Guardian Blue: Season 2

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Summary

Judy is still reeling from the events of the last month, and she is very much ready for things to calm down so she recover and also come to terms with how she feels about the fox she nearly lost. But, when it rains, it pours. They will take an assignment that challenges their comfort zones, and they will uncover a plot that may go beyond Zootopia itself, and into the most untamed reaches of their world.
Author’s Note:

For those of you just joining the story, Guardian Blue: Season 1 is already available in its entirety to read and I recommend reading that before you read any of this fic, as it might be a little confusing otherwise! Also, if you have not read “Thanks for the Fox” that is also important background to the story. Those who have been patiently awaiting the release of Season 2 after having read season 1, welcome back! Let’s get fluffy.

As always, I do not own the characters, the concept, the world, the names, blah blah blah, I write this for fun, mine and yours, so let’s all enjoy!

Guardian Blue: Season Two

Episode 1: Perspective

All that I am…

Judy widened her eyes as he began to talk. She recognized that. Where did she recognize that from?

All that I was…

Wait.

All that I ever shall be…
Judy’s eyes widened even more, ears pinning back as her heart nearly seized up. It felt like time itself nearly stopped. This was the vow Nick had explained to her when she was medicated and on the mend from being hit by the bus. What was he doing?! Judy glanced just slightly to the side at her smiling and oblivious parents, but Nick’s mother was more or less behind her where she was standing.

*I give unto thee.*

Judy began to breath faster. She didn’t know what she was supposed to even say back, wasn’t there supposed to be a question asked first, then arrangements and planning? No, Nick said it was usually just the parents, and he made a point that he had to be looking into her eyes. She thought to look away, but that thought seemed… terrible. This moment was important to Nick, wasn’t it? She couldn’t just ruin it. Judy hadn’t dated much before, sure, but she was positive this wasn’t how it all worked.

*To love and protect…*

Judy’s breath hitched. Her entire mind focused onto a single word. Love. She loved him. She wasn’t able to deny that anymore, and the thought that he said that word to her, looking into her eyes, caused her to lock up. She couldn’t speak, staring intently into his green eyes, not sure she was even breathing at that point.

*To honor and to aid…*

If she didn’t say the words back was she ruining this? She felt a surge of panic running through her, her little nose beginning to wiggle. She couldn’t ruin this.

*Unconditional and unwavering in this life and the next…*

This promise was for more than the span of his life. She remembered that. This wasn’t a joke. This was not a situation where he’d pull out the coin and roll it around on his fingers with a smirk on his face. He’d never violate *this* tradition in front of his own mother like that. This was serious. This was actually happening.

*… may Fate never bear us apart.*
And the moment he said those words he leaned up and pulled Judy forward a little to where he was sitting on the couch, embracing her. She stood there, too stunned to speak, unable to move even to put her arms around the fox who just… what did he do? She didn’t say anything back. Was that okay? Was it required? She didn’t know enough to understand what just happened.

Nick leaned back again, wincing a little, seeming in pain since he’d not taken his medicine. Judy understood completely at that moment why. He wanted to be completely lucid for that. It was not a spur of the moment decision. He had thought about it. Judy realized suddenly she’d been crying, she didn’t know when that started, so she wiped her cheeks.

Stu was the first to speak. “Well that sure was beautiful Nick. That’s a right nice and proper show of gratitude and support. I think you two are gonna be just fine.” Judy looked over to her parents. Her dad seemed happy, but her mom seemed a bit surprised. She would be a lot more surprised if she knew what more about it, Judy considered. She looked down, realizing she was still holding Nick’s hand in hers. She turned a bit to look at Vivienne. She saw the lady fox dabbing her eyes gently with her long and elegant sleeve. She was smiling at least, so it didn’t seem that Nick had done something that his mom thought was wrong, but it was still obviously important.

Bonnie and Stu hugged their daughter tightly but carefully for a moment, letting her know they would be in town another full day if they were needed and to not end up back in a hospital the moment they got back to Bunnyburrow. Judy could barely crack a smile at the jest because her mind was completely consumed by what just happened. Was it a proposal? Was it binding to her somehow, or just Nick? Did she want it to be? It was alarming and confusing and her heart was racing from it. She needed to talk to him alone.

Fortunately, Vivienne stated that she wanted to get back so as not to keep her friend waiting for too long and she brought Nick his medicine from the cabinet in the bathroom and gave him some water so he could take the pills. Nick did so gratefully and hugged his mom again. Viv then gave a careful hug to the injured bunny even gentler than her parents had given, reminding her to take her medicine as needed as well. Vivienne touched her nose to Judy’s jaw with a little push that made her think of a familial sort of kiss and she supposed that’s what that gesture was intended.

Before Vivienne headed out, she looked to her son and said warmly, “I will let Skye know that we’ve all headed out so she knows to check up on you. I gave her my spare key like you asked. Just bring it back with you next time you visit.” Judy lifted her ears at that, having not realized that Vivienne had her own key, but it made sense. Judy was given her own key when Nick went to the academy after all. Finally the door swung shut, and the soft footfalls in the hall receded away, leaving the two in the apartment alone.

“T-minus 18 minutes until I am a rug.” Nick said with a smile. He was referring of course to the medication he had taken. He would be asleep soon. Judy snapped her attention to Nick and pulled one ear down tightly, teeth gritted, eyes wide.
“Nick what did you do?!” Judy was actually breathing heavily at that point, not even sure what she should ask first about what just happened. Nick actually seemed confused about what Judy meant at first which frustrated the bunny as she stood before her partner, actually heavily breathing, nearly panting with panic. She didn’t say anything back. If he had at least told her what she was going to do she would not have just stood there like an idiot in front of everyone for such an important… what ceremony? Confession? She didn’t even know!

Finally, Nick seemed to clue in to what Judy was exasperated about. He smiled calmly and spoke. “Ah, the vow. I just made a promise I fully intend to keep. Do you want a snack before bed? Your mom brought little powdered donuts.” Judy blinked at that. How could he be so casual after that? Was she completely mistaken about what it meant? She remembered that whole conversation so clearly.

“Nick, that was a muh…” Judy took a deep breath. “Those were marriage vows! In front of our parents. Looking me in the eyes!” She pointed at her eyes, as if maybe he didn’t know what those were.

Nick looked blankly at Judy a moment, still seated on the couch, tilting his head a little. He then straightened up, looking more alert suddenly. “What? Oh! No, Fluff…” His ears perked high and a wide grin spread over his long vulpine muzzle. “Carrots, those vows are used during a wedding, yes, but that’s not the only way they can be used. You were not really interested in knowing much else about fox weddings when I told them to you before. You just wanted to know about the vows. There’s certainly more to a fox wedding, and you definitely would have still gotten a choice in the matter before hand!” he laughed. Judy exhaled heavily, suddenly feeling silly. She had pestered him to get right to the words and not really let him explain everything. That was on her.

Judy spoke curiously, “Okay, but then… it’s still significant, right? What does it mean for you to say the vow to me like that?” Judy was calming down a little, but she was still very shaken by it. “The words still suggest… So much.” Judy considered in her reeling mind the word love. He had said it, but the vow simply said he gave himself to her to love and protect. He wasn’t specifically saying he loved her. He gave himself to her and she could love and protect him. She did not want to foolishly read more into the moment than she should. Nick looked quietly at Judy a moment and then patted the couch beside where he was sitting. Judy sat down and Nick carefully turned a bit to face her, mindful with his leg.

His tone was less relaxed and more serious as she looked up at him. “It’s very significant, Carrots. I already promised you before, when you seemed worried about how I might react to how other people mammals felt about me, and how close we are as friends. I’m not gonna leave. This promise tonight is more formal. This is to you, to everyone. I won’t leave you. No matter what happens, no matter what you do, what you say, who you associate with, where you go… you can count on me to be there with you through it all.” Judy found herself breathing a little harder. To use that vow to
make such a promise was intense and he made it in front of both their families. She could hardly get her head around what it took for a fox with trust issues to do that.

She spoke finally, her voice cracking a little. “In this life and the next?” She had almost lost him. What he said about him leaving made her remember very vividly. She had almost lost him outright. “Are you sure I’m the one who deserved to hear that promise, Nick? I know I am right to assume it’s kind of a big deal, it’s really okay to use it on me?” she asked. She worried that he might regret it if he ever got closer to someone else, and she could not deny that it would hurt her knowing that it caused him any trouble later. Nick gazed at the bunny for a few moments quietly, seeming to try to gauge her mood by how intently his eyes focused on her. She found herself looking back into them, trapped in them as she had before. When had she ever looked into a buck’s eyes like this?

The fox leaned to the side a little eventually and hugged Judy carefully to him. He spoke in a near whisper. “Judy… I won’t lie. That promise is important for a fox. I am only allowed to use it one time so we don’t just toss it around.” Judy gasped and straightened up, prepared to interrupt Nick, but he held up a finger and shushed her. “… And before you scold me for giving it to you… I will have you know I thought a very long time about this.” Judy lifted her ears, focused on Nick entirely. How could he just give such an important gift to her as that? She felt guilty for having it, but at the same time, her body tingled with joy that it was given.

“Nick, I…” Judy tried to interject, at least to tell the fox that she understood how important it was. Nick interrupted her, not wanting to let her say anything just yet, it seemed.

“You risked everything to find me when you thought I was already gone. Do you have any idea how unthinkable that is to me, with how I saw myself for almost my entire life? For what I thought anyone else saw of a fox in the city of Zootopia? Carrots, you didn’t just save me from dying. If you had not come into my life a year ago it barely would have mattered that I had ever lived at all.” Judy sucked in a breath at that, suddenly worried about what Nick’s opinion of himself had actually been back then. He seemed happy and energetic enough when they first met, but had he really been so unhappy? Had he seen his life as meaningless? He continued in that soft rumbling tone, “Judy, I didn’t make that promise because you saved my life. You keep doing these crazy things that make me wish I had some way to repay you for how much better you’ve made my life, and continue to make it every single chance you get without ever asking a thing in return.” Judy looked up, seeing a serious but kind expression on Nick’s face.

“Nick, you’ve never had to give me anything or even say anything. We’re friends! I know you would do everything you could for me.” She tried to be very genuine and firm with this, but her knees were shaking. The things Nick was saying were playing to her newly recognized affection with nuclear intensity. He could not possibly have any idea what this was doing to her.

The fox inhaled deeply, seeming to take a moment to carefully think about what he was saying. There was the chance that the medication was hitting him by now also, which likely made it harder
for him to think at all.

Finally, he spoke again. “Judy… when you showed up down there in that … place… risking what you did when you thought I was actually already dead… I realized that I wasn’t just some fox, or just your partner or even only your friend. You cared enough about me to die looking for me. As I looked at the bag you brought with you, knowing that you were afraid, injured, and maybe even trapped down there like I was…”

Nick trembled a little, his eyes closed tight, seeming to suffer through the memory. Judy stifled a squeak of emotion, squeezing Nick’s hand. That shook him out of it enough that he was able to continue, his eyes fluttering open and his voice lifting a bit. “I had been thinking so hard how to repay you all this time for all the things you’ve done. My new life… my happiness, my mother’s return… but thought I had nothing of real value that compared. Until that moment, Fluff. I knew then that had something this whole time you were willing to die for. It was not a hard choice to give it to you.” He smiled at Judy and she whimpered a little, speechless. She dropped her head against Nick’s chest and he put his hand behind it, stroking down her long velvety ears over her back as she softly cried.

She was so confused. Was this just an overwhelming act of friendship? Did he have any idea how she felt? Did he have the slightest clue how much kindling he’d just dumped into that fire? Nick carefully got up, despite Judy’s protests and made his way with his crutches over to the kitchen. He said sunnily, “I do not mean to make the mood so… somburr. Not while there’s donuts.” He wavered a bit. Judy realized the medicine was hitting him, and she carefully got up as well. She wanted to be there to help him to his room, as she knew he was not going to last much longer. He ignored her concern for the moment and pushed a hand into the little white bag with the tiny powdered donuts that he was so set on before. She sighed softly. She had thought about it before and considered it again. It didn’t have to change. Their life together did not need to be derailed because of everything. These were very hard days and there was a lot of emotion behind them, but things would go back to normal, right? Everything would feel the same as it did once they got back on duty and were focused on helping the city. That was normal, and it would be normal again.

She spoke up, laughing a little at her earlier silliness and wanting to help shake the mood a little. “So, to be clear, the vow is a promise, that you will never leave. I’m not expected to change my last name or anything?” She grinned at the fox.

“Nope! You don’t even gotta change your Snoothook relationship status! It’s a big and formal and pretty way to say ‘save a fox, win a prize!’” He sounded exactly like a carnival worker in the way that he said it. She laughed at that, keeping close to make sure Nick didn’t fall over. The bunny smirked to her partner, already feeling a little less shaken by the moment. His humor had a way of putting her at ease.
“Oh? And what do I win?” she asked. Nick held his arms out in a flaring gesture.

“A fox!” He had a little donut in each hand which only made him look sillier. Judy laughed at that even harder. “we’re a real pain actually. You gotta feed us. We like these little white powdery donut thingamabobs. So tasty.” Into his muzzle they went. Nick’s voice was a little raspy, and Judy figured it was probably because he was talking louder and faster. She would have to help him get into bed. A good, long night’s sleep would be exactly what was needed after a day like this. She looked forward to getting back to a casual routine.

“You okay to stand there without falling over for a moment while I take my medicine? Then it’s bed time. You aren’t long for this bag of donuts, Nick.” She grinned at the sleepy-looking fox. He waved her out.

“I’m fine, take care of yourself, Fluff.” He grinned at her as his tail swished side to side. He looked so happy. She turned and headed to the bathroom quickly as she could, really not wanting to leave Nick standing medicated like that but she worried that she might forget to take her medicine as tired as she was otherwise. She took the pill, washed it down and looked at herself in the mirror. The inside of her ears were so noticeably pink. She smiled with a sigh at herself. *You have it so bad you dumb bunny, what are you gonna do?* She sighed at herself and turned and headed back to help Nick to his room.

Judy turned back around and headed into the kitchen to see Nick with his muzzle turned up, the contents of a bottle of milk disappearing with his long pink tongue curled and pushed into the bottle to act as a funnel. Judy didn’t think anything at first then her ears fell back. She moved into the kitchen.

“Nick, please say that was just regular milk.” She took the bottle and looked at the blue bow her sister had put on it. Why?

“Nope. Sweet. Definitely grade-A bunneh!” Her partner gave a dopey thumbs up. Judy looked with some distress at the empty bottle. Nick was feeling happy and silly about this now but he’d be pretty embarrassed about that in the morning. How shameful. Bunny milk down the hatch again. She sighed softly.

“You know that’s not for foxes, right? Why would you drink that?” She shook her head, trying not to laugh at the ridiculousness of it all. She would so hold this one over his head for a while.
“Did **you** ever drink it?” he asked bluntly, his eyes looking heavy. Judy helped Nick move toward the bedroom. The sooner he was on his back and not likely to fall the more comfortable she would be.

Judy answered, “Yeah, of course. First couple years of my life, like most kits. But I’m a bunny. I’m supposed to.” She grunted a little as she had to be careful not to let him lean on her bad shoulder as he lowered himself to the bed. She helped him very carefully get his bad leg up onto the bed and pulled the covers over him, feeling almost motherly about it. Her poor, busted up fox. She was happy to take care of him.

Nick grunted as he got comfortable, wriggling a little to a position he liked. He spoke with a grin, “Yeah, well, you drank it for two years…” Nick laid back fully and looked up at Judy, “… and you carried a mammal twice your weight more’n a mile upward through the guts of the city with your shoulder out of joint and then kicked a freaking crater in the road in front of Palm Market just to drag me back into the light…” He blinked slowly, reflecting on that, seeming to have almost lost his train of thought before saying softly, “…so yeah - Imma drink the milk. I’ll suck down every drop of it that gets handed to me. I figure I’ll be able to *fly* if I drink enough.” He looked up sleepily with a grin and Judy shook her head, chuckling at that. What an incorrigible thing he was when he was medicated. Was she that bad? Judy looked down as his eyes began to drift, rolling back as they closed. He murmured softly, “Judy?…” She perked her ears and looked down at him, but he was gone. Sleep claimed him before he could say another word.

The bunny quietly made her way back to the couch, getting her blanket and pillow from the linen closet and sighing as she settled down. Even as the medication made her feel a little sleepier, it was hard to quiet her mind. She intended to tell Nick. She wasn’t going to hide it from him forever, but she was suddenly uncertain of his feelings about her. To make that kind of promise, one that even included the word she wanted to say… he loved her too, right? He had to. But was it the same? She turned a bit, lying on her good side which kept her bad shoulder safe. She’d learned to sleep like that already because it seemed like her whole time on this couch she’d been injured. She took in the lingering scent of the fox as she closed her eyes and tried to close her thoughts.

No matter what came next, there was the promise. The vow. She smiled and sighed softly. The only thing that she feared when it came to telling the fox how she felt… was the thing he just gave an unbreakable vow never to do. No matter how he felt, he was not going to leave her. She would tell him eventually. Still, what more could she even want than that promise?

Judy pushed a little closer into the back of the couch and let sleep take her.
Emptiness. Pain. Loss. Grief. He was gone. Of course he was gone, how could she be so naïve as to think anyone just came back? What kind of fantasies had she been taught as a little kit to think there was any happy ending to a loss as great as that? Did she really think it was possible to pull some stupid fairy tale ending from the void with her wits and her determination? This was the real world and a bunny didn’t just get an impossible second chance like that. As Judy opened her eyes she realized that she was crying. She was consumed by despair and rolled onto her back, wincing a little as she pulled in a deep breath, shuddering with pain that had no real physical component.

It had been a dream, it had to have been a dream. It was too perfect. It was damn near everything she could wish for served up with a big pretty bow. She then sat up quickly, head turning as she gazed across the darkened room to the dining room. It was real. It had been too real. A bow. There had been a bow, she remembered. She stumbled a little, still very much under the physical influence of pain-killers.

She grunted a bit as she moved to the dining room and stood in the door. An empty bottle of milk sat on the table where it had been left. Judy choked out a sob and clung with her one good arm against the door jam. When she woke she had been so sure it was all a dream and that she was alone and hopeless in that dark and quiet apartment. She had been so sure. Just like when she first lost him, she woke a few times and thought the tragedy itself had been a dream, unable to believe something so bad could really happen to her. She shook her head and dried her face. Judy looked at the clock on the microwave. It was 2:17 in the morning. She consoled herself for a little bit, looking at the bottle, looking at the bag of little donuts, looking at the signed paperwork sitting on the counter in the kitchen and the now blank marker board sitting near it. Sleeping safely in a room not a hundred feet from her was her fox. He was okay. She got him back. The darkness retreated from her heart quickly.

Judy finally exited the kitchen and went to the bathroom. Having tended to that she got up and headed back down the hall toward the living room to get back on her couch. She felt better. As she left the hallway though, her ears perked at a sound. She turned her head and listened a bit longer. Her heart dropped. It was a soft, whimpering but indiscernible cry from Nick’s room. Judy carefully opened the door. Nick was wrapped around a pillow on his left side, writhing softly, his face buried in it. As she got closer, she could hear what the cry was.

“I’m here. I’m here! I’m here.” He repeated it again and again. Judy gasped slightly, knowing exactly what was wrong. She moved quickly onto the bed, careful for his leg as she wrapped herself against his back.

“Wake up Nick – it’s okay. It’s alright, wake up!” She used a soft voice, not wanting to startle him, but she eventually had to use something a little closer to her regular speaking voice before he jerked a little and brought his face out of the pillow, gasping and waking slowly, shivering noticeably. He
turned rather suddenly and pulled Judy somewhat carelessly against his front. Judy guarded her shoulder as best she could so she wasn’t hurt by that. She tucked herself in against his front, finding at some point he’d abandoned his shirt.

The dream she had the morning everything went wrong flooded back into her mind. Held close, bare cream-toned chest, it was hard not to remember that. She gazed ahead at it, seeing his chest rising and falling a lot faster than it had in her dream, the fox quietly recovering from his near-panic. Judy reached forward, unable to resist the draw. Her little grey paw splayed into his lighter-toned fur. It was just as unforgivably soft as it had been in her dream. His heart was racing. He had been so upset.

Nick finally spoke with a shaky voice, “Sorry Carrots… I d-didn’t mean to wake you. I had an ugly dream.” He sighed. “I think the pills mess with my head. I was… I was back in the place.” He wrapped himself around Judy a little more tightly, a quiver running through his body. “It felt so real. I felt the mud on me, weighing me down, I smelled the smell, and I heard the sounds. I thought it was all a dream.” Judy grimaced as he said that, realizing that Nick’s suffering was not over yet. It was more than just their bones that had to heal from it all.

“It’s okay, I wasn’t sleeping, Nick, you didn’t wake me. I haven’t… I haven’t been able to shake the feeling that bringing you home wasn’t real. I… I don’t see you and I forget I found you. It hurt so much when you were… I mean… It’s hard to not feel it right now. It’s gonna take time. For both of us.” She wanted him to know that there was nothing wrong with him. It was expected that there would be some difficulty after what they both went through.

“Carrots I… Can you stay? Just for tonight?” he asked, still seeming a bit breathless. Judy sighed softly with gratitude at not being forced to ask the same thing herself. She would sleep better if she knew that he was okay and right there with her. Besides that, the few times she had slept close to him she had enjoyed it immensely so there didn’t even need to be an excuse as far as she was concerned. It was nice to be near him.

“I was honestly about to ask you the same thing,” she admitted. Nick moved his hand up to the back of Judy’s head, finding her ears pressed back. His hand drew down slowly, caressing them. Judy gave a full body quiver, relishing his gentle touch. She tucked in closer, nose pushed to his upper chest, nearly to his neck. Her mom would blow a fuse if she saw this. Judy just closed her eyes and felt herself already relaxing. This was everything she needed right then.

“I can… I can put a shirt on if you need me to, so you don’t have to lay there smelling fox all night.” He continued to stroke her long velvety ears. Judy felt so sleepy and content.

She murmured softly, “I actually like how you smell, it’s alright. This is fine. I’m comfy now, so I’m not moving.” She had rested facing away from him that time on the couch but there was no way
to do that this time. Her left side was injured, his right leg was injured. They had to lay facing one another. Judy put her right paw against Nick’s chest again and stroked down slowly to his tummy and back up again, relishing the softness. Then she felt a soft caress up her entire back as Nick’s tail drew in around her.

It wasn’t just contentment and security this time, it was pure euphoria. She tucked her head in closer and sighed. If she had been even the slightest bit unsure when she made the realization while talking with her sister before, there was no doubt now. She was completely lost in him. At least he didn’t seem to mind being close. She would enjoy however much of this she could have. Judy felt like she could have fallen asleep as fast as Nick had when he took his medicine, but she actually struggled to stay awake just to feel that soft fur between her fingers. With her hand pressed where it was to his chest, she could feel his heart beating, as always just a little slower than hers because he was larger. His hand remained on the back of her neck while she rested there. At first Judy was sure that her partner had quickly fallen back to sleep, but his voice gently broke the silence after a few moments.

“Carrots?” he asked softly.

“Mmh?” Judy barely answered. She felt so relaxed. Actually speaking felt strangely difficult.

“Did you really think I was just marrying you on the spot in front of our parents earlier?” Judy looked up, having to crane her neck a little with the position they were in. He was looking straight forward into the darkened room, but it was too dark for her to really see what his expression was. His tone sounded light and playful so she pouted. He wasn’t going to wreck such a perfect snuggly moment teasing her about her ignorance of fox culture was he?

“Yes, I really did think that *could* be what you were doing. I mean, I didn’t know, and all we talked about before was how those words were used as vows, so it’s an understandable thing for me to have thought, right?” She caressed that cream fur again, having to force herself to stop. It was so easy to do and made her feel calm and happy.

“Wow. That had to be scary.” He sounded at least a little apologetic.

“Well, no… Not scary, really. I was mostly confused and knew I had to be misunderstanding.” Judy did not want him to think he’d upset her. He hadn’t.

“Carrots?” he asked again after a little bit of time had passed. His voice was very soft, nearly a whisper.
“Yeah, Nick?” she answered just as softly.

Nick spoke after a moment, “I was curious…” Judy tuck in a little tighter, bracing herself for more fox curiosity and listening to him.

“Yes?” she asked. Nick pulled himself just a little bit tighter around the bunny, moving his hand over her back, putting his chin over the top of her head protectively. His voice was a mere whisper when he finally responded, but she could hear within it the expression of critical-level smugness that his muzzle surely held.

“It’s just… I mean… If that’s what you thought…” He paused for a moment before softly asking, “How come you didn’t try to stop me?”

_Sweet cheese and crackers._
Judy flexed a little and decided not to try to move again for a little bit. The pain in other parts of her body had faded, she was grateful for that, but the pain in her shoulder was what she would label the worst it had been since the injury happened. She shivered from it a bit and lay still. Then as her mind cleared from sleep she remembered where she was, mostly because of the weight of Nicks’ paw over her back. She was cuddled into his front, and he’d half-rolled onto his back so her head was on his chest like a pillow, her good arm under the pillow his head was on, and her cheek rising and falling with his slow and steady breathing. The pain faded as the pleasure of just cuddling set in. Judy quietly wondered if she would have ever felt like this with a buck if that was who she had fallen for. She couldn’t imagine it. She moved her free hand carefully; mindful since it was the one that led to the shoulder she was not currently friends with. She placed it on his chest, stroking his cream-toned fur as he slept.

Memories of last night spilled into her waking mind and her ears fell down her back again, heated with a quick blush. That question he’d asked. How could he possibly have asked that? Did he suspect? Was he teasing? She rubbed her cheek against his chest a little, reveling in the silky softness of his fur, remembering the exchange. Why didn’t she stop him? It was a bunch of reasons of course, mostly because she was terrified that she was messing up something critically important to Nick, but shouldn’t she have wanted to mess that up if he wasn’t asking but instead he was outright taking? Judy knew that the answer was no. She would never have hurt him by spoiling such an important moment right in front of his mother, but even if it meant what she was thinking it meant? Had she really stood there and let it happen?

Judy didn’t have an answer for Nick, and with his teasing tone she wasn’t sure that he really even needed one. In retrospect it seemed much more that he was trying to lighten the mood because he had that terrible dream. But all the same, she used a rare thing for her to even have access to with Nick. A get-out-of-conversation-free card.

Judy was locked in thought for a while right after he asked that, but finally had simply looked up and asked him to tell her about the stuffed bunny that Finnick had brought out of his bedroom when he was hiding the Taser when the apartment had been attacked by Darmaw’s goons. It was not a new toy. It looked like he’d had that thing for a very long time, longer than he’d even known her.
Predictably Nick was suddenly just so sleepy and promised to talk about it in the morning.

They cuddled up close just as Judy wanted so badly and she had some trouble falling asleep, reflecting not just on Nick’s perhaps merely playful question, but the real answer behind it. She knew more and more this was not simple appreciation or affection for her partner. She needed him in ways that in another time would have been absolutely unthinkable. Was it okay? Would not being okay even stop it? Judy fell asleep with the cares for those answers bleeding out of her helplessly, her worries mortally wounded by the feel of Nick’s hand over her back, tail wrapped against her and the sound of his steady, slower, larger vulpine heart.

As Judy woke it left her still pondering how she was going to cross a bridge that she would eventually have to cross. She casually stroked his soft fur along his chest, head rising and falling with his gentle breathing. Judy knew there was not a ‘back’ that she was likely to ever go to. She was in, she wasn’t likely to ever be out. She closed her eyes, enjoying, for the moment, the serenity before the door of the bedroom was suddenly flung open. In her position, Judy was facing the door so she immediately saw the frightened face of their volunteer caregiver. Skye’s expression fell immediately as Judy looked up at her and she turned around quickly, ears back. Those white ears did absolutely nothing to hide a blush.

“Sorry! Sorry. I knocked and no one answered and I opened the door and I didn’t see anyone so I was worried you both took your medicine and immediately wandered off. I meant to check up on you last night but I fell asleep and I –“

Judy interrupted the vixen. “Hey! It’s alright,” she said quietly. “We were fine. We’re both here, you didn’t lose us.” She laughed gently. “But, since you are here… could you get me a drink and my medicine, it’s the little clear green bottle in the cabinet. I don’t wanna wake him.”

Nick shifted a little and murmured softly, “Too late.” Judy sighed at that. She had hoped to just lay there and cuddle while waiting for her medicine to take effect. Fortunately, Nick made no efforts to move right away. “Mine’s the orange bottle, can you bring that too?” he asked. Nick rolled fully onto his back with care, but Judy kept tucked close against his side, hand over his chest. She was perfectly happy where she was and would stay right there until shooed away. Oddly, after Nick’s vow she felt somehow entitled.

Skye walked out of the room to get the medicine, and then back down the hall to the kitchen. “You mind if I grab one of these? I like lime soda.” Judy quickly called out that it was okay to keep Nick from raising his voice while it was still on the mend. A short moment later the vixen returned with the medicine bottles and two cans of soda. Nick took his medicine first only because he had two hands with which to tackle his pill bottle. Judy struggled a bit and then her partner helped her out, so she was able to take a pill. She took a drink from the can and set it on the nightstand by the bed.
Now it was just a waiting game for the pain medicine to take effect. Just being fully awake seemed to help, or perhaps it was just how comforting it was to see Nick alive and well as her eyes opened. Even though it was interrupting her cuddling, she actually felt happy to have Skye there. Seeing the care others had for Nick made Judy feel better. He had actually worried at some point in his life, she had found, that no one cared for him. He knew now that wasn’t true.

“So, yeah…” Skye said softly after a bit of silence, pulling her ears back a little with some embarrassment. “I really did think Judy was kidding when she said…” The bunny looked up curiously. What was Skye talking about? Oh. That.

“Well, I don’t suspect you will be teasing us about that.” Nick sat up slowly, putting his back against the headboard. Judy quietly protested. She didn’t want to sit up, she wanted to stay how she was, but she finally relented, sitting beside Nick.

“Why do you suspect that?” Skye asked with a pleasant grin.

“Because Judy and I are suffering terribly from injuries received in the line of duty. We’re sad and defenseless creatures! To tease us for our comfort now would make you a bully!” Nick said with a pout, surely aimed at preventing the expected ribbing that Judy knew he probably deserved.

Skye put her arm up against the frame of the door and grinned at Nick smugly. “No, teasing you about it now would make me a hypocrite. Completely different reason, but no, you are safe from that teasing. You rest, I will check up on you two at lunch time, so try to keep each other from crawling out the window or something.” She gave a little wave and turned to leave.

“Oh, wait, it’s not… wait… What?” Judy stammered, defensive at first then tripping over what Skye must have meant by not being a hypocrite. It was too late. The vixen left the apartment with a twittering laugh. Judy sat back and sighed. “Do you suppose there’s anyone left who thinks we are not dating?” she asked with a slow shake of her head.

Nick put his arm around her again, careful to put his hand at her side and not her shoulder before he spoke with a grin. “You’d need really strong evidence to even convince me at this point, Fluff. Did you see the front page of yesterday’s paper?” he asked. He reached over with some effort to get the soda again and take another drink. Judy’s heart immediately raced. She looked at Nick, knowing her nose had to have been on a hard wiggle from that connotation. She perked her tall ears and regarded him a bit as he looked down at his cast with disdain, wiggling his toes and wincing a bit.

Judy took in a slow, deep breath. She cleared her mind as best she could. It felt like the entire universe was conspiring to bring this up again and again, and there was just no avoiding it. She sat
back, putting the back of her head against the headboard of the comfy fox bed with a dull clunk, lost in thought for a moment as she heard the sipping of the soda beside her. Poor trusting fox, here it comes, she thought.

She closed her eyes a moment and she spoke softly. “I can’t find any evidence,” she said softly. Nick looked at her, ears back, eyes widened for a moment, then his expression relaxed, a smile playing on his somewhat leaner than normal features.

He spoke in that soft, almost stroking tone, “Well, at least there’s always the validity of personal testimony. That will always be enough for the ones closest to you.” He touched Judy’s nose with a claw tip, making it obvious he could see it wiggling.

Judy swallowed and stated in a near-whisper, “And perjure myself before the judges? I think not.” Judy felt every muscle in her body grow tense as a long silence followed that. She was gazing straight forward, afraid to even turn and look. Surely he got the implication of that, even if the medicine was starting to work for him. When she turned finally his expression stifled anything she might have said, nearly strangling her. He looked shocked and locked in hesitation. Had it not been as obvious as she thought? Was it not okay? She looked away quickly. He promised. She still had the promise. She closed her eyes, gritting her teeth.

Nick spoke up immediately as her ears fell back. “Judy, is this just… your medicine, or is this really you?” She lifted her head and looked at Nick. Her eyes locked on his, and he looked so… afraid.

Judy answered slowly, “I’m still in terrible pain, so I am gonna say no on the medicine.”

“Then tell me,” Nick said in an even, breathless tone. Judy’s heart beat so hard and fast that every strike of it behind her ribs sent a pain shooting through her shoulder. She swallowed, finding her throat suddenly dry.

“I’m… Nick, I…” Judy stated in a whisper. Why was this so terrifying to her? He promised. There was nothing to worry about. Nick took Judy’s good hand in his and he smiled. The expression he had was relaxed and casual again, perhaps seeing that she was freaking out a little.

He finally spoke in that reassuring gentle tone, “Very well, then I will do the honors. Judy, I would like to take you on a date.” Judy next breath got stuck and she found herself suddenly unable to take another, eyes wide, staring forward. “I already have the tickets and I should be able to get around on my crutches pretty freely by then. Saturday at 5 o’clock in the afternoon. Does that interfere with any of your other plans?” Judy’s mind reeled. He already had the tickets? He was going to ask even if she didn’t bring it up, or were they just going to go as friends the way they did so often
anything else? What was the difference other than calling it a date? The difference was Nick knowing that she wanted it to be a date. That was all the difference her heart wanted right then. Judy shifted to wrap her good arm around Nick who put an arm round her and held her against his chest. Judy drew in that familiar foxy scent and sighed heavily.

She finally spoke, consumed slowly again in the sense of euphoria from both him and probably the medicine. “That sounds lovely Nick. I really look forward to it.” Her body felt tingly and she felt like she was flying. She considered a moment what this actually meant. Everyone she knew seemed to assume they were an item anyway so it’s not like it would be a real issue for any of them, but it might cause a bit of drama at work. Relationships were not advised, particularly among mammals who worked closely together, but the department policy on it only made it an offense if one officer was in a command position over the other. That aside, the rule was more that it should not interfere with their performance at work and no affection was shown in uniform. Judy was not likely to get in trouble over this under normal circumstances, but the fellow officer she was dating was a fox.

A bunny dating a fox was not likely to be ignored even in the progressive city of Zootopia. The last thing she wanted was a media circus about it, she had enough of that just being a bunny cop. She would discuss their decorum with Nick later. Right now she felt herself turning to wet sand in his arms, spilling over him and laying across his lap. Nick took this as an invitation to rub and scratch the bunny’s back.

Never. Never had anyone just scratched and rubbed her back like that. It seemed something in the world that she had just somehow missed out on entirely. And that was just a crime now that she knew what it felt like. Judy covered her face with her hand, feeling the heat of it as she knew she blushed from this shameless enjoyment, her ears dropping forward and her form going fully relaxed.

“I will give you,” she said in a soft tone, “… until the count of my eightieth birthday to stop that.” Nick’s caress shifted to using mostly his claws which only felt even better. Judy decided exactly how she would spend the rest of the day. She sighed happily.

Taptaptaptap

There was a soft knock at the door. Judy felt a surge of what could only be described as psychopathic rage. No. No one was going to pull her away from this. She curled a little tighter against Nick. He knock repeated.

The fox smiled as he spoke. “We should… probably get that.” Judy gripped him tighter. Nick laughed slightly. “By we, I mean you, Fluff. Please get the door.” The knock repeated.
“Don’t wanna,” Judy stated softly.

“I can continue your backrub later, Carrots.” Nick stroked her ears which were flat down between her shoulders. The bunny arched slightly at the contact of his warm hands with slightly rough pads over silky sensitive ears. No, that didn’t encourage her to get up and go to the door any more than the back-rub did. She just wanted some time to just relax and soak up the fact that she was now dating her partner, was that too much to ask? There was a soft click that gave the immediate impression that a key had been used. Judy looked up with concern. Skye wasn’t supposed to be back until lunch. As the bedroom door had been left open by the vixen their new visitor walked right over to it.

“Well doesn’t it look cozy in here?” Vivienne said with a smile. Judy gave a meek sort of laugh and slowly began to move off of Nick where she had been basically poured over his lap. His hand came back down over her and pulled her back down, claws trailing casually over the backs of her velvety ears. Judy’s head dropped onto her arm resting out in front of her. She was now an immobilized bunny. “Oh, I see why you took your time answering the door.” Her tone was not accusatory or unhappy. Truthfully, Vivienne seemed pleased. “I came to check on you before I take the train back home. It looks to me like you’re doing fine. I was worried that Judy might have left me sans son after you blindsided her with the Vow of Binding yesterday.”

Nick grinned warmly and replied to that, “I’m gonna take Judy on a date Saturday.” He said it so casually that it shocked Judy. Then again, he had not hidden anything from his mother about the things they had done during the Nighthowler incident, so he perhaps really did feel completely open to her. He added as Viv’s eyes widened at the news, “The place I talked to you about a couple weeks ago that you suggested for that purpose. It’s a surprise.” Judy lifted her head. Nick had talked to his mother about taking her on a date? Her ears flared with heat. Of course he did. Why wouldn’t he? And a surprise? He’d thought about something to surprise her? She hated unsolved mysteries, this was going to drive her nuts all week!

Vivienne answered sunnily, “I’m really happy to hear that! The girls at the diner will be gnawing on my tail for gossip if I mention it to Annie, I’m sure.” She laughed, referring of course to her boss. “Oh, but are you gonna be okay to go? Did your doctor clear that, I don’t want you to overdo it and end up with a limp, sweetie.”

Nick answered quickly, “Oh, it’s not for almost a week, I’ll be good to get around a little by then, and we won’t walk much. I know how to get there with the least amount of steps.” He boasted. Vivienne relaxed a little, leaning against the door frame as Skye had done. Judy could only barely see her out of the corner of a sleepy eye. The medicine was definitely in effect and she just wanted to pull Nick back down like he had been the previous night and doze.

“How did last night go? Did you sleep okay?” Vivienne asked.
“I had a nightmare,” Nick admitted. Judy lifted her ears, having almost forgotten why she ended up in the bedroom in the first place. She would probably have not told her mom about that, so she was a little envious of Nick’s candidness, but she also fully understood why. For half his life he hid from his mother and almost lost her. There was no more hiding. At least she seemed pretty pleased with learning that her son was dating a bunny. Judy was not sure how her family would actually feel. Should she even tell them yet, or wait until after she’d been on a date?

Vivienne spoke finally after giving Nick a moment longer to say more if he chose to. “You will probably have a few of those, sweetie. That was not… a happy experience.” She nodded. “But at least you have some happy memories that you are attaching to it, that will help.” Nick’s mother smiled.

“Oh! That reminds me. Can you pull the little lock box out from under my bed, Mom?” Nick asked. Vivienne looked at her son curiously and did as asked. She brought it out and put it on the bed. Judy sat up as well, though reluctantly and just a little dizzily. She looked at the plain metal lock box. Vivienne opened it, finding that it was not locked. The vixen gasped softly at the contents immediately visible and Judy also instantly recognized it. A somewhat threadbare grey-toned floppy plush bunny rested in the box on top of Nick’s Taser. Vivienne took the toy out of the box, ignoring the weapon completely as she held it up.

“When did you take this, he was packed up!” she laughed warmly.

“So you remember him, huh?” Nick asked his mother.

“Of course! Bouncer! He was your favorite toy when you were a little kit, oh Judy he took this thing everywhere.” Vivienne hugged the bunny. Judy perked her ears high, feeling a twinge of a giggle pass through her. Nick, as a kit, played with a toy bunny? That seemed a little odd. She then remembered a comment he made before they were friends, telling Judy that a toy store was missing its stuffed animal and she should get back to her box. That insult finally made all the sense in the world. She glanced at Nick who was smiling kindly as he looked at the toy.

He chuckled, “I promised Judy I would tell her about this in the morning when she asked about it last night. She came in to look after me after I had the bad dream, and stayed with me to make sure I didn’t have any more of them. I wanted to wait until you were there to tell her about Bouncer. It would have seemed less believable coming from me.” He smirked at that.

Judy spoke up after a second, “Why would it have not been believable from you? I don’t think there’s anything wrong with having a stuffed bunny toy, my room’s overflowing with them.” She wavered back and forth, feeling a little loopy. Nick had a pretty dumb-looking grin plastered to his
face so she knew he was feeling it too. The thought of Nick having a bunny toy when he was little was funny to Judy and she was trying not to laugh because she worried that it would hurt his feelings.

The fox put an arm around Judy to hold her a little more still. “Tell Judy about where Bouncer came from.” Nick asked calmly of his mother. “Do you remember?”

“Of course I do!” exclaimed Vivienne. “See Judy…” the lady fox held the floppy worn toy in her paws tenderly, “It was a hard time in our lives. We didn’t have much. We certainly couldn’t buy much… so for Nick’s fifth birthday instead of presents or anything like that, I took Nick to get ice cream. He had a thing for it as a kit. Anything dairy, really. He likes milk, even now.”


“Anyhow, while we were there, the guy running the counter, he was a dhole I think, it’s been so long…” She paused, then shook her head, “… not important. Anyway, he finds out from our conversation in the booth that it’s Nick’s birthday. And he tells Nick that someone lost a toy a few months ago and never came back for it, and asks Nick if he would like to give it a home. Nick was so excited! The guy handed Nick this floppy bunny, gosh, it was nearly half the size of him back then, it was so cute, and they were just inseparable. I mean, for years. The thing with Nick’s father happened a bit after that and he really relied on Bouncer getting through it.” Vivienne seemed a little sad for a moment, then continued, “Of course, as he got a little older he had other pals, then he had his little… setback and all… Bouncer’s been packed for a long time, I’m surprised to see him here.” Judy looked at Nick’s mom, dumbfounded, mind latched on to one element of the story. Nick knew exactly which element Judy had fixated on and leaned in close.

He spoke with a measured and smug tone right into her ear as she cupped her muzzle. “That’s right, Judy. I found this bunny at an ice cream parlor.”

Vivienne nodded emphatically. “That’s right! He – Wait…” Her eyes went round. “Oh Nicholas.” It was easy for Judy to see the shock on Vivienne’s face. It was one of those tingly moments or realization that makes large parts of the universe all fall together in a way one didn’t understand before, clear and a little frightening.

“That’s… a little on the spooky side.” Judy admitted. Nick carefully took the toy from his mother and handed it to Judy. She held it in her hands carefully, as if fearing she would break it. It was heavier than she expected, it was filled with beans perhaps, and she let herself imagine for a moment that tiny fox kit running around playing with this toy, his best friend to help him recover from the trauma of his father’s passing. Then, three years later another trauma damaged the little kit again, and in an ice cream parlor another bunny…
Judy tucked the toy in and hugged it tightly. “You sentimental fox…” she sniffled.

“Anyhow, now you have a better understanding why I kept it. Why I wanted it back.” He smiled to his mom. She nodded, eyes clearly wet as well. She watched Judy hug the toy a bit longer and then inhaled a deep breath to try to get herself under control.

His mother said in a happy tone, “I will head out now. Nick, if you have those dreams, don’t be afraid to call, no matter what time. And I think you should see Dr. Carlisle. I think both of you should.”

Judy nodded slowly at that advice. “It’s actually on the calendar. After what happened we have to see her before we can go back to work.” She yawned a bit, unable to help herself. The medicine was doing its job quite nicely. The pain was gone and the desire to curl up into a ball against a fox was overpowering. Vivienne moved in close, marking both Nick and Judy lightly as she hugged them. The meaning felt slightly different this time, given that Judy was dating her son. It was a level of acceptance that only encouraged her. She took the empty can of soda to put it in the recycle bin for the bed-cozy pair and headed out, locking the door behind her. The bunny sighed softly and whimpered.

“What’s up?” Nick asked with some concern.

“Full bladder and unwilling body,” she grumped, getting up anyway.

Nick chuckled weakly and murmured, “Take my bladder with you.” Judy chuckled at that and felt for the fox. Taking care of that would be harder for him. She realized as she walked out of the bathroom that she had not gotten her phone off the counter when she joined Nick the previous night. She picked it up and headed back to the bedroom as Nick used his crutches to carefully navigate to the bathroom. Judy sat on the bed and opened her messages. She had fewer than the last time she had to clear them, but not by much. Most of the messages were well-wishes and instructions for the care of her injury, foods she should be eating, and advice on taking care of foxes. She actually left those unread to go back to them later.

One of the messages piqued her curiosity, however. It was sent by Angela. There was a video attachment. Judy clicked to save the video as Nick returned.

Nick groaned pitifully. “It was just one soda, that was completely uncalled for. Stupid bladder.” Judy blushed a little as he returned in boxers. She had seen him pass her in the hall and somehow it
did not occur to her. He carefully pushed himself back under the covers. Judy looked at his white cast as he placed it carefully on the bed.

“Hey, can I sign it? No one else has signed it, I want to be the first!” she chuckled, light-hearted mostly because of the medicine. Nick looked at Judy with a smirk.

“What are we, twelve?” he laughed. Judy pouted. Nick’s expression softened and he reached into the drawer of the nightstand, rummaging around. “I know I have one, I had it when I moved, I swore I… Oh! Here we go. And it’s even purple, so it matches your eyes.” He handed the purple marker to Judy. She looked at it, feeling a rush of happiness. Nick talking about her eyes was approved. She felt a little giddy and then leaned down, carefully writing while feeling kind of drunk. It took a while but she used the kind of girly letters that she had not used since she was in high school. She finally leaned back, smiling at her handiwork. Nick read it out loud.

“Property of Judy Hopps.” He looked at the bunny with a smile. “Really?”

“Hey, you gave yourself to me to love, honor, and aid and write my name on, you said.” She crossed her arms, unable to even get her ears all the way up anymore.

“I don’t recall claiming me as property to be part of the offer.” He chuckled.

“Save a fox, win a prize!” Judy mimicked his carnival barker tone. Nick laughed loudly at that. Judy continued. “What did I win?” Nick smirked. Judy finished the quote, putting her arms out. “A fox!” She then winced. She should not have put her arms out. She tucked her arm back and groaned a bit.

“Silly bunny,” he laughed. He tucked her back against him carefully, slowly pushing himself into a laying position so her head was resting on his chest as it had been before Skye checked up on them.

Judy picked up her phone and saw that the video finished sending. She clicked on it and Nick looked curiously as well.

“What’s that?” he asked.

“I’m not sure.” Judy replied. “Angela sent it.” The video began with a shaky view of a city street beginning to buckle. “Gah! Angela no! We do not need to see this.” Judy scoffed.
“Wait, no… I mean… I was not awake for this, and I think I know the worst part because that’s what the paper would have used.” Nick rolled his eyes. Judy sighed and decided to bite the bullet and let it play. She restarted the video.

Nick watched as his arm kept heavy and welcome around her. The road split. There was a soft yelp from underneath and nothing for a bit, the camera-mammal moving closer to the small hole that had been made. The little hole, Judy quietly explained, was from the chunk that smashed her face. Nick nodded slowly. There was a loud growling that caused the mammal filming to back up a bit, and Nick to widen his eyes.

“Was that… you?” he asked incredulously. Judy cringed, knowing it was about to get so much worse.

“Yeah.” She answered softly.

The video continued. A huge chunk of the road flipped upward. Judy hadn’t realized how large it actually was. Then another, and another, parts of the road just bursting outward as a horrible roar of rage escaped, and that’s when folks began to give her space. The one using the cell phone to record was foolishly brave, a fault that almost cost a little wolf girl her life, as the bunny recalled. She saw her feet push into view first, her knees bracing the road. She had forgotten she went feet first like that. ‘How had she managed a handstand with a shoulder out of joint?’ she wondered. And then Nick and Judy were treated to the fact that the picture in the paper had not captured the worst part. The sound Judy made pulling Nick out of the ground was absolutely unholy. Even Nick shook from it.

“Oh Judy, no … How did you…?” Nick gasped, seeing the bunny come into view fully, dragging the limp fox up through the ground. It was a feat that would have been difficult even without her injuries exacerbated by heat exhaustion and the loss of blood so obvious from the sheer amount of it on her face and all over Nick. He was not even pulled entirely out of the hole; just enough to stay above ground, and Judy pulled him into her lap. She screamed again, a sound of rage and absolute feral distress and her scream triggered the screams of probably forty of fifty other mammals who began to scatter in a panic as the camera fixed on the bunny, fairly close-up. A still from this was where the image in the paper came from. Judy’s eyes were terrifying. The blood poured off her like rain water and her posture made it obvious that in her state of mind, such as it had been, any sane mammal would have assumed getting close to her would be the last thing they ever did. Judy cupped her muzzle, really wishing she had not watched this. Why in the world had Angela thought it was a good idea to send it?
“Nick, I was in a lot of pain. I was delirious. I couldn’t get you to wake up and I thought you were dying and there was nothing I could do to stop it. I was scared and I…” Nick pulled Judy up a little, careful with her shoulder as he always was, bringing her nose to nose with him.

“No, Judy, don’t apologize about it. I knew. I knew you gave everything you had, but seeing it… God – hearing you. I’m sorry I put you through that.” He looked into her eyes. Judy folded her ears back.

“Darmaw put me through that, not you.” She watched him carefully. He looked at her eyes, his expression very anxious for a bit, then suddenly softening. He closed his eyes and then drew Judy up close to him, tight enough that she felt his heart through her shirt.

“I’m sorry all the same, Judy. I will try never to make you… make that sound again… okay? I will be careful so I’m here for you.” Judy folded her ears back and moved up a little, putting her cheek up against Nick’s. She felt his cheek push to hers, then forward up her jawline. Marked. She gave a slight gasp. She then tilted her head to the side and pushed her chin to his jawline the same way. Nick slipped both arms around her and held her close, sinking down fully into his pillows and holding Judy against his front.

Judy looked down into his sleepy eyes. She was joking mostly when she wrote what he did on his cast, but looking at his face, resting, kind… there he was, dedicated to caring about her as he’d vowed not a full day before. This was her fox. She lowered her head to his chest and closed her eyes. She then looked up, grinning a bit, realizing her fox was drugged and defenseless. She leaned in closer, bringing her muzzle close to his. So close. She was a bare inch from him. His eyes were closed. He’d never even see it coming. She parted her mouth just slightly.

“Nick, where are you taking me for our date?” she asked.

“I’m not that out of it, Fluff, still a surprise.” Nick grinned. Judy laughed softly and dropped her head to his chest, embracing him adoringly.
Judy expected that a week out of work injured with the promise of something special at the end of that week would have caused time to nearly stand still, but it turned out time went by unreasonably fast. The first three days were the worst in terms of pain, but the worst part for her when she had gotten injured the first time had been that she wanted to move around, as bunnies liked to do. This time, however, there was good reason to want to stay in one place.

Nick was not really allowed to go anywhere either and that meant he was helpless to do much more than lay there and be cuddled by Judy. And he got what Judy knew would probably be an offensive amount of that even to a bunny. He offered absolutely no complaint. Judy worried early on that she was overdoing it since she didn’t know how physically affectionate foxes were supposed to be.

After Nick had asked her on a date, the bunny barely left his side. While the first night back in the apartment they had slept cuddled up together to deal with Nick having a bad dream and her feeling that sense of dread that he wasn’t actually okay, every night after they shared his bed without even discussing the matter. It felt like it was just a foregone conclusion. It felt right, so why would she sleep somewhere else?

Nick happily wrapped his tail and his arm around her and she loved that. They both slept peacefully. It didn’t even seem to have anything to do with the newly designated ‘dating status’. It just seemed patently out of order for her to sleep on the couch anymore.

A couple days after getting back to their apartment, Judy was a little concerned about her fleeting feelings of dread and panic when she could not see Nick, and messaged Sammie about it, valuing her advice even after the ‘security issue’ debacle. Sammie told Judy that separation anxiety was not uncommon with that kind of emotional trauma and she was lucky to have not ended up with something more crippling, like full blown SAS, or Severed Attachment Syndrome. As the week wore on, she did start feeling less apprehension about being away from him, and she was less concerned.

For the time being however, Nick seemed just as eager for her company, inviting her closer if she
was nearby. Nick put up a playful, teasing face as he always did so it was hard for Judy to remember sometimes that Nick was not undamaged by the incident. His broken leg was an obvious injury. There was the lean look of his face, the feel of his ribs from starving down in the darkness... those were easy physical things to actually see the harm that had been done. But as Judy was by his side nearly every minute of the day, she was aware of some of the hidden injuries to the fox.

The most obvious was that Nick noticeably tried to see where she was if she was not in the room. He would position himself to see out the bedroom door if she went to make some food in the kitchen, and would try to talk to her if she was out of the room for a bit. It might have been easy to ignore except that she remembered how he was the first night out of the hospital. He could not tolerate being alone very long. He had, of course, not slept alone after that, so Judy did not know if more nightmares would be triggered by her absence. She was in no way eager to find out.

The second issue seemed to be that Nick did not like anything getting in his fur. He was always tidy before but he seemed to experience actual distress about it now. There had been occasions in the past where Nick and Judy had tussled with a suspect in a muddy street or got paint splattered on them or half a dozen other excuses to have to go get a fresh uniform back at the station. While he was obviously happy to take a shower and get cleaned up before, there didn’t seem to be stress about it.

After the incident it was a little different. Getting some peanut butter on his wrist resulted in an expression Judy felt really did not suit the situation. One would think he looked down and realized he was naked in a day care center. Shame and alarm were evident and he couldn’t seem to scrub it hard enough. Judy felt she understood why too. She could not imagine a fox could ever be filthier than Nick had been in that place. It was not just being caked in that thick oozing muck, but that smell of rot and death. She felt she might have a glitch about it if she had spent a week like that.

While Judy noticed these things, she did not call Nick out on it as she felt they might fade after a bit of time anyway, and they were issues that Dr. Carlisle would be better experienced for dealing with. While there were a few negative things they were dealing with, between the discomfort of their injuries and being a little stir-crazy by mid-week, there was no real unhappy cloud over them. They found a lot of comfort in each other and were not ever really alone.

Even after they stopped taking the stronger pain medicine, Skye visited and even stayed to play board games or card games a couple of nights to provide added distraction, and she even brought Jack on one of the nights. Unexpectedly, the striped lapine absolutely destroyed all of them in Trivia. Apparently, he took advantage of the access to good schooling his parents had given him in their passing.

Another boon to Judy in that quiet week was that Jack and Skye seemed content to cuddle opposite of them and not a word of teasing was exchanged. The comment Skye had made before about not being a hypocrite was exactly what it sounded like. They seemed to be a genuine couple now, even
if very private about it. The fact that Judy and Nick were cuddling seemed to make them more comfortable about it and they relaxed, drank, laughed, and mirrored their friends happily. Judy found great comfort in that and it felt like there was nothing even unusual about it.

A lot of television-watching also took place, and a few entire series were consumed by the pair. Nick managed to avoid horror series and Judy got a pass for reality TV, though they both agreed that Police: Little Rodentia was hysterical, medicated or not. They watched a documentary series that Jack Savage narrated, less because it was a friend speaking in it and more because Nick was genuinely interested in history. The reference books on his shelf were a testament to that.

Between all the cuddling, the company of Skye and Jack, and a few cheery visits from their medium-sized officer coworkers, they made it through the week so quickly they found themselves almost dizzy from its passing. Judy and Nick both commented they expected it would drag on, but they rather enjoyed their little vacation, aches and pains aside. Judy had her sling off by Saturday with instructions to avoid using her arm much, and Nick was certainly growing accustomed to his crutches. They even took a slow walk to the nearby coffee house.

The trip to the coffee house was what made it clear that the city was not going to just shrug off the drama of Nick’s death and resurrection any time soon. They received pretty singular attention while they enjoyed their drinks and pastries. The lady deer barista even teased Judy kindly by saying that they were not allowed to serve anything strong enough for the bunny so their weak mega-espresso blend would have to do. Judy figured she and Nick would be dealing with fluff assignments for a while with the kind of media attention this was getting.

That public outing also brought up the subject of the date that Judy was becoming more and more nervous about as the day wore on. It had been such a light, fun idea when it first was suggested, but Judy was inexperienced with dating. She really didn’t want to ruin the experience for Nick, so she felt anxious. She had gone out as friends with Nick so many times, it should not have been that different, but in her heart it was extremely different.

As they returned to their quiet apartment she sat down on the couch with a careful but relaxed thump. Nick’s arrival onto the couch was less heavy despite his greater weight as he took more care with his leg. His left side against Judy, he leaned in and picked up the TV remote, perhaps ready to select a program to doze off to as they had done a few times in those lazy days of recovery.

As her fox channel-surfed for something appealing, Judy decided to ask the question that had bounced through her mind a few times that morning. “Nick? As we are out on our date I was curious… Do you want to be… obvious about what it is, or make it seem no different than any other time we are out, like at the coffee house?” She worried about the subject because she didn’t want to imply she was nervous about the public reaction to who she was dating, but Skye and Jack were being secretive for a reason. Cross-species relationships were not that uncommon, but predator-prey was much more rare and would likely get some unwanted attention, positive or otherwise. For Nick,
Judy was willing to face this, but his feelings on it were important to. Nick muted the TV and smiled at Judy in a calming fashion, causing her ears to rise.

“Well now…” he said with a casual tone. “This is a thing I have thought quite a bit about. I considered this at length as I dozed off in the hammock at your parents’ farm.” He stretched a bit, getting an incredulous look from the bunny. Judy had suspected he might have already had feelings with how confidently he’d asked her for a date, but he’d not admitted a thing until then. Had he? How long had he been interested? How had she been so completely blind to it? Nick let that soak in before saying, “So, here’s my question to you. Do you feel like people would notice if Skye and Jack sat in the park and kissed?” Judy actually blushed a little at the question. Nick had not tried to kiss her. She was nervous about kissing him because she didn’t want to look silly when she inevitably messed it up. She wasn’t confident she could get the mechanics of it right on the first try with her intended target being a fox. Also, she knew there were two kinds of kisses for a fox and she wasn’t well designed for one of them. She shook the thought away, answering the question instead.

“Absolutely.” Judy said, “…but Jack’s a celebrity. They would talk about it on TV, they would ask him about it in interviews, he’d probably be dealing with that more than trying to keep attention on the things he wants the media to pay attention to with the coming elections.” Judy explained. “But we aren’t celebrities like that, so I dunno. It might not really be on the radar as much…”

Nick laughed softly. “Like it or not, Fluff, we are celebrities, at least until the talking heads shut up about it and we get back to just doing our job. Remember how long it took after the Bellwether thing?”

Judy exhaled heavily and folded her ears back, knowing what he meant. She could hardly slip out to a pub for a drink without someone dying to know her favorite drink for their blog for weeks after that. She was glad that died down pretty quickly but she knew exactly what Nick referred to from experience.

The fox continued with his gentle, reassuring smile, “So here’s my take on it. If we are out there as an obvious couple with all eyes on us because of the aftermath of … everything that just happened… social media would be on fire and it would make it so we had to pay attention to all these outside voices. Now, I have the feeling half the city suspects the situation anyway, given… I mean… the video.” Judy rolled her eyes, not really wanting to think about the impression left on the city, but she understood what Nick was saying. He continued, “Anyway, there would be a few who might be unkind about it, sure, but the loudest voices given all that’s happened would probably be there to offer support. The problem with that is there would be a lot of voices.” Nick placed a hand on Judy’s cheek to guide her gaze up to his eyes. She let her ears lay flat and he stroked them, a gesture Nick discovered early on provoked immediate cuddling.

Judy pushed in closer and said in a very quiet voice, “I don’t care what the voices say Nick. I’m
happy to be with you. This makes me happy.” She put her hand on his arm as he caressed her ears back tenderly while she spoke. “I’m not afraid of what they think about it. That’s what I wanted to be sure I said in all this. I care what you want too, of course. If you want to be low key I can understand! It would be kind of a pain and maybe even cause issues with work. I need you to know, however, it’s not because I’m afraid of public opinion. I’m not.” She watched his smile broaden, comforted by the feeling that her reassurance on that front made him happy.

He ran a claw tip along her jawline to tilt her head up again. “I know Carrots, and I know you aren’t afraid. Cowardice is not a thing I would ever accuse you of.” He chuckled a bit, shaking his head. “But no, you are right to worry about the amount of attention it would receive, and I have my own reason for wanting to be low key - and yes, I do want to be elusive at least for a little while and the reason is very simple to me… I hope it seems that way for you too.” Judy looked intently into Nick’s eyes, glad that he felt the same as she did about not being overly obvious with it.

Judy smiled and nodded. “Thank you, I think I do understand, but please…” Judy nodded to the vulpine as he kept close.

Nick spoke again, his tone softening even more. “… and this is the important part… with all the attention we are already getting, there would be just as much again for the matter of our relationship, and honestly, it could become an contest of the media and folks who feel they have some personal stake in what our relationship represents vying for our attention. But you and I have admitted already that neither of us are very experienced with dating. On top of that, our cultural expectations of it are likely to be pretty different, and there are plenty of pitfalls waiting for us.” Judy widened her eyes at that a bit. It seemed like her partner really had really put some thought into it.

“I won’t give up easily.” Judy reassured him. “You know I’m stubborn.”

Nick smiled, pulling her forward and tighter against him with a sense of adoration that Judy absolutely cherished in the moment. She dropped her forehead to his chest softly as he held her and listened to his soothing masculine voice. “There’s a reason I made that promise first, then asked you on a date second, Judy. You need to know that we will mess up. We will make mistakes. We might even hurt each other. Heaven forbid we might not even be very good at romance at all, but going forward I needed you to know that there is no scenario that results in me not wanting to be a part of your life.” Judy jerked a little, choking back her emotions a little, not wanting him to stop and have to comfort her when he was already doing more to comfort her than he could possibly have known. He continued to speak. “However, while we are still new at this, and making our mistakes, and learning, I do not want a huge distraction of the “everyone else” who feels entitled to be a part of it. Not until you and I are more comfortable with what we have and what we want, okay?” Judy was nearly in tears from the sensitivity of her partner, and she embraced a bit tighter, finally able to use both arms to do it, if gently.

She sighed, keeping her head down and blinking quickly to try not to obviously be crying when she
looked up again. “I understand your reasoning perfectly. We will take our time and just… Enjoy this like we deserve to. Like we should, as little stress as possible. Thank you Nick.”

“When we are ready for it to be known we will tell Clawhauser and be done with it.” Nick laughed. Judy laughed louder and pushed her cheek against his blue Pawaiian shirt. Her ears were stroked again and she took a breath, savoring his scent and then tilting her head up, looking at his kind green eyes. His nose was pretty close to hers as he happily looked down to meet her gaze. It wouldn’t hurt to just brush her lips to his. A little kiss was okay. They’d been cuddling endlessly for a week. Judy closed her eyes and rose up slowly almost to her knees on the couch to reach.

Таптаптаптар.

The bunny slipped back down to a sitting position beside the fox, hands both on Nick’s chest. She felt her left lower eyelid twitch involuntarily. Nick looked up at the clock.

Judy grumbled softly, “Yes, look at the time. The victim of a terrible bunny-induced misfortune has arrived right on schedule,” she growled darkly though her teeth.

Nick rolled his eyes. “How true that is depends on whether Jack’s love scenes are all just show for the camera,” he laughed. “That,” he nodded to the door, “…would be Skye.” Judy looked up curiously, still obviously crestfallen. Nick smirked. “Did you forget? An outfit for tonight. Skye offered to take you in the new car?” Judy winced a bit, pulling her ears. That was right, she did say she would. While she might have been grateful any other time, the timing made her wish the vixen had been running an hour late.

Judy smiled weakly, finally and let go of the fox before telling him, “I guess you get some rest while I run this errand. Am I meeting you back here?” Nick nodded to her as she got up and Judy greeted Skye far more happily than she felt about the interruption, but there would be plenty of other chances, she decided and it really was kind of the vixen to do this for her.

Judy followed the white fox out to the street where the vehicle they had gone to waited in the visitor parking. Judy gawked at it a moment. It was, as far as she could tell, the very same kind of car, though it looked a little less refined. The paintjob looked like it needed redone, but the interior looked new. Red velvet. Skye held the door for Judy who climbed in. At first, Judy was touched to find that there was a custom adapter in the passenger seat for her comfort and safety. However, she then remembered that Skye had a different reason to want that in there which had nothing to do with Judy. The bunny was riding where Jack normally would be.

Judy smirked a bit, quietly. She felt a little sense of victory that the buck had gotten close with Skye.
The fox had endeared herself to him early on with her casual fun-loving attitude. However, wrecking her car to save the mammals at the park so selflessly seemed to cement the deal between them, such as it was. Judy listened to the music Skye was playing while driving for a bit, having not been too surprised to hear classic rock, she answered a few questions during trivia night that suggested she was familiar. After a bit of stop and go city driving, it suddenly clicked to Judy that Skye was another fox. She could literally ask another fox for dating advice. That was allowed wasn’t it?

She looked up to the smiling vixen and inquired as casually as she could, “So, I know this might seem silly, but… I mean, I know you and Jack are aware what Nick and I are up to tonight…”

“…not tellin’ you where he’s takin’ you.” Skye grinned at Judy, who blinked at her, confused a second and then realizing that Nick must have told her not to talk about the date itself. Judy laughed weakly at that. Of course he would have, that sly fox.

Judy shook her head, smiling as she spoke up again. “…No, I was just curious about what I should be trying to do on this date. I don’t even know about lapine dating, so I really don’t want to mess this up. He’s important to me.”

“I know, I saw the video.” Skye stated. Judy cringed. She expected she would get that a lot.

“So, what are some do’s and don’ts?” Judy asked.

“Well, don’t grab his tail…” Skye started.

“I spent a whole Saturday morning in Bunnyburrow doing that, so that bridge is crossed.” Judy laughed. Skye looked at her with some confusion. “Munch game.” Judy clarified.

“Oh, of course he would play that…” she rolled her eyes. “Okay, so he’s alright with you holding his tail already, I guess it’s harder to give advice here because while this is your first date, you two are already really close. Ummm…” Skye seemed to think a bit and Judy blushed. Nick and Judy really were already very close so the standard ideas of dating might not really apply to them. Judy had not figured on that when she asked. She decided to ask a different question.

“Nick and I are gonna try to keep things on the down-low until we are used to one another a bit more. We want to keep the outside pressure off. Is that real hard with Jack? I know he’s not exactly advertised it all over social media.” Skye took a turn to smile at that.
She answered with a happy tone, “Actually Judy, I am finding the subterfuge about being close to Jack has been part of the charm. Sneaking in close, the ever-present thrill of maybe getting caught in an embrace, it’s not been too hard. And we’re just dating at this point, so it’s not like I am prone to jealousy with his fans and the like crowding around occasionally. I know bunnies like the attention and playing the field until they really get attached. We’re grown-ups about it.” She tapped the steering wheel along with the song that was playing, seeming genuine in that.

“I don’t… I don’t guess foxes play the field while they are dating.” Judy felt the slightest prickle of jealousy spike through her. She would not be thrilled ot see Nick flirting with someone, which surprised her as it was not only accepted for bunnies, but expected.

“Oh we still can,” Skye assured Judy, which dropped the does ears a little, before adding, “…unless we drop a vow or something.” Judy perked up a bit.

“So he won’t really flirt or anything if he vows not to?” she asked.

“Well, it’s not a vow not to flirt, it’s…” She seemed hesitant. Judy remembered that Nick said it was not a very openly discussed part of vulpine culture. Judy decided that with Skye there wasn’t really any need to hide that she was already familiar.

She stated casually, “All that I am, all that I was-“

Skye cried out suddenly unintelligibly, ears back, eyes wide as the engine revved suddenly but briefly as the vixen’s foot pressed the gas involuntarily. She looked completely shocked at the words and maybe her own reaction to them, panting, clutching her steering wheel with a vice-like grip. She looked back at her bunny passenger, ears scarlet as they went back up. “Oh my god, Judy! Nick… Nick gave you that?”

Judy nodded to her and chirped, “Yep!” Skye sighed so heavily it seemed like she was deflating. Judy looked at her inquisitively and the fox slowly relaxed a bit, then chuckled. She finally spoke again. “Judy…?”

“Yes?” the bunny replied curiously.

Skye glanced at Judy with a broad foxy smile, shaking her head slowly. “Don’t worry about messing this date up. You can’t. You can’t possibly mess up.” She pulled into the parking lot of a
somewhat classy mall. Judy carefully got out of the car. It was low and sporty to Skye, but a pretty standard size to Judy. She moved up beside the fox who gazed at her with an obviously wistful smile.

“So… That promise really is kind of a big deal, huh?” Judy asked, feeling a little self-conscious suddenly. She knew it was, but Skye’s reaction intensified the effect.

“Well, I mean, it is depending on who witnessed it.”

“His mom and both my parents.” Judy blurted out, getting some strange satisfaction from the squeak Skye made.

The vixen held the door for her, following her into the mall and chuckling behind her. “Oh yeah, Judy. I’ve got no advice. Just enjoy the date. Go where you are going and have fun. Relax, you’ve got this.” she laughed. Judy felt a lot better hearing that. She didn’t know why she felt nervous. Then it came time to pick out an outfit. The nervousness came back. She did not really do formal wear that much, and the only time she’d picked anything out was with her mom who had the fashion sense of a funeral parlor assistant when it came to formality. Where the vixen had brought her was much more showy and nice, but it didn’t mean Judy knew what to pick.

Fortunately Skye seemed to have an eye for style even for a bunny. With the help of the attendant at the store they were able to pick out a mid-length airy deep forest-green colored dress. It seemed to fit not only Judy’s body shape but, they pointed out, her movement style as well. They added to the ensemble a rather simple jade bracelet and an ear brooch somewhat common among rabbits. It was a small one done as a cluster of blueberries in a three-leaf backing with a cream-colored spiral ribbon that hung down over her shoulder.

Given that picking out an outfit for Judy was easier than the fox thought it was going to be, they actually just hung out and laughed, talked and explored the local mall together like teenagers. It was truthfully a lovely experience for Judy. While she had grown up in Bunnyburrow, she found herself always at odds with the normal lives of those her age. She was goal oriented and hanging out in a mall was simply not a part of the plan. She had a few friends, but they were niche friends. They didn’t really do the normal stuff either and many of them had moved away, faded to their own circles, or, as was most common for bunnies, had families and focused on that.

Rather suddenly, Judy felt a rush of warmth through her as she considered the fact that she was doing the very thing her mother was worried she would miss out on when she got herself killed for Zootopia. She was hanging out with friends, dating, and enjoying life. She felt a pang of guilt that she should not lose focus, then remembered that she wasn’t allowed to do anything else right now in the first place, so she might as well enjoy it.
And for a few more hours, she did. Skye eventually took her back to Nick’s apartment, following her into the building after parking her car in the garage. Judy was very glad that Jack had been able to help her find a suitable replacement. Skye certainly seemed to like it, though she listed off a large number of technical things she intended to do for it. When Judy entered the apartment, she felt a sense of panic as she realized with a start that Nick was absolutely not there.

“Calm down, Judy, he went to get an outfit too.” She held up her phone. “He messaged while we were there. He’ll be here to pick you up on time, he said.” Judy crossed her arms, ears back, suddenly a little grumpy.

“He’s supposed to be off his feet where possible, not running around shopping!”

“He’ll be fine, Judy, he’s good with his crutches. Let’s get you ready before he gets back so you can scoot right out the door. You know, a tiny bit of eye-shadow and some blush inside your ears wouldn’t kill you.” Judy looked incredulously at Skye.

“You have got to be kidding,” she replied incredulously. Skye grinned mirthfully.

“Oh no no… I am gonna enjoy this.” She nudged Judy a bit to get her moving. “This is like having a little sister!”

Skye was confident, careful and very judicious with the makeup. Judy was, by the time all was said and done, absolutely shocked with how she looked. She had Skye take several pictures of her and send them to her phone. There was no way she was not sending them to her parents. She posed on the Balcony outside Nick’s apartment with a bit of the cityscape behind her. It was a lovely day for a date, and the outfit and support of Skye had Judy feeling much more confident.

Judy had to admit to herself that the experience really did make Skye feel like one of her siblings and that fact made Judy feel better about her future in Zootopia. She had convinced herself for a while that she did not need to be any more social in Zootopia than she had in Bunnyburrow but that was when she thought she had been perfectly happy there. As she grew into her life in Zootopia, it was beginning to feel that maybe she had been a little deluded. There really was more for her, and she
was experiencing it.

During this reflection, there was a tap at the door. Skye looked down at her phone and informed Judy that it was Nick, and asked her to face the hall while she let the fox in. She wanted to let her turn so Nick should see her outfit revealed elegantly. Judy did so and waited, finding that her heart was racing. Nick had gotten ready for this as well, so she was excited to see what he might be wearing. The most dressed up she’d ever seen the fox had been his dress blues at his graduation and he’d been positively dashing then.

Skye took a moment to let Nick in, murmuring softly to him a moment and leading him to the living room. She finally told Judy to turn around, and the bunny did so. She turned with a sweet smile to face her fox and had to steel her resolve immediately not to cry and ruin the makeup work that Skye had done.

Nick stood before her in a dark blue suit with white shirt and a violet-colored vest. Judy didn’t think she’d ever seen a fox look so refined and handsome outside the silver screen and while his expression had been one of sweetness as Judy had intended as she turned around, it immediately matched her own, of wonder and excitement at seeing the formal version of their normally casual partner. Nick stood with his hands behind him, chest out for inspection as he had when Judy pinned his badge on him for the first time. Skye had taken his crutches so he stood mostly balanced with the foot of his injured leg barely touching the floor. The vixen was filming on her phone, perhaps for their reaction. Judy moved with confident steps over to her date stopping close to him.

“Nick, you look…” she started, but then stopped as he brought something from behind his back. Judy’s heart leapt in her chest and she couldn’t hide the gasp.

His hand turned, palm down, presented a single gorgeous passion fruit flower, stem between his fingers to keep it there on the back of his hand. Being given a flower was not entirely unexpected to Judy. Nick was obviously treating this as a date with all the respect it deserved, but that was a very special flower. In Bunnyburrow, long ago, there was a beautiful if somewhat obscure custom of presenting one of these flowers on a first date when it was clearly intended not to be their only one. Hardly anyone did that anymore because the new generation found the old formal customs either stifling or cheesy. But, seeing that flower held on the back of Nick’s paw, so delicate, beautiful, and frilly, nothing had ever seemed more perfect than when she admitted to herself that she was in love.

Skye, who had remained quiet as she filmed, had to speak. “Oh my… That has got to be the most beautiful flower I have ever-“ Judy leaned down to the offered flower and deftly bit off the stigma and stamen, leaving the stunning circle of violet intact. It was what she was supposed to do for this custom. It showed she accepted the romantic interests of her date. The flower was sweet-tasting and so delicate as she swallowed her fare from it. Skye sighed softly. “… and there it went. Oh wow…” She was obviously not privy to the custom.
Nick, however, was. He took the remaining flaring circle of the flower and pushed the stem carefully into the breast pocket of his vest. This showed that he was taken. It meant that the one he was dating would have his full attention and he’d entertain no distraction. To her knowledge, not a single one of her siblings had partaken of this custom and that only made it more enchanting. Judy was reminded again that Nick seemed to spend a lot of time in the reference section of a library and had known a lot about Bunnyburrow last time they went there. It only made her heart pound harder as she was forced to wonder how long he’d considered the date. She wasn’t even sure where he could have gotten that flower. They were almost entirely out of season!

Judy smiled up at Nick as he offered his arm. She clung onto it and turned to face Skye proudly with her date. The white vixen grinned excitedly and took several pictures, then helped Nick to the Balcony again for the same cityscape as before to get a few more, sending a few choice images to Judy’s phone for her to save later. These were pictures the bunny knew she would absolutely treasure. Finally, Nick was given back his crutches and Skye made him promise not to overdo it.

Nick and Judy made their way onto the elevator and the doors slid closed. Judy whispered, somewhat breathlessly. “That flower in your vest is not low-key Nick. That’s like a shining marquee over your head saying you are dating a bunny.” She stared forward, still reeling. This element was entirely unexpected and she felt special and accepted so completely by the fox. He didn’t need her to be anything but a bunny. She didn’t need him to be anything but a fox, but he was filling her with joy only seconds into their date. Was this feeling what her mom had sobbed for her missing? She owed the doe a long and heartfelt apology.

Nick answered her concerns with a grin, also facing forward. “Where we’re going there will not be many folks from the Burrows, Carrots.” His tone was soft and knowing.

“There’s gonna be mammals who know who we are,” Judy said with a smile.

“Surely the city will grant me this one date for what they know you’ve done.” Nick casually mentioned.

“Our relationship won’t be well hidden like this.” she chuckled as the elevator neared the ground floor.

“I’m not taking off this flower.” Nick said with finality.

“I’m glad.” Judy said as the door opened, and they headed out into the lobby. She found the door
out to the drive in front of Nick’s apartments held by a familiar face. She gasped. Renato Manchas. This was an entirely unexpected mammal to run into. His smile went from kindness to excitement as she saw the pair approach.

“I like this… much better than the uniform, Ma’am,” the big cat announced. Judy, exiting the building, realized at once why Manchas was even there. She looked incredulously at Nick as the large feline moved with a confident quick stride to the white limousine parked in the drive, opening the door for the pair.

“Nick, no… really?” Judy said breathlessly. Manchas put his driver’s cap on. Judy climbed into the roomy back of the limo. Nick joined her while their driver took the fox’s crutches. Judy’s date scooted over close to her.

He finally answered with a grin, “A gift from Fru, actually.” He referred of course to Mr. Big’s daughter who had befriended Judy after the bunny had saved her from certain squishing. Judy got comfortable and Nick helped himself to a small champagne bottle on ice in the door on his side, pouring a single elegant glass for them to share.

“So, “ Judy smirked at the fox, “the idea is that if we show up in a car linked to the city’s most notorious crime boss, the fact that we were on a date immediately takes a back seat. Clever.” She smirked, knowing full well that wasn’t the intention.

“Relax, Fluff, we aren’t going all the way to our destination like this.” He offered the drink to Judy who delicately sipped, watching as Nick did the same. She could not argue that this was by far the most formal and classy thing she had ever done. It felt like being swept into a romance novel. She leaned back, hands on her knees.

The ride in the limo was pleasant and light-hearted. Judy asked where Nick had gotten the passion fruit flower this time of year, opting not to ask him how he’d managed to research it. Nick explained to her that she got it from another source from their past. Emmet Otterton had a greenhouse where he kept a few. Emmet and his wife were happy to supply one, and while he had not intended to tell them what it was for, the botanist already knew without being told and could not have been happier about it. The support of the grateful otter pair warmed Judy’s heart. Nick then explained another poignant detail to Judy. The limo they were in had been recently reupholstered. Eyes wide, Judy knew what he meant. It was the same car they’d tracked down in their first case together. This time, they were invited passengers, however.

The limo eventually stopped at what Judy assumed must have been their destination and Manchas gave Nick his crutches, wishing the two a happy time, and drove away. The bunny gazed out from the cliff-side overlook where they had been dropped off. The sun was low in the sky behind them as she looked down over the Rainforest District, beautiful and rustic and wild as always. Nick
motioned for Judy to follow him, which she did, watching him manage his crutches. She looked forward to seeing him off of them. Every time she thought about his injury, she was reminded of the sad state she found him in. They did not go far, and Judy’s heart beat faster as she realized what their next destination was. Nick stood at the end of a wooden ramp and waited for a gondola.

Judy was immediately reminded by this event that Nick’s mother had labeled her son as unusually sentimental for a fox. This was absolute proof that the vixen was right. Judy held his hand and waited. It was not long before a gondola arrived and they carefully got on, Judy making sure to help Nick in. She insisted that he sit down this time, however.

The gondola ride was mostly quiet as Judy got a chance to really take in the scenery. It had been so foggy and wet the first time they went on this ride together, and she was really focused on what her soon-to-be partner was saying. This place was where she first realized that he needed her every bit as much as she needed him. He had seemed so nervous about getting closer to her back then, and now a rhino couldn’t hammer a razor between them as Nick held Judy tenderly up against his side. Her eyes fixated on the remaining part of a flower in Nick’s breast pocket. He was really hers, at least for this evening. She closed her eyes and held his arm, smiling.

It turned out that they did not have to go as deep into the rainforest as the stop near Manchas’ home. They got out at an arts district that Judy hadn’t been to since her initial tour of the city during orientation. It was fairly busy but it seemed everyone was doing their own thing, and a slender fox and well-dressed bunny were not that out of place, everyone was dressed nice as they moved about, talking, laughing, enjoying dates just as Nick and Judy were doing. Nick was a little slower because navigating the crowded walkways with crutches was challenging, but the bunny was happy to help him.

They finally arrived at a gate where Nick provided two tickets and they were ushered in. They moved carefully down alongside rows of low benches toward a deep central ring. Judy was still not aware what they were there for, she’d seen some glimpses of flashy posters but the words were not in the native tongue so she could not make them out. They were not on the front row, but they were very close when they were finally seated. Nick put his crutches under the bench and out of the way.

They enjoyed a bit of lively banter and chatter as more and more mammals arrived, all likewise elegantly dressed and refined. Judy might have felt out of place except she and Nick really were quite well matched. Finally, the lamps that were held aloft high in the trees were dimmed and more specific lights were used to call attention to a very young antelope singer who sang a haunting and beautiful song in the center of that wide ring.

And as she sang, Judy was suddenly almost overwhelmed by other things that began happening at the same time. First perfectly synchronized gazelle dancers in wild and bright outfits moved around her as she walked casually through them completely in time with their movements while it seemed she would collide with someone. Then a tiger rolled into the arena inside of a golden ring, the feat
seeming impossibly elegant and precise, also through the dancing gazelles. They finally formed a circle, continuing to dance, to hold only now part of Judy’s attention. The tiger in his golden ring performed unbelievable stunts that involved him rolling in the ring while slipping in and out of it, even flipping into the air over it and landing on top of it, and spinning it under his feet like a coin while he stood on top. He had such a joyful grin as he did it, like it was no different than walking beside Nick might be for Judy.

Three bright steel rings descended from the canopy above and a trip of absolutely identical jackals performed stunts inside rings suspended seventy feet from the ground, causing fear to spike in Judy again and again, and still that gorgeous singing in those haunting foreign tones continued as dancers competed for her attention from the death-defying act far above.

The act ended and there was a short interlude where no less than ten meerkats tried to get into a box. It was comical and yet still elegant as five or six packed into it, and then each time another would jump in another would be flung out in an impossibly high or flailing fashion to the laughter and delight of the audience. Finally, they all ran at once and jumped and into the box they went, save for one who tripped just short of the jump. He then got up and walked over to the box and picked it up, Judy gasping incredulously as he found it to be empty. He dejectedly drug the box away off stage with the crowd wildly applauding. Judy had to mind her shoulder suddenly as she found herself joined in the applause.

The next hour was the most magical, majestic, impossibly perfect thing Judy had ever seen in her life. There were dancers suspended on ribbons that went over the very audience, there were three white wolf children painted with gorgeous red patterns in their fur tied on tethers to actual huge gold balloons. They could not be more than ten years old. The balloons were filled so that they almost floated and the wolves used beautiful silver fans to control their motion as they jumped up, letting them fly in seeming effortlessness over the stage and crowd to serene music that made them feel almost like spirits.

Every sense of wonder, every dream and impossible fantasy Judy’s young mind had ever been denied as she grew into adulthood was realized in this perfect hour with her vulpine date. She gripped his hand tightly, leaned into him, and freely cried at the beauty of some of the things this event presented her with. Judy had read her fair share of romance novels and understood, growing up, the impossible standards that they had created. She had dismissed them as any young girl should. Nick had just surpassed anything she’d even read. She was woefully unprepared and let herself be completely consumed by the perfection of the moment.

The show concluded with a powerful vocal piece. It seemed to be sang by every one of the performers and was, in a word, epic. How could they do all of those things and in the end also sing with such power and beauty? Judy clung to her fox, almost shaking from it as the show ended in this perfect explosion of beauty upon the senses. The lights went low and the show ended in the thunderous applause of the mammals gathered. Judy just held onto Nick and softly cried. He held her too, stroking her ears, gladly keeping close the shaking, emotional bunny in his arms.
Judy was speechless as they were ushered out. Typically the smaller mammals left last for safety reasons. Such was the case this time, which was fortunate as Judy had regained control of her emotions by the time they retrieved Nick’s crutches and headed for the gate. Judy needed a visit to the restroom and Nick promised to wait for her, so she took care of that. The line for those facilities was a bit long so it took some time. When she reemerged she didn’t see Nick where she left him.

A rush of despair flickered through her and she put a paw on her forehead. She spoke aloud with frustration. “Stop that Judy! Get a grip. He didn’t die while you were in the bathroom, geeze…” She searched for him, only having to look for a short moment. He was standing in front of a large, fancy koi pond. He had gotten feed from one of the coin-operated stations near the pond and was tossing it out to the large, colorful koi. Judy made a beeline for him, then slowed. He looked… sad. Her heart sank. Was she doing something wrong? Was this not the date he wanted? She then watched him toss some of the food down to the fish and he watched them eat, his ears perking, the act seeming to cheer him up a little. Judy moved over to him.

“Nick?” she called softly. She stood at his side. He didn’t seem to notice her, causing her to deepen her worry. “Nick?” she asked again. The fox jerked a little, as if plucked from somewhere else, and he turned, looking at Judy with a bit of surprise. He cleared his throat and put on a smile Judy knew was genuine but also knew he had to completely snap back into the moment to find it. He was somewhere else just then.

“You ready, Fluff?” he asked warmly. Judy continued to look at her fox with concern.

“Nick, are you okay?” she asked him, taking one of his paws.

“Yeah, I’m fine,” he said with a tender smile. Judy’s ears dropped back.

“We can talk about it,” she said in a caring tone.

“That…” He looked back to the pond, and then to his partner. “That’s something we can talk about later, not right now.” He smiled at her again. Judy kept his hand in hers and he squeezed it with some insistence. “We will talk about it another time, just not this time, alright?” he offered with a hint of pleading in his voice. “It’s got nothing to do with today, with you, or the date… I promise.” The added promise made Judy relax and she nodded to him.

Judy sighed and smiled back at her partner reassuringly. “Alright Nick. Another time. Thank you.” And they departed together, the crowd seeming, thankfully, oblivious to the fox and bunny on
a date as they reeled with at least some of the same wonder that Judy had experienced. The walk back was peppered with Judy talking to Nick about some of her favorite things that she’d seen, her excited tone obviously pleasing the fox. She had enjoyed the date and she didn’t have to try to make him understand that, her excitement from it was obvious.

