he's ever been to showing fear around others. And it confirms without a word that very possibility I feared, last night. Someone as Olympian as him still has a higher power to answer to. The secretary that tried to get me out of the way when the past mayor began a hunt for me. The one that pushed her own agenda of exposing his concealment of a brand new illness. The Ewe that by the end of the day, will have the power over the land to further the cause, the ambition, of a prey pride lynchmob of paranoid longnecks desperate to save everyone in no danger from any enemy. There's lunatics that wetdream over a Fuller Diaries fantasy of a species war that ends with the extinction of every last predator and she's- "Owen!" snaps me out of it.

Makes me know I didn't even bother to hide it like I never do.

He saw it.

That thing I do when I get lost in my head.

He knows why I was lost in my head.
"Now that you have made the error of going down that rabbit hole, you must not tell a soul what you found there."

And he's scared and scared in the only way he can be scared:

"To your very grave must you take it if the time never comes to breath easy."

Not for himself like he can never be.

"Do you hear them, Fox?"

He's scared for me and for everyone in this room, in this city, he might not be able to shelter from the storm. That fear he managed to conceal until I drew it out of him like sword from it's sheath. I don't even have to look to any other face in this Bug Burga to feel that shock that they're feeling at something they've never seen before: Him. When he's scared. "I hear your words..." I tell him, frightened look in my eyes for the thing I must not give a name to anyone. Not Eva. Not Andrew. Not nobody. But that fear is prying that question out of me I asked myself earlier. The one digging in, now, at the inner space in my skull that can't register a physical sensation, but urges that I scratch at the exterior of my skull until I bleed.

I can't help this, it's coming out whether I like it or not so I exorcise the demon by calling it by it's name:

"...But how did Bellwether know about the missing Preds?"

I've revealed too much of what I learned on Saturday night and in an instant, he's up from his chair and about to pummel me.

But he stops.

Because how could she know?

I've put that question in his head and now he's got to ask it for himself.

The intimate knowledge she had to harbor before sending that City Hall request to investigate those separate cases that weren't.
The rest of his body is a still photograph juxtaposed against the slow motion video of his face.

But his eyes.

They bulge.

And their pupils,

They dilate.

The motes of God's all knowing eyes are his to piece together the mosaic scenario of vignettes that is the truth.
And he's seeing it.

Through the terrible tune of his teeth clinching toward the verge of cracking beneath that terrible sight of those black lips peeled back to reveal those big ivory teeth and black gums, that terrible god forsaken sight of every muscle in his face on the brink of tearing because with jaws running on the inspiration of a Hyena's great enough to crack bone, this morning turns to the most moonless night with the loudest haunting howl of the strongest wind.

This is why mortals fear angels like Gabriel, that taker of life the Bull now embodies in a blurred image of rage our eyes can't process.

The one of him grabbing the table by it's base and swinging it so high the thing nearly touches the boards of the ceiling before he stops himself from sending it to the floor.

The sound of dozens of chairs from mammals jumping out of them and falling out of them.

Of fastfood trays tumbling to the floor and wrappers making landfall in a wax paper wave against the tile beach.

Because whatever it is,
The Bull doesn't know how,
But he knows why.
The mere shaking of his wrist is rattling that commercial furniture apart, loosening the screws of the cheap metal base from the underside of the particle board surface. But he's stopping himself, taking everything he has to stop, not even being aware of the panic around him he'll quell by doing so. The adrenaline that overtook him, he's reigning it in now. Tightening his grip around it until he stops shaking it apart. Crushing the metal tube in his hooves he's slowly bringing down, raising his other set to press a free palm against the center of the tabletop. A nearly robotic motion to stoop down and set the thing back down where it belongs.

He's so furious, his drawing of breath in his inhalation and exhalation is like a hurricane that'd gonna go down as the storm of this century.

If anyone that witnessed it would dare to speak of it.

The connection, whatever it is that I still can't make and to what I don't know, he's made it.

Something so great and terrible nearly sent him into a rampage.

But he's better than that and has to be.

Too much rides on his shoulders for him to give in.

Even in that brief moment he lost it was enough to give reason for that table to now sit slanted: He managed to crumple that metal base.

Left the indentations of his strength in it.

He can't pay mind to it like I can, having something to say like this:

"...Individuals like you, are exactly why I made effort to convince my superiors of how moot the pandering gesture was of the Mammal Inclusion Initiative, against the merit of what former carnivores could offer for the greater good..."

Turns his scalpel eyes to me as they are. Red hot to the point that such precision instruments become dull by the changing molecular structure of their blades.

They're melting, as the anger burns out.

Until all that's left in them is a disappointment and longing, not at me but related to.
"...And it has been society's folly that convention kept a Fox like you from the badge."

With the way he said it having my mind pull up a distant faint memory of setting some detective book back down on a table at some sponsored book fair. When I should still be overwhelmed from the terror of what just happened.

Because that's what he wanted me to take away from this.

That somewhere inside of him, he found himself wanting for a partner like me and that now that he's found him, he knows that it's not gonna happen. No Fox, even as honest as he found me, with all the Vulpine wit I exemplify, has ever been trusted with brass and copper. I am too far gone from the straight and narrow to be by his side as a fellow officer. I don't believe I could ever be and it feels like he knows I could never be on the other side in this life. He doesn't just deal in absolutes but their radical extremes. What all the world has ever given him to work with, because that's all the world is. The absolutes of definitions, their stubborn refusal to give way to subjective narrations, and the truth in contradictions.

That I could have been a Cop if I wasn't a Fox by definition.

Something he can hardly stomach, on the verge of choking on it.

Turning to Toby now, pushing the thought aside, all he's left with is awareness for needing to explain that "I had tricked you into coming so as to prove a point for Fuchs on the danger he puts others in by being as careless as he was. Though I see that things have escalated more rapidly than I could have predicted..."

That booming voice, so heavy. Not just because he nearly lost control of himself in that brief moment, but because he has made it a necessity to win his battles for the greater good.

"...I have made it my business to predict yet what has transpired was beyond my vision."

I'm still fixated on the Bull's introspection, too much to even look at Toby. I can only hear how terrified he still is with a scared witless "w-What, Sir, What are you talking about?"

Espada must ignore it completely, and he cannot give his troubles a voice, the same as I can't give my realization a voice.

All he can do is indirectly dismiss that question on everyone else's mind with a reminder:

"You were all gathered here because I have trusted you to maintain a privileged silence. But it is now, more than ever, you each and every soul I must honor this Omerta I have given to be
Even if I am the second sharpest mind in this room, I can't piece together what he's figured out but only know it's something so terrible, the threat of him being revealed to know it must not be allowed. Whatever his newfound fight may be, it's against something greater than himself. So much so, it will give him a battle he may not win. A fact proven as he turns back to me with *Strange days are upon us, Owen. Now speak to me of Larry.*

Oh, right.

That other thing I came here for.

"Exit right before you get to Outback and go down under, he's below the northwest pillar for Lionsgate."

"Full cooperation?"

"He promised the Alpha, yeah."

"He will not have a choice if he wishes I vouch for clemency via differed adjudication with the prosecutor, which I should manage..."

Which reminds him,

"For all you have done, I will make my effort to protect one Eva Belette ring true as best I can."

It's not an absolute, because he doesn't have one to give.

But it's the promise alone in *This is my last kindness I can offer you.*, that starts to put me at ease.

If anyone can protect her like I can't, it's him.

So with my phone in paw, I'll hold it out to him without having to be reminded.

Because I've put my faith in Espada.

"You know what to do with this." and he tells me "I do."

Snatching the thing to taketh with both sets of hooves to effortlessly twist then break apart like a stick of butter.

But I'm not surprised.

And I'm not worried for anything I had to gain from keeping it.
I'm fully off the grid, now.

I'm actually appreciative of that.

I let the Bull know it with a smile, but he'd know I'm grateful anyway.

He offers me a quiet moment of mutual respect, thinking briefly on something before asking "Revisiting that earlier subject of predictions... Did you use that hammer?"

The police scanner.

The alarm on top, the hammer left in reach.

The closest thing to mischief I've seen in him, yet.

I couldn't laugh back then.

But it was so far ago that I can laugh now.

I do.

It's god damned hilarious, even.

However much of a point it was to remind me of things I shouldn't have, ends up feeling more like a stealthily quiet sense of humor he can rarely afford.

Even now, he's barely showing his amusement at being right.

He's got more important iron in the fire to hammer out.

He can only offer a genuine, muted smile at the entertainment I gave with my confirmation.

Then wordlessly,

Control Incarnate turns his back to the scene he made,

Walks to the counter,

Lays a fat stack of denominations for the management,

Tells them "I appreciate your cooperation."

Looks behind himself to remind everyone "Leave here one at a time. Do not make this meeting obvious."

Then walks through the kitchen to exit out the back like I figured he would.
He commanded so much of my attention, that only in his wake can I see the aftermath of him. There ain't a single soul here that wasn't affected by his shock and awe.

Toby finally picked himself up but Andrew's still on the floor, reeling from everything that just transpired all at once in front of him.

Horrified beyond belief, out of breath, the works.

"...Bro I used to think you was bipolar but more or less I think it's just the immediate space you occupy."

I could be offended, but I ain't gonna. I look up for a moment to feign like I'll think on it but "Yeah... Yeah that sounds about right."

I offer a paw to help him get up and he takes it.

"The f was he talking about with the hammer?"

"It's a long story, Bro." I'm pretty sure he's aware of that verbal tick, but I want to defuse him with a little humor.

It ain't working though.

"Don't tell me, don't introduce me to any more cop buddies you make."

"This your first time with Big Devil?" calls out to Andrew.

"Who're you?" he's asking.

Asking the African Wild Dog chick from before that was watching the Lion.

"Used to be a ranking sister for the Sousten set before some Felines did a drive-by. Big devil that just left, he was working homicide at the time with murder warrants on 'em."

Sousten Set.

African Wild Dogs of both sexes bang the streets hard enough to keep Lupine gangs and big cat mobs on their toes, they're that hardcore.

They ought to be, keeping Sousten for themselves.

"That's the scariest damned Cop I ever met."

Of course it'd be Espada that'd manage making one go legit.
"Right? I mean that table thing was new an your boy's about a deathwish lookin' ass for instigating him but... That Bull got a gold heart when you get to know him though. When he ain't mad."

The problem is Andrew's got deaf ears to any kind of reassurance right now.

"I don't ever wanna see him again."

"Well if your boy over there stops antagonizing..."

Toby catches my attention by a shoulder tap while Andrew continues his conversation that she started. While everyone else starts to exit as Espada ordered. Former gang bangers, loved ones of murder vics, survivors of police brutality. People that only someone like him could bring under one roof. Some reminiscing about their own introductions with that blacksmith like a fallen angel. Others telling others variations of no, you go first, I'll wait.

But Toby caught my attention for himself to try and quell his haute tension if it's not quite clear "What happened?" Otherwise I wouldn't have to ask if that what that just happened is "Just now?" as he nearly collapses in his sighing out of a "Yeah."

My mind is still a blur and kind of feels like it's been given a concussion without the head trauma. Maybe that's how I keep coming back to a blacksmith analogy.

That Espada's here to hammer us out against the anvil of our trespasses like one for his fellow mammal.

His endgame feels like the meaning's in to shape those around him for the better rather than destroy.

"I met someone I used to think was the devil. But really, he just wears all black."

I'm not being cheeky right now with what I have to offer, because it's all I can give him.
What's not just clear by no immediate action or word alone, but by all of his being. Against that frightening persona of a nigh omnipotent angel he's cultivated for Respect, not Terror.

It doesn't really let him quell himself, though. It's like he's genuinely afraid of a cop for the first time in his life like I've been afraid of cops in general for all my own.

"Ok, but, he was talking like he was Internal Affairs so what's going on between you?"

I could try to explain how "He was assigned to track me down."

"But you're not a Cop." is a whole can of worms and...

Well, "...It's another long story."

I'm just so emotionally spent, anyway.

Relieved, a little happy, but spent.

"Alright, fine, probably not my business anyway, look, am I gonna be put in another situation like this? Because Owen-" I know what he's gonna say but I gotta cut him off with "It's not gonna happen because he won't have a reason to, Toby. It was just to prove a point about me putting my friends in danger, and the two of us are past that point. I know he's scary-" "That guy's like a demon."

Good god, now everyone's accidentally making me feel bad for calling him Lucifer.

He's better than a cult leader of personality. To reduce himself to nothing but Hubris.

"Right, but he just wanted my respect and he has it."

He has forged his ego out of himself. Now he's got everyone else to work on.

This doesn't calm him down.

"Yeah, his respect, you have it but oh my god, you know what C.A.F.I. is, Owen? Civil Action Forward Intelligence. All those times I joined protests, they've been watching me, I'm on a watchlist, it doesn't help that..."
We both know where he was about to go. That it doesn't help that he knows me, and that they probably know he knows me, and know about me and know about us both. Because the COINTELPRO days are over but the long arm of the law still spies. Still interferes in the civilian response to the state's sins. Espada can go against it because he's in that magical position of being within the system yet not corrupted by it. The rest of us, though? Andrew? Toby? There's a difference between knowing and fully realizing. Toby has probably always known that big brother was watching, but now he realizes it really is. I guess it's just scary for Prey like this Buck because it's not as obvious to them as it is to Preds like me.

"Toby... I've never really gotten involved in activism, I just kept up with politics until I couldn't... But you? You been fighting since before I knew you. You've been better at fighting the system than Buffy by a million miles of difference but boy, don't get it twisted: You picked the wrong fight to win..."

"...Doesn't mean there ain't a point to it, and it don't mean that mammals like you or Andrew aren't ever gonna win against the house."

I dropped a lot of cud for him to chew on, but Toby's smart. He can digest it. A couple of mental swallows like a big boy, and my comforting is starting to actually to do as much him.

Calm him down a little from Espada's respect mongering that I don't even think was meant to discourage, if that's what the Buck got out of it.

Maybe it was just to sway him into getting what he wanted out of him for discussion's sake.

"It was a lot for me to take in. Sorry."

That freakan word again.

Again, "Most useless word in the dictionary." I snap back, don't even mean to but it gets him going "Alright." before he's got to collect himself for a moment until he gets this next bit out.

"So what about now? The search for you is over like he said, right?"

I can't even fault him. He heard it all, Espada's tongue makes sure anyone can hear it all, but the delivery was so much it'd be hard for anyone to take in on one load.

"He wouldn't lie. I know him better than that."

"So... What happens with you now?"
The Buck's got me thinking on the topic of myself more than I've ever paid my mind to. Because it's obvious to me, now, after everything that's gone down these last few days, that thinking about short term goals for survival just aren't gonna cut it anymore.

We were all meant to live for more than that.

What's not just clear by no immediate achievement or assumption alone but by all of this potential.

And maybe it's the fact he can tell I'm mulling a response over, that's calming down his fear for my wellbeing,

But I don't think he's gonna like the objective narrative my reality's gonna give him.

"...I'll go and stay the same I was, just to get it right this time and express it better. For you. Eva. Andrew, everyone around me. Because I'm never changing who I am if all I gotta do now is go perfect it like there ain't a compromise."

The point I was trying to make about being a better me, I wouldn't care if it flew over his head.

I said it for myself. More or less, as Andy put it.

What I think I think flew over Toby's head if "Thank you." is what tells me, getting me to do that cocked brow and tilted head thing again for the second time this morning in less than a half hour.

"...Thank me?"

Thanks does not jive with all I just told him.

"For being you."

I have no idea where he's coming from but he said it so tenderly, if he were a she, it feels like he'd have complimented it with a platonic hug.

"I haven't been all I can be."

"Yeah, like you just said... If I got it, that you're not where-ever you're going yet. But you should be dead right now, too and you're not. I don't understand how, but the fact that you're still alive and talking that kind of crazy? It's kind of reassuring and I'm grateful for all you've been so far. That's all I'm saying."
"Yeah that's easy for your cannibal Prey Boy azz to say when you don't have to put up with his ratchet self like I have to." spits out of Andrew like fire and,

Holy Heck,

That got the both of us good.

Because we don't know what life after Lionheart has in store, only know it's gonna get worse but right now?

We can laugh.

Like we need to.

While we still can.

Fast forward a few and it's 7:42. We're heading back the way we came, where the ghetto gives way to gentrification. There's more mammals out, now. The two different flavors of tension more profound by virtue of the higher concentration of troubled minds on the street. I want to dismiss that fear I keep reading on the faces of ungulates and other natural born vegetarians of Am I Gonna Get Eaten. I can't, though. Every occasional sharp tooth'd kind like mine who me and Andrew cross paths with has to remind of their own and better informed phobias of paranoid prey prone to startles and what greater numbers and higher positions of status really mean.

Who'd win and how bad we'd lose what little we already got.

It doesn't help that, as the two of us pass a Snarlbucks, the TV screens with the news can be seen from outside. Right in the corner of our lines of sight, 'til fast moving images draw the focus in you don't wanna give. When Fabienne Growley's professionalism isn't doing enough to conceal the same shock and hurt that every predator's feeling with her. Peter Moosebridge is trying his best, but he's not Wool Blitzer. A picture of Lionheart in handcuffs. Breaking news icon in the lower right hand of the screen. The ticker on the bottom is nothing but the results of last night's raid on Cliffside, and above that to the left, under Fabienne, is a countdown to a press conference scheduled for 7:55 am.

And that's the thing I hate about the news.

Because it's always there like roaches are.

"Owen."

"Yeah?"

There's some anguished resignation in Andrew's voice when he says "Duck in with me, I need to watch this." and I get the immediate feeling it's a bad idea.
He doesn't take the word Need lightly, don't really want to disway him...

"I mean, we gotta get back to rendezvous with the cab."

But maybe I ought to.

His face doesn't change it's determination.

"Yeah, we can catch both the cab and this press conference."

When a Wolf is dead set, there's no persuasion to remedy one.

And besides, it's his turn to call a shot. When it's a given that as a pack representative, he's the one handling me, and I've had as much say in how this morning's gone as I didn't. So I'll follow him in. Where there's enough Mammals huddled for whatever the news may bring that we're not tempted to order to justify our patronage. We're broke, the need isn't there. There's such a crowd I can't be bothered to observe the sum of it. I'm watching that countdown with everyone else as it falls into the seconds. Feeling like maybe just once, my cynicism isn't gonna be right this time. These past few days, I felt like the eye of a storm. But now, relieved and a little at peace, I can just allow myself to not need to analyze every last thing for one time.

All the while I'm standing on the seat of a chair meant for a much taller mammals to get a better view over it's intended occupants.

Andrew isn't phased, and everyone's too caught up with the screens to notice.

Maybe whatever the Cops say isn't gonna be the worst damned thing they could. I'm trying, really trying to hope for once they won't. They're dealing with the discovery of a new, rabies like illness. There's every reason already in the fact for softening the blow of the next news cycle. To quell fears, instill hope, downplay the terror and maintain what peace is still there between all of us. I'm holding on to hope that hard, like every pred in this coffee shop is. They're looking up to these monitors the same as I am with Andrew. In every sense. To the possibility of deliverance from the threat looming over us. Thinking things can get better for once.

I can feel it, this doesn't have to be the calm of another storm.

Even if the fear is still there,

As the feed switches from the newsroom to "Ladies and gentle-mammals," and I recognize that voice, spout off "That's freakan Bogo!" then get hushed and told to "Shut up, let's hear this!"

Reminding me in an instant that I can still get called up. Not to press my luck, and that noone needs
to know how I know that voice I heard on a Rhino Cop's radio.

"They appear to be in good health, physically, if not emotionally. So now, I'll turn things over to..."

Muted conversations between shoulders on the lack of definitive answers.

Then they turn.

That snowflake bunny Cop I didn't catch the name of.

The sight of her is such an obvious tell of the former Mayor's feigned All Inclusive efforts, I can already pick it out in the background noise.

The frustrations of the conservative and the liberal backlash of putting her on a pedestal.

I don't care.

Nobody should possibly care about what she is or why she's there behind that podium.

I just want her to say the right- "All we know is that they are all members of the Predator family."

...

The moment of truth and dread is in me. They stopped teaching that gilded age leftover of scientific specism back in the sixties. It's Carnivora, not...

Andrew's asking me "The heck kind of backwater they pulled this-", as an offscreen reporter's loaded, manipulative question cuts him off and catch him off guard.

"That is accura- Yes, that is accurate yes."

The hesitance.

The fact she didn't think it through.

I can see it in her eyes so perfectly.
I'm asking Andrew "...What's accurate?" and a frantic offscreen "Why?! Why is this happening?!" frames what horrified dread Andrew is about to spill on me:

"...Only predators are going savage."

...No...

No, no don't just pin it on us like that, I'm muttering the plea to myself and so is every other Pred.

The fear is coming up on the radar, now.

The eyes of flat-tooth longnecks start to dart on me, on Andrew, on every pred in here and I'm feeling it but no, no, Andrew is telling her through the screen "Damage control, please do the damage contr-" for me.

"But it may have something to do with biology."

But it doesn't come.

She's really gonna do this.

We're passengers in a car that's about to jump the curb and hit the wall and she's just going to let it happen.

Turn the car around, "Turn the car around, bunny, turn the car-" "Shut up, Fox!" "Y'know... something in their DNA."

But it's gonna come.

"In their DNA, can you elaborate on that please?"
I saw it coming.

I lied to myself that it wouldn't come all the while I knew better.

And this is how it comes crashing in:

"Yes. What I mean is, thousands of years ago... uhm, Predators, Survived through Their... a-aggressive hHun-ting InStincts. For whatever reason, they seem to be reverting Bhack to their primitive, Savage ways."
Every Pinocchio heart just got stabbed through a live broadcast.

We were never real and we were never boys.
We were only the hollow facsimile of the wholeness of prey.

Everything that Pig did to me was expected because it was right.
Every last act a Predator has suffered and ever will is righteous.
All these things they have done to us and what we are to them,

Subjectively Redefined in our weakest moment with their most ignorant cruelty.

As their eyes twist into us,

Making me reel,

Andrew cower,

And every other pred agonize over the prey mammal's truth we always knew.
And in the midst of our collective agony, is a furious anger in the death throws of it's containment.

One little "Have you considered a mandatory quarantine on predators?" from the television and it flies.

"He's turning savage!"

The anger will consume, now.

The words on the tip of every predator's tongue.

"...THAT FUCKING BITCH BUNNY! THAT FUCKING BITCH!" from a Hyena I paid no attention to and "IT'S HAPPENING!" to the tune of all the screaming that comes with the grunt behind me.

With the air blowing over my head.

From a chair that barely missed me.

Thrown without care or warning.

Spinning into my line of sight from above.
Slamming into the screen with enough force to bounce back off it and right back to me while the one I'm standing on gets pulled out from under me like the rug that under all of us.

I'm falling in sync with the TV and all these hearts.

It's falling over a frightened Horse's head as the thrown chair slams into me to knock me off the table I just jumped on.

"GET BACK I GOT THIS FUCKING SAVAGE!"

The stampeding Water Buffalo living out his fantasy.

"I'M NOT A FUCKING SAVAGE I'M A MAMMAL, I'M FUCKING LIKE YOU!"

The cornered Hyena lashing out at destiny.

The screaming panic and frothing anger.

The trampling and fighting.

And that's how it's always gonna be.

Where it's bound to go and always will.

As the ungulates turn on the Hyena with a Bear and Panther rushing to back him up while Andrew rushes to pick me up off the floor, cursing himself through the crowd as he pushes past where hooves try to latch onto us because it's assumed we're involved when we've done nothing wrong.

But we did do something wrong.

We got born.

Where we were never wanted.

When we would never be accepted.

To live the foregone conclusion but the past as it comes back around.
But why do I have to be right?

Why, though?

Just why did I always had to know that this was how it was gonna be?
Mark

I had never heard the word Bitch shouted out like that before, at that great a volume, with that much repetition, out of that many mouths.

From the news clip I saw on someone else's phone you could watch that Snow Leopard grimace through her teeth, having to say the word Riot like the teleprompter said. Rioting is what they called it. What they were quick to show didn't only happen at the Snarlbucks alone, where Andrew grabbed me up like a ragdoll to get us both out of. It happened at a couple of other places around Zootopia. In front of anywhere that had a few too many TV displays with the news on. Small scale outbursts of hurt and anguish. By definition, sure, maybe it was Rioting. But it's still the typical Prey reaction I knew would happen, I expected, and I tried my best to hope against.

I shouldn't have even tried because always, no matter what good comes, the world continues on.

Getting worse.

Getting harder.

Going on unhindered.

No amount of new growth in the forest will ever make up for the Cronus ways of older trees or how they dictate the ebb and flow of misery,

And all that we attempt, cannot defeat that truth.

...

...Tuesday was weeks ago, myself nor Andrew hasn't been outside since.

The reason for my being here had passed but got replaced by another.

Got replaced by a Rabbit.

Got changed up by a poster girl who Lionheart had propped up to be some big damned progressive deal.

The one who just regressed the world a little further back,

Like the world was on course for and wouldn't change course around.
...So I'd been allowed to remain here by the grace of Woolsey.

Andrew didn't even have to ask, just saw it as the right thing to do and I've been doing what I can in a den for Wolves who couldn't make it out there before this new grief even started.

Whatever I could do to repay a debt that could be forgiven but would never be fully repaid, while Gonzo & Co give me shade like they'd pour molten tar over me, dust me then throw me out of here from the roof of this building if they could get away with it. I can't blame them, really. Because we're all feeling the pressure of cabin fever and worse. Almost noone's left this apartment building we're hiding in except the folks on legit payrolls from ZPD and the rest of municipal. Most of us that had keys got 'em taken. Part time minimum wagers like what Andrew used to be, before a ram gave him lip, even some full-timers that were on their way to moving out and going on their own.

They've just had to quit their jobs, if they even had one a week after Judy.

If they weren't already fired because what kind of employer would want to risk...

...No.

Not right now.

Enough of it...

...The important thing is there's no reason risking the safety of a place noone should be living in in the first place, when it's all we got when others don't and the last thing we need is a police raid. This place is supposed to be under reconstruction for flat tooth'd gentry to reoccupy and it's our one place left. We don't have anywhere else to go, and if it were known we're hiding here, the amount of zoning laws this set up is breaking would have a flood of discos coming down on it from below.

But that hasn't happened yet.

Maybe it will but here's to hoping it won't.

It's possible enough we can't go out for supplies like groceries.

Our saving grace has been that, apparently, when Wolves move out of packs like the one that claimed this contract, move on to middle class and middle age, they're still honorbound to provide as they can, however they can. I know this from conversations I shouldn't have listened to. They've been getting food for us and they get their groceries delivered by some guilt ridden Prey have been doing the shopping for them.

It's a luxury of safety in numbers and blending-in they're aware enough of to use when Preds haven't had as much for going out with.

They've known the real fear, these days.
Cowardice is a matter of survival and the boldness of courage takes a stupidity to ignore the threat against just trying to survive.

Only the bold have been going out in public and they have been suffering the wrath of reality as punishment of that scorn.

There's been twenty eight outbursts, now.

There's been more than twice as many assaults on preds.

They're calling them Savage Attacks.

They won't even call 'em lynchmo-

I had never kept up with the news before but the news has been crawling all around me like Roaches while the memory of Eva has been haunting like a ghost and no, not now, any other time but right Now,

Because I've been trying but it's overwhelming,

Though just not right now...

Though I'm back in the clothes I wore when I went to Sheepgb with her and it remin-

But Not Now, God Damn It,

One more wasted night but I'll barely control it, bringing rice and dried beans to room 726. Most rooms already had portable burners since the gas lines still aren't hooked up, now it's all of them if we can't get enough hot food any other way. Woolsey couldn't bid on the permits because the construction work by his company isn't done yet, couldn't because it's a safety hazard until the rest of the work is done when there's legally no reason for the permits yet because, again, noone should be using gas if noone is living here. Like they're supposed to not be. That's what fuels the worry in these eyes on me as the possessor of a pair gets up to greet and receive. The fact that if this Lupine tradition of hiding from prey sight is breaking laws was inescapable then,

That it's now in the face of everyone here and more than it's ever been, before.
No one here knows where they'd be if they couldn't be here and the history of violence against Wolves makes it even worse. The last genocide could be eighty years ago all it wants. They had always gotten the worst of them and years don't change the feeling it could happen all over. Like longnecks want it to happen again.

When it feels as close to happening as it does.

But right now, this Wolf getting up from the floor has to put it aside like I gotta put it aside. Give thanks with a smile because he's too beleaguered to say it.

Guess he's gotta lighten up with "Hey Oh you been keeping your nose out of the girl dorms, bra?"

I'll abide, if I gotta crack a laughing smile because of multiple reasons.

"You know what, just take them beans!"

"Ooo!"

"Take this gosh darn bag a rice!"

"Ooo!"

I'm shoving them both in his paws with cheek to get him continuing with the Ooos.

"Attitude! Attitude from this sour assed orange juice!"

No non-predatory smiles to be had because we're lightyears away from anyone that'd be scared of a little pearly white showing.

"Nah uh don't get it twisted this attitude ain't mine and I'm doing a return to sender on it!"

Good god, we needed a break from the regularly scheduled programming.

"Whatever ginger just keep your brown nosing self out of the lady business."

And I could just about pretend gekker but the feigning wouldn't translate here like it would in the company of my own kind.

I have to just click my tongue before I resend the memo that "I have. I wouldn't, anyway! Ain't you heard that the grills been getting their own supplies?"

"Yeah cause you'd probably try to slip some vienna sausage in with them buns!"

This dorm is busting out laughing so hard I can't even be mad.

They're falling over each other, I'm laughing with them and the commotion is probably getting attention from everyone in the hall and adjacent apartments.
"Ok, that was good, but realtalk, cultural exchange time!"

"Ok, ok Fox, lay it on us, go."

"That's right, I'm a God Damned Fox. You know what that means?"

"No, dang it, just lay it on me already."

"It means I only got eyes for the one girl that claimed me and ain't no other piece of A from anywhere can replace her so I'm not even thirstin' for anything but the Love of my Life!"

...But now that I've gone and reminded myself,

I can't ignore the fact she's not beside me any longer,

When Lucifer lied and I never heard back from him about her,

And how not knowing if she's still alive and somewhere I could go has been the only thing that's kept me from jumping the fence outside and running out there.

And like that, this happy little moment I was having is gone in an instant.

I'm churning and the instigator is only now aware, as his roommates are, of how he's made me cross a line.

..."Hey Oh, I forgot, I'm sorr-" "Sorry doesn't cut it and you were just trying to have a laugh-"

"What's going on?"
Booming voice behind me, I think his name is Kurt.

Keeping order on both of these floors and the penthouse is left up to Woolsey's sub-lieutenants, and the commotion of laughter's called one forth.

"Nothing, just talking scat to the Fox, here." Says the joker.

But this floor's minder can read me without even seeing my face.

"You got this Romeo thinking about his girl again didn't you?"

My Vulpine ears are picking up the start of a commotion, somewhere.

"Sir, I wasn't even trying." "Woolsey done Told everyone not to get him thinking about his shorty!"

That commotion is getting louder now, more frantic.

This hall monitor can't ignore it anymore, either.

A finger pointing at him from the top right corner of my line of sight, "I'm dealing with you after this, what the f is it now?" his superior trails off and storms out.

I can make it out, now.

How the commotion has a terror in it that can only mean one thing.

The one I already know before those repeated words are clear enough for me to register:

They know.

They found out.

They're coming here.

I turn around to look through the doorway just in time to see the panic of the Wolves in the hallway as one of their own in ZPD supplied Khakis and T-Shirt runs past in wild eyed hysteria.

"THE RAID IS TONIGHT! THEY'RE COMING TONIGHT!"
Obscenities are being cried out.

Every other word is a No.

I'm running out with everyone else,

Like this entire floor is stumbling to chase after the Wolf cop.

There's tears on these faces.

I can't help but see the panic attacks.

A set of digits on someone's wrists locked tightly in terror.

A tail tucked between a pair of legs.

A male going fugue and being pushed into a wall.

A female rocking back and forth in her trembling.

Wolves are scary, they are dangerous.

But they're not and maybe never were.

They're just scarred like the arms of this Wolf I'm running past without the long sleeves to hide the history of a cutter.

They are delicate,

They are fragile,

And right now,

These Wolves are breaking like ceramic thrown around the kitchen in the middle of a fight.

The fact they hid in dens and noone ever knew means none had ever been discovered until now, and there was no precedence for a raid on a den.

But if the police are raiding one...

The world can't accept Wolves and the world is coming.

This is the fall of Damascus for every Wolf in Zootopia.
The one we just wanted to live inside of.

All of this hurt, and I'm not the plastic Andy Warhog wanted to be, I can't stop this soaking in, if I'm not a real live boy, I'm not enough of the Thing the world defined me as but if there was any photo I could take of this, it wouldn't do enough to make the world understand what it's done.

What this means to the poster child of all predators.

The primal yelps,

the cries,

the wailing,

why some are being trampled,

they slipped and fell,

I'm having to jump over one and try to grab the paw of another to get her up or why the mass is running toward the flight of stairs to get to Woolsey on the top floor.

But my grip isn't good enough,

"No freaking time, Owen, No freaking time!"

And I'm being hoisted up into the air by an Andrew Howlerson that came out of nowhere.

The image of her face must become a blur now like all these images surrounding me.

But if only I had Toby's old Laika anyway, though.

If only I had a photograph to slap into the face of any Prey who would not believe we were mammals like them regardless.

Just to show the kind of hurt we're capable of that's rendered me like a child in my friend's grip that wants to go back, wants to get away, doesn't know he wants but knows that he wants this to stop and be made better as we climb up the stairs like this tension is rising like the mercury of a thermometer.

Toward the only place we can go and the only person that could help, now.

Because why can't the God Damned World just accept us?

I'm breaking up and gekkering in the midst of it, as we cross the threshold of the penthouse's first floor toward the last thing we have. The world is coming down to take us from ourselves, and the only person left for us to turn to is a livid, furious Alpha watching his pack spill forward to him in waves. But he stands on that table with resolve like a stone against the water. To see the order we need, so he can howl like I've never heard a Wolf howl before. So loud, I can hear it over everything else. So suddenly in it's explosion, his betas follow that howl up with their own but theirs aren't like his. And even his can't fully stop the momentum of our horror. But right now, he's a nearly immovable object that's at least slowed us down. With Andy putting me down, I lose sight of him as he lets this fly from his mouth:
"YOUR PARENTS RAISED YOU BETTER AND I TAUGHT YOU BETTER, WE FOUGHT TOO TOOTH AND NAIL FOR OURSELVES TO GO PANIC AND I AIN'T HAVING IT!"

This is the end, someone shouts out in defiance.

"THE END ISN'T TONIGHT, IF THIS CITY'S GOT NO IDEA WHAT IT'S STARTED AND YOU DON'T KNOW HOW WE'RE ALL GONNA FINISH IT VINCENT, ANOTHER WORD AN I'M THROWING YOU TO THE SHEEP!"

That slur that Sheep coined who other Prey adopted against Wolves, what Wolves had appropriated ages ago to mean exiling someone from the pack.

The threat to one is bad enough, it's starting to silence what panicking there still was after he howled for an obedient calm.

I hear a snap of his fingers as I work my way through the crowd, he must be commanding one of his Betas forward.

"Lupe, what's their ETA?"

"Thirty minutes! They're still gearing up, then they'll assemble for a convoy!"

Whatever Woolsey is gonna do, it's gotta happen fast.

But "That'll be enough time! Where is Gonzalo?!"

I can see where he's going with that.

"Sir! Here!"

Because he doesn't have time to contact the other pack leaders, but Gonzo would know people from the other dens.

"Make yourself useful for once! Call your connections from the other packs, confirm that they're facing a raid!"

It's a risk but "If they're monitoring phones-" then Woolsey knows better though, cutting him off with "If they know about us they already know about them so just call them because they're screwed regardless, Kurt, make sure everyone gets out of here AND NOT A DAMN ONE OF YOU BETTER QUESTION ME AGAIN!"

This crowd I'm bustling through is starting to turn left, but I'm still going forward.
"Yes sir, Security, start getting down through the stairs and make sure noone else gets hurt! I'll get one of our EMTs that got laid off on the injured! Mike!"

I have to cross myself for all the ones that didn't make it up here.

"Ralph!"

His second in command.

"Here, Sir!"

I'm passing by Gonzalo, already on the phone.

I know it's him because I can feel his leer.

"Take my phone, and call the company's internal emergency line. Second number down, tell my operator I need every last van owned by the business here! Run red lights if they have to, just avoid the Cops and get here because I need them now! The codeword is Exeter. They'll know where to take the pack and Lupe, come here!"

Knowing Woolsey's company is big, I still can't imagine him having enough wheels to move us all. By the time I get forward enough to see through the crowd, I see him with his third in charge. Lupe. Newly promoted after his predecessor moved out of the den to finally have his own place. He rushed to the table with Woolsey coming down to meet him. squatting down with a cellphone in his right paw that's not the personal one he gave to Ralph. "Take this. Call every last number. Tell them that Woolsey is beginning the Ceaster Operation. They'll recognize the number. They won't question you." and whatever he's about to set in motion, I can already tell Woolsey's next move is big and unprecedented. Without even having to look in his eyes.

"And Lupe, give me your phone. I need to call some old friends..."

The Narcotics Officer doesn't hesitate to give, his civilian superior doesn't wait to take.

They both look to me without much shock that I brought myself to them.

Everyone here knows by now I'm inquisitive.

"You. Fuchs. Upstairs with me. Now."

The authority of his voice doesn't scare me because he's certain, surefooted and all of what I came to him for. Moments later I'm in his office, he's called up what's apparently a past pack member who owns a moving company and, by the grace of god, still lives close enough and has a van of his
outside the apartment, with employees living nearby that have vans with them, too. Everything and everyone, Woolsey tells him. With something like We're getting there in fifteen from the speaker that's got him saying he needed them five minutes ago. Just to prove a point on urgency. But this won't be forgotten, he tells the voice on the other end. He gestures to end the call, beginning to break it apart with a paperweight, if he can't risk Lupe getting discovered for aiding and abetting.

Something he's too busy with to look behind, to me, as he tells me in a pause, "You should have met me at a better time in my life. I would have been a better host, but I know how you feel about the word sorry..."

Before getting back to bashing while admitting "And I think I feel the same."

What's the last thing on my mind that I'd appreciate, if I couldn't hesitate to ask, knowing he'll understand if I do, "What's Ceaster?" to make him pause and collect himself to let me know what's going to happen, now:

"...The Packs of this City are taking over Zootopia Central Station."
I feel like a lightening bolt just struck me.
Like I've been tased. Like a bomb just went off next to me. 

This terror reaches beyond anything I've known before now.

"...What do you mean Wolves are going to take over Zootopia Central?"

Oh my god.

Saying it myself just made it sink in even more.

He takes a moment before the elaboration that doesn't require him to turn and face me.

"...I mean the Packs of Zootopia are gonna clear every last flat-tooth out of the station. Then set a perimeter immediately around it. Because the Predators of this city need to be safe, and it's always been up to Wolves to make shelter for anyone in the crosshairs every time there's been a stampede."

A declaration of war on the enemy's doorstep.

"And that's what Operation Ceaster is, Owen."

By Every Alpha of All the Packs.

"Woolsey... That's civil war."

And he could scoff, but'll settle for a clinch of the fist with his reminder if "This past month an a half has been a war they declared and Prey're Winning It."

But if he can feel me about to say he's gonna make it worse, then it's time to turn around to look me in the eye with this:
"And if they won't pretend that they don't want us gone, they've used up the last ounce of control they had over us. Ceaster is a winback of our preservation by Our hands. Our Paws and not their hooves."

And after all that's happened, I can't argue against us acting in our own best interest. He's right by every measure. The moment some Prey girl reporter asked, on that Damned Tuesday's press conference, about if there'd b a mandatory quarantine on Predators, and after everything that little bunny said, the clock has been rolling backwards. Decade by decade. Woolsey is just retaliating. Drawing a line on the battlefield with an ace he inherited up his sleeve. An Ace of Spades that must have taken and spent decades in waiting to be perfectly crafted. But it's flawed to me by this one little problem I can't get over, as he starts turning his attention back to breaking up the phone thorough:

That "They're gonna try to take it back, Woolsey. We're not gonna be able to hold it. It's right next to a Cop Station and City Hall..."

Something he'll address with an about face like he's former military, knowing they'll fight to take it back.

All of the past and present Alphas of all of the packs of this city must've known this.

And that knowledge is a moot point,

"We aren't beholden to any longneck any longer. We played the game and they cheated. They had their chances and ran 'em dry, They Don't Have Power over us anymore and whatever happens now is Not The Fault of Any Predator."

He's taken a page from Espada with that diction. As if the familiarity of it isn't gonna put my mind at ease. When it won't, when regardless of anything, even with all the reason in the world to do this, ever still it terrifies. But I got this one bit of closure. The only thing we could possibly have going for us all. Old Wolves like the one I'm looking to for some vague sense of comfort. Security. Direction and wisdom and ease of effort he's always exuded. The very thing he sees me trying to find in him, right now. Because I need it and he knows it's understood, Wolves can read the feelings of those around them. But Wolves can't hide their own feelings.
And his is how he's about to let me down in my time of need.

"I won't be joining you all."

With something he's hinting that I don't wanna believe.

So I'll try to clarify that "...You're going underground then, right? Lead from afar?" but no...

No.

I can already tell from the look on his face that can't give me solace.

"...I'm staying here, Owen."

He's going to let himself get arrested.

"I commanded the ship, the water under me belonged to none, and every one of them before me was worth his salt enough to know. When the time came? They'd have to be good captains."

They all are.

"So I'm going down and I won't be alone, tonight."

Every Alpha of all the Dens.

And I'm scared,

"They need you all!",

Left grasping at straws like "We need Generals!",

But all he's doing is looking at me as if this is still the end of his line and the start of someone else's.
"No Owen, You need Yourselves and not some old worn out son of a Bitch like Me.". no,

Just No,

No because "How the hell we-" "And they're gonna need someone like you to realize that."
It's never been this hard for me to ask What, "How?" comes out when I don't even understand enough of one to ask the other,

And he doesn't even pause to think on how to word "You're gonna show 'em, Owen."

As if the notion's simmered long enough to be believed.

The one I didn't see coming.

The thing that remains impossible.

The sky is falling, the earth is crumbling, he's projecting something on me even Atlas couldn't manage and I can't.

The Cops are coming, the Wolves are evacuating, there's about to be a hostile takeover of the most famous station in the world sitting right under the establishment's nose like a chin to uppercut and no, I cannot, no one mammal could, and the only one who ever might have a shot, he's trying to leave it up to me and he's a fool.

The baton cannot be caught to be passed on because "...I'm not a leader." like him.

I never would be,

Not for something like this,

I'm not like him but that isn't going to sway him because the resolve is still in his eyes, the glimmer of idealism too pure and distilled from reality.
"You never have been, Fox. But you were born to. Been held back and abused your whole life, seen others suffer like you did and so much worse. You seen the worst and this night's the one you're gonna start getting done with theirs."

I can't understand how he's expecting this, after all the sanity he's been for us.

If being tired of this scat couldn't mean I could lead then "How the hell am I supposed to do this Woolsey? I wasn't born for this, you're not even talking to the right species, I'm not a Wolf, I'm orange juice, I'm ginger, ain't shot-caller in your pack, not in anyone's and whose going to listen to me?!"

And he's wasting his time, ought to be downstairs with "Everyone, given time." but he ain't, he really does believe "It'll come down to you to know what to do when noone else does. They'll see it in you whether you like that scat or not and Naturally, they'll look to you to show them. Something to barricade against all of our Pain, Fox. All that grief the world's inflicted that you seen and don't even know made you is gonna lead you into facing it against hurting anyone else in anyway you can."

No.

"And that moment starts tonight."

Not ever.

Doesn't matter how mad he's starting to get, "I'm gonna let you down if you do this! All of them!"

I can't convince him.

I want to so bad but he's so certain as he tells me "You won't." like saying that guarantees it, when I'm so stuck on the question of "Why are you saying this?!" and the resounding belief "You're talking out from under your tail!"

What's finally pushed him to snapping back:

"I seen more of him in you than I ever wanted and don't you dare question it! I learned from the best and if I took anything from Jon Wilde he could've taught, it's how much You Want the World to Be
better! Not for You, for the mammals you know but for Itself! You don't hate it but it's disappointed you so Bad that you will put your own survival on the line when the time comes! Your people sacrifice everything if that's what it takes! If that's what it takes to make people kinder and gentler like you all wish they were! Like I could never even imagine they could!"

I've had a chord struck.

A gospel sung true like Eva's sermon did when she was on top of me, singing to make me hold on when I got love and let go when I gave it back.

The Cheetah couple.

Those weapons I tossed out of dumpsters.

That meeting with a Cop while certain the rest were still looking for me.

And I think I know the answer to my own question, now.

The one I asked Andrew after dumping that knife.

Why I have to be such an honest someone more than just a definition.

"...Because you love on a level the rest of us can't comprehend. You love the world so much in spite of itself, that you're ready to give your life to show it better..."

But I'm not Jon Wilde.

I don't know who he is, just how I couldn't follow whatever example he's set for me in this Wolf's head.
I understand, yes, but I can't realize it.

It's not my place, because even if I gave it all away for one thing, and just for one thing, like Eva would be ready to give it all up for me?

What good would it really do?

If I'm still not a leader, and I'm still certain I'd let everyone down, even if I finally understand why I do what altruistic things I do.

Just like I'm certain that if Woolsey won't lead, then "What about Espada? That Bull has-" "A dishonorably discharged cop can't do a thing!"

...No...

"w-What do you-" The one good cop, "They fired him, Owen!" Woolsey has to cut me off with because I'm still infuriating him that he has to explain "He bit off more than he could chew and they led him out of Precinct 1 with a SWAT team. They were that scared of him!"

Fear.

Not respect.

The story of his life,

The same as it is for every Predator tonight.

"And you know what? It doesn't matter. Even if what's done wasn't, he would have known his place better. Like you should be acting like you know your own, the one I'm giving you! Because if you ever wanted to take back a damn thing they defined you by then This Is It!"

I've worn his patience out.

"My Betas won't understand at first either but just show them! Show the next Alphas what Jon taught me!"

But he still hasn't swayed me from thinking I know what my place isn't.

"I understand what you're telling me... I'm not ungrateful, either... It's just I can't believe you're thinking this."
I'm repeating myself like I have to. That's making Woolsey repeat his past.

I can see it in his pained eyes that I've forced him to. In frustration, he's reaching into his mouth, and I can't understand why at first, until I watch the grip around those ivories pull them out from the top of his mouth. Dentures. Partial ones. He's setting them down on a table, reaching back in just in case he hadn't proven his point yet, because he gets how doubt is stubborn, and pries the others out. I'm not disgusted, I've hurt myself with how I've brought him to this. That I've made a Wolf without teeth expose himself bare like this. They are at once a point of discrimination for all of us and a matter of pride to most, and this is not natural for a Wolf his age. He's got one molar left in his mouth if that ain't a wisdom tooth.

He should still have every one of them.

But he's got to explain that "My fight was lost at Woolington in '99. They had already beaten it out of me when they went ahead, anyway. Smashed a nightstick through my mouth. I nearly choked on them like they wanted me to. On my own teeth. Because I tried to fight back."

He's put that image in my head of a younger him all those yesterdays ago.

Blood on the ground to nerve churning howls of pain.

Fragments of enamel threatening to choke him.

"These gums are a metaphor, Owen."

He's not trying to sound authoritarian, now.

"They're an analogy for my generation and all the past ones that fought for better."

He sounds so much older.

"Old folks like me are toothless whether we have anything left or not. Whatever clout we were given isn't power. We can't fight."

So frail.

"Not anymore."

So aching.

"They've beaten it out of us and pulled wool over our eyes."

He's desperate to prove a point because I'm too damned cowardly to hear it.

"But you're young. Young like I was. Younger like your brothers down there are. And that youth is what makes this your fight. Their fight."
I'm broken up, now. Defenseless.

"You're young and that's all you're gonna need."

I can't tell myself another damned thing.

Only tell him this one last truth, "Your generation did so much..." and he knows I'm grateful.

But he's running out of time.

"You know what's wrong with old preds like me?"

I can name a million things when now is not the time and I don't have the gaul.

I can only nod the no in reply he was prepared for, like any alpha should be of any eventuality.

Just look at what's happening, now.

"You either die fighting or you live long enough to get complacent."

Truth like it's never been told before.

"Look at me, Owen. I ended up facilitating this stupid idea that Wolves couldn't survive out there. Not without a Pack, not in secret, like we're the mistake children the world made us."

And he's leaving it up to me to not repeat his mistake.

Because he knows noone in his Pack is capable enough on their own to not repeat it themselves.

I fully realize now, what he saw in my goat-getting antagonism, that he felt he had to protect by bringing me into the fold.

I appreciate that for what it was, now.

I just have one last question for him, left.

"...What do you want me to do?" and I'll try to see it through for him.

The answer comes without a second thought.
"...Give them hell, Fuchs." he tells me.

As bad as all of this is, he manages to make me smile with a "...Give 'em hell, huh?" that makes him smile back with a "Give them the Vulpine kind of hell even Hell can't handle, Mr.Order-Up-For-Fire."

...The Ramen shop.

The affirmation my turnabout was appreciated after the fact.

That reason among others Andrew must've given when he told him he shouldn't let me come here and he was right, this immediate space around me is Bi-Polar. Because I needed to laugh at my own gag again if I had to learn where my place is, when I've never been able to rent and had to pitch a tent wherever I could. My place is in a word like it's been trying to tell me, with all the times it's popped up in my head and all the times it comes out of my mouth and the mouths of others. Now is home. It's calling out to come back. Through a moment, a love for everyone inside a dream waiting to be allowed, a Ferret Girl that's out there somewhere and a crying out for universal brotherhood like we've all been waiting for.

Now is my rights, my wrongs and a moment that's finally come like it's been waiting to come,

And now,

I'm turning to the door to the stairs before looking back one last time to say "Thank You." like I never have.

"Show 'em what we got on all their strength, Kit." he tells me, with envelopes he throws and I catch like magnets. One red. One blue. An unspoken understanding that they'll get to where they need to be, like me and all of the Lupine millennials below will get to where they need to be.

I'm pouncing down the stairs with 'em in paw.

Surefooted in the skipping of every three steps, I finally know where I'm going in life.

I can see it like I can on how it's gonna go over here after we're gone to never come back.

They'll flood in all tactical and overdressed in riot gear with their tasers out, nightsticks on the hip, and they won't get any of what they came for.
The single old s-o-b they'll find would've already denied them that much.

Seated on a cot in a penthouse with a relaxed crossed leg and scat-eating grin, he'll watch all that pent up and impotent rage boil over.

That's when he will peel his chops back with a calmly collected claw to remind them they missed one, last time.

Because that's the kind of resolve that Woolsey personifies.

When I clear the chainlink fence, I'm greeted by who's still left of the old guard's pack that still hasn't bustled into his company vans and more coming from his friend's moving business lining up by the sidewalk.

It's chaos barely being contained for the sake of nothing else.

There's so much doubt and uncertainty for the future in all of them, but my body is brimming with a calling.

None of it touches that, as Kurt and Ralph look to me dumbfounded.

"Where's Woolsey?!" asks Kurt, leading Ralph to follow up with "What did he tell you up there?",

Leaving me to tell them both "He's caught another ride!"

I could've told them it's a long story, though I think they understand that just by looking at the envelopes.

They know what they mean, if Kurt still has to ask "...How'd you get those?!" when I can only state the obvious: "He gave 'em to me!"

Kurt immediately snatches the red, Ralph the blue, they nearly tear the content along with the package, begin to read, and it's obvious from their faces: They're instructions for taking over the gem of Zootopia's public transportation network. They can't believe it in the same way I couldn't.

Something that's got them slipped up on aiding the evac, just to look at each other with shock, then me, and only now does it sink in. How it's been written and already done with nothing else for them to do but turn around and play their parts. Muttering obscenities to themselves for the mess they know they're about to get of last of us got out of. In the last few vans, just in time, to hear the echoes of sirens that had yet to turn a corner and get eyes on us.

We filed into these vans in order of rank within the pack, so I had to take the same one that Gonzo, Randall, Lowe and the rest of them took, along with that newly accepted teenager that'll probably never get the chance to pay Woolsey back that one hundred and twenty bucks. Zootopia Central Station is northwest of the apartment building, but precinct would be the first responders, and they
would be coming in from the north. So our own convoy has to B-line around the Cops by first heading east, then north, then west. It's not as safe as going south, then west, then north, but timing is critical, here. Hooking around the SWAT teams and squad cars from behind will have to do. So far, we've done it.

We have to: Woolsey's pack is probably the closest to the station and makes us the pioneers that'll break ground for the other packs along with all the others that'd follow our example.

It's all on us.

We have to be the ones that make this happen...

...Except that now I can think, I can see the genius of it. Daring to ride on the belief that if the Cops found out about the dens, they would raid and if they were gonna raid one then they were gonna raid them all. And the assumption was confirmed by Gonzalo to Ralph. Everyone got raided. That's gonna make police stations like Precinct 1 nearly empty. Whoever stayed behind, they're not gonna have the numbers nor courage for dispersing an ever increasing number of cornered Wolves. So by the time the Police convoy comes back from Woolsey's, it will be too late for them to try and remove us from Zootopia Central. They'll need reinforcements from across the city, if they can even be afforded when they already have their hands full on Savage patrol.

And he'll get to see it all,

Dragged up the stairs and through the big doors,

How they won't be able to clear us out.

...It shouldn't surprise me that Us includes Me, but it does yet doesn't. The kind of feeling you can't define, with how life up to this point has been one extreme after another for me. This new escalation is just a lot more steep than usual. Too much to take in, being in the back of this van. The bumpy ride of this ancient Lobos is making Gonzo that much more infuriated at me. It's a windowless van, except for the ones in the back door that I'm looking out of. I think I'm trying to find an answer, because he told me to give them hell. I can still scarcely imagine all of what that entails, though. Except the urban landscape flying away from me is familiar. It needs a moment to sink in. It's scratching at the surface.

Then it hits me:

We're on that same road I veered into oncoming traffic on to get away from the Cops, the first time they came for me.

We just passed the intersection that turned red on me, with the cop SUV that nearly ran me over.

Which means...
These Wolves are so shellshocked, they're like bees without a hive. Lowe, thinking he could rest against the door gets up without a thought. It's only the driver that asks "What's going on back there?!" and the answer is in the vulpine characteristic of thought, decision and action all happening at once where there could never be any time to explain,

I can only tell 'em as I pull the sliding side door open to a van going about too-fast-for-this an hour not to worry, "I'll get to the station before the pack does but tell Kurt and Ralph I'm coming if I don't!"

Because this van isn't running the speed limit due to traffic but it's going fast enough that as I jump out to land on my feet, the momentum makes me stumble. My timing was perfect, though. That's the rodent market. I can hear Gonzo shouting out good behind me over the horn of that car I'm in front of. He must think I'm finally out of his life as that door slams loudly enough that it's a good thing there wasn't a window to break from the force.

He doesn't know, though.

Kind of like I still don't know what giving them hell entails yet.

I can just slip between two parked cars with all I know being what it is that's going to inspire me until I get Eva back:

A 1971 Vulpon 75 Ranger Fastback painted in racing green.

Beyond this empty, narrow little alley I'm surprised I rode through.

Down these stairs I should've hit wrong and high-sided the thing with.

Past this tunnel with the water soaking into my socks.

Just on the other side of this door.

Right where Espada Del Toro left it.

And back between my legs.

This city won't know where and won't know when this fury came from,

But it's coming.

That snap, crackle and pop of a parallel twin.

Echoing through this tunnel.
Breathing fresh air along this walkway beside the river.

The battery must've been in it's death throws from having sat for so long, but I'm keeping this running. Keeping it on it's toes as I powerslide it from the access ramp to the streets. Early morning traffic. Vornoy Plaza behind me. Freedom is another word for nothing left to lose and tonight, the city of power that never gave but took what it could is gonna get a burning hot serving of Carpe Noctem. With my old mooici floral left unbuttoned, I'm hitting this throttle hard before it's too late. I may never get to feel this gas tank against my chest again, so I'm pressing myself into it. My brush raised on high alert. The heat of the headlight under my chin. My ears tucked back, I'm grinning to my shaking down of Acacia street and that van I jumped out of is just within sight.

I'm imagining the look that'd be on Gonzalo's face as I kick down on the clutch, speed right up to the rear end of it like I'm playing chicken then veer left to fly ahead of it. Splitting lanes between the Vans and the rest of the City like a sound barrier. Every other body in this pack knows every other body's number. Not everyone's, but enough numbers to where everyone eventually gets whatever needs to be Disseminated. So while I'm blasting past the vans, Woolsey's top mammals must be texting instructions to their subordinates, they're telling the rest of the pack what's gonna happen, and Gonzo must be tapping furiously on Lowe's phone to chew out Andrew over me.

Yes, since everybody's doing this over the cellular networks, we're practically telegraphing our parry. Does it matter?

...No.

Even if it wasn't all in code like it surely is and even if Bellwether gave fresh new logins for Laciteps to the ZPD, we're giving them too much, too fast and too suddenly so by the time we take the station, we'll have a defense stronger than chess pieces that never moved. We just have to cross that first hurdle of getting Prey out of there. Ones like the Horse eyeing me. Sitting on my bike at the edge of Watering Hole Park. Shuffling up to me from the station with the clumping of hooves heard over my Vulpon's idle. He recognizes me like I've got As Seen On TV stamped on my forehead. It probably took me wearing the last thing I was seen wearing and the last thing I was seen riding for him to put two and two together.

I can't immediately tell what breed of Equus Ferus Caballus he is, but he's nervous.

Rigid in his posture. Upright enough to have his loosened tie draped over his beer belly and make him a drunk commuter at an hour like this. Fresh off the tap he's probably been on since he got off work. He doesn't know if he wants to get away from me or start throwing hooves down on my head, he just knows I'm a threat to him and he wants me to go away. I'm not phased, though. I even look away from him for a brief moment because I couldn't care less about him, right now. I'm waiting around like I planned to because I did exactly what I said I would. Get here before the pack did. I guess this kinda makes me a de facto forward observer that can relay some basic info if there is any, when they get here.
So while he ponies up from indecision, I'm watching precinct one and I'm happy to say I won't have a damned thing to tell the pack on that front. It's dead like the plan figured it would be.

Dead like this horse I'm looking away from wishes I was.

"'ey. Yer tha Fux aren't Ya?"

That slurring of his words has me right on the money.

I know that a hoof is pointing at me because I can feel it in the air right beside me.

They'll be here soon enough, though.

I'll entertain him, in the meantime.

"And you're that Stallion, right?"

He's completely confused. Not sure where I'm coming from. And even if he wasn't drunk, I'm sure he still wouldn't see what I did there. So he just powers through with "Yur at Fux frawm the news before ya all star'ed reverdin back tu-" and if I'm gonna hear this "Our primitive savage ways?" grief again it's coming out my own mouth because "Yeah, I've heard that before, it ain't original but you're that Horse right?"

It's flying so over his head he must think I'm the stupid one here.

Makes him think about "What do you mean?" long enough to express it clearly, he's not gonna get it unless I look him dead in the eye with the most patronizing look I can give before repeating myself one last time, "I mean are you That stallion?" for him to finally get that I'm mocking him.

And I'm certain he still doesn't know why but hey, at least he knows to be upset and snort.

"What're you waiting for, pred? Yer drug dealer? Purse to snatch? Someone to go savage on?"

This guy,

He's like a slot machine that keeps hitting jackpots.

"Yeah, Prey Boy, I'm Waiting."

The moment he's about to charge me, open his mouth again, I hear brakes squealing and a door slide open then another, and another and another.

Pawpads making landfall, Engines revving up,

And more brakes,

More sliding doors.

The look on his face says whatever courage he mustered has left him in a moment.
There's Wolves starting to pour into my field of vision and one shouts "Boo!" as he starts to gallop in a spook.

With me shouting out "Told it to you I was waiting!"

One of Woolsey's betas stopping next to me with "The heck was that about?" and yeah, it's not "The Horse?" but I ask anyway to get a "No orange juice, the jumping out of a van and that freakan bike." out of him.

"I needed to see my therapist." I tell him with a pat on the gas tank, "My old muse."

It goes without saying he's frustrated but this doesn't, "Tell Ralph that there's no cops next door. We won't have any interference until they come back and that the station's quiet. He was one of the last vans out, it'll put him at ease."

He's acknowledging with a whipping out of his phone, yet he's got to remind me of the obvious:

"You're not riding that thing around in the station."

"I'm not. I won't!"

"Good."

"I still gotta bring her in though..."

"What?"

I tell him what with a twist of the throttle and a letting off the front brake.

The Pack is flooding in to my right, I coast my way into the building. Hugging the wall to swing my right leg over the vulpon's seat, stand on the left footpeg, gingerly apply the front brake to stop it so I can put the kickstand down. I could easily wreak havoc in here, but it wouldn't help. I'm joining back up with the pack on foot, mindful not to get too close to the commuter's in the process because they're already on edge. Prey simply need to be hustled out. Chances are slim, but if there's Preds here besides us, they need to know what's about to happen so they can make a decision. Sure, most aren't gonna join us tonight, the idea of civil action like this is too crazy. Some will come back if it's been as bad out here as I know it is but right now?

The panic's universal: Even amongst preds, Noone has ever seen this many Wolves out in the open as a unit before.

Yeah, Wolves tend to move together but this isn't a Pack as others know the concept. This is one as it actually is. What's probably going to number more than two and a half hundred individuals by the time they're all unloaded. From just one pack. All Northwestern and Great Plains, minus Andrew's Mexican self. And with the packs mostly being specific to a Subspecies benefactor... There's got to be at least four other major ones. Maybe five and they're all coming barring disco interference. The
amount of Wolves that are already here, and how vilified they are by default, at a time when prey have become the most paranoid and hysterical they've been in nearly eighty years? It feels like a powder keg with a lit fuse. Like it's only gonna take one wrong move make this go south fast.

It's not helping that the pack feels as much in disarray as the mammals that aren't welcomed anymore. Of course they don't know what they're doing, no one's done this before. So I need to find Ralph or Kurt and make sure they know what I know but this chaos is gonna make it a game of Where's Balto...

...There's the female Wolf from before with the buck boyfriend.

Ex-boyfriend maybe by now.

"Hey! Where's Ralph? Kurt? I gotta talk to 'em!"

I'm watching her start to open her mouth, as the deafening trumpet stops everyone in their tracks.

The yelps and screaming is nearly enough to nearly drown out the impact of an elephant's trunk swinging into bodies.

Everyone stumbling to my left and falling against me and I'm watching someone fly over me...

...I'm not stopping this fury from manifesting in the tremble...

...And I'm charging through without a thought as the backlash starts,

With Wolves shouting at and testing out a towering thirteen feet of Pachyderm.

Accent as thick as his head,

"I don't know what the big idea is coming out of your side of town but I'm sendin' yas back with yer tails between yer legs!" but it doesn't matter like the fist I'm throwing behind myself does.

With an extended index to a reminder, "There's the god damned exit!"
He thinks he's got quick wit with that "So go back from where ya came, Fox! I've had enough of yer kind too!" he shoots out.

Thinking he's macho,

"You think you're hard, big boy!? Gotta prove your peanuts still work, midlife crisis havin'-'" No, "I AIN'T TELLING YA AGAIN, FOX! I AIN'T SCARED AN I'LL TRAMPL-'!"

I know I couldn't care if "THIS AIN'T ALL OF US!"

And all of this hate and anger I ain't having in our establishment is not enough to blind him from the implication.

It ain't enough to stop him having a doubletake moment, if he's suddenly started counting the sleek, ticked off heads and those slicked fangs around the growls.

"...This ain't even the start of us because let me tell you, Every Last God Damned Wolf in this city From Every Last District is on their way here, we're going nowhere and no amount of charging like a young Bull is gonna stop what'll happen when the rest of us get here."

He knows where I'm going, because that thought seems to always be on the back of every Herbivore's mind.

I'm not giving him the benefit of the doubt, though.

For once, I'm gonna cave in to entertain the fear all those tons upon tons of himself shouldn't.

"I'm telling you again, That is The Damned Exit. You can either take it and walk, or you can take the toilets for the next week and a half! Alive in one big turd or Dead and One Flush at a Time! Your call, Dumbo!"

The feat would probably take more than a month,

But nevermind the technicalities: It feels good enough I could play this moment on repeat in the
afterlife if there was nothing else on my mind.

He's looking at me with the fear of Captain Acorn's crew at the sight of Moby Fickle. I motion behind me to clear the way for him and it happens. He bolts and starts earthquaking before I'm even out of the way, have duck between his legs to save myself. But the part that pisses me off the most is how he didn't do what I said. He's gonna hear it one more time, one last piece of my mind that "I SAID WALK!" and he obeys with fright so great it he's about on the verge to making it rain around all that quaking in his knees. But he's doing a real good job of trying to stay calm, now. Gives Ralph a good wide berth, as he looks to him in shock. Then turns around, looks at me, the rest of his pack to confirm they all are, and letting it sink inside.

He's the new Alpha alongside Kurt, and his whole pack is looking at me like looking's gonna make it believable, and suddenly, it's starting to sink in for me.

Like it's starting to sink in for him and everyone else...

"Did you just..."

I just faced off against an Elephant and I god damned won.

Speechlessness wasn't a communicable disease, until right now.

"...did i..."

The world's stopped for a second.
And then god damn explodes all around me in jubilation

With any doubt

Anyone had

About us not being able to pull this off tonight

Being announced dead on our arrival

"WE GOT THIS! WE GOT THIS FREAKAN SCAT!" someone's howling over me, another
punches me square in the shoulder, I'm being pushed around and it's the best kind. Ralph is
swaggering over to my stupified looking ass with a suave palm for me to slap and god damn, I ain't a
cat but I wouldn't need 'nip for this even if I was.

"My freakan male!"

I don't even know what just got broken inside of "My freakan self!" but,

Did it even register just now or am I, wait, no, not now, Get Back to it,

We gotta get back to business,

Just business with a smile more genuine than a valet after a hundred buck tip because is "That all of
them?!" we wanted out and "What about the downstairs?!"

"Oh, scat, what about the downstairs?!" and that makes two of us that don't even know but even
because I feel like I'm the smartest mammal in the room half the time?

Doesn't mean my smug happy self isn't making this that half of the time I'm not.

But I kind of can't even think straight enough to be coherent on where that thought was going.

"EVERYBODY GET ON THE TERMINAL!" Kurt comes out of nowhere to command, I gotta
follow it up like there ain't no fret to "Don't block them coming out! DON'T BLOCK THE WAY
OUT!"

I don't know where we're going but it's where the magic happens. That's when it happens. There's
how it happens, Here, Now, with the knowledge that if we can make an Elephant nearly go make in
his undies, the world cannot stop this from happening.

Bring the cops.

Bring the territorial guard.

Bring the armies of Ghengis Khan and the legions of Julius Caesar back from the dead with some lightsabers thrown in.

We're ready.

We ain't stopping.

I'm catching Andrew out the corner of my eye so heated from newfound fire he's sliding his self down the handrail of that escalator going down because he's going down to get down in it. But that ride ain't for everyone. There's not enough conveyor belt rubber for all the hips here. Some of us just gotta stay up here.

No, most.

Actually, not that many at all,

"LINE UP AROUND THE RAILS UP HERE, THAT'LL SHOW 'EM!"

We're gonna do 'em like that civil war turkey shoot with the courtesy of not brandishing muzzleloaders. That'll show 'em, jumping over the grass and flowers along the rails, along with the rest of the pack up here. Pulling myself up to look over them and it's showing them already, making a bunch of cervines and antelope stumble up the escalators going both ways. I'm looking between shoulders to see that the message sent has been received to all but one really ticked Ovis Canadensis shoving it back with a return to sender and a "What's going on?! What is this!!?" like it ain't obvious. It's ok, they got thick skulls to butt heads with and pop braincells against.

Andrew's keeping his distance from, circling around him while I go third grade academic on him with "We're taking the station over!"

He ain't gonna learn it though.

Snorting at Andrew before coming back to me with some tired old lecture of "You savages haven't had handed to you? You gotta keep taking from the rest of us?!!"

I legitimately could never have the patience for malarkey like this even if I wasn't high on winning.

I can't even be angry, I just gotta tell him like it is with a smile:

"That's our line and it's been our line, boy!"

I could spend an entire year schooling him about how that's so, yet it still wouldn't remedy that ignorance of his that has him trying to convince us to consider the following: "You useless welfare leeches can't get away with this!"
Everyone gets a good chuckle at that. He's stupid enough to probably think we're laughing with him but it's just not our responsibility teach him any better. We've heard trash like that our whole lives, and it just doesn't hurt like they want it to.

Besides, "The idiot that says we can't should shut the F up because we're doing it whether you like it or not!"

His posturing self just won't cave in as if he's making one last stand for pasture pride world wide.

"Says what the hell you got!" prompts a Wolf on the far side of the station to yell out "We just kicked out a freakan Elephant, what you got?"

He reaches into his pants to show just what he's got.

A taser immediately marking him a meadowlander hick.

Andrew ought to be scared.

Any other given day, we would all be.

Not now.

All he's gonna get is just a "So what?!" from Kurt while he walks down an escalator.

"I'm not going anywhere!" comes out of him like he's not scared.

He always was. Any prey liberal would call the piece a penile extension but that's not what a taser is. A taser is a paranoia reliever. It's grounding for those terrified ones needing a means to empower when they can't do without one.

I got by with a motorcycle instead, though I'm thinking to much if I just got to tell him like it is,

"You're going wherever you were because we've arrived where nothing you got changes a thing about your exiting stage right and Getting Gone!"

Something he's gonna try to ignore.

Raising his taser up, he's starting to say something as subway brakes drown him out enough to make him rethink it.

His attention caught like all of ours, an arrival comes to a stop, the doors to all the cars open, and good god...

They must've been next to a station in the Rainforest District, it's the only way.

The face he must be making at the sight.

Because with all the Wolves already here, the visual of a train full of Indians and Tibetans still
shocks.

And all of their eyes on him like ours were but they're a lot closer.

Our pleasant surprise.

A pair of brows furrowed under a big knife grin.

His horror.

For a Bighorn Sheep, it took long enough to get through, there ain't any fighting, no grandiose soapboxing.

This is only gonna go one way.

Our way.

His bolting past Andrew and Kurt for the escalators with one last "Wait 'til the army comes for you!" to say when it ain't gonna be the last word.

Mine is:

"We are!"

With him finally running off in one piece, I gotta ask myself how the heck the Conductor allowed them all to get onboard until I see him. Andrew and Kurt, too. He's one of ours from Woolsey's. A Great Plains Reminder that Wolves can be found on every level of the city's infrastructure. They're employed by the popo, they do shifts at the hospitals, they work underground with water and sanitation, they drive buses and run subways. Wolves have everything but the keys to the city. They have the know-how and the experience. The Packs can make this work. We can do it. He gets on the subway's PA, looks at Ralph beside me from afar yells out "Is that all of them?! Thumbs up or down!" to get a thumbs up.

He gives back a "Thank god, get the platform clear, I got the rest of them barricaded in at the Ivy Avenue Station and Five-Oh's already on 'em!"... And I got a reason to dread again.
Shouldn't let it crush this ecstasy, but it's gonna be on everyone's mind until he comes back from throwing the sub into a fast reversal while closing the doors.

Ralph observes "Onai's Betas have to be down there, I gotta go meet them with Kurt."

Though I'm not done if "Hey!", there's so much that still has to happen.

He looks back with a "What, Owen?" for me to know "Anything else we gotta do?"

He looks up for a moment to think when he already knows what he's gonna tell me.

"Yeah, start settling and adjusting... You pulled enough scat tonight. I'm getting Andrew back up here to have him make sure you don't mouse on another Elephant."

Gets a soft chuckle and grin out of me, I don't have much more to give because I'm drained. Everyone is, feeling stress's toll. We just did the impossible and the road ahead is longer than the vision. Our lives have made us too nearsighted to see much farther than one mile at a time. But I'm still there enough to greet Andrew when he gets back up to ground level, thinking I haven't seen him beam to this much pride in ages. Hunching down to tiptoe over at a building up pace, "Hey Oh are you ok, bro!?!" and I'm clueless, "I don't even know anymore!"

Just smiling back as if either of us could have one.

The questions keep coming like "Did you freakin' See that scat with you and the elephant?!" and I can't answer them, "I didn't see nada! Zip!"

Couldn't even realize it happened until after the fact but he could just about hoist me up to twirl me as he grabs me by the shoulders.

"Freakan ratchet azz Fox, I love you!" but with him spooning me on the first night, I'm just like "Ew.", he's gotta get defensive with "No homo!" and eh, "That's prejudiced."

He's so done with my cheek.

200% done enough that all he's got left to give is "Whatever! come on, let's just find a place to chill."

"Alright but you ain't sleeping with me tonight."

300% done, "Oh, knock it off, that was one time!"

His frustration ain't gonna stop me from continuing the vexation.

"One time? Last time! Lying azz buster with the ' we ain't gotta spoon or nuttin' ' horsehockey, I swear..."

We're just about ready to fall over each other if we keep this laughing up. He shoves me, I slide back
next to him with a drunken jab to his midsection he evades with a parallel jump in to his right. We've done so much tonight that's so incredible that it's too much for us to know in one sitting what it all is we've accomplished. And by the time this is over, whenever that is, I get the feeling that decades from now, they'll still be debating what it was. The only thing I can think to myself some time later, seated in a circle with Andrew and others, is that the impact of what we've done is gonna be felt long enough to be in the future's history text books.

Whatever the narrative will be, what we've done will have been important enough to have had one.

And anything they can take from us now, will forever pale in comparison to that accomplishment.
Calm*

Chapter Summary

An asterisk marks this chapter as having not been edited since it's publishing. I am going through this story, from this chapter onward, to modify, correct, and slightly rewrite toward my current standard and style of writing. Now that the story is "Complete" and I have no urgency to rush through it. Much.

And in this current moment, I am unable to use Rich Text on my current Browser, so please ignore the notes. The one at the end contains a personal note on what to re-include after alteration

Chapter Notes

...on this past Tuesday, my briefcase was stolen. Inside was, most importantly, my laptop.

I'm writing this on my phone at an internet cafe

I have a screenshot of my progress for 11 but lost my notes to future edits on 11, 21 & 22.

I will be transcribing what little I have as I can and I don't know... I just don't.

I swear to god, this year is out to kill me.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

That reality of none of us being prepared for what we began about an hour ago is something we can't ignore.

The high we felt before can't chase away an uncertainty like this. Whatever it is we've accomplished so far feels like something we've always wanted to do, yet wasn't done exactly the way it should've been. This place I've been to before feels so unfamiliar and it's nothing obvious I can relieve myself with by putting a name on it. A lot of us from Woolsey's & Onai's pack seems to be feeling it, the ones not being kept busy with security and perimeter work, or the formation of an administration with the start of a clerical system to back it. The employee areas are already being cleared out of personal belonging we're gonna hand off, we've gotten into the Security and PA room, but Kurt hasn't decided yet if we should leave the cameras and microphones on for ourselves or figure out a way to turn them off, making sure we're not being watched. If being watched even matters. Someone from Onai's pack had a police scanner, though it hasn't been set up yet. Downtown has more.

Even without it, there's Wolves in all the precincts, and a few are keeping Woolsey's fourth in command informed of cop movements, but there's a delay with that.
We're still just celebrating the fact we're not all in cuffs, but it's become muted. There's so much yet to do. How are we gonna get food? What's gonna be done for personal space or sleeping arrangements? Sure, some of us here are EMT trained, but what about medical supplies if and when we need them? Ralph has been assuring everyone over the PA that we'll be able to cross bridges like those when we get there, but Woolsey's was a big role to fill. He's gone and Ralph's got an even bigger role now than just being in charge of his pack. There's no official leader or chief executive, but it feels like we're gonna go for a flat hierarchy with a commission at the top.

All that me and Andrew knows, seated in a circle on the ground floor with others, is that the disbelief is something we can't escape, we're not hiding anymore, and the doubts are creeping in. There's one thing we do know. A given that went without saying that comes from one of Andrew's pack mates: "They'll come. The cops."

My friend doesn't have anything less obvious to reply to that with. "We just took over the biggest train station." Just like Woolsey told us to.

There's been no major hitch yet, though there will be. "Yeah, and they're gonna take it back."

So what, I could offer. Because on paper, we should be happy with what we've accomplished as it is, when everyone here has been wanting to accomplish something their whole lives. I can't offer it, though. The cops will come.

He goes on. "I mean, a couple years back, the camp movement on Peak Street. Look how that went down an that was just a park."

Yeah, "An open space where they could close in from every direction. This is different. Theres only one real way for them in." I tell him. I could elaborate on how much better organized we're gonna be than a bunch of neurotic prey college kids, but he starts off again before I can get to there.

"Exactly, this is different. This is the biggest train station, and it's right next to precinct one and city hall. Millions of folks use this station every year, the cops ain't gonna just let this happen, they'll retake it no matter what."

Again it's the obvious, leaving one of the others in the circle to remind him along with everyone else "Look, every pack. Alright? We've got every pack in the city coming and the word of mouth is gonna get lions, tigers, bears over here, works."

Yeah, the voice of reason starts off, "Everything but the hippos rhinos an elephants that the cops already got in spades when it's just us and rainforest so far." Someone beside him has to remind him about something though. "We already faced off against an elephant and we won."

That's not an argument to win any reassurance. "No, that fox faced off and won. Against one elephant. A Civilian. Not a ticked off bull elephant in riot gear, not against a couple dozen of them with hippos and rhinos to back them up, not an entire city's police force."

That hasn't happened yet, but it's going to regardless.

The only thing any of us have left to say is the catalyst for all this. "We didn't have anywhere else to go. We wouldn't have had to do this if prey didn't overreact to the news."

Deaf ears. Logic. The obvious: "...That doesn't matter, yo. They don't care. They want us gone an they'll make it happen."

There's nothing left to say. What we knew before is something we just can't stop. The visuals in everyone's heads all amount to scenarios that all end one way.
The cops storming in.
Riot shields.
Batons.
Tasers.
Zip cuffs.
Cages.
Courtrooms.
Prison.

No matter what we can do to prolong the inevitable, there is no doubt about how frail and mortal this brief moment of refuge and our own determination is gonna last. We just have to sit here silently, now. Let the fear invite itself in because nobody's got enough locks on their doors to keep it barricaded out.

These Wolves don't have Woolsey's last words to me to hold on to, and I don't have enough of them to ward off their feelings.

And yet...

I'm getting something from elsewhere to supplement them.

Something in the air I can't figure before thinking on it to realize that it's Andrew. This soft smile feels so out of place, but it doesn't feel like it is. So why is it challenging me? He's always been a voice of reason, someone I could rely on to be a little more level headed than me. I have no clue where he's going with that smile, but I can tell he's be trying to think of something hilarious. It feels out of character, yet it doesn't. I'm grasping at the logic until it dawns on me: He's trying to be happy. Make the conversation go from one ear out the other because it won't stop what we're dealing with from being internalized, but it can help him cope. The more I dwell on it, what's becoming apparent in him is something that's been obvious with me and so many others this whole time.

We're all so depressed, so desperate to be happy, that we're looking for relief in anything we can laugh about. He's had enough of being depressed. We all are, and he's so tired of that fact that he's taking control of the situation. A sense of resolve is coming from him that feels like he's ready, willing to acknowledge the situation if he can just shield himself with something for all of us. Because it's the only rational thing left to do, with everyone but me looking at him like he's crazy before the naysayer lets out a "Boy..." with a cocked eyebrow to get him breaking out into a crack up of a laugh that gets him going.

"The heck are you laughing over?"

He answers him by asking me "Owen, bro, that night you crashed Buffy's party?"

"Yeah?" Now I'm the one cocking a brow at him.

"That clowning around you did on me while you were in that dumpster?"

All that feigned shock and horror I pulled on him with more cheek than any one person could handle. My attempt to find humor in something to soften the blow of rifling through garbage. I know
what he's doing, I see the logic, I did the same without knowing it, but this genuine, open mouthed, teeth bearing smile on me? It shouldn't be, and I can't reconcile the fact that it is. It's happening.

He's getting me to yell "OH GOD!" again to get him going even harder than he already was, getting me laughing along with him while everyone is looking at us like we're out of our gosh darned minds.

"Oh god!" he begins to mimic me, "There's a diaper in here and it reeks to heaven high! Oh god, someone barf'd in this bag ECH!"

"ECH!"

"ECH!"

That freakan Donktron mallarky I started using after watching too much groobitygromps that I infected him with.

"That freakan melted ice cream that busted over my head while I was holding that box of discs over my head!"

"Oh dude bro that freakan comedian azz timing was so-" He can't finish it even if I didn't bust out at my own misfortune before he could. We're out of place like uno cards in a fancy designer poker deck and I couldn't care.

"These two are out of their dang azz minds." comes from somewhere in the circle so dead serious it keeps the laughter going between the two of us.

It's ok, we're gonna move on from our inside jokes in a moment to something these steve azz steves can appreciate.

"Ok bro I never got the full story from that great prey savior pizza zit trustfund baby, how the hell did you jump out of a two story window?!"

I can feel these eyes bulging at us, these collective thoughts that Andrew's spent too much time around me and my crazy is infectious, but it doesn't even matter because I'm used to everything making me feel like an unappreciated joker that gets taken out of the deck for tejas holdem and this beautiful little moment doesn't remind me of anything.

"I don't even know, I was dancing with Eva like everyone else was in this crazy azz moment to You Me Pouncing by Los Lobosinos and I was just ricocheting off every dang thang!"

"Oh my freakan god!"

"Nah, nah like I was running up walls, I bounced off the ceiling, I was just pouncing all over the place and all of a sudden, the music got more distant and I kept falling down before I was like Oh... OH DEAR!"

"Oh dear oh my freakan gosh golly AAAAAAAAAA-" "-AAAAAAAAAA-" "-AAAAAHAAHAAHAHAHAA-" "-HA HAAAAAA!

Nobody here wants to laugh, but we're making them. We're getting them to choke up and cough and lose their funeral composure. Because Andrew's not having it. Because I'm finally getting how important it is to laugh at the face of doom.

"And hey, Hey Oh, speakin' of prey saviors?!"
"Yeah!?" I can see it coming.

"That freakin Gazelle rally in the park next door a the day before last!?!"

I was right on the money, I knew it.

"Oh, geeze louise, yeah, that freakan sheltered, spoiled, Ewe2-tier self inserting idiota!"

I just manage by a miracle to get that all out before the two of us and the rest of them start busting guts.

"How did she freakin put her speel!?!"

"Oh man, I got it, I got it hold up..."

I'm readying myself, I remember the important bits that ticked it off, I just gotta think on the presentation, whether I feign at mimicking her voice or if I give it my best to mock her that much more. Whether the effort is worth it or if I can't stand her to just half ass it. Then I decide, smirk, look to everyone to gauge the suspense, and go:

"we celebrate our differences!"

Everyone's toppling over.

"The Zootopia I know is better than this!"

Andrew slaps a leg of his.

"We don't just blindly assign blame!"

Even he naysayer is reeling, hunched over, squinting his eyes with a genuinely laughing-at-her-and-with-everyone-else smile.

"This is not the Zootopia I know!"

The city she knows.

The city we know.

Noone's holding back, all these pearly whites are coming out in earnest because the juxtaposition of her trying to interject her out-of-touch self into our situation is so damned hilarious.

"Please, give me back the Zootopia I love!"

I join the rest of them in laughing their tails off. They can't get up.

She thinks she's gonna make herself a solution when she's the very problem she's posturing to problem that the prey dominated world is so pathetic, it thinks we can't talk for ourselves like we want to. But their representation is a taxation. Buzzwords that make prey feel better about their guilt. Insincerity for marketing's sake to stick a finger in every slice of the demographic pie chart. Tiger dancers because controversy sells. Ads like the one with with the Wolf licking a naked rabbit that reinforce stereotypes because provocation gets their brand in your mouth. Prey girls hooking up with preds because of daddy issues when we got enough of our own. It's not just the ones that want us gone, it's the ones that can't understand us.

The Gazelles and the Buffalos. The ones that want something from us, through us.
"I FREAKAN HATE PREY PEOPLE!" I yell out with a smile.

"FUCK PREY MAMMALS!" they chant out in between laughing. Because none of us cares if we're pushing PG-13 limits. We could make this NC-17 if we wanted. They can't stop us.

They can't stop Andrew from butting in with an "Oh my goodness, ok, I got the most stupid azz prey girl story ever, did I ever tell you guys about that first day I worked at Snarlbucks?"

Enthusiastic Nahs on baited breath for a reply. He's told me a million snarlbucks stories and always left me feeling like he had a million more to tell.

"Ok I swear to god, fresh out of training, starting a shift for the first time, I'm optimistic, right? My first customer was some freaking doe in the drive thru asking me if I could make a carrot spice latte."

Most stereotypical prey beverage, sure, but we don't get it.

The naysayer doesn't catch that the punchline is coming before asking "Okay, so, wha-" to get a shouted out "WITHOUT COFFEE BECAUSE SHE WAS ON A DIET!"

I start to yell out Ah Hell Nah but only get halfway before breaking out. We lose it right on his cue. The image of her stupid soulless blank overly medicated stare is right there in our brains without him even having to describe it. If anyone was wondering what the heck kind of face he made when she told him that, we don't have to visualize it. He's making it right now, doing what he can to maintain character. Trying to keep it together like he was trying to back when he was behind the counter, when he needed the money and needed to appease flat tooth'd sensibilities. Another reminder that after all we've been through, we have the right to make jokes at their expense when it's all the wit we have left for our survival.

Oh.

Expense.

Reminder.

Reminding time: "Ah Brah, ANDREW!"

"What? What freakan now?!"

"THE RAMEN SHOP!"

He couldn't laugh, that yesterday all those yesterdays ago. I can't blame him. But his eyes are bright and he's letting out a scream, tonight. Springing straight to land on his back, stomping his feet, and laughing like he's never laughed this hysterically. I'm grinning with so much catharsis while Andrew's losing his gosh darn mind, it forces someone to ask me "What the heck is this story?!"

I tell them the whole truth and nothing but and by the time I'm done, they're gone, checked out, falling over each other again and pounding a couple of fists on the tile. We're causing so much of a scene that noone has a black enough heart to stop it. So much of a scene, I'm hearing laughter from outside of this circle. I'm not just going full Kitty Williams on them, but all the bystanders around us. Andrew was right. We needed this. All of us. In spite of how much of a joker I am, I was never able to see it before now that the joke is such an incredible defense. However bad it's going to be, we need to be strong. Laugh in light of apprehension. Let foreboding fly over like the bomber it is because this is the meantime. There are holes in all of us, but we're filling them up tonight.

I'm helping, mischief in my smile as I look over my work so smug with a look to someone in the
circle who finally gets a breath in to let out "Jesus, the first time I saw him at the den that night, I freakin' knew this fox was trouble!"

I can't argue, I just have to be proud of that and smile so boldly in it's acknowledgement.

"Oh brother, you mean that night he slept with Andrew before he got a blankey?"

Blanket. A moving blanket, I could correct if I felt it important enough.

"Ah what, cause his homeboy got too frisky with him?"

My eyes bulge.

I'm still amused, yet I have something important enough to correct but can't with another in the circle shouting out "Dude, I keep hearing about it and it makes me buttmad my azz was asleep and didn't catch it!"

I am raising my hand and extending two paws out for attention I'm not gonna get because Andrew has the floor. Jumping back into a lean propped by his right arm.

"Hey, you need a re-enactment?!

Oh no, "Nana, uh-Nananana!"

I will not be having this.

"Ye, I need a re-enactment up in this!"

The entity known as Fuchs Limited Incorporated has a strict policy against re-enactments.

"Na Nanananana Nah NAH HE DON'T KNOW WHAT HE-"

"Come 'ere teddy bear!"

My mind is jumping so high so fast I'm going into orbit around the moon at light speed. The rest of me is not that fast though. The act of getting up to run has been ceased and desisted by a vicegrip clamping of arms wrapping around my own to squeeze them tight against my sides as we both land on our right sides. My face has landed on someone's tail thats quick to shift as it's owner gets up in a hurry. From a knocked over perspective, these faces must be as priceless as my own and as priceless as Andrew's is. His perfect cozy bliss. My perfectly nervous smile and bulging eyes as my squeezed lungs allow enough air for me to voice a barely audible "helpmeeee...

I'm plotting my revenge while everyone around me gasps for air and grabs at their sides.

"HEY OH,"

Yes?

"DIDN'T YOUR BOY THRUST TOO!?"

Oh no."Oh No He Didn-"

nonononono

"What like this?"
I feel it coming (As in Andrew preparing to thrust ie this is also not a euphemism).

My hips fly forward into the air with my brush between my legs, frizzed out with every claw on both of my feet extended all the way out as my legs kick out for something to latch out and I scream out "AH-HA-HAAAACK! AAAUUUU!"

We need a preacher and about 10 god damn tombstones. They're dying.

I'm not laughing just yet but I might be joining them in a bit in the morgue.

I'm blushing like Toby would for lesser reasons than the one I got right now. No matter how much I'm holding it against him right now and will probably hold it against him forever for this, I'm grateful, I'm happy, I'm proud of him and I'm just wishing I figured out this lesson before Andrew figured it out for himself and taught me my own example. For multiple reasons. Like the one I had for sleeping on the opposite end of the station, that night. By the time I woke up today, the sun was high enough in the glass ceiling to remind me that we clowned around until it was way too late in the AM. It was a knocked over Stanchion woke me up, the abruptness giving me flashbacks to Espada's smelling salt.

It was just some children, though. Two pups roughhousing. Wolves leave the pack when they become parents, but their mothers were desperate enough that they came to here for the safety. They apologized for their offspring when they didn't need to. I told them I needed the wake up call, left it at that. Now, I'm just giving myself a tour, soaking in the contrast between how imposing this grandiose space should be and how warmly inviting it really is. I find myself by the aquaduct for the water faring folk, soaking it all in. The rest of the Rainforest pack got out in the nick of time. From what I gather from all these conversations, we don't know what's happening with the Sahara Square pack, just that the Tundratown pack is still inbound. They haven't been caught in the abandoned subway lines and tunnel networks they're using.

How they're managing that navigation is beyond me, but it must be some ancient old retiree that used to work down there. The Downtown pack of Eurasians with their contingent of Iberians and Italians, they made it from downtown in taxis and black service cars that were owned by their Alpha. Every pack is bringing something, though. We couldn't, because we had to move too fast. The Occidentalis and Nubilus pack I benefacted from had to break ground, and we did our job. The Pallipes and Filchneri brought what looked like medical supplies in plastic containers, and the Lupus Lupus / Signatus / Italicus crowd, whatever they brought, it came in suitcases and other such luggage. The talk of what the contents are is being kept hushed by the higher ups, which is all I needed to know. The Arabs and Anthus Lupaster will bring food and like material, the Albus and Pambasileus, some lodging in the form of tents...

I'm looking up to all these lupine faces around me, counting off all the exposition I can in my head, and whatever doubt I harbored about Operation Ceaster, if there was any of it left after Andrew's shenanigans, this wonderment has squashed it like a factory bug farm press. There's no doubt in these Wolves. No disenfranchised frowns around here. We've all got jobs here like ones they couldn't give us out there. We're empowered, we've got an endgame for ourselves and the due diligence to see it through. If they call this a riot on the news, then let them. We got the organization we need for ourselves. Nothing that no prey could say about us can injure this high of mine. Our high. Andrew's high, as he runs up to me from the front end of the station to tell me You've Got to See This.

He turns, waves his way and I follow. Those assigned to security have formed a wall outside. I cross the archways with Andrew, feel some distant concern on the guards from their body language, and see what that Canis Lupus Baileyi wanted me to see. The cops. A wall of them. The disbelief on
them, I can feel it from across the street and on their sidewalk. What should be so imposing is just a given. The urge to storm in, the scorn for us tempered by the fact that if they had orders to come down on us, then they would have already. The fact that they aren't can only mean a higher power intervened. City Hall power. Bellwether. It should worry me, but I can't let it. Maybe she doesn't know what to do.

We have what we have, though. Something that makes Andrew so proud as he asks me "You ever seen something so good as a bunch of cops doing nothing, bro?"

I have: "Eva's smile, but I'll take what I can get."

He just has to roll of his eyes with a flick of his wrist at me. I could let myself think about her, right now. If I could afford to.

I leave it at that while I soak the image in. My eyes scanning over it. Not sure what I'm looking for until I see it. A Rhino, looking at me like he recognized me. It would be a stretch to assume anything if he wasn't making it clear that he was one of the two cops that followed me into an alleyway. Some other cop says something I can't catch that makes itself obvious in the rhino's booming voice that I'm "Nothing worth the paperwork."

I shouldn't antagonize, but I have to grin at how Dalit I have become. I get a leer back from him, before everyone's attention gets diverted to the horn of an 18 wheeler, blasting in a pattern that must be a signal. Police tape over the grill, which can mean one thing: The Sahara Square pack. The talk of road blocks was true. They must have been dodging disco lights for ages with how long it took them to get here. The line of badges starts to move with a fuss, prompting our move. A Lupus Signatus takes his cue to swing a radio to his mouth and I hear it louder on the station's PA than I do from him.

"All paws front, trouble on inbound, request alpha!"

How they hooked up a walkie talkie to the PA, it doesn't matter now. Semi truck airbrakes follow the commotion behind me as the trailer's doors swing open for the desert's Wolves to pour out. From in between the wheels of it, I can see the doublenake in the legs of those blue khakis opposing us. They must see the faces pouring in from behind the line of security detail as it opens up for our new company to rush in.

"Everyone line up, let 'em in, don't block!" Kurt, coming in with a shove I don't mind as he slips through the two guards in front of me. "Don't you dare! Get your hands off my kind, I swear to god we'll come down on you if you arrest him!"

They're trying to get the driver. I follow up on Kurt to slip between the guards to see it for myself.

He tried getting out through the passenger door, some porcine cop crawled across from the driver's side, grabbed him by a wrist and shoulder, and now he's frozen solid. He's looking at the Nubilus, back at the Lupaster he's trying to get a medal for, all the while some superior of his is chewing him out from the driver's end of the cab. A can of worms, fortified with botulism. An Arabs joins Kurt, several Wolves come in from behind the line, and if looks could kill, this squealer would be be stiff from the rigor mortis. "You have until the count of One, Porkchops! TWO!"

On cue, I see something so poetic, it could move me to tears.

A cop holding his cloven hooves up where we can see them. Another set grabbing him by his shoulder. The look in his eyes, the disembarking of an Egyptian with a CDL license from his steed. His paws thrown in the air, looking back at the porker with some native tongue before he said
something anyone can understand. "Next time my foot will be on your face!"

I don't need drugs when I have what I'm witnessing, as his pack member wraps an arm around him to bring him in with Kurt. Looking back behind me, next to all the Wolves are out of the trailer, security's got a barrier of themselves between the doors and the cops, and the ones still left inside have cardboard boxes to unload into the arms of their counterparts on the ground. We got this like we never knew we could. I run back to Andrew like I could just about jump. I have to one up him, asking him "Have you ever seen something as good as a a cop holding his hands up!"

He's so beat, I got him laughing for losing.

"TundraTown arrival confirmed. All texted, report to employee area for assistance." A female voice on the PA affirms there's more than one Wolf that's got access to the PA via radio. Andrew's phone goes off, and I'm on my way with him.

A crowd later, past a door and couple turns in the back area halls, I'm smacked by the must of iron and rust and sewage on these white and gray and black Wolves. Tundratown made it. Against the odds, we're doing this like clockwork. Their relief and our celebration are backdrops to the work to be had. A line is forming along a wall and Andrew takes his que. Duffel after duffel. Tents and sleeping bags packaged together in watertight bags. They have to be moved first, then the rest of their pack can join us up here from that opened mammalhole in that utility area past that door. Everyone gives me second looks when I form up behind Andrew to hand my first duffel to a Lupus Lupus behind me for him to hand further down the line. They call red foxes ginger runts, and I don't even care about proving them half wrong. I'm just doing what I can.

I don't falter. I get tired, but we've got a rhythm that dissipates that weight with momentum. By the time it's all done, and the Arctics and Yukons flood through like a blizzard, I can barely tell that it felt like 30 minutes, let alone it having took an hour. They're beat, and I can't blame em. They carried two per head through miles of abandoned tunnels. No, that's not gonna be enough for everybody, but if the packs of this city could work magic like what we already have, then we've still got spells up our sleeves, and inspiration to give to the predators that join. What we have for lodging gets set up on the grass under the subway lines, by the water separating us from the rest of the city. Their city. A news chopper overhead, a live report over us as we throw these instant tents and watch them unfurl in the air.

I don't think there's a single one of us that doesn't have that smile of satisfaction for an achievement. Hours later, we found that ladder that leads up to the rooftop. The sun's coming down, now. I'm on top of the station with Andrew with about a baker's dozen heads up here. Someone from every pack except Meadowlands. They couldn't make it here, but they were never part of the plan. They knew about Ceaster, but the Meadowlands district has always been just a little too far for the Northeasters and Reds to factor them in. Doesn't matter. We have what we need. Right now, I got a beer I couldn't pass up with Andrew, a nosebleed seat to the dismay of cops below us.

And that view of the river cascading down from the hill going up to Peak street like I never knew I could get.

The sunset breaking through the shadows of these buildings to play against the water.

Never have of us have seen the river like this before. We just silently bask in the glory of it, without either of us asking if we've ever something as good as this. We never could have until now.

And all I can really say is just this one thing to Andrew: "Thank you."

A cocked brow as he looks to me to receive my elaboration.
"For reminding me how important it is to laugh when I need it the most."

A proud smile on him looks so good. "Heck, you're the joker, bro. You inspired me."

I guess I am. Wally gives me competition, when he's around.

"I left the ball in your court though." I tell him. Fully aware that I left it up to him to get everyone's spirit lifted from the naysayer's slump.

"You're just like that." Now he's the one getting a cocked brow from the other.

"You got this habit of soaking everything you got around you. I'm not saying it's bad. You always been in the moment... Maybe it's just a fox's nature. Like it's something that makes your kind what you are, and most mammals don't really get it. I think I do though. It gives you that insight the rest of us don't have."

Maybe. "I did kinda figure out what you were doing before the others did."

"Exactly! That's what makes you You, bro. Being who you are ain't a bad thing... You just need someone like me to make it work."

Ok, now he's getting too cheeky on me. "Get off..." I get the feeling he's right, but I still gotta give him a shove. The same kind we'd give each other, back before I pitched tents and he was accepted into the Savannah Central pack Woolsey ran. When it was just us in the homeless shelter. The one he almost didn't get to stay at until I convinced the staff to let him share a bunk with me.

Right now, I'm as beat as he is. We need to just pause again. Appreciate the view up here while we can.

That won't happen, though. A Great Plains comes up behind us with news: "Bros, we found a tarp and a couple cans of black paint!"

Me and Andrew catch the potential in a heartbeat.

"Ah, heck ya!" He says.

"Message time!" I proclaim.

"Damn right, it's message time!" We've all been so busy setting up shop, the city around us probably hasn't gotten any kind of official communique from... What are we gonna call this place? Point is, we ought to give everyone around us something they can chew on.

"You cleared it with the Alphas? Need help?" I can't imagine they didn't clear it, or he wouldn't be up here telling us. I mostly just asked to confirm the need.

"Yeah, yeah, Ralph and the others cleared it, we're good to go..."

That pause... "Buuut?" I ask him.

"...Don't you got a way with words, Fuchs?"

And they're Still Getting It Wrong.

Andrew's gotta laugh. I do too, right now.

"His name is pronounced Fyewks, yo. Fee Yewks." He tells him.
That embarrassment on his face is priceless.

I need to make it worse, though.

"Alright, alright I'll Fuchs with you-" so dumb, the three of us laugh anyway.

"Ok, ok, Fuchs-"

"Now he gets it right!" I tell andrew with a jab to his shoulder.

"Alright, ok, listen, you can come with something better to put on the tarp than the others, right?"

I get where he's going, I just need the confirmation: "...You really want me to decide what gets written down?" I can't really believe it, but I know where he's coming from.

"I mean, you don't Have to, bro."

I don't have to? Now I must.

"Nah, I'll give you guys something." I guess this is really happening.

"Alright, then hit me with it, they're bringing up the tarp and paint right now."

I only gotta think on it for a moment.

Out of all the passive aggression I can help them convey, I think I got something more meaningful. Something spartan-like. Three syllables. Easy to remember, speak volumes. I look to Andrew once with a smirk, then back at...

"What's your name, again?" I ask, because I seriously need to start learning more names to put on these faces.

"Rudy. You hitting me with it or what?"

"Yeah, I am, I got it."

"Alright already, go."

This pause I'm giving him is just for dramatic effect, because I want Rudy to feel the hype for this.

"...Ours Not Yours!"

Chapter End Notes

(CONTENT TO RE-INCLUDE AND ALTER)

...The more I dwell on it, what's become apparent from him is the background we've been ignoring, yet been obvious with me and so many others this whole time. We don't even know it, we're all so depressed, so desperate to be happy, we look for relief in anything we can laugh about, however absurd and dry it is, to make make the facts go from one ear out the other because it won't stop what we're dealing with from being internalized, but it can help us deal.
That's how it dawns on me: He's trying to be happy.

We all are, and he's so tired of that, he's taking control of the situation. A sense of resolve is coming from him that feels like he's ready, willing to acknowledge the situation if he can just shield himself with something for all of us. Because it's the only rational thing left to do, with everyone but me looking at him like he's crazy before the naysayer lets out a "Boy..." with a cocked eyebrow to get him breaking out into a crack up of a laugh that gets him going.

"Yeah?" Now I'm the one cocking a brow at him.

"That clowning around you did on me while you were in that dumpster?"

All that feigned shock and horror I pulled on him with more cheek than any one person could handle. My attempt to find humor in something to soften the blow of rifling through garbage. I know what he's doing, I see the logic, I did the same without knowing it, but this genuine, open mouthed, teeth bearing smile on me? It shouldn't be, and I can't reconcile the fact that it is. It's happening.

He's getting me to yell "OH GOD!" again to get him going even harder than he already was, getting me laughing along with him while everyone is looking at us like we're out of our gosh darned minds.

"Oh god!" he begins to mimic me, "There's a diaper in here and it reeks to heaven high! Oh god, someone barf'd in this bag ECH!"

"ECH!"

"ECH!"

That freakan Donktron mallarky I started using after watching too much groobitygromps that I infected him with.

"That freakan melted ice cream that busted over my head while I was holding that box of discs over my head!"

"Oh dude bro that freakan comedian azz timing was so-" He can't finish it even if I didn't bust out at my own misfortune before he could. We're out of place like uno cards in a fancy designer poker deck and I couldn't care.

......
Deliver*

Chapter Summary

An asterisk marks this chapter as having not been edited since it's publishing. I am going through this story, from this chapter onward, to modify, correct, and slightly rewrite toward my current standard and style of writing. Now that the story is "Complete" and I have no urgency to rush through it. Much.

It's official: We're on the front page of all the papers and news sites. Photos from a chopper that flew overhead has the declaration we made on the roof the talk of the town. Ours, not Yours. The message was received, the only question left was what it was we possessed. The new Alphas had a brainstorm over the matter. It had to be called something defiant. Something prey could understand. Ironically, the nature of this thing went hand in hand with appropriating their vernacular. Prey always herd amongst their own kinds in what heralds back to a now pointless instinct for survival. And ironically, that thing predators never really did before en masse is that exact same thing we have to do, now, because now it's the prey that're hunting us.

A fact made clear in all the reports of species related assaults. So we took a page from them. It made sense to call this thing we started a Herd. We began setting up a social media presence on all platforms we could under one form or another of The Zootopia Central Herd, and it blew up like nitrogen mixed with glycerine. The word has gotten out and we didn't know how good we had it. Lupines had of a community so tightly knit that they could rely on each other through the thick and thin of hardship. So much so, that they accomplished what noone else could. And that's exactly the problem everyone here and everyone out there is facing now. Noone else of any other kind had anyone to fall back on.

Nobody to watch their back when the roving gangs of concerned prey citizens were out for a fight to pick. No higher up in HR to keep their jobs from being lost over Safety concerns. No landlord that would hear their pleas after being told that the other tenants are nervous. No soul to intervene and explain the situation when the cops brought the cuffs out. If they did, we wouldn't have had to do this. But we did, I know this now. Because they came in so hard, so fast, that the riot police that were here just to keep a perimeter around us couldn't act fast enough. They were only organized for what they thought was just a bunch of Wolves taking over the station. Not all the sharp tooth'd downtrodden coming in.

They couldn't start beating preds left and right when there were so many reporters and their press coverage. They couldn't hold the line when every arrest for trying to join an illegal assembly just ended in backlash with hordes of cameras pointed at them. They were powerless, they only managed to arrest a handful in comparison to the dozens upon dozens coming in every time there was a hole in their wall of riot gear to bumrush. It was a chaos of the most unmanageable degree. By the time the orders came in to fall back into the park and monitor us, we had already won. A few smaller preds got trampled in the process, but the Wolf packs were prepared. That's what the medics on our side were for, besides treating anyone that got maced by the cops. Noone was seriously injured... The miracle of that!

The miracle of all of this, that we were ready even for a few getting arrested but getting away in the melee. We had spare handcuff keys from Downtown. We had pliars like the pair I'm watching from
above cut through the zipcuffs on the wrists of this Melursus Ursinus. I'm halfway down this stopped escalator for the upper level and I can still hear that plastic snap, and feel the relief in him as that Sloth Bear's arms hang freely. I'm leaning over the handrail as the Arctic Wolf helping him motions for the plastic left on that ursine's wrists to get cut, he's nearly done with only a few left in line, but there is so much going on below me, I can scarcely keep my eyes fixed on just that one scene. There's magic in the air I can't ignore nor fully soak in, there's just too much of it as I'm looking at the crowds of predators on the ground floor.

This feeling can't be replicated. What I thought could not be topped yesterday has been. The triumph is being realized right before me. We never should've had to take over the station, but we pulled it off. The cops shouldn't have tried to stop this but that didn't stop them from getting their hides handed back on a silver platter. There shouldn't be so many preds here, that came here because they had nowhere else to turn, but they nearly all made it. No predator should have ever faced a struggle so great they needed something like this, but they got this. We got this. An accomplishment made necessary by the adversity. A feeling so joyous that we have what we have right now, with no sweat off any brow, no frown on any face I can see, for all the things we lack.

All of that horror we felt earlier, how helpless we initially felt, it's all gone. There is next to nothing we can hold a claim to, but the one thing we have is this, as Ralph gets on the PA to give it a voice: "Everyone, your attention please."

He's got in spades, the commotion winding down. Our little niche in the world waiting on him with bated breath.

"We have a couple announcements... First order of business... Oh yeah, EVERYONE GIVE IT UP FOR YOURSELVES!"

I have never been to a large concert, but I know what it's like, now, when every mouth in the masses screams out all once, that shear, deafening din of every mind being lost at the same time, with every big Cat roaring, every Wolf howling, every Fox crying out along with me, that symphony of voices I never knew could be so good, that release of the greatest of emotion in the most profound crescendo that's breaking me apart as I bear witness to the purest outpouring of a collective joy anyone could ever know. I needed these tears, I am feeling every jubilant showcase of roughhousing vicariously, we are all lending our faces to the portrait of victory manifested with sharp teeth, joining together in triumph against the house and all the odds in it's favor, my ears are ringing, we are letting out all our happiness in an explosion that will rock every block in this city to the foundations because the world needs to know this crater we're making on it's face as we stop time just to keep a good thing going for as long as our bodies can make it last, because this concept I keep stressing in endless repeats with different wording each time just cannot be done justice by language: We did it. We made it happen. Every Tiger has the world by it's tail, every Wolf is having their day, the world is every Otter's oyster, I can go on with every possible twist of every old saying until the end of time because if what's happening right now could be bottled, it would end all wars, cure all diseases, end world hunger, make crime a page in the history books and do every aging body more good than a lifetime supply from the fountain of youth. We are all Pred Supermammal, Pred Batmammal, Pred Jesus, Pred Fluke Startrekker and Pred Jay Piberius Kirk. By the time we've all gotten that out of our system, what was maybe a solid minute has left the impression of an eternity on us. There are no cops, there is no hatred, we have driven depression itself to suicide and all is well as far as the sharpest eyes can see.

"...And finally, our second announcement... Good god, we got lit... We are opening up positions for volunteers! Every able bodied mammal that can put their trades and skills to use with us are welcome to apply. And oh yeah Hey Oh come down here, we need to talk."
There isn't any vexation in Ralph's voice, none could hurt the swagger in my feet, anyway, as I float down the stairs to mix in with these larger bodies that required smaller predators to assemble on one upper level, parents and their children to congregate on the other.

"Everybody else we figured out how to play music on the overhead and got your theme song coming in right... Now."

Ethereal synth ebbing and flowing out to a guiter riff, and I recognize it immediately as Lupine Fiasco's track The Show Goes On. I smile at the given these Wolves would play a jam from one of their own, but it fits the feeling we're holding on to like a glove. The hype is so real in these preds, I could drown in it as I waltz between everyone. I feeling like a star in my own music video, the same as all the others around. My lips synched to Lupine's words, I take my time to get from here to there until I'm there, in eyesight of Ralph as he stands beside a door to a back area. Smiling at me like I'm the fool I am right now, with a fist raised for him to bump.

"You called for me, boss brother?" He hits my fist back with my own before stating the business.

"Yeah, You want something to do? We gotta keep you out of trouble."

We both laugh, then I reply. "I'm down. What you got for me?"

"Receiving applications from volunteers. We're setting up a table for 'em and we want you and one of us behind it."

They weren't really concealing the fact I was here, anyway. Not that I gave them a chance, anyway, showing my face all around here, with my green Vulpon against the wall with a paper sign of Don't Touch taped on the gas tank. It's been awhile since I was a wanted mammal and I guess it won't hurt to make this official. "Aight. Where you want me?"

Beside a juice bar. It would have been good enough to appropriate, if the absent proprietors could afford for us to borrow it. That wasn't the case, though. A fact made clear by our own volitions, before it's owner had raised hell with us in a brief social media war that we ended with the guarantee that it would not be touched. That's fine. It's still a landmark to direct these two lines I'm now facing. With a Northwestern beside me that I'm positive I remember from the one time I looked in a female dorm, back when there was only a den. She looked at me for the briefest moment with a knowing smirk to confirm my suspicion, then we laughed it off and opened for business.

I got the smaller folk and her the larger. I still hear a bit of their conversations as I have mine. Name, occupation, skills, phone, in that order, in one form or another. My first is another Vulpes Vulpes I slap paws with. "The heck were we foxes doing hiding from each other in this city?" I ask him while she asks a Bear's name.

"Ben Beare. Bear with an E at the end" he tells her, and that he knew Woolsey. That he told him he might be needed one day.

"Todd Crevan!"

"I run a camping supply store called Been There." That knowing smug smirk gets her thinking in a pause while my guy continues with a stifled smirk, the same as I'm holding back this laugh.

"I just got fired from a private investigation firm! I got good ears and I used to do nightwatch work too! Noncommissioned bu-"

And now she gets the pun, looking at his name she just wrote and getting herself going so that me an Todd can let it out with her. "Ok, continue."
"NCO security and private eye, got you."

"I got tents in the stockroom and I can get 'em delivered here... Figure we gonna need all the lodging I can give."

two jackpots on the first go. Somebody that can keep an ear to the ground for our security and somebody with more tents for us.

"Alright, Ben,"

"Gimme yer digits, Todd."

Their faces get replaced by two more, replaced by more one at a time.

A Tiger of the Altaica subspecies that did commercial plumbing.

A sous chef Raccoon.

One Leopardus Pardalis with experience setting up audio / video equipment.

An Otter of the Smooth-Coated variety that had a fish stall at a market in the Rainforest District, with product on ice that needs to be used up before it goes bad and has sources he can tap for more.

I keep focused on my own line until I catch the shocked pause in the female Northwestern beside me, look up, and see... The single biggest Big Cat I never knew could possibly exist. Ten feet tall and looking down at us like a cocky god.

"Just call me Big Purr." he tells her. "I'm a bouncer... Was. Before the Oasis Club replaced me with an Elephant." He elaborates, so unaffected as he says that, it's like his only weakness is kryptonite. Like his size almost trumps being born a predator.

"...What are you?" she asks him.

"My father is a Lion and my mother was a Tigress... Doctors told 'em some growth hormone got lost at conception. I just tell people I'm a Tion." I'm left distinctly aware that that doesn't sound like the best possible name, but I'm not about to argue with ten feet of kitty.

I look back to my own line like I ought to and see a male Ferret. "I wanna make my own name up, too. Call me Brent Troubadour." I'll bite my tongue on this and let it slide. "Right, Brent Troubadour. What you got for me, Brent?"

"Journeyman electrician, one of the best and did contract work on the HVAC wall on the Tundratown side of it. Got the strength of fiddy mice and I can fit just about anywhere they can, gimme a hole to go in and I'll come out with a fix. Or a cut wire, if you want."

Bingo, the Wolves identified the lines in the station's latest wiring schematic and they'll want them cut if it comes down to it. "Yeah, most def we might need you. Number?"

He gives it and more faces come, give their info and get replaced by more. Time flies, and when it gets to the point that I need to run back to Ralph to turn my paper and hers in to get more, the lines aren't even halfway spent. Most of these mammals don't have much to offer, but that's not the point. It's that everyone wants to put in work and be made an answer to a solution. The outside world thinks preds are lazy, good for nothing and just want a handout. They're not here. The prey dominated world out there couldn't see what we had to offer as equals and they're not here to see their fellow mammal trying to make something of themselves like they always wanted to. If these
wolves hadn't taken over the station, what could they have done?

This Pine Marten, this Coyote, this communal group of Corsac Foxes offering their help as a singular unit, what could they have done if it wasn't for us? But I keep my smile, with no need to force the extinguishing of that pessimism when it comes so naturally. This joker of a Fossa unnecessarily cementing that, telling me one liners and offering stand up if it'll help the community. It must've been a good half of everyone here by the time we finished with the last of the volunteers. An hour later, and I can be found by the entrance, looking past Security for a rental van since I already volunteered to help unload it. Yet I think I had another motive, besides just watching prey protesters start to pop up in the park.

Some are for us, most against us, but I think I'm here because there's still more preds coming in and I'm banking on a reunion. I think I'm waiting on a familiar black mask with paws tucked close to a familiar body. The more I dwell, the more I realize I'm looking twice at every smaller mammal. That I'm cursing the fact that Vulpines don't have the vision that other mammals do, and that as grateful as I am for the reunion of lovers I've seen here so far, I'm still waiting for my own. My head filling up with all the golden age hypotheticals of how we'd meet again and what we'd do here and where we'd go after all this, because it needs to ward off all the thoughts about her having not gotten away on that Monday night.

This van couldn't have come a moment sooner. I become all business the second I get the chance, running out first in front of the others that came to help unload. The action has caught the attention of the cops and protestors, but I pay no mind, swinging these back doors open when I'm just a little too short and have to hop on the bumpers first. And there they are, tents packed to the ceiling of all sizes. It's still not gonna be enough and we'll all still have to share tents if we don't get more, but we can figure something out. If nothing else, the rest of us will have to learn to live like the whole of a sum, the same as Wolves have. "There better be one big enough for me in there!" Some Kodiak bear that Wolf chick processed says behind me.

I turn around to my left with a grin interrupted. My eyes go over that backdoor window just in time to see a rock in flight, framed by that glass and perfectly centered. It happens so fast, that crashing cascade of shards, my reflexes kick in just a moment too late. My eyes closed shut, my teeth bared when my mouth should be sealed as tight, it's raining over me and I feel it getting in my fur. All this broken glass, it's covered me. I'm on the ground, surrounded by a minefield and coated in it. My rage, the panic around me, a distant melee. All of me wants to fly up a raging storm, but I must be tempered. Keep my eyes shut, breath through my mouth in case any flew in or close to my nose. I can only tremble in anger because anything else might sink it deeper in my fur and stab at my skin.

The PA blaring loud enough inside for me to hear it out here as someone gets on the horn with "EMTS UP FRONT GLASS HAZARD ONE PATIENT CONFIRMED BRING VACUUMS AND PAWPAD GEAR ON THE DOUBLE!"

"Don't move, fox!"

"I AIN'!" coming out of me awkwardly, because pulling my lips down might dig sharp edges into my gums. I can't swallow, because shards might go down. "CAW GAW EM?"

I don't know how I was understood. I am, though: "Ye, bro, cops got em after some another Deer tackled him!"

"GUUH!"

"Hey, who said this guy could talk?! You on the ground, just stay still, stop talking, we're coming over, nod yes or no until we say otherwise!"
The crunching of glass under protective footgear confirms what I can't open my eyes to see. They pick me up and carry me back in. I never had to wonder why breaking glass was such a big misdemeanor or small felony, but the next half hour explains why. I had to be stripped down to my underwear, and however much I hated the whir of vacuum cleaners, I hate it even more now as it's applied to my body, in between the brushing and these tweezers. I should be angrier, but the mood around me keeps a good thing going. Andrew rushed to where the EMTs cleaned me off just for us to laugh it off together. That attempt made by a prey boy to hinder and render an upset did nothing but prolong an inevitable unloading of makeshift lodging I was too occupied to help with.

I don't even mind being in borrowed threads again. Someone donated and these track pants & bomber jacket were meant for a larger species, but still fit well enough until I can get my clothes washed out. I leave my chest bare and unzipped. I check back with my Vulpon for reassurance after it all before gravitating back up front. No job left for me to do, beside appointing myself an observer to the scenes good and bad to witness while it all comes more together in the herd's infancy. My ears still distantly ringing as I make my way there, from the application of air sucking at the fur in my ears before remainder pieces got plucked out. I'm spending enough time behind security, I'm first and last name basis finally with of the Iberians. Alfredo Morena.

I announce myself, he turns around, we slap palms and he asks abruptly "You know that buck on the sidewalk?"

Toby. It has to be him, I know it before Alfred points a finger to lead my nose to him with a plastic grocery bag in hoof. A Jaguarundi passing by him with a dismissive look as he crosses the street to get in the station.

"...I'm gonna run a risk, here." I tell him, making sure there's no cops in his immediate vicinity and running out to meet him before that Signatus can stop me. I'm asking for trouble, that Puma Yagouarundi can see as much as I run past him, but it's been too long since I've seen him and my relief is in my face. He returns it with his own and a hint of pride to remind me of my own. I turn my body with my eyes still on him with both paws directed behind me to tell him something he already knows: "We did it! That station's packed like you don't even know! You wouldn't believe how good we have it in there! The feeling we know in that station, I can't describe it-"

then I see it, the slight touch of a previous scuffle on him. Tufts of hair sticking out of his coat and a residual tremble makes me wonder then put it together. Another deer, that Ursus Arctos Middendorffi said.

There's no mistaking it, it was "You!" I shout, with his confirmation of his left hoof pointing at his smug self and a "Me!" as Trill Bruisers by New Videographers plays in my head while I laugh and jump up to ensnare his midsection with an embrace, my cheek on his stomach.

"Ya bold ass buck, ya dang ass gumption, you got it!" I got him speechless, with both his hooves in the air and no idea what to do next. But I don't think he's one to be embarrassed anymore.

I let go and slide down back to the ground, looking up to him with a gratitude that's got more weight than him just being a decent prey boy or a friend. We're equals and he's proven that enough I gotta say "How's it feel, Toby? Cops didn't give you much grief?"

A smug, silent moi exudes from him, when "The cops have Been giving me grief. I've been doing so much this past month that some of them call my name out."

The price of being a decent mammal.

"Ah, heck." I lament with the weight of that knowledge on me.
"Owen, don't. They don't have probable cause yet. I haven't given any." A start, but not a real absolution.

I've gotta ask him if "You know how much you're sticking yer neck out?" with this frown on me, juxtaposed against his resolve of "I've known since Bug Burga. I can't let that stop me from helping you out"

A quiet moment, where we both weigh our responsibilities and the calls to action we couldn't ignore. This wasn't an argument, yet I have to concede. So I look up to him, grateful like maybe I should've been regardless, when that Elk tried to help me. "Thank you." I tell him, knowing I owe it as much to him as I did that samaritan.

"Thank you, too." He gets a soft laugh and a dismissive cock of my brow. "You're welcome really is a dead phrase huh?"

For a second, I've tripped him up before he brings it back on me. "No. Thank you too, for telling me there was a point. I wouldn't be here if you didn't tell me there was."

I need to look away from him for a moment, so I can take the fact in. Softly splayed ears with a little wag of my tail. The pointlessness of my life being proven wrong again by the impacts I've made on others. It should be old news, but it still feels fresh. "...Owen, are you hiding it that well or are you really okay?"

"The glass?" My face returns to his for my attention.

"Did you get any of it in your eyes? Were you hurt?"

"I got coated, yeah, but the medics in there got it all out and off of me. Nothing a grooming and change of clothes couldn't remedy."

He does a double take on me, like he should've figured it but didn't think about it until I made him. "...You have medics?"

"We got everything! We went all in for a long haul in that station."

He puts two and together for a moment before delivering it: "...It's the Camp movement all over again." I have to kid on the square with this feigned shock because this click of my tongue really isn't fake. "Camp movement? What, we're a bunch of neurotic prey boys? Ya think we got a Buffy azz Buffy in there?" He's reeling in the laugh, with a reminder I just inserted in his mind. Like the very distant sight of cops and chaos made me remember something in a sudden bout of self consciousness. They might not be able to stop preds from coming in, but they'll want to bust anyone they can that're coming back out. They're too busy with prey protestors and other preds, I can't see any cop that noticed me, but whatever I reminded him that has to do with Buffy, it'll have to wait.

"...I need to get back to the station." He understands, but he isn't done.

"You should, but hang on." with that plastic bag of his brought forward and pressed against my chest. I take it by the sides with my paw after giving him a curious look. It's full, yet my grip sank into it like it's full of fabric... I look down, because it shouldn't be what I think it is. My eyes don't lie, though. Green silk fabric, covered in fresh gold embroidery. I can't believe it...

"That's the shirt I gave you! When did you do this?"

The pride is in his voice as he tells me that he "Finished it the Thursday after we met with the Bull. If none of this happened, I would've given it to you before Friday."
I was right. That wry remark all those Fridays ago was on the money.

"...I could embarrass you so hard right now."

I really could, it's everything I can do to not lose my mind on him again. "You really shouldn't." he tells me and I know.

We both get it that the two of us might not get another chance to meet like this. No amount of me just wanting his company as another mammal can change the fact we're friends on opposing sides. The battle line between his city and my station was drawn against our own wants.

These are our circumstances and it hurts the two of us that I have to tell him "Thank you... But I gotta go."

I turn around to hear an "Hey Oh, keep in touch." that I have to question with a "How?!" that gets a "You'll see! Get going, they might catch you out here!" as I head back across the street to return behind Alfred and the rest of security.

"Fox, you can't make that a habit." An Indian Wolf warns me. The danger obvious, with my venturing out feeling to them like it requires that reminder. I could tell him that Toby was a one time exception but it's something else that he's thinking of. The thing that must have been on security's collective mind the whole time. More important than promising that it wouldn't happen again is that I acknowledge what could have happened. That if the cops did bust me, "They would have interrogated me for details if they got their hooves on me." I should have considered the memory of nearly getting Andrew killed and me sent in for a reward, back when I was so crazy to blurt out wanting to talk to a cop.

It's not just the cops they feared then and feared now, but every threat or possibility of a cop that's not a wolf in their own pack becoming involved with or aware of their inner workings. "You didn't think of that did you?" The thought was a little further tucked under the others than I'd like to admit and I'm a little ashamed. I would try not to reveal it, but I know wolves better by now than to try. So I don't. Nor am I the kind of mammal at this point still tempted by the false relief of an apology. I have grown enough now to understand there's no real way to disarm this tension in the immediate present. "That possibility won't be allowed again." is the best I can offer.

"Better not." Andrew's voice behind me, getting me to turn to him. "I just got through talking to Kurt and getting reminded I'm still responsible for you. You screw up, it's on me." That inherent distinction between Wolves and Foxes. That my kind think and act in one brushstroke, and that Andrew's must paint the survival of the collective before each application of color to canvas. Obvious, that Foxes like me are impulsive things, with enough evidence in my mind now to tell me that our guile can only amount to so many successes. That Wolves have never been able to appreciate life like that, when history has never afforded them such a profound luxury that Foxes have relied on for their own survival. And that for now, I must confront my own instinct to reconcile it with theirs as best as I can.

If I can't change myself, then I must perfect what I am, like I told Toby I would all those weeks ago.

"I made you look bad enough already. I have to be better, and I'm gonna try." A Fox's word. A line that could be quoted about doing or not doing it because there is no trying. But Andrew knows me. He knows that to me, doing is nothing less than a successful trying. "...That's all I'm asking, Owen." He tells me, with the faith invested in me that I've gotten this far by trying, and that I've made it work often enough.

All that out of the way and I gotta ask "Did they tell you it was a buck we knew out there?"
"Toby?"

"Yeah, behind me on the other side of the street." I point, he sees him. Toby waves, he waves back and the buck turns around to walk back into the park.

"I've been meaning to text him." he tells himself before getting back to me with a "Since you already got us in a little trouble, how was it?"

I tell him everything I got. He's just as surprised to hear it from me as I was when I saw it on Toby.

"Bro, Toby grew a pair?"

"Wasn't even that roughed up from tusslin' with whoever glassed me! I could barely tell."

It's less to say by Andrew "They just let our boy go like that?" then it is that "There's so much going on in the park they got their hooves full." because the news that broke is getting contested between prey folk. Bedlam enough that as much as the cops want to try and stop preds from coming to the station, it just can't happen.

"...What's with the bag?" and I nearly forgot, presenting it with a grin before he does a double take. "Hold up, that's..."

The same shirt from before. Once pulled out of the bag, it's barely recognizable from it's former self. Every part formerly torn has been embroidered, in art styles both eastern and western. Oak leaves on the collar. Vines and tulips over the left breast. A Phoenix wrapping around from back to front around the right abdomen, an anatomically correct heart on the right shoulder. The Virgo zodiac over the left side. And on the back, Chrysanthemums on both shoulder plates. He went over the entire shirt. He poured symbolism over this tattered silk rag, in a spark of fever so overwhelming in it's final form, it's obvious he was at it for days to make a result this brilliant. Something so captivating to me, it takes Andrew to point out the black jeans at the bottom of the bag.

I find myself now standing a public bathroom counter, between the sinks, in front of a mirror, and scarcely able to recognize myself. I can't believe what I'm looking at, the same as it can't believe what it's staring right back at. My eyes trailing down my reflection until they meet that phone I found in the pants. A new prepaid burner in my right paw, without a SIM card. It converted to some Lionux operating system and installed with an instant messaging program. I might not be able to call or text from it, but I can still message him. He added himself on that instant messenger, the same as he did on a voice call app. He did his research. He thought of everything. Even left a small paper note under the back cover for a codeword in case I had to make sure it was him.

Espada scared him witless, but I emboldened him. He used the bull's knowledge and my wisdom to pick up the tradecraft he must be getting familiar with now. He hasn't changed though. He's no different from before but just all the better. The words come so naturally from the onscreen keypad to the IM window: I'm speechless. Except for one word. Gratitude. I hit the send button, look back at myself, and start to believe myself. I think it's taking affect on me, the things Espada wanted and all I told him and Toby. Realized in by a world surrounded by another that's finally become estranged from us like it always wanted to be. I shouldn't be able to believe all this, like this Leopard next to me can't deal with me on the counter.

"You mind getting yourself off the counter, fool?"

I have to make it worse with a wisecrack.

"Mind helping me back down?" I asked and received something I didn't want. The imprint of wet
paws on my sides, but we laughed it off. Something on the PA about a false alarm from an earlier
intrusion alert, as I'm looking up with a smile to everyone beaming back. A Raccoon walking past
me and we slap paws as I turn to watch him head where smaller preds like ourselves are being
situated. On the southern side of the upper levels, where there's a couple of bears and big cats
carrying tents to my left too small for themselves. I'm walking backward to make it my right,
observe it before turning around to watch where I'm going.

Into a female mustelid. A Polecat and closely related reminder. Her mask is slightly broader, eyes
distantly similar, as they meet mine and witness the shock, the halflife of a momentary confusion for
Eva Belette. She's middle aged, her voice on the cusp of rasping as she asks me "Do I know you
from somewhere?"

I'm feeling pain, trying to hide it under an oblivious face. "No, I don't think you do, Ma'am."

Offense taken with a smile, maybe it'll distract her. "Don't Ma'am me. I ain't a grandma just yet!"

She's caught up enough in the moment that maybe, I can just disarm her and that'll be that and I can
try to move on.

"Not saying you ain't a cute shorty, still!" Is not a lie, but as much as she reminds me of Eva, I have
to make that extra effort to keep my eyes on her to show it isn't.

"Damn right you weren't!" A quick laugh I can join her in, so maybe I can just cut the conversation
off from here and be done.

"Well, I got to goi-" "And I do know you! You're that crazy fox boy I saw on the news!"

Every vulgarity under the sun, on the tip of a tongue I'm holding back from a pained click. "And
that's your bike I saw on the wall over there, you're that OC guy that ran from the cops!"

What could I have done differently? What could it have taken for me to not have a ghost of Eva
before me?

Feigned smile, eyes forced to be wide and friendly. "...Ya got me!" She cackles a bit before not
letting this chance meeting end. "And you got the Po-Po good! All that same old scat the news
always have about some pred boy getting jailed or tased to death over nuthin', then you showed up
and made 'em show something positive for once!"

It still hurts, all the while she's distracting me with this revelation. "...What?"

"Boy," It's everything I can do to not reel, because the way she just said that was just like Eva would
say it. "You're a regular hood hero with how much you put the cops in their place! That night you
ran from 'em when they tried to get you at that club, I don't know anybody that didn't watch the
whole thing! They released security footage from the club, the subways, buses and taxis and stores
during the chase and I about died laughing watching the compilation vids on zootube!"

I'm twisted. Caught between the longing I want to push away and a celebrity status I'm finding
myself aware of.

"You telling me you didn't know? You got vines about you an everything!" It's like she's taking it for
granted that I watched the news, or didn't have bigger things on my mind. I tell her as much, and her
shock mirrors mine.

"Boy, you need to watch yourself, you about a one mammal riot!" It's getting to be too much. "Yeah,
sure, I gotta go but I will and maybe it'll get my mind off stuff!" I shoot through quickly to get away
from her, but it's not enough show and tell for her, with the pain in my eyes, my voices, as I start to run off until I hear those words from her.

"You won't get rid of her like that." Stopped dead. Like the shock of a blade in my side would've stopped me. Delivered from behind, with no expectation of it. The tremble is settling into me, I cannot stop it now. Paused because it's too hard to move.

"That ferret girl. I reminded you of her."

I'm gripping myself, hunched over because a verbal blade might as well have been the real thing.

"That girl I saw in the club video, she's got a burrow in your heart and you want yourself back with her."

How she do this to me, when ".Anything I could do..." is everything I would be if I wasn't damned to remain here with no way of finding out if she's even alive. "But why?" I'm turning my face to hers, because I have to spite her with the look on me. I want her to see my pain, now. My sorrow and longing. Because I have to ask her "Why did you have to say that?" when she's not as affected as I'd hope she would be. As though she's got a game I'm not privy to.

"Because you need to know she'll come back. Lady mustelids like me? We don't give up. She ain't done and she's craving you as bad as you crave her. You think you got it bad? We fixate on our lovers until we both know it's over. We need... Closure. Yeah, Closure. One look at you and I can tell if you ain't got it, that she don't either. A boy like yourself? She might never be over you. Because if she's crazy enough on you to break a bottle over a cop, she knows you're the one. She'll want you 'til the end. She'd give her life for you. All she needs is to know where you are and ain't nothin'll stop her."

She says that like it's the whole truth, but Eva never had to say as much. It's not the flavor of dread that this polecat needs to cure if she's going to appoint herself a healer.

She doesn't get that it's far more than if she'd leave me. It's not the flavor of dread that this polecat needs to cure if she's going to appoint herself a healer.

She doesn't get that it's far more than if she'd leave me. It's that "I just don't know if she's alright."

I've surprised her, made her widen her up a little more like she's dealing with a fool. "That's what got you shook up?"

That's all I can care about, I tell her. Not knowing if that's the truth of my woes or if it's just a thing I'm saying. "Boy, She ain't gonna leave you hanging so don't worry none about her. We take care of ourselves. We make trouble while stayin' out of it."

That shouldn't be enough to dissipate my tension, though the logic that it shouldn't falls flat. Because it feels like a start and something more. So lost in that fact, I can only really reply with ".Kinda like foxes, I guess?" to get her quipping "Nuh uh, you folk are just trouble." so that we can both laugh it off. Since I needed to, since it isn't time just yet for this place to harbor a worried soul. She looks at me with a sense of accomplishment, knowing she did her part as she continues.

"Guess that's what she likes about you. Pullin' all the wild ass scat you do and waltzing right out of it... So how about now? You right as rain?"

"I think so... You know this for certain?"

"That foxes are trouble?" That's specist, but she'll get another laugh out of me.

"No, that she's alright."
"Boy, I'm 42 years old. I've been around the block, I think I know what's up. She'll play it however safe or dangerous she needs to to get back with you."

And that's all that's left I needed from her. So I'll acknowledge it with "I think you do, too. I just needed to be sure." to leave it at that.

She's not done though: "Good. One more thing: When She Sees You Again, make sure she doesn't break something. Long as she's been without you? She liable to smash something downstairs." The realtalk nearly gets me fainting, makes me stumble anyway as it becomes clear the two of us attracted attention. A couple of whoops and hollers tell me as much, as I turn back around to fake a deep breath. I'm soaking in how much better that encounter turned out to be, over how I thought it'd end. And I think I knew exactly what she did. That I needed it more than I did being left hung up on the similarity and reminder. And sure, her words might not last in me for long, but it'll at least keep me reassured enough to not phase Andrew when he sees how I look.

I swear this place is getting more packed, because it's getting harder to move around in here. The Wolves will have to do something. Open up more space than they already have, I think to myself, as a Puma Concolor passes in front of me. Then I see him. Conversing with a guard at the door for the back areas. No trouble on their minds, until the guard catches sight of me. He taps Andrew on the chest to bring his attention my way. An amazed look on his face, then quizzical, apprehensive before showing the mischief told by the grin on his face. I have to roll my arms forward in a shrug, because something gotta give and I can't tell what, only process in an immediate hindsight that he was looking to me, then behind, then back at-

"HEY OOOHHHH!"

My brush frizzes out, ears tucked back and I could not be more happily irritated. Grabbed by my sides, hoisted up in the air like a dang ol' teddy bear on display. My chagrin, Wally's entertainment, Andrew's laughter. Circle of life and some things never change, with my face somewhere between the murder I'm plotting, the laughter I wanna get out and the joy I feel for having one more member of the gang back in the fold. The questions I have, the catching up I need to to, and the stories I must tell him, It's all gonna have to wait until he's done with his pent up antics he's gotta get out of his system. He's gotta make a smart alec fool of himself right now and there's no stopping him.

I need to let out a "WALLY YA DANG AZZ SON OF A- LEGGO MY EGO, DAG NABBIT!" to get him saying "NAH FAM, WE TOURIN' NOW!" and oh god no what wait just please not the tour horsehockey again.

"I ALREADY SEEN THIS WHOLE PLACE FOR FREAK'S SAKE!" The obvious isn't gonna persuade this goat getting mo fugga. Charging forward with his vision blocked, I can only hold my paws over my face in embarrassment as he takes me on a ride. Andrew surely following behind as I'm ran up and down the station and through the crowds. The dips and turns a perfect rollercoaster reenactment. It's so stupid that he needs this, but I need it, too. Dread him for it though. Double dread him. This consternation a vexation at my expense so demanding of a retaliation at some point in the near future, I can already feel the vindication I'm gonna get when I get it. But that's not now, when all I can do is just appreciate the laughs at my own expense.

Forced to not think on anything about the past or future, confined instead to the present tense of Wally's clutches. For as long as his arms can hold me up until they give to my weight.
Sleep barely came to me. It was not for want of a tent or cot, nor that Wally gave me so much to digest.

My right side rests on the tile of the upper level, the rest of me fairly certain I just knew I wouldn't have been able to appreciate the tent I was given, when I allowed someone else to use it. Some lanky Vulpes Rueppellii guy I didn't catch the name of. Doesn't really matter at the moment, as I peer out under the rail to watch the morning sun push shadows further down the buildings. It would be a quiet moment, if my head wasn't back to going twenty over the speed limit.

"Hey Owen, you alright?"

Wally's voice. I roll on to my back to confirm it. Two coffees in his paw. Andrew must've gotten them for us in the break room.

"I don't look like it, do I?"

"Nah, you look like a ghost that saw another ghost." he tells me, moving to sit down with his back against rail, a styrofoam cup offered to make me shuffle to lean upright beside him.

"Sounds about right." I lament. Because I did.

"Talk to me fam."

I will: "I met a girl after that ramen shop fiasco... More like the night before, but a cop used my phone to text her where he left me after drugging me."

"WHAT?!" I threw something so wild at him that he jumps up to his feet to knock that coffee of his over. The action is enough to wake up more than myself, yet it doesn't sway my mood.

"It's a long story, anyway-" "Nah, male, nah, back it up, one time got you and didn't haul you off to jail and did what?! Why didn't you tell me this last night?!"

Because it was irrelevant then and it's irrelevant now, when I want to get out what I want to get out and don't have the mental state to tell him anything else.

"This story ain't about him, Wally. It's about me and a girl and a bunch of chaos. You wanna hear me out then hear me out."

He swears under his breath before letting it go. He knows me, and where I'm at, so he'll hold off 'til another time as he tells me "Alright, you're telling me later, but hit me with it." I collect myself for a moment and then...
"You know that second time the cops chased me? The night before this whole savage scat went down? Well that was the last time I saw her. Been worried sick ever since because she's the one. Except I saw her again yesterday, in a polecat lady that saw that her similarity had put me in a bad way. She smoothed it over, or I'd be in worse shape now than I already am."

A lot to take in, a little time to think on it before he says "You think she got busted? Ain't coming back if she didn't?" so I can relay that "No, that polecat taught me better."

"Alright, then why you twisted?"

"Because she's not here."

He gets where I'm coming from. Coyotes are more Wolf than Fox, but we share a similar need. When we love someone, we want them to last. Foxes moreso, but his kind still has a lot of it. "It's a waiting game, then."

And the worst kind, I tell him. So he squats down, locking his eyes on mine. "Alright. So let me hit you with this: Have you always felt the same way you feel now?"

"That I want someone?"

"No Owen, have you always had the exact same emotion?" A stupid question to anyone else. It's me he's talking to, though. "No." My familiarity with him letting me peek at a partially revealed endgame.

"You've felt everything. Pride, joy, fear, anger, hate, self loathing, and love."

All of it in spades lately, "Same as everyone else, Wally."

"Exactly, and just like everyone else, those emotions came and went."

I get it, but I'll let him pull the curtains back on this lesson because I trust him. "So I can't tell you to stop with what your feeling right now, because you can't. But I can tell you this much: You won't feel like this forever. And if you can get that, You'll have what you need so you can ride it out." I'm pretty sure he's paraphrasing a dead president, but the sentiment is on point.

"I'll ride it out, huh?" My genuine wry curious look, his hopping back on his feet with a wake up call behind his disbelief. "Boi, name one mo fugga 'sides yourself that's survived all the scat you've gone through! You outran the cops TWICE! TWO WHOLE TIMES!"

Too loud, "Lower yer dang azz voice, people are still sleeping up here!"

Too befuddled, but he hushes himself. "Alright! But you're an industrious azz, indefatigable azz, invincible azz survivor of the police state! I think you can survive a little dehydration is all I'm saying!"

It's the admiration in him that gets me buying in. Facts I shouldn't have ignored, so amazing that he still can't wrap his head around. So I'll put my frustration aside for now with a "Thanks, guy." as I get up with that coffee in my hand.

"...Oh yeah, you made me spill my coffee, I'm taking yours back." I was gonna protest, but he acted too soon. Now I wanna picket. Cocked right brow with a shocked smile and an impulse to gekker.

"You're welcome!" Sarcasm thrown back with a return to sender: "I ain't even shown you those vids of you on zootube yet." A flick of my wrist to go along with a silent Get The Fudge Outta Here.
"They got one set to Belly Hill music and everything."

Now I got to ask something that's always been on my mind, walking beside him to the escalator. "Wally how you know about Belly Hill anyway? Matter of fact, how you know about Johnny Squirrelson? I know you got Hey Oh from his show." It actually came from Ed McMare, but the point still stands that he's familiar with decades old media that's been out of broadcast circulation for eons.

"How You Know about Belly Hill and Johnny Squirrelson?"

Of course he'd put it back on me. "I grew up with basic azz small town channels so you could answer my gat dang question!"

He relents, telling me that "All we had on the reservation was VHS tapes of old broadcasts. Nothing but bunk static recordings of 70s and 80s television. Commercials an everything."

Oh god. I pity and envy him at the same time. "Least you grew up with The Puppets?"

"Puppets? Nah, nah, scat like All in The Herd..."

Ah, no.

"...Little Mound on The Plains..."

Ah, nah.

"...Shirley Sheeple-" AH HECK NAH JUST "Stop right there, I can't take it!"

"And The One Ranger!"

I'm done, I'm shoving him, and I'm taking back every last bit of envy while I hold off from losing my mind any further. We keep it up until we're down on the ground floor, a wolf doing security catching my eye.

"Hey let the Alphas know we need a janitor upstairs, this fool beside me spilled his coffee."

A look at him, and he comes back to me with "He's got a full cup."

One quick "Yeah, the punk took mine afterwards." to get him cracking up, Wally to shove me back for earlier.

"Alright, tell Kurt. Ralph is busy but they told us to bring you Kurt's way." Something major, I get the feeling off of him. "No trouble." He elaborates, "Just meet up with him. He should be in the break room."

I'm there in an instant, having left Wally with the one walking a beat for Kirk to address me with a "You!" that shakes me up. Surrounded by off-duty security, the breakroom table converted with laptops to form a social media hub.

"If you mess this up, it's yer tail and Andrew's." And that's why he was Woolsey's security head. Blunt and to the point. The warning before the assignment feeling less because I'm not a Wolf, more for the fact he's just familiar with and knows enough second hand knowledge to assume I need it.

I don't, but I'm not gonna argue. "I'm down but the heck am I being signed on for?"
He doesn't like it so much, he's gotta grimace before saying what it is. "Face time with the news. ZNN wants an interview with us."

Oh. In my mind, on my face, it's nothing but Oh.

"The commission thinks you're the best one for this and we need to get around to it. Word is already out you're here, you've already been on the news, none of us wants to put a target on our own kind."

Upgrade time: Oh. Fudge.

"Sooner we act, more control we got on public opinion. Ralph's arguments convinced the rest of them that you're the first pick." That resentful leer says it all though.

"...You like this about as much as I do, huh?"

"Oh, you think? Can your Fox self tell why I don't like it?"

"Yeah-"

"Because convenient as it is that you're used to being on the news by now you're the 2nd last mammal I'd have representing the preds here."

I was thinking more along the lines of just not having any experience with being a spokesmammal, but yeah, that too I guess. It's a fair point, yet for my sake, I got to tone the severity of this matter to cope. "...Who's first last?"

"Gazelle."

A Wolf behind a keyboard laughs, immediately set on typing his words out until Kurt snaps his claws to stop him. I'm torn somewhere between selfishness and selflessness. So I'll pray for a passive opting out with "...Do I got a choice in this?" to receive the threat of "Depends on how much you want to downgrade from upstairs to boiler room." to make me wide eyed at the fact I don't have much choice.

I took it harsher than he wanted me to, though. "You've done a lot for the pack. Don't get my tone twisted, I appreciate that. I wouldn't kick you out of the herd even if you were a freeloader but Do Not assume you're gonna leave this room with a clean slate if you don't accept this." His understanding out of the way, he affords himself a relenting. "I can kind of even see where Ralph's coming from, picking you. If ZNN tries something, we'll need a witty quick thinker to take back control."

I see the need for that. It's just that I'm stuck on something: "What makes Ralph think I'm the best mammal for that?"

He hesitates, thinking I should know and wondering why I don't. "...That elephant you scared out of here. Or how about that slogan you came up with on the roof, you think your wit wasn't gonna get noticed?"

No good comeback can go unpunished with me. My paw resting upon my temple to get him ordering "Own up to it fox, you're a smart azz."

"Yeesss..."

"Good. You keep that in mind because once you're on air you better keep it in check or I'm coming down on you harder than if you hadn't agreed to this."
I haven't agreed though. I tell him as much to get back a "Thanks for volunteering." Before I get the thing he's doing. Or trying to do.

"Your game can't compete with that bull cop's, though."

"Talk scat get splat. First warning, Only warning."

A yes sir later and I'm out.

Back to tell Kurt we need a janitor upstairs for spilled coffee, yelled at to go and gone again to charge San Juan Hill without much certainty I'll be coming back.

With laundry done and safe from yesterday's glassing, I'm left with options to stress over like I'm getting ready for a date. Wondering what I got myself into. Aware by the fact these articles weren't trashed that they're a reminder. I'm in favor, even if the position's precarious. After the fuss, I just opt to take the silk shirt off to put the floral moocci over the black jeans. I leave the washed cords with the embroidery by my tent. I still look too flashy, but a compromise is the best my limited wardrobe can give. The walk back down has me running into recognition. I had been, so it's nothing new. What is, is the consistency. Went from being stopped or second glance'd a couple of times before to now feeling the way up front is a backstage walk up to the stage.

But the hype feels misplaced. I don't want it. I'm not doing a gig, I'm going on a mission. To make it worse, I'm going in alone. Andrew and Wally are occupied. I have noone to reassure me or keep me in check but myself, coming to a stop beside the agreed landmark: Big Purr. Newly recruited for the front line. Someone so big and bright in his light tan fur that noone could miss him. The preds still coming gravitate towards him. I can feel that smile on him, it's presence great enough I think it's that and his confidence that's quelling me for a moment. Awhile later, they've caught sight of him. Out from the back of that ZNN news van comes a flurry. A Kudu and Pronghorn look to me in shocked recognition before going back to the rush. Some civet is on the roof, aligning the dish when he sees me. He can't believe it, then he realizes it.

Then he whistles, catches their attention to quietly tell the Kudu, the tallest of them, something I couldn't catch past two hundred bucks says. A You're On later, and some bet's been set in place. It wouldn't be my business if I didn't already know it concerns me, so it does. "Hey curly horns, what does the 200 bucks say?!" I ask.

"They say shut up before you jinx me!" He yells out, like I figured he would.

But the least either of the three could tell me is this: "Who's interviewing me, anyway?"

"Oh, almost forgot."

The pronghorn, remembering something as he grabs from the back of the van, and places in front of me... A portable flight of stairs. A small thing, built to the scale of what's typically a medium small rodent. I mutter Oh No to myself. Because the only reporter ZNN has that I'm aware of, that they assign to something as big as this, is the last mammal I wanted it to be. That Civet on the roof, he couldn't just let me tell myself otherwise. He had to go and shout "Don, get done in there, you're on in sixty!" to confirm that it's exactly who I thought. Don Lemming, climbing down another flight of stairs set on the van's bumper for him to wobble and scurry his way from the street, to the sidewalk, and then the stairs in front of me.

The platform has his beady little placid eyes just above my nose. They stare straight back into my own, and with absolutely zero sign of recognition in that soulless looking stare, I can piece together what that 200 buck bet was gonna say. Knowing how specist he is, seeing how clueless he is right
now, and making that comparison between the rest of the crew's recognition and his lack of showing, that bet was gonna say whether or not he'd realize who he's interviewing. Silently looking at me before looking back down to adjust his tie, then back to me again with absolute apathy, it's got to either be the best poker face or exactly what it feels like. I'm trying to make my own to hide it, but I'm nervous. Because whatever hope I had for this to go smoothly, I already know it won't.

The crew behind him finally assembles with the Kudu on sound and the pronghorn on camera. They both kneel to his elevated height.

"Thirty!" the civet yells, grabbing hold the edge of the van's roof to swing himself inside.

Don grabs that little mic of his and it's about to start. "Sound check, sound check, can you hear me?"

Some female voice yells out "Sid's reading you clear, Don! Fifteen Seconds!" and it's familiar. I could pin a name on it if I wasn't grimacing.

"Fox, make a calm face." comes from the Kudu.

"Is this your first time on the news?" from Don gets the Tragelaphus behind him to make a silent nodding No with a leer.

I allow it and nod Yes.

"Ten Seconds, everyone!" from the female in the van again, the Antilocapra Americana looks away from the viewfinder.

"Plain face, come on." he tells me as he does a final check to confirm he's transmitting.

"Five!" and the Lemming makes one last adjustment of the of the mic in his right ear as it pipes in diction from the office.

I'm forcing this funeral look on myself. Scared, angry, with no prediction to give myself on what happens now. Why did Ralph have to vouch for me? I'm not TV material. I can't be formatted to fit a screen or edited for content. I know it. It's gonna go so terrible that "Yes Peter, I'm here with a representative of the predator group that have seized control of Zootopia Central Station, they have identified themselves through social media as The Herd and have declared that they are not dispersing until the city has met their demands."

I am struggling. There is a metric ton of force trying to compel these eyes of mine to roll, because it's that exact vernacular the lemming just used that's making what comes next so obvious.

"Now sir, sir, can you answer why you've disrupted millions of lives with such a hostile act?"

And that's the very kind of loaded question I knew was gonna come. That clinical use of plausibly deniable manipulation that'll fly under professionalism's radar.

"That's not our narrative." is the best thing I can pry out off my tongue when it's got a taste this bitter.

"Narrative? Can you explain what you mean by that?"

I can't stop this bitter look on me, but I can smooth it over as best I can.

"I mean that's not what we're setting out to do here. Whatever effect we've had on the rest of the city is unfortunate but we-" Nothing selfish, I remind myself, not a damned thing that could be misconstrued as selfish. "After the violent backlash we've received over these-" Don't say Savage.
Just say "Attacks on prey individuals, we've been forced to withdraw from a society that's taking revenge on innocent mammals."

Y-" I'm not done. "This is a refuge, Sir."

"Refuge?"

"What we set out to accomplish with the Herd was a shelter for innocent predators caught in crossfire." He's more blank than a brand new computer. He's fresh out of the box, his circuitry is running like his little ITM brain is starting up for the first time.

"An interesting take on your group's actions."

Perfectly infuriating deflection of objective narrative with subjective definition. I have to sigh about as neutrally as I can with him continuing.

"But would you also describe them as creating a Safe Haven, Sir?"

I just said...

Oh.

Oh.

If he's going to try his, he better complete that damned thought.

"Elaborate on what you mean, Sir."

That momentary downward twitch of his mouth, and it's clear that he's processing what I just did.

"Well there have been reports of your group creating a safe haven for Criminals and their activities such as O'Shea Fuch-"

The most terrible snortling ever recorded on television. It's just come out of my tightly pressed lips. I'm reeling. It's not even that he managed to get the first and last name wrong, it's that it's everything I can do to get back up because that just confirmed what that bet between the Kudu & Civet was. I don't even have to look at that ungulate and see the horrified look on his face. I also don't have to look at Don Lemming's stupid curious look of obliviousness, nor here that feminine cackling from the back of the van or the proceeding smack of a high five.

I shouldn't have, but I did, and it's taking every ounce of energy in me to barely keep it together for "I'm pretty sure as a fox, sir, that I would be able to recognize him-"

Another round of cackling from the van. Several lupines on security find themselves carefully walking away from the frontline before they lose it. I can feel the tension from Big Purr behind me.

"What's-"

No Don, let's keep this up.

"That I would be able to recognize him out of a line up, sir." He has no idea what I'm implying and it's so perfect. It's so good and he makes it worse by shooting out a quick, professionally upset "I understand you, sir." with just the slightest aftertaste of seething rage.

"But what do you have to say as a representative of this group..." Again with the Group, again with that not-too-obvious but insidiously manipulative subconscious effort of comparing us with terrorists.
"...That you are creating a Safe Haven for criminals?"

Gloves off. Subtlety is extinct and this is now bareknuckle boxing.

"Noone is a criminal in there, sir." I'm not telling him, I'm telling everyone else as I point behind me.

A Forward Jab: "We are obeying all the same laws in there that we would out here. We're united."

Block: "Yes, point taken, but have you not been told by authorities to disperse and are disobeying the direct orders of law enforcement?"

Uppercut. On the upswing and aimed at my jaw.

"This is a peaceful assembly in protest of the violence we've endured for being born with the wrong teeth." I'm showing too much, but I've dodged the blow.

The slowest downward rolling of the lids over his eyes. That quiet, half buried leer in him. "Moving forward, the Daily Wail..." ...He's gonna cite That Freakan Rag? "...recently revealed in a survey that six percent of predators..." He's really doing this while representing the largest news network...

"...said they support the Savage attacks, would you describe those Predators as extremists?"

I have to pause for a moment, because there's something else going on when I can't even tell what he just did. "Six percent of predator-"

"Identify as being in support of the savage attacks, would you call them extremists?"

It's so rhetorical, such a forceful attempt to make me say his own answer, I must think but I know he won't let me. Whatever I'm about to say, I must let it out deathly quick and hope to god it doesn't spring his trap.

"I think, I mean by definition when someone identifies their beliefs as being out of the boundaries of normal or agreeable, it's kind of immediately acceptable to pin that label on someone and I'm not really sure you could expect otherwise, now that said, you are talking about a small percentage of an already small population and I'm not, I'm not expecting you or other prey mammals to go on tv to condemn the actions of prey supremacist groups but, you've got to admit, there's a double stan-"

"Point taken I understand where you're going with this but I just wanted to get a more specific answer from you, Again Six Percent of Predators surveyed said they support the Savage attacks, would you describe those predators as extremists?"

"w-"

"Do you support the savage attacks?"

And now, rocked to my core, I know what he did.

It's so clear.

The coward made an attempt to knee me below the belt and now, Now that he's done it a second time, with all his commitment, I feel it. I feel that terrible wound of ignorance. That phantom pain to reaffirm how little he understands me, or understands preds like me, or understands the reality of the relationship of our kind with his. All those times I thought him specist, I had made an error. I know it now, that I had mistakenly assumed there was thought to it. That he knew enough to have made a judgement, however wrong it was, on preds as a whole. It's not even hate, it's just an absolute ignorance. I'm looking to him in shock and my god, I see it so clearly. He doesn't even recognize me
as a mammal, as sentient, as intelligent. I am a roach and he doesn't even know what he did.

There is no inkling of recognition in his face to what he's done. He's confused, curious, he's staring at me so much like an open book, I can read that thought. Why isn't the predator working? Why is it not responding to my stimuli? Why is it acting offended? And there is nothing I can say or do to make him see I'm a real live boy. Even if I had the will, I am beyond the help he doesn't deserve. I am a predator, and predators are turning savages. Predators support savage predators because they are predators, and because I am a predator, I am guilty of supporting prey mammals being mauled to death or near death by others like me, I am guilty of being likely to become savage and attempting to maul other mammals, I am guilty, guilty, guilty until proven innocent in a court that will never be held to prove I am innocent and I am a predator...

And now, now that I have realized that like I never have before?

This damned despicable prey has used up the last ounce of control he had over me.

"You're fake news."

"Answer-" "No," "Answ--" "I'm not-" "Ok, tel-" "Done," "Tell me what abou-" "You want real-"
"Don't interu-" "YOU WANT REAL NEWS, DON?!"

His eyes bulge. "Ok cut the-

"I CAN'T CALL YOU A PUSSY BECAUSE YOU DON'T HAVE THE WARMTH OR THE FLAVOR," Whooping and hollering. Before anyone can act to stop me, I reach out. I pinch the end of that microphone, tug it out of his timid grip. "I CAN'T CALL YOU AN ASSHOLE FOR WANT OF DEPTH AND PLEASURE," Crazed Laughter. I bring the little filth covered thing to my mouth so that it'll be known just who's bringing the news now. "I CAN'T CALL YOU A DICK BECAUSE YOU DON'T FILL," hysterical cackling. I'm not done. "AN YOU AIN'T A PRICK 'CAUSE YOU'RE NOT SENSITIVE!" Big Purr is bellowing over me. "YOU'RE SO SHALLOW AN UNAPPETIZING THAT THERE'S NOTHIN' ABOUT YOU I CAN APPRECIATE AND I CAN'T TELL YOU TO GO FUCK YOURSELF BECAUSE YOU'RE SO DAMNED UNDESERVING!"

A delirious scream, a mad giggle. I am being pushed around in everyone else's amusement. That mic is trembling from the fury coming out of my paw. "SO REALLY? REALLY, THERE'S NOTHIN' I CAN CALL YOU, AND THERE IS NOTHING I CAN TELL YOU TO DO OR GET DONE TO YOU." The schadenfreude that I have unleashed, the celebration I've caused, please god, let no mammal ever make a bomb that could compare to me because this shockwave is gonna be felt around the entire globe. "AND EVEN IF I DID SUPPORT SAVAGE ATTACKS, IF I OR ANYONE ELSE WERE TO GO SAVAGE RIGHT FUCKING NOW, THE LAST PERSON ANY MAMMAL WOULD GOBBLE UP IS SOMETHING SO NOTHING AS YOU SO MAKE LIKE YOU AREN'T ANY GOD DAMNED THING AND STOP EXISTING!"

The rioting around me has reached a fever pitch and now that I am finally done, that little mic pinched between my thumb and index digits is held sideways, then released. Dropped to the floor of his little pedestal. Down to his feet. So squarely put in his place, he's gonna need therapy. Good. God damn him. God damn the fact he brought me to this point. But I'm through with the poison already out of my blood. I'll think for a moment on how bad I've messed up while trying to appreciate the entertainment I've rendered on the bystanders. I turn around, laughing along a little nervously with everyone else to know how good I got him. That misstep, future consequence, a final dance before the storm looming overhead.

Loud conversations happening all at once, I can't pick or choose between the ones directed at me to
join in on. I can only yell out "I have no idea what I just did but DAYUM it felt good!"

Even as one of the security wolves start to berate me, he's laughing. I'm throwing fake punches that
don't connect to get him playing along like he's getting shook left and right before he finally gets it
out. "Boy, you messed up so bad, the commission's gonna have yer azz and Andy's for it."

They will, I'm just trying not to think about it, but they will. The reminder is making this afterglow
fade quick, but I'm trying to hold on.

"I can't believe it..." that female voice again. What was muffled inside the van is closer now. It's my
left and distinctly educated in it's diction. With worry starting to settle in, I look in it's direction to see
it's owner. Fabienne Growley.

"You're really OC Fuchs." She says. Amused, curious, and just as shocked that it's me as I am it's
her.

"Wait!" Don, finally starting to put something together with what sounded like what he called me. "I
was interviewing O'Shea?! Kathir and Darrel get set up again I can't miss this opportun-"

"What opportunity, Don?" comes from her before I get around to it.

"Imagine the ratings if I get to interview the bandit that terrorized the city before predators starting
becoming savage, we can put him back on the news cycle an-"

"Go find a trashcan, lemon." Seeths out of her as I look at "It's Lemming-" in disbelief of the things
coming out of him, until she bends over him to look him straight in the eyes with quiet contempt.

"You are done here, you rotten little lemon. If I get my say when we get back to the office, you'll be
done there too. So before you make me reveal any more of my temper you will do what I say and
find yourself a trashcan to rot in."

Bant so sophisticated, it pours a cup of Earl Gray on Etiquette's grave.

We're laughing again, Don so nervous and defeated in his shuffle back into the van that he's like a
sad little puppywolf. Straightening back into proper posture, She's affording herself a brief and polite
non-predatory grin. Even with that tarnish of expected conduct, I have to marvel at how good felines
look when smug.

"Darrel, save that recording for me. I absolutely need that for my collection." No need to look in his
direction, so she puts her eyes back on me.

"Sure thing, Ma'am!"

"And you, Owen." she addresses me. "I am terribly..."

I have to stop her. Smiling with understanding and a raised paw to signal my interjection. "Sorry is a
useless word. Even moreso when saying it over others."

A nervous smile, but it's genuine and bordering on relieved. She acknowledges it, yet there is still
work to be done here. "What can I do to make this right?"

I can't tell her what would make amends here. I wouldn't know.

All I can think of is how I'm going to break what happened to the Alphas.

"You'll think of something, just hang tight... I gotta tell my people what happened." That said, I'm
looking to the security lining back up after their recovery to catch one with a "Radio, anybody got one?"

An Indian, a back and forth later and I got a walkie talkie with Ralph on the horn. "You there?"

"Yes I'm here, we just got done seeing you lose it on him!"

They know, already. To my horror.

"Owen, what the hell did you call him after they cut you off?!"

"I didn't call him anything!"

This would be so much funnier to me at any other given moment than right freakan now.

"I swear to god Owen, you're dead if you don't tell me the truth!"

"I'm technically not lying!"

"Technically!? Hand the radio back to the frontline guard and hope to god he technically says the same thing!"

I obey, returning it to the guard. "Srimaan, I am here."

"Did that ginger runt call him anything?!"

"You may not like it but I can tell you that he called him nothing."

"Whatever! Long as he didn't call him anything, we might be able to salvage this. Give it back, I'm not done with his azz."

Once in my hand, I hit the send button again with "Here, Ralph."

"I trusted you to represent the Herd and dammit, you were on a roll! Why did you have to lose it the the savage question!?!"

"Do you support the savage attacks?"

"What kind of question is that?"

"Exactly!"

"No Owen, Kurt told you what kind of play we needed and you fumbled the ball ten yards to touchdown!"

"I tried, Ralph! I'm not exactly a house pet!"

A tap on my shoulder, and whatever Ralph is yelling gets drowned out. My attention diverted to that Snow Leopard with a paw gesture to give the radio to her.

"Ralph, hang on, I'm handing it over someone else but it's important."

As he tells me not to, it goes into her extended paw and she gets to work. "This is Fabienne Growley, I'm with ZNN..." as she walks away.

I just stand there. Left to think on my sin. However much I can excuse it, a moot point. I doesn't matter that I was cut off before letting out all that vulgarity. I still failed. I lost it.
"You feeling guilty, down there?" Big Purr's booming voice from above. Sounding like he wants me to cheer up, but he needs to back it.

"Big, if I snapped that bad at a club you bounced, what'd you do to me?"

"If you went that turnt?"

Yes, I nod.

"Boy. If you went that turnt... I'd be throwing the other guy out back."

Exactly what I thought he'd say, exactly what I'd deserve to have... "...Wait, what?" I couldn't have heard him right.

"Then I'd slappin' yo digits for the entertainment 'fore I escorted you to VIP. Bottle service on me."

I did hear him right, and I can't understand, "I messed up, why would you do that?" I'm looking up to the peak of dead serious mountain with a powerful, gentle calming smile.

"Because I said so. Let's start there. Second is you didn't start it. Third, you ended it. Forth you made me laugh and fifth? F that ignorant prey boy."

Excellent reasons, if they weren't null and void to the reality of how bad I've let everyone down.

"I-"

"Lemme explain something O'Shea, were you reading everyone behind you?"

A cheeky grin and sure, I've got to laugh but... "I mean I read everyone around me all the time, but I was busy just keeping up with Don."

He comes back so quick, it's almost interrupting. "An it's my job to read crowds, I did it for a living before coming here and don't think your better at it than I am. I'll tell you the same thing I'm gonna tell the Wolves when I get back there. The truth. If you hadn't gotten us laughing so hard, we'd've torn him apart. I nearly grabbed him and if I had then his little azz would be halfway to the moon. You kept us from going off, don't you think you for a minute you didn't do the right thing."

I can believe it, maybe I should, it's just that it's enough of a bombshell I have to doubt it before soaking it in. "...You're saying I defused something that was about to turn violent?"

He's surprised. Then follows up with the realtalk I gotta dismiss as horsehockey.

"Boy, after all this is done, you better march up to ZPD an demand a job as popo negotiator."

The absurdity gets me laughing, has me saying "Fox cop? You kidding me?" before the memory of Espada strikes me, opening me up enough to not really question what comes next.

"They hired a bunny, didn't they?" The two of us crack up at it, but now that he's gotten it across? I believe him. My kind and rapsheet aside, he's so certain of his words, how could he not be, that it's making me think it's not that absurd after all.

"An if I don't apply, what then?"

"Then I'm making sure yer azz gets into ZC's stand-up circuit."

They don't go together in a sentence and I know he isn't joking, but I'd vouch for him being the comedian here before ever vouching for myself.

"I ain't a comedian though." I tell him to get him firing back with "Next joke you tell me gets a noogie." for me to nervously laugh.

"Eyes front and center." he tells me. I swivel back forward to face Fabienne, her open paw extended to return the radio back to me.

"What'd you tell him?"

"The truth. Go ahead, take it."

I do, hitting the send button and coming back to Ralph with "Here again."

"You got one chance to make this right. Forget that Don made this mess, you're cleaning up after him. This situation better be spotless or Andrew and Wally is going down with you." The ultimatum in a saving grace in a shot at redemption. No, maybe Big Purr is right that I saved things from getting worse, maybe I did the best I could and the liability falls to someone else. But the point has been made resoundingly clear. I am excused, so long as I can mend this fence.

"Just tell me what I gotta do, Ralph."

She's going in, he tells me. I'm going to escort her through the station, granting ZNN's proxy the kind of access that'll show the world we're not criminals or terrorists. Make it known that our newfound factionism, if we must be known by that, is through no fault but the cards held by prey that've been stacked against us. I will be interviewed throughout the process, but I have full say in the questions I do and don't answer. Just let the outside world know we're not violent, he tells me.

"...You will have it. Ok, we're going in."

With the radio back to that Lupus Pallipes, I turn to Fabienne once more. "You ready?"

"I am."

"This is gonna be good..." That pronghorn cameramammal. Everybody's looking at that giddy prey guy, confused and bewildered. Checking his massive camera again, hitting record and walking forward like- Yeah, I should have thought about this but he's forgetting something so basic, as a Lupus Arabs extends an arm to pause him midway into entering the station.

"No, no no, you are forgetting something."

"What?"

Fabienne breaks it to him. "Darrel, have you looked at your teeth lately? What about your feet?"

On cue, he looks down, putting it together as he looks at the Wolf's as well.

"You're not joining me in there."

"But we need a camera!" he reminds her.

Her reply comes in the form of gently, quickly seizing it from him. "Solves that problem, doesn't it Darrel? This should do nicely. Kazi, fetch a collar mic for Owen."

"Got it boss."
"Fabe, you know to work it?"

"I'm a bit rusty Darrel but I'd like to think I remember enough from university to work it out. Red means recording, yeah?" half lidded leering with the fainted gleam of canines in her faintly open grin. It's like we're already rubbing off on her.

As they go over the newer model NVC, that Kudu sets me up begrudgingly handing me a hundred in smaller bucks. That civet only wanted a hundred for himself, it seems. That or he took pity.

Awhile later, and I'm back in the fold with her. Those towering doors open to the right of us, and I swing around to a backwards walk to watch her quietly let out that fantastic shock and awe of the scene engulfing her. And so crowded, so impressive, that I still can't get over it. it's like a page from Where's Waldo. Lions, Tigers, Bears, it's... Everything. It's everything but the tighter knit varieties. No Spotted Hyenas yet, nor African Wild Dogs. I know some of us that know a few have reached out, but no word. A fact that leaves me thinking they live in the same manner these wolves used to, and if it's being discussed by their leaderships about whether to join us or not. But I put it aside. My attention is on her on everything happening all around her.

"This is... "Kind of a big deal?" "...Thousands of thousands. Do you know how many?"

"I'm not the one keeping a headcount, but it's about a congregation and a half, ain't it?"

She's so unprofessionally lost for words, I've got to snicker.

"This is the greatest mass of predators recorded in recent memory."

I twirl back forward to watch where I'm going. Catching sight of that Todd Crevan fellow I signed up as he gives me an extended fist I bump without skipping a beat.

"Owen, I don't mean to interview you but tell me, what was your life like before you joined the Herd?"

"Before or after the APB?" gets her smiling.

A quiet downward roll of her head with a squint. "Both, I suppose."

I only hesitate for a second, weighing on whether or not I should open up like that. But I'm here already, aren't I? My past life so perfectly taken from me, there's no point in holding back. So I don't, aware that I'm already not holding punches back.

"Well, I had it alright at first. Could've been better, could've been worse. I was getting by, sleeping in tents and dumpster diving."

"...You were homeless, before this?" That shock, it telegraphs how good she must have had it and the stark contrast between us.

"Not really? When I first came to the city yeah, I stayed in a homeless shelter, met a friend there, but afterward I moved out to squat where-ever I could. Tried abandoned buildings first, but that didn't exactly work out." The stories I could tell her that we don't have time for.

"Did you have a job? Could you have afforded to rent an apartment?"

I'm timid to tell the truth yet confident to be so defiant as to declare with a look to the camera "Well... Noone ever said the struggle was over, did they?"
Yes, your honor. As a matter of fact I did just say that. Do you want an apology? Cause you ain't getting one. She's not caught off guard, anyway. She's got affirmation out of me, with no nevermind of how good she's had it, because we've all gotten the raw deal.

"So you really lived in tents, before we reported on you." I can feel some guilt by association in her, but I won't have it.

"Before your employer did?" to take it off her as I follow up. "Don't feel bad. I made getting by by the skin of my teeth work, didn't I?" She wouldn't know, sure. But I got this far and that should say it all. That I didn't really know any other way to live, and I made it work.

"And during the mammalhunt?" I really survived that, I guess.

Her reminder, my reply that won't divulge all the details. "I lived off favors high and low to do right by my friends after the fact. Best as I could at least."

"And after?" is the line I've got to draw.

"This isn't about me, though. It's about everyone else. You can interview me when we've moved out of here."

She would like that, she tells me. Yes, absolutely, let's get back to topic she says, following up with a question I'm sure she already knows the universal answer to.

"You are all seeming very well entrenched, here. When do you think that'll be, when you'll surrender Zootopia Central back to the city?"

I turn right around the cheeky mature grin of someone's elder, and "Whenever it grows up." catches her so off guard that it throws me off.

Remember, I'm trying to save face here on everyone's behalf. So "Scratch that. How about... Whenever we feel it's safe to try co-existence, again. Because we're not trying to step on anyone's toes. When the city becomes reinhabitable, hospitable, put it like you want... Whenever they make it known that we got an equal share of their city, we'll return."

"I think that sounds right." she tells me, as I come to a stop by the clock, over that arrival board between the platform escalators. Such shamelessly unprofessional conduct, coaching me like that. That smile like a referee giving the red corner a quiet wink to know she's got my back. "There are of course many that've have pointed out that the actions taken here have crippled Zootopia's Transit Authority." she tells me. It doesn't sweat me. We're both in on the game, as she maintains that facade of just doing her job.

So knowing that she's invested, "We did what we had to, and yeah it's not ideal, but we had our paws forced."

"And what about those saying you've disrupted the city's public transportation network?" Would've invited anger if it was anyone else.

But we both know better, to make me at peace when I tell the city, not her, "Well... To heck with their problems. Our problems supersede any prey's concerns."

"So everyone here is in dire straights? Every mammal here had nowhere else to go, before the station became a shelter?"

Wolves like Andrew living in communes. Wally having to join a group that stayed underground. Eva
having to stay in a cargo container. Foxes like me, surely, having to pitch tents among others. However anyone else with sharp teeth lived before this. Let it not come from my mouth alone.

"Say, you got a moment there Mellivora Capensis?" immediately catches the attention of a male Honey Badger. Surprised at the Vulpes Vulpes looking back at him. "Been a hot minute since someone called me that." he tells me. Amazed smile. A hint of gratitude that someone knows that knows his real taxonomy, the one to supersede his stigmatic taxonomy.

I point my right thumb to the camera lens for a hint as I ask "What's your birth name, fam?" and he doesn't hesitate to look straight back at a future audience.

"Idir, Chapelle."

"Idir, why you here?" has him open up with a little hurt that "My landlord wouldn't let me back in the apartment building," for me to give him a shot at vindication. "Tell the city what he told you."

That rightful anger to compliment "He told me I wasn't gonna be able to pay rent after I lost my job anyway."

I'm looking to Fabienne, and she's horrified. We all know what that landlord did was illegal. Now, to elaborate.

"Why'd you lose your job?"

"Mammal resources said I scared customers."

We all know the answer to "Did you ever try to?" before he replies with his own question: "Why would I?"

Fabienne shakes her head in disbelief at the circumstance. I'm not done. "You, Neofelis Diardi. Sunda Clouded Leopard, what did your parents name you?"

Not when I have thousands upon thousands of cards up my sleeve. "Guntur. Why?"

I am taking the house outside for every cent. "Did you have much of a say in coming here, Guntur?"

I will prove the point until I shut every specist up. "No, I was given two weeks by my boss, and my landlady 30 days."

A "What did she tell you?" later and I get it out of him that "She said it would be better for the other tenants if I found a more predator friendly part of town to move to."

My lord, she mouths out. That cat looks to her in shame as she puts it together that it could've been her.

"You, Ursus Maritimus..."

Eventually, I dropped the scientific names. I needed to prove I was articulate, but selfish as it was, there's hardly a quicker way to catch the attention of someone than to call them out so personally. A baker's dozen faces interviewed on the fly, and we've gathered a crowd within the crowd. All coming forward without being prompted. All of them telling her the same thing: The only thing separating her from them is her money and her well-to-do condominium. Something that surely she already knew but now must fully realize. "Thank you... All of you, truly. You have all been so brave to tell me your circumstances, I'm just..." We have become the wrecking ball to her dam. She's will break, now. Trying to remain professional when everything inside her screams how wrong this is.
It can't be ignored and now it will come to a head and force it's way out of her eyes. "Bloody hell, not now." she condemns those tears with.

"Should we stop?"

"No, No Owen, let me fight through it." She tells me. Courage and duty swelling in her to fight that guilt and sorrow. I will not question it. I and everyone around her will let her stare past her soaked muzzle with a sense of purpose as she asks me "What does the Herd need, Owen? Anything you can think of, name it."

She's not a reporter anymore. She is the messenger. And I will not argue against her dereliction of duty as I tell her the truth. "We need more tents and more food. We have enough food for now but tents? We got more mammals coming in everyday. If we could buy every last tent from every sports or outdoor shop in the city, I don't think it'd be enough."

She nods to her acknowledgement. She's got one last thing on her mind, if I'm reading that wet face rightly. "Do you have a message you wish to tell anyone?"

A panicked whistle, and it all comes to a stop.

Alfredo Morena charges through the crowd in tizzy so dire it's like he's been slapped in the face by a ghost.

There's no time to finish "Alfred wh-" for him, because "Owen you're ocupado but we got a situation up front and scat's so dire cops are about to get involved!"

Fabienne's journalistic side takes the best of her, making her turn immediately to get back front as I ask "Tell the alpha-" and "No, it's you! This crazy Chica is screaming your name like -"

Her, it's her, it could only be her, I grab Alfredo by his shirt with delirium, shouting "WHAT'S HER NAME!!" with every fiber of my shaking body, terrifying him to the point he stutters and no, I will not allow it, tell me, let it out, tell me, "SAY IT!"

"EVA! EV-" I'm running faster than I've ever run before I even know I'm running, and I'm running on all fours without a damned care. Between a bear's legs. B-lining it at a breakneck speed, and darting through every empty space, around the blurred shapes of the masses I'm running too fast for them to dodge. I am an arrow soaring through the forest with mammals like trunks. I have aimed for the rolling field beyond it all and I am going to bulls eye straight into the sunset I've been careening toward since that dreaded Sunday night. I am nearing the edge of the treeline. I am looking at the light at the end of this woodland. Her figure is so bright, from how far away I am, that it's blinding. I'm looking at it, I'm looking at her from so great a distance and I can see it for what it is, the promise regaining my breath for me, bathing my body in more energy to keep me going and she sees me. She's looking at me, looking at her, and time grows weak. The fear on her face caving in to her little heart I can nearly see lighting up like a taser. I've cleared the crowds and the security. I'm not slowing down, I'm speeding up. She jumps, arched back, eyes and smile as big as they can get. My front paws make contact with the ground. Then my hindpaws. My claws are out like they're gonna dig in to this hard surface as the legs they're attached to catapult me forward. I am a raving, mach 9 airborne ball of fire. Of Joy. Of relief. Of love. Our chests collide. We are proof of the Big Bang theory. We explode like we're making a brand new plane of existence as my force against her sends us spinning in mid air to have us land in a perfect roll against my back. I'm screaming, she's screaming, we're screaming at the top of our little lungs and I'm touching her, she's alive, we're rolling off the ground, I'm coveting her, she's alright, we're clutching at each other so hard we're pulling at each other's cloths, I'm choking up on these tears like I'm never gonna get another chance to cry, she's holding on to me for dear life and it burns, it feels so good to burn, we're like bodies of
lightening bouncing off of each other as we hold on to each other for dear life while we ricochet off the ground like a basketball and the tears are streaming down our faces as we're pressing them in, tasting them and we're getting drunk off them like June Bugs all the while we're rubbing ourselves off each other and oh god, oh my christ, we're here, she's here, I'm here and I'm ravishing her like she's been away from me for centuries when we needed was each other like heads and hands need each other, this perfectly formed ball is the heart that mediates between them and our tears have littered the wasteland like morning dew promising new growth. We fall one last time, our legs have given up, we can't jump and hop and dook and pounce any more, we've wiped this world clean like a slate and there's nothing left now but our eyes gazing into each other, our muzzles pressed against the other, as our firm grip reminds us of how much we have to hold onto.

Somewhere in a galaxy far, far away, there's an onlooking crowd of shocked, bewildered spectators trying to make sense of what they're witnessing from millions of lightyears away. Cops have stopped dead in their tracks to watch a meteor shower, a solar eclipse and an Aurora Australis happen at the same time, above a flying saucer landing in front of them. A snow leopard looks through a lens to watch two red giants collide with force incalculable.

But there is nothing for them to make sense of.

I cannot stop because I cannot begin.

Because Love is stupid, and it is drunk, and our love is too loud to make out, and it is too bright to see the details of, and like the ocean, it is too deep to see to it's end, and like space, it is too vast for their minds to know it's full scope.

Love is like God.

It cannot be known.

It cannot be studied.

It cannot be defined.

It can only be felt.

Because love is a gift from a superior state of existence that this one will never grow to appreciate.

And in this moment,

with our tears washed over each other,

her rolling us onto her back and me,

pressing our lips together,

to divide them like Noah divided the sea, and our tastes colliding trains,

head on,

I feel more love than anyone has felt before me.
Ablution*

Chapter Summary

An asterisk marks this chapter as having not been edited since it's publishing. I am going through this story, from this chapter onward, to modify, correct, and slightly rewrite toward my current standard and style of writing. Now that the story is "Complete" and I have no urgency to rush through it. Much.

The narration puts it the visuals on the screen in better words than I think I could ever manage.

"Two lovers. Reunited in such a mad flurry of affection, it could only have been confused as a savage attack by only the most blinded of bigots. So powerful was the moment between this Fox and Ferret couple, it stopped ZPD's officers dead in their tracks. Rendering them unable to pursue their plan of arrest. So magical was it, that it rivaled the sense of community I felt inside of that station I left behind. Fabienne Growley, reporting for ZNN."

All of the Alphas are behind me and her as the zootube video ends that flatscreen tv. Rigged impromptu to one of the breakroom laptops. Everyone in here is breathless. Still, like a richly detailed oil painting. As spectators to some wondrous moment in time immemorial. Then Ralph breaks the silent pause. He speaks for himself and all of the Herd's Lupine commission when he relents this to my surprise; "...You really did it. You fudged up so bad you turned it around and made it good."

Good as that sounds, it does nothing to sway me one way or another. My armor is a masked queen of hearts. I belong to her. Because she has me, that flower in her hand like Judith's, nothing can touch me. No hurt. No grief. Not even death. So as I turn to face him with my soft smile and placid eyes, he and the others can tell that if I hadn't done right by happy mistake, that they could still muster neither heart nor force strong enough to injure me.

"...Gandolf, tell everyone what you told me earlier." A mouse arrow appears, goes over the fullscreen button, and clicks until it closes the zootube page.

"Well boss... Bosses..." he starts, clicking on and refreshing the other open tabs. "...Me and the other social media guy... It's like... I mean I'm lost for words, it's almost every neigher and snoutbook post. Any comment or neigh against us, they're getting downvoted, reported, deleted... It's happening so fast, I can't even keep track of them. We went from hundreds of comment chains of longneck prey boys begging for another civil war to... This. All of this."

Post after post. An endless outpouring of comradery with us.

"...And you know that poll I made?"

Kurt can leer at him, but only just. "The one I told you to change the wording, Gandolf? That you said you couldn't, then refused to delete and make over?" He can barely antagonize him. He wants to, and maybe he's right to, but he can't.

"Well sir, look..." He tells him, opening and refreshing another tab for pie charted results. Are You With Us or Against Us, he titled it. "That's everything. All of the votes that were initially against us, and all of the votes now for us." Fifty two percent against forty eight. With us. Against us. This city...
around us, it's as divided now as it was before we left it. And yet in this dark chapter in it's history it feels like it never wanted to be whole as much as it wants to be now. "I mean, this isn't every zootopian citizen, we've only got... A hundred and twenty nine thousand, eight hundred and sixty five votes in all but... I think this is winning."

a beautiful moment painted on a canvas of tragedy. The battle is not over. It will never be over until we're all safe again and we can put this behind us. But those great battles in history, all those somber moments of reprieve the side winning at that time must've felt, we're all feeling it. Even if we don't win our battle we're facing right now, we can still look back to this quiet little moment. Where all was going right. When seeds were sown for a harvest in the peace that could have followed. We all take a moment. So calm is the room, one could feel and hear a tear patter on the tile. "...It's like what Woolsey told Lupe." A flick and pan of my ear as I turn again to the wolves behind me.

"Your Predecessor?" Comes from one of the Sahara Square Alphas. Gets Ralph to reply back with "Yes, Zev. One of our own in narcotics convinced scarface Bogo to sweat him for drug production and trafficking... He's gonna lose his badge for not producing results, but he's taking it for us." A silent nod of respect by that Arabic and I've got to ask "How's he holding up?"

Ralph hesitates. There is a brief tension because I must have spoken out of turn. He looks to Kurt for a yay or nay, and he nods the former. "...They're keeping him in 24 hour muzzle and solitary with chains and a spit hood." The pain of misery sweeps the room in waves. Intermixed with reverence and pride as the visual rings in my head. "Lupe had to put a show on for the guards outside and beat him but it was the only way. We got to communicate with him, that's all that mattered to him." As much as this grieving should ache in me? I can see him right now. Laying on a concrete bed. Toothless without dentures and surely living on food through a straw.

But I can see that smile. I can almost hear him laughing from time to time. The guards posted outside slamming their nightsticks against the steel door and the threats that follow. But it doesn't phase him. The system lost it's power over him. The city lost it's control.

They can't touch him.

They can't touch us.

"...This is the most sovereign we've ever been." I catch myself saying allowed. I'm not the only one surprised. I guess I have the floor, now. It and an expectation. "...Woolsey told me, before we left, if prey won't pretend that they don't want us gone... Then they've used up the last ounce of control they had over us. He told me that verbatim. Self reliance, preservation, we have these right now, the same as everyone out there in the station, because of sacrifices like his and all of your past Alphas. We won it by our own paws thanks to them. And I don't even think it matters to Woolsey or any of your predecessors we win or lose, now. Even if the clock gets set back hundreds of years, what we've done here is worth all their efforts."

A lot to take in. A moment so tender, the closest it can be compared to is every face smiling after a bittersweet eulogy. They all look to each other, Eva tightening her grip, her right paw in my left. Their eyes calmed, confirming the same thought across all their heads, the same feeling in all their hearts.

"You should know by now, we wouldn't let you say something out of turn while we spoke among our equally ranked selves." Ralph tells me. His voice too pleasant for it to be a scalding, but I can't figure out what is as he goes on beyond it feeling like a wry hint.

"...It's like what Woolsey told Lupe. You can't be trusted to do things our way. The way Wolves were raised, taught, the way Foxes like you were, we'll never see eye to eye. We wouldn't be able to
An honest smile with the tone of praise. The contrast between what he's saying and how he's delivering it.

"...And that against all better judgement or logic, you would prove yourself. He told Lupe it'd be exactly because of your emotional, proud, impulsive, stubborn nature... That you could be trusted to go beyond expectation. All your traits that'd anger us, you would make them work. You'd decide and act, sometimes not even think, take charge of a situation, execute your will and we wouldn't know how or why it worked, but it would."

It came to me.

I knew what to do and have done impossible things.

And now, I know what this is.

"Lupe thought he was going crazy, but he told me anyway. I didn't believe it, but I obeyed him. I gave you something to prove yourself for his sake and it took everything I could do to convince the commission with all the other things you did before, yet... You did exactly what he said you would. You scared us, ticked us off, then you pulled through." They're looking to me. What Woolsey said would happen is happening right now. My shocked mouth is a telegraph. Sent. Received. My left paw gently squeezes hers. Few mammals have ever been this close to Wolves. She would not know the significance of what's transpiring before her. Only the importance of it. "You've proven you could be trusted... Even if you skirt on technicality," he tells me, pausing for stifled laughs and grins before the bombshell.

"...Your fellow Alphas can't believe we're doing this. We wouldn't have agreed to it if you hadn't done everything you did yesterday." Our. Not his, but Our. Mine. My fellow Alphas. "We're going to let you enter the commission, the same as any of our own kind that proved themselves."

I'm lost for all other words but "Has this ever happened before?" for him to tell me no, "Never in our history. You're the first... So it'll be kept in secret." They've trusted me so far. They know they can trust me with this, even if it's limited. "Don't go around giving orders to subordinate Wolves, they'll chew you up for it. You won't have authority, that ain't what we're giving you. We're giving you a radio and equal say in meetings. It's on you to present good cases for all your arguments, the same as me and our peers."

I wouldn't expect it another way. If I ever could handle more, if they'd even consider it, it'd have to be in increments. "So what happens now? Now that we're on the same level?" I ask him, like a navigator to a cartographer.

"We've been meeting nightly, and you're expected to not skip a one. We're rotating the times we congregate but you'll be in the loop on when we do. You can choose to either keep your tent on the upper level or move back here with us. We've all elected to remain in the employee areas to keep our presence away from the others. We got the intel to doubt there's any plainscloth one time mixed in with the herd, but we can't risk one slipping past our boys still in blue. You though? Since you're not a Wolf, you might be doing us a favor if you stay out there. We trust our boys on guard duty but you might catch things they won't. It'll have to have one of our own out there."

The lines drawn and I have something to go off of, with a course her presence already dictated. "Then I'll stay out there. I doubt you want my love in here." I may owe them, but they know me. It's not much, but just enough to understand I'll return the favor. "Alright. If you can move your bike, you'll be doing us a favor." I'll treat it like an obligation to be enthusiastic on. "I want to move it next
to my tent." The tent that I share the possession of in eight hour rotations. If I was a lesser mammal, I could ask to have it twenty four hours of the day. I'm not. Those that have the power to make seas rise with a word know better. That's why I'm here. "We'll get some subordinates to help you on it. Just help them out in kind, treat it like we ordered you to move it."

I will, I tell them.

"Alright. That covers everything. Leave the radio on preset nine to hit us and we're meeting at eight tonight. Anything you can think of, tell us then..."

A final few passing words, those like you've come a long way and noone doubts you now, and I'm walking down the hall with Eva. Her paw still in mine, not daring to let go of something she was so afraid she had lost. An Arctic Wolf by the door smiles. The shellshock of the journeys we took, then. He signals whoever's on the other side with two knocks that an exit's taking place. The afterglow of the prize we've earned, now. He opens wide, presenting a brave new world out there for us to appreciate. The knowledge shared that whatever happens after today, we will remain two halves of the same whole. The great din of the masses. Our spirits so lifted we have a foot across the threshold of heaven's golden gate. So many faces looking to us. Our hearts so drunk, it gives them all a contact high.

I can feel it in the air that we've both inspired something. That universal feeling of agape has a new kind of love to compliment it. Bleat Radio's Golden Age isn't just heard in my mind, it is known and felt. My suitor bunts the side of her face into my shoulder. My splayed ears and wagging tail. My Joan of Arc, signaling in her affection our witnesses to trumpet the coming of my kingdom. The moment is so pure, it's beyond my control. I cannot chastise it for getting to my head, on my way to the upper level where we will lay on the grass together. Forgetting everything until an appointed time that something will remind us. Time will fly and be still at once. Our worn clothes, powerless in their modesty to contain what can't be. That shifting and rustling blurring seconds into minutes into hours into seconds.

Our scents mix together. My impossible girl. Her crazy boy. The tossing about to take turns laying atop the other until all we have left is words.

They'll give in eventually. Pent up introspection of all those things we wanted to admit, we have the time to let them out, now. We don't, but noone can stop hands on a clock. What's been on her mind, she finally lets it out. Her frailty and guilt in the admission "I shouldn't have made you go. We should've listened to Lola." as she lays on top of me.

"...You couldn't have known what I didn't. That they were tracking me through my phone." The reconciliation can only fuel her hindsight fright all the more.

"How?" I'll misinterpret as "Buffalo." saving my full damn name on his god forsaken iPaws when that's not the How she was asking, but rather "How did you manage to escape?" I want to tell her everything but can't remember, don't want to, all the blanks I'm drawing between that hourless odyssey's beginning and end.

I just have to break it to her as soft and gently as I can that "Everything after I ditched the Sheep's cop car was a blur."

...Now just wait a hot gosh darn minute. Did I...

"...You stole a cop car?" could just as well be coming out of my mouth instead of hers, over those suddenly stiff shoulders and under those wild shocked eyes. That moment of agony, where I never knew I'd see her again and was breaking down.
And in retrospect? We're breaking up before I can even get the rest of it out because its the funniest god damn story. "I didn't even know, I just. I saw this empty car right outside the front door, engine running, door open, I DUCKED IN NOT KNOWING WHOSE IT WAS AND THE FREAKAN-
"

I'm dying at this part, "AAAAHAAAAHHHHHHHHHHHH THE MOTA FUGGIN RAM, HE HEADBUTTED THE PASSENGER DOOR Shut AND-"

This is spousal abuse, her banging the hell out of my chest and pummeling the laughter right out of my mouth as she shrieks out "YOU RATCHET AZZ BOY, DID YOU JUST-" and I freaking "Did, I Freakan did, just hauled the fu-" I can't. Eva wouldn't let me even if I could. Were cracking up so hard at the slapstick visual I'm reliving that it's taking us ages for me to finally get back to "And I drove it through an alley, went up and down dunes, until I was close enough to a subway station and ditched it..."

"That is NOT the end of your story!" she tells me and it is because for the god damned life of me, "I don't remember the rest! I just know that somewhere along the line, my phone broke, I was nearly ran over and I ended up bringing cops to a drug deal between Wolf gangs."

And as funny as that story ought to be, it's the thing that sobers her up.

The fact I shouldn't be here after all that. Under her, between her legs, as she straightens up, paws on my chest with the disbelief that "...And you're alive. You're here, after living through so much more than I...

I don't know how she got through that night. I want to, if for no other reason than to relieve her guilt in thinking she didn't have it as bad as I did. That "...They hid me in a trashcan before the cops rounded the alleyway corner." could maybe calm her down with the whole Grouch thing Lola started. It doesn't, even as I tell her "They talked the cops down until they got the call to go to Cliffside. Then... The gangs..." and there's no buttering this part up, "...They were about to collect my reward when they figured out who I was... Until they figured out one of their own knew me... Andrew, that Mexican Wolf I was telling you about... They knew him and decided to wait until he came before... The point is, he saved me... When everything said he shouldn't ha-
"

"Don't talk like that right now. Please." because she can't deal, right now. Knowing how close she came to never seeing me. On the verge of tears as she asks "The point is, Andrew saved you... That's how you ended up with the Wolves, right?"

"...And why you couldn't reach me. Because somewhere along the line, my phone got broke. And then Es-" I only know him by "Lucifer," by my oath and respect, "He crumbled it up when I met him the day after SheePGB... It was everything I could do to listen to you until the day before yesterday. To hold on let go. Live right now and not... Not freakan die, wrack my brain worrying about you."

It shouldn't have come down to this, her having to ask "What happened before yesterday?" but it has. With all her frailty, and her inability to cope with what I'm about to say, when I don't have the heart to lie or just not tell her. When she needs to hear it regardless and I've got to let her know.

"...I saw you in a polecat lady... And it was so painful, looking at you in her, I nearly lost it. Just dying that you weren't there, it wasn't you and she caught on. She knew... Made it so much worse... Then she put me at ease. Because she told me you were coming back. Wasn't no nevermind of if but when. You would... You'd be back. Because you were crazy enough to glass a cop to stop me from getting tased, crazy enough to be by my side for the rest of our days... And you'd give your life for me. You just had to know where I was and you'd be there by my side 'til death did us apart..."
It starts with a single tear. Continues with a stifle before the sobbing. Folding herself into me. Face softly crashing, tucking in against my neck and she pours it out. An embrace around my chest desperate for comfort. I'm hushed for a moment. My chest strained to expand and all too quick to deflate, trying to smooth it out to soothe her as she bleeds out through a moan for all the misery we both lived through. Because however long and hard or brief and gentle their pursuit of her was, it doesn't matter, it pales in comparison with my own, when all that matters to her, about herself, is that "The cops found where I was living... I stayed with Lola for awhile at Telly's place. She moved in because..."

It hurts her enough, just why her friend had to do what she did, that she just can't finish the thought beyond "...She just had to move in, and I had to move in because I was so scared... Losing my mind the whole time because I just kept calling and texting your number..." She's shivering on top of me. Shaking her devil's phantom out over me. Every writhe of her body a struggle to let that last ounce of emotional hurt out.

"...Why'd I have to go to SheePGB?" she asks me, when it's doing neither of us any good. "...They would have found us anyway, Eva. They were tracking my phone..." and in the agonizing over that fact, when it's against everything she showed me to believe in, she'll still fixate on "...And they found my hiding spot because that was the last place you..."

And if they had anything on Espada, it was my prolonged stay in his apartment. If they were tracking me by Saturday Night, and didn't even need that Bug Burga calling me in. What he couldn't have even guessed, when it was Bellwether trying to get Lionheart's Fox Hunt done and out of the way of her agenda of getting those Fourteen Missing Preds found.

I'm pushing it aside, because here is now and the embrace of the love of my life. All I want to know beyond her nurture is the how of it in "How did you know I was here? Theres been a happy ending to all this, we're living it." I just need to know how it came to be. "Telly wanted to visit someone in Savannah Central, but I think it was an excuse for me and Lola to get out of the apartment."

The world and all it's venom. The hatred out there.

"And then we past a store and I saw you were on the news..."

The cruelty it chooses to visit on the weak. It always kills the weak ones.

"All I remember after that was I ran. The cops found out who I was when I started begging the Wolves to tell me if you were still there."

Us kids with our vintage pain of being born the wrong kind of mammals. It belongs in an antique shop.

"Do you forgive me Owen?" Not in her head.

"For SheePGB?"

Not in mine.

"Yeah..."

Noone needs to know the misery that's visited all of us. It's enough to make us go crazy but no, I'm not gonna let myself think about this. It's going to stop it and it's going to stop now.

"...Why would I forgive for every good thing that's happened to me because of you guiding me? Every bad thing along the way was just somebody else."
Because we're young. We're young and in love. All this summer, we've been hurried. We've been rushed. It's only natural that by the time we slowed down, even if for a moment, that we'd feel the wounds fester. But we've got so much more ahead of us now than what's behind us.

"So what happens now?" She asks me. Desperate to rebound from the first time I've seen her admit her pain.

"I'm going to be better than I ever was before now. Because I have you." I tell her, like a well taught child correcting an adult led astray to tell that assumed pupil something wrong. Because love is patient. It is kind. Happiness belongs to us and we deserve the best of each other. In the twilight of my former self, we'll recognize that. Realizing that some Pallas Cat recorded the whole thing on his phone's camera and not even caring. We just lie there. Together. Forgetting that there's a whole planet out there. It's chased us until it nearly had it's way. We'll just lie where it left us. In the station. In the eden motes of our garden eyes. Where the love so drunk and high has us where we were always trying to go. With cars to chase around our heads and no pavement to wander aimlessly over.

And by the time Andrew taps on my shoulder, it could have just as well been days and still yet have been long enough. "Hey Oh, committee says you gotta move your bike cause they're tired of seeing down there. Come on, get off yer girl for five seconds, they're letting you get help bringing it up here."

By the time we've ceased the embrace that'd gone without interruption since yesterday, we had entered a daze. I'm so gone, he's gotta look at me like he's on the verge of praying for my ship of fools self because to him, "You about the most god dang azz hopeless fool since Romeo."

I laugh. At him. Not with. Because in this moment, with her presence, I am so complete and fulfilled that the truth is in me having nothing left to hope for. And he just doesn't get that.

"Keep hitting me with the goodness, teacher preacher. Elabababorate on that dang ol' thought." My boldness makes his vexation worse for her amusement and mine.

"You're more mad for each other than Hans an Anna in Floatzen. The textbook definition of head-over-heels love is a picture of you two proving I didn't know scat about how crazy you could get." We need stitches, the truth is that good a joke. "Should I call a recess or do you want to try taking a semester's worth in one go, bro?"

My answer is unapologetically ignant. "Eva, meet my boy Andrew, Andy, love of my life, Eva Belette, Andrew Howlerson, Howlerson, Belette." We laugh at his expense, he flicks his wrist like a get the freak out of here. I tax him further with a flicked wrist in kind, he retaliates with a shove. For a grown azz male like him to belittle my own maturity, then stoop to my level of antics? The time has come for schoolyard-tier roughhousing, making fools of us in front of her like junior highschoolers. He's got size, I got speed and she's got the best stifled giggle.

By the time we reach the escalator, he's almost actually mad as he spouts off a "Boy get yer dang azz down there!" with a throwing of paws to the air. It's only encouraging me to keep going with "My dang azz stubby azz blacksock wearin' azz legs can only do one step at a time, dag nabbit!" and I'm doing it.

"Buster!" I'm doing it so very much to his chagrin with my feigning azz self.

"Tryan!"

"Punk azz-"
"I'm, I'ma tryan!" I interrupt and Eva's about to fall down the stairs, we're losing it that good. His "Freakan...!" to let me open up to primal gekkering and he's just done and so far gone he's not even mad anymore.

He looks down like something ugly's caught his attention and I turn back around, just a little bit too smug for the trio of lupines to not be vexed that this is the fool they're helping. Neither could she, until their quiet anger makes her defensive. I recognize their faces immediately after the smell hits me. Raw Sewage. More pronounced than what wafted in the air when Tundratown entered the station. Ever since we took over the station, there's been so much happening that I never once thought about Gonzalo's gang. Everything about them I hadn't considered them, I haven't seen them, and the stench tells me everything I need to know.

"...They've got you down in the sewers?"

A scoff. A rightful one I'm not gonna challenge as wrong. "Gee, ya think?" from one gets a tap on his midsection by the other. "Cool it Raff, let's just get this done with."

Right. The bike. A conscience on me about their situation when I lead the way, with no good way to put it to Eva's "Who are these guys?"

"I can tell you a little later... I promise." because I don't want to start a scene with people that already hate my guts, having to help me with the Vulpon. Eva is seeing it the first time and I've got to smile at her betrayed fascination. Her amazement at it softening the blow of the evidence of folks touching it. Of course there's pawprints all over the gas tank. And of course the sign has been torn. But I can't be mad, when I know how sensitive lupine noses are, and I can see the effort in their chests to try for fresh air. Any acknowledgement of their situation would just make it worse. Exactly like the spectators are making it worse. Watching as I take the sign off and putting it together that "Holy heck, he's Owen Fuchs!" and taking phones out for pictures.

The awkward moment, when "You got the key and all to the escalator?" isn't enough to distract Gonzalo's crew from others soaking in my inconvenient celebrity status.

"Yeah Kurt gave it and Downtown told me how to turn it off an on. Hurry up." He tells me. I nod my head. Trying to brush off the attention that's making it worse for them. My paws on the handlebars and my foot dropping the kickstand as photos start getting taken. And the crowd doesn't let up, following me on the way back, with me entertaining the prying questions as best I can, while thinking on whether to try to prolong this for their three sakes or if they'd rather deal with this for as little as possible. Time decides and I fail to make my mind up when we get to the escalator. Quick but awkward work, with Raff starting the escalator up and the other two helping me keep the Vulpon stable. All the while my name's getting called out, when I wouldn't know how to handle it under any better condition.

The moment that rear tire is on level ground, they wordlessly turn around for the walk back down before I can try to smooth it all out with a thank you or acknowledgement. Andrew and his good riddance under breath, with a leer I'm left wishing was directed at me for once. It's gonna be awkward, what comes after his glee in "Ain't karma great? All the scat they pulled an now they're down in it." and it making me spout a No off without any forethought.

The shock in him, not fully catching the disappointment in my voice when he's stuck on "Bro, what do you mean No?"

There's no good way to disarm him with the fact, when it can only be put as bluntly as "I mean karma ain't great." to get him the defensive when I didn't want him to.
"They nearly killed me and turned you in for the reward! Tell me they deserve what they put themselves in!"

I am telling him the exact opposite, as Eva processes the fact she just shared physical space with the Wolves that took me away from her. "They don't. The fact they heard my screaming fit out instead of going through with the deed? That never even would've happened if they didn't bother calling you."

She's livid and shocked, watching me declare this like I'm a damned lunatic. "...They almost killed you? And he's feeling sorry for them?"

No amount of me telling them both that "It's not like that!" will not resolve anything for them. Andy isn't having it, trying to remind me "They gangbangers, bro, they made their choice." like free will is some On Off Switch and no, "They made two that tell me there's a decent enough mammal in all of them to not be punished for the one you're fixating on and what are they doing down there, anyway?"

They're genuinely shocked by the gaul. Like I'm so out of bounds, I'm not even in the stadium anymore. I'm running out in the parking lot and still managing to fumble the ball. "Ok... You really wanna know? They and D-boys from other packs are running security down there. If cops try to raid, they'd try to send some through the same way Tundratown came in."

I've got an idea now for the meeting, as I stop and twist the handlebars to back it up to the wall.

Andrew, in his seething "...You really telling me you're not happy about this?", with my admission of "Yeah." and Eva's own "That you're not happy you don't have a dead friend and a jail cell?"

"No I'm not saying that, I'm saying everyone here's been through enough scat in their lives without having to wade through it again over some poor life decisions."

I kick the center stand down and make a final heave while they stand back to disbelieve me. Outside of a mutually shared disposition about the death penalty deserving it's abolition, me and Andy never talked much about crime and punishment. With Eva and most other preds, the knowledge that preds make up half the prison population is a painful given. When they're only ten percent of the outside world's own. So I guess they're seeing it for the first time that I'm this Reform over Punishment. "...So what would you do with 'em, bro? Assuming you'd have the power over that judgement call."

I almost let it slip that I kind of do. Eva's nearly saying something about it makes what comes out look like me being clueless and caught as much in a debate. My eyes darting around as I actually do think it, but my time is up.

"You didn't think about it, did you?"

Whether or not I did is beside the point. I'm actually in privileged position now. I can actually say it with some pride and authority, as I look him dead in the eyes with a completely serious smirk, and tell it like it is.

"...Just you wait 'til congress is back in session."

I got him so good and he doesn't even know how literally I mean it, he's just laughing at a wise azz pizza zit goomba and muttering This Mofugger at him. Then we're roughhousing again. He started it with a thrown punch and I'm just going in with enough force to defend myself on him. With Eva being beside herself, and the knowledge that I wasn't exactly kidding him. By the time we're done, his mood's so lightened he ain't even sweating the argument. It's been and gone and he's a little past spent. Eva's just standing there as he strolls. Not even believing that side of me I guess could never
be easy to swallow. "...You're seriously going to defend them at the meeting?" with a surprise in her that this is the fool she came back to.

"I'm not going to defend them. I'm gonna argue for a better use of them."

One too good for her, when it's not bad enough that "They're in the sewers to keep cops from raiding the station." and it just doesn't sit right to me. "That's just another injury to lash out against. By their own messed up logic they should've done everything they didn't. They can do better."

I'm grasping at it, that thing I've always felt, yet never been able to tell. When it goes against so much, seemingly even against the fact that "Owen, that doesn't change what they put you and Andy through! Those D-boys almost took what means more than anything else away from me!"

But it doesn't, not when "Everything they've done to me and everybody else can never be defended. What I'm arguing is they owe me what I want for them on my own terms."

The same thing Espada Del Toro wanted out of me. What I owed him, on his terms.

How I feel now, in a position like his that to her can only look like "You're acting like you owe them." and begging her the question, the absurdity of "Why would you get in the way of what's happening to them?"

It's come to this. Having to pull something so intimate and personal out of me that I'm not sure it's ready to be exposed. The weakest thing in me. So young it'd never been prepared in a thousand years to be challenged by a profoundly sick society. But it's coming so raw through my magnolia face that she's seeing it before I even get my truth out of my mouth: "...Because I want better for everyone. I don't want anyone to suffer. The world out there, it tells us someone deserves it, but if they did, and all of our pain, everybody else's pain could make the world a better place, if all we had to do was just punish people for doing someone wrong, then why are we here? Why aren't we kings and queens, why is the world so messed up, if eye for an eye is so god damned right, why aren't we seeing things get better?"

Everything we've been taught about crime and punishment, I've just gone against it. The very concept of Justice, and her little heart drops, she's so shocked at the surreal she's nearly injured, teetering on the defensive. Looking to me, as though I just levitated in the air like supermale. She can't believe me, and has to remind me that "...Boy, you're acting like people don't get away with what they've done."

She says that, with it so clear in her that it's not hypothetical. It's experience. Everything that ever happened to her that never got resolved. All that everyone had to live through without ever finding the closure of what was taken and never given back. The pig assaulting me. The sister's boyfriend and his slingin'. Lionheart's fox hunt to cover up the savage preds. The cops that hunted us down. The gang that almost took everything I knew and loved away from me. They could suffer all that everyone else wants and I would still be here, knowing they still didn't know any better. They would remain in their ruin, and for all Espada did to pull me out of mine, they in their own would only continue to pull others in. Tragedy, as miserable and useless as the word Sorry when we were all meant for so much more than what we were given.

And then I see it so clearly: The way to put it from her own example of "...Remember Buffy's party? Me, asking you why we didn't have a better word than sorry and you, You being so bold and quick to say it's called action?"

She knows where I'm going and No, with all her agony, "I don't want anything from them. They can't make it right for me." is her admission of all her understandable, rational hate for them.
"But why is Sorry such a useless word?"

Because hatred is entirely logical.

"Because it doesn't change anything about what happened."

It's the most base product of fear and survival instinct.

"And just blindly punishing everyone, left and right without any thought of whether or not it makes anything better... How can that not be as useless as Sorry, when the focus can never be taken off someone just being punished, without it ever changing what they put others through? If they can see their faults, do something good, even if it doesn't changed what they did, they can be a part of making the world around you better."

I'm feeling everything, the same as I always have when it's so fresh now, more than it has been in so long. Since I was a kit, wide eyed and feeling it all for the very first time. My entire being, burning down to the truest show of my nature. The weakest thing in me, in front of her. The altruistic love for everyone around me. My overwhelming nature, profound and leaving her with the one final question of "...Do you just not believe in Justice?"

That word, the definition it's been given from the bloodthirst of the cards we've been dealt in life...

"...I believe in making things right. Making someone whole. Better. Gonzalo and his bunch can either be worthless their whole lives and a burden on everyone, or they can be made to do something good enough to look back at what they did before and never repeat their suffering again."

She wasn't ready for this to go through her. An arrowhead revelation of who I truly am. So beyond convention, the challenge of it with all of me has gotten all of her to reflect. Genuinely wondering if it really goes against what she taught me by the home she had by the cliff. For a brief moment, if she even still respected me enough to still possess me through that flurry of emotion. And she does. Because I'm exactly the kind of crazy she knew she was signing up for. Swept up and reaching out, to hold and covet it. Appreciate how I pull it all off, with the matter of fact condition in "If you're really gonna do this then I want something out of you." being all I can agree on in my "Anything." I tell her.

"You do what you will at the meeting tonight. But you tell me everything. Don't hide what's happening with us. And if you, or nobody else knows what to do about something? You come to me, and I'll tell you what you need to tell them."

This I promise, when I would give her so much more. She loves me so much, a ferret girl that wants to live and would die by my side, I could never return that favor in it's fullest. She has all I have to give and she's all I have. Pressing her head into my chest as my ears splay down and we lay down by the tent. On the tile, in the open and exposed.

The moment lasts for so long, not long enough and almost too long all at once. I was nearly late by the time I found out when it was. My luck dictating that I run down the hallway until I'm ahead of Kurt. Then I try to save some face, slowing down to a stroll, trying to pool my cool together with a pop of my embroidered collar. Thank god I didn't wear it yesterday, she tore that floral wallpaper shirt of mine to shreds. But I'm not sweating it. Not even sweating the smell of her on me as I cross the threshold of that boiler room Tundratown entered the station through. A passing comment by one of the Rainforest delegates about how she must've come unglued to fall off on the way in, and we've still got humor. We afford ourselves as much, before we begin a discussion of serious matters.

An alarm goes off. Another, and several Alphas gesture to turn off their wrist watches. Silence, and
Ralph begins. "So who we got to take the floor first?" he tells us, all eyes slowly coming to me with no real premeditation. It's a natural curiosity that I'll have to let down for now.

"I think it best I opt to hear some others out first, weigh what I'm bringing to the table." Nods of understanding, but their thoughts still on me.

"I and Zev will speak first on our food shortage."

My surprise is the contrast to the recollection of the other Alphas. As that Egyptian reminds "We have spoke of this with an understanding to revisit it with more knowledge... But I must speak the truth that there are no guarantees for how long what remains will last. With no true count of the mouths we must feed, at the rate we are going as of today we may only have a little more than a week."

Everyone but him and his Arabic cohort share my own dreadful shock. "...Operation Ceaster called for a month's supply of food. You're telling the committee we're Four days in and we may not have enough for two more weeks?" Kurt's terseness reveals a mutually shared anger that's less about fault and more of the circumstance.

We as Wolves and a lone Fox can read it as much, but Zev, in his pleading nod, receives his fellow delegate's consent on the interjection that "We all know this truth: There are far more that have joined us than the plans calculated. Blessed are our elders, we must thank them for what gifts they gave us, but even after the past mammal rights era, they could not have accounted for how greatly the city would test all predators now."

But there is another reason to account for, that the tension out there now couldn't on it's own. And one of the Rainforest Alphas speak on it: "Did our predecessors' past meetings account for the population increase of the past decades?"

A Yukon speaks for the Tundratown delegation. "Ours mentioned addressing it, but it wasn't included in the most recent revision. That one covered the tech and gear that Downtown would bring in."

And now, finally, I am seeing the cracks in the castle walls. We all are, that in a simpler, less trying time, it's imagination couldn't have foretold how bad the future could get. We're living in the future of 2015 that no science fiction film got right. All that past optimism in the progress of mammality proven wrong in even the most depressing dystopias.

"So what happens now?" I ask, finally bringing a word into the meeting.

And Zev answers simply, "It is best we begin outside channels of procurement while we have enough left to save for when we can no longer succeed in outside procurement."

Which means, coming from a Eurasian member of the Downtown Pack, "Does any delegation besides ourselves still have access to their past Alpha's resources?" to which Ralph must say "No, All of Woolsey Construction's assets were frozen. Kurt, Lupe, we tried everything we could but it's all been seized."

And the news gets worse, with a Tibetan admitting "Sahib's ambulance company was seized also, noone has gotten to transfer funds from the business accounts." and on it goes, coming back to Downtown again as one of their three, an Iberian, comes forward. "...Rollins left us something to work with. After Owen's episode yesterday, we have the good publicity that some catering services could leach off of. A lot of Rollin's funds were seized, but we have bank accounts they never detected, and we have... Two suitcases that total to a hundred thousand. But they're useless. Noone
would get halfway through calling that order in and they would be dismissed if they did."

I'm letting numbers sink in. To the right people, what hard assets I could barely call as much in my caches couldn't to quarter of a briefcase in cash, and it'd take years. Whatever Downtown did to manage that much money, I can't imagine it honest.

I dwell on that, as his Eurasian counterpart finishes the thought. "Through the dozen or so accounts, we may have half that... But the moment we use one account, it'll be detected and seized. If top men trace the money, we could lose them all. So we either use up Sahara Square's pantry or Downtown calls the city's bluff with our cards on the table."

That tiny little thing I had thought to address, it pales in comparison to a humbling fact that they have so much more to worry about than what I had thought. We're talking about starvation here. What could the misery of a few gangbangers amount to when compared to that? Yet maybe I'm not completely wrong.

But this comes first. "...We had a volunteer I processed, some Smooth Coated Otter from Rainforest. Did we already run through his fish?" Zev nods yes and I continue. "What about his contacts for more? Did they pan out?"

"No but what ever their means it outweighs our demand." Comes from an Indian. "But it's a start. That's one source to tap for food that we already have in the Herd and that Otter can't be the only one. I also had a sous chef volunteer as well... What I am getting at is, we might already have the help we need right here. Maybe not enough but... That's our third option. It's worth a shot."

There is a problem though, addressed by Ralph with "If we start reaching out like that, it could cause a panic." and yes, "But a momentary one. Ceaster is about our own self reliance. This is just a chance we have to prove that, and if we do... Will that not empower us that much more? Meanwhile, we'll still have the Downtown accounts and the food Sahara Square unloaded."

Whatever disappointment they felt at my initial silence, I think it's gone. Everyone is looking to each other in a silent agreement. Ralph asking for it is just a formality, with no objections raised. "It's settled. We make a PA announcement tomorrow asking business owners if they want to volunteer services. Those that do, we look for anyone in the food industry and ask what they can do. Tomorrow's meeting, we look at the sitrep and make moves then."