They got onto the gondola again to head back up out of the Rainforest District and Judy calmed a bit, sitting beside her date, looking at his flower again, and at his smiling face. He looked so pleased with himself. Just perked her ears and smiled back at him. He should be. She sighed dreamily and took both his hands, standing in the gondola before him, unable to just sit still. Her ears were held tall, face lit with the excitement of remembering the music and the imagery she could never have even dreamed of.

She said, at the end of that sigh, “Oh Nick, was that not the absolute most beautiful thing you have ever seen in your life?” He seemed so calm and casual after seeing something like that! How could he have any experience that even compared?

Nick locked his eyes on Judy’s and held her small hands a little tighter as he answered in a very soft and achingly genuine tone, “No, it could only ever hope to come in second.” Judy’s eyes widened at his implication, her ears immediately feeling as if they were on fire and dropping back as he put his dark claw tips to her jawline, teasing her forward with a gentle stroke of his fingers to draw nearer, as she did. He leaned forward, mostly closing those loving emerald eyes as his head tilted.

Judy’s heart thundered in her chest as, on the quiet, gently swaying gondola, Nick’s lips met hers. She leaned forward a little, almost losing her legs entirely, bracing herself with her hands on her fox’s chest. She was able to feel his own heart not much slower than her own at the shared intensity of the moment. As they rose above the tree line the last rays of the dying light of day touched their faces to celebrate the moment. Judy slid a hand over Nick’s shoulder, tilting her head only slightly more to deepen a kiss she was in no hurry to ever break.
Indescribable bliss. That was what Judy felt as her eyes let in the soft blue-grey tones of morning as it filtered dimly through the curtains. She looked up, able to see the soft cream-toned throat of her vulpine date from the previous night. She’d awakened like this every morning for a week but this time was a little different. She felt more entitled to touch, to push closer, to relish the gentle embrace. That secure slumbering hug was a mix of the placement of his arm over her smaller form and just simple gravity that kept it there as he slept.

Judy closed her eyes and drank in the memories from last night. The kiss on the gondola high over the treetops as the last light of day was extinguished by the horizon was the highlight of her entire evening. She spent some time almost vibrating with happiness as she considered it, lovingly rolling the memory around in her head. That kiss had lasted for easily five or six minutes unbroken and uninterrupted. Nick finally drew away to just clutch his bunny close – and she did consider herself that without hesitation now. Upon leaving the gondola ride, they met with Manchas again at the limo. He’d come back to pick them up, then they went to a rather nice stir-fry place she had enjoyed a great deal when she took Nick there after his graduation.
They went home after, taking the train, and then going slow on the walk from the stop not far from Nick’s place. Judy could tell as they got back into the apartment that Nick was in pain. When he was hurting, he had a tell that Judy sadly had practice recognizing. One ear stayed down on whatever side hurt. In this case, it was his right side which meant he’d been overdoing it with his leg. Judy ordered Nick into some pajama pants and into bed, giving him his medicine. He complained a bit because he felt like it was putting a damper on an otherwise lovely evening.

The bunny crawled into bed with him after he took his medicine and pushed in close, her chest over his as he rested on the bed. She explained to him that the flower he’d given to her made it very clear there would be more dates and that torturing himself would not make the night any more perfect. Taking care of Nick made Judy happy, and she was glad just to have him safe in her arms.

With that slightly emotional revelation given, they kissed again for a while after he got settled in. Judy found that it felt a bit more natural than she suspected, though Nick got a little more adventurous as the medicine kicked in. He eventually slipped that flat ribbon of pink fox-tongue past her teeth without warning. At first it startled her, but after a moment to adjust to what he was doing she quickly found she enjoyed that. He wasn’t giving too much and was still being careful. That offered a sweetness to the moment she further enjoyed.

Nick slowly became sleepy, and Judy found to her humor that he actually dozed off from the medication in the middle of a kiss. She could tell by the change in his breathing. She kissed his nose after and he awoke, apologizing, but Judy shushed him. She let Nick settle in again and relax while she took a longer-than-usual shower before getting into her own pajamas, a simple night shirt and shorts. The bunny then crawled into bed with her fox. He was very much asleep before she had even finished settling in against him.

All of those events Judy contemplated as she rested on her side with her nose pushed forward to very gently touch Nick’s chest. Normally her mother would have scolded the young doe for ending up in bed with someone on their first date, but in this case, it really didn’t feel so strange. She could not imagine any other place she’d have belonged. When she crawled into bed beside him that night, Judy had spent at least an hour beside the sleeping fox looking through pictures from her evening. She found one to immediately cherish.

Skye had sent her a still shot of her bending forward to nip the top of the flower, accepting Nick as her date. It was the moment right before her small mouth reached the flower so it was still whole but it was obvious what was about to happen to it. She gazed at the picture for a while, feeling giddy before putting her phone on its charger and curling up against Nick. The bunny finally let sleep take her as she looked forward to many a night in his arms.

Nick was still very asleep as Judy greeted the day. He had never been a morning mammal. She sat up and stretched a bit, leaving the bed to let him rest as she ventured into the kitchen to prepare some coffee. She also had something she needed to do. She picked up her phone and called the second
most frequently used number on it.

Her mother picked up. “Judy! I just got the coffee made, how are things there?” Bonnie seemed in a happy mood. That was good.

Judy answered casually, “I’m doing great, mom! So, hey… Are you able to get pictures while on a phone call? I mean, I know you can, but you can manage it fine, right?” she asked.

Bonnie spoke on her end, “Eli sends me pictures of the little one all the time like that, mid-call. I manage it. Do you have a picture of something? Not much to photograph when stuck in the apartment all day, I would wager!”

Judy laughed at that, speaking again, “Well, hold on, I am gonna send you something.” With that, she moved the phone away from her ear. Her mother answered in the affirmative loud enough for bunny ears to hear even without the phone right up to them. The young doe searched her phone for the right image and found it. It was a very flattering picture of Judy on the balcony with the city lit by the light of afternoon behind her. She had on the green dress, the very minor touch of eyeshadow, the light strawberry gloss to her lips, and the little blueberry ear clip. She sent that picture to her mother.

There was a slight pause on the other end and then a loud gasp. Judy enjoyed being able to tell the exact moment the picture appeared on her mother’s phone. She felt almost mirthful about it. Bonnie called Stu into the room desperately. He initially seemed to think that disaster had struck and the coffee was the victim. He gasped as well at the picture the moment it was obvious Judy’s mom showed it to him.

Judy could hear him on the other end. “Is that Jude the Dude? Cripes! Look at her. Just… look at her.” The slight rise in pitch and crack of her father’s voice told her he was fighting the waterworks. Judy blushed a lot from the elation the both had. She did not care to dress like that much, but she was very glad it made her parents so happy.

Finally, her mother asked the question she was waiting on. “Judy, what kind of event was that for? Was there an award for what you and Nick did? I wish you’d have said something, we’d have driven out… or at least taken the train!”

Judy smiled and answered confidently. “Oh no, nothing like that; it was for a date!” There was a very noticeable gasp from her mom, and a long pause on the phone.
“She said a date, Stu.” Her mother clarified immediately. She then added, “Okay, so what was Nick wearing, I wanna see!” Judy perked her ears at that. She had expected them to perhaps be less sure about that, and decided to tease a little.

She gasped lightly in pretend scandal and cried, “Oh good grief mom! Are you still on about that? You really still think I am dating my partner?”

There was a short pause on the other end again, and then a darker tone in the voice of her mother. “Judy, bun, if the next image I see arrive on my phone is not Nick dressed nicely for his date, I swear I will immediately get in the truck and drive out there and jerk a permanent knot in both of your ears.” Judy had to stifle her laugh. Okay, so her mom was really, really sure. She brought up her new very favorite image and sent it to her, the one of Nick holding out the passion fruit flower and Judy preparing to take her customary bite.

Judy spoke again while her mother retrieved the image in her phone’s message center. “Here we go, sorry mom, I couldn’t help but razz you a bit.” There was another short pause and then it was Stu with a very loud cheer. Judy was again very surprised at how okay with all of this her parents actually seemed to be. There was absolutely no resistance. Then again, they seemed so sure it had already been going on, so it probably wasn’t a terribly shocking leap into reality.

As Judy thought about it, she also considered what Sammie had said had about the progression of her relationship with Nick. Her heart had already claimed Nick whether she was willing to admit it or not because he filled the natural role of a mate. Perhaps her parents were no less acutely aware of his role, even though Judy had ignored it. How many others could see it? Nick said half the city likely assumed after the video. Still, she decided to make sure her parents knew the newly minted couple wanted the matter kept mostly private.

Judy interrupted their revelry. “Okay, so, yeah, Nick and I dating. While there’s no sense hiding it from you two, we are not wanting it telecasted or anything. We want some time to kind of grow into all this. We are gonna take things nice and slow so we don’t mess things up, and so we can enjoy it and not miss out on anything.”

“That sounds lovely, dear,” her mother stated cheerfully. “Do you mind if we share the picture of you in your dress at least?” she asked.

Judy replied, “That’s fine. And you can tell Sammie, Angela, and Charlie, but I think the others might… prefer to hear it from me. I kind of want to gauge that before I say anything.”
“Charlie probably suspects. Nick called him a few days ago.” Stu said on the other end.

“What?” Judy asked, suddenly completely derailed.

Her mother replied. “Obviously your father and I already suspected where things were going. However, we had a little… incident the other day that made it more obvious. See, your father tried to tell Gideon about the sweet thing Nick said to you the night he came back home. You remember the very poetic thing?” Judy put a little paw to her mouth as she considered that. She remembered the way Skye reacted.

“Oh oh,” she said out loud on the phone

“Uh oh? Yeah uh oh, young lady. You forgot to tell us something important there, didn’t ya?” Judy put her head down. She hasn’t said anything because she wasn’t sure she completely understood it herself. Her mother continued. “…and Gideon straight up panicked and put a banana cream pie right in your father’s face to make him stop saying the words.”

“Uh oh!” Judy exclaimed, but could not help but laugh at the image that went through her mind. As she laughed, her mother did too and kept talking. “…I mean, obviously we kinda wanted to know what that was all about, so Gid explained as best he could. Then, when Nick called Charlie asking who the best mammal to ask about bunny-burrow tradition might be, we put two and two together.”

Judy’s ears blazed, dropped back over her neck. She pulled the phone close to her face, and murmured, “Nick… called Pop-Pop to ask him for advice on dating bunnies?”

“Probably,” chimed her dad. Judy slumped back in her chair. It was hard for her to get her head around that, but she remembered that Nick said he had come to an amicable understanding with her grandfather. Judy’s sensitive ears picked up the tell-tale grunt of a fox who tried to turn over and forgot about his cast. Again.

Judy spoke up quickly. “Okay, so I need to go, I want to get some breakfast in me and I have a few things to take care of. I just wanted to give you and mom those pictures. I took more, so I will send them when I have a bit of time later.” Her parents tossed in their love you’s and take care’s and Judy hung up the phone and moved calmly back into the bedroom. She crawled carefully back into bed as Nick slowly opened his eyes.
“I smell coffee,” the fox rumbled sleepily. Judy nodded and pushed herself up under his arm which he gladly allowed, pulling her in close. She pushed him back just slightly with her chest against his, moving a small paw up to stroke his ears. Nick gazed into her eyes with his own gleaming emerald. He looked very content, and it made Judy feel even more happy.

He spoke gently, as if they might wake some unseen other mammal. “So… this is how it’s gonna be, huh?” He leaned up and just gently touched his cool nose-pad against her much smaller nose. For some reason, Judy really liked that little nudge. She touched back, then followed up with a delicate kiss. After a moment, she leaned back a little, head held above a fox she had essentially pinned.

“Is this how it’s gonna be? Yes. Yes it is,” she said teasingly with a smile. She then added, her ears falling back, eyes locking on his, “I love you, Nick.” She had wanted so much to say it the previous night, but felt it was unfair to say that when the target of her comment was either uncomfortable or unconscious. This was a new morning and a pretty new world awaited them. It seemed the right thing to say to greet that world with her partner. His eyes did widen a bit at her words. Judy then saw a flicker of that unmistakable joy smile that his mother had made her subconsciously watch for.

Nick softened his expression and brought a gentle hand to the bunny’s cheek, running his slightly rough thumb-pad along her jaw to the back of her head. He then trailed his claws oh so delicately down her swept back ear.

He spoke in his most tender, soothing voice, “I love you too, Judy. Hearing you say that mends me in ways a cast cannot.” He then brought his head up a little, taking advantage of the slight parting of Judy’s lips from the pleasure caused by his caress of her ears and he gave a slow, deep, blissful kiss.

A pot of coffee remained, forgotten, as their morning brought them closer to one another and nowhere near the kitchen.

The following days were remarkable mostly in how natural and unremarkable they felt. As they had promised one another, they took their time and enjoyed every aspect of growing closer. In many ways, it felt no different than life before. That wasn’t a bad thing to Judy because of how much joy her life had with Nick in it.
At the same time, those days still stood out as some of the happiest Judy had enjoyed her entire time in Zootopia. The media began to finally back off of the ‘Death backed away’ story, and she returned to work as Nick was able to manage without pain medication. He was only a couple of days behind her in terms of being able to do some desk work.

Judy was touched beyond words when Nick arrived for his first day back to work to find a surprise party waiting for him in the break room. He was very grateful as well, and Judy found that, at least for that moment, his sarcasm was tossed away. It seemed like everyone got to see Nick with the walls down. He resumed his playful attitude after the party was over, of course. While they were back together, back to back at their cubicles where Higgins’ mini-fridge once resided, things really did get back to a kind of normality. They were stuck doing a lot of paperwork but it was good to be back at work. Judy felt like everyone was extremely happy to have Nick there again. She knew from experience that the way Nick had been embraced as part of the department was a powerful motivator to get the fox to try his best.

A few weeks went by in a calm, uneventful manner. It was very focused on the administrative aspects of police work. Judy might have been miserable with this if it were not for how absolutely content she was finding life outside of work. Taking a cue from Jack and Skye, they learned to date without it seeming so much like dating. This took the pressure off both of them, and their more intimate lives were shared away from prying eyes.

Nick seemed less confident at first despite having created such a memorable first date. However, Judy assured the fox that how she felt about him had come to be by just doing the normal things they liked to do. There was no need to feel like he had to stray far from that except for special occasions. He became less worried and just had more fun after a couple of relaxing outings.

Judy also found that Nick spent more time with Finnick in those following days. She felt like originally the smaller fox had been a bit less trusting of her, and perhaps even a little irritated. Her removing Nick from his hustling likely made things a little more difficult for the smaller fox. His attitude toward Judy changed after the incident. He joked around with the bunny openly and was around frequently for card games along with Wolfard and even Skye.

Life felt so much more full and lively to the bunny and she was getting very well settled into it. However, she longed to get back to her other passion which she had shared so happily with her partner. She wanted to return to the field where she felt they did the most good.

For them to do that, however, they had one final thing they had to do. They needed to be cleared for duty by Dr. Carlisle. Judy had spoken to her a couple of times before she retrieved Nick, but not after. Nick had only done so once immediately after his rescue but not again. For this session they would be there together because the counselor felt they needed to both talk about the incident to cover the most ground.
On a rainy Wednesday morning, they walked into the office just west of their headquarters. Judy had to fight the temptation to take off running to avoid getting wet. Nick was out of his cast but he was still going light on the running where it wasn’t necessary. While his body was nearly back to normal, he wasn’t willing to take a possible step back in his recovery for something as pointless as not wanting to get a little wet. The pair entered the doctor’s office and checked in.

“Nervous at all?” Judy asked her partner.

He looked curiously at her, then smiled and shook his head. “Should I be? She seemed so nice before. Of course, I was pretty pathetic then. It was like… days after.” He laughed.

“Well, it’s not an interrogation, but she’s gonna ask the hard questions. You know she will.” Nick flicked a bunny ear, getting a flurry of soft-pawed attacks thrown at him.

The receptionist laughed. “Behave, kids.” The porcupine seemed like the least approachable mammal to have as a receptionist, but she had such a sweet manner to her that it was simply not an issue. “Doctor Carlisle is ready for you.”

Nick and Judy got up and walked into the office together, closing the unusually heavy door behind them. Nick murmured under his breath, “Soundproof. Guess screaming’s okay.”

“Shush.” Judy hissed. She then grinned at the doctor who stood to greet the arriving pair. Dr. Carlisle smiled brightly, a short and petite skunk with amber eyes that reminded Judy of a wolf’s when she tried to look into them. The doctor was graceful, soft-spoken, and everything about her felt nurturing. She was adorned casually in a violet sweater and fashionable jeans. Despite being a skunk, she seemed to lack even the lingering scent of musk. She obviously took very good care to tamp down the scent to avoid its distraction.

The mephit moved over to the wall and darkened the room a great deal, making it seem more cozy. She then moved a fragile-looking dressing screen between the two chairs where Nick and Judy had just plopped down. This made Judy immediately uncomfortable. Why wasn’t she allowed to see Nick? Was this necessary? Judy took a deep breath and forced herself to calm down. Her having issues not being able to see Nick had calmed, but being specifically denied looking at him felt like an attack for some reason.

The doctor moved over to her desk and turned off the little green desk that illuminated it. She paused a moment, and then stated in her soft, motherly tone, “Nicholas, how are you feeling right now?
Comfortable?”

He answered softly, “I am. I like low light. Foxes usually do.” Judy’s capable ears heard the soft scratching of pen on paper.

“So, the time in darkness does not leave you feeling uncomfortable with it?” She asked this carefully.

Nick replied casually, “No, I don’t think I have a lot of baggage from that mess, really.”

Carlisle spoke again. “Judy, how are you feeling right now?” The bunny paused. This session was to determine if they were ready to get back to active duty. While she wanted so much to give the right answers to get back to work, the reason this had to be done was to make sure they would be safe. She could never live with herself if something bad happened to Nick because she wasn’t ready. So often she hid darker things from her parents that it was almost second nature. She had to be completely honest with the doctor. Anything less could be disastrous to them both.

Judy answered softly, “I am extremely uncomfortable.” She knew Nick would not like hearing that but he knew what was at stake here as well.

“Why is that?” asked the mephit.

“I can’t see Nick,” Judy replied immediately.

The doctor spoke again, her voice a little louder. “You know that he is okay, he’s just on the other side of the screen, alive and well. I might add, entirely because of you. You more than anyone should know that he’s safe.”

Judy hadn’t really mentioned the problem to Nick, but she supposed this was what the session was really all about. He needed to know. The bunny responded, “I know he’s safe. It’s gotten better… but for a while, right after he got home, I would suddenly sink. I’d feel like I was waking from a fantasy where I’d saved him and he was really gone.”

Nick’s voice lifted from behind the screen. “Judy…”
“It’s gotten better though.” The bunny insisted. “I don’t think about it, it’s just... When you intentionally wouldn’t let me see him, I felt…” Judy thought a moment, and then forced herself to answer without holding anything back. “… I felt like you didn’t want me to see him for some reason. Like I had done something I wasn’t supposed to and I wasn’t allowed.”

Carlisle inquired softly, “You felt like me hiding Nick was a punishment?” Judy looked up curiously at the doctor. Yes, that was it. That was exactly it.

“Yeah, I… I guess so.” Judy stated, squirming a bit. She hated not knowing why these questions were being asked. She knew Dr. Carlisle was one of the most accomplished in the field of post trauma stress, however.

The skunk inquired again, “Judy, how would you say your friends and family have treated you since the incident?”

Judy shrugged and answered casually. “Not that differently. They’ve been helpful not to overload me with a bunch of visitors, especially early on. They know I don’t care for the spotlight. You and I talked about that,” she told the doctor.

“Do they ask you about Darmaw?” Carlisle asked in a flowing rhythm from Judy’s answer. The question was released like a tennis ball chucked at Judy’s head.

“What? No, no one talks about that. Why would they?” she questioned.

“What do you think they are feeling?” Carlisle asked curiously. “Do you think they talk to each other about it, even if they don’t talk to you?” Judy took a deep, slow breath. She had talked to the doctor already about what happened to the deer. Why ask again?

Judy sighed and answered. “I guess they talk about it, sure. Between that and my kicking my way out of ‘hell’ I imagine they joke about me being more wolf than bunny. But that’s fine. No one like… avoids me or treats me badly if that’s what you are wondering.”

“How do you think Nick feels about you ending the life of his attacker?” Judy had to actually stifle a gasp that she asked that.

“I feel-“ Nick started.
“This one’s for Judy, Nicholas,” the skunk interrupted. Judy folded her ears back again. “How do you think Nicholas feels?” The bunny quietly loathed hearing the doctor call Nick that. It seemed like only his mother should. She considered that for a bit, concentrating on the question.

“I guess… I think maybe he feels bad because I had to do something like that, but I didn’t have a choice!” Judy spoke up, agitated. “If I hadn’t, the little girl would have died! And Nick almost did die! I do not regret killing him and the only thing that’s changed since the first time we talked about it is… since Nick actually survived it… I don’t regret that he didn’t suffer longer like I did before.” She crossed her arms. Did the doctor think she was supposed to feel guilty and dirty for taking out that maniac? She didn’t and she wouldn’t!

The doctor spoke again slowly, “… but you do feel like Nick might be unhappy because you had to do it? Why do you think he’d be unhappy?” For some reason that question made Judy feel a lot more anxious.

She thought about her answer and forced herself to just talk. She wasn’t going to hide anything. “I can’t speak for Nick but he cares a lot for me. I’ll never question that. So I know he’d be really unhappy that I did something so… permanent like that for him. I think he’d wish I didn’t have to. Like maybe he caused it and he’d feel guilty about it and he shouldn’t. I told him it’s not his fault, and it’s not. But I know him. He never wanted that for me.”

Carlisle spoke again softly, “Judy, what I want you to spend some time thinking about that, and most certainly some conversation with Nick about it. Even if the outcome was not what you wanted you did your very best to survive. Judy, you may not feel that you need to be punished for Darmaw directly but if you think that Darmaw’s death hurt the ones you care about… your family, your partner, you will feel guilt not for what you did in self-defense, but for how you think it’s hurt others. What happened reaches farther than just you or the one who caused this to happen. You do not like to talk about it, but I recommend, Judy, that you do. Guilt when you know you did your best is a terrible distraction.” Judy leaned back a little. Her eyes closed as she considered that. It… actually made some sense. She didn’t regret what she did to save the child, to try to save Nick, but she felt bad for how others might feel about her for doing it. She felt especially anxious over how it changed Nick’s feelings for her.

“Can I talk now?” Nick asked, interrupting the retrospective silence.

Carlisle responded. “Certainly.” Her tone was again sunny.

The fox spoke clearly. “Judy, I do feel bad that you had to do that, but you couldn’t make that happen differently, I don’t think. Not even if you went back in time to try to change it. He tried to
murder me and a five year old little pup in front of you. I’m surprised they didn’t classify Darmaw’s death as suicide. He was a killer, Judy, and you saved lives. You probably saved more than my own; I really don’t think he was done.” Judy sighed at that and nodded slowly.

Judy offered in a gentle tone, “It’s something that we will talk more about, like the doctor said. I guess I have avoided talking about that, but I know others do talk. I know they don’t hate me for it, and they aren’t like… afraid of me, but I feel bad that they have to talk about it at all. She’s right.”

Carlisle interjected in a caring tone, “Judy, most officers put in a life or death situation like that… when they have to make that very permanent and unhappy choice… the effects are not always immediate and they can take a long time to heal when they show up. Your direction of deflection of anxiety is not uncommon. Stay open with those you care about and you will most likely manage it fine with very little intervention. I feel like you have a strong support network with your family, and certainly with your partner.” Judy smiled very slightly at that. The doctor had no idea. Carlisle continued, voice rising to add a tone of authority, “In this time of less-than-lethal measures, there are currently only two officers in this precinct who have taken a life. It’s rare, and I do take the feelings of those officers very seriously.”

Nick spoke from behind that irritating screen. “If you don’t mind my asking…”

The doctor looked up with a serious expression on her mostly darkened lean mephitine face. “It’s a matter of public record, but I know exactly who you would most likely ask to find that information and I would really rather you did not do that.” She bridged her fingers together. “The other officer in the ZPD who has taken a life is Officer Benjamin Clawhauser. He… did not take that well. We can, I believe, leave it at that.” The room was dead silent a moment as Nick and Judy were left to digest the information.

Judy murmured softly. “Clawhauser…” She’d been told an incident put him on desk duty but she always thought it was a disciplinary thing or perhaps an injury in the field, and she hadn’t asked.

The doctor spoke up again. “Nicholas.”

“Please stop calling him that.” Judy blurted out.

Nick spoke up, “It’s alright, I understand why she’s using it, it’s to make me feel more like I’m talking to my mom. I’m more open. She picked up on that in my first visit.”
“Why do you not like that I call him that?” Carlisle asked, seeming to ignore Nick’s helpful explanation.

Judy sighed. “You don’t know him that well. It’s a family thing. You’ve met him once.”

“Do you ever call him Nicholas?” asked the doctor.

“No, of course not, only his mom does.” Judy felt a blush creep over her. She was considered family though, and it felt suspiciously like Carlisle was close to picking up on that somehow. Judy had perhaps underestimated just how good a behavioral analyst the skunk really was.

“Do you consider yourself close like family?” the skunk asked. Judy took in a slow, measured breath. Dangerous territory.

“It just seems like only his mom should call him that.” Judy puffed.

Carlisle looked over to Judy and seemed to take advantage of disarming her with that subject by asking casually, “Judy, Nick is skilled at hiding things that bug him. I am sure you are aware. So, if you could ask him about anything that you were concerned about, what might you ask him?”

Judy said it before she even had a chance to stop herself. “The fish.” She regretted it immediately. Nick promised they would talk about it; she just didn’t have the heart to push him on it. She didn’t want to use this session to force the issue.

“I did promise, yes.” Nick said almost on cue.

Judy shook her head, speaking quickly. “I’m sorry Nick, you don’t have to here. That can be later. We already said we’d talk about it.”

Carlisle broke in. “I had not expected to find an important topic so quickly. Nick, if this is too personal you know I won’t force you. However, this is a safe place to talk about things, so it’s fine if you would like to talk to her here.”

There was a long silence and the fox finally broke it. “I want to. I want to talk about it. Just…”
Judy, you won’t like this.” The bunny’s heart dropped. She had worried a little about what that had been about but had forced it from her mind for the most part. He hadn’t shown a lot of other issues. Had she actually been ignoring something more important?

The bunny answered slowly, “It’s alright Nick. You know where we stand. Nothing’s gonna change any of that. My promise is as good as yours.” She did not want to make an insinuation to Carlisle just what promise she was referring to.

Judy could not see him, but she knew her partner was uncomfortable at that point. He was quiet on his side of the screen a moment as the skunk, the only one Judy could see, watched him carefully. She wrote something down before Nick even spoke.

He finally said, “Judy, you know I would not have made it if I didn’t eat something while I was there, right? It was too much time…” She nodded slowly at that and then remembered a detail that, in all the excitement and craziness that had followed, she forgot. There were mostly-eaten raw fish lying in the mud near where she found him. Her heart lurched in her chest, immediately figuring out where this might be going and Nick was right. She was not likely to enjoy this.

Judy called out fairly loudly from her side of the screen, “Nick, you had to. You would have died.” The bunny knew Nick did not eat meat and understood that it had something to do with how he felt about living things, excluding bugs and crustaceans of course.

Nick spoke even softer, and was actually a little harder to understand. “It’s not … eating it, Judy. It was never about th-that.” The bunny’s ears perked a bit at the obvious slight stutter. Nick was very calm and calculated when he spoke, so it was not normal to hear a break in his speech. Carlisle seemed to notice too, as scratching was heard on her notepad.

Nick seemed to try to get himself calmed down a moment, and then continued. “I was down there. It was dark. I was confused. I could hear the fire in the furnaces but I didn’t know what it was. I was covered in that putrid slime. I was in terrible pain.” Judy was not happy to hear the description, but she would bear it for Nick. He continued, “It was a few hours like that, only a few hours before I felt them.” Nick said. “I got into the water a little more because the coolness of it made my leg hurt less. And I felt them. These fish. They swam right up to me and bumped my leg. It took a bit of time before I even realized that’s what they were. It was weird… they weren’t scared at all. I ignored them for a while, calling for help probably once an hour or so.”

There was a bit of a pause there. Judy felt a deep sadness wash over her. She hated imagining him in there all alone with no way of knowing anyone could hear him, knowing what would happen to him if they didn’t. It was terrible. What would it feel like just being somewhere knowing it was all over and just waiting for it to happen?
Nick continued after the doctor wrote a few things down. “Honestly, I think a few days went by like that. I was starting to realize that maybe I was in a place no one could find me, and I knew what… that meant. And I felt the fish, and I talked to them. I mean, it’s all I could do. But it was days Judy. I was in pain and… at first that killed my appetite, but it was days.” There was a slight crack to his voice.

“Nick…” Judy began, but the doctor held up a hand, making it clear that she wanted Nick to finish what he was saying. Judy wasn’t so sure she wanted him to have to finish. She knew what happened. They could talk about the moving forward part. He didn’t need to re-live this, did he?

Nick seemed locked into what he wanted to say however, and continued. “I felt bad at first, but then it was like a horrible pain. It was worse than my leg, but the difference was… I couldn’t do anything about my leg. I could fix this new pain. And…” The fox gasped, as if just trying to compose himself. Judy leaned forward, crossing her arms over her chest, aching for her fox. Why hadn’t she let him talk more about this before? He could talk to her about it, he didn’t have to hide it from her.

He finally resumed. “I finally… just reached down when one of those fish were nudging me and I just… picked him right up. It was that easy. Then I realized it had not been so easy. I… I had my claws in him.” Nick sounded horrified.

Judy immediately felt worse. She was wrong about what was hurting her partner. It wasn’t that he ate meat. She closed her eyes, cupping her muzzle, listening to him.

Nick whimpered a little, and she could tell he was actually feeling the same things he must have felt then. He spoke in a fearful, wavering voice, “I pulled my claws out of it, and it tried to flip out of my hands but I gripped him again, and I felt my mouth fill with drool. It actually came spilling out, it’s never done that. I had to eat. I was going to die.” He voice squeaked. Judy’s eyes became wet. “…But I thought about it. I actually thought about it. What if I died anyway? The fish didn’t have to die if I was doomed, what right did I have? It was alive, it would live after I was gone, wouldn’t it? But as I wondered this I just… I tightened my hands. I tightened them so hard. I squeezed and squeezed with my claws and… and it stopped moving.”

Judy gasped quietly at that. This was so much worse than she thought. He had been carrying that around this whole time. She needed to help him, but how could she? Where would she even begin?

Nick choked out a sob and Judy got up, but the doctor motioned her back down. Judy felt a sudden wave of rage. She needed to go to him! What the hell was the doctor doing? She was torturing him!

The doctor disregarded Judy a moment and spoke. “Nick, in the state you were in, you do
understand that your instincts will do all they can to save you, yes?” she asked.

Nick coughed a bit, and then sputtered, “I pulled it up and I bit it!” His voice was absolutely anguished. “…And I tore it. And I ripped, and I swallowed. I thought it was going to taste terrible but I was so hungry that… that nothing had ever tasted so good and I ate it so fast. And then it was gone, just bones… and I was alone, and I was scared about what I did. Why did I do that? I didn’t want to do that! I couldn’t stop! Can you imagine how much being eaten like that had to hurt? I don’t even know if it was dead!” he cried. Judy got up again, shaking with rage at the doctor. If she didn’t let her go over there Carlisle was going to have to physically restrain a bunny.

“Nick, it’s okay, let’s go back to-“ the doctor seemed to try to talk Nick back to a place of more comfort. Judy agreed. Do that. He needed to get away from this.

“And then I threw up.” The tone Nick gave this confession was the darkest Judy had ever heard him use. Utter hopelessness. He then raised his voice, nearly to a shout, “After all that I threw him up! I wasted it! Its life meant nothing!” The doctor got up, looking concerned. That was enough. Judy was on his side of the screen in an instant, finding Nick on his knees, hands on the back of his head pulling as if he were trying to take a hat off or something, claws pulling behind his ears.

The doctor called out, “Judy get back, he’s-“

Judy shot the doctor a sufficiently cold look that it made her stop talking as the bunny quickly pulled Nick up close against her, getting down low onto the floor with him. He was shaking so hard.

“I g-grabbed another! I ate another one!” Nick sobbed. “They kept t-touching my leg so trusting and I just ate them, one after the other, f-four of them before I stopped, before my belly was full and the m-monster was s-satisfied!” Judy held Nick in such a way that it kept his arms down, and he shook like a leaf in a storm. Judy did the only thing she could think to do. She pushed Nick back, mashing him out flat on the floor, covering his body with hers, pinning him tight. She cried softly, speaking into his ear as he shook beneath her.

“It’s over Nick. It’s over, that’s all over. You had to live. I want you to live. I need you. If you had died I would have been all alone. I needed you to live. Don’t you ever be sorry that you are still here with me!” Nick cried a bit longer, thought much more quietly. He held the bunny that had him pinned. She felt his claws in her back but understood that they were clutching her fearfully. The doctor approached slowly, seeming less trusting of Nick in his panic than Judy had been. The fox slowly sat up with Judy’s help.

“Nick,” Carlisle said softly, “I think… to help you understand what was happening down there I
need to explain what the fish were thinking before I can discuss any of what you were feeling.” She sat on the floor beside him. Judy felt bad suddenly for the murderous look she’d shot the doctor a moment before. She was still trying to help. The skunk continued, “… See Nick, the fish are just fish. You can hold them to your standard of feeling and all if you want, but have you thought much about why they were nudging you?”

Judy looked up curiously, not knowing where Carlisle was going with that. Nick seemed confused too, but making him think seemed to calm him, so the bunny was grateful all the same.

He answered softly, “Well, obviously I know it wasn’t so we could hang out, play some pool or something. I guess they were trying to get bits of food out of my fur?” he asked.

“Nick…” the doctor leaned back a little. “You saw the fish, what do you think the fish down there eat? I mean, they lived there in that shallow pool. What did they eat?”

“Whatever washed down there I guess?” Nick asked, shrugging.

“And you washed down there.” The skunk nodded slowly to the now seemingly exhausted fox. The bunny’s ears went up at the implication.

Nick said flatly, “They were nudging me… to see if I was dead.”

“So they were gonna eat him.” Judy added in a grim tone.

Carlisle stood quietly and walked back to her desk. “That’s life, Nick. It’s not pretty, we don’t always like it, but in the greatest extremes, that’s just life.” Nick wrapped his arms around Judy, wiping his cheek on her shoulder a bit.

“It’s alright Nick.” Judy said softly, stroking one of his ears. “We’ll get through this. I know it hurts, all the stuff that happened, but it’s gonna be both of us, alright?” she asked. Nick smiled weakly and nodded, but then his expression fell a bit.

He spoke in a bit more raspy tone, one that reminded Judy painfully of how she’d found him in the mud and muck of ‘Hell’. “I know it’s gonna be harder… Any time you feel my teeth close on you when I hold you in my arms…” There was deep regret in his tone, “…you say you like it, but now you know what they were… what they were used for…” he huffed. Judy gritted her teeth as she
figured out what Nick was actually referring to. She had not realized that her partner would talk about any of their intimate dealings in front of the doctor. However, he seemed in that moment scarcely aware that she was there. His eyes were trained only on Judy.

The doctor quickly reminded them of her presence. “Wait, come again?” The tone of her question made it obvious she knew absolutely what that last bombshell implied.

Judy ignored the skunk. Nick was her focus. “Oh Nick, that doesn’t change any of that. I’ve never pretended that fox teeth were anything else. Nothing changes between us, do you understand? I’ll like it just as much tonight as I did this morning, okay?” she insisted. What Nick referred to of course was that happy, squirm-inducing touching and trailing of teeth over neck, shoulder, thigh, all over - that represented the more passionate variety of fox kissing. He was most certainly not about to suddenly deny her that. Judy would not hear of it!

Carlisle spoke again in the background. “Uh, back up a sec, I-“

Judy continued with a gasp of realization, “Oh no! Nick, I just realized… God, I’ve been so insensitive. Look… I promise, here and now, I won’t eat any more tuna fish, okay? I promise.”

“What.” The response from Carlisle sounded as blank as her own expression.

“It’s alright Carrots,” Nick said as he smiled at that. “Again, the fact that mammals eat them isn’t the issue, it’s how I… I mean, I…” Judy put her small paw on Nick’s muzzle, not wanting to get him started again. She understood. He was upset because, as hunger pushed him he lost control. He couldn’t stop himself.

“… an important thing to talk about-“ Carlisle tried again.

“Tell you what Nick,” Judy interrupted again, actually starting to have a little fun at the expense of the mephit, “There’s a market in Tundratown – they sell live fish from an aquarium there so that it’s as fresh as you can get it. I overheard Fangmeyer talking about it. How about we go there and buy some of them, put them in water and take them back to the canal? Would you like that?” She remembered seeing Nick feeding the fish on their first. It seemed to make him happy back then.

This seemed to also throw Carlisle from her previous point of focus. “Oh wait, hey now, that’s actually a very proactive and positive idea, Judy!” The doctor’s tone was proud so the bunny beamed. Carlisle looked at Nick encouragingly. “Does that sound like a fair offering? You’d have
died without the fish, but these fish would die without you. Five fish for a fox, a fox for five fish.” Nick widened his eyes a little and then provided a genuine smile. He looked at the bunny with that wide grin.

“This right here. This is why I love you.” He put his arms around the bunny, pushing his cheek to hers. Judy looked up at the silently stunned-looking doctor and then closed her eyes and tightly hugged her fox in return. Patient-client privilege was about to come into full swing.

A soft buzz came from the doctor’s desk. It seemed to startle Carlisle, and she hit a button. “Yes, Addy?”

“Your ten-thirty is signed in,” came the porcupine’s electronic-sounding reply. Carlisle looked mortified, her attention snapping to the clock on the wall.

“N…No…” she said, tightening her grip on the edge of her desk. She then sat back in her chair, eyes glancing quickly back and forth between cuddling fox and bunny. Finally, she sighed and picked up her notebook.

Carlisle jotted a few things down quickly and spoke again. “Alright… That went by quickly, didn’t it? So, this session told me a lot about how you two are coping, and make no mistake! It seems rough but you are coping. I think perhaps you might have forgotten to mention a pretty important social dynamic here. It’s one that definitely affects how our next visit will play out… but for today we have run out of time. I will allow you two to return to duties provided by Chief Bogo on my recommendations. It will be active duty so please look out for one another.” Judy gasped slightly, having feared that one or both might not be seeing a patrol car again any time soon. “That said, I might… normally recommend not entertaining any difficult assignments for a while, but it seems Chief Bogo has a different set of needs. Get cleaned up and head over to speak with him. I will call ahead. He wants to meet you in conference room G.”

Judy and Nick did not keep the chief waiting, but they were both a bit dumbfounded as to why he would have requested them the moment they were done at the doctor. Would they have been requested if Carlisle had failed them? Was this so important that they would have been needed even if the doctor did not want them to work? It was not unusual for the chief to give them special
assignments. It usually meant fluff work and the pair were pretty sure they could handle that.

They walked into the precinct and greeted Clawhauser who was passing time looking through video surveillance for the activities of a shoplifter. On slow mornings he would frequently assist in that manner with investigations. Judy felt a tug at her heart, knowing now a little more about the incident that put him behind a desk. She wondered if he’d ever talk to her about it now that she was a kindred officer in that regard.

The pair went past him to the second floor conference rooms and into the one specified. There was a quick sense of déjà vu for Judy as she walked in. Bogo stood on one side of the long conference room as light poured in through the tall windows that lined the far wall, and Jack Savage sat in the chair at the end. This time he was not handcuffed however. He had his arms folded over one another, sitting casually. The bunny ‘hybrid’ smiled brightly at them.

“Judy! Nick!” He slapped the table. “Great to see you again!”

“Hey Jack. It’s not been that long,” Nick said as he moved with Judy to stand at the other end of the table. Judy looked back and forth between the stripped lapine and the Cape buffalo. Did the assignment involve Jack again? Couldn’t he keep himself out of trouble?

“Alright!” Bogo’s heavy voice ended small talk instantly. “Officers, I take it your session went well? Welcome back to active duty.”

Judy nodded and spoke. “It was helpful, yes. Thank you, Sir.” She looked back over to Jack and then her boss. “What’s the assignment Doctor Carlisle mentioned?”

“Good. Right to the point,” the chief stated stoically. He reached into his uniform shirt pocket and pulled out his glasses, putting them on.

Nick cringed, and spoke up immediately, “I still feel crazy. Can I go home?”

“Shut it, Wilde,” the chief stated bluntly. Judy expected Jack to laugh at Nick’s reprimand but when she looked over to him, he seemed nervous. The chief spoke again. “Officer Hopps…” the chief used a sweet tone uncharacteristic for him. “A little bird has informed me that you and Officer Wilde may be in a relationship of a more romantic variety. Is this true?” he asked. Judy snapped her attention immediately on Jack, who was looking away.
“What the hell, Jack!?” she exclaimed.

Nick looked utterly stunned. He spoke quickly, “I mean, I can’t deny I feel closer to Judy because she saved my life, Chief, there’s a lot of room in a friendship for being really very close. It’s a lot of wiggle room, and what you imply seems to be that.”

Judy took over, fearing that Nick, having just been thoroughly shaken, would misrepresent the facts by accident. The bunny stated briskly, “- We have been nothing but professional in our work and our dealings with the public. It’s close, sure, but that side of life doesn’t have anything to do with work. We find comfort in one another! I mean it’s to be expected after all that’s happened! I mean sure, if I were a fox I’m certain I would be going crazy…”

Nick took over again, “We aren’t going to lie and say there’s nothing at all there, I mean, it’s been a struggle and we have each other. You have to know that we-“

Judy spoke up rapidly, “… policy only advises that it’s an offense if either of us were the other’s superior-“ Bogo and Jack watched the pair like a tennis match.

The fox blurted, “Judy’s pretty superior, don’t take that wrong-“

Judy smiled nervously, “Nick means I am the stronger officer in terms of policy!”

“Stop!” the chief fairly shouted to make the babbling cease. Judy and Nick stood at attention, though the bunny did give a murderous glare to the striped rabbit. He only looked down guiltily. Bogo rubbed his chin, shaking his head. “I know the policy, Hopps. And you are right, it’s an offense if you were in a command position, but it’s my discretion as to whether or not it’s allowed. Did you notice, Hopps, that there are no same-species partners in my precinct?” The bunny looked up and then nodded at that.

“Yes sir.” She stated, knowing where he was likely going with that.

Bogo continued. “It goes a long way to prevent this complex issue from occurring. One would logically assume that fox and bunny partners would be especially safe territory but oh no, not with you two!” He had a teasing tone in his voice. Judy cringed a little. Were they getting reprimanded or what? And what the hell was Jack thinking? Judy and her partner both knew of his secret relationship with Nick’s apartment superintendent. They could blow that wide open on Social media if it were not for the fact that it would be unfair to Skye.
Nick finally spoke up. “Am I to understand that our relationship has something to do with an assignment, then?” Judy snapped her attention back to the fox. She then looked back at Bogo and Jack. The buffalo leaned back, arms crossed.

“Quick as always Wilde. Yes, it does.” Bogo’s tone was less accusatory and more official. This caused Judy to immediately relax. Not only were they not in trouble for it, but it was somehow needed? How was that possible?

Jack was the one who spoke next. “Three days ago a professor of Mammalian History was murdered while staying at a resort day spa. The details of his murder have not been released to the public because of the sensitive nature of his work.” Judy widened her eyes and tensed up immediately. They were being asked to investigate a murder? This was usually very much in detective territory.

Bogo took over. “The nature of the day spa is such that a very old agreement with the city allows it to fall outside of the normal city jurisdiction. Certain rules do not specifically apply there, and they like to keep it that way. As such, we are prevented from sending a team in to investigate the murder because of the disruption that it would cause. At the same time, the mammal who runs the place wants it to be investigated on a less official basis. Mr. Savage was friends with the deceased, a Roland Lupin. He has personal reasons for wanting the murder investigated fully, and he came to me on that regard.”

Jack took over again, which Judy was honestly surprised Bogo allowed him to do. “See, the ZPD hit a snag. Because of the nature of this day spa, their Mammalian Resources department would not clear officers who were not in a relationship to take this case due to the obvious problems involved therein.”

Bogo added, “…And a murder investigation cannot be conducted by a single officer for reasons concerning bias of evidence and a half dozen other problems.” Judy furrowed her brow. What problems could there be? It was a resort. Send officers, let them investigate.

Jack continued, “I was hesitant to tell him, Judy, you have to believe that… but I told him that he did have two officers that were in a relationship. Sorry but… it was the only way. I wouldn’t tell him who until he promised that unless you made it a problem there would be no hardship for either of you over it.”

Judy spoke up with exasperation, “You told Chief Bogo Nick and I were in a relationship to get us on a case? What’s wrong with you?!?”
It was Bogo who replied. “I am listing this as a special Class A assignment, despite the near total lack of physical danger. I do this only because of the strict limits placed on the officers who can investigate it. Are you aware what that designation means to the officers who are assigned?”

Nick immediately spoke a bit loudly. “Triple pay during the course of the assignment sir, with a bonus of two times monthly salary upon its completion.” Judy’s ears fell back, stunned not just by the information but how clearly Nick knew it.

Bogo took his glasses off slowly and smiled. “So I ask you again, officers. Are you two involved in a romantic relationship?”

Nick spoke immediately, “You had implied correctly sir, and there is a clear avenue into romance to be found in that wiggle room of friendship—“

Judy joined in eagerly, “… promise that we will remain completely ethical and professional in this relationship and it will not affect our job in the slightest! While it was about comfort perhaps early on I found that there was definitely something more and—“

Nick interjected, “Yes sir it is definitely a relationship, I would never deny that—“

Judy spoke up again, “… have been following policy sir, we intended to tell you once we determined that—“

Nick cut in, “Well yes, informing you was the plan once we returned to active duty, just like policy stated, but we are telling you now it’s definitely a romantic—“

Judy spoke over the fox, “… if it weren’t for Musk Mask Officer Wolfard probably couldn’t tell us apart anyway…“

Nick gritted his teeth and interrupted, “Officer Hopps has accidentally over-shared—“

“I have overshared, Sir. Sorry—“ Judy stated, cupping her muzzle. Given her nervous state it could have been worse. She and Nick had explored a lot of the wonderful possibilities of their relationship over that recovery period and she had to be more careful not to divulge something she and Bogo
would both regret.

Chief Bogo’s wide eyes made both the mammals shut up. There was a bit of a silence before his shoulders slumped and the buffalo dragging his hand down his face.

“It’s… gonna be a drinking night tonight,” he grumbled.

“This is Jack’s fault.” Nick implied, pointing at the suddenly scandalized striped bunny.

“Hey, I didn’t start the fire! That was all you two.” Jack said with a shrug.

“Don’t act like you are completely outside of all this, Jack!” Judy practically barked back at the other lapine. “What about Skye?!”

Jack gasped, covering his chest with a paw. “That is no one’s business and I will thank you for keeping it that way. Remember, professionalism! I get to spend so little of my time outside the public eye-”

Judy exclaimed, “So little of your time? You’ve spent enough time with her for her to claim you on her taxes!”

Nick added, “Not that we have a problem with fox and bunny relations, it is quite nice.”

Bogo added, “… will pick up a new bottle of scotch on the way home…”

Jack interjected, “Hey, I didn’t have to literally go to hell to get my fox, it was all experience and poise that earned her affections!”

“And the thickness of your wallet didn’t hurt.” Nick laughed.

“I could be flat broke, she’d still want this bunny! I’ll have you know it doesn’t matter that I’m not a fox since I keep at it like a sewing machine for hours, so don’t-“
“Oh my god, stop.” Bogo said with obvious distress. Everyone quit talking. He sighed deeply. “When my wife asks in a text message how I’m doing, sometimes… Sometimes I just answer FB and she knows I will need some peace and quiet and a drink when I get home. Do I need to tell you what FB means?” he sighed. Judy and Nick shook their heads.

Judy spoke. “Sorry sir. Carried away there. We’re friends though. Honest.”

“Your assignment will require that you have full-body disguises as you are both… very easily recognized. Your fur color will be changed. You will be given colored contacts. You will wear specialized musk-mask. You won’t lack a smell; you just won’t smell like you. Do either of you feel you cannot do this?” he asked. Judy shook her head vigorously.

Nick spoke up finally, “When does the assignment begin?” he asked. “We had not expected to be returning to work today. We will need time to pack some clothes and the like, or are those to be provided as a part of our cover?” he asked.

“You will not need to pack clothes and you will not need to be given clothes.” Bogo said, opening the door.

“I don’t follow…” Judy stated, but saw a shocked expression grow on her fox’s face.

Bogo grinned and stated casually, “I recall from an earlier report near the beginning of your career that you are already familiar with the Mystic Spring Oasis?”
Bare

Chapter Notes

Author’s Note:

If you are just joining Guardian Blue for the first time you will want to check out Season 1 first, and I would highly recommend Thanks for the Fox before that as well so everything makes sense. ^^

Also! A HUGE shout-out to J. N. Squire for assisting with editing for Season 2! With my busy schedule and rampant comma-abuse it’s a gigantic help!

Guardian Blue: Season Two

Episode 5: Bare

A deep mahogany-toned rabbit stood in a simple black cotton skirt and white blouse. She held a small bag with a thin strap on her shoulder, looking at the entrance to what amounted to a city block with a high sandstone wall around it. Her dark brown eyes widened with a bit of surprise at the approach of the one she was to meet there. The fox was toned obsidian black where her partner’s red would be, normal cream being in the same place. He had slight highlights of grey to show the advance of age, his ice-blue eyes narrow and cunning, and his ears back. He wore tan slacks and a red Hawaiian shirt. The bunny rolled her eyes.

“How is that any kind of cover?!” Judy asked with exasperation, not attempting to disguise her voice as yet.

The fox grinned, Nick’s familiar voice ringing out. “Relax, Fluff. It’s not like I will be wearing it the whole time we’re here. Where’s your country-girl accent? Aren’t you supposed to have an accent?” he asked with a grin.
Judy growled, “I am not doing the accent.” She hoisted her bag a bit and moved toward the large door of the Mystic Spring Oasis. “I’ll change my voice…” she stated in a light, feathery tone that perked up Nick’s ears, “… but t’ah ain’t doin’ th’ accent sugar.” Nick followed close behind.

Nick responded, “You are definitely allowed to use that voice. I like that voice. You’re right though… The accent doesn’t work. I think of Gideon when I hear it. That’s just… all wrong.” Nick shuddered at the thought.

Judy, in her chocolate-toned bunny cover, grinned broadly, “You should not have told me that. Ah intend to abuse that kind of information at the most in-opportune time!” She cackled.

Nick cringed and shook his head, then spoke in his ‘cover-voice’, something raspy. “I have done this terrible thing to myself.”

Judy recoiled a little at it and said, “Deeper. That’s just a laryngitis version of your regular voice there and it reminds me of when you lost your voice. That’s a monumental no go for me.”

Nick moved up closer and growled in a tone that seemed dark and almost dangerous. It was still raspy, but very different. “This was what I was originally intending to use, but I thought it was too much.” The bunny looked back at him with wide eyes.

She murmured softly, “You sound like a wolf, Nick. That’s eerie. But perfect. Let’s go with that.” Nick followed as Judy advanced toward the door.

He spoke again in his own voice. “Really? You like that? Should I use it more often?”

Judy laughed at that and shook her head. “Nah, I like you the way you are. You know that. And I know you aren’t building any kind of attachments or frisky feelings about this tender, sweet, innocent strange brown bunny. I have no doubt that you are only thinking about a violent, loud, ambitious long-eared honorary-vixen waiting for you back home.” Nick laughed heavily at that and they stopped at the entrance. The bunny then put her hand on the door, but paused a bit and then looked to her partner, ears back, face anxious.

“I mean, really? Us? Just because we’re together?” she whined.

“Actually, I talked to Wolford and it’s apparently two separate issues. It was offered to a few others
since they were not mixed-gender teams and MR would have been fine with that, but absolutely no one wanted it. Some of us do not want to get as close to their partner as I happily did with mine.” He crossed his arms, grinning. “And don’t forget! This is a huge payout, Carrots. It’s the down payment on a car. Not a great car, but we can finally get off the bus. I’m tired of getting sat on by drunken wildebeests.”

Judy sighed, tightening her grip on the door handle. “You know I’m shy. This is so not like me.” She looked up at the smiling figure of her disguised partner. He really looked very little like Nick and that made her even more self-conscious.

“Carrots, look at it like this...” Her fox leaned down to talk. “When you walk around in there, you are going as Delilah, or Dee. You look nothing like Judy Hopps. You will act very different from Judy Hopps. No one’s gonna have any clue of who you are. You are playing a character. Haven’t you ever roleplayed online?” he asked. He then folded his ears back. “No, never mind. Forget I asked. Look, it’s fine. It’ll be hard maybe at first, but I have been here before as a guest with Emmitt, remember? It gets easier after the first few minutes and it’s designed with plenty of places to sit or stand that let you be modest if you’re shy. It took them four hours to get our cover on us, so now is not the time to change our minds.”

Judy sighed and nodded. “Alright, John, let’s do this.”

Nick cringed. “Gerald!” Judy blinked at his reaction a little confused by the intensity of his dislike for being called that, but nodded at the correction. In they went.

It was dark and soothing, and the gentle music made her want to crawl onto one of the haphazardly placed piles of pillows and nap. If it were not for the fact that she was about to leave her clothes behind, she might have really been excited for this assignment. They walked together to the front desk. Yax was there as he had been the first time they were here together, but he was stacking silver magnets into an intricate design that looked like he had been doing it a while. Judy was very careful not to startle him and upset his stacking. There were so many pieces and it looked delicate.

He noticed them as they approached, however, and he grinned. He looked as unkempt and fly-ridden as ever. He stated in his drawn out fashion, “Oh yeah guys, wow… Awesome disguises! If I didn’t remember one of Officer Hopps’ ears was longer than the other I’d have been fooled, ahhh!”

Judy flinched. “What?!” she cried in her normal voice. Yax, the owner of the establishment, was aware that Nick and Judy would be investigating, but that was not what the bunny was immediately fixated on. She grabbed her ears, looking at the ends of them in her hands. The dark tips were hidden by carefully airbrushed dye but as she pulled them carefully together she could only barely, just barely tell that what Yax said was true. The left ear was longer.
Nick’s survival instinct apparently kicked in and he did not comment on that at all, instead nodding to the yak and saying in his new voice, “You should have us down as Gerald Woodson and Delilah Cloverfield.” He smiled at the yak, ignoring Judy’s careful pulling of one ear then the other. Yax regarded his sign in book and then nodded, scooting it over to the pair. Nick and Judy both signed in, and the owner of the specialized naturalist club then showed them to the changing area. This was the last place in the establishment where they were going to be wearing clothes.

Yax left them to their ‘naturalization’ as he called it. Judy looked at her locker. It was plenty large enough for her bag and everything she could want to put in it for this short visit, but she wondered what she would do if somehow her stuff went missing. She shook the thought away and turned, backpedaling a little as she saw her partner standing casually folding his shirt wearing nothing at all. He really was fine with it, but she had to look away just briefly because he still looked like a completely different fox. She had been self-conscious enough with the lady ermine who handled her full-body disguise but to stand bare before complete strangers was almost maddening. What in the world would her mother think? Her sisters would surely tease her mercilessly forever if they knew.

She took a deep breath and finally undressed, baring everything before turning and facing Nick. He regarded her and nodded before saying in his false voice, “They did a nice job. No one but Yax would ever recognize you.” Judy reached up and touched her left ear.

“How bad… I mean… Is it like… really obvious?” she asked.

Nick grinned at the bunny and said, “I spend a bunch of time touching your ears, Fluff, and have never noticed until now. It’s not noticeable. Really. Come on.” He indicated the door that lead out to the common area of the club.

“Okay, so, to be clear on our parts…” Judy stalled, “You are Joh-Gerald Woodson, a close family friend who is in business with my brother in Deerbrook County. You and I both were curious about the naturalist lifestyle after finding a flyer on the bus. Since we are not the same species, we figured it would be good to have a friend here who could offer support without it being expected to be a relationship kind of a deal. You made the arrange-“ Judy looked up and saw that the door was open and Nick had his hand out, indicating the bunny should follow. She put her hands stiffly at her sides, her phone in her hand because she had nowhere else to put it. Nick had his phone, as well as a pack that they had to keep with them because it had items they would need for the investigation.

The first thing Judy immediately noticed was the caress of moving air over her entire body. She could not recall a time in her life she’d ever felt the air move over every inch of her, uninhibited by clothing. Then she felt the sun as she walked out of the shade of the building along the thankfully unpopulated path leading to the bungalows where they would be staying. She watched Nick’s dark tail sway side to side and found that she focused on that more than looking to see if other mammals
were around. The sun actually felt very nice and she could not deny how curious and unique the feel of the weather over her unadorned body felt.

She glanced about after a little while and finally did notice a few other mammals milling about. Two zebras were holding drinks, chatting and laughing about something. There were three lady deer discussing trivially the contents of a magazine they were all marginally interested in. A cougar jogged by. It struck Judy that if anyone looked at her it was only long enough to see where she was so they didn’t run into her, same as they might anywhere else. Her eyes could not help but track over the bare forms of the mammals as they had the first time she was here. She forced herself to look back up for a while, but in the time it took just to walk to the bungalows she found herself just mostly looking at mammals the way she always did. She did not want to admit Nick was right but it did not take terribly long for her to stop really caring about being nude or anyone else not being dressed. No one was staring and ultimately, neither was she.

She did notice that a lot of mammals had long and ornate bead lanyards which held a pouch that was a good size for a phone and personal effects like cash. She could not remember seeing those last time she was there, but she had not been looking that closely. She hoped she could have one too, suspecting maybe they were in the bungalow. Having nowhere to put her phone was awkward.

They arrived at the small single-room cabin referred to as a bungalow and Judy looked around a little before going in with Nick. She didn’t know how much anyone knew about what happened, but there was a reason they were assigned this particular one.

Inside, the place was something of a wreck. There were papers everywhere. There was an overturned chair. A mattress was thrown off the bed and lay upside down on the floor with all the sheets torn off.

Nick looked back at Judy and said in his regular voice, “Classy place. I’ve slept in worse.” Judy sighed at her partner’s humor.

“Someone died here, Nick.” She carefully moved through the room, and began to take pictures. At the ZPD’s assistance, aside from the body being removed, nothing had been touched or handled in the room since the murder. Nick joined her in that endeavor, beginning their investigation by meticulously recording the crime scene. CSI work was usually done by one or more of the department specialists, but the pair got a crash course in it before coming here. Much of the meticulous CSI work would still be done after the fact, using the evidence that Nick and Judy brought back. The fox and bunny were responsible for making sure it was recorded as accurately as possible without anyone knowing that the investigation was going on.

Nick spoke up again softly, “You know, we might one day make detective and we will be dealing with this specific kind of investigation from time to time, no way around it. Are you okay with it?” he asked, his tone sympathetic and caring.
Judy answered softly, “It’s certainly not my favorite way to spend an afternoon, but yeah. I mean… This wolf deserves justice. I wish Jack had been more willing to tell us what it was the professor was researching. That might have helped us in trying to find clues.”

Nick spoke softly. “Professor Lupin was formerly the curator of the Natural History Museum where we had our little showdown with Bellwether. He was forced out of his position by the board of trustees after failing to secure grants and funding. This was apparently a retaliation by some for using some of the existing grant money in a questionable manner by way of travel to the old interior.” Judy looked slowly up at her partner. Nick grinned at her and murmured, “It’s on his Wikipawdia page, Fluff. You really need to get out of the old mode of ‘research is done in a library’.” He circled her and carefully put on blue rubber gloves. “These days, if you ever have a question burning in your heart you just tap a few words in your phone and you have the answer. ‘I don’t know’ is so last century!” Nick seemed to delight in this given that he was about 8 years her senior.

Judy just grinned back at her partner, “You’re right, I feel so silly.” She held up her phone, pretending to tap away at her screen, “Let’s see… foods poisonous to foxes…” Nick gasped, giving his best ‘scandalous’ expression. Judy, having already donned her gloves, picked up a book. As she picked it up, an envelope fell out. She checked and the envelope was empty. She carefully dusted and taped for prints, cataloging it in a small book that was in Nick’s pack. The envelope was then bagged in its own plastic baggie and she began looking through the book itself.

“This is about the old interior.” Judy stated rather curiously. “I guess that was his thing. I wonder why he’d bring books here. It seems you don’t come to a place like this to just read. I mean… You walk around and just… be naked, right?” She looked inquisitively. Nick was looking at an obvious ‘little black book’ and mindlessly scratching his left foxy flank.

“Carrots, give me a pencil…” he asked.

“Don’t leave rude notes in the evidence, Nick, I swear, if you-“ The fox waved the idea away.

He spoke up in a hushed tone, “No, no no, I am gonna do a rubbing, the last page of this is torn out and I want to know what had been written in here.”

Judy rolled her eyes at that. “Oh my god, Nick, this is not a Nancy Shrew novel, that is so cliché.” She laughed and handed the fox a pencil anyway. “You shouldn’t be altering any of the evidence at all.” Nick began scrapping the edge of the graphite back and forth over the small notebook page carefully.
"I know it’s cliché but the cliché exists because it works. A page missing from a book at a crime scene where they obviously searched like crazy for something rather than just killing him and leaving makes finding out what the missing page had written on it important!" He held up his handiwork. "There! A clue!" Judy squinted at the unusual stylized sweeping script forming completely unfamiliar letters.

"Okay, so what is it?" she asked.

"I don’t know.” Nick said bluntly.

“How last century.” Judy grinned. Nick pointed both index claws at Judy, a wide grin on his muzzle.

“Ah? Ahhhh?” He laughed, and they continued to look through the crime scene, Nick having taken a picture of the page before putting it with the rest of the evidence.

There were no other ‘intriguing’ finds aside from the little bit of blood that remained of the actual crime. The wolf had been strangled so there had not been much in the way of blood, but the condition of the scene made it immediately apparent there was foul play involved. After recording the scene carefully, Judy and Nick tidied up the scene a bit as they would have to return to the room later. They put away the investigation kit with the various bits of evidence that they could find and then both sat on the small loveseat. There was little reason for them to need anything larger as they happily sat close together. Judy went through the pictures she had taken and categorized them carefully. She was very meticulous about that stuff.

As she finished doing that, Nick finally spoke up. “Alright, Fluff, you ready to do some asking around?” Judy looked up at her partner curiously.

Judy gave Nick a perplexed look and asked in an exasperated tone, “Are you serious? We’re undercover, we can’t exactly go interrogating and interviewing, Nick.” It was easy to forget that their role here was not the same as it was when they were out in the field, so Judy figured her partner was still thinking in terms of usual police duty. The unfamiliar-looking fox grinned, however.

He said, “Not officially no, but you would be surprised how much mammals share when no one’s really trying to get them to talk.”
Judy folded her chocolate-toned ears back. “If this is a ploy to get me out into the common area just to embarrass me…” Judy growled.

Nick grinned smugly back to the bunny, bringing his nose close to hers. “I got that out of my system the first time, Carrots.” He flicked his tail about merrily and Judy wanted to pull his ears for it, but reluctantly agreed to head out.

They put their belongings away and Judy found that there were pouches with the beaded lanyards suitable for their phones. She had to loop her own a couple of times, where Nick’s fit fine with just one loop. One size fits all could be a very relative thing.

Nick and Judy sauntered out to the central courtyard. At first, the bunny found her eyes wandering again as if she’d forgotten it was normal. However, that passed quickly and she even felt a little less self-conscious about her own nudity. Nick of course seemed absolutely shameless, but this wasn’t his first time. He looked around casually, smiling, nodding to mammals here and there. No one really gave them more than a passing glance. Judy half expected to see the yoga class out on the lawn. That was the part of her first visit that stuck in her head the most, but obviously they didn’t just do Yoga all day long. The lawn was open and there were a few mammals there on rolled out blankets just enjoying the sunshine.

Her fox finally spoke again in his lower, growly tone as they walked. “So, I’m thinking… That maybe the best folks to talk to are the ones who likely hear the most. When I was here the first time, Yax and Emmitt both highly recommended one of the services and I would have to guess it’s popular. I assume that’s where we should start.”

Judy lifted her ears high. “Oh? What service might that be?” she asked. She was almost afraid to ask. She had been waiting for some kind of exotic surprise that she’d not really considered before to make itself known, but that hadn’t happened. Everything was pretty much as she remembered it and that made it familiar.

Her partner answered, “A masseuse.” He grinned broadly.

Judy stopped walking in general defiance of the suggestion. “Nick! We are not here on the city’s dime to get pampered!” she snapped perhaps a little too loudly.

“Gerald! Gerald!” he hissed. Judy gritted her teeth. That was right; they were out in the open. She scolded herself silently for messing that up. This took getting used to. Absolutely no one seemed to notice their exchange, however.
‘Delilah’ whispered back, “Sorry, Gerald.” She again used her sweet feathery voice. “Still, we can’t ask them direct questions about the incident, ‘Gerald’.” The fox nodded at that and simply led Judy with him to the West corner of the compound, his tail swaying elegantly side to side as if to bait her into following.

He spoke again after a moment. “I know the parameters, Dee. Have faith in your fox.” He padded up to a quiet, thatched hut with a white double-paw-print sign outside. Two large palms crossed over it to provide wonderful shade. They both headed inside. There was a curtain of beads separating the lounge outside from the interior. Beyond the curtain there were three long, low padded platforms in the center of the half-moon shaped room. They were sized huge, medium, and small. It was nicely air-conditioned in the hut, which was a welcome amenity. There was a wrap-around counter at one side of the room where the attendants sat. Nick sat on the medium platform and smiled at the present attendants, two rather petite white foxes. They were lovely, elegant creatures a bit smaller than Skye. They had such a dainty appearance that Judy was sure they were not even the same species of fox that Nick was. They were much shorter and their ears were smaller. Both had amber-colored eyes that were brilliant against the snowy white of their faces.

“Welcome!” one of the pair chimed. “I’m Seki!”

The other stated happily, “I’m Uma. We’re only free until one o’clock when we have a scheduled session.” Judy perked her ears and looked up at a small clock above the door. It was about fifteen minutes until one. They were not likely to get much information here. “Oh! A bunny!” Uma exclaimed as Judy finished stepping through the beads as well.

Judy perked up at the greeting, and spoke in her soft, feathery tone, “I take it you don’t see many bunnies here?”

“City bunnies are pretty shy about this sort of thing,” Seki stated. “No offense intended, of course! We are happy to see you. All are welcome and of course, we are knowledgeable in acupressure techniques for all sizes.” The amber-eyed white vixen moved closer, her tail swaying elegantly behind her in a manner that Judy suspected was intended to be casual and relaxed. As she approached she said with a tone of genuine compassion, “Bunny feet get tortured on hard city streets, would you allow me to tend to them?”

‘Dee’ looked warily at ‘Gerald’ who nodded. Judy still felt guilty about sampling some of the personal spoiling the place had to offer, but her partner seemed to have an plan so she decided to trust him. She nodded and followed the instructions of the trained masseuse, laying on her tummy on the smallest of the padded platforms. Seki sat down behind her and picked up one of Judy’s strong foot-paws in her hands. The first sensation made Judy wince with pain just a little, and then it was just pure magic. The bunny’s face dropped to the padding with a soft thump and she sighed out
loudly. This was worth whatever the price would have been for them to come here. Did Nick do this on purpose? Was this just supposed to be a treat for her or did he really have a plan? She stopped caring long before Seki moved to the other foot.

Uma eventually asked what ‘Gerald’ would like and he immediately asked for something the bunny knew already that her partner loved. Brushing. This treatment was almost more common in a massage parlor than actual massage, so it was not an unexpected request. Nick rested on his belly on the medium platform much as his partner did on the smaller one. He looked down at her where she lay and smiled at whatever expression resulted from the pampering the now earth-toned bunny was getting.

Judy glanced up as the other vixen attentively stroked her dark-colored fox with a luxurious brush and the bunny felt the slightest pang of jealousy, but chased it away. Uma only had a brush. Judy had his vow. Those two things existed in completely different worlds. As the brush was applied to him, he relaxed and casually explained some of their fictitious backstory. Much curiosity was displayed by the two vixens about why a bunny had come with a fox companion to this place. They actually seemed disappointed to find Gerald and Delilah were not a romantic pair. Judy was a little surprised at how accepting the two seemed to be of the idea of a fox and bunny pair. Then again, a naturalist club seemed like the kind of place one would find open-mindedness. As her own massage continued she wondered how much different the experience would be if they were not undercover.

In return for Nick telling their story, Uma explained that she and her sister Seki had grown up in Tundra Town and found themselves with no real plan after they got out of school but knew they liked seeing other mammals happy so a friend told them that massage therapy paid well and was not as grueling and repetitive as working in the markets could be. They went to school for that, but found most folks underestimated them due to their size so they didn’t have enough clients to do more than just make ends meet in Tundra Town. While things looked rather bleak, they met Yax at a protest during the Nighthowler Incidents and were fascinated by his slow-rolling style, befriending him and eventually working for him. The weather took getting used to, but it was a far better place for the two sisters.

Judy melted a bit more as her legs were massaged and eventually, Nick began to stray with his topics, relaxing and seeming to just talk for talking’s sake. He asked, “So, you don’t get many bunnies here, have there been any particularly exotic sorts around?” Judy perked up a bit at that. It wasn’t a very direct or telling question, but it certainly seemed like nonsense where the case was concerned. They didn’t have long to get more information at that point.

“We get them sometimes.” Uma stated casually as she stroked Nick with the brush in long, slow, even strokes. “This week’s been pretty typical. I take it you are a fan of the exotic?” As Uma said this she gave Judy’s foot a little shake, as if indicating it. The rabbit smirked. She had no idea. She then furrowed her brow. Were they still giving off signals of being a couple, even while undercover? The bunny worried a little about that.
Nick chuckled a bit and said in his deeper, wolfish tone, “Sometimes… I’m not here for that, but meeting someone new seemed fun and I heard this place attracted all sorts, even folks from far, far away!”

Uma spoke softly, “Indeed we do! Gerald, is it alright to brush your tail?” she asked.

Nick replied quickly, “Thank you, no, I will tend to that.” Judy arched a brow, remembering that this was personal for a fox. She suddenly felt slightly embarrassed for how much attention she gave to Nick’s tail before they were even a couple. Judy realized then that it was every bit as personal as she’d been lead to believe. The masseuse had to ask to even be allowed to touch it, and Nick had refused despite laying there naked. That didn’t seem to put her off though, so perhaps that was not such an unusual exchange. She casually answered his question instead.

“We really do get visitors from everywhere. Mystic Spring Oasis is not the only club of its kind, but we offer the nicest amenities to be sure!” She stroked Nick’s ears with the back side of the brush which was, it appeared, a pillow of felt. It was for hands-free petting. Judy admitted that it looked like it felt pretty good.

Her partner replied, “It sounds like I missed some of the best opportunities then.” Nick laughed at that. Judy found it odd how well Nick could laugh in his ‘false’ voice and it not slip back to his usual Nick voice. He had used a fake voice before, she could tell. It was far more natural to him. This was one of those times where his former life was obviously still useful to them.

Seki replied as she moved to Judy’s other leg, “Only just barely. A lycaon was here a few days ago. He wasn’t here a whole day so I have to guess it was a lunch session to steam his fur, or something.” Nick perked a bit at that, as did Judy. A lycaon, or painted dog, was a rare sight in Zootopia proper. Most of them lived in The Interior, a remote region of the continent which was largely unsettled and not nearly so refined and civilized despite a lot of the original population of Zootopia originating from there so very long ago. That was where the professor had been doing his research. The bunny had to try to calm herself a little. How did Nick know to lead them to talking about that? There was very little ‘forced’ about his conversation and he’d gotten the desired information in just minutes. She had to admit to herself that she was impressed.


Seki spoke again, her voice lilting with cheerfulness. “Are you both staying long? I know it’s a pretty big departure from the norm but it’s really more comfortable the longer you stay. Even I had some worries when I first took the job, but Uma and I have always been treated nicely and everyone here seems comfortable, so it kind of grows on you.” This turn in conversation seemed to signal that their fifteen minutes was up. Uma stood up fully and Nick sat up. Judy did the same, feeling that
her partner actually got the information he was after. It was actually pretty good intel.

Uma grinned at Nick. “I know you said you weren’t, but I still say you two make a pretty cute couple.” Judy’s partner laughed a little uncomfortably.

He said in a stressed voice, “Dee’s brother would have my head on a pike if I so much as thought about it.” He gazed at the bunny, and Judy noticed that he was unable to keep himself from smiling when he looked at her directly.

‘Dee’ gave a coy grin and stated, “I guess I will spare your life and not tell him then. Come on Gerald, let’s get some drinks.” She got up and padded out of the hut followed by the twittering laughter of the younger white foxes. Nick laughed as well and followed dutifully.

He caught up to his partner and grinned. “See, you are warming up to this just fine!” he stated.

Judy rolled her eyes at that and hopped side to side a bit. “I won’t lie; my feet and legs feel like they did before the academy. That alone is worth another visit,” she noted. Nick widened his eyes and gave a little gasp. “…Not that I’m saying we will be back any time soon in the official capacity. But I must concede that right now… I’m not hating this. I’d try the hot tub or pleasure pool if it wouldn’t blow our cover. I guess we can always do the clay-pot thing.” Nick gave a shiver at that and Judy gritted her teeth. She goofed up. She felt bad immediately.

They walked over to a refreshment stand close by to get complimentary water that was available. It was a pretty warm day given the part of the city they were in and the thought of bounding around in the pleasure pool only seemed more alluring. Perhaps they really would do it another time. They quietly discussed getting information about a painted dog. If he was here, he might have checked in. Judy felt certain that Yax would remember something that unique.

They sat down in a shady area where mist sprayers cooled the air around them. Judy leaned back, looking around a bit and finding that they were alone and could discuss the case. She turned to Nick, about to speak, but she paused, watching him focus on his hands. He seemed to be rubbing the back of them with his thumbs as if trying to get the black dye off of them subconsciously, ears back in irritation. She should not have mentioned the clay-pots. That was a treatment where they coated the body with thick, sticky mud to strip the dirt and dander from fur more completely and restore natural oil balance. It made for very shiny, soft fur, but her partner was still having some issues with anything messing up his fur. She had to figure out a way to get him to think about something else.

She perked her ears finally, and asked, with a little bit of trepidation, “So when did you know?” She
leaned back a bit, trying to relax herself again.

Her partner spoke casually after sipping his water, “That strange writing. It looked like something from The Interior, so I figured I would ask about exotic mammals. I bet Jack knows something. It would be wise, I think, to give him a call. He’s not part of the investigation team, I know, but he might be able to—“

Judy smiled and cut him off. “No, not about that!” The fox looked back to her curiously. Judy inhaled slowly and then sighed before speaking again. “You… seemed to have your mind already well made up with how you felt about me. I have wanted to ask you this for a while and I’ve been a bit nervous. The disguises are kind of liberating so I’m asking now. When did you know you had feelings that led us… here?” Her eyes tracked up and down her dark, ‘unfamiliar’ fox. Nick smiled at that, and leaned in.

He said softly, “If I tell you, you have to tell me. Does that seem fair, so long as I go first?” he asked. Judy nodded slowly at that, a little nervous but that was certainly fair. Nick laced his fingers, crossing a leg and resting his hands on his knees. “Well, pinpointing an exact moment it happened isn’t going to do it justice, I think, but I am pretty sure of when I knew. But first, I should say… Even becoming friends with you was unique.”

Judy clarified, “…because I was a bunny?”

Nick shook his head. “No, because it was real friendship. It wasn’t some kind of symbiosis where I needed something you had and you needed something I had. That’s how most of my friendships my whole like worked. When you and I became friends, all we had to give was each other and that’s all either of us wanted out of it. What you offered me was going to take a lot of work, and getting me ready for it was not going to be a cake-walk for you, but we did it anyway. There wasn’t even a guarantee we’d be in the same precinct! But you did everything you could to help me. So, my friendship with you was immediately different, Fluff.”

“That… That’s actually good to know, Nick,” Judy stated, nodding slowly. She was actually immensely happy with even that part of his explanation.

Nick continued softly, “… As for the other… The really deep, hard feelings…”

“…Hard feelings? Haven’t heard them referred to like that before…” Judy chuckled.
Nick smiled kindly and shook his head. “They’re hard when you grow up being afraid of feelings like that.” The bunny recoiled, having not really considered what it might have been like for Nick, feeling that way when he didn’t like getting close to anyone. He continued. “The more difficult feelings started when you brought my mother back, of course. That was… I mean, Judy that was one of the scariest things I’ve ever gone through.” He shook his head a little.

Judy put a hand on his, not seeming to care if anyone saw. “You thought you lost her. I mean, of course it was scary. And you dealt with it alone for a year…”

“No, not losing her. You bringing her back. I mean… I wasn’t scared about you bringing her back. I was scared about how I felt for you immediately after. I… I thought about you nearly all the time in the days after that. I was distracted if you got close, I felt sad if you weren’t there, and I felt lonely. I’d been alone a lot, but I’d never been lonely.” Judy held her breath, hardly able to believe just how open Nick was being about this. She had figured she might get a couple of words about it, maybe a bit of teasing, but certainly not this! He continued slowly, “If I hadn’t visited my mom so frequently during those first few weekends I think I’d have driven you nuts. I knew something was up, but I didn’t want to admit it. I was so worried that I was going to say or do something stupid and you’d be upset. I tamped it down well enough I think, then the sad-fic internet story thing happened.”

“Oh no, don’t remind me, I was so completely silly.” Judy hung her head, remembering that with a bit of shame. Judy had made herself a very recognizable figure and as a result more than a few internet-savvy mammals had their hand at writing fiction based on her and her partner. Feeling defiant to Nick’s insistence she not read it, Judy read it. And she regretted it immediately. The first thing she read had Nick pointlessly die. It made her think about losing him and that didn’t go well for her.

Nick replied, “Was it silly? Yes, yes it was, but… something happened that ended up sparking that flame inside me again, can you remember?” he asked.

“I’m not sure…” Judy replied, chasing back her embarrassment. “I guess you realized that I really cared about you a lot because the story messed me up?”

Nick smiled warmly. “A little of that I guess, but you cuddled me in your sleep… I don’t think you remember that part as well… you ended up having a nightmare… but when you cuddled, you pushed in very close and as much as I wanted to ignore it and just watch the show, all I could focus on was that you were holding me, and I was completely consumed with wanting to hold you too. It was actually painful not to. I decided then that I needed to be really careful. I was quickly losing control of the situation and I just knew I was going to mess everything up. I tried to take a big step back and things got pretty much back to normal for a few months because we started getting efficient at helping each other with work. Instead of everything being new and kind of scary, the job was actually getting really rewarding and kind of fun.”
“I’m glad for that.” Judy interjected. She had suspected that Nick took to being a police officer very well, but hearing him tell her that he found it rewarding made her feel less like it was this thing she roped him into. “So you figured things out when I cuddled you, huh?” she asked. As she reflected on that, she realized that she had pretty much forgotten the two of them were naked. She was amazed at how easy it was to just dismiss the lack of clothing entirely after a while.

Nick held up a paw. “Not so fast. I knew I had feelings, but I would be doing a disservice to the real thing if I called that love. I don’t know what it was. It was strong, but I managed to rein it in. There’s no reining in what I have now. It’s different. But I had things under control back then.”

Nick sighed softly and paused before saying with an eye-roll, “But then you asked me to come with you to Bunnyburrow.” Judy rubbed her chin, remembering fondly the whole trip. It made her so happy to show him around and that Munch game they played was one of her very happiest memories of him. They saved some kits in a burning house and they hung out with a few of her siblings. All of it seemed almost like a dream, so long ago, but it wasn’t even a full two seasons ago. Nick leaned back a little, arms stretched out along the back of the bench, continuing to speak. “Every cautious bone in my body told me ‘don’t do it’. Don’t go to Bunnyburrow, your shields won’t protect you there.”

“Shields? Oh, you mean your wall.” Judy laughed.

“They had already taken a beating, I knew they wouldn’t hold.” Nick laughed. “But, you convinced me to go, and I will be honest. It was the happiest week of my entire memorable life up to that point and the feelings I had toward you were beyond anything I’d ever even read a description of in a fantasy novel. I was scared out of my freaking mind.” Judy widened her eyes at that, ears high. She had not realized that Nick was afraid of those feelings back then, he had hidden it so well. Sure, the trip back was pretty quiet, but he’d been terrified the whole time? She laughed a bit at that.

Judy said softly in her disguised voice as a couple of zebra wandered by, “Well, back then is when I started to recognize that I had unusual feelings too, Nick, so I guess it hit us at the same time. I was worried that it was some kind of weird security attachment like my sister Sammie described and I was just trying hard not to let it interfere in our friendship. So believe me, I understand why you didn’t want to say anything.” She didn’t want Nick to regret that he didn’t say anything back then. She was scared of her feelings too.

Nick looked down rather suddenly, seeming a bit sullen. Judy sat up a bit more, looking at him with concern as he spoke. “I knew what the feelings had to be then, but I didn’t know what I was going to do about it. So I decided I would talk to the only mammal I trusted as much as I trusted you.”

“Your mother.” Judy guessed, knowing she was right.
Nick nodded. “Yep. But…” He looked up into her eyes and there was obvious pain in his, making Judy’s throat tighten up a bit. “I met my mom in the diner… I told her how I was feeling, and I wanted to know if she thought it was normal for friends to feel that way because I didn’t have a lot of friends. But I had no sooner gotten the words out of my mouth when my phone rang. It was Bogo.” Judy winced, her heart aching suddenly as she realized what Nick was talking about.

Bogo had called him to tell him that Judy had been hit by a bus. Nick, at the time, didn’t have any additional information and could only guess it was a bus moving at full speed and his partner… no, not just his partner… the one he loved had been taken from him. His mother had told Judy that she went with Nick because she needed to be there for him. He had not taken it well. Now the bunny understood a little better exactly why it had hit him so hard. She understood why he sounded the way he did on the phone, and why his mother wanted her to hold him when he came to the hospital. It made so much more sense. Judy didn’t care if anyone saw it or what they thought of it in her disguised persona. Dee hugged her sad-looking Gerald tight.

“As I said before, and I mean this, I will be more careful… a lot more careful, so we can keep saving the city together, alright?” she asked with a smile. Nick smiled back, seeming to feel better as he pressed past that memory. It gave Judy a bit of pause, however. Vivienne knew. She knew Nick was in love with Judy when everyone thought he’d died.

Nick continued to speak, pulling Judy from that thought. “…So yeah, that’s when I knew. When I was coming back to Zootopia on a train thinking the worst… and you called. The way I felt when I heard your voice, there was no mistaking it. I knew. And I knew I was never going to be able to think of a life that didn’t also include you… so stuff kind of changed after that. I didn’t pull away anymore. I let you get as close as you wanted. I wanted you as close as you were willing to be.” He sighed finally. “…So, how about you? What was your exact ah-hah moment of clarity?” He wiped his nose, perhaps having been near enough to tears at that to have it unusually wet.

Judy sucked in a deep breath. She had already mentioned when her feelings started and just looked up and told him the exact moment. He’d been open with her and while it wasn’t a great memory, she’d share the truth. “I wanted more and more to hold you and be close to you after the bus incident, honestly. I decided that I really liked being near you when I slept and was still thinking it was a weird bunny emotional hang up and you’d be mortified by it. After the apartment invasion when we really cuddled and slept like that for the first time I knew it was something entirely different but we were too busy to really think about it.” Judy inhaled and gave the part she knew Nick was waiting for but might not like hearing. “I finally figured it out over a week after you… went into the spillway. The day before your funeral.” She said it quickly, like ripping off a bandage.

Nick looked stunned, and was certainly speechless a moment. He then grimaced a little and stated slowly, “Judy that… That’s absolutely… I mean… I…” He looked down, ears back. “That was… really inconvenient,” Nick finally said. “I’m sorry you went through that.”
“It’s done and gone, and feels like a bad dream anymore. And here we are, back on a case, doing what we do to make the world a better place together.” She nodded with a grin. This seemed to make Nick feel a little better.

Nick helped Judy up onto her feet. “Well, we should get back to work then!” he said brightly, disguising his voice again. Judy stood up and checked the bench to make sure her fur-dye wasn’t coming off on it. It seemed it was not. She turned and helped Nick as they walked back into the common area and turned toward front of the establishment so they could talk to Yax about the painted dog.

Judy spoke again finally, “You know, I will say it even more securely now... I don’t know why I was afraid I would ever be embarrassed about coming here. It feels like it’s perfectly natural now, I almost don’t notice.” She walked alongside the taller fox.

He smiled kindly and said, “There’s nothing embarrassing about it, it’s not like any of us are so different.” It sounded like something Yax would say, and she was about to chide him for it before she heard something behind her that made her blood nearly turn to ice.

Her sister’s voice.

Angela’s voice came from behind her, speaking casually and cheerfully. “See mom! I told you there’d be other bunnies here!”
Quite a few times in Judy Hopps’ busy life matters had gone swiftly through her mind as she desperately tried to keep up. Perhaps it was information concerning a dangerous situation or attempting to make sense of a fresh crime scene quickly while the suspect might still be in the area. This time she wasn’t just pushing thoughts quickly through her head. It was more like stomping them into a trash can to make them all fit when there was no way that was going to happen. As such, she briefly froze.

What the hell… were her sister and mother doing there? What kind of sense did that even make? In what world was that ever appropriate?

“Oh no.” Nick said first in his ‘Gerald’ voice, shaking the chocolate-toned bunny out of her personal panic.

He and Judy turned at exactly the same time. Judy could not help but look utterly shocked. There was no hiding it. Yes, it was Angela. Yes, it was her mother. She was not mistaken. Both esteemed members of the Hopps family were for some insane reason in a Naturalist Club on the same damned day as Judy and her partner. Worse coincidences had happened in the course of history, she was sure, but she’d yet to read about them. Suddenly, she considered the inevitable. Nick had turned around to. Her eyes snapped up to him. His own were very round in the understandable shock of seeing Judy’s family there.

Judy let her reflexes take control. Her hand flicked up and she grabbed the top of Nick’s muzzle, jerking it down hard to make him look at the lawn with an audible crack. Nick gave a nasal-sounding ‘ow’ from that and Judy looked up in terror at the approaching rabbits. Both smiled warmly at Judy and made a beeline toward her. Part of her wanted to just run for her life, but she was working, she didn’t want to act weird, cause a scene, blow her cover or be unprofessional. She felt like future opportunities likely hung in the balance on this assignment.
Steeling her resolve, she spoke. “Hey there!” she said in her fake voice, even adding a little accent despite hating it. She could not let herself get recognized by them! Nick did not move.

Bonnie spoke first, saying sunnily, “Good afternoon! Oh that didn’t sound right at all, is he okay?” she asked. ‘Dee’ looked back at the bare, soft-formed lapine before her, not able to remember the last time she’d seen her mother wander out of the shower without a towel or anything. Privacy wasn’t a huge deal at home, but it had certainly been a long time.