It's no longer a shocking thing anymore that I can be useful, or that my life has purpose. It's that I can believe it. That I know I can do great things. That I know I have already, and that I can aspire to even more. It's the knowledge of that, and that fact no longer needs to slap me in the face to lecture me, that's leaving me bewildered momentarily. I don't need to write a hundred thousand word essay on that though. Or is it a ten thousand word essay that's the norm for college courses?

"Moving on to Security, There's been no new badge movement. None of our boys in the force have reported any changes in personnel shifts at the park. The riot forces mixed with the beatwalkers have remained on non-regimented standby and replaced in six hour intervals. Other than that, the whole force is On Call." Ralph takes a step back, Kurt takes the signal and continues after him.

"What he's saying is we have it too good. They've had all the opportunities they needed to assault the station and we're not even getting an indication they plan to. But every bit of common sense and the intel says they're itchin' like fiends. We even got reports Bogo's nearly ordered raids on the fly yet we haven't even heard anything about nearby buildings being evacuated." The most preliminary measure they'd make, and they haven't even done that much.

"So what is stopping them besides our numbers?" comes from a Tundratown delegate, even though
that shouldn't stop them. Not now and even less so before. Nor would the bad publicity, it wouldn't last for more than a couple of news news cycles. A Eurasian comes forward with his possible answer. "With so little traffic picked up on command frequencies and how vague the transmissions are, they might know we're snooping in on them. If that's the case, it explains everything."

The discussion becomes immediately grave in it's concern. The question of whether or not those Wolves still on the force have been made. The knowledge that they know what's at stake. The fear that willful sacrifice will amount to nothing. The cost of telling someone like Lupe to abandon their post. The risk of confirming that yes, we are spying on them, by withdrawing all willing to join us in the herd. The impact that cops ordered to beat former partners could have in demoralizing the ZPD if and when it comes to that.

They are all valid points, going one ear out my other as I think to myself that something else might be playing a role here. Because after all the subterfuge I learned had transpired in City Hall, and the power that the Mayor's Office wielded over the police force, and knowing just what kind of mammal now runs the city, I must ask myself if Bellwether is behind the cops doing nothing. And if all these roads must lead to Yes in My Head County, then how does the bad publicity of losing Zootopia Central Station to predators fit in her endgame. She has a prey supremacist agenda, she's in league with a militia, how does this-

"Owen, are you listening?" stops my thoughts dead in their tracks, and I'm forced to show the shame on my face that yes and no, I was deep in thought, aware of the slight vexation on the wolves around me.

"...We all know Espada Del Toro, right? I know he was fired, but if we can contact him, he might know enough about the situation in the ZPD to tell us why they're twiddling dewclaws, Lupe might be able to lead the chief on and string the drug story line along he used with Woolsey an-"

"Even if that could fly, City Hall ordered Bogo to have him so locked tight under house arrest he can't even order his own food deliveries." Kurt is almost as upset about that as I am, but he could not possibly know why I'm all the more livid. It's proven me all the more right.

It could just be that ZPD knows we've got inside mammals, that're monitoring the airwaves, but what if it's not? What if it's that thing Espada told me to take to my grave, and what if, now he's incapacitated, it's up to me to give it a name? Would knowing it's name even give me power over that devil?

"All in favor of our officers pulling out of ZPD, say I."

"But before we do that hear me out, City Hall might've ordered Bogo to not move on Zootopia Central."

I have invited it, now. That trouble in my mind to manifest itself, to come forward through these Wolves around me.

"...It is exactly City Hall that is screaming for the police to take action."

I've gotta look that Arctic in the eyes, because I don't think he'd believe me otherwise if he didn't see the fear and that wanting to be wrong when I have to commit to saying this: "And the Mayor's Office supersedes the City Council. On paper and off paper."

I've done it. Without breaking that sacred omerta with Espada Del Toro, I have presented my possibility as valid as Downtown's. There is no answer I can give them this time. If I told the whole truth, it would only serve to bring more fear and confusion. And I may be wrong. I want to be
wrong. And if I'm not, it may only be half the reality of our situation, and that inaction may genuinely be partly for them knowing we're spying on them.

"...We should still vote on whether the lupine five oh split to join back with the packs and the Herd. Even if I'm right about the Mayor's Office, they might still know about our Lupine interlopers... I can't tell you everything, but I know from my own experience that ZPD takes mayoral interference in their affairs."

But they can't make that decision they were about to, now. What little I gave them and my conviction in it was too great to not sway them. A room full of open books, and they're all on blank pages. And I'm the only one on a page with anything on it, even if they cannot make it out.

But Ralph has an inkling. As he looks to me, he will take the floor again, telling us all "We will vote on our decision by tomorrow afternoon. Owen, I am talking to you in private after this meetings adjourned."

I'm left nervous, as the other Alphas continue on. They discuss the topics of housing and medical with me having nothing to really contribute beyond my nods of yay or nay. Meanwhile, my mind is a juggling mess between the hypotheticals of what Ralph wants from me and how I can rationalize getting Gonzo's crew out of the sewer detail. But if I can get anything done right, it's got to be the latter, because I have no control over the former. So I focus on that, on the home stretch of the issue of if we have supplies and medics on hand in case of the worst foreseeable scenario of mass injuries in the event we successfully fight off a full blown attempt at dispersal or a predator going savage. By the time they turn back to me, with Ralph asking what I got, I think I have it.

"...I think it best we form a wing of security dedicated to keeping order among any gangs that enter the station. Because things are getting bad enough out there that we might have to face the fact they can't make their own protection. If it comes to that, we should be ready to process them."

The absurdity of my suggestion flies in the face of their logic.

"Who are you suggesting lead this?"

"Well Zev... I was thinking Gonzalo and his crew, or the other lupine gangs that came with their packs."

It's going over as well as I thought it would, in a flurry of angered looks at the very thought.

"We cannot allow that." Rainforest's security guy tells me. Because the Alphas made a pact to reduce the rank of their criminal elements to Omega. Because in a place of peace, those most probable to commit violence have to know their place.

"So what does that mean? What are they doing, now?" I ask, knowing full well as Tundratown's Turukhan elaborates on the details I didn't get before. Four hour shifts in the sewers to keep a perimeter underground. Usually five at a time, with this meeting having twenty down there right now in case of a surprise assault.

"Yeah, we need eyes and ears down there, but I don't think it oughtta be punitive. It'd make it more worthwhile to anyone working down there if they had a sense of purpose beyond petty suffering. There's no question of loyalty with Wolves down there, but there should be some willing volunteers to boost that detail with less sensitive noses."

But that's kind of just a legitimate excuse for how I really feel and it's known. My motivation is beside the matter of fact. Kurt's interjection is quick to the point. "Owen, you don't owe Gonzalo
anything for bringing you in to Woolsey's pack.

"No, It's more than that. It's that I think they owe me better, even after doing the right thing, not killing Andrew and turning me in for the reward."

It's like a bomb has gone off, with the kind of shellshock I'm seeing right now. A mixture of various shades of anger directed half at me, half at Gonzalo. So I've got to tell the story of that Sunday night again. What happened in the Alley, what happened on the way to the Den. How it all went down in a paraphrased form. Ralph, with his familiarity to me and Gonzo, is the only one that can address me.

"They almost killed Andy and collected on you?"

Yes.

"And you think you want them out of the sewer."

Yes, I answer again, forcing him to ask me why, with the reason I must give probably being the craziest thing they've heard yet:

"They owe me better than that and they owe it to themselves. They could have gone through with collecting my reward money and noone here would've been any wiser. But they didn't. I could be in jail, Andrew's body would've been found a week later in the river and in that split second decision to do it or not do it, they chose to have the courage not to do it. There's enough good in them that they at least brought me to Woolsey. I mean, maybe I'm just wanting to thank some bad guys for doing the right thing for once like they should've all along. But I'm here, we still got Andrew and I'm standing here, able to make a contribution to something bigger than all of us combined together in this room because they chose right over left. And if I've got power over them outside of my seat as an Alpha, and as someone they've trespassed against, I would like to hope you could see what I'm doing by vouching for their rehabilitation in your eyes."

And this is where reason should draw the line, but whatever is happening in all of their heads, it's not a struggle with logic like I think it'd be. Maybe it was a mistake. Bringing me into this fold. Like it's possible that I'm just not meant to be a brother in a fraternity like this, minus that one female Arctic with more physical right than my privilege should've accounted for. And yet it's nothing like that. Because there's a recognition of something in their past that's beyond me.

"...Who told him about this tradition?"

My cocked brow and splayed right ear is an answer that says it all for my tongue. Under that confusion in themselves of how I could've quoted something apparently this intimate to them is the fact I'm demonstrating it of my own volition. Pulled from the ether to spite cognitive dissonance. By the time it's all calmed down and sunk in, Zev has to break it to me. "...Owen, you do not know the virtue you're demonstrating?" No. I don't know much of their culture beyond what Woolsey told me. That Wolves are honorbound to help those that helped them and they've lived in secretive communities for their own protection.

I tell them as much and it's one from Rainforest that tells me "This teaching is among those universal that applies to every Wolf. They may have the Bhagavad Gita, Quran, Torah, Bible, they may have other teachings like Hadith, but they all have this credence, code of customs, that they must consider in their behavior also. One of those is that a Wolf that has earned high esteem should of their own volition rehabilitate a pack member that trespassed against them."

"Love me when I least deserve it because that's when I need it most, that's a saying that came to Arctic, Eurasian wolves from the teachings that eventually came to us from the Arabic species after
the Indians got it. And we passed it on to the rest of them." is offered by Tundratown.

How big a deal is it, I've got to ask. With Ralph telling me "It's something we did that's gotten us through every genocide. That's how big a deal it is, that you're enacting it on Gonzalo." And now I know the impact I've made in all my ignorance. That's how profound it is to them.

"You really didn't know?"

"Nah Kurt." A sneezing scoff to show how incredulous he is and "Heck. On top of honorary Alpha I gotta call your Fox self a Wolf too." It's funny, but I've got someone else's trouble on my mind. "So I've got it then?"

"What, besides the fact we need gang related peacekeepers? Yeah, you got it from me, everyone else?" Kurt asks the others. No objection to be had. So Ralph calls it. "Then Owen's getting his colors branch with Gonzalo taking lead. If we've got nothing else, I'm calling the meeting adjourned... I don't think we can handle much more of the new guy."

Some laughs and pats on their backs to make it known we're done here. Moments later, they've all filed out. It's just me and him now. Ralph letting the mood calm down as he goes back to unfinished business.

"You did good in every way I didn't want you to." He lets slip through that tired smile. I'll take it as a compliment. He'll let me have it as the smile fades, his leer sinking in. "...Tell me the exact wording that Bull used when he told to never tell anyone what you both figured out at Bug Burga."

An order regardless of the fact I'm his peer now, and it brings me back to that morning in an instant with the kind of clarity that can have me reciting them perfectly: "Now that you have made that error of going down the rabbit hole, you must not tell a soul what you found there. To your very grave must you take it if the time never comes to breath easy. That's what he told me when I figured it out."

"Then I can't even ask you to tell me what it was... Everything Espada did for us and Woolsey, I've got to respect it. All I'm telling you is, you gotta use knowing whatever it is to protect the Herd any which way you can."

Alright, I tell him. I will. It's not even that important, but "How did you know about Bug Burga?"

"Woolsey told me what you told him, about a week before we took the station over. Now get back to your crazy azz girl before she starts screaming for you again." He tells me, half kidding and half actually worried when I don't even care.

I smile, dart out the boiler room and I don't even try to not run, when I got no concern of pretending like I'm not a teenage hearted fool in the hallway. Nothing to slow me down once I'm outside but the one thing I'm running for. Expecting to find it in the tent, when all the while, it was waiting just within my peripheral by that door's threshold.

Getting me to stop in my tracks to look back at her, beholding her admiration of me from a pursuer's point of view.

The pleasantness on her face when it's so obvious on her face that she's on the verge of dooking. One sudden move from me, and it's all over. She'll be over me like white on rice. So I stay still there for a moment. My ears perfectly alert, my eyes wide. I'm making it worse for her in this awkward pause and I know exactly what I'm doing. I'll let the tension build until it's reached terminal velocity, when it can naturally go no faster than it already is.

And then I go to run.
Not even so kind as to give me a head start, she just goes in for the ruthless shocker of a jump on my back and my neck in her teeth. Sending me down in all of my whimpering fuss with her chittering giggle through my scruff and all the embarrassment in public that comes with it. I'm writhing on the ground floor, to the recognition and entertainment of every spectator and I'm just so god damned embarrassed I could die. And it feels like yesterday all over again, without the tears or desperation. I just wanted to get her flying through the air and spazzing out in a joyfully agitated state, but I'm not gonna fight it. All the reckless abandon that'd have a cop in any other place but here slapping us citations for disturbing the piece with a public display of affection.

I don't want to think about it. I just want to be the larger half of a tossing, churning ball of orange and white and tan and black fur on the ground, now. I have seen how quick someone can be taken away. We both know for sure now that the only guarantee we have is in the moment. With an indignity I'll never be over as she allows me a getting up, only to give me an "I just wanted to see you make that face~." for my fettered smile tucked under the blush, my squinting eyes and all my teeth on display as I laugh out the question "WhyYYEHEEHEEEE!?" when I already know that she just wanted it, out of who's she's got to take it from.

With the knowledge visible enough on my face she doesn't answer, only left to smooth it all off with a cheeky peck on my face with a little jump up to make it so.

"Do you wanna dance?" and I'm so foolish to ask her "What about the meeting?" at a time when she's dragging me by the paw (Thank god, not the neck), completely out of the blue, as though to everyone else we're fleeing the scene of her crime. All it is, is that "Talk comes later, we got a dance to go for!"

Because talking has a place below preserving this mood, as she rushes me past the juice bar and on through the big doors. Down the hallway, towards that churning mass of bodies in congregation around the sound of pop four years past it's expiration. But it fits the two of us, Sika's declaration of Hey I Heard Like The Wild Ones. I'll roll with it, picking up my pace against Eva's own until she longer needs her grip to direct me into the fray. We can still make flight to this, as she takes a jump in sync with mine to somersault straight through the gaps in the masses, stealing their show in all our unhinged acrobatics and gymnastics, until the time can come for us to make a request on someone's radio for a song it would've played before.

We'll captivate all of them, until we only got a few hours left with the tent she'll drag me back into, her teeth clinched into the scruff of my neck to lead me in by force. And then we'll...

Well, that just isn't your business.
An asterisk marks this chapter as having not been edited since it's publishing. I am going through this story, from this chapter onward, to modify, correct, and slightly rewrite toward my current standard and style of writing. Now that the story is "Complete" and I have no urgency to rush through it. Much.

The second time waking up this day feels like the first time I ever have.

Her greedy little tender nips on my neck a better alarm than her phone was, when our tent privileges were up at four in the morn. Right now, there's the blinding mid day sun outside the station and I'm feigning a groggy struggle that only riles her up even more. Then I've had it, a violent playful struggle later and we fall off the grass and onto the upper level tile below. Gasps and laughter. Me rubbing where I fell and her opting to do it herself as she wraps around to my left side. She bunts her head into it and discovers I'm ticklish, my wagging tail making it worse as I find out the crest of her head is the perfect height for me to tuck my muzzle into my chest. I'm returning that favor from her teeth with my own, nibbling between her ears and begging for retribution with my arm cradling her.

Our neighbors in this upper level encampment, they're past the point in their relationship with us for halfhearted requests we stop. Because they've conceded. We ain't gonna. They just got to quietly watch when they roll their eyes because deep down, they know we're their entertainment. And we do it for free. I'm looking up, with us make our way downstairs and in the blink of an eye, we're already sitting under the shade of a bridge. Now we're Andy's and Wally's problem. With her in my lap, she's fuel for chiding in an endless exchange of wisecracks.

Trying to make us our own problem with division like "Wally can you even smell him over her? Mark ass mark got his ass marked up so hard I can't even smell him him over her." just straight out the gate.

Like someone with scentglands and using them to claim a lover is some hot new controversy.

I don't even sweat it, returning it to sender in a smiling back in smug security with her, as they laugh their pelts off hard and continuing on with Wally's "Hey Oh, you high off anything else right now or is it just her pooty?"

I pause from the conversation with Toby on the phone he gave me to ask Wally "Now why in the dang ol' heck would I need anything else 'sides her?" and the answer better be better than "Nah nah, hear me out, I'm just saying you can diversify." but it isn't.

A roll of my eyes as it goes in one ear out Eva's other when this isn't even trying. So I won't either, just telling him like it is with "I won't though. I got everything I need right here." yet the scat talking continues on with the dope analogy in "Alright but hey listen, you think you can put her down for five seconds or would you start itchin' for a fix like a god dang fiend o'er there?"

They just don't get this love.

If they did, I wouldn't have to be so blunt with my lack of interest in the competition I'm not
partaking in: "Hey 'Yote, do yourself a solid and find another piece of A to nitpick about, this one's occupied."

I'll let 'em laugh at the defense, wait for the two to give me something besides Andrew's "Holy scat, his scranny red azz is that defensive about his booty habit." and sure enough it's Wally that gives me an eventual in with "This delusional azz fool over here, with his Slinkity Ass, Slankity Ass, Stankity Ass, PASTA LOOKIN' CLOWNSHOE SKANK ASS WEIRDO ON HIM ACTING LIKE SHE A GODDAM TEN OUTTA TEN HE SO POOTY WHIPPED HE DONE LOST HIS MIND!"

That's exactly what I needed, waiting as they fall over themselves and slap knees for them to stop so I can declare without shame "Wally what're shading me for with that hot azz Lost-My-Mind mess?!" and pausing to build up the tension before firing off that "It ain't lost, she's got it right here with her!"

Her blush, to their laughs at the confirmation of the bias I entertain, laughing back at them to reassure her.

"I swear to god this low rate azz romeo over here so attached to his girl he can't put her down, like She's His Blankey, LIKE SHE A TEDDY BEAR."

I can let 'em keep it up, but I'd rather take this descent of the conversation and turn it into a nosedive because "Andrew That Teddy Bear Line's Real Freakan Rich coming from your touchy azz self!"

His eyes bulging, Wally's entertainment turning sides against him, in the very way that lets me know Andrew spoon'd on the coyote, too. Back when it was him and not me staying with the buster that's still gotta try to turn it back around. Taking the gloves off with the smug look on his face as he tries out "Ye, bro, I guess that's pretty cold, but the thing is you my side teddy and-" falls flat on his face because he went in so hard and fast with that backfire, he caught himself even off guard and we're dying.

"OH, OH I'M YOUR SIDE TEDDY HUH?!

Laughing so hard, I just made it bad enough, Eva's squeaking out Side Teddy between the giggles, to take us all a near minute to calm down enough for "Ah haell I can't come back from that Wally tear him apart I done fudge'd up...

It's all back to Wally's wit, quick and cruel enough to open up with a backstabbing "...You a side teddy that-" "NAAAAAAAAH WALLY GET THE FREAK UP OFF MY D OVER HERE!"

and we're losing it again, Andy feeling the shame before Wally brings it all back to "You a teddy that got the one teddy. You're one of them teddies with the little teddy sowed to 'em."

I'm just about done with this, "I ain't even sweating your bunk azz teddy analogies because look, I put this girl down whenever."

"Alright, do it then."

"I will!"

"No motha fugger I mean do it right now."

"Why I gotta do it right now?"

"BECAUSE YOU GOTTA PUT YO MONEY WHERE YO MOUTH IS RIGHT NOW, CAN YA DO IT?!

"Ok first off I'm not gonna get off this throne without breaking some necks an second..." she'll pause,
with conversation getting all too out from her control not weigh in. She soaks up their laughs, before laying down the law of her land in the declaration "Second this boy ain't taking me off his lap until I'm ready."

Putting me in my place to the point that Andrew's "Oh it's like that, our boy gotta ask Permission." doesn't have to be contested, but the set up is too good to waste for her to not shoot off "My boy."

And sure, it's the same narrative, but it's not in my control anymore and this is getting too much. "Ok I'm getting serious, lay off me with this trying to sweat me over my boo cause she ain't getting off my lap. Andy get yourself a dang ass model ass model fresh off the runway to fawn over and leamme alone with your bunk ass trifling and Wally just quit your scat while you're ahead before you pull an Andy with the Side Teddy misstep!"

But that's not why they're laughing. Because again, Eva's got control. I don't anymore.

Which means Andrew can ask "Ma'am, May we please continue to trifle your boy over there?" and I can protest all I want with "What, Nah-" but all that counts is her saying "Why Yes, please continue!"

"NOO!" in such perfect comedic timing my friends are about to fall over each other and if I'm gonna turn this around then "That's it, Yeah, THAT'S IT, I'MA GO OFF!"

"GO THE FREAK OFF THEN!"

"DOIN' IT, I'MA DOIN' IT, I DONE SAT ON THIS MATERIAL FOR TOO LONG ANDY AN I'M ABOUT TO END THIS YOTE'S WHOLE CAREER, HERE I GO!" and it's at this exact moment, in all my pent up flustration, with all my hype, that Eva does me the dirtiest she possibly could.

The moment I'm nearly on the verge of winning the scat talkin' contest, she has to do me in with a grinding shift over my lap that makes me go crosseyed. Defeated in one fell swoop with the two of them falling over themselves like a waterfall. Put in my place so hard, a white flag of any size would be a moot point.

So I blink and like that, I'm at the edge of the terminal, with her by my side, the two of them behind me, as I lock eyes with a couple from a past Bug Burga experience. The Cheetah duo, looking at me, looking at them from across a young palm tree and lighting up all the more than they already were by each other. The three of us with the biggest, dumbfoundedest looks of pleasant incredulity on our faces.

"...OH FUDGE, IT'S REALLY HIM!" flying wild out of him as she blows a gasket so crazy and dumb I think it's coming to me, seeing my work paying off this good I'm getting goose bumps and we're losing it, the three of us. My girl and brothers not knowing what the cause of celebration is when I pounce and they rush across the grass in a blink.

Her gratitude in a hug and his in a fist to my shoulder as I tell him "I told you to stick with her, told you deserve it AN WAS I RIGHT OR FREAKAN WHAT?!"

"YOU CRAZY LITTLE BASTARD, YOUR WINGMAN ACT HAD ME SO TONGUE TIED SHE STOPPED ME TALKING MYSELF OUT OF HER AND THE COPS, THE FREAKAN COPS, WE STAYED AND SAW ALL THE FOOTAGE AT THE EDGE OF OUR SEATS AND YOU MADE IT OUT, HOW DID YOU MAKE IT OUT?!"

"SUCKA DID YOU SEE ANY KRYPTONITE ON ONE TIME?! NAH AH! CAN'T
FREAKAN STOP ME IF YA PUNK AZZ AIN'T GOT KRYPTONITE!" gets the Cheetahs so good, we're making such a noise, we're drawing spectators to Andrew's and Wally's chagrin. Their paws over their faces, and Eva's own are folded toward her chest, timidly inching forward in wonderment. The wild eyed, smiling curiosity of our high rubbing off her. She needs no introduction to the couple, they already know who she is with her scent on me. With that look on her face she just watches, that cheetah lady thanking me from the top of her heart in "Boy you're a lifesaver, going out of your way like that!"

And I think for how little I thought about it since, I got the answer in "It was the least I could do for you two."

"Least you could do? You nearly got caught over it!" and she's not telling me anything new, but no, "I already nearly got caught with that bear tried collecting on me."

It's begging her lover's question "You have any idea how crazy it is you'd even come back after that?" and of course do, but "What was a couple seconds difference gonna make over a guilty conscience? I didn't know I was gonna end up with that ferret my over there, I didn't know anything about the good that could've come, but... I just figured I had a chance to pay it forward, you know? Do one good thing while I still had the chance. It only took a moment. I get how much it meant to you two but;"

"Don't shortchange yourself after that supermale analogy." coming from Eva to correct the modesty. Speaking on the good authority of all she overheard and put together from the reunion. The four of us in the currents I made of my near mistake, and my love comes from forward to hug me through the Cheetah lady's own.

I blink again and I'm back on the groundfloor. Trying make sense of how it's now fifteen to seven in the PM. Trying to make sense of magic and what new thing is in the air. Looking to her in all my confused celebration of something I can't categorize. I just can't. So instead, I'm gonna lean into her weakly enough she can't not take the hint. Andrew's and Wally's laughter. Her own embarrassment at the fact she has to brace me for a moment and I'm only gonna make it worse. A cheeky smirk on me as I lick at her neck without shame. My friends are losing it. Her blushing fluster so glowing hot I feel it radiating over my own cheek. Her rolling eyes and fed up smile.

"Owen."

Oh yeah. The radio clipped to my waist. I almost forgot that I had something to prompt me to do something besides doing her dirty like she's been doing me dirty all day.

"...Bro, the heck you doing with a radio?" from Andrew and "Hold up, I'ma 'bout to tell my girl something fiercely important!" I declare with a raised finger.

"Like what, Oscar Grouch?!" She shouts out, getting the pair behind to crack up at my expense. Oh, am I gonna get it bad for doing this, but she deserves it after what she did to me under the bridge. "Everyone in earshot of me now knows I call you Dookie!" A flash of the most embarrassed face. I've got them going as good as she did and all she can do is push my face away with her palm. Shoves by the wolf and coyote to give me an excuse to jokingly stumble into a spin with a "The embarrassing you will continue after I'm done with this." to her giving me the finger with a click of her tongue and a roll of her eyes. Now I can finally get to business, with that radio unclipped from my pants and a "Here Kurt, what you got for me?" that gets a shock from Andy and Wally both.

"That Fabienne Growley is back. She's waiting for you up front. Get with her, give us a sitrep about it at the meeting tonight at nine fifteen."
"Roger, I'm heading up front now."

"Hey Oh, hold up, The ZNN reporter? Meeting? What?"

"Bro I'm repeating my question with added emphasis, what the freak is your crazy azz pootty drunk self doing with a radio talking to Kurt about a meeting?"

Somehow, this is the slowest it's been for me all day. "Both of you just come, I'll elaborate on it after seeing what Fabienne wants." I tell them, making my way past the crowd until I'm finally in front of her. "Well there's the lover boy! you are! And his little dove, too." coming from her.

Andrew all too quick to tell her "You got no idea how good you have it that you ain't livin' with the two of them." Eva's quick jab to his side follows my correction of the statement, "What he means is he don't appreciate the reprieve we're giving him." getting her to lose composure.

I'm curious though... "So what brings you back?"

"Opportunity, I suppose. Since Peter was in the area anyway to interview the mayor, I thought to hitch a ride... I've gathered from your police record you're a bit of a photographer."

My head wandering to all those times a cop got involved with me, back when I would try to take shots of mammals catching my eye on the street. Those cameras I had lost before Toby gave me "A Laika 5R Irafas, I've still got one if my YMRA locker hasn't been cleaned out." A double take from her, complimented by a "Laika 5R? Bloody hell that's a piece of kit." as she grabs at her purse.

"What do you mean if, bro? Your dues would've been up ages ago."

"I mean if the cops never made the alias then maybe my memberships still charging a dead dude's credit card."

"What?"

"Later."

"I suppose this isn't as much an upgrade as I thought." she interjects, and as she rifles through her purse, I can't really believe it. But there it is, a camera pulled out and presented in giving hands. Black grain vulcanite over brushed steel. Wide angle 21mm lens. The brand presented right there above the crystal. Laika.

"Go ahead." I'm prompted and do, taking it timidly from her in my confusion as I look to the top of the body and there it is again. Laika. He gets that she is, but Wally still has to ask "You're giving me this?" for a nodding yes explained by "Because I have been demanding more time with you lot here and nothing's come of it yet. So in the interim... I've thought he could give me something good to report on the Herd, while I wait on official channels to greenlight me coming back here."

I'm so floored. "You want me to take photographs for you?" Another nodding yes.

"With your camera, in there?"

"I hardly use the thing for meself as it is, it's just a graduation gift collecting dust."

Eva fumbles to look the Laika over with me and there it is, etched so finely it reads in a rodent's perfect miniature scroll. To My Daughter In Commemoration. The weight of this gift... yet I'm not gonna argue against it. I'm starting to learn better. All I have to know from her is "Anything in particular you want?"
"No. I trust that whatever you give me, it'll be good. Positive." is all she needs to give my means to her end. "Alright. I'll have to clear it with some folks but I'll do it if I can." A ringing of her phone, and she's done here. "...I'll be back in a few days to swap memory cards with you, take care!" she tells me, turning around and taking her phone into her paw.

"She really just gave you that?" from him and I turn around to tell that wolf like it is. "Andy, I think I'm starting to learn to just accept good fortune without arguing about it."

"Yeah well what about her own fortune?" Wally tells me, pointing behind me and I look back. Some horse cop leering at her with no recognition of who she is. Grilling her about what she was doing and what she gave me. Her face a confused mess of shocked anger like he's asking to search her bag. As if he even could with those hooves. But we're watching a well dressed Moose converging on the two. It has to be Peter, so I can only hope that if the stallion won't see her reason that he'll see her coworker's own. "I think she can handle it." My girl tells that coyote. I'm crossing myself with my thumb to hope my faith ain't misplaced and that she's right. I turn away, trying not to think about it as the four of us make our way through the crowd.

That camera in my left paw. I'm going over the dials and marks on the lens on my way back to the upper level. Looking where I'm going and back down at it. Up, down, up, down, up and then I see them.

Gonzalo.

Randall.

Lowe.

The whole crew. Waiting for me by that escalator. Looking to me in half What's This Fox Doing Now, half I Can't Believe What You Did. Backs straightened with a salute to me through their own newfound pride. A pause in all of them, taking their cue from the management as it stares back at me.

That tension coming from behind by Andrew and Eva, him knowing what to make of it, Eva calming herself as Gonz opens up. "So I guess after all the grief we put you both through, I kind of owe you a big damn thanks. That sound about right Fuchs?"

Andrew's confused, I can feel it like I can feel Eva about to snap back. But I'm gonna make it worse: "...Yeah, that's how you say my name."

I've cracked one of them up and Gonz can't keep a straight face.

"What're you doing up here, Gonzo?"

"Andrew, I know you'd rather I stayed down there, I can't blame you, I don't even know how he did it, but your boy saved what's left of our nostrils. I don't get why, I just want to do right by the pack and everyone else."

"Owen what's this dope slinger talking about?" to get Gonzalo miffed and I've got to tell him plainly. "He's saying I gave him a higher calling Andy. I took a risk in hope he'd pay it forward."

"What?"

"Attention Unit 2, you got special processing required up front." rings the PA and the former gang in front of me has their calling. "That's us... Owen, I owe yer ass about a billion favors. You call it in, we'll deliver." he tells me and his crew follows behind in a wide, subservient birth.
"You don't owe me, you owe yourself and you owe Andrew." are my parting words and Wally's clueless "The heck was that about?" has Eva on the verge of addressing them both, with Andrew reminding me that it's my place to do that in "I don't know but Owen you better start explaining things."

And I oblige, even if hesitantly. "...This stays between us but after how I handled the ZNN thing, the Alphas decided to hear Woolsey out. That's why I got a radio and in the meeting tonight Andy, I'm asking they keep you off the hook in case I do fudge something up."

That flurry of emotions in Andrew. He's taking the news better than I thought he would. "...And you gave them something to do that's gonna put both of our asses at the mercy of their antagonistic selves?"

No, "Not our asses. My own. Because if I've proven to them that I'm liable for my own decisions, that means you don't have to answer for them. I do. And whatever happens to me now is not your fault. That's what Sovereignty is about, Andy. It's what the Herd is about. Being at the mercy of one's own wit and will."

I've pierced the three of them with my words. Now all that's left for him is to pick up his pieces. "...I love you like a brother Owen, but I think I've got to mull this over." is spoken with a raised invitation to slap digits and I accept it, raising my paw. We clap palms and he leaves me with a "Be seeing you tomorrow, bro." as I soak the argument up with Wally.

"...Hey Oh, I know it's rich coming from my own self but could you turn down?"

"Turn down for what?"

"I don't know, how about for everybody's sake?" He's got a point.

I'll admit as much to myself but, "If I did then nothing'd get done."

Sure, but he's got another point when he tells me "Yeah but a lot less would get started."

And yet, looking deep inside myself for a moment, I need to tell it to myself as much as he needs to hear it. In the collective, brief doubt of ourselves, I can only offer that "...Maybe some things need to get started before they can get done."

I'm heading up the stopped escalator now with Eva, looking up to Wolves on the upper level above us. Her intangible self reading me like a book in my ascent weighed down by the anchor in apprehension. Maybe Wally's right. Maybe every nagging fear for failure is true. In spite of all my luck, maybe the only saving grace I've had this whole time is just divine intervention for an undeserving. But I don't think I can change. If I did, in spite of my vulpine pride, it'd be nice if I could change things beyond my control. I'd be a herbivore instead. More grateful for it than Buffy, choosing not to see what I don't want. Having the chance to be something more inert than an emotional, knowing thing.

But I push it all away before Eva has to correct me. "You're getting better about that." is heartfelt, but empty like our stomachs.

"...Doesn't change that I'm still letting it start." as I grab a package from one of the Wolves handing out food.

"Boy you've solved so much, I can't sweat the small things. If I didn't think you could handle your own business, I wouldn't have let you do what you did with Gonzo."
I know, "I know.," but I can't help it. I can't stop asking questions without answers. Who started this fight in me? Who lit that fire that divided us from them? Made us fight over one of the richest cities on the planet that could provide for everyone. She can't tell me why it's all gone and she knows it. But she can let me know what good is left. Coming to a stop in front of me. Looking up to me like she's taking charge. Draping her paws on my hips. I'll reciprocate that motion to end that contentious topic. Because Love is patient. Love is kind. She's giving it and I need it now, that only certainty that wills to appoint itself in a curious vulpine heart.

"What'd the Wolf give us? I got some dates left over from earlier." and I hold the MRE up from behind her. "Says it's sheri masala. Thats fish curry I think."

"Good."

"Owen, meeting's in five." blares from the radio. The call of duty just when things were getting good.

So I've gotta slide my right paw off her. She slips her left paw over the radio and unclips it. Doing me a favor after the moment I've put her through. The least I can do is take it with the press of a button, looking to her as I tell it "I'm coming down."

A pause and a "Get started without me. Save half." as I part my lips with hers. Taking the camera slung over my shoulder and put it in her paws. I'll break it off before I get too involved, get tardy. She looks down at it with "...Any idea what you're gonna take for ZNN?" from her, and I turn around with a "No clue, but I'll figure it out when I get back." as I head back down the escalator. Through the crowd.

I make it to the agreed place with a minute to spare. A municipal locker room. Every one opened and emptied, the contents having been numbered, left by the park's sidewalk. That doubt in some of the Alphas, the contrast to the energy in others. One of them of Lupus Albus persuasion has to ask "We're sure we got all the bugs in here eh?"

Confirmation from downtown in a "Positive. That Brent cut all the hard wired ones, Todd with our equipment found the ones that weren't on the schematics. They were thorough," with a holding back of joy for something else.

The beeping of wristwatch alarms and Ralph begins with their ceasing. "Before we start with the food, I'm recapping earlier. Lupe's gonna be coming in tonight, said he's got something big. Since we had the afternoon vote at a draw, the decision to bring the badges back'll be left up to each pack. I talked to Kurt here and we gonna withdraw our own. Downtown, you can debrief them before we bring em in for security."

A nod from the three of it's delegates and Sahara Square takes stage with the good news. "By Allah, we are blessed to tell you that the outpouring we have received will surely provide for now. Kitchen trucks will be parking by dawn and security should expect deliveries by noon for further relief."

That smile on him. The relief in most of these faces, though something still troubles the rest. Downtown with the interjection of "With business so rotten for the food truck owners here, proposals were enthusiastically accepted. We had a pizza joint owner demanding he pay out of pocket for his goods, even." "

Speaking of, we've got an example of how bad Zootopia's getting around us." from Tundratown, the elaboration in "Officers from our pack are saying there's rumors ZPD is aboat to have cops stationed at a refugee shelter in Tundratown with more to follow."
And so Ralph goes into fray, "Lupe said they're startin' to open shelters, too. Not sure if this is a move to weaken our position, but City Hall seems desperate... News is there's reports coming in from all the districts. Protests, attacks, large fights breaking out, the news is even reporting arson in rainforest and meadowland."

And that's how bad it's getting out there around us, and that's why we're still getting so many preds coming to us. The city is a stone's throw away from declaring a state of emergency. On the verge of a riot. The fact we're even getting outside food is a small miracle to the upheaval around us. We're realizing this truth in increments that have Kurt butting in with "Scat like that 'splains why we had our first outside gang come today."

Yes, from the thick accent of a rainforest delegate, "But what are we to do with these criminals as they become part of our group?" and I think I have an answer. "They're indebted to us. If they'll appreciate that, then the least they could do is volunteer. We could use 'em like... Shock troopers. Like have 'em on the frontlines if the riot gear tries to enter the station. We keep some of our own security in reserve, have them join the frontliners to do the heavy hitting. We already have other mammals up front besides the wolves, and depending on how organized the gangs are... They could work like army squads maybe. Anyone?"

I know exactly what Tundratown's Yukon is about to say to me with that look on their faces "If we have gangs up front fighting the cops, the media's going to have a field day with it."

"So we'll take their subjective definition and counter it with the objective narrative. We'll mammalize it, that the gangs are doing something right by protecting innocent civilians from police brutality."

Downtown's regard of the notion is immediate and explained in "Yes but Owen, that's what we have security for. Everyone on the front line, staring back at the cops looking right back at em, they know what's being asked of them. Every wolf is taught to be selfless, and wolves like Gonzalo are where they're at in the hierarchy because they chose their own gain over everyone else in the pack. However the city found out about the dens, it's because of someone like Gonzalo trying to get out of the trouble they brought themselves in."

"And that was a wolf, how are we to even expect as much from hoodlums outside our own packs?" Downtown's and rainforest's arguments are solid enough, I can't counter it quick enough. I have to genuinely think on the points, and we have too much else to discuss.

So Ralph weighs in. "Rainforest's got a point, OC. We gave our own something to do because what you were asking could solve a problem. It did, kept us from having to turn folks back to the popo that've busted them in front of everyone. What you're telling us now is a gamble we can't trust. You got three packs saying it won't fly. Best I can tell you is I hope we never gotta resort to it after casualties."

I'm left a moment of doubt to myself, as Tundratown begins their report on the housing situation. How Ben Beare has cleaned out his supply for us, in spite of being told not to. Even then it ain't enough with what they brought in. Tents may have to be cycled out further, into six hour intervals or shorter. And I've got nothing. No real answer, just another two favors to ask that have no real impact on the Herd as a whole or how we're gonna get by.

So I wait 'til the end. Raising my paw as the committee's about to close shop. "My second order of business only effects Andrew. I'm asking I be held solely responsible for whatever mess I make. I know I'm here because you trusted I won't but that's beside the point. If I do, I don't Andrew to suffer for it."

"Kurt, this is just our pack, what do ya think?"
"What about what OC thinks? You're asking this thinking it's gonna be easier on you Fuchs?"

Yes. It will be. "Because I'll be taking the full force of however bad it gets over a choice I made by myself? Well, Yeah. It's gonna be easier on me to let whatever's gonna happen come my way without anyone else getting punished. I know Andrews responsible for me by tradition, but this ain't some Cosa Roditora pyramid scheme. Our fight's to the benefit of every pred around us now... Let Andrew be one of them. Because I owe him after getting Unit 2."

Kurt tosses his paws in the air, leaving it up to Ralph to nod his head in acceptance. "Okay. You got it." he tells me.

"Alright, and the last thing is Fabienne Growley." and I lay it all out. What she wants from me, why, and how I'm not gonna compromise an already delicate situation. "I'm not doing this without your blessings and she knows that. Whatever I give her gets approved by you guys first and nothing I take is gonna be sensitive. Maybe have Gandolf or the other social media guy look over them, but..."

"But what kind of photographs Owen?" coming from Zev and it's like she told me, "I got free reign from her to shoot whatever. I don't know what it's gonna be, but we've got to remind everyone that this isn't about hostility... I've got to. She's basically our inside girl at ZNN. If I'm allowed to do this, I've gotta give her something to work with."

Everyone's thinking. Looking to each other, reading doubts apparent that it could go either which way.

"...Take your shots, OC." and Ralph breaks the pause, "We'll see what you've taken, and we'll decide if it goes to ZNN. Our Social Media boys'll look at the rest of your photos if we approve the first ones, and you can give them to her. If she comes back before we decide, we're telling her to come back another time. Everyone agrees on that?" Agreeing nods all around but one, Kurt's, and "Alright. Then we're done here. Lupe's ETA is sometime after two tonight, everybody be ready to greet him for a debrief... he's got some scat so major he couldn't trust saying over any other communication but face to face."

I'm gone in a hurry.

Rushing down the hall to get back to Eva like nothing's changed at all. By the time I'm back upstairs, looking at her side profile as she stares at my half of the food, I can tell it hasn't. The longing I'm seeing from her, feeling like a little reminder to reaffirm. I left for the meeting with unfinished business to make amends for. So I'll use what's left of the station's background noise to move like a phantom, on a dare that she won't look back to where I'd come from, or see me in her peripheral. It pays off, some conversation to her left between a group of Corsac Foxes catching her attention as I come in from her right with a hunching down and lick over her nape. She jumps up out of control of sense and nerve and into a dook that threatens to knock that MRE over.

I had my advantage, but she's still the one that drags the other in the tent. "I've gotta be back out with them by two!" I tell her and she doesn't care, and I don't have the heart to stop what happens next. A couple of hours later and I'm so TKO'd, I've draping the neck of my half dressed aching body over the tent's threshold, in such a played moody fuss in my lethargy she's charged herself with feeding me. Bringing the cold plate to my nose and a fork in her paw. I'll take it one step further than she thinks I would though. I'll just watch her reaction as I lap way and chomp down at the contents without shame. A smug grin on me as I look to her mask of blush draped over her fur of her face's own. "You impossible boy~!" She tells me.

Mission accomplished as I run my tongue over my muzzle in victory to make it worse. Her paws over her face as she turns away, stumbling out while I roll on my back to make a vocal attempt to sit
up. My silk shirt at the back of the tent, Fabienne's Laika in the corner. A moment to myself for appreciation of what little I have being enough for my needs. A set of clothes, a tent for a few more hours, a means of transportation outside and a girl to put up with me. The camera's a nice purpose cherry too, I guess. So I hesitate for a moment to admire Toby's embroidery before slipping it on. Then grab the camera to turn it on for the first time. Mess with the lens and dials to get a feel for it. And then I press the play button to see...

"AH-DH-Bu-Jh-PFFFFFT!"

Eva, in a terrible giggle fit outside. The camera flies up from my shock and it's a miracle I secured the flying, tumbling camera back into my grip before I lost it to the tile floor under the tent. She knows why I'm losing it.

"Dookie!" and she's busting out in a giggle fit so desperately trying to not wake the neighbors.

"Girl!" as I storm out the tent, looking down at her on the floor in the fetal position with stifled chortles.

"Eva, what the freak you doin' taking these dang azz pics!" gets her so good she's in writhing pain and banging a soft fist to the floor. I'm not done, I'm getting on my knees and right paw over her, and will now proceed to put the image on the screen up to her nose as she kicks her feet below.

"This is serious!" but I'm cracking up. "Look! Look what you done did diddled me dirty with!" But she can't. Her eyes are squinched shut and it's everything she can do to muffle a busted gut with a clinched jaw and her palms over her mouth. I'm rubbing the evidence into her face and she's dying on me. But I've taken it to far: Her flying out from under me and bursting into a dook is the death throws of a girl so gone she's clinically dead. So I put the camera down and make it official in a Decisive Pounce for the fatality that ends with me smearing the flavor of food else on her face in licks. She's not even moving now. Me grabbing her scruff by my teeth and gently sliding her around yields no response to the stimuli.

My paws over her ribs and I roll the two of us onto my back, holding her slinky, untrustworthy self over me by her armpits to marvel at the dreamy eyed afterglow looking back down. "Did you use Automatic mode, even? You did didn't you?" A cooing chittery sigh as she sinks. Setting her down over my chest and she drapes her chin on my shoulder. "I swear to Gosh Darn Heck ya little poot, I need to take serious azz pics for ZNN and here you went on a dang ol' selfie spree with it yer business end like."

"Stop~."

"Why though?" and her teeth sink into my neck hard. That's why. Because I've got a scruff reflex that immobilizes me and she's got me where she wants me. In my place and at her mercy and with a whine.

An hour later and I'm still rubbing at my neck. Up front with her and the Alphas. "We got a noise complaint from the upper level. Don't let it happen again." from Kurt and "You hear that Eva? You need to stop makin' a ruckus." gets a jab straight under my ribs. The heads of Alphas shaking over me in disbelief that this fool below them is a part of the committee.

Ralph shrugs it off with a radio to his mouth and a "Roof team, you got visual on the VIP?"

"Yeah, we got him on binoculars right now, he's walking out the lobby now. Hold on, I'm putting the radio to her face." We're all waiting. Looking back at the cops staring back at us.
Their presence making Zev speak up in "Won't the other police try to stop him?"

Downtown's Italian replying back with "By the time they see he's defecting, all he needs is a short sprint and he's here."

And Ralph's radio comes back with a female voice. "Right, he's coming down the stairs... There's a lot of cops and civilians in the park still, I might lose sight of him." She tells us through the speaker. "That's why you got more than one pair up there, use 'em, if something happens to him en route we need to know."

The anxiety is starting to show. The security line occasionally looking back at their superiors. "Copy, he's crossing the tram line, going into the park now... Some protesters are yelling at him."

Typical specist thanks you get for putting your life on the line for a bunch of ingrateful longnecks, that at the end of the day will still spit venom. The badge doesn't even matter. The teeth do.

"Ralph, you give me the word and we'll order our security to rush out to get him." from Kurt and the Northwestern won't have it from the Great Plains. "It's too risky, might come to that but let's hold off. Lupe's gotta make this as far as he can first. I'm not losing good males over nothing."

A Who's Lupe from Eva and I tell her as little as I can with a Downtowner staring down at me. "He's got something important to tell us, can't say much more." The radio comes back and "VIP is making his way around the watering hole and there's a giraffe couple in front of him with banners, I lost sight!"

The hairs of all the committee on edge while Ralph gets on the horn in a split second "Get eyes back on him, he's halfway here!"

A clinched fist beside me from a Tibetan delegate in front of me. An antsy tapping foot by an Arctic Alpha.

"I got him and he's on the ground!"

Shock.

Confusion.

Eva muttering "What's happening?"

Ralph in his immediate "Roof top, repeat!"

"VIP is down, he's shaking like he's having a seizure!"

"REPEAT THAT AGAIN!"

"HE'S ON THE GROUND, I DON'T KNOW, HE'S-"

Screaming, awkwardly transitioning into a howl. So loud from the park I can hear it over the station. The cops in front of us turning around.

"WHAT'S GOING ON?!" from Ralph and Kurt orders "I NEED THREE OF YOU TO GO GET HIM!" as everybody stomach drops and Ralph flashes his teeth in a "NO DAMMIT EVERYBODY STAYS, KURT DON'T YOU MAKE ANOTHER ORDER, ROOF WHAT'S HAPPENING?!"

The horror is setting in deep, with what we hear next being the last thing we wanted to hear.
"HE'S GONE SAVAGE! BOSS HE'S GONE SAVAGE!" and in comes the screaming from the park.

The cops opposite of us in disarray as they make their moves and the Alphas charge through the security line and I'm with them in my wild eyed shock as we get a better view.

An Elephant with a badge starting to charge for us and we run to the side, hugging the frontline perimeter in a panic. "EVERYBODY BACK BEHIND THE LINE! LUPE! LUPE WHAT THE HELL!?" flying out of Ralph.

The Committee merging back into the safetynet with him staying by it, chasing cops, chasing a wolf on all fours, chasing a Gnu.

I pass behind a guard and Lupe is nearly on her.

I pass behind another and his teeth have sinked into her ankle.

I pass by another. The still image of Lupe thrashing at her in his grip.

Her screaming.

Her disjointed leg.

Ralph crying out loud at someone that's not there anymore.

Lupe's not there. He's been replaced by a snarling, vicious thing. A fact that has Kurt screaming out No in vain.

That female gnu screaming at her broken, torn ankle.

Leaning forward to grab at it and Ralph, Kurt, everyone in the station watches as the thing that replaced Lupe lunges forward into her neck.

Silencing her in a way so horrible I can't look, I don't want to feel her pain but I can't not.

Some pained sound out of me. Eva rushing to me for my comfort is to no avail. I'm looking again. Some moose cop threatening to snap the lower jaw of his co-worker. The blood from her leg all over his face. A deer cop with a taser, pulling it out and firing, lighting up the three of them together until a badge holding zebra pummels the side of his face in to stop him.

I'm trembling.

Shaking down into Eva like an avalanche of pain.

Sinking into her in my grip because I'm feeling so much, so vicariously through the scene unfolding, that I can't take it.

A hard hit on the side of my head sends me recoiling, as the cops outside scream for an ambulance. For a muzzle and snare as I make sight of Kurt's fist that had just sent me flying. I'm sliding on the tile. My head head hitting someone's foot. Andrew is over me. His upside down face looking down as he picks me up. Eva rushing to help him help me up. Kurt looking back to me in shock. Ralph
behind him, shoving his way back through the security line. A cop behind him having second thoughts as the front line confronts him and Ralph grabs Kurt by the shoulder, twists him around, and slaps the hell out of him. Our first taste of someone going savage before us, and this is the terror, the confusion, and the rage that comes with the calamity of it.

What if it happens in here?

What happens if it becomes contagious?

What happens then, with thousands upon thousands of preds in here in such close proximity to each other?

Exposed to what we just witnessed as being so destructive it's practically a weapon?

"Owen, it's ok, bro, I got you, talk to me."

"I just... Andrew I just felt too much. All that pain and terror coming down in front of me, it took me off guard."

"Kurt knocked the freaking scat out of you." he tells me, but my focus is just on my lover. "Eva, you fine?"

"After I'm done beating Kurt I'll be just god damn fine!"

"You ain't laying a claw on him, ferret girl!" and in comes Ralph with the interjecting leer. "We take care of our own, we punish our own, we answer to our own. What we're bringing Kurt's way for hitting your boy here, I'm telling you it's gonna be bad."

"Leave me alone with him tied up in a room-"

"Eva-"

"You ain't hearing me, Eva?! We're taking care of him whether you like it or not! Now Owen, you explain that to your fix right now while I'm still able to watch my damn temper!" That shaking fist of his, the anger born from just getting through watching one of his highest ranking pack members, a friend in need, turn primordial before his eyes. Attacking and apprehended.

Sahara Square and Tundratown surrounding Kurt with a firm grip, walking him away from the scene as Ralph tells me "We're waiting for you in the break room. We're talking about what just happened until there's nothing left to say."

He leaves me, the rest of the committee following behind. Slipping through the crowd of panicked onlookers as I watch through the legs in front of, Lupe held down to the ground by cops with snares and a muzzle over his face.

"Come on Owen, get up." from Andrew.

"Tell them. Tied up with me alone with him."

"Eva, I'm not doing that."

"He can't do that Eva."

"No Andrew I can, I'm in the committee, I'm an Alpha and I can argue Eva's case but I'm not going to."
"What?" from Eva in her angered shock.

"Owen... They made you an Alpha? That's how you got Gonzo out of the sewer?"

She gives me the reminder that "Boy, He punched the lights out of you!" like I already don't one on my face.

"Yeah Eva, and he put paws on an Alpha. Alphas don't touch other Alphas. He's screwed."

"He's not, because I'm telling them I'm forgiving Kurt." I tell him.

"Owen,"

"Eva, listen to me, everything happened all at once, he couldn't help it, tell me you wouldn't be out of your mind if it was me instead of Lupe!"

"You're really gonna just let it slide?!" Andrew's asking me as I stumble back on my feet in the aftermath of Kurt's fist on my sore, raw face and "Yeah, both of you. I'm telling them to watch their temper on him because he lost his mind." Turning around to face Andrew, Eva helping me stay up as he looks down and I feel the shock of my temperance coming off the both of them.

"...Owen? Bro? You're crazy but I'm starting to see it might be a good thing."

"Andrew, we're talking about it later. Girl, I'll be back upstairs... Whenever..."

And on I go. Leaving the scene behind me. A head so confused in the turmoil of so many emotions it's making my jangling pace harder to keep than the physical trauma. At the end of the day, the night, I've just got so much uncertainty about everything that for the first time, I am actually struggling to make my way through the crowd.

And the worst thing about that?

The thing in the back of my head I don't even want to admit, after everything that just happened, is the thought that maybe, just maybe, there shouldn't be a crowd here in the first place.
Weakness*

Chapter Summary

An asterisk marks this chapter as having not been edited since it's publishing. I am going through this story, from this chapter onward, to modify, correct, and slightly rewrite toward my current standard and style of writing. Now that the story is "Complete" and I have no urgency to rush through it. Much.

There on the grass, by the waterway aquatic mammals used to go through. That's where she is. By my side.

With my exhausted, aching, sleep deprived self laying there by the sound of running water as she nurses my right cheek. Tending her shellshocked lover while last night and those early morning hours run through my head. But it's alright. All of it. Because she's there for me. Doubts of whether I'm good enough for her or not, after all of that they don't even cross my mind. This Ferret knew what she was getting into, and I can scarcely think I'm a work in progress to her. Looking into those blue eyes, I'm seeing what she's staring back at. An open soul. An honest, emotional boy. The lover she's always wanted. And I smile, even if faintly. I know she's my armor, as I lean in forward for a peck on her cheek and a lick before she grabs the sides of my muzzle to hold me there as she separates my lips with her own.

I have no heart to stop it. If she wants to give it, for crying out loud, I'll come and get it, volunteering my compliance to intermix our tastes. Because whatever happened has passed. Whatever happens next will come soon enough. But right now, I will feel it right now: I have her and she has me. Maybe, just maybe, that's all we need. As the Herd, Pred Central the Longnecks are calling it, churns around us like the water by our side. Her stroking pets where Kurt decked me, and the only thing right about the past six or eight hours is the one thing we needed to be. So we're ending it on a highnote full of goosebumps, that kiss, and we're savoring it for what minutes we have left.

Along comes Kurt. Timing good enough that before he comes to a stop, I've already dismissed if it's bad. Eva's tension and my comforting paw on her thigh as he asks "Can I sit down an talk?" and I offer space on the green. I'm trying to make it less a subservience thing and more that we're still equals, but Kurt can't help it after the chewing out, or the fact I saved him from worse.

"I can't believe you still did that for me."

"Well don't know what to say. I spent a lot less time and words trying to tell her the same thing." with a laugh and it still doesn't alleviate his guilt.

"I'd tell you that you don't know how bad I messed up but I guess it's you just aren't a Wolf." he tells me, sitting down and I raise up softly to make no sudden, jolting motion. Eva has to excuse herself with a kiss before her slowly building tension gets too hard for her to handle.

"I at least gotta tell you why."

I could tell him the obvious, that a friend he's known for years, decades, turned into something else before his eyes and watched the cops go after him. But I'll let him think. I won't interrupt him gathering his thoughts as he slowly puts it all together.
"...I guess what it was, was I was expecting you not to get emotional. Maybe it ain't weakness for Foxes, but it is for Wolves. We gotta be strong. Not phased. Stern."

"Stoic?"

"Yeah, Wolves gotta be stoic. The higher you're up in the pack, the more you gotta be. So when I saw you breaking up, I guess habit took over." he laments on me.

So I'll finish the thought. "You were Woolsey's head of security. Part of that meant you had to be a drill instructor."

"Yeah, exactly!" he tells me, like he's still trying to excuse himself in private for something that by Lupine rules, there isn't one.

"So, I'm telling you to stop being sorry because it's not changing the fact you sent me flying, when I'm an Alpha just like you." and I've hit him hard enough he's on the verge of being defensive. This is the part that I'm gonna get what I want, while he'll still listen. "It's ok, I'm not a Wolf, I'm a Fox, but I'm a work in progress for the standards you Wolves got. And I'm getting there. The fact I'm even in the commission should tell somebody that. But I still got a way to go. I'm trying to get there. Best I can tell you is I'm gonna work on it. Best you can tell me after all I did for you this morning is that you're gonna allow that for yourself. Not me."

His mind is blown. Sure, because of how much I argued to make sure he stayed an Alpha, he'd know he owed me regardless. But now that he sees just why he does, I've defeated whatever qualms he had about me.

"...You got a messiah complex or something?" slips from him and we trade the positions of Defense and Offense. "I ain't saying that's bad! I'm just... Well I don't even know. It's like Espada's rubbed off on you. Or maybe you've just been waiting your whole life to pull this scat on the world." he tells me.

Like I'm something so alien, he can't even dismiss me. So all he's got for me is a permission, honestly spoken as he pours himself out in "You know what, Fox? Nevermind trying to fit Wolf standards. Do yourself, I think I wanna see what happens next." to leave me speechless.

I just throw my paws up in the air, getting up with a backwards walking away and a smile. I need to ride this out, I need an aperitif to digest all this. I turn around to face Eva, wrapping an arm over her and leading the two of us forward.

"Come on, let's check the food trucks." because I'm starving from the all-night-and-morning-er. "Just tell me you put that Wolf in his place." she demands as a Least Weasel looking mustelid passes by us with something that looks half his size and smells south of the border.

"He put himself in his place, I reeled him in and then he put me in mine."

Not good enough. "Owennn." she's gotta groan.

"Hey, that place was a pedestal! It went like magic, You missed out. Your could've-witnessed self should've stuck around."

"Step off." to compliment an elbow jab delivered on my ribs. I play along with it, feign a stumbling over to mess with her. Getting her to blush because I can't get over it.

"Girl. You abusive."
"Kiss my ass, Boy. You love me for it~." A feigned gasp and I'll remember that, whenever the time's ripe for revenge.

Now, I'm just making my way through the crowd with her. No thought in my head about being a hinderence. I've only got to look up now and then to see the smiles. They start to dwindle, before they get replace by the drone of generators and the backs of the frontline's heads. I pan my eyes down. Those trucks are parked as close as they can be.

"HEY OH, THE HECK YOU BEEN?!!"

Andrew out of the corner of my eye. I'll smirk a little as I look to him with some in-your-end-oh and a tight grip on the love of my life.

"WHERE THE MAGIC HAPPENS!" gets his goat, the same as it gets her own. That dismissal on his face that let's me know he's not over how hopeless he thinks I am. Wallace walking up behind him, too absorbed in the consumption of a foil wrapper's contents to be his usual jesting, coming-out-of-nowhere self. He's blissful, nearly ascending to the Beyond Realm with how good whatever's got is treating his tastebuds. All he can do with that smile already on his face while he orgasms over food is point it my way with a distracted wave of his paw to compliment it. I've never had it this good. This is Wally at his most vulnerable, and I am I'm taking the opportunity. Pointing behind Andrew, I take the first shot: "Look at this 'yote azz 'yote, stuffing his mouth up in front of my starvin' self an not sharing!"

Bull's Eye.

That quixotic pizza zit is reeling, running to a trashcan by a truck to spit his mouth's contents out because he's gotta save face in spite of Andrew's laughs at his expense. "Sucker azz fox, get your own dang food, they giving it out free!" flying out of him so fast, but I'm pushing my advantage.

"I Know they're giving it out free!" so I can get real on him, because I need to get him riled up to a spitting upset in "SO WHY IS YOUR PUNK AZZ, SUCKER AZZ, BROKE AZZ SELF BOTHERIN' ME?!!"

One of those three ain't right. "I GOT A HUNDRED DOLLARS THOUGH!" to make it so bad he's gotta charge at me, and I've gotta grab my girl like I've got a hostage to run around and away from him. The two of them choking up behind me with Eva's hot blush glowing off the right side of my face. I'm on a roll. "HEY OH, CHECK THE CHAPULINES TRUCK OUT, THEIR GOODS LEGIT!" from Andy and I gotta screech to a halt. "WAIT HOLD UP, CHAPULINES?!!"

"YEAH, BEST I HAD SINCE MOVING TO ZOOTOPIA!"

"AH, HELL YES!"

"Chapulines?" from Eva, to let me know there's an education to be had with her as I let her down to face her. "...You telling me you don't know about Chapulines?"

"No, what is that, a fish?" to reaffirm what I already know and I smell it. Intermixed with the scents of so many other protein options being cooked up, opened up and gobbled up around me. Unmistakable. I've been with Andrew and Wally to too many joints with Guanacojara in the name to confuse it for anything else.

"Come!" I beckon her, even though I'm not giving her an option with a dragging her by her wrist, as I run to the source through one line to get to the end of another in front of a van with the tricolor livery of green, white and red. A lazy eyed, Jiminy-looking cartoon of a grasshopper poorly
handpainted by the counter, looking way too jovial for what's on the menu. So Fresh It's Still Kicking on the passenger door and I don't have to doubt it, if the sudden commotion is anything to go by.

"You smell that, girl? Come on," I plead, my paws waving over my chest, "Deep breath, suck that magic up your lungs." and she does, curious look on her face all the while.

"Ok, yeah boy, but what am I-" The clicking of wings, and suddenly, something big swats itself onto my face to have me going cross-eyed. Then I see it, jumping up to toss my paws in a wild panic as Eva stumbles backwards to land on her butt, watching me tussle with the tremendous big Chapulin grasshopper that landed on my face while I make noises. By the time it's finally springboarded off my Schnauze to terrorize someone else, she's gone into intense chortling at my expense and I just stand there, soaking up the defeat.

"...That's Chapulines."

"Grossss~!" as she gets up and "Hey, your boy over here is Very Dang Fickle when it comes to eating bug. I don't even eat roaches!" with an offered paw to help her on her feet. "You don't even eat roach? You religious, OC?"

"When it's convenient! What, you're telling me you eat roaches? Now? After all the places you've put yer mouth on my body?"

"No~! Oh my Good God, I hate the little plague dancing creepy crawlers, too!"

"So why are we fighting, then?" I tell her, addressing the stupid freakan situation with smarmy, toothy charm. She's gotta come back with a "Just stawp!" and no, I don't think I'm done. I'll let the line move up a little to think it's over. Then I'll let slip the Pee Wee Vermins of innuendo I reserve behind closed tent entrances.

"MMMm, Hamburger!" in a perfect impersonation of Mr. Big (From Cheek & Don's Next Film). A breach of her trust in me so profoundly bad that she's gasping in the shock. No, noone around us is catching what I did did to her, but she's not gonna hold back.

"mMUUHH, HUH Huh HUH HU- AH!" she's punching me so rapid fire she like Hoof of The North Sun on me. Pummeling me so machine gun comically, I can't even keep a straight face as I bounce around between her fists and fall down. Her terrified and embarrassed "You said you wouldn't do that in publiic!"

And yeah, I did, but that blushing look on her is too good "And I'm not sorry I did it in public! Ah! Heu Heu!" but I'll stop with the Pee Wee, I swear, because I think I'm getting to the point I'm embarrassing myself. That look in jest of thinking about breaking up with me to let know not to push her buttons any further. Everybody's attention directed at us, the kind that's gone from a threat to a luxury I can finally afford.

"You got any idea what kinda concern you're doing us with your ratchet azz self?" getting me to look at an upside down Andrew with a Wally faking his distress in a facepalm to hide his laughing. "Yeah, A little."

"Eva get away from this Fox before his crazy infects you." by a backstabbing Lobo and no, she's not there yet, but "I'm thinking about it." she tells him. Getting up, I gotta remind her, though: "Yeah but before you meggup yer mind, let me tell ya about chapulines." Wally's gotta ask it. "Don't she know about 'em already?"
"Nah."
"What?"

"Eva, tell me this 'Yote over there you don't know about chapulines."

"I don't know about chapulines."

"She don't know about chapulines!?"

"Boy, did you just her? She said she don't know abou-"

"I don't even fu- Ok, Ferret Girl-"

"Eva."

"Eva, bro." Andrew tells him after I do. "My name's Eva."

"JUST... Listen to the Fox by your side, let 'im tell you about chapulines before you split."

"Hey, the four of you clowns! The lines moved an you're up!" interrupts the four way conversation to get me looking around and oh... Oh...

For what it's worth most of the line behind me that I'm keeping from the deep fried grasshopper is more bemused than upset but yeah, "I feel bad..." I tell myself with a laugh between me and her as I climb up the flimsy plastic step ladder thing to peer over the counter, up to a Jaguar dude that doesn't know whether to be bemused or upset and a coyote too caught up with the friers to notice the commotion. "Right... Two tacos with grilled onions and guacamole, one flour one corn." "Right, got it." "Your guacamole better not have lemon juice in it either!"

"Excuse me!"

"Excuse you!"

"Nah excuse me and listen here little doggy, what do I look like, una presa gringa? With a laptop back here, writing a book about how multicultural I am?!" gets me going hard, and Andrew and Wally that much harder.

"You think I'm back here, texting freakan publishing houses while I'm ruining this primo bug back here with sour cream? With watery azz cilantro?"

"No!" but the visuals are busting my guts.

"Conocen a este tipo? Esta pedo o algo asi?" and I don't know half the spanish Andrew does. He's only fluent enough to maybe get half of that. It's up to Wally to reply in a deadpan "Imaginate si estuviera pedo." that has the feline going "Ah!" and Pfff before spouting off "Lo aguantas a este nero?" to fly over my head because I have no idea what all this is but Yes En Espanol. "Dale piedad por ahora que yo me encargo de el despues. No puede vencerme, ni siquiera enfrentarme."

Eva's gotta ask me, "Owen, what the heck did you start them on?" and I don't know but I'm gonna lie on the fly with a "I think they can't stop talking about wanting a girl like you in their life." that I didn't even mean to say. I've goof'd it all up. Now I'm the one blushing, holding my paw over my muzzle. The only thing she can muster is a slow, no damn given rising of her middle claw as I drape all of mine over my face.

"Alright, Fox-"
"It's Fuchs, act-" Oh. In my distraction, I opened myself up to a blunder and no, it's not news to anyone here in the Herd, but I guess it is to him. Her laugh at my awkward slip as he takes a good look at me again. "...I knew I recognized you! Alright, three tacos coming up, next up!" but that's wrong, "Two!" I tell him as Eva tugs me off the steps. "Move over and stop arguing A-Lister alright, Next Up!"

"Owen I'm warming up to it but do you gotta make scenes all the time bro?" directs my face to Andy, as I take the upperhand on Eva to be the one tugging her along with me to the two of them.

"They cut the brakes before they got to the umbilical cord." to Andrew and with a smirk, my ego's been restored to normal levels. His shook head and the flick of wrist with the undertone of appreciation in the mock dismissal. "Trifling azz..." he mutters in his glance to Wally. That coyote's looking away, but I know that plotting look, those tells on his face. "Order up for Fuchs!" and I do a slick about face. A jump up and grab later, with a plastic bag's handles in the crook of my arm, I'm sinking teeth into corn while she cautiously takes a nibble of flour. I can't even blame Wally, because now I'm the one losing it as Eva watches with a cocked brow through her chewing.

These are perfect, at the apex of a trifecta between the fried crunch and the tastes of salt and lime. Well done, a minimal softness to the point of being arguably blackened. The tang is right where it ought to be and I'm losing it while Eva's on the verge of coughing to force me to swallow fast.

"Mm, just gulp it down, that's the antennae, it's alright." and she'll follow the prompt to let me ask her, without a full mouth stopping either of us, "What'd you make of it, is that just the most sublime bug ever or freakan what?" A little reflex from the rabbit ears and "That's... Wow. I thought I'd hate this?" she asks herself more than she does me, but it's all I need to know, watching her dip her muzzle back into partially unwrapped foil. "You think you connoisseur azz boy here would lead you astray?" and I don't wait for her to finish before digging back into mine as she chews, swallows, and tells me "Less talking, more eating, I'm still reviewing this." So I oblige.

By the time we've finished, she's the one to admit "Ok, so I'm not ever going back to a Bug Burga after that." That gentle smile of mine to match her own, right before we're about to split the other taco and Wally was about to make whatever wisecrack to Andrew he was gonna make.

My left thumb slipping the bag back into the grip of my right paw and we're all interrupted. The commotion of trouble brewing had been ramping up and I'm only now catching it, seeing the distress on the faces in the crowd around us.

"Hey you can't do that!"

"Hey popo, you ain't got nothing better to do?!"

"What's your problem!?"

"These trucks aren't doing anything!"

"Get back on your own side of the road!" from an Ursine member of security, that Andean Bear pointing at them as he comes forward. The Wolves from the line are following him.

I will, too.

"Are they really...?" I'm muttering to myself as I toss the bag to Wally for a catch. Then I see them, on the driver's side of all these vans. A big lumbering trio of cops, strolling towards the chapulines van. The Hippo handing a ticket to his Rhino buddy as an Elephant follows. A pounding on the side to draw the attention of the Jaguar and Coyote, followed up with toxic pride in the boast "HEY
BUDDY. If you got a complaint, you can fight your ticket in traffic court!" and I know that voice.

"...That's the hippo from Marula Park!" and Wally confirms that recognition in Andrew. I'm swinging my head back to before looking back through the windshield as that Coyote stumbles into the cabin, his eyes fixed on the ticket under the wiper blade.

"What the hell is this for?! GET BACK HERE!" muffled by glass and pouring out from the counter. He's gotten what he wanted. They're coming back around.

That livid posturing of the shifting in the Rhino's shoulders, his frame marching back into view from behind the driver's window. "WHAT?!"

"That ticket on my windshield! There's no traffic coming through here, the station is shut down and all I'm doing is serv-"

"DO YOU GOT A PROBLEM?!"

"YES I GOT A-"

"THEN STEP OUT OF THE VEHICLE!"

"WHY DID YOU- HEY!"

The door flies open. It's going down exactly like the foregone conclusion. Bystanders yelling out their condemnation and the entire line of moves up, shoving everyone back away from the food trucks before anyone storms the cops prying him out for an arrest. He's resisting and what we don't see, everyone this side of the road hears with a slam. The recoil in the food truck's suspension and I'm pulled back along with everyone. The howling out of so many wolves to get back, the dare in a cop begging for a chance to knock more heads and no, none of this had to happen. The Hippo didn't have to antagonize this, the Coyote didn't have to take a baiting, and the Rhino didn't have to answer back with force.

But after seven days of doing nothing, the cops have had nothing else to do but take out one of their own. That mishandled subduing of a Wolf fresh in the Herd's minds. That brief pause we had this morning up until now could not defuse the tension that's been building up. The fortune of fresh food, turned to a contest of power. Security pushing us back to try stopping what is inevitable, and I'm watching that Jaguar entering the cabin, yelling out a "Boss!" I can barely make out through the commotion as that Rhino slams the open door shut. A hand signal to roll the window down and the feline obliges. "Stay right there, you're moving this truck after we're done with him!"

"Benigno, don't listen! The truck isn't moving until you're out of food to give!"

"ONE MORE WORD AND YOU'RE GETTING MUZZLED!"

"THEN MUZZLE ME! BENIGNO, DO NOT MOVE UNTIL-" "SHUT UP!" follows up another slam as we watch the van shift again. So much shouting and I can't make it the rest out through the noise. I can only tell fragments out of body language as the Jaguar gets his attention going between his employer and the cop ordering him to move. Moments later, and I'm catching sight of the employer between the vans. Dragged away by the Elephant's trunk. Handcuffed, muzzled, roughed up and still shouting to the Jaguar torn between what's right and what's being ordered. On the tail end of a climax, the security is starting to ease up. "Everybody stay on our side of the vans!" and they're starting to let us back through because now the reason for fighting's been hauled off to jail.

"If you haven't eaten yet, get your food before the cops start something else!" A split second for the
hope of begrudging peace broken with "HEY, YOU PRED'S STARTED THIS AND WE'RE ENDING IT, NOBODY'S EATING ANYTHING BECAUSE THESE TRUCKS ARE MOVING RIGHT NOW!" and we're nearly back to where things going wrong again. The tension ratcheting up again in my friends and lover and everyone else around me. Someone shouting out behind me "You didn't hear the coyote?! They're staying until they're out of food!"

"Says who, welfare leech?!

"SAYS THE FACT WE NEED THIS!" shouts Big Purr out in the distance. Right of me with the Rhino in front of me shouting "Yeah, and We need you to go back where you belong!" and another soul behind me has had it.

"This is where we belong! You've taken everything else!"

"BOO HOO HOO, CRY A RIVER TO A LIBERAL!" to turn the heat up and this just may be it. I'm watching this all happen with a pain in the disbelief, but it's really happening. He really is trying to get this oil in the pan to light up and start a fire in his own city that he swore to protect.

"Owen."

Andrew, beside me. I'm looking up to him. I can see it in his furrowed brows. Those placid eyes. That knowing crook in a mona lisa that he accepts something. And he gives it his voice.

"I can't doubt your crazy anymore."

That'd be nice, if it just wasn't now, at the worst possible time when all hell is about to finally let loose.

"...Why'd you have to warm up to it now?" because I need more to know what he's getting at here and he's ready.

"Because I don't want you holding back, right now!"

I'm lost for words. That admission of wanting something out of me, from a friend that had once given up, sometimes scolded and most of the time begrudgingly accepted me. I think I know what he wants, I just can't believe that's what he's asking.

"What're you telling me to go and do here?"

"Go. Do. You!"

The want so wild, it's taken me back. But I can't ignore it anymore, what's on these faces and in these heads above me. That desperate, powerless look. The same as when I saw it last night. That pleading wish for the tide to change. But this is not last night. This is now. There is a chance here, my eyes darting and I'm looking for it in my head. I don't have to watch this. We're on the prelude to open warfare and it can still be stopped, the tides can still be turned back in the favor of quelling an opening shot that doesn't have to be answered with more. I can start something beautiful, wrapped up and disguised as something ugly. I can accept it now, that I do have to abide by what's unfolding. I just have to plot the course and angle of my attack.

Because I'm looking at all these preds looking back at the scene beside the van and they want something good to happen so badly. And I've got it. A final squeeze of Eva's paw in my own and I kiss her behind her ear for good luck. My armor has protected me, but I know what'll ring true now. She hasn't taken me this far to hold my hand when I can do this solo.
I can make this right, now.

Because "I GOT ONE HUNDRED DOLLARS!" and I'm pulling the folded evidence out of the pocket of my jeans, for my declaration to garner onlookers.

"WHO ELSE GOT MONEY?!" because god damn the cops.

"COME ON! WE PAYING THESE TICKETS OFF RIGHT NOW!"

If they want to put a price on doing the right thing, we're gonna tax them.

"THIS GREEN IS GOING ON A DASHBOARD NO MATTER IF I'M THE ONLY ONE TO HELP OUT HERE!"

I'm gonna dissolve this feud at it's very source. I'm gonna bring it back to the initial wrongdoing and reconcile it with the right thing by having us all show the cop something about the bravery of the weak and the cowardice in his strength.

"I got fifty dollars." and before this gets any further, "HOW MUCH IS YOUR TICKET!?" I shout to the guy still behind the wheel. It's still stuck between the windscreen and the wiper.

The moment that Jaguar goes to try reaching around to grab it, the Rhino sees it, slapping his hand so hard on the windscreen it cracks. Because he's not about to let him see what he even owes.

"You move this truck right now and I won't ticket you for having a broken windscreen." is just the icing on the scat cake, delivered with a pair of satisfied wise guy eyes.

"HEY!" a distant voice yells out. "THE LAST TIME I GOT A PARKING TICKET IT WAS A WEEK AGO AND THEY WANTED TWENTY FIVE!"

"YEAH WELL THIS ONE IS TWO FIFTY BUDDY!" That cop shouts back. "WITH A ZERO AT THE END." with a grin on his face, on an obvious dare.

It's on.

I am calling his damned bluff.

"...I NEED FIVE HUNDRED AND I GOT ONE FIFTY! COME ON! ANYTHING! WHEN WE REACH FIVE HUNDRED, WE'LL GATHER ANOTHER FIVE HUNDRED FOR THE NEXT FOOD TRUCK AND WE'LL KEEP GOING UNTIL WE PAID OFF EVERY LAST TICKET!"

I wait in this pause. Time stands still...

And then it starts coming.

"I only got ten."

"I got three dollars."

"Sixty four!"

"One Stinking dollar!" Two hundred and twenty eight, "TWO HUNDRED AND TWENTY EIGHT, COME ON!" and I'm realizing this, it's dawning on me, as Kurt calls out on the radio being unclipped from my pants and shoved up my face by my right paw with it's own mind.
"Owen we are freaking out back here, what the hell you doing out there?" as more preds yell out what they have to let me know "I got this! These tickets aren't paying themselves and everybody watching this is gonna donate whether the other Alphas like it or not!"

My will shall be done, even if I have to go back there and grab a downtown suitcase.

But I won't have to; "...Make it rain! I got your back!" rings from the radio and I scream, I shout, I've got this and I'm jumping up and running down along this wall of paws full of dollar bucks. My lover and friends behind me with all their support of my cause. Running beside me, gathering up all I miss or can't reach. This is not the start of a war. This is a celebration in a resolution. What Andrew wanted out of me and got. And that look on him, the pride he's wearing. It's like Rafiki's was, on the edge of Pride Rock after delivering Simba to his father's kingdom. Hundreds of Wolves from all the packs answering my friend's howling with their own, and we're grabbing the bill after bill after bill lined up and presented. The most money any of us have ever had at one time, and we can't even sweat it not being ours.

Wally isn't dismissing this in "ANDREW HOW IS THIS HAPPENING?!", he's just in shock that this is working.

"DON'T GO AND QUESTION HOW HE'S DOING THIS, JUST LET IT HAPPEN!"

The absurdity of it all, that the four of us cannot even keep up with every last soul that went from spectator to helping hand. We're losing our minds so bad it's threatening to keep us from keeping track of every half of a grand. That fool. He thought we were had. I would bet the title to a house I don't have that the look on that Rhino's face will be priceless. I could cry right now. Kurt gave me free reign to do it, but I think I'm just too lost in the moment I break five hundred and we get well on our way to another. And another. All the way until we run to the edge of the entrance, with another declared "Eighty Eight Bucks!" at the edge of the entrance to make another five hundred with Fifty Nine to go for another.

I'm Not Done. I'm going back to the start.

"ANDY THIS IS FIFTEEN HUNDRED, START HANDING IT OUT! WALLY, GIVE YOURS TO HIM AND FOLLOW ME BACK TO THE TACO TRUCK!" and my wish is my command and the show goes on, Lupine Fiasco's lyrics ringing through my head.

All these predators to my left from every walk of life. All these pats on my back. If the stigma was true that we were greedy lowlife scum, I would've been mugged over and over. But I haven't been. This isn't an alley, it ain't even an illegal assembly harboring criminals.

This is a community, paying debts it doesn't have to, to benefactors that dared to give without any expectation of return on investment.

Screaming my heart out in joy with Eva, this show is going on with another god damn Five Hundred and Four Hundred and Ninety Four Dollars to go. And even if the city turns the stations utilities off, even if they turn the lights out, this show will go on to spite them with it's each and dying breath. I'm the male making it happen. Playing my cards without folding. Effortlessly giving my best, doing what must be done. Jumping up to Big Purr to swipe his Two Hundred and I'm running, rushing back to the chapulines truck. To turn around to Eva so awe struck in wide eyed fascination at what her fix has done. The magician has witnessed a Pledge, Turn and Prestige unlike anything she's ever seen.

A trick every bit equal to her own, most grandest trick. Something so beautiful, I'll never be able to put it to words how I managed it. Greenbacks for days in my paws, arms stretched out, and she
crashes into me. Kingdom comes to me, and I ensnare it, spin, I twirl it around before leaning down, letting it back on its feet, look it dead in the eyes and kiss her again with a wagging tail. "We only got..." and I'm so caught up, I can't even remember how many trucks. Are we halfway there? Over?

"Take this, and keep rounding up the money with Wally! You two collect another seven hundred and figure out how many trucks we got left," and I shove Three Hundred and Thirty Two dollars into her wad of a Thousand while holding onto the original Five Hundred. She's still swept off her feet, a moment of stressing in her face about responsibility and "I gotta pay this one off, go!" with a straightening up and I shout out the business. "EVERYBODY, GIVE WHATEVER ELSE WE NEED TO MY GIRL AND FRIEND HERE!" I turn around with a suave swing of a passenger door, climbing up into the chapulines truck's cabin, looking at the most pricelessly stupefied face I've ever stared straight into the eyes of with the total amount of twice his made up toll slammed on the dashboard.

A big, wide, toothy, predatory grin on my face with goosebumps all over my body for what I've just put in it's place. The establishment. On it's Knees. Via an agent of it's oppression. Taking a big, audible gulp and trying to put the facade back together I've broken beyond repair. "Boy, that's real cute that you got a bunch of ghetto rich boys to pay your ticket off, but you still need to move your vehicle."

He's not giving up. But that Jaguar knows, as he looks back to the herd, that the duty his boss gave him ain't done. So he looks back the Rhino reminding him that "You are disobeying a direct order by a law officer, pussy cat." but will not persuade him from the determination he has to tell it like it is. 

"...Officer, I understand that, but this truck isn't moving until I either run out of food or you get a tow truck."

A twitch in those megafauna eyes. That tremble in his right shoulder, and it's rolling back. It's telegraphing reason to his right foot sliding back as he hunkers down, that trembling fist winding up spooling in it's ascension to his shoulder. Then the springs go sprung. A forward lunging. I'm bracing myself with whatever I can grab onto as a clenched fist the size of my head barreling through the atmosphere with all the speed of a snail as it's unstoppable force makes impact with several tons of van. It's rocked so hard, his withdrawing fist has poured daylight right through the hole he made as the kitchen in the back bangs and rattles with loose utensils. "MOVE YOUR FUCKING VEHICLE, PREDATOR!" bellows from the depths of his throat like we should be threatened. But we can't be. The evidence of that Objective Narrative as much in his stuttering and cracking voice as the desperation in his mouth and the fear in his eyes. He's not terrifying. He ain't a boogeyman. He's just a spoiled brat with a temper tantrum because he's finally not getting what he wants for the first time since kindergarten. My chuckle, following another, and then I burst into laughter. I'm getting that Jaguar going too, I'm hearing laughter outside the van because we're all on the same page about just how powerless he is to do a damned thing. Everyone knows what this emperor is wearing and somehow, I diverted another escalation. All should be well. It ought to be well.

But the disrespect of authority has forced his hand. His palms resting on the window sill, his shoulders rotating up and forward with every muscle of his upper body tensing up. A pistoning downward motion, and what I neglected to see coming when he crunches the sill in his grip is now happening. I have never questioned a Rhino's strength, but I have never seen it like I have now. Glass in the door shatters, then the blood curdling scream of metal being torn drives me to cover my ears. The jaguar stumbling out of his seat as he crawls away to the kitchen and I watch that door being crumpled downward by the force of all his hardened skin, flesh, sinew and bone. The sheer force of his shearing has heaved the van towards him, I'm falling into the driver's seat and somehow,
I know how it's going down.

The security up front is on the verge of being trampled as it struggles to contain a stampede. Kurt among other Alphas have approached the front and he is screaming at the top of his lungs to blare his orders for every pred to stand down. To not fight back. To not start a war. Some cop has seized a megaphone from another cop and is shouting for everyone to stand back to let him handle this, and Eva has somehow slipped through security and is in the van with me, dragging me back from off the driver's seat when all the while, that Rhino that was so dead set on dragging that big cat out of his boss's taco truck has finally figured out who I am. Looking up, I see it in his eyes.

In some moment of clarity through his blinding rage, with the door's remains finally coming off the hinges and Eva pulling me away from him, he's seeing that I'm not just another Fox. I'm That Fox. He's too far away, yet he's still going to try to crawl through the cabin to get me, as that cop with a megaphone throws it against the van to distract him, grab him by a wrist and swing it behind his back to pry him away from the scene he just made with a spin. After everything that just happened so fast, I am so numb to surprise that I can't even be shocked to see it's the Grizzley Bear veteran that stopped the Hippo in Marula Park. Another trigger happy prey rookie. Another incident born from the hatred of his own people.

"WHO TOLD YOU TO START A RIOT?!" with every tooth of his jaws exposed and for once, that Rhino is so scared that someone less than half his mass can shove him back.

"I AM YOUR SUPERIOR OFFICER AND WHAT THE HELL ARE YOU DOING?! WHO TOLD YOU?!!" echoes through the cityscape so loud and clear that I can barely hear his subordinate answer back. "Lieutenant Woolward ordered us and he didn't have to tell us twice, we've been sitting around for a week and having cracked a single head!"

Sheep.

"I'M YOUR SUPERIOR OFFICER!"

Bellwether.

"WOOLWARD OUTRANKS YOU!" and he's finally found the balls to raise his voice as coworkers swarm around the two of them.

"I AM YOUR SUPERIOR OFFICER, I AM DIRECTLY LIABLE FOR YOUR ACTIONS, AND I ORDERED YOU AND TELT TO GUARD THE OTHER SIDE OF THE PARK TO KEEP PROTESTERS OUT AND YOU DISOBEYED MY DIRECT ORDER ON THE WHIM OF A FAST TRACKED YARNBALL THAT COULDN'T KEEP HIS OWN CAR FROM GETTING STOLEN BY A GOD DAMN PERP!" His words spewing out louder than ever. A condemnation so perfectly pinning his charge by rank so dead to rights that that Rhino should know by now how perfectly inexcusable the inexcusable is. But the fear has given way to the security of righteousness.

That hateful leer in the Rhino's eyes as he looks to his boss, throwing a pointing hand at me to ask him "That perp in the van?! With his drug dealer girlfriend that assaulted Woolward's partner?!"

He's looking to us, and he can't believe it, but it's really us, and it's really me.

"You mean that perp, right?!"

We're staring at each other in perfect, questioning confusion. In that eye contact, from so far away, I am feeling every question running through his head. Right. Wrong. Duty. Purpose. I'm reading that...
face and this is all repeating all over for him more than ever before. "We've got rapsheets and open cases on half the carnivores in that station!" gets thrown at him like it's gonna change what he's coming to terms with, but it won't. But he's going to try one last time, thinking of everyone else besides me as he looks back to "Rhinehart," with an undeserved plea, after everything that just happened, to allow everything he believed in one more chance.

"Officer, There are good people in there that haven't done a god damn thing but get their lives ruined by the news."

But he's just not going to have it.

"Burney with all due respect you're one of the good ones, but I didn't join the force to have a bunch of Dindu Nuffins act up over us trying to serve and protect good people!"

And that's what it's come down to. The assumed truth. The Subjective Definition of what The Good Fight has been taught to be. How it will always be known through the lectures of the scared deaf, dumb and blind children that long for security over freedom. Brought to his attention in the smartest, most eloquent way ignorance could have put it. That his whole career has amounted to the rehabilitation of the fact he was born with the sin of being a predator. Sobriety on his face, like he's coming to terms with what he's now seeing as the farce it was all along. He can't make the world a better place. He can't stop the momentum of the world from dashing reason out of it's head. He will not be listened to, because no matter what, a predator like him can only ever hope to be Redeemed.

In the end, the reason he had to join the force has been reduced to a moot point, paling in comparison to the supposed higher calling of his subordinate. All his career, he has tried to be a good cop.

When in the end, all that seemingly mattered to officers like Rhinehart was that "...I'm one of The Good Ones, Huh?"

"Sir," Now He Says Sir, Burney's thinking. "You don't have to make it awkward, it's just fact! They gotta go back where they belong!" his inferior reminds him, like it was the point he meant to get at. And Burney, opening his mouth, is nearly on the verge of opening his wounded heart out while knowing it won't do a damned thing. Like a stormtrooper coming to terms with the fact that the Rebellion was The Good Ones all along.

So he doesn't, as a Caprinae Copper I'll finger as Woolward comes into my line of sight to ask them "Are you two done making a scene here?!" All officer Burney can tell him is the truth, with his paw reaching to his badge.

"I'm done..."

"You better be ready for the new Internal Affairs Captain tonight after the mess you just made here! AND YOU, Rhinehart, I told you to wait, what-" and finally, they're catching on to what the Ursine really meant. That badge in his paw, unclipped from his blue khaki. Looking down upon it in every sense of the phrase.

"Officer Humbert, you put your badge back on!" Woolward orders, ignoring the fact the Rhino next to him wasn't even wearing a badge in the first place.

"...s-Sir? Sir, what're you doing." stuttering out from that Rhino, looking down at the badge as his superior drops it on the ground, then back to his face as Burney cringes out a reminder:

"I ain't your Sir."

A slip of the tongue in "Burney Humbert, what are you doing?" to serve as Woolward's own answer
to what he's doing. The master will address the learner now, to not even give his former outranking officer the dignity of a directly answered question. He'll make his way through the cops surrounding him while they're still not aware of what he's doing as he tells that damned stupid idiot, with a look over his shoulder,

"I'm going where I belong, Sir."

"w-What, what're doing Hey y-YOU CAN'T DO THAT!" now sputters out of the Sheep as he comes towards the deserter and what comes next is so obvious, but that Rhino can't comprehend what's happening. So his old superior will make his point with a haymaker to that Sheep cop's face to send him flying back as he sprints to us, running through and from his former life as it starts to pursue him.

"EVERYONE HELP HIM!" coming from Ralph outside the van and I was so wrapped up in a moment, I forgot something. That there's an entire world out there. And that, as a ducking Wolf pounces from one seat to another over us, and as more pour out from around the van and I look through the windscreen to watch another running on top of the bumper, there's a whole 'nother world out there, too. Our world. Running to the rescue of an outsider, against incredible odds. I'm getting up and twirling to hop on top the passenger seat, and Eva's joining me. My saving grace by my side, the two of us watching snarling, baretooth'd magic. Kurt beside the bear and shoving him forward in a pull of his arm.

Security surrounding them, a protective barrier that almost didn't react fast enough, an insurmountable force of navy blue too caught off guard by a fear of something they never should have to press their advantage.

"HOLD POSITION! EVERY LAST ONE OF YOU LINE UP ON THE OUTSIDE!" and we're going to keep our own, we are not pulling back. By their cowardice, we have been emboldened to counter. The riot brigade in the back is finally moving forward but it's too late, even for the initial swarm of uniformed cops in front of them that had swarmed the Bear and Rhino. The cops cannot counter neither our concentrated opposition, nor our reaction time. Overwhelming, even if only psychological. In spite of that split second of hesitance before Kurt's order. We still pulled through and more Wolves pour through the cabin to line up with the others. Kurt and Burney making their way past the Wolves still coming in around them from in front of the truck.

"JOIN YOUR ARMS, DOUBLE UP THE LINE, STAND YOUR GOD DAMN GROUND!" bellowing out of him and I think we did it. We pulled it off. The line is holding outside, the regulars are withdrawing through the cracks of Riot shields and face masks taking their place and a brand new member of the Herd, whatever doubts his safe and sound self could've had about being accepted by us, Ralph is there to instantly dissolve it with an offered paw. That Grizzley takes it for the slap of palms heard 'round the city and I'm amazed. We took the worst possible scenario we couldn't stop from happening and against all odds we turned it all back around. I don't know how. I'm too lost in the fact we took so many negatives and made them a resounding positive to understand this.

But I'm amazed.

All I can do is break up. Become overwhelmed.

Let my bones ignite over the moment that just changed everything. With Eva holding me, holding her, all I'm left to teary eye'd do in my breaking up is look at her through the shellshock so I can recognize the one thing I can barely wrap my head around: "...You saved me again..."

It hits me like a brick to the face. Again, with my paws on her shoulders, "Again! You crazy, risk taking SALVATION ANGEL OF A GIRL, YOU STOOD OFF AGAINST A GOD DAMN
I'm losing my head. She's losing hers because "I THOUGHT I LOST YOU, YOU CRAZY BOY!" as tears stream down my face, laughing at the stupid impossibility of my girl. Laughing along with her, holding her up in a bear hug as he kicks her giddy feet at my shins and I don't believe right now that there's nothing the two of us can't pull off.

Her teeth bared over me in her smile and I'm just now seeing it: "Blood?" quietly slips from me. Getting her to relent with "I mean, I had to get through the Wolves to get to you!" and I'm putting it together, wild eyed.

"...You bit a Wolf?" and she won't hesitate with an "On the paw." to floor me.

Make me weaker in the legs than her own weight over that can of worms as my giddiness lets up. I'm letting her down in more than just the physical way, I feel. Ironic, from a dumpster diver, but this one's got a sudden bout of Hypochondria that's the only thing stopping me from kissing her. So how come I'm still about to lean forward? How come it's her taking the hint and being so kind as to force me? With her paw on my muzzle to push it away gently as she realizes something?

"...You would've done that? Even with the blood?" and I'm so dizzy, neither of us knowing what's become of me and the shock sinking in. But I think more than just being alright, that 'I don't think I could have held back.' and the admission's sunk in in an instant.

That our love is that thick. That indomitable.

The chills up and down our spines. The risks we've already taken.

The willingness to not stop.

We have each other so much, we're on the verge of losing ourselves. At that point where neither of us knows where one ends and the other begins.

The world around us silenced in it's chaos as the two of us now sit quietly. The two of us watching as Burney Humbert, flanked by Alphas, gets escorted into the station. The line holding as riot cops demand his release back to them. A Cheetah in a well tailored suit looking like Cervino Armani catches the Jaguar's attention. Their conversation indistinct with the feuding outside between our protectors of the peace and the city's own, but I think it's got something to do about the damage done to the food truck and a willingness to give him and his boss bail money and enough money to replace the totaled van. Some outlandish scenario that shouldn't be happening but is, that should be flooring me as much as the offer is to that Jaguar.

But I'm too far gone in my embrace of her. The same as she is in mine as the riot cops outside seem to be getting ordered to withdraw by some distant command by megaphone. Not even the cheering howls of our security sways me one way or the other as I nestle my snout into her nape. Some thought in my head about the realization that whether or not I should have been allowed to kiss her being a superfluous thing. All the while that Jaguar hesitantly, finally accepts a check by that Cheetah, finally revealing himself to being a bank executive on self imposed migration and it's obvious why. Even for a pred so high up a corporate ladder, once these savage attacks started happening, he must've sensed a guarded apprehension in second looks.

That isn't hurting me though, the same as it isn't hurting him. Well mannered, laid back. Unaffected, because he has money. And I have Eva. Serenely at peace in spite of all that's happened. It's not even the businessman reminding us "I think that bear saved you both, actually." or that Jaguar offering Eva a cup of lime juice with "He said it makes a good antiseptic mouthwash." that gets us stirring to
leave the scene behind us for a return to the station. We just sort of did it of our volition. Letting a moment fade quietly on the good soft note of synths and violins in our heads. Andrew and Wally follow from behind and there's so many faces staring at us. But the conversations around us and about us don't puncture through the bubble.

I'm witnessing something, though. With her paw in mine as she she swishes limeade, I am seeing my involvement Espada reminded of me. That Woolsey demanded of me. That Eva wanted of me. I have potential. I did this. I made this happen. I am somehow responsible for a chain of events that dictated the events of this play. I can empower the actors on stage to deviate from the rhythm and tempo.

From how things are, to what they could be. And that if I can achieve what should be impossible, then reluctant directors before me, beside me, and long after me, can achieve all the same and more.

A Ferret that gave the directionless a heading.

A Bull that steered the ship true.

Wolves that set the sails to full mast.

Andrew.

Gonzalo.

Woolsey.

Kurt.

Ralph, on the radio with an "Owen. Break Room. Now." and I don't have to remind Eva I love her. Or that I'll see her later, once I'm done with the Alphas. Her on my starboard wing, I only have to passingly kiss her on the back of her neck as I break formation. Making way from the crowds to the door to the hall to the door to the breakroom where Ralph and Kurt are. Looking at me in disbelief and a torrential downpour of emotions.

"When I told you I wanted to see what happens next... I didn't think you'd be pulling that much off that god damn quick." as the opening admission, after a brief pause that the two of them had in amazement. I'm still so high from that truest knowledge I harbor, that I'm still aloof enough to ask "Am I in trouble?" and they don't know where to take that.

They need a moment, before Ralph can spell it out.

"The cops were looking to start trouble. You did so much to stop trouble from happening, that it gave one of their own time to make his decision about joining us. He's on the radio right now with the other Alphas in the boiler room, trying to convince the other predators on the force to join us. Its causing so much havoc with them, that it allowed a clan of Hyenas and a pack of African Wild Dogs to get through them from the west."

"...We've got Hyenas and African Wild Dogs?" They're bewildered. "Did you not see them coming in?" from Ralph, and he follows up quickly. "Ok, Owen, are you high right now?"

"No."

So Kurt needs to ask me the following in genuine curiosity because it's not adding up: "Why you asking us if you're in trouble when you're the best thing that could've happened today?"
"I've been up for too long. But more than that, I'm coming to terms with the fact my girl saved me for the second time, and that even though she had to bite a security guard, I was still ready to kiss her."

About that, Ralph is thinking to himself since I brought it up, "Yeah... Remind your girl this ain't a kindergarten playground and she can't just go biting mammals." And I've just got to be honest with them both. "She won't if you tell security not to keep her from getting to me. Wolves aren't gonna stop her. Not even Big Purr."

"Ok, yeah, noted, we'll do that." Kurt tells me, and Ralph follows up because he still doesn't believe me. "...I don't think you can do a single wrong. You saved the day. You've made every good thing happen and I don't think we could've..."

I have to stop him with a raised paw and he stops. He's deferring to me. I can't have it. Because we've come to that point where a Wolf, an Alpha, has so much respect he has me, that it's beginning to cloud the judgment of his own ability and responsibilities. For the first time, and hopefully the last time. I have to tell him, and remind myself, while I'm high off of it, the self evident truth: "No... No I didn't make this happen... I allowed it to happen through me. Everyone around me started it, and I didn't stop it." That's what I'm responsible for. Continuing what everyone else began. The two of them are starting to get it and I will follow through.

"I don't blame you for not getting it but... All of you started this. Because if it wasn't for Eva, and it wasn't for Espada, and wasn't for Woolsey and all of you that made up his pack... You. And You. And Andrew... I never would've been here. When and where I had to be, to let something come through me that needed to. Thank yourselves and everyone out there. You're making this all happen... I've got all of you to thank. Because you've let it happen through me. That's the part I'm playing here."

I can only hope that the silence between us means they're taking that to heart. I don't wanna be a hero. I'm not even sure heroes exist outside comic books and movies. I'm showing that thought on my face and I'm not trying to hide it. I think they get it, with the only thing left to say coming out of Ralph.

"...Whatever you're doing, keep doing it. You've come a long way and I don't think a single one of us still doubts you."

And in between them, staring back at me from the counter, is Fabienne's Laika. A soft reminder. "...I guess I should take some photos." I tell myself, walking around Kurt's left when I feel like I could easily undo everything I just said by walking right through them.

"Still don't know what to take photos of?" from Ralph and "No... I know it when I see it though." I tell him with an exit stage right out the door. Making my way down the hall, making sure the ISO and Exposure settings are where I left them and that I erased it's past shots. A Wolf opens the door and I look up. Past the threshold, in the station, I am looking at the Clock.

Something about it, in it's gravitational pull. Beckoning me. Calling me toward it like it has something in store for me. I don't know what I'm feeling, just that I'm long past the point of doubting instinct. So I'll oblige it, entering the station and not knowing what it has to show me. It's Andrew. Waiting by it but not for me. Distracted and looking. The moment I was about to call his name, I see who he was.

For Her.

The Sousten Set girl.
Because I had so much in my head at the time, I never stopped to realize how beautiful she was. How Athenian her grace. How delicate she was under the facade of a former gangbanger. Nor did I catch that moment between him and her when they exchanged numbers. Those times he was caught up with his phone. That they had been texting this whole time. And now, with her here with her pack, he directed her to the clock.

To him.

A beacon of promise that's guided her to this place, and to this moment, shining through all the misery they had been through since that god damned Tuesday. When the world as we knew it changed, turning against us that much more. I'm circling around, trying not to catch his attention. In the focal point of the universe around me, I'm seeing something through a telescope that through the lightyears, I never did before with the naked eye. What Andrew could've seen in her smile that I'm seeing for the first time. The hope in sacrificing herself.

They will drop their cellphones on the floor, now.

With her body so close to his, they've served their purpose.

Their paws have something more to hold on to now, and the longing is over. What's been unreconciled can no longer go unreconciled. They touch, each other needing to know what's in front of them is really happening. Their paws delicate in timid placement around the hips of their lover. The confirmation in the touch to let them know what's true. She sinks into him, now. Their bodies so perfectly pressed together, it's like God himself did make one for the other. They are the perfect height for themselves. The softest hints of his colors that I can see in her mottled fur. Their mouths parting. The interlocking of teeth. The soft, subtle wagging of tails as they complete each other. Love so strongly felt that they can't tone it down. Even if they tried. Even if they wanted to.

I bring the camera to my face, taking the shot the moment a Hyena walks off screen. The moment he dragged his paws up her back, pressing her mouth all the more into his own. The masses blurring around them for the perfect framing, the same as their heads frame the time over them. That's what I'm seeing on the screen, before looking back to them. Before looking around me. And now, I am seeing something that was there, since Eva came back to me I couldn't see before. That mysterious dark matter I had ignored. That had been swelling up in all these gaps of my attention span. I was so caught up in witnessing her when I wasn't witnessing the struggle, I could not observe these vignettes we stirred in our surroundings.

The masses of this station that had been changed by us. I am feeling these held hands. These embraces around me. Softly closed eyes. Delicate smiles of bliss. The love I hadn't seen happening all around me until this moment. That the lovers we've inspired have been what's kept the station sane through all this. Couples like me and Eva. Like Andrew and his Sousten Set girl. The stories that had played out of one coming first to make sure it was safe for the other. Of both taking the dive into the station together. That met each other for the first time, here. This love I'm feeling is not my own. I inspired it through Eva, but it's no longer mine. It's theirs, now. And they have given the rebellion around us something equal, if not greater, than that emboldened brash jubilation still ringing true in the air.

Because another victory against the city that demands we stop existing, stop inconveniencing their perfect little world, would mean nothing if it didn't have something that gave it reason. Because young predators like myself are a concept feared by the unknowing. Noone can seemingly see our forest for the trees we are. They cannot see the promise of my friend and his female. In all of these young couples so fallen, so tenderly weak and fragile. That we are not unfeeling, and we are not their stigma. We are mammals in love. And our love is equivalent, the same, as a prey's most fanciful
notions. If not greater for the fact we're feeling it all the more here. On the inside of this refuge, more than we've ever felt before here and now.

Because in our darkest hour, our love is all the stronger. It's all we have. Fighting back with kisses and tender licks, needy embraces and things done behind the closed curtains of tents. The one thing we have to our name and we're giving it away freely. Ourselves. In the open. Exposed to the world's elements, against all it's ridicule. I know what Fabienne needs, now. I know what she needs to show the world. What it needs to be reminded of. To see demonstrated. She needs to show the world our example, the one I inspired just the same as others inspired me.

That the city is cowardly in it's brittle strength.

And that we are all the more brave, patient and kind for revealing ourselves to each other at our weakest moment.
Facture*

Chapter Summary

Parts 1 & 2
An asterisk marks this chapter as having not been edited since it's publishing. I am going through this story, from this chapter onward, to modify, correct, and slightly rewrite toward my current standard and style of writing. Now that the story is "Complete" and I have no urgency to rush through it. Much.

The thought I always had with the Vulpon, and the reason I always rode so recklessly, was I would never have a passenger to think about.

I wouldn't be risking anyone else's life but my own. I believed the theory she disproved, that I would never know someone so content with my daredevilry that I could share it. That I could be at peace with someone having the same lust for life requiring the mortal gamble. But there we were. Barreling through South Canyon road on a cloudy morning. Rays of light shining down on morning dew. It felt something like how I always imagined the Isle of Malle race would. She had convinced me, somehow, not to change the single seat bodywork of my Fastback into a normal two seater. Something about how she liked holding on to me from the front, and looking at the world behind us fading away. That she didn't need to look forward, and loved the uncertainty of where I was taking her.

It was just us, in our little world as it churned into a rolling dipping right becoming a left. My foot tapped up on the descent before the apex, and I steered to the wall to go into a hard, thirty five degree angle left and away from it on the ascent. Something I had no business doing with knobby tires but could pull off and was. Her gleeful shouting over the rev’d up engine, and we climbed up the hill as I leveled out just a little too close to comfort to the brick wall keeping us on the cliffside. So I slammed on the throttle. I broke traction perfectly, the back tire spun with the slightest hint of just enough control. The tail sliding out, but I had it where I wanted it, all the while she screamed in joy to the rollercoaster ride without rails.

I stood up, looking back at the smoke trail and black line etched into the apex of that asphalt. I had pushed out to the left, almost to the double yellow and into the oncoming lane. I flung my body right and steered left to bring the Vulpon back to the right side of the road. Traction regained as I sat back down before another hard angle. My head so close to the wall as I leaned us towards it. But I didn't target fixate, I just recentered the bike as I balanced ourselves back over the gas tank. One of a series of beautiful impossibilities made real. Ahead for both of us was a long straight of rolling dips and small crests. A tap down, and we sped toward a ray of light a long straight as the alarm struck Four in the AM on our phones.

Being woke up becomes a waking up and I awake with a second blink and there she is. On her side with her cheek on my left arm. Those big beautiful yellows staring into my half lidded orange-ish browns. Her smile working me up, she rolls her head up in a bunt into my arm. Chin up, and her vision's upside down. Just the most perfect, afterglow look on her of comfort and I hate the fact it won't last. I want it to last, but this is not our tent anymore. For the next five hours and fifty nine minutes, it belongs to the silhouettes on the other side of the nylon entrance. Because Eight hours is no longer possible with this amount of people. We dress and join the rest of the upper level as the old
guard shuffles out their tents to hand privacy to the new.

I can only look to the Vulpon I just dreamed of riding with her as she asks me to stoop down, before she wipes away the dried crust from the corner of my eye. I groggily let out a softly purring growl like mewl and she adores it for a moment. "Boy, the sounds you make, I swear~." and I smile with her, splayed ears as I think about the dream for a moment, considering aloud "We didn't talk about last night's meeting." for her to think on.

"...Told them your idea about the gangs handling savages?" and I'm proud to tell her, "Downtown and Tundratown were already considering that after Lupe. So after all I did yesterday, the six of us got it through."

"Good... Like I said, if they can't join security up front, they can at least do that."

"And they can roll hard. Just need security to hand them off to cops after that, if that's what the Commission's gonna do."

...I didn't want to take this turn.

Eva looking to me with a little tremor in "They're really gonna hand them off to the cops?" but I've got to remind her, "You saw what Lupe did. Imagine what a bigger pred could do." We have no space to contain someone turned into a something. The best we can do with Downtown's gear is muzzle and snare.

What a pitiful thing to wake up and get dressed for, Eva lamenting in a sigh that "...We should've talked last night after dancing." but I'll try to turn it back around in "Toby's in charge of the prey protesters with the herd, now."

She'll give me a searching look with "They ever decided on a name for themselves?" and yeah, but "It's a stupid one. He had better ideas but they all went with Prey4TheHerd."

The wordplay is so dumb, she has to give off a disbelieving smile when I follow up at "With a four for the for!"

"Oh my god, that is just cheesy enough to be a prey idea, Did they really go with that?"

And yeah, this is ingrateful, but "They're prey folk, what the dang ol' hell you think?"

My snicker, her chortle.

"They at least learned something from the camp movement right?" because all the good gesture in the world amounts to nothing the method's a repeated failure.

"Everything Toby's telling me says they're better about weeding out false flaggers and plainclothes. Those Buffy ass Buffys are being kept in check about as much as they can with virtue signalers." and I can't even believe this, hesitate to even mention it, but "...Supposedly, Toby even got Buffalo woke up and off his fumble." and it's enough to stir a shock in her.

"...That prey savior boy?" with a cocked brow, "Dropping his Prey Savior act?"

"It's what Toby said!", sure, yet she's still got to dismiss it in "I'll believe it when I see it!"

But it "Hopefully won't come to that... Said they got a plan in case the cops try to raid."

One they've kept to themselves. "Does the Commission know?"
"Told them already. Only thing we don't know, besides what Toby's got in mind for when that happens is..."

The obvious. So long overdue by now, the waiting makes it inescapable. The eventuality from her of "...When it's going to happen." to finish my thought. Bring it all back to the worry no soul can ignore any longer.

"It's gotta be soon." I tell her, "After yesterday it's just a matter of time, they only made the protesters move out the park of Lupe. Rounded a few up when they started fighting themselves about it but that was it."

The high of taking this place can be celebrated long after we've been evicted.

They can't take that.

But they can take the station back and they will.

We can hold on to it as long as we can, but the waves are coming from the horizon.

What we knew would happen is becoming visible.

And when it happens, the house will win. Take back all the chips we've earned at the table. And all we'll have for it, is a story. A legend. A myth...

But we have what we have. Right now. I can't let the future sway me.

Looking back, I find my change of topic in the Vulpon I've been unable to not ignore. Yet it brings me back to the dream, the joy of it, those details I'm starting to lose. So I'll hold on to what I have left of it in "...I had a dream of us on that bike. We need to ride it bike after all this."

I say that, and the reality of what All This is sinks in a little. To go along with the doubt of if we even will have that chance, after All This. She caught what I was thinking. That we will miss the good times in this station. But they and the victories we shared won't change a thing about the wish we're starting to feel.

"What if I had my own bike?" to let me ward it off.

Brighten me up when I'm not against it, just need to confirm "You want one?" so I can get "Sure, I mean, what's even out there I could ride?" and I'm beaming at the promise.

Even when there's not much, I'm joyous, immediately thinking "Susagi, maybe. They make Rabbit sized bikes and they had some hot two strokes in the 70s."

"Two stroke?"

"Means it's smokey, burns oil with the gas. But that don't make it unreliable... You'd probably need less rebuilds with it than I would with my Tea Sipper's set of wheels. I'd even teach you how to do it yourself." I say that, leaving her to think "You think I wouldn't try to learn on my own?" but all it was, was that "...I'm just saying I'd be there in the wings for when you did, trying to pay you back for all you've done for me when it's the least I could offer."

Sappy enough, the genuine truth of it can't be mistaken. We just blush, the two of us in an embrace that wouldn't mesh if her practiced maternal wasn't as strong as my blooming paternal. It goes without saying, but if we ever consummated in the house of the lord, I would not hesitate to take her surname over mine.
Maybe Belette wouldn't get mispronounced as often as Fuchs, but I'm thinking too far ahead.

When all those same thoughts flowing through her head don't count as much now as "What happens, now?", the tone of the question bathed in the littlest touch of fatalistic optimism. And as Eva holds my hips in her looking up to me, I am reminded by that Laika lung over my shoulder, of the truth I uncovered yesterday.

"...Have you noticed what we started here?" I ask her, answering her question with my own question and the cheeky plan on my face to answer mine. The curiosity on her face as I decide not to tell but show, making our way to the escalator and down to the ground level.

Another Red Fox and his Stoat boy sitting on his lap. The silly, grateful smile on him as his weasel gives me that content smirk of possessing a lover twice his height.

A middle age couple of that Polecat from before, adoring on her same species male as he gives it back to her in kind. Telling stories to each other about the struggles of their youth and wishing they had found each other sooner.

A Dhole and her Clouded Leopard female, caught in an embrace as they kiss delicately. Blissfully at peace with showing their love in the open and they jog my memory, but without recollection of where I remember them from.

Alfredo on break with another Iberian Wolf. A coffee in his and her paws as one sits crosslegged in front of the other. His smile seen behind her head as she lays it on his shoulder.

Two Brown Bears that look like Ussuri and Kamchatka, him holding her paw as they stand at ease with the rest of Security.

A mildly anorexic Maned Wolf and her likewise boy pouring his heart out for both of their sakes.

An African Wild Dog and his grateful Brown Spotted 'Yeen laying on her back as he croons some John Leopard from on top of her. Easing her mind of doubts, because what began yesterday is still fresh enough to not be believed just yet.

An Egyptian Wolf and her Arabian boy, hugging his girl from behind as they watch the crowds. An undercurrent of doubt about the world around him, before his lover slips her paw behind her own hip and reassuringly to his own. The momentary frailty in him as he realizes he doesn't have to be a perfect Lupine.

That Bug Burga Cheetah couple again, dancing slowly to the Rhythm & Blues they feel pouring out from an iPaws and set of speakers. Him licking at her face as she grinds a twerk into his lap. She only catches me taking their picture after the fact, and I could swear, I'm reading those lips as telling me Thank You when I take another.

Moment after moment with their own magic that doesn't get lost when me and Eva look back at them on this screen. The kind of photos I think I always wanted to take all that time ago when I was too scared of being harassed. On Friday nights of going nowhere, just wandering the streets looking for something beautiful as ugly situations ran through my head. When I just wanted to catch pedestrians in the act of captivating me. But all those photos I've just taken have all the more meaning than the ones I never did. That Mule Deer with the wizard like regard of his phone. That Chital in the paisley suit. Those were just mammals. These are love in all its shades. The love me and Eva inspired through all the pouring out of our hearts we made the station endure before succumbing to that capture.
"This is what we started." I tell her. With a smile as I look to her wide eyed face over my shoulder as she asks a perfect "...You're saying we started this?"

"Think about it, what you wanted and what you did to me. You asked me what happens now and I didn't realize it until yesterday but... It's been happening. Everything we've done is playing out in everyone else here."

And she's connecting the dots, the profound depth of what I was so hesitant about being for her, that so many here are now becoming for others. Leading up to the profane coming from her in "I wanna smash you so hard right now." that gets me laughing.

But she's not kidding.

Her right paw shifting my head to the left and she leans her head in for a nip of the side of my muzzle. I'll take that animalistic hint, leaning down until I'm cradled in her over me. Her sinking lips into mine, locking our teeth together and holding my mouth hostage. I don't know how far she's gonna go. I don't think I'd stop her if this ended in a dressing down. She's the best kind of reckless to mirror my own and I'm just letting this happen. All of it her and none of it me up until that moment my radio blares out Ralph's voice calling out my name. When I'm not lost in her anymore, and I'm suddenly aware of no weight in either paw.

"Where's my-"

"Laika? I don't know, I just found this other one by you on the ground. Speaking of You, what the hell you been? Last I heard, you crashed Buffalo's party and got on the news."

Oh hell, no, that's not who I think it is and he did not just pull a Wally on me. "That ain't..." trailing out of me as I go from looking up to her and straighting back up to pan my sight forward to "Aahhh, get the freak outta here, it is!"

Jager God Damn Impisi. In a glorious Hyena fit of giggling because that's what they default to before they dip into laughing. Throwing a paw out and I slap my grip into it for him to yank me forward into a standing before him that becomes him grabbing me up in a hug.

Forget where I been! Where the heck has your mo fuggin' self been since Friday?" Holy god all mighty, I've missed this clownshoe so hard and I'm just now getting it.

"Damn dude, I don't know, how about with my Clan scared like crazy that if I went out the cops would spot me and start asking about yer whereabouts!"

That smart mouth of his, delivering the reminder of how nervous and scared of the world he's always been. He lets me down as I tell him "Ah, hell, forget the cops, Your skiddish azz should've gone out when you had the chance!" and he's got no defense in "I know, it only got worse... It got so much worse." and I can feel it in him. That personal experience he's remembering. That hint that among the scores of preds that were chased and attacked by longnecks, he was one of them. "Owen, report back, you there?" Ralph on the radio, and I go to grab it while holding eye contact with Jager as Eva comes up behind me. "Here Ralph, got distracted. What's the business?" with it to my mouth.

"New Face wants to see you." The code word we settled on for Burney Humbert. "We're waiting in the break room and got a sitrep on something else." and I'm reminded of the interview. Fabienne's finally getting to come back here.

"Alright. There in a sec." I tell him. The reunion cut short, just like my love scene and it's all gonna have to wait. I'll leave Jager with Eva so she can give him the catching up I should be dishing out,
and I make my way from the terminal to the ground floor to the hall and that open door as Ralph converses with the defector, joined by others that came before him, those from Savannah Central's and Tundratown's packs that had somehow managed to join us after Lupe did. Their looks to me, and he turns.

Seeing me but still not believing me, "I can't get over the fact it was you." comes from him in near pride that's almost paternal.

"That same damned Fox I didn't arrest that's done so much good I could've nipped in the bud." with a scoffing laugh at a past life's duty to uphold the laws that were built to impoverish the impoverished all the more, and hold back all the mammals already held back.

How quick he was to come to terms with it all "When I saw it was you and your lady I pulled the rookie away from I guess I saw divine intervention in the coincidences." at the time, when I all I have to say might come off as ungrateful, but I want it to be about the insight that "But you weren't talking about us when you said there were good people that had their lives ruined by the news."

He gets it, and "No. I saw a good male that did everything he could, keeping a lid on a riot my daughter could've got caught in."

The implication sinks in hard and fast. My stillness in contrast in Ralph's double take in "You didn't say anything about a daughter." and Burney's matter of fact "It wasn't relevant until he made it." as it dissolves into the lamentation "Her and my future inlaw weren't allowed by my landlord to live with me and my ex disowned her for marrying out of species."

Even a cop's own daughter... Something that hurts Ralph bad enough he's got to offer it. "Alright, give me their names, I'll make sure they're moved back here with you."

Burney almost doesn't think about it. Then he does, opening his mouth and saying nothing. A conflict brewing in him and it's just about leaving him offended. His hurt more for circumstance than the kindness as he reminds Ralph "...I appreciate that, but what are you gonna do for everyone else's daughter and son here?" to let us know where he stands.

Ralph halfway gets it, with no offense taken, when he tells the cop "It's the least we can do, no sweat off our brows." and it's everything Burney can do to hold his fort.

"No. I never put family before duty before. I'm not about to put her over everyone else's child is out there now. I love her. But I'm an honest cop. Have been. Always will be. If I can't protect everyone's blood out there the same as mine, all the good I tried to make on the force means nothing."

Decades of his life running through my head in an instant. The turmoil of his personal life, the burden of his duty. The trauma of having not been there for his family pouring through my head. Ralph's feels it, too. He's about to say something else and Burney cuts him off at the intersection of interjection and interruption.

"If you want to still do it for some other cop's son or daughter, I can't stop you. Thank you. The offer means a lot. But don't let me catch you making it to me again."

And Ralph will leave it at that, bringing it back to me with a look in his eyes that says it all: "...Speaking of cops, I guess." I lament. Knowing now this was part of the reason Ralph made that offer for Burney in the first place.

"Hopefully, they don't know that we do, but they finalized plans this morning. But it doesn't make sense."
And I knew this was coming. It's just the confirmation that hurts me, makes me wish Eva was here to hold my paw when I ask him "How does it not make sense?"

The reason why, is Ralph's "They've evacuated the building around us, rooftop monitored that, but the talk makes it like they're not sending in enough riot cops to round us all up."

That doesn't... "How many riot cops?"

Do they not have enough? Are they not going all in to test and gauge us?

"Like I said, talk not numbers." Ralph tells me, but it doesn't add up, makes me feel like... "That's gotta be misinformation." A thought finished by "Like they know we got insiders and are trying to bait us." and Ralph follows up to "...The other packs are aware of that and they've already told their officers to get out as soon and quietly as possible."

This threat looming over our heads, Burney can soften it with "The new mayor doesn't know how to run a police department and she's got Bogo under her thumb. Bogo wouldn't do this, he'd go all in, but Bellwether's been so heavy handed, this sounds like what she'd make him do."

And I'm reminded by that of what he told his Rhino rookie yesterday, about the Sheep cop that couldn't arrest me being fast tracked above Burney's own rank, but we're out of time. It's moved too fast for this, what Burney didn't want to call me up for as the Alpha's radio and my own make it known. "Big Purr, here. We got Fabienne coming in for the interview." Time for our defector cop to be a reluctant symbol. He tells me "We'll walk and talk." as Ralph calls it in that "Burney's on his way now." and we're walking out. The three of us, with Savannah Central's past cops in tow for escort.

His uniform must've gone through the drier with a little starch, but it's not up to his standard. "I should've ironed. I look like a damn security guard." and a fellow former, a Yukon, tells him "You'll look fine. I think everyone understands we're not a laundromat." He gets that, leaving it as such because with him looking back to me, he's still got to say what he does before he goes live.

"Do you believe in God, Owen?" coming from him in such a way that demands I hold back from my usual smart mouth'd When It's Convenient. He deserves better than that. I have to genuinely answer him.

"I think somebody up there has gotta like me for me to be where I am."

"Well I'm a recovering Catholic. I wasn't kidding when I said it was divine intervention that had me pulling you out of another fire." He tells me, as a Wolf by the door opens it and we enter the station.

Eva waiting for me outside with Jager recognizing the bear beside me and nearly bolting out his fur. A cheap laugh by the bear at his expense. Eva embraces me and I needed it, as she explains yesterday's events to Jager and Burney continues.

"Anyway. I was ordered with my partner Telt to check your girlfriend's place. We never got told how they pinpointed the location..."


"...But I saw your girlfriend on the other end of the bridge. While I was waiting for Telt to finish turning her shipping container upside down looking for her. I nearly ran for her. Almost called it in because I knew I couldn't catch her at that distance."
I'm angry yet relieved at the same after-the-fact time. Eva's grip trembling in hindsight fear, with the two of us only getting an inkling of where he's going with this as he continues.

"But then there was a little voice in my head. I've gotten it before. Went against my better judgement back then but I listened and it turned out to be right. So I listened again. Told me not to call it in or pursue. Like it just wasn't her time and you both needed mercy. More than what my gut told me about Lionheart's Fox hunt for you being a farce."

So it wasn't just Espada. "You knew?" from Eva gives her back "I think we all did. We never got orders for the pig, but all the witness testimonies said we should've been going after him or the Elk more than Owen. It was such a small incident anyway. Left us asking why. Couple of days later, I was there at Cliffside with Officer Hopps and it all made sense."

That damned... No, I'm better than that. Whatever she is, that's beside Burney's point. The one I've got to let sink that at least some of the cops are reluctant villains. That I shouldn't be demammalizing them, when he wasn't the only one to question orders. Just the first to go against them, and maybe, after Fabienne's done with him, not the only one. He already tried once, but as adamant as the commission was in the meeting last night with him, he still made it clear that he was gonna plead with his fellow officers on live TV.

"Guess you needed to know that, but that's not what I wanted to talk about." he tells me, and I can't fathom "What was it?" but in a brief pause, he puts it back together. To what he was gonna say before he let slip his daughter's here.

"...If it wasn't for you trying to stop a riot? I could've lost everything I got left on this earth. Cops like Rhineheart are ready to kill. Espada's not arround to make sure they'd be brought to justice even if I could live with myself. It could've been her. The same as it could've been someone else's daughter."

And that's what starting to make him emotional. Tearing up, on the verge of a pathetic whimper.

"And it all came down to you. That Rhino could have pulled your head clean off your shoulders and yet you stood against him like a martyr. That's when I knew I was, was on the wrong side and that god damned little voice was right, I saw her with you and it all made sense and just... Just thank you. Everything you both did, hell I'mgonna like scat now going up on TV Damn Me."

I'm doing it without a thought, unbuttoning my silk shirt I got back from Toby because "Here, here's my shirt, come on, you need it." and it's all I got. "Not the shirt off your own back, don't kid me." and it's making him cry a little harder.

"What do we look like Goats?" wasn't meant to be a joke. But it's what he needed to laugh to put a plug on his eyes. "Nobody's kidding anyone here. Take my damned shirt." and it's all he can do to choke out "You wise ass piece of... Lord, thank you." as he takes the balled up fabric from me, and I'll do it intentionally now to get him ready for the camera while he brings it to his face.

"Me or him?" and a muffled "For crying out loud, both of you! Jesus... Not him, you..." as the two of us laugh and he dries his face off.

"...Ok I'm taking it back that you weren't one of those good mammals that the news ruined his life. You are. Didn't think you were when I said that but I know you are now... God, Fuck the news..." comes out from him as he hands the damp shirt back to me, looking to me as a Northwestern former says "Burney? Eyes forward." to get him looking towards...

Oohhhhh...
"I would use the same terseness with regard to your own occupation, but my upbringing taught me better than that."

Fabienne Growley. Behind the security line, camera on her shoulder. Leering at Burney with about half the intensity she gave Don Lemming. Letting me know she's only half as upset as Burney stares petrified of the one thing a Cop has historically feared as much as Internal Affairs or the Chief. A news reporter.

Scomfully dressing him down with her eyes before breaking character with a grin.

"I'm just taking the piss here mate, I'm working for the devil and I know it!" and the relief of weight coming off him can be felt. Laughing ensuing between the two of them as I stand there to ingest it all. As much beside myself as he is beside me as he offers an "Officer Burney Humbert." and an 'I didn't mean that. I been through a lot and."

"And I'm a professional. I know who I'm working for and can't begin to imagine what you're going through."

She's not having it. Because she understands that "It's a long story Ma'am." and the kind where she has to ask "On camera or Off camera?" so he'll get she knows what she doesn't know, and what she does know is the respect she still has for him. That we all do. Sticking his neck out on a limb the way he did that'll guarantee he's facing trial after all this.

"Off... Whatever you don't piece together during the interview, I can tell you in private." because he'll choose to hope. Because that's what his faith is all about. To keep in mind that he's been rewarded in his faith so far and be ready to see where it'll take him.

"Off camera it is. My mother was a devout enough physician, she raised me to first do no harm." as she breaks eye contact and sees me. Pulling the card out and holding it over my head in pride. A "Speaking of Cameras..." from her segues into my good news. I ask her if "You got another one for me?" and she pries one out of her blazer pocket for the exchange.

Disbelieving that I've "...Been that busy, boy?" when the truth is "Only since yesterday but... I knew what you had to show the city when I found it." I tell her.

Vague enough to have her question "What was it you found?" but I won't spoil the surprise or distract from business. "You'll see. You got an interview to do, now." from me, as that Kudu from before walks up to the security line behind her.

She looks to me one more time with a "Thank you for everything, Owen." get a "It's the least I can do. Hippocratic oathe and all that jazz, right?" from me as I walk off to join Eva and Jager, watching as a Lion in Security behind Fabienne reminds her sound guy of the no prey policy. He knows, testing to see if his boom will reach over the line. He and Growley know they can't do this on the other side of it because of the cops on the other side of the road and how sensitive the interview is, but she's looking at this and knows it won't fly. "Kazi, I don't think that's gonna work." from her leads to "I don't know what else is unless... Ok, what if I set this and then hand it over to somebody in the station?" and a defector Great Plains cop volunteering.

A beautiful little scene to leave behind me and Eva, putting my damp shirt back on, Jager following behind us. His looking back behind it with a "...That was actually the bear cop from Marula." that makes it known how dumbfounded he is. But the ridiculous has all just become so matter of fact that I can barely offer "Yeah. That gumshoe hippo of his was outside yesterday, too." with any real sense of amazement.
"And that was the Snow Leopard chick from the news?"

"Well, yeah." I guess Eva didn't get to that part.

"You know her?" comes from him like it's another bombshell. Eva volunteering that it was
"Accidentally. Don Lemming nearly started a riot with Owen, she came up to make amends for it and take over for him."

"...And Owen's the only non-wolf in the committee."

No. Not the only, just the first "For now. Keep it hushed, but I pushed last night to have representatives from Sousten and your Clan join too. They agreed."

And Eva's surprise that "You didn't tell me about that!" makes it no way around the sin that "I forgot... Had a lot on my mind, I was trippin' something fierce."

"...I know." Eva tells me, knowing she was on the same boat as I was.

All the while Jager's quietly losing it to his assumption in saying "My friend's a god dang hero."

No, just no, "I'm not a hero. I've just come a long way." I tell him with a shake of my head. Wrapping my arm around Eva in a making up attempt. I fill the gaps of the past month she wasn't privy enough to tell my friend. All the while trying to keep him from having his jaw hit the floor too hard. I don't want him to.

Ultimately, about an hour later, I just have to work it down to the analogy I'm not comfortable with: "It's like with my Vulpion, Jager... It doesn't matter that it's a Vulpion. Doesn't matter that I poured my heart into it up until Eva came to me. Doesn't matter that it's still got a lot of me. I stuck with it, it brought me here, but that's not what mattered... It's the Journey... Destination, outcome, whatever, but not the glory. I'm as amazed by it as you are about me. But don't be. I don't want laurels. I don't think the bike would, either." Not Eva, either. Doesn't matter to her that she saved me from my own doubts.

She just wanted me. Because what all this is, is only just that "All that mattered was it serving a means to an end."

The same as I met Eva's own end of having The Right One.

And "That ain't heroic, it's just purpose. What I always wanted. To just do something with myself. Not even... This. Just something," with a subconscious look to Eva. It's just that what something ended up being has still floored him. That thing I've come to closure with, and given closure back in kind. Amazing but insignificant to what me and Eva found in each other, like the Vulpion never could. And all I've left unsaid, Eva's caught on, knowing that hidden layer to what I said and reeling me in by my shirt collar for a kiss. Jager's losing it somewhere in the background. Let him.

Sometime later again, I'm on the grass under a rail bridge.

Eva in my lap facing me as Andrew joins the circle, beaming in pride with his Sousten set girl in tow. He makes it everyone accounted for, besides the token prey boy I'm messaging on the IM App of his gifted phone. I look away from it, watching Andrew make Wally and Jager drop their jaws at the reveal of his lover, looking like something out of a magazine. Features so fair that by common standards and gilded comparisons, lesser males would covet her. Cheeks so perfectly balanced and fleshed out that they contrast against Eva's wide bones and the mildly sunk valleys against her teeth. With one darting look from Andrew's Girl, I can tell she's perfect for him. Real in her depth. I can appreciate this girl from afar for she means to Andrew, without the thought to covet anywhere in my
I fell in love with who I fell in love with, and I'm hers and she's all I've ever wanted. I was made for Eva, as clearly as "Name's Rene." was made for Andrew, him and Rene waiting on us to introduce themselves to her. But I'm occupied with admiring Eva. I've left the ball in the court of our mesmerized friends and they've dropped it, leaving it up to her boy to fix an awkward moment.

"Ok well that joker azz 'Yote is Wally, and the Brown Spotted is Jager. And that girl on Mr. Big-Woof-Wanna-Fight-About-It's lap is Eva Belette."

He should leave the class clown act to me and Wally, but he still gets a laugh from me and Rene. But it's time for one I can appreciate when I protest with "Ok first thing, we established this last time that I already got a girl on it so just get right the fudge off and second..." Wally's guffaw and Jager's gigglefit are so bad as Rene chortles, holding Andrew because he needs it that I gotta ride out the laughtrack that Eva compliments with a snicker and polite shift to keep me in check. "...Second, I don't know what the heck ever I forgot because I'm distracted because Eva But My Name is Owen Conrad, dag nabbit, act like you know." Now the laffs are at both of our expenses as he relents on the unbecoming sly.

"Ok, his name is Owen Conrad Dag Nabbit, MY BAD!"

Oh my "Freakin' gosh darn I'ma doing it." so bothered now by the gaggle at my expense I'm bothered enough to attempt a getting up that Eva nips in it's budding with a "No you don't~." and a double whammy with a bite and a grinding of her tush that subdues me into a feeble mess of...

"okyouknowwhatonsecondthoughtnevermind"

Ohhh, this tear in my heart butcher with a smile, making me look so bad when I was just about on the rebound again. It's making them freaking lose it in the laughs at my expense and all I can't do anything but curl my toes and put my paws over my face under her grin over my neck with it's scruff in her teeth.

"...Andy, you sure that's the same boy the cops were after?" cuts deep from Rene and the humbling gives way eventually, just not soon enough. We settle down, messaging Toby en masse and giving way to huddling around Andrew, his back on Rene's lap, her back against the wall.

Jager can't believe it: "You're kidding me, Toby's really leading up pro-herd protestors?" Those outsiders genuine enough to advocate for us. It's not a far cry from his past of following protests, it's the fact he's sticking his neck out. Fact making Wally answer back with "I know, right? The heck got into him? Skiddish azz prey boy went from getting shook at the thought of going to jail to asking for it... Hey Andy, you know anything about-"

He does, but he can't be reached, right now. Wally and Jager look to him leaning his head into Rene's chest as he trades his licks from below with hers on high. No regard for decency. Clueless and without a care about their laughs in their background, the same now as I saw him yesterday. In love so pure it drowns the world out. And in this moment on repeat, I'm remembering that dream, of just me and EVA on that bike in our own world. What she started that I saw through with her, there. What Andrew exhibits before onlookers as I do as I see, kissing Eva, crashing my tongue into her teeth. Because what inspired me has come full circle. In what Eva inspired, and I what I inspired because of her.

If it weren't for the helicopter flying just low enough to not be ignored, the moment would be perfect. I want her forever on a never ending interstate through the mountains and the forests. The image of us leaving this city bereft as not beggers but lords, the thought of us to float out of this town like two
ghosts over a parallel twin, it's overwhelming me, overwhelming me so much I can't stand it.

I want now what may never be, the reminder of that in the chopping thwoosh of a helicopter overhead. But as I break off the caressing of my lips with hers, I can sing this lullaby.

I can moanfully coo some notes, the ones she will know immediately as we burn up to the anticipation of what I'm about to do before it's done.

"Bro, what're you-" from Andrew, answered by Eva's lustful coo along at the tail end of that bridge to that song we know, the song I want us to live out, when I sing to her that decree.

"Next year we'll go traveling, our escapades so baffling, our sovereign love returning to the see-eea..." The world beyond us almost dissipates behind her smile so warm and caught off guard.

The beat is almost skipped when she follows my "We'll be Miles from Winnesota then, writing letters we won't send, for no words shall contain what will bee-ee-~!" and she leans into it now, that great pouring out of her heart over my own, like the violins in our heads as they pour out of our mouths as we spill it forth:

"Well your sweet voice and my rough palms, when darkness prowls, we will dance through bluffs and fields and orchards with the moo-oon!" over the world around us. As though we could ever drown it with our love to make right all it's wrongs. The helicopter and the dismissive laughter.

The wishing we wish through the serenading hope in our tongues as we aspire to make real that "Yes next year we will leave this place, leave summers kiss as just a taste, falls warm embrace is coming to us soo-oon!"

Because she knows it as well as I do, now. We both know that after yesterday, There remains no question left that our singular answer can't solve: Our union. In it, forever the solution for our woes here in our coils. The whatevers of before and now and after are no challenge for the fact we now know.

"OHHHWE'VE GOT EVERYWHERE TO GO! YOU SHOULD SLEEP I'LL SEE YOU IN THE MORRNNIINNG!"

But for all that will be, then, the world is forcing me to stay here Now. With it's shadow of a helicopter merging into the shade below this bridge, our friends no longer as able as we were to not look towards it as it slips menacingly into the line the sun has drawn between what's beyond the bridge and what lays below it. The world has injured me with such cruelty, that it would snuff out the deeply rolling waves of a crescendo I was not allowed to feel through it's completion. Shaken in the whiplash of having an outer body experience, only to have myself battered back into it. I will make one last effort, to kiss Eva and wish this would be over, now. But This is not done.

It's forcing Kurt's paw, to have him project his voice through my radio that "It's happening, Owen. Get with us by the station entrance because they're giving the order."

A kiss broken before it got started, and the dread is creeping in. The same as it is for everyone else because they're reading me. They're making that connection between the chopper overhead, the words from the radio, and the look on my face that I know what's happening. For a moment, something was given to me. But only to have it taken. The same as what I must fear, that what we have right now in the station is about to be cruelly taken and not replaced. I feel it coming. The cold war wind blowing through my bones.

"Owen, was that Kurt?" from Andrew and an "Order? What order? You mean the damn cops?"
from Wally as they and Jager look to me with weariness like mine. Rene and Eva knows what this is, they can see it in my face when I look to everyone with no way to sugarcoat the sorrow in my eyes.

"Yeah. That was Kurt... The cops are giving the order to disperse." and it hurts that it is so.

Jager's reeling, the symptom of the lack of past experiences with the law that's left Andrew cold enough to only just say to himself "...They're finally doing it..." while Wally's rhetorical "Disperse?" contrasts the fact on his face that he's scared enough to show he knows.

All of it coming down to Eva's bittered sigh, holding tight because she's so tired of the cops, when she has every right to never see one again.

And Rene to make it known "You mean leave the station? Because I just got here yesterday. And I ain't going anywhere, with or without Andrew."

And Wally brings it all back around with a challenge in the nervous tone of a disbelieving "Hey Oh, they expect us to go where? Their own shelters? They dropped the ball. We didn't have anywhere to go until you and Andrew made the first one out of here. They can't just take this from us, I don't care how much revenue they're losing out of public transportation!"

But the fact they're gonna try is all that matters. The pain in this, when we need what we have, because of the venom injected that we're about to lose it. The unfairness of it all, when however much the Wolves and I had no legal right to make this station a refuge is a moot point. When it's not about what they did and didn't do, nor what made us attempt what we accomplished. When all it could ever boil down to, over their fire, is about what they want and what they're gonna do to take it. With no concern that they forced this as much on themselves as they did on us. The anger in all of us that I'll manifest with my tongue, when the radio beckons me again.

"Owen, do you read me? It's Kurt, they're giving the order and we need you!" and I grimace in my reply when I tell the radio "Copy, Kurt. I'm coming."

Because I want a rewind. I want to take it all back and burn the candle at both ends to undue every cruel jagged edge in my life that brought me to the point that I could always almost reach the grapes. Because every time it feels like I finally got them, the world has to take them. Now, Eva has to feel it through my touch, trying so hard to make the wordwine that's become bitter just a little more sweet when I tell her "You should sleep, I'll see you in the morning..." and she can only frown. Getting off me, my girl will let me get up to do what must be done, when "I'll see you guys in a bit." is all I've got left to give. Because I'm turning inward as I walk away from them, scenarios in head of how this'll go.

Trying to hold out for hope when I can't think of any way it'll end good. Because as Burney's Rhino revealed yesterday, they got rapsheets and ongoing investigations on half of us. And like Burney himself just told me earlier, they are motivated enough to kill. It doesn't matter anymore, that some of their pred partners has blood here, or at they themselves are here themselves. The same as it not mattering for the few that care about it, that they care enough about us as their fellow mammal to support is.

Because it doesn't matter if just maybe all mammals got one big soul we're all a part of. They have their orders, the public has it's fears, the mayor her scheming, and we've got the cross to bear for the sin of everyone else not knowing what they do. This will never be allowed to end with us leaving of our own free will, to reenter a society that has finally god damned stopped hating us over our god damn teeth because god dammit, we would have chosen differently if god gave us nothing else but the one option that'd make this all so fucking right, GOD FUCKING DAMMIT, I JUST WANT THIS SHIT TO FUCKING END AND I WANT TO BE A REAL LIVE BOY, JUST LET ME
"NNNOOO, NO I CAN'T DO THIS BY MYSELF ANYMORE, I'M NOT GOD DAMN SUPERMALE!" I'm howling and just aware of the outside world enough for a moment to hear Eva scream my name in "OWEN, OWEN YOU GOD DAMN COWARDLY IDIOT, WOULD YOU QUIT CLAWING AT YOUR HEAD FOR ONE SECOND TO JUST LISTEN TO YOURSELF!"

I'm trembling... I've made it a grand total of fifty feet, and I had stopped, given everyone behind me enough time to catch up and watch me. As I dug my claws into my head and had a nervous breakdown so overdue it took this long for me to have it.

And I'm turning, my eyes to the love of my life that is completely, entirely, perfectly and forever done with me trying to make due without her and is fully committing, when I need her the most, to try to make me just live, and live in spite of how much the world doesn't want me to. I've made her cry, because this might've been the last time she could ever seen me, and I'm so used to doing it all alone by my loathsome lonesome that didn't see what I had. When It's finally fully dawning on me that I am precisely here, exactly right now, because of her. Her and everyone behind her, those people in my life and the others that couldn't be here today that have sailed me so far that I barely recognize what I was, just to spite it all and relapse into the scared, cowardly pred the world wanted me to be.

And I will speak the truth of every last sailor here and elsewhere, as those here look to me to tell them "...I'm done with doing everything on my own. I can't ignore the fact I need you anymore, when I've put you all through enough of me trying to survive on my own. I need every one of you more than I have have before. Eva, we can't lose each other again. I've put you through enough and I don't want to lose you again, not to the cops, not to death, no-god-damned-anybody, I want to die with you, get arrested with you, any bad freakan thing that comes now, I can't live through it without you and if, if one year from now, we're gone from this piece of scat city, I wanna do it with you BECAUSE WHATEVER I DO, LIFE OR DEATH, I WANNA DO IT WITH YOU BECAUSE... AUH, CHRIST...!"

She's tearing up over these words she'll say for me, when I need her to the most, that she will speak for every last one of the souls that've touched my own when she reminds me of her truth.

"...That's all I wanted to hear you finally say. All I wanted you to do was say you needed me. That life or death, whatever you do, you'd let me do it with you so I wouldn't have to lose you again..."

This is what it's come to, me having gone through all the lessons without having absorbed the curriculum.

That she would fight tooth and nail against heaven and hell for me and that there is nothing she will not face to stand by me, when all her life had led up to her being convinced by Eva to go to some Fumblr Warrior's all inclusive party to meet me.

Dancing to Los Lobosinos until I jumped out a window.

Waiting for me by a river because a stranger told her to.

Singing me the gospel of a song the world will never listen to and the radio wouldn't play.

Getting punched by a cop and breaking a bottle on his head to stop me from being tased.

Everything she's done and I'm only now getting to the truth of what I felt yesterday.
The give and the take of taking the weakest thing in me and beating the world with it.

The same thing she has given me, and will be ready to do for all time.

To hold on when you get love so you can let go when you give it.

To do what must be done without any thought to the probability of success or failure.

And after all my own final admissions, when I need all I can get, she will not be the only one that won't have me going quietly alone to that uphill battle they would still face with or without me.

Jager putting it nearly as good as Eva's own words when he admits to me "You ain't a hero. There. I said it. But I done missed enough of your hellraising. Call it just doing what you gotta all you want, I missed Buffy's party because pride but I'm not about to miss this. If you've given the cops all the grief everybody says you've given, this is gonna be you doing them the best you ever have."

Andrew has to remind me that "Owen, all the times I doubted your crazy, it's always come back around to what you did being the thing that had to happen. You were right every time. I'm through with you showing me better... I'm going with you both. If you're gonna be in the crosshairs and have your pelt on the line, I need to be there with you."

Wally could make a wisecrack, and he wants to, but Andrew has spoken for everyone. The looks they're giving me, reminding me that I've come this far because of them. They've come this far because I allowed it to happen through me before, and they need me to take them forward, now. With Eva beside me, holding to me to blow away the cremated remains of the doubt that she will refuse to let linger in me. Because it was good to burn it. I have been burned by Eva, and by all of them. It has felt good for their fire to burn away all the world's illness from my body. All that bitterness.

I'm in Echkart's hell. Eva and everyone I've ever known, has absolved my soul. In this firestorm, having burned away every god forsaken thing that the world's ever wrought on me.

And if I am crying right now, it's only because of the freedom I know now. From myself. From the land my knees rest on as I hold Eva like I did in that alley when the Wolf Cop let us off with a warning.

I made a lot of mistakes... But one of them was never, ever relying on someone to help me when I least deserved it. Because that was when they needed to help me the most. As alone as I used to be, as solitary as I'm supposed to be, defined to be, my survival has always been in everyone around me.

All of my crazy, boldness and courage was all a gift others gave for me to give back. That weakest thing in me is my strength. To make me like...

"Let the waves dash themselves against the rocks." I tell myself.

Letting come what may, because the waves have always battered the rocks. They have shattered themselves against them, and have always faltered. Because what may someday finally succumb to them has endured longer than civilization has been.

That is how this is gonna go. How I am going to go forth, now. With Eva beside me, and all my friends. The same as the Commission and every last predator in this station. As the rocks on that beach that will give testament until we no longer can to the very spirit of the hope to gamble with the will to withstand.

"Let the waves dash themselves against the rocks... Let them come against us and falter..."
And as we go to that beach, I think of the times I've had to go solo. To take what was wrought alone. Without the defense I have now.

When even with how impossibly well I took that malice, that what we're facing now cannot be faced by any one mammal. By myself without them. What must be attempted now can only be in the kind of solidarity Burney revealed when he decided that no son or daughter should be placed over another. And in the kind of will that only Espada could have shown, in his challenging of society's cruel notion of what is Just, and to decide for himself what must be Punished and Nurtured, and how they must be so. Eva's strength in her weakness to fight all the world sought to render unto her, and Woolsey's bravery to hold within him that fool's belief for the hope in sacrifice.

Everyone around me has held the answers to all my questions. Those teachers will have their lesson through me, today. Eva holding my paw. Andrew looking down in pride at what Gonz gave back to him. Wally rubbing his paws together with a smirk. Toby, on in the IM app of the phone he gave me. Messaging me what I already know. The cops are making moves. I reply back with an I Know, pocketing my phone as I tell everyone "Toby just confirmed it from outside. It's happening." and the PA comes alive with it's announcement.

"Attention. Blue Alert. Riot Police are forming up in Watering Hole Park and we have been ordered to leave Zootopia Central Station. We are not going home. The city has gone too far in it's panic and we have nowhere else to go. This is a peaceful refugee community. Do not provoke the cops. Do not make the first move. If today ends with casualties, it's got to be on them. All Security forward. All Medics, up front. Unit 2 on standby. Everyone with children, volunteers will be moving you for safety. All non-essential members of the Herd, back away from the front calmly. Evacuate to the hallways, terminal and upstairs but do not panic, do not trample. We are going to try to keep the peace, but if we can't maintain order between the herd and the cops, they are going to attempt an eviction and mass arrest. We've come this far. We do not have to lose it today."

What I felt in Woolsey's apartment complex isn't here. These are the stakes, yet in a thousand thousand clouded out faces glancing to us in the hall, that panic isn't setting in. A thousand voices abounded in the shelter that is Our Central Station's ground floor. Ours, not theirs. Eva taking me by my sleeve to be my leading female, through the light of these spirits I decipher as having the hope one would have at the end of all he or she has ever known. That the world and all it's surrounding us of it's hate had made no difference. That all the dreams we lived in to walk alone through was never at any point all for nought.

That against all the terror and abuse, the darkness we sought to end in spite of what it would've liked could never nullify the truth that we were meant to live for so much more than at it's own expense. It does not make any less the shouting of panic that has every right to, but makes the shouting back of faith for defeating what will never be all the more meaningful. That what is about to come has never made a difference before, and won't now, will not ever. I feel alive, alive like Mouflon Stevens, I feel it glowing in the room, that prayer that though the world we were given has spurned us, that all that we had always wanted for it was our meaning. Not those past genocides, nor the attempts at our enslavement or the reduction of our mammality to submammality.

Only the wish and the attempt. Only, and only just, that though fate has sought our misery, resolve or surrender, that it was always our potential that had the meaning. Not success, nor failure. That will to struggle for our most basic dignity. To contribute. To become whole. All these mammals that could have never faced this alone are the same as I am. They have seen through the examples around them that bold determination to become their own dreadnoughts. Because to be one is neither qualified by size nor exemplified by power. All that has ever mattered in the truth of the concept was the ability to be indefatigable. That ability to withstand that the Wolves have shown them, the same as they have
Those same Wolves between us, the crowds and the divide between that I will now cross in a rush. Because Eva and everyone else have told me what they wanted, and I have calmed down. To become an impossible soul that is finally done with my mind becoming a ruinous wreck.

I will get it right, this time.

And I will know that I can, because all that is certain is not impossible to overthrow.

I finally, Fucking Finally, I Finally understand that.

I come before the Commission behind their lines as we cross empty tiles so renewed, not changed, that I am like the Phoenix embroidered over my shirt.

"Just tell me they know what they're getting into!" is all Kurt's asking of me. Yelled over the chaos of the security lines as they lock arms.

It goes without a question I can't harbor. "They have always known! They need me to need them back!" and I cannot tell if it's either or both of those two and the delivery that's widened his eyes or Ralph's. But even with me, they are not going to just stand beside me. Andrew knows where his contribution is, and waves to Rene, with Jager and Wally following suit, as he enters into the furthest line back. All of them locking arms without instruction from the others beside them.

And what more could he be asking, is what Bogo must be thinking when he tells us this from behind his row of pieces: "I repeat to all civilians in Zootopia Central Station, you are taking part in an illegal assembly. You are being ordered to leave the area immediately and return to your homes. All persons seeking housing are advised to report to your District's refugee shelters."

But I am not scared anymore. What I already know is happening, making itself known to me beyond any doubt, will no longer have control over me.

Because Eva is holding me, and Andrew is looking back to me in pride and gratitude. Making me secure enough to have me consider what I can do against Bogo, what injury to his order to carry out can possibly be so intimate as to wound-

"Burney!", opposite of me and outside the huddle of delegates, staring towards his former partners.

"Owen, what about him?" from Ralph when it's so obvious that "If Downtown has a Megaphone, it needs to go to Burney!" and I do not have to explain why. Him and the pack delegates overhearing know it immediately.

"You got it, it might buy us time, Raul, if you got one of your pack to spare and got a megaphone-" "Yes we do!" that Iberian tells him, immediately grabbing his radio to command his reserves as Burney recognizes his name being declared to shuffle through Alphas. "What about me?" and Ralph answers "We have a megaphone and we need you to-"

"This is a direct order by the Chief of Police! Failure to comply will result in your arrest! You are trespassing on and blocking municipal property! Leave the area immediately and you will not be arrested nor charged!"

"Burney, can you do it?!" is my plea for him to see the charge we're giving him. "All I can do is buy time but I'll try!"
"Perfect! Ralph, has Brent already cut the camera lines?!

"Troubadour? He's cut them but they have battery backups, they're still rolling!" which means they’ve already seen what defenses we’ve got. However many Riot cops they’ve got to face us, even if they didn’t get enough, they’ve factored in the defenses they’ve seen. But because of that, we can still add more, with it being too late for them to change their own plan of attack.

"What about the Hyenas and Wild Dogs?!"

Kurt's attention and Ralph’s "What about them?!

My awareness of how quick we may lose the defenses we currently have and a declaration that "If they're gonna join the committee, they need to pull their weight Now!"

"Pull their weight, you mean make them send their guard prospects up here?!

"Exactly! We need every able bodied up front right now!"

"Owen if we use them now we won't have them to replace our own for next time!" from a Tundratown delegate and his logic falters on what I am seeing.

"If there is a next time! The stronger our show of force is now, they'll be intimidated that much more if there ever is a next time!" and I won't have Ralph's "Owen, the hell's come over you?!" because with what we're dealing with right now, if that's what he's thinking about, "Whether or not they ain't sending enough riot gear to get us all doesn't matter! It's everything we can do right now or it's not a damned thing at all!"

I am asking so much. But it's only because, through Eva stepping up to defend me, that "You had him join all of you for a reason! If you're not gonna hear him out now then why did you let him in the commission in the first place!"

As bold and unapologetically uncalled for as it was, I can't correct her. But none of the Alphas can make this call. I can see as much in them. The same as Kurt being unable to dismiss the inaction of his fellows. So he'll make it himself. Changing the frequency on his radio as Raul nearly says something as a Eurasian hands him a Megaphone, and gives it in kind to Burney. It's left up to Ralph for him to question what Kurt is doing. And all he can say for himself is "I wanna see what happens next!" before hitting the send button, as Ralph tries to stop him and several Alphas stop him in kind.

He cannot wait on a vote. "Attention to the leaders of the Hyena Clan and African Wild Dog Pack, any and all able bodied you can contribute to the frontline defense, bring them forward!"

Time alone will tell me if this was right. Time will come soon enough. To prove the fear on these fellow Alphas right or show reward for my boldness through Kurt. We cannot ponder it any further and neither can the rest of the Herd.

"All protesters in Zootopia Central, this is your final warning! Disperse and evacuate from the municipal property you are trespassing on! You have five minutes before I give the order to march! Fail to comply with the dispersal order in that time and you will be arrested!"

And in the space between all these Alphas looking to Kurt, trying to figure what his acting out of turn means to the tension Bogo has just ramped up, I'm looking to Humbert from behind. Paused, staring back at the riot shields and batons facing us, choosing his words and considering their weight before hurling them to his former superior. Then, determined, he lets slip his tongue of war.

"What about the sons and daughters of your officers that had to seek shelter here sir? Are you gonna
have them beat their own children? Or are you leaving that to their fellow officers because you knew you wouldn't be able to live with yourself if you did?"

The volleys will begin, now.

"Officer Burney Humbert, you've just exhausted any chance you could have had for my mercy, at the hearings I will be dragging you to personally! All personel, ignore this Benedict Elkold!"

Bishop takes Rook.

"The only traitor between us is the public servant that's going to have his males march against their duty! You are ordering them to disrupt the peace they swore to uphold, against the good people they swore to protect!"

Knight takes Bishop.

"AND YOU KNOW THERE ARE CRIMINALS BEING HARBORED BY THE WOLVES, AND YOU KNOW I HAVE MY ORDERS!"

Queen takes Knight.

"ORDERS THE MAYOR'S OFFICE SAT IT'S WOOLY CRACK ON FOR OVER A WEEK AND WHAT USE IS IT GONNA DO ANYONE TO CARRY IT OUT NOW?! WHEN YOU KNOW HOW BAD IT'S GOING TO BE! WHEN YOU KNOW THINGS WOULDN'T HAVE GONE THIS FAR OUT OF HAND IF IT WASN'T FOR THAT STUPID RABBIT LIONHEART FORCED ON YOU!?"

Rook takes Queen.

"OFFICER HOPPS WAS THE BEST ROOKIE COP THAT EVER SERVED THIS CITY AND BY THE TIME I'M DONE, YOU WILL HAVE EVERY LAST MAXIMUM SENTENCE THE JUDGE CAN THROW AT YOU!"

Knight takes Rook.

"I WOULD LIVE THROUGH EACH AND EVERY SENTENCE THE COURT HANDS ME WITH PRIDE FOR HAVING DONE THE RIGHT THING!"

Pawn takes Knight.

"WE'RE COMING FOR YOU IN FOUR MINUTES AND I AM GEARING UP TO TURN YOU IN, MYSELF! GET READY AND PRAY BURNEY HUMBOLT, GET READY AND PRAY!"

Rook takes Pawn and the game has been called, Burney's king in checkmate. In their parley like chess, Bogo has proven to our cop that the only winning move was not to play at all.

But Eva will see it through with me. Together, and she tightens grip on me as she move forward through the committee. All we have always, only wanted, she has found it. The angle he was going for and the impact he tried his best, tried in vain because our world is a mess, she has found my way.

"BURENY, THE RADIO ON YOUR BELT!"

I'm seeing what she's seeing now, and his frustration in "WHAT ABOUT MY RADIO?!" is mine to quell because fundamentally, "WHY DID THEY ISSUE IT IF YOU HAD NOTHING TO
"SAY?!!" but they won't hear him, because if "BOGO ORDERED THE FREQUENCY CHANGED THE MINUTE AFTER I LEFT THEIR SIDE, WHAT GOOD IS IT GONNA DO US IN THREE AND A HALF MINUTES?!" then the cops can't believe in his conviction.

"RAUL!"

I will find a way.

"YOUR BOYS ARE HANDLING POLICE SCANNERS, WHAT'S THE NEW FREQUENCY?!!"

I will break through.

Raul's shouting to his radio "SOUND DETAIL, WE NEED NUMBERS ON BLUE ON GREEN!!" and the seconds are passing, every tick, every tock, a punch blowing through to the trembling core Eva's adorning with her embrace as I start to lose it around her until I finally hear it.

"ONE FOUR ZERO POINT EIGHT FIVE, DIAL IT IN TO-

"ONE FOUR ZERO POINT EIGHT FIVE, BURNEY YOU GOT IT-"

"ONE FOUR ZERO POINT EIGHT FIVE, I'M DIALING, DIALING, I GOT IT, I GOT IT!"

"THREE MINUTES, YOU GOT THIS, BURNEY YOU GOD DAMN GOT IT, GO!"

But even with it in his paw, his claw hovering on send, in a split second, he has come to an epiphany, looking to me and her like he knows what must be done. Time in such short supply when we could never be ready and I'm losing it, why is the fool not using it, why in the mother of god won't he...

...Would he hand it to me of all souls present, would it be me and not himself he wants-

"You know exactly what to say. You know when to say it and how. You have something I'll never have..."

His tears, as he bends over, reaching for my right paw's quivering as he grabs around it, brings it forth, and with my palm out, puts his newfound voice under my charge. How, how, so how very much that declaration of faith is shown and revealed to me at the very moment he fortifies his words.

"There's only one person they have to hear. I am not that person. Do not doubt it's anyone else but you."

Noone has ever seen it as such, that navy blue could be stood before trial by a rogue. But in spite of that, before us is a Ronin, disgraced by his lord, having abandoned the fox hunt to renounce the legitimacy of that rule. I can't think, I can't know, not even come close to believing, and stare blankly at it. The thing I didn't ask for is wrapped in black plastic and staring me straight in the face and the world will have it's day through a radio. It comes so quick and naturally, that these words are not my own. They are everyone's:

"Every cop in the operation against us, My name is Owen Conrad Fuchs! I don't have a say in what you choose today, you know this as much as I know I can't blame you for following your orders! But I'm telling you exactly that because it's your choice to follow them! No matter how much the Chief or the tells you otherwise, no matter how much you've been led to believe differently, what's
about to happen and what you'll do about it is your decision to make! Yours and yours alone! You have that power to choose how you're going to live with today for the rest of your life! Are you going to remember standing with us or are you going to remember following orders, doing exactly what you were told and taking part in someone else's war against your fellow mammals!"

It bellows out like Vesuvius over pompeii, "EVERYONE IGNORE WHAT THAT FOX TELLS YOU!" and it will change nothing. Because "IT DOES NOT MATTER IF THIS STATION IS OURS OR YOURS, WHAT MATTERS IS DECIDING FOR YOURSELF WHO DESERVES IT MORE THAN THE OTHER! YOU GET TO CHOOSE WHAT HAPPENS TODAY AND NO MATTER WHAT YOUR CHOICE IS, YOU ALONE GET TO MAKE THAT CALL! WHATEVER IT IS YOU DO, I'M BEGGING YOU, RIGHT OR WRONG, MAKE THE CALL YOU WILL ANSWER TO GOD FOR, THAT YOU'LL KNOW THE PEACE OF HAVING MADE ON YOUR OWN TERMS AND YOURS ALONE!"

It came like a call from on high. Followed through by the howling, roaring, screaming, shouting mess of an ode to joy of everyone that heard me without a radio, where it's not about what the cops needed to hear, but what we needed reaffirmed. It doesn't matter what happens today. It matters that at the end of it all, we can finally be so bold for once in our lives to stand for our will against someone else's. The pride, joy and hope in sacrifice, I'm looking at it in my friends, the alphas and the lines of security that are ready to give without doubt. In a still moment, I'm left in Eva's embrace without a need but a want, asking myself if it did anything for the cops. Regardless of what it's done for us, has my reaching out actually touched them?

The others that our own is looking back with a sorrow as I hand his radio back? Our own cop, that... "I'm not speaking on the commission's behalf, but... They're gonna single you out over everyone else to bust."

I can't see why they wouldn't him to get back, yet he's quick to tell me "I heard them and I know what you're getting at but I'm staying up here. , where Bogo is so much more likely to follow through his guarantee.

When he's got a chance right now to not let it happen, and the Alphas can still let him off the hook with a Tibetan's "...You done your duty up here, you should be with your daughter!"

But he's not going to afford himself that, when "Bogo just made me a priority! If I go further back they'll just bash their way through more of you to get to me!"

Kurt's weighing in at "Burney, you stay up here and we'll be occupied trying to throw cops off you!" and Burney has to double down. "Noone's doing that because I'm holding my own! If you wanna help then help keep them from me killing one! They're not gonna hold back and they're biting off more than they can chew!"

Ralph, now, with assertion in "Noone'll think less of you for getting back." but it's a lost cause. "I can't do that and I ain't doing it. If he's coming for me then the closer I am will put heads between us to crack. I'm not putting any more people on my conscience there's gotta be. I'm staying and you can't make me pull back." is the unwavering resolve that can't be shaken, and that demand of respect we've got to appreciate when it mirrors our own.

As we enter the two minute mark of the countdown to what's coming for all of us.

Big Purr's "Kurt, are you guys seeing this?!" and we're reminded that the lines of security are too silent. What ought to be tension ratcheting up is only shock. Burney, the committee, everyone else taller than me is seeing what's outside and their faces are dismayed, confusion in their ears and eyes, looking from my observation like the sighting of the unbelievable.
Burney beside me, beside himself, so caught off guard he can scarcely comprehend "What's everyone staring at, Sir?"

"Can I pick you up so you can see it yourself?" tells me what he can't trust with his own eyes.

"Yes. Please."

A "Let me climb up to your shoulder." from Eva, Burney's nod, and he grabs me from my sides as Eva gingerly claws her way up one of his. Her on his shoulder, myself hoisted up to see...

"Owen? Is that Buffalo?" comes from my girl, and there is no mistaking that American Bison.

"It's him.", a part of an entire wall of arms ending in hooves and locked together. A third wall in front our own, from the last place anyone could expected. That I could've considered. Prey folk, that have swooped in between us and the cops to form their own barrier to supplement our own, the evidence is right there and all I've been left as, is as speechless as everyone else.

This was Toby's big damned plan. And mixed in with it is a Buffalo that has finally figured it out, what he had done to use us and what solidarity he could actually give us. The same as Toby had, and maybe even because of him. "I'm taking back every last bad thing I ever said." about him and that's...

"And that's the Elk, the one I slashed up, he's right there with him!"

I don't get it, I can't, "This was Toby's plan?" from Eva and my "They're really doing joining us?" as Bogo shouts over a megaphone "YOU HAVE A MINUTE AND THIRTY SECONDS, WE'RE DOING OUR JOB WITH YOU IN OUR WAY OR NOT!" and of course Buffalo flinches, of course he's quivering, they all are. But they're not moving. They're not scurrying back off to whatever free speech zone the cops had posted them to.

I can't... "They're really doing this with us! " A mass of big damn prey, all in height greater to most of us, some even equal to Big Purr's elevation, that towering Big Cat I can still see as Burney lets me down, a whistling is let out behind us all and I along with the committee look to see a mass of Hyenas and Wild Dogs coming toward us, the defense we couldn't possibly have had enough of before Prey4TheHerd manifested itself as a mote between Us and The Cops. And now, therein lies in those two legions of brown spots over brown and mottled chunks of red, white and black.

A number looking as great as the Security's own, I'm shook, stumbling backwards from all this outpouring and "Owen," Eva's calling of my name catches me, like a ball in her mitt as our cop lowers her down beside me.

"We can't just hold the cops off, we got enough now to do something!" flies out of her, so determined to make me see it when I tell her "What are y- We have to, we got enough to hold them off now, more than enough!" that she'll override it with an "And that's why we can't just hold them off, now! We need to do more!"

"We can't-" just a risk here, a thought I can't complete because "Are you not seeing it!?" is so much more important to her and no, I'm not, "What am I supposed to see, Eva?!" at a time like this, at nearly a minute left before the cops march against us, when all I can think of is how long each line of defense may last against the initial wave of riot gear.

She sees that and it's making her so incredibly frustrated, she's practically hurt when she begs me "Owen, we can push them!" and the only thing I can ask, my "How can we-" sends her over the edge to show, not tell, in a shove of her paws into my chest to send me into an offguard falling back.

In that moment before I land in someone's outreached grip, I'm hurt, and wondering why of all times
would we start fighting, and it would get physical.

Then I get it.

In a eureka moment as I'm leaning into Kurt's grip behind my fallen down self and I'm seeing just what she demonstrated.

What Ralph isn't seeing, when he yells for someone to get out of here and I shout no, stop, wait and hold on. I can see how it can work, now. With nobody else understanding why she'd go from pushing me to helping me back up, as she offers to help me back up with an offered paw and I take it. I know it, why that kind of relief is in her for what she's seeing. The cops, they're expecting us to stay still, stand our ground and wait patiently as they pick us off little by little like sitting ducks. It's what they want, and what they're not gonna get, can't get, won't get, shouldn't and must never get. Because we don't have to to give it, because my girl has just figured it out. We can do more than hold...

"We can knock them down."

"What?" in the tone of disbelief in a downtown alpha and I've got some 'splaining to do, before they decide to come down on both of us.

"Ralph, Kurt, everyone, do you know what'd happen if everyone still on the ground floor slammed into Security?"

Kurt's wild eyed stare and Ralph's "Security would get pushed right back and get knocked down..." as Kurt whispers "...My god..." and Ralph's "...then the cops would go through them like butter..." drowns out his "...They'd have to charge us at full speed..." until I can barely hear "...AND EVERYBODY UP HERE WOULD GET ARRESTED..." over "...But if they did, then..."

"...AND LEAVE THE ENTIRE FREAKING HERD WIDE OPEN FOR THEM TO."

"No, Ralph, he's got it!"

"Got what!?"

We're running out of time enough for me to just shout it and hope it's not heard outside. "It's physics! Deerton's Cradle, but with a wall slamming into another! It'll send them back, if we get even half of the people behind us to push the lines forward, they'll stay intact and it'll send Five-Oh flying backwards, we can do this!"

"THIRTY SECONDS, LEAVE AND DISPERSE NOW BECAUSE THIS IS YOUR FINAL WARNING!" from outside and Ralph finally gets it, all of the Alphas do, and he lights up like a firecracker, getting it so hard he's screaming what must be done.

"SECOND LINE, BREAK AWAY FROM THE PILLARS, MEDICS FILL THE GAP AND DO IT NOW! HYENAS, WILD DOGS, FORM UP BEHIND THE SECOND LINE ROWS AS ONE BIG WALL, FORM ANOTHER AND EVERYONE DO EXACTLY WHAT I SAY WHEN I GIVE THE ORDER AND BURNEY I NEED THAT MEGAPHONE!"

I'm so terrified of it failing while it's coming together, a gamble so genius that the desperation behind it can leave no quarter for doubt, when Ralph is grabbing his radio and the PA over us crackles to life and all bets are off with the bookmaker:

"EVERYONE WATCHING US FROM THE GROUND FLOOR, ON MY COMMAND, RUN TOWARD US AS FAST AS YOU CAN!"
T minus Twenty, and "TWENTY SECONDS!" will not intimidate us when "WE HAVE A PLAN AND UNLESS WE GET EVERY VOLUNTEER THAT CAN HELP US, IT'S NOT GONNA WORK! ON MY COMMAND, EVERYONE RUNS FORWARD!"

They have to hear this outside, and I can only hold on to Eva and pray, pray so damned hard, and as much as I can, that this is all going to work out exactly like her faith is leading me to hope it will.

I've only got one thing left to know, now.

"If this is it, is this how you wanted it all to end?" from me so I can make sure. "Yes." with all her certainty.

"T E N!"

What will the headline be, tomorrow? A thought I'm losing, as Eva grabs me by the wrist, pulling me towards the medics behind a pillar, "We're too small! We'll be crushed if we stay here!" is her reason and I nearly forgot about what kind of force I pitched that we're about to inspire.

"EVERY LINE GET RIGHT UP ON THE BACK OF THE ONE IN FRONT YOU!" from Kurt rushing to join us, preparing the lines as Ralph's the PA with an "EVERYONE GET READY!" and I jump in sync with Eva. Over the bench and onto the pillar, next to medics with my friends looking ahead at us. To the best seat in the house, where we'll be safe to witness what we're five seconds away from.

The cops are banging their batons against their shields, their Psychological Wardrums falling on deaf ears. We are standing against them and nothing is changing that.

All I have left to think is a question for her. "What happens after this?"

After whatever will happen already has? The most important thing, that I'm looking into her eyes to know, she tells it with all the conviction she gave me on the day she found me by the water.

"We'll live."

"YOU HAD YOUR CHANCE, CENTRAL STATION! FORWARD MARCH!"

Everything or Nothing, Now or Never, Best or Worst and if this is gonna work, Kurt knows "YOU NEED TO PACK YOURSELVES AS TIGHT AS YOU CAN!"

I'm so scared about the timing. They're merging now. Behind Prey4TheHerd's line. Chests against every pair of locked elbows. But the timing has to be perfect. Everyone rushing has to hit against the wall the second the cops have lost momentum. The melee will start by then and riot gear will be leaning neutral, if not back. And I can only hope that Ralph will get it right.

"HOLD THE LINES! LET THEM COME!" and they are, but as they get closer, I'm seeing it behind their plexiglass shields, that doubt about orders, that lack of conviction in really having to do this. I am seeing in them the words I hoped would strike something, and it's this, the one single thing I needed to see, that I needed to know about our chances. Most, not all, but most of them, I'm finding in their eyes the lack of faith in something they can only go through the motions of doing.

At a time like this, all I can do is smile.

When "RRRUUUUUUNNNNNN!" thunders so hard it's shaking me to the core, as faith and hope convene with Ralph.
Everything ounce of those things that Woolsey had to entrust in us, if it's ever going to come to fruition, it's gonna be Now. The enemy is drawing near, and I'm squatting down to hold Eva.

I have learned from my mistake of ever disbelieving, again. She has become my point of reference to get out from between what I've wanted and what I've tried. I just need a sign, and it needs to come from my right. I'll look there now, and I behold...

Everything I could ever wish to come out of what Eva had willed. So great in scale and scope, I am feeling the quaking from under my feet.

"DO NOT SLOW DOWN!" because the most beautiful day I've ever known is about to happen, when what I'm looking at is not a wave, it's not even a tsunami. It is not water. It is a landslide of rocks and boulders and trees and everything else that comes before the volcano around it explodes.

"RAM INTO SECURITY AS HARD AS YOU CAN!" and if I could see the look behind those shields, just how much would they be questioning their orders, now? How much doubt for their odds of victory would they show?

"IT'S PART OF THE PLAN, EVERYONE HOLD THE LINE!" coming from Kurt to the wall, where all of the things that have made us who we are is about to come to a head through the hundreds upon hundreds of doors coming toward us that didn't fly off the hinges but slammed themselves so hard into their sills that they shattered their doorways. Doors flying through everything that's been built around them, crumbling it all to the very foundation. A great, barreling storm of them. So against what the cops expected out of us that they could not possibly understand the crazy, wild eyed thing we're up to when from any sane and clueless perspective, they'll never be able to get through the solid wall they're about to pointlessly crash into to slam against the cops.

"HIT THEM WITH EVERYTHING YOU CAN!" They never could be prepared against an unprecedence, and that's exactly when I'm hearing the start of that violent melee. The pained and frightful screaming as batons roll over the heads and shoulders of and hard knuckled tactical gloves grab at the prey in front of us.

"EVVVERRYTHIING YOU CAAAAAAAANNN!" They don't know, and I can't take my eyes off what they're about to. The truth in these Deerton Cradle wrecking balls, in all their momentum. They fly past us like cannon shells, in those terrible few milliseconds where I can look over her head before they make landfall. I can see the moment of clarity every last cop has to face now. As the wall they're pressing against becomes a sum of the freight train force crashing into them. The evenly distributed power like an atomic bomb, through a wall of bricks breaking the sound barrier. So instantaneously that the riot gear before us could never have been trained before on how to counter, how to defend against, how to withstand if they ever even could.

The power of hundreds of tightly woven bodies and the hundreds more sending their raw kinetic energy forward. Shaking everything against them to the the very core. The wave that came before us. Crushed and shattered and falling backwards into a mist right back into the water.

My entire life has led up to this moment.

Their size, their safety in numbers, their rule of majority and their every last other god forsaken notion of superiority to their weak flesh in armor disguised, it's falling down. Their Pachyderm towers to the sky are crumbling over like the academy of lies that all prey ego was built upon. Because their out of luck theory has been challenged with such resounding, empirical evidence to the contrary, that it can never be believed true again. We've lived through all we had to for a reality feels so strange and untrue. So shockingly much so that for a moment, nobody knows what to do. The prey protestors on top of the fallen down riot gear and the cops that had filed behind it looking back
to a tally of predators they were not prepared to face all at once.

There they all are, without a soul among them to figure out what just happened.

But it's time to begin. Isn't it?

"...GRAB THEIR SHIELDS ALREADY!"

The moment before now was the last time. Ralph will follow up Burney's follow up demand to "GET EVERYTHING OFF THEM!" with his own order to "CUFF THEM QUICK AND GET EVERYTHING ELSE OFF THEM TASERS CUFFS SPRAY EVERYTHING YOU CAN AND START CUFFING THEM!" as Bogo stumbles back up and orders his own to assist the riot cops that are out of wind after getting it knocked out of them.

Every one of us in front of me acting on their own as a whole, and the moment we used to fear of having to fight badges is happening. We're living it and we can win. It's not a foregone conclusion anymore that we can't. They're fighting tooth and claw and hoof and horn all the more fiercely for it in a melee crucible where none of us are powerless. No concern of victory or defeat. He sees that, just the same as me.

A riot shield flying through the air.

A taser thrown towards us, spinning like a tomahawk and making me duck to dodge it.

A riot cop Hippo with his wrists behind him, being dragged away by an Elephant, by the back of his vest.

All of these sharp teeth bared under snarling, peeled back lips.

The sound of claws swiping at and scratching into plexiglass.

Our least fearful moment and their own most. They underestimated us. Completely. And as quick as they were to attempt our eviction, I can tell it from Bogo's face that they were not prepared for this much chaos being organized this eloquently. And for as sudden as they came to take us, I can't believe it all the more, when I hear come out of him now. "FALL BACK!" is so out of the blue that it bears repeating because his own can't believe it.

"ALL OFFICERS FALL BACK!" reverberates so loud and clear there's no confusing it. They're truly being ordered to retreat. With everything we're throwing at them giving no room to argue against it. The compliance is immediate, without any time given for anyone to appreciate it. We're just left confused to watch it as it happens and let them depart from the fight we were certain to lose. They screwed up. There has to be something more to this, but I can't figure what. Their drawing away from us, that defeat in them, the hilarity of a riot cop running away with his hooves cuffed behind his back, though it warrants laughing, there's none being had. They're leaving, more empty hoof'd than when they came and all we can take away from it is too surreal to ingest.

It's only when someone in the crowd finally says "We did it." it that it starts to sink in.

"...We did it?" escapes from me.

"We did it!" is Eva's confirmation and the start of a chain reaction en masse to the recognition that the cops are back on their side of the road. Those three words, like lit matches over a gasoline ocean.

I blink.
We explode.

I've entered a bold new world so deafening, I can feel the shockwave in my guts. In that brief moment where I can count more feet in the air than I can on the ground, I am witnessing history. The narrative to all these exposed teeth have changed. I thought I knew what going to concert would be like several days, ago. I was wrong. All the louder and more violent is this day's celebration than the one before it, when we were just glad this station was a shelter. It's a fort, now. A meaning we have given and proven.

We did it.

Again.

I can't think clear enough, I can barely see, all I can do is feel something so beautiful that I've got no prose so bold enough to do it justice. So powerful, that what ought to be my frustration can only seem like an omnipotent moment's tender, relieving acceptance. And Eva, the love of my life behind it all, her shaking tackle of my frame makes the last chance I had to wax gone for good. Somewhere in the background, Andrew is singing praise. I'm stumbling, she's crying out her laughter and I'm replying with a scream so loud my own ears can't register the full range of.

I am feeling a dozen songs all at once, and all of their instruments, all of those vocals, are each like a unique metaphysical sentience dancing under the fur of my back. I could fly. I think I'm dancing. One moment the world is upside down and the next she's a bullet ricocheting off the back of a bench. I've lost control. I am on electrical fire. I can never change all those yesterdays that have been and gone. I have never felt burning this good and clearly before. Those yesterdays have built up to making This, Here, Now, Today, the greatest day I have ever known. Playing out in slow motion the same as it is for everyone.

The same as it ought to be for Burney, when my feet land one more time, for me to look at him and see his face.

The moment we've been waiting for, for all of our lives, and it's not quite right. In the afterglow of my bliss, I can't make it out at first. But the vision of him is so sobering, that it doesn't take much longer than all too soon for me to know what's happening. That tremor in his grip on the radio. Those wild eyes. All the while everyone continues their celebration around him. Terror has engulfed him, separating him from us by a million miles. There is an evil pouring out from that radio that I can actually feel spreading out that's becoming known to everyone around him. I get it, and know it, that same thing I felt when I looked up from my Vulpon to a traffic, it's here again both in front of me and above and behind me.

Watching me. Addressing him. That fast working venom that in an instant has him screaming and running without grace. Dread has become him. A distillation of fear at it's greatest purity.

"MY DAUGHTER! FOR GOD'S SAAAKE NOOOOOO!" bellows a runaway train as it makes flight past me. Coming off his rails with furious shaking. I know what the most poisonous thing is on the planet. It's just struck me, with venom acting so quick it's frozen me solid. The delegates joining can barely keep his pace as one from each pack all give chase. I can barely move with all of my will until my body becomes a host to something beyond my power. It's taking me forward, the question jabbing like a blade in my neck. It finally lets itself out in a "WHAT'S HAPPENING!?!" but the relief doesn't come, this gangrene only threatens to take more when the words come from Kurt.

Because there is noone that can tell the world why it happens in the first place. And wherever it has happened, even with the gangs here being charged to deal with it, there was noone besides Lionheart's lupine cops equipped to handle it. The Alphas discussed what's now a reality to only
conclude that what steps we could take would not be enough if it was a contagion. And wherever it's happened, it's going to be in a crowd. With the clearing out of the station's ground floor, it's going to be so tightly packed we might not be able to get there before Death does. What Ralph is ordering Unit 2 to combat, what Kurt just yelled out, has my living body fighting against rigormortis with it's every last defense.

We got a savage. And it's her fiance.

The source of the screaming we're drawing nearer to, getting on the radio with Gonzo to direct the gangs towards. The worst case scenario from within. The perfect uppercut to nullify all we just accomplished.

We don't have time to clear the escalator down to the terminal that Burney is already charging down. A blood curdling Get Out Of My Way from the top of his lungs is not going to the job of his weight and inertia. It's everything I can do to dodge his fallen down tripping hazards as I gain on the Alphas following him. I am starting to black out, reaching the same threshold I went over the whole time the cops chased me that Monday long ago. And I don't think it was Nadine's scream that brought me out of it, or that primal, feral roar of what used to be her lover.

No... I think it was the image. The one anodizing itself into my brain.

Of the blood on her tattered clothes, the look on her face as her father lands successive swipes of his claws into Orson. The tears over both of their eyes and total absence of anything at all behind what used to be his own. As what replaced him shrugs off every other assortment of Gangbanger besides the Wolves coordinating to clear the crowd trying to get away. An African Wild Dog holding his broken and mangled arm. A Hyena girl screaming her heart out for her male and the horrible, limp way it's dangling to send pain so great that he's slumping, with his eyes rolling over as he passes out and becomes silent in mid-wail. The moment that Kurt, having grabbed and taken Burney's taser, has pulled it's trigger and sends lightening through a savage animal. When the flow of electricity funnels into Burney as he grabs at the animal trying to bite his shoulder. The chaos of the tragedy moving so rapidly that I lose track of where I am in the epicenter, as it wildly goes from one direction to the other, surrounded by the multitudes of injured, where there are no medics when they're still coming. The image of every terrible thing happening all at once, like it would have to be depicted by a painter of antiquity, that had to capture the events of a calamity as one singularity. But this is not a painting, and I am not disconnected. I am feeling all of it, all at once, all encompassing and all consuming as all of it happens so intensely, so vividly I might as well be all of them and I wish I was so, so much. If only it was happening to me, as everyone else takes those blows and loses their blood and suffers that agony. If Heaven and Hell could convene with me, to make that deal where it was me and only me and noone else. As the barrier finally forms between me, Unit 2, Kurt and Burney and what his son in law has become. That rabid, lurching hulk as Gonzalo and what's left of Unit 2 takes the opportunity the Cop's uppercut gave them to pull it back by it's clothes and limbs and neck and clumps of matted fur to tople it down on it's back to the ground and hold it down just long enough that Burney can roll it over and restrain it's arms behind it's back. As the medics finally come to swarm over a path of destruction. Like Angels that came too late over the ruinous heap of Damascus.

And it's now, in the cruelest calm, that everything which just happened is starting to register.

With Eva holding me.

Looking up to my shock.

My fugue body standing there for my broken up mind to be left with my eyes. Images burned into my vision of the sky over me. Towards the northeast, to one of the buildings the cops evacuated.
And at a time like this, I'm just wondering why a window was left open.
An asterisk marks this chapter as having not been edited since it's publishing. I am going through this story, from this chapter onward, to modify, correct, and slightly rewrite toward my current standard and style of writing. Now that the story is "Complete" and I have no urgency to rush through it. Much.

The press of Play. The chirp of an incoming call in the recording.

"Well aren't you just the most chivalrous scumbag pred we've had to deal with~!" synthesized through a voice changer. Just enough to still be made out clearly.

A pause, before the reminder came that it was a "Real smart rookie move to not ditch the inflection. Is this your first time or are you just that cocky?"

It was ignored completely. Whoever it was, they had an agenda.

"Let me see, now... Oh yes! Sargeant Burney Humbolt, Precinct One and Oh, wouldn't you know it, You Have A Daughter and future In Law~!"

The disgusting, oozing way that reminding prelude seethes out through the speaker of that Cassette player in Raul's hand. The way it makes me visualize the malevolence through the feigned innocence of wide, reassuring eyes behind a soft smile.

"...Quit being cute and tell me who the hell you are to be looking at my file." he told the voice. He didn't know.

Noone could have even guessed it at the time.

"Boy, wouldn't it be a shame if your new friends at that train station couldn't keep her safe from a fucking pred that's reverting to his natural instinct?"

But the voice. It knew.

"YOU TOUCH HER AND I SWEAR YOUR LAST WEEK ALIVE WILL BE THE LONGEST!"

The pain one has to feel in hindsight, for the ignorance in the past. Where the afflicted didn't know then what's becoming so obvious now. With Eva having been allowed to join me in this emergency meeting. Keeping me just here enough to wish better for her as she feels the horror and the pain.

As terror pulls back it's skin like a curtain, with the showman's flourish to reveal a puzzle piece through the steam of an open wound in the cold.

"Oh, your primative little brain must've not understood what I did there! Silly me~! Well How About I tell you with a little more Annunciation, just like that Bull you know... What... If... They Couldn't... Save Her... From The Future Husband That Just Turned Savage?"
And she's reliving it with the Commission like we are all Burney Humbert.

In that exact moment Evil revealed itself as so much more whole and absolute than just violent bludgeoning hatred. There was an exacting, refined sharpness in that distorted voice. It was methodical in it's approach. Calculated in it's execution. Clearheaded through the pride to plot with precision. It was the degree of Evil that knew to apply itself from beyond. To strike it's victim at it's most tender and delicate, with an injury so intimate and carnal in nature, the violation would mutilate and cripple someone beyond the chance of ever recovering. It knew, it planned, it watched from the security cameras running on batteries. As Burney silently realized that Nadine's fiance was turned into a monster.

Because the voice, with the omnipotence of a phantom, had possessed him into becoming one.

"Well alright, I gotta go, but I'll be sure to mail you in prison about the funeral you couldn't attend ok, bye bye~!"

The precision of certainty from a foregone conclusion.

The viciousness of words that hollow organs out of their cavities.

Burney's scream through the speaker jolting us and Raul fumbles with the pause all too late to keep us from reliving everything that just happened. Reminding me that he cried out Nadine's name as she cried out Orson's in the distance, for me to know their names, to tell Gonzalo, in my panic, the useless tidbit of who he had to get his males to stop. But they were too late. The only reason I can cope with all that happened an hour ago, is her clinging to me as my emotional life support in it's own death throws. All the while the sounds of the aftermath play outside the hall. Burney is not the source of the delirious moaning outside in the hallway. He's in the locker room.

Having screamed so long and hard his throat gave out.

He's still dismantling all of those lockers, and prying benches loose from the floor to slam them into what's left of every surface he can.

With his daughter outside by the door, because noone had the heart to tell her she needed to keep her distance. She's weeping, joined by a Hyena's sobbing for her African Wild, moaning from the pain of his mauled arm as medics look after the three of them, with as much morphine in the Wild Dog as they can give without him falling asleep and not waking back up. Desolation like an abandoned asylum. Anguish with a half life that will remain lethal longer than any of us will ever live. We're living it and there's not a single dry face in this huddle of Alphas besides my own. I have become as mute and fugue as a statue, as the delegates of each pack piece together the sum of the truth they now know from having wiretapped Burney's radio by his own request.

They never considered that, when they called out to a father to Come and See it's work in a broken Fourth Seal.

Leaving us with the most horrible truth ever recorded in a cassette tape.

Into the fury of knowing there is no coincidence of pathogen, no circumstance of remnant evolution, and no mistake of anthropology to excuse the terror we've come to know.

Evidence laid bare, Ralph lending his voice for what we can't ignore.

"...They're doing this to us..."

And the breaking up of emotions cracking up will bring the ruin. Over our faces tearing. Through
our fists clinching. In our muzzles' chops peeling back. All to the recognition.

"...They're making us go savage..."

And we are all the more powerless for knowing. And just as useless as the truth itself. When there's noone out there to hear us out. Noone up there to save us, so far away from where we are in being so much closer to Hell. All that fury in all the Alphas, built up in a swell, to boil over in recognition for the conspiracy just laid bare.

It starts with Fuck cried out.

Then it takes hold over the room.

Rage exploding in the Commission. Some in The shrapnel of slurred condemnation, others in the shockwave of every fist thrown into the air and tile and drywall, the rest through debris field of tears.

For Nadine, the Hyena and her Wild Dog to not know why, only lose it, to the calamity echoing through the hall when they already have lost it.

Eva pummeling her fist into me, screaming into me, pouring her hurt and anger over my side for all we've gone through in a news cycle to have the meaning it does.

For me to just stand there. Motionless in the melee with grief in all it's forms surrounding me. But I am not done. I cannot accept this, even as it wears and tears into me like a saw because I can't help feeling I could blow through it all, if I only knew we did not accomplish all we have together for nothing to come of it. When Eva herself and everyone else taught me better than that. For us to never figure out what to do about what is unignorable of our world. And just take it, let it happen. Like I would have when I was so much older before now. That Quarantine on Predators that's coming. The Genocide that'll just have to happen because there was noone to ever figure out that keeping us from going Savage was as simple as not making us.

And I think, always being the loneliest soul in the room, that I'm starting to appreciate what it really means to be the one outlet of dissent.

Overcoming my fugue in front of everyone else's loss of control. The hard reset of my skull being put back together, undoing all that the poison of bad, brown, rotten blood coming out of the cracks has wrought my entire life. Knowing that there is still work to be done, even when the foundation is being taken out from under our feet. If I can know that, as brittle and old as I once was? They just need to do the same. Come undone enough for the kind of helping hands I've known to let put themselves back together. I'll wait for them. Allow them to let it out like I have. Unphased by it all as the one that was there, first. Already having stared into the abyss and been weighed by sin and merit.

I will be that one good digit on a pair of broken, smashed up paws for them to wonder just what the hell is wrong when it's all still as clear now as it was before the cops tried to storm. Nothing should phase me. Should phase an of us. There is nothing else to be but akin to the frog in the cream that just kept kicking until it finally got so far as to finally jump over the rim of the barrel.

"We knew from the start that the odds were against us. All that changed is that we now know why. That fucking Cassette Player has put this knowledge in our heads... and you are going to figure it out with me just how we intend to use it."

I've torn myself across their faces with that gospel. Eva's gospel. Recognized in me by her.

Eyes wide open to the reality the commission can't see and I can't be so petty as to blame them ,when Ralph has to ask on all of there behalves "Figure it out, the hell is there to figure out, what could we
And that's where the terror in the doubt has to be slain. Not in what could possibly be done, but what must impossibly become through us.

"Anything besides not a damned thing at all but fixate on what we're dealing with, like they want us to, like I would've kept doing if this girl beside me did not dare to teach me better than that, if she did not try to open my eyes about the same thing you're doing right now I used to be victimized before I met her."

This is not Eva getting broken. It's her being reset. Knowing again what she managed to forget for only a brief moment and cannot be blamed when she's putting it back together, in spite of Ralph being so dead set on taking it all back apart because "...Lionheart's quack couldn't figure out why this was happening. God damn every lab can't make those Savages go back. Even the Feds can't find out where to start. What good is a bunch of Preds gonna do to save themselves, now?!"

So with this shortness of breath in the hurt, through her wounded, pleading eyes, she's got to take it upon herself to explain the infinite. Be as bold now as I was only a moment before with the eloquence I wish I could have held.

"You took over the best known train station in the world with Owen. You sheltered and fed thousands of refugees. We defended them against cops and fought and earned half of the city's acceptance for all you accomplished... You celebrated it, then. When you knew what we were grateful for wasn't gonna last. We made it that far on our own, and we know more than anyone else out there is bothering to admit or find out... Don't you get it? That the world wasn't any help before? Never going to be? It can't, and will not do anything about what it forced on us in the first place... This is our problem, left to us to make our own solution like it has been, for none else but each other... We have done all we have without the world's help, and that fact alone makes ourselves the only ones that owe what we need! As we have been and as we can remain!"

Everything I wish I could've said.

Everything I have to be thankful for. This truth, to remind them of their very nature as Wolves when every last soul in this station needs them to know it, that hope in the void they knew before. Their courage like a galaxy of stars, to carry that light on through a future they'll never see for themselves. Their hope in sacrifice for the survival of the pack, and all they hold dear through the sense of community. With none else's glow to nourish them but their ancestors, no greater duty than to pay it forward to the future. How rare and beautiful it is that they even have that.

An intangible thing, that I can barely do justice for when I finally find the boldness to declare that "This is a fight against the very belief of precedence's supposed immutability... We've proven it wrong with everything we've done here. We have made probable all that was thought impossible. That is all the evidence we need to know we can still struggle. So I'm going to say this one more time: What this recording has given us is a blueprint, and you are going to figure out with me and her just how we intend to apply it against them."

Because if they're making us go savage, then they've got to have a way to apply it.

If we can figure out how they're delivering it, we can try to find a way to stop it.

If not stop, then at least parry. We can find one single thing to turn this poison against itself. And it is coming, from a shot in the dark by Kurt's own voice.

"...Was it just me? Or did anyone else see a mark on that Bear's neck?"
"You mean where you tased him?" seething from Raul and "No god dammit, I know where I tased him and it wasn't anywhere close. I shot so close to his heart it would've stopped his heart if he wasn't so worked up. This wasn't blood, it was like something blue was splattered on the right of his neck."

Andrew is so quick to dismiss it with the opening volley of "What do you mean, something blue splattered?" but Kurt is gonna pull through.

He is not going to let his faith wane in me and Eva, now. He will desperately kick his way out of the cream with the best footing he can get.

"I mean it was like... Like a paintball?"

Airborne, leaping over that rim of the barrel in the Tundra Wolf Delegate's confused "...Like a paintball?" and I am seeing it.

"Holy scat, that's it! I saw an open window to the northeast, did anybody else see that?!"

And Ralph is starting to piece the two together. Paintball. Open window. Spoken by Zev in "...Shot... Friends, this has to mean that the fiance of Burney's Daughter was shot!"

Coming through in spite of Ralph's "Why wasn't he shot with a-" Dart, when it is obvious to him now that a dart would have left "Evidence, A dart would have left physical evidence-" so of course, finished by my own tongue, "Of course it would've left physical evidence, that's why they used a ball filled with whatever's making preds go savage!"

Oh my christ, on the tip of everyone's tongue when the Tibetan Delegate muses the obvious aloud in "So what we are dealing with is a sniper..." for that to mean... "WE NEED TO GET EVERYONE OUTSIDE BACK UNDER COVER!", flying from Ralph in his panic.

An impossible task, made so by the reality through the words of Tundratown's Yukon female that "Cover? Back into the Station? You're talking hundreds of tents and thousands of refugees, the groundfloor is already cramped by foot traffic!"

"But the hallways!" Kurt's desperation relents, "We can move them there, line upper and lower hallway walls with tents! We can open up the employee areas if we have to!"

We have got to do something, even as "Dost," comes from Rainforest's Indian reminder that "We cannot begin to even start evacuating if everyone outside is under threat of Sniper fire! If the sharpshooter sees we are moving into the station it will prompt him to start firing!"

But this is not a catch 22, Downtown's Italian cannot let it go unseen that "We're talking about paintballs here, not bullets, not even darts! We gotta have something that'll protect us!"

"SHIELDS!" flying out of Ralph, "We got Riot Shields from the Cops and they're up front! Round them up to give Gonzalo's Gang Unit, they're the Savage Team, anyway!"

And Kurt has gotten it, too: His "OF COURSE! Downtown, do you got any gasmasks?", combatted by it's Eurasian in "Gas Masks! Gas! You've all said as much that this is a liquid!"

"If you got gas masks to give Unit 2 It'll protect their faces! All they gotta do is keep the stuff off an out of their eyes and noses and mouths when they've gotta wrestle savages down!"

"...Oh lord, that is it, of course!" Rainforest's Tibetan proclaims in the Eureka moment Kurt's given him. "Orifices, entryways towards the bloodstream! That is why the sniper shot her Fiance in the
neck! It is the same principle as needleless injection! The impact of the ball itself would cause bruising enough to have the substance pierce through the skin and go right to the carotid artery!"

Meaning to me that "...It's not just gas masks they need. If that's how this scat works, Gonzalo's crew needs to have their whole upper body covered up, anything that'll keep the juice off them!"

And Eva gets it from my own getting. "Scarves, towels, anything we can give them to wrap around their necks!"

We're actually doing this.

This desperation is not pathetic, when it is a miracle we are even daring to extinguish the cowardice in the fear of defeat.

Even as some scoff.

Even as Kurt decries "Towels?! You're talking about stopping a high speed paintball with freakan Towels?!"

Because of course it's crazy, it'd be hilarious if the stakes were not so high but no, "No, god damn it, it's a start, an idea, it's something and all it's gotta do is keep the juice off necks!"

And Eva's put it all together with "Hoodies!" flying out of her so hard she's practically dooking when "We need to get every hoodie we can from everyone in the station! Combine them with towels and gas masks and riot shields and it'll be the best equipped we can make them!"

And it's about now, when they ought to be reminding her that she's not an Alpha, that she's only here for me and that she needs to keep out of this but they can't: All of the starts by the Commission looking to her with it all at the tip of their tongues are false. They cannot argue against her declarations. Not with her conviction, not when her certainty is so on point that it cannot be dismissed. It's easy to get nervous about the rules of conduct being ignored. It's crazy and dumb, when they were all they ever had before. But this is something greater than what they were ever given until now. Something they need, when they were already certain they would have delegates from Sousten's Wild Dogs join them with those from Jager's Clan.

There is no way to ignore that this is how things must become, etched in Ralph's face as he looks to me. "...Owen, unless somebody here says otherwise, your girl's been heard. Kurt, call security up front for the shields. I'm making an announcement on the PA for hoodies, towels and scarves after this. Only thing we gotta figure out now is if setting Gonzalo up with all this is gonna raise a flag. Let whoever's doing this know what we know."

The one last thing to figure out, when what we can't afford is antagonize whoever's behind the shootings.

Making public all we know would only have us branded as paranoid conspiracy nuts to the narrative of the News cycle.

If we even only contacted the cops in secret, if they dared to listen in the first place, would they even care? Would anyone care?

The same thoughts on everyone's mind, when Raul comes out with "Has Gandolf or the other social media guy posted a statement yet?"

Kurt's "No. I told them both to keep quiet until we're done." and my "I get we had to do that, but Orson going Savage has had to reach the news by now... We need everyone to know we're keeping
the station safe after today. Not just refugees, but the City."

Raul has finalized it in his head. "So we make Unit 2 public as a savage response team. Keep Gandalf quiet that they're gang members, have him spin it that Gonzalo's crew is dressed the way they are to keep from getting mauled. It's flimsy, but'll throw suspicion off that it's to keep them from being shot."

"...Two birds with one stone. We come off proactive to the public, whoever's shooting us might buy it." comes from Kurt, for Ralph's addition of "Whoever contacted Burney wouldn't have, if they knew Downtown had the gear to record them. This can wor."

Frantic banging from the other side of the door, cutting him off with the urgency of time running out.

Unignorable, as the door swings open to show a Indian wolf medic at his wit's end. Looking to his pack’s Alphas, speaking in their tongue to the tone of lamenting.

"What is your medic telling you, Shudra?" by Zev, and the Indian delegate clinches his fist. "He is apologizing for his interruption but he and his fellow has done what they can for the Wild Dog. They have stabilized him but this has only prolonged the inevitable." He tells us, motioning to join him outside and the commission follows. The word hospital muttered under Ralph's breath as I walk behind him.

The thing that immediately catches my eye is not the gurney I'm too short to see over. I feel the pain of that Hyena girl and her boy too greatly to even look up. It's everything else I didn't catch before when I went blank that I see. The path of destruction Burney caused. Clumps of drywall littering the floor. Gaping holes in the walls. A battered locker room entrance and it's framing. Nadine, back to the wall by the door between her and her father. Slumped over with the placid, glassed over eyes of losing all she wanted in one cruel moment. Wanting to reach out. Hold something. Know anything. Staring at a wall when there's nothing there for distraction against all she's got to come to terms with.

I become lost in it all, until the moment Eva grips my paw to anchor me back to what's happening. The unavoidable I have to face with everyone else.

"He has got to be evacuated if he is to survive, Onnai had us go to Ivy Avenue with supplies to handle most emergencies... But not this. His injury is too great."

There is no questioning Shudra's call, when Rainforest brought the medical expertise in the first place. Raul is dismissing what good it'd do, his observation of "Will the cops even let an ambulance through to pick him up?" being a moot point to "Whether or not they do is on them. We must act on our own conscience and leave it to fate to decide what happens after. There is no other way around this, we must hand him over."

And the Hyena girl reels in the sobbing. She knows she won't be able to leave his side.

That they'll arrest her for trying to go with her lover. Cop protocol unable to be ignored, when her boy is ready to face it through the delirium of barbituates.

"...Just cuff me cops before, cuff ’fore they do me, coming, I know the..." is all he can barely get out. A mess jumbled up of wanting the kindness of denying the cops that one last vindictive petty outlet of spite.

"You want us to cuff you so the cops won't?" Raul asks.

His girl reeling, bending over him as he nods gently with a "Please, yes please..." for her to mirror it in "Get me a pair, too." when she already knows she'll face it, too.
Raul's Eurasian grants it in the order. "Go get them a couple of pairs, you know which suitcase
they're in... I'm gonna call for an ambulance, Ralph. We're handing that bear over to the cops? 'Cause
we might as well do it now."

Savannah Central's Nortwestern can't argue otherwise. "Kurt, round the shields up, bring Big Purr
back and a couple of others to drag Orson up front... I'm going to the PA room to make the gear
announcement. We're meeting the Hyenas and Wild Dogs at eight. Anything else that's gotta be
discussed, we'll do it in a couple hours."

Nothing else to say or do. To keep the Commission from going to their stations.

Nothing to keep my eyes from wondering back to Nadine as they split up. Reminding me of where
I've been before.

Even if I was only on the surface, when she's so much deeper below.

But maybe I was still close enough to how much farther off she is that I can at least walk over. Inch
closer. Reach out. Give whatever I can. Eva walking up behind me to the Hyena girl before we
separate, knowing what I'm doing and telling me to go in a silent nod of approval. Before looking up
to the Hyena as she puts a paw on her knee. Offering what she can for her.

The same as me, treading so delicately to Nadine. Without any sudden movement, and only a quiet
announcement of my presence.

"...do you want me to sit beside you?"

By her torn cloths.

By the exposed skin under the fur around her superficial clawmarks.

Next to the wounds that'll heal someday like the rest of her might not ever.

So lost, so far gone, it takes all she's got left to just barely mouth out a quiet, deathly silent yes.

The signal received a million lightyears away.

Avoiding eye contact, I drop to the floor next to her at my gentlest, least provocational. Close enough
I can barely hear her, now. Through the ringing from before. Slowly stuttering in between the pauses
for something like a question. Getting out a whole of two syllables with everything she has.

"...can I..."

"...anything." as softly spoken as I can make it.

Whatever she needs or wants. Nothing I could hold back if it would help.

Processed in a trickle. Coming to terms with it, and faintly, gradually lifting her left arm. Slipping her
paw between my back and the wall, shaking and trembling like a female so much infinitely older.
Hooking those claws under my thighs. Leaning into it when she picks me up in the scoop, bringing
her right arm over me. Enveloping me in all her quaking pain. Having me feel every ounce of it. Her
Fiance lost, not knowing why it had to be their future cut short and not someone else's. Why he
would claw at her like whatever he became could not still appreciate, could not still recognize, could
not still care for her. Why her father wasn't there again when she needed him the most. Why
everything she wanted had to turn and witness it all go down the drain the way it did.
All that unanswered misery not held accountable.

All of it going back to what she won't stop lingering on, when the comfort of holding me like a stuffed mammal that's timed it's breathing with her own can finally let her find in herself to be just strong enough with her mouth to ask it.

"...why do things always have to change..."

I want to make so much better for this stranger. Make it all better like I have for so many others. Give her more than just the best I can give, when a tear falling on my forehead is the simple truth that things keep changing because of the obvious.

"...it's all they ever do..."

Consequence of cause and effect that cannot, can't ever be circumvented.

No amount of knowing if God is either all knowing or all powerful or all loving can change the fact: He's up there. and we're down here. Where it's so much closer to Hell and all it's got to offer.

Her inhale, my exhale.

My warmth to ease her off from the chills going through that incredibly large torso and her weary head.

Giving her whatever solace she can get from the stroking of my back as she squeezes me. Soaking up the medicine in my presence that's starting to soothe her. But I'm not her Fiance. Not even the thing that took his body from him.

I am just a makeshift doll for her to make a plea towards.

"...tell me i can have him back..."

And at this very moment, I don't want no victory over whoever did this. If I could drag them by an ear down the only road I've been down with every other predator, have them know suffering like this, it wouldn't change a thing.

It wouldn't bring Orson back, wouldn't change today for Nadine, that African Wild Dog, his Hyena Girl, Noone.

I just want it all back for everyone and it never will be. So in the end, it just comes down to the bittersweetest truth.

"...it doesn't matter what i say... the only thing that matters is how you feel..."

The hidden truth behind what Wallace told me when I didn't have Eva. She's feeling all that she is and that's all she can allow to matter for herself. The best she can do, all that anyone can in her position, is accept it. Ride it out. With someone's presence to give her all the comfort and reassurance it possibly can. Not enough, not a replacement or cure, only just a stopgap remedy. If only that Coyote were here in the hall with us, if I could give Nadine the exact quote I figure he butchered. If I even had what he told me to tell her in kind. Tail tucked against myself, under one arm as another keeps stroking my back. Listening to Eva doing the same as I am for the Hyena but their words are static.

They don't register.
All I can do, is to limply stay as I am.

Time's passage, me being there with her under Ralph's voice on the PA. She needs to stay like this for as long as she can, but the hallway door swung open in the distance, it's something she'll just have to be denied.

"...you're going to have to get up, you shouldn't be here when they come back around..."

Big Purr behind Kurt with more muscle coming in behind them. All of them surveying Burney's destruction, their eyes coming to me and Nadine as Kurt points his thumb to the exit. Already ahead of him and nodding confirmation of what he wants.

"they don't want you to see it..." I tell her.

"...i know." when knowing is only half of this battle.

It can't work, if knowing what she's got to do won't change the fact that she doesn't get how to use it.

"...how did you do it...?"

She doesn't know how she can even get up. Go forward. Put one foot in front the other.

"how did you keep getting from the cops? keep going when she wasn't there?"

Make her progression like time's own when she hates it so much and yet could still abide by it if she only knew it's god damned secret.

"...i don't know how... the best i can tell you is i just kept getting up when i didn't think i could. i didn't even try... it just happened."

I remember it now, this taking me back to when it all first started. Back to That damned Friday when the world pitted it's turning against me, took away what little I had to give something more back with one hand on the dial just to take it all back again with another. But I've only got myself to blame for it, and I accept it now. I lost my nerve on an Elk that just wanted to freaking help me. Lionheart wouldn't have had me to sideline Espada and this all could've gone just a little different if I had just accepted that kindness that Elk tried to give. What a damned fool I was then, but that was then and it isn't now, now when it's time to let it go, go out and start again.

I know it.

Nadine knows it now, too.

It comes with a shift of her body going forward like she will.

Loosening her grip with one last stroke of my back to start putting me down to use that momentum of letting go of me to keep herself going without even thinking or trying.

Just doing it. Like noone ever could tell her to do it, as I tug on an arm to get that squatting position towards her ascension and just like that, against all odds, she's finally standing up.

And looking to the door to her right.

"...What are you doing, Nadine?" as she slowly turns to it, with a determination I couldn't fathom her having. When I'm trying not to be nervous, but can't help raising my voice.

"I don't know... I think I need to let it happen... Can you do the same for me?" without having to
explain what this is. Seeing her through what's about to happen. Go with her where she needs to be.

"...Anything I can do, I'll do it for you." I tell her. And she pushes on a door that won't budge. Tries again, keeps pushing against it, everything her exhaustion can give, and the damned thing finally relents. Against the creaking of it's hinges, and the scraping of debris against the tile. An entire locker cabinet on it's side, being why the door was so hard to open. It's legs sheared off. It was bolted that securely to the floor before he threw it. Evidence of her father's strength. But I can't be scared, when it doesn't even matter to her. I can only be amazed by her, putting one leg over it and then the other as I climb over it for her. As she navigates the two of us around the broken glass and the dangling fluorescent light fixtures. Stepping over torn off locker doors and a splintered wooden bench. Finding her way to him, leading me around a devastated corner.

The sight of his stillness, sitting there hunched over and staring at the floor.

To his mangled up fists.

Those ruined claws that left themselves in every other flat surface.

He used his paws, until there wasn't enough of them left to express just what he felt for letting her down the worst he ever has.

Not being there the one time she needed him the most.

A bastard mistake of a father, the same as he ever was to her, with nothing left to his body but a head reflecting on all he never did for her to culminate in today.

He can't even see her for what she is, right there in front of him, letting go of my paw when she doesn't need me anymore.

Unresponsive as she comes to him.

Not without idolatry, but all the more like a believer of a symbol far too frail to not need her pity.

She needs him, that hollow covenant like a marble statue watching Nero burn down Rome in silence.

Her kneeling down is not a prostration, yet a little more than just the confirmation that there's still someone there for her. She loves that god. Without a care that he was false, and with a love all the more whole than filial piety. There's someone under that torn blue uniform she's dying to break out, as the violence echoes in the hall outside. Leaning forward into that navy cage, with delicately shaking paws clinging to it, trying to find her father behind it.

Not only because she needs him when she does. But because he needs her. Needs his daughter to come back to him like he never did for her, as the thing that took Orson's body draws nearer, bellowing through a muzzle with claws clicking and scraping, while a ten foot tall feline and the rest of them struggle like Atlas with their mission.

Nadine presses her forehead against Burney's own. Soothing him as best she can, her father shaking to the reminder, that traumatic fury he could never reconcile if she was not here to embrace him for all he is. A keeper of the peace. A stoic, dutiful agent of justice. A father that will always be loved. Those tears like a king at the end of his rule. For a daughter becoming a queen before his eyes.

Alone and together at once, needing each other when they are all they've got.

His limp, broken paws lifting up in a god's prayer toward his own disciple. Placing each other along her sides when he can't even grasp her.
A choking up, a sob, a rabid animal outside like a runaway train in a struggle against it's rails and it all comes down for him.

Emotion raining down their faces, making shelter against the thunder echoing so loud outside. And I think, from the language of his body, that he knows what she's doing. What she's giving, and what he's taking, and what it truly means.

The relief in that for both of them, seeing each other through the calamity outside drawing further and further away.

If he had a throat, would he even have the words? Would he be able to say sorry? Would he be able to say those three words she just said in the affirmation of how she feels? That example he never led, all the times he had no choice in not being there for her. She is taking up that mantle like he never did, without it having to refute anything he couldn't do before. Because it doesn't matter, what he did or didn't do before.

Not anymore.

The only thing here that matters is how she feels now.

Choosing to be here for him.

Choosing to be her father's own daughter.

Burning in each other's intimacy against the cold dark hell they're surrounded by.

Finding that freedom from all that ever was and wasn't, in all that isn't and is. With each other's downfall being drawn further and further away. Until the calamity of Orson's possessed body is so far removed from where they are, leaning into each other so greatly, that they can't even hear it anymore.

With so much more being found than they thought was lost and gone.

But whether or not I knew I wasn't meant to see this, it's dawned on me that I'm not needed here. Overwhelmed as I am by what I've seen, I find my way back to the door that Eva's holding open for me. Aware that I was never the son I could've been for my folks, nor the male, the mammal, that I should've been. But with her in my arms and practically sweeping me off my feet, I've got the peace to know it: I have only ever been the best I could've been, and still have all I have yet to accomplish.

I ask her "Where's the couple?" in that embrace, when I eventually note their absence.

"...She's alright in there. They both are... His fists looked so bad it's a miracle if he'll ever use them."

"What happened in there?" she asks, and not about what she saw with her own eyes, but what I saw with mine around that corner, splattered with blood like all the other craters he left.

"I don't think I could ever say it well enough to do right by what I saw... If it was even my place to tell you but... I think it was the best thing that happened today."

That conviction in saying it. The shock in her face when I place what I saw in there above even the
fact we're still here. Above our fighting off the cops. Things change, and I'm the one holding the other, now.

Her reminding me "We ought to be up front in case they need us." is a given I can't really argue against. So I get on the radio with "I'm heading up front, New Face is safe for medical whenever they get the chance." and we go together.

Down the hallway. Through the crowds on the ground floor that never felt as sober as it does, now. This space as much in twilight as the sky above us, filled with doubt and fear at what it just witnessed. Caught between between feelings like Emergency Room and Funeral Parlor. A wake still remains from everyone clearing the way for Orson and his victim. Walls lined in the poison of distraught questions of if that's how they're gonna leave here. It's not that these muted conversations aren't sinking it's fangs into me. It's that from a safe distance, I can realize that I didn't even know how hard that life was. Believing in how uncertain the ground is under your feet. I wouldn't have thought about it if I didn't see so much of my old self in everyone surrounding us.

I haven't even noticed, until now, that Eva isn't even holding my paw. I'm making my way to the station's entrance without the reassurance of her touch as the sobriety around me starts giving way to the shouting. Big Purr's towering mass in a clearing with the others on snare duty, struggling every time the beast snarls, lunges and thrashes.

But that's not what Eva's taking me to. I lose sight of that scene through the crowd as she leads me towards the Ambulance.

A slip through Security and Prey4TheHerd's lines, with Eva calling out "Lateefa!" right on time for the two of us to see Raul securing and locking the handcuffs behind the Hyena's back. As she turns her pained gaze away from the cops she's pleading with to have our hearts sink with her own.

The hurt on her face when she tells Eva "...They won't let me go with him..." and we all know what we can't believe.

The one thing that the cops have to lord over them, is that she's not a relative, and he's not married to her.

And that Elephant is not even the least bit torn about telling her "And we told you why we can't let you go!" to draw her attention back with "No Officer you don't under-"

"I really do understand, hood girl! Ain't no vacancy for you except a jail cell if you can't handle being with your own kind!"

My stomach churns to "I love him!" because I know what the cop's gonna say and he doesn't disappoint. "Tough cookie! You should've thought about that before you got yourselves in this!"

"I'm handcuffed and turning myself in if you'd just let GO WITH MY MALE, IF YOU WOULD JUST-" Her lunging forward, Raul holding her back as some Red Stag from Prey4TheHerd puts himself in between.

The tears come to her face when she's done all she can and it's all just so damned funny to that Elephant because with a laugh, he's just got to say this: "Hey boys, the news said this savage stuff might be contagious? Look at that bitch go!"

And every time I think I couldn't get anymore sick and tired, that prey's disease just proves me wrong again.

It flies, flies so quick out of my mouth I couldn't stop it if I wanted, "HEY, WHAT WOULD YOU
"DO IF THAT WAS YOUR FEMALE ON THAT STRETCHER?"

"It wouldn't be, Fox! SHE OBEYS THE LAW!"

Eva shakes her head. "You... YOU COWARD!" she declares him, to not even be able to try to put himself in Lateefa's position, when that Hyena screams "HOW HARD COULD IT BE FOR YOU TO JUST LET ME GO WITH HIM?!"

She's trying to get herself out of the grip everyone keeping her at bay and all it's doing is giving that elephant the room to gloat.

Front feet on bended knees as he hunches over, pointing his trunk at my love with that smug poison in the promise.

"Don't you worry little lady, I'll make this bitch's ghetto boy is taken Good Care Of him after we're done w-"

A black cloven pair of hooves coming from out from the line of bystanders in uniform. Latching onto that damned ghoul's trunk and pulling down so hard, that gray and aged arm thicker than my torso could nearly pull it off his face.

"AS A MATTER OF FACT, I'LL MAKE SURE THEY'LL BOTH TAKEN CARE OF! YOU!" that Cape Buffalo calls out, his free set of hooves pointing at Lateefa. His leer into his subordinate's eyes unflinching when he tells her "GET IN WITH HIM! NOW!"

This is...

This is happening.

"...Thank you, thank You, oh my Go-"

"GO! NOW!" with his keratin digit accentuating each syllable with a thrust.

I can't take my eyes off what's demanding my disbelief. I only sense it out the corner of my eye when Raul lets her go and she slips into the back as the EMTs load her boy up behind her...

This is really happening, the Chief of Police correcting one of his own right in front of us. We're speechless. He's got all the diction in the world for the example he's about to make.

"...I told every last officer here what I couldn't afford. I told you! And Here You Are, Compromising My operation That Much More?"

As selfish and ugly his posturing is, I'm somehow seeing something else like it's under a mask. One of his officers openly, proudly threatened torture on our own. There should be every reason his benefit would be an accidental afterthought to our own, right now.

I could tell myself that it's just not shame and moral outrage he's feeling, if I could not see how his face is twisting under that leer.

It shouldn't be.

So why does it feel like the Wolves around me sense it, too?

Why am I left feeling like there's a mammality in him that can't get out from years of being cold? Like he's almost cringing under that livid leer into his subordinate's eyes, bringing the pain into that Elephant when he pulls him down to make him see just a little closer, more eye to eye with how
betrayed he feels?

"I will personally handpick the officers that will stand guard by whatever door is between you and that couple. If I so much as hear you've called the hospital they were taken to, I will make sure your unpaid leave becomes a dishonorable discharge. Have I made myself clear, now?"