She looked into her mom’s eyes and smiled brightly before lying as hard as she could. “Oh don’t mind him, he’s just had a massage ‘n we are still tryin’ to get some of the kinks out ‘n all. A bad neck, this fox, but the massage here… better ‘n anywhere else, I promise!” she stated with some force. Nick whined. That probably did hurt. Judy would have to apologize later.

Judy’s mother tilted her head a little and said, “I suppose, poor thing. Is that your husband?”

“Ahah! Hahah!” Judy laughed nervously, her voice cracking a little. She could not laugh in a fake voice as well as Nick could. “Naw, shore not. He’s a good friend though. Kin you imagine that, though? A bunny ‘n a fox? I will say I don’t see a bunch of bunnies here, what brings ya’ if ya’ don’t mind my askin’?” Judy went full bore with the accent. This was a nightmare. What made it worse was that Angela’s eyes were going over ‘Gerald’ like the rough side of a sponge over a baker’s pan.

Bonnie chuckled happily at the reaction and shook her head. “Oh sweetie, it’s fine, you don’t have to be so shy!” She put her hands behind her back, looking completely comfortable. “Nothing wrong with it, if that’s what it is. One of my own daughters chose a fox so you’ll get no worry from me.” Judy widened her eyes a bit. Her mom was not supposed to talk about that to her non-designated family members, much less complete strangers.

Nick’s false voice spoke up. “Pretty lawn in this place, just here.” Judy knew it was Nick’s way of saying that he was not happy being forced to look down.

“You can let the poor fox go, we aren’t gonna steal him!” Angela laughed.

“I’m fine.” Nick stated.

“Yew all just happened upon this place?” Judy asked again, insisting they get away from the subject of dating foxes.
“Oh no!” Angela said, waving a hand at ‘Dee’. “We heard about it from one of my sisters and her friend. That would be the earlier mentioned fox!” she chimed brightly. “I was super curious about the place and the fox hooked me up with two one-time guest passes. He’s a real sweet fox.” Judy twitched hard. Nick. Her beloved fox was directly responsible for this disaster. It was the most plausible answer out of every cosmic alignment that could have happened. Instantly she believed this moment with every strand of fur on her body. It had to be like this because of Nick.

“Oh really?” Delilah said in a powerful and curious tone.

“Sure did!” chimed Bonnie. “I’m Bon, this is Angela, my daughter. I normally would never have done something like this but you know… Try Everything, right?” she giggled. Judy flinched a bit. She was going to be so lonely after Nick died, it would be so sad. Bonnie continued to talk. “It was supposed to be one of my other daughters but you know what, I don’t regret anything so far. I did some sunning on the lawn and it was amazing. The wind through my fur? It’s just magic.”

“Gerald and I need to get some food…” Delilah said with some urgency.

Angela spoke casually. “Have you been here before then? I mean, you know the massage is good so I assume you have.”

Dee faltered. “Huh? Oh! Uh, yeah, a few times. It was recommended by a friend. Otter fellow.” She nodded at that.

Angela asked, “What pampering do you recommend that a bunny might really like on their first time here?”

Judy suddenly felt frantic. They weren’t letting her escape! She tried to think of an answer but she was caught in the snare with that one. She had no idea what to recommend.

Nick saved her. Gerald’s voice spoke up as he managed to finally look up so he wasn’t suspiciously staring at the grass. “The pedicure and foot massage are top notch here, I promise,” he stated, “…also, I would really recommend the Yoga. For those who have endured the toils of motherhood and those who are more athletically inclined it can be easy to become so accustomed to extremes that one forgets how a body is even supposed to feel. I would put that at the top of your list.”

Bonnie seemed impressed as Judy’s psychological well-being teetered on the brink with her lover
seeming so casual in that situation. Judy’s mother spoke softly, “Well that sounds just perfect, I’m glad we asked! This is all so new.” She nodded. “Thank you…”?

“Gerald!” Nick stated with a warm smile. He was uncannily comfortable for a fox who had perhaps just minutes to live, Judy considered. “… and this is Dee. She’s a friend of the family. I work with her brother. She started bringing me here after an accident in the shop kind of messed me up. I went backwards off a ladder. It’s been working wonders for me.” He flowed so effortlessly into someone else’s story that Judy was actually a little envious.

“Thank you Gerald,” Bonnie stated happily.

“It’s nice meeting you Bonnie.” Delilah stated firmly. “I need to git my friend here somethin’ to munch on. He suffers from the low blood sugars.”

Angela crooned. “Aw, the poor thing, just havin’ it rough, huh?” Judy chuckled nervously at that.

“Mind if we tag along to wherever you are getting grub?” Bonnie asked. “We don’t know our way around yet, and I could certainly use a bite to eat. It was a really long train ride from Bunnyburrow. Judy inwardly whined. Why? Why was this happening to her?

“Sure, I don’t mind if Dee doesn’t.” Nick offered.

Dead. He wasn’t going to live through the night. She would say whatever got Lupin must have gotten Nick too. Dee nodded slowly with a toothy grin. She could not think of a good reason to act completely standoffish to her mom and sister who were in an unfamiliar place needing help.

So they went to the onsite restaurant. It was a long, low hut with tons of windows that let air continue to move freely throughout. There were just a few other mammals about, an elephant in a darker corner reading a newspaper and two zebra right by her. There was a squirrel, a bit older and very grey, sipping tea at the other end of the long row of stools of various sizes at the bar. A lady gazelle ran the counter cheerfully. It was such a wonderful environment and Judy might well have enjoyed it more were it not for the absolutely incomprehensible situation that accompanied it. Judy wanted the Caprese Salad but she ordered that all the time around her family so to help keep her cover she ordered a veggie wrap and loathed having to do so.

Nick enjoyed a black bean salad with cheese cubes and he talked to Angela. He seemed completely unconcerned with breaking his character or giving himself away. Judy knew he had practice with it,
but Nick being a completely different fox was believable even to Judy, and she knew who he was. He seemed as comfortable as could be while Judy nervously listened to a tragically boring story all about the history of the Hopps Family Farm from her mother while they ate.

After a while, the nervousness of the situation wore away and she became more and more used to her ‘character’. With as talkative as Bonnie was, Judy didn’t have to invent much more backstory. After a while, neither Bonnie nor Judy had to talk at all because Angela decided to share the Munch video with ‘Gerald’ who acted very surprised and enthralled throughout. Judy relished this because to see the phone she huddled in close against the dark-furred fox and she felt better to just be close to Nick.

The video lasted a pretty long time and they were almost done eating by the time it was over. It was actually kind of fun to watch. Judy had a lot of very happy memories built into that day and it felt wonderful to see it again and relive a few of the memories. Nick apparently had some positive feelings about the video as well since ‘Gerald’s’ tail managed to coil slowly around the back of the chocolate-colored bunny. It appeared to have done so subconsciously, but ‘Dee’ did not feel like chasing it away. Judy was so used to feeling it wrapped around her that she felt no need to chase it away. She absolutely did not mind. Unfortunately, the squirrel did.

“Seriously?” he said loudly from his seat. Everyone looked up curiously. The middle-aged grey squirrel swung his rotating stool around to face the four in the middle range against the long bar.

“What’s up?” asked Judy in her Dee voice.

“It’s a naturalist club, but it sure ain’t an ‘anything goes’ club. Leave that in your rooms.” He gestured a bit more forcefully. Nick dropped his tail, seeming to have just realized that it was there. Bonnie and Angela noticed that part, it seemed.

Angela sneered at the squirrel. “Nothing in the rule book about hand-holding or tail-wrapping. Let them be.”

Judy’s blood chilled. They did NOT need a confrontation. Dee and Gerald were not even supposed to be a couple because they were trying to avoid attention. It was a slight slip-up in the moment for Nick and nothing more. She could not let this turn into an argument and put all eyes on the bunny and fox. They still had work to do.

Judy spoke up in her feathery tone. “It’s alright, we’ll jest ignore him.”
“…just set in his ways. It’s fine.” Gerald said.

“Set in the right way, you mean.” The squirrel got up. Judy groaned. No, don’t escalate this. Nick didn’t respond. Long game. He was playing the long game, she could depend on him.

Angela stepped in front of the fox and bunny she’d ‘just met’ and glared at the squirrel. “Sit back down, mister. If he wants to wrap his tail around her or hold her close, you’ve got absolutely nothing to do with it.”

“It’s nothing to stress over.” Nick said in his low, gruff tone, “I just lost myself in the moment. It was a fun video, I can’t believe she won! I thought it was over for sure…” Judy had to commend Nick’s attempt to diffuse the situation.

Angela crossed her arms and shook her head. “No, this is principle now. I know you two are just friends, but if you weren’t, well, there’s nothing wrong with that. He can just sit down and let it go at that.” Judy covered her muzzle. Her black-furred sister was one of the most hot-headed bunnies ever born. There could not have been a worse rabbit for this squirrel to cross and Judy was not sure she could salvage the situation. He was almost the same size as Angela but he was not nearly as athletic. She knew why Angela was being defensive too. She obviously had no problem seeing her sister getting treated like this and it made her blood boil. Judy wondered how this was all going to look in the report. Bogo would need another drink, she bet.

Bonnie finally attempted to be the voice of reason, much to Judy’s relief. The older bunny stated, “It’s okay, we don’t want to start a scene, let’s all just let it go.”

The squirrel sneered back at Angela before saying, “Things will go back to normal soon enough. A bunny saves a dumb fox who rightly should have been killed for thinkin’ he had any business being a cop in the first place, and now half the city’s given the foxes a damn free pass like they all earned it.” He left his tea and walked closer to Angela. “‘Little bunny went down to hell to get a fox.’ She should have stayed there with him! It’d have brought less shame to her family at least, I bet.”

Judy’s eyes went wide. Oh dear heavens, this squirrel had no idea who he just said that to. This was it. Assault charges against her own family. This was how her first undercover operation would end. So much for her shot at detective in the future. She held stark still and slowly looked up at Nick. Yeah, he was freaking out too. His eyes were round, pupils tiny, ears back, completely still. Judy wanted to tell him to at least close his eyes so he didn’t get blood in them.

To Judy’s amazement, Angela’s response was not with her fist like she expected. The black-furred bunny stated in an almost teasing fashion, “If that bunny didn’t already have rights to that fox I’d be
after him myself, so you can take your pitiful fox-envy and jam it right under your twitchy fluffy tail.” Judy rolled her eyes at that. It was certainly said to irritate the squirrel, but she was never going to hear the end of that from her partner.

The squirrel scoffed. “Envy?” he asked, suddenly standing up taller and puffing up. If he hit Angela first, it would absolve Judy from having to arrest her sister. Judy suddenly felt awful for hoping the squirrel tried to hit her sister first.

Bonnie quickly spoke next, “Angela, sit down, honey. This… mammal… isn’t worth our trouble. Show Gerald and Dee the video of-”

“A bunch of cheap knot-cozies, every one of ya’.” the middle-aged squirrel stated loud enough for everyone to hear. “How about it fox? Do ya think you can handle all three bunnies at once?” he asked, obviously trying to antagonize ‘Gerald’.

Nick looked back at the squirrel and smiled that classic, smug Nick smile. He said slowly, “Sir, you obsess over the strangest things… Just look up some videos on the internet or something in your room. Let us enjoy our meal in peace. Please.” Judy inwardly groaned. The squirrel’s accusations were being applied in reverse. That was not going to calm him down. It was going to piss him off worse!

The squirrel stomped toward Nick angrily, shouting, “You callin’ me a predophile, you brush-tail piece of shit!” Judy began to move to get out of her seat for the inevitable police take-down and complete obliteration of their cover, but to her horror it was Bonnie who got in between them.

Her mother said, in a voice reserved for only the naughtiest of her siblings, “Sit. Down.”

The squirrel shouted at her in a rage, “Screw you, carrot-farming predo! I’m not gonna stand here and-“ he tried to shove Bonnie to the floor to clear a path to ‘Gerald’. Judy felt a protective rage flare up inside her, but actually never had a chance to intervene.

Bonnie bounced back a step when shoved, then jumped up half the squirrel’s height and planted both her feet into his gut. There was some kind of pitiful grunt from him as he was fired backwards like a stone from a slingshot, chairs on that side of the bar clattering and scattering as he was slammed through them easily twenty feet. Judy’s heart nearly stopped. That could not possibly have just happened. The disguised bunny was unable to even say anything as she took in what she saw. She suddenly saw her mother in a very, very different light.
“Wow.” Nick said in his own voice, not able to think to change it. Fortunately Angela was too shocked to notice that either.

Bonnie stomped over to the squirrel. He rolled onto his side, half-curling into a ball to clutch his midsection where he’d been kicked. Judy’s mom leaned over him and spat out, “That’s right! I’m an honest to goodness carrot farmer! But, hey - it looks like I just diversified! Looks like I’m a squirrel farmer now because you just got planted!” She then stomped over to Angela who looked way more shocked than even Judy was. “Come on!” Angela obeyed without a word, seeming genuinely rattled. Judy cupped her muzzle, not even recognizing any longer that everyone was naked. That was the most reasonable part of all of what she had to mentally digest. Her mother just got into a bar fight! Bonnie leaned in and smiled. “It was lovely meeting you both. I’m gonna check to see when the Yoga class is and let our… culturally re-educated friend get his wind back. Have fun!”

And she and Angela left.

The squirrel tried to get up and changed his mind, deciding to remain curled on the floor. Judy’s mind was racing. The squirrel put his hands on Bonnie first. She could claim self-defense! Judy didn’t have to arrest her mother, right? She didn’t have to blow her cover. Had she already messed up by letting her leave the scene? Oh this was all going to hell so badly.

Eyes still wide, Nick spoke in a level, slow, barely audible whisper. “Your mom… just kicked half the letters out of that fella’s last name.” Judy looked up, her paws actually still in front of her face. Nick sighed out softly, still in a whisper, “Whooo, I’m glad we are out of jurisdiction.” The bunny blinked at that.

They were out of jurisdiction! She couldn’t arrest her mom! She was spared. She sighed softly, and then looked at the groaning squirrel. She should check on him. He got hit hard. By her mom. The bunny shook her head again incredulously. Before she could even start in the direction of the writhing victim of Bonnie Hopps, an elephant entered through the beaded curtain of the restaurant. Judy looked to the other side of the bar, having almost forgotten there were other patrons. The zebra were both still there, wearing bright grins to illustrate how entertained they were. The elephant that had been there was gone, and was not reentering. How in the world had she gotten out…?

Judy then recognized the pachyderm from the henna tattoo over her trunk. It was Nangi. It made perfect sense that the Yoga master elephant snuck out during that conflict. She was followed by Yax. Well, this was it, the proverbial poop was about to be elevated to fan-level. Nangi pointed to the squirrel.

Yax strode over to him and helped him up.
The squirrel grumbled, “Arrested, I want all of them arrested!”

Yaks drawled out calmly, “Woah now, slow your roll there, Mr. Beechgrove. No one’s getting’ arrested, which is totally great for you since you started the fight. This elephant here saw the whole thing and that’s as good as it bein’ on camera! I’m gonna need you to head on out and not show up here again.” Judy blinked at that. The squirrel was getting thrown out? She felt kind of bad that she was having trouble feeling kind of bad for him.


“Nangi, what is Line Six of Article Three of the MSO Rules of Patron Conduct?” Yax asked, crossing his arms.

The elephant glared at the squirrel. “I don’t know,” she deadpanned.

Yax spoke officially. “Matters of personal bias, negativity toward your fellow mammal, and personal strife are not to leave your pockets, and those are to be left with your clothing in the ‘Naturalization’ area. Bringing strife into the MSO and interrupting the general chill-vibe is totally grounds for dismissal. Yer gonna have to leave, yeah?” Judy watched, dumfounded. Her partner was likewise transfixed.

“I am not going out that door without a full refund.” Mr. Beechgrove crossed his arms defiantly.

The yak laughed a bit at that, sounding so cheerful and care free. “Huh huh! Oh, you don’t have to go through the door if you don’t want. Nangi, how far you figure you can throw a squirrel over the property wall?” he asked.

“I have no idea,” the elephant stated flatly.

“Thirty-six meters and sixteen centimeters if it’s not too windy.” Yax chimed. The squirrel looked suddenly terrified. That was a very exact figure and it seemed good enough reason for Beechgrove to retreat. Out the door he went. Nangi went back to her seat, munching casually on a stalk of what looked like sugar cane as she read the paper she had before. She seemed to genuinely not care about any of what just happened.
Yax clapped his hooves together as if dusting them off. “Huhhuh! Yeah, no one interrupts Nangi’s crossword puzzle!” He laughed and looked back to the pair. He moved over beside ‘Gerald’ and whispered, “How goes the thing with the stuff?” Judy looked at him blankly, almost forgetting entirely what he was talking about. Her mom and sister came to the Mystic Spring Oasis. Naked. Her mom got into a bar fight and positively wrecked someone. It was, for a second, hard for Judy to re-focus on what she was even doing here.

‘Gerald’ motioned for Yax to follow him and they went outside. ‘Delilah’ politely righted a few knocked over chairs and followed quickly. Nick spoke as Judy reached them where they sat at one of the ‘chilling’ booths, the fox warily making sure no one else was close by.

Nick finally said in a hushed tone, “We have a couple of questions to ask about one of the guests who was here, possibly the same day the incident took place.”

Yax straightened up a little, which was impressive given his nearly permanent lazy slouch. He said, “Wow, that’s impressive. You haven’t even tested and of the fur from the scene and you’re already on the trail. Now I see why Adrian has such faith in the two of you.” Judy stumbled a little at hearing her boss referred to by his first name. Did Yax know him personally or something? Did Bogo come here? She suddenly wanted to think of absolutely anything else, looking off to the side. Oh, two naked pigs in a ridiculous play-slap fight in the mud-pool; that would do nicely, yes.

Nick spoke softly, his voice uneasy. “Rrrright… Yes, the mammal of interest.” He cleared his throat a little. “We’re wondering if you have had a lycaon visit here recently?” Judy refocused on the conversation.

Yax expression was always hard to read because his face was partially obscured by his hair, but his suddenly ridged body language made it obvious he knew something. The yak spoke in a more hushed tone. “Wow, yeah. Yeah! I’d love to see you take on Nangi on Trivia Night!” Judy was starting to feel a little sorry for the elephant. If she really had a memory that good, every elephant brain quip this proprietor levied against her must have really worn thin. Nick stared at Yax a bit longer, expecting more.

The fox finally asked, arms out as if ready to receive, “Can you tell us anything about him?” Nick asked.

“Oh, sure!” Yax said, “But the one who would really remember would be-“ he started.

“Nangi, yes, we know!” Judy cried, then forced herself to lower her voice. “…but this is an undercover investigation, remember?” she asked.
Yax laughed a bit and nodded. “That’s right, I forgot.” Judy flinched. Really?! Nick was grinning at her and seemed to understand her reaction. The yak continued, “… So yeah, somethin’ odd about that guy, for sure! But I don’t know that he’d be involved, he didn’t check in till like… four or five hours after the wolf guy… you know….” Yax seemed not to want to talk about the incident itself. They already had a statement on file from him about that, it was not what they wanted to know about.

Nick asked in a calm and level tone, “What was odd about the lycaon?”

“Oh, Ukweli was his name, that’s right,” he said in a measured tone. “He was very quiet and kind of shy. He came here alone, but the odd part was… He didn’t collect his clothes and belongings from the Naturalization Area.” Judy widened her eyes at that.

“Wait, what? Did you look for him? Yax, do we need to search the property for another body?” Judy asked. She did not look forward to that prospect at all.

Yax shook his head heavily, unsettling his flies. “No way, Nangi saw him leave. He calmly and quietly walked right out the front door with nothing on. She was so surprised that she didn’t try to stop him.” Judy folded her ears back. Or the elephant didn’t care. Apathy seemed to be Nangi’s default. Nick seemed to mull that over a bit.

Judy asked quietly, “Was the door to the cabin Professor Lupin was staying locked when he was discovered?” asked the bunny.

Yax shook his head. “Nope, it was left open, that’s why we found him so quickly. An attendant saw it open and investigated and found him. Oh, you’ll want to disregard her fur in the investigation. She blew out half her coat in there from the scare. She’s a bobcat.”

Judy replied, “It takes weeks to even go through all the individual fur-types in a public room like that, and it’s notoriously inadmissible so I would not worry. Genetic testing is usually used to prove a perceived link, not to create one.”

Nick pushed forward with the investigation. “Do we have any personal information about Ukuule?”

“Ukweli,” corrected Yax. “Only other thing I really know about him is that he came here on a shuttle bus from the Gold Antler hotel, by the airport.” Judy clapped her paws together. That was a
They already had a lead, and they had barely had time to get used to being naked. They might just get the bonus for the investigation.

Nick responded in the same fashion that Judy had been thinking. “I think that will be our next destination then. Thank you so much Yax. I hope that we can clear up this matter quickly so you can let the chill-vibe fill your establishment again.”

Yax bowed in a rather reverent fashion to Nick and said, “Śānti, syālalē.” He then wandered off with his characteristic lazy slouch evident, leaving Judy and Nick alone.

The lull in activity was just the opportunity Nick needed to tease his bunny, and he took full advantage. He grinned at the brown doe before him and stated casually, “First Sammie, then you, then Angela? Am I making life harder for foxes in Bunnyburrow? You can tell me.” Judy put her hands by her hips, balled into fists, glaring at Nick.

After a moment she said, in a slow, careful tone, not masking her voice, “It will be so unfair…”

Nick perked his ears. “Oh? The fate of those foxes, you mean?” he asked with a sly grin.

“No,” Judy stated flatly. “Some poor medical examiner will have to stay up to some unforgivable hour trying to figure out exactly how you managed to get beaten to death with your own smug.” Nick’s eyes widened at that and he recoiled, as if expecting the beating to commence immediately. His phone rang, likely saving him. The fox fumbled with the zippered pouch on his beaded lanyard a bit and finally fished his phone out. He had, by then, missed the call. He inspected to see who it was from.

“It was Jack.” Nick stated, immediately calling back the number.

“What?” Judy asked. “Why’s he calling you?”

“I sent him the picture of that weird note.” He put the phone to his ear.

Judy protested. “Nick! He’s not on the case, you can’t share that stuff with civilians!”
“Hey, Jack, what’s up?” Nick asked, ignoring the bunny. Judy fretted visibly. Her playing loose with the rules by necessity when she was struggling against a department that didn’t want her there was one thing, but there was no call for that now, her partner could get in trouble! Nick furrowed his brow, and Judy immediately wished she could hear the conversation but being that they were outside it was just a little too muted to understand. “We are following a lead out to the Golden Antler hotel. It’s by the airport. Lycaon signed in under the name Ukweli.” Nick stated. He widened his eyes a little and nodded slowly. Judy could hear Jack’s frantic voice but it was still too hard to make out what he was saying, but he was obviously distressed. Nick finally replied, “Absolutely, we will be heading out there as soon as we get our clothes. That will buy us some time. Are you sure that’s what it is?” Judy felt a thrill run through her. It was coming together, she could feel it. Nick said firmly, “Thank you, Jack. We owe you.” He hung up the phone.

“So what?” Judy asked immediately, “What’s the deal?”

Nick said, not even hiding his voice, “The note was written out GPS coordinates. A very rare language was used that our book-friendly rabbit pal happened to know. Jack said that the coordinates were for the interior, and that whatever is there is likely what Professor Lupin died searching for. I think someone else is after whatever he was seeking and if we don’t stop them, according to Jack, a lot of harm can be done. He said he didn’t dare explain it further because we were in danger even seeing the words. It’s a big deal, Fluff.” Nick stated. “Jack said this was bigger than a murder. We need to get going.” Nick headed for the entrance, Judy quickly following. She looked back at the frolicking mammals, bare and care free. She folded her ears back with a smirk. Yeah, she was gonna come back eventually. For now, however, far more serious matters awaited. Judy could not deny the sense that what was to come might well be extremely dangerous and the sensation of excitement that accompanied that worried her.
Okay… so… Very big deal here… I have had a lot of great feedback as I have written this series for a while, but recently as I have changed the tone of the story I have been met with some very valid negative response. I happily brush off negative feedback where it’s just a matter of opinion, but in the case of my recent change of heading, reflecting on the way I was writing the story, I do agree… I accept that the story had begun to feel like it was something entirely separate, and didn’t really relate well to the character-driven story telling that Guardian Blue was built on. It was instance-driven, like a cheap formulaic anime. The plot was obviously forced and while that effect was supposed to be diluted on the move, nothing really shook that feel.

One of the biggest sins for me is a full-on retcon. But a retcon I must do. Byron Howard and Rich Moore know my pain. X.x I know this will be an irritation to a few of the readers as a few were enjoying the show, as it were, but it just didn’t feel like it fit with the series as a whole. I have taken a few weeks off to consider how to proceed and make things better moving forward, so hopefully what I have coming will make up for what I left behind. We will be resuming from Nick and Judy following their lead about Ukweli and going after him, no changes further back than that, but things going ahead will be very different.

Guardian Blue: Season Two

Episode 7: Suspect

Judy, fully dressed in her skirt and blouse from earlier in the day, stood behind Yax he carefully opened the lock of the locker that had been used by Ukweli. Nick moved up behind the chocolate-toned bunny, having fully dressed as well. Judy looked back at him and nodded in acknowledgement.

“Call it in yet?” she asked.

“Yep. They are sending officers to cover the hotel, but they are waiting for Detective Pawlander to get there before they head in. We will meet them in a little bit. I arranged for a ride.” Nick stated.
“Makes sense… we aren’t detectives yet, after all.” Judy said. “It feels like we did the real legwork here, though.” She sighed. It felt good to have some good information already, however.

Nick put a paw on Judy’s shoulder and said, “It feels like we did the legwork, but you know how detective work goes. We may have just carried their bags to the starting line for them and little else,” he laughed. Yax opened the locker and stepped back to let the officers inspect the things that had been left behind when Ukweli inexplicably left in the buff.

The seemingly carefree yak stated casually, “Not sure what’s goin’ on, but I hope this helps.” Nick pulled the bundle of clothing out of the locker and put it on the table in the center of the locker room. It was a pretty ordinary looking bundle of clothing. The fabric was light-fitting and colorful which was not unusual for distant border towns out near the interior. However, as he put it down there was a noticeable clunk. Judy and Nick both perked their ears at that and Nick used his claw tips to carefully move the clothing aside. The bright gleam of mirror polished metal gleamed back at them under the fluorescent lighting.

“Woah. That… That is totally uncool.” Yax said in a tone that reflected the dread in Judy’s heart as Nick revealed the object. Her eyes widened and she froze. A nearly comically large gun lay on the table.

Firearms had been made illegal in Zootopia and the surrounding burrows around the time of the last war, something Judy’s grandfather clearly recalled. The tendency for the weapons to be misused disastrously in both the right and wrong paws had compelled such heavy punishments for possession of them that even most of the organized criminals in Zootopia opted to avoid them outright.

Judy and Nick had been trained to fire an actual gun but it was much, much smaller and likely less powerful than this shining metal brick with ivory handle that lay on the table. Judy had never seen a gun like that one outside of a movie. The bunny was shaken out of her reverie by Nick’s voice.

“Wolfard, make sure whoever’s on scene knows we are gonna be adding class A firearms charges. Proceed with serious caution, guys.” Judy was happy with her partner’s immediate response being to communicate to the other officers. The gun had nearly completely derailed her and Nick’s professionalism where it counted encouraged her. The fox regarded the implement of death on the table a moment longer before blowing out a long heavy breath. “That… looks like it belongs mounted on the side of a pirate ship, not in some lycaon’s paws. Where was he even carrying it before it went in the locker?” Nick took a plastic baggie out of the evidence kit that he’d picked up from the bungalow and used one of the garments to hold the gun down while very carefully making sure the safety was all the way engaged. He then used the sleeve of that shirt to put the gun into the bag and picked it up along with the clothes before placing it into the evidence kit.
“That looks way different from the guns we were shown at the academy.” Judy stated. “Military maybe?” She felt more relaxed with the gun put away. With the size of a weapon like that, she would likely fare no better on the firing side of that weapon as the muzzle side of it. The recoil would probably tear her arms off.

Nick answered. “I suspect so. I don’t think they ever had something like this for civilian use. I mean… Judy, if you fired that thing at the ground, we’d probably have to call MASA to get you back down!” Nick laughed with an obvious tone of nervousness and then nodded to Yax. “And you say he just left his stuff here? I wonder why he wouldn’t have taken this with him… I’d not want to have someone find this and link it to me.”

Yax kept his distance as if the gun was cursed, not just dangerous. He said, “Well, I don’t know what his deal was, but I don’t want it here, fer sure! Gonna be droppin some white sage real heavy in here.”

Judy spoke up, distracting the nervous proprietor. “Thank you for allowing us to investigate, Yax. We may have to do some follow up, so is it alright if we return later?”

He answered cheerfully, so easily shaken from his distress, “Oh totally! Any time, yeah? You guys work super hard! I saw all that stuff on the news. You need to relax hard too. Come and chill out with us again.” He seemed very happy as he said that, and Judy followed her partner out. Nick carefully looked left and right to see if anyone else was outside the establishment. It was clear. He moved hastily, Judy following behind, to the convenience store across the street.

Judy sighed as she stood by her partner, waiting. “So… Wow… This just got a lot bigger. I mean… A murder’s big, but jeeze. I hope this was all Ukweli had on him.”

Nick replied softly, “Well, witness account said he had nothing on him when he left, but I have trouble believing that a lycaon could even use a gun like that, and there was no trigger guard on it. That makes me think larger mammal would use this. A bull or something, maybe. This isn’t all making sense.”

“Who’s picking us up?” Judy asked.

Her partner stated, “I didn’t want to blow our cover by having a patrol car pick us up, and the detective was already closer to the airport, so I made other arrangements.”
“Nick, who’s picking us up?” As she asked that, she heard the roar of a powerful engine approaching. Her ears fell back. She remembered who he’d been speaking with moments before they found the weapon. Judy glared at Nick.

The fox looked back innocently. “She was close. Seriously,” he said with a smile.

Judy groaned. “Nick! Skye is not our personal taxi service! We nearly got her killed last time!” The bunny was exasperated by that. This fox could really quickly wear out a welcome if he kept that up. Skye had done a lot to help care for them while they were on the mend.

Nick smiled back at her and stated, “Well, we will just have to make it up to her. Don’t worry fluff. She’s actually excited to help!” With that, the brown-dyed doe turned and saw the black sports car approach, moving at a speed that likely would have deserved a ticket in any other circumstance. She pulled into the parking lot and then right past Judy and Nick to park in a spot on the other side of the lot. Judy looked at the car blankly as it stopped so far away from them.

The bunny then murmured in realization. “Oh yeah. She didn’t recognize us.” Nick was already sauntering over to the car. Judy could see black tipped bunny ears in the passenger seat, and realized with a start that Jack was actually with her. Skye looked irritated. Maybe she was not as eager to help as Nick had suggested. She and Jack might very well have been on a date. After all, if they were close it meant they had not been at home. Nick stopped by the door as Judy approached.

“Hey there, how’s it goin’?” the black-dyed fox asked.

“I’m not carrying any cash, sorry pal.” Jack stated in a very automatic tone. Skye looked down at him incredulously.

The white vixen hissed, “Are you serious? He didn’t even say anything yet! I’m gonna tie your ears together, Jack!” Judy felt a pang of guilt herself as she realized she very likely would have thought the same thing to see a fox she didn’t know moving over to the car like that. How easy it was to forget tiny little assumptions that seemed pretty harmless. It didn’t seem to bother Nick at all though, who just smirked at the rabbit as he shrugged helplessly at his vulpine girlfriend.

Nick spoke in his disguised voice. “No problem, I hadn’t expected my Zuber ride to get here so quick-like. This app is so much better than a taxi or a bus, I’m tellin’ you!” Judy looked at her partner with undisguised irritation. He was playing games! They had really important work to do.
“What?” Skye asked as she was shaken from her irritation at the front-seat bunny. “No, oh, hey, I’m not your Zuber, I’m here to pick someone else up.” ‘Gerald’ looked back to ‘Dee’ and chimed, “Look sweetie! There’s already a bunny and fox in the car! They’re sayin’ they aren’t our Zuber though.”

Judy glared at the black-furred fox as she replied in her normal voice. “Nick, cut it out, we’re in a hurry, remember?”

Skye recoiled a bit. “Whoa! What the… Nick?!” She then looked over his shoulder as Judy waved at him. “Oh wow. You guys are… You guys are under cover?” she asked. Nick put a finger to his muzzle as if to shush the vixen and she grinned and nodded. Whatever foul mood Skye had built up seemed to evaporate at the intrigue of what Nick and Judy were doing out there. Jack got out of the car and hopped into the back. Nick sat in back with Jack and the evidence bag and Judy belted herself into the front seat. Skye quickly pulled out of the parking lot.

Jack awkwardly spoke, looking back at Nick. “Sorry about… you know… The thing earlier.”

“Ha!” Nick laughed. “Don’t worry about it. Begging’s not a fox thing, but it is a hungry thing, and walking up to strangers’ cars is a thing folks do when they are hungry.” Nick made it clear he was absolutely not upset about it.

Skye spoke up as she drove. “The Golden Antler is where we are going, right? They hold a Maker Faire there at the end of the year. I’ve been there a few times.” She gunned the engine as they got onto the highway. The wind roared through the open windows as apparently Skye did not see a huge need for AC and it might have been too warm otherwise.

“What’s a Maker Faire?” Judy asked.

Jack responded instead of Skye. “It’s like a grown up version of a school science fair. It’s got clever engineering, a bit of zany art and fun, and lots to see and do.” Judy raised an eyebrow at Jack knowing that, and then looked up to the rear-view mirror, seeing that Skye was grinning too. Apparently, the buck’s knowledge of those things that she loved helped to bring them together.

Judy spoke loudly over the din of the wind and engine. “You will forgive us if we can’t share much about what’s going on! Nick wasn’t even supposed to send you that picture, Jack. It’s all still an open investigation, so-“
Jack yelled over the wind back to Judy. “Yeah, yeah! I get it, no talkie! There’s probably not more than a paw-full of mammals in the city that could even read that thing you sent me, Nick. With Lupin dead, there’s one less!”

“Lupin Dead?” Skye asked loudly, eyes widening. “Wait, we… we’re dealing with killers?!” Skye did not seem to like that idea very much.

Judy stated flatly, “I wouldn’t have spent three hours starting at four in the morning in makeup for a petty theft.”

“Are we going after the killer?” Skye asked bluntly.

Judy answered, “We don’t know yet. We are after someone who was acting suspicious at the club the day of the murder.” Judy still did not want to give too much away. Even if it was harmless, it was unprofessional. Still, she understood Skye’s tension. The last time she helped Nick and Judy with a life or death situation she got a lot closer to the action than she had ever wanted to. However, Skye’s thoughts wandered to something different.

Skye narrowed her eyes, obviously thinking hard a moment. “The club… Right there? Wait, you guys were in the…” She blinked at that, and then burst into laughter. Judy put her ears back. Skye was certainly capable of teasing about that.

Jack responded with a smirk. “It’s a nice place, Skye. I’ll take you there sometime.” Skye gripped the steering wheel tighter.

“What? No? Goodness no. I’m good.” The vixen denied him outright. This seemed to quiet her possible incoming teasing though, for which Judy was grateful.

The doe finally grumbled, “Now that all our investigation’s thrown out to the breeze, I guess it doesn’t matter what we say. But when we get there, just drop us off so we can go in, meet with the detectives and give them our evidence. We just need to be available to assist. We have other officers meeting us on scene. You guys do not go in there, okay?”

Skye answered loudly, “Yeah, I’m gonna leave the unknown violent murder mammals to you this time. Trust me.”
Jack chuckled a bit and stated, “I’m actually kind of happy to be involved in this. Lupin was one of my teachers. I have a personal reason for wanting this solved.” Jack stated.

“Wait, someone you know got killed?” Skye asked incredulously.

“Yeah, I told you my old professor passed away the other day.” Jack said blankly.

“Good heavens, Jack, you didn’t say he got murdered!” Skye shouted. “Tell me these things! I care!”

Jack seemed to ignore that, saying, “I think he got killed for something he knew, or something he was close to finding out. He was very involved in research that was a bit controversial and in places that were a little dangerous. I’d funded his last two expeditions. I know it was important.” Jack stated.

“Do you ever just keep any over your money?” Nick asked loudly.

Jack shook his head. “It’s dumb to just hoard it in piles in the dark confines of some bank vault when it could be out there helping someone,” he said casually. Judy liked him a little more for saying it. Skye smiled too.

“What was he researching?” Nick asked.

“The Origin Story,” Jack replied in a hushed tone as the exited the highway and came to a traffic light.

“What, like… The Origin of Peace?” Skye replied.

“Yep!” Jack stated. Judy knew what Jack was talking about, of course. Anyone on the continent over the age of five likely knew it. Long ago, mammals, even as they became more civilized and intelligent, continued to socially exist in a manner not that far removed from their distant ancestors. Even ten thousand years before, bunnies got eaten, and entire settlements of any nearby predators would get attacked and burned to the ground over it. Those were dark days.
But at some point back then, thousands of years ago, there was a meeting. Predator and prey tribes from all over, of all species, attended. An agreement was made for the good of their world. They drew up documentation carefully recording the agreements for law, trade, and a promise to aid one another. The tribes sent out emissaries to more distant tribes with the news and asked that they embrace peace. It was not instant, it was not always easy, but it spread over time. The agreement was followed to that day, and prosperous cities like Zootopia could stand, thousands of years later, as living testaments to ‘The Origin of Peace’.

Skye asked curiously, “So you are thinking he found something valuable that someone wanted to claim for themselves?”

Jack nodded. “That, or someone doesn’t want the thing found out. Not everyone was on board with the peace at first and some mammals did not… shall we say… behave admirably. That led to a lot of strife early on and a lot of mammals want to distance themselves from those days as much as possible. Proof of their species unwillingness to live under the peace accords would be an embarrassment.”

Judy interjected, “Well, we don’t know what the person we are following did, but I suspect he may know something about what’s going on.” She did not want to start pointing fingers early. She learned her lesson.

Skye asked curiously, “Did you find evidence that suggests he knew something or did something?” The vixen was obviously still concerned about how dangerous the favor she was doing for them was turning out to be. Judy prepared to tell Skye that it was an open investigation and could not be discussed, but Nick spoke, because of course he did.

“We found a firearm in his belongings,” he blurted out.

Skye replied loudly, “What, wait, shit, are you serious?”

“Nick, you can’t discuss that, they aren’t involved in the case!” Judy fairly shouted.

“Jack’s why we even have this case!” Nick barked back. “Besides, the well-read and well connected actor might have information valuable to this case.”

“Can I see the gun?” Jack asked.
“No!” Judy shouted.

“Sure.” Nick said casually, unzipping the bag.

Judy growled loudly. “You’re gonna get us suspended on our first day back on the force, Nick!”

The car coasted to a stop at a stop light. Skye turned to look as well as Nick displayed the weapon low enough that it would not be visible outside of the car.

Nick spoke softly, “You do action movies with guns sometimes, Jack, would you know anything about that one?” he asked.

Jack shook his head. “No way. Nothing from the prop department looked like that. That thing looks like it should be part of a tank.” Jack said in awe. “We are not seriously going after a guy who was carrying that, are we?”

“EX 1123 Bifurcator.” Skye stated. Judy looked up to the vixen curiously.

“What?” she asked.

“The gun. It’s an EX 1123. Most powerful non-rifled firearm ever sold. Only distributed to the military. That gun’s worth more than my car.” Skye began driving again as Nick zipped the evidence case back up.

The black fox looked at Judy. “See, aren’t you glad we showed it to them, Carrots? We have more information now.”

“No, I am not glad we showed it to them!” Judy grunted back, crossing her arms as she leaned back in the front seat. “But that said… Skye, why do you even recognize it?” Judy asked. The vixen was quiet a moment as she drove, taking a turn and heading up a main thoroughfare. They were getting close to the hotel.

She finally answered. “My dad collected old non-functioning weapons before they tightened the restrictions and confiscated his collection. We still had a bunch of books though, and to me, when I
was younger, these guns were like every other machine to me. I liked reading the specs and learning about them.” She finally pulled in front of the hotel itself, a 14 story silvery glass block of a building.

“Well, we’re here! Get out.” Skye’s blunt, cold wording was, of course, in jest. She had stopped right in front of the hotel. Judy hopped out and crawled out when his partner folded the seat forward. Judy thanked Skye brightly and followed Nick. She straightened her clothes, chasing her fox up to the hotel. She looked behind her, seeing two patrol cars parked across the street alongside the road that lead to the airport. She then moved to catch up to her partner as he moved swiftly into the lobby.

Inside, Judy found Nick walking over toward the front desk. A squat Cherrywood-toned beaver stood on a stool on the other side of the desk. The black fox moved swiftly up to him. Judy caught up as Nick spoke.

“I am here with the ZPD, Nicholas Wilde,” he stated, looking down at the beaver’s name tag, “Have any other officers arrived yet, Stanley?” he asked.

The beaver regarded him with narrowing eyes for a moment before stating, “First of all, you aren’t Nicholas Wilde. I’ve seen Officer Wilde on the news. You do not look like him.” Nick looked back with wide eyes, as if he had not entirely expected that would be a problem.

The bunny spoke up from behind her partner. “It really is Wilde. We’re under cover. I’m Officer Hopps.”

Stanley widened his eyes a little and rubbed his chin. “You do a good voice impression, but I need to see some ID.” Nick took his badge out of the evidence bag and showed it to the beaver. Judy sighed softly. He was doing his job, and that was commendable at least. He inspected it for a pretty long time, as if not genuinely believing it, and then finally nodded.

He stated calmly, “Yeah, three others went up, I sent ‘em to room ah... 714. Went up about five minutes ago. Sorry for the heavy caution, I was told to keep anyone from heading to that floor for a bit.”

Nick nodded and headed quickly for the elevator. “Gotcha, Thank you, Stan, you did great!” Judy smiled at him, getting a genuine smile back as she turned and followed her partner. She got onto the elevator and sighed, ready for this whirlwind day to be over. After so many lazy days just savoring Nick’s company in their apartment, this was overdoing things. She already missed just laying her head in his lap or kissing and holding him, feeling his arms around her as the passing of the day meant little but opportunity together.
Those days felt like a lifetime away already, and as she looked at her reflection in the mirror-polished elevator door, she didn’t even look like the same bunny.

She murmured softly, gazing at Nick’s tail by her legs, “You know, for a while I wished I could be someone else, but I am starting to miss being me.” Nick turned and grinned at the bunny, sliding a fingertip over her ear.

“I miss my bunny,” he said in a silky tone. Something about it put a cold chill through her, as if an unspoken promise had been made that his bunny would be greeted warmly indeed when he saw her next.

“Soon enough!” Judy chuckled and then looked up as the elevator’s bell chimed. The door opened and both cautiously stepped out. The hallway was empty, so they assumed the officers were inside. The fox and bunny were careful and quiet, not wanting to get the other guests of the hotel involved in any of this, whatever it would be. Nick finally tapped on the door.

“Who’s there?” The voice answering on the other side was obviously Wolfard.

“The naked truth.” Nick said with a wry tone. Wolfard opened the door and looked a bit surprised as he regarded his fellow officers.

“Oh wow… they did a great job on you two. Come on in. Bring the evidence kit and you can probably give us some extra supplies from it. We’re gonna need it.” Nick entered the room, followed by Judy.

Judy immediately wished she could have opted to guard the door. The hotel room was in shambles and there was blood on pretty much everything. On the floor was a lycaon who would not be getting arrested for weapon’s possession. Shirtless as he was, it was easy to see he had a gaping hole completely through his torso. By the look of the hotel room, it appeared that more blood was likely out of this canid than in him. The bunny immediately looked away from the lifeless mammal, contenting herself with watching detective Pawlander take pictures of the scene.

Nick sucked a breath through his teeth. “Well, that’s not tranq-dart damage. What the hell happened to him?”

“He died.” Wolfard deadpanned. Nick rolled his eyes.
The fox responded, “I suspect that was not on his to-do list, but I guess we are no closer to figuring out what happened to Lupin. Geeze, what a mess…” Nick looked around. There really was blood slowly drying on what seemed like every surface of the room. “Is this normal for a scene like this? I mean… the walls and ceiling?” he asked. Judy wondered the same, but didn’t feel like saying anything. This was not the first body she’d seen, but it had never been anything so obviously violent.

Pawlander was the one who answered. “From the looks of it, the attack did not end when our victim did. Whoever did this wanted to make a point. They wanted someone else to be scared.”

“It’s working.” Nick said. “I’m not getting in line for that ride.” He handed a few bags to Pawlander and then removed the gun from the evidence bag. “I bet he wishes he’d have brought this with him.” Wolfard took a step back and Pawlander’s eyes went wide as he whistled.

“There was just… never any need for a gun that big.” Wolfard said.

Pawlander shook his head. “That can’t be a common gun. We should be able to find out something about a possible owner with a little digging. That’s a good find, Wilde.” Judy enjoyed seeing Nick get praised openly like that, mostly because she could tell he still wasn’t used to it. He was a part of the team here. He wasn’t a lowly fox skulking around on the wrong side of town during daylight hours. He was an equal. His tail flitted with a bit of energy, and she knew why.

Nick spoke with a casual smile. “Way ahead of you. It’s an EX 1123 Bifurcator. Military grade.” Pawlander wrote that information down and Judy finally mustered up the courage to go see what had to be Ukweli. The rather young-looking adult male lycaon was a characteristic black with brown and white splotches. He looked a bit underfed and was certainly under-dressed. He seemed to be wearing pants that were a size or three too small, so Judy had to guess he’d snagged them along the way. The bunny wondered what kind of weapon was used to create such a ghastly wound. She felt certain even though she didn’t get close enough to actually check.

“Did anyone report a gunshot?” Judy asked.

Pawlander answered, “There was a noise complaint, but the noise had stopped by the time security showed up and knocked. They didn’t think anything else of it. It looks like he was stabbed, not shot.”

Nick huffed. “Stabbed? With what, a highway guardrail?”
Wolfard shook his head. “Forensics might be able to tell us a little more. Right now, we don’t know a whole lot other than being pretty certain that the fight was one-sided.” The grey-furred lupine bagged a tooth in an evidence back, causing Judy to cringe and turn away. No one deserved this. The ZPD would get justice for this canine, and the older wolf as well.

Pawlander spoke up again. “I think that’s all we need here. You guys have been up since what… three? Head out. Get back to your usual color. We might have some answers for you about this stuff in the morning. I’m glad you two were able to help with this. Without you bearing it all for the ZPD, We might never have known these two crimes were even related.” Judy nodded at that, though it was hard to smile amid all this carnage. It felt really good to be back on the force, back at work, and helping again. She wasn’t sure how much this had actually helped, but at least Pawlander did not have negative things to say about their participation. That could work out well for them later.

Wolfard spoke again as Judy and Nick moved toward the door. “It’s great to have you guys back on the team. We’ve missed you a lot at Headquarters. It’s been too quiet. Higgins has been trying to prank Fangmeyer and it’s just not the same.”

Nick chuckled at that as he exited and nodded to Wolfard. “Well, Bogo brought us in for this specific assignment but he didn’t tell us if we were gonna be back on the roster, so I’m hoping we are. I’ve enjoyed chilling out and watching movies with Judy all day, but I’m glad to get back to work. First time in my life I’ve actually missed doing my job,” he laughed jovially, “… though usually it’s not… this,” he gave a more somber nod to the hotel room in general. “Be good just to write some tickets after this.” Somehow, Judy doubted they would be completely out of the loop where this horrifying incident was concerned. Still, the detectives would be the ones investigating, so it was more likely she and her partner would be back on patrol more than dealing with this specific case.

Trying to push the images of that awful room out of her head, Judy followed Nick back on to the elevator. The ride back down was quiet, where coming up had been a little flirtatious. The mood was strikingly different and the bunny noticed that right away. The mood change was actually more troubling to Judy than the image of that room that she was trying hard to push out of her head. Judy became a bit concerned as Nick spoke not a word as he got off the elevator and walked toward the door of the hotel. She followed close behind. He had seemed more resilient in that room, but had it kind of messed him up? She knew he could put on a strong face when he needed to.

The black-furred fox walked up to the matching black car parked not too far from the entrance. Judy was actually rather surprised to find that Jack and Skye had waited. Nick and Judy could well have been tied up in there for hours. Judy wondered how long Skye would have patiently waited out there with Jack as she moved up behind her partner.
Nick leaned into the window by Jack and asked softly, “What are you guys doing for the next few hours?” Judy watched her partner carefully, having not expected that question. She assumed he would be asking if they would give them a quick ride back to the apartment. There was not a smug smile on Nick’s face. He looked weary.

Jack glanced up curiously at Nick as Skye answered casually, “We were probably just gonna hang out. I was considering hitting up a junk yard to look for some parts, but it’s not time sensitive. What’s up?”

Nick’s eyes glanced between Skye and Jack, and then spoke softly, his tone a bit heavy. “I’m… Not gonna lie… we just saw some pretty unpleasant stuff… so I wanted to know if you wanted to go do something fun and distracting to kind of… brain bleach some of it. And no, I don’t want to talk about it. Really.” Skye looked horrified. Given how candid Nick seemed to have been about so many other things, she was left to her imagination about that. Skye’s imagination was likely pretty talented. Jack looked unsettled too, but got out of the car, not even assuming that Skye might say no.

Jack and Skye were their friends. They would never say no to something like that. Judy quietly got into the car. Yes, what they had seen had bothered Nick. No, he wasn’t completely okay. Judy knew he wasn’t from the doctor’s visit just the previous day. But one thing had changed that made Judy grateful. Nick did not pretend he was alone anymore. He had friends, and while perhaps it was for Judy as much as it was for him, he asked for help. Judy found immediate comfort in seeing Nick not only seek out the support of his friends, but readily find it.

Skye did not make a suggestion on where to go, or even ask. She seemed to know where she was going and drove swiftly onto the highway. Jack interrupted the quiet as he began talking about the worst romantic comedy film he was supposed to star in. It was a movie which was so awful it was never even shown. Judy closed her eyes and listened to the comical tale. She reached a paw back to hold Nick’s own. He readily took it and held it tight as Skye whisked them away for whatever distraction she had in mind.
We are certainly going in a completely different direction now. To take this new road, we can’t get there from here… Time for something completely different. One has to wonder what sort of thing Skye would consider enough to take her friends’ minds off of what they’ve dealt with. Onward!

If you are just joining Guardian Blue for the first time you will want to check out Season 1 first, and I would highly recommend Thanks for the Fox before that as well so everything makes sense. ^^

Guardian Blue: Season Two

Episode 8: Distraction

“Are you serious?” Judy blurted out, wide-eyed. The still-brown-furred doe looked up at the gaudy, brightly lit gate to what had to be the most out of date, cheaply built, disaster-in-waiting of an amusement park she’d ever seen. The late afternoon sun cast long shadows of a few sparse trees that dotted a gravel parking lot. She still held Nick’s paw in her own as they both looked up at the sign. A third of the lights were broken or burned out, but it was supposed to just be blinking the word Fun, one on top of another, three times. Skye crossed her arms in front of her, flitting her tail about wildly, grinning.

The vixen chimed, “I know! Great, huh? After all these years, it’s still here!” Jack stepped up behind her, hands limp by his sides.

“Against all odds. I’ve never even seen this. Is this even allowed?” The buck indicated razor-wire on top of the fence which made it look like an off-limits testing facility. It was impossible to see inside because boards were put in front of the chain-link fence. It made it look even more shady. Carnival music emanated from inside.

Nick spoke softly. “Wow… I haven’t been here since I was a kit.” Judy looked back at her partner.
She felt like he was lucky to be alive at all if he came to this place as a helpless little kit.

Skye clapped her paws together excitedly. “Nothing you could have seen in that room could be worse than this! This will make you forget all about it!” Judy looked incredulously at the white fox, cupping a paw over her muzzle. This was entirely in the wrong direction. This wasn’t what Nick needed!

“It’s perfect!” Nick laughed. He pulled Judy toward the gate. “I’m buyin’.”

“Hell yeah!” Skye barked gleefully.

“What?!” Jack cried. “No, really? I don’t think this…” He followed along, despite his obvious reluctance. Judy huddled against Nick a little shyly. It was against her nature to be so shy, but the largest bear she’d ever seen leaned over them as soon as they came to the gate. He snorted and held out a paw the size of Nick’s entire body. Nick mashed eighty bucks into it and the claw-laden paw closed as if it were a machine, the money going away.

A low, dull, horrible booming voice rose from the bear with a thick accent of some sort. “A happy welcome to Fun-Fun-Fun, you play all day till day is done. Lose your cares to the setting sun, much too tired, too tired to run.” Skye gave a gleeful squeak at what had to be a memorable saying to her.

Jack went suddenly stiff, the vixen literally dragging him behind her. “Wait, the last part, what did he say? What was the last part?” Judy looked with concern to Nick, but his ears were up, eyes wide and nose quivering with excitement as he led the bunny through the gate behind Skye. Judy was sure her partner would never willingly take her somewhere he knew was dangerous, so she was relieved by that. Jack, however, seemed to trust Skye a little less. His ears were straight up and nose on the perma-wiggle.

Judy was immediately overwhelmed by the festive if cheap atmosphere. The boards seemed to be for noise control more than anything, as it was much louder inside. There was smoke or fog or something hanging near the ground everywhere, and the music sounded like it was coming from broken speakers, broken instruments, or both. The place felt like the combined representation of every horror movie amusement park Judy had ever seen or imagined.

The truly surprising part was not the mood so much as it was the crowd. With as run-down and hazardous as the place looked, Judy had expected it to be a near ghost town, but it was as busy as the Carrot Days celebrations while she was growing up. She also noticed right away that she and Jack were likely to be the only bunnies in the place, and might well be the only prey species. Wolves, dholes, foxes, lions, cougars, stoats, ferrets… the crowd was very diverse with the exception of
prey. And Judy and Jack were definitely noticed.

“I think… we got their attention.” Judy said as she pushed a little closer to Nick.

Nick answered jovially. “It'll wear off, Carrots. It’s the place. We’re just outside Happy Town. These mammals are mostly all locals.” Judy looked at her paw, still clasped in Nick’s.

“This still okay then?” she asked, giving it a squeeze. She wasn’t afraid, but she felt less like letting go because she didn’t want to get lost in the crowd. She had no idea how welcome she’d be in this place without a predatory escort.

“Actually…” Nick pulled Judy closer, almost hip to hip with him, sliding an arm down behind her back. Judy blushed a bit at that, the somewhat flirtatious act taking her by surprise.

“Nick… That’s not low key.” She laughed.

The black-furred fox grinned. “Don’t care! No one knows who we are. Enjoy this, Carrots!”

Skye yelled from behind them. ‘That’s the spirit! Exactly! Hey, I’m gonna take Jack on some of my favorite rides.” The striped bunny looked immediately distressed. Skye leaned in closer to Judy so Jack couldn’t hear her, speaking softly into the doe’s ear. “I used to work here, fixing stuff. I even came up with some of this stuff myself! Try out the cat-a-pault, you’ll love that one.” And with that, Skye seemed to be whisked away by her own excitement, a shrill sound of protest coming from her less-willing lapine companion. Judy was actually encouraged a little by Skye’s explanation. If she used to be in charge of keeping the place running, she was at least aware of their safety requirements. If they had any.

Judy looked back up to Nick. She smiled meekly as she really considered the fact that they could actually just have a date together, even though he didn’t look like the fox she loved. It didn’t matter. It was him. She knew that, and she wanted to be close to him. There was also the matter that her insatiable curiosity that got her into so much trouble as a kit burned super bright here. She loyally followed Nick, who seemed to be frantically looking around for the first thing he wanted to do in this ‘fun’ place with his bunny date. Judy had to admit that for as ridiculous and cheap as the place looked, it was not a bad place to just spend time with her fox. A little thrill ran through her as she considered him as a kit, no less excited, eyes darting around for the next fun thing to do. She had taken Nick to experience the here memories of Bunnyburrow, and she was suddenly deeply aware that this was not so different. Nick was sharing a little sliver of his life as a kit, maybe a piece before things were darker for him.
Nick finally spoke up, beginning to walk. “We should probably eat something, but I admit I don’t have much of an appetite yet. I think as I get my head straight it’ll be better. Would you like to try the roar-a-coaster, Fluff?” Judy looked around, expecting the rickety wooden frame of a death trap that she could protest, but all she could see were smaller rides of various sorts and the many one-story booths that lined the sidewalks.

“I don’t see a roar-a-coaster, Nick.” Judy pointed out. The fox laughed and moved along with her, keeping her close to his side. His paw rested on her hip as they walked and it felt very much like she would expect to be treated by a lover. She was not used to the openness and she absolutely loved it. Another thing she noticed immediately is that the others around them were not only staring because she was one of two bunnies in the place, but because she was obviously dating this fox. However, the looks were of surprise, not disgust like the squirrel at the naturalist’s club.

What she had thought might be an insurmountably big deal before suddenly seemed a little less taboo. Sure, it was different, but how long until no one cared? She beamed brightly and just walked close to her fox. Surprised glances melted to warmer expressions at the sight of how genuinely happy the bunny was with her fox. She knew the word ‘cute’ was likely on everyone’s tongue, but it was still encouraging. Finally they got to a dark iron archway. There were two iron gates. The first, marked ‘inbound’, had a large framed photo of a wolf in a leather jacket and a bear in flannel laughing as they punched each other roughly while entering the gate. The other gate was marked “outbound” and had a photo of the same two very obviously sobbing, wet nosed and hugging one another in distress as they emerged.

“Uhh…” Judy half-whispered, slowing her walking speed beside Nick.

Nick looked up at the gates and laughed. “It’s not that bad, Fluff. It’ll be nothing for a thrill-seeker like you.” Judy had never been much for big high-speed rides in Bunnyburrow, but it was mostly because she simply hadn’t spent a lot of time doing this kind of thing. It was a pretty new experience for her. Still, if Nick believed in her, she didn’t want to disappoint him. He did the rope swing with her, after all.

“Uh… I still don’t see a roar-a-coaster, Nick, I – oh my God it’s under the ground.” She felt heavy vibration under her feet. “I’m out.” Nick gripped her a little closer.

“Carrots, you can’t possibly tell me that a bunny is afraid of being under the ground.” Judy looked at the fox with wide eyes, her nose actually wiggling.

“Nick, it’s not that. I just have no idea what the coaster actually looks like. It’s a complete unknown.” Judy continued following Nick through the gate as if hypnotized. There was a short line
waiting where they arrived. She expected an attraction like this to be busier. Maybe most folks had simply already ridden it since they were local.

As they stood in line, a gangly maned wolf pointed to Nick and shook his head. The wolf stated in a raspy smoker’s voice, “You can’t bring that.” He walked over to indicate Judy. Her vulpine boyfriend just grinned back, undaunted.

“Why not?” Nick asked. “She meets the height requirement for a ten-oh-one.” Nick referred to the last cart on the ‘train’ which had four seats, a small seat and a larger seat. Their positions were reversed between front and back for balance.

“You know darn well why not. No bunnies on this ride.” He pointed at the sign which illustrated conditions not suitable for riding. It didn’t say specifically ‘no bunnies’, but Judy got the meaning. It did say heart conditions and bunnies could die if one were to scare them hard enough. Judy was perfectly fine skipping that ride and going on a different one, but to her shock and growing dread, Nick handed the ride operator ten dollars. He stuffed it in his pocket and said in his gravelly tone, “Uh oh. Looks like one got through. Nuts.” He then moved back to the front of the line and let the next batch of mammals onto the ride.

“Nick. Nick you can’t do that.” Judy said with sinking dread in her voice.

“It’ll be fine, Carrots. Almost no one dies on these things anymore.” Nick helped his bunny companion up to the next slot in line.

“You bribed the ride operator.” Judy hissed.

“No bunnies’ was not even a real rule. It’s all for show. Makes it more realistically scary.” Nick grinned.

“Sweet cheese and crackers. Nick, you hate scary stuff, how can you be okay with this?” Nick donned his smug expression.

He practically purred, “I normally would be, but I have my bunny with me to keep me safe.” Judy tensed up at the smug, coy attitude that she knew could be nothing but trouble coming, and she prepared to protest. She was cut off however.
“Cripes you two are the cutest thing I’ve ever seen,” the soft voice chuckled from behind them. Judy turned, having not really noticed that others were lining up behind them as she was so focused on what honestly felt like a completely undeserved ‘getting’ on the way. A lady wolf and what seemed to be her two adolescent children, a boy and a girl, were there. All three had typical grey fur and markings, dressed in casual t-shirts and shorts.

Nick smirked at the older lady wolf and murmured, “It’s actually funny because she’s dragged me through way scarier stuff than this. She’s one fearless bunny.”

One of the young wolves, the male, ticked away with his claw on the screen of his phone. “I’m tellin’ Eddie about this bunny. She’s so gonna die.”

“Maxwell!” scolded his mother.

“Are you her boyfriend?” the girl asked.

Her mother weakly chuckled, her head turning suddenly to regard her other pup. “That’s not really any of our business, Miriah.”

“He is.” Judy answered, a thrill shooting through her at being allowed to say it. It was true, and for the moment, disguised as they were, it was perfectly safe to say it. The girl gasped and grinned broadly at her brother.

She said in a sing-song voice, “See? Not so unlikely now, huh! It’s just how love works!” The girl crossed her arms defiantly, baring her teeth in a playful and teasing fashion. Her brother snapped at her and then shrugged, dodging an ear-pinch by his mom.

The older lupine female said shrilly. “Manners! Don’t show your teeth near a bunny! You know better!” Judy was well distracted from her impending ‘doom’ by the playful family dynamics on display before her.

“It’s alright, really!” Judy stated, wanting to make sure they knew she was not offended.

“It’s not, it’s improper and inconsiderate.” Their mother offered politely.
Nick then surprised Judy a bit as he touched his cool nose-pad behind her ear before parting his muzzle and seizing that long slip of velvety flesh near the base with his teeth in a gentle grasp. He then drew his head back slowly, standing taller to run the length of that captured ear between his teeth before letting it go. It made the bunny so weak in the knees that she had to tightly grasp Nick’s paw in hers to keep steady. There was no containing the surprised but elated squeak she emitted, and she blushed, pulling her ears down in front of her, over her shoulders to hide how scarlet they were inside.

Nick then responded in a kind tone, “Seriously though. Teeth do not offend this bunny.”

Miriah beamed. “Awesome.”

Max laughed. “Still doesn’t mean I secretly got the hots for your friend.” Judy chuckled a bit, figuring out why it was even brought up. She shook her head slowly.

“It sneaks up on you.” She said in her feathery Delilah voice. “You think you don’t, then suddenly you can’t think of anything else.” Max looked genuinely frightened for a moment and his sister grinned broadly.

“We’re up!” Nick barked. Judy squeaked as she was nudged forward. She found herself ushered into the smaller seat usually used by a slightly smaller rider beside their parent. A simple lap-bar was not what this called for. A three way harness with metal interlocking bars was used. It felt very secure and yet oh so foreboding. The cars began to move and Judy looked up at the ride operator who wore a very sad face as he waved goodbye to the bunny.

“I’m gonna get you back for this, Nick,” Judy said through gritted teeth.

Nick spoke in a hushed tone, as no other mammal on the coaster seemed to talk during the slow roll into near complete darkness. “My sweet bunny…” Judy’s heart skipped a beat at being called that as he resumed, “You don’t have to get me back… You’ve done all this to me before.”

Judy looked up hastily, unable to see Nick at all in the pitch blackness. “What? When?” she hissed.

“The first few days that you came into my life were like this. Recklessly flying through the dark, not knowing what turn was coming next. It was scary, crazy, fast and dangerous, but I hoped that in the end you’d be there by my side. Just like this.” Then, in the darkness, he kissed her lips sweetly. The only sound was the slow clack clack clack of the cars being moved into position. Nick broke
the kiss after a tender moment, then whispered, “It’s more fun to pretend we’re flying.” He then held Judy’s paw in his and leaned in against her. Judy was about to say ‘what?’ when the whole world dropped out from under them.

Ordinarily, Judy might have really screamed. She might have actually felt the pain in her heart of death’s icy fingers which so many bunnies dreaded if it hadn’t been for what Nick told her to do. Imagine she was flying. Others in the cars ahead of them certainly did scream, but Judy pressed as close as the restraints allowed to her fox, and she really felt like she was flying with him. There were lights here and there like bright stars that seemed to rush by through time and space. She knew they flipped a few times in loops and corkscrews, but the sensation of fear was almost completely bled out by the emotion she found instead as she held her fox’s paw. The initial drop was scary but afterward everything that came next was an utter thrill. It excited her and when her throat unlocked from the stifled initial scream she cried out in joyful intensity, screaming for fun, not fear.

They went through some neon hoops underground inside tight turns and spins. There was a dimly lit cloud of mist and dry ice that flickered with what lightning animated along the walls, as if going through a storm. Loud thunder cracked around them as they rolled through it being bumped side to side by short turns in the track for effect. Judy had been so sure of how horrifying this was going to be that her adrenaline only enhanced how magical it became. She had dreaded this so much less than three minutes before, and then she suddenly found herself lamenting it was over as they drew into the lit corridor they had come from, where they would exit the ride.

“Cool, she survived.” Maxwell chimed, getting his ear successfully pinched by his mom. Judy and Nick exited the ride, the bunny practically vibrating with excitement from the experience. She could not wait to tell her family about it. As Nick led her out through the exit gate, they immediately encountered Jack and Skye standing outside.

Skye was speaking to the striped rabbit as they approached. “-probably won’t let bunnies actually go on that ride, Jack, but this is the… Nick? Oh God, Judy - are you alright?!” she exclaimed, cupping her muzzle.

“That… was… awesome!” Judy screeched, little paws balled into fists by her cheeks.

“That… was… awesome!” Judy screeched, little paws balled into fists by her cheeks.

“Now I’m definitely not getting on it.” Jack stated bluntly, shaking his head.

Skye kept her paws up at her muzzle. “I’m not lying, Judy, you are seriously probably the only bunny who’s ever been on that ride. I can’t believe you did that. You guys are crazy.”

Nick laughed at that and replied, “That sufficiently cleared my head, Judy, and I think I could
definitely get a bite to eat. Skye, do you and Agent Frost wanna join us?” Skye’s ears went scarlet at Nick applying her last name to her companion.

Jack appeared to ignore the teasing, instead only nodding emphatically. While Skye had been obviously attempting to get Nick and Judy to spend time more together without them, she was flummoxed by the other fox’s jest and only nodded along with her date.

They all went over to an outdoor dining area by a winding stream that cut through the quieter part of the amusement park. They ordered their food and chatted with one another idly. Skye had taken Jack on the bumper cars which he really enjoyed, and they were considering playing a round of mini golf. It was something they had done before at a different place.

Nick and Judy split a large salad with apple slices and walnuts. Skye got a tuna sandwich, and Jack ordered a vegetarian taco bowl. Skye blanched at the heavy use of guacamole, but nibbled at the shredded cheese. Judy excitedly told Skye about the her experience with the Roar-a-coaster. The vixen explained that she had made the fog and storm effects a few years before. She was happy they were still being used.

Skye explained that her date had been recognized a few times as they walked about. Those who recognized him seemed to think that Skye was his bodyguard and was leading him around the place. She didn’t mind that. It actually meant that folks tended to leave him alone and not try to hassle him much. He did sign the back of someone’s phone, but that was the only autograph solicited. It had been a little more peaceful outing than they generally got to enjoy in a public setting, and the vixen was pleased.

Judy kept her chair right by Nick’s, savoring how close she was getting to be with him. The memories of the ugliness they had been witness to were fading, and the relaxed smile on her partner’s face was reassuring.

That changed however when Skye jokingly offered Judy some of her sandwich, remembering how she’d gotten Nick in the park before. Judy had not, of course, told Skye that Nick was having some…difficulty… concerning fish. She saw his ears go back and she tried to think of some way to diffuse it. She kindly passed on the offered sandwich, intending to privately discuss the taboo with her friend later. The reminder didn’t seem to really faze Nick for very long, and he relaxed a little as the vixen polished off the sandwich. Judy then noticed something out of the corner of her eye that immediately lifted her spirits.

“Hey Nick.” The black fox looked up at her as she spoke. “… The restaurant… look at what they sell…” She indicated the large tank inside the wide, busy booth. There were live, dark-colored, fleshy fish to select and fry. Nick perked up with a gasp, immediately interested.

“No, not to eat. Come on!” She waved to her partner sweetly to get him to follow. He grinned brightly, willingly doing so. Skye and Jack stayed at the little round table they’d been at, the buck still calmly munching on his taco bowl without much visible concern. Judy walked up to the grey-furred bear running the booth.

He snorted with a smile and a friendly tone as he spoke. “Heya, bunny! Ain’t you a rare sight! We got fresh arugula. Want a sample?”

Judy spoke in her Delilah voice. “How much for five of those fish? Little ones are all we need.” She didn’t want to upset patrons who might have wanted a big tasty fish. It would be more infuriating to miss out on them when the pair did what they intended to do.

“You want... You want the fish?” he asked.

“Yep! In a bag with some water, please.”

“Uh... These won’t keep like pets in a bag like that, lady.” The bear seemed concerned about Judy’s impending disappointment.

The doe grinned broadly. “I don’t need them to be in it long, don’t worry. Please!” Nick put his paws on Judy’s shoulders, smiling as well, offering support. He took his wallet out and paid for the fish as the bear did the strange thing he was asked to do. Judy figured in a place like this, it was better to just take the money and make a happy repeat customer. The bag they were given was large and clear, so it was easy to see the little fish as they were placed carefully one at a time into the water-filled container. Judy was delighted at Nick’s happy face, so captivated as he watched them swim around in the bag. The bag was bound at the top carefully and handed to the fox since it would have been a little heavy and awkward for Judy to carry.

“Uh, what are you two doing?” Skye asked as Nick came back to the table. The fox put the bag down on the middle of the table, making Jack scoot his taco bowl back. The striped rabbit watched wordlessly as Nick took some pictures. The black-furred fox seemed so intensely happy and excited that it made Judy a little giddy. He then put his phone down on the table and walked with the bag over to the little canal that ran through the dining area. He carefully hopped over the barrier. On the other side was a sheer stone drop of about five or six feet to the water, so Nick had to hold it with one paw. He hooked his arm over it to untie the bag which was being difficult.
Judy watched him prepare to release the fish and looked back to Jack and Skye, deciding to explain at least a little bit. “This is something that Nick’s therapist thought would be good for him. I know it doesn’t make a lot of sense, but it’s really positive, I promise.” Judy turned and looked back at Nick again. Several younger mammals, appearing to be in their teens or maybe just out of them, moved over to watch what Nick was doing.

“Didja catch some fish in the creek, fox?” one of them, a tall and angular cheetah, asked. His buddies, a few wolves, a hyena, and a particularly short badger gathered around.

Nick answered in a happy tone, finally getting the bag untied, “Nope, returning some of them. These ones get to be free.” He held the bag in such a way that he could hold it over the water, leaning out a bit at an angle and holding the divider with his hand for stability.

The cheetah scoffed at that. “That’s dumb. Why the heck’r you doing that?”

Nick poured the fish out carefully into the water, smiling as he watched them fall the short distance to freedom. “I get to choose this for them… That’s all I need.” His answer was happy matter-of-fact.

“Huhuh! Right! Of course!” the cheetah stated, his buddies laughing at what had to sound really silly without any meaningful context. “Everyone should be free, right?”

“Yep!” Nick said jovially, shaking the last of the water out of the bag.

“Even foxes!” the cheetah casually pulled Nick’s paw off the divider and let him go. All the young predators burst into laughter as Nick gave a short shout and then a heavy splash as he hit the water below.

“Hey!” Judy yelled furiously. She took her phone out and dropped it on the table before rushing past the startled younger mammals. They had likely not figured Nick had a companion nearby as he did something so weird. Judy would deal with them when she was sure her fox as alright. He was still not completely mended and a fall from any height could be seriously bad news. Over the divider Judy went, resulting in a smaller splash. The fox sputtered and thrashed around a bit before realizing that he could just stand. The water was about chest deep to him. He reached out and took Judy into his arms, pulling her close.

He hugged the worried bunny and spoke with soft reassurance, “I’m alright, Fluff. I’m alright.
Just… wet. Well, now we’re both wet.” His voice was raspy from how cold the water was. He looked up scornfully at the cheetah. The young mammals were a little shocked at the sudden involvement of the bunny, but they burst into laughter again seeing that their trick had soaked both the older mammals.

Judy growled. “When I get my paws on you guys…” She glared at the laughing kids.

“Uh oh! Bunnies are after you now, Greg!” the badger laughed. He had to pull himself up a bit to see over the barrier.

“Dude, what’s with his color?” asked one of the wolves.

“Huh?” Greg looked down at the pair. Judy’s heart sank. Their disguises. They were soaking wet and the artificial color was just pouring off of them. Nick pulled water up to his face and brushed the dye back so it didn’t get in his eyes, revealing more obviously that he was a red fox. Judy pulled her ears down, the chocolate tone coming off of them easily because of how short the fur was, leaving her grey ears with black tips plainly visible.

“Uh, they’re dyed?” the young badger asked.

“What is wrong with you mammals?” Judy asked pointedly, actually baring her teeth a bit with anger.

The look of Judy’s furious expression beside a mess of a red fox had been plastered in the papers and on the news for a week. It was no wonder that seeing them exactly like that side by side was a dead giveaway to their identities. She cringed a bit at a cry from the badger. He took off faster than they thought his legs could even carry him. They could scarcely make out his exclamation of “That’s Officer Hopps, run!”

Another cry rose up, this time from a wolf. “Oh crap! You pushed Officer Wilde into the creek, dude!” That lupine backed away as if afraid to actually turn around. He pointed to the cheetah who caused Nick to fall in. “I don’t know that guy! I’ve never seen him before! Oh God, I’ve never met him in my life!”

“Run!” one of the other wolves repeated. Judy’s ears fell back at the abject fear in his voice. “Scatter! She can only chase one of us!”
“W-Wait! I didn’t mean to, guys!” Greg stammered.

“Leave him!” one of the more distant sounding wolves yelped. The expression on the cheetah looking over the edge at the fox and bunny was absolute panic.

Greg whimpered softly, “Look, I messed up. I was just playing! I didn’t... I mean, let me help you out of there, hold on...” He hopped over the barrier and took a position not unlike Nick had been in to free the fish. He reached way down to offer a paw to Nick and Judy to help them up. The bunny was still a bit stunned at the over-the-top reaction that the reveal of their identity had caused. Bogo had been right. Between the bear incident, the Palm Market incident, and other stories about her work on the force, the media had made her into something she really wasn’t. At least temporarily, the young predators were genuinely terrified of a vengeful bunny. As Judy looked up at the fear-widened eyes of the cheetah attempting to help her, some of her anger bled away. She wasn’t a monster.

Indignantly, she scolded him. “Why would you even do something like that?” She shivered a bit in Nick’s arms. She hoped someone might have a towel or something, or she’d regret having to soak the inside of Skye’s car. The cheetah gestured a little with his arm extended way down, still attempting to help them out if they would let him.

“Sorry. Sorry, it was dumb... Just... Let me help you out... and maybe let me buy you guys some dry shirts or something and then I can go free? Maybe?” he asked hopefully.

Judy was about to answer when Skye loudly exclaimed from behind Greg. “Cheetahs should be free!” and she yanked his paw free of the divider. Nick and Judy moved back a bit as the young cheetah yelped and went face first into the green-colored algae-rich water. Judy looked incredulously at a fuming white fox as Greg surfaced, sputtering and looking back at the bunny. He jumped back and pressed himself up against the wall as if he were trapped in the canal with a shark. Nick began to laugh. Then, hearing her partner’s joyful intonation of happiness, Judy could not help but laugh as well. Stunned and a bit nervous, Greg also laughed, finally followed by Skye.

Jack peered over the edge of the divider and called out, “This. This right here’s why I keep hanging out with you guys. This kind of crazy is a service only you provide!”
Judy looked at herself in the mirror. It felt like a lifetime ago, but there she was, staring back at her. Judith Laverne Hopps, Officer of the ZPD. She was dressed in full uniform, healthy and ready for duty again. A quick soft-pawed polish of her badge and she turned around to see Nick, who was carefully adjusting his tie. He smiled back at Judy brightly.

“Don’t you look eager?” He grinned at the mirror as well, eyes down, not looking at himself. He was proudly gazing at his bunny, and Judy knew it. He reached down and stroked one of her ears, then turned. “At least you got all the dye out of your fur. I’ve still got it under my arms. I think that gross canal water changed it somehow.” They had gotten out of the water with the help of the cheetah, Gregg. He made good on his promise and, despite Judy telling him he didn’t have to, he got them both t-shirts to help them dry. They also had a bundle of paper towels provided by one of the mammals running a booth nearby.

Afterward, to help dry themselves fully, they played a few of the carnival games and saw the sights around the park. They even took Greg along with them since his friends had all bailed on him. He was pleasantly surprised to find that the dangerous death-defying bunny was actually sweet and polite. He was even more surprised to find out that Jack was not a cosplayer, but ‘actually legitimately really Jack Savage’. He even got a picture with the initially reluctant buck, on Judy’s insistence that it was okay. She and Nick forgave the cheetah.

They didn’t stay much later just because Judy and Nick were both really worn out from a very long day that started far too early. Morning did indeed come early, but found Judy and Nick revitalized after a good night’s sleep. The fox picked up his apartment keys and let Judy out the door ahead of him. He then locked up and the pair headed down to catch the bus.

Things felt pretty normal again, all things considered. They would walk together into the bullpen the way they had for months before the incident. It should all feel normal, but Judy was still a little off balance from things being so different for a while. Nick didn’t seem as out of place, contentedly looking at used vehicles on his phone as the bus rumbled along. About 45 minutes later, they exited
the bus in front of the ZPD Precinct One Headquarters.

The red fox addressed Clawhauser as they walked into the lobby. “Hey, Big guy! Woah… You look like you’ve slimmed down a bit.” Nick usually didn’t dole out unsolicited compliments, but Judy actually had to agree.

Clawhauser replied in his usual over-the-top happy manner. “I am! Down a whole uniform size! The chief promised something ‘worth it’ if I make him order new uniforms three times,” the portly cheetah said.

“What’s he gonna give you?” Nick asked.

“I don’t know!” Clawhauser said excitedly. “Maybe back stage passes again… Something like that would make me slim down to wear a giraffe’s tube sock!” While normally Judy might have found it strange that Bogo would take so much direct interest in Clawhauser taking care of himself and minding his health, what Dr. Carlisle had told them about Ben had made things snap into focus with intense clarity. Benjamin Clawhauser had to make a very hard choice for the ZPD, and how he was as Judy knew him was likely the result. It also likely explained Bogo’s attitude toward the big cat. Clawhauser seemed to daydream just a moment about his offered reward, and then glanced back down to the smiling pair of smaller officers. “How you two holding up?” he asked.

Nick responded, “Physically great, but it’s gonna take a few days to shake off all the cobwebs, I think. I suspect we aren’t gonna see a regular patrol for a little bit, since they are still inviting Judy to the talk show circuit. I’ll even take the records department if it gets me away from day time television.”

Judy crossed her arms in front of her. “… aaaand I’ve refused all of them. I’m not an attention hog. And you can always turn off Bearaldo, Nick.”

Clawhauser leaned over the desk, his long spotted tail flicking about. “Well, get going! You don’t want to be late for roll call your first official day back!”

Nick saluted Clawhauser and chimed, “Ten-four! Our notoriety won’t get us out of parking duty.” He took Judy’s paw and headed for the bullpen. Judy made it a good twenty meters before her mind snapped back to where they were and she pulled her paw back, ears heating.

“Cheese and crackers, that’s habit-forming.” She hissed.
“Sorry, Carrots, I didn’t even think.” Nick whispered, looking back at the cheetah to see if he saw that. Judy looked back as well. The tip of the cheetah’s tail was nearly a blur of frantic twitching. Oh yeah, he saw. Well, they didn’t have to explain it. It was just a moment. They would need to be more careful when in uniform, however.

Nick said softly, “I’m gonna go get us some coffee in the breakroom. It won’t take but a second.” He had perhaps decided that wandering off in separate directions was warranted to dispel whatever the cheetah was thinking. Judy nodded at that. Coffee was definitely an offer she’d not turn down.

The response to her entering the bullpen was normal. Friendly greetings, a massive fist bump from McHorn, the usual. She’d been back, mostly handling paperwork for a few weeks now. When Nick finally entered with their coffee, a few genuine cheers went out. The fox smiled in appreciation and put a huge ceramic mug of coffee on the podium for Bogo, which Judy found to be a charming change for the fox. He then brought the pair of cups in their holder to the table where they always sat. Nick took his chair with Judy as usual. It felt somehow different this time. It was always their chair during the briefings. They always took the same one because they were small and they were a team, a single unit to be addressed in these meetings. But now it felt like there was the expectation that, in uniform, this might be too close. The limits they had to self-impose now would take some getting used to. Still, for the moment, they remained where they were.

Bogo entered a few minutes later and received his usual barking, howling, fist-pounding racket of greeting. Judy and Nick joined in despite being completely drowned out by the larger mammals. He cleared his throat and tapped his files on his podium. Bogo noticed the coffee and glanced about, a little bit of surprise obvious in his expression.

“Thank you.” He said bluntly, and sipped. “I will begin with the bad news.” There was a collective silence. “Our long, pleasant break from Officer Wilde is now over. Watch for gag-gifts, make sure your lockers have no wires leading to them before you open them, and check before you sit down.” There was a roar of laughter at the good-natured ribbing from Bogo. Nick smiled smugly. He had made a name for himself in a pretty short time. “The first item on the docket requires a little… altering of plans, I fear.” The large buffalo looked back to Judy and Nick. “Has your doctor cleared you for travel, Wilde?”

Nick widened his eyes a little at that, folding his ear back. “Yes sir. I’ve got a clean bill of health, with a recommendation that I avoid taking any big falls.” Judy was not sure why that was being asked, but a sudden sensation of dread shot through her. He didn’t ask if she was clear for travel. Was he sending Nick somewhere without her? Could she even protest it when the chief knew they were a couple? The moment it became a hindrance to their work, they could be reassigned. She had to be far more careful how directly she advocated for her partner. It had to be professional and it was going to be hard. She knew that.
Bogo put his glasses on, causing the knot to tighten in Judy’s stomach a little more. He resumed, “As you are likely aware, I have the added consideration of your… notoriety in the news recently to stand as a possible impediment to your effectiveness on the streets, particularly in regards to Officer Hopps. I spent much of last week trying to consider assignments which would not generate undue hassle back to me. Something where I felt you two could stay out of trouble for just a little while.” Judy felt bad about the fact that she knew it had been a hassle to Bogo, but the buffalo had forgiven her. He’d said so. Still, she feared this inconvenience to her boss would be plenty enough to provide a temporary reassignment to remove some of the pressure the media might be causing him.

“We don’t exactly go looking for it, sir.” Nick offered in his defense. A light chuckle went through the ranks.

“Stand down, Wilde.” Bogo commanded, taking another drink of coffee. “If I thought you deliberately caused such matters, you’d have my discipline, not my consideration.” Judy found that to be blunt but fair. “But… as fortune would have it, I have been offered a solution, at least for a couple of days. And, it’s something I feel you both will handle with the utmost care.” The bunny had to restrain a squeak of happiness. They were both doing this, whatever it was. It was not just Nick. She scolded herself quietly for being so emotional about it. There were almost certainly going to be times where they were apart. Still, the idea terrified her, so perhaps she was not as far along in her recovery from the incident as she’d hoped.

Nick asked, “Does this have anything to do with the assignment we just completed, Sir?” Judy found that her fox was being considerably more polite than she was used to seeing. He rarely called his boss ‘Sir’ and often openly prodded or teased him in the bullpen on a typical day. The bunny wondered if this was a change because of the incident, or if there was something else to it. She liked seeing Nick so respectful.

Bogo seemed to catch that, and arched a brow before replying in his usual deep tone. “On point as usual, Wilde. You and Officer Hopps handled that admirably, by the way. Pawlander was impressed. Don’t expect a transfer off the streets just yet though. I’m not done with you.” Another chuckle wrapped around the room. “As stated, yes, the assignments are related. I need a couple of unimposing officers to escort the remains of a recent foreign murder victim back to his home in The Interior.” Judy’s heart sank as the memories of the previous day flitted through her mind.

They were being asked to take Ukweli’s body home. It was a very important task, the bunny agreed, but she was certain that it had a lot more to do with just getting them away from the unwanted attention they were still getting in Zootopia. Bogo didn’t hide it at all. This was an opportunity that allowed him not to use officers from his active roster for a possibly multi-day assignment. Judy looked up at her partner who nodded, eyes closed. He was taking the assignment seriously and was not protesting it at all. It was a somber thing, and Judy suspected Nick really did take it seriously.

“Will we be meeting with his family directly?” Judy asked, suddenly dreading that a bit. She had
delivered bad news before, but it seemed like it was likely to be a bit worse given how violently Ukweli died.

Bogo took his glasses off and put them away before taking another longer sip of coffee. He seemed to hesitate, before saying, “I will discuss the assignment in a little more detail after the morning briefing, so please stay after the meeting.” He then proceeded to pass out the other morning orders. Judy was surprised to hear that there had been an uptick in thefts and robberies as it appeared a new gang was moving in to take over the vacuum left behind by the Alabaster Paw. The new group was less experienced and certainly less organized, so Bogo felt like good attentive police work might be able to stunt the growth of that endeavor. As such, a few of the assignments were related to that. The bunny wished she were getting to help on those cases, but did not offer her opinion.

As he finished delivering the assignments, he took a long last drink of his coffee, seeming relaxed and grateful for it. Chief Bogo then jerked suddenly, eyes wide, and then ejected a huge mouthful of coffee in a violent tan spray nearly all the way to the front table where Nick and Judy were sitting. The officers in the bullpen all looked stunned as the chief slowly turned the mug around. As all the officers stared into the large white cup, the cup stared back. Large googly eyes had been glued to the bottom of it so that they had been revealed as Bogo took the last big drink. Everyone stared silently with eyes more round than those in the bottom of the cup.

Bogo wiped his mouth with the back of his wrist and glared at a very calm, smug-looking Nick. “Do I even need to ask who is responsible for this?” he growled.

“It’s great to be back, Chief,” Nick crooned. No one made a sound. Judy cupped her muzzle in her paws, stunned that the fox managed to prank Bogo so hard only minutes into his first day back. He was only in the breakroom for a few minutes to get coffee. A fox ‘getting’ was such a serious matter! The bullpen remained silent for a tiny bit longer before a high pitched whine was heard from the back corner of the room. Judy turned back, seeing literal tears in the eyes of Higgins, their hippo Senior Officer. The sound was coming from him, and reminded her of a radiator with a crack in it. As everyone turned to look at him he lost it and burst into a loud fit of laughter.

“Parking duty.” Bogo commanded bluntly.

“Damnit, Wilde!” Higgins bellowed through his laughter. The unspoken rule. No one was allowed to laugh at Officer Wilde’s pranks. They were allowed to laugh at Higgins getting parking duty however, and they all did.