...That wasn't a show. He actually cares.

Against everything he's built it, I am watching sympathy seep through. I was almost fooled to believe he couldn't hold such a genuine investment in others. He didn't just order her into that Ambulance to bring an escalation back down. He didn't have to. Nothing could have made him, but a sense of duty, and the volition to make his decision his own, on how he was going to live with what happened before his eyes.

"HAVE I FINALLY MADE MYSELF CLEAR?!!" he bellows against that Elephant's silence of shame. And it's about now that I remember a trunk is a nose, and with that Elephant's nose pinched off, I could laugh at how he's to sound, if I didn't already have just what I wanted out of all this.

"...Sir, yes, Sir..." comes out of him like Droopy. It gets a few chuckles out of everyone else, at least. Rubbing it in his face when it's already smeared on him.

"Higgens!" from that Cape Buffalo, to get a Hippo coming into sight with another Sir. "Take Trunkford's Badge and escort him back to his desk! Make sure he leaves nothing behind then head to the hospital that couple was taken to! You're on guard duty until for them until further notice!"

Another Sir, and an unceremonious tearing off of Trunkford's gilded potsteel by Higgens makes this all about too much placation for onlookers to not be on the verge of celebrating it. By the very face of that Goliath we toppled just a few hours ago. From an act that could not have been foreseen. But this is the enemy we're talking about.

And yet I'm hearing one clap from a Prey4TheHerd idiot become another, and another and then some more. Of course they would, not having had anything close to the experience we've had that's keeping us from backing their ignorance. But it still gets Bogo's attention drawn back to us.

With Higgens leading Trunkford away, he's got to remind them, remind all of us "I still have my orders to clear Zootopia Central and so help me, it will cost what it'll cost!"

...It's a war, after all. He means that, sure. Couldn't have it any other way. But somehow, as much as he wants it to be, it just doesn't really feel like a full commitment to the war effort. Like he had to remind himself. Lash out at the momentary weakness he's afraid has been shown. He's got to have it as black and white as him being the well defined set against our narrative. He couldn't handle his position any other way, forced to do whatever it'd take for him to get the city out of the mess it made for himself.

This could've been avoided, and I think he knows.

However much he hates preds, hates us for all the things he thinks we are, he knows our taking this Station from his City, as a reaction to all his cops and his city did to us to make us do this, was the only thing we could do. The fact that the Wolves within his police force warned their own packs of the oncoming raids doesn't really change that.

...I'm mammalizing the very avatar of the system that demammalized me and everyone like me. Even as he takes back all the steps he's got to against seeing us for who we are.

What the hell am I doing?
What the hell is Eva doing, telling Bogo that thing that must have never crossed a specist prey boy's mind in the truth?

"...We just wanna live. I want me and my boy to work jobs, get money, make rent and enjoy life. We want to do all those things you can, without being held back enough that we've gotta break the law. Is that too much to ask for?"

And just like that, she's made it known that he's not impregnable. There's a person in that immaculate uniform. Not a statue but a soul that can hear them.

"Hey Officer, you think I want to be here?!"

The floodgates open.

"All you had to do was not tase us!"

The grievances will be heard.

"You want me out of here so damned bad?! I got the money! Just lemme crash at your place 'til I find a landlord that'll take me in!"

Every onlooker will attempt the one thing he's trying to keep himself from even trying.

"I just want to be around people that aren't afraid of me!"

Whether he likes it or not, they will be heard.

"You longnecks got your quarantine! All y'all just mad Wolves got around to it before you did!"

And oh god, is it starting to hurt.

"Y'all so scared of us going after your precious spoiled prey girls like we even got the patience?! I don't want no females like yours, they couldn't get me if they tried!"

Oh god, was this the last thing he needed right now.

"I can't even get upset about something without you thinking I'ma 'bout to go savage!"

The fury building up in sync with the guilt.

"Why'd you have to get me fired from the best job I ever had?!"

The knowing that the system he's serving abandoned the folks that deserved a spared rod as much as anyone else.

"None of us would've kicked you prey boys out of our station if you hadn't kicked us out of your city!"

But no, he's telling himself, it's not his fault. Wasn't ever his fault he only had what he had to work with.

"Keep talking 'bout that Mammal Inclusion Initiative like we even care! You never even tried!"

But it never mattered who's fault it ever was, when he never even tried to fix someone else's mess.

"Hey Prey Boy, all I want is to walk down the street without ending up on the news!"
But not even that matters right now.

"You don't serve the people!"

Doesn't even matter what he's hearing and what he's not because all that matters in that quaking trembling of that hoof stomped when he thrashes his body lunging forward is that he's had "ENOUGH! THAT IS IT, I HAVE HAD ENOUGH AND NOTHING YOU SAY CHANGES THE FACTS!"

...This is when the faintest glimmer of hope gets snuffed out before it.

"YOU'VE ALL BROKEN THE LAWS I SWARE TO UPHOLD AND YOU WILL KNOW THE CONSEQUENCES IN THE COMING DAYS! MARK MY WORDS, YOUR PROTEST WILL BE DISMANTLED AND I WILL GIVE THE CITY BACK IT'S STATION!"

...This is when just a simple understanding gets smashed before the groundwork was even laid down. Not even a truce. Not even an agreement. That plain as day definition in our borders of us versus them and we know it all over again: The cops don't serve us. They don't really want to know that they don't. Even if they could and did know, they never will serve us.

God damn it all is on everyone's mind. The hurt creeps back in, but it ain't mine I'm feeling. It's everyone else's. The hurt in Security, Prey4TheHerd and all these onlookers that have to meet the badge's staring down with their own. The same way you've got to size others up in a big damn fight and pick out the ones you're most likely to win against and figure out how you're gonna do it. That same thing I've felt every other time I've been here. I'm just more aware of it, now. God damn all of our sympathy for having just gone to the devil, as he grabs his radio to remind his own "ALL OFFICERS, MAINTAIN SILENCE WITH THE OP4!" because he can't have a repeat.

Not when we got as close as we did to reaching through to him. But that's even the start. He needs to raise the stakes. Take his calm between his past attempt and the next one hostage. "ALL RIOT UNITS MOBILIZE! ONE MORE PROVOCATION AND WE PREPARE FOR ANOTHER ASSAULT!" Make sure the curtain's closed between us with plexigass, when all we asked of him was a little empathy. But this rejection of us is just starting to feel like a quiet disappointment, now. A familiar expectation to only shake my head to while regular uniforms get replaced by the battle vests and faceshield helmets.

"Eva, lets just forget it and go back inside." Because again, she gave her heart up to the chance of a cop hearing her out and didn't get anything out of it but another punch in the face. We walk the space between Security and prey protesters. Looking for a gap for us so we don't have to squeeze back through. So lost in the facts, he's to my right and I walk past him without even recognizing him.

But he recognizes me.

"...Owen?" he calls out, and Eva stops as I do.

"Owen Conrad Fuchs?" he asks again. With that voice I heard before. Drawing me out of the bitterness I've sunk into while I wonder how it knows my name. I piece it together as turn my head back. To look up and see...

"My name is Bruce Hartford." the Elk reminds me. Kindly like I don't deserve to be. As a gentle haunting, dissolving what Bogo left me with, to replace it, and Eva's anger, with something reassuringly uncertain.

In our apprehension, neither of us can put a name on just he's left us feeling. But his gaze searches
It's almost uncalled for, how genuinely he admits "You probably didn't hear me, the first time I told you." but somewhere, far from where we're standing, he's reliving that moment between us.

Back in the middle of that street with me, where he offered me a hoof and I gave him a scratch.

But the way he's looking to me, whatever he wants, it's not anything that I'm left to feel right about.

Like he's got some kind of peace that should be putting my mind at ease. But I don't deserve it, and challenge it with "All I remembered you saying the day before was that I was the last time you'd ever..." for him to finally finish that thought in "...Ever help someone out like you."

The way that stings, how it hurts him more than it ever could me. It's not sarcastic, me telling him "...Hell of a way to break that promise, ain't it? You sticking your neck out like this, for everybody like me." but he can appreciate the humor of this all the same. A softly distraught, self conscious smile to himself as he looks left to everybody like me.

"Well... It wouldn't be a lie, if I said I swore that you were going to be the last."

But he was right, about me not having heard him before, with my ears still ringing back then to not even make out anything I didn't want to hear. I've got to confess that the "...First time I heard your name was when I saw that video on the news. I was at a Bug Burga, caught up in the stories playing out in the other customers when ZNN broke the news that cops were looking for me. I had already lost a good friend that day, trying to get back at a bunch of specists like I didn't think I could when it was that Pig that went after me... I was alone, and suffering in my guilt over everything I was and did, as everybody started looking at me and calling the cops."

And as much as it hurts to say that, it kills me even more that it feels like I'm making up excuses.

But something about the pity on him says that he knows I'm not. That I'm just trying, when I know he deserves as much from me.

His look is telling me and Eva that he's not looking for anything else than to understand, and tells me something that feels like a needless confession. "I read in the Zootopia Times you were nearly caught there... I was looking for every reason those interviews could give me to hate you even more. You wouldn't believe how angry I was that someone convinced the rest of the customers to let you go. I hated them for it. I blamed them as much as I did you for all the chaos that happened when the cops hunted you down. Watched every clip of it on zootube I could find to validate it..."

Even though none else would call that a sin, and I'm nearly on the verge of telling him I don't blame him when he continues.

"...But everyone the reporter interviewed kept going back to you going in that restaurant again. Only to tell a couple they needed to stay together. How you poured your heart out to them, even though you knew the cops were already en route. I still hated you, but it just wasn't the same after I learned you did that."

With some amazement at the fact I did that, his hopeful look betrays that question in his head: Did that one little thing I tried to accomplish actually help them?

And not to change the subject, but I think I need to tell him for his own piece of mind that "...Those two are in there, somewhere. Every time I've seen them, they've been... It's like he's never a doubt about deserving her since. And she's thanked me so much, I don't think..."
But I can hardly cope with how much good I did for those two, when I've been through all I have today and tonight. And he gets that, reminding me "You've had a hard day," to have it all come to a head when that's not what he meant to happen.

I don't deserve that pity, even if "Hard doesn't even start. First the cops, then the bear going savage, me having to comfort his fiance as best I could... Then watching her stumble back to her father so they could piece themselves back together-"

"It's ok, Owen." he tells me, thinking he needs to reconcile this all for me. When half of this was good. The other half was something he had no control over. I end up saying "I mean, it really isn't." when really, I'm just overwhelmed at how low and how high this date's experience was for me. But he gets that somehow, thinking for a moment and changing the subject. "...Her name is Eva, right?"

I would appreciate what he's doing, if I wasn't so hung up on "How did you..." when it's obvious how he knew her name. "...The news, right?" and then I get it. Him bringing us back to whatever want he wants, as he goes back to "I tried to keep track of you both, after they started reporting about Lionheart and the savage attacks." He laments that with all his being, softly despising the fact that "I didn't want to accept you were anything more than violent, but knowing about the couple made it hard."

And maybe he's being selfish. Maybe it's me being selfish instead, when I bring it all back around to what I had done. "...I didn't leave you much reason to think of me as anything else."

I really don't know.

But I want to know.

My face twisted, not so much about what I had done, before, as what I'm trying to figure out, now. But for a moment, he'll entertain it with "No, you really didn't." when I can see it as much on his face as I can hear it in his voice, that he's trying for something better. "...And I had made my mind up about you until four days ago, when I turned the news on and saw you reunited with her. How emotional you both were. And how earlier in the day, I enjoyed every thing Don Lemming said to you. It was good... I'm not going to tell you I wasn't petty. But I saw how wrong I was, the moment I turned my television on in my apartment to see you both on top of each other. And until Fabienne Growley said only specists would confuse it for a savage attack, I thought it was... I saw the rest of her report on Zootube. And I watched as you and Fabienne had everyone in there tell the rest of us why you were in the Station... Then I saw you both falling over each other and I saw it for what it was..."

That the two of us, as small as we are, predators though we be, criminals we've become, and for what little we had to give, we gave so completely with our fullest absolution, all of the love and nurture we possibly can. On such a profound scale that even he, a slighted prey mammal, cannot be blinded to it. And in that admission of seeing that, I'm starting to get where he's going. I just can't believe that it's where he wants to go. That he's trying to see me as more than the pred that rejected him. Leaving me to believe, more than that, he's trying to get me to come at him with the truth of why I did what I did. Everything I'm seeing on his face seems to be begging that. For the very thing I couldn't see, with him trying to make me see the same as he has.

To get me to the point that I can finally say this without guilt, only as a truth of where I was. To look back to it like he has. But I'll believe he's ready, look back on that day like I had before, and give him what I think he's looking for. "...I was angry that I couldn't just fend for myself. Get him off of me like I could have if I wasn't just a pred. It hurt so much that I couldn't just get him off me for myself, because I knew if I did I'd only make it worse."
"...You thought everyone that could have seen you fight back would think you started it." he reaffirms. Finishing that thought with "Because you were a predator."

And I could tell him that I didn't hear him, because of that Boar shouting into my ear. But what I'm caught on, when I look back, is that "...I never even saw you come. I was just hoping he'd get all his anger out of his system before he started decking me or try to kill me like he was about to." His mouth opening to say whatever he was about to, recognizing that I am not done and closing back. "I didn't see it until after you threw him back in his truck, but his wheels were turned into the left lane. He saw me splitting lanes in his rearview and was thinking of cutting me off to have me crash into him. Had he done that, he would've guided me straight into the back of another car and I would've flown."

In this moment, he recollects seeing those wheels turned towards the left lane. He's back there with me, like he wanted us to be. Together. And all that fury he felt in that moment towards that Boar comes again to him. Hooves clinching, wishing he knew where that third party is, now. With thoughts running through his head of how easy he had let the Pig go in retrospect.

But as I bring it all back to "And for how grateful I should've been that you at least tried to help me, when nobody else was..." he has to renounce it with a betrayal of knowledge he knows is going to shock.

"Nothing I could have said would make up for the things that pig did. Because all you saw was someone only acting self righteous out of Prey Guilt. Like you didn't even matter to me. That I was just looking for something to feel good about."

He met Toby, somehow. In that confusion of their counter protest against everyone that wanted us out, he had heart-to-heart with Toby. He came to that White Tailed Buck, for what hints to the riddle of my action he could get from him. For Toby to tell this Elk in front of me everything we talked about on that day Cliffside made the news. Bring himself that much closer to seeing me as I was.

"...I don't think you were completely wrong. I would like to say I wasn't as bad as Buffalo Buffalo..." he starts, making it known Toby brought Buffy up to him, obvious enough he doesn't remember for me to say "You say it eight times." while wracked with guilt and for him to ignore it all the same because like so much else, it doesn't matter to him. "...I would like to say I wasn't as bad as him, but I kind of did fit the bill."

I don't think he's blaming himself for whatever he was, but I'm interrupting him with this while I can. "But none of that even matters. You believing and doing whatever you did, you being however much a stereotypical prey boy you were, none of it should've mattered when you came down on him... You were still being the best you could. You only tried like you were taught to and none of that even matters, when I should have just been grateful someone even bothered to help me out."

I owe him, with all of my debt, every inch of that journey he's gone through that I can give him. When all he's trying to do is look back for the sake our mutual closure. That we just did what we did as products of our experiences.

"...And you rejected it and gave me a cut straight to the bone..." he tells me, to shake that last ounce of his hatred of me out of himself.

"...To the bone?" I repeat, shocked and finally aware now of how deep my wounding rejection really went.

"I taught myself Iron Claw. When I was younger and a feline, canine only school rejected me. The nerve damage worked so well I didn't feel it, much less know how bad it was until my physician told
me and sutured the cut.” He says that fondly. With a little self congratulation but more or less, it comes off as just a simple statement of fact.

Leaving me floored and reminding him, again, "...I cut you to the bone, and you're here in front of me, right here with Toby's other protesters like that doesn't even matter."

But he's not gonna have it. "I know you've got the guilt to say it should matter, Owen. But it really doesn't." Not when he's trying to be a better person now, and only looking back for the sake of closure. Without guilt. Just telling me that he knew the role he played when he admits "I know as well as you, who most of my students' parents assumed their children would have to defend themselves against someday."

But I can't blame him, taking part in a system he couldn't really see for what it was, until he made whatever decisions he did to put enough distance between himself and what he was built up to be.

"...It ain't really your fault as a prey boy. All this scat the cops, the news and your kin have put us through." but that's not what he's looking for.

I can see as much in that look that he gives me, that right now, "It doesn't matter who's at fault."

That one simple statement makes it finally dawn on me, just what it's all about. This chance meeting, long overdue, realized by him having done his part between these preds and those cops.

I'm just so shocked he's come to me as he has, but I can believe it, now.

He's not looking for forgiveness, here. Nor a sorry out of either of us. Or to find any one single soul to blame. It's not about any of that.

"And I'm not here to make it up to you or any other predator. None of these protesters with me ever could... I'm not able to speak for them, but for me..."

Self conscious, aware this might not be the right way to put it, he'll power through with some gentle peace in his voice says he's done with lingering.

"It doesn't matter what you did. Nothing would make any of you less than a fellow mammal. I just want better for all of us. Do whatever I can for everyone like you."

It feels like a relief, to look to him, and receive back what I think I always wanted in someone like he used to be.

"Your kind fought tooth and nail just to have a seat at the table. I understand that better than I ever have before. How the society that belongs to both of us still tries to keep you away from it. But we have a duty, regardless of where we have come from, to go somewhere better than this together."

The truth he's getting at that I can finally acknowledge. With all that's left for us, is to accept that day for what it was. Where we both were in our lives back then. To stop fixating on blame and try to focus on how we can just fix this mess.

To have it come out of my own mouth, as a real live boy, that he's here in front of me "...Without Hubris. Forfeiting all we've known to do what must be done. For no lesser reason than the burden being on all of us to refute, against all it's logic, that definition of how things will always be."

That charge we need to accept as mammals and nothing else. A mutual, unspoken understanding that it doesn't matter if that responsibility was always there. Only that we're all the more equipped to make our society now, as much now as we ever needed before, a steward and not the circumstance
as we've known it. If he was still the mammal he used to be, he would've followed up my words with something about me being articulate, I feel. But all he can do is smile back with me, without me having any doubt in my mind that he sees me as an equivalent.

"...I needed this." I tell him.

"We both did... If this world ever gets to the point we can meet at a better place..." He'll still offer.

My "Thank you." with a wave of my paw, him waving goodbye back to reassure with "Your welcome, and you're welcomed to." and I part ways.

Eva leading me through the first gap in security she finds. Back into the station with her guidance. At peace but confronted all the same. Through the crowd, but not by how everyone's still caught up in doubt.

It's a little more complete than just seeing that fear I used to have for what it was. Or that Nadine could have reconciled her father's agony through her own. It's more than both of those things, combined with a Police Chief doing the right thing and almost seeing reason, and the Elk that genuinely did.

It's everything, all at once.

Libraries of testimony to reaffirm what was always there. The simple fact I was made to believe against as a predator. I am not only that, but more. A mammal, a person, as every last predator with that lingering doubt like my old one still is, no matter all the definition we've endured. The cruelty which could not accept what we are. It's not survival instinct to say what I am, anymore. Not some fight or flight challenge to it's revocation. But the dauntless, irreconcilable truth. Self evident, like the rocks of a shore. Unburdened and remaining.

And I'm going in.

Eva feeling this from my paw. To look back, and see her boy become.

"...Guess I'm doing that thing again you hate." I admit. Thinking like a maelstrom churns.

Yet all she can do is look at me in pride, the feeling beaming out of her to let me know, with her beautiful dark brown eyes before her voice does that "...You're doing it right, for once."

We've got everywhere to go, someday. But that's neither now nor here. Paused to appreciate what's happening in each other, I could say I wouldn't be who I am without her and everyone and everything else.

But it'd be a disservice to the truth that I am.

Our paws holding each other's body, I bow my head down. For her to raise her own. For us to part our lips. Me to slip mine underneath her tongue. Her teeth to lock into mine. And unleash our love into the other, and know wholeness without question. Holding on to love taken and letting go to give it all at once. To burn to become our own beacon.
Midway through the night and I'm waking up before our alarms strike four.

I think she is, too. I feel her shifting over me.

I used to lay on my right side, my spine had settled to where I couldn't sleep any other way. Now I sleep on whatever side she lays me on. Her body is small, but I don't need heavy blankets anymore with her on top. Eva covets the same as she is coveted. and she covets me. I'm just a Fox that knows better than to argue. My gratitude is so much bigger, so I try not to suffocate her with it. I only go to stretch from under her, and she cheekily tucks her snout into my scruff. My weakness is my neck and she uses it well. A quick application of teeth nibbling into the right side and I melt. I gasp and go crosseyed. Limp and defenseless, as she grinds her lap off on the small of my back. The only thing I can move is my wagging brush and I can't help it.

She beams with pride, but isn't satisfied.

She lets go of my neck. She rolls onto her back to stretch it against mine. A slinky sliding off my right and I shift onto my left side. Our timings down perfectly. A flurry of movement later, and she's spooning with me. Except she's doing it in reverse, with her butt in my face. I think she meant to do that but I know I don't mind when either end of her's as sacred as the other. She chitters while I let out a mewl. Unapologetically primal, the both of us are when waking up. Her back to my shifting stomach. The crown of her head pressed into my own lap. The underside of my jaw between her legs. My chin resting on her womb. Her smell is all over me, mine on her, and all is right in our own little universe of just the two of us.

I'm her boy and she's my saving grace. Could I ask for anything else?

When she's this good at taking my mind off of everything else?

Well, I got an idea at least in "get yer butt up out of my face."

She's all too quick to put it back on me with a whispering "you get your head out from between my legs~!" when she initiated this, but it's alright, even with her foot's in my ear.

Because I just got reminded of something she said a couple days back.

And I'm about to act on it, when she's saved by the bells. Our phones going off, getting me to obey her, to look to them placed by the entrance as alarms in other tents start going off and I see the
shadow of a couple outside I'm still not on firstname basis with. Some Marbled Cat lady and her Margay boy that's put up with the stink we always leave behind. Making me kind of feel bad as I whine and turn mine and hers off, as she slinks out of my big spoon to start getting dressed and throw me my own clothes. We make it out with our stuff in record time, though I still don't get their names. They're in with the front zipped shit before I can ask.

Guess it's their turn to contribute to the stink in there.

Everyone else on the ten to four sleepcycle shuffles off from the tents and the crowds envelope us. A backdrop to keep things insulated while the afterglow from last night keeps the peace in me.

Cemented in Eva's hold on me. With a self satisfied pride of "...I guess I'm an Alpha, now." for me to gratefully remind "You always were, Misses Taking Charge. It's just official, now."

She's not having it, though. Returning it back to sender with a squeeze of my cheeks when she corrects with "Miss, Mistes~."

Brush gently pressing to wrap between my legs for a moment when I melt so hard, I barely catch what she did there. "...Yeah, I'm not gonna argue, that could be a word." when I practically am that word, and it feels a little less like a petty turnaround, just a simple reaffirming that I'm someone's.

"Damn right~." she coos, still riding on how high she got off me, earlier. I'll make worse for her, when I can already see "How's it treating you? Being all managerial and shid?" and I'm only asking for her please herself with "Makes me feel like Janelle Mewlnae."

We're making a scene, here. Her antagonizing my aching body when I egg her on with "You were always were, though." and she turns my words back on me in "Yeah, but it's Official now. I'm everybody's Janelle Mewlnae."

We're so high off each other, but our neighbors in this upper level encampment are past the point in their relationship with us for halfhearted requests we stop.

Because we ain't gonna.

They've conceded.

Like I'm certain she's gonna have me doing in repercussion, to a goat getting "That's my empowered azz dookie." I pull on her.

No disappointment to be had. Her tail doing the silliest little wag I've ever seen. Entrancing me as I stifle a snort, and she leaps up with her teeth out. Sinking into my nape. A gasping soft gekker and her weight bring me down to her level when she lands. Always Why The Neck Every Time Single For Sake's Fugging blasting in my head with the volume dial broken off somewhere after eleven, like the chitters reverberating into my scruff as she tugs and drags me along. I am feeling that smile harder than I'm feeling everyone around us quietly watch. Let them roll their eyes. They know we're their entertainment and we do it for free. One well placed foot of hers and I trip over the rest of her as she lets go to put me right where I belong.

Under her and staring up, the same way she had me when I didn't know better, and she had to beckon my reckoning in asking What Does She Do When She's Lonely.

Not an iota of shame in me, just pride like her own to drown some laughter and gigglefits out from the background.

They don't know how good it is to be a fool.
It flies straight over their heads like the next thing that happens: Her bringing it back to business with "...And also, you still gotta talk meetings with me, Mistes Grouch~." I feign a whimper, but she's not gonna have it. Her "Don't fuss with me! You're a big boy." gets followed up with the threat of "You either take this and interface with me on it or you take my A again with that sore ass D of yers~." to have me bug eyed and clamping my knees shut. I don't even have to say a word. My high tension is all she needs for a self congratulatory "I knew you'd see reason~." As quick to help me back up as she was to bring me down. She lets me have a moment. Leading me to escalator in silence to ease me into it as a big hard sun.

Her "So Zev, he's the Sahara Square's Arabic, right?" and my "He is." flows into the unfettered acknowledgement of "Well, He had a point that we wouldn't be able to get another food truck, food supply run from the front. The Cops aren't gonna let it happen." Even though his Pack's pantry has been stretched thin. Challenging me to not let it get to me, just accept and think. "I was thinking last night, that the only way left now is from the side of the park, but..."

And she finishes that thought, following through to "...But we can't have everyone outside after yesterday. The only way the Commission could make it happen is if Gonzalo's group runs the food back and forth to the terminal. They're the only ones that could go out in the open like that. But someone would still have to get the food from the sidewalk and carry it over to the park wall."

I've got something though. A maybe. "...Maybe I can get Toby to have prey dudes run the food back and forth to the wall." There is a problem in that. "...Even then, if Gonzalo's crew carries stuff from the park to the terminal, it'd have them stretched thin." I lament.

Bringing my thoughts to the worst thing I can say: "If the next savage is another Bear, or some Big Cat..." makes her movement still, and her happiness fleeting.

To have the worst case at the forefront of her tongue.

"...If the next savage is Big Purr..."

I wrought it on us both. Brought the worst of mental images on us.

Made it known, that whoever did that to Nadine, Burney and Orson still did so to punish that father through his daughter through her fiance. But there's an unhappy coincidence that won't be, next time. Whoever is gonna do it again to another one of us will have to fire for effect. Because shooting someone as small as us or smaller wouldn't be the same. There is so much more to gain from making someone infinitely bigger, stronger, and all the more lethal for it their next victim. And if it's Big Purr they'll aim a barrel to next...If he goes savage... I have barely used this radio clipped to my jeans and now, Now when I need to tell everyone we need to pull Big Purr out from firing range, and every other massive, hulking prospect of a sniper's to turn against us...

"everything i want to say that i can't out here. i need to radio it in, get a list started of folks we need off from the front."

"i know. i'm thinking it too." she tells me, to kill me that much more. Beneficial as it might be that I swung this conversation where neither of us wanted to go.

"...We got got bigger dudes from Toby's detachment, anyway. They can come back up when the Cops..."

No, there's no way I can turn this around and ignore it because "Dammit, I was trying not to think about that." for both of our sakes.
She can't turn it around, either. Because she has to say this: "...It might happen when they try again tonight. When the Herd can least afford it."

Fear feeds itself with the unignorable.

"Do you think it's..." the cops, the police state that'd benefit themselves and the prey population so well by making their own reason to hunt us down.

"If it is, and it was up to me, I would..." with all of her fury, for every last thing they've done, the fullest extent of her imagination, greatest suffering and I can't take it. I don't want her to sink that low, have that cruelty the best she's got to offer.

"Hey, girl, ease off this, take a moment..." I'm begging her like I'm homeless and loveless and yearning for so much better. We were so lost in this terror, that neither of us noticed until I did that we were on the ground floor under the clock with the privacy I need close by behind the door to the employee hallway. "...Take a moment while I excuse myself behind that door to make that call. Then we both go down to the terminal and see how Tundratown's doing on the move-in. You got me?"

"...I get you..."

"...Don't let anyone take away the best you've got to offer everyone else. Noone deserves you sinking down to their level... You've shown me how to be. Please don't stray from what you've set in me."

"...I needed that..." she thanks me in. That amazing thing of us both, when all that we just went through together was enough to make lesser folks go crazy. This thing above strength and nearer some omnipotence we have in each other. I turn, she watches. A guard by the door opens it and I unclip my radio. "Ralph, you there? It's about Big Purr." I broadcast with the press of a button.

"Copy that Hey Oh, I'm here. What about Big Purr?" he says, after the fact comes to me that I'm not entirely certain the cops haven't finally broken through to our channels of communication.

"...Matter of fact, I wanna say this off-air. You back here with me?" because better safe than sorry, when we embarrassed the cops as bad as we did last time and telegraphed how much they needed more intel.

"Yeah, with Gandolf, I'm excusing him out of here."

The breakroom. Past Burney's carnage in the walls and in trash bags by the open locker room door ahead of me. Making me wonder with sobriety just how Nadine is doing with him. The breakroom door swings to that social media guru locking eyes with me and giving a genuine "That photo you took of Gonzalo's crew is blowing up fierce." that turns sour halfway through.

"Good, but not now."

He understands, closing the door behind me as I walk through.

Ralph facing me, when there's so much in front of his mind that he can barely see me over it. It's the stillness of him that betrays he's hardly here, with a coffee pot in one paw and a cup in the other to show the all nighter he's pulled. There's a conflict on his eyes and a want for relief in the soft frown of his mouth. But he'll entertain whatever new thing I have to burden him with, if it means getting him away from whatever he's thinking now. He offers "Coffee?" for an innocent "We got any creamer left?" given with all of my own worry in my voice. Letting him know I'm about to make things worse for him, but that it's alright. He leers into that smirk over his eyes, looking to me with a smug plot and he springs it on me.
"What, your mom didn't wean you? You going prey boy on my ass?"

This Oh Hell in my eyes, when I realize just how bad I messed up.

"Would you like some cheese to go with your milk?"

That Oh God Dammit I can't get out past a coughing chuckle we can share when yeah, it kind of is a prey boy thing to take coffee any other way than just black with syrup.

"No wait hang on," he plays at moving to do when he makes it worse with "Let me go check if we got some Carrot Spice to go with it." and dangit, now I gotta laugh out a "You son of a friggin' bitch." for us to both reel over. More for the fact we're both tired and the sun's not even up yet than for how funny it is.

But it's done it's job. Made us both ready for Ralph to go say "Right, now that I got you off whatever slump you came at me with, hit me."

"...We need to pull our heavy hitters back. Just enough to rejoin the line when they'll have to, far enough away they can't get shot until then."

Without even reminding him, he pieces it together with the same fright me and Eva had when it came to us. Why I said I had to talk to him about him, with the scenerio of "...If they hit Big Purr next..." coming right out of his own mouth, heavy from the images in his head.

"Worse yet," because if he isn't already thinking it, I've got to make it worse with "if he gets shot when the cops try again... That'd be just enough havoc on our end for the cops to carve everyone out of here."

He wasn't, and I've made him shed that stoicism expected of an Alpha like him. Setting both pot and cup of caffeine down on a table so he can, with noone else to see it, put his palms on the sides of his head. Run his claws through his fur and pace through the anxiety that's fallen on him. Walk it off until he can come to a complete stop with the defeated anger at the fact that "We need them! I know you're right, but it was everything I didn't know we could throw at them, last time! To keep us here and the cops out!" And however prepared or not the cops were, last time, whenever they try to evict us again, they will be all the more prepared. But I've got an idea to give with "We can still use them if we've got to, we just need to be ready for the worst case if we do is all I'm saying."

He'll think on it. Doesn't take much time for him to, either.

"Maybe we can tell them to rush into the cops if they start going savage."

Wasn't what I was thinking, when "I was figuring to have Unit 2 up front with them in case that happens but," yeah, "that wouldn't leave them free to respond if someone elsewhere got shot."

"This sounds bad, but if we go my route and have charge the cops before they start mauling us instead, it's three birds. None of our own gets hurt or killed, they get to give the cops hell and it keeps us from having to be stuck with them if the cops refuse us handing them over."

I hate how right he is. That he thought this through to get that it'd do the cops so much for us to have what little we got stretched thinner and trying to contain a savage, ourselves. We don't have the city's resources and it damnus us both to coming back to the truth coming out of his mouth again.

"...It was everything I didn't know we had, last time..." and it's gonna be a lose / lose situation, no matter how he can spin it. We lose one of our best, when we can't afford it like the cops could. And same as last time, we will give them experience and expectation to work off of if there's a time after
next time. They will be used, and I cannot argue against that.

The best I can give him, without the time to think on it, is that "And it will be everything we still don't know we can throw at them, next time."

Those words, though. They anchor him back to task, like I didn't know he needed to be. Reminded of that lupine survival instinct of letting it cost whatever it's gonna cost, if it means the survival of the whole over the individual. So unlike a Vulpine's own stereotype of survival, the words bring it all the more home to him.

So, with what's meant to compliment, he's gotta observe "Your scrawny red ass should've been a Wolf." I'll take it the way I shouldn't, like he wants me to.

With a smirk to go with my "Yeah... But I wouldn't be the Fox I am, would I?" give him that typical Fox turnaround in earnest, when there's nothing really wrong with it. Let him know his appreciation wasn't lost in translation when we both just have a mutual quiet moment.

Still... We've got things to do. "Hey, listen, I gotta get back with my girl."

"Yeah, you do and Kurt's sleeping right now or I'd do it with him... I'm going up front in a mo, start picking folks out to move back."

"Do that, we'll sort it out with the Commission later." I tell him, walking to a chair to drag by the counter so I can grab two cups from the stack.

Bringing it up in his head that he's got to tell me back "Meeting's been moved down to four in the afternoon. Depending on if we're even still here tonight, we're having another in the evening."

"God damn that's some college kid crouton shid, making all that clutch time crunch!" I'm protesting with a smile. Getting him to laugh a little as I help myself to what's left of his pot. He know's I'm joking, but he knows I'm joking on the square.

That's not what he's thinking about though, when he says "One thing though..."

It's something else having me give him eye contact, with the way he did.

"You think Big Purr is selfless?" blindsides me. I don't even know where he's going with it.

"What'd you mean? He didn't just volunteered, he practically helped himself to a spot up front." is all I can make with what I have to go on, but that's not it.

This is: "...Is he anywhere about as ready to sacrifice his life as I hope he is?"

I guess I just took it for granted, that it was all but expected for Security volunteers to have thought about it more than I didn't have. Confronted with it, this doesn't sit well with me, but it's pretty much what he wants to hear.

"...From what little I talked with him, when I caught him on break, I think he'd die happy right where he is."

Even with me getting it, though, I don't get it like Ralph is. Leaving him with doubt for whatever he's thinking of.

"...Just get back with Eva an for god's fuggin sake try to keep it in your pants." he tells me to get my mind off it.
I'll allow it though, with an "I Been keeping it in my pants." to reinforce what he's trying for both of our sakes.

"Don't spin this on me, semantics arguing mutha fugga! You know what I mean!"

But I'm not gonna do without without taking something from it on the sly in "I get that, I'll fudge widdat, but I'ma do it like a side girl."

Getting his goat so bad it almost helps him. But he's gotta do it alone, and I've got a love that's become my life I need to return to. With cups for both of us overflowing and runneth over a little as I walk. Making the trip out the door and around the masses harder. Entertaining her with pity of me as we catch sight of each other. How careful I'm moving forward between the paths crossing mine. That beautiful smile of hers to let me know she is before I even ask "You better, Miss Mewlnae?" Her face scrunching up to the question as I hand her a coffee. "My barista." She compliments. "Baristo." I'm correcting when that ought to be a word as much as Mistes.

One soft, not really upset look in her cup tells me she don't think I deserve it yet. Her "I'll let you have that if you remember the creamer next time." to have me protest in "I did! Just that Ralph gave me about half the grief you do over my asking for it. Wasn't about to press the issue."

She's not gonna believe Ralph can, but she'll be reminded. Let us both take the issue I needed to with him a littler gentler than before. In her "He's handling it?" and my "Personally. Ought to be out that door any moment." that we won't have to get bent out of shape about.

A sip from my cup, when my look back to the door has her doing the same. Relieved with her own "Good." as we heading to an escalator.

But the dread still haunts, I want us exorcising it as best we can.

"Girl, lets finish this coffee up before going down." and recognize we both need a moment. Since the coffee's only lukewarm and not burning our mouths out. We find ourselves a bench below the clock to make quick work of caffeine. Run our digits over each other's free palms to soothe and be a little more domestic than we're used to being. I'm fine with it, but we've got plenty of time to settle down and I'm done with waiting on her to empty her cup.

So I'm returning all the grief she's given my neck with tongue and teeth playing on the left side of hers. Encouraging that purring chitter of hers, keeping it up when she stops to pause, blushing through her "You're only making it worse for yourself~!" for me to say "Good." right into her nape.

Because I'm a sucker for her kind of punishment and I like it when her face scrunches up. I'm gonna get it and those squinting eyes with that smirk is telling me how much, pausing for a bit before getting back to the coffee as quick as she can, big gulps and her head craning back. And it comes to mind, finally, that I've yet to see her when she's wired like she's gonna be. Her body tensing up in the moment where the cup is empty, she tosses it and tackles me down off the bench.

By the time she's done with her reprisal, we're high off each other again and right as rain. I can reminisce about, not distract with, the better part of past days on the way down with "I'm gonna miss those hallway dances we got into." Something I can handle not having anymore, when the only way that could've happened was the halls being far enough away from anyone trying to sleep. We need to hug the right of the escalator steps as Yukon and Tundras hug the left with packed up tents on their backs, heading wher I used to with her after meetings.

She can entertain it with a look back and some "What about having us private dances in the break room?" but it "Ain't gonna be the same without a crowd to stop dancing and watch us."
She gets that. Can't argue against my exhibitionism when it's like hers, only exchange a smile and be happy for little inconveniences.

Finally down, and there's as many tents set back up and lining the walls of the north and east terminals as there can be. None in the center, where a thinned out morning crowd still lingers. Tundratown's Yukon is past it, ahead of us on the far end of the terminal. Watching the progress outside with her back turned to us. Something is calming about her, in spite of circumstances. "Her name is Yvla, right?" Eva asks.

"Yeah... Never did get it until last night when she had to handle things." I don't like admitting it, that I'm good with names once I know them, bad about asking for them in the first place.

Eva's got a different concern in "Have all the meetings been like that?" since last night's with the new delegates was her first, too.

"Nah, that was just culture clash. Figure Hyenas and Painted Dogs just do things different from Wolves and had to be roped in." I tell my girl for a "Good on her." and a paw on the small of my back with an arm draped over her shoulder when we draw closer. Wolves don't have ears like a Foxes, but they've got a greater sense of smell. Must be why she's shifting her muzzle to the left and sniffing the air. Making us both a little self conscious about how much we've had of each other behind a closed tent. "We ain't bothering, are we?" Eva offers for the icebreaker. She turns a little to us while still facing outside and has a quip already lined up when she looks to us.

"You two are on your feet early. Usually you're still on top of each other for another two or three hours."

The warm greeting smirk is all the answer Eva needs, and the fuel I need for "She dragged me out the tent a little harder than usual." for Eva to elbow my side. Ylva's gotta scoff and roll her eyes to "You two are impossible." when she looks back outside.

"I got him up so we could keep updated on things. Maybe help out where we can." is Eva's justification, but word's gotten out how she does me and Ylva knows that's a half truth. She compliments with another look back and turn to face us with a "Nice of you both." but her face says we ain't needed. She'll entertain us, though. Break up her monotony and hope we won't distract.

"Not much to say on my end. Rudolf is organizing things one hallway at a time. I'm here to monitor the pack's progress one section of the park at a time. He should be almost done with both of the eastern halls. When he finishes those, I'll redirect those out there to the western."

"No major hangups? Good progress?" I'm asking. More to keep myself distracted from Eva touching my brush than anything else.

"In spite of the litter and some belongings that got left, yes. Our pack is over halfway done. Most everyone we had out there is taking the story that we need to move them inside in case the cops raid..."

When they're going to, and they just may come in through the park and sides.

"...A few have complained to me but they see reason when I tell them that." yet it doesn't sit well with her. Because it's more than just a cover. The white lie is only half a lie.

But I can't let it get to me, telling it more to myself than her when I look away for a moment to say "We can do it again, and we can keep doing it."

And she could argue, if it wasn't that her radio beeping for attention to the oncoming "Yvla, I've
filled up the east side, heading with everyone still coming to the west, now. Start sending our pack that way, over."

Glad as she ought to be for the change of topic, she's got an idea too. "Roger and... I'll see what I can do for everyone you can't catch coming going your way... You two heard that?"

A nod of my head and Eva's "Want us to catch the others?" gets Ylva to beg us "Please! Keeps you both busy, and me from having to hear another complaint about you getting too frisky with each other."

But since this Wolf brought it up, I've gotta ask with a plotting grin "Who says we can't do both?" She shoos us off, Eva spins around me with her paw in a back pant pocket to turn me around with a squeeze and a push to propel me back to the escalators. My ears splayed back with a single soft gekker at the invasion, and I swear, by the time this day's done, I'm gonna kiss her on the tushy in front of everyone.

Just not now, when we got a job to do, with our first Tundra Wolf to intercept and navigate with my "Hey, Rudolf and Ylva wants you to go..."

I hear something in the air like a whistle.

And then it comes.

A wet, fleshy impact before the screaming out that has me instantly turn around and going back without immediately knowing why Ylva is on the ground in pain.

Holding her right paw over the left side of her neck.

In the confusion, I'm asking when that deep down, I probably already know but don't want to believe "What happened?!" as Eva asks "Are you alright?!" when everyone knows she isn't.

"YES, I'M ALRIGHT, IT JUST FEELS LIKE I'VE BEEN..." she's trailing off, thinking on what she was about to say, as that moment comes.

Where my mind registers what my eyes see.

What she's looking at, as she holds her paw to her face.

Both of our eyes widening with Eva's, to the horror in our recognition.

The fur of her neck is matted. And it is blue.

Why Me in Ylva's eyes, stifling a sob and the trembling settles in.

Fear will hollow the three of us out, now.

We run back to her without a thought of what we can do with the male Tundra beside us following. He doesn't know what's about to happen, as I fumble with my radio and it's frequency knob, Ylva digging for something in her pantsuit pocket.

"UNIT 2 CENTER TERMINAL RIGHT NOW, IT'S A WOLF ON THE CENTER TERMINAL, GET HERE NOW!" I scream, with Ylva's paws shaking so greatly, that what she was searching for flies out of it's pocket.

"MY CUFFS!" she shrieks, wide eyed horror toward the chance to restrain herself sliding away on the tile she crawls over to reach for. Convulsing. Turning. Becoming what she can't imagine.
Eva's scream of "I'M GETTING THEM DON'T MOVE!" as fast as she's running when I'm already by her side and on my knees.

What am I going to do?

"UNIT 2 CENTER TERMINAL NOW!" flying out of my mouth. Before I look back at the digital display and see that I'm on the wrong frequency.

That Tundra finally yells out "What's happening?!" at the moment I can't help myself but to scream out my own condemnation, changing the frequency as Eva orders that Tundra to "GRAB HER AND DON'T LET GO!" while Ylva is still just enough here to cry out "GET THEM! CUFF ME!" and her pack's own takes enough hints to grab her by her wrists, even as he looks to the blue on her neck and wonders, with Eva shouting that "I'M TRYING!"

Ylva is losing herself, millisecond by millisecond, every quake and tremble becoming more primal and we're all losing time, Eva's slides into her the moment I finally got it on the right frequency this time for "UNIT 2 ALPHA DOWN CENTER TERMINAL SHE'S GOING SAVAGE!", as Eva struggles with the cuffs, the Tundra trembles and jumps back from what I just said, I replace him in holding her when I can't think, Eva gets distracted by his cowardice, as he screams out "SHE'S GOING WHAT?!", "PLEASE HOLD HER!" I shout and the moment comes.

That instant, when Ylva disappears from her own body.

The very soul vanishing from the eyes and leave behind neither iris nor sclera. Only the black of her dilated pupils. Only a void. A Blackness to contrast the mirrored image of Eva's face, as she realizes what's staring back at her.

It lunges.

She stares.

Jaws open.

Adrenaline rushes.

Enamel glistens.

I am not enough.

Head twists to the left.

He watches.

I scream.

Teeth crash down.

I will be enough.

Body thrashes.

Voices scream.

I struggle.

She goes limp.
I explode.

Yelping.

The taste of iron on my tongue.

Body rolling into me.

She falls backward.

Head snaps back to face it's pain.

I pull it towards me.

Paws push me down on my back.

I've got blood in my mouth.

Black mirrors are giving me my reflections, now.

Right ear bleeding over me.

She isn't.

I am relieved.

Teeth aim for me.

She's only scared.

I would rather die.

He finally acts.

I can't keep up, can only process what happened after the fact with that Yukon off of me, that the Tundra somehow pulled it off me. He threw it off me at the last split second and now it's him facing that onslaught, holding on to it for everyone else's sake and letting come what may to him, unable to scream when it's teeth are around his neck, having cuffed himself to it in the process to have him be the only thing it could attack. I watch on the floor from a distance as Unit 2 finally comes and Eva frantically crawls to me. Running her paws over my body to check it while someone asks if I'm alright, SAY SOMETHING deafens, and I think I said I thought she bit you. But I don't know, and I don't get anything back. For what feels like a century in only a second, I don't feel a thing.

Then I do. I feel brought back.

The throbbing of her heart against my chest as she cries, her weight like anchor as my embrace.

She is as here as I am.

A hysterical wreck alongside her, trembling to the confirmation we're both alright when others aren't. Traumatized and crying our eyes out to what almost happened and what did, when we have come out of that the same way we came in, alive after something we shouldn't have lived through. I am so distraught, I can barely see Unit 2 struggling in front me. I can perfectly feel what's happening. Her arms surround me, as that snare on the neck of Ylva's body digs in as her body lashes against it. The side of Eva's face on mine, and the puncture wounds on his throat. Her gratitude that I'm alive, and the terror in everyone's heads that is stopping them from trying to find the keys that would undo the
cuffs and free him from the animal that's taken his voice.

The way he's losing blood, with everyone screaming for a medic as he starts slowing down, and the savage Yukon is pulling his arm with it's own to bring it closer, trying to attack him again as Unit 2 starts wrestles it down with as much weight as they can put on it. How they have to put themselves between it and him. I can't stand to watch him losin consciousness and cannot look away. I am holding on to my girl for dear life because I have no control over this yet all I feel is guilt that it had to be them. It just happened and I'm left begging why it had to be anyone. We're all alive and yet I'd rather have died. I'd rather be anything than worthless and responsible, when I cannot even figure out how I am. Every attempt I make to get up and try to help is a pointlessness.

I'm shaking so hard I can't even make my legs work, I can't get Eva off of me. I can't help, watching as the medics finally come, Everyone trying to keep it off him finally figures out to search it's clothes for keys. I would give anything. But my world is such a mess, that by the time they finally come to me and Eva to make sure I'm alright, and Ralph starts calling me on the radio, I can barely say anything but gibberish. I feel power over me. The exertion of control by a phantom haunting us. I feel the omnipotence that Titans had over Olympians. That hell has over the earth below me. And at this moment, power has won. I have spent my whole life subverting it into defeat, and right now, I cannot see how I can combat it anymore.

The world becomes a blur, again.

Time's chronological order of events shuffles the past and future with the present.

One moment I am in the breakroom for the emergency meeting, the next I am making my way to it, Ylva's body is over me again and Ralph is screaming at me to answer him.

I have become Damascus.

That ruinous heap frozen in it's trauma.

But I keep coming back to the way Kurt's looking at me.

That undefinable appreciation. The gratitude like I showed him something. I keep coming back to the way his gaze mysteriously reassured, before going back to the meeting as it starts falling apart and putting the runaway train back on the rails. Regaining control of it, somehow.

The meeting has come and gone like the mauling has at the terminal, and yet... I am as much at both the terminal, and the breakroom, as I am with Eva in the hall with Kurt. Aware now of feeling like this after running away from the cops when they came for me at SheepGB 2. The familiarity of it, as I start to piece things together. How the meeting went, with everyone's doubts about me and her even being there for it. Him looking at me without anger, but reflecting on how he would be angry, before. The way he's pulling me out of the past with that smile, acknowledging that truth about him, as he is in saying "You ain't ok." like I can't for myself. Like Eva barely can, bringing herself back but still so far gone that her grip can't take me with her.

"I ain't... No... No I'm real damn far away from being that."

"You feel like you're a million places that ain't here." Like I'm stuck in moments she's barely getting out from under. That thought conveyed, without him having to say it. Her nod, trying to understand what he's doing when I can't even start. And I can remember that Wolves can read others as well as a Fox can. But there is so much space between where I am and where I've been before, in being able to get someone.
"I can't... I can't even tell what you're doing here." I tell him, trying to comprehend his vector, somehow starting to slip back into the here and now.

"I'm trying to do something you taught me." comes from him, with Eva starting to come to terms with what something is.

"...I haven't taught anyone." is the only thing I can think to tell him, feeling like a truth like Eva's latched onto when she whispers to herself "...i wanna see what happens next..."

Whatever she's got, I don't. But Kurt's acknowledging it, that thing he said in front of everyone, yesterday. Up front, when the raid was imminent and... and...

"I wanted to see what happened, if I called for the Wild Dogs and Hyenas to bring everyone up they could. Because every damn stupid fuggin' idea you ever had ended up being the right thing."

And I'm fighting back, still not getting it when Eva does clearly. With a "That's just what had to happen and you made that call. Not me." from me that's got him giving me the look of doubling down on a bet.

"...I made the call you wanted to when none of the other Alphas would've let you. Just like you did with your girl. I took everything your crazy orange juice self showed me and ran with it. I did that for you yesterday, same as I did that for you just now in the meeting. Being the crazy azzed voice of reason when you couldn't be."

And it's starting to come. "Don't you get it, Owen? The way I looked at you in there like I was thankful? You showed me how scat could get done, with that wild azzed jack out of the box thinkin' of yours and I worked it." That outline of the form and shape of his words trying to soothe me. The declaration sinks in. In a moment of focus, I am starting to see what Eva's realized, coming from her to declare what I should've seen in what Kurt has done. "...You won him over so much, he used the way you solve problems to see what'd happen..."

And it comes, and it comes down, and it soaks me to the heart. Not just him. Not just a couple of other folks. Everyone. Everyone I've ever interacted with. As much as everyone I can think of and not has made me the mammal I am, they all, the entire spectrum of those souls, have taken from me in kind. That Kurt wouldn't be the Wolf he is without me. Not Andrew, either. Bruce Hartford took a journey because of me. Espada solved cases he never would have with me. All those crime victims he helped found peace through me leaving evidence out for someone to find. Eva wouldn't be here, if she didn't see me on the news chewing out Don Lemming. Nadine and Burney would've never overcome what happened to Orson without me.

So many things. So much good I've done, the impacts I've made, for it to not matter what I am torn about. Having not been able to stop Ylva from going savage, or saved that Tundra Wolf I never got the name of from dying... I have done so much. I am on my knees. Holding on to Eva. Delivered from my agony and my face is a twin of floodwater streams. Reeling in silence, because this one stupid thing I should've known from the start is a truth so bright it's blinding me from all the ghosts I've held onto. Burning so hot, it's blowing the ashes away of devils I could never shake. Noone has to tell me it wasn't my fault. Noone has to remind me how impossible my soul is. I have made my mark. I have been worthwhile in spite of all the terror and abuse.

Just like that, I'm taking what's been there this whole time. What I needed to be on my way to go forth from all those yesterdays.

To look up to Kurt in pride of all those flames wicking off my body that led me to this moment of me telling him "You got me from falling off the deep end and feeling like I'm higher than the
Nothing else said between the three of us, when nothing else has to be. He ventures forth, and we go our way. Eva leading me down the hall, my gait like a jangling shuffle, when every landing of a heel quakes with purpose. My body war torn and my mind on the path to a way. I'm not there, and I'm still not completely here. But I have seen enough glimpses of how I'll find it, I know I'll find the sight with familiarity. I am pledging myself an allegiance to this, as put together as I am. Such momentum in how I'm becoming, that Eva's getting overwhelmed from feeling it through my paw. My eyes closed in good faith of her guidance, and I'm feeling her see the distance between how she found me and as she wanted me to be. The morning sunlight poking out from the ceiling's glass, and on this ground floor's tile, I look and I see her again. Having stopped me to see my eyes.

She is so amazed by what I'm becoming, she can hardly find the resolve to say that "I don't recognize you." I can't blame her. I'm burning in front of her like I never have before. This transition to some new thing that might've just been what was laid dormant this whole time, like a giant shrouded in Jupiter.

"I don't feel sorry, but I don't think I can stop where I'm going."

The chills running down both of our spines. This fragility in both of us. She's ready to see what happens, next.

"I'm not asking you to stop."

Only to hold on to familiarity one more time. I'll give it, bringing her in close to have her chin pressed upon my chest and tucking my own close to have us nose to nose. She wants a kiss but can't reach. I hoist her up, my ears tucked back as my lips wrap around hers. Still is our moment, with the crowds churning around us. A hello and a farewell. I can't help but feel like I've been hypnotized from the day I was born. A shortness of breath, and I'm starting to spin for both of us. Make the world revolve around us for her. For myself. For everyone. The morning has me and her seeing the masses for as weary as are. To acknowledge but not fall prey to that fear of where we're going to stand this time tonight, tomorrow and the days after. Knowing how it feels without feeling it.

The cops in the park have only grown in and grow ever still. News reached the Commission last night that the airspace over the station was declared a No Fly Zone. No news chopper will fly over us when the cops try to evict us tonight. The news media, as we learned last night too, has been barred from reaching out to us. Anything that the city gets told, now, will only come from the official, hoof selected sources of the navy blue and mayor's office. No one here outside the commission knows these things, or that we know they're planning to try again tonight what they failed to make happen yesterday. But they can feel it in the air. The way an unseen grip is choking all of us. The way one finds things full of unease in the calm before a storm.

The nervousness in my friends that've become her own, in small talk to distract that only highlights when they avoid asking me or her about what happened on the terminal. Or how we're somehow holding up, after that experience. Sitting in silence to their conversation by the ground floor juice bar. As I lock eyes with parents and their children as they make their way to the east hallway's rooms. I see the past coming back around, in the way they have to hold their offspring's paws for dear life, with something awful likely to happen at any given moment. Would Bogo have the heart to just let them go? Relocate them to one of the city's own shelters? Would they have even half the peace of mind elsewhere that they used to feel here?

Or would they just arrest the parents and send children through the adoption and foster home networks and rob these households of everything they had left? All these questions, and yet, as uncertain as the outcome feels, I only feel that much more responsible to do whatever it is that I still...
don't know I can. What ought to cripple me, is only leaving me feel that much more determined. All the while I wonder something that, with any other mindset, would terrify. How much worse can things get? What new terror will be set upon me to overcome? And yet, it's all going back to what I remember telling myself. "...Let the waves dash themselves against the rocks..." so quietly determined and out of left field it catches the attention of everyone in front of me and lights up Eva beside me.

"Let them come and falter." I tell myself, without caring if causes them some concern. Andrew can't find the fault in the "Hey Oh, you alright over there?" coming from Wally, but he still wants to correct him. Giving him the stinkeye instead with Jager prefacing some deriding derogation with "Wally," but I'm not gonna have it.

"...'Bout time one of you said what you were all thinking." I tell them all. Making the rest silent, letting Wally push forward with "I mean, you're sitting over there with yer girl looking like ghosts. We just wanna know how you're holding up."

"...Holding up?" I've got to ask, genuinely and knowingly at once. Perplex everyone with how I'm treating it as a foreign concept. "I think I'm doing a little better than just holding up, if it makes sense."

"...After what happened? You being just fine making any sense?" from Andrew, because he knows I'm crazy, but not this crazy. The uncanny valley I'm putting them all except Eva into. How I'm treating all this setting off alarms left and right, like I'm not even the Fox they know. Like this is my trauma they're seeing. The best I can reconcile this for myself, even, is that I just have all the pieces to see my own puzzle for what it's always been. Pieces they've never seen. Andrew, confronted with all this unfamiliarity, concerned for all he knew me as, has to do the one thing he didn't want to. Reminding me that "You and your girl almost got killed and watched someone die." and reeling at the image.

For a moment, I've got to, as well. Reliving it for a moment and fighting back against it like I shouldn't be able to.

"And if it wasn't for Kurt trying to set me right, maybe even succeeding, I really wouldn't be able to deal with it. Maybe I've lost my mind, and I just don't know it right now. But I'd like to think that even now, with what happened earlier still there... That where I'm going is gonna be a salvation."

And at this point, maybe they just don't wanna know how my garden's growing. Or they do, regardless of what they wanted to know, and this is gonna be the best I can give them. But Rene is gonna take a chance to change the topic, maybe more for himself than the rest of us in "...There's rumors therers gonna be another raid tonight."

"And I would be lying if I said noone has a right to be afraid." I tell them. Aware of how bad it sounds, when only me and Eva can even start to see the cloud for it's silver lining.

"It's really gonna happen..." comes from her, with all the fear in everyone's heads slipping from her mouth.

"I've got a plan." to challenge it, knowing it ain't gonna resolve it. Maybe nothing can. But I have what I have. The only thing I do to work with: This absurd, crazy resolve I'm feeling that might only be my desperate denial. "...I'm gonna take how much worse things can get so I can right it back into a triumph." All I've ever done and could have. Taking credit for what I've been able to do, and believing in it like God. Looking like a fool to everyone in front of me, because the odds are just that much against all of these things that've made me who I am.
"...You're delusional, bro." from Andrew, for Jager to follow up with "...That's your plan? Wait and see what's gonna happen and somehow make it better?" but that's just not it.

"I'm not waiting for anything at all." I've got to declare. Somehow at peace with the inevitable, when that's not enough to stop Wally from finishing their thoughts with "You can't just go and turn things around on whatever the cops are gonna do this time."

Because I'm taking myself too far even for the people that know me best. But it can't matter to me if I can't.

"Whatever they're gonna do, it's going to happen and it can't be stopped. But I'm damned if I do, damned if I don't, damned to try and find some way to make the only thing happen I can."

Not to meet power with power, but make that might useless by whatever void I've been able to find for it before and direct into it's own trap.

"You've been lucky, Owen." comes from Andrew's mouth like the gospel. Again, maybe I'm wrong, taking too much credit for things that were bound to happen, anyway. Yet it doesn't feel right, even with me still having the doubt I do.

But if that's really the case... "Then let's see how far my luck will run." is the only thing left I can offer.

Because however long it can run doesn't matter, now. Not when I need to get where I'm after. When I have become impossible, that I am ready to walk the rest of the way without it. Even with some bad vibe in the air, and the sound of confrontation behind me. Let it come down to me being impossibly against all odds. With that noise that's getting everyone's attention making them wide eyed and frozen stiff.

Something woeful, this way comes. Feeling strange and untrue to have whatever's left of my past self trying to wrack my brain. That collection of fears the world gave me. All of them coming out to play, every one of them wanting their pound of flesh. Even Eva cannot completely shake them off, when she's given me all the bravery she has.

"What the hell's happening up there?" Andrew mutters.

But it's time to begin. Isn't it?

I have to carry myself, now. To think back on his own example that he gave me, the night when we first took over the station. My own, when I needed to be reminded of it. My softly determined smile in the face of terror to make light. I cannot know if I can do anything. But It's time for me to tell them all there is "Only one way to find out." and rise up on my feet like a fire.

Eva following, then the others. They're coming with me partly to watch me for my own good, sure, but there's a tinge of something else in there. I bring the radio to my mouth with a change of preset frequency and a "Kurt, Ralph, I'm on my way up front, just tell me what Security's telling you!"

The reality from Kurt is that "They don't know! One moment everything's fine then the next someone started a chant!" and I can hear it clearly now: You Don't Serve The People.

I know that cadence. Eva does too. Andrew remarking it's "That Handsome Stoles song." and as opportune as it would've been before, that verse can only serve to antagonize the cops in the present. It's the last thing we need. "I'm gonna try to quell this," I tell the radio as the chanting sinks into the crowds around us, "Just get security to do what they can!" I pick up my pace, with the crowds converging and moving forward. Getting in my way and contributing to the problem. It's getting
loose, and I'm going from one Wolf on the line to another, giving them the order of calming everyone down when it's still not my place to. They don't have the time.

The confusion is too much, even as I hear Raul's voice on Alfredo's radio, when I finally do find him. Shouting back over the chanting at "I'm trying!" with the lines of security trying to hold the candle at both ends. Trying to watch the cops when they're all too distracted with the crowds that ought to be at their backs. I'm halfway there to feeling bad about asking Alfredo "You know how this started?!" but I've got to know my angle.

The frustration in his eyes and in telling me "Somebody me one of the cops called out someone's rapsheet!" to leave me with a clinched fist.

I can hear their batons clanging, now. Against their plexiglass shields, answering the very aggression they started with more of their own. The same thing Bogo told them not to.

Eva beside me, swearing to herself when I already know that "You heard him?!" I'm stuck on trying to piece together what's happening. "I did!" and she already knows it's name: "Owen, they're giving themselves an excuse!"

...This is intentional. They're making this happen, strengthening their case to raid us again. But that's only half of it. I get it all too clear that "...If this keeps up and they try to bust folks early, we'll stand less of a chance tonight against 'em!"

This has to stop.

There is no time to consider if someone is listening in, I've got to let it be known through the radio to "Ralph, get on the PA and tell everyone to stop chanting! The cops are baiting us, they're going to march on us early to take security out!"

The passing of seconds, leaving me with the look on his face in my mind's eye as YOU DON'T SERVE THE PEOPLE grows ever more in volume.

"...It's got to stop even if you're wrong, but are you sure?!" when it doesn't matter how sure I am. "Please do it! I've only got what I have to work with!"

He must be shouting to himself right now. Unable to hear "Kurt here," over himself on his end.

"I'm on my way and rounding up the commission!"

"I'm making that announcement, god damn the cops!"

"And I'm getting with the protesters! Those prey boys fell for this!" I tell them both, with some thing from Ralph about not exposing myself that I can't hear, must ignore. I'm grabbing Eva by the paw for once. I'm making my way with her through security and through the protesters. Putting myself between them and the cops because I need to be front and center for this.

"STOP THIS!" at the top of my lungs, when even with all my fury, I'm still only being seen. Not heard. Bringing just enough attention to myself that it's not just my friends watching from behind the walls in fear.

Eva to follow my lead in "YOU DON'T KNOW WHAT YOU'RE DOING!" when even her daring and mine combined is still only enough to catch Bruce's attention.

Make him break formation and run up to me in my need and his terror. "Everyone stop chanting!" finally blares from the PA in front of us, and the crowds can barely hear it, much less oblige. I do not
want to be the best chance for a cease fire before the fight starts, but deep down... "Bruce, who did Toby put in charge of you guys?!!" comes from me once he's finally in range.

"Me! What the hell are doing?! Those cops behind you could snag you any minute!" and I know, I God Damned know, I know that they could snag me, I could even sooner be shot and might even be in the crosshairs where I stand. But I do not matter: What I can do matters.

"Get these prey boys to stop chanting because we're the best chance the Herd's got right now!"

"EVERYONE STOP CHANTING! STOP GIVING THE COPS WHAT THEY WANT, FOR GOD'S SAKE!!" comes through, louder than before and yet still not enough. YOU DON'T SERVE THE PEOPLE still rings truer and louder. But Bruce knows what he has to do, running back wordlessly to his fellow herbivores. And I run in the opposite direction. "IT DOESN'T MATTER THAT THEY DON'T SERVE US!" just like what I'm trying to say doesn't matter. I do not have a megaphone. I'm not loud enough without a megaphone. And neither is Eva, howling out "YOU'RE GIVING THEM AN EXCUSE TO RAID US! PLEAAASE STOPPPPP!"

Because this is a stampede. Between us and everyone that'd listen are the prey mammals too caught up in herd behavior to hear us. This is hopeless. I am watching a train wreck and they were right, I cannot stop it. It's going to happen. The only thing I can do is look to my right. Stumbling. Staring that army of blue khaki that's about to come down on us. The smug anticipation of that Hippo in front of me. That towering mass beating a makeshift wardrum. Everything he was hoping for, in every expectation of us being fulfilled. He is going to savor the moment that's finally about to come for him. The crowd shouts it in unison. YOU DON'T SERVE THE PEOPLE. It billows from behind me like a gust of wind. My eyes affixed to the plexiglass shield of that Hippo.

The mid day clouds hang low and dark. The storm is coming. And then I see those shields reflect a light. Rising from above the crowd's own reflection.

Flickering.

Orange.

Unmistakable.

I freeze solid. I know what this heat to my left is. I do not even have to look. Watching it happen from shield to another. My wide eyes catch the fear in that Hippo's own. It passes over, making it's way to him.

An unmistakably gas filled bottle with cloth wick alight in flame burns.

It's going to happen, now.

The sound of glass cracking before the dull thud ignition of fuel.

War has been declared. The radiating heat of fire, and the blinding light of it all as the cops stumble back.

I quietly mouth a How. How could someone do this? "NO! NO! NOOOOOOOO!!" as my horror.

The thought not even crossing my mind that's crossed Eva's, when I'm still hung up on what just happened instead of asking "WHO FUCKING THREW THAT?!" because for a moment, it doesn't matter who threw it: It's been thrown.

Silencing the Station's chanting with shock.
Like I never could have.

Too little.

Too late.

"ALL OFFICERS INTO FORMATION! WE MARCH NOWWWW!" rings Bogo's voice over a megaphone like mine never could. There will be no defusion. The bomb has already gone off. The writing is on the wall.

And looking back to the protesters, to the very traitors that brought us all to this, I can already see the cowardice. One among them, a Boer Goat, having made his contribution, is already separating from the line to surrender himself as if it's going to make it easier on himself. All we were to him was just a flavor of the week. The fury Eva can feel right now, when all I can do is sink. Quietly ask myself at the end of days if "Does he really think-"

"THAT'S NOT A PROTESTER!" She screams. Calling him out to me at the top of her lungs and jarring me back with her eyes. I almost actually ask what she means when it's obvious enough. The meaning is obvious.

I just have to look at him. Look at him, and remember when she noticed what I couldn't. Let the realization sink in with every movement of his figure. Recognize how he's being grabbed by cop's hoof. The performance for what it is.

You can take one out of that uniform. But you cannot shake that aura from them. The flow and tempo of their body language.

That same language I'm staring at, in the goat that knows exactly what he was doing. I know what just happened. Rage begins to fill me.

The moletov cocktail came from my left, before. From the West.

I turn, catching a glimpse of the line of riot cops reforming in front of the fire.

I know who threw it, the moment I see him.

A Mule Deer with backpack in hoof. Upright and at attention. Surrounded by condemnation. It's not just in his posture. Nor the stone cold facade to hide his satisfaction. It's in the way he takes that first step forward to the cops, when everyone is so blinded by what he just did that they cannot figure out why. So frozen in confusion and hurt that they're not even bothering to stop him. He's breaking off from the line to feign his surrender, and they're letting him get away without so much as a demand to come back.

If this world will only see me as a predator...

Today, my gentle heart swings. The sheer quantity of cruel deeds. I become the lightening. I don't want to play the part. As suddenly into a full sprint as a switch turns on a light. Cry havoc. Before I even know I am. Bolting to the chase of prey more than twice my size. Too focused on it's kin to see the interception I'm about to make. I don't want a taste of victory. Let slip. Flying like a cannonball hanging low over the field. I am in sprint on all fours. This natural anthem of the hunt. Springing back upright. I've got a dance. The method in mind without thought. Jumping up for the pounce. Keep looking forward, actor I've identified. Clockwise spinning like a bullet to the blur of all things surrounding me but the Buck.

Let it come. Arms forward, claws extended. Vicegrip clamping down of my paws on the right wrist,
and I am flying too fast for this to not hurt.

Today, my body swings on a dislocated shoulder that sends a small giant into a counterclockwise spin of agony. The screaming that follows up the sound of tearing cartilage. The horror of it's an audience and stage hands.

A brand new octave, when I land on my feet in a twirl to watch prey land on a ruined arm. The crying out of condemnation and confusion by all sides. It looks to me. As good as sown to my grip. Too crippled in pain to resist, only able to plead for everything it does not deserve with it's eyes. Every last thing I could never consider, anymore.

And today, my teeth gleam.

The riot shields in front of me begin to break formation to only make it worse. Forcing my hand to have me heaving backwards with a wounded limb in tow. Making that Buck crawl. Having it cry out to my deaf ears. Farther from Bogo abandonment of the thing, as that Cape Buffalo's fury bellows into a megaphone to hold the line.

There will be no salvation. I will be it's demon to drag it's soul to hell.

Bringing it farther away from grace. Towards the masses of the station that look to me as the monster the world always wanted me to be. As though this failed actor in my grip was exactly the role it was playing. They will know what I know. What Eva knows, as she comes to me and what I bring, delivering a punch and a kick and a "SHUT THE FUCK UP!" into it's god forsaken face before grabbing it by it's other arm.

"NOT BY THE GOOD ARM!" I shout to her, when I cannot harbor sympathy.

And the world is leering on us both, because it can not possibly know this folly of conceit we bring with us, pulling it by that ruined arm to make it obey with every jolting raw explosion of a nervous system short circuiting. Time alone will reveal the tradecraft. Me for what I am. The cops for what they've done. My friends for how misplaced their fury is. How wrong Kurt is to come through the line of flat tooth'd suckers to dare ask on behalf of the Commission behind him "WHAT THE HELL ARE YOU DOING?!"

As though we don't still have the only chance left to stop this from happening and I don't got it by the hoof. As if I'm not "BUYING US LEVERAGE!"

"YOU ATTACKED ONE OF OUR OWN!" comes from the prey. And I'll leer into that direction, too livid to not unintentionally keep the pronoun game up. When Eva cannot stand this misdirection any longer.

"ARE YOU A COP?! IS THAT WHAT YOU'RE TELLING HIM?!!" she screams for me. Loud and clear enough that the truth begins to dawn. Just enough for those that don't get it to realize that others do. Holding their tongues as the realization comes to them. And slowly, surely, those leers begin to turn from us. The suggestion plausible enough to not be denied. A Yukon Wolf comes forward. One of the same former cops that escorted me and Burney, yesterday. The look of recognition is unmistakable.

He knows it.

It knows him.

"Hold his right leg." he tells us and "NO! NO I SWEAR, WHAT ARE YOU-" is the last thing Kurt's got any patience for. Mirroring Eva, he kicks it while it's down. In front of the Commission

...
waiting for the confirmation as I twist his right arm and Eva grabs it by the ankle firm. The Yukon kneeling down to grab it's screaming self by the knee with one paw, rolling back the leg of it's jeans with the other... And revealing it everything it didn't want to be revealed as.

There for everyone in eyesight to see on it's shin. An elastic band and a badge.

6428.

Trust.

Integrity.

Bravery.

Words as hollow as the facade of brass plating over potsteel. The fact that we've all just maimed and assaulted a police officer in front of his entire department is as lost on our fury as it is on his own's.

We are out of time: Bogo cries out the order. "FORWAAD MAAAARCH!" explodes out a megaphone crackling from his deafening volume. Bringing our attention back to his forces flinching at the decibel count as they forward with all the might of a towering tsunami.

"MEGAPHONE! NOW!" I call out. Against the dawning of panic in all of us, in spite of that flood to wipe us off the face of the earth. Raul throwing through the bodies between us what I need to jump up to seize. Let the wave dash itself against us.

Ralph commanding "GRAB HIM! PULL HIM UP! NOW!" as I drop back down to the ground that the plainclothes is being hoisted from by the antlers.

It doesn't matter if Bogo knows better or not. The same as it doesn't matter how unstoppable his self-righteous fury appears, as it's avatar closes the divide between itself and us.

All that does, is that stop sign piece of meat we've got to bargain with. Yanked up by an antler and held high enough over my head by an Elephant for Bogo to see him. For all of them to almost slow down to what they're seeing.

They will not.

These animals before me can't look themselves in it's face.

 Mouthpiece to my snout, eyes clinching shut for the killing blow and my torso thrashes forward into the declaration. They have ruined what was good just 'cause they needed a fight.

No.

Let it be known in fury at the loudest I have ever been.

"YOU MAKE ANOTHER MOVE AND THIS COP GETS IT!" crashing into them like an immovable right daring to challenge an unstoppable hate.

"ONE MORE STEP, YOUR FALSEFLAGGING ASS PLAINCLOTHES GETS MAULED TO DEATH!" Shattering their resolve like a train through a neighborhood.

"YOU PUT SIX FOUR TWENTY EIGHT BACK HERE WITH PREY4THEHERD, AND IF YOU DON'T STAY RIGHT WHERE YOU ARE, WE'LL HAVE NO FUCKING REASON NOT TO LET THE HOSTAGE GET IT!" undoing all their momentum.
With no greater than a millisecond before the melee, no fewer than five feet between me and a collective horror that feels like miles away.

Today, the impossible has been made real. An insurmountable force of hundreds halted. A parley brought to fruition. A line drawn. They know fear, now. In spite of their numbers and their armor.

Even if they disbelieve at first that it's a cop we have, the peril of a prey hostage is so great, they don't question what their upbringing has always said predators were capable of.

The recognition has been left to that Cape Buffalo between and behind his Hippo and Indian Rhino. Looking up beside them to that badge on display below a rolled up pant leg. To that contorted, agonized face. In that moment of discovery, that Caesar gives it a name in the quietly muttered "...Officer Buckley...?" that escapes him. As if he's not responsible for it. Like the order to infiltrate Toby's ranks and give his officers an excuse to injure us did not come from him.

First he feigns confusion.

Then he explodes.

Effortlessly throwing the riot cops out of his way like paperweights.

As though we're all just going to stand there have him take our bargaining chip. I have thrown this megaphone so hard into the ground between us, before I realize I have, that he plastic housing shatters like glass with the speaker giving out one last wailing screech. The pieces ricocheting off him and bringing his attention right back to where it belongs.

"DON'T YOU DARE, DON'T! YOU! DARE!" stops him cold.

Has him looking into my eyes of fire so hot that they murder his resolve in the first degree.

Stopped from even daring to charge for one of his own when all he has to yank him down hard enough to tear the antler off it's head.

Made to watch in his periphery as that Elephant with us swings the plainclothes down between his side and an extended arm and thrown to Security.

To the Wolves.

The air is so thick with the combined fury of that Cape Buffalo and myself, that he cannot flinch and I cannot speak.

It has to be Ralph that snarls out the words to lay the law down on the lawless keeper. "You'll have your piece of shit back when we're ready to throw him in your face. We will decide when that happens. Not you. You so much as call in a negotiator after what you've done, I will tear that arm off and drink his blood."

In any other state of mind, I would be able to tell if he's bluffing. The fact that I can't, means Bogo is all the more unable to call it. The silence is so great, I can still hear the Chief's teeth grinding into a clinch threatening to shatter them. Even through my ringing ears and over the Plainclothes' screaming.

Nearly as clear projection of the low, gravelly "What gives you the right to make that demand?" that slips through them.

And I finally have but one single word I can give: "You."
That tremble to his fist hanging low over me. Threatening to bash my skull apart. The one word to declare it all cutting so deep, it's all he can do to ignore me while addressing the obvious to the rest of us. "And you think I ordered him? That I wanted this?"

The seething out of "Order your males to step back one pace." by Eva is all we have left to tell him. Speaking on the entire Commission's behalf. For everyone behind her.

Because if any one soul has a right to dare tell the very persona of their suffering that "I'm not asking. I'm not repeating it." it's her.

For all she's lost. All of her struggles that epitomize my own and the rest of us.

This is not a fight. It's an ultimatum.

And in these long, hour like seconds of him and her staring each other down, it is him that finally blinks. Coming to terms with the fact that for however much he was in power, that he is now out of it. Taking his Radio into his hoof and projecting his voice through hundreds of speakers.

"...All officers, hostage situation confirmed critical. The predators have one of our own. Step back one pace. Any further provocation, and I will throw you to the Wolves myself."

Because if he has any one thing left to spite us with, it's that timeless slur. Words that can no longer cut. Their meaning has been dulled over us. They are powerless, now. Almost pitiful, really. Would be, had we had any pity left. But this city has used up the last ounce of control they had over us. We've got no quarter left in us, as our attention returns to the Buck. The first prey mammal that's going to enter the station since that Taser wielding longneck. Grabbed by the horns by Kurt and a Hyena Alpha, as Eva pulls me by the arm back behind Prey4TheHerd and towards the cop. It's voice hoarse, stumbling over words. "WHAT ARE, WHAT ARE, WHAT, WHAT, WHAT ARE YOU DOING?!” coming at the tail end of it's wit.

The cop doesn't know. So, just to make sure I've got it's attention, I'm going to softly take hold of it's arm and spell it out with every vile drip of a lifetime's catharsis.

"...I'm taking you for a cruise down the only road you ever let me.

An easy enough yank to throttle it's legs forward. Obedience like my Vulpon's own with a shrill cry. Headlong into the dark and hellfire of everyone's staring down. "NO, NO NO NO, DON'T LEAVE ME BEHIND CHIEF PLEASE! PLEEAASE! HEELLLL!!" falls on deaf ears. It's going to church. If it is ever going to know a half of that alienation we've always known, it will be today. My friends beside themselves at the scene they're following. Looking to me like I'm something I shouldn't be, no matter if they agree with it. When all I've got to give to them, is my gifted phone to Andrew and a "Tell Toby everything," as the condemnation begins to come down. The entire station knows what we're bringing with us for what it is and what it's done.

Lifetimes of pent up frustration and resentment boiling over like a foundry's cauldrons. All that never could've been spoken, before. More loathed than a sex offender. More feared than a serial killer. The Commission ought to be encircling us for the scapegoat's own good. Protect it when it doesn't deserve to be. Kurt's got a bigger problem to relay to his radio in "Big Purr and the rest of you Ralph pulled off the line get to the boiler room!" over the shouting, because "If cops are gonna call in SWAT through the sewers, they're gonna do it now!" and whoever we've got in the sewers won't be enough to stop them. Every violent, ugly thing we've ever been told we were. Fists flying in it's direction to point and single out in the masses' calling to task.

One of the Wild Dog delegates being the first to voice the disbelief that "They're not gonna join in on
interrogating the creep?!!" as a Cougar in front of us becomes the first to throw spit over my head on
the plainclothes' face.

"An give One Time a chance to slip in?!" from Ralph. If we were born sick, then this is a
bloodletting that deserves to be taken literally. That Painted Dog wants it like I do. "Then we take
this scat to one of the bathrooms! Makes clean up easier!" he says to send a chill down it's back,
through the wrist I hold it by.

Kurt won't have that though, howling out NO and "Thats the last thing we need is privacy!!" for a
shock.

"We don't need folks seeing what I gotta do to his ass!!" I tell him. Before a Black Bear fakes a
charge. Gets the Buck to try and cower off, with the pain sending back forward.

"Yeah, hell no do we need that! That's why I'm saying we're doing this right here on the ground
floor!"

And for all I want to argue, I'm being reminded instead. Because Kurt's trying to be the voice of
reason I can't even begin to be. With something that ought to be coming out of my own mouth as the
crowds start giving less and less room. Getting close enough that these sharp claws could poke an
eye out of that cop's face. Making Raul step in front of my to start making way when noone else will.
Even as he shouts out "We're gonna do it out here in the open?! You want his own watching us go
town on him?!" with some Dingo trying to shove him out of way. Forcing him to push the fellow
canid back with a snarl, distracted from Kurt's admission of "If I'm on the verge of snapping this
fucko's neck right now then how the hell we gonna keep ourselves in check behind closed doors?!"

With Ralph, and seemingly Ralph alone, starting to appreciate it, when Eva's still got to point out
"Like we need to after what they tried!" with the Commission finally taking Raul's hint.

Only needing to see the Dingo starting to grapple with the Iberian to see that if they aren't gonna give
the Cop what it deserves, that they'll do it for us. That bastard covered in spit, hyperventilating and
on the verge of passing out. Making me realize just how low he's been reduced. I'm starting to see
what I was doing. Ralph snapping back to my girl in a snarling "Any god damn chance we can give
'em to let him he's alive in here! You gonna argue with Kurt when that's gonna placate his own from
coming down on us right god damned now?!" as I look up to him, and to the cop, and catch the fact
that up until this moment, I've been reducing this prey to a thing. Not even him. A thoughtless It, The
same meaning to the vernacular that's always been used against preds.

Some horrible truth about where I've just gone dawning, as a Tiger comes out of nowhere. Rushing
past me with all his hate curled up in a haymaker, wound up and pummeling the Buck on the left
cheek so hard that he's knocked out of my paw and sent flying. And in this moment, in spite of all
the pity they lack, the Wolves that founded and are this Commission have to act as a singularity of
everyone else's preservation. The rest of them circling our felled hostage on the floor for all our
sakes, Ralph grabbing hold of the Tiger and throwing him, his chops curl up for the threat of his
teeth against the Tiger's own, as the Hyena delegates take the hint to assist and Kurt howls out the
threat he never should've had to make.

"EVERYONE BACK UP OR WE'RE THROWIN' YOU TO THE COPS!!" drowning out all the
blindness to the razor edge game we're on the verge of slitting our own throat on. With the Hyena
pair taking over for Ralph on the Tiger to free his paws up for his radio to follow Kurt's threat with
his own.

"ANYONE MAKING THIS WORSE THAN IT ALREADY IS GETS THROWN OUTSIDE!
YOU WANT TO DEAL WITH A COP THEN THERE'S A CAPE BUFFALO WAITING FOR
YOU OUTSIDE! WE NEED THIS ONE ALIVE!" blaring through the PA system loud enough to echo through the silence he creates.

Making the stakes clear, as they should've been, had the entire station not gotten swept up in the one chance they’d ever to return their suffering to the source.

...

...But this cop I'm watching quiver on the floor just isn't the source.

No one cop, no one person, could ever be anything else but a continuation.

Something I lost my grip on.

Zev reluctantly helping the Buck up, while a Wild Dog delegate asks if "All we need him for is bargaining, right? So why we even interrogating him if we already know what he is and did."

Obvious to Ralph that "Yeah, we do know." but only "About half of it."

Obvious for Kurt to follow up on the Northwestern's elaboration with his own crushing blow of reality. "And hostage or not, we're not stopping them raiding us tonight." is better served coming out of his mouth than mine. Because when I gazed long into that abyss, I was not solid enough to keep it from seeping through. Empathy returns to me, having me feel all I made that Buck suffer in the low I stooped.

An argument about to be made by one of the Hyenas stopped cold by Kurt telling it as it is in "We're pushing our luck's daisies up. The more reasonable our demands, the more likely it is Chief Bogo will hear 'em out."

I had gotten so overwhelmed with my blind fury leaving me that I've barely got the energy left to stand in the wake of it. Shudra stepping forward with a syringe in a vial to go with his "If we are to interrogate him..." alongside the clinical, precise sticking of that ruined shoulder for the injection. "Morphine." he tells us. To remedy the pain I caused, in the trap I fell into. My right shoulder feeling the ghost of the Buck's agony like it is it's own.

Downtown's Italian having to ask "And not a truth serum?" for Shudra to reconcile it in "He will be lucid enough. Our pack has nothing like that." and Raul to offer in kind that "We've got some."

But "We will have no such thing! Count your blessings that he's even conscious and accept that we will get out of him what we can!"

Raul bringing it back to "What, 'Sides leaving us the hell alone?!" and the remaining Tundratown delegate replying to that snapping back with his own: "How about the people I lost?"

And slowly,

surely,

painfully and as clearly as I couldn't have known before,

hindsight has me realize what I've done.

Getting me on the verge of collapsing as Rudolf continues in "You're really going to ignore Ylva? The one that she killed?" Ralph can try to appease Rudolf with "It's not like that...", yet it's not enough to sooth this "Then making them take my dead and wild is what we're gonna do, isn't it?"
that the Tundra Wolf has to reaffirm.

I have reduced myself to what the world's always told me I was.

Cruel.

Ruthless.

Uncaring.

Savage.

Everything I ever owed to myself to not mirror. Those projections of the threat I was supposed to be, that I have always denied up until today. I had a line drawn. Without ever knowing it. And all I'm left to feel is that I have crossed the event horizon. With all my hope of being better than rhetoric torn like this cop's cartilege.

There is no opiate, no drug, that can numb this truth. Only the chopping of the atmosphere by a police helicopter's blades coming to a hover over the station, and the flicker of it's spotlight in mid rotation to shine a light on my victim.

As much to telegraph the crew's visual of his subordinate to Bogo, as to have my legs finally give way to the evidence that I have become the heartless It they've always said I was.

My name hanging low from Kurt's breath. Seeing me for all the wreck and ruin I am. Telling Eva I've done enough and to go sort me out.

The love of my life, appearing like some saving grace I'm not deserving any longer in it's approach. Trying to lead to my unsteady frame away from the sin.

It terrifies me, having the fright of her touch compete with all my remorse. For what's got to be the first time, not even her touch can comfort me.

I am so far gone and it's like she's a ghost.

Her trying with all of her heart to hold on to me when I'm doing everything I can to reel away. Andrew having excused himself to follow us, as oblivious as she is on what's eating me. They're not seeing me in between, left incapable of not feeling a little bit disappointing and skimmed over. I've thrown them the obvious enough to see what's occurred in my fall from courage. And this is the old anger, the lonely water of not being known below the river current, to have me throw myself, now.

Throw myself out of this house of her embrace that don't feel like a home I merit. Bringing me to look at her until I can't, seeing her as hurt for what she doesn't get as I am for knowing I'm as cowardly as the strong.

She'll finally demand it, "Why are you acting like this?!" because "You're a hero, boy! You just saved everyone up front from getting locked up!" and it hurts my soul to be called that. When I know what I wanted to be, now.

The cool, happy, genius opposite of all the concept has ever been made out to be that's sick and wrong.

When the only person I could ever start to think could be the definition of what a Hero's defined as, is a black on black on black on black outward Lucifer of a terrifying horned angel that noone,
nothing, should've ever come between and his ability to do all the things I never will and she's...

"You're gonna celebrate what I've done? When I can't even face you?"

There's a difference between knowing and fully realizing.

"Boy... You did everything right."

I can't realize what the opposite of a hero is that's not a villain.

"No, NO Don't you dare call my worst that!"

I didn't want to worry and just be sure of myself.

"Your Worst?! You're coming to me with that like you didn't just possibly save this whole station from getting cleared out?! That was the greatest thing you've done yet!"

I wanted to know that I was known.

"But I wasn't trying to be the greatest, I've been trying to be my own damned best and all that I just did is everything I've has been set against!"

Know the ground under me wasn't ever gonna cave.

"Owen this whole time I've been waiting to see what you did there happen because the cops and everyone thats hurt us deserved to have it come back to them!"

Feel a closure and safety.

"...You were waiting for me to be a piece of sorry god damn shit like them?!"

Be understood.

"...You could never be like them."

Seen for what I was.

"Eva... The weakest thing in me, the thing I've been beating the whole world out there with, has been me not playing their game!"

Andy Warhog wanted to be plastic.

"You played their game better than they ever could!"

I just wanted to be anything but what I am.

"And when I did, I reduced myself to everything they ever told me I was!"

But I can't be who I wanted.

"Owen, stop being like this when I- that narc deserved everything you gave him!"

I can never be who she wanted.

"No he didn't, I just had to-"

All I want for us is peace.
"You're just going to act like you've never hurt anyone?!

What she wants is justice.

"I never even wanted to and I ain't ever let myself live up to what they've made me out to be-"

I can't.

"Yes you did, Yes you freaking di-"

"When?!"

"I don't know, how about that Elk you-"

"THAT WAS DIFFERENT!"

...

...And if I could've... If I could've been, I have lost it. That chance of the possible fading from her eyes staring almost back at me, when I've finally got the guts to bring my own to them. But they're glazed over, she's looking straight through me, to the injury I've made. The obvious is in them, the irreversible that came from a shout out of turn.

Real sorry grimace. Begging eyes, ears hung low.

But I can't say a word, when there's nothing left to say but the one thing I've given her every right to: "...I don't, I can't-"

"Ev-" I almost try for, shut down with a defensive throwing up of her pause to stop it all. "Don't... Don't anything with me, right now."

She'll turn her back to me, with so much more than just her shoulders. I want to show her how painful my purple hurt reason is. But I don't have the right. Couldn't be, when it's all her own she's got to walk away with it, now. Have me watch her abandon and question just what she was doing with me in the first place. Something I haven't done since the Sunday she spent to make me know the place she wanted for me. I didn't want to worry, anymore. I just wanted to be sure of myself. Know the ground under me wasn't ever gonna cave and it has. And noone else could've taken her out from below me better than myself. Watching her try not to tear up as she disappears into the crowd like she does. My own fate I've forced. Minutes spent where I'd tear up, too. If could blame someone else besides myself. If I hadn't made this injury without anyone else's help.

Everything good, made to leave me by my own paw.

I've left myself beside Andrew. Not her. She was only caught between what I was saying and trying to mean, and I can feel it on the tip of a Wolf's tongue. The thought not given a voice of just how I could've ruined something good and secure. Bring the one thing I had going for certain to a certain conclusion. If I wasn't made so completely silent, I would ask for him to just say it.

Let me have it when I warrant it the most.

Yet when he finally does speak, saying out loud the quiet "...How?" I almost reply to, the feeling comes that it's not the How I'm thinking of. That he can read me. Not just a Wolf, but the friend that's known me, for how little he does, better than anyone else ever has. Even her. When he wants to make flight but'll still dare to fight, he'll still ask "How was you slashing that Elk up any different?" to spite the grief I want from him. Avoid the salt he could pour on the wound and give me a chance.
Explain myself to at least a someone when it still can't be enough, when it won't be said to her. And yet I've got to make it worse, when I can't appreciate what he's trying for. Because a thought just occurred to me. What's changed between today and yesterday and getting hung up on the terminal and a possibility.

"...You think that when I had to fight Ylva off of Eva, that..." I catch myself before revealing anything more. Remembering that for what knowledge I've betrayed, that the fact someone's making us go savage is the last thing that needs to leave my mouth. "I mean, we don't know what it even is or how it works..." And I don't get what I'm trying to say, but all the grief he wants to give me starts to boil out through the lid he's been trying to keep firm. "...What if that-"

"Owen, are you listening to yourself?! Did you forget about how the folks that go savage act?! That's not you! You're walking like you're supposed to, you're talking and the scat coming out your mouth ain't any different, you know what you did to that cop and God Damn, I can't even begin to figure out why you Feel Bad about it!"

The thing I thought I didn't want and believed had been resolved, "...The scat coming out my mouth ain't any different?", slipped out of his mouth to be repeated by me. Meant without meaning to be said, leaving him with guilt for how much He didn't want to let it out.

"Bro, don't... Just answer my-" But he let it out and "No, No Andrew, you don't just get to have me dismiss it like it isn't anything when it's something now look, I know I've been antagonistic, I know I've been upsetting things left and right, I know I'm crazy-"

"Then think about that last thing you just said and consider what that really means to everyone else that ain't a straight jacket candidate!"

And it's exactly what I wanted, invited, and brought him to.

"...You really just said that?" when I know he did.

It just kills me, "You think I'm gonna shy away from it?" he asks when he knows "You want the truth out of me, you're gonna make me say it?" and he's going to have me answer for what I'm asking for.

"Then I'm gonna say it: In spite of all the bad that's come with it, and for all the good it's done us, as close as I've come to understanding your bizarro assed logic, You're Still Crazy!"

I'm still just the same as I was. Haven't changed who I am for her or us and not anyone else "And no amount of you making up for it, by you somehow making it work, doesn't change the fact that for half the time I've known you, it's only made everything worse for both of us!"

Yet for much as it still hurts that this is all he's still seeing, it's still comforting me. Irreconcilable as it is. Like I've still got somewhere to go with his plea of "...Are you gonna tell me how slashing that Elk up was any different, or are you gonna change the topic again?" to have me ready to ask him something fair.

"Are you gonna hear me out or just shut me down?"

Leaving him to doubt what he's trying for in a split second defensive train of thoughts on just what good this all even is. To be dissolved in his reflection, bring him to his honest truth of "...I'm gonna give you a chance to make sense, Owen. I love you like a brother, I don't just call you that for nothing. But I don't Get You. I want to but you confound me like noone else ever has."

I've never really explained myself. Not even to myself, because I've never never had the articulation
to match the eloquence I've gathered up. That absence of the former making the latter invalid.

"If you could just explain why you going to town on that cop is messing you up..." he's begging.

But if I'm really getting better, then I've got to give myself a hope that I'll finally be able to get the words right. "Because I've been seeing how things could be better. How I could be better."

The truth I'm struggling to find in the good I've done. As nonsense as that good seemed to me and everyone else.

"When I slashed up that Elk, I wasn't the male I was supposed to be. Wasn't taking any pride in what I did, either. I just acted up on him. I was vindictive, mad... I was taking it out on anyone I could. On that Elk, on Buffalo when all he had to do was be sat down an woke the hell up like Toby had to go and do... On that friggin ramen shop when all I had to do was just leave... I could've just told that Elk to go to hell... We could've just ate somewhere else... It wouldn't have been so hard."

What everything's been leading me to see. "Do you even care that you saved everyone up front?"

The things I couldn't see for myself.

"I know I did!"

What I've managed without realizing.

"So why are you so torn up about how you did it?!"

What I've got to, for myself, without their help.

Hard as it is "Because of all this misery I've gone through, Andrew!" when "Every damned thing I ever did wrong being spat back in my face..." is it's own reason that's been given to me. "I was supposed to be better than all I did to that cop!" and I don't know how, and can only see what I've done before to judge that "I saved everyone and I did it wrong!"

Are You Being Serious Right Now on his face, "But what you did might've just given us a chance tonight!" coming out of his mouth, and I can make it through my own head, without that having been anyone else's charge but mine.

I will finally start to figure out what I mean with "I played their game!" when know I've become better than that, just can't figure out how and left as hysterical and manic as Andrew's "Owen what the hell is this game you keep talking about?! What freaking game?!"

It's staring out from in between my teeth, I can feel it, I'm almost there with "I'm seeing the world play chess when the only winning move is to not play it and I'm tired of everyone losing!" but it's not whole, it's not a sum that's enough and I'm struggling with this tongue to finish the thought in "I'm seeing the past keep coming back around and I don't care if it's gotta be me that dies trying..."

I lost the words.

I can't figure out what I was aiming for.

I've been through so much these past days that my wit's been frayed down to it's last scrap, when I was so close and it's killing me.

Maybe it's a miracle that I'm this broken, and not any further. With me having gone through all I have with everyone.
Leaving Andrew all the same, on the verge of giving up in one last "...Do you... Do you care more about that cop than us?"

"No!" but I can't blame him. Because I would be lying if I said I never hated, because...

Because that's it.

"Do you care more about him than your own girl?"

It's so simple, so very clear, now.

"That ain't it, stop thinking it's me choosing si-"

"Do you care about yourself?"

It's everyone's sake but mine.

"That's it, isn't it? You really don't... Like you told me you didn't."

I was running around like an unkept kid, trying to rationalize the things I did before. Trying to define instead of narrate.

"All that ratchet ass swagger, you not turning down for anything and you can't even tell yourself the truth."

How was I still holding on?

"You can't stop for five seconds to think about your front or back your flexing."

If I went too far I hope it hasn't done me in.

"You're so self asborbed an yet you think you're nothing."

Because that every impossible thing I've done has been me going against convention so hard, it's no wonder I've never figured it out before.

"You can't help everyone. Can't even help yourself."

Cause I'm body and blood and a bleeding out heart and the cup overflowing has added up to every different idea I wanted to be.

"Can't even see over yourself to look at how much you're killing the rest of us."

And he's so on point, he's missed the mark of what it's all about. I'm looking up to my friend with all of this, and I'm watching him come towards the verge of tears for the first time. Those torn up eyes begging it out of me as much as his voice. Almost ready to give up on me as someone that can't be saved.

"...Owen... Owen, why am I even your friend?" coming out of him at his weakest, his frame on the verge of trembling as he asks me that. Doubting everything that we've ever gone through with "What's the god damned point?" because it can't be explained.

And it hurts my soul.

I could tell him it's because he doesn't know me, yet for as easily I could define us like that, I'd be making the same mistake.
Because this cannot be defined. It can only be felt.

I wanted to grow, but didn't think I was growing back. Right down to the impossible I wanted to see. Because this hurt is what it means to burn. I have been. Left in the char and ash of all my dark ages.

No one should suffer, because "I care about what I can do, Andrew." when everyone needs empathy like that "I care about you and everyone but me and I don't care about anything else about me. I'm at the point now, that if what I can do means the end of me, then I'm ready."

"...You're fucking with me."

And it's crazy, it's impossible but...

I think I'm finally there enough to see it, just as he's about to to turn his back on me for the last time.

That "I'd go to hell if I could take the place of everyone else. I'd make that deal with God. Because I don't hate anyone enough to wanna see anyone suffer like that. Everyone deserves better. You deserve better. All of you. I'm heavy about everything but my love but I love you all too much to just let everything we've gone through keep happening. I can't take seeing it when I know there's another way."

Nothing he's ever known could be compared to what I've told him. The sheer shock in his eyes. Something I had no intention of, that's left him still and wild eyed and all I needed to see, to know that I have finally broken through. Pierced the armor of all his convention enough for him to understand the mistake of having ever applied what I was to what I've become. Not changed: Realized. So resolutely, that in a frantic pace of his head's internals whirring to calculate all the connections adding up to the clues for the mystery I was to him that he had all wrong and are now coming together. But he's got to confirm the results. "...That's why you had Gonzo and the gangs put on Savage Duty? Why you had the Alphas pull their sorry asses out of the sewer?"

He needs me to reaffirm that "You'd still go to hell for Gonzo after what he almost did to us, and knowing the product he's pushed? You'd do it for every cop, every longneck prey boy that's ever fucked you up and treated you like you weren't even a person?"

To remain without any change, like a rock that allows the waves to dash themselves it, even "If someone killed Eva, would you still do that for them?"

And in that instant where I almost question, he recognizes it, like a cigarette burn on a roll of film to stop.

"Don't mess with right now." because we can't afford it.

"Don't even think." when I shouldn't even have to.

"Would you really?" and the situation is right enough, that the only way I can answer him has to come as naturally as it really is.

"...Would you try and stop me?" I tell him.

With me not trying not to answer him. With it only being that I'm just not able to put it another way. And for once, I know the peace of that uncertainty. Enough for him to feel it in kind. That the bridge I've yet to cross ain't the journey I'm unwilling to go on. If for no other reason than that I'd be willing to try.

"...What would you have done, besides about break his arm off to drag him back with it? How
would you have brought him back to us and stopped the cops from raiding without doing that?"

"...I can't tell you. Maybe if you gave me a week, a year even, I'd be able to tell you what I would've
different... All I can tell is that... No matter what I could've done different, I wouldn't have been so
proud and satisfied about what I have."

And with my peace has come the truest realization in him. With the thought telegraphed through his
face that he believed he'd never feel the way that he does, now.

About me, the world around us, the way it all is and the impossibility of of how little I've made sense
starting to make sense.

"...I don't know if it's that you're a square trying to fit in a round hole world or what but bro... It's
either you or it's the rest of us that ain't fit for each other."

As though I just manifested heavier than air flight and touched the face of God with it to prove him
wrong about how earthbound he knew we were.

"And if there's gonna be this much maladjustment between you and us... The world out there then...
Then I don't know... Maybe I'm going crazy with you... And it's like I can't even tell if that's a bad
thing, anymore."

For a moment, we've just got to let the brave new unimaginable soak in. Let it come through all the
layers like the sun through the clouds. This really is the uncharted. Unlike anything we didn't even
know existed. But there's no rush to our cartography. This land we've found ourselves on has always
been here, and it's been patient. Nothing can distract from what we're seeing.

So he's not really torn about asking if "...You're really not gonna go after her?" when it can't.

"I want the best for her." as I always have.

As much as it hurts.

Same as when I didn't know what was, same as how I've found it, now.

He can tell me "You're saying that like the first fight you two ever had is gonna be the last and you're
done." with me appreciative about the closure of what I'm worth. Feeling like for all I wanted to be,
I'm a little more than a real live boy. Like a purpose.

But "I don't think we are done."

Maybe in the back of my head, that was what kept me from following. Like "We just need space for
awhile."

"Did you ever tell her anything like you told me?"

"I didn't have the words until now."

And I'm not crying for once, over being asked something like "...so what happens now?" so it'll
come the way she'd appreciate.

"If we're done, then all I can do is take the love she gave me and give it. Because we're going to see
each other again in a few hours anyway... The Commission's gotta come together for a meeting
before the raid tonight. I'll know if we're done, then."

And any other time but now, I would've said one last meeting. I would've given up, knowing before
seeing. Some fact not lost on Andrew, without needing to be spoken. I'm looking up to a friend unburdened of doubt and light on his feet in the high. I could go back to where the commission's interrogating the Buck, or me and him could just stay here to soak the moment up. But he's not testing the waters as he starts to wander forward without me. He's taking the moment of clarity with him. For a purpose I could guess at, if I didn't feel it right to stay on what and where I am. My time left before I set forth seeming best spent on trying to know this place a little better.

Every different person I've been and all of my faces. Reflecting to own up to them. Taking the best I've been needing from each one. Getting a little lost in my head for awhile, to about a dozen songs and their instruments dancing in and over my back without earbuds. Something I'll try to hold onto when I come down. Knowing it's gonna be hard, turning my head left and watching the crowds around me tighten up, tense in horror to make way for Ylva being escorted out onto the groundfloor. I'm catching glimpses of her figure through them. Fighting and lashing out in every direction she can, her handlers struggling with the snares. Her out of control body registering the scent of me. And for a moment, by a glance, I can swear there's a sentient plea behind the wild eye leering at me.

That somewhere deep in that zombie, there's a person dying to get out and be known. Taking me back, and I'm going in. The terminal's events so fresh, it's a wonder I'm not being overwhelmed. I still can't recall the terror lightly at all, that someone else put the two of us and Eva through. I'm still not sure what forgiveness really is. Not sure if I could even apply it to what ended, with someone making the split decision that it was gonna be his life to end. But it's not lost on me, that I'm not calling her an It anymore. Estranged as her soul seems to be from her body, I can still recognize that I'm not playing someone else's pronoun game. I can look to someone whose body nearly killed me and still see them in it. I can harbor a dissonance of not wanting anyone to suffer; just stopped from hurting others.

That I don't care if it's me or someone else: I just want this all gone like a page turned over. All I'm left with is the sight how things could be and wanting that so much closer.

So that's how I'll come. Rounding the corner of that breakroom threshold, sometime later. Seeing the new Tundratown delegate beside Rudolf, making the Commission nearly all accounted for, minus thee Hyenas and Wild Dogs.

And Eva.

The touch of fear still on the faces of all these Wolves over how I left them.

The shock in how deliberate but certain my feet slowly register on the tile.

I won't be worried though. I wanna be invested in how things could go, not on how they're bound to.

Take "...You high or something, Owen?" from Ralph to make my words "Imagine if I was, though." with a softly knowing smile.

Watching the visual telegraphed between his ears of me with a blunt and him getting a little scared in the humoring. At a time like this, where everything's about to come to a head and there's nothing else to do but wait for the unaccounted. I want to change the topic, but can't find one to replace it. Knowing these Wolves want to ask what happened with me earlier but holding it back. Making note of her walking in before I do, with the state I'm in. Turning my head left and looking to those beautiful eyes behind the mask on her face, that can't hide the crater I left with my tongue. It's almost coming back, that guilt of mine. I'll feel it for a moment in the distance, when I can't feel Sorry and wish I could.

Anything that could be their business to know, they can read pretty much read all they want off the
both of us for awhile. The divide in our eye levels that isn't physical, coupled with the conflict in her over something new I can't catch the meaning of. Her guard strong enough to throw me off the trail of it, but, in the end, it leaves me feeling like it's not my right to know. Yet. That we've just got unfinished business that can wait, like we all know it has to. So she'll take her place opposite of me. Silent and questioning. Hoping for a distraction, and it can't come soon enough, when we're taking all the light out of the room. Setting the uncertain tone for when the Hyena delegates finally do come in...

Shuffling forward with a duffel in each of their paws.

Great and heavy things of purpose to tax their strength. The same as they tax these Wolves. Cocked lupine brows all around in the confused frustration of "What's with the bags?" voiced by Kurt. With the tension to let me know that something must've happened, as I left the scene of my 241.

"Thought we weren't bringing anything to the table?" gets spoken by one with just a little too much pride for it to not challenge his refrain. For her to be a little too smug for what she's getting as his anger shows. But the pair of Wild Dog delegates coming in means he doesn't have the time. If it's really as bad as the look on his face makes it, then they'll settle it when we've got nothing better to do. When there's none of the responsibility we all got right now.

Ralph will try to get meeting started proper with "...I made the choice with Kurt to have Unit two up front, tonight. The bigger folks we had on the frontline'll are on reserve 'til we need them-" "Why do that when we're gonna need them more than ever tonight?"

But the other Hyena, she's got another plan to press buttons just like her fellow. Because what ever went down between can't go unaddressed. There has become a divide that's form in the last place and time there ought to be, to have the Wolves all getting on the same wavelength.

The mutual nonverbal, with Rudolf so livid that he's gotta awkwardly keep his temper with a clinched fist and "...Does Owen gotta remind you what happened at the terminal?" when they're all about to snap. Leaving Ralph feeling his fury hard enough, that he's gonna interject for Rudolf's sake. Betraying the foresight I gave him in the process that "If whoever's shooting us, shoots Big Purr or any of the other muscle we had exposed up front, and they get shot before the cops raid us, it's going to cause all the havoc they'll need to mop us up with."

And in comes the second front from one of the Wild Dogs, taking the side of the Hyenas beside him in "What's going to stop the cops from shooting them when we do bring them up, then?!"

I need to say something when I can't. I wasn't there, before.

I'm left needing more to go on, and I get it from Kurt when he shoots the volley off... "Did you not god damn notice that Bogo really don't know?!"

...It's just that I'm not ready to hear the shockwave. I almost don't process it at first. Neither does Eva. The both of us looking each other straight in our shocked faces for the first time again.

Because it can't be.

"Know his Cops were mixed in the protesters between him and us?!!"

But it is. That Bogo didn't plan the false flag, and he really didn't- "Know that someone's making us go savage before Teshi opened her mouth about it?!!"

...The one question neither me nor Eva was ready to hear answered.
"...Are you serious?" she says, when she already knows the truth of the postmortem bombshell Kurt's just dropped that needs to be taken at face value, with me reading the certainty on her face that she can't refute.

"Yea and she better hope to god he doesn't even bother making it public 'cause it's gonna make us look like conspiracy theorists if he-" is something he can't finish before "Why are you acting like Bogo ain't a two-faced bastard when him shooting us would be the best thing to happen for-" happens, but the Hyena I've got to assume is Teshi, and her cutting off of Kurt, gets her cut back in kind by Ralph raising his volume to the tune of "Because he might be a sorry specist assed piece of scat, and he may hate us and want us gone, but he's honest about it!"