Finally, the uproar dying down, the morning briefing was dismissed and Nick and Judy were left alone with Bogo. Judy hoped that the chief was not really mad about the coffee which the fox had dutifully cleaned up as everyone was heading out. He seemed to know without being asked that it would be required of him. There was a pause from Bogo as he seemed to be organizing some of the
documents that were left over from the briefing, perhaps making the reporting for him easier later on. She knew that for every page of reports Nick and Judy were responsible for, Bogo did three. That was a well-known ratio and she did not envy him that.

Nick was the one who broke the silence as he hopped back up in the seat beside Judy. “…Will we continue investigating the case in The Interior, Sir?” Judy’s attention snapped back over to Bogo. She hadn’t considered that. It was most certainly out of their jurisdiction, but that murder was possibly related to a murder that was definitely in ZPD’s jurisdiction.

Bogo sighed, putting his glasses right back on. Nick sucked a breath in through his teeth. After a long pause, the chief stated grumpily, “Every law-enforcing bone in my body screams investigate the hell out of this, Wilde.” Bogo stated solidly.

“But?” Judy asked.

“The Council of Unified Interior Affairs intervened hours after the discovery of Ukweli. We were not even allowed to perform an autopsy. There was an immediate order for cremation and anything he had with him was transferred as property of the CUI, including the weapon.”

Judy looked back with obvious horror, stammering, “Wh-what? Are you serious? Why? Are they trying to cover this up?” She looked up at her partner who was obviously just as shocked.

Bogo tapped his papers on the podium in obvious irritation. “If I had to guess, I would say that this was political. The elections are in a month and Swinton is not polling well. There is worry about a shakeup in the ranks of the CUI if there is public perception of a murderer from The Interior freely committing such a level of brutality inside the city. They have support from Swinton, but not interim mayor Bearington. As such, they want it buried.”

“Where’s the justice for Ukweli, then? What about Lupin? Can they really do that?” she asked.

Bogo answered more slowly. “They aren’t preventing us from investigating Lupin, actually. I may have forgotten to mention that Ukweli’s death was understood to be linked to that investigation. So, while you are there, in a… careful manner… find out what you can about Lupin’s dealings there, if any.” Nick’s ears went back, eyes wide. He opened his muzzle to say something, but nothing came out.

Judy looked back to the chief and asked in a tone of exasperation, “An unofficial investigation, sir?”
The chief replied in a hushed tone, “You have until the return flight from The Interior on Wednesday to learn what you can about why the professor might have been killed. You are to avoid any direct questioning or investigation of the lycaon victim, however.”

Nick took a deep breath and responded in a measured tone, “I can understand your reasoning for wanting Officer Hopps and I to take on that last assignment. Literally no one else wanted to do that and it put us outside the public eye. But this really seems like the kind of thing you’d trust to Pawlander.”

Bogo looked down and tapped his files again and then laid them on the podium. He moved over to the table that Judy and Nick sat in front of. In a low tone, still hushed, the chief spoke. “… Officer Wilde’s iconic pranks aside, how can either of you honestly think at this point that I don’t have full confidence in your abilities as officers? I don’t expect the same from you as I would of Pawlander, this is true. I actually expect more, and I expect I will be satisfied with the results.” Judy didn’t even look to see how stunned her partner had to be at that, she focused entirely on keeping a relaxed expression herself. She had not expected that level of praise. It made her chest hurt. Bogo added, “A hundred and fifty bucks per-diem and you are still under the arrangement of your investigation at the Oasis. See MR Director Minque to get your plane tickets. You will need to get moving and pack quickly. Your plane leaves at 12:30.”

“Yes sir.” Judy answered quickly, her heart actually speeding up. She had worried that her choices only weeks before might have limited her chances in the ZPD, but this was proving very quickly to have been an unnecessary concern. “Is there anything else we will need?”

“As a matter of fact, yes. I have secured the help of a translator. You will find that is a necessity given where you will be going. It’s a pretty obscure location. You will meet up at the airport.” With that, Bogo turned and left the bullpen.

Judy stared dead ahead at the map at the head of the room. It did not include The Interior where they would be going. That felt significant somehow. She looked back at her partner. Nick was pinching the bridge of his muzzle at the corners of his eyes. Judy’s heart lurched. The compliment had genuinely shaken the fox.

“You okay?” she asked. Nick inhaled deeply, moving his paws back down and looking up a moment. He then gazed back back at Judy.

“This is still new to me, Fluff. It’s something I’m… glad to be having to get used to.” He took a deep breath and sighed, before looking back to the bunny with a smirk. “You ready to dive back into the unknown craziness of the world with a fox?” His mask of confidence was held in place of
what Judy knew to be a very excited vulpine.

Judy laughed and tapped Nick’s nose fondly. “I’d never jump into the crazy without one.”

Nick passed a ten and a twenty to the badger who drove the Zuber car they had taken. The pair took their small bags out of the trunk. One, which Nick rolled behind him, contained their clothing and necessary personal effects. The other, slung over Judy’s shoulder, was a carry-on which included a mirror-polished canister that looked something like a large silver thermos. That held all that remained of Ukweli. Judy rejected the very idea of putting him under the plane with the other luggage. The airport actually losing him would be an unrecoverable disaster.

The pair took the shuttle-cart that zipped back and forth around the massive Zootopia airport. Even for a large mammal, the distances between terminals was lengthy. Judy and Nick would have been walking for quite a while. Their terminal was also at the very end of the airport’s long North branch. Judy leaned against Nick as it was necessary to kind of wedge onto the back of the cart. She again tensed up about the image this portrayed because they were in uniform. It was hard to remember not to be so close, but they would have pushed together in this case regardless simply due to the lack of room. It felt odd having to reconsider things that might not have even registered to Judy before she and Nick became a couple.

They had kept their uniforms on because the first part of this trip was definitely going to be in official capacity for the ZPD. Once that part was over, they would likely don civilian clothes and try to find out what they could about the unfortunate Professor Lupin. They hopped off at Terminal 26a, which was where the cart turned around to head back. There were a few mammals milling about around the area - some sitting, others standing. Folks were coming and going and standing about.

Judy looked around and murmured, “I guess we just wait where we can be seen. I’m sure our translator will know it’s us. We kinda stand out.”

“I don’t know, Carrots. You can be hard to see.” Nick moved his tail in front of her face, dabbing it lightly against her muzzle like it was a powderpuff. Judy blew into it and swatted it away.

“Quit it! We’re still in uniform, Nick!” she laughed. That tail was her weakness and he knew it.
Nick grinned back warmly. He was clearly happy to harass the bunny a little even in uniform. This was really not so different than they had been before they started dating, though. He crossed his arms and leaned against one of the large pillars to allow him to keep an eye on the seating area. The fox looked down at his partner with a relaxed and pleasant expression.

“I hope we don’t have to stick too close to this translator mammal. I will go nuts if I have to be the perfect professional mammal for half the week, day and night. I have a hard enough time on my own – no way can I resist mischief around you.” His tone made it clear he was being complimentary, and Judy elbowed him playfully.

She then looked out the large bay of windows and saw the rather small jet being loaded with luggage, including their own. There were not a lot of folks going out as far as The Interior, so a full sized jet wasn’t used. This one held perhaps fifty passengers. It would be enough. Judy felt a pang of worry, though. She hadn’t considered it much really, but she’d never been on a plane before. She wasn’t sure how flying felt. Would it be scary? Her brother Charlie had flown, and he said it was easy. Had Nick ever been on one?

She was about to ask that, but was interrupted by a bright but loud voice from not far away, “It can only be officers Hopps and Wilde.” Judy looked to the side and saw a huge rhino in a navy blue suit. Nick was actually a little startled by his appearance, as the doe felt him flinch a little against her side. The reason was not that he was just a large mammal; he was just really imposing. His suit was immaculate, crisp and perfectly sized for him. It was obviously extremely expensive. His horn was as long as McHorn’s was, but instead of being bare, it was sheathed in what looked like polished silver, gleaming brightly with a jade emblem that looked like a family crest near the bottom.

“Good afternoon.” Judy said kindly as she pushed the surprise under the surface. “Are you the translator the ZPD said we’d be working with?”

“No, that wouldn’t be me, I’m afraid,” he answered casually, “I’m Gaudby Pembe. I’m in charge of a conglomeration of mines out in Matumaini. I come to Zootopia to do business frequently enough, and I think you two have been in the news in some fashion every time I’ve been here. I must say, it’s… fascinating to meet you. Are you meeting someone here? This… translator you speak of?”

“Yes and no.” Judy replied, “We are heading to The Interior. We have a quick task there, and then we are heading back.” The bunny was immediately nervous about sharing much concerning their purpose with anyone who might get too curious, and this rhino seemed like the curious type. He simply smiled at that.

“It’s a pity you won’t be staying very long. There are some incredible sights in The Interior. Even touring some of the mines themselves can be breathtaking. We’ve gone through great lengths to preserve the natural splendor of the lands we hold for our industry. The result is no loss of the
natural beauty, while creating unparalleled access to the region. I do hope you find some free time to see it. I will even extend a discount for the tour if you decide to take me up on it - you need only ask.”

Judy nodded courteously to that and said, “Thank you, Mr. Pembe. That’s very generous. Officer Wilde and I will be travelling a bit North of Matumaini before having to head right back, so we will not get to see the sights much. We do appreciate the offer, though.”

The rhino grinned kindly again, bowing to Judy. “I understand, certainly. I also wish to say you are far more… soft spoken than I expected from the media’s version of you.”

Nick spoke before Judy could reply. “To the media, Officer Hopps is something that they can sell. She’s unique. So very unique.” Judy hoped that Pembe couldn’t hear the extra layer of adulation in her partner’s voice as he said that, looking right at her. Nick then looked back at the rhino. “But in the end, she and I are just public servants… pretty new ones at that. So that’s why we are being ushered out here to tend to some small busy work. Low mammals on the totem pole as it were,” he laughed. Judy worried Nick might tell too much, but he thankfully stopped at that point in his explanation.

“Well, given your presence in the news, I think you two will be lieutenants in no time.” Pembe said confidently. I’m going to pick up some post cards for my nieces. I do hope your visit to The Interior is pleasant and unhurried.” Pembe gave a bright grin again and strode off casually. Two hyenas in matching suits got up to walk with him. He apparently was important enough to have his own entourage.

“I hope everyone in The Interior is as nice as that guy,” Judy said contentedly. “Still, I feel bad that I have to keep dismissing the media version of me. Seems almost easier to just kick everyone I meet across the room and live up to it,” she added with a shrug.

Nick laughed and shook his head. “You punt ‘em, then your mom punts them back. You can make a sport out of it!”

Judy groaned loudly. “Oh God, don’t remind me!” She still could not believe what her mother did. And what was worse, she could not even reveal to her that she knew. Her mother would be distressed that her own daughter didn’t tell her who she was.

“Oh no.” Nick hissed under his breath, shaking the bunny from her thoughts. Judy looked up. He appeared suddenly filled with anguish and horrified regret. “No. No, no, no…”
“What? What, Nick? Did you forget something? We can’t go back now. It’s too close to time to board!” Judy was afraid that whatever Nick was upset about had to be serious.

“No, not that, Carrots… That!” Nick tilted his head, pointing his muzzle ahead. Judy snapped her attention in that direction.

Approaching on foot were two figures that were pretty unmistakable, even at a distance.

“No. Oh no.” Judy responded in the same deep tone.

“He’s one of the only ones…” Nick started.

Judy finished in a surrendering sigh, “… in all of Zootopia who knows the language.”

Jack and Skye walked side by side rather confidently, the vixen toting the larger wheeled bag behind her. She was dressed in an outfit that screamed stereotypical ‘explorer’. It was a khaki button up shirt and shorts. Jack wore what honestly looked like a light blue version of one of Nick’s awful Pawaiian shirts. They were casually chatting as they walked up to the terminal.

Nick sighed under his breath. “Look at it this way: at least we don’t have to pretend we aren’t dating around them.”

“There is that.” Judy nodded, before shaking her head in slow disbelief. “Maybe this won’t be so bad.”

Jack stopped in front of Nick, grinning. He said in a confident tone, “I bet you thought you were going to have to solve this mess all by yourself, but you’ve got me now! Your good fortune does not end!” It was hard for Judy to honestly tell if he was being sarcastic or not.

The officers both looked at one another and stated flatly and simultaneously, “I resign.”

Skye burst into laughter, leaning down and hugging Judy. The bunny gave the vixen a good
squeeze. She looked back to them and said earnestly, “Listen carefully, both of you… I advise saying nothing about anything work related unless we know we are alone. Our time is short and support from the ZPD is limited. No one can even know we are investigating anything. Can you work with that?” Judy looked at them intently.

“That especially goes for double-oh-stripes there.” Nick elaborated unnecessarily.

Jack’s eyes grew wider. “Oh. Wait…” he whispered. “Seriously? Like… actual under the radar, stealth justice kind of stuff?” Skye looked at Nick wide-eyed as well. Judy shrugged at her fox as the striped buck’s expression quickly shifted to something like spiritual elation. He finally spoke again in a hushed tone. “Hell yes. Damned right I’m up for it. Are you kidding? This is gonna be like living out one of my movies…”

Skye gasped at that. “This sounds positively adventurous. I’m definitely in.” The vixen’s tail flitted about wildly with excitement.

Judy gritted her teeth, exchanging a worried glance with her partner.

It was not going to be as bad as she thought. It was likely to be far, far worse.

Nick stated flatly, utterly dazed, “Bogo finally got me back.”

Jack laughed.
Judy kept telling herself that the plane would be safer than and not nearly as chaotic as the Roar-a-Coaster, but that did not calm her heart down as the small jet taxied out onto the runway. She was ridged and tense in her greatly over-sized aisle seat as the red fox beside her looked casually out the window. The engines were so loud and the thrum of that noise shook the whole cabin. Did it have to be that powerful? What if the engines were only a tiny bit less powerful, would they just fall? Was the pilot happy today, or was he having a ‘crashie into the side of a mountain’ sort of day? Why even buckled into a seat that she could slide side to side a good two feet in? Despite the bunny’s logical brain immediately swatting down all of these thoughts as they blew through her mind, she could not make her brain stop with the parade of doom as the plane held position while the pilot waited for clearance to take off.

“You okay?” Nick asked as he looked over to his partner. Judy looked down and found she was gripping his paw tightly. She let it go, but he flipped his paw and took hers kindly. She didn’t have to let go. Judy took a deep breath. Nick could easily tell she was anxious.

“I’ve never been on a plane before.” She admitted.

“Neither have I. But, I promise it’s safer than fighting bears.” He grinned warmly. Judy gave a shaky sigh and tensed again as the plane began moving onto the runway.

“I know it’s not like me. I just… I feel the whole thing shaking and I don’t know if I’m supposed to,” she murmured.

Nick nodded forward a bit to indicate Judy should look ahead. He half-whispered, “Well, Pembe there, near the front, he comes to Zootopia a lot, remember?” Judy nodded at that, looking up at the rhino who took up two seats on his side of the plane. His hyena attendants, one male and one female, were on his left in the opposite two seats. “I can’t really see him from my seat, but you
probably can. If he starts acting anxious, then you can wonder if something’s wrong. He flies all the
time.” Judy leaned into the aisle a bit and watched the rhino. He appeared to be reading a book that
was comically tiny in his huge paws. That was an unconcerned rhino. She leaned back again.

“Okay, that’s a little comforting at least, thanks Niiiii-“ She gritted her teeth as the engines suddenly
roared to life and the plane began accelerating down the runway. The fox leaned a little and pulled
her head up to his chest, covering her slicked-back ears with his gentle paw. The whole while the
bunny could only hold her breath and repeat to herself that none of that was normal. Mammals
should not move this way. Flying was crazy. She could feel how fast the plane was moving and it
seemed so dangerous. The bunny’s stomach turned as she felt the plane pitch up and the rumbling
lessened as wheels left the ground.

“It’s okay. Just breathe deep, Judy.” Nick said. She did so and got a world full of fox-musk since
she was tucked tight to his chest. She felt a sudden shameful level of euphoria. This was not the
public image she should be presenting, she knew. She eventually forced herself to sit back, but her
partner kept her paw in his. The plane continued to climb and pitched right a bit, startling her so she
squeezed his paw a little harder. Eventually things calmed down and less motion was immediately
noticeable. It let the bunny calm down a bit and she finally released Nick’s paw. Her partner smiled
at her, and said nothing. Judy felt silly for how upset the takeoff had made her, but it was over at
least.

Self-consciously she looked around to see if anyone else had noticed that shameful display. Most
around her were concerned with whatever was on their headphones or in books or magazines. It
was a long flight. However, one face was turned to her and looked a little taken aback. A slightly
older lady pig, nicely dressed and very tidy, stared at her with a little bit of surprise.

Judy put her ears back and chuckled nervously, “First time flying. It feels really unnatural for a
bunny.” She wanted to dismiss the notion that she was in any way easily frightened.

“I can see that,” the pig said in a kind tone, smiling and nodding. “Officer Judy Hopps, right?” she
asked. The bunny nodded. It was not a surprise that folks knew her. She’d been on the news so
much that she’d just gotten used to the idea that a lot of mammals would recognize her, especially in
uniform. The pig continued talking as Judy, whose stomach was beginning to settle, offered no
immediate conversation. “I’m Aggie Porcintia. I work for Council-mammal Swinton.” Judy perked
up at that information. She knew that Swinton was seeking support from The Interior, so it was
interesting to run into one of her employees on this flight.

“Nice to meet you.” Judy said, putting her little paw out. The lady pig nodded but did not take it.
Judy put her ears up curiously. Maybe she was a germ-a-phobe or something. She did seem really
tidy and well put together. The bunny awkwardly withdrew her unshaken paw.
“Are you two on official ZPD business?” asked Aggie.

“We are, yes. If you see us in uniform, it’s always official,” Judy explained. She looked back at her partner who was fixated on the window. Nick did not appear to be afraid of flying, and was very interested in the view. She just knew he was leaving nose-smudges on the window. She looked back at the pig who seemed suddenly unamused.

“Needed to check with him?” she asked with a condescending tone. Judy lifted her ears curiously. What was that about?

“Not really, no. I just-“ Judy started, unsure why she even needed to answer for looking at her partner.

Aggie rolled her eyes a bit and cut Judy off. “I know. You just answer to a predator driven department,” the pig stated. “Hey, I understand. It’s not fair, but I understand.” Judy looked blankly at the pig. That wasn’t it at all.

“I’m not sure what you are getting at exactly, but you do know that the chief of police isn’t a predator, don’t you?” she asked.

“But he was appointed by one, wasn’t he?” Aggie inquired. Judy furrowed her brow and laid her ears back. She was starting to get a little offended. “I know you are just doing the job you wished your whole life for. I know all about you, dearie… but don’t blind yourself to the politics of it all. Swinton’s intended role is to restore the balance.”

“Uh…” Judy wanted her to stop right there. Nick was right beside her and she was not going to sour his enjoyment of his first plane trip with that kind of garbage.

The pig continued. “Don’t get me wrong, it’s not like I don’t like predators, I do just fine.” Judy watched the pig’s eyes dart down then back up. She was lying. Of course she was, she wouldn’t shake Judy’s paw because she had been holding Nick’s. Now the bunny was quietly seething. “But… they are over-represented in the current political system due to appointments under Lionheart who was obviously incredibly biased.”

“You do realize that Lionheart’s policies were why I was allowed to become an officer in the first place, right?” she asked.
Aggie chuckled haughtily. "Oh sweetie, you were definitely not the intended target of that policy. Lionheart couldn’t have dreamed a bunny would even bother try out, let alone succeed in the academy. Even with the academy being dumbed down for the influx of wolves, you were a shot out of left field for him.” Judy was a little alarmed at the sudden desire to bite Aggie. Maybe the fox really was rubbing off on her. “Anyway, all I’m saying is that there’s no need for predators to hold 48 percent of the ruling body as representatives of 90 percent of the population who are not predators. Swinton speaks for all mammals, and predators will still have appropriate representation. For the past year they have been adding unnecessary protections because of the whole Bellwether fiasco and those need to be rolled back. All mammals are understood to already have the same general protections predators are demanding.”

Judy narrowed her eyes at that before slowly saying, “Perhaps you didn’t read the legislation yourself then, so I should point out that all of the additional protection legislation that went through and was nearly unanimously approved by the council did not use the word predator even once. The writers of those protections were very specific in the verbiage they used to include all mammals, so that we might all enjoy the promise that we would never be maligned because of what we are.” The pig scowled at that, before waving a split hoof at the bunny. “You must be real popular at family gatherings, yeesh.” She stated bluntly. Judy bristled and felt a ping of rage, but exhaled slowly. No. She was not going to smear the department she was representing while wearing the uniform with taking the bait from this lady. She suddenly feared, however, that Nick might be defensive and snap at Aggie. He wouldn’t protect himself, Judy knew, but he had a history of interjecting when it was Judy being attacked. She looked briefly back at him, but found he was still mashed against the window. He might have needed to so that he could hide his expression, Judy thought. Nick avoiding arguments like these because he felt they were always pointless. She looked back at the pig who seemed genuinely irritated suddenly. Aggie huffed, “Are you so starved for approval in that messed up system of the Zootopia Predator Department that you feel you need the approval of a fox?”

Judy blazed inside, but calmly answered. “I don’t need to defend myself from your opinion, nor do I need him to defend me, but I do value my partner. I would risk my life for him any minute of the day and I know he’d do the same for me. He nearly died saving a child, so whatever opinion you have by virtue of him being a predator, it’s immediately void to me.” Judy felt that this was level-headed and safe to say. It was supportive, but not antagonizing. That was the way. Nick was probably proud of her for saying it.

The pig absolutely sneered. She seemed to really hate being contradicted at all. “He only saved that wolf pup because it was a predator, dearie. Had it been a bunny, I promise your report would have been very different that day.” Judy was instantly at her breaking point. She wanted to give this pig the bear-treatment so bad her teeth literally itched from it. Her heart was hammering in her chest as if she’d just finished a five mile run.

Before she could say anything, however, her mind spinning for the right thing to say, a large black shape emerged over the seat ahead of the pig. Aggie looked up and found herself nose to nose with
one of the largest wolves Judy had ever seen. Aggie froze, a horrified expression on her face as gleaming white teeth bared a long, horrible snarl spilled from the wolf.

The black-furred female wolf wore an outfit that had a simple tribal flare to it and boasted bright colors, yellow and red primarily, making it appear she was likely from the Interior. Judy’s heart raced for a different reason suddenly. She did not want to have to arrest someone for defending her.

Judy stated with a tight chest, “It’s alright, her words are inconsequential to me.”

The lady wolf murmured darkly, her yellow eyes tracking over to the bunny, “You are a credit… to your family and your species, bunny. I am not so patient and forgiving. Apologize to the officer.” she growled.

“Are you threatening me?” the pig asked smugly. “You are really gonna force this cop to arrest you when we land while you think you are standing up for her? She won’t enjoy that.”

The wolf loomed over her with a cold expression, and then said in a lower tone, “You are wrong. I only demand you show respect. I cannot inflict a wound greater than the one you’ve already delivered upon yourself.”

The pig sat up a little, showing that she was over that initial fear. “Mind your business. Your attitude suffers from the unusual level of autonomy your lawless tribes have lived under for so long. Those days will soon be over. Anyone will be able to live out here without having to worry about panting, drooling, self-important nosey bullies. So sit down.” Judy’s clenched her fists. She was going to have to pull a wolf off a pig at ten kilometers in the air.

The wolf, however, only smiled wickedly. “You’re right, of course.” She crossed her arms over the back of her seat, resting her chin on them, her tail wagging against the back of the seat it bumped up against. “Our lives are all changing, but only because the heart of the world beats ever closer to our own. Those wisest among us have seen it. We will join the world. You just do not realize…. It is not your world which waits for us all.” She then turned and sat down again. Aggie looked as if she was fuming as she stared at the seat ahead of her impotently.

She then turned to Judy and indicated the seat. “This is why we need balance.” She then turned and scooted into the seat by the window and looked outside, obviously tired of talking to mammals who did not agree with her. Judy rolled her eyes and took a deep breath to try to calm down. She scooted closer to Nick and put a little bunny paw on his back as he watched quietly out his own window.
“I’m so sorry you had to hear that…” the bunny said softly. She always felt personally hurt when he was attacked for such a dumb, contrived reason.

Nick turned around suddenly, a grin on his face. “This is just so amazing! I had a friend when I was really little who had this great big train set he and his uncle made in their basement. Everything was miniature and it looked just like this! You really should take a peek if you feel up to it, it’s crazy!” Judy looked blankly at Nick. He hadn’t heard any of it. Her blank expression puzzled him, so he asked softly, “You don’t have to of course, if you don’t want to. You okay?” he asked. Judy’s heart melted a bit. She was actually glad her partner had, in his excitement, been so oblivious. She turned and looked at the pig, who was not paying attention anymore. As the fasten seatbelts sign had already been turned off, she climbed forward onto her knees over Nick’s legs and joined him, looking out the window. It was perhaps not the most elegant portrayal in uniform but she suddenly had absolutely no room for shame in the presence of that pig, and just enjoyed her first plane flight with Nick.

The four hour flight out of Zootopia had fortunately gone on without any additional problems. The pig seemed to realize that there was not a drop of kindred spirit in the bunny. Judy could not be too surprised that Aggie thought there might be. After all, the awful press conference made the suggestion that Judy was not so different. She was glad to have put a brick wall in front of that notion, at least with the lady pig. The bunny had gotten bored of the scenery long before Nick did. He was still enraptured by it nearly the entire flight. Judy listened to music on her MP3 player, interrupted only once when they flew by what looked like a rainstorm not far away. The view of the entire storm from so high up excited the fox a great deal. The pig had glanced over as Judy sat back down from it and mouthed what was probably the word ‘simple’. But, Judy didn’t care. If Nick loved the clouds, that was beautiful to Judy, not simple.

The plane began descending, and that involved more pitching and turning which made the bunny uncomfortable again. Fortunately the landing was pretty smooth and seemed to take less time than the takeoff did. Perhaps it only felt like that because she was not dreading departing the plane as much as she had been the flight itself. They far more quietly taxied into place at their point of arrival. Nick seemed satisfied and happy, his eyes bright and curious. Judy dismissed the pig’s opinion as she lovingly looked up at her fox. She liked seeing this side of him. She decided to not leave their seats until the pig was gone in case she had any intention of making any dumb remarks on the way out. She wanted to preserve happy, enthralled Nick if she could.
Fortunately, without comment, the pig took her carry-on and left. Nick took the small carry-on which contained Ukweli out from under the seat in front of him and once the plane seemed to have cleared out, Judy stepped into the aisle. The lady wolf stepped out into the aisle as well. She had been waiting. Judy smiled at her and tried to avoid saying anything that would reveal to Nick what had happened. He really didn’t need to know that.

“It was nice meeting you…?” the bunny offered, trying to get a name.

“Danni Canus.” She gladly offered a large paw to be shaken. Judy took it. “That pig… she is just the ugly last struggle of the world that is fading away. Do not listen to her.”

“Listen to what?” Nick asked. Judy’s heart sank.

“A pretty closed-minded lady beside us had some unflattering things to say about politics. The usual stuff.” Judy said, trying to dismiss it.

The large lady wolf got her carry-on from the overhead bin since she was tall enough to effectively use it. She said with a grunt, “It breaks my heart that… oof… that this is so common-place to you two that you do not even find it intolerable anymore. That lady represented an actual representative party in Zootopia. How can it be that it is so easily dismissed after everything that’s happened in your city?” Nick seemed a little distressed suddenly, perhaps because he realized that he hadn’t been paying attention at all while Judy was going through that.

“It’s okay Nick, just one of Swinton’s lackeys representing the reason why that candidate is polling worse than fleas right now.” Nick and the wolf both laughed at rare political humor from Judy and it seemed to immediately dispel the tension. They all walked out together into the much smaller if still perfectly modern airport terminal. Skye and Jack were standing out in the seating area. They were patiently waiting. Judy felt bad to have made them wait but she really didn’t want to deal with that pig.

Danni held her arms out as she turned to the fox and bunny as they entered the terminal proper. She grinned and said in a flaring, deep voice, “Allow me to extend my welcome, officers, to the city of Makali. It’s the last modern city of the civilized east. Dark secrets and hidden magic abound! Eyes and ears open, and you will see things never before seen, and hear stories older than your family lines. Be safe.” She bowed to them and padded off. Jack walked up to them with Skye walking alertly behind him. She was, it seemed, still playing the part of a body guard.

“Friendly lady!” the buck chuckled. “I’m looking forward to some of that hidden magic myself. Some of the legends and sayings and history here are so spooky.”
“You two realize that we won’t be doing much exploring, right?” Judy asked. “We do have a purpose here.”

Jack chimed brightly, “…Which we will have taken care of in no time, leaving a little time to experience this place in full. Be positive!”

Skye laughed at that and shook her head. “I expect some interesting stories and a lot of old, interesting places, but you don’t really expect magic in this place, do you?”

“I’ve always wanted to see the real deal.” Jack stated.

“You… You’re serious, you believe that stuff?” Skye asked, taken aback.

“You don’t? Not ever?” Jack asked. Judy looked back and forth between them as they walked ahead of them to the baggage carrousel to get their larger bags.


Jack seemed undaunted. “That sounds kinda boring, only looking for the things you understand and trying to understand everything you don’t. Don’t you ever just look at something at let yourself be in awe? I will certainly point out anything magical and amazing when I see it.”

“If you point at my butt I’m gonna punt you.” Skye said over her shoulder with a grin. Jack put his paw down and Nick and Judy laughed. Maybe it would be better to have them around, even if it made the case a little more complicated. They retrieved their luggage and wandered outside. There were mammals waiting to be picked up by various vehicles, but the one that Judy and Nick needed was already there, waiting. A simple small white van with somewhat over-sized tired that looked like they were made for driving through mud had a little sign in the windshield that simply said “Siri Shamba - ZPD”. It was sunny and very hot outside so Judy and Nick moved toward the vehicle in hopes it would be air-conditioned, but there was a sudden call from Jack.

“Aggie, you decided to get some fresh air?” Judy gritted her teeth, not realizing that Jack might have known or even been friends with that awful lady. Judy wanted to flag the buck down and tell him that they didn’t have time, their ride was waiting, but he was already walking up to her with Skye at his side. The next words out of Jack’s mouth Judy did not expect. “While you are here, might I
recommend drinking a lot of unfiltered water and sampling without hesitation many of the beautiful toxic plants so that you may suffer the vacation you’ve always deserved.”

“That’s the lady that was sitting beside us?” Nick asked.

“This is bad,” Judy stated flatly.

Aggie sneered at the male bunny, looking down at him and predictably ignoring his fox companion. “Nice to see you too, Jack. I hope that you take it easy and enjoy a relaxing full-body trampling by the lawless savages you have been trying to exploit to sell more movie tickets.” Judy gritted her teeth, not sure if it would help matters by making it apparent that Jack was travelling with the ZPD when there was obviously already some bad blood between them.

“Good luck on selling your fearless leader’s ‘Outside Tribal Council’ proposal. I suspect they will welcome you with song and dance in their eagerness to surrender the pristine lands and way of life to Swinton’s unending desire for more of everything. Tah!” The buck then very flamboyantly turned and literally sashayed away, heading for the van. Skye, looking a bit dumbfounded at that, simply followed Jack silently, her tail swaying gleefully at the obviously teasing manner in which her lapine lover was walking away. Aggie sneered darkly and went back to waiting by the curb for her ride.

“Not a friend, I take it?” Nick asked as he buckled in beside Judy and Jack did the same by the vixen.

The striped bunny answered casually, “As you know, it was never my intention to run for office. I did so mostly to suck up Swinton’s spotlight and then redirect it back onto her when she started becoming desperate and pandering to folks who were openly still in Bellwether’s corner. Swinton is too blind to understand her unbalanced and ridiculous policies or notice the overwhelming presence of bigots in her party. So of course her numbers dropped like parking availability before a Gazelle concert. But they blame my interference and cried foul when I made it clear I wasn’t actually running for any public office.” Nick nodded at that in understanding as the van pulled out of the parking lot and began heading down what was a surprisingly rural road. Judy was shocked at the sheer size of the trees out here. The Rainforest District had huge trees but those had only been growing, even with direct and continuous special care, for about sixty years or so. These had likely been here longer than Zootopia itself had existed.

“She took her time to insult Judy, it seems.” Nick stated.

“I should have antagonized her worse then.” Jack stated bluntly.
Judy deflected the topic. “We have more important things to attend to. When we get to Siri Shamba, you two will get everyone checked in at the inn there.” From what Judy understood, the ‘Inn’ was just a four bedroom home that was rented out temporarily to travelers and scientists pretty routinely, not an actual inn by any stretch, but it was still listed as that when Nick asked about accommodations. Judy continued, “Nick and I can head out to take care of our duty there.” She referred to, of course, giving Ukweli’s remains back to his family and village.

Skye murmured softly as the vehicle lurched a bit on uneven roads, “Yeah, I don’t really want to be involved in all that. It’s gotta be one of the worst things you two have to do as officers.”

“Certainly, yes.” Judy answered. “We don’t have to do it much, though. The ZPD has officers who are better trained for this specific task, but we were better for this one.” Judy did not, in fact, feel she and Nick were better for this one. She knew it was more the case that they would cause too much distraction taking back to the streets again and Bogo was enjoying the peace and quiet that he’d been given without them causing media attention on his department. They did this pretty relentlessly.

“You have work in Siri Shamba?” asked the driver, a somewhat portly-looking impala. He had a very slight accent which made him pronounce things more carefully than he needed to.

“Just a bit. A thing that needs taken care of.” Judy answered with a non-answer.

The driver responded, “It is a small place. Very close knit. If you are going to arrest someone, they know you are coming, probably. You will never find who you are there to take. Not ever.”

“It’s not anything like that, it’s alright. This is a service call, not a legal matter.” Judy would be happy to not talk about the case to anyone. This part of it she was not even allowed to investigate or talk about.

Jack volunteered only a little bit more, causing Judy to tense up. “ZPD officers do not handle arrests out here anyway, that’s all ZBI stuff.”

The driver grinned after that, seeming more relaxed and cheerful suddenly. “Ah, I see. Well, the town you go to, it is small, but the mammals there are friendly. They will be happy to meet you. I am pretty sure they have never seen a bunny. The kids will be so excited.” Judy smiled and nodded, holding hope that it would go well despite how unhappy the news they were bringing was. She remembered the fox kits that she encountered during her visit to New Reynard. They had never seen a bunny either and the excitement and curiosity in their eyes was heart-warming to Judy. She was
sad they would not be able to do much outreach and public relations. There was a real opportunity here to let the mammals who lived so far from Zootopia hear what life was like there.

Most of the conversation that followed was about the natural splendor that they all saw. They failed to see a single unnatural structure for over two hours of driving. Jack and Nick seemed the most deeply enthusiastic about it. Skye was equally fascinated that her phone had no signal which she’d never experienced since first getting her phone. It had really dawned on her how out of the way they really were. The driver talked a bit about how long the road they were on had been there, and how it was one of the oldest still-used roads in the entire world.

They eventually arrived at a small gravel parking area which probably only fit about six mid-size cars and two large. It was not what Judy would label a parking lot, really. The driver parked and they got out. Nick paid him and tipped him well, something Judy was fond of about the fox. He was generous when it came to gratitude. The driver was enthusiastic about this and Nick shrugged off the counter-gratitude.

A path lead into the dense forest which looked to be the only way other than the road back in the direction they’d just come. The place they found themselves at that point was likely quite a bit higher elevation as it didn’t seem to be nearly as hot. It was also very shady, which helped, and the cool breeze felt good as they approached the clearly marked dirt path.

Judy turned and smiled at the driver as he got back into the van, saying to him, “So, it’s just a little way up this path to get to the village?” The slightly rotund impala burst into a fit of laughter and quickly pulled out of the parking lot. The bunny looked back at the departing mammal with a bit of confusion then back at her partner. Nick’s ears were folded back in stunned silence. “…then, maybe it’s not such a short distance. Well, good thing we’re back in shape,” the doe sighed.

“I love hiking.” Skye said cheerily, taking Jack’s paw in hers and their bag pulled up with the other over her shoulder before heading up the path. Jack appeared to have no problem letting the fox carry their bags and Skye seemed perfectly happy to do it. Judy looked around at the empty lot, the quiet road, and the lush ancient forest around them. She then smiled and held out her paw to Nick.

The red fox smiled and took it, tail hooking a bit behind Judy’s legs as they began walking together. He said wryly, “It’s not improper if there’s not a witness.” He rolled the suitcase behind him over the dirt path and Judy held the pack that contained Ukweli slung over her opposite shoulder.

One of the most immediate revelations as the group of four began their hike was that it was pretty much entirely uphill. This was not a problem for Nick or Judy, and Skye was honest in her love for hiking, so she was enjoying the lush vegetation and beautiful flowers she saw along the way. Jack, however, was less enthusiastic about the uphill climb. His legs were shorter than Skye’s, and he was not trained for endurance like Judy. He was not a weak bunny. His body was strong enough; he
just wasn’t used to that specific kind of exercise. This resulted in him lagging behind.

While the trees around the airport had been larger than these, this forest was more dense, and seemed much darker around the path. At times it was impossible to tell if it was still even day time, and Judy had to hold closer to Nick and rely on his better night vision. The smell of wildflowers was carried on the wind and that was actually comforting to Judy because it reminded her of the fox she was walking with. The scent of the damp forest floor and the slight acrid scent of rotting wood was there too. The walk was peaceful with the predominant sound being a myriad of unseen birds and the heavy occasional whooshing of wind over the top of the still massive trees.

They reached a little opening on some slightly more level ground which featured a rather crude picnic table with a single attached bench. It was intended for mid-sized mammals and was a welcomed rest stop. Jack hopped up on the table itself, sitting on it and Judy and Skye sat down on the bench. Nick said if he sat down he’d regret getting back up. This caused Judy to worry a bit about his leg, but he didn’t complain beyond that. As it was healing Judy made Nick promise that he would stop and rest if he was overdoing it, so she trusted him to keep that promise and opted not to mother him.

Nick saw a sign that was somewhat obscured by a low-hanging branch so he lifted it to look. The language was not familiar but the symbol was certainly familiar.

Nick looked back at the others and said, “Might want to check around you to be on the safe side.” Judy looked at the symbol and slowly moved to stand away from the table, regarding her bench cautiously. Skye was a lot faster in motion, immediately standing on top of it and looking a bit distressed.

“Jaaaaaaack, what’s that sign say?” the white vixen asked.

“Hatari. Buibui,” he read casually, slowly pulling his legs up onto the table the rest of the way, ears falling back.

The vixen spoke in a slow and measured tone. “Am I… to understand by the picture on the sign… that this means ‘spiders’?’. Not a fan of spiders, gonna be real open about that right now.”

“Spider Danger is pretty much what it says,” Jack clarified needlessly. Nick finished looking under the table and around.
“All clear here,” he stated. “I assume if a sign is needed, we will want to try to avoid anything with more legs than us.” He nodded at that.

“I vote we resume our hike.” Judy said bluntly.

“I was afraid you’d say that.” Jack grunted, hopping down from the table.

“You know about The Interior from all the studying you’ve done, Squeaker, you better tell me about this spider.” Skye demanded, walking closer to him. Judy’s ears perked at that, but it seemed that Nick’s ears managed to perk more.

Her partner’s response was immediate. “Squeaker?”

“Crap.” Skye huffed.

“Thank you so much Skye, I am sure Nick will never remember that,” the buck said, slowly turning to look at his foxy girlfriend with wide blue eyes. She looked back at him meekly.

“I was stressed?” she offered.

“I’m gonna have to change my color to ‘intrigued’ on my ID when I get it renewed,” Nick said mirthfully. “Why Squeaker?”

“Uhh…” Skye drawled out, ears back.

“Judy,” Jack called back to her as she took Nick’s paw again, “If Nick asks where that nickname came from or abuses it in public, you are to drop an embarrassing personal fact about him on the spot each time he does it. This is only fair.”

Judy rolled her eyes. “That won’t work, Jack. To embarrass Nick he’d have to have, somewhere in his smug self, an ounce of shame.”

Nick nodded at Jack with his grin spread stereotypically wide. “That’s right, sorry Squeaker.”
Skye spoke immediately in a pleasant voice. “Nick once attempted to get into modeling like… four years ago.” Judy regarded a sudden look of panic on her partner’s face. “They only called him in for one shoot and it resulted in a billboard directly across the street from our apartments with a pouty Nick face and an advertisement for fast acting laxative.” Judy and Jack both burst into heavy laughter and Nick tilted his head back, grimacing. Skye grinned. “I’ve got more.”

“Oh please.” Judy laughed.

“I concede!” Nick cried, shaking his head. Judy laughed again. Her partner glanced over at Jack and attempted, predictably, to change the subject. “So, Jack, do tell Skye all about buibui. Please.”

“It’s not that important.” Jack said, immediately trying to deflect.


“I mean….” Jack started, looking away, obviously anxious, “I don’t think I could pick one up, but you or Nick I think could definitely lift one.” Skye gave a sinking whine and said absolutely nothing else.

Judy slowed down as well, suddenly more worried about the spiders than she’d initially been. Surely Jack was joking. He had to be joking. Still, no one said anything after that, and Judy was left furtively scanning the undergrowth for something with eight legs too heavy for her to lift. Nick was walking a little slower and Judy was sure his leg was fatigued. The bone was fine but not using it for so long had made it a bit uneven for exercise. Nick didn’t complain, but Judy knew he was hiding it. She found that the others did not mind a slower pace, however.

“Look, there’s the village.” Nick said, pointing up ahead as they crested another hill. Judy looked up and slowed her walking, having to be pulled along behind Nick a little bit. When they were told they would be going to an outer village to bring Ukweli’s remains home, she had pushed out stereotypical thoughts. She did not want to assume that it would be thatched huts and crude cabins arranged in a circle around a large fire pit, but as they topped the hill, there it was. And it was exactly that. There seemed to be more dwellings up the hill from the flatter point, and another path to the left of the largest hut which suggested there was more to the village. It was still the most primitive thing Judy had ever seen.
Skye spoke a bit breathlessly. “Oh wow. This… I am going to remember this for the rest of my life. Thank you so much for bringing me here, Jack.” As they came under a wooden arch with a sign that Judy assumed was the name of the village, she noticed two lycaons sitting on a couple of stumps, facing one another. They were dressed in colorful fabric tunics and darker colored trousers similar to what the lady wolf on the plane had been wearing. They both stood up, eyes filled with concern more than cheer at the sudden visitors.

Jack went with Skye and spoke slowly to the pair. They seemed to relax a little at whatever he was saying, and pointed to one of the larger huts one tier up the hill and well to the left of the village center. It was no more than a five or ten minute walk away. Judy marveled at how small and close-knit the little settlement actually was, and suddenly dreaded why she was here. It was such a peaceful place and they were there to inflict a great harm upon that peace. Jack spoke a bit more, and got much more concerned glances, but another location was pointed out, one in the opposite direction. It was a much smaller hut a bit down the hill to the right of where they stood.

Finally, the two lycaons sat back down, facing one another. They did not seem to want to engage with Jack anymore. The buck stood there by the stumps where they sat and said a few more things, but they didn’t respond. His ears went back, making Judy feel like they were not responding favorably to him at that point. Jack turned and he and Skye walked back to where Nick and Judy had remained.

He said in a hushed tone, “The hut we’re staying is up the hill there. Looks like the nicest place in the village, so they like getting visitors. But, they clammed up when I asked where Ukweli lived. All I got from them was that I would not be needed for translation there. Either his family is not popular, or those two just don’t want anything to do with what’s happened. Understandable for how quiet it looks here.’’

Judy nodded in agreement as Skye took their suitcase from Nick. She was fine even after that hike uphill to carry it. Jack helped by taking the smaller one Skye had been carrying, at least.

The vixen said softly, “I know this part really sucks, Judy. Take care of that, and we will do something more pleasant when you get back, okay? It’ll be fine.’’ The doe nodded again and looked at Nick. He wore a somber expression and tipped his muzzle in the direction of the smaller, suddenly lonely-looking hut. Judy followed him down the hill on the path toward it as Jack and Skye headed for their over-night residence. The two Lycaons closed their eyes, facing one another again and not speaking or looking, shutting out the bearers of bad news entirely. This visit was probably not going to be very social.

After a few minutes of quiet walking Judy stood at the light wooden door of the hut, looking up at it. It certainly looked cozy enough, but the windows were shuttered which made it seem a bit ominous. Nick tapped on the door gently. There was a pause, and then the door opened. Standing in the doorway unexpectedly was a rather large female hyena. She was nearly larger than the already very
big wolf they met on the plane. She was wearing drab colors, grey-woven wool it looked like. It was a simple tunic and something that appeared to be half skirt, half loincloth in design. She looked down at the uniformed officers and her curious expression melted to one of despair. She turned and walked into the hut, leaving the door open. Judy looked curiously at Nick, who shrugged and walked in after her.

“We weren’t invited.” Judy hissed lightly.

“Good afternoon.” Nick said, ignoring that. “I’m Officer Nick Wilde, and this is Officer Judy Hopps, we work for the Zootopia Police Department,” he explained. This was a pretty definitively memorized greeting when they would show up to question someone. Judy’s ears were more sensitive than Nick’s, so she was keyed in better to sudden changes in breathing if a mammal they were talking to was hiding something. Because of this, Nick greeting first had become pretty standard.

The hyena sat down and put her paws between her knees, closing her eyes and keeping her head down.

“Did Interior Affairs contact you yet about our visit?” Nick asked. She shook her head. The fox gave a nervous glance at Judy. Perhaps it was just because the place was so out of the way. Skye didn’t have cell signal, it was likely no one here did.

Judy took a turn to speak. “Are you acquainted with a lycaon by the name of Ukweli?”

She answered in a heavy tone, “I am only one who is being his acquaintance.” Nick perked his ears at that, giving Judy another anxious glance. It did not sound like Ukweli left a very welcoming place.

Judy was not sure how to tell her the next part, so Nick stepped in. “I am very sorry to bring you this news…”

The hyena interrupted, “He is dead. If he were not it would be him here and not you.”

“I’m really sorry.” Judy offered, sympathy rising in her voice. The attachment was likely a lot stronger if this was his only friend.
“How did it happen?” she asked bluntly.

Judy really was not looking forward to that question, but she was glad to get it out of the way. She inhaled deeply and sighed before stating softly, “We are not sure of all the details yet but…”

Nick decided to finish for her as the bunny was struggling with the wording. “It appears he got into a fight with someone in his hotel room. He was killed in the fight. We do not know more than that, as we only found him some time later.”

Her next words were slow, barely above a whisper. “Will you… capture who did this, or is he to be another kitu?” she asked.

“Kitu?” Judy asked.

The hyena sighed. “It is meaning something that one does not miss… a lost thing that does not… matter.” Sorrow was heavy in her voice. Judy instinctively reached out and took one of the larger female’s paws. She looked up, seeming a bit surprised at Judy’s contact.

The bunny spoke softly. “He matters. Our department will do what we can, but the Interior would be the one really heading that investigation. We are not the ones who are searching for his killer.”

The hyena took her paw away suddenly. “If you are not looking, then I assure you, no one is looking. He is kitu. He should never have gone.”

“Do you know why he went?” Nick asked. Judy gritted her teeth. He was not allowed to ask questions about Ukweli.

The hyena responded, “To correct a mistake he made. He was close with an outsider. A wolf. I do not know his name.”

That was something they were allowed to ask about. Judy spoke up, “Was this an older wolf?” she asked.

“Yes, he was old, but he was grey anyway, like wolves can be. I do not know how old. I told
Ukweli to stay away.” Her voice rose in pitch at the end. She was getting upset.

“What’s your name?” Nick asked kindly. Asking a simple and unrelated question was a normal tactic to calming someone down.

“Motti.” She said, beginning to breathe heavier.

Judy explained softly, “Motti, the case of your friend-“

“Brother.” Motti interrupted anxiously. Judy paused. Adoption maybe? A pact? She couldn’t pretend to understand, but she continued.

“…Brother… His case is not ours to look into, but the case of the outsider… That one is something Nick and I can investigate. This wolf… he was also killed, separately at an earlier time. If we can find out what happened to him, we might be able to find justice for Ukweli too.” The hyena regarded the pair skeptically for a moment, still breathing a bit heavily. She was clearly upset by all of this and Judy certainly understood.

“I… I thank you for whatever you can do. But understand… I suspect Justice to be denied for him. It is the way of this place… for us. Maybe it does not make sense in the city you are from… But here, unless you own land or have followers… you are kitu.” Judy ached for how hopeless Motti sounded. She really wished that she and Nick were in charge of the investigation so she really could tell her everything possible was being done to find his killer.

Nick took out the mirror-polished canister and offered it to the hyena, who curiously took it. She turned it over a few times, clearly baffled by it. She looked at Nick expectantly. He explained, “These are your brother’s remains. We brought them so that he may be put to rest in his home. That is the main reason we were sent.” Motti’s eyes widened and she opened the canister, which Judy had not expected. She looked inside, seeing only light grey dust. She looked back to Nick, a pained expression on her face.

“How are you supposed to know this is even him?!” she asked, raising her voice.

“He was not like this when he was found. He was cremated, per instruction of Interior Affairs, after he was found.
“You burned Ukweli… in the city?” Motti asked in a high pitched tone.

“We did not-“ Judy asked.

“Wahalifu! You will not be able to find justice for Ukweli,” Motti growled as she slowly and carefully closed the canister.

“I promise, we will do all we can.” Nick said softly, trying to calm her.

Motti growled darkly, standing slowly and dropping the canister onto the wooden floor with a clunk. “You can do nothing. You will not get the chance… because I am going to kill you.”
Shetani

Chapter Notes

Unfortunately, a family tragedy has prevented me from writing for a while, but things are starting to slowly get back to some semblance of normal. Hopefully I shall resume on at least a weekly update. I will have some weekend opportunities for some binge writing soon as well.

Guardian Blue: Season Two

Episode 11: Shetani

The silence of the tiny mountainside town of Siri Shamba was shattered along with a significant portion of the front wall of the tiny hut Nick and Judy were in. Faster than either fox or bunny could possibly react, the hyena, Motti, exploded with agonized rage. She hurled herself forward at Nick with as much force as her powerful body could muster. The result was light flooding into the dimly lit interior of the hut as a brand new roughly Nick-shaped door was created. The loud thump of the fox and his attacker hitting the ground outside was punctuated by a cry from Judy. She jumped through the new door and outside to find Motti savagely strangling and shaking her partner, tears streaming down her grief-stricken face.

Judy had not been in any way interested in causing an incident, but there was no way out of it at this point. Motti looked like she could and would kill Nick, and that thought threw adrenaline through Judy’s veins like the very opposite of a tranquilizer dart. The hyena could do a lot of damage very quickly in her state and Motti didn’t deserve to face the kind of consequences that would carry. She wasn’t a bad mammal, was just overcome with grief. The bunny moved in sudden leap alongside Motti as the hyena straddled Nick to hold him down. The fox was unsuccessfully attempting to curl into a ball underneath her to protect himself and get his feet under him to push away. Once Judy was beside the kneeling hyena, the bunny planted her little paws in the dirt, digging her fingers in, and then spun around with all her strength and considerable momentum to deliver a satisfyingly loud kick to the back of Motti’s head.

Judy’s kick had the very potent effect of actually flipping Motti forward off of Nick, making her tumble two or three times into the leaves out in front of her hut. The bunny turned to help her
partner, who was coughing and clutching his neck. Judy’s heart sank as she saw blood spattered on the leaves. She needed to find out how much damage had been done. Unfortunately her attention was immediately pulled away from him as her sensitive ears picked up the sound of running paws striking the ground on a panicked approach. She turned in time to see two very angry-looking lycans and another hyena rushing toward her. Knowing that Nick was hurt, possibly badly, Judy could not afford to let this devolve further than it had.

“Stop!” she cried, jumping back and attempting to dodge a set of paws trying to grab her. “She attacked him! I don’t want to fight!” One of the lycans shouted something back in his native tongue, and the bunny suddenly regretted not having Jack nearby. The one who had shouted lunged for Judy and she sidestepped slightly, catching his wrist in both her paws and turning into his lunge. This let his momentum carry his motion and she pitched her shoulder under him before literally launching him into the open ‘door’ of the hut with a loud crash. The hyena, a male with no shirt and obviously wet fur was the next one to reach Judy.

His misfortune was being interested in how far the bunny had just hurled a mammal at least three times her size. This misplaced interest left his attention off the bunny who quickly stepped forward and put her powerful leg behind his. She then put her paw hard into his sternum, folding him backwards hard over her hooked knee. Gravity did most of the work in this case as he grunted hard from the impact with the ground. Judy then turned before side-stepping the attack of the other lycan. This evasion put her on top of the hyena’s wet tummy. He had to have been swimming or bathing when the fight broke out. To put distance between her and the lycan, she jumped hard off of the sprawled out hyena. That made him grunt again and fold forward with pain.

“Go easy!” Nick grunted, sitting up as Judy found herself facing him with the lycan between them. He had blood on his neck. Judy felt the prickle of very unprofessional rage building. She pushed it back, heart racing. This was about protecting him, not avenging him, she couldn’t afford to think like that.

“Tell them that!” Judy said, jumping to the side again. She was agile, small, and hard to catch. With only one opponent on their feet she felt a little safer not to engage the last one. The sound of running filled her with dread however. The rest of the village was likely on their way to kill their invaders given how it must have looked.

The other lycan that had been launched into the hut emerged and immediately jumped on top of Nick, perhaps feeling his friend was now outnumbered. Nick pushed him back, able to deal with a mammal this size easier than the now limp female hyena who had been viciously attacking him before. Still, Judy watched her partner get pinned on his back, struggling again while all she could do is dodge the other splotchy canid.

Mid-struggle, Nick pointed off to the side suddenly and shouted “Buibui!”
His attacker looked that way fearfully, crying out “Wapi?!” Nick took advantage of his suddenly exposed jaw and landed a powerful ZPD-trained blow right on target. His attacker went instantly limp on top of him and the fox rolled him away.

Judy, encouraged by Nick’s personal victory, jumped away from her attacker again in time to see Jack vault right into him, planting both feet into his back and sending the lycaon sliding a considerable distance down the adjacent embankment. Skye was behind him, followed by what Judy really dreaded. It was surely about half the village. She regarded the shirtless hyena who was finally getting up, bristling with anger, clutching his tummy. The conscious lycaon scrambled to get back up the hill. This did not seem to be the kind of thing that was likely to end well. Nick stood up shakily and moved back-to-back with his partner, panting. He was ready to fight, it seemed.

Jack shouted loudly, “Kuacha Mapigano!” Everyone stopped. Jack panted as heavily as Nick, having run the considerable distance from the hut they had likely just gotten their bags put away in. “Kuacha!” he shouted again. Jack then turned back and looked at the approaching mammals approaching behind him. They were much more cautious. No blows were being thrown so no one was in immediate danger. Jack spoke to them a bit slower, still panting as Nick and Judy moved over toward him. They were less likely to get jumped again if they stayed together.

Judy wasn’t sure what Jack was saying but it seemed to calm the other mammals down. Instead of continuing to attack, the hyena and other lycaon tended to Motti and the prone lycaon. Motti was revived first, and she spoke rapidly, sobbing, to the male hyena who had shaken her back to her senses. He looked shocked, then pained and began to cry with her, holding Motti. The lycaon Nick knocked out was eventually awake again but not really back to his senses, flopping about in his friends arms as he tried to get him to sit up.

Judy felt absolutely miserable about all of this. She expected Ukweli’s family to be devastated and maybe angry about things, but she had absolutely not expected that Motti would try to kill them for it. She hoped that Jack would be able to find out at least why that happened. The buck was sitting beside Skye on the grass. Two other mammals, a wolf and another lycaon who had been uninvolved, sat with him. Another older hyena had taken over comforting Motti as the shirtless one finally sat with Jack also, seeming agitated but conversational.

Judy took advantage of this distraction to check on Nick. The wounds which were still lightly bleeding were not too severe, and were definitely caused by Motti’s claws. She checked on them a bit but found that the bleeding had already mostly stopped. She then approached Jack, only to find that the mammals sitting with him all scooted way back. She stopped short, tilting her head curiously.

Judy murmured softly, her tone heavy with regret, “Please explain that we didn’t come here to cause
problems or scare them, we are only here to help.”

The shirtless hyena, now mostly dry, spoke up. “This is known now, as your friend is telling. I am Samaki. I... regret not knowing what was happening, I only see you kick Motti. My duty is to protect the village. I protect.” He stood up, wincing a little. He was likely a little sore from the gut-kick from Judy spring-boarding off of him. “Please do not be angry with Motti, Sungura ya Shetani.” He bowed a bit to prove himself genuine perhaps. Jack tensed up a bit at the phrase Samaki used and looked away uncomfortably.

Judy replied softly, “In her state of mind, I worried that she really would kill the other officer. She has every reason, every right, to be upset with what’s happened, but I couldn’t let her take a life over it. We are only here to bring Ukweli home, and to promise that we will do what we can to give him justice.”

The male hyena grunted. “We do not seek justice for Ukweli. He was foolish to leave and his fate was known the moment he seek help from the outsider. Outsider says he will help, but has questions about secrets we do not speak of. All here knew he would not help”

“That doesn’t sound like Lupin at all.” Jack stated with a bit of irritation in his voice. Nick shook his head at the Buck. This was not a personal slight against his friend, it was the hyena’s point of view. They didn’t trust outsiders despite going through the trouble to accommodate them. Judy suddenly felt like the nice hut for visitors was just to contain them, not to invite them.

Judy helped Nick diffuse Jack’s obvious defense of his friend. “This was the old wolf outsider?” she asked.

“Yes, Shetani,” he stated calmly. Jack winced again. Judy made a mental note to ask about it later.

She ignored it for the moment and asked, “This outsider, he helped with a problem then?” she asked.

“No,” Samaki said softly, “He listen to the secret he asked about, then he leave. Ukweli disappointed the village. He did something very unforgivable. We still loved Ukweli, but he was in much trouble for telling.”

“What secret?” Judy asked.
“Really?” Nick asked, making Judy grit her teeth at her own ridiculousness.

“I will not discuss it. I beg to be forgiven, Shetani, but we do not talk of this thing to outsiders, and Ukweli’s very bad luck, this is what happen.” Judy felt nervous because the discussion of Ukweli and Lupin were so tightly interwoven it was impossible to say whether it would be able to be shown as a separate investigation, even if they solved it. She did not want to cause problems for Bogo down the line with this, and there was a chance word of the fight would still make it back to Zootopia. It had to go in the report.

“What was Lupin supposed to help with?” Nick asked. Judy tightened up, knowing that was sliding into Ukweli’s case more than Lupin’s. Where did the wolf go? Who did he talk to? Those were okay to ask. What Lupin was actually doing with Ukweli could be harder to pursue without making trouble for their boss.

Samaki answered hastily, “We do not need help.”

“Uongo!” cried Motti as she stomped over to the group. Nick visibly flinched and Judy stood closer to him.

The shirtless hyena held up his paws. “Let it go, Motti. You should be resting!”

Motti shouted, “He dies for nothing then?! He is kitu by our own choosing?” The other hyena came back over to try to comfort her and calm her, but Motti pulled away.

“Kuacha! We do not want outsider help!” grunted Samaki as he stood up. Motti turned to Judy, tears in her eyes.

She sobbed, “You say you are here to help, then help this! You find out why Motti and Ukweli’s family is not coming back from the mines!”

“Motti!” came a shout from one of the other villagers.

“Kuacha!” shouted another.
Motti fell to her knees in front of Judy, her face agonized. “You cannot bring Ukweli back, but maybe my family does not have to be all gone. Maybe I am not alone now!” Judy swallowed.

The other hyena shouted at Motti. “Shetani is not helping with that! Outsiders do not help! Leave her alone!”

Motti stood up and spit in Samaki’s face. Judy feared another fight was about to start as the bunny backed up a bit. The female hyena cried out, “Then you are kitu! We all are kitu! Kitu kitu kitu!” She stomped off to her hut nearby and actually used the door, only because she could not slam the open hole.

Samaki sighed heavily, rubbing his temples. He said softly, “Sorry again. It is not… a good day for our village. I ask that you… do not stay long. Let us be as we were before you came.” He then turned and walked away. Most of the other villagers turned to do the same. Judy regarded a couple of very young lycaons who were skulking near the bushes, regarding her. She smiled brightly to them, not wanting them to be afraid.

“Sungura ya Shetani!” one of them squeaked, and both bolted. It was too late. They were fearful of Judy because she’d been fighting with their friends and family. The bunny sighed and looked back to Nick, who just looked tired.

“That went well,” he remarked softly with a shrug. Judy folded her ears back and reached to take his paw.

“Come on, Nick. Let’s try to get you cleaned up. Hopefully this is going to be the worst part of our report.” Judy led Nick back up the hill to the ‘inn’ where they were staying. Jack resumed talking with a couple of the villagers, Skye loyally staying by his side. Nick and Judy went inside their temporary dwelling. It really was just a slightly larger hut than what most were in, but there were two significant differences that delighted Judy the moment she walked inside. First, there was electricity fed from two large solar panels on the thatched roof which were not obvious from the path leading to the village. This allowed for plenty of light inside rather than the dark feel of Motti’s hut. Second, there were fans.

It seemed that while those in the village didn’t seem to care about that particular level of comfort, they wanted guests to feel at home. Judy again supposed this was more to keep their guests inside and not interacting with the village, given their obvious distrust. Nick moved over to a rather heavy, plump-looking couch and dropped down onto it with a chuff.

“It’s like a cross between a couch and a bean-bag chair,” the fox proclaimed joyfully. “Go on
without me, I’m done for.” Judy moved to the small kitchen area, finding a clean cloth. She soaked it with clean water and brought it back to the living room area. She sat down, scooting so that Nick’s head could rest in her lap. Nick winced a bit as the injuries by hard, strong hyena claws were tended to. Judy was careful, but knew they probably stung a bit.

The bunny spoke softly as she stroked Nick’s head. “We can’t help them, you know. With the mine thing Motti was talking about.” Nick took a slow breath and nodded.

“I want to, Fluff…” he said softly. “Can’t we think of some way?” Judy closed her eyes. She knew he would want to help. The pain that Motti presented in her plea was very genuine. Her snarky, cynical fox had, buried within him, such a kind heart.

Judy murmured softly, “Even if we could, we have a limited time here and we would not be doing the thing we were sent to do. Lupin didn’t get involved with this. They already said that. It’s the wrong direction. We can report it to the ZBI, but… we have something else to do.”

Nick asked in a secretive tone, “What if they are the same case? What if Lupin was helping them, and that’s what got him killed?” Judy caressed Nick’s chest and cheek, looking lovingly into his eyes as he just kind of stared up at the ceiling fan.

“Can we afford to make that assumption and not investigate any other possible lead?” the bunny asked.

“Something feels wrong here, Carrots.” Nick said. “Call it a gut feeling, but I feel like time’s running out here, and I don’t even know exactly what that means for them. I don’t like it.”

Judy laid her ears back. “That doesn’t sound much like the astute and confident problem solver that I’m used to.” Nick looked up into her eyes pleadingly, only wincing as she brushed a pinprick from those claws a little harder with the wet cloth. She continued to speak under her breath, “If we go this route Nick, it’s heavily entwined in the lycaon’s business and only lightly involved in the wolf’s case. You know that.” There was a sound at the door and Judy looked up to see Skye and Jack as they walked in together.

Jack sighed heavily. “I got them calmed down, I think. They are mellow enough that we aren’t being told to stay inside the inn, at least. I think they are angrier with Motti at this point. They really don’t like involving outsiders in their problems.
“We are thinking of helping Motti.” Nick said without asking Judy.

Jack continued in a tone that made it seem as if he were resuming Nick’s sentence, “… is what you would say if you wanted to go missing too. But we are investigating my professor friend instead, are we not? I mean, that’s what I’m here for.” Judy sighed a bit at that. They did not need a conflict.

The bunny intervened before Nick could reply. “Nick thinks that the two cases are about the same thing.” She had to admit that it was plausible enough that if there were not a specific instruction to avoid matters involving the lycaon’s case, Judy would have latched onto that lead herself. This was so needlessly complicated because of some stupid bureaucracy from above.

Jack reflected on that a moment and looked over to Skye. She shrugged, not having an opinion to offer on it. The buck looked back to Judy and nodded. “Well, it’s your investigation, of course. I’m just here to help translate and prevent you two from beating up anymore entire villages, Shetani.” Judy’s ears perked at the title that was being used.

“Okay, now… what is it they are calling me?” she asked plaintively.

“You probably don’t want to know.” Nick said.

“He’s right, you know.” Jack added.

“No, tell me.” Judy insisted.

“Sungura ya Shetani.” Jack repeated the whole name. “Roughly translated, Demon Rabbit.” Skye gasped at that, and Judy groaned.

The white vixen pulled one of Jack’s ears, making him wince. “Never call her that! Not even to be funny! That’s awful!” She crossed her arms, looking sternly at her buck. That was what she was afraid it had been about. She did not want that kind of reputation. That wasn’t who she was at all!

He rubbed his ear indignantly and grumbled, “I didn’t make the nickname. They did. And you can bet it’s gonna stick. Judy came out of that fight having dropped two hyenas and didn’t have a scratch on her. It’s partly why I think attempting to help them at this point is a bad idea. It’s clearly superstition. They think she brings misfortune. If we look into the mine thing or whatever and find bad news, you can bet they won’t place all the blame on the mine or anyone else. It’s gonna be
about outsiders. They are not a trusting lot.”

Nick sat up on the couch, his neck more or less cleaned up. His white fluffy fur that had been marred with crimson a bit ago now hid the injuries just fine. He said in a serious tone, “I don’t think anyone’s going to even try to help these mammals if we do nothing, and if we succeed in helping them, or at least giving them a real answer to what happened, I think that we might be able to get some real answers to our actual investigation.”

Jack nodded at that. “That is if they don’t just blame us and throw us off the side of the mountain or something, Nick. You should be the least eager to piss them off of any of us. You’ve already enjoyed their response to bad news.”

“She didn’t really want to hurt me.” Nick said. “It would have been a lot worse if she did. She was just overcome with grief. I wish I knew what triggered it. If there was a cultural issue to our bringing back ashes like this, you’d think the department would have warned us.”

Jack shrugged. “They do funeral pyres here, so cremation isn’t an insult or anything. It might have been something personal to Motti. No one else seemed to freak out when I explained what you were doing there… what you brought.”

There was a bit of quiet as Judy inspected Nick’s neck once more to make sure that everything looked clean. The punctures from Motti’s claws were not deep. It was Skye, eventually, who broke the silence. “We should help them. Motti’s right. There’s nothing we can really do to help Ukweli or Lupin. But other lives might be in danger if what she said is true, and we should try to help. If it’s wrong, I’d rather be wrong for the right reason.”

Jack sighed resolutely. “I love you for saying that, Skye, but we need to think about this realistically. These folks who are missing in the mines, they’ve been missing for what… weeks? If they were trapped down there by a cave-in or something, they aren’t likely to be alive now. We don’t have much chance to bring pleasant news back to these people and they will only see that we got involved, which they didn’t want. There’s so little chance for anything positive to come of this that I just do not see the benefit of the time and the risk we would have to take.” His explanation was carefully thought out to the point that Judy was a little surprised to hear it from him. He was right about how unlikely it was to result in something positive.

After a moment of silence, Nick spoke, his voice soft and tired. “She brought a bag.”

“What?” Jack asked.
“Judy.” Nick clarified. “She brought a bag for me and risked her life digging down to hell without a shred of hope in her heart that it would fix a damned thing.” The doe’s heart pitched into her throat as the significance slammed into place like a perfect pachyderm puzzle piece.

Skye put her paws over her muzzle at the mention of it, murmuring, “Oh shit…”

Nick looked down and continued talking. “She brought a bag with her because she didn’t expect good news. She really didn’t. But that didn’t matter to her.” Judy’s partner looked at Jack. “So go on. Go over to Motti’s hut. You look at her… and tell her that finding out what happened to her family isn’t worth it to us. But I want you to pretend you are saying it to Judy the whole time you say it. I’ll wait here.”

“Nick.” Judy felt like he was being a little hard on Jack, but she couldn’t deny now that she saw the symmetry. Of course Nick would not feel right about just leaving this.

“No, he’s right.” Jack stated flatly. “I… I feel like a heel for not thinking like that. After everything that happened, I couldn’t even see it. It still all feels unreal to me, I’m sorry.” He looked away.

Skye hugged him and he sighed. “We know it won’t go great, but I bet we can find out the details from Motti. She was heading toward the spring up near the top of the mountain to get cleaned up. She was really upset, so we should probably wait till she gets back.” Judy nodded at that. Wait till the violent hyena with sharp battle-proven claws had cooled off, that seemed sensible.

“Actually, I think we should try to meet her there.” Nick stated. Judy sighed. Of course. That would be the better idea. What was she thinking?

“Why?” Skye asked blankly, making it so Judy didn’t have to ask the obvious.

“I don’t want her getting in trouble for our interference. Not any more than she’s already in, anyway. The villagers do not want her talking to us. It’s better if we try to talk to her alone.” Judy nodded at that as well. She hadn’t considered trying to reduce the blame for Motti if this didn’t go well.

“Should we try to talk with Pembe?” Judy asked, suddenly remembering the rhino they had met at the airport. He was associated with the mines. She didn’t know if they were the same mines, but he might be a good place to start if all they were trying to get was answers.
“I don’t know…” Nick said in a softer tone. “I don’t know that I trust him. I actually almost never trust anyone who obviously is disproportionately wealthy.”

“Thanks for that.” Jack stated.

The white vixen literally scooped up the striped buck embarrassingly. “He didn’t mean you! You shovel it out and help people, Squeaker.” Skye stated adoringly.

“Don’t you dare, Nick.” Judy immediately snapped, shooting a glare at her suddenly excited partner. He looked mock-crestfallen and headed for the door.

“Okay. Guess I’ll just go talk to the murderous hyena lady then,” he said with a heavy, jokingly-depressed tone.

Skye waved pleasantly, “We will have a snack and a drink and wait for you to get back. The less time I am out there where there are buibui the better. The bed’s also stupidly fluffy.” Still holding Jack in her arms, she turned and just headed right upstairs with him Judy felt if she were in a similar position with Nick she might look indignant, but Jack seemed happy instead. Maybe Skye picked him up a lot.

Judy looked at their bags which were still by the door and looked back to Nick. “If we are hiking up the mountain, should we wear something cooler?” she asked.

“You just want to see me take off my uniform.” Nick grinned.

“You mean your shamefully blood-soaked uniform, courtesy of your public beat-down?” Judy growled.

“Huh.” Nick huffed. “Good point. Yeah, changing is good.” The two quickly changed outfits, Nick putting on a casual light button-up with a leaf pattern that made it count as one of his more reserved Pawaiian shirts. He put on tan shorts as well while Judy tossed on a pair of similar khaki shorts. This was much more comfortable now that their more official duties here were complete. While dressing, Judy turned with her back to Nick, suddenly remembering that she brought something that she had not told Nick she was wearing. The pendant around her neck, a heavy rectangular silver plate, was hastily tucked down into the grey-toned undergarment she wore under her shirt which prevented chafing of her custom body armor. She didn’t care to explain the raw sentiment of carrying that around at the moment. She hastily finished dressing, throwing on a light
but form fitting white cotton shirt.

As they went outside, Judy found that absolutely no one was walking around in the village. It was quiet, and everyone was apparently inside. At least if anyone was watching them it was from inside a hut. They headed up the path which led higher from alongside the inn.

“Nick…” Judy stated softly, falling into step close beside her partner.

“Yeah, Fluff?” he asked in a cheerful tone.

“Thank you for helping Jack to see what this meant to you. I didn’t think about it like that either though. If you hadn’t convinced me, I might not have tried to help Motti either. I know you tease me a little about my habit of bringing mammals back when everyone else thinks they are gone, but we have no reason to think that will just keep happening, Nick.”

Nick slipped his paw around Judy’s, holding it as they began hiking up the wooded trail. “It’s alright Carrots. I know this is a different situation but… I think about it sometimes. But I think more about how it was for you, not me. I was miserable, sick, hungry and hurt, sure… but you know… I checked up on what you went through too, right?” Judy gripped Nick’s paw a little tighter. Did he really need to talk about that?

“I told you what I went through, Nick, you didn’t have to check. It’s not like I hid how glad I was to have you back. How much it hurt not having you.” Judy wanted the conversation to go away. She preferred not thinking about those weeks at all if she could help it.

“You didn’t tell me everything. I didn’t expect you would,” Nick stated slowly as he plodded along up an increasingly steep hill. The pace at which he was moving made it hard for the bunny to tell if her partner was trying to draw out the walk so they could talk, or if his leg was hurting him. He seemed pained, but it could just be the subject matter.

“What did I not tell you? I am sorry if you think I was hiding things.” Judy said with a hint of hurt in her voice.

“No… nothing like that, Fluff. Just things I know you didn’t like to think about. I certainly don’t hold it against you.” He softly panted. It was feeling warmer with the physical exertion.
“‘Like what?’ Judy asked casually. She figured at this point he needed to talk about it, and the situation with Motti had it on his mind.

“You forgot to tell me what you did after I fell.” Nick stated.

“What?” Judy replied quizically. “No, I told you about that. I got the cub back to her mom and had her call for the Fire Department and additional backup to help look for you.”

“You told me that, but what did you do when you woke up in the hospital?” he asked.

Judy blinked at that, still clueless about what he was trying to get her to talk about. “Bogo was there. He told me that you … Nick do we really have to talk about this stuff? Is there something I did wrong?” Judy was beginning to fret about his mysterious reason for even bringing it up.

“Why did you wake up at the hospital, Fluff?” Nick asked. Judy then tripped a little as she realized there had been something she didn’t tell Nick.

“Oh. Uh… Well…” She looked up at him. He looked back at her with concern. “Nick, don’t be mad at him. He had to. You know how I am when I am really determined. I would have actually fought them.”

“Carrots, Wolfard had to tranq you twice.” Nick said with a tone of exasperation in his voice, giving her paw a squeeze.

Judy gestured a bit in irritation. “Okay, not my proudest, most ‘in control’ moment, I admit.” Judy explained. “But I was really upset, okay? Remember, I told you I had just figured out that I had really serious feelings for you. It was a nightmare come true! My whole world was burning around me!”

Nick shook his head, stopping and kneeling, facing Judy. “Stop the wiggly-nose, I’m not upset about it, Love.” Judy self-consciously cupped her nose, having not been aware it was on the wiggle. Her attention was wholly fixed on her partner and boyfriend, however. He didn’t call her ‘Love’ often, so it was very potent when he did. The fox continued. “I saw video of you after it happened, where you were dodging the media when they wanted to talk to you about it. I saw something I’d never seen in you in the whole time I’ve known you. Hopelessness.” Judy tightened her paw in Nick’s again. “I saw it in Motti’s eyes too. It’s happening to her too. Her world is burning around her and she’s hopeless. She feels alone. Maybe there’s not any hope for her lost
family, for Ukweli or for everyone in the village… But I will not let her have no hope that someone out there cares about it. If we can’t give her family back, we can give her the peace of mind that they at least mattered.”

Judy felt the sting of tears welling in her eyes and she just tilted her head, leaning in and kissing her fox. He gratefully returned the kiss, and then pulled her closer, a tighter embrace against his chest before pushing his muzzle down alongside her cheek. She tilted her head away, knowing what was coming and gladly welcoming it. His muzzle cupped where her shoulder and neck met and he gave a slow and savory bite, not too tight, but a delicate push of his teeth upon her flesh. This contact elicited the soft groan of pleasure that Judy knew he was so keen on hearing.

Jack was right. It would be dangerous. It might end in more heartache. It might not even be the right thing to do, but she followed her heart before and it put her beloved back in her arms. She’d follow it again, and hope that for someone, some good might still come of this tragedy to which she and her beloved fox were now bound.
Judy managed to shake herself from the desire to just spend the rest of her time in the forest, holding, kissing, and cuddling her fox. However, they did have something to do. They reluctantly continued up the path through the very dense forest to where the hyena was supposed to have gone so she could wash up after her fight with the visiting ZPD officers. They took their time, and Judy was pretty sure it was because Nick was slightly more injured than he wanted to admit. His back was sore after being used as a wrecking ball. He didn’t complain; they merely took longer to get there.

The sound of birds that could not even be seen was a constant reminder of how pristine this place was. The rush of wind over trees occasionally unsettled them, and shadows could be seen flitting through the treetops. The sheer size of these behemoth trees made Judy feel smaller than she already was, but she was getting a little more used to it.

After about fifteen minutes of walking, they came to a slight clearing. It was still shady, with a dense canopy overhead, but enough light filtered through the slightly less dense treetops to allow them to see a picturesque, crystal clear lake. It was not terribly large; maybe the size of the Munch field in Bunnyburrow that Judy and Nick had played on. They did not see Motti anywhere near it. Nick padded to the edge and sank to his paws and knees and put his muzzle into the water.

“Nick, I’m pretty sure they bathe in that,” Judy informed.

The thirsty fox lifted his head after gulping down a bit more, “Look how clear it is, Judy. It’s pure, natural, unpolluted mountain water. It’s fed from a stream coming from that cliff. See? The water I get in our apartment’s not as clean as this, even with hyenas splashing around in it, I assure you.” His head went back down and Judy continued to look around. It was odd not to see anyone near this place. As beautiful as the scenery was and as cooling as the water must be, she expected it should be crowded. Judy looked at her partner. He was still face down in the lake.
“Did you drown?” the bunny asked.

“Mpaahh! Oh Judy you have to try this.” he huffed. “It tastes great. And it’s so cold!”

“I will remind you that Jack wanted Aggie to drink the unfiltered water from The Interior. I suspect this was not for her health.” Judy crossed her arms. “You just got over a mess inside you from drinking bad water, remember? They had to give you antibiotics at the hospital from drinking ‘natural’ water.”

“That was really bad water. This is really good water. I’d not be much of a mammal at all if this was gonna be what gets me.” He stood up, wiping his muzzle on his forearm. “Suit yourself, Fluff! Leave all the neat experiences to your partner.” Nick wiped off his paws and his knees, and then he looked around. “Maybe she took a different path down? Or she didn’t actually go? We can check back by her hut.” Judy nodded to that, considering having a drink of the water because Nick was so excited by it. She ultimately decided that if there was something wrong with it, she would prefer that at least she remain healthy enough to get help if it was needed. She turned and headed back down the path.

There was a soft thump ahead of her and she looked ahead, having been peering up at trees for a moment when she heard the sound. She thought that perhaps Motti was up ahead, but instead her heart froze at what she did see. It was a spider. The arachnid was very furry with bright blue legs and body with a lemon yellow abdomen. It would have been strikingly beautiful if it were not also about the size of Nick if he were curled into a tight ball. The thing was ready to jump by the looks of it.

“Nick…” Judy said as she stood utterly still.

“I’m seeing it. Don’t move. Maybe it hunts things that run.”

“I can’t move, Nick. I’m not moving.” Judy felt a deep and primal fear unlike anything she’d ever felt around a predator. There were warning signs about these spiders on the path. She wished she had asked more questions when Jack was clarifying the size. He had not been exaggerating. It remained right in the middle of the trail for a moment, its many shiny black eyes appearing to be locked right on the two mammals.

“It’s not wandering off.” Nick noted. “I’m going to try to lead it toward the lake. Maybe I can trick the thing into jumping into the water or something, and we can get away from here.” He backed away slowly, and it sidestepped a little, changing its intended target. Her fox seemed to be right. The hairy arthropod was attracted to moving prey more than one holding still. He continued to back
away. The spider began twitching in his direction. It would have been interesting to learn about it from observation if it were not for the fact that Judy was pretty sure it was hunting her partner. She got over her initial alarm, and moved very slowly toward the edge of the path to get out of the way and give it room to go past her.

That turned out to be a mistake. It flipped to the side and zeroed in on her.

“No!” Judy whined. “Over there! Not me!” She held as still as she could. The spider suddenly trundled rapidly in her direction. Nick bolted to his lapine lover’s side and put himself almost between the bunny and spider right as it jumped hard enough to make a little puff of dust and leaf-litter behind it. Nick intercepted, grabbing it by several of its back legs with one hand and turning his body to hurl it over toward the water with a grunt. He was obviously still sore from his hyena adventure. With his strength reduced, it did not make it into the water. The arachnid tumbled a few times and stopped before turning and scurrying rapidly back toward the pair. Nick was shaking his hand rapidly, wincing.

“Good gravy! Ngah! It stung me or something with the hairs on its legs!” he hissed. Judy began backing down the trail, not wanting to just turn her back on the spider. There were a few thumps behind her that froze her heart. The bunny immediately dreaded the thought of several more spiders showing up. Were these things pack-hunters? Did spiders do that? She turned and saw Motti race by. She was holding a crude club with a gnarled and spiked root-ball intact. It might have been a broken tree simply ripped out of the ground.

The hyena circled to the side as the spider turned to face her. She snarled at it and looked very much the part of a stone-aged mammal. Her dark, woven skirt was short and tattered while her top was made of a band of cloth that was wrapped around her chest a few times and tucked. It was obviously made to help her to dry herself more than to look elegant.

“Motti been looking for you, Buibui!” she laughed. “Village is forgiving me for sure when I done with you!”

“Are these everywhere?” Judy asked frantically. She heard a chuff as saw Nick go to his knees in the leaves. He was clutching his wrist.

“Did he touch buibui?” Motti asked loudly. “No touching! All of it is poison!”

“Yeah, I grabbed it!” Nick shouted. “It burns! Oh cripes it burns!” He shook his hand frantically again. Judy looked back to Motti in time to see her dodge the spider as it jumped, taking a swing at it. It looked like she might have tagged one to he legs since it rested weird behind it, but the limb
might also have been damaged when Nick gripped it.

“You going to regret that you did this thing!” Motti shouted.

“I’m regretting it!” Nick yelled.

“How bad is it?!” Judy cried, more deeply worried for her partner.

“Not dangerous, is only painful. We get him-” she was interrupted by having to dodge again. Judy wondered if all spiders of this size were so aggressive. Motti jumped at the arthropod and swung her club. It slammed down but missed the spider by inches, putting a deep divot in the ground by the lake. The hyena lady was obviously very strong. The club looked like it weighed about as much as Judy did. “Grah! *Kuwa ilipigwa*!” She looked back to Judy, “We get him back to village… We have medicine what makes it stop hurting.”

“Yes! Oh my God yes, that!” Nick shouted. Judy jerked her attention to her partner and saw he was clutching his arm as if trying to decide whether or not to just gnaw off his paw at the wrist.

“Do not lick!” Motti panted.

“Not a chance!” Nick barked.

“We have to get rid of the spider first, Nick! I’m sorry!” Judy leapt up. She understood now why Motti was doing this. Having this thing so close to the settlement was dangerous. Her killing it would help her standing in the village, and make the little community safer. Also, with Nick in pain nearby, Judy was not feeling particularly sorry for it.

“Stay back!” shouted the hyena. “Motti survives a bite, cute little bunny does not!”

Judy grimaced at that. She made it to the side of the little lake and used all her strength to pull a huge rock out of the water’s edge. “I’m… not a cute… little… bunny. I’m… *Sungura ya Shetani*!” She hurled the rock at the attacking arachnid. The heavy stone landed beside the spider, and Judy worried that she made herself look foolish because she missed, only to find that a few of the creature’s legs had been pinned.
“Bahati!” cried Motti, who then jumped an impressive distance to clear the range between her and the spider before it could wrench itself free. She brought the club down with a rather horrifying crunch in the middle of the beast and the deed was absolutely done. The legs twitched a bit, but what remained in the middle of them didn’t resemble a spider much anymore. The hyena jumped away from it, quickly rinsing her legs and hands off at the lake before bolting back toward Judy.

“Shetani! Jasiri sana!” She patted Judy on the back. “Impressive! Motti is helping your fox, now! We go quickly.”

“Club! Club!” Nick cried. “Club me next! Oh please oh please oh please!” He curled up around his hand. “Why does anything have to hurt this bad?!"

“Calm down Nick! We’ll get it taken care of!” Judy said. The fox grunted as he was casually slung over Motti’s shoulder. He seemed so very light to her.

“Why didn’t Jack warn me not to touch them?! He’s out of the will! No used Pawpsicle stand for him!” Nick groaned. Judy followed rapidly behind Motti, a little surprised to find that she had no trouble actually running with Nick over her shoulder. He tried to hold on.

“No touching Motti with paw!” the hyena warned.

“I wouldn’t dream of it, this paw’s spoken for!” Nick barked as he held it away from Motti.

“Where’s the medicine?” Judy asked as she ran ahead, ears burning a little at knowing who that paw was reserved for, despite the panic of the moment.

Motti called up to the running bunny. “In the inn! We use it as a hospital when is empty!”

“Why is it always me?!” Nick whined unevenly as the act of being carried by a running hyena was not gentle. His tone was not making for a formidable fox right that moment. “I gotta get flushed down toilets, nearly drown in a lake, fall through the jungle canopy, jump from a crashing, exploding train, get head-butted into a pit, shot in the neck, and get sent to Hell! Can’t I just turn my ankle or get a paper cut?!”

“Shush, you! I got hit by a bus!” Judy called.
“What?! Sent to Hell?” Motti shouted, ignoring Judy’s bus incident for obvious reasons. The bunny rolled her eyes. She would explain all that later, maybe. The trio continued to race down the hill back toward the inn. At least it wasn’t an uphill climb to get him back to the village. Something important suddenly occurred to the bunny.

“Hey, is there any way we can downplay Nick being hurt by *buibui*?” Judy panted from ahead. “If Skye finds out…”

Nick gasped at that. “Oh yeah, we can’t tell Skye, we’d be headed back to the airport immediately!” he grunted.

“Being quiet is up to you!” Motti huffed as they cleared the forest. There was still no one outside. It was just as well, they certainly did not make it a secret that they were in Motti’s company at that point. They quickly made their way to the inn. Nick whined softly, trying to keep quiet as Motti dumped him unceremoniously on the couch with a chuff. He winced, his back sore from his fight earlier, but he then looked at his hand. It was obviously puffy and swollen.

“Is it supposed to be like that?” he whispered, grimacing in pain. “It’s like a damned balloon animal.”

“Mostly, yes.” Motti answered in an unconvincing whisper. She then quickly unwrapped her top and grabbed Nick’s arm, wrapping it tightly from the elbow to nearly her wrist. Because of how long Judy had spent hanging out with Nick in the naturalist’s club this didn’t really faze them. Motti certainly didn’t seem to care about modesty. The hyena headed for a room in the back that Judy supposed must have the medicine. The bunny stroked Nick’s ears encouragingly, comfortingly.

“Smother me with a pillow, I’m ready.” Nick whispered.

“Shush!” Judy shook his muzzle a little with her hand playfully, knowing he was just being dramatic. Motti came back with a white stone jar and a latex glove.

“Good news. We have plenty,” she stated. That made it seem like they might have been out and Nick would have been suffering a while. She was glad Motti had not made that more apparent before.

“What can I do to help?” Judy asked.
“Shetani helps keep Janga still. It feels worse first, then better.” She whispered. Judy pondered the nickname used for her partner and tried to commit it to memory to ask Jack about it later. Nick’s eyes widened as the hyena poured the contents of the jar into the glove. The thought of having to be held still made it obvious that this was not going to feel good. He squirmed suddenly as Judy nodded and moved over to sit right down on Nick’s chest. She put a leg on either side of his ribs, her back facing him to put her in a good position to hold his arm. He put his good paw on her back and whined.

“It already feels like it’s on fire…” he growled. Judy could actually feel his poor heart racing where she was sitting on his chest. He was in such distress. She would have to really dote on him later to make up for this. He got hurt saving her from a spider bite that Motti admitted would have been fatal to her.

“It’s gonna be okay.” Judy whispered.

“Eventually.” Motti murmured and just climbed up on the couch as well, sitting over his middle to help hold him down. Judy’s heart sank. Was it really going to hurt that bad? Nick grunted a little as the hyena grabbed his wrapped up arm. Judy realized suddenly that the wrapping was there to keep Motti from getting any of the poison on her own hand while working to neutralize it on Nick’s paw. It looked like she had actually done this before. The fox groaned loudly as the medicine-filled latex glove was pulled with awkward difficulty over his paw. He then struggled, arching, grunting, growling, whining… Judy was sure that Jack and Skye would be able to hear this racket and dreaded having to tell the poor arachnophobic vixen what happened.

“Nnnnh! Gah!” Nick cried, “Please, it’s like a freaking oven!” he barked loudly.

Judy snapped at him, “Quiet! Hold still, it’s already nearly too tight, it needs to go all the way in!” Judy scolded the fox as he pulled and struggled, managing to get his head over the arm over the couch, but being held mostly in place by the larger hyena.

“Hahhh! It’s so hot!” Nick whined. “Faster, oh please work faster!” he panted loudly. Motti pushed back down on him to shake him a little to get him to hold still, which he did. He groaned as the glove finally went on completely over his paw. Nick was shaking a bit, muscles taught as he struggled against the pain. There was obviously a reaction with the toxin on his skin that made it burn worse. He was being good about not crying or yelling with how bad it obviously hurt. Mostly he grunted, huffed and groaned. He was trying to be quiet at least, but it was not terribly effective restraint. The vulpine tensed up again and Judy and Motti both held him down tightly.

Suddenly, a voice was heard along with quick stepping down the stairs of the ‘inn’. It was Skye.
“Oh my God, you two! This isn’t a honeymoon, and this place hasn’t got actual windows; everyone can hear you! Oh shit.” Judy looked up, seeing Skye standing stark still at the bottom of the stairs that led to the room where she and Jack were staying. Her bright blue eyes were so wide. “I… I was just… I… Hoh…” Skye’s ears folded back tightly in shock. Judy looked blankly at the vixen, and then widened her own violet eyes, realizing suddenly what the vixen’s point of view showed her.

The white fox could only see the back of the couch and Nick’s head draped over the arm of it. Judy was sitting on her lover’s chest and Motti was straddling his hips. With only the hyena’s top-half visible from Skye’s point of view, Motti likely appeared to be naked with a panting, squirming fox pinned under her. There could not possibly have been a more suggestive and compromising position Skye could encounter.

“Uh…” Judy tried to figure out the best way to make this not what it looked like, but also not about spiders.

“Nngaaaahhh!” Nick groaned in a suddenly deep, satisfied tone, oblivious of the vixen’s presence. His eyes rolled back and tongue lolled out as he sank into the couch, relaxing. “Oh yes, there we go!” The medicine apparently was working and Nick gave a long, rushing and grateful sigh. Motti looked back down and smiled at Nick, apparently unaware of what any of this must have looked like to the stunned vixen.

“There! Is so much better now, yes? Like Motti promise. It stays swollen still longer, but we keep it in here and you are resting a bit. You forgive for earlier and now we are friends!” Nick closed his eyes, panting breaths heaving as the pain subsided. He did as requested, panting heavily. Skye cupped her muzzle. The bunny shook her head emphatically.

“Oh it’s not… It’s really…” Judy stammered.

“Thank you so much…” Nick puffed. “Never gonna forget…”

Skye backed up, falling onto her rump on the stairs before turning and scrambling back up them. She said in an apologetic manner, “Sorry, gonna just… check on stuff. Upstairs! With the things!” Nick looked up at that, having only then realized someone was downstairs.

“Oh that’s not good. Skye came down.” Judy said.
“Did I say spider? I hope I didn’t say spider.” Nick said curiously, eyes wide with concern. Skye had just bolted up the stairs after all. She certainly seemed alarmed.

Judy pinched the bridge of her muzzle. “Uh, no, I don’t think she got the impression of what was really going on Nick.” The red fox, panting as comfort returned to his blazing paw, looked up at the half-bare and confused-looking Motti.

Nick widened his eyes and put his ears back, murmuring, “Oh. Uh… Yea, that maybe looked… Kinda…”

A shout, Jack’s voice, was heard from upstairs.

“They’re what?!”

“Why does this keep happening to us?” Judy sighed, covering her face.

“Janga is really been to Hell?” Motti asked obliviously. Judy slumped back a little. Somehow it seemed like the most appropriate question that could have been asked.

“I feel like I maybe preferred thinking the other thing happened.” Skye said uncomfortably. Judy and Nick came clean with Skye about the spider. They had to, given what she understood to have been happening when she came down. Her ears were pinned way back and Jack held his entire face, trying unsuccessfully to stifle the strained high-pitched giggling. It was terribly uncharacteristic for all of his very masculine characters he’d played over the years.

Judy had called Jack and Skye down and they reluctantly arrived to find everyone sitting normally as Nick nursed his injury. As predicted, Skye nearly bolted upstairs to pack her bags with the mention of why Nick’s paw was twice its normal size. It was getting better though. Motti helpfully assured the vixen that these spiders were uncommon in most of the Interior and the village of Siri Shamba only started having problems with the one she’d just killed a few months before.
It then took a while to explain to Motti that the scene Skye walked in on had appeared intimate at a glance because of the circumstance. It was uncomfortable for Judy to try to explain that, but the hyena did not seem to be embarrassed. She also remained topless which was making the scene a little more awkward for the vixen, but Jack didn’t seem to care. The garment she used to bind Nick’s arm was likely contaminated by the poison. She would not be putting that right back on. Jack was actually highly entertained by the entire situation, despite being scolded about laughing by Skye. He found the misunderstanding to be, in his own words, ‘sitcom gold’.

Motti looked back and forth between the two couples as she reflected on what the misunderstanding had been about. She asked seriously, “So, is confusing though… This is a thing Skye thought could actually be happening? Is it a thing she sees before with her friends?”

Judy put her ears back, hiding the rose tint inside them. “Oh no, certainly not!”

Motti nodded. “Lady fox has the very interesting imagination then.”

Skye looked suddenly indignant. “Now hey, I’m not just running around thinking weird things! At first I thought, with how it sounded and what was being said, it was only Nick and Judy together! I didn’t expect… the rest.”

Judy’s eyes shot open. The vixen over-shared.

Motti was quick on the uptake. “Then it is expected for Shetani and Janga to be found this way?” Jack went wide-eyed and burst out laughing for some reason and actually got up and went to the back. Judy looked after him and then sighed, seeing Skye cover her muzzle, likely realizing that she was not supposed to really say that.

“We do not discuss this secret.” Judy offered. Nick looked surprised that his bunny said it like that. If the village could have their secrets, so could Nick and Judy. This should not interfere with what they were doing. Not if this hyena wanted their help. The grey doe looked up at a very surprised-looking hyena.

“Why were you at the lake, Shetani?” Motti asked, willing to absolutely drop the subject the moment it was deemed a secret.

“We were looking for you, actually.” Nick said, apparently grateful that they could move on from
that rather cringe-worthy moment.

“Motti was at the lake, but she was finished with her task. She heard Shetani and came back.” She nodded at that.

“Getting washed up in the lake, you mean?” asked Judy, wanting to drive that point home to Nick again.

“Yes, that first. Then is… giving Ukweli to the lake also. It was his favorite place in the entire world. It is where we become a family. Ukweli belong there.”

“What.” Nick blurted in the ultimate deadpan.

Judy gritted her teeth. She didn’t want him to pay quite that big a price for not listening to her, but there it was. Jack returned finally, having regained his composure. He flopped on the couch beside his own fox.

“Why did you look for me, though?” Motti asked.

Judy took a breath, deciding that Nick’s brain would be occupied a moment and so she started talking. “Motti, what can you tell us about the mine, and what you think may have happened to your family?” The hyena perked up immediately.

“You… You will help us? You will help my family?” she asked breathlessly.

“We can only try.” Judy stated calmly. Skye nodded as well, making it more apparent that it was a group decision.

Motti spoke quietly, looking down. “I can take you to the mines. I have been forbidden, but the village is kitu. I have no reason to obey.”

“Don’t be upset with your village,” Judy requested, sitting up a little. “They are afraid. They see nothing to gain and too much to lose. I do not want you to endanger yourself. A map or directions would be enough. Is the mine close to here?” Judy asked.
“We take a boat on the river and it is close, very fast.” Motti explained. “The boat is there, no one is allowed to take it. The mine is off limits.” The hyena wanted to make it clear that they were not supposed to do what they were going to do.

“So…” Nick interrupted, “… When you put Ukweli into the lake, did you just… put his urn into the water… or, did you like… pour him out into it?” Motti looked up, roundish hyena ears flicking in uncertainty. Judy sighed at her partner’s quiet distress. Poor Nick.

“I pour him, and make him one with pretty waters there. Why do you ask this thing?” Motti stared at Nick curiously.

“No reason.” Nick said, suddenly looking pretty glum. Skye covered her muzzle again, perhaps actually piecing together a valid reason for Nicks’ question and sullen mood.

Motti looked back to Judy. “It is what he would want. He would not want to be in scary fire all alone. It is why I was so mad.”

Judy looked up with interest. She actually wanted to know more about what had happened, so she murmured, “I had wondered about that, actually. I understood that the pyre was not uncommon as a ritual out here. We certainly did not expect that you would become so upset.”

Motti sighed and shook her head. “I’m… so sorry about that. It was not right. I should not have, but… You could not have known. It was personal. Ukweli’s family… They died in a fire, his hut burned. Ukweli would have died too if Mr. Pembe hadn’t been there.”

“You know Mr. Pembe?” asked Nick suddenly. “The rhino?” he clarified.

“Yes, you know of Mr. Pembe too?” the still-shirtless hyena asked.

“We’ve met him, yes.” Judy said with a nod.

“Does Mr. Pembe run the mine where your family works?” Nick asked. Judy was aware that her partner did not trust him, and he was obviously trying to see if there was a link.
Motti answered, “He did long ago, when Ukweli’s family was alive. But he was very sad when they died. He wasn’t able to save them, only Ukweli. He sold the mine soon after to village elders. It was not good for fortune, he only own it to be friends with this village.”

“How did Pembe save Ukweli?” Nick asked.

The spotty female leaned forward on the couch, seeming to hate thinking about it. “The hut had collapsed. Mr. Pembe used his horn to pull the burning wood upward, off of everyone. Ukweli’s mother and father, they shield him with their bodies and died, but Ukweli didn’t die. Mr. Pembe’s horn was damaged by the fire and never got better. He covers the marks with a metal thing. My family took Ukweli in. He was like a brother after.” Judy reflected on that a bit. If it was true that Pembe had injured himself, disfigured his horn, saving the lycaon, it was extremely unlikely that he was responsible for his death.

“When are your parents the only ones who haven’t come back, or are others missing?” Nick asked. Judy was glad that he seemed to have gotten over accidentally drinking the hyena’s adopted brother. He had at least recovered enough to continue the interview professionally.

“My parents and my other brother are all missing. Only them. They were the only ones still working the mine. We do not go there as much in the rainy season. Much of it is flooded and not accessible. But what we do have access to is safe enough.”

“What do they mine for there?” asked Skye.

“Probably gold.” Jack said, finally speaking up again.

“Gold?” the vixen asked, suddenly a lot more interested.

“There is almost none left there. It is… not our village’s treasure anymore. We have not seen gold there in a long time, but the mine is so old… It has many secrets, so we continue to tend it. We do not so much now mine it. We care for it, my family.” Judy wanted to ask if the secrets in the mine were what the professor was asking about, but thought better of it. They were secrets.

“Has anyone from the village gone to the mine to look for your family?” Judy asked.
“Yes, on three occasions. No one was there on the first two, but the third time, a few mammals were there, putting up a gate to close the mine. They say it is not safe, and The Interior is closing it. It is for safety. We ask about my family and they say the mine was abandoned, no one was there. It was true that two times before, it was empty, but I know the mine better. I wanted to check. They would not let me.”

Judy looked warily at Nick. The Interior department was involved. That was not a good sign, and he looked just as distressed about that.

“Do you know where these Interior mammals were from?” Nick asked.

Motti answered with a sigh. “They was from Dhoruba. Is city further down river. We should not go there. They are not liking our village. We got into fight with them before. We want less visitors and they send more. Our elders got mad and fight about it.”

“We will check out the mine.” Nick said with finality. “We might have to visit this Dhoruba place too though. If it comes to that, we will not make you go.”

“Do you… Do you think there’s a chance for them? For my family?” the hyena asked, her throat sounding tight. Judy laid her ears back, feeling sad for what she must be going through.

“I don’t know, Motti.” Skye said softly. Judy had not expected the vixen to answer. “… I will say that you won’t find a better bunny to try to find them, though. Don’t give up hope yet.”

“We can only try.” Judy repeated as she’d said before.

“Thank you, Sungura ya Shetani.” The hyena bowed her head.

Despite knowing what it meant, Judy had begun to feel attached to the name these mammals had for her. It might have seemed a negative connotation before, but it seemed used almost affectionately by that point, and she did not feel the need to correct them. The name filled her with a sense of purpose in this place, and the feeling that she had to succeed no matter what.
Thank you, everyone, for your well-wishes and concern. Things were getting better, slowly as they do, and then I immediately lost my job (laid off). I am getting back into the swing of things, but I was too down to really write for a while.

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“And you’re sure they’re rare?” Skye asked warily, looking up and down along the banks of the slowly moving, and sharply winding river. The walk down the long and meandering path from the village to nearly the base of the mountain where it was located had been a fairly quiet one. Judy was mostly focused on Nick to make sure he was doing alright. Aside from having more trouble going downhill with his healing leg than climbing up, he was keeping up just fine. Skye added softly, in a mutter, “I can just imagine them around every bend. It’s not a good headspace for me.”

“Motti sees two her whole life,” she answered quickly, obviously caring about how nervous the lady fox was. “Buibui is very not common far from the caves on the other side of this mountain. They only sometimes come out. River is more dangerous. Worry about river.”

“What?” the vixen asked with trepidation.

“Thanks for that,” murmured Jack as he had just finished loading their belongings into the wide, modern inflatable raft. Judy had actually expected they would be loading into a primitive canoe or trying to pack everyone onto a wooden raft. She scolded herself for forgetting that these mammals liked being away from the city and excluded from the busy lifestyle of the urbanites, but that didn’t mean they hated everything modern. It was especially sensible that they would prefer the safest means of travelling on a river that clearly carried some risks.

Nick expressed his curiosity about those dangers as he asked, “While we are on the river, what should we be looking out for?” He helped Motti push the tan and red raft into the water in the lazy,
shallow part of the river.

“Just stay in the raft,” she answered. “Then, nothing is there to worry you.”

“I can do that,” Jack offered, jumping deftly into the inflatable raft from the side of the river.

“Will do.” Skye added, hopping in less gracefully. Judy and Nick both climbed in, with Motti getting in last. She picked up one of two paddles that were lashed to the inside wall of the raft. Skye grabbed the other one and assisted on the opposite side. She seemed naturally inclined to just do things, Judy noticed. Skye seemed pretty high-energy where Nick assuredly was not.

“Would you believe I’ve never been in one of these?” Nick asked.

“We did a water rescue exercise in one, didn’t we?” Judy asked. She sat down toward the back of the raft, actually impressed with the size of it. Travelling like this, despite it being a little warm, didn’t seem so bad. It certainly was a new adventure she could talk to her family about. They didn’t seem tired of the stories of her usual day-to-day work, but this was altogether different!

Nick answered curtly, “You got to be in this type of boat, remember they paired me with Francine for that exercise.”

“Oh that’s right. Francine in this thing would not go well,” Judy mused. “I forgot, they had you on that hovercraft thing.”

“I wanted to be in the raft. That thing was so loud!” Nick said as he sat down beside his bunny. Judy took a moment to just enjoy the natural splendor. They were in something of a valley. The much larger of the two mountains was the one they had just walked down for over an hour. The river did not appear overly deep, and the water was brown with lifted sediment. It was pretty wide, but definitely winding with the busy topography of the region. Even as the raft moved at a decent pace with the current, Judy wondered if they saved much time winding down this tangled stream of a river.

“How’s your paw doing?” Jack asked, leaning forward a bit. Judy inspected it as well when Nick held it up. It looked pretty normal.

The red fox answered casually, “It’s kind of tight still, opening and closing it, but it doesn’t really
The hyena smirked somewhat playfully at Nick. “Loud, crying foxes I can’t suffer. Too noisy. I help make *Janga* be more quiet. Is better for Motti ears.” Motti finally stopped paddling, the white vixen following her lead and stopping as well. Nick pouted at Motti and leaned against Judy. The bunny furtively glanced up to him, but he didn’t seem upset, just comfortable. It was likely that it wasn’t really necessary to hide their relationship a lot from Motti since it would have been suspected given Skye’s previous comment about them.

Judy fidgeted a little, worried that that it counted as a public display of affection and they were both technically at work. Then it occurred to her that there was not likely to be anyone else to witness it, and it wasn’t likely they were going to hide it from Motti. She was more surprised at how freely Jack and Skye enjoyed the cuddling on the lazy raft ride, however. It was the first time Judy had seen them really hold one another in front of anyone but her and Nick. Motti watched up and down the river for a while, not really minding her passengers for the first few minutes, but when her gaze finally fell on them, her ears went down as she wore an expression of immediate confusion.

“You okay?” Jack asked casually. He had to know what was on her mind, of course. Even Jack would understand that expression.

The hyena answered in a slow and even tone, “I was feeling maybe that my thinking earlier was surely wrong, and Judy’s secret was not what I thought it was. But, it seems everyone in the raft has secret.”

“Oh, it’s not a secret in this boat right now,” Skye answered. “I’d go crazy if I had to spend the entire trip unable to do this…” With that she parted her muzzle and squeezed a point at the base of Jack’s neck with her teeth. His eyes rolled back and he spread his light grey lapine toes wide. He was likely already hot with the form-fitting black shirt and canvas pants he was wearing.

The buck gasped out, “Skye, I said she could *know*, not that we’d demonstrate!” He squirmed a bit, as if trying to get away from her embrace, only to have the arms tighten around him possessively. Motti cupped her muzzle with her paw.
Nick asked sleepily, “So, that’s a dynamic that you were maybe not expecting?”

“This is normal in the city then, yes?” the hyena asked.

“Not so much,” Judy said firmly. She felt a little more relaxed that Motti was not irritated by it, just surprised. The doe was still trying to slowly gauge how others might react if it became public knowledge. It would eventually become public knowledge. Judy knew they could not just hide it forever.

“But here are two bunnies and two foxes.” Motti said.

Nick answered softly, stroking Judy’s ears reassuringly. “We’ve all been through a lot together. You can’t stop the kind of friendship and bonds that form through all of that. Judy’s really an amazing bunny.” There was so much pride in Nick’s voice that it left his grey bunny completely speechless.

Skye spoke up as if cued, “I just think small mammals are adorable, but I also love stripes, so my options were extremely limited.” Her tone was playfully smug.

“Hey!” Jack cried, flattening his ears.

“You know she loves you Squeaker,” Nick laughed.

Skye blurted out, “One time, Nick dressed his best friend, Finnick, like a little girl so they could sell-

“Sorry! Sorry! I surrender!” Nick cried. Judy stared wide-eyed at Nick. She really wanted to know the rest of that.

Motti waved a paw in distraction. “You say you have been through much, I remember… Janga say he went to Hell. Did this really happen?” she asked.

“Yes.” Jack and Skye answered in unison before Judy could answer in the negative.
“I should explain,” Judy sighed.

“Yes,” Motti proclaimed, looking more than a little unnerved.

“She’s made a hobby of bringing foxes back from the dead.” Nick said frankly.

“Nick!” Judy exclaimed. He shouldn’t say stuff like that. This hyena might be highly superstitious, and if she was that would stress out Motti.

“Foxes? More than one?” Jack asked. Judy held up her paws, seeing a deepening look of concern forming on the hyena’s face.

“Nick’s mother, remember?” Skye explained to Jack, “Judy brought Nick’s mom back. She told me about that.” Judy shook her head. They needed to stop talking. Motti had gone from concerned-looking to alarmed.

“Oh yeah! I can’t believe I forgot that,” the stripped lapine said, nodding. Judy looked back and forth between the two and then back to Motti.

“I didn’t really…” Judy tried to think of the best way to quickly diffuse what that all sounded like.

Motti cried, “How do you forget that Shetani brings foxes back from the dead?!”

Nick intervened. “My mom wasn’t really dead, she was just lost. I thought she was dead.” He obviously did not mind spooking this poor grieving hyena. Judy made a mental note to extra-strength scold this fox later.

“She really did dig down to ‘Hell’ to get Nick back, though.” Skye said. “I know. I helped her get there.” Judy snapped a panicked look to the white fox. She was helping Nick? Unacceptable!

Motti’s voice was hollow, as if she were in a bit of shock. “You are really her then. Sungura ya Shetani. Like the story. What has Motti gotten into?” she asked, her voice changing pitch to show
obvious distress.

“It’s okay, Motti, I’ll explain,” Nick said in a kind tone. Judy was going to get this fox back for this so bad later.

“I beg you!” Motti exclaimed.

“In Zootopia, where Judy and I work as police officers…” Nick began, slowly pulling Judy back up against him. She melted a little in his arms. She would get him back later. She wanted to be held. Especially given what her fox had started talking about. He continued, “Carrots and I were chasing a very dangerous suspect. He used a kind of poison to make elephants go crazy so they would attack and hurt other mammals in a park,” he explained.

“What was he?” asked Motti.

“Quite certainly insane,” Judy answered quickly. This was not a ‘this kind of creature did it’ moment. She worked hard now to avoid that kind of implication.

“A deer.” Skye answered unhelpfully.

“Larger than Shetani, yes, and you chased?” asked the hyena. Judy put her ears back. That should not have surprised her; she knew Judy didn’t back away from a fight with larger mammals by firsthand experience. Judy glanced out at the thick, surrounding forests, trying to consider better ways to discuss that element without ever really making an implication. She was aware how hard it was to be a sheep in Zootopia for a while after the Bellwether thing. She had to break up a lot of fights in those early weeks of the trials.

“Yes,” Nick resumed, “We chased him for a pretty good distance, and he became desperate. He grabbed a little wolf girl. I would guess she was about five or so. He dragged her into the underside of the city where the pipes and conduits and everything are. It’s a pretty dark and scary place.” Nick explained.

“He took a cub? Why?” asked Motti. Her tone made it obvious that she considered that unthinkable.

Nick answered, “Hostage. He told us if we didn’t jump off of a walkway above this kind of
underground river... from way high up... he’d throw her over.” Motti gasped loudly at that. Nick kept talking. “Spoiler… If we had jumped we’d have died, so we obviously didn’t jump. We tried to talk to him, to reason with him. He was just so filled with hate and anger. But he lost patience with us and threw the girl over the side anyway.”

“No!” Motti exclaimed. Judy suddenly felt rather worse telling her the true story about getting Nick from Hell. It was very revealing about what kind of monsters existed out there to find out this was what really happened.

Judy interjected to try to calm her. “Nick jumped over the rail and caught her just in time. Her caught the little wolf cub. He saved her. I went and got the girl first while Nick was hanging on to a part of the walkway. I moved her to safety and went to help Nick… but…”

“The walkway broke. I fell. It was so far.” Nick said sadly. Motti recoiled a little, seeming fearful of the result despite the fact that the fox was sitting right there before her on a nice, lazy raft ride. The red vulpine continued, “I hit the water and got immediately sucked under, down into a pipe. I went through like… a mile of pipes, down into one of the deepest parts of the city. It was dark, smelled like death, and is full of loud, hot furnaces. Oh, and there’s no way out.”

“Hell,” Motti said darkly.

“As close as the living can get to it,” Nick responded, “I broke my leg in the fall into that place. I had no food and just horrible, dirty water. I was down there for days and days and days. The whole city gave up looking for me.” This story had the hyena absolutely transfixed. “The day before my funeral, Carrots found someone who said they knew where I might have ended up because of exactly where I fell. And she followed that lead, hoping just to reclaim my body, but she found me alive just in time.” Motti sat in the raft, speechless.

“Wait,” Skye interrupted, “So, I never found out who gave Judy the location. You’d think that person would be soaking up the attention after giving information that critical.”

“Duke Weasleton.” Nick said with disdain. Judy gritted her teeth. Duke was a confidential source in this. Nick was far too open with the other bunny and fox!

Skye exclaimed, “Wait, the guy that sold me those fake “Roach” sunglasses?!”

“The one and only.” Judy said, not even having to ask Nick if that’s who she meant. It sure sounded
like Duke.

“Huh…” Skye murmured, “I wonder if that’s why he went legit?”

“Wait, what?” Judy asked.

“Your conversations need fences.” Motti stated flatly.

“We really do have a lot going on sometimes.” Jack explained.


Skye shrugged a bit and said, “I hadn’t seen one of his stands out on the road in a while, so I asked if someone finally ate him for selling them fake stuff, and the girl who sells the paw-fashioned silk flowers, she said he works for an insurance company now, helping them research fraudulent claims.”

“Huh…” Judy said.

“Everyone needs to try very hard to stay in the boat.” Motti interrupted.

“I remember that you said that.” Jack stated, looking up at her. “I think we’ve got it under control.”

“Is about to be more relevant,” the spotted female added. As the raft cleared the next rather sharp bend in the river, a stretch of river quite some way ahead caught everyone’s eye. Rapids. They actually looked pretty treacherous. Judy moved a little more toward the center of the boat. Skye grabbed a paddle.

“You are too easily distracted!” Jack said to the hyena. “You could have warned us about this!”

“You are very distracting!” Motti laughed, putting her paddle in the water to keep the raft heading straight as it began to speed up.
“I find him very distracting!” Skye laughed. Motti laughed at that as well.


“A big tub, an agitator and a green-screen, Skye!” Jack said loudly.

“Aw, you ruined the magic!” Nick grumbled.

“I wanted to do the real thing but our insurance carrier wouldn’t hear of it!” Jack replied back.

“Jack is not an officer? He is an actor?” asked Motti.

“Yep!” Skye chimed. The raft pitched suddenly, getting a frightened squeak out of Judy.

“Hold on tight!” Nick called to her unnecessarily.

“What is Skye?” Motti asked.

“I fix things that break in the apartment where I live,” Skye said calmly as she put her paddle in the water. “I’ve seen plenty of videos of rafting, and I’m a visual learner, I think I can do this.” Water splashed over the front of the group, soaking Nick and Judy in the back, and somehow leaving Skye and Motti both dry in the middle. Jack jumped to the center.

“All this stuff’s gonna get soaked, careful!” the buck shouted.

“I thought all of you worked for the ZPD!” Motti stated loudly as the raft began to list much more heavily in the uneven flow. The roaring of the rapids made it so she had to yell. “So, before this gets crazy, you never mentioned what happened to the terrible deer who threw the little girl!” Judy seized up a little, but was too involved getting herself into a better braced position to intervene in time.
Skye, who was obviously excited about the ‘adventure’ that she was so eager to experience, just blurted out the simple, established, everyone-in-Zootopia-knew-it fact.

“Judy killed him!” she yelled. She then immediately appeared to regret saying it, as if she had simply forgotten that her bunny friend was actually present in the raft. The bunny glared at Skye to make it clear she did not like that particular subject, even if she didn’t really lament what she did. Motti, however, was surprised enough that she fumbled her paddle, nearly losing it into the water. She recovered it and focused on keeping the raft straight. She veered as needed from larger rocks and the like. It looked like Motti likely did this trip pretty frequently, but the reason the village did not check on her family every day was pretty apparent. This was still pretty dangerous!

“She had to!” Nick clarified. He was quick to his bunny’s aid. “He didn’t just run off after I grabbed the girl, he was trying to kick me and her off the walkway. He’d have killed us both if Judy didn’t do something!” He lurched a bit, holding on. Judy hadn’t realized how violent being in a raft could be, but she literally had to be snatched out of the air by Nick as the rubber craft fell suddenly down at a low point in the rapids. The water was really going fast at this point. That splash got everyone too. The doe genuinely feared the boat might fill with water. Could an inflatable raft sink in rapids like this? She had no idea.

The next few moments really wiped every bit of conversation out of Judy’s mind. She had considered trying rafting with Angela once before she joined the academy, but she had a test to study for and opted out. Angela said that the experience had been boring. Judy bet the river her sister had been on was nothing like this! There was hardly a moment for nearly twenty minutes that Judy did not absolutely believe she was going to die. She was held by Nick who held ropes that ran along the inside edge of the raft.

Skye mostly helped with the paddle to keep the boat straight, holding the rope with another hand. Motti didn’t seem to hold onto a thing, completely focused on keeping their frantic party from smashing huge rocks that littered the swift-moving river-bed. Judy didn’t know how much of that task was shared between Skye and the more knowledgeable hyena, but they did stay straight. If they had been spinning and lurching, Judy was sure everyone would have gone out of the boat. Their pack was tied down already so it was safe, and Jack was tenaciously clinging to the bags. While it looked pretty comical, it was an effective way for him to stay safe.

It seemed like every time they went into a bend the river started to calm, only to go crazy again on the other side. Judy would get her hopes up and have them dashed like so many times they nearly were on the rocks. Twice more the bunny was nearly cast up out of the boat, losing hold of the rope on the side both times. She was caught immediately by her protecting fox. He was instantly pardoned for messing with Motti. The bunny cherished her fox and his predatory reflexes. Overlooking the fact that he was naturally inclined perhaps to snatch escaping bunnies, he was the best partner she could ask for right then!
They finally got past the section of river that was so deadly. It was still moving pretty swiftly, but it wasn’t violent. A little past that, as the water slowed, Motti slowly guided the raft to a sandy beach-like bend in the river. The trees were pretty dense behind it, but Judy was able to see some kind of sign or marker there which likely marked where they were supposed to stop. Everyone got out, squeezing water out of clothing, shaking off, and making sure all of them were okay.

They pulled the raft pretty far up the bank, as Motti mentioned flash floods could come without notice and sweep it away. It was a pain to move it, but they got it up and stowed. Nick took a turn shouldering the pack, as Skye had carried it down to the raft from the village. Soon, the five were on a new trail, a bit wider than the one that led to the village. It was apparent by the shape and size of the trail that carts used to be brought down with rock or gold to waiting rafts on the river. With the mine closed, and with the gold having long since run out, the trail had grown up a bit, but was still very easy to follow. The walk was quiet for a bit, as if everyone forgot anything they had been talking about. Judy felt odd, like someone had said something wrong, or that maybe Motti was upset that she’d killed a deer. She looked at the hyena, but Motti was just being alert, watching up and down and along the sides of the trail.

Judy felt like someone would eventually notice Motti’s attentiveness and ask what she was looking for. Then Skye would have to learn about some kind of terrible specifically-white-fox-munching beast that could be lurking behind any of those trees. Judy decided to head that disaster off and bring up some small talk.

“So, Motti… You said *Shetani* was from a story. Can you tell us about that?” The hyena looked back and shrugged, nodding.

“Yes, I can say,” she said calmly, “It is very old story. Older than my village, even.”

“Oh my God yes, please let’s hear this.” Jack sped up a little ahead of his suddenly irritated-looking vixen. “I have wanted this since I got here. The old stories are worth more than all the gold in that mine to me.”

“Let me know if you need me to hold your tongue, Jack,” Skye huffed. Judy looked back, but the fox was smirking, so perhaps she wasn’t really mad.

“The story of *Sungura ya Shetani*... it is a little different in some villages. In ours, the way it’s told is that before the stars were born, the sky above was an inky black.” Jack made a happy squeak, making it obvious that this really was exactly what he wanted to hear. Skye rolled her eyes. “Under the cover of darkness, there were those who would do evil. They would steal. They would sneak and hurt, and no one was safe. The moon stood watch, but she could not watch all the time, she
must sleep. When she would return, she would find the smaller mammals of the world afraid and unhappy. Most of the young, to this day, are afraid of the darkness.”

Skye interrupted, “You do know how the phases of the moon actually work, don’t you, Jack?” She sounded frustrated.

“Yes, I know. Please, go on.” Jack stated, giving the hyena his undivided attention. Judy saw an unmistakable look of irritation from the white vixen. Did she have some reason for genuinely hating folklore?

“Uh… Okay, so, anyway, the moon conjured a protector for the night. A bunny, swift and strong, she could move quietly through the dark and watch over the world.”

“Why a bunny?” Jack asked with a healthy portion of obvious self-interest.

Motti answered slowly, “…so as not to be frightening to the innocent. Kits and cubs should never fear Shetani, she does not come for them. She protects children most of all, and the most terrible punishments are for those who would hurt them. All those who would commit harm are captured by her, and they are taken to Hell.” Suddenly, Judy had a sneaking suspicion why some of the story Nick told her set off Motti the way it did. She ‘sent someone to hell’ for attempting to harm a child.

“Okay,” Judy said, falling into step on the other side of Motti, “…so I get some circumstantial reasoning for why you’d call me that now, after you heard more about me, but why did you name me that basically right after we met?” Judy asked. The name made plenty of sense with other things considered, but right away it seemed a bit unfair. She started calling her that before she knew any of the other stuff.

“It was the ears,” Motti said bluntly.

“My ears?” she asked.

“Did Shetani have uneven ears?” Nick asked. Suddenly, the red fox was back on her ‘to be scolded’ list.

“What? No,” Motti stated, “The black tips. Shetani was grown from the dark, starless sky, from the ears down, so her ears were black. So… yeah. You looked the part. And she was fearless. Most
bunnies are unwilling to come out to the jungle like this, but Shetani here, she fights *buibui* beside Motti. *Shetani* does not fear the wild, they say. She *becomes* the wild.”

“I could see that in the future.” Jack said, smirking. Judy gave an embarrassed groan. Someone else on the list. She and Nick hadn’t even been dating that long. Still, it was probably aimed more at Nick, given his insistence on referring to Jack with the last name ‘Frost’.

It was Nick who actually spoke next. “Had I known there was a story like this, I would not have joked around about the other stuff,” he stated, panting a bit from carrying the pack.

“So let me get this right…” Jack sped up again, turning to face Motti as he spoke. “*Sungura ya Shetani* was a rabbit… with black-tipped ears… She was a protector and an enforcer of law, who was unafraid and strong. She locks up bad guys and protects the innocent, and would send folks to hell for harming a kit? I’d gonna call it. Spooky. My vote is spooky. Everybody vote.” He grinned.

“Oh come on, really?” called Skye from behind Nick.

“You can’t ask for a better uncanny story than that! That’s solid!” Jack exclaimed.

Skye growled a bit and sped up, moving alongside the striped bunny. “You can’t believe that kind of camp-fire nonsense story like it’s a physics text-book, Jack!” Judy cringed a little at that and regarded the curious-looking hyena whose culture was being lashed out at. She didn’t really seem to care.

Jack stopped walking, standing, facing the fox. “Obviously I won’t be disregarding what I know about astronomy because the story said rabbits come from the starless sky, but that doesn’t keep me from enjoying the beauty and symbolism of these old tales, and they always have some grain of truth and unique origin in them. And maybe, just maybe, a little bit of honest magic can be found in them. There’s not a bit of harm in enjoying that. I like it,” he said in an honest and earnest tone.

Skye flailed a little. “There’s all kinds of harm in believing that, Jack, because it’s not true. You can’t let someone tell you something that’s not true and just… ignore that you are being lied to! Mammals were being told all kinds of stuff about foxes and other predators and they could have checked and known it was all fear-based misinformation! But they were willing to believe it so long as it came from someone they respected. It’s harmful to tell anyone, especially kids, a story without prefacing that it’s just a story. I don’t mind that it’s their culture, but why would you need there to be magic when you know that there’s just… not?”
“Maybe I want there to be magic,” the striped bunny said in a little darker tone. Judy could tell he was starting to get upset. Judy also knew that they were both getting very tired and were hot and frustrated and not really trained to deal with it.

Judy spoke up, trying to diffuse it. “There’s nothing wrong with that. And there’s nothing wrong with preferring to be grounded entirely in reality.”

“No, no.” Jack said, “There is a problem. Why can’t I believe in magic? Why is it wrong for me to want that?” The striped buck crossed his arms, glaring at the vixen. She crossed her arms and glared back.

“Magic is for little children who don’t know how the world works. Grownups who believe in it just don’t want to know how the world really works, and self-imposed ignorance can be genuinely dangerous! I know you’re better than that, Jack. You’re brilliant. Don’t waste that on wanting a thing that’s just… not,” she insisted.

Jack put his ears down, a sour expression on his face. Motti watched back and forth between them quietly. The buck murmured softly, “So your issue… is that magic… that these stories… cause people to mistreat others, maybe foxes… because it teaches them to just accept things they are told and doesn’t teach critical thinking. Any kind of belief in non-real things is an invitation into believing anything anyone says?” he asked.

Skye smiled a bit at that, seeming relieved. “Yes! Yes, you do understand that! That’s my problem with it!” The vixen nodded emphatically. Judy sighed. Maybe that understanding would be enough to end this argument. She did not like seeing the only other fox and bunny couple at odds. Jack and Skye were a source of encouragement for her.

“So tell me something, Skye…” Jack stepped up closer to her and she leaned down, happily nose to nose with him, ears up and alert. “I happen to know a story you like… I know you like it because you have it, it’s the only fiction story on your shelf.” She looked puzzled. “So you tell me… how you can say my belief in something fictitious is harmful to foxes when you, and about any other fox I know, insist on assigning unrepentant hero worship to some imaginary dark-aged thug?” For a second, Judy wasn’t sure what he was talking about, but she saw that smile instantly vanish from Skye’s face. A second later, Judy realized what he was talking about and it stunned her to silence.

“Jaaaaaack.” Nick said in a dark, warning tone.
“No. You tell me, Skye, how my hoping that there’s magic is as harmful to foxes as their own insistence on loving a fake historical figure. One who is, by so many reputable accounts, the very basis for all the crap foxes are accused of being. Low, skulking, cunning, untrustworthy, anarchist thieves.” Judy was just not close to the pair enough to do anything to stop the inevitable.

There was a solid thump as Skye tackled her striped buck so hard they both sailed back about ten feet. Jack hit the ground hard enough that he was winded, particularly since Skye landed on top of him. She looked furious, both paws on his shoulders, gripping tightly with her claws. The pinned rabbit, struggling to take a breath, looked absolutely horrified as he stared up at the vixen looming over him. Nick bolted over toward them. Judy was only a couple steps behind, afraid that she was actually going to have to physically prevent Skye from beating the buck senseless.

Before Nick even reached her, however, Skye’s expression suddenly changed. She looked suddenly frightened and ashamed. She jumped back, landing on her tail, scooting back some more. Jack remained where he was. His jaw was moving a bit as he tried to breathe. He was managing it finally, and started coughing. Skye scrambled to her feet and just bolted back in the direction they had come from. Judy cupped her muzzle. Skye didn’t want to do that, and she was upset. She wasn’t safe just running around here alone! This was a huge problem. Nick helped Jack sit up, slapping his back a little, trying to get the buck un-winded.

Judy’s partner looked up with a bit of irritation. “Carrots, go after her! You’re faster than me right now. I’ll fix this mess here.” Judy groaned a bit. They did not need this! If Skye got lost they would miss their flight back to Zootopia. This mission was going poorly to start with, but now it was a disaster! The bunny ran as fast as she could, hoping to catch up to Skye before she could get far or hurt herself somehow in her panic. And there was still hope, more brittle now, but just as urgent in her heart, was that she hadn’t just watched their friends’ love snuffed out in anger.
The grey doe ran swiftly, mostly quietly along the trail lined in tall grass and small saplings, though the sides of the trail faded into dense undergrowth beneath enormous trees that blotted out any real visibility into the forest greater than about twenty meters. Every fifty meters or so, Judy stopped and listened. She suspected that Skye was not trying to be very quiet given how she ran off. After listening for only a second or two, Judy would bolt again, her feet carrying her as swiftly as possible. She reflected on the preposterous fact that she was actually hunting a fox as she came to a stop again.

She finally heard it. The vixen ahead of her was still running, but Skye wasn’t built for distance. Judy was off like a shot again, running even faster now that she knew she had not accidentally passed a hunkered down and hiding fox. She knew that Skye had a temper. She had seen the vixen blow up at Nick a couple of times early on, but this was beyond the pale. They didn’t have the time to stop and deal with this, but it absolutely had to be dealt with.

Coming around a slight curve in the trail, Judy finally saw Skye. The vixen was running a lot slower, and stumbled. It was the middle of the afternoon and the sun was high. It was very hot and humid outside the trees on the trail. The fox got up and continued mostly trotting along, coughing a little. It was obvious that she was crying. Judy slowed just a little, not wanting to frighten her. She didn’t want to cause a confrontation between her and Skye.

“Wait up! Skye!” Judy called, panting heavily. The fox crumpled to the trail, heavily panting, just on all fours. She tried to crawl a little.

“What have I done?!” she sobbed. She then promptly vomited. Judy opted to stay back a bit from that. Helping raise little brothers and sisters got her over any issues with sympathy sickness, but it was still not something she wanted to crowd the distraught vixen with. Judy stood quietly a moment, catching her breath not far from the retching white fox. “I won’t… run. I won’t fight. I’m so… sorry,” she cried, gasping between words. Judy’s heart ached to see her friend like this. Judy wondered if she and Nick would ever get into an argument that bad. Nick could get angry, she knew, but he certainly didn’t have Skye’s temper.
“Take your time. Catch your breath, Skye.” Judy said softly, moving into a spot of shade just off the trail.

Skye sobbed a little longer before she shakily asked, “Is he… Is he dead? Please don’t let him be dead.” She curled into a ball on her knees, tucking her head under her as if ducking for cover from a bomb blast. Judy widened her eyes at that. She had only tackled and winded Jack! Did she honestly think bunnies could be killed that easily? It then instantly dawned on Judy how absolutely terrified this fox must have been at that moment. She moved in a flash to Skye’s side, ignoring the mess out in front of her.

“Jack’s fine! You didn’t kill him, Skye!” Judy exclaimed immediately. She put a paw on her back, the khaki material of her button-up shirt warm in the sun. Skye sobbed louder, but it seemed at least a more grateful sort of crying. Then it shifted right back to despair.

“I’ve lost him! Oh, Judy, I ruined everything! Why! Why?!” She was shaking. Judy was profoundly uncomfortable in this situation. She was not in her element here.

“Hey, it’s alright… you don’t know that for sure. Jack’s pretty… forgiving.” Judy was honestly not sure about it as she said that. After all, his girlfriend just punctuated an argument with assault and battery. Had it been in Zootopia the fox would be in cuffs and most definitely a muzzle. That thought pained Judy. Skye might actually need some help with her temper. Judy didn’t want to push her right then, just letting her have it out. A bit more dry-heaving got the bunny’s paws off her a moment, but she resumed crying in that tight little ball. Skye’s forehead remained on the ground as she clutched pawfuls of grass like she never wanted to let it go. Judy sighed and just stroked the inconsolable vixen’s back and let her cry. She didn’t want to outright lie to comfort her. It was entirely possible that everything was not going to be okay.

“I’m sorry Judy! I’m sorry for ruining everything.” She sobbed with an added hiccup. “I know I’m going to jail, but let me tell Jack I’m sorry. Please! Let me make sure he’ll be okay…” she asked plaintively. Judy flattened her ears, stunned. She had no intention of arresting Skye out of jurisdiction. Even if she wanted to she couldn’t. She could call the local authorities and hold her till they arrived, but that wasn’t about to happen unless…

“I refuse to press charges.” Jack’s words from behind her made Judy’s breath just rush out in a relieved sigh. The magic ‘get out of taking Skye back to Zootopia in a muzzle’ card had been dealt. Judy looked back to the approaching buck. He was a bit out of breath, but she could not tell if it was because he ran, or because he was still a bit winded.

Skye didn’t even look up, she only wailed into the dirt louder. If it were even possible, she balled up
tighter and mashed herself lower to the grass in anguish. “I didn’t want to do that! I didn’t want that! I didn’t mean to!” she cried hysterically. Judy looked back to the buck as Nick and Motti more calmly approached. Nick gestured for the hyena not to get closer. It wasn’t dangerous of course. Nick just knew that this moment might have been sensitive and private. Jack stopped in his tracks, looking pretty stunned at the condition of his fox, and obviously noticing that she’d gotten sick. The hyena merely veered off the trail to stand in some shade. She didn’t seem irritated or inconvenienced. That was a surprise, given how inconvenient it was to have the mammals you enlisted to help you be barely able to maintain themselves on a simple trail through the woods.

“Skye, I wanna say I’m sorry. I’m sorry for saying that,” Jack said. He looked extremely pained as he said it. It was a genuine apology. Judy had a suspicion that the culturally literate buck knew exactly how sensitive the topic he attacked actually was.

The white fox finally lifted her head, eyes pinched nearly shut as she fairly screamed back at him, “No! Don’t apologize to me after I did that! I attacked you! I thought I killed you!” she sobbed and then fell to her side, shaking and sobbing again. Judy tried to pull the vixen’s head up into her lap, looking at Nick with a ‘please come help’ expression. Her partner came over to her and helped her haul Skye into a sitting position. She dropped right back down, head on Judy’s lap at least, and not grinding white fur into the red clay of the trail.

“You just winded him as all.” Nick offered helpfully.

“He couldn’t breathe!” Skye cried, looking up at the scattered clouds. “He was just lying there trying… and he couldn’t! And I thought I broke him! Or that he was too scared and his heart…” Skye couldn’t say it, and just shook. That was enough for Jack. Even if he was afraid she could attack him again, he was there in a flash.

He put his smaller arms around her. She appeared to be indecisive, if it she might not deserve to hug him back, but she just couldn’t deny herself the comfort. She embraced him, and Jack sputtered a little too. Judy had to look away to keep her own emotions in check. Skye whimpered out soft, shaky apologies and Jack kept trying to tell her it was his fault. She kept telling him it wasn’t and that she was completely out of line.

Nick finally interrupted, “Can we be miserable in the shade for a little bit?”

“Yeah, and away from the… I’m sorry… Ugh…” Skye sat up and with some help from Jack, shuffled over to the fallen tree in the shade where Motti was sitting.

“Are we… okay?” the hyena asked.
“Give us a bit,” Nick stated apologetically. The spotty female opened her pack and took out some dried, salted fish. Judy’s partner scooted away.

“Skye, listen, no… stop…” Jack started to speak but the vixen started to shake her head, eagerly denying his attempt at what sounded like another apology. He spoke up, holding her cheeks, “I’m okay… first of all. I’m not hurt. But I could have been. You know that. And I know you don’t want that. So let’s… Let’s fix this.”

“How? How are we supposed to fix this?” Skye whimpered. Judy’s heart sank. She did not want them to give up. Not so fast. Not like this.

“We communicate.” Jack said. Nick nodded at his partner. Judy realized suddenly that Nick might have coached Jack a bit on what he needed to do here. This greatly encouraged the doe. Her partner had a gift for salvaging a broken situation.

“I was wrong to attack you, let me make that absolutely clear.” Skye said with obvious self-disgust. “There’s never, ever an excuse for what I did. I can hate what you said all I want, but I shouldn’t have… I should never…” She choked. “How can you hold me, knowing what I did to you!?”

Jack scoffed. “Please. I’ve begged you to do more damage to me than that before, Skye.” Judy’s ears felt like they’d been left behind in the sun. They pitched right down her shoulders.

Nick murmured a barely perceptible, “Wow…” This got a half-sob, half-laugh out of the vixen and she shook her head.

“Never again!” she whimpered. “I p-promise!” Jack was briefly shaken by how intense the vixen’s reaction was. He then gritted his teeth, as if suddenly determined.

Jack clutched her tighter as she leaned against him, saying softly, “…and I will help you with that by not intentionally saying the absolute most awful thing I can think of to you. That part was completely my fault, and it was stupid, arrogant, and selfish. To what, win an argument on semantics? Skye, I want to drop the whole argument, it’s not worth this. It has never been worth this. I won’t bring it up again, I promise.”

Nick spoke in a slow, careful tone, “…is what you would say if you never wanted to solve the problem and wanted to resent this moment in your memories forever. You just said you wanted
communicate, Jack. You need to do that.” Judy snapped her attention to Nick. Provoking them was a terrible idea! What was he trying to do?

“No, I’m serious, Fox-lax, I’m dropping it.” Jack said with an edge to his voice. Skye stifled a laugh mid-sob. The buck continued, “I don’t need to win a dumb argument about semantics and fantasy. I need Skye. What if this was Judy, laying in your arms, thinking everything’s gone dark, huh?” Skye sputtered at that, but the aggression from the striped bunny drove ice through Judy’s heart, despite the ridiculous nickname from Jack concerning Nick’s past misadventures in modeling.

Skye sat up, looking the buck in the eyes. “Jack, he’s right. I don’t want to think you gave up part of yourself because you were scared of me!”

“I’m not scared of you, Skye! I’m afraid of losing you!” Jack said in frustration.

“It’s still fear.” Nick added. Judy paid attention. Nick had trust issues. He had very few friends. Why was he confident here, where she was not? She remembered how careful Nick was with her feelings after finding out that she was afraid she could lose him. He was really quite perceptive about that stuff. Jack shot an angry glance at Nick.

Skye looked into Jack’s eyes insistently, turning his head. “I don’t want… fear… as part of what we are. We can talk. It’s safe. Please.” The striped buck finally deflated a bit.

“You guys want any of this fish?” Motti asked. She was obviously trying to soften some of the tension.

“Judy’ll have some.” Jack grumbled.

“No, stop deflecting, talk.” Skye half-whispered. She was thankfully over her emotional explosion from earlier, even though her face was a bit of a mess from both crying and being ground into the dirt.

“What then? How do we talk about this?” he asked with more than a hint of hopelessness in his voice. “I want my universe to have stupid magic in it so bad I just said what I honestly can only hope is the most bitterly speciest, heartless, ignorant thing you’ve ever heard in your life. I just gave you every reason to never trust my feelings for you are genuine, and I have no reason to ever think you want the real, superstition-embracing, ignorant Jack Savage. Not one hundred percent. Does talking about it really help here?” he asked, his pitch rising as his throat tightened. Judy looked at
Nick warily as if he might fix that somehow. His ears were back and he only silently watched the pair.

“You really want some?” Motti asked, holding the dried meat out to the bunny. Judy had to restrain herself from shooing the well-meaning hyena away rudely, as she was so transfixed on the discussion. She took the piece of offered food and just held it so Motti would focus on her own food instead.

Skye considered that a moment. She was definitely conflicted. The vixen finally inhaled deeply, eyes closed before looking back into Jack’s blue eyes. “Alright Jack, then we can talk about magic,” she said resolutely.

“What?” Jack asked incredulously.

“Tell me about why you need magic. What is it about that idea that makes you happy? That’s what this is about, right? Magic makes you happy. That should be important to me because I want to make you happy.” The buck gazed at her intently a moment, as if unsure that she was serious. He finally sat up a little straighter and thought about it.

“Well… I guess… I grew up with my studies and all… I wanted to do something to make my parents proud. They tried so hard just to have me, and they gave me everything they had after they passed,” he explained. Skye nodded, focused on him completely. “I grew up grateful for what I have. I don’t ignore my responsibilities to the city and those less fortunate. I want Zootopia to be a great place to live and I have more power than most to make it that way. I’ve believed that since I was a kit… but…” He looked away.

“It’s okay,” Skye whispered. “I’m listening.”

Jack inhaled deeply and continued, “Part of that was getting a good education. And I had only the best. What came with that education was a pretty good sense of how the world worked. And as I learned every detail, nuance, scientific name and satellite picture, the mysteries of the world were laid bare. I was starved for it. I loved it. I lusted for it!” he said excitedly. Completely absorbed, Judy took a bite of her dried fish. She froze. Eyes wide, she looked at Nick. He hadn’t seen it. Out of the corners of her eyes she saw that Motti absolutely had seen it and was staring. If Judy spit it out, the hyena might be horribly offended. Then the flavor hit. It was so salty. With the intensity of the past few days, Judy felt like maybe was a bit depleted. The moment the taste hit her tongue she craved it with intensity. Slowly she chewed, able to taste little other than the heavenly saltiness. She would just… quietly chew. That was okay, right.
Skye distracted Judy from her inner turmoil as she spoke. “But these things aren’t magic, Jack, it’s just the world. You loved the world. I knew that about you, it’s part of why I love you.”

Jack smiled and took the vixen’s paws in his as well as his smaller paws could manage. “That’s just it. It was real, but there was only so far real could go. And so much that I wanted to fix and no one could… Those were things that were real. One of the absolute most glaring things for me, growing up, was the very real matter of my existence. My mom and dad could never have a kit of their own, no matter how much they loved each other, no matter how much they wished for it. I took years of trial and error and many failures no other mammals should ever endure like my parents did. Just to get me. Even the all-powerful science I grew up respecting and supporting could only go so far in that matter.” Judy found herself taking another bite of fish. She immediately dismissed that she’d done it. What Jack was talking about was incredibly deep.

“So that’s why you give so much money to the surrogacy groups and the Genetic Research Foundation?” asked Skye with a gentle tone.

“Right,” Jack responded straight away. “But it felt like I was so far out on the fringes. It was lonely even wishing it were possible. It got me to also search through books and history to see how many others felt like I did. Was I really that alone? I found very little through history texts, but I met a teacher, Professor Lupin…” he stated.

“Lupin?” asked Motti suddenly.

“Yeah, that one.” Jack clarified. Judy was suddenly intensely focused.

“He was searching for something that had everything to do with what I cared about at that point in my life.”

“You said he was searching for details about The Origin Story.” Nick said. “This actually has something to do with your parent’s relationship and hybrid families? I’m a little… uh… lost…” Judy looked up as her partner trailed off. Her heart sank. She froze as she looked meekly back up at her fox as he gazed with wide eyes down at her hand which clutched the half-eaten strip of dried fish. She felt suddenly like she had betrayed him, and she looked down dejectedly, ears back, nose wiggling.

Jack pulled Nick’s attention off of his suddenly scared and ashamed little bunny. “The professor sincerely believed that The Origin Story had its beginnings in a love story, not in what is the currently accepted model… a trade agreement during a drought.”
Nick spoke, his tone seeming fine, which breathed some life back into Judy. “Jack, those trade agreements go back centuries. There’s a tablet and everything. This is physical evidence that we’re talking about here. Why did Lupin think it was something else?” he asked.

“Stories.” Jack said frankly. “Roland wanted to find the absolute earliest record of the interaction of the organized groups of predator and prey. What we had was established trade, but it was not something that specified the first amicable contact, and certainly not their agreement. But he found stories that had been passed by word of mouth in the interior.”

“This is secret talk.” Motti said in a warning tone.

“There is a secret about the first meeting?” Jack asked.

“Motti is not saying. It is stories. These are our stories, though. We do not give them to outsiders.” Her tone was suddenly severe.

“Drop that for now, Jack,” Nick instructed. The buck huffed, puffing up a bit. “Please.” Nick said. He deflated with a sigh and then looked back at a pained vixen. He shook his head. “Sorry. That… That doesn’t really matter now. Look, I helped him look for answers in the old stories. Not much more than a kit myself, I willingly funded his travels and he brought so many crazy tales back, and they were so full of mysteries, magic, old folklore handed down, impossible dreams and the fantastical things I had never even dreamed of. Sure, I knew these things were stories, and maybe nothing was more than that, but I felt joy like I’d never felt before. I wanted my world to be magical, dark, and mysterious… new answers waiting to be found in some unexplored place, a discovery out there left to be made that no one had seen before. Secret adventures and incredible memories could be out there, I just needed to look!”

“Jack…” whispered Skye in a wondering tone.

Jack continued, a little bit frantic. “I found out around then that people loved seeing me tell those stories. I know it was partly because I was exotic, and the stories were exotic too, but it was enough that teachers shuffled me in the direction of theatre and drama. That became my calling, of course, and I loved it, but I felt a little empty still, you know? It wasn’t magic, and yet… it wasn’t even real at the same time.”

“So you hope that out there, somewhere, you will find magic?” Skye asked, transfixed.
“Not exactly!” Jack said hastily, “It wasn’t a weird incantation, a glowing stick, or a flying deer that I wanted. It was never that kind of thing… I craved discovering the unexpected. I wanted to be surprised! It sounds silly, but it’s why I couldn’t stop thinking about you after I met you.” His tone was softer as he said that, as if he really had just made the connection. Judy crammed the rest of the fish in her mouth shamefully, not even checking to see if Nick was looking.

“Wh… What?” Skye whispered anxiously.

Jack smiled and chuckled, rubbing the back of his head. “Yeah, I guess… I guess it was. You really surprised me. I… I couldn’t understand what happened. Why did that happen? What made you do that? Was there a story? Everything about you, and Nick, and Judy… was so crazy and intense. It was insanity the moment I met you. And, oh my God I could not get you out of my head. So, when Judy asked me to meet with you… I said yes. The rest you know. I had fun with you, and you were relaxed with me, like a regular friend. I really needed that.” He held Skye’s paws and she seemed to melt a little bit for him. Judy swallowed her shameful snack and had to wipe her eyes. This was encouraging.

“You never told me that part, you goof.” Skye whimpered.

“And then, things got really crazy, and Nick died…”

“Got lost.” Judy said loudly, glancing at the visibly anxious Motti.

“Right, sorry,” Jack corrected, looking back at Skye, “And you nearly killed yourself helping them take that monster down. I realized immediately how horrible the thought of losing you was, even though we’d only been close for a short time…” he said with a somewhat distant voice.

“Wait, why was she fighting the monster?” asked Motti insistently.

“Shh!” Nick shushed her.

The buck continued, “Oh course I got closer to you as we kind of supported Judy together… while Nick was gone, helping her grieve.” Judy preferred they not talk about the relatively short but still sensationally long period of time that she thought her beloved fox was dead. She did not interrupt, however.
“I think we all needed each other through that.” Skye admitted.

“Then Judy brought Nick back. And… that night, we went home to celebrate. We had that ridiculously priced bottle of champagne that the studio gave me, remember?”

Skye laughed. “That was amazing. I feel bad for even asking you about it, that was so crazy expensive! I can’t believe you just popped it right open!”

Jack shook his head, pulling a little closer to Skye. “It was the absolute right occasion. You see… To me… I had seen real magic for the first time.”

Skye gasped at that, breathlessly whispering, “Jack, that was just… I mean…” She found herself speechless.

Judy’s own breath hitched at the full and brutal bunny sentimentality unleashed. Even Nick cupped his muzzle. Magic was a strong word, but it was certainly a pretty intense scenario.

Jack leaned in closer, almost nose to nose with Skye as he rose up on his knees a bit by where she was sitting. He murmured, “Then, as we laughed and celebrated, I looked into your eyes… and I saw real magic a second time. And you… remember what happened next, I am sure.” Skye’s inner ears were bright pink as her bright blue eyes took in the view of her striped bunny. Those ears then went back and she choked out a sob and completely engulfed Jack, tail curled around him. Her arms and legs enveloped him as she stole him close and made it so only his ears peeked up over the ball of white fox.

“What? What happened next?” Motti asked. No one answered. Judy cupped her face, eyes soaked, and she quietly savored the sentimental moment. She hadn’t really asked any of these questions of the pair, but it was not lost on her that she and Nick were a part of it all. She just let her friends revel in one another’s embrace. They needed this. Judy barely caught the soft tone of Nick’s whisper to the hyena. The bunny could not hear what he said, but Motti spoke in a regular tone. “Oh. Right. I knew that.”

Jack and Skye embraced and quietly talked for a bit longer as Judy and Nick sat over by Motti. They needed their space. The grey doe was actually proud of Jack for how he talked to the distraught fox and turned that mess around. It was heartwarming.
“It’s okay, Judy. I’m not upset.” Nick said from behind her, making her jump a little. Judy turned and looked into his eyes, her own wide.

“What?” she asked.

“I just might… prefer fox-nibbling for a bit and not kissing,” he admitted.

Judy gasped slightly. “Oh. Oh, Nick, I’m sorry, I got handed the fish and I just…” She felt awful about it.

“Hey!” Nick smiled at her. “I said it’s okay. Like I told you before, I won’t eat it, but I don’t care that other people do. The issue I had wasn’t that I ate them, it was that I…” He looked away. Judy held Nick’s paw. He forced a smile. “Well, like I said… You’re fine. And I am glad this… didn’t get worse…” He nodded at Jack and Skye, the vixen rocking a little with her bunny in her arms.

“Thank you, Nick,” Judy whispered, “I… I don’t know that I could have dealt with that alone.”

“You ate a fish.” Motti said unhelpfully. “But Nick doesn’t eat them?” The doe actually kind of felt bad for her new hyena friend. The bunny found her own life confusing and alarming sometimes, she could not imagine playing catch-up from the outside at this point in her life.

“I have a lot of experience with repressing my feelings. I know the hazards.” Nick explained as he ignored Motti’s question, giving Judy at least some clue as to why he was so perceptive about it, and why he knew that he needed to provoke the conversation to really fix the issue.

“Can we talk about carnivorous rabbit?” Motti asked.

“Sure!” Nick said, turning around, causing Judy’s ears to fall back. She did not want to talk about that. She didn’t even really want the fish! “But before I tell you all about that, let’s hear the Origin Story handed down in your village.” Motti looked with wide, surprised eyes back at Nick.

“Shetani’s diet must remain a secret,” she said in an official-sounding tone. Judy rolled her eyes. Clever fox.
“Okay, I think we’re ready.” Jack said, padding up to the seated group with Skye beside him, holding his paw. “I’m so sorry about the delay. It will not be repeated.” Nick stood up, helping Motti to her feet as well. Judy dusted herself off.

“You aren’t always going to get along,” Nick said casually. “Even Judy and I will have our spats, but you will find they happen less if you talk like you did there.” They fell into step behind Motti who plodded along as if they had merely stopped for a snack.

After a few minutes of just walking along, Skye seeming very tired and emotionally drained, Jack spoke again. “So… I can ask questions about the story I ended up insulting?” he asked. Skye tensed up a bit, and then sighed out heavily.

“We don’t have to,” she said after a moment. “I know you said what you did just because it would get a rise out of me, but you already know the studies or you would not have referenced them. That story has certainly been blamed for the whole buffet of fox stereotypes you so eloquently listed for us, and I’m not going to gain anything by defending it. It’s just a story.” Judy looked over to Nick beside her. He could help with that, right? Surely he knew something to help with that. Nick did not intervene, however. Was he upset over Jack’s viciousness about that character too? The doe considered the statue in the middle of New Reynard.

“Do you feel that way about the story, Skye?” Judy asked, not wanting to leave it at that. Nick squeezed Judy’s paw warningly.

“Oh no! Certainly not!” The tone Skye used was defensive, as if the doe had accused her of abandoning her very culture.

“So, then… explain what he means to you,” Jack said calmly, still holding Skye’s paw.

“What?” the white vixen asked, caught perhaps off guard.

“He doesn’t represent those things to you. That’s what Judy was asking about… So how do foxes see him?” Jack asked with genuine curiosity in his voice. Judy smiled at that. It was a good question. She was actually glad she said it.

“Well… I guess… First of all I want to know why you don’t like him,” Skye said. Judy tightened up anxiously. Then again, maybe that wasn’t such a good idea.
“I never said I didn’t like him,” Jack responded.

Skye’s blue eyes tracked back to her stripped bunny as she spoke. “Okay, then you don’t respect him. He helped people. You help people. He was brave and stood up for what he believed was right. You do that. You have things in common. Why don’t you respect him?”

“Uh, well, because I can be all those things and still respect the rule of law?” Jack offered with an air of superiority.

“So you just see him as a criminal.” Skye said with a tone of bitterness in her voice.

“Was he not?” the bunny asked. “I mean, don’t get me wrong, it’s good to help, I help all the time, but I am happy to give it, I don’t want it just taken. I’m not greedy, but stealing is stealing.” Judy felt a sinking sensation of dread. She screwed it up. She pulled Nick’s hand. Help.

Nick finally spoke. “Jack, if you were to meet him right here, right now, what would you ask him to do?”

“What?” Skye asked.

Jack looked up at Nick curiously, slowing a little before he answered. “I’d tell him that there’s a better way to take care of the problem! You can help people and not drag yourself, your family, your whole species down.” Skye sighed a bit at that.

“It’s okay, we don’t have to talk about this,” she said rather sullenly. Nick sighed as well, causing his partner to grit her teeth. She caused this. Her mind raced for a while as they plodded along silently.

Jack spoke meekly. “No, I’m sorry, Skye. I am not trying to be closed-minded, I want to understand. I need to understand. You are worth it to me to understand.”

Skye held his paw up a little, squeezing it reassuringly. “We can talk about it later… when we are not so drained, Jack, it’s alright. I’m not mad, just really tired. We’ll figure it out. I still love you.” He nodded sadly, and they continued to walk. Judy thought hard for a while. Jack’s hang-up was on something specific. He hated what was being done, not who was doing it or why, but wasn’t the thing that was being done still genuinely wrong? What if she had this conversation with Nick?
Would it be the same? Did Nick still respect this hero, even though he was a cop? How would Nick deal with him if he were real, alive in Zootopia, stealing from the rich to give to the poor? Would he steal from Jack? Jack already gave so much… Judy snapped her ears up high. That was it.

“If he came into existence in Zootopia, he’d be pretty bored,” Judy proclaimed out of nowhere.

“What?” Nick and Skye both asked at once.

“If he were alive today, no one would notice.” Judy said firmly.

“Judy…” Nick’s tone was one of warning. She was treading on something sensitive. The bunny knew that.

“No, I want to hear her explain this.” Skye said. Jack nodded. Nick gave a very firm squeeze to his lover’s paw.

Judy continued anyway. “Nick, if we found a family with starving children at work tomorrow, what would we do?”

Nick shrugged. “Help them get set up for assistance payments, job-training, all that. I know what you’re saying… it’s a different world out there for the poor now, but…”

The bunny shook her head. “No buts, that’s exactly where the misunderstanding is.” Judy said with some confidence. “Jack, you have watched the story played out in movies, maybe had it read to you as a kit, maybe even read it yourself, but you missed part of the story because of something you never had growing up. You only felt it once, and that changed your entire point of view about the world.”

“Do tell.” Jack said, appearing interested. He likely welcomed anything that would help him mend things with his fox. Nick still looked as nervous as he could look.

“Hopelessness,” Judy said earnestly. Skye looked curious, but neither she nor her frustrated lover seemed to get it. Judy inhaled deeply, “Jack, you think the story is, as face value, a tale about money being taken from those with money and given to the poor who needed it. I’m sure you understand that there were not programs in place to help them in those darker days. They had nothing to eat. They often had nowhere to live. Those poor mammals, left with nothing, were being asked for still
more when they had nothing to give. When this fox came along and used his skill and cleverness to take back some of what had been plundered from the poor, he wasn’t giving them money, Jack.”

“Uhhh.” Jack tried to interject, to inform Judy that was exactly what he was giving them.

Judy cut him off. “That’s never been what that story was about, Jack. He was giving them hope.” Nick squeezed Judy’s paw again, but this slow and warm squeeze was not the sort he used to warn her. She looked to him, seeing a warm smile on his muzzle.

“Please,” he nodded, indicating she should keep explaining.

“Yes, please.” Jack asked, eyes locked on her in interest. Skye looked back and forth between her bunny and Judy. She looked confused.

“Jack, you’ve grown up not having to really worry that much about how far you were going to go, and you know that you have had advantages. You have integrity and you give back to those less fortunate. You are altruistic and kind,” Judy explained.

“Oh please go on,” Jack said with a grin, getting his ear tugged by a smirking vixen.

“But when you ultimately realized that there was a big problem out there that all your money, time, and effort could not fix, you felt hopelessness. You wanted an answer, but there was no answer. Sometimes a problem is there that you just can’t fix. How much money did you give to the Genetic Research Foundation last year, Jack?”

“Kind of personal,” the striped bunny said.

“Ten million.” Skye stated.

“Skye!” Jack huffed.

“Let her talk, Squeaker!” his lover insisted. He suddenly didn’t seem to mind being called that, pulling himself closer to her. He was still her Squeaker.
“Why?” Judy asked.

“Because you deserve to finish what you were saying.” Skye answered.

“No,” Judy said, a little more clearly, “Jack, why do you give them the money? You said yourself… that in your lifetime they haven’t made a real breakthrough. You can’t change this undeniable reality around it. Why ten million? Why anything?”

Jack was visibly a little stressed and answered, “Hell, I don’t know. Because they need to see we are doing something!” He was pulled a little closer to Skye, as if protectively. “I know how bad my mom and dad wanted it, how much it hurt that not everyone could just hold their child like they could hold me. I see how much others want it, wish it… how much joy they see others have that they can never experience.” Judy felt a hard tug at her heart. This was it. This was exactly what she was after.

“So it’s not about the money.” Judy stated flatly.

“Oh, God.” Nick whispered. Jack stood, stunned, eyes wide, pupils moving side to side a little as it obviously began to fall entirely into place for him.

Judy spoke louder, not letting herself be interrupted. “They need hope. That one day it will be better. Just like him… You are there to tell them to keep their chin up. One day there will be happiness again.”

“Yes!” Jack cried suddenly. “Oh God yes! That’s all I want!” He was pulled hard into Skye and she ended up back on her knees, holding him in an embrace, thick white tail coiling around him again.

“It’s okay…” she whimpered to him.

“I’m sorry, Skye! I’m so sorry! I didn’t mean to be… I didn’t get it! I didn’t understand… I do now. I do.” Jack cried quite freely, and Motti sighed as she sat right back down alongside the trail. The hyena was being patient, fortunately. Judy felt like this was not a delay, however. This was needed. All of this needed to happen. She regretted little about it.
Nick pulled Judy close, arms wrapped tight around her. She sighed happily. She was grateful, feeling immensely better with the direction things finally went. She then tensed up and gasped as she felt Nick’s teeth on her right shoulder. It was a firm squeeze, a very good indication of a passionately grateful fox. Nick was often proud of Judy, but this was a gesture that told her how much. Her body tingled with a rush of joy at the feeling of foxy approval under his teeth.

Motti finally spoke, shaking her head as Judy looked up to her, “This is why we are happy being in the forest and not the city. City is making mammals too complicated. Motti is now travelling with scary Sungura ya Shetani, fox who is back from Hell, and monster-fighting other fox who loves strange bunny who is painted with stripes. Motti can never tell this story,” she said with a sigh of resignation.

“Hey, his stripes aren’t painted!” Judy said, looking around Nick’s arm as he nibbled the back of her neck, making her tail twitch.

“Why is a bunny having stripes, then?” Motti asked, understandably.

Skye looked up and smiled helpfully to their newest travelling companion. She stated matter-of-factly, “His mother was a striped hyena.”

Motti’s face went blank. “No.”
Jack held still as the understandably curious Motti pushed around at the fur along the bunny’s cheek. She used her dull, keratinous claw tip to sift the fur back and forth and find that the skin underneath was actually a different color, if only slightly. The stripes were real. Nick flicked his tail about happily, entertained by the hyena’s reaction to their relatively odd circumstances. Judy was finding that messing with everyone’s head was of particular interest to her fox, and she worried a little about how much fun he’d have if their relationship ever became common knowledge. She did not suspect he would make a spectacle of it, as he was considerate to her feelings at least, but could he really resist the temptation all the time? Judy remained seated in the shady grass where they had moved alongside the trail to recover from Jack and Skye’s short but ugly fight.

Motti spoke up, finally. “I don’t understand all the medical things you speak of, but your mother was really… I mean… Like… you were actually born from a…” Jack nodded at that. That part was definitely true.

“I was, yes. Not a fully natural thing though, again. Lots of medical science involved and even then, it wasn’t literally a combination of the two. Not in the, uh… traditional sense,” he explained. Motti finally stopped sifting through his fur, which made a grumpy-looking Skye relax a bit. Judy glanced back to her lady vulpine friend and wondered if Nick was the jealous type. The doe hadn’t really been in a position where someone was trying to get that close to her. Certainly no one had touched her like that in front of him.

Motti resumed walking again toward their destination, saying softly, “I was thinking that I was to be having some difficulty on the trip for what we might find.” She looked over her shoulder warily at the immediately following mammals. “I was not thinking I would struggle just knowing who you all are. I worry I have made a terrible mistake. No turning back now.” She laughed a bit at that, instantly dispelling the idea that she was really upset.

Nick nodded as he took Judy’s paw, “Yeah, crazy seems to follow us around. I will admit that.” Judy punched him in the arm. She didn’t want to be labeled as causing any of it, and it often felt like she was. Her job just made it likely that she was going to be where the crazy was happening, regardless of whose fault it was. She shook her head and Nick laughed with a good-natured tone.
The police officers walked right behind Motti quietly a bit, and Jack and Skye lingered a couple dozen meters further back. The latter couple was obviously softly talking, perhaps reassuring one another after that emotional outburst. Judy nodded to herself, ears back so as not to listen to them inadvertently. They needed that time alone.

Judy had originally suspected that they were getting close to the mine at the point that Skye and Jack had their fight.

She was so very wrong.

There was over an hour of hiking left to their destination. The wider trail made for a lack of shade. Judy found herself hugging the edge of the path alongside Nick to get what relief she could from the hot sun. Motti didn’t seem to care if she was in shadow or not. She was really used to travelling in this place.

After suffering a frustratingly hot hike, the forest rather abruptly became denser. The trail narrowed a bit before they came to a very large brown-colored rock-face. Judy found that the rock face formed kind of a ‘V’ that they had walked into, making for a sheltered area. There was only one direction they could even go at that point, and the little valley they were in became narrower as they continued on. The hills on either side went up steeply at least thirty or forty meters. Massive trees capped the steep hillside to cast dark shadows down over the valley, making it feel almost like a cave in and of itself.

Finally, they reached the focal point of the valley. It was a bare and grey-toned sheer rock-face. It looked like some of the cliff itself had been cleared away. Inside that indentation, there was the gaping maw of a cave. There was a heavy-looking iron gate that made it nearly to the top of the easily five meter tall cave opening, but not quite. It was very large. Nick panted a bit, leaning over. The last roughly quarter mile had been pretty much all up hill. It was tiring. Jack and Skye had fallen further behind, so Motti and the officers waited there a bit for them to arrive.

Nick asked breathlessly, “That’s it then?”

Motti answered, but did not appear to be so out of breath. “Yes, but I not really knowing how we get in. It’s locked. The gate I mean.” She pointed out the heavy industrial-looking padlock. It was almost as big as Judy’s head. Even as far back as they still were as they approached they could see the obvious bulky, defense of that gate. For how huge the gate itself was, it would have been difficult to open even without the lock, Judy thought. As Nick and Judy’s breathing caught up with them, the other fox and bunny arrived, plodding wearily past Motti.
“Well, that’s certainly imposing.” Skye huffed as she trailed her bunny boyfriend. “The doors must way half a ton each.”

Panting, Jack asked, “Why do we even need to go in, anyway? I mean, you guys searched it already and they weren’t down there, right?” However, before Motti could answer, Skye cried out loudly and snatched Jack by the ears, jerking him back rather violently. He lost his balance and ended up on his back with an understandable protesting cry. Judy cupped her muzzle, holding her breath. What the hell brought that on? Everyone stood still, glancing back and forth between the fearful-looking Skye and a stunned striped buck on the leaf-littered ground.

Nick regained the ability to speak first. “Skye, what was that for? He didn’t do anything!” Judy nodded at that, agreeing with the question entirely, if not so tactfully delivered. What could have warranted that? The vixen didn’t seem to be listening, gazing fixedly at the ground ahead of them, eyes wide, ears perked. She looked fearful. Motti began to walk toward it.

“Stop!” Skye commanded.

“What?” Motti looked on the ground. She then backpedaled a little, suddenly sharing that look of fear. Judy’s senses were heightened by her tension and the sound of birds high in the canopy was oppressive, as if even they were calling out in anxiousness.

“I… don’t understand…” Jack said as he sat up, rubbing one of his yanked ears. Skye moved forward achingly slowly and got onto her knees on the fallen leaves. They were a little thicker right there, but otherwise didn’t look strange. She slowly moved them away, side to side. She was barely touching them. As she did, Judy saw what, somehow, the vixen had spotted. There was a brown wire that led to something under the leaves, over to a pile of small stones beside a tree.

“What… is that?” Motti asked.

“Oh no…” Nick murmured, obviously catching on to what Judy was considering the same moment.

“Nobody move. Just stay… exactly where you are.” Skye said, her tone heavily stressed. She took a small folding knife out of her pocket and cut that single wire. A strained squeak came from Nick, who had gripped both his ears in his paws and pulled them back in horror at the vixen’s careful cleaving of that line. Skye then more eagerly scooped the leaves away, revealing what looked like a hinged clamp set in the leaves on the ground. There was what looked like a small battery in it. When stepped on, the mechanism would make contact for the battery. Skye pushed it to the side,
out of the path, exhaling deeply.

“Is that… a booby trap?” Judy asked, knowing the answer even as she said it.

“Skye!” Nick hissed with palpable distress, “I don’t think you should be cutting wires or touching anything!” He then cried out again as Skye dug into the pile of small stones to reveal a black tape-wrapped square with a little cylinder set into it. The wire that went to the battery-powered mechanism led into the cylinder. Nick let out a stuck breath and then cried, “Are you trying to send us back to Motti’s village as rain?!” The doe’s eyes fixed on the taped block.

“Oh my God…” Judy murmured under her breath, her body suddenly feeling like it weighed as much as a hippo. She was absolutely horrified. A bomb. The booby trap wasn’t a simple pitfall, a hanging fish-hook or anything like that. Whoever set that had wanted to kill literally anyone in that general area indiscriminately. Judy felt ill. They almost died. The bomb would have sent those little stones outward all around and that would have shredded everyone in the vicinity of the trap. Everyone almost died in a flash and she never saw it coming. Her chest hurt. She gritted her teeth, working suddenly to get her fear under control.

Jack looked exactly like Judy thought she would under the same realization.

“How did you even know… how did you see that?” Jack managed before just hugging his arms around his middle. The vixen sighed heavily, seeming to recover quickly from the stress that Judy herself was having a lot of trouble surmounting.

Skye finally answered as she stood and dusted off her knees. “We’re in a shielded valley, Jack. Leaves don’t blow around into clustered piles on the path because there’s no wind in here. The trees over us are too thick to allow that. It looked wrong, so I looked closer.” Nick, wide-eyed, looked to Judy, a paw over his obviously racing heart. He gave a slow nod that indicated he shared Judy’s immediate thought. That was a very fortuitous thing for Skye to have been watching out for.

“We take this as evidence, yes?” Skye asked, opening her pack and dropping the little square explosive into it. The chuff of it falling into the bag made Jack visibly jump.

“What? No, we leave that crap here!” he protested.

“N-No, Skye’s right,” Judy stated a little blankly, starting to get over her shock, “We have to have it.”
Nick stated the obvious. “I don’t think going into the mine is an option anymore.”

“We have to!” Motti shouted, actually spooking the explosion-wary group with her loud outburst. “We have to know what they hide! No one protects unsafe mine with bombs!”

“I agree, Motti,” Judy said sternly, “But we can’t help anyone if we get killed.” Judy didn’t move a muscle. The whole area could have more of those bombs, or any other kind of trap. The mammals who put those there might even still be around. “We have to get back to the village. I need to call this in. I need to tell Chief Bogo. It has to be escalated at this point. This needs to be investigated by the ZBI directly, Motti.”

“No!” shouted Motti. “It gets ignored like it always does!” Nick held up a paw, trying to get the distressed hyena to lower her voice. Jack wasn’t moving. He looked like he was still in shock.

Skye spoke up, her tone reassuring. “Motti, they can’t just ignore missing mammals and booby traps. Not with what all that suggests. They just can’t. Let us help you the right way… the way we know none of us ends up dead, okay?” Judy actually felt impressed with Skye’s demeanor. Nick might not be the only fox here who was ZPD material. The hyena sank a bit, sighing and looking at the ground. Judy loosened up a little as the hyena relaxed.

“We won’t just let it go, Motti…” Nick offered in a gentle tone.

“No!” This time the cry came from Skye, not Motti, as the hyena just bolted toward the gate.

“Oh no!” Judy cried.

“Get back here, don’t go near the gate!” Skye shouted angrily, and the white fox bolted after her, earning a deeply horrified cry from Jack. He got to his feet shakily and seemed to want to chase her, but he was rooted right where he was. He was still too shaken from almost being blown up. Judy looked hard at the ground between them. There were a few other leafy patches where a bomb could hide, but Motti and Skye were avoiding them as they both rushed the cave. Nick began to scurry along the edges of the path where roots, rocks and the like gave him what appeared to be a safer path. Judy followed suit.

Only a few meters before the gate, Judy watched as Skye caught up to the reckless Motti. Judy actually had to stop in place a moment with what she saw next. The vixen pulled in front of Motti
and grabbed her wrist, jerking her hard to the side and hooking a leg behind hers in mid-run. The motion worked with the hyena’s momentum like a swift lever and sent Motti tumbling on the bare, dusty ground. The area before the gate was slightly sheltered by the carved away rock face, leaving it perpetually dry. The vixen stood between her and the gate, panting.

Motti scrambled back to her feet from the grey, powdery ground and moved to push Skye away. “Stay out of my way! My family!” As Motti’s paws reached Skye, the vixen crossed her arms against the larger mammal’s own and then turned and pulled the heavy Motti hard over her shoulder, launching her to the side, right off the path. Judy’s jaw went slack at that.

“Don’t touch the gate, Motti!” cried Skye. “Damn it, stay down!” The doe resumed moving as quickly and carefully as she could toward the scrapping pair, still stunned at the vixen’s unexpected fighting prowess. She acted as Jack’s body-guard for the purpose of getting to join him on this trip, but it hadn’t occurred to the doe that she actually had any combat training. Nick arrived first and helped to corner Motti who sat up as if she’d make another go for it.

“Why?!” she screamed, “Motti is not your responsibility! You go away! I need to find my family.” Tears left dark marks over the hyena’s dust-coated face. Skye panted a bit and the other fox looked at the gate, his ears perking a bit.

Nick spoke breathlessly, “Because if you touch that gate, you’ll die.” Judy stopped short, looking at the massive iron barrier. It looked normal, but she finally realized what the foxes had both seen. The plants around the gate were stunted and small, curling back from it a little, and a few that had at some point been in contact with it were actually damaged or even obviously dead. Judy’s sensitive ears finally caught the dull, soft, constant and droning hum.

“It’s electrified,” Judy stated flatly.

“They don’t want us in there! Why?!” cried Motti, punching the dirt furiously. “What are they hiding?!”

Judy shouted back, having trouble restraining her anger over Motti’s recklessness. “We can’t go in the mine right now, Motti! We just can’t! Trust us, we will still help you, but this is foolish!” Motti just sat down with a dusty thump, hanging her head. She wasn’t crying. She just looked completely despondent and dejected. Judy looked back to find Jack still fixed in place on his knees where he was. He hadn’t moved from his spot at all, and hadn’t even been able to remain on his feet as his vixen fought the larger mammal a few dozen meters away. Suddenly, he pointed at the gate with an expression of alarm.
“Look!” he cried. Everyone looked to see that the cave wasn’t empty. There was a hippo and a familiar rhino. Pembe stood before them, dressed in shorts and a pawaiian shirt that looked like something Nick would wear, though it would have been large enough to stuff about ten of Judy’s partner into it.

“Gaudby!” cried Motti. “Don’t touch, gate is dangerous!” Pembe sighed and reached up to the wall, opening a metal box. Inside was a keypad. He tapped it a few times, the pad beeping in different little tones that sounded like an old touch-tone phone, before the dull hum from the gate stopped. He then used a key to open the lock, exiting the cave with his suit-wearing hippo companion.

“What’s going on here?” Nick asked sternly, Judy for the moment speechless. “We’re with the ZPD. We are investigating a crime.”

“You are investigating nothing,” stated the hippo, drawing out a huge, gleaming firearm. Judy recognized it immediately. It was the gun that had been found in Ukweli’s locker at the Mystic Spring Oasis. This was… really, really bad.

“No. No, no, no.” Jack whined.

Judy crossed her arms. “You do understand that by doing anything to us you are guaranteeing a much larger investigation.” She would not be intimidated. She had to keep her head about this and get them out of here. They were trespassing and did not really have jurisdiction to force the issue. They could be forced to leave and there was nothing that Judy could do about it but report this to the chief. Something was being hidden here and it would be investigated. For the moment, however, just leaving and making her report was the only thing on Judy’s mind. The next words spoken shattered Judy’s plans and sent a chill through her veins that rivaled the reveal of that bomb moments ago.

“Come on, in you go,” Pembe said, seeming sad more than anything. He indicated the cave. “I had hoped we would not cross paths like this.” The gleaming silver ornate sheath over his horn made him seem just as imposing as the giant hippopotamus with the heavy, shiny gun.

Motti whimpered. “Gaudby, why are you doing this? We were your friends! Did you kill Ukweli?” she asked plaintively.

Pembe shook his huge head slowly. “No. I am sorry. I could not keep it from happening. Any of this really. It’s too late. Please. Go inside.” At gunpoint, Nick and Judy and Motti were ushered inside.
“You, join them!” the hippo bellowed to Jack. His voice thundered through the valley-turned canyon. The buck was still on his knees, stunned at what was happening, holding his ears.

“There’s traps! I’ll get blown up!” Jack shouted back.

“A shame you weren’t already. You’re clear up to the gate, dumb ass,” the hippo grunted. Jack shook his head fearfully, looking warily at anything that looked like more leaves than there should be.

“You just want my friends to watch me get exploded!” Jack shouted.

“Oh for… I’ll get him,” Pembe grunted in frustration.

“Please,” his companion responded. Jack stayed put as the rhino moved purposefully to him. Judy’s heart raced. They could not let themselves get locked in here, but the danger of a massive firearm made the situation very one-sided. Pembe grabbed Jack pretty roughly by the paw and pulled him toward the gate. Jack resisted at first, and then began to stumble along more willingly. He likely got his little paw crushed a bit to get him to make him comply. He was hauled and practically thrown through the gate. The huge iron barrier was immediately slammed shut, the boom of it echoing through the cave behind them. Judy watched as Gaudby slowly dialed the code into the number pad on the other side of the gate. He seemed genuinely reluctant to do this. The hum returned.