And the frustration of what seems so obvious to her, has got to be dispelled. Because if anyone is as good a judge of character as a Fox, it's a Wolf. And Ralph's conviction in what he's just yelled out leaves no question about it.

Even if that makes our situation that much worse, that we're not just dealing with Bogo.

That he's not in complete control.

That every assumption Eva had about this bedlam has put to question with Ralph going on.

Because it's obvious that "He could've called in SWAT," he tells her along with Teshi, "Could've gone ahead with raiding us while we were busy interrogating that cop and he didn't. He didn't have to meet our demands and he did, even after you went in on him!"

The difference being made apparent, between Wolves and everyone else. Even other Communal preds. In this hard reminder that their kind had to learned how to read everyone around them to not become extinct. Reminding me of an analogy and connection I could almost make out, if my head wasn't so caught in the dismay I'm seeing that Ralph's trying to end. With Kurt's contribution not skipping a beat to add "That spell it out enough for you? That it's someone else?" When it's obvious to them that there's gotta be a third party. Some unseen hand that's playing us as hard as they're playing the cops and driving Eva mad.

Driving me mad. Because if I only had the time, if I had more to go on, I could figure out who it is.

"We get it. We wish it was that easy, him and his boys doing it. But it ain't that easy. When he went to town on you for accusing him, you lit a fire under his ass so bad that he didn't have the time to make scat up. He looked you dead in the eye. Didn't even looking away once. He showed what he knew and he doesn't know a damned thing."

I'm trying to not be scared. I'm managing a little better than Eva. It's just that I can't figure out what's really happening when it feels like I can, if I hadn't been through enough that I lost the trail of something that feels right on top of me. Looming over my head. Feeling so obvious that it's suffocating.

Killing me with agony when I can't divert my attention to it, because Ralph's seething tone to all this infighting is keeping me right here with "So like I was saying, Rudolf clearing out the park has freed Gonzalo up. With everyone inside, we don't gotta worry about someone getting shot outside and got the station more secure."

But the back and forth isn't over, because the male Wild Dog's need to bring it up can't be ignored: "What's gonna stop the cops from finding another way to shoot us?"

And Rudolf nearly lunges. Having everything he's done put to question, his body so tense to
telegraph the intent, that it's the new Tundratown delegate holding his old superior back and try to
plead that "We've done everything we can to-

"Matter of fact what's gonna keep 'em from circling around and getting in through the terminal, now?!"

I'm on the verge of losing my head to a question that's not impregnable, but the feuding is happening
too hard and fast to not cement me in the here and now. With Zev joining in, on a Nine to Four
argument he can't believe he's gotta take part in. "Bre Gafiller! They are expecting us to flee in that
direction and into the city! If they manage to make us then that is their scheme, Tahmores!"

With his Egyptian cohort coming in fast on the elaboration of "The same as they did years ago with
the camp protestors! The police made everyone run in the safest looking direction, with officers
hiding there and arrest everyone that fled! They must be planning to use that same tactic to get
anyone that runs from here, Is That Not obvious?!"

It is to me, and it is to Eva by the look on her face. But what ought to be obvious for the ones that
need to get it still falls on their deaf ears. At the end of everyone's wit, there is a fear and paranoia
about what seems to be happening. Questions we weren't prepared to ask. Answers we weren't ready
to face. And as much as the Wolves are trying to keep themselves together in spite of it, the Wild
Dogs and Hyenas can't keep their focus. They cannot go without questioning everything, now.

"You still opened up the park for the cops to come through there!" from Tahmores.

"Who did we have to defend it, when everyone we had on security is up front-" kept from being
finished by Rudolf from Teshi's interrupting "An you think they don't know?! That them making us
abandon the park behind the terminal wasn't their idea?!" when there is too much happening, and a
demon she's got to give a name even if it it's the wrong damned one and Ralph's through with it all,
charging into the middle of the circle and hunching over when "EVEN IF IT WAS IT'S ONLY
WORKED IN OUR FAVOR WHEN WE COULDN'T PROTECT EVERYONE WE HAD OUT
IN THE OPEN, THEY'D GET IN WHETHER WE TRIED TO HOLD IT OR NOW AND NOW
THAT RUDOLF JUST SAVED THEM ALL FROM GETTING SHOT OR BUSTED WE'VE
PACKED THE STATION SO TIGHT IT'S TAKE AGES FOR THEM TO CLEAR THE
PLACE OUT!"

It doesn't matter, now.

If I could really call a demon by it's true name.

If I could sort it all out and know who's pulling the strings that Bogo isn't.

Because the moment of truth is coming too fast for whoever's set the ship on a crash course to matter.
Because Teshi can't see that the rest of Wolves know Ralph ain't about to put paws on her, howling
out what could feel like a challenge in "YOU DONE, NOW?! YOU WANNA KEEP ACTING
UP ABOUT HOW WE'RE TRYING TO DO THINGS WITHOUT YOU HELPING US?!"
when it's really just a plea. But she's still gotta it all the wrong way. About to meet the fists that aren't
about to come with her own. Her body tensing, the rest of Wolves reading it with Ralph, when we've
got all the hands on deck we need to clear the wreck we're about to become, if we only weren't
distracted with the mutiny we don't have to face.

It doesn't matter if I could solve the mystery.

We're on the brink of a losing everything and don't be distracted, "For god's sake." don't be
distracted, it comes.
The mournful begging pain out of my throat to make everything still as a painting of some greek tragedy. All the players frozen in the moment of their hubris being realized, their charge becoming known without my having to declare it. Almost after the fact and in the nick of time. But if the Wild Dogs and Hyenas can possibly not see where they're letting us go, I can't risk it. Pouring all my focus out of my mouth, I've still got to put that hell to canvas: "We can settle our differences in prison if we gotta. When there's nothing better to do with ourselves but play the Warden's game of keeping each other in check. We can play his chess out in the rec yard after they rounded us up. And we'll do it, when we don't have all of these other lives on the line we got 'em riding on."

Truth so resounding it's as good as written in stone. A tomorrow so clear, that it's as irrefutable as a yesterday. When we still have the chance we do to alter history before it happens.

"So if we can keep the inevitable from happening for just a little while longer... Can we please just try to see a little more eye to eye? Not let a bunch of innocent folks down? With the one chance we probably got left?"

Like that, my galvanizing opinion has got them to solidify. Carrying up our purpose along the hard hike past what's really happening, to how we're going to making it a moot point. Because if I've been carved in a fire that's become everything I've been through, to be forged and made better from, then I'm going to need the Hyenas and Wild Dogs to go through it with me. No intention of burning anyone, and I think that got through like it couldn't get through from the Wolves. In this pause, the culprits consider those words, apparently enough for Ralph, Kurt and all the Lupines to see it from them. Everything made calm and right enough for the most pertinent question to come to forefront.

Yet just because we picked the wrong fight to win, against the cops and against their city, that does not mean we don't still have something more than ourselves to see it through, for. With Eva breaking the silence, hers and ours, with an admission in the miracle that "As crazy as what we did yesterday was?” can't be repeated. Conveyed in her uncertain tone. But "It ain't gonna work a second time." is a damn good place to start figuring out where to go next.

Everyone on the same page of "Our defense with Unit 2 joining us, Big Purr and the others waiting in the back is gonna better than yesterday's but..." for me to finish her thoughts in "They didn't the time to organize that they've had, now." and Kurt to elaborate with the intel: "They're ready, this time. Lookouts on the rooftop've said they got twice the cops, now. They're gonna hit us with every spare badge at their disposal and that's just the ones on Watering Hole park... They'll have more waiting behind us. Like Sahara Square said."

Ralph can finally get the meeting started proper. "...Now how are we gonna keep them from making it happen, in the first place?" he's asking.

With all the odds against us coming back to everything we don't know we can do.

The impossible has to happen. The craziest thing. And it'll come in the form of "We need to scatter the ones in front of us."

Tahmores drawing all eyes to the wild optimism. The confusion that he's really suggesting "We need to cause enough casualties to get them running back to Precinct 1." leaves Downtown's Eurasian unable to entertain it. Noone can, seemingly but Teshi and her fellow Alpha, and how they can, I can't know. Because "They got Rhinos, Hippos, Elephants and numbers." is something he's got to remind Tahmores. "We don't have the tasers to go against them all. We have two cases of them and even with the tasers and spray we took off of them yesterday, that ain't enough to change their advantage." And as much as I agree with Tahmores, that we've got to repel them with fear, the maiming method that Downtown entertains is something I cannot get behind.
In spite of how easy and practical it would be, if it could even be done, I'm left wanting better and feeling like it's asking too much. Conflict that I think Eva is catching a glimpse of from my face, as Teshi looks down for a moment.

In a smug toothy grin, she'll take the floor from both of them.

Deathly honest look on her face, when she admits "We got better than Tasers." and has it all come back with a point of her finger to the duffels on the ground. Her cohort taking the cue to squat down and open one for the reveal. The apprehension in the Wolves that goes in hand with some distant optimism they share with the rest of us, as the offer is handed to her. Showing some thing to us that's maybe three quarters the size of a basketball. Wrapped in wax paper with a cylinder at the bottom. A cord going all the way from there and back to the top, molded to contour around the curvature of the body. The word Willow stenciled on the side. With none of us recognizing what she's holding at first.

...Then I realize what it is.

Ralph, too. Because what Teshi's holding looks just like you think it would.

And in the knowledge of what she's brought out to bear comes the quiet disbelief that goes beyond an outrage, to dip into the confusion of Ralph's "...Better than tasers? That? Those, assuming those duffels are full of them?"

Disgust coming in waves as what the Hyenas brought sink in.

Raul getting it now to add "All the things you could've brought, and that's it?" for Teshi to lose her pride to the offense she's taking.

"We had them from a client's shipping container. They were the only thing we could find of any use at the warehouse."

Her intent lost in translation between the purpose of what she's got and the application she's got in mind. When it can be seen how they might be used, and I know, without her saying it yet, that that's where she's going.

And it horrifies me.

"And how the hell are we supposed to use those?!" comes from Kurt, with her being more than ready to spell it out:

"...Aim them right in their faces and fire."

The killing spree plan heard loudly and boldly clear.

Everyone else's shock, with me wincing to the visuals.

"...You're really saying shoot them at the cops?"

Cauterizing bloodshed.

"And why not?"

The force to maul limbs from torsos.

"How about the preds you're putting in the crosshairs? Let's start there!"
Bone chilling screams.

"The traitors that kept their badges? They had their chance to join us! They didn't have to choose the longnecks' side and they have and what, you want me to second guess this and feel bad?!

The shapes of mammals made unrecognizable.

"I want you to second guess this Rambo scat because if anything's gonna prove them all right about us all being violent ass savages, it's gonna be us getting a bunch of cops blown up!"

Everything I just faced with a single cop in plainclothes,

"If they want us to be their terrorist so bad then why not let 'em have it?!

cranked all the way up to the validation of fear,

"We do that and they're gonna mulch us down like roaches! No mercy! No second thought!"

the affirmation for hate,

"WE'LL STOP THE RAID DEAD!"

and the declaration to open war.

"AND THEY'LL COME BACK AN COME BACK TO KILL US AND KILL EVERYONE WE'RE TRYING TO KEEP SAFE!"

When noone could ever deserve this, when not even the cops can't deserve this, they don't even know who's pulling their strings, I can't even say someone ain't pulling our chains, that someone ain't binding us all to shooting holes through everything we all want and I know, I know it now that I'm not asking for too much when I can see it, I can see a use, and I can see how this can be turned around so we can light the candle from both ends, how we got a chance to make this all blow up in everyone else's face without making it more than a phrase because "Noone's gotta die."

...And I hear it...

...And I have to let them sink in for a moment.

"...Noone's even gotta be hurt."

Words I could say to myself I couldn't say to anyone else.

Not before.

The reality that I heard it coming out of the mouth that wasn't mine. And I have to process just who it's came from when she barely believe herself. When the girl is so uncertain of how it feels, she's got to question herself. Even the unfamiliar doesn't feel against her. Almost like she's onto something, if it's really stopped the yelling. Getting her to try making it bloom inside of "We just have to scare them so bad that we can push them back when they panic." without doubt when there has to be.

The sentiment so unbecoming of how she left me, the good will I couldn't get out before she did, I'm asking how it's coming from her. Questioning as much as Teshi, only to the tune of an opposing reason: "...Only just scare them?"

But if there'll ever be a perfect time to see my heart through, she's helping it happen and I must follow through and tell the truth when that Ferret has gotten Teshi bewildered enough to distract her
off the airborne toxin of the killing sensibility.

I'll go all in without a thought to trip the Hyena up from finishing "Eva, like they ain't gonna laugh it off while they-" because I would be lying if I didn't ask anything else but "Ain't your balls big enough to scare the brown out of their cracks?!"

So unexpected, she doesn't even know what hit her. Delivered so absurdly into the worst timing, the straight faced pun's got her caught in a blank stare gaze towards me. Crosseyed and ensnared between two opposing emotions to compliment the laughter that almost comes everyone else. Silence so deafening, it's working wonders. Confusion that's Priming Teshi too perfectly for Eva to not see the tag team comeback I've given her.

Because seeing it action, she would be lying if she didn't admit "...Crazy has gotten us this far, hasn't it?"

The fact so obvious, Kurt can't help but get on board the Hyena's boat with us to hijack it. He can start to entertain us using them if "It's like Owen said, before you and Sousten joined the Commission." when noone knows what the hell we're doing.

But the "Everything we can do or not a damned thing at all." from Kurt is just enough for Ralph to admit it to himself: "...Everything we didn't know we had."

An everything or nothing idea, with something we didn't know the Hyena Clan had.

The change of heart proposal to have the heads of it's delegation spin so fast, they can't protest Eva repurposing my own past words.

When I still can't believe this is happening.

"You've got a chance to keep them from evicting us... Now you gotta figure out how we intend to not get anyone killed with it." She's telling that Hyena.

The four of us so in tune to turn Teshi's lethal force around that she can't fight back.

Noone can.

We're all caught up in thought so bad alongside her. She can't even say a thing without Ralph's prompt. "...How are we gonna fire them, if we do go through with this?"

I want to know how and why Eva's gotten this ball rolling, but the momentum is too much for either me or Teshi to do anything besides try to keep up as best we can.

"I got the remote for them," She shellshock docile tells him. "They just need to be wired up to the receiver, someone pushes the button and ten seconds later they go boom."

Kurt's "But where're we fire them from?" and she don't know where she's going when she says "From the rooftop." yet it naturally comes back to what we want when "We'd almost be using them like they're supposed to be. We get the angle right and they'll go off over their heads low enough to make them scatter."

"But high enough to not hurt anyone?" I'm saying to make her stay on course to get it with "I- Yea, right, high enough not to hurt, yes." for all of us to start feeling the relief...

When we still don't know what's happening, it's moving pretty much amazingly enough to reassure us into not questioning this. We've really got a chance. Something so desperately out of left field it'd
never be expected. The cops will never know what didn’t hit them until it’s too late.

Kurt can sigh to "Radio operated... Noone has to be on the rooftop." like a safe position is a guarantee...

"...I don't know that..."

...And the admission brings us back to fearing.

Ralph's "What do you mean you don't know?" to Teshi's "Let's just play it safe and assume they gotta be!" for Kurt's reminder of "Play it safe? You're talking about having someone out in the open just asking to get shot!" and I'm so god damned enraged.

"You boys already got your folks up there running a watchtower gig!"

Enraged that we're really gonna let a snag this minor get close to having it all come undone.

"Yeah and I'ma have Unit 2 up there to keep you safe setting em up, but we can't gonna have anyone up there once the show starts! We’ll need everyone downstairs an even if we don't need the help, we can't risk one of 'em getting shot to distract us!"

The single best chance we got and it's gonna come down to reception.

"That don’t change the fact I ain't about to guarantee the antenna’ll pick up the signal between the distance and the big damn ceiling!"

And catching Shudra out the corner of my eyes, it's more than just a similar disgust he's got as he looks at me.

"Alright god damn it fine we'll do it your way just tell me who the hell who we'll get up there an stick his neck out!"

It's a lightbulb going off over to his head to an epiphany that "Dost, dost, dost, dost, do you really not believe there is someone among us that will volunteer for such a thing?!"

The someone obvious enough, that he doesn't even need to drop the name in everyone's mouth.

Because now in their lines of sight slowly panning this way, it's more than just them thinking I'm crazy. It's knowing the relief that I can pull it off. When I was practically born to conduct this overture, and all my proof has led up to the foregone that I'll do it.

Of course I will.

I'd die with a smile, I'm that ready for this...

...I've just got "Two conditions:" to be known as the least I can ask. When I'm already on board enough to be known as such when I look to the Hyenas with "You promise me one more time that noone gets hurt." Just not not known well enough to keep Ralph from saying "Owen, she gets it."

"No, an you don't get it either." and I hope to god it doesn't get taken the wrong way.

With brows cocked to confusion more than anything else, my heart is making it known that "I hurt two people too many, today." for Eva to nearly go back to dismissing me all over again, when she's done all she has while all the Wolves go back to Ralph's asking if I was high. But Teshi can't argue this. Not when I'm standing so firm in the declaration I've made, that rather than argue the narrative, she has to respect the determination that outshines her own. Some feat so foreign to her, she's
prepared to hear my heart pouring out against her odds and ego.

"You can tell the jury this was all me... I'll play trigermammal and I'll make that plea bargain with the judge to keep any of you from going down for this after it's all done... The only price I ain't about to pay is my conscience getting weighed down by anyone else getting hurt."

It floors them all as hard as it does, because I mean this. Mean it so hard, they really do get it.

...She gets it.

So swept up by the line I've set in the sand that they can feel it like the physical...

The same as I can feel a little heart sink into the shortness of breath that's opposite of me...

When only I can realize what I just did to it. Only after the fact. Without an ounce of doubt in what I told everyone else.

The rest of them left convinced she did the right thing, when Eva said noone had to die or be hurt. When all she can do is look to the noone I've declared myself with all the pain of a ghost looking at her killer.

And looking back, I'm right there with her. The both of us left wondering what she even saw on the night we met. When she would've slit her own wrist and gone to hell just to save me. The Wolves slowly catching on to while the Hyenas and Wild Dogs continue misdiagnosing.

Trying not to let it show when Teshi tries to meet my cup overflowing with her own to promise that "We got a couple hours, my clan'll make sure noone does." since all that matters is the math. Teshi left certain that "Everything we looked up says they go off about five hundred feet... A thousand is the standard but they were custom ordered for rooftops." for her to try putting everyone at ease to "We'll figure out the angle and distance and aim for the watering hole at the park."

...In spite of what's starting to dawn on her. They'll feel the relief all the same, when I can't take it back for Eva's sake. Couldn't if I tried, even if I wanted to. We're really doing this.

Something so crazy, none of us can really wrap our heads around the magnitude of it.

"...The moment you're done, we'll need you back downstairs with Unit 2..." coming straight out of Ralph to seal the deal with Teshi. No second guess static, none...

Until but Eva finally finds it in herself to challenge this by the one angle she's got.

"...You're gonna let him go up there alone?"

...They know what she's asking. And the perfect sense that couldn't be otherwise argued wouldn't kill me, if she was only asking if they were gonna let me do it without anyone.

"...I know what being out in the open like that means, but if I'm alone up there, it won't make sense for the sniper to shoot me."

The words of the obvious written on the wall, that there has to be a back up trigger to make it up for all the let down of a single soul being entrusted to light the fuse, only to become entrapped in a body gone savage.

"It doesn't matter if it won't make sense, what if you get shot anyway?"

...But that's not what she asked. When I could do it with anyone else, but the one I would've died on
the terminal for, if someone hadn't come to both of our rescues. Ralph can try to argue the undefendable, trying to make "He'll have to see it's just Owen up there and aim for someone else." some kind of perfect excuse to keep the Romeo and Juliet trope from playing out overhead. When they could've settled for the modern conveniences of visiting rights and once a year chances in trailers.

But not life after death.

"Are you all about to really take that risk and let the cops march with noone on the roof to shake 'em off the rest of you?" This is more than her having to be felt up by professional creeps just to see me through the looking glass and hear me over a phone line.

It's her losing the mind and soul she's tried to understand, in the body she'd never get to hold again.

And it's me not ready to live after mauling her to death, when I know it from Ylva that I'd still be to get what I'd done.

"No... No, He ain't doing this alone, we got too much riding on that button being pushed to just leave up to him!"

I can feel it all coming back to that Monday night. There, where we were happy, long ago and just like yesterday. Before it all went wrong and the Fox hunt began anew. How well she can see this ending I'm asking for, where she lives and I take the fall. The opposing want to her wish of it being her not me that goes down for the one we've loved the most. How should she expect to see anything that she hasn't seen in somebody she's wanted since she was a teen? When I couldn't be who I am, just wouldn't be who I am, without her and everything leading me to this moment?

"You showed us how we could make this happen. You taught me the courage to take weakest thing in me and run with it and this is it!"

The heaviness of our hearts, belonging to the gravity of what is intimately at stake.

"No, I want you to live and this is more than just you wanting to go to hell for everyone else, this is you giving us up!"

The one thing we have, and we're not ready for the other to give it up.

...And if I wasn't so on the defense, I'd start to ask where she got me going to hell from.

"If I'm shot, then I'll only be gone until November, or however long it's gonna take for them to find a cure!"

I can't begin to ask, with every word I say taking me farther from her.

"...They're not gonna bother finding a cure. If you get shot-

And every move she makes reminds me that I'll always hold her preservation over mine when "It's not the end if I get shot and I know it, I saw Ylva in her own eyes, she's still there, she's somewhere deep inside her own body trying to get out, I saw her, she's there, there'll all the-"

The slam of a door so hard, that the handles break off.

Insides of a latch falling out as the door recoils back from the threshold and nearly ripped from it's hinges. The worst I could've said. Far worse than trying for Eva's comfort, about it not being the end if I'm shot, what Rudolf heard was the nightmare that Ylva's living. The horror of being trapped in
one's own body being used against one's self. The reality he was hoping against, that's the cause now for the handle still in his paw to get thrown down the hallway as he cries an obscenity. The truth noone wanted to face. Everyone that's been shot is not so far gone from us, that they can't know what their bodies have done. Something the new Tundratown Alpha following after him can't reconcile for Rudolf, even if he's got to try.

That even if there ever is a cure, there will be no amnesia for the conscience. They will know what they did. An undertone to the optimism I tried to get out, that I think I meant Eva to get. When maybe that would, if nothing else could show why I don't want her beside me. My last straw of cowardice, if that is what it was. Trying to manipulate her like that, letting the one good option we all have left come down to me not wanting to hurt her like I have, meaning to deny her the one thing left out of her life, if it's going to come down to tonight. But this is more than us. It's everyone. A fact coming back, when I could ask myself how the commission just allowed it to come to a head...

If I couldn't catch the subtle hint from Kurt's pose that it was all him. Staying them all from interrupting to let it happen. He knew this had to play out like it has. Me having to come to the point where I've to look back to Eva with no defense left, against the weakest thing in her.

"I just want to be with you... Before I lose you, just one more time... Is that alright? Can I please..." She's begging. One last time, to draw all of me into her focal point that nothing else exists to her but me. Not even her without me. The past becoming clearer, now. To the night she risked it all to keep a cop from lighting me up, and a polecat's honesty about what I'd gotten myself into, when me jumping out of a window and everything else I've done since could never be enough to keep her from wanting my best and my most. It's so rare and beautiful, how honestly it is that she exists, that I'm getting too caught up in all of this emotion to not let it come through. How love like hers for my impossible soul could be this endless, even after all she's endured.

She knows what she wants out of life. For me to make these messes matter, and let this chaos count.

Time for Kurt to take everything he's learned from me, and dedicate it to the bold maneuver of "If the sniper sees you both up there, and makes that call that it's either gonna be you or him, that's it. You're on your own up there. And the one that doesn't get clapped is gonna have to survive long enough they can push the button for the rest of us."

It's not me he's addressing. He already knows the answer to "Are you ready to handle that? Knowing it's probably him the sniper shoots to kill you?" but it's the final nail in my cowardice's coffin, before she even nods her confirmation. Without a moment's hesitance. Because he had to make it plain that I didn't have a choice. As short as he's known me, he's figured me out enough to deny my chance at keeping this from going on any longer. Leaving it all up to being her call to make, when I've already committed to giving up me for everyone else's sake. And the kindest thing I can grant her, is me accepting that she's got to face this beside me. With nothing but hope, so I can give us both the chance to see if we'll live after the fact.

We're on the same team. Against all odds together.

...And I just can't argue against it, anymore. She's kept herself from folding for this long, fighting for me as much as she's been for herself, without even knowing of all these cards we're holding. If I really belong to her, then I owe her just this much. I'll relent, shoulders slumped with a nod of my own to grant her last request, if it really is. Her sigh of relief so much more than everyone else's, with Ralph finally able move on, now.

His "Second, Owen?" to me forgetting what the second thing was. I'm such a mess, I might've even just asked for two things for the emphasis, but... I'm reminded, as she moves a little closer in frailty to mirror mine, with her forward motion feeling like a valium cloud. The night we spent, listening to her
favorite song and sang along to it, until her phone's battery finally gave out. I don't know why I've been reminded, but... It's given me something to ask, now.

A thing so out of left field, I couldn't judge their reaction, regardless of how small it is of a thing to ask in the first place: "...You figure out a way to hook Eva's phone up to the PA."

There's no reason they can't make it happen, it's just that they don't get where I'm going with "You got your radio hooked to send a signal out to the PA speakers through an Aux, right? I want the same thing when I'm up there with her."

So it's a given, the whole commission giving me that cocked brow look while Eva figures where I'm going, when all Ralph can do is question "Why you asking this?"

And there's no way to downplay and sugarcoat what it is,

"Because I need to play a song."

The disbelief on all of them, contrasting against everything I've just reaffirmed to Eva. Every drop of doubt about me almost washed away with the ebb tide curtain drawing back. Because of all the things she's restored in me, the most important one for the present feels like the gospel that a song can instill in the audience. That if I or her or anyone else are ever going to know what all this life on every inch of a pale blue dot was for, it's going to come from a song. An idea so god damned stupid, noone can even bothered to question the delicate smile I'm sharing with her. All the while that ominous line tries to haunt and I brush it off. With some relief given in kind that tells me if her corpse could talk then she would tell me it was worth it.

"...Fine. Fine, okay, fine, whatever, I can't even believe what the hell we're about to do in the first place, you got it." Ralph gives me, like there ain't a voice of reason on this earth that could even bother saying No, when it ain't him, and can't be anyone in the room.

"...What are we even doing?" Raul asks.

Again, it's crazy to follow through a plan this silly. Let alone understand, when it's just too absurd.

We could be crazy... But it's not as easy as a definition, anymore. And it's alright.

It's everything we didn't even know we were capable of.

When Zev is right there with him, unable to know what it really is. "I cannot tell you..." He says, "I can only beg to god it works."

But they're done, here. Ralph not having to declare as much, pointing his index to Teshi, then his thumb to the door. She follows him with the other Clan Alpha in tow, then everyone else but me and Eva. Kurt dragging behind, when we're hesitant enough to telegraph the fact we're not quite ready.

We've still got to talk.

"Eva. Owen." He'll order, for the sake of every last soul that's riding on the peace of mind we'll need.

"...Sort yourselves out." with all the frustration he's got a right to on the whole commission's behalf. Slamming the door without getting his fingers caught.

And like that, like a gavel coming down, bedlam finally finds it in it's hysterical to let itself sink in.
The breakneck pace it all just happened to, winding down enough for us to catch our breath.

The conversation will be our own.

Meaning can have it's place, between what we've said and what we meant.

...But the words have trouble coming out. The silence dwells, because of course it would: Where can we even start? Having tried to make each other understood, the apprehension remains. I don't know where's gone, she can't know where I am. I can only hope she gets that if I make the pearly gates, I'd do my best not to gloat I Told You We'd Meet Again. But I know she wouldn't get why I'd say it as nervously as I would. Her exhaustion telling me as much, mine telling her in kind. We're at our wits end, because even the limitless can only stretch so far. We need a prompt, and she thinks she's got it, right there in her paws. Her phone, that preacher that helped me understand her, before.

She can look down to find just the song we need. Making the right selection when we both need it, squatting down and laying her bible on the ground. It can finally start, her being so bold to be the first to step closer, and me replying with a forward step in affirmation.

With us standing in the break room that's life. Trying to figure out our fate, tonight. Hearing a sound coming out of her phone while we try to see each other from who we've become to what we've always meant.

Things that've felt as distant as God, when they were never very far from us at all. They were always there.

Here, in the both of us, still needing us to make sense of who we really are, now.

And that's the hardest part. The same for me as her, when the chance that's been denied to the two us is so much worse for her, now. But I'm trying, and it comes. All of me, seeing all the why of what's got her got her so caught up in my enigma soul.

She can't believe me.

The same as I could hardly believe her.

Even though I'm right in front of her.

Looking to her with all the same uncertainty she's got in her own eyes.

Without me knowing what the reality is, that's got her looking at me that way.

Even if she can hear me say "...Do you want to hear a fact? Not an excuse?" and see me realize how untrue that's coming off as, to backtrack with "Do you want to hear something that's gonna come off like an excuse?"

Even if she's felt my touch, she can't believe I exist.

Even as she reaches out, and I meet her grip with mine, and in spite of the fact I'm as real as the Wolves, Hyenas and Wild Dogs that've left us, and more real than anyone else she's ever been with, before. Feeling what she knew what she wanted when the truth of me is so surreal, so lovecraft in how unimaginable it all is. Delicately paused to consider how she'll break her silence, time ticking by to have me worried until she starts to find the words. "He tracked me down through the crowd, must've used my scent on you to find me but... By scent, and..." I can pin what her conflict is, now. Where the origin of her saying Noone's Gotta Die started, see it shown on her face for why she even bothered to hear that much and dealt with all she has, before she finds it in her to admit it: "...Andrew
told me what you said..." She says.

From me.

Through Andrew.

Him having tried to reconcile things as best he could when he was still so drunk, "...He still couldn't believe what it meant." and no matter how well anyone could describe the scene, it wouldn't be as vivid as her voice is painting it in my head.

The kindest betrayal, when I was too high to make it my own.

"...You're... Were you serious? You told him the truth?" She'll confront me with. Looking up in disbelief to something as obvious as the example I've made. But I've been there with her, before. All it is, is that she's there with me, now.

To answer her plea, I've got to admit first that "I would be lying if I said I never hated... Wanted the worst and not the best." to be paid in kind to every different of bastard the world's given us.

"...Because you have," she says. Seeing how much it hurts for me to nod confirmation. I allowed it all to get twisted "And been a bastard in turn to everyone I've suffered and confused as the source when it was never them I was really facing." the same as anyone would...

But I cannot change.

Even with the temptation I was given, "I've grown too much to not know there ain't a soul left for me to hate." when what's been set against us is no one mammal, but the very concepts that tempted me and control them.

The pursuit of justice, through the poison of power, that no one can have and only be consumed by.

Revenge on the world as we know it through breaking it's reflections.

Through each other.

I know we're just as guilty. As clearly as the question is on her pained face, letting it out with 
"...You'd go to Hell for everyone else?" like the Bullseye I knew it'd come as. Ringing true, making it's mark and having me reel. I cannot tell her anything less than my greatest masochism.

It just hurts to say "...I'd make that deal with the Judge and I'd make it with God." when her growing horror proves what's killing me.

The same way I felt, when I first met an angel I thought was Lucifer and a broken old Wolf said everything I was put through was going to make me stop it from being inflicted on others any way I could.

And it's all come true.

"...I just don't want anyone to go through what I have. Not a tenth of it, not a hundred times worse, nothing." I surrender. Nothing but me wanting to let her understand, getting twisted into me giving up and having her go on the defensive. "You think I deserve to go through Heaven without you?"

The sky up there could be blue, could be gray and cloudy with a chance of haul, but that salvation would mean nothing. It'd just be a waste of eternity without me there with her. But "That ain't what it is."
"Then what is it?" she's begging. "Tell me what it is." she's crying out for, when the song playing behind her ain't enough to get her off the Frank Sea cover she's stuck on. I'm feeling too much. But I think I'm doing it right. Like said I did before and wants out of me, now. Just right enough, that I can try to start explaining the infinite I've felt to her.

"...I love everyone and I can't turn it off."

I've been holding on to it and I need to give it back because "I care too much about how things could be, and I care too much about everyone around me."

And she can feel that, but she can't reconcile it against the plan. "...Then how're you going to do what we're about to?" she's begging, when it doesn't add up "When you know it's gonna be a miracle if noone gets hurt?" Because the only reason she can see, is that my crazy made me the one to volunteer, as if it could ever make me ready to take center backstage. She knows that I'm a fool, but that the fact I am, does not mean I don't know what I'm charged to do. Or what she demanded, when she didn't give me a say in her going up there to help me and Kurt kept me from trying. But if I can accept that this may be the last time I hold her, maybe she can she me for what I am. The least I could for. And if I've never known how to say it, I've got to find out now.

It's just that the best I can think of, is that To Do Something Well is So Worthwhile That to Die Trying to Do It Better Cannot Be Foolhardy.

...

"There was a racecar driver," I'll start, "A Wolf, that said doing something right, is so worth dying, to try an do it better, that it can't be foolish... That's as much you as it is me and all of us picking the wrong fight to win."

Courage as the best I can imagine it looking like. When it's all but certain that a trapeze act this wonderful was never meant to last. We are going to fall, and this is going to end in Ambulances and Hearses. I can accept something that omnipotent. When rocks still lose themselves in time and nothing can ever last.

But...

"...If I could just tell them what we want so perfectly that it'd make them finally get us..."

With me knowing this is just the way it's got to go.

"...I didn't want it to come down to this," the only chance I got, "There's so much at risk of it all ending up proving them right... But I've got this one chance, to take might's right and return it to sender upside wrong. And if it all goes right, I can turn everything they've done and bring it all back to what we all want."

Nobody understands just what it'd mean. With everyone on the same page and lost on the translation, "The whole wide world out there can be as it seems, same as it ought to be and I've seen how it can," and I know what the words mean, now. "I know how I want better from it for everyone else..." and I know she's ready to hear them: "I just wanted better odds than this, when I can't be certain of what little we got but... All I've got left is to hold on hope that after all this is done... We'll start seeing things for how much more they can be..."

A Virgo Dawn for Astraea to come back to see us for how we always ever could've been.

"The world to be a better place like it could've been, this whole time."
Deep down, the words have changed our mold.

Day breaking so loudly, that more than hearing it, she's seeing it and feeling it with me. The broadside volley of my heart overflowing. The way a star can't contain it's own light and gives it freely. Sacrificing all it's got so someone out there in the void can see it.

And she has.

And it's gotten her hard, looking forward with eyes wide open like God should've sent a poet to describe this nebula she's looking at. Weak and on the brink, I can only hope she's got the chance I had on her Sunday, jaw quivering, eyes glazing over when she can't even blink. Because the words I couldn't find my voice for have come through without it. I finally got it out, and I'm right here with her in being overwhelmed, to all of my coming undone in her arms.

"...When we danced at Buffy's..." she's choking out, "I got so swept up in what you could do, I didn't stop to wonder about what you were." when what I am cannot be defined. Definition is just something I couldn't be. "I just saw someone's soul trying to shed it's own body." and she's never had the chance to look farther than "The way you just wanted to be everywhere at once..." I'm just too simple, too pure and weak and young against being a concept. "...And I didn't try to think why."

When where she saw me was something I wasn't at all. "But..." I start to ask, when it's obvious that "You have, now."

Because she's grown back to where she knows what I mean without definition. And I finally do, too.

When we were getting old and startin' to forget just who we are, but can see each other so close now. In the wonderment of our youth. Against everything they've tried to make us.

It's been nearly forty days, forty nights, and it's all still coming down on us. Everything coming down at once without end, when it can't be done because it can't even begin. But it's got to end, tonight. We are going to be known, her will to live and my love for us all and god damn, if there will ever be a perfect time then now is going to be that start of something. No matter what it is, beautiful or ugly, we are going to be known. When prey told us it was chiseled in our mouths, they never took their chance to look much farther. But we can take away the violence that represents the thing that scared them. Because we're more than their definition's got to offer.

We are...

"Owen..."

We just are.

"...You're impossible."

A picture too surreal to be anything else but a Vincent Van Goat. I feel in love again. That truth in our embrace. She shakes, she trembles, I quake and convulse, love and desperation going paw in paw and welling up with such throbbing intensity it feels like the whole damned station falling to the ground around us.

This cannot be understood.

It can't be studied, and it cannot be defined. It can only be known by being felt.

And in this moment, with our foreheads pressed together, our tears washed over each other, we feel it more than anyone has felt before us.
The echo of a mournful synth.
"...I've made a lot of mistakes."

The heart bleeding out over guitarstrings.
"I don't mind...

The kindness in drums pummeling to reassure.
"...god...

The crying out chorus crying out loud against all the agony of everything that didn't have to happen. The event horizon between definition and narration. What it means for a rock to let the waves dash themselves against itself. To burn. Nobody understands just what it is. What the song helps us look to that's gotten us so weak, we can barely support each other's weight and what we've said before and what we mean, now. Something I can't tell you, after all the time I've had. But we're ready, now. Light guiding, bones ignited, the two of us burning alive. To the point that we can finally stop crying our hearts out. I'll look in her eyes to the tune of a fading piano, and say it from the top of my heart.
"...Thanks a lot for listening."

Time to begin. All over.

Walk down the hall knowing who I am, what I'm not.

Beside a lover I believe with all her will to live, that's filled up all my empty spaces to become my own.

She's seen me for what I am, that's so much more than any precedent, and has made all my forward momentum matter.

Leaving me so able to withstand the crowds beyond the hallway threshold in their terror and confusion, that I don't need her to hold my paw.

I feel her all the same, the current inside of our love changing what it is to witness something like smokers outside the hospital doors.

Weakness shared, against all the presence of power outside the station.

How everything they've all been through with us, makes what we're facing tonight not even matter.

That what we've got can never be taken.

As though we've already won and that it's only a matter of time we show it, what's gotten this Mountain Lion crossing himself with confidence in the silent prayer like the foregone. The faithful of another prophet bowing on their knees and facing east. Friends trying to ease troubled minds, the white lie hope of mothers and fathers to their children. Young and younger, part of the past and ever still the future. The way every other body in the sum of these masses have been paired.

The love and the promise and the hope through all the souls among them.

Hated and feared for something they don't want. The way it suffocates anyone less than the tenderly emboldened with the greater heart shared.
All of these things, in the paranoid sea of everyone else fearful that can't yet know that everything will end as it should. That this pain of ours has come and will surely go.

Without need to dig a grave early to find a land better than this.

Wisdom I've been given in spades, feeling it all like a hundred ballads at once without earbuds, how my gentlest hammer beside me wanted me to. Like a big hard sun letting me wince because I'm doing it out of something so much more than sorrow. Burning with emotion so great along with her, it's as irrefutable as daylight. The radio on my hip tuned to the commission, with Ralph's voice blaring out "Kurt, Teshi is coming down. We're inbound."

"Got ya, Ralph. We're waiting for Owen and Eva about a hundred paces from the entrance. Rudolf's taking one last chance to make sure the hallway rooms'll be safe, if the popo gets that far."

At least he's occupied, but...

No.

It all played out like it had to, even if I could wish for better. I've just got to owe Rudolf whatever I can give him. And Kurt, for making this all somehow work out. "...Kurt did good, knowing how to handle me when I needed it." I tell Eva.

With her not trying to shade me by reminding me "He did it for everybody's sake. Not just our own." and it's understood, "I know..." but in the end, "I'm just grateful he got it all to work out."

I say that, trying to give due credit, and I feel her looking at me for a moment like I just don't get it.

"We did. You and me made it all work out, just as much as he made it happen."

And maybe that's just a little too self congratulatory. But it's about time I stop arguing. Her knotting her paw's digits into mine best as she can fit them. I take my free right paw to the radio, and I let them know, "Kurt, Ralph, we're inbound, too... Guess this show's finally about to star-

Everything going black in an blink.

To the sound of power getting cut off, for gasping confusion to surround us.

The city night glow outside, it's just enough for me to make out silhouettes of heads turning about.

And somehow, without having given it any thought before, I'm still left amazed that it took the cops this long to put us in the dark.

The glow of cellphone screens on their faces beside and above me trying to turn their lights on. I'm not far from the Commission, hearing the faintest sound of radios receiving Ralph's "What's going on?!" and Kurt's voice coming back with "I don't know, one moment I'm talking to Tahmores about Rudolf and the next I can't see anything!"

"God damned Cops, Bogo must've cut the power!" I'm hearing from Tahmores, my ears leading me by the voice to the source as I get another from Kurt's "Don't they know they ain't gonna be able to see anything, either?!" and of course they would, they must know this won't serve them...

..."And that's why it ain't Bogo!" I'm realizing, announcing our presence as a cellphone light passes over my face and Eva's, her telling them both in the follow through that "It's got to be the third party!
It's got to be them making this worse for everybody!" when she's got to embrace that possibility, does so without flinching, and has no need to be afraid of that unseen hand any longer. Even while Tahmores starts losing it to the tune of "No, no goddammit, they can't be that far up the city's ass that they can pull that!"

But they are. The proof Kurt already faced with me and Eva, in the recording of a distorted voice telling Burney it had Orson go savage. Bringing me back to that scene like I ought to be a frightened mess all over again, when I just can't.

Not now, even as the confirmation comes out of Bogo's voice, his bellowing out projected through the distance that "I DON'T KNOW HOW YOU DID IT, BUT IF YOU BELIEVE THAT'S GOING TO HELP YOU THEN YOU ARE GRAVELY MISTAKEN!"

I can't be frightened, when I'm this livid. Over the very start of everything that's built us up to this moment, that someone unseen is trying to keep us from what we've been owed our whole lives.

"WE ARE EVICTING EVERYONE FROM THE STATION AT EIGHT, NO MATTER HOW DIFFICULT YOU MAKE IT!"

I have been fighting for this so hard and fast, she's been fighting her whole life, the struggle seeming so ingrained in us, now, that it's come to the point I don't know how we'll ever stop.

And neither does she.

When we've got just as much right to be afraid as everyone else. To the point that I can no longer doubt what's gotta happen.

It's just that all I can do is howl out "I hate being right!" because I'm distracted, like I shouldn't be, and Eva has to be the one to remind me, remind the commission that's present, with a Forget It yelled out that all that matters is "We need to get the power back on!"

And getting me back on track, as everyone else wonders how, it comes back to me. All those volunteers I signed up, and there was only one electrician.

"We gotta find Brent!" coming out of me, lighting Kurt up to recognize the name, "...The Ferret guy you signed up that cut power to the security cameras!" he says with a snap of his fingers, that gets mine snapping back with "That's our male!" and we've got this, got it so good it's practically in the bag.

There's just one small problem evident on his face, before he even gives me back a "Great, how we supposed find him like this?!"

And I almost dismiss it, but no...

No it's not gonna be easy, like this. No PA, no light over head, just all these cellphones sweeping their own all over I can't rely on, we got megaphones, we could yell for him until he finds us, but I've got to find him, because if he can't make through all this chaos...

...When Andrew went looking for Eva, to try and tell her everything I meant...

I don't have my eyes to rely on, I don't even have a nose like a Wolf does, when I can't even remember the last time I used mine, but "I think I remember his scent!" and it's all I've got.
"I'll try sniffing him down, just start calling him on a megaphone in the meantime!"

Turning around and rushing off, before I can get a good look at the face I know Kurt's making. Eva aboutface twirling to try and keep up, keep me grounded on keeping my head when I can't lose it, and I need to make it easy for her to follow. Even if all she's got for me is "You can find him like this?" when the best I can tell us both of us is that "I've got to.," taking my radio in paw to tune in Ralph's frequency, before putting my nose to the air to start trying. Multitasking with a sniff to find that particular musk as I press the talk button for "Ralph, where's the wiring schematic?! I got somebody that can put the power back on!"

But in the midst of all these others scents, I can't even tell if I'm receiving something like Eva's kind.

Distracted for a moment, when Ralph comes back on the speaker that "It's in the breakroom, I'm doubling back over there!" but the whiff I caught might've been a Skunk. Or someone's toked. I've got to curse myself, when I know what to look for with my nose, but I can't even tell if I'm coming to or going away from anything like it. That earthly tone of iron like blood, yet not metallic. That middleground between canine salt and feline acrid...

Coming from somewhere else that ain't my point of reference, and I dart to the left, shuffling my way through the crowd with her trying to keep up. Finding the source right in front of me, past a Tiger. But it ain't Brent. I missed the mark by a whole genus. I've run into is a Wolverine. Into how quietly on the edge he already is, and his face getting louder about it, the more he looks at how frustrated I am.

Without it getting through that it's with myself, not him, as my almost mouthing out a sorry ends up being "...You seen a Ferret?!" over the crowd's noise. His quick pointing to Eva without breaking eye contact, a "Not me, a male one!" from her, and his eyes still don't break from mine. The intensity of them, that I can feel with intermittent cellphone lights flashing all over, as if he's going through withdrawal and it being everything he can do to not snap. A booming "He tried goin' that way?!" with a northeastern point later, and Eva's got my left wrist in her grip. Practically dragging me, bringing my head back to task. Nose in the air, and I still can't tell all of these scents apart. Even when I got her right beside me.

But I've got to find him.

I'm almost begging her to "Just give me something to go off of." when what I've got ought to be enough but it ain't, I should know what I'm looking for, without her coming back to me with "...He's gonna smell stronger than me, unless he got descented." and I don't get it. I'm so occupied with my nose, it's leaving me feeling like I ought to know the reason behind "Descented?" and maybe I did, maybe "Most of us don't like how we smell!" is something I'd known but forgotten, because this whole day has left me so mentally exhausted that I've got to ask "Then why you been rubbing yourself off on-" when it's obvious that "Because I own you and I like how I smell!" and all this leaves me with is frustration how I can't just take one big long inhale and...

And...

"...I think that's..."

"I caught that whiff, too!"

My second wind, coming in like a super cell storm.

"Brent! Brent is that you I'm smelling?!" I'm calling out, to hear "Hey! I been bodyspraying since I got here, the hell you talking about?!" from my left and in the distant.
No wonder, I should've thought about that but I don't even care, I've finally got him pinned down, my nose finally able to catch what my ears did first. "Just stay where you are! I'm coming, you're needed!" and I'm bolting full sprint towards "You're tellin' me?!" and all his knowing. Pushing myself through everyone between me and him, until the obstacle is all gone, and it's the scared-while-determined look on his face I'm looking at above the glow of his cellphone screen as it's flash illuminates me. His "Just tell me you got the schematic from before!", Eva's "We don't! Management does and we gotta get you up front!" and my own grabbing him by the left wrist that I hope he'll understand, because we're on the wire out of time.

Having him nearly drop his phone before he can pocket it. I'm charging through everyone between us and where I got to already be, whether he losses it or not. Because even as far away as I am from up front, and the commotion of the crowds, I can still hear the threat of "TURN THE LIGHTS BACK ON, TURN THEM ON NOW OR SO HELP ME...!" coming from Bogo. Turning the terror up in everyone around us. Against all of my everything that ain't fear, that all boils down to that Water Buffalo, for all he could be and all that he's allowing himself to become. And I can feel it through my grip, that Brent's about as done with me, as he's done with the whole rest of this. Trying to loosen my right paw's grip, as my free left reaches around to the radio on the other side, because I could try to smell for the commission but I don't got time.

So I yell it out over Ralph's frequency to "Call out my name, I've got a better pair of ears than a nose!"

When the panic's getting to be so loud, I might not even be able to hear them. But I do. Faintly, but more and more clearly, until I finally see them, lit up by cellphones and past a few dozen more mammals.

With Brent's eyes already on the prize in Ralph's grip, finally loosening himself out of mine, jumping up and grabbing the thing before the Northwestern can even get out Right Here. Mouth left open and just kind of left silent in the wide eyed realization that he got jacked, before he could've even done a thing about that Ferret doin' him like he did.

And I'm no better, seeing what's got to be the transmitter for the PA I'll need for Eva's phone in the other paw and taking it, too.

Neither of us wasting time, Brent on all fours and trying to unfold the old, delicate sheet that dwarfs him.

Me and Eva taking the hint to help him, with feet on either end of the roll, Teshi tossing me the detonator I'm grabbing out of the air without even thinking about consequence.

As Brent's back arches, his eyes darting all over in pursuit of the starting point. Finding it, making it obvious when he starts trailing an index claw over one line, out of a near spaghetti bowl mess of lines intersecting and trailing over each other. As I realize could've happened with the remote, and Ralph realizes what did with the schematic and transmitter. Brent's nose practically to the paper, waddling over it with all the focus of being in his element. Stopping cold with the eureka moment on him, and he's so shocked when it comes, I can't even tell if "...They never changed that out?!" is a good or bad thing. But there's a surprise in his getting up, eyes still locked on where he's gotta go, that "The breakers for this whole place are all in one big box they used to call weasel traps because of how hard they were to get out of!"

When none of us can handle any more surprises, and Kurt's gotta let out "Oh my freakan--" for Brent to hurriedly dismiss with "No, no no, not bad, this is perfect, municipal buildings were supposed to change these out because of how easy they are to get into through the wiring! I can get the power back on without them even realizing I'm in it!"
The surprise coming through for the relief it meant to be. With Brent's good news that we've still got something on them all, to get all of us sharing the smile he had, before whatever the grim reality of all he said starts to sink into me. Contrasting to Kurt slapping Ralph's back, and Eva keeping herself from dooking.

And yet, still knowing Brent's got a trouble on his mind, I'm still on the verge of throwing this shaking fist to the air in celebration.

But the world out there bellows all too soon: "YOU WANT THIS?! THEN I WILL BRING IT! OFFICERS, CHANGE YOUR BATONS OUT FOR FLASHLIGHTS!"

...Not even a momentary reprieve can't go without being taken. Without the visual being smashed into our heads that "WE'RE CLUBBING THEM WITH METAL!" before it's declared. That for what patience Bogo might've had, he's got to revert now, to the full brunt of brutality that the state's invested in him to harbor. Leaving me wondering, if it was a baton or a flashlight that Woolsey lost his teeth to. If it even makes any difference, and what I'm focused on for a moment ain't just some placebo that changes nothing. All the while looking at Brent, and catching that whatever was on his mind has come and gone. Replaced in the leer of his look to where Bogo's voice came from. Saying "...I've got to do this! Now!" to himself more than anyone else.

"Forget them longnecks, the hell are they gonna pred prod you all in the dark, the sorry assed specist fu-" He goes off, interrupted, because Kurt's still caught on "But if they call those things Weasel Traps, how're you gonna-"

"I ain't!"

...And that's what was eating him. Before Bogo made it known what's at stake. Because he can get in, but not back out.

This is going to mean him sacrificing himself.

The only chance we've got, all being left up to him to make the worst case scenario his and noone else's. Selflessness like a Wolf's, from someone they least expected, when somewhere in all of them, all these witnesses still had that definition of what a Mustelid like him was. Ralph's left speechless, as he goes to start grabbing the schematic he thinks Brent still needs.

But "It's memorized," and "We're wasting time," and all that matters to him now is if "You gonna help me get in the pipes or not?!" when he's already running headlong to where he's gotta go. Without a second guess of himself, regardless of Ralph's and everyone else's. All of us just standing there like awestruck fools. Yet I'm not surprised. Neither is Eva. Brent leaves my sight for the last time. As I watch Ralph finally snap out of the wide eyed vacancy, to curse himself and bolt to a sprint to follow. Because this is happening, whether anyone else believes it or not. When I do, because rather than shocked, I just saw that same thing in action that Eva and the Polecat taught me. He's made up his mind about what he wants.

No need to think it over.

If he's wrong, then he's still right.

And I'm still wasting time.

Kurt's reminder that "This show's finally about to start, an you're just standing there!?" and it doesn't shake me.

Because I've just realized something: "...We need to figure out a plan!"
If we don't time everything, every-last-thing perfectly, they'll just find Brent, turn the power back off, and everything he's just put on the line, everything we're trying to stop, and everything we've gone through, would all have been for nothing.

"So we gonna figure it out together, or are you just gonna stand there, too?!"

But he's not going to move, until I give him the reason to start. Until I dart so abruptly away, it triggers him to make the chasing pace of a pursuit. With Eva in tow, and it all starting between the blink of my eyes. From one still frame to a blur of all the station around me. Every gap in the crowd, found and taken after the fact I'm through one and in the middle of the next. I hear Eva, that "WE GOTTA GET THE LIGHTS BACK ON!" but "NOT BEFORE THEY'RE MARCHING!" when Kurt's gotta yell out "WHAT?!" and I don't know how, I just do, that "ONCE THEY COMMIT, THEY'RE NOT GONNA HAVE TIME TO CHANGE PLANS AND BOGO'S GONNA DEDICATE HIMSELF TO THE ONE HE'S ALREADY GOT!"

Kurt's "HOW YOU KNOW?!" and I've got to repeat what I only told myself: "I DON'T KNOW, I JUST DO!"

And maybe it's a hunch, that I took from Espada to apply to Bogo, but it's beside my point. In my way like the mammals I can jump over and the rest I've got to dart between the legs of, that Kurt's got to push and shove his way through as Eva calls out "THEN WHAT?!" in the middle of a springboard somersault from one and over the other. "WE TURN THE PA ON FIRST AND HOPE THEY FIGURE WE GOT GENERATORS HOOKED UP!" Kurt tripped up and stumbling to recovery as he asks the right question in "THEY GONNA BUY WE AIN'T GOT POWER WHEN YOU'RE UP THERE BLASTING MUSIC?!", and maybe this is desperation, me only being able to tell him that "IT'S MORE LIKELY THAN THE LIGHTS! CONFUSION MIGHT BUY US TIME 'TIL WHOEVER CHECKS THE BREAKERS!"

But it's not pathetic, and it's still a miracle.

If it works.

If by some gamble coincidence, it still works out.

If I can get it out from between Kurt's "YOU AIN'T DIRECTING A CONCERT!" and Eva's "WHEN DO WE TURN THE LIGHTS ON?!" that I'm hair-trigger quick on the draw but won't be the one that misses because I know "I GOT ONE SHOT AND I AIN'T WASTING IT!" when "IT'LL ALL BE TIMED TO SYNC AT EIGHT! THE SONG WON'T COME 'TIL THE LAST SPLIT SECOND AND WE'LL KNOW WHEN TO TURN THE LIGHTS ON!"

"HOW?!!" Kurt's demanding.

"BECAUSE THE SONG WILL MAKE IT OBVIOUS!" I'm telling him.

Making him left to repeat himself in mid jump over someone small that "YOU ARE NOT DIRECTING NO GODDAMN CONCERT!" but that's not what it is. When Eva gets it, can tell him "HE AIN'T!" and that "WE ALL ARE AND IT'S NOT THAT!" but can't define what can only be realized by being felt. That magic we know that cannot be summoned in words. The ethereal still beyond Kurt's reality, when we can't even tell where we're going in the dark with everyone in our way. Leaving him to the howling of "I SWEAR TO GOD, HE GETS US ALL BUSTED AN-!

And reaching out, I don't know how, but I've finally found the handle to the door I'm throwing open
for Eva and Kurt to fly through before slamming it shut. Without me being able to care how I found my way. How I managed to get here, without any ambient light from cellphones for us to see with, before Eva pulls out hers. The three of us left panting, trying to catch a breath when we hardly feel winded, and everything just happened is still catching up to us. Looking up to his silhouette as the realization starts to sink in, how crazy the plan really is. How much we've got to pray for everything to be choreographed perfectly without rehearsal to fall back on. Yet I don't doubt or question a bit of it. Can't tell how, when it shouldn't be possible, to be this determined on something this insane.

I just am. To have my certainty on my lack of convention so bold, that Kurt can feel it without even being able to make the details of my face out.

Leaving him to stand there bewildered. Because "Owen... I ain't doubting you... I know better... I just want you to tell how me how you keep coming up with this scat..."

I want to tell him everything. Want to know where I could even start. And it's just not possible, and so beyond definition, that I will never find the right way to put it. To only say that it's all I ever do, would still leave the meaning of words unspoken inside. To pull us under and defeat the very attempt of trying to make to make known what can only be felt. And maybe that's just the best that I'll ever be able to tell anyone.

Because me coming up with all this impossibility is all I ever do.

In the end, "It doesn't matter, what I couldn't ever say to explain it."

When "The only thing that matters, is if you're all gonna feel what I can't put to words."

To leave me with the one thing left for us to wonder, the whether or not of "Can you do that?" I've got to ask of him.

Even though his tongue's become undone, under the weight of what few words I had to offer. Leaving him floored and undone, the threads of everything he does know about me not enough to tie it all together.

He's as lost for words as I am, with it taking a pause, before what's got to be the closest to confirmation finally comes out in "...They're gonna have to clone you, when you're gone."

When he's tried his best and tried in vain, yet can still appreciate something intangible being there.

Unburdened and becoming, regardless our radios' interruption. "The Ferret's in!" Ralph's telling. Reason for everyone's relief but Kurt's, as Raul's "What's his ETA on power coming on!?" gets back "Ten minutes tops, but we gotta turn everything off and back on, lights, PA, everything!"

And if Kurt didn't know better, like I don't, like he does, he'd be as relieved as the voices on the radio are.

But the tension of a truth remains beside his amazement.

Feeling like treason hanging over him.

And then I get it. Whether he sees what I'm aiming for, clearly or not, the fact remains: "I ain't gonna be able to explain your plan to the other Alphas. You know that, right?"

You couldn't make this up.

Even if you tried, even if you wanted to, what can't be made sense of, that's always been there,
defying all definition and still can't be appreciated before it's been seen. I'll say Yes, when all we know can't amount to grasping it. The impossible that has to be tried to be felt. What Kurt will try to see through with me, as he lays it out to us, and to the radio by his face, "I'll get on the PA, get Gandolf by the switchbox for the lights..." before taking his digit off the send button. "...And tell him to turn them off and wait for the right moment to flick 'em back on."

...What I saw coming and it still manages to surprise. Eva all the more. Ralph coming back with "I'm close to the hallway, Kurt!" for Kurt to let it be known that "I'm in the hallway with Owen and Eva. Keep everything up front on lockdown, I'll run backstage like I been." when she gets what that means, but can only offer up "...You're going to have to tell him to ignore every order he's given to turn the lights on."

And he knows, "Even my own." he's reminding himself. Admitting it to her "Because I ain't about to say I won't jump the gun either. It's all on you, your boy and Gandolf. I'm just gonna let it happen and hope they all get to see what happens. So whatever that is that I still can't picture, whatever song you're gonna pick up there, it better be real obvious to Gandolf when he's gotta light us up."

But as good as he's concealing it, the uncertain vibe sticks out in his words. To have everything he's offered known against his nature so greatly, the daring to cut against that grain has got us both feeling the weight of what can't be quelled or reconciled for him.

I could offer "Kurt, if you got any doubt-" but he can't allow the relief. Holding his paw out to stop me, because his will is too brittle to let it get touched.

"If this is the night your luck runs out, I'm gonna tell it to you now, I ain't gonna regret what you tried for if it does."

Speechless.

Speechless, when whatever fear I had left, whatever fear he was still harboring, had to be carved out and has been perfectly. The moment could be allowed to simmer...

But it's time to begin. Isn't it?

There's nothing left to say, only one thing left to go for. "We done all the figuring we're gonna do. So stop standing there and make it happen."

So I'll set forth. Follow her lead in the dark, the same as I've been. As Kurt followed my own.

Walking past a delicate moment coming back to me as we go past the locker room.

Across the still raw emotion I can feel from behind the break room door.

Into the boiler room where I began to prove and behind the equipment, to the ladder tucked against the far left corner. The one I hadn't gone up, since the day after we all proved what we were capable of.

And for one crowded moment, I feel like we've found our golden September near the end of this savage summer. Against all we've yet to face, when there's still so much further to go, so much I've yet to make everyone feel. Beyond that latch over my head at the end of these steps in front of me I've taken. The ones we'd both be climbing up, if it didn't feel as though we had unfinished business. Cue Eva pointing out "I guess we both got something left to get out..." to remind me that it still feels like I can't be done when I can't begin. But I'll make a gesture in "I just want you to know... If this doesn't end like we hoped, that I'll still have Augie Trot's One Clouded Hour to remember it by."
She'll break the news with a well meaning scoff and smile through her "Ok, well, I'm done carrying yer bittersweet azz..." I absentmindedly try to turn back around with "I like it when you bite me, though," after all I've done to fuss about it. But that's beside what she meant, "Yeah, but," she still admits, "My point still stands that those steps are too far apart for me to climb."

And if this reprieve is just one last act of desperation to calm our nerves, we'll take it.

With her grip on my shoulders. With it maybe it's just being my summer coat, though I swear I feel that smile of hers pressed into the fur of my nape. Tucking my muzzle in against the side of her head, I hope she can feel my gratitude as much as I can feel her pride. A quiet moment like the calm before a celestial storm that eases us both into something that's been on her mind. It's distance reminded in her admission of knowing "...You were gonna do something, this morning. Before the alarms stopped you." Something so quaint, we've gotta appreciate it while we still can: "I was gonna grab yer hips, kiss you on the right cheek. Turn what you said the other day back around on you to reaffirm it." That I love her for her every last part.

"Would've done me the worst you ever had, if you did that in front of everyone."

My life has given me so much more than I'll ever be able to return.

"I forgot... Don't think I ever had a chance today, anyway."

And I love it, for everything she's become of my life. "We still got tomorrow—..." I just wish I wasn't so late, finding her. Or that I had one more rung. "Yeah, but now it ain't gonna be a surprise." I'm reminding her. Her shimmying up my torso to vicegrip my stomach between her legs to reach up for the latch. Me propping the door up with a grimace and the crown of my head before she gives it a heave to throw it open. Bringing my chest in closer, so she can perch herself on the rim. Giving one more smile to disarm, to set me up for the receiving end visual of her rolling away and over her back to put her feet on the roof gravel. So I'll try to make it worse and get the jump back on her. Pulling my weight up from the ladder to launch into a full blown pounce.

Smiling without an intent to hide... And seeing it in a split second on her face that the moment's already been robbed.

Her gasped attention no longer on me and all to her left. Without it processed when I stop smiling and started to know her concern. Slow pan of sight towards my right...

When it's reflected, over wall of the buildings around us...

Without even wondering all the way forward, to that edge I sat beside Andrew...

Where I came up with the Ours Not Yours we're walking over...

It's so surreal.

The image that had to be seen to be believed.

The Wolves that used to be on watch up here, said Bogo had twice as many cops as before. Kurt said they were gonna throw every badge they could at us. And nothing else they could have said, would've done the visual justice. What's spilling over the night, pouring out over the city's walls. There are more disco lights down there, a greater wall of squad cars between the police and the outside world they border, than I think any of us have ever seen. The red and the blue, blurring into the purple afterimage piercing through the slow blink of my eyes. Flickering over faintly wrinkled rooflines of buses lined up for our transport. Reflected by badges and twinkling through my retinas. Eclipsed by the LRAD arrays aimed at us.
I knew what power we were gonna face. It was an unquestionable given Bogo would have to commit the entirety of his power towards evicting us. I just couldn't have imagined what the scope of it would look like. Or believed that it was gonna fail this hard at having any control over my emotion. The fight I was never looking for feeling moot before it's even begun. All the stops pulled, and it's ending up kinda funny. Regardless of how it turns out, with who wins and who loses. Coming off like it never even mattered. Without even trying, I think I know what we're worth. The only thing left to feel sad about, is how I used to love this city, and want the promise back I came to it for. Like I want it out of cops, like I want it out of the whole world that's come down us.

If this is a mix of delusion and desperation... I don't think I need certainty, anymore.

"Owen..." her voice is calling out. Taking my vision and thoughts momentarily away from the odds, to the hand we've got to bluff with. All the way back, near the edge overlooking the rail lines and the park below them. Exposed out in the open, without it being obvious what they really are. Looking exactly like you think they would, if you knew what you were looking for. But only if, when it's so impossible, so out of left field that we've even got them in the first place, that noone could.

The question coming in through the radio if "You see them, Owen?!" while I walk towards the set up. "I'm looking right at them, and Teshi... You know you almost had me blow your load early, right?" The long silence to appreciate, between her catching the wisecrack and not getting how hard the chance of clumsiness nearly lost it all for us.

"What?!"

"You throwing me the remote!"

"Oh, forgot, there's an off on switch by the antenna you gotta flick before you press the big red!" she tells me, now. Absentmindedly enough for it to almost be funny. A turn of the detonator to it's side, the flick of it's switch for the button on front to glow. Leaving me with the chill of knowing it really is just one push away now. The incomprehensible click, of a big red dot let out in the open dark. There must be something I don't recognize. It's coming back, what I felt before the power was turned off.

But there's something here more than that, that I don't realize.

Thunder.

I've run out of time to take.

Barometric wave.

The wardrums will begin.

Reverberation. The clap of flashlight ends against the faces of shields. Cigarette Burn Cue. "It's lit up, right?!"

Nothing left for me to do, but to not turn around to see the view of Watering Hole Park that won't mean anything.

"It is."

I mustn't be easily confused.

"Then get ready!" Teshi's ordering me, as if it's her call to make.
When looking back to Eva, I can tell it ain't mine either. That nothing could renounce that I'm here where I stand, because she still carries me as something she's always had in her.

Less like a bomb in the paw and more like a heart. If it was her just repeating me that noone had to die, when I couldn't repeat myself at the meeting, it wouldn't make this any less hers, no more mine.

My life inspired me.

This only happened because of Eva living up to the meaning.

And now that she's looking back at me after all she's given, the intent can't be mistaken on my face.

Teshi's remote, for her phone, to plug up to Ralph's transmitter.

"Owen!??"

I might be letting her down, with the thank you in my smile being enough to say I've got to give her what's been a long time coming. Wanting this to be for her taking those chances on me, and me to take another on her. Doesn't mean she won't question what the hell I'm doing. Knowing what I'm thinking.

Though I know it smaller than she does, it's only fair. In spite of her nodding a disagreement, to let her be the one that sees it through. She can't argue against what doesn't have to be. Coming forward to entwine and exchange. Letting the trade off tempo flow into the seamless waltz. Pouring what gratitude I've got left to express into our touch.

"Owen!??"

It's less about if I get shot, and more of an admission that this could be the last thing I can give. She knows this is stupid. Me giving her the remote. Doesn't make it feel any less right. Me at my most thankful, and it's still gotta be with me being given something in kind. Alright enough, when I know it's gonna be me carrying her in due time. No demon of mine wouldn't have been laid to rest, if it weren't her to make me their undertaker. If I ever stop, it'll be because I'll have nothing left to be taken. I can't wish for anything better, because there isn't.

The radio carries Teshi yelling out "Fuchs!" and I've ignored it for too long. I know the silence caused a scare, but it's still kinda funny that all I've got to say for myself is "And y'all still getting my name wrong!" like an irredeemable bastard.

"It takes saying your name wrong to respond?!" that Hyena's genuinely asking me, when I'm ready to dismiss the concern with "It's alright, it's only-" until I see the fact right there on Eva's screen.

"It's seven fifty seven!?!" I'm left to process and leave Teshi all the more panicked on "You mean you didn't know what time it was?! When were you gonna press the button?!" before the relief comes in from Kurt "It's lit up! I'm in the PA room and the soundboard's lit! WE GOT POWER! BRENT DID IT!"

And if the radio can only convey half of what I'm feeling through the speaker, it still can't do that half justice.

"Kurt, Kurt tell me Gandolfs by the light switch!" Ralph's begging.

When there ain't no way to break it gently we're about to betray them with the best intent.

"He just texted me! He's waiting for the right moment!"
Because if their radios can't convey how relieved they are, mine would never be able to transmit anything I'm feeling up here, that everyone needs to feel down there.

"I'm texting him to do it now!"

What no amount of this radio's reception would ever get through.

Only the PA.

"It's on!" from Kurt to soothe me.

"Owen, Eva, you're live!" he's affirming.

With Ralph distracted enough to not catch on, only remark that "No they're not! The lights aren't on!"

Eva's question of if "You got my soundtrack?" and "Yeah!" of course I don't have a song picked out yet. I just ain't gonna say as much. Skimming through her library without a clue. Every song I can think of, every band, and if anything sticks out, I can't see it over Teshi's begging me "Fuchs! Fuchs, do you hear me?! When were you going to press the button?!" and I've got to give her something.

A to-the-point "Eva's gonna press the button. I gave her the remote. And she aint gonna until the right moment comes."

"Ok, good, wait until they're on us, yeah, alright, I guess we're doing them like last time! All she's gotta do is press it when we yell contact! Or when the lights come on!" She's saying through a nervous laugh trying real hard to convince herself with.

And I shouldn't make it worse, I know I'm gonna make it worse, but I would be lying if I didn't tell her the truth.

If I didn't break it to Teshi any other way than "...That ain't what she gonna time it by."

The dots starting to connect and being felt through the radio's silence, that we're ready like they couldn't believe. In the worst way, with all the pressure on the brink of breaking the hope.

Reason about to lecture me on how I can't be trusted. Distracted by it being all too easy to be nervous when Eva asks "What you got lined up to work with?!" while the Commission downstairs put two and two together from what I told Teshi.

I think I got this when I just can't know and, on the fly, "Firework by Catty Perry!" just slips out...

...Slips out like a bad joke I couldn't help myself from making. Letting her know I don't know what I'm doing, with enough regret on me to collect every millimeter of that middle claw she's giving me.

"...No, bitch, excuse me, you listen here," Teshi's calling out and, hell, "...Overture of 1812?" I'll throw out when "Ain't no chance he meant it! Ralph was desperate!" can't matter to get back Eva's "And monologue me with a bunch of words starting with V?" to leave me at square one and "You are not directing a music video!" couldn't be any more right, "All Delighted Mammals by Mouflon Stevens?" can't meet the criteria when "This isn't gonna last eleven minutes! There's no time!"

Teshi's "TELL ME YOU'RE JOKING!" couldn't be a better descript of the look Eva's still got for me, and all I can think of is "Coldprey's Fix You?" while Ralph's "KURT, WHY IS GANDOLF TELLING ME HE CAN'T TURN THE LIGHTS ON YET?!?" reminds me the of the let down like "Too sad before it gets better." does, before Eva starts to make her own offers with "What about A
"WHY DO WE HAVE THE PA IF WE DON'T HAVE THE LIGHTS!? WHY IS THIS HAPPENING!?"

"That's as much our song as Hold On When You Get Love, that's my own our song, no!" I've got to shoot off, raising my voice over the radio's for Eva's "What else, then? You Me Pouncing by Los Lobosinos?" to not sit right with me either when I'm "Too attached to that moment at Buffy's and this needs more-"

"WHY DID YOU BELIEVE HIM!?"

"What about Business by 'CoOnYaRdZ, it's perfect for getting in Bogo's head!" I'm putting on the table to have it thrown back with her "Like he's even gonna listen! We're the ones that need this! Not him!" over the speaker's "RALPH TELL HIM YOU DIDN'T MEAN IT!"

"Open Your Eyes?!" adding up to me telling myself as much as asking Eva to only get back "Polar Patrol or Toxic?" when I don't know, I can't but f it let's just go with "Polar Patrol?!" when we're running out of time and arguing about what song to play and the one I just offered can't be it because "It's determined but builds up too slow!"

"KURT WE NEED THE LIGHTS NOW!"

"Smokers Outside The Hospice Doors by The Edi-" "It's too sad before it gets better!"

The length.

"DO YOU HEAR ME?!"

The timing of me finally throwing the radio to where it's breaking my ears with the crackling to last straw get to "There by Ennio Moosecone!" as the radio blares out Ralph's voice, blares out Kurt's voice distantly enough to almost have me asking the "What?!" Eva's asking me and Oh my "God damn, girl, you don't know about Mission to Ares?!

One look to the screen opened up to Eva's music folder, and the numbers Seven Five and Eight has never hurt so much to look at.

We've run out of minutes.

"...The movie?!!"

...

...But I've got seconds. "What about Entwine?!"

Four minutes and twenty two seconds.

"All You Good Good Mammals or Nature's Way?"

Fifty Five and a half seconds.

"...You know which song I'm thinking of."

The stroke of Seven Fifty Nine. "...You don't mean..."

The one song that could make this work.
The one she knows without my smile needing to confirm it.

To express everything we've ever known.

Four and a half seconds, the brightness of her eyes to sing the tune of her "...I love you!" and the press of play, the absolute explosion of drumsticks against cymbals. Blaring so expected through speakers downstairs, they're crashing through the ceiling and into my feet, jolting me into a shocked jump back. Blaring so loud... I can't hear the whistle of something flying past my head. But I can feel it. The inch of difference my reaction just made. The disturbance in the air, the breeze, to have me know I've just dodged a shot. That the sniper has me in the crosshairs, and all that just saved me, was my gut reaction to how unexpected the volume came. It's happening. Eva can see it in my face, looking to her as her little heart starts to sink to knowing everything I do to her fading eyes. That someone out there wants me to lose my control and end the love of my life with fangs... And without understanding what I'm doing, I can't begin to question what's coming to me. I am ducking down. The driving force of a guitar and piano sending it into a cartwheel. Flourishing as a somersault, and becoming a roll of my back against the roof to pounce over. I will put the blindfold down. So my mind can't see.

I'VE WAITED

And my soul will run my body through this field of gunfire. The absurd solution to how I'm going to keep from getting shot ringing true like nature's law. Brandishing my every limb like a conductor's arms in full swing.

AND GIVEN THE CHANCE AGAIN

The frantic waltzing tango to communicate to whoever's shooting at us that shots won't change a thing. Breaking off the hippie twirl to give it the jangling millennial twist. The Aquarius Age notion leading up to the Virgo so good, and so rightful, Eva couldn't fight this madness coming over her if she wanted. I am dancing like sunrise light flying, for her to become an orchestra in kind. Following the flow of my body's beckoning.

I'D DO IT ALL THE SAME

Something I don't have to tell her to do. Rising and believing in all the answer hateful definition has made out of me. Song and dance overwhelming all the impossibility that reason has to offer.

BUT EITHER WAY

Because the only chance we have, to dodge the sniper's fire, will come by making flight with everything we can give each other. Embracing all of our combined potential to cast a world aside that will not accept us. I'll take a page from the discipline they denied her. I will spin on my toes with all the force of a cyclone.

I'M ALWAYS OUTPLAYED

Taking that momentum from the vertical plane to transfer it into the horizontal. Parallel with the ground beneath me, to skip over it like a rock on the lake's surface.

UPON YOUR DOWN DAYS

Losing myself more deeply into the spinning top I've become than Dom Cudd ever could. Frenetically trying to express everything good in me she's known.
I LEFT IN THE RIGHT WAY

Where anything is impossible. The current inside of love changing what it is. Where I know no cop can venture. No power. What weakness really means.

TO START AGAIN

How against all odds it faces itself.

NOW WATCH ME RISE UP AND LEAVE

Headlines from this night on won't have anything to say about the moment strength faltered.

ALL THE ASHES YOU MADE OUT OF ME

The truth impossible to bind by words, that even with no space to rent in this town, and when noone else can, poets still find a place to dream.

WHEN YOU SAID THAT WE WERE WRONG

Taking the weakest thing in us, and beating everything around us with it, holding on and letting go to all of our love as the conduits we've always been.

LIFE GOES ON

In this moment, I am something more than a Fox. And she is more than a Ferret. We are more than our teeth. Operatic pantomiming as a picture being painted, it cannot be disproven that we have become the narrative. Diving down and soaring high as every note from every instrument.

JUST LOOK AT HOW LONG I'VE AGREED

What she is and what she's done to me. The momentum of every direction I'm going in, to the disorientation of not knowing one from the other.

NOW WATCH ME RISE UP AND LEAVE

A raving, mach nine ball of fire.

ALL THE ASHES YOU MADE OUT OF ME

Transferring that force of my palms and soles against the world beneath me into cartwheels, into somersaults, into a flare into an aerial flare and into the vertical flight of an Apollo mission to the stars. The diving swells of falling in reverse from everything I left in the right way to start all over. No cop to grab my wrist. No trustfund baby's window to fly out of. No sniper to land a hit. No representation in me of the one to blame and no longer who they thought this would be. All I wanted, with all of my dream not falling down.

WHEN YOU SAID THAT WE WERE WRONG

Somewhere down there, Bogo is on his megaphone, last ditch trying to bellow loud enough for his poison to be heard over something we're refusing to have drowned out.

LIFE GOES ON

I feel this, without hearing his words, to Kurt just turning the PA system ever more louder against
what the law's trying to crush with.

JUST LOOK AT HOW LONG I'VE AGREED

For Gandolf to flick the switch with the perfect timing. With the overhead lights shining down on everyone on the ground floor, the same as they pour over us in mid flight from the glass panes below me. Twirling through the air like feathers like bombs. Spinning on my toes as a whirling dervish, my right paw extended overhead. Bending down for the momentum of my spin to transfer into my palm against the roof as my legs pendulum swing the rest of me into flight and back on both feet to cannonball fly back into the air. Flying in a dizzying bolt from there to here like we are never going to come back down.

OUT OF PLACE

Somewhere from the southwest, there is a sniper gritting his teeth in frustration, trying to anticipate my every move, to line up the shots he's firing in rapid succession with all of his years of target practice having nothing on the everything I am.

LIKE A GEM ON A COAL FACE

Because even when the song is so loud, that I can feel it in my gut, I can still feel the disturbances in the air around me from every attempt of making me become what they want me to be.

LOST ON THE RIGHT WAY

The swinging, the tossing, the billowing churn of this world around me. Beyond all the control I can't harbor, anymore. My very blood carrying the momentum of every song that's brought me to here and now.

IT'S ALL THE SAME

The world was wrong, all of it, about what we were and would always become. With our very souls trying to leave the definition of our bodies.

CAUSE I'VE HAD MY HOPES RAISED

It can't believe us, if it can't see us. they can't believe us, if they can't hear us.

RIGHTING THE WRONG WAYS

We were meant to live for so much more than all their definition and I feel it with all of our emotion.

SCARED WHEN YOU FELT SAFE

Somewhere up front, looking towards all thats about to come down, Ralph finally knows why I needed to play a song.

TO START AGAIN

Smiling, in the trembling, shaking in disbelief for what can not be defined.

NOW WATCH ME RISE UP AND LEAVE

The chorus hook's second repeat as triumphant before the battle's won before him, as when we all realized we had this station a place of refuge. Surrounding him in the determined plea of everyone
that has ever been destroyed to be known. We are unburdened in how undone we’ve finally come to. The sound of defiance, the denial of everything strange and untrue. The side of a cliff firmly against the biggest wave it’s ever faced. And if there is still a single pair of eyes on us, still closed to what we are, then we are going to open them. As much for their sakes, as ours, as everyone's sake. The windmill's ever spinning example of our arms and our legs. Rejecting the very idea of the city below me for all it’s stood for against us all. Making contact like every time is gonna be the last. Falling around us like dominos, this place I've loved against it's all it's come to stand for. The fine romance that's left me over the coldest love to have the hottest end. Where I'm nothing ugly, and she's looking at me burn. Sideways. Against the backdrop of an upside down cityscape. The triumph of my soul crashing through every boundary that's ever been put around it to fuel her feet's ricochet of her bullet body. The two of us doing everything against it all as our own. Flight like Saint Joseph, for all the failed attempts we made in the past to fly, and making up all of it like we never will again. All of us a witness to what impossible really is, what it has been and all it ever will be.

ALL THE ASHES YOU MADE OUT OF ME

My feet reaching for nothing, into the air itself like a wet road forming a circle. And all that indecision I had about which song would best narrate the resolve we need against all of every last odd against us has become a moot point. Because I am feeling and am becoming all the music that's ever given me hope. My body lit and burning in dedication to the ebb and flow, bridge and crescendo in a thousand rhythms all syncing together. The sound of a jet airliner taking off in Ewe2's Beautiful Dawn. I only know I'm getting away from them, now. The meaningful Chinese Operatic take on the meaningless millennial whoa in Felix's Entertainment. Inside of a place where I'm neither and all I am is here in the now I've been. The Saxophone in 'CoOnYaRdZ's Business coupled with the trumpets of Amou Blakk's I'm The Male to break through the soul of the Drums in Kodiak Line's As It Is. Where I've been built, and where I'm taking us. Going To The Meadow's Guitar solo with all it's reverberating thunder. Like a Fed Zeppelin Angel flying over the grand canyon. Beside the frantic reverb high notes of Smokers Outside The Hospice Doors' own and the back and forth rock of Crosseyed's as it churns into an orbiting around my spine. Forgetting all foretold, before I got too old.

WHEN YOU SAID THAT WE WERE WRONG

The dizzying, bittersweet adventure in No Cops Go's crescendo chorus. The life already lived and being retold in Living In Technicolor's Santoor. The endless Piano of Coldprey's Watch. To know better, before I became too deaf and blind to what is so obvious only youth could feel it. Sleepyface's Synthesizer in all it's full surround stereo. As light carving flight in every direction inside of my back like fire around the brim burning solid to burn thin the burning skin under my pelt. Hysterically primal in all the ways that frustrate whoever has aimed to make the shrieking call of my kind as anything but my own choice. The declaration of faith, in the lyrics of Suns' Hold On When You get It And Let Go When You Give It. Bittersweet Melody's Violins, with You Me Pouncing's, with StarالفLuhr's, with Storm's Violin and Cello all at once, all once, all coming down all once in unison to lift my vupline fists to heaven and hell at once, my very soul burning through my body like the first time I heard Swan's Sincerely. All of it coming together better than anything Kits And Explosions ever mashed up.

LIFE GOES ON

The trilling hocket of it all coming together better than Madeeron's Pup Culture. A mash up symphony of all my favorite parts of all my favorite songs like propulsion to my flying ascent aiming for the moon. Against gravity. And every bitter disease of the mind and soul I used to know. I've been here before. Just never like this. As though the world itself is tossing and turning, falling and crashing around me. With every ounce of me in control of what it does below and around me. When
this energy I feel is not just coming from the speakers, and it's not just coming from Eva, and it is not just the tension down there reaching a fever pitch, and it is not only just every last thing I have faced to mirror these lyrics blasting so hard that they're rattling the speakers apart.

**JUST LOOK AT HOW LONG I'VE AGREED**

This energy is the emergence of a star. Against the void watching us rise up against it. Losing all control we were never meant to have. Because we all know a place where no cops go and it's ours. Where I'm seeing everything so vividly, that nothing is blurred. I could count every speck of glass from the ceiling pane below me in mid backflip, from the impact of hard coating and blue splattering over the cracks. If I wasn't so unburdened. If I was not becoming a change of something all the more. I think I'm starting to sing. Feeling like it could've been anyone to know that we don't need anything or anyone. Understanding now why I didn't want a victory when I was being held by Nadine. As little as I had to work with thinking on why, then, I realize it now. My pursuit, however Pyrrhic, is not for Victory. This is not Victory.

**NOW WATCH ME RISE UP AND LEAVE**

This is Triumph. Aiming for every building around me, convinced I could jump that far to bounce from one to another like a pinball to tear institution down from the inside out. As out of control over this loose gravel as a Group B car. As reckless in the air as a thrust vector fighter. My very soul like the Vulpon of mine that took every squad car set against it to task. That delivered me here, as much as Eva, Espada, Andrew and Woolsey had. Her like a comet with a trail of electric fire in the wake of the air we're bending. Taking me from all the harm that the world meant for me, so I could show it some way than the violence I've enacted all the same. To a place where I'm not thinking about the past or future. My impossible movement taking on the charge of breaking every law of physics. Absolving all cause to leave the effect of my wings left broken by the wrongs to still make flight by it's very merit. With time nearly on Eva to have it all come forth, when we need it to the most. When I see her from the back of my head, in my mind's eye. Placed in the line of fire. Overwhelmed shaking, obliviously standing, in the path of the mortars and the face of flame she's about to spew forth. Snapping my neck, counterclockwise thrashing my head backward to meet my eyes with her vision, to confirm the final peril to be levied.

**ALL THE ASHES YOU MADE OUT OF ME**

And with no intention of ever being paralyzed as I was, I am coming down. Without Newton. From the forward somersault reversed to backward freefall, ending in the onward momentum caught by feet landing to send through a bouncing roll.

**WHEN YOU SAID THAT WE WERE WRONG**

Before the press of the button, and a capture of her torso to follow through the lunging tackle. Between the press of the button, and the left paw kick to clockwise spin project us parallel. Ending in the click of the button, and the start of display.

**LIFE GOES ON**

As I send us flat against the gravel in a roll, with Time crumbling down and Gravity losing it's orientation. To blinding trails of light from the north to my left becoming my right, to the overhead intensity of it's heat close enough to singe, becoming the drone of powder based propulsion from the thunder of detonated charge. And if noone else has ever been there, if we are never coming back to where we knew, then let's go together.

Let it come, let it bloom, let it stand, let it burn and make flight and say it, **LET IT BECOME AND**
There's a kit somewhere in me. Looking up to fireworks like it's his first time.

The deafening staccato of it all sending shockwaves through my body.

And that kit in me, has me laughing and crying so hard, staring into the beauty of this perfect declaration of Ours Not Yours that I am far past gone. Lost in the glory of a forest of displays, to realize why they're called Willows.

Feeling them so greatly, it's like watching God painting all that is into creation.

As though I can look into the abyss until the end of time, without ever having to worry about it taking me.

The same feeling that's come, with the roaring, howling, bellowing din of every last of our voice projected all at once to every refugee downstairs.

That priceless exchange of all of our doubt, for all of their certainty.

Below the Willow trees on fire.

The blooming of a forest of them timed so perfectly with the song, that it cannot frighten the herd.

Suns like me and her, coming down so hard, they only threaten, and all the more terrify all that was dressed in navy blue that seemed so insurmountable, so immune to being overrun. For all it needing to take, was a moment to change everything.

**NOW WATCH ME RISE UP AND LEAVE**

Without needing to see it, I can feel it all the same from the noise down there that the cops have become overwhelmed, and we have grown down to know that what is impossible has only ever been a thing to overcome. I wish I was there. But I don't have to be, to see how beautiful the moment is up front.

**ALL THE ASHES YOU MADE OUT OF ME**

Where all of our conviction in what is ours, not theirs, is being expressed so rightly, it cannot a
melee. It's us saying goodbye to every fear we've ever known. From this very moment that has changed everything, we are going back all over again to the start.

We are not gonna see them.

Ever Again.

**WHEN YOU SAID THAT WE WERE WRONG**

No threat and no peril to smash itself through. No Wave, no sea, no ocean will be able to bear itself against this cliff we've become. Not as rocks, but the very earth beneath and above. Drawing our boundary against all the force finding itself in retreat from a manifesto expressed without words.

**LIFE GOES ON**

In reckless abandon, to the subversion of all the cops brought to destroy what can never be. i have not, she has not, cried this hard, neither of us have lost our minds this greatly, since the day that's coming back. When we found each other again between those cops we've just repelled and the Herd that remains where noone else stands. Like we were never going to weep in joy like this again. Like we are never going to come here again.

**JUST LOOK AT HOW LONG I'VE AGREED**

There is nothing to make sense of.

How we did this, where it came from, or why it worked out.

Stupid and drunk and too loud to make out, too bright to see the details of, too deep to see it's end, and too vast to know it's own scope.

I cannot stop because I cannot begin.

And all I can think, is that this must be what Now wanted out of us.

I have learned from my mistakes, and repeated them until I made them right.

**NOW WATCH ME RISE UP AND LEAVE**

With all my wisdom departed, it's got to be true. All the words that can't be said...

When their definition is not meant to be heard: Their narrative is meant to be felt.

**ALL THE ASHES YOU MADE OUT OF ME**

A point of reference has been established.

With my ears ringing, and my back feeling it through the roof, from the ceiling, that earthquaking outcry of celebration that could only mean Bogo has conceded.

We really did it.

**WHEN YOU SAID THAT WE WERE WRONG**

Looking up to Eva's face, I know it's true.

**LIFE GOES ON**
Tears pouring down my face with her above me.

YOU BLEW ME AWAY

We've done it.

I can't wish for anything better, because there isn't. And if I ever stop crying, it'll be because I'll have nothing left to give.

When there's nothing left to do, but make an attempt to grab at her face. When there is no need to direct her lips to my own. She brings hers to mine, pouring all of herself into me. All of her love for all of me.

We are back on the ground floor before we even feel our feet on the tile. We can't look down, only up, to all this glow around us. Something more than just the mixture of LED and Flourescent sources over our heads. Something like a glorious morning, at 8:30 in the PM.

A slow dawn, and a long time coming.

And I can feel it, coming through my lungs, that from this high, we've forgotten everything we used to know about doubt. Relief is so thick in the air, I could nearly describe the taste of it like the deaf can smell sound. With my ears still ringing, and my heart at peace with the prospect I may have lost some of my hearing. I think I could even go blind, now. Without it mattering over what I felt up there.

I barely even have my legs.

Riding so high off my adrenaline that I can't know if I sprained something to have this limp I barely notice.

Nothing I could lose, no injury, can touch me.

Can touch Eva, can touch any of us.

Because even if the cops comes back, we still proved what we have.

This soul of ours has been given lift. And at last we have made flight. We are beginning to soar.

There is peace, here.

For everything we've suffered.

All we've done.

From every question left to answer, and all we're going to face.

The moment we've been waiting for all of our lives...

Such a long time coming...

And yet...

The closer I get to where I last saw the commission...

To where the front line was, and it's not quite right. Something I can't appreciate, but feeling wrong.
The celebration is becoming muted.

The light over our heads, getting as stale as the air we're breathing. Every other face above and beside me turned East. And with the look on Raul's face, walking away from where everyone else is is staring at, I feel this smile I had starting to fall. Me barely able to hear myself asking him "...Did anyone get hurt..?" Him not responding, just answering me without even seeing me as he goes past.

More than hurt, I'm left with a hunch of what's happened being worse.

Eva trying to tug me back, but I've got to see it for myself. The crowd getting more and more like statues, with nothing to say or do. Leading me up to the backs of the commission, forming a circle and surrounding him.

Limp on the floor.

Seen between the Wolves I'm moving past.

Finding Shudra kneeling in silent anguish.

Ralph standing over him in remorse.

In a pool of Big Purr's blood.

Laid down on his left side with a big blue dot matted into the right side of his neck.

Ralph asked me this morning, if I thought he was selfless, and as ready to sacrifice his life as he hoped he was. And there's his answer in front of us, to questions I didn't read enough into. "...He knew he was about to go savage..." I hear through the tinnitus. Coming out of Ralph. When the only way Big Purr could've known what was happening, is if Ralph warned him of how it'd happen and start to take hold.

"...He knew, and he did the one thing could to keep himself from hurting anyone..."

He was losing control. And he... "...Took his right paw and tore his left carotid out with it..."

Slashed his own throat open. And quietly sank down. Giving himself that third option. Between either staying to maul us, or charging into the cops to maul them. Because at some point, whoever was shooting at me, must've had one shot left, that had to be spent on someone that wasn't a lost cause.

Without it ever occurring to that shooter, that this tower they shot would've rather killed himself, than live to be what they wanted him to be. I can't blame Big Purr. Can't blame Ralph, can't find a point in blame, itself. I can't even feel sad. I have felt too much, to feel anything else but want. Muted and pointless want. For I know it's small, but I just want Big Purr back. Want what Teshi promised that none of us had any control over. "...I want it back, that's all..." I'm telling myself. More than I even want the lights to stay on, as I hear the sound of power getting cut back off, to let me know that the cops found Brent. And that the city out there won't let us have a god damned thing. Not even just a couple more minutes of light.

Chapter End Notes

I feel like I should becoming back to this chapter, eventually. There are (Hopefully) two
more to go and... This story I've been working on, since the 26th of March, 2016, will finally conclude. But I genuinely doubt I will be truly done with it for some time. Making edits and revisions here and there. Pretty much all of this has been entirely by my own. No co-author, no real editor, some input but otherwise, very little in the way of genuine guidance.

A lot of the time, I have felt that I have been writing this entirely for myself. If nothing else, and I can complete this fanfic, I will have something to point to after all this time that says to noone else but me that I had accomplished something.

Which... I guess that's a lot of what this story is about. Is just not giving up.

But I am aware that this hasn't exactly been the best story. The typos and grammatical errors can end up feeling like an entirely minor thing when compared to... This narrative.

And though it's not to excuse, maybe I should explain what I've been trying for, with what's influenced me.

A lot of my favorite movies have been like Jacob's Ladder, or Dark City.

People struggling to understand themselves, what they're capable of, and not knowing their possibility yet desperately trying to realize themselves. Against an environment that is dead set on dictating who they are, when it just doesn't mesh with their self reflection.

If it ever got tiring, watching Owen Conrad constantly on the verge of doing that for himself, only to end up frustrated, confronted with some new challenge that had him falling back on doubt, well... It is tiring, trying to do that for yourself. When you know the world could be exactly as it seems and ought to be. And all you're left feeling is that this lot in life is so much less than what you want to do with yourself. Maybe if nothing else, I've managed to capture that.

I have had the issue addressed before, that this first person, present tense structure has the reader so far up Owen's head, that it's been a detriment.

And well, I think a part of that was trying to affirm and uplift you, too.

I'd like to think that, at least.

Even if the end of this chapter fails to resonate. It's not perfect, I know, but... Over the course of 3 months going, I haven't exactly been able to do especially critical rewrites. All of these chapters have been their first draft, for most part.

Anyway... Thank you.

You, having read all this, having read all the way up to this point, if I've got gratitude for nothing else, I've got it for your patience and your time.

My discord is as follows, if you want a direct way to contact me:

83j049733rfe4#7597
...I'm nearly done. 2 chapters left. Good god.
"...And, well, after a careful review of the facts, both on the savage epidemic and the rioters that took Zootopia Central Station, it's obvious to both me and the state governor that we need to take more action to protect the good citizens of our beautiful city..."

We all know where the song and dance is going that's playing out on our cellphone screens.

"...For all we've done, in coordination with some of the best first responders and law officers in the Country, this sickness and the unrest they've caused are challenges my municipal government can't handle on it's own..."

Here comes what we've given her, and long overdue.

When all we ever wanted, was the peace of mind that couldn't be appreciated.

Now trouble's got nothing left to do but rubberband back on us.

"...Our medical experts are working around the clock to identify what's causing this outbreak of predators going savage, but my police force does not have the resources to protect it's citizens from both the maulings and the riots..."

Because we've done too good of a job at proving all we were going to, and it's forced Bellwether's hoof.

"...So, in conjunction with the state governor and federal officials, we are declaring a state of emergency. Effectively immediately, Zootopians are being asked to limit their travel and respect the curfew we'll be enforcing. The Territorial Guard has been mobilized and will enforce this curfew
from Eight PM to Six AM, effective tomorrow. They will be deployed on the streets to protect all that our wonderful citizens have built. If you need to report a savage attack, the military personnel will be able to assist you if our law officers are unavailable..."

We could raise an eye to all her implications. Or try to read past her face, to figure out what the cracks are showing.

But it doesn't matter.

"...The Chief of Police has been informed of this decision, and will be cooperating with the Territorial Guard to hold the rioters at Zootopia Central accountable for their actions. The Zootopia Police Department will hold their perimeter around the Station and keep the rioters in place until the Territorial Guard takes over and begins their Operation..."

We fought the law and the law broke itself against us.

That was our moment, and it's over.

Soon we're gonna face the one thing we can't pretend will fail.

That won't fail to drag us all out of here.

"...We are reviewing a quarantine on Predators as we receive new information, and control of the shelters for displaced predators will be handed over from Chief Bogo to higher officials if we decide to take that action..."

Nothing can last.

Nothing good can go without being lost.

When we all knew this would happen, thought it to ourselves as much, that it would... But noone could've ever told me that when it came, we'd all feel this hollow.
This drained of emotion.

"...I will be doing everything I can to bring order back to our home. We are all afraid of what's happening, but we need to be united and vigilant..."

The Commission starts to tune out, and not long after I stop trying to hear through the ringing in my ears. Before they even turn off their livestreams of ZNN's coverage.

I think I'm the last one still watching, as the feed cuts back to Fabienne Growley and Peter Moosebridge.

The disbelief on her. The shame on him to contrast.

Neither of them ready to do their jobs and comment on the fact we're facing.

That this is the end and the the start of it.

The given so obvious, that there's nothing left for either of them to say.

She's not looking to the camera, as she says "...Fabienne Growley, ZNN." but looking to who's behind it, asking it be turned off.

Because she's about to break down like we aren't able to. Soaking up what's coming next with the rest of the city, with us in the dark of the hallway, in private, away from everyone on the ground floor that just watched the breaking news, too. I can feel it all coming through the door. Knowing how much a miracle it was that we held out for this long.

But our luck's run out.

What we're gonna face tomorrow won't be the cops. The nightsticks and tasers been traded for guns. Rubber bullets and beanbags and teargas to leave all of the Commission beside itself.

Ralph being the first to sigh. Kurt giving the trick question "What the hell kind of chance do we got,
I know the answer to. No expectation of any answer better than the only one. And for once, at sometime around the witching hour, I've got nothing. And neither does Eva, save for the mutual wish it was the old familiar we could've had one last chance against.

We've brought this all to its conclusion, and it's gonna come with no pretending there's any other way but the only way that this is gonna end.

We can't surrender to the Cops, and we will not be able to fight off the Guard, when it was everything we didn't know we could do just to keep the Cops from carving us out of here.

And maybe we're grateful for the run we had, a little proud that we brought it to this point. It's just buried under so much consequence. The silence speaking to the truth in volumes.

But we've still a charge to uphold, I can feel as much, just can't put a finger on it. I guess I've done my part, left wish I had one more thing left to pull out of nothing.

Yet "What about the Children and their Parents?" will still come out of Rudolf, because he ain't through with his and won't stand for all this nothing being said. He'll shake us out of the fugue state with "You're telling me I just worked my ass off to keep 'em safe, and you're just gonna ignore them?" to have us understand we've got to try something, even if we can't.

Except that's the thing, spoken by Ralph with "Who the hell we got to get them out of here?" and making Rudolf to grasp at straws like the rest of us wish we could. His "They're pulling the cops out, right?" against Kurt's "So what if they're pulling the cops out?" in the mad hope that "Maybe they've pulled back SWAT from the sewer entrance, and the same old male that led Tundratown through the networks can lead them back out."

With everyone's knowing better coming out of Raul that "They wouldn't pull SWAT far enough back that they couldn't see that happen." and it's not pathetic, when Rudolf won't hesitate to go somewhere impossible with "Then we figure out a way to tell Bogo that that's what we're doing so they don't get shot up and gassed!"

...It's just that we can't believe that's possible, can't go without being wild eyed and shook after all we've done.

Going without needing to be reminded by Ralph in his stone cold look to Tundratown with "...We've told him to fuck off so hard that Bellwether's called in the Guard. What good is asking him to do
anything for us, now?"

But he's not giving up.

"What good is hoping the Guard doesn't end up shooting mothers in front of their own?"

In spite of the truth that we're damned if we do, damned if we don't, damned if we don't do anything when "Bogo can't do anything about it if he even wanted to, it's over and there's nowhere to take them, noone, no way to get them out of here. Whatever we do, it's gotta be here." and all of me wanting to look past it just isn't enough.

Rudolf is right, and I want to do something because "Having them run out the front and hoping they don't get shot by the sniper's better!"

I just can't see it for myself. As though I've expressed everything I could see and broken myself over it. And all I'm left to feel is how much that exhaustion is keeping from seeing the one way out they deserve.

While Eva watches my silence, with the argument continuing to go nowhere. Towards the conclusion she'll tune out of that she's just not ready for.

So she'll whisper to me if "you've really got nothing?" and feel me admit it, that I've got nothing on my own, with so much more than the words "everything i had before, it's just gone."

She rejects it, telling me "you're wrong." but leaving me without know how I am. I've got to ask her, because it's right in front of me, that answer to "how could we save them?" yet I just can't see it, what's so simple and obvious to her:

"by getting the message out to bogo."

And before I can start denying it, she sees and puts an end to it before I can even open my mouth through the reminder in the "you know he'll do something if we let him. you know he wouldn't let this happen." that's having me to look back, past everything that's happened to the day before.
"...lateefa?" and "everything he felt and did in front of us. it wasn't just for his own sake."

How genuine he was, when telling off one of his own, and how it got to him, when he tried to put his armor back up, but was too late to stop everyone from coming down on him with the truth. That he just wanted to do his job by the best way he knew how. With as much idealism as he could still harbor. After all his years of forces beyond his control had their way with it, there was someone still trying to be better under all that navy blue and the scars on his face.

I can't help asking if "...you think he's still got that in him?" after all he's gone through and we lit over him.

It ain't a challenge, she gets that, but she'll admit her weakness of "i don't know if he does..." before bringing it back to all her truth in "i'm just not ready to give up."

Wanting to still beat the bastards with, and leaving me feeling she's onto something.

Everyone but Rudolf, and maybe Raul, would say she's wrong.

But they'd still be missing this chance that's got her hope reflected back on my face. The slightest smile I can afford, before Ralph jars us out of the moment, yelling out "Owen, Eva, you two even listening?!" and bringing all eyes on us. If we've said and done nothing during this meeting, we've contributed all we could. The both of us knowing her solution being too frail to be put on trial, here. With how brittle I am right now, I won't be able to defend where Rudolf's coming from and Eva's wanting me to go. And she knows. It's her time for guiding me again. Grabbing my paw like she needs to, and through the tension rising up between everyone else. When the rest of the commission can't appreciate what she's doing by leading me to the hallway door, nor how we're gonna try to undo this gordian knot.

Ralph turning around with his "What're you doing?" and Kurt knows that "I'm gonna try to figure this out with Eva." but Ralph's sentiment bears repeating to "Without us?!"

And I wish I had something better, yet looking back, it takes me to where the Wolf Packs first agreed to have me join them. To the way Ralph put it, that's been everything I've done with no way left to defend it all but his own words. Without spite, and nothing but remorse, the best I can give is the truth:

"...I can't be trusted to do things your way."
I could tell myself that I haven't let them down yet, but going this long without precedence, I've got everyone at the end of their wits. Maybe they'll understand, is the best I can give myself. Opening the door handle she can't reach as she exits and I follow her, getting right to "Now tell me how we're going to do this, boy."

As everything I felt through the door surrounds me, and I'm trying to get through the crowd's emotions with her, to dive past all the weariness I've got and the dread over what the rest of us are going to face. Dragging all the options I can out of myself, against all this collective meltdown in Eb Minor. To being damned to born to die to the last sight of a pair of hateful eyes. It's wearing her patience thinner. It's stopping me from making up any which nonsense way we could contact Bogo we probably don't have, when something tells me it's got to be on the sly, without any third party being any wiser about it. Whoever they are, they've infiltrated his own force, and I can almost feel it looking down over us...

His own officers...

...

..."We've got the cops that defected."

Our own radios couldn't reach Five-o's frequencies, but Eva knows "Their radios!" can, if they've still juice left in them. If none of them kept theirs, Burney's got his, and that's enough of a start to light her eyes up, but it's not certain, not like having someone outside to meet him face to... "And I've got Toby."

If he's ready to do what it might take to get his attention, to tell him he's got to reach out to us. Two options, and Eva won't hesitate to say it like I already know. "We'll take them both!" and any other I can give her. If we can't do anything for everyone else, we can take whatever we can make happen to get the households out of here before the Guard comes, with all they're gonna come packing. We all knew how all this safe harbor was gonna end, but if we can have this one last thing... No matter what they do to the rest of us, I don't think I've ever been happier about a compromise. "I'm messaging Toby. Now." on my eleventh hour's second wind for the millionth time. While making our way to the eastside upper level where Ylva and Rudolf posted the defectors and Unit 2.

Hoping to god he's up to read my Are You There or will see it before the phone he gave me runs out of battery. Waiting for him to get back to me, and keep myself from letting what it feels like to be dead and waiting on Saint Peter get to me. To keep from having all of this knowing what it's like to be dead and hoping for Limbo from everyone else come through. There's no distracting myself from it, though. All of the Ground floor's dread about everything having been said and done with no way
to take it back. The deafening sound of muted sobs and shuffling footsteps to all these thoughts. Nothing else to feel but everyone's reeling to the fact that there's no escaping this. Coupled with compositions of delusion that this can't be happening and whispers of surrendering to the cops that'll just fight them back.

We had so much, only a few hours ago. And looking back from the escalator, halfway between the upper level and the ground floor, it's all a lot less the mote we meant to be to the cops, and all the more our own emotional grave. Yet with one more nail for the coffin left, that Eva's still got to silently remind me with a tug of her grip to stop soaking it in. We've got work to do, and bringing my eyes back on screen, Toby's finally writing in the instant messenger app. I can start trying to figure out how to word my follow up to his I'm Here while she looks for defected uniforms. Typing out Did you hear the news, when I already know he has, so I can get that confirmation from Toby that he knows the stakes. Distracting myself from her getting told he didn't keep his radio when he joined us.

Toby coming back with the only two words he's got to send me. I have, says all he needs to have me picture the sober look he's giving his screen. Followed up by They haven't given the order, but are going to clear Protestors out before the guard steps in. While another tells her his is out of power. And I want to put it better, trying to come up with something more, with her approaching each Cop she can while I go back and forth with Toby. Me being able to somehow distract from all her explanations and all their rejections. But I can't find anything else but the blunt Can You Reach Bogo. And I know how he's looking at that on his phone. The shocked confusion I've thrown into him while another tells her his got broke sometime between leaving them, joining us and putting himself on the line up front.

Toby's feeling of helplessness to go with all my desperation boiling up in the silence, before I finally type it out that We got parents here with their children and we got to get them out of here. That Only Bogo can help us. Nothing lost on everyone she's going up to, just something that for one reason for another, it's not anything they can help her with.

Everything I'm trying to tune out of, hoping Toby will come back at me, write whatever he's going to in reply to my Please help us evacuate them.

Until I feel it so hard, I can't help looking up.

Shudra's medics having done the best they could to bandage up his fists. Given him all the opiates they could.

And Burney's massive paws remain limp, draped over his knees.
One look to Nadine standing above his hunched over frame, and even in the dark, her face still says just how much she's had to tend to her father.

And how it hasn't been enough to not seem like anything more than a placebo to her.

He's not really there, just trying his best with a soft smile to seem like he is, through all the painkiller.

"Nadine..." Eva starts, knowing she might be asking too much of her that can't be asked of her father.

"Is it alright if we talked?" to signal to her that it's best if he's left out of what's better asked of her than him.

She's gotta hesitate, because from Eva's tone, she knows it's one more burden we're about to throw.

But she'll accept it. Afraid, but whispering into her father's ear before the hug comes from his side.

We don't need much distance, but we give him all he can. Before I feel it right to turn and face Nadine with "...Can he talk, yet?" before asking more.

The bad news on the worn out stare she saying it as much as her mouth does, when she gives back "He can barely whisper."

And how much she wants to hear his voice again. Like it used to come to him. Her "What do you want?", Eva's cue to finally get to it, that "...We need your father's radio if he's still got it."

Nadine already knowing where we're going, and about to dismiss us, before I stop her from turning around.

My explanation that "There's a chance we can get the children and their parents out of here." keeping her from heading back to her father.