“Why?” cried Motti. Judy backed up with the others away from the gate. The cave mouth was as large initially as a cathedral, but narrowed quickly to a more typical cave deeper in. It was inky black inside, though. Judy looked back as Motti growled at Gaudby Pembe.

“Kuwa salama, Motti,” the rhino whispered, shaking his head. “Usiende nyumbani.” And with that he turned and walked away.

“Wait, you can’t just leave us here! Are you serious?!” Nick cried.

“Well, I suspect that the foxes will live longer than the rabbits, if you know what I mean,” laughed the hippo.
“Jonas,” the rhino turned and growled, “…that’s not called for. Come on, we need to report this. This… complicates things a lot. We have less time now.” The hippo put his gun away and fell into slow and heavy step behind Pembe and they eventually walked away.

“Well, we’re in the mine,” growled Skye. “Thanks for that, Motti.” Motti sat down, hugging her knees and simply began to cry. Judy didn’t know what to even say to console her. Her recklessness cost them the chance to go back and report this and not get trapped in here. There was no other way to spin it. The hyena might very well have gotten everyone killed. Judy inhaled deeply. They would figure something out. They had been in fixes like this before, the bunny and her partner.

She looked back to Nick for reassurance and her heart just sank. The look on his face was absolute terror. She had not expected him to look like that, but his chest was rising and falling rapidly, his eyes wide and pupils so large she could hardly see the green in his eyes at all. His paws were shaking and he looked completely panicked.


“Uh…” Skye looked at the suddenly the bunny’s shaking partner.

“What…” Judy backed up a little.

“No!” snapped Nick. “I don’t want this. I don’t want to be here. This can’t be happening!” His voice was suddenly raspy and scratchy. The look and the change in his voice made it instantly clear to Judy what was happening. Nick was stuck, and if they couldn’t get out, he’d starve. Just like before. Only, this time, fish were not the option. Judy felt a flash of emotional agony over what was going through her beloved fox’s head. This was the absolute worst possible situation for him.

Judy embraced her shaking partner. This was a nightmare for him. She had to shake him out of it. “Nick, it’s okay, we’ll get out! It’s not like when you were in Hell. Help me think! I need you.”

“Guys…” Jack said, trying to distract attention.

“Don’t go home?” asked a confused-looking Motti. “Why does he say ‘don’t go home’? He locked us up!” The last part came out as an echoing scream.
“Seriously, everyone, look…” Jack said again with some insistence.

“Judy, if I start to get hungry…” Nick whimpered, still shaking. Judy grabbed Nick’s muzzle roughly, giving him a shake.

“It’s not coming to that! Stop it, Nick!” she said sternly to her actively hyperventilating partner. She had to get him under control. Carlisle had been dead wrong to clear them for duty. Then again, the duties they had been assigned were not at all likely to lead into something like this. It was never supposed to be anything much more intense than desk-work. Bogo would never have suspected such an outcome. He had, by not putting them back onto regular patrol, perhaps wanted to ease Judy and her partner back into things.

“Guys!” shouted Jack. Everyone looked at him.

“What?!” Skye shouted back, obviously also stressed about Nick beginning to absolutely freak out.

“I… I think Pembe may not be a willing bad guy here,” the buck said a little more meekly because of the severity of Skye’s tone.

“Are you kidding?!” Nick cried back to him. Judy made note of the fact that absurdity shook Nick from ‘that mood’.

“Seriously, he just kinda left us here to die, Squeaker!” Skye said with a huff.

“Why is he being called Squeaker?” asked Motti. Judy looked back to her, ears folding to her back again. This hyena fixated on the oddest things in times of stress.

“I guess it’s the sound he makes when he…” Nick started, going right along with her. Judy covered her face in her paws. This was better, but not useful.

“Look!” Jack shouted, interrupting Nick before he could reveal more. He held up, in his little paw, a dark-colored key. It was the one for the heavy padlock on the gate.

“What?” Skye asked, peering at it as she moved quickly over to it. “Oh you quick, sexy bunny, how
“Is that…” Nick asked, also approaching.

“Hey, I didn’t filch it,” Jack said, as if anyone would hold it against him if he did, “Pembe pushed it into my paw when he grabbed me and pulled me to the cave.”

“He told me to be safe… and don’t go home.” Motti said in a curious tone. Judy’s mind reeled. What was going on? Why did he do that? Was he working against whoever was behind this, or was it merely conscience over Motti? He said he hadn’t been the one to kill Ukweli, and Judy knew he’d saved the departed lycaon at one point. Was this some kind of penance for everything?

Nick shook Judy from her musing. “Well, we can unlock the gate, but we can’t turn off the electricity,” he clarified. Judy inhaled deeply and sighed as quiet as she could. He was acting more like his thinking self, at least. There was a new path to him that didn’t involve the unthinkable thing that had played itself out in his mind. She was glad. Nick paced. “We need to figure out a way to hold the lock and put the key in it without getting zapped, and then open that heavy gate without actually touching it.” Nick glanced over to Judy and Skye. There was a measured pause.

“Not it!” Skye shouted.

“Not it!” Nick repeated.

“Really?” Judy said flatly. She sighed and then moved over toward the gate. “Well, guess it’s gotta be me, huh?” she asked.

“Oh cripes, Judy!” Nick bolted, snaring the back of her shirt. “I was kidding, jeeze! Let’s think first!” Judy smiled at that and perked her ears up. She was as far as she needed to go anyway. She moved her little paw up to the keypad and struck a combination of eight numbers. The hum stopped.

“Oh wow…” Skye murmured.

“Judy…” Nick said, voice soft and stunned. The doe secretly relished the tone of awe in her partner’s voice. She loved to impress him when it really counted.
“The phone dialer keypad.” Judy said, nodding to it. “Pembe entered the code extra slow. I thought it was a mistake, but with the key and all, maybe it wasn’t. I listened to the sounds carefully.”

“I was unaware that you could do that,” Nick stated with disbelief. “Why can you do that?”

Judy smirked smugly and answered, “I used to guess phone numbers that my sisters were calling when I was worried about where they were going, what they were doing, all that. I uh… I might have threatened a few of their boyfriends with certain harm if they were unkind to my sisters.” She rubbed the back of her head. It sounded less like the moral high ground when she laid it out like that.

Nick grinned, shaking his head, “You? Using fox-level cunning and nearly unethical coercion? I’m shocked.” Judy rolled her eyes as Jack stood in front of the gate with the key.

“Go on, open it.” Judy said.

“What if there’s like, residual charge or something?” he asked.

“Here…” Skye took the key and used it, the buck cringing heavily.

“Stop doing that!” he cried, visibly upset. She looked back at him, eyes wide. “First running through the damned minefield after Motti and then grabbing a possibly electrified gate… I can’t lose you, Skye! Please!” The vixen appeared a bit surprised by that, and just scooped up her bunny, hugging him tightly.

“I’m sorry, Squeaker, I just… I couldn’t let her get... cooked in front of us.” She pushed her cheek against his, an obvious fox-marking given. That elicited a flood of happy emotion in Judy.

Jack chuckled. “You’re just gonna keep calling me that, aren’t you?”

“You can call me something silly too, if it helps.” Skye chuckled, a grin on her muzzle as she nodded to her lover.

“Don’t tempt me. I’d call you Magic,” Jack said, seeming to actually be near tears. The expression on Skye’s face started as a blanch, but then quickly shifted, her ears going back as she perhaps
remembered more clearly the conversation they’d had just over an hour ago.

Eyes wet, Skye touched her nose along Jack’s jaw as she whispered, “I might actually like that…” The Buck’s eyes widened.

“Really?” he asked. He was answered by a soft bite where his jaw met his neck, making his muzzle part involuntarily.

Judy reluctantly intervened, knowing from plain experience where that was likely to go. “Okay, you romantics. We need to get moving. We have absolutely got to call for backup at this point.”

“We can’t go.” Motti said.

“We have to stay.” Nick agreed. Nick’s statement stunned Judy more. This was a fate worse than death to him a minute ago. Why was he dragging his feet now?

The doe threw her paws up. “What are you talking about?! We just got kidnapped at gunpoint and left to die!” Judy fairly shouted.

Nick replied in a softer tone, “Motti said that Pembe told her not to go home. I think she needs to check here.”

Motti nodded emphatically. “He… He said that, yes. You are thinking…” she looked pleadingly at Nick. The red vulpine shook his head slowly.

“I don’t know, but I feel like we were supposed to. Also, we’d be better to wait a little while anyway. We don’t want to leave with Pembe and that hippo close by. The rhino’s not gonna be able to help us a second time.” Nick turned to head into the mine.

“Wait, I’m coming with you.” Motti said. Judy sighed. Of course she was. The doe pulled the gate closed again so at least it looked like it was secure and looked at Skye and Jack. “You can stay here, if you like… This could be dangerous. I can’t ask…”

“We’re coming,” Jack said shakily. “Right, Skye?” The vixen nodded at that.
“We’re all safer together,” she replied. With that, the group began to descend in the mine. The first bend or two in the mine were nearly pitch black to Judy, but after that, little lights began to come on every time the group drew near them. They were positioned every fifty feet or so.

“How are they powering these?” asked Jack, touching one curiously.

“Battery, it looks like.” Skye said, actually casually prying one off the wall. Judy wanted to tell her not to touch them because they were not hers, but she could not think of a better reason why. They at least had something like a flashlight to walk with. “I think it has an infrared sensor on it so it only comes on if someone walks past it. It’s efficient.”

Also efficient was the fact that they did not put out much light, but this didn’t matter to the two foxes and the hyena. They had great night vision. Jack and Judy both gripped a fox tail as they moved quietly along. The movement was slow because a lot of care went into making sure they watched for traps. Nothing of the sort was found inside the mine, however. Motti, as promised, was familiar with the mine and moved swiftly down a few corridors, each ending in an expected dead-end. She was being thorough about her search, but Judy was increasingly nervous about how long this was taking. After three such results, she wondered if they were wasting valuable time. Pembe and the hippo might come back, and they said they had to report this, so others might be with them. Being trapped might not even have been their final disposition in all of this.

“Wait…” Motti said in a whisper, shaking Judy from her quiet concerns. “This… This wasn’t here.” They were at another dead end, but it terminated in a heavy-looking solid wood door. She pulled at the handle. It was locked. “This wasn’t here! It’s new! It’s new!” The hyena’s excitement was paired with frustration. She clearly expected answers on the other side which the door was denying her access to.

“Hold on, Motti…” Skye murmured, “Don’t just…” The vixen was cut off by the heavy, suddenly furious hyena shouldering the door as hard as she could. Judy winced sympathetically because that obviously hurt the larger mammal’s shoulder.

“They’re here! I know it! I know!” cried Motti, hitting it again. Skye snatched Motti’s shorter tail and jerked her back.

“Stop! Geeze! I’ll open the door!” the white fox growled in frustration. Motti backed up, rubbing her shoulder. Judy took the hyena’s paw, comporting her. She knew the feeling. The knowledge that the one they wanted was just behind an impenetrable barrier paired with shoulder trauma was an experience they now shared. It was all too real to the bunny. Skye opened her folding knife again, pushing it into the top of the hinge of the door.
“Woah…” Jack marveled.

“This door’s meant to lock someone in, not keep us out,” Skye stated.

Jack released a long sigh. “Skye, every minute I’m with you makes me lament every day of my life I spent without you,” he positively purred. She laughed meekly and shook her head, pulling the pin up through the hinge enough to yank it free with her paw.

“I need your help with this one, Motti, I’m not tall enough,” Skye asked, not responding to her lover right then. Motti had a little more difficulty getting into the hinge to work the pin up, but eventually got it free. Judy felt like maybe Skye had installed so many doors that something like this was simply second nature to her, but the vixen was thinking impressively clearly. It made Judy suddenly glad they brought her along. With the pin out of the top, Motti immediately went to open the door.

Skye instructed her carefully, “No, it’s still locked there. Just give the hinge-side a little kick. It’ll come out a little…” Motti did that, a hard thump echoing in the cave from her kick. As planned, the door was shaken a little from being level with the frame. Motti caught the edge with her hard claws and ripped the whole thing out, actually throwing it to the side noisily.

There was another tunnel on the other side. There was also the smell of food which struck Judy as odd. However, if there was food, there was likely someone there to eat it. Motti gave a strangled cry.

“Someone’s here. Please. Oh please…” she moved into the darkness.

“Wait, careful!” Skye went in with her, and through the winding tunnels downward they went. It did not take too terribly long before a greater source of light was evident.

“Hold up, I hear voices,” Jack warned.

“I do too…” Judy halted, holding Nick’s tail. “Shh…” They were still a moment, and then crept through the tunnel. The doe wanted to be cautious in case the voices belonged to someone affiliated with that hippo and rhino, but Motti immediately strode forward. Her movement was quiet, but she did not hesitate.
“She is so gonna get us killed.” Nick sighed.

“Quiet, Janga.” Jack hissed.

“What does that even mean?” asked the fox.

“It means ‘disaster’,” Jack replied, following with Skye because he was still holding her tail, and she’d gone after Motti.

“Wait, really?” asked Nick. “Seriously? Come on, it’s not that bad. Come back!” he hissed, and Judy and her fox were in motion. The next thing they heard was an exclamation from Motti.

“Momma! Papa! Kijivu!” Judy’s heart raced, knowing what it must have meant. Nick sped up. She couldn’t blame him. They rounded the corner that lead to the source of the light and found a much larger, more open area. It was a natural part of the mine, an actual cavern. The low hum of a generator somewhere in there was accompanied by brighter electrical lighting. This put light on a camp with six fairly large tents. The camp was populated by three lycaons, two lionesses, and originally three, now four hyenas. Motti was surrounded by what was obviously her family. All of them were sobbing. Judy had to fight back tears herself. They helped Motti. They actually helped the hyena like they had hoped.

The other mammals in the area looked surprised and alarmed, none of them trying to move. The lycaons looked like they were wearing drab grey prison uniforms. One of the lionesses was wearing a tattered robe or some kind and the other was nearly naked, wearing only shorts and no top. They all looked under-fed and very dirty. The half-dressed lady lion had an obvious injury with brownish bloodstain along her midriff. Judy gave a wary glance to Nick. He looked… okay with all of this. He was peering intently at all of them as they all inspected the hyena that had suddenly arrived. No one appeared to even notice yet that she wasn’t alone.

Crying wrestled under control, the older female hyena finally cried, “You should have stayed away, Motti! Now you’ll die here too! Why did you let them catch you?!” This was probably her mother, Judy thought. Clad in a black and red shirt and dark colored trousers, she was actually larger than the already pretty massive Motti.

“You aren’t gonna die here,” Motti growled. “You aren’t. We’re leaving!”

“What?” the older male hyena asked. He was adorned in some kind of brightly colored robe that
was reminiscent of the village he was from. Nick, Judy, Jack and Skye stepped forward from the narrower part of the cave where they had been standing.

“We are here to save you,” Motti said, more than a little bit of pride evident in her voice.

“We? Who’s we?” asked the younger male, obviously Kijvu. He was a shirtless grey and charcoal colored hyena. He was a little smaller than Motti, but a little bigger than her dad.

The doe stepped forward slowly. “I’m Judy Hopps. We’re with the ZPD.”

“Really?” asked Kijvu, suddenly stepping back, his eyes wide. He looked suddenly excited. “Wait, are you serious? It... It’s over? It’s just... over?!” A cheer went up from the other mammals, all immediately on their feet.

“Hold on! Quiet down!” called Nick. They listened, suddenly appearing fearful. The fox took a breath and spoke again. “Nick Wilde, ZPD. Look, we aren’t out of danger yet. The guys who put you here are still out there.”

“What?! You didn’t take care of them first?!” cried the uninjured lioness. “You’re crazy!” She didn’t even have an accent, so Judy felt as if she might have actually not been local.

“We have to hurry.” Judy said, joining her partner in trying to get the situation under control. “We won’t stand a chance if we stay. It’s dangerous out there, but we can get to a safe place at least. Here, your fate won’t change.” Judy folded her ears back. Yeah, they were in it deep now. This was not at all what they were here to investigate, but they would have to report it. It was a nice result, but they were going to have to explain why they didn’t bother actually investigating Lupin. At least they would have something to show for it. The mammals in the camp grabbed a few items, including the food they had been eating. Given that it had just been cooked, Judy felt like maybe it had been delivered by the rhino and hippo. After gathering what they intended to take with them, they quickly joined Motti as she headed for the exit.

The group wasted no time as they hurried through the tunnels. The new one that Motti had never seen before wound downward nearly a half kilometer, one of the longest by far, and then there was the main tunnel of the mine itself.

As they walked hastily through the darkness, Judy could hear Motti several mammals ahead as they moved. She asked loudly, “What were you all doing down there? Why were they keeping you?”
she asked.

“Oh Motti, they were destroying it,” her mother said. “They were making it like it was never there! They were having us dig out to the aquifer to flood the whole hall of stories!”


“This is secret.” Motti’s brother replied in a cross and warning tone. Judy felt a sudden wave of apprehension. The secret. It might all have something to do with the professor after all.

“We will worry about all that later,” Nick said, “I need everyone to be quiet. Our ears should be up front, we’re near the exit.” Judy moved with Jack into the light that spilled through the open gate. The sky bore hues of orange and gold as the sun sank lower in the sky. It was getting late. Judy heard nothing. She looked at Jack and nodded.

“It’s clear, come on.” Jack stated, “Be careful though, don’t walk anywhere with thick leaves. They had traps set.”

Cautiously, the mammals all emerged. Judy felt a tug at her heart as she realized all of them were crying. They had been down there for weeks, some of them possibly longer. Maybe they had never expected to see the sun set again. There was hugging and quiet rejoicing.

“I don’t think we’re all gonna fit in the raft.” Nick observed.

“We can’t take the raft anyway; we have to take the path back to the village.” Kijvu said warily.

“We can’t go back to the village yet. It’s not safe.” Motti said. “Pembe said don’t go home.”

“Pembe’s with them, bunga!” Kijvu exclaimed in a hoarse whisper.

“He’s not. Not completely, at least. He gave us the key to get out.” Jack said. “If nothing else... he’s regretting something. I don’t know.” The buck shrugged.
“No way…” Motti’s father said.

“I was so sure he was rotten, too.” Nick added, shaking his head. “I mean, his first name literally anagrams to ‘bad guy’.”

Jack stopped walking and tilted his head. “Huh…”

“C’mon, keep up.” Skye prodded Jack a bit and they resumed.

“I can’t believe they sent bunnies,” the shirtless lioness said, falling into step behind Judy. She didn’t seem to be trying to be offensive, she was genuinely surprised.

“Sungura ya Shetani,” stated Motti calmly.

“Uh, no.” Kijvu said firmly.

“You’ll see.” Motti said. Judy shook her head and followed along, her ears focused for any sounds outside of the group. She was actually surprised that they were not immediately besieged as soon as they exited the cave. It felt almost too easy. However, if Pembe really did intend for them to escape, he’d not have given Jack the key if it was certain they could not have left unchallenged.

“We need to listen around us,” Jack interrupted.

“Sorry.” Motti whispered. The walk continued in silence. Judy trailed at the back with Nick, and Skye and Jack walked with Motti at the front. The rescued mammals spoke with Motti very quietly. It was found that they from three separate villages. The lycaons were arrested for theft in two different villages. They didn’t speak the common tongue, so Motti translated for them. The hyenas, of course, were all from Motti’s village. The lioness pair was from the same village as one of the lycaons. They had grown up in Zootopia but moved to the Interior five or six years earlier. They had been drugged at a celebration and brought to the mine the same night at the lycaons. Everyone was forced to dig day and night toward what they all assumed was going to be death by drowning.

Judy was absolutely appalled that such a thing was being done to them. It did not help her opinion of Pembe, even with his apparent change of heart that he allowed this to go on at all. He had to have known. There would be little leeway for him in the courts when Judy got this report to the chief, she would make sure of it. This was absolutely unconscionable.
Once introductions had kind of been exchanged, everyone kept close together and quiet. After a good two miles of hiking into the darkness of night on a trail that went up into the mountain, Motti had everyone go off the trail along a less obvious older path that went down into the valley. She said that it would be safer because the valley offered better shelter, and they could follow the stream at its bottom out to a fairly large village that would have more modern structures. This allegedly included, to Judy’s absolute elation, a cell tower. They could go there and call for help without ever actually going into the village itself. Risk would be minimal.

One thing was very clear to Judy by that point, and that was the thing that was terrifying her most of all. The Interior Department was involved. They gave that gun back to the hippo. It was the same gun and Skye had been clear it was a rare and expensive weapon. The government was involved in this conspiracy yet again, whatever it was. Judy and Nick needed help from someone they could trust. They had to contact Bogo and make sure he knew. Even the chief could be in danger if this went higher than him.
Unity

Chapter Notes

Life continues to push back against my love of writing, but I am bearing with it. It will get easier once I have my job situation sorted. It’s not been easy, but with help from friends and fans and with art commissions and the like, I’ve kept my head above water. Thank you for all your concern and support. I hope to focus on the things that make me happy more in the coming weeks!

If you are just joining Guardian Blue for the first time you will want to check out Season 1 first, and I would highly recommend Thanks for the Fox before that as well so everything makes sense. ^^

Zootopia ain’t mine, no matter how much I wish it would have been. I have created worlds in the past, but they were always fantasy-oriented. Having more in common with the characters is actually pretty refreshing.

Also! A HUGE shout-out to J. N. Squire for assisting with editing for Season 2! In some cases he doesn’t get to edit until after posting because scheduling means you may all have to wait a lot longer for a chapter that just gets some slight typographical and flow-setup attention. Thank you, everyone, for your patience and support with this long-term personal endeavor.

Guardian Blue: Season Two

Episode 16: Unity

Nick gazed up quietly at the stars alongside Judy as she rested on her side pushed up close to him. It was some time before dawn. They had slept fitfully with the uncertainty that they would be discovered, despite members of the group keeping guard. The forest was dense and it was impossible to tell if they were being followed. Some sleep had still happened. It had been a terribly long day. It felt like almost a week worth of things had passed in that time and it was hard for Judy to get her mind around the things that were going on.

They had nearly drowned rafting over the rapids. Skye and Jack had gotten into a serious fight that was then emotionally resolved. The group nearly died from a planted bomb. They had been taken captive and locked in the mines. Pembe had intervened inexplicably. They had rescued the missing mammals from the villages around the mine. They had uncovered a possible government conspiracy concerning the secrets that this indigenous population had been protecting. There had been kidnappings. There had been murders. These were extremely dangerous mammals. Soon,
however, they would not be alone in this. The conspiracy, like the one she’d discovered at the beginning of her career, was not universal. These mammals would pay for what they’d done.

“I missed this, honestly,” the fox whispered beside her. Judy perked up a bit, shaken from her thoughts. The soft sounds of other mammals in their dark wooded camp softly snoring or shifting on leaves made it so it wasn’t a full break of silence, but her attention fixed on her partner.

“Missed running for our lives and nearly being killed every hour, on the hour?” Judy asked with a tired chuckle.

“No, Fluff,” Nick laughed back softly, “Camping. I missed camping. I wish I’d done this with you sooner. With a tent. And bug spray. And marshmallows.” Nick’s voice was wistful as he smiled. Judy was amazed at how calm he could be when things got hard. They had not spoken about his panic in the mine. This was not the time.

“You like camping?” Judy asked, pushing in even closer to her beloved vulpine and stroking his bare chest. His shirt was spread out under them to give them something other than bare ground to rest on, which suited Judy just fine. The cuddling pair simply wasn’t bothering to conceal their relationship. No one was even really paying attention to it. They had their own important things going on right there.

“My dad and I used to do this a long time ago.” Judy’s heart lurched. It was one of those rare occasions where she got to look a little deeper into the heart of her fox. Her ears lifted and she focused on him so hard it utterly muted the other sounds around the smoldering campfire. “It’s what we did the only time I ever went to New Reynard. I think I was only five or six back then. It’s strange how the smell of the fire and the sounds of the forest at night can make you really remember that stuff, even so far back.” Nick put his paws behind his head, propping it up a little, looking up through the small divide in the canopy to see the myriad of bright stars unfettered by the lights of the city.

“Happy memories I hope?” Judy asked. She was concerned at the kinds of things that would be remembered by someone who had lost their father so young.

“Yeah. I mean… I don’t remember much about the uh… the bad parts,” Nick looked into his partner’s eyes, murmuring softly, “I guess I never told you about what actually happened to him, huh?” He sounded regretful.

Judy shook her head and leaned in, planting a soft kiss just below his eye, on his cheek bone. “Nick, you don’t have to talk to me about that if you don’t want to. I know it’s not something you enjoy
discussing."

“Judy, I’m vowed up to you,” Nick said calmly. “That wall’s not for you anymore. There’s a little bunny-shaped door in it now, you can come as close as you want. I’ll not hide. It won’t always be happy stuff but you can ask me anything. If… If it’s something you don’t want to know, then I understand that. It’s not a happy memory after all.”

Judy lifted her head, looking into her partner’s uneasy eyes. Did he really think she would not want to know about something so important? She stroked his muzzle with her small paw tenderly. “Nick… You can talk to me about anything. When I claimed you as my fox, I didn’t just claim your soft, fluffy tail to cuddle at night. I really did want the whole fox.” She grinned at that, feeling a little wrong for how possessive she sounded, but his expression shifted to something less worried and she felt better for it. He then relaxed and looked back up at the stars.

“It was sudden.” Nick said with a sigh. “See, my dad was a tailor. He’d just, with some difficulty and some painful loans, opened a shop where the canals bumped up against Happytown. It was a rough start, and he had to work late hours to get the loans paid off and still support a family. He worked really hard.” Judy sat up a bit, paw on his slowly rising and falling chest. He wasn’t looking at the bunny as he spoke, just the stars, as if letting himself more clearly remember these long unspoken things.

“Overwork? Was that… what happened?” she asked. She had heard of quite a few mammals burning out like that.

“No… uh… actually…” Nick looked into Judy’s eyes and then away again. “One day, as he locked up shop to come home early to take mom to dinner… a rare treat…” He finally looked back into his partner’s eyes. “There were these two kids. Giraffes. They fell into the canal. My dad tried to save them.” Nick looked away again, sighing softly. “He didn’t have a chance, from what the witnesses said. They were panicked and they pulled him under. None of them made it out.”

Judy cupped her paws over her muzzle. That was way worse than what she was thinking. He died trying to save someone. Another shock ran through Judy of agonized realization. How had Vivienne even been able to look Judy in the eyes when her son had nearly died nearly exactly the same way? The bunny whispered, “Nick, I’m so sorry. I… I know he tried. I know he didn’t mean to leave you and your mom…”

“I know,” Nick said hastily. “I know that. I mean, I was very angry for a while, I remember that. I was a little kit. I didn’t feel like he abandoned us or anything. I just felt like it was all so… meaningless. It didn’t help anyone and it left my mom to try to pay off his loans and me to try to find the bright side. There’s not any. That was the part that really ate at me. He was a good mammal, I knew that, but it felt like being a good mammal didn’t count in the big, scary world. Like a lot of
things in life, you try to find meaning, but there’s not. You just keep going. He had to have known what his chances would be to actually save them. He did it anyway. I thought it was dumb, not valiant or anything like that.”

Judy traced her tiny claw tips back and forth over Nick’s chest. “I don’t think your dad thought it was dumb. He had to have thought there was a chance. You should be proud of him, Nick.”

Her partner sat up and wrapped his arms around the smaller doe. “Judy, I am proud of him. At least, I am now. I will admit, most of my life I didn’t understand why he did it. He knew what could happen, and he did it and I honestly never understood. Not until I got the chance to make that choice myself. The day came where I got to risk dying to save someone who I’d never met. Risk everything for a chance for someone who might not even remember me. And I made the same choice he did without hesitation. Twice now, actually. I knew the chance that we could be killed trying to go back into the mines, but the same choice came up and my answer was the same.”

“Nick…” Judy whispered.

“If we don’t help them, no one else will. No one else jumped in to save those kids. My dad didn’t want to be a hero, Carrots. He only thought he could give them a chance. Not a sure bet. A chance…” Nick looked into Judy’s eyes, a gentle smile on his russet face, green irises fixed on her. “He just knew he was the only chance they had. I wish he was still around, but I kind of doubt we’d be together if he had been. Everything might be different. So we move forward, and I like to think he’d be proud of me.” Judy pinched her eyes shut at that and leaned in and kissed her fox.

“Of course he would,” she whispered. She was deeply glad he had told her this.

“Wow,” came a soft voice beside them. Judy looked to see the shirtless lioness, arms wrapped around her middle. This was the one nursing an injury to her midsection. She had kept up with the group well enough so it seemed to be healing. Judy looked at her partner, not sure what to tell the big cat.

“It’s complicated.” Nick said flatly.

“Riiiight. Uh, we have a problem.” The tone from the lioness made it sound like it was a real problem, so Judy and Nick both say up on his laid out shirt.

“What’s wrong?” the fox asked.
“The lycaons left,” she said in a tone that made it seem like they were cutting class. It was a much, much bigger problem than that.

“What?!” Nick shouted. It startled a few of the others from their sleep obviously. Skye and Jack’s heads popped up together.

The feline shrugged a bit. “I don’t even know when. I think it was during one of their watches. I heard them talking about thinking we couldn’t be safe travelling in a noisy group, and we’d be better off if we split up. The oldest one put that argument to bed, I thought. I guess they changed their mind.”

Nick got up, Judy moving to get off of his shirt so he could hastily put it on. He stated anxiously, “We have to go.” He rose his voice. “All of you. We gotta go!”

“We aren’t being followed, and they probably just went home or something.” The lioness sounded like she felt that it wasn’t as big a problem. Others began to stir.

“What’s going on?” asked Motti’s mother.

Judy spoke up, loudly, “The lycaon’s bailed in the night. If they get found, our heading at least might be compromised. We are depending on help getting to us before _not-help_ reaches us.”

“Can we catch em?” Motti asked, struggling to get to her feet.

Judy shook her head, stretching a bit. “We do that and we give up the only chance we have to call for back up. Trust me… we are better off taking our chance with my team in Zootopia at least knowing what’s going on. The Lycaon’s chance is better that way too.”

“Why are we following the smallest mammal in the group again?” asked the uninjured lioness indignantly. Judy tightened up anxiously. The stress was building. She knew it would happen so long as they were in danger.

“Shetani is small, but she is the strongest. My family follows her,” Motti said resolutely. The three other hyenas looked a little uncertain, but nodded. They valued Motti’s opinion of the bunny, it
appeared. Judy loosened her shoulders a little. If it came to a vote at least, she knew it would go their way.

The non-injured lioness hissed, “We appreciate the assist, but the longer we are following you on your mission the easier it is for us to get caught and put right back in that mine or worse!”

“Judy is a well-respected police officer.” Jack stated solidly in the other bunny’s defense. The fact that he was also a bunny got a dismissive eye-roll from the lioness. “She’s trained to deal with these things.” Skye stood up slowly, obviously concerned about the mood. Judy’s partner was getting concerned too.

Nick spoke up quickly. “Look, you are right, we don’t have much time, and we can’t spend it arguing here!”

“He’s right,” Skye said bluntly. She already had their pack slung over her shoulder. She was ready to go at a moment’s notice.

Judy focused back on the hyenas who were the locals in the group. “Motti, how much further do we have to go until we are able to use the cell tower for the other village?”

“I don’t have a cell phone, I don’t know exactly.” Motti said.

“It’s line of site, pretty much,” Nick said. “How far do we have to go until we could see the tower?”

Motti’s father answered, his voice a bit gravelly with age. “Over the next ridge, actually. It’s not far. But there’s a risk. I don’t know if anyone in town’s gonna be part of Jonas’ private little army, so we don’t want to be seen on that ridge, and it’s been clear-cut. That was a lumber-town years ago.” Judy gritted her teeth. A clear cut ridge would let even a bunny stick out brilliantly against the sky behind it. Her attention then focused on one word that had been used.

“Wait, when you say army, how many people are we talking about?” the doe asked, tensing up a lot.

“Not that many, but you don’t need a lot of mammals out here. Just the right ones. Big, mean ones with weapons.” The older hyena answered.
Nick spoke again. “I don’t like it either but we gotta get on the ridge, regardless. We have to chance being seen. Once they know we got out of the mine, they are gonna know what we will likely do next.

A female voice took the attention of the group again. The uninjured lioness spoke uneasily. “W-We are not going with you, we’d be better off walking back to the mine.” The last part was delivered more resolutely.

“We stay together,” Judy ordered. The more they fragmented the less control they were going to have of an already precarious situation. “When I call for help, I can only help the ones who are with me.” The lioness who was still wearing a top strode over to the smaller officer and just picked her up by the back of the shirt. “Hey!” Judy exclaimed in irritated surprise. Nick and Skye both moved to intervene. While Judy might have originally not wanted Skye involved in anything physical, the vixen seemed almost as capable in a scrape as her own partner, so she welcomed the help. The captured bunny cop tensed up immediately at the feel of sharp claws pushed to the side of her face. The fully clad lioness growled slowly, in a cold, harsh tone. “We follow me and my sister and keep quiet until this blows over. If anyone makes a move otherwise, I change this bunny’s identity for her.” Judy felt a spike of rage. She was helping this mammal, and she actually took her hostage?

The other lioness winced a bit. “No, Cassie, that’s not what we talked about! Put her down!” she pleaded. “She’s still a cop!”

“Out of jurisdiction. She’s just a bunny.” Cassie angrily shouted back, focused entirely on her suddenly second-guessing sister. That was her second mistake, right behind underestimating Judy’s training.

“Mom, dad, don’t look.” Motti said bluntly.

Judy put both her little paws on the lioness’ strong wrist where she was gripping the back of the bunny’s shirt. Judy very quickly flipped up and over Cassie’s arm backwards so that it wrapped her shirt over it. This let Judy drop right out of the garment and onto the ground. The smallest officer gave a fast, very hard backward spin-kick to the back of her assailant’s knee. Cassie, already off balance trying to grab the agile bunny, cried out and went to the ground with an unceremonious thump. A loud groan came from Motti’s family who had still been looking.

“Woah,” Motti’s brother said in disbelief as Judy bolted quickly to the relative added defense of
literally everyone but Cassie.

“Told you.” Motti said without emotion.

“Cassie!” the other lioness said, bolting to her sister’s side. Judy relaxed a little as her attacker remained on her back, a bit stunned. She did not want to do that, but she could not let herself be used to endanger the group. Their best chance was still contacting the precinct for help. If this was a larger conspiracy they would not be safe out here without serious help. Not anywhere.

Motti’s dad spoke seriously. “If they don’t want to go, leave them here. They’ll cause trouble.”

“No, we stay together.” Judy said, picking up her shirt and putting it back on. Having been in the Mystic Spring Oasis with Nick, it was a lot less embarrassing than she might have found it before that experience. Judy dusted herself off a bit and continued talking. “It’s not like we can’t understand how afraid they are. We all are. But we can’t split up.” She leaned down over Cassie, checking on the lioness. Hopefully there weren’t both injured now. “Are you okay? Can you stand up? I tried to be careful.”

“Ugh… That was careful?” Cassie asked, shaking her head a bit. She leaned up into a sitting position. Cassie sitting up made her sister relax again.

“Hey, I got knocked out completely for attacking her.” Motti laughed, “Trust me, she went easy on you.”

“Wait, what?” asked Motti’s mother.

“She’s really a nice bunny, we promise,” Skye said, which Judy appreciated. It did not really relax the suddenly worried expressions of the elder hyenas or the sudden look of wonder on her brother Kijivu’s face. Judy was just never going to come back to this place. That was all.

“Can we please get going before we lose our only chance to survive this?” asked Jack with some exasperation.

“Seconded,” Nick said with authority.
“Are you okay?” Cassie’s sister asked.

“Yeah, I can walk.” She got up a bit unsteadily. “I’m so gonna file a ‘police brutality’ claim if we survive this.” she grumbled.

“Out of jurisdiction,” stated Motti.

“Oh shut up,” growled Cassie, falling into step behind the other lioness.

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Judy spent the next hour or so holding Nick’s tail, certain that Jack was doing the same with his vixen. Neither could see as keenly in the dark as their predatory counterpart, though they could see a bit in the starlight. It was enough to know the tree cover was dense, they were not on an actual trail, and even the hyenas were using nothing more than the stars to determine the direction of travel. Having Motti’s family to guide them turned out to be as helpful as Judy having a cell phone was about to be.

As the sun rose and the blue-grey misty morning began to unfurl out ahead of them, the bunnies didn’t need to have their fingers buried in fox-fluff. Both took their partner by the paw instead. There were a few off color muttered comments by the lionesses, but other than that the light and quiet conversations going on were not in a language Judy understood. She tried not to let her self-consciousness fuel the assumption that they were talking about her, but with how Jack occasionally chuckled and looked back at her, she was pretty sure they were.

After about an hour of walking, Motti diverted them away from the hillside Judy was sure they would have to walk up. She was sure because it had been clear-cut. It was stripped bare of trees and only grass and rock and low stumps remained. The lions protested a bit at the hesitation and Motti explained that they needed to get water. Judy had to agree there. They had been sharing the canteen in Skye’s pack and it was empty before the end of the previous day. Begrudgingly, Cassie agreed. Her sister, Charisse, was less confrontational. She had apologized to Judy twice during their walk, very softly so the other sister couldn’t hear.

It was not far down the hill before they found a small stream that had cold, clear water bubbling down through the rocks. There was what could only be described as a small cliff that lead down to
“Seems risky.” Nick stated with some discomfort.

Judy spoke reassuringly. “Those rocks look dry. I can jump down from each one easily enough.”

“I could manage it, yeah.” Nick said. There was a tone of uncertainty there that Judy knew exactly how to read. His leg hurt. Jumping down would be agonizing.

Judy shook her head. “I don’t want you to, Nick, your leg’s still mending. Skye, are you good at climbing and the like?”

“I wanna do it.” Jack said flatly.

“What?” Skye asked predictably.

The striped buck chuckled a bit dismissively at her tone of protective alarm. “I’m at least a little athletic, Skye. It shouldn’t surprise you to know I did some of my own stunts.”

“Yeah, with a team of medics on standby, Jack.” The white vixen crossed her arms.

“I can do this, it’s certainly not the hardest I’ve done. I want to,” he insisted.

“Alright. Just… Be careful,” his vixen offered tenderly. She nibbled the back of one of Jack’s ears where it met his head.

“Wait, them too?” asked Kijivu behind them. He was shushed by Motti.

Judy distracted them from that conversation. “I’ll be right back, Nick. Everyone rest a bit in the meantime. We might have a pretty hectic time ahead of us.” Grumbling, Cassie flopped down on the leaves. Charisse sat down beside her, talking softly. Judy sighed. Even if she managed to save them, she bet there was serious moral damage there. She could not help but wonder if she could have handled things differently to make it better.
Carefully, she hopped down from one large white rock to another, further and further down the cliff. It was probably only twenty-five meters or so, but she was carefully watching to make sure Jack was doing alright. He seemed competent enough, so perhaps he really had done rock hopping before. Skye cheered him on, and Nick watched quietly to make sure the bunnies both got down okay before his head vanished from the edge of the incline. He definitely needed to rest, Judy thought. She would take her time.

She placed her little paws into the cold, pure water and then dipped down, quietly drinking. She would reduce the amount she needed to carry in the canteen by getting her fill right from the source. Jack did this as well, taking even longer to drink before beginning to fill the canteen he’d brought.

This was done in relative silence before the buck finally spoke up. “So, uh… keep your voice real low, Judy. I wanna ask you something personal.” Judy looked up at him as she filled her canteen and just nodded. Nothing was quieter than just not talking. Him wanting to talk to her made his valor on the cliff suddenly make way more sense. Was he concerned about something the hyenas had been talking about? Were they starting to side with the lions? It was a distressing thought. Jack looked up at the cliff, perhaps seeing if anyone was leaning over it. He then spoke. “I almost died yesterday. You know that, right? I almost stepped on a damned bomb.” The doe nodded at that. Of course Jack was still rattled, and he hadn’t really talked to anyone about it.

“It’s alright,” Judy stated softly, “I don’t expect you to want to put yourself into this kind of situation. It’s a lot, and it’s really scary. You’ve done very well under these desperate circumstances.” She wanted him to know how he behaved, as a civilian, was not shameful. He froze up in front of the cave and had been pretty helpless. That was actually perfectly normal. He nearly got blown up and the hippo had that massive gun. Everyone was scared, not just him.

“Skye saved me, Judy. She’s amazing,” Jack continued. There was tension in his voice.

“We both have really nice foxes!” the doe chuckled in a whispered laugh. There was still novelty in her being friends with perhaps the only other fox-bunny couple in Zootopia.

Jack lowered his head a little, nose down, seeming so small there at the stream’s edge. His blue eyes stared up into hers. He said in a low and very serious tone, “Tell me about the vows, Judy.” The doe had to actually stifle a gasp.

“Jack…” she said, not even sure how to respond to that. Did he understand at all what that meant? Did he have a clue of how serious that would be?
“I mean it. I wanna know. Skye mentioned it. I was…” He hesitated. “Please don’t laugh here… but I was a little jealous of Nick. You know… He’s another fox. He’s a really great one.” Judy had to stifle a laugh at that. The idea that Nick and Skye were compatible as a couple was a lot funnier to someone who knew what living with that teasing, frustrating vulpine was actually like. With Skye’s temper, that would be a disaster. Jack kept whispering. “…so I worried. What buck wouldn’t? Skye realized how anxious it made me and she told me to stop worrying about that because he was ‘vowed up’ and that was more binding than a signature from any justice of the peace.” Judy looked wide-eyed at the nervous-looking buck. He was serious.

Judy lowered her voice as well, continuing to fill the canteen. “Okay, first, yes. It’s a big deal. The biggest deal. I think in some ways it’s bigger than how we see marriage because it can go one way. It doesn’t have to be both. When you take the vow, you are giving yourself to them for not one, but two lifetimes. That’s the promise.” She felt a little guilty again that Nick had done this, but her guilt was waning in light of how very much she looked forward to both lifetimes with him.

“Wow… so… What if I vow, but she doesn’t vow back? Can she leave me?” he asked.

Judy folded her ears back. “If you are doing this because you are afraid she might leave you when we get back to Zootopia, it’s the wrong choice, Jack.” She sealed her full canteen.

“I can’t bear the thought of being without her, Judy,” Jack whined. “Would you have left Nick after he vowed?” he asked. That was not a very fair question.

“Absolutely not, but I don’t think I could have anyway. But… he couldn’t have known that for sure,” Judy explained. She hadn’t really considered how scary it was for Nick to use his promise without even knowing for sure if Judy would want him the way she did. Still, Nick wasn’t blind to her actions. He had to have known something was there.

“What if you had said no?” Jack asked, obviously afraid of that possibility of rejection to his promise.

Judy took a long, slow breath, collecting her thoughts. She could not let Jack pursue this recklessly. It was way too important. “From what I understand, Jack, I can’t say no, I just don’t have to promise anything in return. That’s how it really is. That was his promise to make. His to keep. I can just keep living my life knowing that Nick’s mine, even as I start a family of my own. I can even decide he won’t be a part of it. But he will always be mine. Two lifetimes. It’s two lifetimes, whether I want to reciprocate anything or not. If I don’t want him, he gets to be alone. For Nick, this sad possibility is only gonna happen if I die first.” She said that a little louder to ensure that Jack knew that Nick didn’t waste his promise.
“Geeze…” Jack stated in a hushed tone. “That’s… super heavy.”

“Yeah,” Judy murmured. “You can imagine how freaked out I was when he gave me his vow in front of both our parents.”

“Holy cow,” Jack said in reverent awe. “He really went all the way. Gave you everything no matter what would happen. He just… knew that was what he was going to do.” The sound of wonder in the buck’s voice brought a gentle smile to Judy’s lips. She was glad he knew the seriousness of Nick’s dedication to her.

“Before you ask, I haven’t given the vows back to him yet,” Judy said softly. “He wanted to take dating a little slower and enjoy all the aspects of having a relationship. But I doubt I need to tell you how I feel about him.”

“Can you tell me the vows?” he asked.

“What? Here? Now?” Judy hissed under her breath, “Jack, I’m not the right mammal to tell you those.” Her heart was suddenly racing. Sure, Nick had told them to her while she was medicated. He wasn’t even supposed to be in her field of view when he said it. It was that… what? Dangerous? Serious? Magical? Judy felt a little shock run through her. Of course Jack would be interested. It was very mysterious and magical to him. But how would Skye feel if the buck did this? Would she be angry? Would she be happy? Judy didn’t know her well enough to promise that.

Jack spoke again. “Judy, we could die today. I need to tell her. I need to.” His voice was a little higher and softly pleading. Judy sank a bit. This was hard, but she couldn’t tell him what he needed to know because she literally wasn’t able to.

“Jack, when Nick gave me the vow, I was terrified. I didn’t memorize the words. This might be less comfortable for you, but if you are serious… If you really intend to do this… you really need to ask Nick for help.” Judy was being honest. She knew the ‘to love and protect’ part, and the ‘all that I am, all that I was, all that I ever will be’ part, and she was pretty sure the ‘in this life and the next’ was in there, but that wasn’t the whole thing. Jack could not afford to mess this up.

“Oh crap,” Jack murmured. “Man, I doubt I can get him alone. Crap.” He sighed in exasperation. Judy took a deep breath. She wanted them to be happy. Would this make them happy?
“I can try to get you alone with him when I go on the ridge to make the call. I’m small and I stand the best chance of not being seen. I’m gonna crawl in the taller grass to stay hidden if I can. You will stay with everyone else in the cover of the forest and I will try to think of a reason that you need to pair off with Nick. But we need to focus on survival first, Jack. Keep your feelings on the back burner so you and Skye have more than just the next life to spend together, alright?”

Jack stood up straighter, nodding confidently. “Alright. I can do that. Thank you...”
Judy stood with her back to one of the trees that lined the edge of the clearing. The treeless expanse behind her went up the mountainside. It was a relatively long way up to the top where a defined rocky ridge offered very little cover. The grass was at least tall enough that her ears would likely peek over it, but not by much. The bunny’s arms were crossed as Nick paced in the forest before her. The two lions looked on curiously as the four hyenas sat in a circle in front of Skye’s pack where the vixen and her striped buck consumed some rations. At least the hyena family had stopped crying at that point. Apparently, as Judy and Jack got water from the stream, Motti had told them that Ukweli had died. They were obviously not happy to hear that. They seemed, as a result, much less interested in the discussion between Nick and Judy.

Nick grumbled a bit. “I know you’re faster right now, Carrots! But, I don’t like sending you. I really don’t like it. In a list of stuff I don’t like, I’d circle this one here with a red pen, Fluff.”

Judy sighed yet again. “I won’t get caught Nick… and I’m gonna be a lot harder to see than some bright red mammal slinking through the weeds.” She was more than a little exasperated to be going around in circles with the absolute most sensible choice.

“Foxes used to sneak up on rabbits just fine,” Cassie grumbled. She was still not feeling amicable toward Judy after being introduced to the forest floor so hard earlier. Nick and Judy ignored her, however. It would serve no great cause to provoke her.

Nick crossed his arms defiantly. “I know you, Judy. There’s an entire town on the other side where you haven’t arrested or beat down a single bad guy. Can you even resist that kind of temptation?” Judy rolled her eyes. Nick was stalling with wit. She knew why. It was the main point of contention between them at that moment. Judy wanted to call immediately, and her partner wanted to wait until dusk when it would be harder to see her.

“We are wasting time, Nick. The sooner this is done, the sooner we get everyone to safety.” It was pure common sense. “Some of us need medical attention.” She indicated the lioness without a shirt
who was still hugging her middle. Cassie nodded emphatically and pointed to her sister as well.

“It’s not that bad.” Charisse grumbled. She didn’t like being the focus of attention.

Nick slumped a little and rubbed his muzzle. “Okay, fine. You make that call, and come right back. Don’t do extra investigating and don’t get curious and check up on a thing you see. You make the call and get back to the tree-line. Please?” Judy could see the fear in his eyes. She knew how protective he was even before they were dating. She figured it had to be so much worse for him now. They could not let that get in the way of their job, however. And that job, right then, was contacting Chief Bogo and asking for help. Judy moved over to Jack and Skye and nodded to the understandably morose family seated with them.

Judy spoke in a bare whisper, “Okay, I’m heading up. Skye, I need you to keep an eye on everyone here and make sure they stay together. If anything happens, you follow Motti to the shelter point. Don’t take unnecessary chances on our behalf. We will be focusing on our own safety. Jack, you and Nick get up the hill to that big twisted stump Motti pointed out. Hold there so you are close enough to hear me call down if there’s trouble. I can get myself to cover faster than all of you can together, so I need to give those in camp as much of a head start as I can.”

“Wait, why is Jack going?” asked Skye fearfully.

“To keep Nick from following me up the damned hill.” Judy grumbled under her breath. She knew the real reason, though. It was to give Jack a chance to get a very special piece of information from Nick. Skye didn’t question the reason Judy gave. She knew Nick well enough to believe that.

“Please be careful,” she said to Judy. “I hate sending you alone. It’s nearly half a mile up to the top. I would be willing to go with you.” Skye having that bright white pillowy fox tail was just as bad as the beacon-worthy orange fox tail, so Judy had already shot that idea down.

“I know. It’ll be okay though. We don’t know that we’ve even been compromised yet, and if we have been, it’s not likely they have been able to alert anyone here. I will be careful.” Judy explained. She would feel a lot braver about what she was going to have to do if everyone wasn’t acting like this was the last time they might get to see her. It was certainly not helping with the doe’s own anxiousness.

“Squeaker…” Skye hugged Jack as he got up uneasily.
“It’s alright, Magic.” He pushed his cheek to hers. “I know it’ll be fine, and we will be back home safe and sound soon enough,” he stated. “Just wait here. Listen for me if there’s trouble. I will be right back by your side, I’m not leaving you.”

Cassie interrupted. “So, do we all eventually get our own fox? Is that how this club works?” Charisse punched her in the arm, making the irritated lioness flinch. “Hey, I didn’t say it was a bad thing. Maybe I want one of these neat foxes too. The bunnies sure seem happy with them. Did you ever think of that?” The injured lioness rolled her eyes at that and hugged her knees, looking dejected. She was not happy with Cassie continuing to be an antagonist, but it appeared that the attitude was not wholly unexpected. It was possible, Judy mused, that Cassie was always a bit hot-headed.

Jack walked over to Nick, and the red fox followed Judy as she began ascending the steep hill through the grass. The sun was high in the sky. It was hot, and they were certainly visible as they exited the forest. The mid day heat did more to make Judy reconsider waiting until Dusk that Nick’s worries did. It was so oppressive. Still, contact had to be made as soon as possible. That was not going to change. Judy pressed on.

“Alright, so if you get in trouble, don’t hesitate to make a lot of noise, okay?” Nick asked as they panted through their hot uphill march.

“I know, but I’m not going to get in trouble, alright? I’m not rising up higher than the grass. The cell signal will go through the grass just fine the moment I get over the hill. Heck, maybe even a little bit before. You just stay there at the ready. After that, we’ve gotta try to find our way to the sheltered rock outcropping Motti mentioned. It’s not over yet, but it’s close.” Judy was feeling tired from the past couple of hard days. She looked forward to being home with Nick. A few ciders and a movie night would put all of this behind them.

The three of them ascended the hill up to nearly the half way point pretty steadily. Nick was having more trouble with his leg, but it didn’t seem as bad as it had been yesterday. They had not been traveling quite so fast due to Cassie complaining about her ‘bunny-injuries’. Nick and Jack finally hunkered down a bit and the red fox hugged Judy tightly. With the sun directly overhead the thick, gnarled stump offered no shade.

“Stay low, talk quiet. Use your ears. Please.” Nick was achingly anxious. Judy felt a pang of guilt putting him through this. She knew he was afraid of losing her, and the danger was real.

“Alright,” Judy answered in a serious and caring tone, “…and you listen to what Jack has to say and help him, Nick,” she stated solidly. She did this in order to provoke Jack not to waste any time. Hopefully this would not take long at all.
“What?” Nick asked, and Judy turned and darted up the hill as quickly as possible, hoping that this would give him enough time. This was important to Jack, and he might not get much of a chance to follow through if things went badly.

The rest of the climb up the hill was actually pretty slow because the bunny would only move a few meters before stopping, hunkering down, and listening. She could, at first, hear soft murmuring from the direction of Nick and Jack. Then all she could hear was the hissing of wind over tall grass. It was unbearably hot under the sun, but she made her way toward a large boulder that was near the top of the hill. If she didn’t have to move entirely over it, she wouldn’t. The bunny checked her phone every few stops to see when she had any signal.

Part of her mind immediately worried that it was too easy. The tower would have been shut off or something. They would not be able to call out. They would have to fight their way out of this place. If it were just Nick and Judy, that might work. However, with other mammals depending on them for protection, that would be a lot more difficult, if not entirely impossible. They were taking an unspeakable chance coming this close to a settlement to call for help, but they didn’t have much choice.

Judy finally reached the boulder and gasped in silent delight when she saw the single bar pop up on her phone. She found herself thanking the sun and moon that this was possible. Carefully, she looked through a “v” shaped divot in the rocks. She could see the small village down the hill. It was not nearly so far down as the forest on the other side, and a lot closer than Judy was really comfortable with being. It would take less than thirty minutes to get from the village edge to the rocky ridge she was on. It would be way faster in a jeep or something. That wasn’t a lot of time to get back down the hill to the cover of the forest. She peeked through the rock only long enough to make sure there wasn’t a guard on the hillside or something, able to hear her.

Judy ducked back down behind the rock and immediately dialed Bogo’s personal emergency contact number. It began to ring. There was a connection! Her mind was racing and her heart was pounding. She considered all kinds of things that could go wrong to spoil this idea. Maybe Bogo would not pick up. Maybe the line was not really fully connected. Maybe his personal phone was dead, or sitting in his desk drawer. Maybe he was at a press conference. Maybe if he picked up, the signal would not be strong enough and he would not answer again because he was irritated that she was calling him direct.

“Adrian Bogo, ZPD, how may I assist you?” he answered clearly on the other side. It was beautiful. His voice was beautiful to Judy. She almost completely forgot to say anything at all. “Hello? Judy?” he asked. Her name had probably shown on his caller ID.

“Chief, we need to be extracted. Now. I am texting the coordinates to you.” That was the thing that
needed to be said the most.

A hoarse whisper came from the other end of the line. “Hopps, this had better be a real emergency, we are dealing with a top-level crisis here ourselves!” Judy had no doubt in her mind that her emergency was worthy of the call, but her curiosity was crippling in the moment. Bogo sounded absolutely distressed and she was not used to hearing him like that.

“What’s happened?” she asked quickly.

Bogo whispered the next part. “Mayoral candidate Swinton was assassinated last night in her car outside the airport.”

“What?!” Judy hissed.

“We don’t know much more than that, and obviously all of our resources are on it, so… can you give me a good reason to divert them to coming and picking you and your partner up so suddenly?” Judy took a deep breath. Of course something would be going on to make this harder. Why wouldn’t it?

“Nick and I stumbled into something really bad here and, long story short, we rescued a bunch of kidnapped mammals. We were locked in a mine and left to die. That gun you had to give back to the Department of Interior Affairs? It found its way immediately back into a kidnapper’s possession to be pulled on us. We were nearly killed by a bomb. We have managed to escape with the other prisoners who had been abducted and forced to work in a mine where they were to be drowned upon completion of their unlawful task of destroying a historical monument of some kind which is, I believe, tied to Professor Lupin’s death.” She absolutely needed to point out where Nick and Judy were even involved in this. The bunny sighed slowly as she got silence from Bogo’s end. She whispered, “There is a likely wide-spread, high level criminal element here, and it’s not safe for us to go into a town or city. If you don’t have us picked up remotely, we, and the other survivors, will die.” Judy nodded at that. That was concise enough. She opened the text app and plugged in the numbers for the intended pickup point based on where that was on her GPS map. She brought the phone quickly back to her ear.

“Damn it, Hopps,” Bogo grumbled. “I take it that the ding from my phone was your text of the location?”

“Yes, Sir.” She had succeeded. Help was called for. Anything that happened now would not prevent it. She was sure of that. All they had to do was stay low, keep quiet, and wait for pickup. Still, she needed to have Bogo exercise caution too.
“Do not tell any of this to anyone from the Interior Department. I think it’s been compromised,” Judy said.

“Because of course it has,” Bogo whispered grumpily. “I had suspected already, but do you have proof that is not circumstantial? My boss is going to need a really solid reason why I do not get the necessary departments involved in this immediately. I’m breaking protocol here, Hopps.”

“Gaudby Pembe is the name of one of the kidnappers. He’s…”

“A very important mammal, Hopps,” Bogo hissed into the phone. “And a high ranking member of the Department of Interior Affairs. Are you absolutely sure?”

Judy sat up straighter. “Absolutely. He was actually with the mammal who had the gun when we were locked in the mine with the other prisoners. The hippo’s name is Jonas. They both came out of that mine. Pembe knew the combination for the electronic keypad for that mine and was carrying the key for it. He would have to have been aware that a group of kidnapped local mammals was being forced to purposefully destroy a historical site inside the mine. They were going to flood the mine with them in it. While Gaudby is involved, sir, he may not be a willing participant. He slipped Jack the key to the mine when he was throwing him in there.” Judy understood that her statement to her boss might be the only evidence if Bogo did not make it in time. They had to know as much as possible as fast as possible.

There was a painful pause from Bogo’s end of the line before he said, in a hushed tone, “With everything going on right now, Hopps, I cannot send a lot of help. Security for the city is top priority for obvious reasons and any diversion of my force outside the city might compromise you faster than me just telling the department head about the problem. I will send a suitable team to extract you. We will have to have the ZBI deal with your kidnappers separately. I know that might mean some of them get away, but that’s all I can do. I will get this moving immediately.” Judy sighed softly, feeling the weight of ‘oh crap, things went to hell in the city and he can’t help’ lifted off her sunbaked back. Bogo continued in a whisper, “I don’t think I have to tell you to keep low and wait for pickup… and do not confront these dangerous mammals in the meantime!”

Judy was about to answer in the affirmative when she jerked hard at the unmistakable sound of a gunshot from the forest. “No!” she cried as she immediately looked down the hill. Nick and Jack were still huddled against the stump tightly, but were looking around it fearfully. There was another shot. Judy was able to read the direction a little better this time. It was about a quarter of a mile away from the camp at the base of the mountain. It was way too close.

“Hopps! Are those gunshots?!?” cried the Chief. He was certainly not whispering at that point.
“Officer Hopps!”

“Yes, Sir! Gotta go!” She hung up the phone and bolted down the hill toward Nick and Jack. She kept low in the grass, scurrying as fast as she could. Nick might have already started to run down the hill to aid in the camp, but he was busy shaking Jack who was absolutely going to pieces.

“Jack, it’s father away! It might not have anything to do with them! It could be hunters plinking buibui or something! We have to move before it does involve them!” Judy yanked one of Jack’s ears, shaking him out of it a little. He finally stumbled along with Nick. He apologized softly but was too consumed with worry to say anything else as they began moving as quickly and quietly as they could down the mountainside.

“I’ve made contact,” Judy said breathlessly a few moments later. “Bogo’s sending a team. We just gotta get everyone to shelter. Now. Also, Nick, Swinton’s been assassinated.”

Nick jerked his head back, looking at Judy incredulously. “The candidate for Mayor? Are you serious?!” Judy nodded at that. Nick sighed heavily. “Well, there goes any hope of a day off after we get back. I’ll be lucky to have time to empty my bladder before they have us stand endlessly out behind some frightened official’s door to guard them.” He groaned. “Still gonna be a while before the Chief can get someone here. I guess I’ll just pee at the pickup point.” Nick panted. Judy looked back at him, checking on her partner. His leg didn’t appear to be giving him too much trouble, but she was sure the adrenalin helped that.

She called back to him, “I’m telling you that so you know that there’s all kinds of problems for Bogo right now, but he’s still sending a small team. It’s just to get us back, Nick. The ZBI will have to deal with the crap here later. That’s not our deal.” Judy puffed. She would prefer the criminals got caught, but their survival, and that of the other prisoners, was a lot more important.

After a bit more weaving through the tallest tufts of grass and small mountainside shrubs, they finally reached the tree-line and their little makeshift camp. No one was there.

“Nooo!” cried Jack, going to his knees. The place was bare, only the few scuffed areas where folks had been sitting showing that anyone had ever been there as all. It was completely quiet save for Jack’s horrified lamentation.

“Jack!” Judy barked angrily to silence him. “Motti’s taken them toward the agreed shelter point. If there’d have been a fight here, you’d have heard it. Can you imagine Cassie going quietly?” Jack stood up shakily.
“N-No. No, I can’t,” the buck agreed in a shaky tone. While he was prone to freak out about his vixen, which Judy certainly understood, Jack was doing as well as one could ask from an untrained civilian with the situation. The doe felt the same fear and dread and anxiety. It was hard even for her to get around the creeping panic.

Nick interrupted with a huff, “Yep, everything’s comin’ up team HoppsWilde today! It was getting pretty boring with all of the walking, but now we have mammals with guns in the dark, dangerous forest to liven things up. I’d almost given up on this dull party!” Judy shot a warning glance at Nick. His use of banter to calm himself was something she understood and had learned to deal with, but it was not making it any easier for Jack to hold himself together. The fox continued anxiously. “Okay, so we aren’t safe just standing here. Do we just follow them?”

“I hear someone!” Jack whispered, ducking down in a very bunny-typical fashion. Judy’s ears picked it up at the same time Jack’s had. It was the scuffling of leaves as someone ran recklessly through the undergrowth. She and Nick moved to the sides to take cover behind shrubbery at the edge of the forest as Jack hunkered down behind a cut and rotting tree. Judy spotted the mottled color of a lycaon as he burst into the unmarked temporary camp. It was one of the missing lycaons who had left the previous night. He looked utterly panicked. That… was definitely not a good sign. Judy pushed her way out of the shrubs to get him to stop.

“Kila wafu!” the distraught canid sobbed. “Aliuawa na bunduki!” Judy pulled him forward and down, pushing his face to her shoulder to try to quiet him. She needed to hear if someone was behind him. And she could hear it. Stomping feet. It was at least four mammals, all heavy.

Jack popped up, ears back, looking terrified. “He says they’re all dead, killed by guns. They aren’t taking prisoners this time, Judy! Whadda we do?”

“They’re moving away.” Judy whispered.

“Samahani!” cried the lycaon. Judy covered his mouth, feeling bad about how rough she was being, but she didn’t want them hearing him and coming back their way if she could help it.

“He says sorry. He knows he led them right to us.” Jack growled.

“At least they are going that way.” Nick said apprehensively. “That way used to be North on the map, but has been renamed ‘NOPE!’… So we should be going approximately…” the fox pointed the other direction. “That way, now called ‘as fast as we can’ on our compass rose.”
“Which way did Skye go?” asked Jack quickly. Judy could appreciate his narrow focus. She’d be absolutely the same if it were Nick that she could not see. Jack did not, however, help the simplicity of the situation. What had been ‘trouble is that way, we should go the opposite way’ instantly became painfully complicated.

“That way.” Judy groaned, pointing in the direction that the heavy footfalls were going.

“They’re after the group!” hissed Jack.

“Samahani!” cried the lycaon again before he pushed the embracing bunny back and bolted in the original direction Nick had said to go. Away from the trouble. Judy let him go. There wasn’t any stopping the terrified and grieving mammal. Judy felt pain in her paws from the surge of adrenalin and looked at Nick.

She said, in a fearful tone, “We have to buy them some time, let them get some distance.”

“How do we do that?” he asked. Judy looked frantically from side to side and then threw her head back and released the loudest howl she could. It was an anguished sound. She wanted it to sound like the distraught lycaon. She heard a shout in the direction the footfalls had been in.

Nick had both his paws on either side of his horrified face, muzzle wide and eyes as round as jeep headlights. He then threw his arms up in the air. “Well that’s all done up neat and nice,” Nick whined. “Life was great, wasn’t it? What was your favorite part, Squeaker?” he asked. Jack looked completely stunned as Judy’s mind raced. She did the thing, but they had to deal with what was coming.

“Skye was my favorite part,” Jack answered seriously.

“I liked movie nights with everyone,” Nick grimaced, crossing his arms. He then gave a very fake smile of comfort. “Oh, and I was also very fond of not being gunned down in cold blood because my partner and Officer Wolfard somehow switched bodies before the trip!” He pointed in the opposite direction again. “We gotta go!”

“Nick, running’s not gonna work here. We gotta switch to offense.” Judy growled. She had to focus the fox on a very painful reality. They had a long wait before help arrived and they could not hide in the forest for hours from a determined search party.
“You want to fight the gun-toting murderers!? I’d call that absolutely bonkers!” Jack cried.

Nick wore a stunned expression and slowly nodded. “That’s why we lose to him on Trivia night, Fluff. He knows the big answers.”

“We don’t have time, Nick. And we may only have one chance. Remember the Four Officer Alley scenario in special training?” she asked. Nick furrowed his brow and then widened his eyes, nodding.

“Are you absolutely sure, here, Fluff?” he asked.

“No, but…” She looked away, toward the sound, drawing ever closer. It was still about 60 or 70 yards out.

“We’re gonna die, aren’t we?” asked Jack sullenly.

“Hide.” Nick said, leaning down and grunting as he pulled up the fallen part of a tree, showing a hole that the buck could slip into.

“Are you guys kidding?” he asked plaintively. Nick shook his head sadly. Jack whimpered and wedged himself into the hole. Nick then picked up a sturdy limb to swat someone with. Judy knew that, given their size, it would not do much, but it might let them get enough of an upper paw to let Skye get the others to safety. It really didn’t look good. Judy got a smaller limb and she moved behind one of two trees that were more or less lined up laterally at the camp’s edge in the direction the approaching threat was from. Their pursuers would reach them before they reached Jack. The seconds ticked by. Then minutes wandered past them. It felt like it took so long for anything to happen. Surely ten minutes passed with the sound of the mammals getting closer. They were being very thorough in their search. Would they have ever caught up to Skye and the others at that rate? Had Judy made a terrible mistake waiting for them here? Should they really have run instead and circled back? Finally, the shuffling and stomping became loud enough that she could tell that they would be clearing into their temporary camp soon.

“They’re coming.” Judy whispered, ears straining to pick up more than the whispering from the boughs of the trees overhead. She then gave a signal to Nick who clutched the limb in his paws solidly. He nodded to Judy. She held three fingers. That’s the number of individuals she could hear. Nick grimaced at that. It meant that the officers would be outnumbered. If they all had guns, this was going to be the shortest last stand ever.
The next few moments seemed to go in slow motion from Judy’s point of view. Rarely had she ever been in so much danger, so every sense was enhanced as three mammals moved quickly past the trees which she and Nick had been hiding behind. They were able to get a good look at their pursuers.

There was the familiar hippo, Jonas, and two very large and heavy boars they had not seen before. The boars had long, heavy machetes, using them to hack away vegetation out ahead of the hippo as he stomped through the forest confidently. Jonas was carrying that massive silver gun. Judy made a motion to Nick, and the agonizing wait was over. They could not wait for them to turn around and see the officers waiting for them. Time was up. Judy bolted hard with a kick off of the tree behind her. The three mammals didn’t have a chance to even hear her as she brought her slightly smaller, but still very stout limb into the back of Jonas’ knee. The gnarled wooden limb shattered, having been laying on the damp forest floor too long, perhaps. However, Nick’s was nice and solid as he brought it up hard to the butt of Jonas’ gun and palm. The silver weapon flew up and out at an arc into the leaves.

“Gyaaah!” the hippo yelled, recoiling in obvious pain. The boars spun around as Jonas dropped to his elbows and knees from the shock of being hit twice in rapid succession so unexpectedly. Judy scrambled to the fallen weapon and grabbed it, flinging it out into the forest hard to take it out of immediate play. She then spun around just in time to avoid a swipe from a very sharp machete. She bounced quickly to put a tree between her and her attacker. Her small size made her a lot more agile than the boar’s stumbling movements. She glanced quickly in the direction of another pained shout as Nick dodged a bladed attack and brought his limb into a rounded boar snout hard enough that the sound echoed off of some trees. Down he went.

“Welcome to the club!” Nick yelled back at the fallen boar as he moved swiftly to square off with the other one. He glared at the nervous-looking mammal in front of him and grinned. “It’s got a sweet, woody, earthy scent. You’re gonna love—…” Judy tensed up as Jonas finally jumped heavily forward and grabbed Nick by the tail. The fox yelped as he was yanked back by it, but turned with a savage crack on the huge mammal’s thick grey knuckles, earning the freedom of his tail. Judy gritted her teeth, surprised that was all the hippo got for grabbing it.

“Om nom nom!” Nick barked, and then swatted the hippo in the mouth hard, sending Jonas hard onto his back. Yep, there was the actual response.

“Nick, your Nine!” Judy shouted as the other boar moved to the aid of his fallen comrade with blade in hoof. Nick jerked away from his nine o’clock position in time to avoid being split open by a machete, and then blocked the next swipe with his stick. It cost him about a third of the length of his weapon.
“Judy!” Nick shouted with a tone of panic. Judy turned a split second too late.

The world suddenly jerked backward, and searing pain shot through the bunny’s chest. She felt the chuff of leaves on her back as she landed and curled into a ball defensively. Something hit her. Her mind reeled through the possibilities. Was she cut open? Had she been shot? Was she dying? She felt heat spreading over her chest. She’d been cut. It was a machete blow. How could she have lost sight of the other boar? The shock of the hit wore off as she felt herself lifted up by her slender neck and she grunted as she was pushed hard against a tree. Her little feet didn’t even make it to the ground.

“Dwop it phoxth!” sputtered the boar that had Judy pinned against the tree. His face was a disaster. Blood was everywhere. The fox really let him have it. Nick looked at him with a pained expression. Judy grunted as she was pressed harder. The boar had the strength to break her neck with how hard he was pushing. Breathing hurt even without that hoof on her neck. She felt heat spreading into her beltline. She was bleeding badly and she knew it. Nick scowled and held onto the stick. The hippo finally got back onto his feet and walked over to the other boar, taking the other’s mammal’s machete. Judy couldn’t see Nick very well, and she knew he couldn’t see her either to know she was really injured. She couldn’t escape like she might normally have been able in such a situation. She really needed help.

Nick spoke in an angry tone. “We already made the call, Jonas. You aren’t silencing us here. We gave names, locations, everything,” he growled, holding up his stick to confront the approaching hippo. The huge mammal laughed and swiped at Nick. The fox deflected the weapon but it was swung heavily enough that it knocked him backwards. Judy cried out as well as she could in fear for her partner and lover.

Jonas grinned at the red canid. “I don’t know how you all got out of your cage, fox, but you are gonna really wish you’d stayed.” He looked back to the boar that was holding Judy. “If the fox dodges this next one, break her arm.” Judy grimaced a bit, feeling her smaller limb clutched painfully by the boar. This was not going to be a quick end, she quietly dreaded.

Nick gave a furious growl. “You won’t win this, Jonas, you already lost. Stop this madness! You aren’t getting anything out of it! Just leave! That’s your best possible choice here!” Nick was obviously stalling for a little more time. But help was hours out, not minutes. It was for all nothing, Judy thought dizzily. Maybe Skye and the others would still have a chance.

Jonas laughed. “Nothing? Well, except the satisfaction of seeing you in multiple parts all over this damned forest. You really think we’re afraid of your buddies at the station? They’d be pushing documents through the proper channels for six months before they were even allowed to send someone to get your shattered bones. We are kings in this place! I assure you, nothing can touch us out here.”
“That’s what you think,” interrupted a rather dark-toned voice off to the side. Judy turned her neck a little with some pained effort to look in the direction it had come from. Her jaw dropped. Jack stood, braced and ready with a massive silver firearm clutched in his small, straining paws. It was aimed carefully at Jonas. “Let her go, or I turn your boss into fertilizer.” At the very least, the boar let go of Judy’s arm.

“If you fire that, it’ll kill you too, stupid bunny. This ain’t no movie.” Jonas rumbled coldly to Jack, not putting his machete down. The hippo grinned, blood spilling down the front of his expensive-looking tan and black button-up shirt from the deep split Nick had put in his upper lip. There was a quiet pause.

“Worth it.” Jack growled, lifting the gun and very obviously preparing to fire. Jonas stepped back a little, fear growing in his expression. Suddenly, the woods were shaken by a loud and thundering boom. It came from the direction that the others had been retreating. Jack looked in the direction of the sound. “Skye!” he cried. Judy took the unexpected opening as she felt the startled boar relax his grip on her neck. Curling her body upward painfully, she put her heel as hard as she could in an already ruined boar nose. That gained her freedom instantly as he fell backward and dropped her to the ground. Nick lunged for Jack to grab him before a machete split the buck in two. The fox blocked the hard downward blow with his stick at the same time, which caused Nick to lose his footing from the furious force of it. He tumbled with the bunny in the leaves as Judy put some distance between her and the two boars.

Unfortunately, Nick tackling Jack knocked the gun out of the buck’s paw, and Jonas seized it immediately. He threw down the machete and lifted the gun, firing it. Splinters exploded not far from Nick’s head as he ducked and rolled. Jack ran the opposite direction. Judy hunkered down in the cover of some dense undergrowth. She couldn’t risk running further because she’d not be able to see the hippo if she did. She’d be an easy target. Her ears rang painfully from that gunshot but she was able to hear the heavy rustle of leaves on leaves and a heavy thud from the tree falling after its supporting trunk had been exploded by that massive gun. That was a stupidly powerful weapon.

Judy tried to quiet her breathing, making herself dizzy in the process. Or was that from blood loss? Her entire front felt wet. She comforted herself that it was not so bad that it took her out immediately, so she tried to ignore it. She got cut, but she could deal with that later. She couldn’t check it without moving and maybe giving away her position. Nettles and briars cut into her clothing and fur and skin. She could barely see the hippo, but knew it was only a matter of time before they saw her too.

Jonas called out, “We will find you, idiots! You should’ve killed me while you had the ch-…” The hippo’s words were cut off with a thump on the side of his head. He staggered and quickly whipped his gun in the direction the large, heavy stone had been thrown from. Judy covered her ears, wincing before the shot. Jonas fired the weapon twice as he swung it around. Judy couldn’t see in that direction. Had he hit his target? Judy’s heart hurt. Nick couldn’t leave her. Not now. The hippo
waved his bloodied hoof. “Fan out! Both ways!” Judy relaxed a little, not just because they fanned out in directions that did not include hers, but because she felt pretty sure that monster would have gloated if he’d actually hit anything. Her Nick was safe for at least a little longer.

What was that earlier boom? Was it another gun? It had been so loud. If someone had been shooting at Skye’s group, it would likely have been more than one shot. Judy rubbed her ears, the ringing starting to subside. If they moved far enough away, she would try to get a more secure hiding place. The shrub was not cutting it. Fortunately, the assumption the hippo had made was that they were on the run. At least the mammals chasing them weren’t wolves. Boars had a good sense of smell too, so she couldn’t hide forever. They would smell the blood. It burned. It was a pretty bad cut to hurt like that.

“Fox, I’ve got your bunny!” the hippo lied. Judy growled under her breath. He was using Nick’s love of his partner against him. Judy watched as Jonas turned away from her. She didn’t think she would be so lucky as to disarm him again. Her back hurt. Her chest hurt. They weren’t going to last much longer. Nick did not show himself after a few moments. That meant he knew that Judy was not actually captured. That pained her heart a little because it meant he had not run away either. He was still close enough to know it was a lie.

“Stop!” yelled one of the boars from some distance off. Jonas quickly looked that way and lifted his gun, causing Judy to flinch, but he didn’t pull the trigger. It was too far off to be in his line of sight, most likely. “Hold it you little piece of…”

“Nope!” Jack yelled.

“Can’t you catch a damned rabbit?! Do I have to replace you guys?!” yelled Jonas.

“Hey, I sniffed him out didn’t I?!” yelled the boar. He sounded out of breath, like he was actively chasing Jack. Judy grimaced. They were doing better than they could hope, but they couldn’t keep it up forever.

“At least you kin thtill thmell!” yelled a boar from the other direction. It was definitely the one Nick cracked in the nose.

“Idiots!” the hippo gestured wildly with his gun. “This forest is full of damned idiots! It’s the Idiot Forest!” He leaned back against a tree.
“Yew kin help uth, yew know!” came the call from the nose-bleed section of the forest. “They fasthter than they-...” He stopped suddenly with a thumping sound from his direction. There were two more solid thumps. This got the hippo’s attention.

“Barry?” he called. “Hey! Did you find him?” He moved the gun in that direction, but didn’t fire. Jonas peered intently into the woods. Judy widened her eyes. Did Nick get him first? If the group was suddenly outnumbered they might leave them alone. It was not going swimmingly for them as it was. “Barry, call out! Kev, check on him!”

“I’m on it!” the one called Kev shouted. There was another thump from the forest. Judy held still. Her heart ached with hope.

“Kev!” shouted Jonas. “Shit. Kev?!” A very nervous hippo clutched his weapon at the ready, obviously shaken. Judy held perfectly still. There was a shuffle from off to her left. The hippo turned and fired faster than Judy could cover her ears. Even through the ringing, she heard the hippo bellow, “Gotcha!” It was the worst possible thing for her to have heard. Judy cried inwardly. No! Then she watched Jonas stomp in distress in that direction and scream. “Kev, what the hell! Why didn’t you say it was you?! Damn it!” the hippo roared. “Announce your approach to armed mammals! You always announce your… oh God damn it!” He flailed his arms furiously, looking like he was about to blow apart with rage. Judy let out a breath she’d been holding. It had been the boar. It wasn’t Nick.

Disasterously, the breath she let out, while meaningless to her ringing ears, had been audible to the hippo. In an instant, Judy was staring into the inky black darkness of the barrel of that personal cannon. Her heart froze. No. Not after they were getting the upper paw.

“Stand up slowly, rabbit,” came the low, growled order. Judy struggled to do so, hugging her middle as she pushed upward from under the thick and pulling nettles. She looked down, waiting for the shot. “Alright fox, I don’t know if you’re still watching me, but I really do have your bunny friend this time. Don’t bother showing yourself though. I’m through playing with you guys. I’m not letting you save her, I’m just giving you a chance to say goodbye.” Of course he’d take the time to grind this into the one she loved. The hippo smiled, bringing the gun up to point at her.

“You won’t get away with this.” Judy said coldly. “They already know your names, and they will come for you. Maybe you get away today, but you will have your day. You will have to look over your shoulder for the rest of your life.” Her arms felt very weak as they were held crossed over her chest.

The hippo lowered the gun a bit and began to laugh. “That… is so children’s book stupid,” he said. “That’s very funny. Exactly who are you, to threaten me?” He grinned at bunny. There was blood on his mouth and running down the side of his head where Nick or Jack had hit him with a rock. At
least the smug hippo didn’t get out of this encounter unscathed. It was a bitter comfort, but it steeled Judy’s bravery a little as she stared up at him. She bared her teeth in a snarl and balled up her fists.

Judy growled out darkly, “I am Sungura ya Shetani.”

The hippo brought the weapon up again, sneering. “Oh really? And in the end... what does that mean to me?”

“JANGA!” came a loud cry from above the hippo. Judy and Jonas both jerked their heads up in time to see a red streak plummeting toward the ground from the trees above. As Nick had screamed “disaster” mid-fall, Jonas didn’t have time to really move the weapon. Judy dove to the side instantly, fearing that the hippo would just pull the trigger and blow her away. She rolled and bolted to the side as she heard a terrible wail from the larger mammal. She jerked her head to look back. She stumbled to a halt as she saw the scene behind her. The hippo staggered backward clutching his arm to his chest, crimson marking it down to his elbow. Nick held a machete in one tightly gripped paw as he dove to grab the fallen gun.

“Now!” Nick yelled. Jack bolted from behind another tree with a sturdy limb nearly the size of the buck weilding it. Still crying in alarm and pain, the hippo was treated to a horrible crunching impact to his locked knee. And then another to his head as he fell. Then another. Also... another. Judy might normally have told Jack to stop, but she only wanted one thing right then. She ran toward Nick, feeling a little numb as she watched him stumble back onto his backside. He looked like he was having trouble standing as he clutched the gun, training it on the unmoving hippo.

“Nick!” Judy yelled.

“Okay Jack, that’s good!” Nick yelled. Jack slumped back, clutching his bloodied stick, panting. The buck’s eyes were wild in lapine distress, little pink nose wiggling hard. Judy couldn’t blame him. That was a combat situation, not just an apartment raid. Nick kept the gun on the hippo and smiled at Judy. His smile then instantly went away. Judy stopped in front of her fox, a little uncertain at the horrified expression. Fearfully she looked behind her. No one was there.

“Nick?” Judy asked.

“You’re hurt!” Nick cried, trying to get up and falling again. Judy’s eyes went down to the crimson soaked shirt. She had almost forgotten that she’d been hewn down with a machete. She suddenly felt light headed. How bad was it? She couldn’t tell. There was definitely a lot of blood and her shirt had a wide open gash in it.
“You’re hurt too, Nick!” Judy said firmly, trying to push through the sudden sinking ‘about to pass out’ echoing ringing tone in her ears. “I’ll be okay! Did you break your leg again, please don’t tell me you broke your leg!” Focusing on Nick’s injuries helped Judy get through that sinking dread and mind-numbing absolute certainty that she was nearly cut in half. She needed to push through it. She needed to ignore it and just focus on him. Nick shook his head.

“No, I’ve screwed up the other ankle. It’s fine, Carrots. Judy! We have to get you help! Hold on, it’s okay…” He sounded terrified. The bunny knew what it looked like. However, it didn’t hurt that much. Nick’s reaction to it was frightening her a bit more than any pain from the wound.

“I’ve got her.” Jack held her from behind. Judy looked up at him, a little bewildered and not entirely sure why she saw treetops framing her view behind the buck. Oh. She was lying down. That was why. When had she started doing that? Oh no. It really was bad. She felt like she couldn’t move. Her heart raced faster, and she felt so weak. Her limbs didn’t want to move.

“I’m cold,” she said, more to herself than to anyone else. It was so hot today. What a funny thing. She began shivering. It was suddenly hard to feel afraid or care about much of anything. It was mostly all just very confusing.

“She’s going into shock,” Jack said, his voice echoing a bit.

“I know that!” Nick shouted at him. Nicks voice echoed longer. “Gimme your shirt, we have to stop the bleeding!” Judy looked up at the treetops. Her chest felt so heavy and numb. It didn’t hurt really.

Judy suddenly remembered something. Nick loved gazing up into the trees over the hammock in the back yard of her family home as she rested there with him. That was so much fun. He smelled of fox and of homemade cider that day. Her mom caught her sleeping beside him. How silly.

She wanted a drink. That cider would have been wonderful. The stuff her dad made was so good. She wanted to try making that. It didn’t seem so hard to make.

She had to get up. If she closed her eyes she might not open them again. What was she even thinking about?

She was glad that her dad got over his distrust of foxes. Her grandfather did too. Good for him.
Gideon was sorry for hurting her. He was a good fox. Maybe he would have been no matter what. They grew up. He opened a bakery.

Fresh baked food was so good.

Blueberries in her back yard with Nick was one of the cutest things she ever sent a picture of to his mother.

Vivienne loved her son so much.

Nick was crying. He loved his bunny.

She wanted to give him some fresh baked pie.

That would make him feel happy.

Where was Skye? They had to help Skye.

Those adorable little white wolf pups on balloons from the show Nick took her to would look cute sailing over her head in those treetops.

The waving points of light through the leaves reminded Judy of snow when seen blowing around from below a streetlight.

Was it snowing?

Did it ever snow here?

What was snow?
There was a soft shaking of her shoulder and Judy opened her eyes, startled. They were shooting! She was in danger! They were going to get shot! She tried to roll over and get to her feet to run.

“Judy, stay still, it’s okay!” Nick said sternly, arm over her neck as she began panting in panic. The bunny instantly relaxed. Hearing his voice made her feel safe. It always did.

“Nick?” she asked in a dry, raspy tone.

The fox holding her from behind, embracing her, spoke calmingly. “You’re okay. You went into shock, but you’re coming out of it. We have to move, but I want to make sure you go easy. I don’t want you to start bleeding again.”

“How did I get hurt?” Judy asked weakly. It was still all random ideas and images tumbling in the wind. Floating wolf pups and snow… cider and blueberries. That was all a jumble of her last moments. They were in a forest. Oh, the mine, there had been that. Wait, did Nick attack that armed hippo with a very large blade? Oh. Did Jack kill him with a tree limb?

“You got cut by a machete.” Nick stated, confusing Judy a bit as she came out of her flurry of thoughts. Oh yes. That was how she got injured. Nick continued. “But… it’s not too deep. You are light enough that it threw you more than cut you.” Nick stroked Judy’s ears, gazing lovingly into her eyes.

“I can get up.” Judy said, suddenly remembering why they needed to move. Skye. And they needed to meet someone for the extraction. It was all coming back to her. She looked down,
realizing she was wearing Jack’s black shirt. Her shirt had been pretty much completely destroyed.

Nick put a paw over Judy’s head. “Give it a moment, love. I want you to relax until your eyes are back to normal. Immediately falling over won’t do you any favors.” He looked tenderly into her eyes, making it obvious he’d been carefully observing her.

“Where’s Jack?” Judy asked bluntly.

“Getting sick.” Nick answered.

“Why?” she asked.

“Jonas died.”

“Head injuries?” Judy asked, remembering that Jack had bludgeoned him.

“No,” Nick said in a serious tone, “While Jack and I were trying to treat your injuries, Jonas got up and tried to get away into the forest.”

“Blood loss?” Judy asked. This was serious. A suspect dying in their custody was a really big deal and required a lot of investigation.

“No,” Nick answered slowly, barely in a whisper. “…the forest also contained the lycaon that Jonas failed to shoot. Jack didn’t secure the other machete, which a vengeful canine discovered, so…” Judy widened her eyes. Oh no. “So… yeah, that went exactly how you’d expect.” Judy tensed up a bit. Jonas had been killed by the remaining lycaon, but…

“Jack shouldn’t feel responsible for that!” she murmured.

“He doesn’t. It was my fault.” Nick said.

“You aren’t the one who made him attack us, Nick!” Judy also did not want Nick damaged by that.
“No,” Nick said. “It’s my fault Jack got sick. I didn’t want to take pressure off your wound so I sent
him to collect the other weapon so Jonas couldn’t find it. And we wanted them all accounted for. I
should not have sent him out there. He found Jonas. It wasn’t pretty.”

“Oh my God.” Judy said in a sinking tone. This was a disaster. It was not going to look good in the
report at all.

“Yeah, thanks, Nick.” Jack said miserably as he staggered out from behind a stand of trees off to
Judy’s right. The injured bunny looked up and saw a shirtless buck. She’d not seen him in person
without a shirt before, but there were plenty of times in film she’d seen it. Somehow, she expected
the real thing would be different. It wasn’t. He was a handsome buck. Skye was lucky.

“We have to go to Skye.” Judy said, remembering her again.

“Thank you!” cried Jack in exasperation. “I’m on it!” The buck turned hard and just started
stomping off through the woods.

“Hold it!” Nick barked sharply.

“No!” Jack said pleadingly.

“We’ll join you, let me help Judy up.” Nick stated.

“Yes! Thank you!” Jack shouted, pivoting on his heel. Judy winced as Nick helped her up.

“Please be careful,” her partner whispered. “Seriously, you almost died…” Nick looked away,
gritting his teeth. He sucked in a hard breath through them and Judy worried as she sat up fully.

“Nick?” she gazed at him intently. Was she okay or not? He said she would be alright.

“I didn’t…” Nick closed his eyes, unable to say anything a moment. He looked up, obviously trying
to calm himself. Judy then looked up at Jack. He pantomimed throwing his friends into the forest so
he could run after them. He was really urgent. Judy looked back to the fox and he pinched the bridge of his muzzle between his eyes. Judy realized how upset Nick was and she held him.

“I’m okay, Slick,” the doe whispered softly, “Let’s just go get Skye. There’s time for this. We have to make sure she’s alright.” Nick moved his hand over Judy’s shirt a little. She flinched, afraid he was going to push on her cut, but instead he moved his fingers up to the collar of the shirt and reached in a little, pulling a beaded metal cord that held a very special pendant. Judy’s heart sank.

“I never knew you went anywhere with… this,” Nick whispered as he handed Judy the silver rectangle. It was the plate from the officer memorial with Nick’s name on it, and the date that he ‘died’. Bogo had given it to her, and it had taken on a very special meaning to Judy. Nick knew that she had it, of course, but he did not know that she wore it as a necklace when she went out. Judy cupped her muzzle.

“Nick…” she clutched it tight in her little paw. She turned it over. There was a deep groove on the back of it, the side that didn’t have the engraved name and date. The blade hit it. Judy felt a heavy chill run through her as her eyes went wider. Had that been all that stood between her and death?

“Don’t… don’t lose that. I know it… it’s important.” Nick said in a serious, wavering tone.

“Wait, what the hell is that? What’s that date?” Jack asked, approaching to find out what was keeping them from helping him find Skye.

“Nick, I wear it to…” she started. They didn’t have time for her to explain this! It wasn’t a big deal. It shouldn’t have even mattered to anyone but her.

“…to make sure you remember to always come back to me so I never know what it’s like.” Nick finished for her. He looked into her eyes, his own still pained.

“I… Well… yes.” Judy shakily stood up. Okay, he understood. He really understood.

“Sentimental bunny.” Nick whispered. Judy closed her eyes and nodded. They could talk about it later. They would talk about it later. She pushed the silver plate back under Jack’s black shirt.

“Oh my God… that…” Jack cupped his own muzzle with his tiny paws. He had spotted the writing, it seemed, as Judy put it away.
“Why are you still standing there, Jack? Did you forget Skye?” Nick asked. Jack’s eyes were wet.

“Come on, you’re slowing us down.” Judy chuckled weakly, and they started through the forest. That prevented more discussion about the sentimental token of Judy’s. Nick did not look comfortable, even if he understood it. That was reasonable. It was… pretty morbid in its own way.

Judy felt brutally tired, so walking was tedious. At least she wasn’t dizzy or cold. She knew she lost a lot of blood, so it was going to take a while to totally recover. Hopefully whoever Bogo sent would be there soon.

The lengthy walk kept along the lower point of the valley, fortunately. Judy did not have to push herself hard to go up any steep inclines. Nick offered to carry the bunny a couple of times, but he was having trouble with his twisted ankle. Judy appreciated that he might have the strength to do it, but if he stumbled and dropped her, and she got hurt even worse… She knew how bad that would be for him. She declined.

The walk was interrupted every few minutes or so to allow them to listen and look for anyone who might impede or attack them. Thankfully, they found themselves alone in the densely wooded valley. Still, the boars were unaccounted for. They had all the weapons they knew about, but it didn’t mean that everyone was safe. Nick kept the big, heavy gun in his belt behind him, ready to use it even at the risk of breaking an arm if he really had to. They were making it out of this forest no matter what, he’d said.

Jack didn’t speak much at all as they made their way along the valley floor. Judy knew why. He was worried about his fox. There had been that loud boom. What had that been? Judy had a nagging concern, but didn’t bring it up. Skye had been carrying a bomb. It was evidence. Was it unstable? Had it gone off as they fled? She feared this answer above all others. That would destroy Jack just as completely as it had his intended mate, and Judy dreaded this more and more as they moved.

Nick watched Jack carefully as well. He had likely prevented the buck from running off when he was taking care of Judy. She’d been unconscious in her fox’s arms for over an hour, she was told. She recovered quickly once she got over the shock, but that was so much lost time. Jack didn’t seem to hold anything against them. No one had it easy in this. He was simply focused on not stopping long as they plodded on toward the sheltered rocky outcropping. Jack held the two machetes and cut away brush and undergrowth to allow Judy’s journey to be a little easier.

Judy felt dull pain slowly increasing, likely due to the effects of adrenalin leaving her. Her joints all hurt too, which she expected. Jack didn’t seem to be injured, but the doe knew he was not likely to
be undamaged by all this. He would be so deeply harmed if anything happened to Skye. He’d just
told Judy that he was willing to give himself to the vixen forever. Every step that Judy took, she
asked for the same thing that the buck was surely quietly asking. Let her be okay. Let them be
unharmed. Don’t let this be it for them.

“Jack, hold on, stop,” Nick said rather suddenly as they approached a drawn in point of the valley
with a somewhat defined trail onward. At the end was sort of a cave made of rock on both sides but
vines and roots overhanging the top of the valley. Jack looked back at Nick, then ahead of him. It
was instantly obvious. Between where they stood and the mouth of that cave… there had been an
explosion. The ground was scorched and cleared in a wide circle. A few small trees were fractured
and ruined. Dirt and grass and leaves had fallen everywhere on the outskirts of the cleared radius.

“Skye?” Jack called out meekly. He stood there alone, in the middle of the blast mark, a machete
gripped in each hand. One still boasted crimson from its terrible purpose. Judy looked side to side
frantically, heart heavy. She didn’t see a body, but… would there be, with Skye holding the
backpack? Nick moved forward quickly, passing the smaller mammal. He likely wanted to keep the
terrified buck from finding whatever might remain. It made Judy immediately worried that Nick did
see something. “Skye!?” Jack called out louder, despair in his cracking voice.

“Jack?” The familiar voice of their missing vixen was whimpered fearfully from above them. Jack
gasped out as he looked up. Standing at the mouth of the cave, with a stick fashioned into a spear,
was the white vixen Jack needed more than the life he had barely gotten away with.

“Skye! Ahhhahahaa!” Jack cried joyfully. He dropped the twin blades with metallic clanking and
ran toward the mouth of the cave. Judy choked back a sob. Wish granted. She wouldn’t be able to
try her luck in anything for a year, she told herself. She put her paws over her aching chest, bowing
her head. Lucky, lucky Jack!

The vixen cried out desperately, “Are you okay? We heard gunfire! I was so scared!” She
clambered down the roots of a tree at the edge of the little cave. Jack ran to her, throwing his arms
around the larger mammal, gripping her tightly. She went to her knees to better hug her buck,
dropping the spear behind him. Judy sputtered a bit and Nick put an arm around her.

“Calm, Judy. Calm. It’s okay. It’s alright, don’t waste energy, love…” he whispered. Judy
couldn’t stop crying as she saw a hyena, then another, and finally all four exit the cave, follow by a
couple lions, glancing about cautiously. They were all okay. Nick smiled at the scene before them.

“Is… help coming?” asked Cassie with fearful uncertainty. She was suddenly a lot more humble.
“Is Judy okay?” asked Skye, dismissing the lioness. Cassie wilted at that, apparently having missed how weak the doe was as Nick held her up.

“She’s cut, she needs help,” Nick said. “But she’ll be okay, I think. Help should be coming. Judy got through to Bogo.” He answered Cassie’s question in a manner which made the hyenas cheer and the lioness who had asked just instantly sit down. The strength was sapped from her legs with relief.

“What happened here?” asked Jack, indicating the blast radius. “Is that blood?” he pointed at part of the rock face. That, Judy felt, was what Nick had been moving to keep Jack from seeing. It was definitely a wide arc of blood-spray.

“We got followed,” Cassie said bluntly. “Hyenas are loud when they’re scared.” Motti nodded at that casually, indicating that this was a fact.

“I knew there was at least another guy,” Judy thought aloud. “Was he armed?” Judy was immediately afraid that the terrible fight might not be over, heart picking up pace again, fluttering in her chest.

“Skye blew him up.” Cassie said matter-of-factly. The vixen grimaced a little at that.

“What happened to the other guys? Are they gone?” asked Motti’s brother with concern. Judy had to agree that his question sounded more important than the fate of the one they all knew about already. They understandably wanted to know if they were safe. Nick reached behind him and pulled the huge pistol out from behind him where it had been pushed into his belt.

“Uh…” Skye gazed at it fixedly.

“The owner of this gun is no longer with us.” Nick explained.

“Told you so.” Motti said to her family. Her mother and father both nodded slowly with serious expressions. Judy gritted her teeth. She didn’t do that alone, it wasn’t like that!
“So, we’re safe?” asked Cassie, breaking Judy’s discomforting train of thought.

“Not yet,” Nick said, “But at least we aren’t being shot at. Skye, did someone else get killed?” he asked. Judy glanced up to a very serious Nick. That was a very police officer question. She felt a pang of guilt as she’d not been acting much like an officer when survival instinct became the prevailing sense.

Skye looked extremely anxious. “Nick, I heard gunshots, I had to protect them,” she said in a pleading tone, very visibly wilting. Her buck held her comfortably.

“Sweetie, it’s okay!” Jack said seriously. “It’s alright… nothing’s wrong, we know how it was!” He was holding her. That’s all that mattered to him.

“What happened?” Judy asked. They still needed to know.

As Skye’s face was pushed against the smaller buck’s bare chest, Cassie answered instead, “She combined one of the motion sensing lights from the mine we were all in with a freaking bomb is what she did.” Judy froze. “She wired it up, pointed the sensor upward mostly, reconnected it and moved back. The yak or whatever he was… walked close to it a few moments later. He was trying to figure out what it was. That light came on and his got snuffed out.” Skye kept her head down for the whole description of that, ears back. Judy was speechless.

“Wow.” Nick said slowly, looking completely dumbfounded.

“Wait, what?” Jack asked.

“Jack, we were going to talk about it!” Skye whimpered bitterly. “We were going to talk, honest we were. I just didn’t want you thinking it was why we were together!” Skye seemed genuinely fearful. Judy tilted her head. It didn’t seem like she was upset about what she did, but something she hadn’t talked to Jack about.

“What?” Nick repeated Jack’s sentiments.

Jack looked wide-eyed at his vixen. “What are you talking about? Skye, how did you even know how to do all that? That was so dangerous!” he cried.
“When I was younger, Jack.” She looked away, gritting her teeth bitterly. “I told you I wanted a job that they didn’t want to hire a fox for, and I told you back then that I didn’t want to talk about it. And! And, you said it was okay. But I was going to talk to you about it, I promise.” The fox shrunk against Jack a bit, as if actually groveling before him. Judy felt a sinking sensation of dread. Skye was afraid of losing Jack over this. What the hell was it?

“Skye, nothing’s wrong, you can talk to me.” Jack said. He seemed fearful too.


“Shut the hell up.” Motti’s mother said unexpectedly. The offending lion recoiled at that.

“I went to school to work for The Mammalian Intelligence Agency.” Skye said in a slow and even tone. “I flunked out. I didn’t make it. Not the right attitude for the job, they said. But we all know it’s because they couldn’t place a fox. Even my instructor knew that. He was furious.” She sighed heavily. Jack looked at her with wide eyes.

“A spy. Oh my god, you trained to be a spy.” Jack said slowly.

“No, it’s not all that. An agent. Law enforcement, like Judy. Just… more flexible,” the white fox explained. “My feelings about you had nothing to do with that. I know that your movies were just stories, you aren’t some stupid wish fulfilment, Jack. I really do love you!” Judy stared fixedly at Skye as Jack gazed at her with an utterly shocked expression, ears back.

It suddenly made sense. Everything about Skye made perfect sense. The chip on her shoulder about Nick poorly representing foxes. The knowledge about military weaponry. Her fighting style. And she was afraid that Jack would hate her for it? Judy watched as Skye just held the small buck and cried into his shoulder as he said nothing. He finally took her by the shoulders and moved her back. He was on his feet, looking down into her eyes as she remained on her knees before him. His expression was serious. Calculating. He looked almost cold as he regarded the fox before him with his ears actually towering over her, perked and focused. She went quiet. Tension swept through everyone watching as his blue eyes locked on hers.

“Jack, please…” whispered Skye with a squeak in her voice. “Please talk to me.”

Jack looked at Judy, then at Nick, then back at Skye.
Finally, he spoke. His tone was confident and every word was clear, very much for all to hear, “…All that I am, all that I was, all that I ever shall be, I give unto thee.” Skye’s jaw fell open, and Judy couldn’t help but cup her own muzzle, tears pooling at the corners of her eyes. He was really going to do it. He was doing it right there in front of them.

“What…” Cassie started to speak, but Judy shot her such a murderous glance that Motti visibly flinched as if she might get lion spray on her from it.

Jack continued almost melodically, expression softening, but serious. “…To love and protect, to honor and aid…” Tears marked the buck’s cheeks just as clearly as Skye’s as he spoke. Judy glanced over to Nick who took her small paw and nodded to her. He was getting the words right. That didn’t surprise Judy really. Jack had to learn new material quickly all the time.

“Oh Jack…” the fox wilted a bit in her kneeling position before her lover. Her teeth showed as she gave a joyful smile, both paws taking his. Judy’s heart soared and she felt light-headed.

Jack smiled back to her, obviously encouraged by her expression of happiness. “Unconditional… unwavering…” He moved his little paw to lift Skye’s chin to keep her looking up at him for those words. “In this life and the next…”

Skye said the final line simultaneously with the buck. “May fate never bear us apart.”

She then threw her arms around him. “You crazy mixed up bunny!” she cried, “What did you do that for? You never had to!” she squeaked. “Do you even know what you did?”

“I finally got to say the lines I was made to say,” he said, and then half whispered the next words to his beloved vixen. “…to the only audience that’s ever deserved to hear them.”

Judy perked up a bit and looked to Nick. She could hear it. She didn’t love the timing of it, but she had to tell them.

“I hear a helicopter,” she announced. “We need to move to the pickup point.” Her chest hurt, she felt weak and near her limits, but strength was returning to her limbs with a will to walk to make this whole mess be over. Jack helped the still-crying white fox to her feet and Nick motioned for the others to follow. Motti took the lead, knowing exactly where they going to meet the helicopter.
“Glad you made it, bunny.” Cassie said, falling into step right behind Judy. She sounded genuine about it, and uncharacteristically caring. “You really gonna be okay? You’d not be wearing a different shirt if you weren’t trying to hide how bad it was.”

“I’ll be fine. I’m wearing the shirt because mine was completely destroyed in the fight,” the bunny explained.

“Well, Jack no longer gets to have his shirt, and I know we’re all enjoying that, so… Yeah. But… It’s not too bad? I never wanted you to get hurt.”

Judy looked back at the following lioness as she held onto Nick for stability. “I think it’s gonna just be some outpatient work,” she groaned, hoping it didn’t mean another hospital call to her parents. Would they eventually just stop visiting her there? Or maybe family members would take turns? It was starting to feel like a running gag.

“I’m sorry about…” came a soft murmuring from Cassie.

“Don’t worry about it.” Judy cut her off. She understood Cassie’s stress and fear and why she acted as she did. There would be a chance for her to show that was not her usual attitude. This was not the time.

“Thanks,” she said, then looked back and nodded to her stern-looking sister who had likely provoked the apology, heartfelt and genuine though it might have been. The other hyenas spoke together in their unfamiliar language, trailing behind. The walk through the forest was, otherwise, not terribly eventual. It was quiet, stuffy, and Judy felt a little sick and dizzy. Her concern was just putting one paw in front of the other more than any dangers that might lurk there for them. Help was close. The helicopter got louder and louder as it moved overhead.

As slow as they were going, it took a while to get to the pickup point. It was a fairly bare, grassy hill on a ridge at a right angle to the one that separated them from the village. It was not nearly as difficult a climb, only a couple hundred meters up to the intended spot and not overly steep. The silver and black helicopter circled the area as they moved into the clearing. Upon spotting them, it came down lower. Everyone held low as Judy and Jacks ears were laid comically flat by the wind from the vehicle when it neatly touched down in the tall grass at the top of the bare hill.

The chopper proved to be full of larger mammals in tactical gear. Two wolves, a tiger, and a lion hopped out and moved into a defensive circle around the chopper. An old goat acted as the pilot.
The crew was armed with rifles and took up a perimeter as they ushered the group closer to be inside that perimeter.

The black-furred wolf strode toward the group. “I’m Lieutenant Richter Bay. There’s another chopper coming, Officer Hopps!” he shouted to Judy. “That’s the one to actually pick up everyone. This one’s heading out! Do we have any priority evacuations that need to be aboard?”

“We have a wounded officer!” Nick said seriously, indicating the bunny. He and Bay helped Judy up to the helicopter. She knew better than to try to say she could wait for the other chopper. Nick would never allow it.

“Officer Wilde, right?” asked Bay.

“Yes!” Judy’s partner shouted back, “We need to get her medical attention fast! Also, there are bodies in the forest. There’s least four, maybe as many as six. I’ll fill you in. Please, just… take care of Officer Hopps.” Nick then moved away from Judy as they helped her onto a backboard in the vehicle. She wanted to stay with her fox. Was it safe for him? Was the danger over? He could hear him calling out to the other survivors, telling them everything was going to be okay, and that the next chopper would be a transport for them.

A tigress leaned over Judy rather suddenly, startling her a little. She pulled up Jack’s shirt carefully, bringing out a first aid kit from a compartment in the chopper. “Hey there, Officer Hopps. Sargent Serena Felis. Big fan.”

“Nice to meet you.” Judy stated with a weak smile. She wanted to help the others.

“So I gotta ask, and I promise, I ain’t gonna say anything to anyone…” she moved her paw a bit as Judy winced in pain.

“Yeah?” she bunny asked.

“Uh, is Jack Savage a real agent, pretending to be an actor… who pretends to be an MIA agent?” Judy laughed at that, and it was agonizing.

“No, sorry. No luck there. He’s an actor. He does love adventure, though.” Judy smiled as she braced for an IV insertion. There’s what she was after. Don’t-give-a-damn juice. Serena got her
hooked up to that quickly enough. Judy was glad this helicopter came equipped with an advanced med kit.

Serena inspected the wound carefully. “It’s not too deep, but it’s pretty long. I’m used to seeing this stuff on much bigger mammals, so I mean… that’s not too many stitches for you. Gonna be stitches though, I bet. Sorry, bunny. A new scar for the veteran, I’m afraid,” the big cat said. “What cut you?” she asked.

“Machete.” Judy answered.

“Oh wow, it hit this…” she held up the tag under Judy’s shirt. “Oh God.” Judy closed her eyes, knowing that Serena knew what she was looking at. If she was a ‘fan’ the tiger knew exactly what Judy had. But she didn’t care about the tiger had discovered. It only reminded her of what she didn’t have with her.

“I want my fox.” Judy murmured lightheadedly. The IV was quick to mute the agony and she felt sleepy. She didn’t want to close her eyes if she didn’t know he was safe.

“Your…” the tigress moved aside a little as Nick got onto the chopper. The whine of the engine was audible.

“Fluff, you doing okay?” Nick asked with open concern.

“Oh, your fox,” Serena chuckled. The smile on the tiger’s face made it obvious she got the insinuation. Judy didn’t care to a medicated extreme.

“We’re gonna head to the closest city.” Nick stated. “The team’s heading down to collect our two boar friends. That is, if that rampaging lycaon didn’t find them first. They sure didn’t stick around after the fight,” he explained.

“Don’t leave, please.” Judy said dizzily.

“She’s on IV,” Serena explained to Nick. The fox nodded.
“Good, thank you. I know it hurts,” he said in a muted tone to Tigress. He looked back down to Judy with a smile. “I can’t leave, Fluff. It’s a real long way to the ground right now,” he chuckled warmly. Nick’s words shrank away with him. Judy couldn’t feel the motion of the chopper at all. Were they flying? How far was it going to be? Were they going to the city they arrived in? The painkillers made everything feel like it was kind of moving anyway. The sound of Nick’s laugh and the look of his smile brought comfort to the doe as she relaxed more fluidly on the backboard.

“Do you want me to be the one to contact your parents?” Nick asked. She could barely even hear him over the chopper, and could barely even hear the chopper as her senses slipped away. Better him telling her mom and dad than the hospital again. The bunny slowly nodded. Nick continued talking, but if she could understand him at all, she certainly wasn’t going to remember it. She finally closed her eyes. They survived, but what was coming? How much more was there left to do? In that moment, the only question she needed an answer for was:

Was Nick holding her?

The answer was yes.

She let sleep have her.
“I really wanted the window seat.” Nick said sullenly. Judy looked a little sleepily at her fidgeting fox. He was in the aisle seat of the plane beside her. Judy sat in the opposite aisle seat. It was an early morning flight and her medicine made her sleepy as it was. Being so early only amplified the effect. She felt the plane begin to move, taxiing to the runway. She discovered that the medicine really helped with the anxiousness about flying that she suffered last time. On Nick’s opposite side sat Skye. Jack sat in the seat beside Judy’s. Nick grumbled. “The Frost family all gets window seats.” Skye put her pink tongue out at Nick playfully.

“It was done fair and square, Nick.” Judy said. “We drew cards, highest two got window seats.”

“You never shuffled the deck! Of course they both got jokers!” Nick whined.

“You knew I was medicated, and you gave me the task. I shuffled. They won,” the doe smirked.

Nick flattened his ears. “You did this.” He held a paw as if there was a deck of cards in it, and then shook his paw violently as if it were on fire.

“Maybe I don’t want you to have a window seat.” Judy stated, smiling.

Nick gasped scandalously. “Say it ain’t so.”

“Maybe I want you to pay attention to me, and not endless trees sliding below us for the next couple hours,” Judy explained with a frown. Nick immediately wilted.
Nick gave the sign for a time out and genuinely pouted. “Oof… Flag on the play, unnecessary feels.” He then settled in his seat a bit more, and acknowledged that Judy wanted his attention by giving her his paw. She pulled it into her lap and cradled it lovingly as the plane moved into position for takeoff. Nick grumbled something about wishing that Jack had at least sat beside him because it would be easier to see out the window over a bunny. Skye deliberately mashed herself up against the small window to take in the view of the runway as it accelerated underneath the lifting vehicle.

Judy tensed up a lot as the plane left the runway, but her nervousness was missed by everyone else because all four hyenas also on board loudly ‘enjoyed’ the sensation. Judy winced a little from the force of the changing angle in their small, single propeller plane. Nick certainly noticed that. “You doing alright?” he asked with genuine care.

“Yeah, just a little jarring at the start there,” Judy sighed.

“I hope we don’t have turbulence,” Nick murmured in a worried tone. Judy rested a paw over her middle, feeling the bulky bandages beneath it. 21 stitches had been what it took to put her back together. She hadn’t really talked to her family about it. Nick, despite his opinion about misleading them, told them that only that Judy had been cut during an incident and needed some stitches but left a lot of information out. He was actually instructed to say very little because the investigation was just heating up. He wasn’t even allowed to tell the Hoppses that they weren’t in Zootopia when it happened.

Judy didn’t remember the helicopter ride to the local hospital at all, but she remembered being wheeled into the ER. She could only see slim bits and pieces in her memory. She remembered two armed ZBI agents remaining by her side the entire time in the ER, as instructed by Chief Bogo. She could hazily recall that Nick had been there in her room after they were done fixing her up, and vividly remembered noticing that he was also carrying a holstered firearm. She understood that the agents were posted at either end of the hall for her room. Great care was being taken to make sure they would be safe while they remained in the Interior.

Judy slept mostly through the night, blissfully unaware of anything but the presence of her fox by her bed. Nick slept at one point, she remembered, one of the only times she woke up. She found him slumped against her leg, chair pushed up to the bedside. He began to stir as she shifted when she woke. To force him to get some rest, she immediately took his velvety fox ear between her thumb and finger and rubbed it until he completely stopped moving again. Seeing him sleeping triggered her comfort response the way it always did, and she nodded off immediately after. They both needed to recover. Everything had been very hard on them.

Morning came and things started to move so quickly. She only got to talk to her parents briefly before they had to head out before the sun was even up. They didn’t even discharge her from the hospital. She’d never actually been checked in. The drive from the hospital to the airport was anxious. She became aware of the tension and they finally explained to her that there was an unacceptable risk element and she was being evacuated with the others. They were going back to Zootopia.
After a few moments the plane levelled out. It didn’t bounce around too much, thankfully. She had been warned that smaller planes were not as gentle most of the time. She looked around the cabin. Two armed ZBI agents were with them still. One was on the helicopter that came to pick her up, Judy remembered. The black wolf, Richter Bay was accompanying them to the city they called home. The other was a female snow leopard that she did not recognize. She introduced herself as Cynthia Rosette.

Before leaving for the airport, Nick had been relieved of his weapon, which he protested a little. He seemed genuinely worried about how safe they would be at the airport. That turned out not to be an issue since they never even went into a terminal. They were driven just a few feet from the plane and hastily loaded up. They barely had their seatbelts on before they were taxiing. They were not taking any chances, apparently.

Once airborne, things calmed down a little. The hyenas murmured quietly among themselves, obviously very excited about being in a plane and visiting Zootopia. None of them had ever been. Judy actually kind of wished that she and Nick could give them the super tour that the fox had given her not long after the Nighthowler incident. There was so much to see that someone would never think to see if they were not actually from there. The hyenas would all likely be taken to a safe house or somewhere to stay and be contained until their security could be assured. They were all witnesses.

The ZBI had allowed Nick to explain the full details of the event to them while Judy had been in the ER. The reason for the rush to get that done was simple. Once their reports were all taken, their value as targets dropped significantly. Revenge was an exceedingly rare motive to harm a witness after the report was given.

As the plane levelled off for the slow flight back, Judy gave in. She lifted the arm rest by the aisle and leaned to the side, taking Nick’s paw and drawing him to lean into the aisle too. She arched a bit, nuzzling into his neck. The fox was a little surprised, given that the two ZBI agents were seated behind the pair. He was thankfully unwilling to stop her. That was good. Judy needed the comfort of something that was in her control. Something familiar. She needed something that was not this cyclone of crazy. The agents surely noticed, but they said nothing about it.

“It’s gonna get better Judy. This isn’t forever.” Nick said in a soft tone, seeming to sense that the bunny needed comfort. Judy took in a slow, deep breath. That was exactly, to the letter, what she needed. His soft voice, his touch… It felt like it had been months since they had been able to just hold one another.

“I know. It sucks right now though, Nick,” she whispered. “I can’t even see my family. We don’t even know how long this will go on. Who knows when I will get to really talk to them? They’re
gonna worry Nick. I can tell my mom already knows something is wrong.”

“They’ll understand, okay?” he said softly. “They did after the details about the Nighthowler thing came out.”

“Wait, Shetani is… is that bunny?” asked Kijivu from the front aisle seat. “What? No, seriously!” he asked. Skye nodded to him after neither Nick nor Judy wanted to answer. He gasped rapturously. Of course he’d be the one who knew about the events a year ago, out of all of them.

“What bunny?” his mom asked.

“I told you about this! In the city, the poison gun!” He was immediately exasperated. Judy lowered her head, ears back, leaning back into her seat, but not letting go of Nick’s paw. She sighed as Motti’s family began loudly yammering back and forth about that. There went the quiet, snuggly trip home. She just wanted to relax with him a little bit before the crap hit the fan when they landed. Kijvu switched to their native tongue and the four of them spoke rapidly about that subject. Judy actually felt a little nervous that she couldn’t understand the story while it was being told since she could not promise he was being entirely factual. They were still calling her Shetani, though, so it certainly didn’t do anything to dispel that little gem she’d be getting to explain to Bogo.

Fortunately, Jack was listening and did care about the facts of the story. He corrected, without speaking their tongue, that Judy had not killed Bellwether. The ewe was in prison. He explained that a lot of what Judy did was normal police work, which she appreciated. She also appreciated that he changed the subject immediately when Kijvu asked if the doe had killed anyone.

“I have been asked, actually, to adapt the story about Bellwether for a movie, loosely based on the details, but the script for it was just… unfixable. It was an abomination!” he laughed.

Motti’s mother was the one to respond to that, as Judy relaxed a little with the change of subject. “Oh that is right, you are the actor, yes? I think I have seen one of your pictures. In the Cinema. It is… Jungle Savage, yes?”

Kijvu chimed in. “That is the one with the pretty white doe… Is it… Rose Tillerson?”

Motti’s mother gasped and said in a scolding tone, “It is rude to speak of Mr. Savage’s previous lovers!”
“We weren’t actually lovers.” Jack said with a chuckle. Judy opened one eye to glance over to Skye. She was smiling and watching the conversation.

“Only for the screen then?” asked Kijvu. “Man that must be so exciting. I bet you could *buy* this plane.” Skye rolled her eyes at that. It was likely lots of mammals fixated on that detail.

“Not anymore, but Skye could,” he laughed, nodding to the vixen. She looked back at him with her ears back.

“No I can’t. Half my pay is just free rent!” she laughed.

“I gave everything to you though, remember?” he asked.


“The vow? Everything I am, everything I was… all that?” Jack stated.

“J… Jack, I don’t get all your stuff. Oh my gosh! You… You really thought you just… Seriously?! You vowed up thinking that you just… You…” Judy looked at Nick who just looked extra-strength smug. She was going to throw him out of the plane. She would have to watch for particularly sharp and horrible looking terrain.

“Nick explained how it worked.” Jack said.

“And he told you that it meant *that*?” Skye exclaimed, paws over her muzzle.

“It doesn’t?” Jack asked meekly.

“No! You only give me *you*! For two life-times! How are you supposed to take all the other stuff with you to another life, Jack? Nick, what did you tell him that for?!” Skye fairly shouted.

“Wow,” Nick said slowly, “…these poor ZBI mammals gotta be hating how they can’t tell one damned mammal about this secret mission, huh?” he asked.
“I have no idea what’s going on.” Rosette stated, crossing her arms, “Not what I’m paid for.”

“Nick! Why did you tell him that!?" Skye demanded. “Jack’s your friend!”

“And so are you.” Nick said.

“How was that friendly?” Skye asked. Jack stared at Nick, wide-eyed. Nick looked back at him with a grin.

“Because I knew he’d still do it.” Nick said slowly.

“Come again?” asked Skye.

“And now you know what Jack would choose… if he had to choose between you, and literally everything else in his world,” Nick stated. The white vixen squeaked.

“Damn it, Nick!” Skye whimpered, cupping her face in her paws and leaning forward on the other side of Nick.

“We uh… we gotta trade places, Nick,” the striped buck said softly, squeezing past Judy carefully so as not to push on her middle. The fox beamed.

“I call window seat.” Judy said coldly, scooting over to give her partner the aisle seat. Nick gasped and mock-sobbed into his own paws melodramatically. He took a seat however, and Judy was considerably happier to just be able to cuddle her partner more easily. He leaned in closer in part to be able to see out the window. He almost always managed to work things in his favor. It never failed to surprise her.

Bay, the lupine ZBI officer stated casually, “I feel like I’m being given some kind of psychological test, and none of this is real.”

While other conversations about Jack’s films and personal adventures became the topic of discussion,
Judy actually pretended to be asleep, or at least as sleepy as she was feeling to discourage anything but the weight of Nick’s paw in hers, and the smell of his warm, silky fur. She could be content just a tiny bit longer. Things were going to be so crazy in the city for a while. She was not looking forward to any of it.

After a time, she really did fall asleep. It was not for long, however. It was actually interrupted by the sound of one of the cell phones being carried by the agent. They had service through the plane’s radio communication system.

Bay brought the phone to his ear and spoke quietly a moment, before moving the phone down and turning on the speakerphone feature. The black wolf stated, “Go ahead sir.”

“Officer Hopps, are you there?” asked the deep voice of Chief Bogo.

“Yes sir.” Judy answered.

“It’s Chief Bogo,” he stated, as if she wouldn’t recognize him.

“Who?” asked Nick.

“Go stand outside a minute, Wilde,” the chief said sharply.

“Sir, we are on a plane still,” was Nick’s anxious reply.

“I’m aware of that!” Bogo snapped. Wilde cringed.

“Err… Got it,” he said, making it clear he understood there would be no more banter in the conversation. Judy still smiled to her foxy boyfriend. She still appreciated his humor. He grinned pleasantly back at her.

“Wipe that grin off your face, Wilde!” Bogo commanded. Wilde cringed again. The cape buffalo continued talking. “Officers, there’s been a change in plans. You are not to return to Zootopia. You are not to enter the city.” Judy was immediately very awake, though she held herself half over Nick’s lap still, relishing being held during this likely bad news.
“What?” she asked. “What’s happened?” Were things getting worse there? Worse than a public official being murdered, even?

“Are you wearing your glasses, Sir?” Nick asked.


“What’s happening there?” Judy asked, elbowing Nick slightly and prodding the chief to continue.

“We are unable to locate a number of officials in the Department of Interior Affairs,” Bogo explained. “The likelihood that there will still be a danger to you is high. We may have found out what all of this is about.” Judy sat up so suddenly she felt pinching from her stitches. She winced and relaxed again.

“Ah... Nnh... What? We are all ears.” Judy said firmly. Nick snickered and stroked one of Judy’s long, silky ears and got his paw slapped. This was serious. Nick didn’t have a serious setting unless someone was trying to kill him.

Bogo responded, “I don’t have time to go over all the details with you, but I can tell you that a package was received by Swinton’s assistant, Aggie Porcintia. It had been sent the day Swinton died. The contents were sent to Swinton by an unknown source, and it seems she sent it immediately to her assistant. She likely knew that she was in trouble, and tried to leave the city before being killed at the airport.” Kijvu looked at Motti and shrugged. He had no idea who that was. “However, as it had been sent from the Golden Antler hotel, we suspect it was sent to Swinton by Ukweli before he was killed.”

“What?!” cried Motti. Judy flinched at that. It really was all connected. That’s how big this was. It would have been nearly impossible for her and Nick not to have gotten completely tangled in it. Bogo, however, sighed at the sound of the hyena’s exclamation.

“I forgot an important detail about your passenger list.” Bogo stated darkly. “I do apologize, and am deeply sorry for your loss. As you are hearing, we are working very hard to give Ukweli the justice he deserves.” Motti’s mother and father hugged one another, nodding, and Motti and Kijvu just looked intensely toward the phone. “Yes. Ukweli may have sent these research documents. They included pictures of a mural and some painted text.”
“The secret!” Motti cried.

“They wanted to destroy it Motti.” Her father said in a wizened tone. “Ukweli knew this. He had to. He did the right thing.” Motti then slumped in her seat and quietly cried, embracing her remaining brother. Judy swallowed heavily.

“Hopps, it’s got really serious implications. I will discuss it with you more later. But you are being directed to a town north of the city. You will be safer there while we deal with the absolute latrine fire that is going on here. I do not have any direct intel that there is a threat against you, but I can’t promise your safety inside the city. There’s just too many mammals and too many moving parts here. You’ve provided us enough by giving us names and securing witnesses. You have the bad guys on the run. It’s time for your brothers and sisters in blue to follow through.”

“Do we have any suspects yet?” Judy asked.

“We have captured Pembe. He was collected at his office in the Interior.” Bogo explained.

“He might not be a bad guy. Completely.” Motti said in his defense.

“We know,” the Chief informed. “He is how we know that the missing mammals from the Interior Department are involved. He is, thus far, cooperating.”

“Where will we be going, sir?” asked Judy, curious about how she would even contact her family from some unknown location.

“New Reynard. I have already made the arrangements.” Bogo stated.

“No, not New Reynard. Somewhere else, you mean.” Nick stated harshly. Judy could actually see his teeth. The bunny knew exactly why.

“It’s the best option, sorry Wilde,” Bogo insisted.

“No, absolutely not, sir. My mom is there. I’m not putting her at risk.” Nick stated adamantly.
“Look,” Bogo said in a careful tone, “We do not have actionable intelligence that there is a direct threat to you or Hopps,” explained Bogo. “But we have far greater control of your security in a remote location. There’s only one road going into that town, and the rail line. It’s got satellite access and the surrounding forest offers excellent cover should you need to depart in a hurry and request evacuation. I know you don’t like it but your mother’s about to change her dinner plans. My advice to you, Wilde, is that you and Hopps and all the others get some rest while you are there.” Judy sucked in a deep breath. Nothing sweetened the deal more than that offer. Bogo spoke in a lower tone, suggesting he might not be in a completely private location. “I don’t know how long this will take, but security is being handled. You’ve all been through a lot, and I feel with a high degree of certainty that you will be safer there than anywhere else.”

Judy interjected, “Will the other prisoners be transported to New Reynard as well?”

“Yes.” Bogo said. Judy understood that to mean the lionesses that had been taken on another plane. Her boss continued, “We will be securing a bed and breakfast by the lake there for this purpose. It’s out of the way and even more defensible. We may move other witnesses there as well, but if we do, additional security will be provided. We want to make everyone as safe as possible, but we wish to avoid making a big impact on the town. The fewer mammals involved, the better. I have to attend a press conference in a moment, so I have to go. The ZBI agents will set up security at the bed and breakfast and additional security will arrive later this afternoon. Do you have any questions before I go?”

“Are you still wearing your glasses?” Nick asked.

“Yes, why do you keep asking that?!” Bogo shouted.

“Good luck with the press conference, Sir.” Nick said. “You will be in our thoughts.”

There was a pause. “Thank you, Wilde. All of you are in mine.” The phone hung up.

“You know, I had real questions for him.” Bay said with a glare at Nick. “Thanks for that.” Nick shrugged casually. Judy sighed. What was going on in Zootopia? What was all of this really about? She closed her eyes and leaned in against Nick as Jack and Skye helped comfort Motti. She cried not from sorrow but gladness. To her, the whole city was working hard to make it so Ukweli was not forgotten, and his death not meaningless. He would not be ‘nothing’ after all.
There was a very small airstrip a few miles outside of New Reynard. It was used for fire control due to the large size of the forest, a place for planes to land and refuel when battling forest fires and protect the small town from certain doom otherwise. The runway was made of dirt, so the landing was bumpy. Judy was held tightly by her fox for it, and it still hurt a bit. She felt like at least one of her stitches might have popped. She’d have Nick check when they were settled in. After landing, they were transferred to a couple different SUVs. Coming into town, they passed the train station that sat lonely in the forest. Judy wistfully remembered it from when she came here and found Nick’s mother so many months ago. The leaves were already beginning to change colors. It was late in the season. She bet New Reynard was stunning in the fall.

Skye and Jack were in the same SUV as Judy and Nick, and she was delighted by the look of the town as she came into it. Jack admitted that he had also never been to the small predominantly fox town. Judy smiled and pointed out the Muck Street Diner to Nick. They looked as hard as they could to see if Vivienne was working, but they just couldn’t see well enough to see inside. Without stopping, their vehicles went through town on Musk Street, the main road there. Three black vehicles in a row were as suspicious as one could get in this small town. Judy watched as they passed the graveyard where she had met Elliott Scritchard. Judy looked at Nick, wondering very briefly if he’d visited his dad’s memorial there. She wouldn’t press him on that. Skye was elated by the statue in the middle of town. She pointed it out to Jack, who was not as enthusiastic, but was certainly supportive.

The bunny had not been further than the middle of town, so she watched as the school went past, a few homes, one of which she understood to be where Vivienne lived, a factory of some kind, a grocery, and then forest again for about half a mile. Finally, they reached what was literally the end of the road. It ended in front of a small, lovely lake with a rather large dark blue two story house with white trim and a wrap-around porch. The sign in front read, “Autumn Refuge Bed and Breakfast”.

“This looks really lovely,” Judy said in a gentle tone. “Have you ever been here?” she asked her partner.

“No, never.” Nick said. “But obviously I stay with my mom when I visit, so I never had a reason.”
“I love these kinds of places,” Jack whispered to Skye. “You’ve not seen cozy until you’ve been to this kind of establishment. They all have such magical personality.”

“So long as I’m with you, it could be a cardboard box, Jack,” she said melodically. She had been in a snuggly mood unrelenting since Jack’s confession that he thought giving up all his worldly possessions was a part of vowing himself to his vixen. She was impressed by that, and Judy was not entirely sure that had not been Nick’s entire intent. She didn’t want to ask in front of them.

The ZBI got out, moving around the house before signaling back that everyone was okay to get out of the vehicle. An sturdy looking lady badger dressed in camo trousers and a black sweater exited the establishment. Energetic brown eyes gleamed at the approaching visitors.

“Oh we are in luck,” Jack said excitedly, “I bet she’s the empty nest super nurturing type.”

“What the hell!” she cried in a harsh tone. Jack waved politely. She put her paws on her head. “That guy said four rooms! There’s a dang army of you! Oh, yer gonna cook your own vittles, all right! And I’m gonna pitch a little tent outside for the first’un that decides they gotta take a shower at three in the morning, and that’s a promise. Oh my God, are those bunnies?” Judy looked warily at Nick, who didn’t look particularly confident either. “I ain’t even got bunny chow!” She flailed. “Now I gotta run to the grocery.” She spun around a bit. “I just went! Why can’t they’a told me who was comin’? Ya’ll go in and suss out your own rooms! Gah, why? On a Monday!” She stomped to the back of the house, two of the ZBI agents moving to avoid her. She then drove out from behind the house in a van that looked like it was held together with rust, harsh political bumper stickers, and aging anti-Bellwether propaganda. Judy watched quietly as the van with a license plate that said “Honey” lumbered noisily down the road.

Yep, gonna be real cozy. I can’t wait.” Jack said, ears tall, still grinning like an idiot as he took Skye by the paw and headed for the front of the house. “Hey look, a porch swing!” he exclaimed. Skye brightened up immediately.

“Let’s get our bag put away!” Skye laughed.

Judy cupped her muzzle and looked at Nick, who shook his head slowly.

He said, in a soft tone, “Maybe Mom won’t mind if we visit her a little.”

“Sweet!” Jack called from inside, “This place has a punching bag in the living room that looks like a
sheep, Nick!”

Nick folded back his ears with a cringe. “Or maybe a lot.”
“They got your outfit out of the 80’s, I swear,” Nick laughed to his partner. She was stretched out over the somewhat over-plush and frumpy brown couch in the middle of the living room with her feet in the fox’s lap. He had been casually rubbing them to pass the time in a cozy late afternoon. They had no reason to hide in their current company. Motti and her family were all upstairs settling in (and quieting down). That left Agents Rosette and Bay, and the two lions. Both were now dressed in casual shorts and t-shirts. Everyone had been provided with a change of clothes after being rescued, but it was obvious that the clothing came from donation boxes. Judy’s black jeans and lime green, midriff-celebrating t-shirt needed just a pair of legwarmers to prepare her for a yak-band rock video.

“Your outfit came out of a prison trash bin,” Judy teased back. Nick had been given a jacket to cover up the fact that his white shirt had no sleeves. They were probably lacking in medium-sized shirts out in the Interior that day, it seemed. This one was too long, but still almost form-fitting, and the sleeves had been literally ripped off entirely at the shoulders. The dark green shorts were fine if one loved a thousand pockets and jingling zipper tags. Jack and Skye were upstairs already. By how they had been slumped over each other when they arrived, Judy knew they were likely already napping. They wanted time to be close. It was completely understandable to the doe. It had been pretty quiet in the living room with most of the group upstairs. It left Nick and Judy to relax and stare at the obvious sheep punching bag with dark, thick-rimmed glasses and a little gold bell around its floppy neck. Judy had no doubt who that was supposed to be as it hung silently from the rafters conspicuously in the common area.

A lot of predators held a great deal of malice toward the former mayor after the Nighthowler incident. There were even a few cheap apps one could buy where you got to fling water balloons at her. It was not a surprise that some of the sentiment about her, particularly so close to the end of her trial, might be a little more on the violent side. The punching bag looked like it was custom, at least. It wasn’t some company profiting off of that malice. Judy quietly wondered if maybe this badger had been personally affected by Bellwether, as two badgers had been shot with Nighthowlers.

“Well, the special secret agents devoted to moving fox and bunny luggage will deliver our stuff tomorrow at least,” Nick said, shaking Judy out of her musing as he took the bunny-foot in his paws.
and began working it diligently. She dropped her head back. The relaxed doe could see into the
dining room where the table had been taken over by the wolf and snow leopard agents. They had
files and papers strewn across it as they discussed security measures. The lions were both lounging
in different arm chairs on opposite sides of the room.

“I haven’t been anywhere near Zootopia in years,” Cassie said with some excitement. “I wish we
were allowed to go out and see the town. I’ve never even heard of it. It looked so quiet and sweet.”
Nick smiled up at her as Judy gave a barely perceptible groan of satisfaction with her handling.

The red vulpine murmured, “This particular town is mostly foxes, actually. I don’t know if they told
you that.” He slid his warm paws up and down over the bunny’s legs, over the tight-fitting fabric of
those black jeans. Judy closed her eyes. Yeah, that was just fine, he could pet and hold her for the
rest of the day. She would accept her fate.

“Oh hey! Now I really wanna get out there,” the lioness laughed. “I was just saying I wanted my
own fox!”

“Cass!” Charisse snapped in admonishment. “Kinda rude?” Nick and Judy both laughed, showing
they weren’t offended. After all, Nick was being very sweet to his bunny, which made foxes
appealing right then.

“Sadly, you have to stay here,” Judy reminded. “We need to keep low until they can determine the
level of threat, if any. It’s a really important precaution.” Cassie sighed. She’d surely been told all
of that by that point.

“Trading one prison for another,” she said sullenly as she rolled her eyes.

Her sister replied to that, “At least no one’s making us dig endlessly under threat of not being given
food or water!” She was obviously the more appreciative of the two.

Nick chimed in positively, “And, if there’s anything you guys might like as a treat, I can probably get
it for you. Carrots and I may go into town later.”

“Wait, how come you guys get to go into town?” Cassie asked grumpily. “I bet half the town at least
knows who you are, given all the crap Kijvu was saying you and your partner did!”
Nick put his ears back, surely understanding why the lady lion felt this was unfair. “We have a reason to be here,” Nick answered. “No one will think much of it if they see us wandering around here.”

“Why’s that?” asked Charisse in a less accusing tone.

Nick smiled and answered, “My mom lives here. I’m here all the time.”

“I want to meet your mother.” The words came from the dining room. Judy glanced over to it. Motti had come downstairs.

“I may bring her by here, then. Depending on what the ZBI guys say,” Nick agreed.

“Have you called her yet?” Judy asked.

“You wanted a foot rub. I was doing that.” Nick said.

“Nick, we’ve been here over an hour!” Judy laughed. “You’ve had time.”

“Someone hasn’t given me permission yet.” He glared at Bay. The agent hung up his cell phone and put it down casually on the table. He shot a wolfish grin at the fox. He was obviously making Nick stew a bit due to the fox trying to get Bay to howl on the plane. The ZBI agent had a lot greater control of that, they found, and he managed not to howl. And now Nick was paying for his playfulness.

“You can call her, Officer Wilde. Thank you for your patience,” he chuckled. He turned in his chair to face Motti. “I have been on the phone with our Interior Office. We have two agents assigned to your village to monitor their safety. Your friends there were absolutely nuts about the news we brought for them. They are very glad that you and your family are safe”

“Thank you for that.” The hyena bowed a bit to him. “It means much to my family. I go tell them.” She turned and left abruptly.

The wolf turned to Nick and Judy. “Your belongings from the inn there will be on the next plane.”
You should have all of that by tomorrow night.” Judy smiled and nodded to Bay, then glanced back at her partner, who was already dialing his phone.

“Put her on speaker, I wanna say hi to her too,” Judy laughed.

“Sure, Fluff!” Cassie sat up straighter, as if she might be judged by Nick’s mother’s voice or something. The phone rang a few times and a voice chimed out over the phone’s speaker, a bit of a throaty tone Judy immediately recognized.

“Musk Street Diner, Annie speaking. How can I help you?” Judy hadn’t heard from her in a long time, so she smiled at the voice.

“Hey, Annie! It’s Nick. Is Mom there?” She usually worked the afternoon shift on Monday, so he was right to try the Diner.

“Sure, I’ll put her on. V!” cried Annie before it was obviously put on hold. They were not waiting long enough for Judy to even figure out which campy folk tune was playing in the background. Vivienne picked up, speaking in a hushed, desperate tone.

“Nicholas?!” She sounded almost breathless. Judy tensed up a bit, not enjoying hearing that level of stress in the vixen’s voice. “Sweetie, are you okay?” she asked.

“I’m fine, Mom. I have Judy here with me.” Nick appeared concerned at her mood as well.

She immediately began talking frantically, “Everything in the city went to mulch over the past couple days, I’ve been watching on the news! I kept trying to call you and your phone was only going to voicemail. That’s not like you, and I was so worried. I called your boss and he told me your status was classified! Nicholas, I hope you didn’t get fired, I was not very nice about it,” she offered in a little more meek tone. Judy felt suddenly guilty for not having insisted Vivienne be called immediately. Nick had been so worried at the hospital about his injured partner, and it was onto a plane with them right away after that, with orders not to contact anyone as they got security under control. Even the lions, who didn’t know Vivienne, were visibly pained at the state this left her in.

“I’m okay, Mom. I promise.” Nick’s tone was compassionate. “We were not in the city when all that happened.” Bay made a show of his teeth at Nick to encourage him not to share specifics. The fox rolled his eyes at that. “We were running an errand out to the Interior for the Chief. We just got back.” The snow leopard and wolf both gestured wildly at that. Nick simply didn’t care. He wasn’t
giving any vital information at least. They went to the Interior. That’s all he said.

“That would be why I couldn’t reach your phone, then,” Vivienne sighed, “Nick, please tell me before you go somewhere out of contact!” Vivienne scolded. “…don’t know whether to hug you or nip you!” She huffed in exasperation.

“Well, you can do either of those things, since Judy and I will come to the diner to visit you, if that’s alright?” he asked. It was directed more at Bay who looked grumpy about how much information he gave.

“That’s fine, if you mind your discussion topics, Wilde,” growled the agent.

“Who was that?” Vivienne asked in slight alarm.

“That’s my buddy, Agent Bay. He’s helping out with things while all the crazy is happening,” Nick said, dancing around specifics. Judy knew that was hard for him. He was very candid with his mother.

“Agent? With the ZBI?” she asked.

“That’s a discussion topic I’m supposed to be minding,” her son replied.

“So there’s more to all of this… and you can’t talk to me about it?” Viv clarified.

Judy answered seriously, “Unfortunately, that is correct.” She wanted to spare Nick having to say that. He obviously felt dishonest because of it.

“Hey sweetie!” chimed Vivienne in a suddenly adoring tone. It practically melted Judy’s heart. She blushed a bit at the expression on both the lions.

“Hey, Mom! So… it’s okay for us to visit you?” the doe asked, eager to move the conversation away from not being allowed to tell her things when she was obviously worried. She then flinched a little as she has been hardly conscious of calling her ‘Mom’. By the expression on Bay’s face, it was noticed. Ah well. Not like they were hiding much right then anyway.
“Sure, hon!” sang Vivienne, “What day do you want to visit? I might be able to have that day off.”

Nick answered. “We’re in New Reynard already. I figured we would just come right over.”

Vivienne squeaked humorously. “Yes! Sure, oh, yes, that would be wonderful! I… Oh I can get your food started. Are you hungry?” she asked.

“I’ll take my usual. Judy will have the hot salad.” Nick answered.

“Hey! I didn’t say what I wanted!” Judy chastised her fox.

“Sorry, go ahead,” Nick indulged his lapine lover. Judy thought a brief moment and then sighed. She maybe didn’t want the steamed vegetable medley before, but now that Nick brought it up, she desired absolutely nothing else.

“Hot salad,” she surrendered, glaring at her painfully smug-looking partner. “Extra balsamic.” At least adding that made it clear that she should get to order it herself.

“It should be ready by the time you get here.” Viv said. “Are you just getting out at the station?” she asked. It was Bay who answered, which surprised Judy a little.

He clarified, “We are at the inn by the lake, actually. Do you have fish-burgers?” he asked. Nick folded back his ears. Judy knew where this was going as well.

“Sure do! The bed and breakfast you mean?” she asked. “That’s… a unique place to stay.” Her tone was uncertain.

“Actually, I’m gonna come with them,” the wolf laughed. “I’m pretty famished.” Nick stared daggers at him, ears pinned back. Judy understood the reason though. He was in charge of their security. He didn’t want them getting into any trouble.

“Sure thing. I’ll get those started. Anyone else?” Nick’s mom asked in a pleasant, waitress tone.
“Does Nick have any brothers?” Cassie asked brightly, causing Judy to snap her attention in that direction, muzzle dropping open. “I’ll have one of those.” Her sister pitched a pillow at the laughing Cassie hard.

“Err…” came the confused reply from the phone.

“Can we get fish-burgers brought back?” Charisse asked in exasperation. Cassie nodded her affirmation at that, still laughing. Nick nodded to them.

“Sounds like you have quite a party going on over there!” Vivienne laughed. “I will get your stuff started. I’ll see you in a little bit, Nicholas,” Vivienne crooned before hanging up.

Nick and Judy got up and headed for the door. Bay put his blazer back on, which thankfully hid the fact that he was carrying a firearm. It still unnerved Judy, seeing it all the time. She’d had a massive gun pointed at her head just a day before, after all.

They piled into the ZBI sedan outside the bed and breakfast, and actually passed the badger as she was coming back on the lonely two lane road that lead out to the lake. She gave Bay the finger as she lumbered on by in her van. The wolf only smiled back to her.

“Not a lot of respect for authority in that one,” he commented.

“I hope she’s not mean to the others,” Judy mumbled, a little concerned about that. They’d already been through a lot.

“I think she will more likely just dump food on them and avoid them,” Nick said. “I’m gonna bet she had plans this week that did not involve suddenly hosting a bunch of mammals in the inn.”

“Maybe going out and burning sweaters,” Bay grunted, yellow eyes on the road as he grinned. Nick chuckled at that, even though it was a somewhat alarming proposition. Judy could almost see that, given the somewhat distressing living room decor.

The rather dark comment led to something of an uncomfortable silence. They rode for a bit through the town, but Judy broke that silence as they passed the graveyard.
“I wonder how Scritchard is doing…” she asked.


“You’re kidding!” Judy gasped.

“Nope. He never vowed up, after all these years. Young gal, too - in her 70’s.” Nick laughed. Judy could not be certain if he was serious. They finally pulled up to the Diner. Nick had fortunately put the grey jacket back on that he’d been given. Judy would not have allowed him to go into the diner or literally anywhere else with that awful ripped shirt. Her outfit was dated, but at least it was whole. They entered the diner to find food being placed on the bar for them. They all hopped up onto the adjustable stools. Judy had her Veggie Medley, Nick had a black bean and cheese salad with creamy dressing, and Bay had his rather large fish-burger.

“Hello! I’m Vivienne Wilde!” the vixen stated, reaching over the bar to shake the wolf’s paw. He smiled back at her. “I hope you’re keeping my hopeless kit out of trouble.”

“I’ve been with him every minute for the past 36 hours,” he stated. “I have not shot him yet.”

“Goin’ for a commendation, eh?” came the gravelly voice from the back as Annie exited the kitchen. “…’atta boy.” Bay laughed at that and immediately took a huge bite of his hot fishy burger. Judy wanted to blanch at that, but it actually smelled kind of… appealing. She worried a moment at that realization. She’d perhaps developed a tolerance to that smell because of her recent… explorations into that culinary domain.

“Have you seen a lot of new faces the past couple of days, Mom?” asked Nick.

“Nope. Yours is the newest in a week,” she laughed. Bay nodded at Nick, obviously aware of why the fox asked that. Judy knew too. Someone new in town might need watching for the purpose of security.

“Can you message me if anyone new shows up?” Nick asked.

“I can. Wait.” Vivienne’s features became serious. She then glanced at the oblivious Annie and
folded her ears back. She obviously understood too, at that moment. She then nodded. “Yes, I’ll message you if I do.” Her tone was more cautious. Bay nodded again, slower to insinuate its importance.

“Thank you,” the wolf replied. Judy munched on her hot salad, extremely pleased with it once more. She had honestly hoped to get to visit New Reynard again with Nick soon. While the circumstances were a bit difficult, she was still happy to be here.

Vivienne pulled a stool up to her side of the bar, looking over it at her son and his partner. The diner’s manager busied herself with the two other patrons present, giving Vivienne some time to talk with the son she likely very vocally worried about. Nick nibbled at his salad contentedly. The vixen spoke in a soft manner, “Well, Nick, since there’s little you can talk about, I was thinking maybe I could talk to you about something… both of you, really.” Nick peered back at her with interest. Judy nodded, swallowing some of her food.

“Well…” the bunny chimed cheerfully.

“Well…” Vivienne looked like she was trying to compose her thoughts. “Gideon’s come down to New Reynard a few times now… bringing baked stuff to special events here, as well as to the Diner. We’ve started selling the pies. Hot item, those,” she explained.

“Gid’s a nice guy,” Nick said as he nodded munching his food.

“Well… it’s funny you should mention that, Nicholas…” Vivienne stated slowly, “… so… see… I have decided that it’s actually time for a very significant life change.” Judy widened her eyes, her nose immediately on the wiggle. She glanced at her partner who was the very image of a mammal going down with a sinking ship. She turned to look down at the sound of claws on counter top. The bunny saw Nick had crushed his napkin in his paw slowly, a tight fist still gripping it as he stared wide-eyed, fixedly at his mother. Judy glanced back at her as she smiled at her son. For how stunned Judy was, Nick had to be an absolute disaster as he sat quietly beside the bunny.

“How significant are we talking about, Mom?” her partner asked in nearly a whisper.

“Permanent, I’d hope,” Vivienne chimed. “See, I love that you visit, but I know it’s a long way and it costs you a bunch of money, and it gets lonely here, Nicholas. No offense, Annie.”

“None taken, V,” she called back. Judy was keenly aware that Nick’s breathing had become a little
Nick’s mother continued. “Anyway, Gideon has made a very heartfelt proposal to me.” A very tiny whine was pressed from Judy’s partner by that. “It was your mother’s idea, actually, Judy.” Judy stared in sudden alarm at Nick, then back to Viv.

“Really?” she asked. She was going to be calling her mom as soon as she left here, she was sure. What was she thinking?! Meddling with Judy was one matter, but not this!

“So… Uh…” Nick looked away uncomfortably. “What is this… change exactly?” He finally came right out and asked it.

“Well…” Vivienne smiled warmly. “Nicholas… Gideon and I…” She leaned forward. “Well… He’s decided to allow me to open a franchise of his bakery in Zootopia!” she finally stated brightly. Nick sat motionless. His mom nodded at him. “Yep! I’m gonna be moving into Zootopia next month! No wasting half your day on the train any time you want to visit. And I can see Judy a lot more often too. I know she’d like that, right?” Vivienne added, turning to the bunny.

“Right!” Judy chimed, her brain a mess. She was waiting for the Got You coin to come out, but it seemed Viv was not even aware of what it had sounded like. It was, perhaps, that completely unthinkable. Nick did not share what he’d thought either, though Judy knew absolutely it had been the same.

“That’s wonderful news, Mom!” he finally laughed. “Oh, gosh, do you know where the shop will be yet? Do you need help moving in and all that?” His tail flitted around wildly behind him as if to vent his coiled up stress.

“Probably, but I don’t know the exact date, yet,” Vivienne said warmly. “I will know that when we settle on a location. Right now, we want it to be close to city center, but it’s more likely to be in Sahara Square, on the Palm Market side. It gets a lot of restaurant traffic.” Nick nodded at that slowly and stood up kind of shakily.

“Gonna… restroom. Now. I’ll be back,” he offered.

“No, by all means, stay in there.” Bay laughed. Nick shot him a look as the wolf polished off his burger. He stumbled off to the bathroom. Judy understood why. He needed to compose himself. That was a shock to his system. She wondered if she should tell Vivienne what it sounded like she
was explaining at first. She decided not to.

“What kind of stuff do you do for the ZBI?” Annie asked Bay.

“Whatever needs done, really.” Richter said.

“Havin’ to deal with that mess in Zootopia right now?” the black-furred vixen asked.

“No, not directly, though there is a chance I will have to,” he said. “I hope I can just enjoy this fluff assignment here though,” he laughed. Judy winced at that. Protecting her and her partner was a meaningless fluff assignment to the ZBI. They were wasting resources. She would try to be patient with them, knowing that. She was at least sympathetic to that side of things.

“Ever killed anyone?” Annie asked.

“Annie!” Vivienne scolded.

“Yes,” answered Bay, frankly.

“Oh. Wow,” Annie said. Judy wilted at that a bit, but then remembered that she’d have had the same answer to that question. It was odd how that worked. Nick returned, having washed his paws and trying to dry them on his second-hand coat. He looked more composed and confident.

“Do you wanna visit the inn when you are off work?” he asked his mother immediately.

“Oh goodness no, Nick. That place is terrifying,” laughed Vivienne. The fox folded his ears back at that.

“The hostess seems a little off, is that why?” asked Judy curiously.

“A little off? Oh goodness, bunny, she’s absolutely cracked!” Annie laughed.
“That’s not very nice.” Bay stated in what may have been mock defense.

Annie gestured wildly a bit. “She put crystal wind chimes around the entire town in a hexagon to prevent sheep from getting in and taking our kits!”

“Have you had any sheep since?” asked Nick. Judy punched his shoulder.

“Well… no…” Annie stated, perhaps thinking he was serious.

Judy’s partner chimed, “Well then! There you go!” Another punch to the shoulder. This time it was Judy who winced, not Nick. She lurched too hard, and felt a very unpleasant pinch. Her paw instantly went to the side of her chest. Nick immediately turned and put his paws on her sides, looking at her cautiously.

“I’m okay,” the bunny said in a breath.

“Did you pop a stitch?” he asked. Judy folded her ears back.


“I think I’m alright.” Judy said. It was tender, but she suspected ripping a stitch out might hurt worse.

“Let’s check on it, sweetie…” Vivienne walked out from behind the counter. Judy didn’t want to cause trouble, but she knew she would feel better if she could be sure she hadn’t messed it up. Checking it on her own would be difficult since she would have to unwind the bandage. Doing that in the middle of the diner was absolutely not going to happen. Bay nodded to her and she and Vivienne went to the back office.

Judy had not been back there before. There were two sides to the office. One had a computer and desk. The other had something of a lounge area. The bunny blushed to see a bunch of pictures and stories about her and Nick hanging on the wall. The lady fox, maybe both of them, had been very focused on the two smaller officers. The paper clipping with Judy holding her partner after bringing him up through the road was in the middle of it all.
The bunny let Viv help her remove her silly lime green shirt, and then held her arms up as the fox unwound the ace bandage over her chest. Then a bit of wincing as gauze was pulled away from bare, shaved skin where it had been sticking a bit. There was a fearful squeak from the vixen. Judy glanced down and understood why. There was serious bruising around the cut that went right over her sternum from one side of her ribs almost completely to the other. And there were nearly two dozen stitches there to repair the damage. It didn’t look like she’d actually popped one.

“Judy, what happened to you? Is… Is Nick okay? Did he get hurt too?” she asked. Judy shook her head. She could answer some of that at least.

“Nick’s not injured. We are fine. I got cut, but I’m gonna be okay. And we’re safe now. The ZBI is here to help.”

“They’re… protecting you?” Vivienne asked. “From what?”

“Vivienne…” Judy felt awful leaving her in the dark about those things.

“You can’t talk about it. I… I know. I’m sorry. You know I’m going to worry. You look like you nearly got killed, Judy.” Judy realized as the vixen examined her that she was still wearing Nick’s memorial plate. The bunny took that in her paw and put it hastily over her shoulder, ‘out of the way’. She was not going to let Vivienne see that. She was already upset enough without being reminded that she nearly lost another kit only several months before. Vivienne put the gauze back on carefully and began to re-wrap the bunny’s chest. It was still so sore.

Judy tried to relax her. “You know that our job can be a bit dangerous sometimes. Usually it’s not, you know? Missing kits, lost merchandise, loitering… that stuff’s normal.”

“A mother worries about her kits even if they are just walking back and forth on a safe sidewalk, Judy.” Vivienne smiled at that and leaned up, pushing her cheek and applying a fresh motherly mark to the bunny. She blushed at that. It always made her feel so happy.

“I really am glad that you are coming to live near us,” Judy whispered. That was genuine, but also intended to lighten the mood a little.

“If I ever find out who was responsible for this, Judy, the ZBI won’t be able to protect them from me, so you know,” the fox growled.
“That mammal was already a lot less fortunate than me, Mom.” Judy knew she should not share much, but she wanted to close that bit of anger, at least. Vivienne looked a little stunned.

“You… killed them?” she asked with concern.

“No.” Judy asked. Suddenly, her fox-mother’s expression became more pained. “Nick didn’t either,” Judy immediately explained, making the vixen sigh heavily.

“Will you… ever be able to tell me about any of this?” asked the worried mother.

“Yes. Right now there is a very open investigation and it is widespread. Even Nick and I don’t know how serious all of it is. We will be fine, and we are gonna be here in New Reynard until further notice.”

“Have you told your parents that you got hurt?” asked Vivienne. She knew that Judy had messed up last time and not even told them about Nick’s funeral because she was so distraught. The vixen was likely trying to keep Judy from getting in trouble with her mother again. It was a very endearing gesture from her vulpine mom.

“She knows I got hurt, but she has no idea how or how bad. I will tell her more when things calm down,” Judy stated.

“Nick asking if I’d seen anyone new… does that have to do with why you are here?” asked Vivienne.

“Yes.” Judy answered. That was safe to say. Her being aware of possible threats and being able to keep herself safe if strangers showed up with bad intentions was important to Judy.

“Dangerous?” the fox asked. Judy nodded slowly. She didn’t like it, but it was dangerous. “Okay.” Vivienne inhaled deeply. “I won’t spread this around, but you are safe here in town. It’s small, and I promise… no one here would let anything happen to you. Please don’t overdo this.” She put a paw on Judy’s chest. “Even for Nick,” she smirked.

“Oh… Okay…” Judy murmured, ears scorching as they fell back. Vivienne laughed at that and headed back into the diner. Judy followed, a bit meek at that last comment.
The rest of their meal went pretty uneventfully. As soon as Judy sat back down beside Bay, his expression shifted a bit to surprised and he suppressed it. Judy knew why, and ignored it. It was none of his business. He already knew, if he was paying attention. Nick spoke with his mother about what she wanted to do with the new bakery, how they were handling profits, or what she would need to do in order to ensure a good following. Nick always had a good business sense, and while Gideon’s plan of ‘make pies no mammal can refuse’ had been effective in Bunnyburrow, Nick felt that there were definitely opportunities with branding and especially advertisement campaigns in social media. They enjoyed their meal while talking about that.

Judy spent more time talking to Annie, who she had not spoken with since the day she met her, back when the bunny showed up to find Vivienne for Nick. The bunny shared lots of pictures, including ones from her home town, and even a picture of her as a kit which her mother had posted some time back. She was in a little pretend police uniform she loved back then, and that just emotionally wrecked Annie. After the food had been eaten, they shared the Munch match from their vacation in Bunnyburrow. Bay particularly enjoyed that, though he irritated Judy a little in his highly positive appraisal of Angela. Yes, creepy ZBI agent. That’s a very nice bunny. Move on. The sun set as they talked, and even the wolf got into the conversation a bit more near the end, kidding around with Annie a lot and seeming to relax. The Diner had that effect. A few other foxes came and went, including two rather large families. The kits were excited to see Judy, and one even asked for an autograph, which was embarrassing. It seemed she was still a little bit of a celebrity. At least she was to the kits. That was fine.

Once that was done, however, Bay said it was definitely time to get back, as he’d absolutely overstayed his own break, and Rosette would have his hide if he stayed any later. Nick got the fish burgers for the two lions and picked up four more in case the hyenas wanted them. Agent Bay felt like any that did not get eaten would certainly have a home soon enough. He picked up one for the other agent as a peace offering. There was a somewhat confusing flurry of hugging between foxes and bunnies and more foxes. Annie and Vivienne even hugged Bay, who participated awkwardly in the confusing kerfuffle, only to find at the end he was hugging Nick who had jammed himself in there somehow. With riotous laughter at his protest to that, their party exited the diner into the night.

The trip back to the Bed and Breakfast was a bit livelier. There was less of a feeling that the agent was controlling them and more a feeling that he was working with them. It was a lot more relaxed. They moved swiftly through the small town that appeared to have already gone to sleep. Judy just quietly looked out the window as Nick explained his Munch credentials to the wolf. The past few months had rattled the bunny so much that this sleepy town felt almost alien to her. She felt bad that the other officers were not just lying around a cozy lakeside inn like they were on vacation. Judy felt her padded chest a bit as she reconsidered that. They were not nearly lopped in half by a brutal boar in a dark, primeval forest. So maybe she had earned a moment to catch her breath.

They finally returned to the place where everyone was staying. The van was pulled barely into the driveway, making it so the ZBI’s car could not pull in as well. The signal was obvious. Don’t block in the van. The wolf didn’t complain, he just pulled off alongside the driveway. They went in, Nick and Judy both holding bags with food that was still pretty warm. It was a rather short drive, really.
They were greeted in the living room by a grumpy-looking badger.

She glared at Bay. “I already said y’all can’t be coming in late, and here you are hauling food in here after I went and got groceries so you can fix yourself sandwiches and the like. I even got like two dozen carrots for the b-b-buh…” She stared hard at Judy. Then she moved her dark brown eyes to Nick. “Wait.” She stepped closer. Judy tensed up a bit. The badger was at least a little unstable, this much had been established.

“She’s got food,” Nick stated calmly.

The inn’s owner gritted her teeth in horror at the wolf. “You… You not only failed to mention how many guests, but you neglected to say you had VIPs with you?! The place is a mess! I’m a mess! Oh what the Hell!?” She paced. Judy folded her ears back.

“I’m not a VIP,” she laughed.

“Not a… Not…!” the badger paced hard, paws over her small ears. “You brought down the whole sheep cud-spiracy!” she cried. Judy suddenly considered the ‘Bellwether’ effigy. Oh no.

The fox tilted his head. “Conspiracy? Yeah, that… wasn’t really held together all that well.” Nick said somewhat dismissively.

“I had been watching it for years! It seemed like no one could stop it! I… I mean, you just… This is a rare and wonderful honor! I’m Maude, but you can call me Honey.” She took Judy’s paw in hers and shook it eagerly.

“You suddenly seem less put off about helping the ZBI protect these witnesses,” Bay said in a smug tone.
Honey narrowed her eyes at him. “You jerk. All you had to say was her name and I’d have signed the place over.” Judy’s ears blazed. She hated undue attention and this was as ‘undue’ as it could get. She did not do this to get at some sheep conspiracy. Though… there were a bunch of sheep involved. That was just how it was. It didn’t mean there was a real conspiracy involving just… sheep.

“Well, you will agree then that their security is paramount and we will have your cooperation?” Rosette asked from behind as she entered. She accepted the bag that was handed to her. She didn’t request it, but it appeared likely she was willing to deal with it.

“I don’t know who the others are, but these two I know,” Honey indicated Judy and Nick.

“You probably know the movie star staying here too.” Rosette said, taking her burger out of the back and savoring the scent. Judy scolded herself for doing the same. That was just so wrong. That was it. She had messed herself up. No denying it. She would just ignore that.

“What movie star?” Honey asked.

“Savage.” Nick said.

“Wait, the action bunny?” she asked. “Why’s he…” Her eyes shot wide open. “I knew it.” She leaned against the dining room door jam. “I knew it. I knew it. This whole time. A real agent.”

“Bahahaha! No, not that,” Bay laughed.

“Right,” the badger winked to him. “Then what about the others? Why are they here?” she asked.

“Can’t tell you.” Bay answered. “I will say… you will want to be nice to them. Those two saved them from certain death.” Judy flinched. He didn’t need to put it like that. Jack and Skye and all the mammals on the ZBI extraction team did their part too.

His reasoning was obvious though. He had Honey hooked.
“I will do everything I can to make their stay here a worthy vacation, Officer H— Officer Hopps.” She seemed almost unwilling to remind herself that Judy was standing right there in front of her. The bunny inwardly groaned. This was going to be so awkward. Maybe she could stay at Vivienne’s for however long this was going to take.

She decided to make a retreat. “I’m gonna take these burgers upstairs to our guests. Do you know if Jack and Skye are still asleep?” Judy asked.

Rosette answered, “I think they’re asleep, yes. It’s perfectly quiet there. Motti’s family is playing poker. The lions taught them how. They’re all in the meeting room upstairs with the big table.”

“Is it alright if I let them have these burgers and stuff up there?” asked Judy, not wanting them to make a mess and put out their host, odd as she may be.

“It’s literally your house the whole time you are here,” claimed Honey resolutely. Judy forced a happy nod at that. Oh boy.

She took the food up there as she listened to Honey lay into the wolf. It was a tirade about cleaning toilets and raking the leaves and the condition of the hot tub, oh God the hot tub, there was so much to do. She was not sleeping tonight, no Sir! Judy shook her head and looked to see if Nick was following, but he remained downstairs, just enjoying the antics of their new biggest fan.

At least no one was trying to kill them here.
Judy dabbed the corners of her eyes with her embarrassingly lime-green shirt. Having Motti’s family in a safe and controlled environment really let them cut loose, and they reminded the bunny of her own family with how they poked fun at one another and laughed together. Even Cassie was shocked at the level of sass from Motti’s mother, particularly in regard to Kijvu’s not-so-successful attempts at romance. He took it all in stride, however. Everyone was happy at the second chance at life that being there at the bed and breakfast had afforded them. It might not be home, but it wasn’t the mine.

Originally, Judy had intended to just bring them their food, but Charisse invited her to play a paw or two of poker with them. She might have said no to Cassie, but the somewhat rude lioness’ sister was a lot more genuine. The bunny didn’t care to offend or insult her. Unfortunately, a couple of sets of cards brought them ultimately to midnight. The doe, still laughing, finally separated herself from the party upstairs. It was winding down anyway.

It was actually kind of surprising to Judy that Nick had not come upstairs to check on her. She’d been gone well over two hours. As she hopped down the stairs to the dining room, she expected that maybe he was assisting the ZBI with security stuff or maybe spinning up the honey badger about sheep. It was quiet as she got to the bottom.

There was no one in the dining room. Judy went into the next room, the living room, which was pretty dark. She moved over to it, pondering if Nick had just gone outside. She halted mid-step as she saw the scene in the living room. Honey was sitting on the couch quietly with Nick slumped over her lap, pinning the larger badger a bit against the arm of the couch nearest to Judy. Nick’s eyes were closed. Honey was stroking his ears. A rush of anger prickled through the bunny, but she stamped it down.

She knew what happened.

“What happened here?” Judy asked sweetly. Honey visibly flinched at that, startled.
“He fell over,” she said in a rather uncomfortable tone. “I was just… I mean, his ears are… I was…” She looked back fearfully at Judy. “Don’t tell him.” she whispered, stowing her paws down by her hips and shrinking a little under his partner’s gaze. Judy sat down on the other side of Nick, knowing that he probably never meant to flop over on the badger. She had no doubt about why, however.

“He’s not really slept much in about three days, really,” Judy explained. She wondered how long it took Nick to fall over like that. Did Honey actually pull him over to hold him? She was a fan of both the bunny and the fox. Was she not able to ignore the temptation to be that close? It was kind of cute, if just a little creepy.

“He was… He was tellin’ me. About th’ things you two have done,” Honey said in a meek whisper. Her intense and fanatic enthusiasm from before had passed. Her tone was a lot less overwhelming. It might have been because the fox was sleeping. She respected Nick and didn’t want to wake him. Judy watched her slumbering partner’s slow, rhythmic breathing. Seeing him asleep has the usual effect. It made her feel sleepy and safe again. She could probably reach over and pull him over onto her instead. However, she worried that she might hurt herself if the doe pulled wrong, so she left him where he was. Honey continued explaining. “He told me about th’ thing with Darmaw. I… I really had no idea it was like that. I’m sorry if I seemed careless about what you both have gone through. I… I guess it’s easy to forget that you aren’t really… that different from me.” She stroked Nick’s ears again. It was pretty hard to resist that, the bunny knew.

“You don’t have to apologize. We don’t talk to just anyone about that. It sucked.” Judy leaned up a bit, getting in on the fox-petting. She hadn’t held and touched him enough since they left. She needed this. She didn’t care if Honey was there. Even if the badger tried to spread it around, the fact that she was the one saying it would actually likely do more to dispel the rumor than enhance it.

“It’s fine I mean. I just… I was a little over th’ top, I know. I get like that. Around most new folks, not just... you know.. celebrities,” she explained.

“Where are Bay and Rosette?” asked Judy suddenly, wanting to push Honey away from sorry-ville.

“Rosette’s on the porch with her laptop. Bay’s upstairs in the camera room,” Honey stated.

“You have a camera room?” Judy asked.

“Yep. I’ve got sixteen cameras around the property,” the badger said proudly. “Bay was super stoked.” Judy grinned, actually not surprised the paranoid badger had something like that. Honey was probably right about the wolf being stoked. The ZBI agent would have found that to be a
“Well, that could not have gone better if he planned it,” the bunny chuckled. She looked back down at slumbering Nick, playing with his twitchy ear casually for a moment.

“He told me how you brought his mom back…” Honey whispered, breaking the silence. Judy glanced up at Honey, a bit dumbfounded. Why had he shared all that stuff with her? Was he really just that exhausted? The bunny suddenly felt a little guilty. She should have just put him to bed like Jack and Skye had done. Judy got to rest and recover during the night when she was in the hospital. Nick probably hadn’t slept a wink other than the short nap when he did. And he’d only slept for an hour or so the night before.

“Did he tell you where I found her?” Judy asked. Did Honey know about that?

“No,” she whispered. Just that you showed up a few days after he told you about it with his mom makin’ a home cooked meal… his favorite. Told me that he cried.” Honey said the last part in a barely audible tone. Honey’s sudden quiet attitude made more sense. That would have most certainly made the badger see Nick as less a adventure-story figure and more of a mammal with vulnerabilities like anyone else.

“I found her here in New Reynard,” Judy said. “I didn’t expect to find her.” Honey looked surprised at that. She then leaned back, as if thinking. Judy was smiling at that. It was a happy story, after all. The badger thought for a while, and Judy quickly recalled that she was a conspiracy theorist. She liked putting puzzles together.

“The Musk Street Diner,” Honey said, catching on quick. “That’s where you guys got the food. Then his mom is… She’s the red fox there? V?” The fact that the badger only knew her by what Annie called her made it apparent that Honey did not know Vivienne very well. She would probably get to know her better after this, the bunny suspected.

“That’s her.” Judy said.

“Nick Wilde’s mom… has lived here the whole time… and I never knew.” That fanatic tone had crept back in. However, as Honey stroked down over Nick’s neck a little, she wilted a little. “Oh no… Oh that poor vixen though.” Judy widened her eyes. Poor vixen? Was there something Judy didn’t know? Was something wrong with Viv?
“Why do you say that?” the bunny asked, barely masking the fear in her voice.

“To have lost her mate when her son was so young… That had to be absolutely brutal to both of ‘em,” she said in a very soft voice.

“There’s just no way Nick would have said that to you.” Judy stated flatly, actually having to moderate how loud she said it. That was ridiculous. Even sleepy, her fox would not have been that open to the badger they’d just met.

“He didn’t say anything. He didn’t have to. John Wilde’s his dad, right?” she asked.

“Yes? How did you know?” Judy asked, sitting up a little more.

“A guess.” Honey answered in a whisper. “I’ve seen his grave in the cemetery. Nick didn’t say it was here in New Reynard, but he did tell me that you thought she was dead and you went to find her grave, but found her instead. Well, there’s a grave there. It’s a double plot. But the fox there died back when Nick was really little. So… yeah… Poor vixen. I know that stuff’s hard on the kits too. Their moms can get super obsessed and cuddly after… something like that happens. They mark their kits like… all the time. Come to think of it, I think you got yourself marked, too,” she laughed, obviously trying to lighten the mood.

“I did, yes.” Judy said with a smile. She wasn’t thinking much about the implication there, of course, she was more surprised by this badger’s observational abilities and retention of information. It should have been expected though. Putting patterns together definitely appeared to be honey’s thing.

The badger spoke in a lighter, less serious tone, “I know a bunch about foxes, obviously, since I’ve lived here all my life. My dad’s the sheriff in New Reynard,” she explained. “It’s why I’m a little soft on them,” she chuckled, still slowly stroking Nick’s fur. Judy looked up, eyes widening a bit. The badger was being more affectionate with her touch. Nope. She needed to put stop that ship before it left port.

“This one’s mine,” she stated bluntly. Judy inwardly cringed at how possessive that sounded. There were definitely better ways to say something like that.

“What?” asked the badger, leaning back and taking both paws off the sleeping vulpine as if she’d been caught groping, not petting.
“I uh…” Judy looked down, thinking of how to soften her tone, “I mean… Of course I love him. I know… what it’s like to be kind of soft on foxes,” she chuckled, wanting to make it clear by her manner that she was not mad that another mammal petted her fox.

“How are you letting him just lay here on me then? You could have told me,” Honey chuckled nervously in a mock-scolding tone. The badger carefully reached down and shifted Nick slowly onto Judy’s lap. The bunny felt a surge of happiness, feeling his weight there. Poor tired fox. He was really just a sack of potatoes right now. He curled his tail around himself a little. Judy petted it lovingly, savoring the silky softness. She bet the strong badger lady could carry him up to bed if Judy asked. The bunny pulled a throw pillow under Nick’s head. He could lay there a bit with her. That would be fine. Honey elaborated, “He didn’t mean t’ fall asleep on me, he just dozed off like… mid-sentence.” Judy glanced up at the badger. She was defending Nick’s honor in how Judy found him.

The bunny chuckled. “Oh, I’m not worried,” she shook her head. “I have his promise. That’s good enough for me.” She’d never suspect Nick of breaking that. It was too important to him. She believed that.

“Wait, like… like the promise?” the badger asked. Judy snapped her eyes wide open. Oh. Honey knew about that. She really had been around foxes her whole life.

“Yes,” Judy said frankly. She wasn’t going to hide it while they were practically on vacation in this place. She was going to hold Nick and do everything she could to comfort him after the rough week he’d had. She owed that to him. This time, he was the one who likely saved her life.

“Nothing against bunnies, but geeze… That’s as serious as it gets. I can’t think of anything he’d have been through more profound than vowing himself to a bunny.” The shock was very real in her voice. Judy looked down at her partner, and then reached into her collar and pulled out the memorial plate she still wore, letting it dangle in front of the badger so she could read it.

“Oh. Oh my God. Oh holy crap,” she said, leaning way back as if the thing had some kind of evil power of death by just existing. “Okay, yeah. So that’s serious. I… I didn’t mean to suggest he shouldn’t… I mean, I think it’s g-great.” She seemed a little breathless. Judy put the memento back, feeling a little guilty for shaking up the badger like that, but it got the point across.

“Don’t share that fact, if you don’t mind. It’s not really the rest of the world’s business,” Judy explained.

“Oh, hey, it’s like… the only rumor I was actually skeptical about…” Honey said in a near whisper,
grinning at the ridiculousness of that. She was so surprised, however, that she said it a little too loudly.

Nick shifted a bit, rolling over and ending up with his head on Judy’s lap instead of the pillow. Honey got up to let him put his feet out. She moved over to the other room, opposite of the dining room and came back with a somewhat heavy-looking quilt. She spread that over Nick. The fox opened his eyes and looked up at Judy.

“I dozed off.” He informed. He tried to get up. Judy mashed him back down.

“I see that.” Judy chuckled. She leaned down, scooping his head upward a bit and kissed his muzzle sweetly. The bunny ran her fingers over his chest, pressing quite close him. The position was not comfortable with the stitches, but she held it anyway. “We can rest, Nick, don’t get up…. we can take advantage of some time to just… get better, okay?” The bunny was genuine in her offer. They could rest. They could stop for a bit. His mother would be there to help too.

“What? You mean the bunny who never stops would be willing to take…” he gasped, “… a day off?”

“This isn’t like… part of your cover or something?” Honey inquired, still struggling with new information.

“Would you let me?” Judy whispered, not responding to the confused badger.

“No. I’d tickle you,” he grinned.

“That’s a terrible idea.” Judy smirked. She’d pop all her stitches.

“Then I guess I have to find other ways to keep bunnies distracted from working.” Nick practically crooned. Judy tensed and melted a bit against him as she felt his hot mouth cup the side of her neck. She tilted her head to give it to him willingly, eyes closed as she felt his teeth tenderly grasp, touch, and tease. She splayed her little fingers through his soft fur along his neck and cheek as he held her. His own claws ran down both of the doe’s ears. His fingertips glided back up to perhaps appreciate the heat in them.

Honey murmured a little uncomfortably, “What a night. Guess I’ll just, uh…” She paused a bit,
obviously uncertain what to even say, but unable to stop watching the display. “You know… Yeah. So, not uh… Not just a cover…” She walked over to the middle of the living room, suddenly grinning a bit excessively. “Heh… so freaking awesome. Goodnight, sheep.” Judy and Nick both jumped a bit as Honey punched the hell out of the punching bag one good time. She hit it so hard that grit fell down from the ceiling onto them. With fox and bunny staring at her, the smiling badger looked at the covered, cuddling pair and said jovially, “Glad t’ have you here. I’ll make sure you have a happy time. You earned your rest.” She then turned and headed through the dining room to go upstairs, laughing heartily. The fox and bunny watched their rather eccentric hostess a moment longer, then back to the swaying bag. Yeah, she was strong enough to carry Nick up the stairs if she had to, Judy considered.

“Don’t lie… you want to hit it too,” the fox said with a grin.

Judy pointed at the still slowly swinging sheep effigy. “That is not healthy.”

“I won’t tell anyone.” Nick laughed.

“I feel weird just cuddling you in front of it,” Judy said, suddenly hyper-aware of those thick-framed glasses.

“The first time you felt my teeth was in front of Bellwether, it should feel nostalgic.” Nick teased. Oh yeah, that was exactly what she should have expected him to say.

“I’m not making out in front of the sheep.” Judy insisted.

“A good thing, honestly. Because if we don’t get up now, Fluff, we’re gonna be sleeping in front of it. Seriously. I’m barely functioning right now.” Judy smiled at her fox and moved back a bit to let him get up. Nick helped Judy stand fully. Agent Rosette came in from outside on the porch.

“It’s getting late, you two should be resting,” she said in a genuinely kind tone. She was relaxing a little too, perhaps.