Striking her like nothing more than pointless enough, that she can't entertain, only dismiss "...You're
gonna try to have the police help you?"

With all of her injury out in the open, thinking that's what we're going for.

But we're not. And Eva's "No..." almost keeps her from walking off. Before she starts guessing, and figuring it out for herself. The shock of the fact "We're gonna try to have Bogo help them." having her look back to us in slow motion.

To see that we're not suggesting the probability he would at all, only hoping, and complimenting it with my admitting "We know it's a longshot." and Eva's charge that "We've got to get them out of here before the military takes over for them. Before it's too late to save them." to have her know what we're going for her. One long look back at us, and it almost leaves us feeling she'll agree.

She'll even go as far as looking back to when "...They were good friends..." That "He even picked me up from school, when my dad couldn't." One quiet little moment with her smile...

Before it goes into a betrayed, grimacing leer to go with "...Why would you trust him to do a thing for us?" to have it understood, with all their history, having been erased by all our reality, that it's not that we're asking too much of her. But too much of him.

We knew as much. It was obvious, before we even bothered to have her spell it out.

There's no excuse to her, us having to make her say that.

But this isn't about excuses.

Only the one fact from Eva that matters: "We either take any chance we can, or leave them in the middle of a warzone."

Something that Nadine can't ignore. Nor find anything to argue against something so worth hoping for, that she's got to find the right way to put what's becoming too apparent to not make happen.

"...I know Bogo's old frequencies, and I've got dad's radio."
In spite of all she's gone through, and exactly because of all she has, she'll cut us out of what she wants to do herself. We're just middlemales to what she's going to put herself through.

And she could tell us "I know how to get to him better than you could..." but it can't stop my "...You don't have to-" like her "I got unfinished business." will.

Both of us stopped dead in our tracks, where she's about to take herself.

And however much she ain't done now with her uncle, she is with us.

So before we can say or do anything to ruin this Magnolia moment, she'll end it where it needs to her sake. One "Let me go back to my father, now." later, and she's already off to where she needs to go.

The chirp of a notification on the phone, and my looking back to the screen.

To the words If I get arrested, it'll be worth it.

What I wasn't prepared to ask of Toby, but what he's willing to face, it that's what it will cost him to reach out to Bogo.

I'll never quite get over how every mammal around me keeps surprising me with all their soul.

I hope it never stops happening.

The two of us left still like statues to soak it all in. Holding each other for minutes on end, when we're done being overwhelmed by what we're still getting shown. In spite of, because of, how much worse things keep getting, and how much we're still fighting.

It's got me almost good enough not to feel what everyone else is, when it shows back up on the terminal. In Rene's black eye and Andrew's wrists, with zipcuffs for bracelets to show and tell how it all went down up front during the raid.
The pride they've still got in each other, that makes the coming storm seem like it doesn't even matter.

They're high, all the same. In all their disbelief, in all their afterglow to what I may've helped make happen, but won't ever appreciate. I could only feel, but can't go back to see, exactly how they witnessed it all first hand.

He could gloat about what he did, after some cop decked her. If he wasn't so hung up on the question of "...How'd you pull that off?"

While she holds him and nestles her chin against his shoulder. I'll take anything I can't handle, as long as it stays this good. As long as it distracts me in the right ways from the worst things. I've got no answer though.

The question of "...How'd you keep from getting dragged off?" being a moot point to the fact they're still here to draw us away from what's coming next. Rene not hesitating to answer for Andrew, and I ought to be glad for what she gives us in "I jus blacked out... Next thing I knew? I was on top of him and looking back up to the ass of that cop that clubbed me. The one he went after, wit all his buddies that started cuffing and beating him runnin off after those fireworks starting goin' off."

And I would be glad, and maybe I kind of am...

It's just that boxer's slur has got us both knowing the cop gave her a concussion.

I've got to hide how much I'm starting to worry again. Andrew'll catch it all the same, but I'd like to hope he'll be ready to keep the facade up for his own sake.

They've been through enough.

I'll keep my smile up, then call up Shudra on the radio about whatever his Pack can do about head trauma as bad as hers. In the meantime, I'll try to not worry about how tired she's acting. Even as someone's light flashes over her face again, and me and Eva get another good look at how much bigger her left pupil is than her right. I'll try not to read too much into the way Andrew changes the topic back to where it left off and started at in "I guess it don't even matter how you did it, Owen. You just did."

But I want so much more to say, than the nothing I've got to give. Some restless thing's been drawn
in how he put it and it's still out of place. Yet I can't give it a name. I want to be as grateful as his own misplaced, unspoken thank you is, but can't cross that line.

"...We both did." I hear coming out of Eva. Knowing what she needs to, with one foot on the line for the other to cross it in "Because of you tracking me down like he wasn't able to."

And that was it's name. If I've called it too much, I still haven't called it out enough.

Everyone having been amazed by what I've been doing with Eva when "We wouldn't've managed what we had if you hadn't told Eva whatever you did."

One more time, one last time, I've got to take that opportunity to give thanks for not being completely, entirely responsible for what we've accomplished. To have Andrew's tired eyes light up from out of their weariness, when it's been that "You, Rene, everyone we ever met, everything we've gone through made it happened." this entire time.

We've done this all together. With some argument in his throat brewing to the contrary I've just got to stop before he speaks it, I'm still curious about "How's it feel, bro? Having played yer part in the best fireworks show this city's ever seen?"

And it's not like he knows. It's not like he's ever really considered how much he's made an impact on me, when I haven't made it easy in the past to make those connections.

But he is, now. The sum of all his challenge against all I had confronted him with. How much it's all helped to bring us to this point where he's got to admit that I wouldn't be who he thought I was, without him. Without his part in making me who I really am. It's his turn to having nothing to say, now.

He'll try to find something, even though there's not much I need and nothing he can really give in kind.

But he's given enough. Against all this fear around us, we've got our own little bubble for awhile. Where we can ignore all the bad and relive all our past relief and better days. Enough to make ourselves feel crazy, when it's enough to have had what little we've still got in each other. He'll smile, he'll almost laugh, and try to soak it in through his battledscar'd lover he's still got beside him. Wrap his arms a little tighter while he can. Try not to show it when Rene licks the side of his face, but will, anyway. That same passionate gratitude in the completion they felt, as I saw them give each other
from below the clock those long two or three days ago. It doesn't matter, what he could ever say about his part. What matters, is all he's still got because of it. As good as it still is, to keep my mind and Eva's off of what they're left needing.

Time passes. Miseries come and bounce off us. The four of us holding on to our anchors. And when he's finally got something to say, it's "How was it up there?" that takes me back to reliving all that joyful mad completion I had up there. Gets me right back to burning inside the memory of it. I almost see it like how I felt it, but I'm already losing the nuances. Like a dream I should've written down, but still remember enough of to not feel sad. Only grateful I had in the first place, to have me at peace that I felt it...

"...Like somewhere I'm never gonna come back to. That I'll keep with me 'til my last day alive, when I forget how it even felt."

I can't be sad, when that much is something so many folks go their whole lives without. We've all gotten something out of this station, and it's gonna remain long after it's left us. Long after we've left here. Small big miracles. All of us having seen these days and nights through to the one morning we were wanting out of them.

It's over.

But it's gonna last.

It's not a lamenting that comes out of Andrew, but a pride in the fact "We went so hard the Five-o and did'em so dirty that we got the army involved..."

I'd like to defuse the severity with "Weekend army." but "I ain't saying I can keep track of what day it is Owen. I'm just saying this don't feel like the weekend."

As another cellphone's light passes over Rene's face, and me and Eva get another good look at how tired she is, how close she is to passing out over the swollen left side of her face. I can't keep it up. Can't help but think it bad enough that I've got to go there.

"Listen... The Commission would do me in if they knew I offered this... But maybe I, we, can help you two slip past-"
"No." Shuts me up, ends the arguments I was ready to give before I even gave them. Eva about to try and double team with her reason, until Rene dreamily wonders on Andrew's back if "You think I'ma put my boy at risk?"

They know the facts and the stakes. As inseparable as they are.

As we are.

What they're facing and what it might cost, when there's nothing they're willing to give up, inside Andrew's truth that "We got nothing to do out there, and everything we need and got to do here."

If I owe this much to them, to let their chips fall where they may, Eva will still ask "...You good?" for Rene to come back with the "We both good." to request we surrender and give up some more. They're only asking what they're owed. Their own terms. We'll accept it, without any condition they can give.

"So what happens now, bro?"

"...We get the families out of here while we can." I tell him.

"And after?" he's asking. When I'm still not sure of any of the details. Only that "...We'll give the Territorial Guard all the hell we can. Make headlines one more time, together."

Like they both want.

"You got a plan?"

"Nope!"

But he ain't about to sweat it.

Knowing me, and giving me a wry grin to whatever plot he still believes I'm capable of.
If I don't, yet, he knows "...You'll pull one out of your ass. Like you always do."

I'll laugh with him one more time. Even if I don't agree with him, I'll let him have it.

I'll keep my optimistic facade up for them, even if they know better. Until we've left them with
enough distance for me to call the concussion in with Shudra. I'll try not to let the word Never back
in my vocabulary, as that Indian Wolf chides me, asking if my earlier disrespect did us any favors
when I can't know yet. I'll do it for Eva's sake, after all she's done for what little she wants back out
of me. As Shudra ends the radio call on a sour note, and I'm given every reason, by everyone around
us on the ground floor, to doubt I've accomplished much but making things worse. I'll take the life
everyone else has given me, until it runs out. Being left to feel in the end like a cross between Heroes
by David Doewie and High Hopes by Kodiakine. I'll hope those songs ain't over for us. Just for one
more day.

Until I'm so exhausted, nothing else can touch me. Waking up, morning light means I've slept
through my alarm. Trying to get my bearing from a sideways perspective, we must've been so tired
that we didn't go climb up the escalators between us and our tent. We're curled up on a bench below
the clock. Back of my head into the headrest, and looking to a passed out Andrew and Rene at the
other end of it. Must've found and joined us. Turned off my phone's alarm, before it woke me up.
Wrapped up each other like I am with Eva. Like Wally is with... How long has he kept her a secret?
This other Coyote, she has a face straight out of a magazine. How did they meet? Where did this
stationary world's sun come up from?

"...Owen."

The voice sounds so cold. As though everything's gone wrong.

Takes a moment, before my recognizing it's Ralph.

"Owen."

On my radio.

Impossible to get to, without undoing Eva's arms wrapped around mine.
Time to stir her like I don't want to. Wanting it to be gentler than it ends up being in the drowsy grab and a press for a "Yeah?" I've got for Ralph.

He'll give me "Breakroom.", gritting his teeth with the "Now." and tone that says I ought to know "What's happened?"

With Eva rolling over and grabbing at me in her halfway point between awake and asleep, Ralph will come back on the speaker that "You happened."

Here we go, fast and slow on the big blame he's got for me.

Because "Burney's daughter just came to us with his radio." and "You got what you wanted." and as angry as he is, all it's left me with is wondering why I was afraid.

I'm wide awake, unphased smiling to the threat in "Now come and get it." because I know a bigger blessing than the fact that Ralph ain't beside me to see how happy I've just been made.

Trying to hide the fact I'm getting caught up in the swell of bad news for someone that can't handle how good it really is in "...We're coming. Now."

The relief still shows itself, probably. But I'm grabbing up Eva and lunging off the bench in a kicking launch to stumble forward through the crowd with Eva going wild eyed in the panic of "Boy what's gotten into you?! What's happening?!"

"We're happening!" too fast for courtesy, when "Bogo's making contact!" and the rush of adrenaline needs a moment to swell.

But it comes.

Her slipping out of my grip in a dooking roll onto her own two feet while a Wolf by the hallway door opens it too slow for me to not have to throw it open wider.

For her to not make up her mind on whether to lose her mind beside me or on top of me. So she'll try to have it both ways.
And I'll try not to get tripped up and fall over, as I turn my cellphone's light on to find our way down the hall.

While I ought to be losing my mind to the fact we're still going to face the end of all we know that's replaced what we used to.

I'll feel her filter through it, anyway.

Until I round the threshold, to get immediately hit by the radiating fury and sorrow I can't see past the glow of a workshop lamp. Immediately killing whatever relief of hers I felt.

With all I can being every unseen pair of eyes on me hateful. For something I'll take the blame for, when it's Eva that forced my paw that forced theirs.

An opened up dialogue with all the best intentions in the betrayal. As Bogo's voice calls out to "Naddy," like some slip of the tongue.

"Nadia... I didn't want this." he's giving, told everything he's been about what's happened to her.

To her father.

"You have to understand that."

But I can tell she's done taking, wordlessly handing Burney's radio to Ralph and seeing herself out, when she's done her part.

The rest of this is left to us, with Ralph pausing to consider his words.

Noone in the Commission besides Rudolf and my girl was ready to face this moment. To ask anything from the Cops.
But now that it's come... It feels like everyone understands that this the best case scenario. The best chance we have.

And whether Ralph's ready to accept it or not, he's sending "This is Downtown's Alpha." across the channel, and wait to hear back "...Am I speaking to the mammal in charge?" until after Bogo's understood what happened.

It's beside the point that "You're talking to one of them."

The same as "I figured I was dealing with a flat hierarchy, when I was in charge." stalls what everyone knows what this is about.

If I felt some guilt for trying to the right thing, then I'm beginning to feel relieved that it's even got a possibility.

Before Ralph's "So why are we talking?" tries to dismiss what it took to make this happen before it's even bloomed.

...This isn't right.

This isn't him.

And when all of me asks what is it, I'll look like I've seen a ghost of all of those memories come rushing like feral waves to his mind.

I should've seen it sooner. When it's not about "Because I have been made aware of your situation. I want to assist in evacuating the families."

It's about "Why should we let you help us, now?" to the tremendous bag under the eye of Ralph's halflit face.

He didn't sleep.
He spent the whole night on the ragged edge of all we've gone through.

He's seen his responsibility all the way through to a nervous breakdown.

And it's obvious on him, that he's lost it along the way to this moment we'd never have seen coming.

If I felt some guilt for trying to do the right thing, then I'm beginning to worry again alongside Eva.

With all of our collective anger towards the badge showing through Ralph why we even came here in the first place. At the worst possible time. With him cutting against the grain of Bogo's bewildered repetition of "...Why?"

When "You could've helped us this whole time."

I hate that I know what's happening.

That after a whole life, and all that inherited disappointment, to be left wanting from an idea that never served him, Ralph can't accept it, now.

Because "You've done nothing to solve our problem." and everything else he's gone through his whole life is finally culminating in the trembling fury of "Why should we let you help us, now?"

This isn't right, and it's caught us so offguard, it's happening so hard, that noone's even got the courage to take Burney's radio from Ralph.

Not even Rudolf.

Not even as Bogo reminds us, in all his disbelief, "Do you have any of the situational awareness I have, in my position, to know what's going to happen if you don't trust me?"

Something so obvious, it shouldn't even matter if we didn't deserve to wait around forever for this when the duty Bogo's finally giving us was always there.
"You think we don't know?"

But it does.

"Then are you going to-"

The moment that could've changed everything has come too late.

"After all you've let happen-"

And he'll make us realize our deepest fears with it.

"All I've let happen?! As if-" Ralph's tension will come to a head for us.

I've had my relief, me and Eva had our moment, I don't even know if Ralph's slept since I told him about-

"YOU LET IT ALL HAPPEN!"

Big Purr.

"AS IF I HAD ANY CONTROL AND AFTER ALL I'VE FOR YOUR SAKEs, AFTER EVERYTHING THAT'S HA-"

Guilt.

"DONE WHAT FOR OUR SAKEs?! WHAT HAVE YOU DONE?!"

Doubts about the cause he's served to the end of someone else's life. Like Rudolf never had to over
Ylva, and I faced to came back from.

Luxuries he's never known, for him to take this one as it is.

Raul.

"EVERYTHING I COULD-"

Raul was there, "Raul, You were there!"

"YOU DIDN'T KEEP THE PEACE, YOU DIDN'T KEPT YOUR OFFICERS IN LINE,"

Raul saw Bogo's reality when he let Lateefa go with her boy and put one of "My officers?!" back in line, Bogo can do this, he wants to do this so please "SAY SOMETHING!"

"I AM NOT IN CONTROL OF MY OFFICERS!"

...Did Bogo really just...

"...I have done everything I could to keep my own from making it come to this..."
And in the silence, of a whole room realizing what he's admitting, not even Ralph can find it in him.

"...I have tried... Tried with every ounce of my power, to have it not come to this point..."

But for all the power he had, he never had any control.

And that guilt brought to bear on us, through the speaker cannot be denied.

Not anymore.

And that knowledge we're left to face with him will pour out the radio like the shame of tears to the cowardly strong.

"...Only to have had some outside force infiltrate them, undermining my efforts the whole way through..."

Because he knows what's come to pass and it cannot be denied.

"...Can you imagine how powerless I feel for everything I didn't see happening right before me?! That I didn't even know until you confronted me with Buckley?!"

As intimately felt as a knife to the spine.

"Do you know how much I just admitted to?" he'll ask us, as though any one of us can pretend we don't know better any longer. The game was rigged from the start to pit us against each other before it was ever set in motion. The stage was set against us, and only now can me, Eva, Ralph and Bogo and everyone in this room can really understand that we played our parts in a performance that was never quite our own. In the hindsight that's come after the fact. Like how Bogo didn't give up just now, over all the reason Ralph gave him to.

"Please... Let me do one good thing for you while I still can." he'll still beg. Because he knows he was our red herring as much as we were his. But if Bogo's been patient, Ralph will still confess out of bounds that "...I think I got someone killed.", now that he can't hide it from himself.
So that voice on the other side of the line will stay determined. Talk Ralph through it, when "...I wasn't there, for a friend that might not speak again." will let him know why.

With Bogo's own betrayal burned along his head, like a scar so much worse than I could see on it, before.

How much he's changed, been made to see, and there's no mistaking the honesty ringing true in "I denounced him... His daughter may've lost the love of her life, and I can never take that back for them."

Guilt to mirror Ralph's own. The fact that he's even admitting it. Putting himself right there beside him like he's in the room with us. Leaves Ralph wondering "...Why're you even bothering?" without any spite he can't harbor, anymore.

If it's obvious that it's because "Because we've still got a job to do. Together.", it's still so hard to believe. That "We've got children in your station that have to get out before the firing starts." and he's got the vision we didn't have to what he can do.

But Ralph could only see if he knew "How are we going to do that, if you're not able to keep your own people from making things worse?"

And the answer comes without hesitance: "Because I'm doing it myself."

With the certainty of a debt that must be paid "Without authorization. With you, no matter the consequence."

Damned if he does, damned if he doesn't, damned to wanting to trade it all away when doing the one thing he can that won't sort the mess that's already been made because "If I am going to be dismissed from my position, give me this chance."

...Ralph told him to fuck off so hard...

...Yet Bogo's still doing this.
And for all I can know, all that's obvious, I'm still not over it.

Noone is.

Something's happening here that's so profound, Ralph's beside-the-point "...How?" hardly is.

We're right there with him.

We need to know, even if Bogo can only give himself enough rope to hang himself, in telling us to "Just get them ready to move."

He can't afford the rest of us an inch if "I cannot risk the plan being compromised. I can't know if this line is secure."

Because he's not in control. Only in power, for what little time power might still entertain the chance he's got.

And if that truth had to get beaten into us, then it's finally broken through like all his officers couldn't.

With nothing for neither him nor us to gain.

This is going to happen, if Ralph could just say Yes.

Having gone through all he has, to finally have something he's wanted all his life, but can't accept.

Now that he's too lost in the fugue of his wreck and ruin.

It's been on him this whole time, but it's not his place, anymore.
It wouldn't be right after all the doubt he's given this. With it having been Rudolf, having been right all along, that deserves to be the one not to leave "I can't do this without you. Please..." hanging.

So, shaking like a leaf, he'll relent.

Looking to Rudolf without pride, with what he needs to do not being as good as when I handed Eva the remote for the fireworks. To offer the radio for Rudolf to say the one thing left that needs to be heard. Because he can't say it himself, what Rudolf wanted to this whole time: "...This is one of Tundratown's Alphas. They're going to be ready." rings through the silence of the room with all the relief we needed to find in it.

The one small miracle left we had to ask for. That the ones that needed the safety of this place the most are going to get out of here before the Guard comes. It's going to happen, with Ralph's guilt racking up, and Bogo finally coming back with "...This won't change how much right he had, but... I can't blame who I was speaking to."

It's almost doing something for Ralph, as he walks out the room. Kurt following with words still forming to see him through it, like he had for me so many times before.

It shouldn't be water under the bridge to the rest, but what happened, came and went so fast, we're all so exhausted, that Rudolf has to admit it for us, to himself and Bogo that "...He's gone through a lot." An inch given, and a mile taken by "...If I had only tried, before... It might have..."

Talking to us.

Negotiating.

Seeing us as something besides criminals.

Dead beats.

Savages.

Predators.
Understanding why we were here, when nowhere else was safe.

Reaching out just enough to figure out something better than all that happened.

But the city he serves, the city we loved, could never had allowed it.

Everything left unsaid and all figured out too late.

We've run out of time, for Rudolf to bring the confessions to an end on "...We need a few hours, if you can give us that."

Bogo's "I need that time, myself... You'll hear back from me, then."

Rudolf's "...Thank you for this... Over." and we've been caught in a fire.

We'll Burn like we are, even if that perfect storm of the Territory Militia is still going to come. It's somehow alright, even if for a little while, in the heat of this better moment. Me and Eva got what Rudolf needed, the rest of us wanted. He gives me "...And I do not even know how you two made that happen, but... What you said about Ylva yesterday, I cannot hold it against you anymore." and yeah, if I had been given any time to reflect on it, I would've felt more remorse. But it's gone, now. Me and her having replaced it something with so much more weight to it. I'm still exhausted. We all are, enough for him to know that if I could say something, I would. But it's time for him to begin, with nothing but both of our smiles on the lamp's light for the silent agreement to be had.

He leaves with Tundratown's other Alpha. All the rest of the Commission filing out at their own pace. Until it's just me and Eva in the room alone to ourselves.

Feeling we had everywhere to go. Now we've got nowhere, for once. And the limbo is starting to sink in again, but we don't feel needed anywhere. So we'll stay. The rest of the world will come back when it does. Me and her have run for so long, we'll let each other think we deserve to hold each other's paw and do nothing else. With everything this quiet, I can somehow hear Kurt in the hallway with Ralph. Through the lingering Tinnitus of last night to remind how good we all had it. For that one moment, where we were something better than heroes and had everything we ever wanted. We walked that line between what could and never would become. And maybe I'm a little grateful. So I'll just smile on and feel the lamp's glow. Where I'm not ugly and she's looking at me with an unsaid told-you-so.
The sound that suddenly fills the room, it comes so out of nowhere, gets us so on edge, that neither of us recognize it's a phone ringing jolting us.

Not until the rings again.

It shouldn't be.

No phone should be ringing if I can tell her "...Your phone is supposed to be dead."

Dead phones don't ring. Phones without service or SIM cards don't ring.

My own phone can't be ringing.

But there's no mistaking it.

"owen that's not my phone."

It's the burner Toby gave me.

I'm so hung up on how it's my phone that's ringing, I'm not even thinking about who could possibly be calling a phone that doesn't have a number.

How I ought to be afraid like Eva. I'm digging it out my pocket before she can stop me for all the red flags this is giving her, as I light the screen up and start to ask "Who the hell is calling..."

Then I see it.

Eyes widening, mouth left gaping, head vacant.
Toby didn't leave the SIM card in this phone.

The one number this phone could call out to is 911.

...But I never would have thought I'd ever see that number calling me.

The triple digit I'm staring at on the phone.

Scaring the hell out of Eva like it ought to be scaring me.

But they don't. Because I remember. I know. With Eva's shortness of breath in "owen, what the hell is that?" in contrast of my trick uncertainty of "i think it's an angel."

It's alright to see a ghost, and I can't doubt that I know who this used to be.

I could warn her not to fear, as she mouths out her "wh-" and watches my thumb going for accepting, she'll start to plead "d-Don-

But I wanna hear his voice. To put it on speaker, when they've never been properly introduced.

With seconds ticking by of nothing being said, until I admit it over the line that I know "...It's you."

That there's only one mammal who could go this far.

"There You Are, my Vulpine Friend." taking me back to where it all started. From a familiar diction under autotune distortion. A big hard voice that's lost so much of it's impact as it admits "It took some time, to find All I had needed for this call to happen." for my closure to start coming, her to start making the connection between my stories and unmistakable vocabulary. Putting her at peace, knowing all that she thought about from the writing in the text that led her to me on that Sunday morning by the Water.

The absolute absurdity, in how pleasantly surprised I'm finding her asking "...Is that Lucifer?" and it being funny enough to have that fallen angel hold a laugh back at the slight. But he knows her name,
he'll be patience, because she's been my grace. Choose to appreciate the relief she's got when "I assumed my method would concern you two at first... Though it seems your Fox shares your courage, Now... After all you two have faced together."

Even under house arrest and me knowing better than asking "...Would it be crazy if I said I miss someone I've only met twice?" when his time must be sort, and it's got to have a purpose beyond "I could be asking you much the Same."

I can't even begin to figure how this is happening, in the first place. With the call being so welcomed, I won't try. Because it's not the method that matters. There's a message coming through it.

Being heard as much through the alteration of his voice, as by how it's changed. For me to start catching on that "You sound so worn down... I can't imagine how it's been."

Theres no ignoring how muted he's become. I can tell the weariness in the tone he's got, now. The rot of that residual anger from "It has been quite hard, being too Feared to be respected Enough to have the... Control that I used to."

But his soul shines through the peace he's found by that, with only the autotune to mask it. I'm left thankful by, but just can't understand how he got it. Hearing some kind of solace in him, without the menacing facade he needed before. It's obvious to him, in this momentary silence, that he's tripped me up again. That if I still get that he knows everything, the depth and scale will catch me off guard one more time.

So he'll find some pride in it, when he gets to the point: "...But it has been good, to hear what You were all capable of in my Place."

Because nothing really has left his eye unmoved.

"...You've been..."

Not even me.

Even with everything keeping him doing anything else, he's keeping them on what I've done. Watching through those of his people here beside us.
"My Wards in the hallway outside have made Some effort to Keep me from doing so. But they are sloppy, and my sources quite Dilligent."

What would terrify anyone else, that's only got me appreciating how he's been as good as here. Never as far as he seemed, and all the best informed to tell me, when I could never be ready to get told "And You... You have Exceeded every Expectation I had set."

I don't know where to start. I don't think it'll end when I find where to begin. Obvious enough in the quiet I'm about to say "You were not alone." that he'll cut me off with it. "You surely understand that." he'll have it known, "But I must Remind you, how I can scarcely comprehend your lot achieving so much with what was afforded."

And if I still need everything I should've been thinking on come forth, "That you all faced the odds you did...", if I'm too brittle to handle it, bowed down by all the control he's still got over conversation, he'll pierce the chink in the last of my emotional armor in the cruelest blow:

"...And how You became the Fulcrum to Subvert all the Terror set against you."

To be realized like I should've been by myself, in the pummeling in that I have run for so long, I've been all around it. Between how he found me and why I was, and overwhelmed by the distance between the now and then, the here and there. Between when I wasn't and where I've gone to be a better mammal. It could never be lightly recalled. Placed under that affirmation spell I shouldn't have needed. And I'm breaking up, with the strength to hold myself upright in the waves it takes for everything to come together. My eyes on my soul. My ears on my heart. I ought to be sad. It didn't have to come to this. Yet for how badly we could both take that, him putting me in this space, I'm so lost in it, my mouth can't find a thing. He didn't intend to destroy my tongue.

It just happened. And I'm not even aware of how long that silence was, with him knowing the meaning of it, until he finally hints at his intent for calling.

"This call will not be Picked up, as long as we avoid certain words. Do you Understand?" he asks me and Eva, when he can't risk any more than he has. It had to be stressed, already knowing that I'm gonna say "...We do..." It can't be known to him, if he should ask us "...Do you know who they are?"

...Because he does.
And as rare and as bold as I found them, even he can't name them, now.

The ones that brought all of us, and this city, to the point they have, have power beyond his control to reign in.

To the point their attention can't be drawn. But he knows who they are. When I should. With all the pieces I ought to know what to do with.

When "...It's been everything I didn't know I had in me, just to help keep everyone safe. And maybe I've been given all I needed to piece it together, but..."

But knowing all he put together from the writing on the wall I couldn't read, "...But you have done as much as I myself could, if I were in your Place. And if you were in mine..."

No.

He had the plan he could've used, I know he did.

I want to believe it, even while Eva asks if "...You can't?" for me.

But the reality we're longing against, is in the tone of his voice, as much as it is in his words.

"Every last Cell of me has Begged for it. I have considered my every last possibility. And I would be stopped before achieving any End to what Means remain."

The truth came too late to him. The chance to do anything with it is gone. And he is as damned to watch the species war happen, as we are to face it.

It's only begun.

And it is too early for him to have any prayer beyond "...I can only hope God invests the ability to
expose them in someone else."

Our time is over.

And Eva can't help but ask, with all of her want to just be allowed to live, if "...Is it gonna end, if that doesn't happen?"

Because she's got to ask for me. When Espada always made it his business to predict the future, and hates the way "...No. It will not end until you are All..." sounds, how the future hurts so much to admit, that he can't bring himself to say what we didn't want to accept...

That this won't end until every predator is...

...

...We knew how it was gonna end.

We just hated how it sounded too much to admit it.

But there's no other way.

The past is coming back around.

We've made all the difference we were going to.
I'll accept it, now.

And there's nothing left to say or do, but for me to mean it that "...If I never get to see you again... I'd give anything to do it one more time."

That I'd go all the way back to that Friday morning.

I'd do it all "Exactly the same... Because it taught me the courage to mean something beside a definition."

To be impossible.

I'll give him that final confession. For me to get the feeling that I can't hear him crying. Knowing how much I owe him. How much we don't deserve what's coming.

The courage I've found in weakness, to let the inevitable happen.

"...It has been a Privilege..." he chokes on.
Then he hangs up. Leaving me for last time.

I let the phone fall out of my grip. It's done it's purpose.

I've got nothing left to do, but wrap my arms around my life.

The love that's seen me through all she has.

Because I can't know anymore if I'll still have her after this is done.

It comes to us, some time later. Our recovery to soak up like the daylight coming in through the windows and the ceiling.

I think that it's helped, that this ground floor we're sitting together at feels like Ghosts on their way to comes after. The dread all drawn out from us like the bad blood it was. Some place between Michael coming for them, and Saint Peter calling their name. With some kind of peace only the dead would get from seeing all their old potential and how whatever they did, whatever they said, they know it's alright.

But I don't think I've got to point it out to Eva.

One look to her, and her eyes to mine says everything either of us needed to about it.
So I'll stay my words, when they'd probably too depressing to be bittersweet.

She'll give me hers instead, with "...The day after we met back up. You said then, that that was the most free we'd ever been. The most in control of ourselves."

Or something like that.

And "...Yeah, I did..." I'll guess. When it ain't the exact words I can call back, just the feeling I had at that moment, coming off to me now like the ending of A New Hope. I know it's silly to compare, but the fact remains:

It wasn't complete.

It wasn't a conclusion and it never could've been.

But we've got something, now. Enough of something she can put the words to, looking back up to me with a soft smile that goes like "Well... I'm just looking back, and all I'm left to think... Is right now's the freest we'll ever be."

And what we're both left to take from that, what could mean a little more than "Like I've gotten everything I'm going to out of life, and everything I didn't get didn't matter.", is that we're lucky just to have all we took.

Even if it's gonna get repo'd. We still taxed the state. We've lived so fully, they'll never convince us that we weren't real again.

That we weren't alive then or that we aren't alive, now.

If we'd never took the shot, we'd never have felt this.

A thought shared between us so loudly, it brings her back to where it took off for her.
"...That line from our song? The one I said messed with me?" reminds me of I Keep Seeing You From The Dark, With You Above Me. Though that's what messed with me.

Not her, when I still have to ask if it's "Nothing that you say or do will make you love me?" in all my exhaustion.

But I remembered rightly.

"I think I get what it meant to me, now... That nothing it could say or do, would change the fact society saw me as nothing else but a Weasel."

The way those big brown eyes look past the black marks on my muzzle, and all the way through the mask over her.

That peace in her to make it out like it doesn't even matter, because it never did.

Like what we could've been given by this city still wouldn't mean half of what we've got in each other, right now...

Because she's still had me.

We've seen each other through this whole thing.

I got her, now.

And if we're staring at the barrel of fate's gun, she'll have me until the bullet flies out.

If we've walked the line, between what impossible really is, and what it never should've been...

...I'm doing that thing she hates so perfectly, that she can't reel back when I lean in to hold her.
As something in the crowd above us starts changing elevation, she'll only tighten her grip on me, in spite of how hard I'm burning and how much it's hurting.

That she'll burn with me in all the deepest of these emotions.

We'll burn so bright like the youth we're feeling around us, we'll call it singing that we're quietly sobbing when we've gone too far into it.

If losing our heads to this, does nothing else but keeps us from losing it in the only other way we could, then we'll let it run this course. Because it's beautiful that we ever managed to learn anything better. Against everything we've replaced that we shouldn't ever have had to know.

It doesn't matter if we'd never be enough to face what's coming. We'll light up as if we had a choice about it. Blind to what's changing around us, when we're still afraid but can't stop.

Because it's enough that we'll be right beside other.

We've made a place between the click of the light and the start of a dream. That season that's leaving the world that will return.

And if I make the pearly gates back to her, after everything still needing to be said and done, here... Then I can't ignore it anymore that we're surrounded by the children all staring at us. Like their mothers and fathers are telling them not to. Even if they can't help it, either.

And we don't mind, if I'm just as helpless to keep from staring back. They're not interrupting any of what we're feeling, if Eva can hold on to it, looking up to whoever's looking back at her.

It ain't nothing, when some Lupine pup can't take his bright eyes off of me. This familiarity I'm sensing can be a little more than me thinking I've seen him, somewhere. It could mean for a little while, that I'm right there with him. Staring back while the lack of a PA has Rudolf shouting in the background. Caught between orders to his pack, coordination with the commission, and the news that Police outside are starting to clear out for the Guard at Watering Hole Park. Yet I can hear him taking his charge and running with it, without having to make how stretched thin yet still holding up he is. Something not coming from my radio or Eva's, if they're out of power. That he's got this and he's making it happen.
And our moment ain't up... I just wanna see if I can still use it. Eva feels it, before I even ask if "We're ready?", that we ought to see him do this. Even if we've done all we could. I wouldn't hold it against her, if she won't say what I feel coming.

But she says it for both of us: "Yeah... Yeah, we are."

So we're getting up. Making our way through everyone set to leave before we've got him in sight. And I'm seeing that Tundra Wolf exactly like I imagined him. Calmly afraid but hopeful. Genuine, soft smile around a flurry of words. His radio and Burney's in both paws gesturing in every direction. Eyes so busy, he doesn't notice us. Ears swiveling to catch everything he can't miss. Megaphone on a sling over his shoulder to broadcast everything noone else can. I may've had some lingering doubts before. But they're gone: Looking to how in control he is was that last piece of evidence I needed. So when he finally catches sight of me and her in front of him, it's my smile he's seeing before anything else.

That relief in him could mean anything. Whether or not it's from him doing this or me and her having helped give him the chance... it just matters that he's got it.

It's an aside thing he tells the radio in his left paw that "Everyone, I got the Fox and Ferret here!" to have Teshi come back with "Aight, they got their radios out, too?" to let me and Eva it wasn't just ours. No power leaving every radio left in their death throws.

But me answering Rudolf before the fact with "Our radios are dead." doesn't even phase him, either. "Affirmative, their radios are down, too! They're sticking with me until we meet again!" he tells them.

With some doubt still in Teshi when she asks him "You heard back from Bogo yet?" that he can't even entertain. He already knows "I will!" well enough that she's got nothing left to dismiss it with. He's that much in his element, making every uncertain thing feel like a given. Having her leave it at "...Out." and me to think twice about wondering about how much juice Burney's old radio still has.

After all these snags, everything just not going to plan, for once, everything just seems to be going right without needing to be confirmed. Without us having to struggle to make it happen, or him really needing to ask us if we're alright, when he sees those tears from earlier.

My nod, Eva's quiet acknowledgement that we are and his smiling back to offer up "Whatever was bothering you... I figure you two have already come back from it."
I'll leave it up to Eva to just say that "We had a lot happen, after the meeting." so I can keep from saying 911 called me.

...I'm still gonna laugh about it, though. Now that I can appreciate how crazy that funny that sounds in my head. Know how desperate I've always been to be happy. Setting him up to cock a brow with a caught offguard question coming up that I couldn't answer.

Because it won't ever be asked: The unmistakeable chirp of a cop radio to make our whole world freeze in disbelieving relief.

The sound that used to be so horrible that's become a deliverance like it won't ever be again.

It's so good to hear "Do you copy me and do you have them ready?" coming from that Water Buffalo, the three of us just remain as statues for a bit.

Before it's so certain it just happened, that it can't be questioned.

It's happening.

And it's everything Rudolf can do to keep his composure. His tail wagging so hard to good news, it's about to fly off of him as he brings Burney's radio to his face with a wide eyed smiling "...We copy you! We copy you and they're ready to move!" and a shaking presenting of his own to me and her. When I'm too drunk off of this to catch what he means and Eva takes the hint.

With Bogo coming back to say "Good. We have a narrow window before anyone figures out what I've done." as Eva snatches Rudolf's radio out of his paw and immediately hits send to tell "Everyone come quick, Bogo just called and the evacuation's happening!"

And Rudolf's doing everything he can to keep some kind of composure facade when he asks if "d-Do you have an ETA?"

We're doing this.
Even if we can't believe we are and don't know how we're going to, as Bogo only gives us a "Standby." that leaves Rudolf to his own spiraling out of losing all his stoicism in a fit. Jumping up high and higher before howling out "EVERYONE GET READY! THIS COULD HAPPEN ANY MOMENT!"

Scat's hitting the fan so hard, I'm joining him and Eva's dooking without waiting to hear a word back from the rest of the Commission to transmit "We're on the ground floor with Rudolf and you gotta come!"

This is happening. And I'm losing myself to Now all over.

Rudolf's grabbing me up in a back breaker hug to "YOU DID THIS, BOTH OF YOU!" and my "YOU STARTED THIS, YOU FUGGIN...!" when it doesn't even matter who's done what if the end result feels this friggin' good.

That it's only Burney's radio chirping that gets us to stop losing our scat long enough to hear Bogo asking if "You still with me?" for Rudolf to still be a little overenthusiastic about confirming. With his "Yes! Yes, we are still here!" to leave Bogo pausing for a moment.

"...Ten minutes, starting... Now."

...

...We knew this had to happen fast, but Bogo knew he'd still shock with how quick it would.

And yeah, Rudolf said this could happen any moment.

He just didn't think the one moment would be "That soon"!

And if we weren't so drunk, we could understand what the Chief's hinting at with "Service has been shut down up to Ivy Avenue. There's no traffic ahead of us... And my friend just bypassed the speed limit."

We're still losing our minds so hard, the only thing Rudolf has is a "What?" to give.
The three of us having to wonder now, what Bogo's hinting at, how he's going to take them away.

When we ought to piece it together for ourselves what he can't say over the air.

But there's no hint left to give. Only where we've gotta take them.

"Get them to the terminal! I am inbound and you have less than ten minutes! We are down to the wire on this! Clear the terminal for evac and I'll see you there!"

...But there isn't a single one of us that can move past the fact he just said "The Terminal...?" that Eva's repeating to us.

How is...

..."...Did he just...?" I'm struggling with but Rudolf can't have our confusion.

It doesn't matter, how Bogo's going to get them all out.

"...EVERYONE TO THE TERMINAL!" jolts me and her out of the pause,

"EVA, MY RADIO!" and she's throwing it back to him as he starts to run for us to give chase,

"EVERYONE WITH A CHILD HAS TEN MINUTES! GET TO THE PLATFORMS AND DON'T PANIC!" to get them all moving as he switches frequencies to tell "TUNDRA TOWN, CROWD CONTROL ON THE TERMINAL! EVERYBODY DOWN THERE MUST BE UP HERE! THERE CANNOT BE A RUSH!" with the rest of the commission spilling through of the crowd clearing out ahead of him for Kurt to grab him by the shoulder when he can't know "What's
got into you, Rudolf!?"

His "We gotta get them down there!" and Kurt's "Well we got time!" as Ralph comes up beside him too recovered for me to realize because no, "We got nine minutes!" I'm gonna have to tell Kurt.

And now they all get what's gotten into Rudolf they're gonna join the panic with him.

As Teshi's voice repeats a "...Nine?!", from behind me to have me turning around to confirm before Rudolf does it for me. "We have nine minutes and a hundred and fourty seven adults and children to get on the platforms and keep from getting rushed or split up! How?!", comes from him.

With all of them already making their way past us in a mess towards what's gotta be hundreds down on the terminal.

An order so tall, we're all at a loss.

But if Woolsey's example from the penthouse floor is going to show, it's gotta happen now:

With Ralph somehow able to come up with an "Everybody needs to be going down one pair of escalators or another, which is it?!", that ought to have us all floored.

That Kurt could've set him right enough to have already recovered from earlier... But he didn't wait too long to make it happen. With everything moving this fast, we can't appreciate Ralph beyond Rudolf's "South up, north down!"

"Ok tell your pack an we're tellin' ours, anything else?!", he's giving Rudolf, and that Tundra Wolf is all too quick to unsling the megaphone over his shoulders to shove it in his paws.

"Tell them!" he's giving with a point of his finger downstairs, "I will lead the group down!" and he's running off to catch up with them.

And Eva just knows where we've gotta be, coming up with it out of the blue that "Me an Owen'll trail behind 'em, if a child gets lost, we'll bring them!"
I'm doing an aboutface in a jump before she's even done saying it. With her to follow and run headlong with me, towards Rudolf's pack bleeding through the crowds and me telling each one I pass that "South is up and north is down!" without me giving any thought to it. With her starting to laugh behind me while Ralph's orders blast through the megaphone. And maybe we're not gonna be here, tomorrow. But I just caught why she's laughing. And I can laugh while I can, too. Be amused over nothing, as we find the back of the evacuees and put enough distance between us to react with before I can ask. "How good was the look on their faces?!" "You had them so tilted and it was so dumb!"

And sure, we're laughing over nothing, but something around us just feels right. Not realistic, but right. As we start scanning our eyes over everywhere, waiting to find a pup or kit, some cub, an anything out of place. As I picture how good it's gonna be when everyone I told figures out that it wasn't my idea. The two of us exchanging glances and smiles but expecting something to go wrong. Because this evac's gonna happen, but we're just so used to nothing going without a we don't stop looking all around to find it. Even while she comes back to before with "You had this one Tundra stopping dead in her tracks like 'What The Fug Is He On?!'" and I'm busting up, as the clock counts down and all is as it should've been this whole time.

With me already seeing the escalators through the parents and children to know it really is, for once. That we've set out to do something and it went like clockwork. With me knowing that I ought to not be shocked, but still needing to ask Eva if "That really just happen like that?" after every unknown variable we've faced.

It just worked.

And we're going down the flight of steps disbelieving how easy it was. Working our way around the Wolves and all this out of place order, this peace of mind in everyone we're getting out of here, until we got Ralph in sight. Rudolf by his side, and close enough for her to ask without a raised voice if "We got everybody?" to get back "We checked twice and my pack's checking again, but this is everyone I made record of."

And I can feel it, that "...It did just happen like that." before Eva affirms it...

...But "I still don't get..."
...Because I know he's getting them out of here, but...

If he had us send them up front, or through the boiler room, then I wouldn't be hung up on "How can Bogo get them out from here?"

I didn't know what to expect, just that it'd be something discreet.

But Eva's seeing something she's got to tug at my shirt sleeve with.

And everyone's staring outside.

So I'm turning my gaze over there, too. Yet I can't believe what I'm looking at, either. Even as I hear it coming.

If Bogo really had to do this, help us get the least deserving out of here with the most to lose...

And we knew that...

...Then we still weren't expecting him to broadcast this loud.

"...That's a ZTA sub..." I'm reminding myself.

With everyone else but Ralph left speechless to the fact "...He commandeered a subway train." as he looks back at us. Smiling through the windows like he's not used to being this proud. If I've only ever known him as a male fuming in frustration...

Then I can't get over that look on him that says it's all gone.
In a placidly determined stroll to the doors, timed good enough to keep the tempo right through them. As they open in front of us, and he steps onto the platform.

In spite of all their shock, with no announcement needed, it just comes naturally to every parent to start getting on board with their children.

With a Thank You called out from so far away, as he looks down to us, we up to him, and the same thought leaves us all floored.

What has to come from Zev, that "...They'll not gonna have any mercy on you, being so careless." when he could've done this any other way, and there'd be doubt, no repercussion like the kind he's set himself up for.

He might as well have spraypainted his name on this like all the specist slogans that's been sprayed all over the cars behind him.

But it's nothing he doesn't already know.

That he hasn't already made his peace with.

To say "Let them do their worst." so certain, without any fear of it, as another Thank You is called out in the distance, that it's a given he doesn't have to confess:

"I'll still be proud of having done the right thing. Like all of you."

For the shock to sink in deeper. When we already couldn't handle what we were witnessing.

For another Thank You to be heard that couldn't resonate like the one he just gave us.

Without even having to speak it, to have it come from someone we hated and feared, for something he didn't want.

Who we can't pretend wanted what's come to pass, now that he's looking back at us with all this
same admiration for those he used to hate, too.

He'll ask "...Who was it? The one that organized this with me?" but it's gonna take a while for Rudolf to give Bogo a tell he can read. But the Water Buffalo figures it, without having to be told.

As a Thank You rings out, when it's all that's on the mind of every parent.

While the Chief of Police leans down to hug a rioter.

Like a brother.

"You deserve a medal."

Like one of his own.

Something we're never gonna believe. That I never would, even if I had the photo to prove it.

With Ralph being the one to understand what's happening, watching Rudolf start to break up, trying to wrap his arms around a cop and having to settle with making it halfway before getting overwhelmed.

Because his "...What convinced you to do this, what made you?" has got to be asked, like another Thank You has to be said. To have Bogo break off his hold around him and straighten up to tell us.

All our grief we sent his way just doesn't add up to what he's done for us. And yet it comes so quick and simple to him:

"Last night. And Nadine. And you convincing the protesters outside to harass me."

He says that with such certainty... But Rudolf's gotta call out the curveball in "What do you mean, the protestors?" to throw him off.

...And I can feel it coming.
In his turn to get shook up as he starts to ask "Then whose idea was..." with his eyes scanning over the Commission. As they trail further and further down...

Until they finally lock onto me. Widening as he loses his smile to the recognition and disbelief hitting him like a knockout combo.

He feels it, just can't quite understand how it's "...You."

But he knows. Cold as he's been.

The mammal Lionheart tried to distract from Cliffside with.

That caught a cop trying to start a riot.

The Fox looking right back at him.

"...Me." I've got to admit a little hesitantly. Because it feels like I'm admitting it to myself. And I've gotta think, by the look on his face, that he's been thrown farther than he's ever been. Far enough from all convention and possibility, he doesn't really want to make the connections he is.

All those things I'm starting to remember with him.

So more than asking, he's trying to deny it by finally letting out "...Who's responsible for last night?" when he doesn't really want to believe it.

But he does.

Kurt just needs to make him know it, now.

"Both of them."
With everyone's genuine looking back at Bogo that'll force him into accepting who inspired all he witnessed, Teshi only has to step up in explaining it "With fireworks from my clan, and someone volunteering to get power back on." for the truth to sink in.

And if all the good I've known here, has come from relief, from gratitude...

Then I think I know pride, now.

For myself.

For surviving, just to watch him realize how wrong his definition was.

Pride like what I've had in Eva this whole time, that's got me telling him "And Nadine would've never called you up, if she hadn't gotten her to."

To have him remember the Ferret that told him we just wanted to live.

The day before yesterday, the day after that Fox next to her had reached out to his officers before his first attempt to clear this station...

...For everything Woolsey told me to get realized by both of us.

How everything I've witnessed and been given has added up to me and her humbling him to this point.

Where he could know how wrong he had always been, before. What he didn't even know he had excused.

That for all he's done, that all I ever was was a mammal that only wanted to be seen past the definition of predator for the narrative in everyone like me.
I hear another Thank You in the air, and for a moment in our weakness, it could just as well have come from me as it could've him.

A moment where I can't say a thing, Ralph can't handle anymore, walks away, and Bogo can barely look at all of us. Past all the remorse for wanting to be right and failing to so hard, that now, he just wants us to know "...If I could take back everything I put all of you through... Especially You..." like he never will.

When he can't know it for himself, and I've got to remind him that "...You have."

That "You made your choice. You've done what you could with it."

To have him reel back to try and handle it with a palm over his face like it's gonna conceal how close he is to losing it.

He wasn't ready. And he's about to come down pouring like the rain I'm finally hearing from above.

I've kind of just gotta accept that I've witnessed too much emotion for anyone else to handle feeling, right now.

Because I've practically burned him so alive, he'll admit it.

What he shouldn't even allude to.

"What the Hyena accused me of..."

A thought he can't stop himself from finishing.

"...I believe you, now."

With all the shame of knowing he played a part in something he couldn't have he was.
"I know everything you do. As I should have for myself." and he wants to do so much with it, it's got me remembering how much evidence was on the roof. From all those shots that Sniper wasted on me that're being washed away.

I'll cherish this moment, the same as I will the best we've had, here.

But it's come too late, and he can see I'm holding back, telling him "...I don't think any of us knows what to say."

But his time here is up.

With no Thank Yous left, he's made to look and see the last of his charge get in the train.

Now Departing: Zootopia Central Station blares out and he's got to go. With every ounce of "Twenty four years on the force, and you've made it all worth it." meant dearly.

I don't think any of us knows where to start.

I don't figure it'll end if we found where to start.

Every one little piece of our lives added up to this.

I'm catching Andrew beside me, out the corner of my eye. Rene by his side, left eye bloodshot and her boy leading her through the stumble. They'll never know what they missed, as Bogo does an aboutface and slips through the closing doors.

And off they're all going.

Leaving me to admit "...We didn't even ask where he's taking them." as if it even mattered. Like we should doubt that he's gonna do anything else but the best he can for them. Because I haven't noticed how beside the point the thought is, when everyone's still lost for words over what happened. Having it take Rudolf some time to gather up a few for himself, over what's haunting him. How he found me earlier when "Owen, I did not ask what you were crying for... I think nothing will surprise me, now."
And I don't give it much thought before telling him "911 called my cellphone.", but I should've. I took the words he's eating for granted and I ought to turn down for everyone's sake. Only I don't know how. With nothing left for me to tell him except the fact "It caught me offguard, too." that won't put him back together.

But we've done it.

We got our evacuation.

And I'm feeling a little out of touch with myself, kind of unfamiliar, yet it ain't a bad vibe.

I think everyone else has got it, too. Like we really have accomplished every impossible thing we had out for.

There's just one thing left on Earth left to come: "...Now we've just gotta worry about tonight." and I can't recall it lightly, in spite of how ready I feel.

Though the feeling's shared mutual between the Commission. Between me and her.

We'll take this life we've been given 'til it runs out.

If the two of us have been ready to try, knowing we'll fail no matter what, then I think they are, too.

It starts with Ralph's "There's no way we're gonna defend the terminal." and that's not a dismissal, but a given.

The same as Kurt's "Not the ground floor either..." that'll recognize how honest Ralph is about seeing this through with us.
Determination that'll see itself through Raul's "But the halls." and Tahmores' "Upper levels, too." before Shudra adds in that "They will shoot the windows out over us in the halls."

But there's no stopping this, from Teshi's "...Then we break them ourselves." to Kurt's "Shatter the glass from inside and most of it'll fly outside." that's got Rudolf ready to play his part in "Clear the ground floor and terminal?"

This is going to happen.

Downtown's European Alpha knows it all the same, even if he "We're not gonna manage to get everyone to the halls and balconies." and it's alright, it just is, somehow, before we even get that "One last thing, Rudolf." we needed to hear from Burney's radio. Because if Bogo has already defied every expectation, "I've just had my Lieutenant replace every Prey Officer in the sewers with the Predators I've got left." and we're not sure what absurdness is, anymore.

So we'll run with his "I cannot sanction what you might do with that knowledge. But I thought I shou-" as the radio finally runs out of battery and dies.

We're ready to make this happen, from Ralph's "...Maybe we can get some folks through the sewer, after all.", to Teshi's looking down to us with "The smaller mammals won't have a chance." and Eva's carrying up boldness for the "We'll make our chance." that Zev'll give "Then we get the weakest ones out of here." to.

And with no need to philosophize it, the reality pierces through.

We are going to stand until the Territorial Guard knocks the last one of us down.

We might make it half the night, and it'll be as good as this lasting 'til the end of time. With any odd in our favor, any hope we can take that's got Eva reminding of "What about Prey4TheHerd?" to give the Guard every kind of hell we can.

Her gunning for that before it's accepted, and it will. From Kurt's "Their people are still with us, up front." to my "We oughta see about letting them in with us, if you all think that's right." that'll paint the agreement on everyone's face. All of our will, and all of their scale.
A given not needing Rudolf to offer up a "Take my radio." before the toss of it and my catch.

My looking up to all of this determination and her leading me off.

Walking far from everything I used to be and up the escalator steps.

Where the crowds aren't waiting for any more terror. The ground floor where I witness how everyone around me can say so much without a single pair of lips needing to speak.

A sound I must've dreamt of, to have it come to me like I've been waiting for it.

A chorus bridge for everything everyone's done, felt all the way to the drumming rain outside. Past our front lines and the edge of the overhang's cover.

Where every face is staring out, and I catch sight of military rain ponchos in the far distance. A future flood of weekend soldiers waiting for tonight, between every gap in the hedge of Prey mammals. We're not gonna make it through this. Even with Prey4TheHerd joining us.

But I'm keeping my bet on them.

Glancing forward for an Elk's antlers and hearing some commotion about breaking news. News I'm catching him watch ahead of me. Staring to his phone in amazement, and me hearing parts of Peter Moosebridge’s report of a train having come and gone from the Station.

I kind of don't want to interrupt him. I'm not really over it, myself.

So I wait to announce "Bruce?" until me and her had stopped and stood beside him for a moment. Having let him hear as much from that Moose as he needed, before I got him turning to face us. Our soft, hopeful smiles and the pride below them that could say enough if he see the reason past his tied tongue. It takes him a couple tries to get out "Is this...?"

Real.

Our doing.
Happening.

What he thinks it is.

However he was gonna finish that sentence, he's been caught off guard.

"Yeah." it is, I'll tell him.

With Eva getting to the point in "But we're here about tonight." and my "Commission's wondering if you got any plans." to answer what I saw forming on his lips. So he can ease himself into saying "Well my contact with the main group was Toby..."

But I've got to be the one to tell him that "...He got himself arrested, trying to make that happen." when I should've broke it to him gentler. Things are moving too fast for him, but it's only speeding up for the rest of us. He'll face it, though. Reflecting for a moment, until he smiles back. With all his pride in Toby's example that's got him taking it like a call to task. "...Guess that leaves me in charge of all these Prey." he tells himself. And he's coming to terms with that, but the clock's ticking, and I've got a favor to ask in spite of all I owe him. "So what'd ya say about coming in out of the rain?" comes a little sly from me to be appreciated. He knows what I'm asking, only he's got to request I make mine a little more blunt. With his "Sorry, run that by me again. A little clearer." to tell me all he's wanting out of me.

For me to just be bold enough to ask "...You guys wanna go to jail with us?"

Even if he wasn't expecting it put that blunt. With me losing a little confidence from the silence...

...And me being the one to offer up my paw, this time.

Not having considered it the callback it is to him. Not meaning to surprise with the gesture. In spite of the help I should've taken before or how much he's already given, from having met me like he did to having been here with the other Prey beside him.

Facing all they have with us, I'm asking him to stay by our side tonight. Let the worst that could happen come like every other thing will for us.

And how we've got no chance in hell, yet how much it'll mean for him to lean down and give me his
hoof in kind.

Shaking on it. No doubt, no hesitance left.

Even if the "Problem is, I don't think everyone's up for it." that he's got to admit, with a smile says he'll spend the night with us. And a few years, if noone else does. Regardless of whether or not I'm bringing a radio to my muzzle and telling "Everyone. I think Prey4TheHerd's on board, but some of their people might want out, too." I'll do it anyway. Because it's owed, after having gotten everything we have, from noone expecting this whole thing would end in military intervention. Nothing lost on the Commission, and Ralph coming back with "We're doin' that for everyone but their best." as all we can offer. "The same as us," I tell Bruce, and he's already sold on it. It's just an aside thing when he jokingly asks "You have blankets we can dry off with? Towels?" when they've stayed out of the rain.

But it's reminded me of earlier, with all that rapid fire planning. Giving me an idea: "For knocking out windows with."

Kurt's "Already on that." though and had one better in the West Hallway. Bruce watching from behind me and Eva, while a Lion couple hold a quilt of sleeping bags somehow zipped together over a window for a Bear to slam a riot shield through it. I don't think it's him "Having second thoughts?" and Bruce reads as much through the certain tone, after the muffled crash and cascade of shards mixes with the rain outside. More or less him a little shocked over "...Is that really necessary?", rather than questioning it. Watching as the Bear bashes out the remaining shards in the frame before grabbing the shroud and tossing it out. But Kurt can't read that much into the Elk, right now. An "Either they glass us in here or we make sure they don't come in through-" that he can't finish.

The radio Rudolf handed me with it's "Are you there Kurt?" becomes more important. I toss it his way when I've got to "Explain it to him." while Kurt walks off with the radio to roger Zev's transmission. A little less terse and impatient than he tried to, that "They're gonna shoot at us from outside, anyway."

Rubber bullets, Beanbag shells, teargas, everything I'm thinking of with any terror. Like they'll only matter when they come.

"So That'll throw all the shards on us if we don't break 'em out ourselves. But if all the glass is on their side?"

And Bruce gets it, that "That leaves them one way in.", through the doors from the ground floor.
But's he's thinking of more than my "Two birds, one stone.", looking to the doors of the hallway's rooms like we could make it three. I think I know where he's going, before his "...What if you barricaded the windows, too?" confirms it. Eva's "Take them off and lay them over?", his "...We're not leaving this station like we found it, right?" and I'm with him. About to check them and see if they can be unscrewed or if we've got to pry them off the hinges, before Kurt comes back to me with "Rudolf's got a problem in the boiler room." I can't even see it though. Whatever it is, I'm just looking past what he hasn't said and the look on his face for what it means. The second evac is underway, and all I've got for Bruce is "Don't do anything but figure out how we can take them off." 'til I get back.

I'll walk and talk with Kurt and Eva, when whatever's wrong not being "The Cops giving us grief?" and telling that much.

It's not Cop urgent, because we're not running down the hall to the ground floor.

But it ain't that easy, either. From my looking backward to the shake of Kurt's head. It's his "We gotta get the injured out first, need every able bodied we can keep for tonight." that's the problem. That's got me going "Yeah, we do, so what's...?" until I make the connection.

I know the two like me and Eva that'd be caught in that catch 22.

Who'd stay in spite of her wounds and who wouldn't betray his pack or leave his station.

Kurt's "...Andrew's female don't won't to leave him." and this is how tonight starts. From him telling me by the hall's big doors to the uneasy confusion on the ground floor. The selections being made by the Commission's packs and clan to couple with the fearful truth I wasn't feeling until now.

We all know how tonight's gonna end, but can't make peace with what comes after.

How we stand to never feel again this everything we've found in each other.

All brought to focus between two lovers that can't go or stay without the other, and how they remind me of Us.
That I could say me or Eva could live after this, without having the proof we could after each other.

How I start to worry, beside her selfless asking of Kurt "We're not making any exceptions, are we?" that he won't confuse but still go hard on the reply to as he reads me.

"Just Nadine since we owed it to her and Burney... Commission was even debating if we should even let all the small fry folk go. Not hold some of them back." he's saying. A little more to me than her that's made her aware, to get her reminding "...I wasn't asking for Andrew's sake." Not me or hers, either. He knows, "I'm just saying." in the same way he's got to put it to Andrew and Rene or anybody else. When it's a miracle Bogo's even given this chance for anyone else to get out. It'd be ingrateful of everyone that hates how it feels to not take it. But we're making our way through them and it's showing, how it was so easy for Rudolf to get his first Evac. Because for everyone that wants to leave, there's still so many that don't want to.

That'd take the certainty of guns and zipties if it meant staying just a little while longer. They'll still be rounded up out there, alone, in piecemeal, but that's not the hangup:

They can't change back.

After all we've gone through together, for all they've got here with us that can't be defined.

And I don't know how that could possibly be reconciled for Rene. When I know Andrew well enough to get that he'd stay if she could just go without him.

It's her.

This want I'm feeling through the hall's open door, of everyone lined up and lit by the lamps against the walls. What's coming from so many of the injured as quick as it's coming from everyone that wasn't tall or big enough to go on tonight's ride.

I could try to keep myself from feeling all this want for staying here no matter what... But I hear singing.

Some heart pouring out in the distance seems familiar enough to have me saying "...I think that's Andrew." who's echoing down the hall.
From the boiler room, where I feel the emotion radiating from the hardest. Having this resignation effect on every set of ears lined up to leave. The words unclear, the meaning of departure and the unknown so certain...

I know that melody.

What Andrew's going for, in the bated chorus of only being gone 'til November.

The sadly high hope of a lullaby's promise that can't be guaranteed.

If my heart's aching, just hearing it from this far away, against her fear made so real that it's already pushing me back from the weight...

I'm already stumbling against her moaning sobs and pleas of how she just wants him closer, fighting him back from the closure he's trying to cool her down with.

"I ask myself why, oh why." he's trying to pierce through, from beyond that doorway.

But it still kills her, him trying to talk her down from the last request of going together.

Either nowhere or anywhere.

Her feeling like an overgrown field too thick to walk through.

She's burning so hard in her boxer's slurring it hurts and hurts so bad, without even seeing it like I've got to, I can't make it without Eva to pull me in the boiler room to go there.

See their figures lit up from a lamp by their feet.

Him telling her "So I'll be gone 'til November." with his paws limp, not able to hold a grip around her like hers have to on him.
They've taken a crowded room and made it feel so empty.

Tears down their faces over how she doesn't need anything but him.

Not the hospitalization a Rainforest Medic's prescribing her, not the safety from ending up dead or left untreated by authorities, none of it but him.

The one thing she can't take with her whose landing the painful blow against her need she ain't hearing that he can't leave, even if she can't go without him.

"Said I'll be gone 'til November, I'll be gone 'til November,"

Even if she tried, even if she wanted to.

If he can't stop her from crying, if he's lying and they both know it, as much as they want his vow to be true.

He can't rest his case, "Yo tell my girl yo I'll be gone 'til November." with all his love without any glory.

"January, February, March, April, May,"

They can't take their welled up eyes off each other "But girl, I can't stay," by her side.

As tongue tied as it's making her plea for so much more than just the repeated hook, for too much to ask of him beyond his high hopes. Against the violins playing in everyone's heads. When he's not singing lines like If My Corpse Could Talk Then I Would Tell You I Was Sorry, when he doesn't have to, when it's all she's hearing.

Some die with a love and she don't wanna die loveless without him, no nevermind of how and when.

"Every time I make a run, Girl you turn around and cry," and he's staying on repeat on what he never wanted, either.
"I ask myself why, oh why." that the lonely hour has come.

Why he's even fighting against his every needing impulse to not remain.

Go wherever she's going.

Face whatever's out there with her.

Be the one that escorts her to the ER when he needs her just the same if all he's got is a pack and a duty he won't abandon, that's got him shrugging his shoulders to "See you must understand," on how he's got to do her.

Got him breaking up the same as her, if he knows he wouldn't let her do him like this, if he was the one that had to go in her place. He's been waiting for his summit girl all his life and it just ain't fair.

But she came too late, they're out of time and this is just out of their control "So I'll be gone 'til November." is all he can give.

A white lie. A promise he can't back, no matter how many times he tells her "I'll be gone 'til November, I'll be gone 'til November," with a Justin Timberwolf take on Wyclef Keane's words.

She's keeping up the fight for him, but I swear, I think that he knows. Against all her continuation, how she gets that it's all coming to an end. With all the conflict in him saying he's not even ready for her to slow down, or what it means when she'll start to sputter that's making it harder for him to keep telling her "I see you cryin', but girl, I can't stay,"

It ain't supposed to mean how she's taking it, but it's got to go there. Where every struggle they've gone through won't mean a thing, if she can't take the rhyme or reason she found here with her.

In a Boy that won't stop committing it that he'll be back when they'll never be closer than this.

But she can see this ending. Before her silence makes it too hard for him to say it one more time.
He can't see that hope she had, anymore. Only that he's broken through her defenses and it's finally sunk in.

How he's wishing he never did, how she should've known his loyalty, saw his betrayal coming, and how she's hearing all his regret in their silence.

And so it is. In his coldest love, with all the best he can intend.

Their paws have nothing left to hold on to, if there's no more desperation left in her. Just that same remorse I felt yesterday with Eva, without the luxury of time for either to do anything about it.

The longing's gone. All she's got now is the bitterness swelling up in her.

The fact he's crossed this line of theirs and they know it so well, he'll stay still for her. All he's got to do is stand there as she shakes her head.

Let her be the one to take a step back.

Watch as her frame tenses up, and let her fist curl up into a jab on his jaw.

See her reel from the pain of a punch he can't even feel and be the one to turn away. Regardless of another Wolf grabbing to lead her out.

As he just stands there, watching her get shoved towards the manhole she needs no help going down. Taking one last look at him and making it like they never should've flown so close to the sun.

Like he was just the dust that hid her glow from someone braver. Bolder. Someone better.

Someone that would've disregarded everything she would've.

He'll hold up 'til she turns her leer to the ladder, and he loses sight of her.
Until the crest of her head disappears down the City's drain.

Then it does.

The reeling will begin, now.

Every irreconcilable facet of God's honest truth will have him shiver that Heaven only knows if he'll ever have her back. Make him cower in the loneliness of what's got everyone else that noone's realized quite like him. Flashing his teeth to all the agony they've got to grind on so loud I can't hear anything else in spite of that tinnitus.

The worst he's ever been seen. A low too intimate for anyone to do a damned thing about soothing. I can't. Kurt can't. Everybody but Rudolf's just looking as he holds his tongue about some kind of remorse to Kurt. As Andrew's bending inward at his paws clutching at nothing to hold. Before stumbling through the motions of turning away dead silent and shuffling out the boiler room.

And he's so far gone, with so much more that's got to happen before tonight, noone can even try to stop him.

Talk Andrew down in my place, when I'm the last person that needs to tell my friend a damned thing.

Because some part of me gets it, that they would've known she had her head cracked up a Cop's Staglite. Shudra's pack would've found her regardless and forced Andrew's paw on having to make all this happen. Noone's gonna make it out of here tonight, and she wouldn't have made it out alive.

She needed to go.

I get these excuses but they're just that.

I'm still left with the fact that I'm the Snitch that made this happen.
The one that told Shudra about the Sousten Set Girl with a concussion.

The blame's all mine. It ought to be all I'm thinking of, when it's the one thing I got a right to. But it isn't.

Because I caught a glimpse of myself in Andrew.

The love I knew that wasn't even my own.

And for all the blame I've got on me, I can't ignore how my world's become a train station that's set it's time around a lover that noone, nothing could ever take the place of.

I can't refute how my everything belongs to someone that wouldn't give me up for anything. We're two halves that'd be so unwhole without the other, we're so in love, after everything we've gone through...

...We'd die in place of the other.

The sound starts pouring back in.

I hear a Serval sobbing behind me.

I hear a Jackal moaning through a broken nose and shattered teeth.

A Wolverine sporadically cry out from the blood and juices still pouring out of a lost left eye.

Andrew crying out in the distance.
It's all drowning out what relief there is in Folks too happy to get the hell out of here.

It's like they don't even matter over everyone that's left to go who knows what they're leaving behind. Injured or not, they've taken Ours Not Yours so close to heart, I've gotta hate we ever ran with it.

We made this place somewhere only we belonged.

We made this station a place in time like the comfort of home.

We knew peace here so well, we had community so woven in our every waking moment, that when someone out there wasn't trying to start a riot, as long as someone wasn't made to go savage, it was like the cops weren't even right outside. It felt like nothing could've touched us.

Everything I can see, right as I'm losing it.

How we'd gamble everything we had and won every time.

How Andrew never would've had Rene if there wasn't a big beautiful clock to meet under.

How I never would've gotten Eva back if it weren't for Zootopia Central Station.

But I'm looking to her by my side, and I can understand why there's folks so grateful we got another Evac out of Bogo.

This place is a cage, now. I'm trapped in it with Eva, the same as Andrew is. And I'm remembering that Monday again. What I felt as I stole that Ram's Cop Car.

I remember that time when I thought she was gonna die. How nothing much has changed, since I found her again.
And how I'd be the same if I lost her.
Coda*

Chapter Summary

An asterisk marks this chapter as having not been edited since it's publishing. I am going through this story, from this chapter onward, to modify, correct, and slightly rewrite toward my current standard and style of writing. Now that the story is "Complete" and I have no urgency to rush through it. Much.

Chapter Notes

...I tried... And this is still a work in progress, but... So, when you get to the underlined text, that was the moment I've had in my head for years, and I haven't done it right. As best as I could.

But I've been working on this story for 3 years. I've got to respect that.

So, if you think it better, you can stop reading at the underlined text. Because from there on out, I haven't done this entirely by the perfect means it really needed.

It's a long chapter, anyway. About as long as the on-and-off chase scene would've been, between chapters 6 & 7.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

I ought to be glad, if Andrew made it his fault and noone else's.

But I can't be, if I know I can't make it my own fault if I never see Eva again like I'm seeing her now.

Even if she can't look at me from the opposite end of the Locker Room's doorway. Has her gaze on everyone still making their exit. The lamps are running out, but there's still enough cellphone screens and lights lit up to make up for them. The Commission's hiding it as best we can, keeping Security posted up front with Prey4TheHerd. Most of who we're keeping are either behind security or are on the other end of the Ground Floor. It's hopefully enough of all we can do to keep the second evac discreet, with some rushed plan of taking the city's underground networks as far north as they can towards the Meadowland district. Hopefully noone gets lost down there.

Maybe most of the uninjured will even make it to the Wolfpack up there.

The one that was too far away from here to get involved, before now. That's the idea, at least. Noone
Bogo put down there has stopped it, or we'd all know by now. But once they go topside, heading north from the city, there's gonna be no hiding it. Bogo's gonna have to pretend he's only responsible for getting the parents out with their children. He'll put up a containment act, and it'll tie the rest of the ZPD up with it. That might even keep him look good enough to everyone else, he'll keep his spot in the system. I can't blame Rudolf, if Kurt's radio died on our way to the boiler room. Before he could tell the three of us that Andrew had it under control. It just happened, whether it needed to or not.

...It's all for the best, if the Territorial Guard is gonna have us all to themselves. When they've commandeered what the Cops had to leave behind.

The inmate buses, the riot APCs and armored trucks.

The LRADs and Water Cannons to go with their own firepower.

City Hall's expecting no quarter being given and I'd accept it, now. We'll keep them tied up for as long as we can, if it'll buy everyone else some time.

It's alright, if there'll be no more innocents left, and we're not gonna make it out of here.

This can't be home, anymore.

If the eviction notice has been received and an army's outside. Waiting for the greenlight.

We had this coming...

...But there's no keeping us from drowning in reality this time, if I can't help but trying not to go there and failing.

If we're so drained from seeing what happened with Andrew, she's not even stopping me from going off into the deep end of my head. If I can't help but know that the best we were gonna have was last night, and last night's over. I could accept however tonight goes down...

But there's no high hopes left for how it's all gonna end.

That'd be fine...
It's just that Eva's made up her mind.

No need for her to think it over.

If she's wrong about staying, then she's still right to stay by my side.

And if I'm right for wanting something certain after all this, I'm still wrong to be afraid of the one thing I've got to fear.

The luxury we'd never have to give the other.

That if one of our corpses could talk, then we'd tell the other the useless word.

The distress mutual, with her glancing to me like that. Shivering like she has to and turning her eyes back from me. We were born to die and our luck's run out.

A thought felt so loud, she'd freeze to death if she touched me.

And I don't even know right now, why we have to have so much emotion, all this awareness of it, if it's just got us feeling like this.

Dread so physical, it's fenced her off from me.

But the clock's ticking.

I want better than this, while we still have what we got.

Zev's Sahara Square has got no food left to distribute. Rudolf's got no tents left to house with, all of Downtown's equipment is out of power.

There's an art to walking through this terror without her help, getting up on my own when I don't think I can.

I didn't even try, before. But I'm trying now and it ain't coming... If it just happened, all those times before, then why can't it just happen, now?

Ralph's Savannah Central ain't security, anymore. Everyone's all got the same detail, now: Make sure everyone else gets out, hold the station to the last soul. Shudra doesn't have enough supplies and we're not gonna be around enough to need what's left.

Everyone's where they need to be,
I just want to reconcile that she's here and not going anywhere.

I can't even get myself to tell her what she already knows too well to distract herself from, as she
stares at refugees and wishes one of them was me. If the world would just see how honest we were,
that we can't hatch a plan to stop loitering. If only we had the cowardice left in us, so I could follow
her anywhere but the back of a Prison Bus.

An Ambulance.

A Hearse.

I wish I could make her so pissed off, I'd break her off of me.

To get her to leave, so I'd ignore all those odds against us ever getting back whole.

I could never manage what Andrew did, though.

And I could take anything else, tonight.

Anything to me.

I'm just a coward when it comes to her.

I was so brave and so certain yesterday.

I withstood fear so perfectly, then.

So why can't I accept it again, that there's no saving us, she won't be no runaway, and she's done all
her running?
...Because her staying here ain't got nothing to do with death worship.

She's not suicidal and it's not duty by itself.

She's not waiting for the hammer to fall but only wants all the fulfillment that she's ever gonna get out of her life.

Something she knows she'll never have, if it's not living if it's not with me.

If nothing she could say or do will make the world see past her definition then she just wants me to live her life with her.

Know her narrative like a song the radio won't play.

Survival ain't got nothing to do with living to her.

And then, just like that, some part of me just snaps back in place to remind me of the present, where she's still got me, that much is certain, and certain as the final sinking in of her truth. Where she's gone everywhere she'll go on her own, with nowhere else to find herself but anywhere with her one true huckleberry. It's not relief. It's something else I needed.

A lover I can look to and tell "You're everything I ever needed." to.

I don't know how I keep getting up, how she's helping me without even knowing to look back to me in surprise at the sudden change of my heaving myself off the threshold to sit up under my own will.

It just happens.

Because I'm still living as long as it's with her.

To Live Well is So Worthwhile that To Die Trying to Live Life Better Cannot Be Foolhardy.
I'll accept it now. If she could still "Promise me something." and keep it.

See how far I will go knowing what I know now. Wide-eyed with a future slow.

That I'll sing along with her for one more crowded hour and I won't go out of key if I only got the one condition:

"If it's gonna be you or me that dies... Make it you that lives."

To know my own wish like hers, and hold it true, confronted with how selfishly selfless she's made me and try not to flinch.

I can't blame her, if it hurts. My words could as easily have come from her and it's taken her tongue-tied.

But I'm burning right there with her. Needing to face everything the World's still got to throw at us. Together, the same as she has to.

But it begs the question out of her, "...What if it's not that easy?"

If hardly anything we've weathered so far has been that easy, that effortless, that well without a hitch. Her asking me a what-if like that ought to be enough, raw and delicate as she saw me, to throw me for a loop. But it won't, because it just needs some imagination, if she's given me hers this whole time. It can be that easy.

I know it's true, like I know her name.

"...Well, Eva means Life, Right?" the trick question flies, as simple as the Vulpine smile it came from.

To light her up from the bone to the fur. To those glowing eyes under that mask as I lean forward on my knees, on my paws, prostrate to my life and overwhelming her guard to the reminder the request,
That "You've owned up to what your parents named you this whole time... I'm just asking you to keep your name."

What tonight's gonna do it's damnedest from happening. From her, what may ever come against it's odds. We could write letters we won't send, next year, if no words shall contain what would be. Miles from Zootopia, then. From all this grief, to mammals we know that would have to be there, to feel what cannot be known or studied or defined. The intangible thing I'm seeing stirred in her.

I know why she looks bereft, she hasn't fully lived before she's left, just yet, though I won't be fooled by that minor chord.

All she's got to do is agree, and all this pain of Now will be ours to own.

From here, we've got everywhere to go.

From her shiver and disbelieving smile, with every hair on end, to how it dawns on her like it has on me how our bravery in weakness has no end. What will be, will be, we'll remain, after the end of all other things.

One look to me, and her eyes tell me all I've yet to hear.

But she won't leave me wanting for a voice.

So, in her sweetest "Owen...", unbecoming of all the misery surrounding us, with no venom of fear left to poison it, she'll answer my request with hers: "...Take me to the riot."

With my offered paw, and her claws knotted through mine. To help pull herself up and know she'll have me for a fight to lose. I don't think this is happiness. Maybe we're just sleepwalking, turning our backs to the boiler room. Against all the certainty of an open malehole.

But it's a high.

Something to walk out from the hallway with, to join the rest of the Commission on. Up front, coordinating with Bruce. The sun is on it's way down for the night. Time passes, and once we're with them, Bruce can barely hear them all over how bright she's made me. Watching me take in every word calm and collected when all we've got left to see with is coming from the City, out there. The clouds have gotten thicker reflect to it back over Zootopia. They have some dim glimmer of light pollution glow from the ceiling glass on down and it feels like something made just to be
Ralph's "Right, Bruce? We got most the doors off the hallway rooms?", and patience runs thin for him, when everyone else is used to me taking punches above my weight. "Yeah, right, they're pretty much all off the West wing and the East wing's working on theirs." and his attention's back on topic. Ralph's got an idea in "Ok, Bruce over here thought of covering the windows with the doors, right? Well we could use them between us and the Guard, too." And it's taken with a little too much confusion, if Bruce has "Barricade the windows, hold the rest up between us and them?" to take out of it. With hope in "That way the Guard won't break up the front lines?" Kurt's got to bring down: "That way they won't break up the lines as fast in the halls."

Won't beat the fight of us as soon, won't have us all in custody as quick.

We're only here to slow down the inevitable.

The strobing of red and blue still flashes, and the Guard waits to turn on the spotlights. Here's to hoping the darkness in the station is helping conceal how empty it's gotten. Because it's not quite empty enough yet, with some still left on the ground floor waiting on their departure. We're cutting it close. Between how many are outside the hall, and when the zero hour comes. But Ralph's got to end that topic on a positive, if it means "That'll free up riot shields from Unit 2 and last night to help hold the second stories overlooking the terminal." Let Bruce consider a "...Means the best place for my people is in the halls, then." to go with my "Have 'em where we need 'em most."

I got every reason to be worried, standing by the rest of the Commission, amidst their tension. I'm still at peace with all the fear, though. As Rudolf couples Bruce's guess and my reassurance with the fact "It is not pride alone, anymore. We will be distracting them from everyone in the sewers going North.", if he's still got enough doubt to show it. As long as I got her, I don't have to feel their urgency over our certainty. Everything will be alright. Everything will be fine. Even if his hesitance has a tell on his face, when up until today, Prey4TheHerd's just been a third party. We've only coordinated when we had to. They've been on the outside and left us with enough room for Tahmores to nearly finish a thought.

A slip of the truth with "Besides, Ours not-" meant to remind what's at stake, and held back too late to keep from earning a leer from most of the Commission. But Bruce can take one glance at me, and turn the phrase to complete it with his own spin. "Not mine. Just yours to trust my help for holding onto.", spoken with a smile. Alleviating any concern left about his commitment, if all he was worried about was putting up a good enough fight. The humbleness is appreciated, but here's to hoping that's not lost on the Elk if Ralph has gotta rush past it. "So when the raid starts, everybody knows who goes where, right?" Raul fires off "Everybody up front goes to the halls. Everyone by the terminal goes for the upper floors." and I can't get over how much we've really got this.

How certain we still are in all this belief we're holding onto.
When no amount of what we've accomplished will make a difference tonight, yet has Kurt smiling through "Good. That's four groups. We'll be splitting the guard up pretty good like that and they'll have a hard time getting up the escalators back there." But the feeling's mutual and we're not even faking it. Knowing we can't imagine how bad tonight's gonna be, after how bad we've had it. We're controlling the fact we're about to suffer everything a military force has to throw at us and taking what we need from it. Brushing off what's coming without pretending, because if we've got no chance, as long as everyone else gets out, it'll be some pyrrhic victory so perfect that could never be a defeat.

We got the vision, now Eva's just gotta remind us of one last detail: "So who's calling what?"

When everyone else can't get what she's getting at, and I figure out the hint with one look to her knowing smirk.

I catch it, too. Then explain "There's seventeen of us here to lead each one. Eighteen if you count the Prey boy over here."

And when I put it like that, I kind of can't feel bad for not knowing everyone's name. Gets a laugh out of Bruce, if I knew he could handle that 'reverse-specism', gets the rest of the Commission a little cracked up. A little more able to swallow what's coming, if Ralph can follow up with "That's about four of us for each group. I'ma call West Wing. With Kurt, Owen and Eva." Shudra's "I will take the second floor on the West." and Zev asks "Tahmores, will you take the East Hall with us?" as Raul calls "The three of us will take the upper story on the East, that sound right?" for Downtown. Teshi's "We're coming up with you, Shudra.", his "Good. Welcome." and we are going to do this. With Bruce looking to Raul and asking "Mind if I join you?" to get back "Yeah, we'll manage that."

But not before coming off distracted with one glance to the Guard in Watering Hole Park.

Something I'm ignoring if Tundratown's the odd one out, still needing to stake a claim, and I've gotta ask "Rudolf, you the wildcard here, whatchu call-"

A hard tap of hooves meant for my shoulders land on the side of my head. He forgot how tall he was, how short I was, but it's got my attention and gets everyone else's.

With Kurt trying to ask "Bruce what-" when it's too urgent we "Look out there." to be respectful. What noone else can without looking over the frontline's heads, that I've got to walk through with Eva, to see until I've got a clear line of sight.

I'm still holding her paw. My claws knotted through hers. I feel like I need it, looking out and seeing commotion get telegraphed by the running out there. The yelling, the way those BDUs double time with some kind of fury as some Moose that looks like top brass listens to one end of his radio and
screams into the other. Holding it with his left and gesturing to everyone around him with his right.

He's sending them off on all their ways and this must be exactly what it looks like.

I can't make out the words through the tinnitus, but I think I know. We thought we had more time and these things are happening earlier than announced.

I think I know where this is going.
Because I'm reading faces and seeing orders being made we aren't ready for.

"...no..."

I just hate how it sounds in my head, if there's still people here we've got to get out.

And that's the problem.
That's the horror I'm not feeling, if all we want now, is just some folks out of here that don't deserve another fight.

Time stops.

The clock holds it's breath with us.

Then the spotlights send us reeling.

A lack of warning blinding like the brief second of panic in the frontline.
It got me, too. I can't pretend I didn't see it coming, though.

They know.

The second Evac's been discovered, they're about to start, and the night starts here. Under the cover
of brightness so overwhelming, there's nothing else I can see besides us and the uniforms out there.

But I've been here before.

Deserving all the fear that's about to come down without any care for it.

I ought to be. I'm just quietly livid our luck's come back around like everyone else. I ought to be so very, very afraid. It's just that if this city won't pretend it doesn't think we were born sick, doesn't hate us, doesn't want us gone, whatever it takes, then Zootopia's used up the last ounce of control they had over us.

We don't care.

And if he's right there with us, Rudolf knows where he's gotta be.

"...I need Unit 2. Because I will lead the hallway's defense."

Have them where they're needed most.

Leave the upper levels without Gonzalo's crew of gangs to hold them.

Raul beats Ralph and Teshi to the punch, "You got it." and in comes Bruce with "I'm joining you, I'm bringing an Elephant with me and a Rhino, too." before Raul is assuring Rudolf "We're gonna draw their attention the best we can." Offers Rudolf can't raise his voice to, until Ralph takes it too far in telling "Bruce. You can give him more."

That's his line in the sand, "The longer you last here then the better everyone's chances are underground."

But Ralph wasn't offering, and noone else is raising objection. The whole rest of the commission is with him on this when Kurt tells Rudolf "Just cram everyone in the hall. We ain't got time to argue."

It doesn't matter how long we last, anymore.

The only thing that does, is Rudolf seeing the evac through.

So there for the grace of God, if it's time to begin and it is, he'll try to keep composure but lose it in
his smile. The last time we're probably gonna ever see each other, and it could go unsaid, but he's got to say it for his own sake:

"...I will never forget what we accomplished here."

A song coming out of all the other things unsaid. And off he goes. With Bruce sprinting elsewhere and saying "I'll meet you, I'm getting my volunteers!"

The anger starts to fade. And maybe it's still not fear I'm feeling, so much as much as it's the red and blue of commandeered cop rides flashing through the spotlights, as more sets of discos start going off.

The immediacy of what's impending, that's got me taking Eva's paw in mine and squeezing it tighter.

"Let's go, Shudra." and Teshi's grabbing him by the shoulder to lead. As Downtown takes it's leave by the Eurasian Wolf then the Italian. Leaving that Iberian Raul to promise he'll "Be seeing you in jail Kurt." with a smirk before going his way with his fellows.

We're gonna go through hell tonight and it's gonna be great.

On our own terms.

Rudolf seeing his purpose through to the end. With the rest of us to back him. And me to make sure Eva holds her end of the bargain. If it's me that suffers, me that dies, that's all I'd ask. If he did right by backing his demand of Bruce to send more herbivores Rudolf's way, that's fine, but Kurt still has to remind his Northwestern that "Bogo's gonna get them anyway Ralph." He's telling Ralph what he already knows though. Has a believer looking back at him with an "After what happened on the terminal, Kurt?" to throw his doubt off both their backs. If Bogo's old self has been so perfectly carved from him, that he's gone from Saul to Paul, then Ralph's got a smile to go with "I'm glad it's him."

Kurt wasn't ready to see Ralph like this.

But one squinting glance back out there was got Tahmores cutting the moment short.

"They're starting to form up out there!" and it's as good a prompt as any to have Eva ask "So what's our plan, now?!!"
Has me staring back to Ralph and reading his face while he gives it a think, going over what options there are and coming back to the same thing on repeat. He settles on it, looks to Sahara Square on his left and shoots quickly, "...Zev they know we've gotten folks out of here but they might not know how many, let's stick to the plan. Straight down the middle, everyone on your side goes east and mine go west."

Zev's not having it though if he's stuck on "That will leave the ground floor wide open, no." and the fact won't budge.

"We ain't got time and we planned on it before." would be good and well "But not with the refugees still here."

Something Tahmores has to try turning back around if "That's why we gotta distract 'em in the halls." but "Who is to say they won't ignore us?" is something Zev can't ignore himself.

If we're not blocking their march straight through the ground floor with nothing but empty tents in the way.

It's a point Kurt can't break it if "The Guard's gonna massacre the halls in no time if half of their numbers get bodied out here in the open!", If there's no holding onto anything but holding on long enough to keep the military op off the evacuation.

A holding off that's got me seeing both options, taking Zev's "Then they do what's expected and we hold our defense here!" and getting so fed up with indecision, with Eva, I can shout out "No, then we do both!" to get everyone's attention first. Then Eva can take their silence to elaborate "We hold the line to slow them down, then we all run for the halls!" so I can come back around to explain our gamble:

"We slow the spearhead down, they don't roll right through the hallway. We keep their attention on us, they get thrown off from focusing on heading for Rudolf."

And if Zev didn't see it before, that "If we hold out long enough for the Guard to take the halls, they'll go around us anyway.", it'll come out of his mouth, now. With Kurt reminding him what we've always known.

"And we know this line wouldn't have held before. It's not going to on it's own, now. If it's gonna do Rudolf any favors, this is how we gotta-"
Shearing, deafening, ear splitting pain.

A frequency nail driven through every set of paws over the sides of every predator's head.

I am shaking, I can't see straight, and can't ever hear the screaming being drowned out over the message's insertion directly into my middle ear through all the bone and flesh and skin and fur:
Everyone Surrender.

Resistance Will Be Subdued.

All Nonlethal Force Permitted.
One Minute To Comply.

Everyone Surrender.

All Nonlethal Force Permitted.
Resistance Will Be Subdued.

Fifty Seconds.

Stand Down.

The moment it ends, I hear nothing.

I only feel the aftermath at first.

An Elephant on our side falling on bended knee.
The pain under my right shoulderblade.

Then the screaming reverberates.

It's only after that, do I hear everyone's crying out loud through the ringing in my head.

Somehow, I only worry if Eva's gone deaf. Even if all she's worried about is if I'm deaf.

I can make out her words just enough to so and ask her back.

Time for resolution, and Zev's shouting his agreement out to carry out the third option, but I can't tell if he can hear himself. Only that Ralph got the message, and that he's shouting something into Kurt's face.

Something like going to the far end and towards the west hallway, as Zev shouts the same things to his Egyptian and Tahmores and the other Painted Dog Alpha.

Then Ralph screams it to me and Eva. Pieces of "boy you gone mild!" and at the top of his lungs with facial distortion.

I know he said for both of us to get in the middle. I'm just terrified I didn't hear it like Eva did, like she's repeating back to me as she drags me behind her sprint.

Our best odds, the only hand we've got left to put on the table, a bad bluff, a final hope for losing on the best terms, and I don't even know all the cards.

That combined volley of LRAD blasts lasted less than half a minute and I'm already shaken.

We have never been this shaken, if I'm looking through the front line to my left and I see silhouettes out in the open.

With paws and hooves where the Guard can see them.

I can't blame them. I just wish Eva could be one of them.
The dark of a train station taken off the grid.

The light strobing through the spaces between the predators and protesters.

That army out there, these civilians that don't stand a chance.

This is definition.

This is me being the most scared I have ever been.

She's sliding to a halt and my momentum's dragging her along.

"ge be wee me kur!" she's screaming.

Take the second safest spot, if I'm gonna be right where I wanted her to be.

I can barely hear myself scream "no!" in all my fury that's got me shoving her that much closer to the hall, where she'll have the best chance to make it in before the line falls, when it falls, if I know this frontline's not gonna make it to the halls in one piece.

I can't let her take that chance of not keeping her promise, her potential to live.

I'm sorry...

But "i love you!" and I will always protect it. I'm selfless, I'm selfish, but I will always choose her life over it's reason.

And for a moment, in that gap between lines of folks in front of us, the light shines on her.

She is black, she is white, and she's nothing else but one or the other.

Defined between the right side of her face being lit up, and everything I can't read behind it.
I've hurt myself, on her reason to look at me like that.
I'm feeling the most useless word in any language.
I can only beg "please!" and watch her go.
I'll have her back but it's gonna take a moment.
Right now I have to tell everyone I can.
I have to start grabbing at everyone beside me to get their attention.
Elbowing knees and hips, then punching. Anything it takes to look up to see mammals looking back down.
There's a job to do, here. A relaying of "everyone get ready to run for the hall!" and "when i say go you god damned go, when i say go you run for the hall! tell everyone and wait for my signal and book it!"
The ringing in my ears. My own volume I can't hear.
I'm climbing up a Tiger by his pants and clinging on to his shirt collar to know he can repeat what I said. But he's so washed out by the bright lights, he almost looks like Big Purr.
Like a dead body we couldn't find anywhere else to put but the locker room Burney tore his fists on.
"did you freakin hear me?!!" is coming out so much more afraid than livid. But he got the message.
He's roaring out "We're running for the halls but wait until the Fox says Go!"
And either my hearing's coming back, or he was just that loud. My relief could go one way or the other...
...But not if I'm watching him look back out there and turning into a deer in the headlights.
If he's ducking, and pulling me down.
If I can look up where his head was, to see something trailing smoke that was aimed right at it.

I know what it is, before I start to feel the dust sprinkle over us.

Zero hour.

Tear gas.

I can't shut my eyes, but I'll look down, away, to my left and see someone in front of him sent flying into his chest.
Watch the beanbag that ricocheted off her tumble in slow motion.

Know that scat's hitting the fan too hard for me to blink.

To feel it.

To shout it as loud as I can for that Tiger "when I say it you say it and you don't stop saying it until you're in the hall!", over the Wolf howling out in his arms and frozen up in pain like the shot cracked a rib.

I can process that's exactly why but only after the fact.

With a Pronghorn breaking through formation to help her while looking to me with a judgment.

Even on my shame, I've got no feeling there for anything but "there's a bench by each pillar just sit her on one an get back in line!"

The best he can do and I can tell him. Have him drag her off with the best amount of care to afford a first casualty while I watch.
Know how numb I wish I wasn't.

Then look back out to the park from the forest over me.

Spotlights making pattern under them and well defined.

It's high tide, out there.

Not a wave.
Something so much more certain.

As surefooted as it's forward motion.

I'm staring at a fate and it's marching.

We're gonna drown in the drumroll.
Pull the blindfold down.

When I say go, everyone that heard me will say it too.

When my part of the levy hears go, it'll break and draw the flood off path.

But not 'til Kurt's cracks, after Eva's or before Ralph's.
Least I think I know how it goes if our woodline holds up like that.

My eyes are starting to burn. There's more shells coming from where that first one came.

I'm almost glad I'll have something to pit against shellshock with. Give me reason to slowly back up as the Prey4TheHerd in front of us starts reeling, with one of their reasons grazing the left side of my neck.

That was a rubber bullet that sent my fur flying.
Got me spinning til I tumble on my right shoulder.

They're reaching out to touch anyone they can to soften them up for the melee and the sting's all I needed.

Won't even need the teargas burning my eyes.

If I can look to Eva, and see her this black in white, in fear for me, enraged at the hit I took, it's all the more reason I've gotta cry out through it for her, "get behind someone! don't get shot!"

She can't hear me.

I can't hear what she's screaming, either.

I want to turn my face back around into something that won't give her reason to be afraid but the floor's quaking is my body's own.

Use it.

Tremble it with all the force the lungs can muster.

"G E T   B E H I N D   S O M E O N E!" comes so loud and clearly through my ears, I can take stock of how just a little while ago I thought staying here for all this wouldn't hurt. Like I could brush it off, like everything that came before.
I guess not, but she heard it, too.

And if her slipping into the dark of a shadow will be the last time I see her, it's alright. It's fine, as the shadows from out there merge into the ones from in here.

With me seeing it from the bottom left of my eyes, and through the front line's gaps.

The contact between military uniforms and civilian clothes.

They're here.
There's second thoughts and a Lion running.

There's my trying to get back up and a Horse jumping over me to dodge.

The staccato of one steel horseshoe banging on the floor ahead of me then the thud of him falling flat on his face.

Eyes forward.

I'm staring at the end of the world we made.

Look left.

Ralph's shouting go, and everyone in front of him is.

Now it's my turn.

Get up.

From a roll to a springboard jump to make it through several more fleeing crashing into dozens more gunning for the halls.

Let it be a revival, when I shout Go, as I vault myself through two Wolves and shout Go again.

When I climb my way from someone to someone else and pry my way through the frontline, and won't stop shouting Go until I start hearing it come out of someone else's mouth.

Then another's and another several other's.

Find Eva.
I keep shouting Go, anyway.

While watching through the tears an Elephant that ain't one of ours bowling ball slamming his trunk into everyone he's charging through and somehow missing me.

They're coming in.

He's torn a hole right through us and some of his own bumrush around me as I slip through from between them.

A grab at one of my ears from behind.

It doesn't connect.

Just reminds me of how it could've been "E V A !" instead of myself some cloven hoof'd hand tried to snatch.
But I'm small.

She's smaller, still.

And if I'm tumbling forward with the rest of this forest then I was wrong about it being fine if I can't find her in it now.

If I know the odds of me seeing "E V A !" staring back at me from between all of these legs.

But I hear her voice.

That's all I'll ever need to hear again is her still primally shrieking "G O!" and getting louder.

Until she's in my arms before I even realized I've found and grabbed her up.

Now run as fast I can through the woods falling 'round.
Make it to the West Wing by running on top of one that tripped over another.

Know the reason the light's blinding me in one eye and I felt a teargas shell slide over the fur of my brush.

Because I'm running on shoulders and heads.

Take a dive into the dark.

Slipping into it between a Wolf and the Tiger from before and stumbling in the first few steps back on tile and be entirely aware of the Bear behind us being as terrified as anyone else and just as unable to keep from running us over if I fall.

Recover.

Make it happen with every claw.

She's holding onto me with everything she's got because I can't make this recovery without having first complimented both legs with my right paw before having gotten down on all four.

When everything and everyone towers over my line of sight so bad I can't even tell we're already in the Hall.

Where all those bodies ahead of us come crashing into everyone that couldn't move.

I can't stop my momentum.

Trying to chain it from one dodge to another, I can't keep it up.

One millisecond, one stray point of contact on my right knee, tears her grip away to have her tearing at my shirt.
In that one freeze frame moment, in the middle of an empty space, I watch her outline fading and floating away.

The decibel count stabbing my ears.

The chemicals over my eyes.

The fear rendered in every one of us to the bone.

The rubber bullet that connected with my neck.

The knowing of all that's yet to come.

All of the terror and all of the abuse and every last single part of the panic switch comes inside of me in this one moment, when the shock of all my trauma goes and I'm not catatonic anymore.

Everything in everyone comes into me.

I don't think there's a word in any tongue that matches up.
Everything registers.

I've never screamed out no like this before nor sent my paw flying this fast either or latched on to someone's wrist with this much mania and I have never needed her like I do, now.

I have never cried out with the dissonance of relief and all other contradictory emotion, nor clutched at someone I needed this frantically.

I'm holding her like Nadine held me, but I can't shake this feeling I've got. How everything I still didn't know I had won't be enough to make it for her.

She told me to take her to the riot.

But I've seen, I've heard, and I've felt enough horror now, to be ready and abandon ship with her. Under any condition I can make that happen.

...And yet we're going back to where we came.

And if she's following, not leading, it's all on me. Keeping grip of the fight, trying to find Kurt and Ralph in the unlit hall packed this tightly.

"H A A A A A A E E E E E E E L L L L L L L L p!"

I know where Kurt is, now.

Then I'm right there with him.

As the spotlights turn off, and red and blue shine bleeds into my eyes through the pain.
Gun mounted lights dance out there on the ground floor, and they flash over the scores of us who didn't make it.

All getting taken by the beating.

And with several flashlights over him, I've got to witness it with Kurt.

As Ralph writhes on his side and gets kicked hard enough in the gut to slide over tile and roll over himself.

I wish it was me.

I felt it all the same. With Eva. With Kurt so blinded by it, he's got to be there.

There's no saving him.

Only something that's either fear or duty that has me grabbing his wrist to pull him away from the threshold, the doors, close the doors, close the doors, close the big damned doors,


"I   G O T T A   H E L-"

"W E   C A N ' T !" and I hate we can't, but I've got to make that run for the "D O O R S !" instead.

If noone else will for the "D O O R S !" with me and Eva, as the Guard starts pointing lights and the barrels they're attached towards the hall.

If that "S O M E O N E!" I'm begging for when I struggle with the hinged weight of a metric ton of wood isn't one of us still left.

From that moment I become aware of a Yak pointing his gun my way, to whether or not I'll ever get the help I need to slow this down, she'll keep crying out to "G E T   T H E S E   D O O R S   C L O
"SED!" for me.

When I'm out of breath, until I feel a slam of hooves against it from behind us with all the force that protester can throw.

In the nick of it, as I duck to shove the door from behind, the Yak fires, and I feel a rubber bullet bounce off wood instead of me.

Someone finally came.

He didn't come alone.

I must've looked insane trying to swing this shut on the outside. It's only gonna slow down the inevitable.

But being surrounded so many, so much bigger than me, has never been this much of a relief.

I'm about to laugh.

But this door didn't just slam against the threshold.

Someone so big like a train outside just quaked the door so hard it must've been an Elephant that got me back to rattled same as the wood my paws were over.

The inevitable will come.

And it's coming with a trunk hooking 'round through the gap between the doors we'll never close.

In spite of the protester that I'm aware is a Buffalo I never knew as better finding his way around to bring the fight on the Guard from the outside. Whatever he's sacrificed himself to slow down won't be.

"Everyone out of my way!"

The fact we're all sliding back from the floodgates being swung gradually back open is just a part of the plan.
"Watch my feet! I'm coming through!"

We're not gonna last. But even then, with all this shouting, and these screams, I still hear a snarl from behind getting louder. Come charging up beside me.

The kind of pure rage that'd curdle my blood if this was any other time.

If it wasn't exactly what I wanted to hear, when I look to the source right next to me.

That Wolverine's climbing up the door and he's aiming for the trunk, pounding set of nails into the wood after the other.

Fury's never looked so good as this junkie taking all his withdrawal up the door and out on the limb he's clawing up.

I'll try not to let the pain I'm hearing from the Elephant get to me. As that muffled scream becomes a deafening trumpet, that Wolverine slips through the crack of the door, and I watch a Giraffe come tower over us. Punching both sets of hooves into the doors, then push them back against everything out there that's not the Elephant I just felt fall on the ground.

This one little moment of relief, I can't describe it, I don't think it could ever be defined well enough to be compared to every other time I've gotten more than I knew what to do with.

It doesn't need to be compared. I just needed to feel these doors latch shut.

The inevitable will come. But if we always knew this battle would be fought like it would be won, it's only now we realized it.

With someone big enough to not stress his throat to be heard, and looking down with some kind of apology on his face when he tells us "I had to watch my step!", like we could even care how long it took for him to give a miracle.

I can't entertain it. I'm done and I only got the one thing on my mind now: A "...HOW LONG CAN YOU HOLD IT?!" to catch him off-guard. One hard thud against the door later, I think it's the best
answer we're gonna get. That it doesn't matter how long he can hold the doors shut, and "Worry about what you're going to do after I can't!" is all he's got to give.

In a moment just calm enough for me to feel Kurt's agony over us losing Ralph, and watch his hesitance on locking his handcuffs on the doorknobs. Like he could still go out there, even if he couldn't save Ralph. Like he ought to.

I don't think he can blame me for cutting off his loss. But I wouldn't have stopped him if it was Eva.

I wish it was me. When the two of us are distracted and wasting time for planning.

But if I don't know where we can go with it, then Eva knows how to take it.

Her "...I'M CRAWLING UP YOUR LEG, NOW!" for the Giraffe's "Wha- Ah for crying out loud!" and I could laugh if I didn't feel like a Judas alongside Kurt.

There's no time. Only another thud on the doors and Eva showing her resolution in climbing his skinnyjeans to get up to eye level with the rest of the tallest of us.

Only her taking over to look out to who she's got left to use, to demand "EVERYONE THAT JUST CAME FROM THE FRONTLINE, GET BEHIND EVERYONE THAT WAS ALREADY HERE!" and get immediately get questioned by Kurt and his snapping out of it, with his "WHAT?!" and his "WHY?!"

...But she's not the one I'm questioning. Who's still got enough resilience to remind him "BECAUSE THEY'RE ALL AS TRAUMATIZED AS YOU AN OWEN! NOONE'S ANY GOOD LIKE THAT!"

I don't have to question anything that's happening, as long as it's her making it. After all the trauma I've just gone through to have my higher function shut off, I don't care how it happens. If I've got her to restore it. If this battle's going to be fought like it'll be won. With her brand new outlook she's given and having what she called for becoming real in everyone from the front lines turning around to filter through those taking their place.

She doesn't have to take her eyes off Kurt to know it, and she's not done with him, either.
"NOW DO WE GOT ENOUGH DOORS TO LINE FROM ONE WALL TO THE OTHER OR NOT?!!"

The ones we took off the hinges to put against the windows...

What she's scheming, and Kurt's stalling on processing.

...My "CAN WE DO IT?!!", and his "YEAH, YEAH, WE GOT ENOUGH DOORS BUT WE'D HAVE TO TAKE SOME OFF THE WINDOWS!" to set against it.

That won't keep me from getting on board with her.

"AND RIOT SHIELDS?!!"

I can already see where she's going with this, as Kurt shouts "YES!" and Eva turns her attention back to everyone in front of her.

"THEN WE NEED TO LINE ENOUGH DOORS UP TO MAKE A WALL AND HOOK THE SHIELDS OVER THEM!"

Kurt almost starts to argue, before getting cut off by the force of a battering ram that sends the doorknobs on our side flying with the cuffs he had on 'em.

He's got no room left for arguing now.

"You need to hurry up down there!" but we're gonna make it, and she'll have anything she wants to have it happen.

"WE TAKE THE DOORS OFF THE WINDOWS CLOSEST TO THE ENTRANCE, HOLD THEM UP BY THE HANDLES, THEN WITH THE RIOT SHIELDS OVER THEM TO KEEP THE GUARD FROM GRABBING AT THE DOORS?! THAT'S OUR WALL!", that's her call to action, and that's her above me watching it build in everyone below her.

Then climbing back down from the Giraffe's knee with one last thing she needs to get out of Kurt: "DO YOU GOT A PAIR OF CUFFS THAT FIT ME AND OWEN?!!"

At this point, it's just confusion in him, no longer anything else he's overwhelmed by.
That's got me stumped all the same on where she's going and has her needing to repeat "DO YOU GOT CUFFS FOR US?!" to finally get a "YES!" back out of him, before another driving of the battering ram into the Hallway's entrance, the Giraffe pressing all of his weight on it, and her telling Kurt "THEN CUFF ME AND OWEN TOGETHER!"

...I'm right there with him.

As shocked as he is.

Except I get why she's demanding this.

Because she needs him to do it for me.

I need that closure, that certainty, that whatever we do, whether she stays or I find a way out of here with her, we'll do it together and "I'm not arguing, unless it's you I gotta argue with, so just do it!"

I want this, she needs it for me and if he's still reluctant, then "I'm begging," for that relief, "She's not asking!",

And this slam of the battering ram out there has the wood starting to crack and splinter.

It's autopilot from here on out.

My throwing up a wrist and Kurt's grabbing it to slip one on mine before Eva grabs the opposite cuff to bind it on her own.

My right to her left, a hurried twist of the key to lock them both, and it all clicks together for me in an instant.

He doesn't know what he's done 'til after the fact.

He doesn't get what it means, even after he does.
But everything is going to the beat.

These seconds can come to a crawl.

This hallway's never been this bright.

He can curse how insane we are, but everything in me that was screaming to find a way out of here with her has just gone away.

I can perfectly hear all the chaos in the background, without any of it driving me crazy.

I'm not losing her.
Not even their teargas from before that's flicking fire like saltwater can hurt my eyes.

No pain.

No terror.

No promise of how much worse this is all gonna get can touch me.

I can look into her eyes and find all the peace I have to have.

So I can tell her that "...I've never been happier to get cuffed." and mean it like what bound us are as good as wedding bands.

The battering ram comes flying through, now.

Sends the broken latch and all it's parts ringing through the air.

They'll use the hole that the ram's sliding back out to send something through.

A flashbang or teargas canister.

I don't have to worry about what they're gonna do, anymore.

This is me and her running with Kurt to join everyone else because we're looking forward to how much worse it can all get.

Him panicking as he tells them all to "GET BACK! THEY'RE COMING!"

The Giraffe using all the strength he's got left to give on holding the doors shut for a little while longer.

Everyone trying to set Eva's barricade up in front of the doors.

Her shouting out "FURTHER BACK!"

The Guard throwing something through the hole.

The shouting out of the word Clear from the Ground Floor, from behind the doors.

My first attempt at yelling for everyone to get behind the corner of the Hall.
Explosive charges blowing the doors off their hinges, sending them down around the Giraffe and synchronized with the teargas grenade's detonation behind us.

The fact that the Guard won't see us, now, until they're right on top of us and so long as we "SET IT UP BEHIND THE BEND!"

Eva's wall to give them a surprise around the turn in the hall we're leaning into.

What's still being formed that me and her slip through without the trouble Kurt's got trying to.

As the beating that the Giraffe is giving and taking is felt through our feet.

In the very air over our fur.

Against the sound of beanbags and rubber bullets being shot through the teargas between us and them to hitting nothing but the wall in front of them.

As the fear builds back up around me and her without a drop of it seeping in.

In spite of the flood that's coming. Against the rolling of it's thunder as the water draws nearer. As it shakes the floor under our feet ever more greatly. Without any panic in us when a Polar Bear behind us reads the situation and hoists us to his shoulders. The intent coming out of things unsaid. Not needing to be spoken, when we can look behind him to how tightly packed this one single mass is. How everyone our size can practically walk from from shoulder to the other. But he'll tell us anyway: "You are needed up here.", above and at eye level with everyone we ought to be. As the question of "Where are they?!" gets filtered through a gas mask in the distance. As the last Riot Shield gets placed over and in front of the doors everyone's stacked to complete the wall.

She was just quoting a song from her favorite band, when she told me to take her here.

And yet I have never been so certain of anything in my life.

How all of this power billowing toward us, the world that's coming for us, could not possibly mean anything greater than nothing.
Making no difference, if this is hope, or madness, or courage that's got me so certain of where we stand.

This seal, made between the two of us holding the other's paw, and the cuffs to keep it secure is all this is riding on.

And it's all I need.

Is what we are.

Raw and delicate and exposed and weak.

To be all the more reason for how we could look to the other with a smile.

Where we've made our peace against all the bedlam our lives will ever be.

At a time like this, in the lull of a riot.

That all she needs to do, is just lean forward.

As the shoulders we're standing on grow tense.

Close her eyes, to let me know I can close mine.

As light shines through my left eyelid.

And let her lips find mine.

As a Soldier yells "CONTACT!" with the absolute worst timing.

As terrified as all the rest of us are between the click of his trigger and the start of our boldest Fuck You yet.

That'd have me and her laughing, but just leaves us smiling all the more through the kiss.
That's got everyone on our side of the plexiglass too bewildered to know if they should even be afraid of the beanbag that just bounced off the see-through top of the rampart.

But it did.

And whether or not it was aimed at me and her makes no nevermind, if the followup shots won't stop me from rolling my jaws around her own either.

It's still happening.
Making it manifest in our making out that all their power remains dissonant against the chance in hell we're making all on our own.

From whether they keep wasting their beanbags and rubber bullets or not.
To whether the shields only crack or outright shatter.

We're not faking this subversion.

This one stupid, genuine moment where nothing we've ever been defined by could matter.

We are.

We just are.
Outdoing every last Impossible thing we've done, before.

To have the rest of us too defused to really be that afraid, and make the Guard watch on at how close we are to laughing in the middle of a kiss.

Like nothing they've got could compare to anything we lack.

And god damn, has it pissed someone off.

"You think this is funny?! You think that's all you gotta do is just pretend I'm not here with my entire division?! With everything the ZPD didn't have the balls to use on you?! THIS IS YOUR LAST CHANCE TO GET THE F**K OUT OF THIS STATION, IN ONE PIECE, WITH ALL OF YOUR TEETH, ALL OF YOUR BONES, AND ALL OF YOUR BALLS, THIS IS YOUR LAST CHANCE, IF YOU DON'T PUT THAT DOWN RIGHT F**KING NOW, IF YOU DON'T PUT YOUR PAWS IN THE AIR AND LAY DOWN, IF YOU SO MUCH AS LOOK AT ME WRONG, I'M NOT LETTING YOU LEAVE UNTIL WE'RE DONE WITH EVERY LAST ONE OF YOU!"

He even pulled out a megaphone for it. Even though he's only twenty feet away from us. But we'll let someone else laugh at that. Have it be someone else that goes and makes it worse, when Kurt can look at us, to how we can't be bothered to address him, and be the one to ask him one little antagonistic thing so we don't have to stop kissing.

A "You and how many more armies?" heard loud and clear without a raised voice.

It doesn't have to make sense, how we've gone from all the fear his soldiers gave, to whatever this is we're rejecting it with. It just has to set him off. Make him go lob that megaphone only to have it break apart and bounce off the plexiglass with a death wail. Prove a point about how impotent he really is, right now.

But the funny thing is, is that I wasn't even trying to make this so much worse than it already was. To get under his skin until he could finally give me a reason to pause.

"God Damn My Orders, I'm not gonna cry over their dead bodies!"

But I did.

So now that he's got all my attention, made everyone freeze up with everything he implied, indirectly enough between the lines to give himself some plausible deniability for what he just roundabout told his soldiers to do...
I'll glance at him. Out the corner of my eye.

"...Now you look at me, Fox?" and I am, at the Moose leading the whole operation.

I'm looking at him out of nothing else but pity against the threat he technically didn't make.

Because he doesn't get it, what's so obvious it's staring him right in the eyes.

How all we wanted to do was just live.

Without their eviction, from everywhere they've wanted without our threat that never would've been a threat, had they just defined us as anything else but nothing else but a threat. Like the threat he just made out of himself, his power, his control and his soldiers, as what he said gets gotten well enough by us, by them, that it'll even make some Rhino beside him feel weak. With his stomach so churned by dread it's forced his reminder out of his throat, of the pointless little detail of this whole situation that finally has us breaking our lips off the other's.

"Sir, we're not authorized to use lethal-" "I DIDN'T SAY A FUCKING THING ABOUT AUTHORIZING LETHAL FORCE! DO YOU UNDERSTAND ME, CAPTAIN!?!"

But he didn't have to. And it's not a bluff, if he's too clumsy in his rage to hide it any better than he did.

If he really wants us dead.

If we're not taking him seriously enough to still be hysterical.

If that's what it's going to take.

Because it's never gonna be accepted that we just wanted to live.

Me, Her, Every one of us I've ever known and Any one of them I'll never see again.

We all did. We even quarantined ourselves. Made it happen before they could. But our own quarantine would've never been enough, if it wasn't theirs, under their terms, with none of our conditions.
Nothing we say or do would ever make them see us past their definition.

He's so invested in getting us out of here on his terms, they're going to cost us everything we've got.
So that's it, then.
"Now... You do whatever you have to. I only said I didn't care."
If that's what it's gonna take.
"But I want the grins wiped off of every face looking at us,"
If up until the moment he made it clear,
"I want them wiped out,"
I could've kept hoping,
"I want everyone you leave screaming rounded up,"
Against all our experience,
"I want them all in holding pens, in one piece, in a coma or not,"
That noone was gonna die tonight.

We were fated to pretend.

"And I want it done by the hour.", with all his hate, is all the impetus the Moose needs to give his
leftenant to make it certain.

I'm not even angry. I'm just distracted. And I know what by, just not what it all stands against.
Between me and some reason to find something else I still haven't realized I'm not lacking.

But I hear it on the Moose's radio: "Sir, heavy resistance in restricted area hall, OP4 well organized, they got this shit on lockdown!"

...That I've had all the reason I'll ever need, this whole time.

We only have to keep the Territorial Guard from going after Rudolf's evacuation.
What this Moose went to war over, ahead of his schedule, to cause the pain he'd inflict on everyone he had no business with. I was wigging out in too much worry, before. I could not get that at all.

But I do, now.
"So don't disappoint me, Captain."
And I will.

If I'm not the one he's speaking to, I'm about to make myself the real articulate feller, if I gotta be.
If I gotta warn her in a whisper through a smile "i'm about to monologue, now." if he's really gonna make me.

It's been a long life. Only one last chance.
She can silently laugh over how silly, however juvenile it is.
But that won't leave her to dismiss it. If she can still look at me and know I have no idea what I'm doing, while realizing it's still a shot in the dark worth taking.
If I'm not kidding, and she can give me that smile that could only mean everything she doesn't have to say.

We still got our paw held by the other's, we have had those bindings that connected us all along.
A song. A dance. A kiss. A flight and a fight and a realization of all that's come and a time to cast all odds aside.

We can do much more together.

That beacon of companionship by any means, to make us as inseparable as not as parts but as an instant where we have become a whole. It's not so impossible and I wanna dance.

To show and tell of all these things that made us who we are.

If all she needs to give to let it happen is all she already is.

With a smile that says it for her: We're both ready.

So hold on, Rudolf, just hold on, put my face together, hold on Rudolf, I better get it right, just hold on, better stand up straight, act like I know, look at that Moose leave like I'm not done, like I'll never be done, because I better get it right, get up, stand up, get up, stand up, get on with

"This is ours, you know."

Because I am going to pretend.

"It never was yours."

Like every predator has ever been fated to.

"And it ain't ever gonna be."

Better get it right, get it right, get it right, if it's all we've ever known since the day we were born, and against all the narrative that said that to call it pretending was anything else but as wrong as the very definition of the word impossible...

"Every last thing we've fought for is ours and it's never gonna be yours."

...Then I'm going to pretend until I'm real.
Does it register?

Will it make him turn around and stare back at me like staring's gonna kill me?

...Yes sir, I'm exactly who you thought this Fox would be.

"You got something to say, Bullwinkle?" because if this material's been building up since before I was born, from beyond, and up here at the pillar I'm on to see them, I say, asking him with my terror departed, in the digits of my paws gesturing to bring it, if all he's gotta do is set the trap off then I'll spring forth the mote on him to deny what Prey have given us that will never be returned.

Because he's put us in a corner, I've been there, in my mold, and all he thinks I got on him, if all he's got to say is "The signs' read the same thing for a hundred and fifty years.", is that I was talking about what this station's been called for "A hundred and fourty three-"
"ZOOTOPIA CENTRAL STATION, YOU USELESS FUCK! THE SIGN HAS READ ZOOTOPIA CENTRAL STATION AND NO KISSING, NO FIREWORKS, NO WISECRACKS AND NOTHING YOU CAN PULL OUT OF YOUR ASS, WILL EVER GET THE NAME CHANGED TO PRED CENTRAL!"

...And he's taking me so hook, line, and sinker, he's never gonna see my fire speaking to his skin 'til it's too late.

Because "That kiss was ours."

This isn't about the station.

"Those fireworks were ours."

This never was about the station.

"Our wisecracks are ours."

The only road we've ever been down, with "Our teeth, our claws, our wit, our ability to manifest the destiny of our own narrative against your definition,", the only thing this has ever been, "Our Will to Live, to fight, To Fight, To Fight and Fight and FIGHT AND FIGHT, TO FIGHT AGAINST THE REALITY YOU HAVE IMPOSED," is just us wanting to be mammals, and this battle will be fought, "THAT BATTLE WE'VE FOUGHT OUR WHOLE LIVES, WITH EVERY INTENT TO WIN IT," like it will be won, "IS OURS! NOT! YOURS!", if it's the weakest thing a Predator has ever had to beat the world with. To ring and resonate so profoundly in every ear able to hear it that I am drawing the narrative out with such truth it's got the Guard all trembling like us. With all opposite meaning. Because we never would've been threatening, had they only let us be anything else but a threat.

But if they only see us by their fear,

"AND IF YOU'VE ONLY SEEN IT WITH YOUR FEAR," if they only hear us by their pride,

"IF YOU ONLY HEARD IT WITH YOUR PRIDE," and if they only know us with all their definition,

"AND IF YOU'VE ONLY KNOWN IT BY ALL YOUR DEFINITION," in "ALL IT'S
"Power?"

Then I can almost feel sad about how much hell we're gonna send right back in all their faces. "THEN ALL OF OUR STRUGGLE TO LIVE OUTSIDE YOUR FEAR AND PRIDE AND DEFINIT-"

"YOU! HAVE! NO! POWER!"

No.

But this battle will be fought like we've already won.

"IF YOU CANNOT SEE THAT YOU HOLD NO POWER, THAT POWER HOLDS YOU,"

Then maybe that's why I'm not even mad, if he wants us dead.

"IF IN ALL YOUR STRENGTH, YOU ARE TOO COWARDLY TO ACCEPT YOU'VE ALREADY BEEN CONSUMED,"

Why I can still pity him.

"THAT THERE IS NOTHING LEFT OF Y-"

"YOU! HAVE! NOTHING!"

And yet he still doesn't get that nothing is all I need.

"AND YOU WILL NEVER CLAIM WHAT IMPOSSIBLE MEANS,"

To make what it is real.

"IF ALL YOU HAVE TO DEFINE WILL NEVER OUTLIVE OUR NARRATIVE,"

And get this out from between what I say and what I mean.
"THAT EVERYTHING WE ARE,"

This experience to levy.

"AND MAKE REAL AGAINST ALL YOUR REALITY,"

Against all the education meant to deny it.

"IS-"

And if there will ever be a perfect time to try,

OURS

for everyone like us to lend their voices,

NOT

against every intangible part of all the wrong things we all have ever been taught,

YOURS

...This crying out coming from everyone around me...

OURS

...This...

NOT
...Though I would be lying if I said I never doubted...

Y O U R S

...In all the conviction that rejects the lies that were all we were given...

O U R S

...I'll never know what reason I had.

N O T

Ever again.

Y O U R S

Those three words.
They are not heard, alone.
They have been felt.

And in their volume, the clarity of their vision, in the collective of the experience shared by every predator, from that past, to this present, to now, they have become more than words. Become the fact that transcends all barriers of definition, the mote where everything against disappears into.
It does not matter. Whatever they say, whatever they do. They will never have control. Not the News, Not the Cops, Not their Mayor, No City, No Army, Noone.

No power.

Will ever drown us out.

And that's the scariest thing for them.

The reason that they have to care that we don't, why I've got to smile and look around with Eva in spite of all we lack, because we still possess the one thing to place that Moose somewhere between threatened like he never thought the unarmed would've made him, and just straight up more pissed off than he's ever been.

With one giving way to the other's build up. So I think that's it, then...

I think we've done it.

Now that I'm staring back down at him. If I've impressed it on his face, that all the reckoning he reckoned he'd need to seize the train station Bogo couldn't, the one the rest of his career hangs on, if I've done nothing else but thrown him so off kilter, in the rage I've placed inside of him, with all it's tension built up to the point that he's trembling so much, his cloven hoof'd fist is gonna fly off his wrist...

If we're so ready to die for what's Ours Not Theirs that it doesn't scare us...

If we've led him to the conclusion that this isn't enough... And he needs to make certain I die tonight...

...I think we've made him go full Gary Oldmale.
...Make my night.

Beyond, from up here on a Polar Bear like laurels I'm on just to look down at him, what does this remind you of?

Make my week.

Lift up, lift up, lift up that radio about to rattle apart in his hooves and breathe in for me.

Make my month.

That order ala Norman Stagfield.

Make my 2015, from a distance, yeah, let it go something like Everyone Get To The West Wing, if his body's language I'm reading is on point.

Doesn't matter if he likes it or not, make someone come back and ask him What.

Oh Yeah, make my life, make him look at me when I shout "SO HOW YA LIKING ME, NOW?!"

He signed up for this, so he's gonna participate, not take his eyes off me, and try to make my meaning like she's already made herself, and charge at the barrier with his radio in his face.

Because we did: We've made him scream something with all his decibel that sounds like an Everyone I could almost hear every syllable of through the background noise barrier.
And then it clicks, on the repeat...

"w e s i n g , o w , e r y o n e!"

...All in.

He's breaking off every last soldier, from every last thing they're doing, and he's throwing them all at us. At me, and everyone around me... I have just made the worst thing ever happen. And for a moment, he's got to think my shock means what he wants it to. Because with the desperate way he's leering through the grin, he needs it to, if there is an entire army coming to prove his point.

But it's coming to me. That visual of Rudolf with Bruce too speechless to ask themselves What, too amazed to make sense of How, too relieved to wonder Why, but they're watching it happen, the same as everyone else. From the Employee Hallway, to the East Wing and the Upper Levels. That what they don't have they don't need it now, what they don't know they can feel it somehow, what there ain't no sense to make from the impossible but the meaning of it, the parts of the Territorial Guard that were set against them are all turning back, this Moose just dedicated all his command on the West Wing, and he gave it his best shot...

And he could not have made me smile with any more disregard.

Made himself any more trapped than he already was, made his storming off back to his soldiers any more good to watch.

Because nobody's gonna tell us how to die.

I'll bleed if he wants me.

In this firestorm of emotion blowing out of my control.

If everything is going to my beat, I'll die if he needs me.

Because this isn't winning.

But I've just won everything I ever fought for.
Without even knowing how I did it. With her grabbing my muzzle to kiss me again, to throw us both off balance, send us twirling off of his shoulders to roll along that Bear's arm held out to catch but fumble and leave it to Kurt to complete the pass so I can land on my feet. And she can spin me into a slam against a door, if she's not done yet kissing. To make it mean Kurt's "WHAT'S HAPPENING?!" gotta wait until she is. Because she won't be done expressing what I am and reminding what I mean to her until she is, 'til she can't press herself any further into me.

And then she is. So she can let it fly from a tongue no longer tied that "HE'S JUST SICKED EVERYONE HE'S GOT ON US!"

And yeah, I know, I just said that, and it means exactly what it sounds like, but if Kurt's still in transit to believing, with the kind of look he's giving me, I'll say it over again, with a little more elaboration.

"HE'S PULLED EVERY SOLDIER OFF THE REST OF THE STATION AND THEY'RE ALL COMING FOR US!"

What comes too wild into his ear to catch all in one chew.

What he's choking on if "...I DON'T EVEN KNOW WHAT TO SAY!" can be his only reply to go with mine:

"I KNOW, AIN'T IT GREAT?!"

What he's still hung up on, when it still has to hang over him, that "WHAT ARE WE GONNA DO?!" torn across his mind.

Between what's ours not theirs, theirs to get returned to sender, and the long overdue in the truth of all we're about to face.

But it doesn't have to be explained any further than the simplest answers.

Than her "ANYTHING!" and my "EVERYTHING!" because it's like she's putting it, "IT DOESN'T MATTER! AS LONG AS THEY'RE ALL HERE THEY'RE NOT ANYWHERE ELSE!"

As long as things don't go according to their plan, for as long as we can keep making them change directives, we'll last as long as we need to.

Which brings Kurt to "DO YOU AN YOUR BOY KNOW WHAT YOU'RE DOING?!", but it's something he ought to know by now, an "IMAGINE IF I DID, THOUGH!" he still saw coming, but beside his point where all the relief he needs stands on.
"I JUST WANNA KNOW WHAT HAPPENS NEXT!"

...When he's trying his best, but the fear's still there where I can't lie to myself.

It can't go without a eulogy, if the only reason he's the last one left to know it, is because he's the only one that made out what I told him.

Through all the celebrated and the chanting that won't shore him up.

No, he don't to feel this, he don't want to be distracted, but hell... What do we got to work with? What's the next big nothing to make an everything out of? His point is still raising in me, but I could just give him something if I only knew what to quell it with. But the volume of everyone's emotion isn't fading out. The overwhelming sound that it is to drown my thinking in, I know we're not a hopeless case, but...

...Sound...

...I've never been to a concert...
But I have. The reminder right through the noise. Coming back to me when I heard us make it out of joy. From the day after dawn broke under the refuge we made, and where it remains. We've had it this whole time. What Prey celebrate from themselves then gnaws into their instinct coming out of us. That calling out Eva never got to hear for herself. The last thing they'll ever want to hear. And if my eureka smile of mine will make it real for him... Then he already knows we've got this.

"...WE'VE HAD WHAT HAPPENS NEXT THIS WHOLE TIME!" like we're never gonna lose it.

"GREAT THEN WHAT THE HELL IS IT?!"

The thing that goes by many names that he's gonna have to see for himself. That natural language we were all born with.

"EVA, GET ON MY CHEST AN HOLD ON!" and I'm twisting my right arm over her back and around my left shoulder.

I wanna hear him say it with all of us. I'll do like he wants from "JUST TELL ME WHAT IT IS, OWEN!" but not down here. Where I can't be heard. What he's not ready to hear and I'm not able to reveal. When Eva's grip is certain, and I know she won't get thrown off of me. Because I'm catching another Bear out the corner of my eye that's tall enough and close enough by the wall and I gotta tell it to Kurt like this: "...ALL I HEARD WAS TAKE ONLY WHAT YOU NEED FROM IT!"

There's a better way to put it but I gotta run. Build my momentum. Duck under these arms stretched out to hold the barricade in place. To pick up the speed to translate this running into a wall into a running up scaling of it. That takes a horizontal backflip jump from the vertical plane and spins it a landing on the shoulder I aimed for. I didn't even stop to think if I could pull that off. Take Eva on a ride like that without it ending in a crash like it should've. I guess it caught her off guard, too. Let's me know with a look I'm not done taking her breath away, when she's stumbling over this Kodiak's head and onto his other perch. He's kind of still figuring out what happened, too.

But next to us, I feel them again.

Make some sense from it and I think reinforcements coming in. Got some idea of what the radio chatter's like if I can't even hear it, just tell that it's a fighting withdrawal for them, and that the Moose
ain't waiting. Because everyone he's already got here is advancing regardless.

They're getting ready.

And I can't even hear the shots they're taking. Only everything that matters.

Four: Control myself.

Three: Disregard the deja vu in thinking to take only what I need from it.

Two: Kiss her again for a second.

One: Look back to everyone one of us looking at me and her and wondering what the hell I'm doing.

Zero:

"HEY YO ONE TIME THESE GUYS WITH THEIR SIR THOUGHT HE HAD AN LRAD AN YOU KNOW THAT I KNOW, I KNOW I AIN'T HEARD Y'ALL SHOW AN TELL 'EM WHAT KIND OF NOISE WE BEEN COOKIN' UP!"

It doesn't matter if there's a teargas shell overhead flying for the back of the end of the hall, if there's a call to charge, or the Moose fired real buckshot.

"THAT SOUND YOU BEEN HOLDIN' BACK!"

I feel it rough, I feel it raw, we're at the point of our lives.

"THAT'S GONNA MAKE 'EM ACT LIKE THEY KNOW THEY AIN'T EVER GONNA MAKE NOISE LIKE US!"

Against all the evidence they're right behind me spraying mace at an arc over the riot shields he hasn't shot apart by the lead he's slinging.

"DON'T KNOW NOTHING 'BOUT MAKING THE KIND OF NOISE THAT'LL KEEP 'EM UP AT NIGHT!"
Because we've all been changed from what we were.

"WILL NEVER FORGET FOR THE REST OF THEIR DAYS THE SOUND SAYING THEY DIDN'T SIGN UP FOR THIS!"

I can't fear them, if I can't hear them.

"SO YOU KNOW WHAT I DON'T WANNA HEAR WHEN I GO AN MAKE MY OWN NOISE?!!"

We can start this conversation over and it will all ours.

"I DON'T EVEN WANNA HEAR MY NOISE OVER ALL Y'ALL'S NOISE!"

Doesn't matter even if plexiglass just barely missed carving into me.

"BECAUSE WE GOT ALL THE LRAD WE'RE EVER GONNA NEED!"

And stabbed itself into drywall in front of me.

"WE'VE HAD IT WITH US THIS WHOLE TIME!"

If they're right on the ramparts and they're falling down.

"WHAT'S BEEN WAITING TO BE HEARD,"

Here, if I caved in for it, it will be the last time,

"LOUD AND CLEAR,"
And if I'll still allow it, as the melee starts, it will be the last time,

"BRIGHT AN EARLY,"

and if I stumble to fear,

"FOR YOU TO TELL IT TO 'EM ONE TIME THAT ROAR."

It will be the last time.

"THAT HOWL,"

The mace is already soaked into my fur.

"THE SOUND THEY SAID WAS TOO LOUD,"

My skin's not burning like the rest of me.

"SET IT WILD,"

Because the world hates us,

"SET IT FREE,"

But I love it too much not to show it better,

"MAKE 'EM KNOW,"

How a narrative is a charge,
"WHO YOU ARE,"

A definition is a toll and us folks know,

"IF IT'S GONNA BE THE LAST TIME YOU'LL EVER GET,"

No tolls go where we've gone.

"LET THEM HEAR WHAT'S OURS!"

With the gaze turned back toward the world, holding the trigger down on the taser, sending voltage through the needles plunged into the right arm, that I don't believe in the pain they want to register.

I believe,

I believe,

I believe,

I believe,
I believe,

Against the Mace I've breathin' in,
I believe in the longest draw of my lungs.

I believe in the motivation of what they'd call a Vixen Scream,

In the determination of these eyes they're looking at from me to lean into the peace I want through the teeth exposed and cutting through the sound to discard the life I once knew,

What is ours to let go, to break through the sound barrier so my life can finally be heard if there's no place that I could be without this.

All of this.

The everything that means who we all are.

I believe they thought they had us cornered.
But this Hall was a barrel.
They didn't think we were bullets.

That all of us would fly like this, like me, through the Howls and Roars and all other ways we can speak it, no matter the fear that makes the taser fall from a set of hooves, that we weren't joking around.

We just wanted it heard:

We're done surviving:

We need to live.

To make our meaning something else burn bright enough around the hair of their hides to leave them naked to the truth that shakes the constitution of these walls in the crescendo of a chorus in the eighth dimension I no longer have to hear my part inside of, the deafening and immutable and all shaking orchestra of frequency and pitch and tone in every major and every minor to drown out the contrast of every thing around us from every angle.

And make felt what can only ever be felt.

Don't call this rioting. As the We in Us and Them merge to encompass both.

Don't call it crowd surfing, either. As we run and make dance from where me and her came to a floor made of helmets and armorplate vests and walls.

And this isn't fighting. Because it ain't a challenge if it's everything they brought against everything they thought we were.

If everything we really are can drown out the thought it was enough.

So leave it untitled like Dashing Buntings did.
Because there ain't a name to give all it is but we're shredding it like Billy Goatan.

The Wolves that form their motions in unison of six or eight around the singled out to overwhelm.
Playing whoever they pick to choose from like the sum of Vishnu's digits over all the strings.

The Clouded Leopardess chaining one swipe of a set through a vest to the next of her other claws in another, in another, in another, in another, and swinging from another an another an another an another.
Letting the momentum build to the beat, cause they're all green enough to still be the jungle she'll swing herself around.

The Honeybadger to volunteer getting thrown to land on a Soldier's face as a forty yard pass gone long.
Not wrong.

This Cheetah we're sharing airspace with from vaulting over this Buck's shoulders as her other trips him up.
Launches him airborne as her feet's claws sink into the back of someone else's gear.
Then throws one over the other when kicking back to spring into the Hippo she just tossed a Buck at.

The pair of brothers of Lions rolling through the depth of a combined roaring out long-live-us-kings to show that Moose without a shotgun that they're all the army they need.

The Polar Bear launching any one of them he wants through the air and slammed into one wall or the other or another or the floor.
One after another.

The Pine Marten pouncing from belt to belt that goes unnoticed until the pins already been pulled from the smoke and teargas.
Until the mace or taser's already been swiped out of hooves, out of reach, out of control, out of power.

And yeah, these Soldiers still do us their worst but, they ain't got the soul to trifle with the kind of conviction all of their own with us from Prey4TheHerd still got to do them with.

If they only got half the nuance, they got all the same finesse as us.

Because Kurt was right, when he thought he was joking, just to take a page from me in pissing off a Moose more than he already was: How many more Armies?

'Cause if the Mayor didn't call the Airforce then she called the wrong people.

'Cause the army she sents needing air support.

'Cause me and her are slinging like chain shot, I just hooked my left arm around some Equine's throat while she runs across some Elephant's chest too occupied with these Lions and Tigers and Bears to make a grab at her and she carries her weight to my sliding off a neck to spin a Zebra around my axis.

And playing him like a top.

Playing this wall like the dance floor as I spin like I want if she's already latched on around my ribcage.

Playing me like I am this outstretched paw with a twist of my foot.

Like a high five.

Yeah I see you, Andrew.

We gunna end this shit, bro.

What's happening is we didn't have a sign, I just fantasized, try to mastermind, then she got after mine to handle ours so we'd dismantle theirs if we didn't wanna finish what they diminished so we'll replenish and if you want it, I could just yell Believe It like a true story.

And that's the things I don't even gotta say if he'll catch the gist from the look on my face, as he watches what we didn't start getting ended like a keynote.
'Cause he can see the end in the beginning that we'll lean into that three stroke expression toward purpose til it's realized that we're Pred Supermale, Pred Spidermale, Pred Jesus, Pred Startrekker, Pred Captain Kirk, Pred Batmale, Pred Goku, All Pred Everything when it's meaning something new now.

From the top of the heart, no killing it, not a slur uttered, no fear just remorse, none of ours just ours to return to sender, for a refund in the equity they owed our granparents.

If no hell like this ever gets raised again, let it be that it never has to. We're raising the benchmark for penance and if soldiers fear a punishment, if Prey are still holding on to grandad's day, then they don't know what part of them we're burning away.

Cause we ain't the devils needing exorcism.

We weren't the past, we're present tense now.

Lighting up the hall outside like the spotlights they moved around outside never will.

As explosions from outside blow doors apart around the windows.

As the mace still flies with the needles from the tasers, if we're too close for them to use beanbags or rubber bullets and the Moose has already had his stolen shotgun stolen back taken back again out of his power and control.

As reinforcements try to come in from the outside, when the ground floor's a battle like the one in here, when they planned ahead enough to have mats on hoof to roll over the broken but just couldn't plan for the moment Eva kissed me to change everything.

Because this ain't a horror movie, anymore. It's all about that meaning we were hunting for.

To get it out from under all the grief they buried it under, like they planned on us never finding quite like this.

In some kind of feel good moment that don't even feel like a fight, just a re-educating for the both of
us all.

They couldn't plan on something like this like I couldn't plan on...

...There's window out there.

It's open.

...How do I know?

I couldn't stop moving and in this moment I'm cemented on a Lion's shoulder with Eva.

Why am I suddenly frozen?

Because I am staring at the Polar Bear Eva kissed me on top of by the side of that Rhino that tried to correct his CO about lethal force.
And without knowing why I'm hoping he doesn't move, when the Rhino still makes him by the full blow of a punch to the face.

The split second after...

...After the shot's already been taken.

As the Bear's knocked out the crosshairs and against a window we took a door off of.

I'm staring at the Rhino as the shot meant for a predator lands square into his neck.

Where the light from outside illuminates that blue splatter. And brings all the focus of my eyes on the sharpest defined color in a black hall, where white light bleaches out the shape of a Rhino.
He doesn't know what's coming.
And I do.

What Eva's just realized with me, in questioning what was wrong.
Before she sees it, herself.

And realizes we were wrong.
We were wrong about horror.

That was only a Gnu we watched get electrocuted, while the cops tased one of their own, with his jaws sinking into her throat.

A brilliant, horrible, richly bluish purple.

That was only a Bear we watched maul his fiance, before trying to bite the arm off of some guy that tried to pull him off.

Against the canvas of his hide.
That was only a Wolf we saw tear through the throat of one of her own, after he got her off of me, after I got her away from Eva.

Trying to keep something in control that he can't name.

That was just Big Purr's corpse we saw, after he killed himself, because he didn't want to kill anyone else.

Losing himself to instinct, second by second.

And that was just a Bear, and that would've been a gigantic big cat.

Every quake and tremble becoming more primal and we were wrong.

"...run..."

Neither of those, and no predator, would ever be able to cause what this Rhino's about to.

"...Run..."
And I'm watching the evidence unfold in front of me: That bluish, dark purple substance does not care if you're a predator. It will take anyone from their own body, because the evidence is playing out from twenty five yards away.

It's making a Rhino turn savage all the same.

"...RUN! RUN, RUN, E V E R Y O N E R U N !"

A mammal that didn't want to kill anyone feeling instinct with greater and greater urgency. And he's afraid like me, like her. Helpless to stop it like us. When he only knows that he can't stop it. Crying out for help and awkwardly grunting.

"HE' S G O I N G S A V A G E ! RUUU U U U N N N N N !"
Not even feeling the blows of fists and the slashing of claws and the grabbing of paws.

I can't look away.

Because I have known fear.

And I thought that meant I knew horror.

What starts with a crashing down of his forefeet onto whatever's between them and the floor. Into his primal form announcing itself by a mewling bellow.

Where correlation divides from eventuality.

When cause becomes terminal.

The meltdown of all power to cease.

The knowing it's too late.
Once everyone else finally realizes what's happening, after it's already begun and the bodycount
starts to add.

As it barrels forward. A bulldozer lurching and crashing into everyone around it.

The Tigress on his face. How that horn's gone straight through her. Crushing her against an Oryx
getting crushed into a wall with a thrash of the head.

That unnameable violence will begin to register, now. How I can feel the crushing of her pelvis.

How not all four of his limbs meet the ground under him.

The flight of a feline body with a hole bored through.

As it all comes into me. The scale not being seen in real time I'm watching unfold in still frames.

The separation of fear from horror.

The loss of control.

The sight of a trainwreck and the helplessness of it.

Departed from all metaphor and only gradually gaining rudimentary navigational skills. To flying
forward with. For crushing bodies by. And drawing closer. Smashing through screaming. In a
Hallway where there's no escaping where the purest form of death rampages against all life that
moves. When noone has ever seen a Rhino turned into a purer thing anyone would never really want
to even see. As a Moose stares on, without knowing that this is how he'd get what he wanted and left
wanting to take it all back like me like Eva like everyone that just wanted to live and everyone dying
and getting maimed. Coming toward the Lion I'm standing on with Eva, as he fights against his own
fugue to dodge the black cloud.

To throw me off his shoulder and have me fall into the air in front of him.
I can spin myself to save Eva. It's all I can do.

Is let the bloodsoaked horn press itself into my back in full fabulous swing.

And spin me from the scene drawing farther away.

As I feel something against my back.

Where the faces blur out in the distance, and the colors of all things blend together as a strangely peaceful dream without gravity.

Floating in an empty space like a relief departed from all screaming.

Where the ground will gently let me rest down on it.

In a comforting slide until it lays me aside from all the images shown by very friendly lighthouses.

In some kind of warmth sort of soothing to feel outside of their own glow.

In a place feeling so good and neutral, it's asking me if I should even get back up.

If it seems there's nothing left to consider proving, after having proven all we wanted.

For a moment, it's all so quiet enough to be believed.

And I hear it that "i can't get up.", but it's not that easy.

If "i can't get up, owen." bears reminding against the peace I'm in.
I can tell it's got the best intent, but I wouldn't say that whatever this peace means gets me.

Because that nervous "i'm stuck." means I'm not done, here.

If my life's outside of my body and inside of someone else to stick around for.

And I hear her calling out "Owen.", but I'm getting there and I'm coming back around.

I just need a moment to open my eyes back up with a little more effort than before.

And seeing the outside of the Station from a sideways angle.

"O w e n !"

I think we cleared all the broken glass.

I think this is the curb by the street.

Where I'm looking at a bunch of Territorial Guard paying all their attention through the windows without trying to stop anyone from climbing out.

And looking down to the crest of her head, to the angle saying she's looking down at herself without being able to hold back the moaning crying out of "No, No, no, oh christ boy, n-" like she's alone.

But she don't have to feel that way. I could just ask her "no what?" if I can't be aware of how much of an enough it is for her to hear. To understand why she's breaking down in tears and trembling somewhere between Michael coming for us and Saint Peter calling our names.
"...Oh my god, good god you're-"  

"What, girl?"

Seems to me like she was scared of never hearing it again, to light up to my voice for a reason I wouldn't know. There's something here I don't realize, as if she had a choice to scream the "ALIVE!" she's crying out loud.

Breaking up and burning with the fact "...YOU'RE ALIVE!" in spite of the pain in her voice, so I can process what my silence seemed like.

And it hits me.

That "...We're both alive!", that what I felt before her calling out crying brought me back was something like dying.

But she's the very life of me.

And she won't have it.

Has me laughing in the relief we're right where we are until I'll feel it in her frame I'm holding onto.

Something's wrong and she's afraid to admit, but gets how I'm catching on regardless.

Because she can't stop crying.

She's still afraid.

And she's got to tell me "...I can't move my legs.". If the last thing she wants is for me to be angry or a nervous wreck like she's being.

But I don't got any of those two in me, anymore.

I'm done with them. Like I'm done with trying to prove something.

I was looking for an excuse to get out of there and I've got it, now.

Because she's injured and I think she gets it.

That all of our effort wasn't about proving some undefinable thing to Mammals who wouldn't understand, anyway.
It was all about trying to.

We gave it our best.

Now there's nothing left for us to do but for me to finally ask her:

"...Are you ready to go?"

There, where we can just park all the craziness, that business we were living in, in the moment so I can be with her, then.

Like I am now.

Because I can take her away from here by whatever it takes, I just need to hear it from her and I'll make it so.

That quietly delirious "...Yes..." that says she's still afraid.

When she doesn't have to be.

Because "I'm taking you to a clinic." and we've everywhere to go from there. After this summer we spent getting carried away. The one just about over we spent never wanting to fight from beginning to end.

But we're done, here.

So she'll smile, still tear up, and she'll tell me "Ok, boy."

So I'll get on a knee to plant a foot on the ground without worry about whatever she's holding back.

Stumbling westward without caring why it's so hard to put one foot in front of the other.

But I've only started.

I can't stop walking until I find some place to take her in.

No matter how hard it gets.
As hard as it's getting.

As out of breath I'm becoming.

With however many pauses I need to give my-

"Owen..." distracts me, just long enough to have me turn around, with a shuffle as difficult as it shouldn't be, with my looking behind and seeing Andrew, seeing me desert the Station.

To make it out in the streetlight, in spite of the spotlights illuminating him from behind, that he's never been horrified like this.

Never seen the pleading No look in his eyes this bad or the framing of a shocked mouth around his teeth.

This fear, this terror, this disbelief in the absolution of all he's feeling with every part of himself crying out some emotional wreck and ruin beyond comparison.

And I'd be, too. If I hadn't had the fear knocked out of me, if I had something else to worry about.

But I'm sorry.

But I gotta get going.

But "...I gotta get help for her, please don't-", but he's not gonna hear it.

And I love him like a brother, but "I'M GETTING HELP!" was something I wasn't asking.

Just an understanding she's more important as I shout out "Hey!" to get his attention.

But he's not taking it.

But he's giving "HEY, OVER HERE!" and getting it for us, the attention I wasn't asking for, that's got me trying out "AN-" just to fail, to find it hard, to try again and cry it out in spite of the pain, "ANDREW, NO!"

"COME HERE, MOTHERFUCKERS!" and I'm pleading with him, now, as painful as it to plead, to just "SHUT UP AN JUST HELP ME GET HER OFF THE STREETS!"

But it's already too late.
He's already got the attention of the Guard and there's two detaching from the rest.

And I can't understand, why he's gotta look at me and cry his eyes out to the fact "I CAN'T HELP YOU!" when it could've been so simple before that Rhino and giraffe drew their rifles on him and started shouting "DOWN ON THE GROUND!" but it can be, it can still be so simple if he'd just grant my last request and "JUST FUCKING RUN WE'LL GET OUT!" that's taking so much effort to shout. If he'd only do something for the three of us besides crying his eyes at the sight of me and her. If he'd just do something besides getting on his knees before the Rhino shouts "WOLF, GET DOWN ON THE GROUND!" as if he ain't, in spite of my "NO! ANDREW!", in spite of the tears I gotta share with him over not needing this last thing I wanted.

This watching him doing what he's told and knowing what's coming, anyway.

The beating I don't have the heart to watch.

When it's either I stick around with nothing else I could do, or leave and do the one thing I can.

The decision I never wanted to make.

But he's forced my paw. I've gotta do him like this.

To just round the corner. Just round it, round it, just get around the corner of this building and hope that maybe they'll be too busy with the brother I'm deserting to make it out with her before they find us, no matter hard my feet make it, just get the hell away with her like I wanted all this time, like I needed, li-

"...the fuck is..."

...That's not Andrew.
"...Holy SHIT!"

...That's the last kind of person I wanted to find me. The Rhino that's going to finish the job some other one started.

If a Fox has nothing else, he's got his words, an if I don't got a prayer, I've got to try and make one. If I just look into his eyes...

If I can turn back around to beg of him, the "NO, NO PLEASE DON'T MOVE, DON'T MOVE!" won't matter.

As out of place as the horrified tone's coming out of his authority I ain't gotta respect, I'll turn around, I'll turn around, I'll do it as hard as it and tell him "No, NO JUST LET US GO;"

I'll keep trying if he still tells the radio "WE GOT MAMMALS BLEEDING OUT OUTSIDE, GET MEDICS HERE! I'M OUTSIDE THE WEST-" because "WE'LL MAKE IT TO A HOSPITAL IF-"

"...Fox;"

"JUST LET ME-"

"FOX, LOOK DOWN!" and fine, fine, JUST FINE, I'LL ASK MYSELF WHAT AND IF IT'LL STOP THIS HAPPENING, I'LL LOOK, I'LL LOOK, I'LL CRANE MY HEAD DOWN...
...I'll crane my head down...
...I'll look look over her the crest of her limp head...

...

...I'll look...

...

...And I'll realize why her lungs draw shallow.
Why she couldn't move her legs.

Why Andrew did what he did and why this Rhino's not trying to kill us like he was told to.

I see it.

I see the piece of wood that went through her.

From the door that was over the window that we were thrown out of.

That when the military detonated a charge from the other side to break through, I saved them the
trouble of breaking that stubborn piece like us out of their way because I broke it off because it went through me and it when it went through me it went through her and that blood I'm staring is mine and hers and she was stuck and she couldn't get up because THE PIECE OF WOOD I'M STARING AT CONNECTED US TOGETHER AND IT'S WHY I COULDN'T RUN AND IT'S WHY I COULDN'T GET AWAY BECAUSE I'M WEAK BECAUSE THE THING I FELT AGAINST MY BACK WAS A PIECE OF WOOD THAT WENT THROUGH ME AND I WASN'T ENOUGH, MY BODY WASN'T ENOUGH AND IT STILL GOT EVA AND SHE'S DYING, SHE'S DYING AND...

...And the feeling of all those splinters that separated from this chunk of wood, from the chunk of wood I'm feeling inside of me...

...I'll feel it now.

In all my agony.

As the trauma wears off.

As this body of mine accepts the transmissions from all of my nerves.
And I scream.

And I scream.

And I fall on my knees and I scream and I keep screaming and scream so loud that the screaming and the pain and fear I've got for Eva drowns out all the attention I've been given.

As I stop screaming, and the change of time and the stimuli of grow far and distant and abstract.

He's calling out.

They come around.

Realize they can't stop it.

Municipal EMTs inbound.

God's name.

Dozens dead.

Sirens.

Too many injured to count.

Radio chatter.

Touch.
Anyone can go savage.

Needle.

The sound of rubber rollers.

Stretcher.

Every bump in the sidewalk and the transition from curb to street.

Mask on.

The strobelight flashing of two colors.

Oxygen flowing.

Diesels idling.

Fluid running through the vein.

The change of pressure in the cabin as the doors slam shut.

Eyelids peeled apart.

Concern felt from across the flashlight shining through my eye.

Left turn.

Distant conversation.
Right turn.

Go faster.

Full throttle over every bump down the downtown street.

Turning.

Accelerating.

The breathing of the love of my life inside of her expanding and contracting frame.

That lets me know she's still alive.

And if I didn't make it known, that everything I wanted to say I kept forgetting to, while I still have time, even if she cannot hear my voice, I can still make it up.

"If I don't make it," known that "There's been this song I've been coming back to in my head. Past couple of days have had it on repeat in there and it's one of those you hear once."

I can tell her I loved her all along this trip she's taken me on.

"Because," because I wouldn't take a damned thing back,

"Because you only have to once. But you always wanna hear it one more time."

That's her.

That's someone telling me not to talk.
And this is me letting her know the lyrics, anyway:

"I couldn't help but ask you say it all again. You taught me the courage of stars, before you left. I tried to write it down, but I could never find a pen. How light carries on endlessly, even after death. I'd give anything to hear you say it one more time. How rare and beautiful it is to even exist."

He's saying he said to stop talking.

But I'm about done.

And she's smiling, even if she doesn't know why.

So I'll say this last time for her, if I really have to go.

Even if it's just for a few years, I'll make it up for all those times I didn't say "That the universe was made just to be seen by our eyes."

He's telling me I'm about to die.

I know.

I know.

I nearly dip for a moment.

Just to lose a little more consciousness.

Left turn.
Full stop.

Doors open.

Thud.

Doors closing.

More causalities.

Sirens.

Half might make the night.

Lights.

Greatest loss of life in decades.

Rolling.

Bumps.

Doctors.

ER.

Condition critical.

Losing her.
Lower vertibrate severed.

Gastrointestinal Perforation.

Artery severed.

Sawing.

The droning of the PA is the last thing.

Unconscious.

Conscious.

Unconscious.

Needle.

Injection.

Adrenaline.

Waking.

Eyes widening.

THE SCREAMING WILL BEGIN AND IT'LL COME OUT OF ME AND I SEE AND HEAR AND KNOW EVERYTHING ELSE AROUND SO LOUD AND CLEAR IT'S AS GOOD AS RIGHT IN MY FACE AND STARING ME DOWN LIKE A RHINO WITH NEITHER IRIS

And then I feel the heartbeat from the other end.

I see the cuff on my wrist and where it leads my eyes to.

And like that, she becomes everything.

From up her leg resting over the other and past the sight of that horrible thing stuck in her. As her chest moves under her left arm where the IV drips in from the line I'm looking past. Around the corner of her shoulder to roller coaster ride my eyes through the dip of her neck to climb along her jaw. Where the sight of her sleepyhead face becomes the only thing to matter. Where nothing else surrounds me but her and her glowing.

Where the presence of a Nurse that rushed over can't touch me. Not his terror, not the things he's trying to say.

As he watches me flying high, overwhelmed and losing it mile by mile and by the metric ton around how beautiful she all is.

Around the relief of just having her tangible in front of me.

To witness her eyes stirring under those lids. And imagine what kind of perfect it'd be for her to look at me.
To take a timid peek from the other side of the curtain.

Like they're trying to.

However long it takes.

Like they are.

However difficult it is.

Like they will build up to.

Until they have the courage to pull it back slow. So she can look at me without helping but smiling back like a sunday morning I shouldn't cry on. Watching the everyone she's coveted and yearned for witness her through the softest "hey." to ever stir me.

To tell me through an oxygen mask that everything's gonna be more alright than I ever wanted.

Than I ever needed.

Any time I ever had to have it take me back to when it all first started. With Buffy's party, at her place in the Rainforest, in front of everyone at Zootopia Central Station and in the tent and on the roof over everyone else.

And I can't help but cry about it.
Over the fulfillment of a piece of that limitless undying life where love was all, it was enough, was all that mattered because it was and remains what it's all about.

We got what we needed together.

These drugs don't matter. Not the pain they're blocking or the reasons that've been inside us since before the wood touched us.

If I used her or she used me to get here then neither one cares. I can't even begin to hate or blame anyone for anything that led up to now.

None of it compares to this place in a better state of being the world out there will never grow to learn past the definition.

And when it comes to my valium life, she won't mind if I cry out laughing "We made it!"

We did, "Eva! We god damn made it!" and I knew we would, I knew we would, and this is the confirmation of the one thing we struggled for.

To just be alive and to feel it.

To nevermind the hospital beds we're laying on and the Nurse that can't get it out that we shouldn't talk.

As weak as she is, that she can hardly laugh with me. It's more than enough, just to have this much. It ought to be.
But I want to hear her laugh. Chitter, sing, bark like she did with me in the west wing and manifest every last thing her voice can give.

And it reminds me as much, in seeing his reflection on Eva's glassed over eyes.

"Hey! Doc!"
The one in the hallway out there, having some kind of argument with another on the other side of the window.

How he ought to "Get back to work!" 'cause there's work to be done while "You got a girl to save in here!"

His shift ain't up 'til I say it is.

Nothing that this nurse can say can change my mind. He can tell me he'll get to me when he does, but I've already got his attention. Been heard loud and clear through the oxygen mask that couldn't muzzle me. His senior is gonna deal with me whether he wants to or not. Whether or not I watch his reflection on Eva's eye end the business in the hall to swing around and slam through the door to make it him I'm staring at.

And that's when it hits me.

What didn't translate from a mirror.

The look on this Goat's face.

The way he's staring that says he's trying to hold back some dread but can't. Has my crooked smile start to fade against his gaping fear.

The one I can't place, that he's watching me try to figure out.

So he stops looking at me, like it'll keep me from reading him as he focuses on the life just there enough to hear him ask "Can you hear me?" before getting back her nod.

"Can you tell me your name?"
I want to think a part of it's the recognition of who we and hoping he's wrong. But she's not gonna hesitate to say "Eva."

And she's not being coy, if there's no deception in her adding "Eva Fuchs." to make it worse. Because she doesn't mean to. And she's smiling about it in the most genuine conviction. Hits me so hard, I nearly don't chime in to argue I'm "Owen Conrad Belette!"

But maybe we can both exchange our family names. And maybe they don't even matter.

But they're the last ones he wanted to hear.

If he already knew, then he's still realizing something and it's got to sink in for him, now: This panic of his is warranted.

Yet I can't get why.

But he's afraid.

And it's getting hard to tell myself it's over the two of us handcuffed together being who he thought we were.

Because he's scared of something else.
Something worse creeping in to me when his face means to withhold it.

That it's been long enough since he paid off tuition he's forgotten when it happened. How he's got enough gray in his hide to tell it for him when he knows this whole hospital better than his other residence. When he's over fifty and all his years can't keep from leaving him at a loss. With all the experience and knowledge and wisdom that he can't fall back on. If he doesn't know what he's gonna do about this.

Because he's never dealt with what a Rhino's thrown his way.

What's slipping into her, too that she don't want to accept, either. Except there's no arguing against the obvious, the certain, the very absolute.

We got skewered on a piece of wood.

We shouldn't even be alive.

And maybe we don't wanna let it in, but...

...But I hate that it's coming.

The fact he's not gonna be able to hide with this stopgap idea of his he'll doubt all the same, as he grabs her clipboard from the mournful looking nurse and commits a pen to paper.

Because "I need you to listen to me carefully, you have to pick up on everything I'm about to tell you." and it hurts.
Because I saw it coming.

The fact he's gotta get Eva ready to face with a turn of the clipboard to her held sideways and a starting off at "We need to do a blood transfusion. We've already ran the tests from both of you."

...And she's looking at him and the paper...

"Ma'am, you're B-. He's B+."

...And sees exactly where he's leading her as he adds in "One can receive but the other can't give."

...But she's shaking her head at what she's got to face.

What's killing me when it's killing her and leaving her needing to be told anything else but "The wooden stake that impaled you and him is the only thing holding back the blood loss." before he finally has to say what will peacefully sink in to me if she'll accept it.

"But you're running out of time. We need to start removing it Now."

I won't lose no hope on this, 'cause I get his plan.

The one that's got her almost too hurt to cry.
The truth he can't hold back any longer: "He's lost too much blood." to live without and "There's not enough of it compatible to go around."

...Which means she's not leaving here with me...

"And we can't begin without a donor."

...Because I'm that donor.

And my life don't stand none of it. Tearing up something fierce to the thing noone ever said would be easy. Fighting back with "no... No, you can do something..."

That one of us is gonna do what she always knew I would.

The least I can, like I'm going to anyway, if she can only accept it. If she could stop fighting it and thinking "If you can't do something about it there's someone else."

I want it. I want so hard, the same as her.

The anything it'd take to remain where she thought up that I should be with her.

Where our love was so thick, it saw us through all they could throw at us.

But she has to face the truth, from the doctor's own mouth: "...I'm looking at the only one that can do something about this." and I'm not staying here with her.

Making that harder for me to accept, when I'm losing composure over her, right there with her in the
thick of the pain.

"We can't save everyone."

If it's come down to one of us giving their life up for the other.

"We're over capacity."

If the Goat only has so much to work with.

"We can't waste our best chances."

If there's nothing left for him to tell her but the useless sentiment in "I'm sorry."

If there's nothing else to say but that powerless word.

If she won't accept that she's about to lose me any other way than a Sorry from above.

And I'm somewhere between my own apology yet not.

If me dying here ain't got nothing to do with death worship.

When I haven't been suicidal, if I haven't been waiting for the hammer to fall and only flirted with the trigger all my life.

I can die all I need to, if she can only accept it.

That what her parents named her is the living I've had beside her, and the happiness I've known makes it certain I'm ready to go.

He stops himself from finishing "You are going to..." she already knows the end of.
Because I'd be dead already, if her sadness wasn't the only thing keeping me here. That I lived all I could for her. Through a love that will never stop, and only remain.

It's not about if it's not me needing to convince myself "...You're gonna live, Eva." a little too eagerly, and it's not accepting I'm dying, alone. What doesn't have be acknowledged, if the doctor's got a quiet relief I can't place, if I still ain't making it better for her. That I know I'd never live again, if it's not living if it's not with her. Even though it haunts and she can't accept I'm as good as a ghost that's already found peace about it. I held on when I got it, I'll let go when it's time I gave it back.

I can go ignored beyond a nervous glance as he asks her "Do you understand what I'm suggesting to you?" to have it affirmed with her cringe and a couple tears that "I do."

I just want her closer to living with it. I know it's selfish, but she made a promise. But it's gonna be him to make sure of that. I only want all the fulfillment that she's ever gonna get out of her life.

All it's gonna need is her taking the last drops I've got to give.

"And do you consent to it?"

In spite of this guilt she's got to go with his that shouldn't be her burden.

Not anyone's.

There's nothing wrong with my ceasing, if it makes my blood hers to live by.

She just needs to hear the one thing that'll reconcile the rest of her living for herself.

The thing I'm too far out of it to tell her. That my corpse won't have to talk. When she gets to heaven, her boy'll be right there.

"You're gonna live your name!" comes out instead, but they won't keep me from calling it.

I'll make it up. I'll make the pearly gates if it means crawling out of hell and I'll do my best to draw
that photograph I couldn't take. Of her looking up to me from the floor of Lola's Vulguar. And I'll make it up 'til the end of time for all those years I wasn't there with her. For how much I'm hurting her, now.

Maybe I'm delirious. I know it's crazy to believe in silly things.

But it's not that easy.

But "You're out of time."

And she doesn't want this and it hurts, and she's dying just knowing it, but he's got to tell her "We're not gonna make it if we don't begin, now."

And she knows...

She's realized it.

She's feeling it happen.

She just needs to hear that one thing.

She only has to be told the one thing. The closest she'll ever be to nevermind the fact society saw her as nothing else but a Weasel. That peace she felt beside me, to make it out like it doesn't matter because it never did.

Against whatever pain she's still feeling.

Our life was brilliant. Our love's pure all the same.

Because she's had me.
And she's taking the the risks we took with her.

When she can barely look at me, but it's time to accept it. I'm not gonna go with her.

He doesn't have to ask again.

She'll nod.

And nod.

And grimace and rock her body through nodding the confirmation of the fact she loves me too much not to do it.

Because it hurts.

But she'll give him a yes.

If she can't even say it and nod it out to him, she'll let go and give him all the yes he needs, "...just tell me i can have what i want before it happens..." is all she can ask.

Weak as she's getting.

As close as it's coming.

As terrifyingly urgent as it is that he needs to start Now.

He tries to ask me if "I have your consen-" and I'm already there to say "Yes! Give her my blood!" What's mine is hers to "Take it all out of me!" they can and leave what's mine to make us, make my blood with hers my home. "She's fucking got my every any some nothing EVERYTHING I can give her, my whole of it, WHATEVER IT TAKES, JUST LET IT BE HER THAT LIVES TO GET WHAT SHE WANTS AND LET ME DIE FOR HER ALREADY!"
As terrifying as he’s gotta take the proclamation.

As ugly as I made it out to be.

I was born to die and I’m out of time and I’m out of patience and I’m tired of waiting.

But if I shot it out, then I’ve made it clear.

Made him freeze up to batter any other thought out of his head than the only one I want in him. That the girl he’s looking at’s as good as god: This is either gonna go by gospel or damnation.

To let her have that everything he can’t deny her.

"What do you want?"

And make it mean something she always wanted.

"to sing."

To not become anything between her and this.

"can you let me sing?"

Because nothing’s gonna change her world.

The one and only thing:

"...You can do whatever you want, now."

And that was it.
It was all he had to tell her.
All she had to hear from above.

How limitless her options are.

How free she is, now.

How whatever she does, whatever she says, she knows it's alright.

It's done.

It's guaranteed and this Goat can go about his business, tell the Nurse with a grab of the scrub collar "Round up everyone outside, make sure Oxford's back with bolt cutters, I have space in OR and if you ever put me in this position again..."

He can be as livid and ugly as he wants.

It won't matter. If the nurse is inexperienced, and only gave tried to give me enough adrenaline to stop flatlining on him.

This how I wanted to die.

Was just to know nothing's left to touch her.

To see her happy.

The way those big brown eyes look past the oxygen mask on my muzzle and all the way through the mask over her fur, to let me feel things that used to be as distant as God.

The chills up and down her severed spine over it, that has her looking to me like she is.

Around the peace she's got to spite the artery bleeding out I can't even touch.
In the courage she's become as the best I could never imagine the hope in sacrifice looking like. Without me accepting what the reality is.

To keep on carrying calm on high as the Lord's call says to stay steady.

If I said go to Hell for everyone else.

I know it's crazy to believe in silly things.

Because I wanted to know different and I didn't. What the Doctor wrote on the clipboard he left on top of her without a thought.

The message he wrote on it reads exactly like what I was trying to convince myself otherwise.

You are going to die but can save him.

"...no..."

In my head, I'm gonna pretend until it reads as something else.

I need it to read as any other way but how it does, no matter what, but it keeps meaning the same thing.

The horrible sad truth she'll tell me as best she can. Focusing on it as hard as she can behind those afterglow eyes.

In the most loving, well meaning way her brain shutting down can interpret.

And this is what she tells me, while she's still here.

That
"Every time I make a run, Boy you stare at me and cry-hyy~."

The fiddle that opens up for the violins it's calling out to.

That it's gonna be her not me, realize it, now, the same as she already had.

"...no..."

Because it would've been that easy, if this was something either of us had any power or control over. If she could let me, if it was, if she would live in a wheelchair and I could call the time coming up for her for myself. But it's not that easy. But no...

And she'll admit it for herself,

"I ask myself why, oh, wha-eye~?"

If I have to face why she was agonizing over what they wanted with her. When she's just trying to ease us both into this, as much for herself as me but no...

"See, you must understand: I can't live a nine to fiive~."

...No I wanna take it back. Maybe noone ever said it would be this hard to die for somebody else but I need to,

"But I'll be there~. At the end, boy."

The Goat's asking himself if she's singing what she is, and she is,

"But I'll be gone 'til the end, yeah I'll be gone 'til the endin',"

And all I can whimper is no because I Need It Back, Every Chance I Didn't Take I'm reeling in, to them, if there's nothing left to take back,

I want to make taking it all back happen because I take it back, it's taking me back and I didn't want this and I take it back,

"You tell my boy, that I'll be gone 'til the endin',"

I need the chance to go back to the start of this because I can leave instead of her but I can't live, Not Live Without Her, Now,
The Goat's waving to everyone and no,

"I'll be gone 'til the end, yeah I'll be gone 'til the endin',"

No, he's telling them they need to start now, no, they're rushing in, No, they're all around, NO, I've been cheated at death and it hurts,

"You tell my boy Oh, she'll be gone 'til the endin',"

I didn't want this, I didn't, not like this, I'm dying every other way but the one I want to and it crashes, like this,

"After January, February, March April May,"

Like fucking this, I want it back, I need it back, no,

"I see you cryin', but boy I can't stay,"

That I'll die when I die, by any other meaning than for her and it's coming in from every chance I had to stop this before it started.

But they're rushing in.

And it's happening.

"I'll be gone 'til the end, yes I'll be gone 'til the endin'."

So I start to lose myself like she's losing her life because it's killing me, and onward they're taking us.

Almost too caught off guard to hold me down as I start screaming out for them to stop, finding energy I didn't know I had to fight back.

Leaving panicking and crashing our stretchers through the doors of a makeshift staging room that was filled to the rim with casualties.

"So give a kiss to my Lola."

Getting everything they didn't know I had in me to where they wouldn't believe it could fight against their strength.

Onward and away under the heavenly white light of the hallway.

"Boy I gotta lea-eave, please don't cry~!"

I'm screaming to Just Let Me Take It Back, to do it any way I can to keep from hearing these violins starting up in my head like splinters like waves like this everything that's gone against the beat of my heart rate jumping up that oughtta be hers not mine,
"When you come back, we know the limit's the sky~!"

I tell them I'll Do It Different, if someone would turn me around so I won't light the candle from both ends this time because she's losing her end right before my eyes and I can't stop it,

"Make it you me dancing at your favorite spot,"

Can't keep this from going down like it will, like I know it will, like I keep desperately trying to turn back around, into an outer body experience happening so fast it's becoming a blur,

Becoming vignettes,

"Feed you my pheromones just to get you high~."

A disconnection between the world out there and the world I wanted. I'm losing her and I'm losing my body to the fact of it. It's not about the pain and the waves of it, why I'm quaking like I'm going into shock.

"Take you to the buskers~,"

They're gonna save me not her, they're gonna use her like she was before me, turn her into an excuse like they defined her,

"By the cemetary,"

Gonna take all the life she had with me and it's not right, it's not fair, I didn't agree to this but I'll do it different, I'll go anywhere but where they're taking us, I'll feel the pain of this wood in me jolting from the crash of my stretcher and my stomach acid eating up my torso, I'll scream that I'll Go Anywhere but Where You're Taking Me Just Let Me Fucking Go For Her.

"An if my ghost can talk then I will tell you that I'm sorry."

But they won't. As hard as my body's making it.

And it's a symphony of violins sweeping over our heads. That's making them lose their professionalism.

As reassuring for her, as agonizing for me as they are.

Their every note.

Their every coo and wail and expression of what I'm living in.

And it's everything they couldn't believe I had in this body, to make it thrash and scream and shout and shake with all the violence it's got building up inside of it against this.

As it stops being my own and starts becoming someone else's.

"Hey-ey, lifestyles of the poor an hated,"

They're shouting for me to calm down, the Goat's ordering they hold my body down but I can't calm down,

"I WONT 'TIL IT STOPS 'TIL I REVERSE 'TIL THIS ENDS I'LL DO IT MYSELF I'LL SAVE HER I'LL TAKE HER PLACE," to make it Wyclef's mouth in mine not hers,
"Some die beside their love, some die loveless."

I don't care if she's not lying as tongue tied as it's making me, even if it's a heavenly choir coming out of her smile anyway,

Making the plea for anything else, I'll bargain among the living and the dead lining this hallway's walls and I ought to be glad, I know,

That my lifer won't face no fighting anymore.

"Every time I make a run, Boy you turn around and cry-hyy."

And it's time to make it inarguable, when the orderly places the blades of those bolt cutters between what still links me to her.

And severs our bind.

That's when it happens.

When that's not me, anymore.

"I ask myself why, oh, why-iii."

There's a Fox screaming, thrashing against the weight of all these mammals bigger than him.

Becoming something so horrifying they've never seen the likes of it, before.

The damned shame of it.

The noises he's making.

"See, you must understand: I can't make a nine to fiive."

The fury to go with the tears of someone trying everything he can to die, if they'd just let him, if it'd at least mean he's gonna die alongside her, if he can't live beside her and she's too far gone to live regardless. Screaming out Let Me Fucking Die For Her like every voice in the hell he's willing to go through, trying to work his wrists held forward around to the back of him to pry the wood out by his lonesome. She's still singing to me.

"So I'll be gone. 'til the end, yeah."

To herself, looking to a Fox she showed how to live and thanking him for everything he showed her. But it's not me, anymore.

"said i'll be gone 'til the end, oh i'll be gone 'til the ending."

That just bit into the wrist of someone holding both of his. This ain't the one she introduced herself to
by the same way she's leaving him.

It's somebody else's corpse now that she's serenading among The Living and The Dead.

"you tell my boy. i'll be gone 'til the endin',"

With everything she's losing as everyone above him and her watch him thrash his teeth around the punctures he left in someone.

"i'll be gone 'til the end, i'll be gone 'til the end."

When this Fox makes it official, that there's gonna be nothing left of him or any of them trying to save him,

If they don't take the risk that the needle's got in it.

Even if they finally got some security chasing after to catch up with them with the muzzle already pulled out.

"you tell my boy she'll be gone 'til..."

Placing himself between him and my life, while a pair of hooves hold his head down with enough pressure to flip the stretcher over itself.

"january, february... may,"

If someone hadn't grabbed the other end to put the back wheels back on the ground. As the goat jabs the needle in to introduce enough sedative into him before it breaks off in the fighting against that muzzle getting strapped over him.

"i see you cryin'... boy i can't stay,"

Without enough of her left to feel the tragedy unfolding. Without enough of me left in there to really fight it, anymore.

"i'll be gone... i'll be gone 'til..."

As this Fox breaks down crying. Still trying to plead, to beg, to let it out that he would've given anything to keep this from happening like it did.

"...so let it be, that..."

As they slam his stretcher through an Operating Theater's doors, and the rest of them drag her off to take her blood and her life elsewhere.
And that's when I leave. End up somewhere between what comes after living and before the outro I never wanted. Because I didn't want to survive... I never did and I know it, now.

But it's time.

It's time to face the truth.

I would never die for her.

Chapter End Notes

...And, well, you probably know how I feel about the word Sorry. And why I probably feel the need to still say it, after all that mess, even if it's a useless word.

But I've always known, even after I post the last chapter this didn't turn out to be, that's still coming, that I would still be editing and rewriting as I need to.

Because my means of getting out that narrative I've been trying to express past all the definition of language has changed, over these 3 years.

So, like so many other moments, I'll still be going back to do this ending moment between Owen & Eva my best. I'll wring it out of me, like I've been trying to.
...Thank you. From the top of my heart. For your each and every ounce of patience, if you're still reading this.

But this isn't over. There's still one chapter left. Hard and painful as it's gonna be.

And I will try not to sing out of key, again.
An asterisk marks this chapter as having not been edited since it's publishing. I am going through this story, from previous chapters until I reach this last one, to modify, correct, and slightly rewrite toward my current standard and style of writing. Now that the story is "Complete" and I have no urgency to rush through it. Much.

The distractions don't end anymore, the focus doesn't start.

And it plays. And it plays against his diminished functions. In his head while chasing asphalt on another motorcycle. And it plays. Courts said everything would be made up but it's alright this ain't his old Vulpon. Somehow doesn't feel it'd change anything if it was, wasn't some 67 Guide he overpaid for, what's out of tune and still everything Andrew can do not to lose him. The Wolf had to take his best bet to follow his friend, and if he's riding twice the CCs than he can get the hang of, they're not enough to keep a Fox in sight. He's just a squid somehow only just avoiding collision. But he's still a Junebug too buzzed and buzzing to really be aware of it's surroundings, not there enough to see how close either of them get to wrecking on a daily basis, to have mercy on this Wolf, the one chasing after someone that ain't...

...He's thinking too much. But it's Bib Burga season, anyway. And that one is smelling pretty good, before he's even off the Vulpon. It doesn't have time to land on the kickstand, he's already swooped off the bike while Andrew comes in too hot and in a rush to park not to drop his own. Too distracted to stop his friend, only watch him fly on an opportunity so fast, the Ram doesn't even know what's missing, before looking back down at what he don't got in his hooves. That the Fox from his left took out of reach to the right, has already spit the bite he took out and throws the rest of it at the wall.

Since when did Bug Burga start carrying cheese?

"You think I ain't weaned?!"

The hell was a Sheep even doing with a burger, anyway?

It's like this Fox can't even let him go without catching a breath, because it's always already too late for Andrew to do anything besides watch a trainwreck happen in front of him. This Jackal's livid for the Ram beside her, she's about to snap. He's always already gone off the rails by the time Andrew's got his bike back up and dropped the kickstand. Ashamed and scared, the Wolf has gotta act before she does, rushing toward the two of them with whatever denomination that bill in his paw is. It's hopefully enough, hopefully not a twenty but he don't even care beyond telling the Ram "I'm sorry." on someone else's behalf that isn't even. Maybe the money in his hooves will stop the both of them, before the Jackal he's with goes off on the Fox he's gotta get back on course. But what's become of him is never over. That crooked smile to "No cheese this time either, lambchop!" that rubs the insult back in before Andrew can plead with him to just shut the fuck up, but, well...

She smells a whiff of something on him, under that his unwashed musk from his unkempt fur. A whiff of what's got her asking herself "does he gotta wipe yer ass too, piece of-" like he won't pick it up, like he "Can't hear you!" when he has and "Owen would you PLEASE-" ain't enough. He wants to make it worse and see where it goes. Make her pull the sucker out her mouth to spit the
venom off her tongue.

"I SAID YOU SMELL LIKE-!" Yeah, he don't wanna know who he is but "YEAH LEAST I AIN'T FULL OF IT ANYMORE AM I FUCKING RIGHT?!" is something to win an argument with, if he'll pretend he thinks he gets what he is. Lifting his shirt up without dignity but a grin to go alongside the manic leer, to show a stomach off as furless as a mange case. Where the skin contrasts against the colostomy bag hanging out of it, and all the lines of scar tissue where his stomach must've been ripped apart. And all that revealed, it really does end what she was about to start. Leaves the Jackal about as bug-eyed silent as that Ram she's with. Realizing why he's like this. Because he lost how to digest something on his own.

He needs help with it, now. Medical supplies. Medical prescriptions. What the doctor won't order and the pharmaceuticals don't offer.

Anything he needs, any money they'll take and however ugly it makes him. The attitude's in vogue, these days.

She still can't tell if this Fox is really him. Doesn't want to. Doesn't matter where he went wrong. He just has. He's just this. So she'll shut up the burger he snatched out of some Sheep's hooves. Let him think he won like he didn't. There's no arguing he's lost. That he could be at enough full tilt to make it physical if she doesn't just leave it at this. He can scoff like they'll let him out of pity. Mutter something else ugly under his breath as he turns around, if Andrew's gonna suggest it with a paw on his shoulder to just go up the god damn flight of stairs to Toby's building.

...Where I swear I think he sees my face looking back, in the reflection of the glass door.

Even if he can't recognize it through the self medication, for a moment, he feels like he looks like Forty Four by Dashing Buntings. He doesn't know why. He's not sure how, but he's seeing me in his head like it has someone else's eyes. Noticing strands of grayed out fur on our face without a mirror. I don't know why he's stressed. I didn't notice he was this angry. I don't know for. This is just who he is, looking like myself while talking like myself but only on the surface, by the see-through gold leaf. From the way they look at him, it's like all these chemicals are foaming out of his mouth. But it kind of hangs, even though Andrew's already opened the door and giving him a push inside. The way they stare is like he's rabid. And it's got me seeing it, too. That what they're looking at isn't me, anymore. When the cheapest proof of 151 fumes out of his mouth like the pill binges out his his brain and the barbiturate through his...

But the image kind of hangs, even though Andrew's already opened the door and given him a shove inside. Then it disappears, and the remedies take him back over. The Wolf behind him pulling it shut against hydraulic actuation. He's somehow thankful it wasn't worse, just still left hating that his friend is too far gone to even protest. Then it disappears, that he's ashamed of what's left of his friend, drifting in the last direction he was blown. How unrecognizable it is from behind, the way it shuffles from right to...

...There's somewhere inside of him to ignore. Something about a big pill that got stuck going down. Stairs take over on his mind. Even if Andrew's gotta hover over him, if he can't even go without stumbling up a flight of 'em.

He can ride a bike, though. He can say "Least I can go without dropping my bike." without knowing
why he said that. What it even means.

The door, though. Some conversation going over his head while he lets himself in. How familiar this apartment looks, before turning around to recognize that White Tailed artist. Though "Toby?" is holding something back, before turning back to Andrew to let him in.

The radio is playing. This living room is pleasant. Surroundings enough to keep him occupied. Something on the speaker cut off to Andrew changing stations about how it's gone up because the gangs replaced the packs that were all broken up after...

This living room is pleasant, surrounding him enough to keep it occupied, and the bars are in effect. Toby asking something about...

Andrew saying it's like he's dealing with a bomb all day. Doesn't have to register what it means. The Fox can appreciate breathing for awhile. How air feels going in an out of him. The room going up and down every time. Even if it leads nowhere. Why Andrew's here with someone Toby can't believe, not knowing what to do with him, like the Buck would know any more than he does. He could've come by without him but he really couldn't, if he's always...

Just lower your voice. Talk around it. He don't even think about it now like I know what's there. Discussion droning in and out, in one ear out the other and if he's never doing acid again, the contrast is still going up. The definition of colors that he's grown to appreciate, if they're just real enough to drown out the rest of the scene. A slide show cartoon exchanging still frames of beautiful furnishings with every blink. Leaves it at feeling like a dream every day. A dream of a place that's easy to. It was real. He's not sure that those were xan he took, when Andrew woke him up calling. It shouldn't really matter though. Whatever's giving this is still a kindness. A placating. A little break in Now.

It came from wanting in the bubble to look at Now as it passes by. Bugs can be crushed and remain alive. It brings a different sort of thing to that. How his ears pick up he's got no family here. Andrew can't find his folks on his phone or anyone else. And he doesn't have to wonder why the Wolf's saying that. A knock on the door in rhythm to the beat on the radio. But if he's not imagining it, Toby or Andrew will answer and it's Toby that gets up to answer with an opening for a Fox to slip through. One that takes a moment for the Buck to...

Oh. It's another repeat. He's got consciously commit to reminding it's a repeat. Look back to where they sat down and Toby's still there with Andrew. It's all it is, is another loop thats got the Fox amazed at what a bastard this other one is. Projecting myself without feeling my self. They always find him passed out in an alley or on the sidewalk, never at the lease he rented or the group home. I can't help the feeling I could blow through the high, if I just turned...

Close the book on it, while he's at it. But he'll always remember this room and be inspired by that framed photograph or whatever. It came from being in the bubble and looking at things as they passed by. Looking at it like it's a dream with his eyes closed, I think all our ways just feel kinda the same but it licks that our vision is dissonant. This isn't seen for what it is, but it's obvious, it's real and not even that can kill this vibe he swore he'd chase until I was dead. This has been like he's been raised from the dead. He felt the roads were paved with gold. That's what my father said, first time I walked in on him with a needle. The sweet thing like cinnamon that I can understand him taking, now. How he could laugh about the sheriff beating his head in, trying to steal the pcp he didn't have, never even tried.

He never was the same after that, but I'm happy I got to make him laugh, the one time he wasn't screaming at me or my mother in between trips.

He's glad he can laugh out of nowhere if it still scares the hell out of Toby, because it's god damned
hilarious how they used to ask if I was high. Somehow it got easy to fast forward.

How Fabienne Growley didn't have the heart to release the footage from his own interview.

No cop even tries to even touch him but Lucifer.

Sometimes he's just happy he doesn't care.

They find him, call him in to Lucifer and he takes over from there. Everyone tries to ignore him but him.

There was a time I moved someone else's work instead of taking it.

It's hilarious because he needs it to be like a fucking dream I'm living in.

Neither of us even knew how hard life was and he don't even think about it now because...

But he can still laugh that prey are still furious about how easy they think we all got off, still saying we're out of control, out of their control, out of...

Out of...

Who?

Who was it like me that didn't care how hard it was?

No.

No this is still working, they're not killing this high, it just needs more time, it needs more popped.

He tried committing him then keep committing and he does, he takes a little bag out his shirt pocket and he swears to god he does but they won't make it stick, the plastic sticks to his pawpads and he can check out any time then he's going to voluntary centers, he's taking whatever he's shaken out the bag but they keep saying he's not related, not bad tasting going in, not a married relation or they could make it so he couldn't just... ...What are they talking about, again? Write it out of the book, right there. Whatever it takes for him not to read the present, the past and a future without... ... When something keeps coming back, I'm doing that thing someone hated, and as long as he doesn't know what it is, it's only reminding him time to pull out his little bag of pill for some reason robitussin's wearing off against.

Before I can make it worse.

Still in his paw and sure, he just swallowed one but sure, fuck it. But it already is. He spends every day nauseous on no options against all the ones the Fox has and keeps taking. Just play it safe and shake another one out. Fight it down with that dried out mouth of his and "You see?! You see this fucking shit I gotta live with?! I said we gotta talk around however you can help me and he still figured it out to go an keep TAKING THAT GOD DAMN CRAP LIKE IT'S GONNA..."

The fake plastic relief that wears him out.

It's suddenly become the last thing on his mind.

"Change the station."

A song just started and it's the last one either of them could deal with this Fox hearing.
Toby hasn't been around him to watch what Andrew never wants to again. He doesn't get it, that's
got him looking at Andrew like what could be wrong with Take Me to Your Best Friend's "JUST
CHANGE THE STATION!"

Going around this roundabout, oh, yeah, that's finally got Toby on his toes and his hooves on the
remote, Take Me to Your Best Friend's House and Toby's trying to "CHANGE THE DAMN
STATION BEFORE HE HEARS-"

But I was Late for This, Late for That, Late for the Love of my Life.

Eva.

Love of my life.

Eva, my life.

My past life, Eva.

Life.

Eva is Life.

Eva.

And When I Die alone, When I die Alone, Die, I'll Be On Time.

What a Deer doesn't get and a Wolf knows is coming.

Because Eva means Life.

This is when it connects.

That's where I'm going back to.

A fact that Ferret girl named Eva was the love of my life. Past Tense, Has Been, Was, Will Never Be
Again BECAUSE WHAT HAS BEEN HAS COME AND LEFT AND IN THAT ACTION OF
LEAVING HAS RETURNED TO SOMETHING THAT ISN'T BECAUSE IT ISN'T
OCCURRING BECAUSE IT OCCURRED BECAUSE IT IS NOT NOW BECAUSE IT IS
GONE AND LIFE IS GONE BECAUSE LIFE WAS IN A GIRL NAMED EVA THAT I
LOVED IN THE PAST TENSE AND CANNOT LOVE NOW BECAUSE LIFE IS BECAUSE
OF LOVE AND LOVE IS LIFE AND LIFE IS GONE BECAUSE MONTHS, WEEKS, DAYS,
HOURS, SECONDS AGO, MY GOD FORSAKEN LIFE WAS TAKEN FROM ME
BECAUSE MY LIFE WAS IN A FERRET NAMED EVA BELETTE AND IN THIS
HOLLOWED OUT PIT THAT IS MY BODY MY MIND HAS NO FUCKING SOUL TO
FRAME IT LIKE THE BONES ACHING UNDER MY MUSCLES UNDER MY ORANGE
FUR AND WITHOUT THAT SOUL THERE IS NOTHING TO KEEP MY MIND IN MY
BODY SO OUT OF COURSE BECAUSE I HAVE NO MIND BECAUSE THERE IS NO
SOUL AFTER THERE IS NO LIFE WHEN I GAVE MY LIFE TO HER AND THEY TOOK
IT FROM ME BECAUSE THEY TOOK HER FROM ME AND...

And...
I Can See You From The Dark With You Above Me.

The efforts of thousands of chemical formulas, hundreds of researchers, decades of work, billions of dollars, a half dozen pharmaceutical conglomerates will all come crashing down, now.

To the chorus of mournful angels.

Now, they will do nothing.

I'm coming back to where I didn't want to be.

But I'll play the part.

As the emotions I took their products to freeze solid will boil over and wash over my walking corpse.

My palms will tremble as they raise to the sides of my face.

Every hair on my body will raise.

This carpet bomb stampede that're my deconstructed feelings will blot out the sun and decimate my land, now.

Every hell of every religion will take me, now.

My mouth is wide open. There is screaming. My ears hear it centuries after the fact that I am screaming, now, I am howling at the top of my lungs and reeling in the most agony I've ever felt and clutch at the sides of my head.

The ceiling revolves around the blades of that fan I'm looking to.

I'm spinning. Rolling forward from Toby's sofa and reeling into a spastic thrashing curled up ball in the death throws of my body and mind and soul without life.

My fists pounding into the sides of my head, Andrew springs forward and comes over me, holding at me and "OWEN, OWEN HOLD ON, LET IT GO! LET IT FUCKING GO!"

Hold on.

Let go.

My body springs out. Eyes bulging. Explode. My limbs like a roach's when it's dying on it's back. Like a sun explodes. I have exploded into a bellowing wail on such a scale that a nebula will remain long after I'm gone from here. Future generations will see it millions of years from now. After the fact. Without paws and hooves grabbing at me there like they are here, where my teeth sink down the soft soil of flesh to press into the frame of bones.

Hold On.

A crying out.

Andrew reeling back and for that one moment, I see eyes filled with so much hurt from that betrayal.

That I've bitten him. Without an instinct for anything else but to run.
To run, and run, and run, and to run the door, and to run from the threats, and to dodge two sets of hooves and slip through the crack and to run down the hallway and to run from the chase and jump down the first flight of stairs to fall and to get up and see two frightened pair of eyes lunging for me and to bolt and run on all fours down the next flight and clear the next jump and to run through the lobby and fly out the exit just given to me by a prey girl I've frightened so bad she's fallen down backwards with me climbing her and running down the sidewalk and running to my bike and jumping on...

Until I've suddenly realized everything I just did. What I've become. How much of a savage I am, that I just bit my best friend staring back at me. At a full sprint. Because after all I just did...

He's just trying to save me.

That he's helpless to, with my foot slamming down on the kickstart so hard it gets the engine fired up on the first try.

Because I can't stop my other foot from kicking the clutch up to first.

This paw from twisting up the throttle.

And I can't stop my one chance to get away from happening.

It's automatic and it's instinct, flying me forward as I look into Andrew's eyes for the last time.

And I couldn't say sorry any louder with my mouth than I am with these eyes. With all of my guilt in them, looking to him and not the source of the blaring out of a horn.

I'm swerving myself out of a head on collision without even seeing what I nearly crash into.

It's automatic and it's instinct and a place for the end I wish was here.

I've swerved myself out of a head on collision without even seeing what I nearly crashed into. An arm and my bitemarks and a knowing how undeserved it was and a wish I was already dead. But I left the scene. I've left the help Andrew was just trying to get me.

The last person I had that hadn't given up is a mile behind me, already.

Two miles.

Five.

The City's going past me that fast. All these buildings, mammals gone with the wind. The wheels will guide me and the engine try to distract, but it won't. It couldn't. Nothing can. This is just a moment of clarity. I could try to take enough not to wake back up and it wouldn't stop it. But I could try to use it while the traffic tries to dodge me. I can try to tell myself it's alright, it's ok, it's alright, it's ok, turn it 'round, it'll be right, it is, I believe it is, I want to be, I can make it...

I can't...

I can't undo what's come to me in the middle of an apex I'm sliding out the rear wheel through, in the middle of fishtailing so hard I should have been thrown off three times in a row.

I should have died three times in less than a second and it can't be ignored: How could I let myself turn into this?
I can't stop asking it. I can barely see through how hard I'm crying, everything is so loud I can barely hear myself screaming out how.

I can't stop telling myself I didn't spend a whole red light howling it out to some big cat in a Taxi I scared bad enough to make him climb out the driver's seat to the front passenger's because I did.

I'm still seeing that look on his face. The look on hers. I can't undo it. The face of the last friend I had left that was still trying to help me. What I became. What the muddied blur of everything around me is now, leaning to the asphalt beside me in the turns and sending the front wheel airborne in every straight.

She's fucking gone and left what we imagined together.

If I'm still running red lights and somehow dodging one front bumper after another, the rear wheel's sliding at every one I'm not and burning out to green lights.

I can't tell what I'm doing but I can see it now. I dove too deep.

I went so far I couldn't even see that ewe in the dark. I think my right paw's sore from breaking a mirror off a car but I can't unsee them. I can't get the ghosts of everyone past me out of myself. The front brake lever must've broken my pinkie.

These drugs have never worked. I can't stop seeing that last look she gave me.

I can't get out that the DA should've been more than thrown out of office for making them make it her and not me they saved and just for another fucking term of office.

I can't stop seeing her face.

I can't stop thinking and I can't stop wishing that it'd get me killed already but I don't even know where I'm going. The blur that goes from gray to green. It was unfair, the game cheated and I didn't even have a say in playing it.

It just happened.

She just died just so they could have me for a trial that never happened. They didn't have the heart.

How am I the lucky one?

Why the hell can't I just find the blue tulip extract that no dealer will even touch just so I could be mindless? I'm already savage and I just want it official.

They got excited. They got excited over a false flag and they already don't owe me what I'm experiencing and it makes it not even matter if they still own me. I bit a friend I never deserved then I ran away and the facts have nothing else matter but the one: I don't wanna be anywhere. I don't wanna know how Downtown's already behind me and I'm in Rainforest. I don't even want to remember. I dove too deep to even see Bellwether right in front of me. See what I should've seen, seen with everything Espada told me I shouldn't have forgotten if I had the chance to do a damned thing about it all and I can't stop seeing Eva through these tears through these eyes through this fucking sprinkler rain I'm going too fast that I'm still not hydroplaning over.

I was too there in the present. The game wasn't fair.

I'm still there in her eyes and under her skirt and it licks that pred is a brand but it clicks that noone saw eye to eye but her and we shared visions and kisses but I guess it's something Bellwether meant
that a pred is a brand, not a mammal and it means that the feelings and the present has dissonance against all the facts.

This is a mental breakdown without a conclusion. I loved and I'm no longer. She left me here. The front wheel stayed straight inspite of the scrape of the left handlebar across the whole passenger side of the minivan. All the dope in the world hasn't been enough to stop me from doing all that thinking she hated. This truck just swerved into the shoulder instead of letting me back my face through the grill and through the radiator. I shouldn't be out of breath but I shouldn't be here and I shouldn't be breathing, I shouldn't be thinking and I should already be under the bike and on the road and ran over into a pulp a hundred thousand hundred thousand million times already. But I can't have a god damned thing. Not even the death I've been looking forward to for days like weeks like months like years like decades.

I was dealing with too much and it licks that I wish I only had as much now. I want it back, I want 2015 back because her fear was a collar but our love was unchained but they made her do it, Bellwether made them make me become what I became without Eva.

They made her leave and there's no going back, no taking back, nothing to give in exchange. I'm free and I don't want the experience anymore. Whatever this is that's come after life but before death. I can't stop trying to scream. It hurts. I think I asked it before but where? It all just hurts. Where can I even go from here?

We didn't see eye to eye and we've never seen eye to eye to make it seem that we don't appear that we could ever be seen or seem eye to eye.

We don't see eye to eye. The system's still in place. A summer didn't stop it, a flower reinforced it and the reveal didn't end it and it licks that a pred is a brand and the definition is dissonant.

They can't even take a look at what they've done. What they had left after they took the rest from me.

It couldn't be known and it couldn't be studied and love like ours could never be defined and it can never be felt again because I'm trapped here, my body is free and a cage for a girl that came too late that I never got to marry, who I didn't get to hold enough that I didn't spend every moment fucking and kissing and hugging and loving and and and

and

AND

and

AND

and

AND and AND and AND and AND and AND and AND

AAAAAAAAAAAA"AAAAAAAAANNNNNNN!'NNNNNNNNND

...And I've lost it so hard, the rear wheel's locked down on one stretch of tread going up in smoke to the asphalt under it.

To the fishtail sliding I'm not correcting toward the foregone conclusion.

This is a cliff and that is a guardrail.
The less of me, the merrier.

Let me highside, let the wobble throw me off and let me fly into the guardrail let me wrap around that tree let me bounce down the cliff let me let me let me just for fuck's sake just let me...

Let me...

But I'm not in control.

But the reflexes kicked in and this god damn bike didn't Guide me like the name implied.

I can imagine it and wish it all I want.

I'm not dead.

I'm only screaming.

I'm just not alive.

I want a bar, I want a club, I need a room full of people that can just beat me 'til I die.

I want a blue tulip you can't even buy anymore.

I need a crash that'll kill me.

They took it off the flower shop market and they kept it for themselves, this body's so disconnected from what I want it won't even let me make it stop functioning to just let me go already because she kept her name, she kept my life, she left me to lose my mind and I don't know why she abandoned me.

She didn't have a choice.

It's not her fault.

That's the part that hurts the most.

Leaves me with all I've been left with is wishing it was me, wishing fate had let me give my own damned body and hadn't leave me to slam this Vulpon through the Meadowlands to hope and pray the next lean into a corner kills me.

Like every corner before it should have already.

Like tearing my own stomach back out after they put me back together should have.

Like trying and taking every last thing I could get my paws should have done me in.

I'm not even moving. I rolled a whole mile with the right paw off the throttle because I've been
pounding the top of the tank with it.

I haven't been moving. I haven't moved for a whole year.

I can't.

The scenery and the folks in it just moved around me.

I'm out of breath. I can't feel my fist pounding on the tank.

But I don't even want to fight it, anymore.

I'm just looking at a gas tank's cap and knowing I could huff all the fumes I want 'til I pass out or die.

It's not gonna change this. This is just this. Nothing's gonna change all of this.

The dope's only stopping me from feeling how broken my pinkie is.

Didn't matter if we had souls. If I ever had one. If Eva still has one to mean that she existed and still continues. If the whole reason we could get high off of music was because we had something only the ethereal could touch. We could've all been just like them and it wouldn't change their world.

They didn't know it. They couldn't see it. They'll never get it.

I can't even hate any one of them that did this to us. To every last mammal they could to have it cost every last thing it was going to just to try and bring the past back around.

They didn't want to know me and they never could.

He tried.

They made us so strange and foreign from the world we just wanted to be a part of, no one else could see me but Eva but they'll deny what it meant.

Andrew tried. He gave it everything he could.

I just had to go become what they always wanted out of me. The only thing they were comfortable with me being. The confirmation of all they were ever told. The dismissal of everything I was. I've become the only thing that ever mattered to them.

I'm not a person, anymore. They wanted a minstrel.

This doesn't even hurt like I thought it would. There ain't enough of me left to feel it.

If it's really better now, then the world's still somewhere I can't feel a part of. They took my part of it.

They'll keep us separate and they'll keep their hate. She could still exist and she'll be waiting on someone I'm not. They can keep their hate. I've clinched my teeth so hard, I think one of the bad ones finally cracked. You keep your hate.

Everything I'm high on is only doing their jobs. They can't help me stop thinking. I don't even want to fight it, anymore.

I want to light it, I want to light it, wanna light the gas with a match and I don't have a box so what's the point?
I won't get rid of her like that.

...But maybe she's still out there.

Maybe I can find her.

Maybe this whole time I've just been told something else and the reason it doesn't fit is that I only have to cross that one bridge or round that one corner or walk through that one door.

And then I'll see her, right where she's been this whole time.
Waiting for me.

...This second wind ain't the pills or the needle or the bottle kicking back in.

Doesn't matter how delusional I am.

She came back to me before and I remember what that Polecat told me.

All she needs is to know where I am. Ain't nothin'll stop her.

I can smile without needing medicine.

So I'll ride this Vulpon and I'll try to go there.

She's just gotta see me.

And in the meantime, I'll go to a gas station and buy a lighter. If I still gotta die by then well then I will. Maybe douse myself at the pump and ride the bike a safe distance from everyone else. But it's like how I always had to blackmail my father: You can put it off. You can always put it off and see what happens next.

I'll look for a place for the end, either way. I'll just look for her, too.

I'll know it when I see it. It'll happen it's be meant to, when it does, as it should.

But I'll look at how bloody my knuckles are right now, and somehow find a way to laugh it off.

And I already got it. I already am.

It's alright to see a ghost in my head, in the meantime.

It just means I've found her there, next to me, like a song.

And That's all the proof I need about us being real live mammals. That's all the reason I need to take this banged up paw and gently lay it back on the throttle.

I'll let what comes next happen and I'll appreciate it, this time. Anything after that is all me.

...The scenery is moving around me. I won't stop it anymore.
This road is beautiful. Nothing like it was before.

Everything’s coming to me like a music video. The moment doesn't need anything I've taken to make it any better than it is by itself.

I could overdose a Horse with a blood transfusion but the pills aren't doing this.

Moving on forward has happened on it's own.

So I'll take over from here.

I'll ease my left paw off the clutch and give the throttle a twist like I'm learning how to ride all over again. Put my feet back on the pegs and my toes to the shifter and rear brake.

There's somewhere ahead of me and I'll accept it, now. It's not Zootopia and I wanna see what it is. As the treeline above opens up and lets the sun out. While the cliff side starts to level out and the guardrail starts to end. There's a place ahead of me I've never seen. Like a magnet that beckons my metal toward it and I need where this Vulpon's guiding me so much closer. To let this matter. To make that count. I've wasted enough time. I've wigged out like I gotta tell myself never to, ever again. I'll ride this bike and I'll appreciate it, this time. I'll let it take me back to how I'd imagine this when I was a kit, years ago. Remember how I always saw something like I'm seeing here when I heard it through the house.

As dark as it always was to save electricity. He'd play that Almond Brothers song about Foxes bearing sorrow, having fun, as the needle moved his dealer's work up his vein. I'll let it be a happy memory. I'll remember worshipping those stories about his easyrider days in Zootopia, instead of him telling me to do as he said not done, in spite of all that yearning he had to do it all again. Go back when it didn't matter to him if Prey didn't even like it when their own rode motorcycles, or whatever excuse a younger pred like him could give for getting on one. I grew up wanting to relive him. Even if wide eyed, with a future slow, my father tried to get me to change my view. I still saw the rot that had led up to that final fight he had with my mother to convince me not to get like him. How bitter he became.

That's why I left for Zootopia. I don't regret it. It's just that I was in love with a place in my mind, where it's not welcomed anymore. Doesn't matter where it went wrong. If it was ever right. If the tree line over me is starting to end with the cliff side and guardrail to my right. If I've become something else that's still like my father... I think I'll run it to it's course. Just do it better. See it through to the end like he didn't. I'll do it right, blow through the asphalt like I blew threw the settlement and let it give me something better. Because it's not gonna replace anything. But maybe it's gonna prove that I ain't gonna need nothing else, in the meantime. Might even take me back home to her. This could still end with us having everywhere to go.

I'm still high. Done things today I'll be better off to never remember.

I've made a lot of mistakes. I'm still seeing her and I don't mind.
She's just there.

I'll try not to sing out of key again. I'll try to make my own peace. I'm thinking too much but I'm doing it right like she wanted me. With the right narrative. I'm crying in the way I ought to be and smiling like I ought to. Taking what I need from this to be haunted the right way. To take this road at a strawberry swing pace. Gliding down the straight like I'm not waiting on anything else to happen. That's a three way intersection ahead of me. Not sure why it's got a Yield sign instead of a Stop.

But I'll stop for a moment. I need to get rid of nothing and I owe it to address something. That I can never pay Andrew back. Won't ever undo what I've done. But the least I owe him is a text that says I'm leaving, thanks for what he tried, but I'm sort myself out and here's to hoping noone's gonna hear about me again. All things I hope he'd know if I didn't say as much.

First things first, though.

Reach into my shirt pocket with a right paw too banged up to have the dexterity I need for this. Prove it to myself, before I can tell him I'm going to. Remind myself it's alright. I'll commit to it. With my eyes closed as my arm winds up. I've made a lot of mistakes. But it's alright. This isn't a waste.

If I've done this before, it will be the last time. I won't need this, next time I see her. So I'll hope to be worth it to make it worth giving this throw my all.

I won't miss this chance to live, I've only started to enjoy it again an I've already done it...

I've thrown it as hard as I could...

...I think I lost something. I think I'm losing something...
...That's rod knock I'm hearing from the engine.

I rode it so hard, so violently, that all those stock internals from forty eight years ago are about to fly through the block.

When's the last time I checked the oil?

The rattle is bad enough, I don't think to flick the ignition off.

I think this is it. It's not coming back if I turn it off. This thing is going to die. And I don't think I care.

So why am I starting to panic?

Nevermind. I don't have to mind, if I don't want to.

I can invent something.

I can try to find somewhere where I can just remain, try to stay at peace about it and I think tonight, if I haven't for a year and I never will again, I'll try to do just this one time: I'll let the ghost sleep tonight.

I think I'll try to let it happen, for once. I'll let her sleep, just to shut her eyes and burn the past and burn our life away.

I threw it, so why am I even looking for it?

Because I threw it as hard as I could.

...It just slipped out my grip to land a little closer than I'd like...

Nevermind.

I don't want to pick the bag up... I really don't.

Nevermind I can pick it back up, this isn't me that wants it back.

If I ain't got the bike for much longer then I still got roads. I don't need to pick it back up. I need to get away and I can text Andrew when the motor blows up.
I don't want it, I just... I'm not dead and I'm not alive. I've just been looking for something.

And that's when I realize it's found me.

That's when I feel it.

What's haunted me my whole life. That's here now that I'm here, too.

I'll know it's there to the left and just outside of my view. Because without needing to turn my head to the the left, I feel it's gaze on me looking down like the sun.

I look anyway. To a black and white car with a Sheep driver and a goat partner under a light bar and behind a bumper guard.

It knows me. They recognize me. I know what this is and what it looks like.

This isn't gonna be an arrest, but what it's come down to: That thing Andrew told me not to do, last year.

They're waiting to bag me. I could give them an excuse.

They don't care if I'm going to or not. If I'm stone cold faced to letting it end, to what I've been made to have happen, waiting for what's been coming since I was born.
To have my last sight be pairs of hateful eyes.

I told myself I'd know it when I saw it, and if they've been with me my whole life... Then they could be a kindness, this one time.

A Fox's life is a hunt and it means that I've had to give in, someday.

They've got their minds made up, anyway.

A Fox's last look is that softest knowing smirk to someone else's plot.

So I'll let it happen.

I've waited here for this.

Because if she still exists, if cloven hoof clinching, plastic creak to steering column flex, if shoulders hunched, eyes leering forward, thought laid bare, if fate culminates, with brake pedal pressed to a shift from park to drive, hoof to the gas, to RPM building up and if button pressed, disco light flashing will bring me back to her, then I will do just that much.

With my earnest smile, I'll let them know with one last twist of the throttle and a repeat.

How do you like me, now?

Hats off to my second birth, this rev to launch, a lurch of steel against the brakes, rear end hunkered down, bullguard forward climbing to strike my leg between motors, red and blue LED cycling, behind a grill, over a roof, a screech of tires, a puff of drivetrain smoke, to loose suspension creak, pistons screaming, heads moaning under tired block straining, for differential whirring under load.
I'll let the hunt's ghost have it's exorcism.

I'll die for them and if she's behind a wall of breath, that swells 'round the soul whose meaning can be touched, I got myself on Fire with hope she'll Be there and I'll See her, I've got my bet against the doubt I'll feel her feelings crackling, that I will See her and I will Feel her, for every cubic Inch of motor, they're going to make me Mean it, with every single Ounce of hate, they're going to make me Deem it, with every single Drop of blood, they're going to Make me Mean Those words I'll sigh.

"...i'm glad it's you..."

Fast forward VHS distortion, frame cycle repeat, eyes locked on the driver's, and it comes on the front of a deadly weapon's bullguard raising, the goodbye I was bound to with the front of a squad car lifted up by the torque and at a swallowing angle while the Bullguard sinks into my left leg, to see me on my bike forced down under an undercarriage, against the moving parts and bone crushing weight. Bike and body as one, smashed together to make a goodbye where there is cracking, pops and limb by limb, by torso, by face, with adrenaline to do what no pill, no designer, no nothing else ever could: Let me not feel anything at all. As what's merged to become me catches to lift the law off it's back wheels.

With what's left of me and that bike catching the plastic rear bumper to pry it off. Their rear wheels land on the grass past the shoulder. Like a pound of the stick on the drum the cymbals follow, the sliding roll of tires against the wet earth, as the front cascades into the pond at the end of the slope. The big country echo of everything that just happened reverberating with me looking at me.

There, when I can't move... I can't move.

This disconnect. This home. I've been trying to find it for a year. That swell of bittersweet violin.
It's finally here.

With everything broken. Something pouring into my lungs. Anything my heart can do to pump without rhythm. And nothing left for me to do but stare...

It's a big hard sun. Reflecting in my eyes. Beating to a better tempo than my spilled blood flow.

This is me smiling like I haven't for a year. That's whooping and hollering climbing toward me. The bumper between me and the bike's wreckage.

"Boy I tell you, that's a Dead Fuckin' Pred I'm looking at!"

Gasoline's leaking out the tank.

"You Fucked that Fox right up!"

There's wires exposed.

"That's roadkill if I ever seen it! I got his fucking ass!"

Ignition's still on.

"We gonna call this piece of shit in, sir?"

And they're gonna ignore all that.

"Not until he's done breathing now shut up, just watch this fucking junkie pred die with me... I wanna savor this."

But I don't need karma, if I don't believe in it.

I'm drowning. They can watch. My skull's broken. They can point at where bone sticks out and the fur was peeled back.

Everything is bleeding out.

It beats fast.

And I'm grateful.

It beats faster.
He told him I left with brain hemorrhaging.

The heart, it beats and builds up beating.

I don't want revenge.

It beats without rhyme or rhythm.

It was fatal from the multiple ribs that punctured through my lungs anyway.

It only beats just to have that last drop of reason to hold me back with.

The took.

To beat, just skip tempo and beat, and build up the pace of itself to beat and beat and beat.

I know this, because it's in the autopsy report.

To beat itself against the collapsed ribcage, to drown the lungs, to flood my brain.
I don't a cycle of revenge.

And beat and beat and beat.

I was there.

Beating and beating to beat, to throb and crash and pump and shake and falter...

I am back here.

The taking, and the beating.

I don't want to fight anymore.

And the beat.

On the ground.

And The beat.
Took.

The attempt to beat.

I am smiling, I'm almost laughing.

To try and regain pulse.

I don't want fighting.

To try and beat.

I can feel the blood pooling up in my mouth and in sudden fit of coughing, puaked red into the white wool'd face of that stupid looking Sheriff and I am now crying.

To pump that last drop.

Taking.
To shutter.

I am feeling the tears of joy washing over me as he kicks me, curses me, and fails to understand he's given all I asked.

And give way like the rest me.

Wouldn't stand anyone to shed unless they were mutual.

To silence with no sound left to hear but the wind.

I'm happy and full of drunken song because it's over, it's over, it's done and I don't want revenge, the pursuit, the fighting, the repeat, the cycle of revenge, I don't want to fight this death or these last two prey I had to share my life with.

The road.

Don't need anyone to dare shed a tear over this ending because I'm glad and that I've got better things, now.
The water.

I'm just glad, so don't argue with the narrative.

The grass.

The observation that the land is for the weary, the sea is for the end, and I don't even have to try now, I'm swimming whether I want to or not but I do, I want to and I don't got no mind, no body, no spirit to fight something I don't want to fight.

Blow off.

Cause it was a bittersweet symphony, that life.
Look down.

That revenge, our fighting, their taking, and I'm just done with it.

Turn away.

I have other songs I want to hear.
Get gone.

All my life I got carried away, held on to this as long as I could, I was a Fox.

Livin' ain't a concern anymore. I'm back in love, again. Now that it's over, we'll be good as married forever again. Inside a universe made just to be seen by our eyes, here.

All over again.

We don't have to be defined by anything here but the narrative we choose.

So don't pity the dead. Because when you get Here, it heals pasts that futures never would. The reconciliation wrapped in the inevitable. Leaves me open to choose to tell you about that life like the present because I lived in the moment so much, I guess it shouldn't surprise you that I still feel time all the same now, just so much more Objectively Fucking Literally.

I just got a choice, now. Which means I can go back to the start. I want a repeat and I'm gonna have it. Like a chorus.

I'll cross over, she's been patient, and we'll be again. Like a never ending song.

Friday. Beautiful, beautiful day. The traffic is frozen still in time, because there's noone in these cars for me to dodge, to infuriate, there's noone here that doesn't get me. Noone to derogate or deride me.
Define or dismiss. I'm back here, how I wanted it. And I'm running down the yellow line of this Downtown street, in between the empty vehicles like I'm never gonna run out of breath. Because I'm not. For a motorcycle it's size, that Ranger had such a perfect song. Like a Hoggley but better. The same snarl, but in a higher tone and more soul. Sure, the thing was loud. That was the point: I Loved every last decibel I could get to drown everything out, back there. But I don't need it here.

I want to hear everything, now.

It's not like I could've found happiness like this in any other way, except in the arms of my one true life. And that's where I'm going. To her. To Eva. She's waiting for me, in that little cubbyhole of good memories of friends from before. Marula Park. She's waiting there for me, now. Without worry, no need for patience. She still wants me and I'm coming over to meet her. Won't have to tell her I'm sorry, if that word's for the living, now. She'll know how lovely she is, and I can tell her she is. Without need, now. Just to tell her for other reason if it's still obvious. Now, going back to the start for good memories we didn't get to make together before that Friday night. We're gonna make them, now. Here, in this city that's a ghost town that we got all to ourselves. We're beyond that conspiring, now.

We're free, now. We'll lie awake forever, now.

We're gonna dream this escape until the end of time, now. Now. Now will last long after we get tired of storming through neverland. After we settle down, like we never got to settle down until Forever Now came along. We'll remember and get to see what we wanted to be, now, until there's nothing left for us to do but turn around, see the view, and see the distance we tried to run from everyone. I know this sounds weird, but that's your problem now. I don't have to water this down. What I'm after, being what I'm finally getting. I'm just haunting you because... I'm not defined, anymore. I can't be filtered. But you wouldn't get that, right now. Nobody but Eva ever got it, before I got it too. On the roof of a train station. By a shipping container. In a hallway.

And it's times like 8:43 on the sun's position, that for a brief moment where time stands still, I can feel so pure and free from weight, from a past life's burdens and the trouble with living. I'm done with you and the living. And because of this, now that it's finally begun, I have a smile on my face. I do a pouncing somersault, roll back onto my feet and just keep running. I feel like a bird, and for now, finally, for all time, nothing new and nothing other will ever again hold this music back as I fly past a familiar truck. Running up and down the sides of cars and trucks, taxis and vans. So many songs, all at once. You don't even know how it feels to hear all of those songs that touched your soul all at once. To feel them through the ground and the air and see them in the morning sky and the buildings and to just...

To become.

But one still sticks out over all the others. On the razor's edge of this yellow lane strip I'm running over. Where the lyrics resonate over and over and over to the beat of my feet. I couldn't live it, then. But I've become that, now. Running through the intersection of a city with no other sound but the echo of her singing getting closer. That song they wouldn't listen to and the radio wouldn't play. I'll sing it with her, now. Let her know I'm coming from the bottom of my lungs to the top of my heart. We're gonna be anything we wanted that never had to be challenged. I got it and I'm gonna give it. We're gonna live the only way to last after the fact. And if you still don't understand, it's alright. You'll get there. But if you like it, you can still sing along.

So say it with us:

Take the weakest thing in you,
And Then Beat The Bastards With It,
And Always Hold On When You Get Love,
So You Can Let Go When You Give It,
Give It,
Give It,
Give It,
Give It,
Give It,
Give It.

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