“We’re headed there now.” Judy said. “Thanks for watching over us. It’s been a rough week.” She took her partner’s paw in hers. They kept the nice quilt with them. Leaving it seemed unappreciative of the gesture.
“I know. Let us know if you need anything,” the snow leopard stated, walking into the living room. “We have two agents coming in the morning to help out. I will be here tonight, and be back tomorrow evenings. We’re doing shifts.” Judy nodded at that. It was sensible.

“Shee you tomorrow night then, if I miss you in the morning.” The bunny said softly, leading her fox along. They then headed upstairs. As Judy ascended the stairs, she heard dull thumping of someone beating on a punching bag. It was so, so wrong. She led Nick into their chosen room, beside the one where Skye and Jack were staying. They could finally get some safe, heavy sleep. Well… after a bit of uninterrupted cuddling, at least.

Nick dropped into a deep slumber with his bunny in his safe and securing arms, tail wrapped over her thoroughly. This was what Judy needed. The bed was soft. It was quiet. It was dark. It was completely peaceful, finally.

Judy looked at her phone, setting an alarm for herself, and quickly sending two text messages. The first was to her mom to let her know she was safe, and was gonna get some sleep, and the next was to Nick’s mother with a quick request. The bunny set the alarm to vibrate, and pushed it in her pocket. Quickly, sleep claimed her.

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The soft buzzing in her pocket startled Judy a little, as it was meant to do. She carefully pulled her phone out, trying very hard not to move much. Turning off her alarm, she looked at the six messages she’d received in the night. The first four were from her mother.

*Where are you?*

*Oh, you went to sleep. We’re going to have a talk about communication, young lady.*

*Your dad thinks your boss is keeping you from us. Message him and tell him that’s false.*
Everyone wants to see you again. Please visit soon. We miss you.

The doe sighed and replied to them in order. She was still outside the city. Yes she went to sleep, and sometimes she could not talk much about things going on. Her parents already knew that. She sent a message to her dad stating that her workload was keeping her from them, not Bogo specifically. She replied to her mom that she was going to try to get out there for the holidays, and looked forward to it. The bunny then regarded the two other messages. They were both from Vivienne.

I got your message. I’m glad I went to bed at a reasonable hour. I can come out there. Is everything okay?

That message was sent at about six in the morning. The next was sent about an hour later, about the time Judy had awakened.

Heading out there now. I’ll meet you where you said.

The bunny sighed achingly. She didn’t want to get up and leave her fox, but she’d arranged this herself. Her midsection hurt a bit. It was tight. She carefully moved herself out from under Nick’s heavy, tenderly embracing arm. She regretted having to move at all, but this was important. The bunny got up and headed to the restroom, then went back downstairs. Bay was there in the living room. He was sitting in front of Honey, who was standing in front of him with a very large sword in each strong, thick paw.

Bay spoke cautiously. “I can’t just take one of those, Honey. We aren’t allowed to accept gifts.”

“It’s not a gift, just take it. We can spar in the front yard.” The badger requested.

Bay recoiled a bit. “Oh that’s definitely not going to happen. I promise you, that is not allowed. Where did you even get those?” he asked.

“I collect medieval weapons. I have a whole room full of them!” she chimed. “You’re a wolf, so stop being a sheep. Take a sword. These are dull for practicing.”

“Sorry, it has nothing to do with my species. I can’t do that while I’m on duty. I need to focus on my work. You are so odd. What makes you think I’ve even used a sword in my life, anyway?” he
“The way you walk around with your index claw relaxed.” The badger pointed at it.

“The way you walk around with your index claw relaxed.” The badger pointed at it.

“Huh? Oh. Maybe. I did that stuff when I was younger, but I still can’t do it right now, while I’m working. Ask the bunny.” Bay betrayed Judy by pointing to her. Judy gritted her teeth, both at being used as a badger-diversion, and at how observant Honey actually was. Putting together the facts about Nick’s dad was sharp. Was she always looking for stuff like that?

“Officer Hopps! You’re awake!” she chimed gladly. “Oh, but she’s hurt, Wolfy,” she said, turning to face him with her swords again.

“Please don’t call me Wolfy.” Bay asked.

“You are such a cub,” Honey teased.

Judy intervened in that conversation. “Is it alright if I sit over by the lake? Nick’s mom’s gonna come by in a bit and I wanna say hi to her before she goes to work.” Bay nodded at that.

“I only ask that you don’t leave the property,” he said. “Until Bogo says otherwise, you are all to be escorted in town.”

“Well that’s not at all conspicuous,” Honey said, taking the words out of Judy’s little mouth.

“It’s alright, I just wanna sit by the lake. It’s pretty out here. I want to relax and enjoy it.” She smiled brightly. That was the truth. Nick’s teasing last night was deserved. She was bad about relaxing when she had a chance to.

The badger nodded at that. “There’s a swing out there. It’s like the one on the porch. Overlooks the water. Enjoy that. I’m gonna get breakfast started. You can have some when you come back in.” Judy nodded at that. Apparently she’d changed her mind about having everyone just make their own food. She wondered how late the others would even sleep. Jack and Skye might already be awake, but they were still in their room. They were probably cuddling. The thought made the doe really happy.
Judy headed out, pulling on a dark blue sweater three sizes too large for her. She would be glad when she got her own clothes back. The front yard was large, but the back yard was several acres. It reminded her of her own home, except that it was completely covered by forest. The yard was well-tended though. The leaves were neatly raked. Had the badger done this after realizing who her guests were? Judy felt bad about it if she did. She found the swinging bench easily enough. It was attached to the limb of a massive, ancient-looking tree which overlooked a small hill that lead down to the sandy shore of a pristine, clear, beautiful lake. Oh yes, Judy was definitely bringing Nick back here when they were both ready for a quiet break. She sat down in the swing.

She wasn’t there long before she heard the soft, fairly rapid footfalls behind her. She turned a bit and was actually a little surprised to see Nick’s mother approaching in a full jog. She wore a dark green semi-sleeveless hoodie and short green running shorts. Judy then considered that a moment. His mother seemed pretty healthy and energetic for her age. Of course she took care of herself. The vixen smiled as she approached and slowed her approach, walking out the rest of her trip as a cool-down.

“Hey, Mom.” Judy said very intentionally. The bunny really enjoyed calling her that. She wasn’t too shy about it anymore. Vivienne stopped in front of the bunny and pushed her muzzle to the side of Judy’s neck. Judy remembered what the badger had said. Mothers who lost their mates hugged a little tighter and marked their kits a little more. Vivienne needed this. She embraced the vixen and leaned up, pushing her chin over the top of her head. Her fur was a little lighter in color than her son’s, so in the morning light she looked almost gold in places. She really was a beautiful fox.

“You said you had something really important you wanted to talk to me about. Is Nick okay? Is it about work?” she asked, finally sitting down on the bench.

“No, everything’s fine with work,” Judy said. She remembered suddenly that Nick’s mother had been unkind to Bogo the other day. Was she really worried that Nick got fired? What in the world had she said?

“Fine. Really?” she asked, seeming a bit flustered about that. Judy put her ears back. Being a mother to kits who led a dangerous life was probably not a lot of fun.

“Well, disasters aside, and I promise, as soon as we can, I will tell you everything… just… that’s not what I care about right now.”

“We care about the same thing, I think,” Vivienne said with a smile. Judy nodded at that.

“Exactly. I… I got hurt and I know it bothered Nick. I know how important I am to him. So I am
being careful, I promise. But it made me think more about us. Our happiness together. I want to do everything I can to make Nick the happiest he can possibly be. I can’t do that alone. I need advice from another fox, and it needs to be someone who knows his heart even better than I do.” Judy felt a little dramatic putting it like that, but it really was that important to her.

“Well, it certainly makes a mother’s heart glad to hear you say that, little bunny,” Vivienne said in a near whisper. “I think you are being a really good partner to him, though. You don’t see how much he’s changed for the better now that he’s with you. I knew the old Nick. I knew the one I think you only knew for a little while. Nothing’s ever going to make him happier than you just keeping him close to you, sweetie.” Judy perked her ears again. This wasn’t exactly the conversation she wanted to have, but she was still curious.

“I know he was unhappy before. Before I met him, I mean,” she offered, wanting to know a little more if his mother was willing to share it. What would he have been if he didn’t have her? Would he go back to that if he lost her? Certainly not.

Vivienne put her paws between her knees, having mostly caught her breath by then. She talked more softly. “Judy, I don’t mean to alarm you, but I don’t think you have the… the history… the experiences that you would need to understand… what Nick was actually going through. Judy, I wouldn’t even want you to truly understand it.”

Judy shook her head. Okay, so they didn’t have to talk about something so dark. “Oh no, I know he wasn’t happy. I mean, he’s told me how he felt. About everything. Just being a fox was hard. It still is sometimes, but I know how unhappy he was. He’s told me.”

Viv lowered her head a bit, ears back. “Judy, he’s told us more than he wanted, if you were listening. It was a lot worse than just his words suggest. You have to read between the lines. You think that he vowed himself to you just because of me, or because of being pulled out of Hell by you? Those were actually tiny gestures compared to what you really did for Nicholas.”

“Oh no, he told me.” Judy responded, chest tightening up some. “He said he gave me his life because I was the one who made it worth giving to me.” As Judy said it, the weight of those words came back to her, and she felt a lump in her throat. His life was always worth something. She felt terrible that he ever thought otherwise.

Vivienne replied sweetly, “That is true. And he’s told me the same, a bit before he told you.”

“At the Diner, while I was getting run over by a bus, right?” Judy asked. He’d explained that part to her.
“Yes, literally minutes before.” Viv said softly. “That still… doesn’t leave you with an appreciation for how meaningless he thought his existence was before you got your little paws on him, Judy. You still don’t understand how bad that damage was.”

“He doesn’t really talk that much about it,” the bunny confessed. “He’s happy now.”

Vivienne looked at Judy sadly a moment, and a very long pause filled with thoughtful silence passed between them before the vixen spoke again slowly. “Judy, would you say Nicholas was a really clever fox, or a really dumb fox?”

“He’s one of the smartest mammals I know.” Judy chimed brightly. What doubt was there?

“Does he plan things well? Think things through meticulously?” she asked.

“You heard about our first date, didn’t you?” asked the bunny with a smirk.

“I did, yes,” Vivienne said kindly. “Such a sweet boy. But… Judy… Do you think Nicholas suspected what might happen to him if he insulted the most notorious crime boss in Tundra Town with a skunk-butt rug? Could he really have thought that violent and powerful mammal would think that skunk fur was wool?” Judy felt her paws go cold and clammy as her heart sank even remembering that had ever happened. Her partner had told his mother all about it when he was explaining how his life had changed. No. Nick would have known that wouldn’t work. He could not possibly have thought that ridiculous substitution would have had any chance of accomplishing anything but filling Mr. Big’s tiny little body with white-hot blood-lust at the clear insult. If he had to have known it would not work, why in the world would he have taken that kind of dumb chance? Judy immediately felt a wave of nausea. No.

“He didn’t expect it to work,” Judy croaked out bitterly. Her eyes immediately became wet. He couldn’t have. No one should ever…

“Shhh, I didn’t say this to upset you, Judy…” The bunny winced as she was pulled against the soft cotton hoody, Viv embracing her. Judy jerked softly, nose wiggling, stifling a cry. He shouldn’t even have passed his initial psychological evaluation with something like that. Her fox-mom whispered softly, “It was a different time and a different fox! You have to understand that, Judy.”

“He’s still the same fox.” Judy squeaked through soft fabric against the vixen’s chest. “He was
hurting so bad. I never knew,” she whimpered. “Would he have really tried to make that end happen?” Judy asked with a crack in her voice.

“No, I don’t think he really wanted that, Judy. I just think he stopped caring whether or not it did. Playing it safe… stopped mattering to him.” she remarked. Judy felt a pang of guilt. Nick wanted her to slow down. Nick chastised her about the chances she took. He spoke from absolute experience.

“I can’t… imagine that. You’re right. I don’t have the ability to know what that was like for him.” she sniffled.

“Sweetie, he really doesn’t think of himself as that fox anymore. Wording is important here, so listen.” Judy looked up at the vixen, her eyes wet. “Nicholas said just coming into contact with you obliterated that sad creature… mercifully sent him to his next life. A life he gets to share with you. You’re his heaven, Judy. I’m telling you this because I saw doubt in your eyes. You worry that you can’t make him happy enough. Nothing can even make him happier than you do. Believe me when I say this, my little bunny kit… a mother fox is one of the hardest mammals to impress and gain the trust of and I could not wait to hear him speak his promise to you, Judy. He’s happy with you. We both are. That is my promise to you.” She smiled as tears rolled down the bunny’s cheeks. This only hardened Judy’s resolve in the moment.

She took a deep breath and spoke more clearly. “Then that brings us to why… to why I asked you to come,” Judy sputtered a bit. Vivienne wiped her tears away with a sleeve.

“Oh?” asked Vivienne in such a sweet and motherly tone.

“I want you to tell me the words… Tell me how to vow myself back to my fox.”
Judy pulled Vivienne a little tighter to her, the fox shaking a bit as she genuinely sobbed. The bunny stroked vulpine ears back slowly and blushed. She had suspected Vivienne would have an emotional response to this, but she didn’t expect it to be so pronounced. She didn’t want Nick to come outside looking for her only to find his mom falling apart in front of the lake.

“I hope it’s okay…” she whispered, a flicker of worry shooting through her that maybe Vivienne was actually upset and didn’t want Judy to do that.

“Oh sweetie, no, it’s wonderful! I… I didn’t expect… I had hoped, but…” She made Judy wince again as the fox squeezed the tender bunny. Judy squirmed some as the older vixen kept her held close against her green hoody, warm and safe. The bunny was about to make herself a part of a lot of fox cuddling, so she accepted that she should get used to this at least.

After a bit more of this, the doe whispered gently, “I don’t want Nick to wake up and see this and ruin the surprise. I just… I wanted to ask you personally.” Viv looked up into her eyes, ears up and alert, nodding. Judy said, still nearly whispering, “I need to know how to say it. Where and when. I want to do this absolutely right.” Judy was released and she leaned back a bit, the fox still sitting on the swinging bench in front of her.

“It’s not so complicated as all that.” Vivienne stated, wiping her cheeks with her bare arm. “I mean… It can be something between just the two of you, at any time. You two are the only ones really involved in this promise.”

Judy smiled up at her fox-mom and perked her ears up. “It’s important to me that I do this in front of others who care for Nick. I am sure you understand that. And I need to make sure my intentions are clear. It’s not just the promise… the vow I mean. I don’t know how a fox wedding actually works.” There was an adorable squeak from Vivienne at that.
“Oh sweetie…” She leaned forward again. The doe’s ears got stroked by the Viv as she looked at Judy with wet eyes. “The words are… a little different for that, yes. I will send you the right ones. When you are ready to use them, I would love to be there, Judy. I will come at a moment’s notice, understand?” she asked.

“Yes, Mom.” Judy answered. Another squeak from Vivienne.

“Your mom and dad will be there too, yes?” she asked.

Judy nodded. “I want my family there, of course. You, them, Jack and Skye.”

“Jack and Skye are family now?” Viv asked.

“Good as. They…” Judy widened her eyes a fraction of a second. Of course, Vivienne didn’t know. Judy inhaled a quick breath and let Viv have it. “… Jack vowed up to Skye with Nick and I as witnesses.”


“Yes,” Judy chimed brightly.

Vivienne sighed a little sadly. “And just like that, foxes were wiped out. Bunnies learned the secrets of fox-loving and the end was unavoidable.” The vixen grinned broadly as if worried that Judy might not have understood she was kidding about that. Judy tried to remain stoic for effect, to mourn the passing of the age of foxes, but ended up giggling anyway.

She glanced back up to Vivienne and asked calmly, “Is there anything I should know about before this? Things I should understand about Nick that will help me be a good… mate?” She felt good saying it, but just a little bit nervous.

“First of all, it’s alright to call him your mate.” Judy perked her ears at that, flitting her little teardrop tail. Her trepidation had been visible, perhaps. Vivienne smiled at her and explained. “After he vows up to you, Judy, he’s exactly anything you want him to be the moment you want it. That’s how that actually works. Besides, I think you are handling that stuff well enough, honestly.
Particularly now that you two aren’t afraid of the physical side of that,” she chuckled. Judy went more scarlet in her ears than the vixen who said that.

“He… he told you about that?” Judy asked with a weak chuckle. Oh dear heavens. Nick really was an open book. Surely he didn’t say much, did he? Why would he?

“He said he nearly caused you to lose your poor mind. Something about … him not understanding that a bunny without hormone modification can’t just be kissed, nibbled, and teased endlessly without there being serious repercussions?” she asked. Judy groaned, covering her face with her little paws. He did tell her.

“So embarrassing.” Judy whimpered.

“I’m not trying to embarrass you, sweetie.” Vivienne laughed. “It is what it is. And he didn’t tell me much. Just that you two had that little… snag.”

“It was awful.” Judy commented dryly. “I was snapping at him like… every twenty minutes. Then I yelled at him about some joke he got me with and stormed out.” Vivienne paid close attention, perhaps not actually knowing all of this. Judy kept talking. “Well, I went to talk to Skye. She told me to just talk to Nick and tell him what was getting to me, as you already mentioned.”

“Reasonable of Skye, yes,” the vixen nodded.

“So, I went back, and I found him packing boxes,” Judy said bluntly. “That was a melt-down triggered, let me tell you.” The bunny groaned.

“Nick never mentioned leaving,” Vivienne stated with some surprise. “He actually… can’t do that.” She was obviously stunned at that detail. Judy smiled.

“Oh don’t worry, he wasn’t. And I understood that, Mom, I really did… I was just… in a bit of a stressed state then. All I saw was him putting clothes in boxes. I completely forgot about the charity clothing drive at work.” Vivienne cupped her muzzle as she tried to hide her smile. It wasn’t funny. Not really. But it was silly.

“Oh no… you poor bunny.” Vivienne said.
Judy didn’t take it personally. It was pretty silly looking back on it now. “When I ended up in a tightly curled ball on the floor at the sight of boxes, Nick was just… done being patient about whatever was causing my weird behavior. He made me tell him.” Judy explained.

“A little awkward, I take it?” Vivienne asked.

“Oh yeah. He didn’t realize that while he thought he was keeping me happy and making me feel content and loved, I was basically boiling in my fur every minute I was with him.” Judy shook her head, taking a moment to consider what a mess she had been. “We uh… We got over that dumb fear just a little later, and took things slow… so, yeah…”

“Didn’t need to be afraid after all, huh?” Vivienne asked with a chuckle, only making the bunny blush harder.

The bunny pulled her ears down over her face. “Well, more personal territory there, but yeah… Everything was fine. Wonderful. I mean… We were careful anyway. We were recovering… I can’t believe I’m talking about all of this.” Judy laughed, ears still covering her eyes.

“Hey, you aren’t gonna embarrass me, sweetie. I’m a pro, remember?” Vivienne asked. Judy’s eyes shot open painfully wide.

“Oh my God! Viv!” the bunny cried. The fox laughed warmly. Judy’s attention was called to a car door shutting. She looked back to her vulpine mother.

“I’m gonna bet that’s our relief ZBI agents,” Judy chuckled. “I imagine Nick will be up shortly if he’s not already. Do you wanna come in for a little bit to eat and say hi to everyone? Jack and Skye are here and one of the mammals we rescued wanted to meet you.”

Vivienne’s eyes went wide. Judy winced a little. She wasn’t really supposed to say that part. The fox murmured, “I honestly don’t know how long I am willing to wait to hear all about this Judy. Yes, I would love to meet your new friends.” She added emphasis on ‘new friends’ to indicate that is what she was really supposed to be told about that.

Judy helped the older fox out of the bench and walked with her happily up to the door. In a while, she would be sitting down to memorize the words that would give permanence to the happiest days of her life. She had a lot to look forward to. She decided to take the back door instead of walking all
the way to the front of the house. She found the door to be unlocked. That made sense. The badger had apparently been doing yard work earlier. As she got into the house, however, she found it suspiciously quiet. No one was there. She went into the kitchen. There was food on the table. Salads, shrimp-wraps, black-bean sausages, and bread and cheese were all there, but no one was eating.

The bunny felt a chill.

“Something’s wrong.” Vivienne stated the obvious.

Judy’s phone buzzed. She looked at it. It was from Nick.

*ZBI Compromised. All in safe room. Stay away. Bogo informed.*

The bunny jammed the phone back in her pocket. Her mind raced. The sound of thumping hooves on the porch clarified where things stood. If they left the house they would be seen. It was too late to just stay away.

“We gotta go,” she said in a whisper. “Upstairs, now.”

“What?” the fox said plaintively.

“The ZBI was compromised. We’re in danger,” she said, her heart sinking. Nick didn’t want his mother in danger, and here she was. It was Judy’s fault. He didn’t even know.

“What? Oh my God, are you serious?” the vixen asked, following Judy upstairs. The bunny had no idea what room the safe room was, but she used her ears, trying to sense the tiniest sound as she crept through the halls through first the second floor, then the upstairs. She would knock in a way that Nick knew it was her. Vivienne squeaked suddenly, and Judy spun around to see her vulpine mother pulled into a dark part of the wall. The bunny jumped into it right behind her, and found Honey standing inside. It went dark as the panel shut softly. There had been a secret panel in the wall. There was a hard crack, and a cry from Honey.

“She’s with us!” Judy hissed.
“Oh, sorry!” whispered Viv.

“Oh, ffff… Did anyone see you?” the badger said.

“No, I don’t think so. We came in through the back door. What’s happening?” she asked. Judy expected that Vivienne could see fine, but as she bumped around, maybe it was too dark even for her. Secret corridors and camera rooms painted a real clear picture of this badger’s state of mind, but it was actually a truth that Judy was immensely thankful for.

Honey spoke in a very hushed tone as they slid through the dark, narrow passage. “They had a changing of the guard, and I knew something was off. It didn’t look right. They brought someone else, obviously not an agent, but she looked so damned scared. The other ZBI guys didn’t stay, so we were left on our own. I moved everyone to the secret room. Then the new guys came in and when they saw no one was here, they went back out and took a weapon out of their car.” The badger opened a room that had a lot more light due to about 20 monitors in it. Everyone else was there too.

“Oh Judy, thank heavens.” Nick was on her in a second. Judy leaned into him sadly. “Mom?” That was why.

“Hey sweetie,” Vivienne replied, leaning in and marking her son. Judy was embraced by Skye next, then Motti’s huge arms ensnared her. The other hyenas were jammed in a corner, perfectly quiet. They’d probably been dressed down about their nosiness already. The white vixen went back to holding a nervous-looking striped buck. The lions were sitting on the floor with their backs to the wall because the ceiling of this room was a bit low for them. Stooping under it was probably frustrating.

“What are you doing here?” Nick asked his mother plaintively.

“I dropped by to see you,” she answered, leaving Judy bus-free for the moment.

“What’s happening?” Judy asked, looking back to her partner.

“Sheep.” Nick said. Judy tilted her head. Did the badger have everyone doing this?

“What?” she asked.
“I’m serious.” Nick said. “Look.”

Judy looked at the monitor that Nick was indicating. There was a shot of the forest marked ‘East Quadrant’ where she could see a pig on her knees in the forest with two sheep standing behind her. One was talking on a phone, it seemed, and the other was holding some kind of pole. No, it was a spear. The head of it was really large, seeming as if it were made of silver with how it gleamed. It looked like some kind of implement of sacrifice.

“Is that…” Judy squinted a bit.

“Aggie Porcintia, yep.” Jack said. He was holding Skye’s paw.

“How many are there?” Judy asked.

“Based on video, just them.” Nick said.

“They were going to what… deal with all of us with just two sheep?” Judy asked.

Nick spoke in a dark tone. “Based on how they came in originally without the weapon, I think they intended to pick us off through the day or something. Maybe poison us or something, I don’t know. But I’m gonna bet she’s still their main target because she probably hasn’t talked. I’d bet she’s trying to get a good deal for the info. It’s gonna cost that pig her life.”

“We need her information. We can’t let that happen.” Judy said. Well, that and it would be wrong for Aggie to be speared, even if her failure to cooperate might have put her there.

“You can’t fight, Judy. I will pawcuff you myself to keep you in this room.” Nick said.

“I do not intend to fight, but I can create a diversion,” the bunny stated.

“That’s a great big nope, Carrots.” Nick said.
“Stop calling her that!” Vivienne hissed, perhaps more protective because of what they had just discussed. “I agree with Nick, though, I don’t want you to go. Send Honey.” Judy widened her eyes. What a terrible thing to say!

“Hell yeah!” the badger growled. The bunny glanced back at the stoked mustelid. Or not.

“The sheep have to go to trial, Honey!” Nick growled.

“Nooooo,” whined Honey.

“You didn’t send the hippo to trial.” Motti suggested. “You send him stright to hell.”

“What?” Viv asked.

“That wasn’t me! The other prisoner got him, you know that,” came Nick’s somewhat panicked reply. He did not want his mom thinking he killed someone.

“Bunny is more dangerous to send, though. Shetani beat down half my village. You understanding why I say she can go,” responded the hyena.

“Uh…” Viv stated softly. Judy groaned. This was getting nowhere.

Honey cut in. “They are seriously gonna kill that piggy. If you want to do something, time’s on the rare side,” commented the badger. Judy snarled a bit.

“Nick. We have to do something. You coordinate a response. I need you to keep these mammals safe.”

Whatever she was going to say immediately after that Judy was unable to say. Nick seized her shoulders and mashed her tight against the wall.

“Nick!” Viv cried instantly.
“Nope, anyone but her,” he said.

“Me then.” Viv said softly.


“Then let her go!” growled the fox’s mother. He relaxed his hold on Judy.

The bunny said softly, “Nick, I’m sorry, but this is by the book. You know that we have to do this no different than if we were officers who were not more than that at the end of the day.”

“We’re witnesses, Judy. We’re off the clock, please don’t go.” Nick whispered.

“I’ll go with her.” The badger spoke from behind Nick.

“I’m staying right here.” Jack said. “Skye’s staying too.” Jack was, it seemed, done with endangering himself and his vixen with this whole mess. Skye didn’t argue.

The doe spoke softly, “I don’t see a gun. They have the spear. All I have to do is buy us some time. They don’t really know we are onto them.”

“I can’t let you do this, Judy,” Nick said in a sad tone. “I can’t let you go out there alone. I’m going with you. You’re my partner. That is by the book.” Judy sighed and then relented. She didn’t have time to argue. Nick looked back to the badger. “Honey. Do not let anyone else leave this room, no matter what you see. Mom…” Nick looked at the cameras a moment to see if any other motion was visible. “Quietly go out the front door and run. Meet the sheriff on the road. I’m sure they are on their way, but I need you to direct them to the side of property we are going to be on to make sure they get there quick. Don’t stop for anyone else. They aren’t looking for you, you’re just out for a jog, got it?”

“Got it.” Vivienne said. That surprised Judy a little. She figured the last thing she’d want to do was abandon her son before he went out to face armed mammals. Then again, perhaps she realized he’d be able to think more clearly if he wasn’t worried about her. Judy felt that was the real reason he was sending Viv away, after all.
Jack spoke up hastily. “Hurry you guys, the one that was on the phone is coming back toward the house. He probably called to verify that we were all supposed to be here.”

“Wait!” Honey hissed. She handed Nick a pair of pawcuffs.

“You just carry these around?” Nick asked.

“For fun?” Cassie suggested.

“For fun.” Honey verified. The lioness put her face in her paws.

“How? How have we lived this long?” she whimpered.

“Luck of Shetani.” Motti proclaimed. The other three hyenas murmured in agreement.

“What’s a Shetani?” Viv asked. Nick shook his head.

“No time, c’mon!” he whispered, leading her into the corridor. Nick and Judy carefully pushed their way through the narrow hall and out into the proper one. They moved through the house with an abundance of caution. Vivienne went a different direction to go to the front door, so they parted ways upstairs. Judy knew that Viv would come back with help. That’s why she was so eager to go. She would get the help there where they needed it.

The bunny and her mate exited the back door. The ZBI agent, a slightly older sheep in a dark blue suit, approached the porch.

“Where is everybody?” he asked.

“They all went to visit my mom at the Diner.” Nick stalled. “Best food in town. You just have us.” Judy smiled at that. He was keeping calm, and that helped to keep her calm. These mammals were most likely here to kill all of them, under the cover of being agents. Were they actually even agents?
“What? Oh you gotta be kidding! They… All of you were told to stay here!” he bleated.

“Well, here or the diner. We gotta eat, right?” Nick said with his smug grin.

“Geeze! Hold on…” He took his phone out, hoof ticking on it hard enough that Judy was surprised the screen didn’t crack. He was sending a text message. Judy could barely hear the click of a latch. Vivienne had closed the front door, so she was successfully on her way. Judy focused her attention back on the agent. He lowered his phone a moment, and waited.

“You wanna go swimming?” Nick asked.

“Nick, it’s fall.” Judy answered. It wasn’t quite cool enough to see her breath, but it was close.

“Sheep don’t actually get wet,” Nick stated matter-o-factly.

“Yes they do!” Judy responded with pretend indignation at her partner’s insensitive remark. Nick rolled his eyes. He walked down toward the faux-agent who was checking his phone.

“Sorry, I don’t mean to seem rude, Agent,” the fox stated. Can you please help me a moment so I can finally win at least one argument with my partner?”

“It’s just fur, Nick! It’s as waterproof as yours is! Drop it!” Judy cried from the porch.

“Drop it?” Nick asked.

“Drop it!” she called back. Nick looked back at the dumbfounded sheep who was pushing his phone back into his suit jacket. The fox shrugged with a look of defeat.

“Sorry pal. Gotta listen to the missus.” Nick then simply delivered the hardest, fastest uppercut to the underside of the sheep agent’s jaw that the fox was likely capable of. As requested, Nick dropped it. The sheep toppled backward like a lone, pillowy white domino, a little puff of dust and scattered autumn leaves billowing out around him. Judy’s sensitive ears actually picked up a muffled badger cheer from deep inside the house.
“Woah!” Judy shouted, and joined her partner in a hurry. She found Nick clutching his paw. Yeah, that probably hurt a lot.

“Is it broken?” the bunny asked, taking the cuffs from the back of Nick’s belt.

“I don’t think so.” Nick huffed, blowing on his paw and shaking it. The fox helped his partner get him turned over and cuffed. There was a buzz.

“His phone.” Judy said. She took it out of the unconscious mammal’s inside pocket. As he’d just been looking at it, it was still unlocked when Judy turned it on. The bunny folded her ears back and turned the screen so Nick could see the text message.

*Break their necks. I’ll do the pig*

“Crap… We might be too late, come on!” Nick said, breaking into a run to the side of the property where the sheep had been seen with the pig. Judy winced and groaned a bit as she tried to keep up. She definitely couldn’t run very well stitched up like she was. Nick noticed right away and slowed down a bit.

“No! Don’t slow up!” Judy knew a life was at stake. Nick nodded and doubled his speed. Judy tried to run a bit faster herself. She ended up catching up to Nick as he slowed to just try looking for the pig and sheep. The forest was quiet. The part they were in was pretty dense, but there was a clearing they had seen in the video feed. They took it slow, not out of caution for themselves, but to try to hear their quarry.

Nick was obviously using his nose. He guided the bunny as her sense for that was less developed. Ultimately, they came up over a small hill and found what they were looking for. And neither of them enjoyed what they saw.

Aggie was lying on the ground, arms and legs spread out, tied up and bound to stakes driven into the soil. She was softly, weakly crying. She was bleeding from the nose, likely having been beaten a bit in the process of putting her into this position. This really was like a ceremonial sacrifice in how it was set up. The sheep was, unfortunately, facing the direction Judy and Nick were approaching from. He held up the spear, pointing it at the two smaller mammals, his huge horns tipped in the same etched silver at the spear was.
“I give one simple order, was that too much?!” the woolly mammal bellowed.

Judy stood up defiantly. “ZPD, let her go. Backup is on the way,” she commanded.

“Heads me!” screamed Aggie, suddenly aware of the other mammals that had arrived.

“You’re what… here to arrest me?” the sheep said tauntingly. “When I’m done with this porker, I’ll cut the fox open and stuff you inside his belly where you belong, rabbit!” Judy recoiled a little at the level of violence considered by this caprid. She had little time to appreciate the terrible nature of it, however, as the sheep turned his immediate murderous attention to his intended porcine victim.

“No!” Nick shouted as the spear came up. The sheep prepared to lance the administrative pig to the forest floor. The pig screamed, and then a wet ‘thak!’ sound punctuated the sheep suddenly lurching backward hard. He dropped the spear and landed on his back on the ground. Judy perked up, a bit stunned by that sudden shift in the situation. She hadn’t heard a shot. She then looked in the direction opposite of the one the sheep had lurched, to the source of whatever hit him.

On a wide, white stone about twenty meters away was Vivienne. She was on one knee, still in her green hoodie, with a long-bow in her steady paw. She already had a second arrow nocked and her bow tightly drawn and ready. She stared down the shaft of that arrow with keen green eyes, her ears laid back coldly. The sheep slowly sat up as Judy looked back to him, too shocked at what she was looking at to move. Nick, wide-eyed, stood absolutely still with his paws down limply at his sides.

“Mom?” he said, as if only beginning to digest that part. Their fallen suspect clutched at an arrow that was jutting at an awkward angle from his shoulder. A bit dazed, he looked down at his fallen spear.

The lady fox pulled her string a little tighter and snarled loudly, teeth vividly bared, “The next arrow’s a letter addressed to your face, Poufy. So go on… just give me a reason to lick this stamp.”

Absolutely nobody moved.
Judy stared, transfixed at Vivienne as Nick darted down the hill and collected the huge spear. Her vulpine mother remained, unmoving, with her eyes narrow and her paw not even trembling as she held back that arrow. She was ready to release it if her target dared to interfere with her son. With what that sheep had said in reference to killing the officers, Judy felt like he would still be willing to try to hurt Nick anyway, even if it meant his death. He was absolutely barbaric. However, he did remain still. The lady pig continued to cry. She was saying things, making promises, it sounded like, but she was almost unintelligible.

As the fox took the spear away, the sheep did not move, only speaking. “I’ll eventually be released, and I will find you,” he growled.

“His mouth is moving. Something moved. I’m gonna shoot him,” Vivienne said in a tone positively dripping with hate. Judy felt like she was listening to a different fox. The ram actually tensed up noticeably, fearful that she would. Judy was about to ask Viv not to do that, but there was shuffling of leaves from a mammal approaching through the woods. There was the sound of something hitting wind chimes hard and that was followed by swearing in a recognizable voice. It was Agent Bay.

“Who put these out here?” asked a female voice in reply to the swearing. It was his snow leopard partner.

“Agent Bay!” Judy called, wanting him to get there before Nick’s mom closed part of the case herself.

“Are we sure he’s on our side?” Viv asked, teeth bared, still keeping the arrow pointed at the sheep. The wolf crested the hill, gun drawn, and just stopped, looking dumbfounded at the scene.
“What?” he deadpanned.

“Move!” called his partner behind him. The swift feline passed by him and threw herself upon the sheep, flipping him over to his side and cuffing him. She could not put him on his belly because of the arrow jutting out of his shoulder. The ram growled furiously at the agonizing addition anyway.

“Orson, who are you working for? Why would you do this?” Bay finally shouted at him, starting down the hill. The wolf holstered his firearm as Rosette got the sheep cuffed. Vivienne finally lowered the bow and moved briskly over to her son. Nick threw his arms around his mother. Judy wasn’t able to hear what he was saying, but she was sure it was somewhere between gratitude and anger that she’d come right back to them.

The bunny wanted to talk to Vivienne too. She had so many questions.

Judy moved down the hill as well, alongside Bay, and then began working to try to untie the pig. The cords were too tight, so she eventually just picked up the spear and cut the cords with that. The pig stopped crying the moment Judy came into her field of view.

Pinned on her back on the leafy ground with the sheep waving a huge weapon over her, she had no idea who had come to rescue her until then. She looked like she was seeing her own ghost.

“Officer… Hopps?” she asked.

“And fox!” Nick chimed, his happy face coming into view beside Judy’s. The pig, released from her stakes, sat up, rubbing her wrists. They were still cord-bound. They could get that off later.

“Th… thank you.” She glanced fearfully at the sheep with the arrow in his shoulder, and then to Vivienne who was giving her bow and remaining four arrows to Agent Rosette. “Is it… over?” she asked fearfully.

Nick smiled at the pig. “Well… the part where you are going to be skewered in the forest by a psychotic sheep is over, yes. But! The part where you are stuck in a town that’s 90 percent foxes has just begun.” The last part was delivered with the fox’s smug turned up to eleven. The pig just swayed slightly side to side. Nick folded his ears back, smug dropping away. “Yeahhh, she’s going into shock. Agent Bay!” Nick went to get the wolf. Judy smiled back to Vivienne who was approaching.
“I can’t believe I just did that. Is she okay?” Viv said, pulling at her hoody a bit to pump air through it to cool herself.

“Aggie’s fine, she’s just gonna need a minute,” Judy answered, “Where did you even get that?” Judy asked, indicating the bow and arrows laying by the confiscated spear.

“When I was trying to find my way out of the house, I found a weird room with a bunch of stuff like that,” Viv replied. Judy perked her ears up a little. She remembered the badger trying to get Bay to play with swords that morning as she headed out.

Still, Judy furrowed her brow, “And… you just what… grabbed your weapon of choice?” the bunny asked, hoping that she didn’t seem unappreciative. It wasn’t that. She just could not get over the vixen’s surely unintended homage to the hero memorialized at the center of town out of her head. It was completely insane.

“It’s New Reynard, Judy,” Vivienne chuckled. “Every fox here has fired at least one arrow into one target. It’s kind of a thing here.” She smiled. The bunny dropped her ears back. That… Kind of made sense? The skill of Nick’s mother was still a surprise.

“You meant to hit him in the shoulder, right?” Judy asked.

“No, I tried to kill him.” Viv said bluntly.

“Uh…” Judy tried to figure out if the fox was joking, but got distracted.

Bay spoke as he came up behind the bunny. “I have an ambulance coming to check on Miss Porcintia. I have her sitting down for the moment so she doesn’t just… fall. Was there anyone else? Just the two who relieved us?” he asked. Vivienne moved over and took off her green hoodie and wrapped it around the pig. Aggie, startled, looked fearfully at Viv at first, and then just started sobbing. The fox hugged her. Judy had to rip her attention away from that just to answer the wolf.

“I think so, yes.” Judy stated. “Is everyone inside okay?”

“Yeah, Honey’s talking with her dad. He’s got the other agent in custody. Sheep was running down the road with his hooves cuffed behind his back. Like that wasn’t gonna stand out. I uh… I mean… Great work, you two.” Bay cupped his whole face in his paws. “This is a complete
“Well, obviously you didn’t know because you haven’t killed us.” Judy chuckled.

“I’ve worked with Orson for five years. He was a rising star,” the black wolf growled.

“I always hated that creep,” spat Rosette. More leaves shuffling announced the approach of more mammals. Bay went to meet the arriving badgers. Honey stood with a uniformed older badger that Judy assumed to be her dad. The doe glanced about at the scene, finding that it was quickly completely under control. She moved over to a large root ball that was pushed out of the ground and sat down on it. Nick immediately sat down beside her. Judy looked back over to the fox’s mom, who he’d been talking to a moment before. She was still attempting to comfort Aggie.

“I’m sorry, Carrots,” Nick said in a sympathetic tone. Judy gazed back to her partner curiously.

“What for?”

“You didn’t get to knock any of them out.” he deadpanned, hugging his knees. “I was saving the last one for you, but Mom doesn’t know the rules yet.” Judy rolled her eyes and thumped the fox on the shoulder.

“Thank you for coming with me,” the bunny stated genuinely.

“We’re still partners. That’s never gonna change. Some stuff might be different, but not that. I still… hated that you had to come out here injured like that. That was… not what I would have liked.” Judy reached over and stroked Nick’s ears. He leaned into it gratefully. A very large dark shape moved between Judy and her fox, tragically ending the petting. The bunny glanced up and saw Honey sitting hip-to-hip with both the smaller mammals. She gazed up at the mostly cloudy sky through the trees with a grin on her muzzle as she simply draped her thick, powerful arms over both the officers’ backs.

It was quiet for a moment before the badger dreamily spoke. “I’m having a really nice time, you guys.” Judy gritted her teeth at that, glancing to Nick, who just looked a little concerned, ears laid back.

“I’m… glad?” Nick offered cautiously.
“I was watching on video.” Honey said wistfully.

“I figured.” Judy stated.

“I recorded it. We should all watch it tonight.” She still sounded lazy and happy, like they were not merely sitting beside her, but waking up next to her. It was just a teensy bit unnerving.

“I think the ZBI will be taking the video,” Nick explained.

“Your mom used my favorite bow. I’m putting that right in a glass case, I promise,” Honey murmured slowly.

Judy responded, “Uh, they are definitely taking that as evidence.”

“I feel so happy now,” the badger practically purred. Nick attempted to pull away from her slowly and grunted as she snagged him and pulled him closer. Judy didn’t even try to escape. All the fox and bunny wanted was to rest, but at least their hostess was having a good day.

Agent Bay stepped in front of them. “Your dad needs you, Honey.”

“Sure thing, sweetie,” the badger replied, making the wolf actually wince. She practically floated away to where her father was standing, addressing another wolf who had arrived in a uniform that suggested he was a deputy. He was so skinny and small, however, that it was easy to mistake him as a fox. He was jittery and really spun up. Judy figured that this kind of thing didn’t happen all the time in a town like New Reynard.

“Your boss called me the second he got off the phone with Officer Wilde,” Bay explained. “I got back here as fast as I could. I am… really sorry this happened. If that badger wasn’t so nuts about … everything…” he looked after her a bit, “… I don’t even want to imagine. There were two stun batons, a canister of knock out gas, a gas mask, and about ten gallons of kerosene in the trunk of their car. You don’t have to be real creative to paint a picture of how this was supposed to play out.”

Nick looked back at Agent Bay with huge eyes. Judy actually felt a bit ill. If that had gone differently, just a little bit… she might never have even known it had happen. The sound of hissing,
feeling sleepy, leaning in close to her mate, and then all of it… gone. She put her head down and Nick stroked her back.

“Thank you for… that colorful grocery list there, Richter,” Nick said softly.

“Gonna throw up…” Judy whispered softly.


“I’m sorry, I know you guys have already been through so much,” the agent said, obviously regretting filling them in on that so soon.

“Why, Nick? We already gave the information, what was there to gain?” Judy slowly became aware that what she thought had been fear was merely bile-inducing rage. She suddenly felt the need to hug Vivienne for shooting the monster, even if it wasn’t as effective as Judy’s bunny-boot-to-the-buck had been. She hated Orson in that moment and hated herself for feeling that level of malice.

“It’s alright, Carrots. He’s gonna be brought to justice.” Nick narrowed his eyes at the wolf. “They all will be, right?” he asked.

“You can count on it.” Bay stated coldly. “This blemish on my department will be the very definition of setting a historical example,” he growled.

“I imagine things are not real fun at your headquarters right now,” Nick caressed his bunny slowly. It was helping. Something about her sweet fox always curbed her temper.

Bay sighed. “No. I suspect Rosette and I will be just… living here with you until Bogo calls you guys back. He is also sending two of his own officers to assist so that we have time to sleep. He wants guard around the clock, but unfortunately, this incident proved his choice to be correct. Your lack of accessibility here likely made this a harder thing to accomplish. He didn’t even know about the camera security or the fact that there are secret hallways and stuff. It pretty much dooms us to stay right here.” The conversation was interrupted as Nick’s phone rang.

He pulled it out and answered it immediately. “Chief, you really do care!” Nick said warmly. Bay snuck away, perhaps not wanting to have to answer to the Chief while he was still cleaning up the
mess left by his own department. The response from the buffalo was loud enough that Judy could hear it just fine.

“Stow it, Wilde! Is everybody okay? I’ve been given a message that the scene is clear but no one’s elaborated about what that exactly means!”

Nick answered dryly, “I subdued one of the ZBI agents, and my mother shot the other.” Judy lay her ears back. Oh yeah. Nick didn’t want to come to New Reynard because his mother might be endangered. This further distracted her from her own anger. Nick was hiding it so well but she could see his fur bristling harder than she could ever remember seeing it. Judy extended the petting she had been receiving back to her partner. His fur began to smooth back down.

“Your m-…” Bogo began and went silent. Nick grinned slowly. Judy covered her face with her paws. No, don’t fight it with humor, not now…

“It’s perfectly fine though. How else would I have ever known that my mom was so handy with a long bow if you hadn’t sent us here to attract psychopathic killers for her to put arrows into?” Nick inquired.

“Arrows?!” Bogo yelled.

“Stop messing with him!” Judy hissed.

Nick grinned at his partner and nodded. “You’ll get the full report soon, but to answer your question, I’m fine, Officer Hopps is fine, everybody’s fine. Please send more arrows.”

“I… You… Put Hopps on the line!” shouted Bogo. Nick passed the phone to Judy.

“Yes, Sir?” she asked professionally.

“Hit Wilde,” ordered her boss. The thump was probably audible on his end. “Thank you. You and Wilde are off duty. Stop. Working. And did his mother really get involved?” asked Bogo.

“Yes, Sir. She shot a sheep with an arrow, Sir. She’s fine.” Judy wanted to be professional about
that. It really was very serious.

There was a long pause on the other end, and Judy could swear she heard the lid being unscrewed from a bottle. Bogo finally responded, “In one hour, you all need to be watching the news conference. A whole lot of this is going to make sense finally, and we are going to get to put some of this mess behind us. You and your partner will be coming home soon, but certainly not tonight. Probably not tomorrow either. This is not even because I feel Zootopia is dangerous. It is because if you show up right now, I will have to put you right back to work, and I can’t handle dealing with another crisis right now! Stay. Put.” Judy smirked at that a little.

“Yes, Sir,” she promised. “So, we know what’s going on finally? Have arrests been made?” the bunny inquired.

“Yes, and you will know all about it in an hour. And Hopps,” Judy listened, “…Tell Wilde’s mother that my wife found her suggestion of… a new location for my desk to be amusing.” The chief hung up without saying goodbye, as was his way. Judy cringed as she considered the last sentence. At least he didn’t seem angry about that. Vivienne must have really gotten into it with their boss.

Paramedics arrived a short time later and looked after Aggie. She ended up being taken to the hospital because at some point she’d been struck in the head. There was no visible injury, but as she had been in shock, they wanted to be sure. Nick and Judy did what they were ordered and stopped working. They just sat and watched as the Sheriff and the ZBI agents tended to the situation professionally. Vivienne eventually had to leave with Rosette to give her statement and Honey left with her dad to take the injured sheep to the hospital to get fixed up before being transferred to jail. The paramedics on scene had administered a sedative to make him more compliant and to mercifully help with the pain.

The bunny finally broke the silence between her and her partner. “I am glad… that Bogo says a lot of this is about to be put behind us.” Nick smiled down at her caringly.

“It’s been a lot,” he agreed.

“It started out as just… bringing poor Ukweli home. Will there be justice for him in all of this, I wonder?” Nick considered that a moment and then took a deeper breath, eyes widening.

“We caught his killer at least,” the fox said, a little distantly.
“How can we even be sure who the killer is?” Judy asked. “Those jerks in Interior Affairs didn’t even do an autopsy!” She growled at that, taking the injustice a little personally.

“You and I saw the wound,” her partner reminded her.

“Yeah, and it was absolutely terrible.” Judy crossed her arms over her middle, remembering the size of the hole through that poor lycaon.

“Have we seen a weapon recently that would have made that kind of injury?” Nick asked. Judy’s eyes immediately snapped to the huge spear lying on the ground by the bow. She looked back at Nick, muzzle parted in revelation.

“Nick, that sheep… He…” Judy trembled a little.

“Maybe they can’t prove it, but I know. I’m sure,” he said. “I would bet my career on it.” Judy lowered her ears and just leaned into Nick. It was probably exactly as he said. She could not help but feel a little emotional about that. Perhaps, in time, Ukweli’s family would understand that the ZPD really did all they could, and those poor hyenas could have peace of mind.

Eventually, the two officers were finally obligated to get up and head back to the bed and breakfast since everyone else had cleared the scene. It was actually a pretty painful walk for Judy. She didn’t think she had popped a stitch or anything, but running had pulled on them. She was definitely going to need something for the pain when they got back. Nick noticed her careful motions immediately and became concerned. He tucked in close against the bunny, even coiling his tail around her a little in a way that made her feel very cared for.

Nearly everyone was in the living room when the fox and bunny got into the house. The lionesses had claimed their opposing arm chairs. Motti’s parents were sitting on the couch beside Jack and Skye who both appeared to be splitting a bottle of lime soda. Kijvu and Motti were on either side of the punching bag, playing with it. One would hit the wool-lined bag and the other would hit it back. Judy flattened her ears again at that. She could hear Vivienne talking with Agent Rosette in the other room. She was just talking about her intention to move to Zootopia. The conversation sounded happy.

Upon Nick and Judy’s arrival, cheers erupted in the room, and Skye was on Judy in an instant with a warm hug. Nick moved to the side to allow that, and then held his arms out at Jack with an excited fox face. Jack glowered at him, then smugly approached and hugged Nick. Bunnies hugged. That’s just how it was. Nick seemed surprised at first, but squeezed the other rabbit warmly, patting his shoulders.
“That was just… certifiably insane.” Cassie said. Her sister shot her a look. “Great work out there,” she added. Charisse smiled.

Skye spoke excitedly. “Oh my God! You two have to see the video of Nick’s mom shooting that guy. It’s so crazy!”

Jack nodded slowly. “I no longer question the validity of that particular quasi-historical figure,” he said with sincerity. “I’m being serious when I say Motti had to actually hold Honey up because she damn near had an aneurism over it,” he laughed.

“Badgers can get really animated!” Skye laughed.

“They tranq’ed the other guy, I think. I bet he wouldn’t stop running,” Charisse said softly. “He was still asleep in the car when they took him for booking.”

“Are those guys really ZBI agents?” asked Skye.

“Yeah,” Nick said somewhat darkly. “The one with the spear’s been with them over five years, apparently. Real… piece of work that one. I have never met a mammal that… personally violent.” Judy nodded at Nick’s assessment. That was a sheep that would never need to be out among the normal population again.

Kijvu spoke up. “Honey say this was all part of her cud-spiracy,” He punched the bag harder. “Wouldn’t quiet about it. I not really believing all that, but I not unhappy about how she was ready. Is really good, being ready.” Judy nodded at that slowly.

“You certainly don’t mind punching that bag, though.” Cassie observed.

“Is for fun,” he bunched the bag again as his sister sent it back at them. Judy understood. They were all pumped up and the younger hyenas were venting their energy from the fear that likely caused.

“Sit, sit!” requested Motti’s mother. “We honored to have you back, Shetani.” Judy grinned and moved toward her. Nick grasped the back of her shirt.
“We will be back in a little bit. I’m gonna make sure this bunny is fit for sitting,” her fox said.

“Thank you,” Judy offered politely to the nodding older lady hyena. She smiled brightly back at the bunny. The mirror fox-bunny couple sat by them instead. They resumed talking to Cassie about concerts, which had apparently been their topic of conversation before the other fox and bunny got there.

Nick led Judy upstairs and into the large bathroom. The bunny sighed as her partner closed, and then locked the door. He moved over to his bunny as she sat down at the edge of a very large claw-footed tub. She smiled at her fox as he looked at her with serious eyes. Nick brought his paw up to her ears, smoothing them back, drawing them down her back with a gentle petting motion. He then pushed his muzzle to hers, tongue flicking past her lips, around her larger front teeth.

Judy was a little surprised by the kiss, but eagerly accepted it. It went from that and melted into the more desired push of his maw over her neck and shoulder. The embrace of his teeth was a bit tighter than she usually got. She was sure it left a few red marks on the pale flesh beneath her soft fur. The bunny squeaked from it, not in pain but in delight. It made it clear how much he wanted her. The bunny slipped her little paws down over Nick’s tummy, snaring his beltline.

The fox chuckled tenderly, “You’re injured, bunny. This can wait,” he rumbled.

“It’s been forever,” the bunny whimpered.

“It’s not even been a week,” her fox replied, stroking her ears again.

“I’m gonna start acting weird again,” she threatened.

“What, you’re gonna start acting like a bunny?” Nick teased.

“Do I act like a fox?” Judy asked in a serious tone. She had wondered that a few times.

“If any fox I knew acted like you, I’d already have been vowed up before you met me, Fluff,” he laughed. “Let’s get your shirt off.” He indicated the lime green mini-T that the bunny was still wearing.
“Okay, now we’re talking,” Judy purred teasingly.

“You quit that. Oh no, not those eyes. I’ll look away,” Nick threatened.

“Don’t you dare,” the doe said. She put her small paws on Nick’s cheek to keep him looking into her eyes. Her expression softened, and she leaned in a bit, ignoring the sharp burning pain of her injury as she pressed her chin to the top of her lover’s muzzle.

He murmured softly, “I want to check your injury, Carrots, and I can’t if you don’t let go of my face.” Judy kept her paws where they were, planting little bunny kisses along the top of Nick’s muzzle.

“Sorry, Slick… Never letting go,” she whispered. Her ears shot up as she heard the unmistakable sound of rending fabric. Judy leaned back, looking down at her now exposed front. Nick smiled at her and bared his teeth with a sweet growl as a reminder that he was a big, scary fox.

“You were saying?” he rumbled. Judy looked down, eyes a bit wide. Yeah, Nick never hid the fact that he hated that shirt.

“You are gonna get us both injured in here at this rate,” Judy whimpered. Her entire body rejoiced at the mere suggestion of Nick’s ‘big mean fox’ side. Still, she leaned back a bit and allowed her partner to slowly unwind the ace bandage and take off her gauze. She was crestfallen to see that there was some blood present on the white padding. Nick sucked a breath through his teeth and got a cotton ball and some antiseptic.

“Oh yeah, you almost popped this one. Tore the skin a little. I think it’s okay though.” He dabbed at it, which was like fire to Judy. She winced and whimpered her way through it. “Running was a bad idea,” Nick added as he tended to her wound. “Does this hurt much?” Nick asked.

“Not much. I really want to take a bath now,” the bunny added.

“You can’t get this wet for another day at least, and even then, only a quick shower,” Nick explained.
“Then you shouldn’t have growled at me.” Judy chastised. Nick glanced up at her, and then put his ears back, obviously hiding a blush. He then looked at the locked door, and back to Judy.

“Sponge bath?” he offered with a meek grin.

“Please,” his lapine lover sighed. Nick glanced back and forth with uncertainty.

“Okay. But just grooming,” he clarified. “I don’t want to make this worse.” Judy grinned brightly at her fox.

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When the two officers returned downstairs, Judy was adorned in a bathrobe that was way too large for her. Nick’s face and paws were damp, having been freshly washed. Judy felt so much better after a bit of grooming and some maybe slightly coerced personal time with her fox. The mild pain killer she took didn’t help nearly as much as her just getting to be with Nick for a while. Her partner sat down in the spot where Skye and Jack had been, with his doe cuddling up against him.

The other fox and bunny were in the kitchen with Vivienne at that moment. Agent Rosette was not around, but Judy assumed she or Bay were likely close by. Kijvu and Motti were sitting on the floor in front of the TV watching some kind of cartoon. It was a little charming, really, but the bunny regretted that their entertainment would have to go away a bit.

“Could someone switch this to a primary station? There’s supposed to be an important press conference.” Judy stated. Kijvu did as requested. The two didn’t seem to mind as they simply remained there in front of the TV. Bay entered the room as they channel surfed to find the right one. They stopped on one where two bunnies were arguing about ‘who the father was’. Judy rolled her eyes.

“That’s the one.” Nick said with a grin.
“No, please turn it! I hate ‘All My Kits’,” Judy complained. “My mom watched this stuff ad nauseum when I was little. It’s terrible! It paints bunnies as out of control disaster-factories.” She gestured angrily at the TV. Nick laughed just a little too hard as someone on screen got a flower pot thrown at them.

“Yes Judy. We’ve got like... six channels here. That’s what it’ll be on.” Nick chuckled. Honey entered with Rosette, still looking serene.

The badger chimed in sunnily, “No fighting over channels. I’ve got the video from earlier to watch, and we are so gonna watch that,” she grinned as she held up a flash drive.

“Important press conference coming up.” Judy informed. As if on cue, the station switched to a live feed. It was a place Judy recognized. They were situated outside the front of the ZPD headquarters. The cameras were all trained on Bogo who was ascending the steps to a podium at the top.

“This should be interesting,” Bay mused. He was shushed by every hyena.

“Good morning, mammals of the press and the City of Zootopia,” Bogo addressed the audience courteously. He took a moment, seeming to compose himself. “In what has been a very long couple of days, a lot has happened. This investigation started with the murder of a private citizen doing research from The Interior and lead to the violent assassination of council-mammal Swinton, an act we know now was tied to an unbelievably old crime. I will turn the microphone over to someone who will explain some important matters so we may all finally know what all of this is about. Lacey Lupin.” Bogo stepped back and a slender lady grey wolf, appearing in her 40s or so, took the podium.


“Good morning,” she said a little nervously, clearly not used to public speaking. Judy felt her pain. “What has transpired here these… these past few weeks, these terrible things which have come to pass, I mean, have all been to cover up a simple truth. The Origin Story we all know is a fabrication.” There was heavy gasping from the audience, including from Rosette and Honey. Bogo had to intervene to quiet the press box.

“I knew it! I knew it!” cried the badger.
“Shhhh!” replied Motti.

“My father investigated the rumors for much of his life,” Lacey explained seriously, “... and he ultimately died for the secret. But his death was not in vain. A mammal from the interior, Ukweli, was one of those whose purpose it was to guard the secret of their village.” A graphic popped up on the stucco wall in the background via projector directly behind Lacey. It was a mural. It was obviously from inside the mine. Images of burning villages and graves and other terrible things were there, as well as a symbol that seemed familiar somehow. It looked like an L overlapping a C.

The badger whispered, “Oh my God. This is it. This is the day.”

“Kind of need to hear… And let go.” Bay grumbled, trying to pull his paw out of Honey’s. She held on. Below the depicted carnage was a picture of a tiger and a gazelle in a tender embrace with a halo of what was probably actual gold around them. Lupin’s daughter continued to explain.

“The village kept this secret because other villages with knowledge of the truth had been burned to the ground more than a century ago.” There was more excited murmuring. The lady wolf continued, “Thousands of years ago, as the story goes, mammals came together in a time of hardship and agreed to finally trade openly with one another, ignoring the ancient, unspoken laws of the jungles and forests of old.” The graphic showed stock images of paintings that depicted the scenes of mammals coming together over a stream, and then images of the original carved stone trade agreements. “We know now that these trade agreements likely never existed at any point in the true Origin Story. They were created later by the three largest companies, sometime at the turn of the 1600’s. They were fraudulent, and heavily favored the parent companies, as well as at least a dozen subsidiaries that built their reputation as being part of the ‘motion of change’. These companies went on to use that reputation to win the contracts to build the great city we live in now.” There was more loud murmuring.

“Are you saying these companies control Zootopia?” came a cry from a leopard reporter.

The wolf replied, “Almost all of these companies, over time, have been divided, bought out, or otherwise washed of involvement except for one. That company was the one so many more of the others had been overtaken by.”

“Lanolin Enterprises.” Honey stated.

“Lanolin Enterprises,” said the wolf on screen. Judy felt a hard chill run through her. No. The badger couldn’t be completely right. She then realized why the L-C symbol was familiar. It was that company’s logo. They were implicated in the image of destruction. This was suddenly a very real,
very terrible conspiracy.

“Woah.” Jack huffed.

“I can’t even,” Cassie growled.

Lacey continued talking, with the offending company logo behind her. “A century ago, while Lanolin was gaining momentum as a shareholder in nearly every major enterprise in Zootopia, huge amounts of money were being funneled into the creation of the DEC to allow us to control the environment for the city population. It was somehow discovered that evidence existed that could prove the trade agreements to be fabrications. Lanolin Enterprises, fearing the loss of their lucrative contracts, sent mammals to any location that they deemed a threat and barbarically wiped those mammals out. It’s unknown how many lost their lives, but this crime was covered up with the exception of a record kept underground and secret, so that the truth would never be forgotten.”

“It’s money. It’s always been about money…” Nick whispered, sounding horrified. The mural popped back in place behind the wolf. It showed a close-up of the gazelle and the tiger.

“This was what my father wanted to find. The origin of all of our species coming together, from the mural and from the research notes based on stories passed down from mammals who are descended of those who were actually there… was love, not trade. The son of a tribal leader and a gazelle commoner changed the very course of history to allow them to be together. Missives went out detailing a great conference of mammals to bring peace, and no one could deny the value of that great message in those hard times. But the great conference never happened either. It was only the young prince, with the help of his father, writing a new history for mammals to follow that would lay to rest the barbarism that had existed since the beginning.” There was more murmuring and a lot of pictures taken of the mural. Judy felt a lump in her throat. That struck just a tiny bit close to home. She glanced over at Skye who was holding Jack close. Jack was actually crying. Judy understood. This was his friend’s life work. He had been right. And now the world knew.

“What does this have to do with the assassination of Swinton?” called someone from the press group.

Lacey answered. “My father, Professor Roland Lupin, set out to find the truth about the Origin of Peace. What he discovered was a terrible crime and an unforgivable cover-up. He was murdered here in the city to make sure that secret was protected. Before he could be killed, however, he had been warned by a friend from The Interior. That friend attempted to reach my father in time, from what we’ve been able to tell, but he failed. He was able to find my father’s notes that had been left in a locker to which Ukweli, his friend, had been given a key. Ukweli knew that the mammals who killed my dad were following him, so he sent the information to the only place he thought they would actually not get covered up. He mailed the documents and notes to Council-mammal Swinton.”
“Why Swinton?” asked Judy.

It was Jack who answered. “Her dad was the judge who tried to break up Lanolin as a monopoly a long time ago. Turned up dead. Not a lot of love for Lanolin.”

“You know the cud-spiracy too!” cried Honey.

“Shhh!” went the hyenas again.

Chief Bogo actually took over, as the lady wolf seemed a bit emotional at that moment. Judy folded her ears back. It had been so hard, she knew. The buffalo spoke loudly, “It is thought that when she got this evidence, Swinton tried to flee Zootopia because it was not safe for her, but not before sending a copy of them to an assistant. These documents were intercepted by the ZPD after the murder of Council-mammal Swinton. At the same time that we were intercepting this information, Sergeants Hopps and Wilde with the ZPD were working the case and managed to unravel a conspiracy in the Interior Affairs Department.”

“Sergeants?!” Nick and Judy exclaimed at the same time. The doe felt a spike of excitement ripple through her. No wonder Bogo wanted them watching this. It was a rather odd way of telling them, but it was something she instantly cherished.

“Congrats!” Skye cried.

“Not surprised.” Vivienne boasted.

Bogo continued, “There were many in that department whose secret work it had been to maintain this dark secret, and they saw to the suppression of any who knew its existence. The information did not come easily, and Hopps and Wilde had to rescue more than half a dozen hostages in a very dangerous operation, which resulted in the death of one of the hostage takers and ultimately twenty-seven additional arrests. Two of the hostages were unfortunately killed with a firearm carried by their kidnapper, but the rest have been moved to an undisclosed location. Sergeant Hopps was also seriously injured during this heroic rescue, but did not need to remain in the hospital,” the Chief explained.

“Sergeant.” Skye repeated sweetly.
“My mom’s gonna kill me,” Judy whispered.

“Yes she is.” Vivienne whispered. Judy was not sure which mother the fox meant, suddenly, flattening her ears again.

“Information provided by Hopps and Wilde resulted in the arrest of Council-mammals Baluchi and Cotswold, as well as very nearly every mammal in anything higher than a clerical position in the Interior Affairs department.” More loud talking came from the frenzied reporters.

“Baluchi and Cotswold are-…” Honey whispered.

“Sheep, yeah, Shh!” hissed Motti’s mother who had to have been guessing. She was correct however. Judy rolled her eyes. Honey was going to be impossible after this.

“That’s a lot of arrests,” Vivienne mused.

“Most are likely not directly linked,” Judy stated, more hopefully than anything. “They were likely only arrested on suspicion. It’s gonna take a while to sort everything out.”

Bogo resumed, “The arrest of the two council-mammals includes charges of conspiracy, but additional charges have been added for both for the attempted murder of the relocated hostages. Two rogue ZBI agents were responsible for the attack which was quickly halted by Hopps and Wilde. Kidnapped Council Assistant Aggie Porcintia was rescued at that time.” There was murmuring from the press box again but cheering in the room Judy and Nick were sitting in. She blushed at that. Bogo continued after the din at his location died down. “The CEO of Lanolin has retained a lawyer and has stepped down pending a full investigation, leaving the company in the paws of its board of trustees and the shareholders. And there will be a full investigation.” There were more questions fired at the Chief. Honey leaned back, sighing deeply.

“It’s all falling apart. It’s all coming down. I can’t believe it.” The badger fanned herself.

Judy spoke cautiously. “You… do know that not every single sheep is involved, right?”

“Of course! I’m not a nut-case!” chirped the badger happily. Judy slowly looked back at the TV.
The Chief took to the mic again as the reporters calmed down. “As a result of the assassination of mayoral candidate Swinton, the election has been cancelled. The Council, having been compromised, has agreed that they cannot reasonably be placed in the position of leadership for the day to day operations of Zootopia. This brings me to the secondary and also very important reason for this press conference.” Bogo put his glasses on. Nick held Judy tighter.

“Oh no, what...” he whispered.

Bogo placed his hooves on the podium and spoke in a careful and clear manner. “Until such time as the investigation clears the city council and determines that they can, with confidence, take over the task, I have accepted the role of acting Mayor of Zootopia.”
Judy needed to sit down. Oh, she was already sitting down. Nick stroked her ears, smiling at her. He seemed so happy. Oh! They had been promoted. That happened. She almost forgot. Bogo was stepping in as mayor? But who would be the chief? Who would she answer to? Would she thrive under new leadership with new ideas, even temporarily? Would the new, temporary chief be complicit with the relationship Judy had with her partner?

Wait, if they were both promoted to sergeant, they would be acting in supervisory roles. Didn’t that mean they couldn’t even be partners? Judy closed her eyes, ears actually ringing from the sudden influx of new information and worries. The newscaster on TV was still talking about the incidents, the murders, the police action in the Interior and the investigation within the ZBI, but Judy just looked up to her partner.

“It’s gonna be okay, right?” she asked him, eyes pleading. Nick was certainly that their partnership might not be permanent, as a promotion would likely change that. They had discussed it both when he became an officer, and when they started dating. But now that it was a reality, it frightened Judy. Nick continued to stroke those graceful bunny ears and smiled down to her.

“It’s gonna be different, but we can handle it. We’re still a team, no matter what.” He whispered. That fueled Judy’s confidence a lot and she pulled herself up closer to her fox. Her primary worry sated just a bit, she became more focused on what was going on around her again. Bay and Honey had gone upstairs to print some pictures and save video clips for the file to be provided to both the ZPD and the ZBI. The moment Bogo had made his critical announcement, Rosette got on the phone to call someone important to discuss that. Judy wasn’t really sure who she called, but the cat had gone out on the back porch to have a quiet phone call. The four hyenas went upstairs to just think about the part of that news conference that meant something to them. Ukweli had been the reason that a terrible crime committed in his homeland over a hundred years ago could finally be investigated and known for the terrible thing that it was.

It happened so long ago that none of the original perpetrators would likely be alive, but the corporation who intended to continue covering it up was going to answer for any real part they played. This included the infiltration of the Interior Affairs department, by appointment or by
money. They played dirty and the Lanolin name would burn away faster than any village they had attacked a century before. The idea that there had been a massive conspiracy at the heart of all of this by sheep didn’t set well with Judy either. It was obvious that only those really involved in the cover-up were responsible and culpable. However, between the Bellwether plot and this new terrible secret, it was not going to be fun to be a sheep in Zootopia for a while. It wasn’t right, but she knew it was going to be the truth.

The lion sisters were in the dining room talking with Vivienne. They were suddenly very interested in who she was, where she came from, and where she learned to use a bow. Cassie predictably asked what Nick was like as a kit, and a picture saved in the vixen’s phone gallery was shown before Judy’s partner could do anything to stop it.

Jack and Skye had gone out on the front porch to talk quietly on the swing. They had been very close to one another the entire time, and seemed intent on being closer still. The buck’s vow made a difference in his vixen, and Judy was encouraged to see that as well. They were so nice together.

“I bet they make Mayumi Tora the new acting chief until Bogo gets back.” Nick said, snapping Judy’s attention back on him.

“Tora?” Judy asked, “But she only transferred in like… two years ago from the island. She has almost less experience with the City of Zootopia than I do.”

“Yeah, but she was still the Assistant Chief.” Nick argued.

“In training.” Judy countered.

“Can we take a bet?” Nick asked.

“According to you, I own all your stuff anyway,” the doe purred, smirking at her lover.

“Oh no,” Nick said darkly. “I did this to me. This is my fault.” Judy laughed at her fox and rested her head on his chest, just drawing in his scent.

Then her phone rang. Her eyes shot open and she glanced down at it, expecting maybe it was Bogo, calling to find out if she had watched the news conference. It was her mother. Her entire body tensed up. Her mother had seen the news conference. The one that said Judy had been seriously
injured on a mission outside the city where other mammals had been killed. It was the same news conference that detailed an attack on the remaining survivors by trusted agents, endangering the bunny again. She was not ready for this call.

“Can you answer this and tell them that I’m napping?” she asked Nick.

“You can handle this, Sergeant Hopps.” Nick stated, saluting his bunny. She glowered at him and dropped her ears back.

“…get you back for this…” she mumbled before answering the phone. “Hello!” she chimed brightly. Express energy and happiness. That was the way.

“Congratulations on your promotion dear,” offered her mother calmly. Judy relaxed a bit, smiling even though she could not be seen on the phone.

“Thanks mom,” the younger doe replied.

“You can enjoy that until I get my paws on you, young lady. Then you’ll be glad just to be promoted to stable condition,” the bunny matron on the other end of the line growled. Judy wilted a little. Yeah, there it was. Nick’s cringe told Judy that he’d heard that too.

Judy sighed and spoke softly. “I told you I would talk to you more about it when the investigation was further along. As you can see, it’s kind of a little bit serious.” There was a long, heavy sigh on the other end of the phone. There was dead air for a little while.

Her mother finally spoke again. “I don’t have to tell you why I’m upset, but I am… glad you and Nick are okay. Is there anything else that you two can tell me about what happened today? The… what was it? An attack on your base? Where are you, even?” she asked.

“New Reynard.” Judy answered. She felt like she could tell her mom that, at least. Their enemies certainly had no trouble figuring it out already. It would comfort the mother bunny to know that she was not so far away as the Interior.

“Your father and I will be there in the morning,” Bonnie said resolutely.
“What? No, I shouldn’t even have told you where we were!” Judy exclaimed. She regarded Nick for his reaction. He was silent-laughing. An elbow to the ribs informed him of the folly of that response. He continued laughing.

“You’ll have to have the ZBI stop us at the train station, then,” her mother answered.

“It might still be dangerous,” Judy warned.

“Oh, you’ll be safe ‘till I get there, little Bun.” Bonnie deadpanned. “It’s not an argument we’re having here Sweetie. This is an update. See. You. Tomorrow.” The phone beeped as her mother hung up.

“I’m so dead,” Judy groaned.

“She just needs to see her kit,” Vivienne said, coming into the room. “I would feel the same. She’s protective. I can be just as bad.”

“You put an arrow into a sheep,” Nick said with a blank expression, “You have certainly established that.” He looked back to Judy, whose ears were pulled over her eyes in dread. Nick grinned and continued, “Your mom would have every right to be jealous if we only let my mom shoot someone to protect us.” He grinned, obviously trying to lighten her mood.

“Nick, my mother punted a squirrel across a bar to defend our honor. She already got to participate,” the bunny flattened her ears.

Nick smirked. “Hey, you coulda taken him on, but you just stood there with your paws in your pockets, letting your mom have it out with him.” Vivienne looked back and forth between the pair with a growing grin.

“You’ve left some fun things out of your emails, Nick,” the vixen said, tail flitting around behind her excitedly.

“What pockets?” Judy asked, gesturing in frustration, “We were all nak-…” she stopped short. Vivienne’s eyes widened almost as much as her grin at the implied scandal.
"Oh really?…" She moved closer still, tail really flicking about after that.

Nick crossed his arms in front of him. "Here I was, for the first time, omitting something for you… and you go and do that," he scolded. Judy’s beloved fox grinned at her, making it seem like he somehow did that on purpose. It was like he knew that she would call him out on the pockets thing. Now he could just be honest about that story with his mother and it was all Judy’s fault! He explained casually, "See, Ca-Judy’s mom and sister showed up quite unexpectedly while we were doing an investigation at the naturalist club that’s out in Sahara Square."

“I love that place! I haven’t been there in ages!” Vivienne exclaimed. Nick’s smug face slid right off. Judy grinned as hard as she could.

She practically sang, “Nick and I can take you there when you move back to Zootopia. I was nervous at first but it was ultimately very liberating.” Her lover gave the cutest little fox-squeak ever, paws over his muzzle as he watched this disaster play out in real time, powerless to stop it.

“Ca-Fluff…” Nick murmured, having to clear his throat a little, “I… probably don’t have to mention why I might not have thought to go with my mom to that place.” His eyes were absolutely begging.

The vixen crossed her own arms defiantly at that. “What, you can go there with Judy’s mom, but not me?” Her features were overtaken by bitter expression, ears going back, and her tail falling like the setting sun onto the floor. Nick visibly wilted.

“We were… all naked.” Nick explained, as if that made some kind of substantial argument.

“I’m gonna have to move to Zootopia,” Honey said from the dining room as she entered. Nick flinched. “It sounds like that’s where the real party is!” She laughed heartily. Judy turned and smiled at the badger, letting her arrival give Nick a reprieve for the moment. She was seriously considering inviting Vivienne for a day out at the MSO, even if Nick didn’t want to go. It would be nice to just spend some time getting pampered.

“Are they going to give you back your bow?” Vivienne asked caringly.

“They said I could have it back after the investigation, most likely,” Honey replied.

“I’m glad. I would hate to think I got that taken away from you when I borrowed it without asking,”
Viv said. It pleased Judy that things like that mattered to Viv. She really was such a sympathetic fox.

“So, I want you to have this, at least,” Honey said, handing a folder to Vivienne. The vixen opened it. Inside was a full-page printed image of Vivienne crouched on that large flat boulder with a nocked arrow. The camera position made the image nearly side-on, so it showed her profile, her form, and her expression very well. Honey had zoomed in on her when she saw motion on that camera. It was alarmingly clear, with crisp detail.

“It looks like I’m actually posing for the camera,” Viv laughed. “I wasn’t even aware of it. Good heavens, it’s one of the best pictures of me, and I’m not even wearing something nice.”

“Man, those eyes…” Nick said in a whisper.

“Sharp.” Honey said.

“This was… just before I fired the arrow?” asked Vivienne. Judy felt a pang of fear ripple through her. Something Viv had said early echoed in her heart. She wasn’t aiming for his shoulder. Seeing the fox’s keen, smoldering emerald eyes told the bunny that Vivienne meant it when she had mentioned that. She wasn’t merely kidding. Those were the eyes of a mother willing to kill for her family. The image instantly seared itself into Judy’s mind. Vivienne was, in a special way, the doe’s mother too. She glanced at Nick to find that held much the same expression of fearful reverence.

Honey finally countered the tempered moment. “It’s a neat image. I’m glad it came out so clear.” Vivienne smiled and closed the folder, not seeming to realize how disturbing it was to her family.

“Thank you, Honey! I will get this one framed. Annie’s gonna love it.” She smiled very genuinely. Nick straightened up a bit.

“Ahh… You want to join us for cards or something, Mom?” he offered, obviously in need of immediate brain bleaching.

“I’d love to, sweetie, but I have to head home to get ready for work in a moment,” she answered. Nick gestured frantically.

“You’re going to work today?” he asked with distress, flattening his ears.
“Vivienne put a finger on her chin and considered that, then pantomimed putting a phone to her ear. “Sorry Annie, you have to work alone for the afternoon rush.” She glared at Nick, “… yeah, I shot someone again, so I have to call out.” She shook her head, making it clear that was silly. His mother wasn’t hurt or upset, so she could still work.

“Again?” asked Nick.

“What?” Judy added.

“Alright, I got more info on our not-friends from the ZBI, are you ready?” interrupted Bay as he inconveniently arrived. “Hey, Honey,” he greeted the badger.

“Hey, love,” she purred, pushing up close to him.

“What? No! Off!” he nudged her back. She grinned. Bay rolled his eyes, “… just gonna start calling you ‘badger’,” he muttered. Judy had to smirk at that, wondering how much mileage their hostess actually got off of that joke.

“What’s the news?” Judy pushed, wanting to get past that so she could find out if Viv was just messing with them. The vixen was known for teasing and having a slightly dark sense of humor.

“Okay, so, turns out they were likely responsible for a bunch of other dark stuff that’s gone down, including a few witnesses going missing, arson of crime scenes, and some other ugly stuff. They might as well just forget what the sky looks like, it’s dim fluorescent lights forever for those guys. Fortunately, Orson’s partner, Aaron, is a seriously weak link.”

“Went down easily enough,” Honey said in a dreamy tone. “I watched it over and over and over again.” Nick and Judy were already aware. “Seriously, you could publish your own Ewetube series off of that.” Nick put a paw over the bridge of his muzzle. Judy knew that the fox hated fighting if he didn’t have to. She continued, unabated, “…‘Dropping Shady Ungulates’, with your host, Nick Wilde!”

“As I was saying,” wrested Bay with a glare at the interruption, “He’s probably never had blood on his hooves before so he’s rolling over like an armadillo on an incline. As I suspected: Their attack was never about silencing witnesses, it was simply reprisal. Two executives at Lanolin have been named as the ‘client’ who they were taking payment from for this job. They have been intercepted at
the airport, as well as eleven other members of management for that company. I hope none of them were innocently heading out on vacation, because they just landed themselves into a serious long-term inconvenience.”

Vivienne growled at the back of her throat softly. “I’m mad that this was all about a bunch of mammals wanting to hold onto cash and a cozy way of life.” Nick nodded to his mother.

Honey cut in, “I’m gonna go ahead and surprise all of you, and say I was honestly shocked it was really sheep. I… I mean I talk about the cud-spiracy all the time, but tracking that’s been a hobby more than anything for me. Now it’s not a hobby and it’s… kind of scary,” she admitted. “Not so much for me, but think about all the poor cotton-balls out there just tryin’ to get by and now… bam. Big sheep conspiracy number two. I feel terrible for them.” Judy was a little shocked to hear Honey say such a thing. Maybe it wasn’t such a closed-minded bias as it had seemed.

“Honey, I…” Judy began.

“Hope they don’t try to stay here to get out of the city…” the badger grumbled. Judy stumbled over her line of thought.

The wolf herded attention back over this his explanation. “Two other employees in the ZBI are on leave as well. They had been ordered to be our relief but had traded shifts with Orson and his partner. We are pretty sure that Orson would have just offered to take over, but it was still against protocol, and could cost them both their job, given the severity,” Judy nodded at that.

“Do we know anything else about the situation in the Interior?” inquired Nick. Judy looked back at her fox. He was being remarkably calm after discussing that misappropriated trust that nearly cost everyone in the house their lives in whole-carrot-cake-onto-floor level embarrassment for the wolf’s agency. Judy knew her partner was still furious, as it had gone in very much the manner he feared it would when they discussed it with Bogo.

Bay just sighed softly. “The ZBI has taken a bunch of mammals into custody as you already know, and there will be quite a few more. The reach of the company and its subsidiaries was far, but not everyone was actually complicit in wrong-doing. Like honey mentioned, a cashier at Ewe-mart probably wasn’t hunting down folks from the interior. It’s going to take a long time to get it sorted out. We’ve pulled forty mammals out of retirement to deal with this mess.”

“Will the ZBI be handling the investigation of the crimes committed by Orson?” Nick inquired.
“Yes.”

The fox narrowed his eyes. “I wish to add another formal charge, if I may.” Judy stood up a little straighter. She knew what this was about.

“You may do so now, yes,” the wolf responded.

“I would like him to be charged with the murder of Ukweli, the Interior mammal who helped break this case.” Bay appeared very surprised at that.

“Yes, I know who that is. I understand that the Interior disposed of the evidence, having made sure no autopsy was done before cremating the remains. I looked at that file,” he explained.

“The ZPD has photos of the scene. Those will likely include pictures of the wound. Measurements done of that weird spear will match, I am reasonably sure.” The wolf’s yellow widened at that. He then put his ears back, sighing in frustration.

“I am… sure you are right. I will communicate this to my supervisors. I can’t believe this maniac was working alongside us. What a damned mess.” Bay simply turned and left.

“Oh, that poor family,” whispered Vivienne. She moved over and hugged Nick.

“That sheep… killed someone else?” asked Honey.

“Motti’s brother,” answered Judy. It was going to come out. There wasn’t any reason not to tell her. The badger wilted some.

“I will… talk to them later this afternoon about it,” Nick explained.

“Yeah, right now they are just remembering him as he was when he was alive,” Honey agreed. Judy felt suddenly very gloomy about that. They got out of this pretty unscathed compared to some.

“Geeze, that’s just… really sad. I wish we could have gotten to the hotel sooner,” the bunny sighed,
going quiet. The mammals awkwardly stared at the floor as they considered that. “Sweet cheese and crackers,” Judy grumbled. So much could have been saved if they had gotten to Ukweli first.

“You know what…” Nick stood a little straighter, “We should check on the other fox and bunny to see how they’re holding up. Can we bring them a drink?” Judy perked her ears a bit and smiled. That vulpine tried so hard to make sure she stayed happy, even when it was okay to be sad.

“Two lime sodas!” the badger retreated into the kitchen a moment.

“Thank you,” Judy chimed to her sweet fox.

“Sergeant,” he replied with a cursory nod.

“Sergeant,” the doe responded.

“Oh my gosh! That’s so painfully cute,” Vivienne whimpered, melting in her stance a little.

“Thanks, Mom,” Judy said.

“Wait, she can call you ‘cute’?” Nick asked, flailing in exaggerated fashion.

“So can you, silly. You’re mine,” Judy grinned back at him. Nick paused and stood there, perplexed, reflecting on it.

He finally sighed dismissively, “Well, plucked whiskers… Now it’s not any fun, since it’s allowed!” Judy laughed as the four of them headed out to the front porch. When they got there, they found Jack resting on the swinging bench there, his head in Skye’s lap. The younger vixen was leaning down and biting softly along her bunny’s arm, seeming to enjoy partaking in the classic foxy affection of mouthing over him. He had taken his shirt off, perhaps just to give more bunny for her to bite on and less cloth. They were definitely relaxing as requested.

“W-Wait, no… them too?” sputtered Honey incredulously. Judy perked her ears. That was right, Jack and Skye had been basically hanging out in their room since they arrived.
“Hey, Judy,” Skye said sweetly. “We aren’t avoiding everyone, we promise. It’s just… not our place… all the police and ZBI stuff.”

The doe grinned brightly. “Hey, if Nick and I could be doing the same thing right now, we would.”

“You knew about this?” the badger asked.

“There’s room on the bench,” Jack offered jovially.

“… and you didn’t think to tell me?” added Honey.

“Another buzz.” Skye grinned down at the buck.

“Mine hasn’t stopped.” Jack replied, laughing, “It’s killing my battery. I’m almost scared to look!”

“What?” asked Judy.

The confused badger murmured again, “This is a day that I will never, ever forget,”

“SnootBook is going nuts,” laughed the white vixen.

“I haven’t looked at that in fluffing days,” groaned Judy. “I bet my family’s going nuts right now, after the news.”

Nick shrugged at that, however. “Hey, they didn’t even name you guys in the presser,” he rumbled in a mellow tone. “Why should your social media accounts be affected?”

“You should check,” Jack said with a smirk. “I forget… do you follow me on SnootBook?” he asked.
“Don’t you know?” Nick inquired in a scandalous tone, pretending to be wounded by that. The buck shrugged.

“I would not have noticed. I can’t pay attention to new watches all the time.” Judy hadn’t really given much thought to what social media was really like for a celebrity. She had a couple hundred watchers on her SnootBook, but she barely used it. She was always so busy. It was mostly family and friends of family.

Nick finally answered, letting Jack off the hook. “No. I don’t watch you. I don’t use SnootBook much because, when I first got it, Finnick thought it was fun to boop me a hundred times in the middle of the night. Just hours and hours of ‘LittleMonsterFin just booped you’! It was maddening.”

“I watch you, Jack.” Judy reassured the buck. The doe didn’t want to admit that she hadn’t even started watching him until they became friends. She took out her phone and, as expected, there were dozens of messages directed at Judy that she had to slog through. It was mostly folks in Bunnyburrow who were concerned about her. They wanted her to update so they all knew the bunny was okay. She would do that later, she supposed. After scrolling down through about ten of them, she found what was making Jack’s phone heat up with messages.

“Oh shhh-ed…” Judy said, snapping her gaze up to Vivienne, not wanting to swear in front of her, then staring at the grinning buck.

“What?” Nick asked. Judy showed him her phone.

Her partner, green eyes wide and round, read it out loud.

“TheActualJackSavage has changed his relationship status to… ‘Would you, could you, with a fox?’.”

Judy stared at the post again, almost not believing it. There was an included image of Jack, curled up, shirtless and happy on that bench with Skye. She was holding him close and smiling as if no other vixen could ever be happier than she was.

“You went public.” Nick stated flatly.
“Of course I did,” Jack proclaimed. “You thought I was gonna keep Skye a secret when I gave myself to her forever?” Nick stood there, still looking shocked. Judy was a bit stunned too. She worried a lot about how mammals would feel about a fox and a bunny, and she was about to seriously find out. It might not even matter if everyone knew about her and Nick anymore, not with a celebrity in a similar situation. Who would care, other than family and friends?

“Huh, the responses look pretty positive, really,” Nick reported, scrolling down.

“Don’t really care,” Jack smirked, stroking his fox lovingly.

“Wait, did you tag the location?!” cried Honey.


“Scared the hair out of me,” she mumbled.

“Am I missing all the fun on this side?” asked Agent Rosette as she rounded the side of the house.

“Agent, would you be so kind as to take my mother home so she can get ready for work?” Nick asked kind of out of the blue.

“Nicholas, I can jog. It’s how I got here,” Vivienne protested crossly.

“No, he’s right. I would prefer you leaving here in a vehicle,” Rosette stated firmly. “Our relief from the ZPD just arrived, so we will be heading out to a meeting with our field office, then coming back for some rest, so I don’t mind. I can even run her to work, I want another of those fish-burgers.”

“Who’s here from the ZPD?” Nick asked.

As if on cue, Honey’s dad pulled up the drive in the sheriff’s patrol car. Judy and Nick walked to the steps that lead up the porch. The older badger got out and opened the doors to the back seat of the patrol car. Those were not really made to open from the inside. Pawlander and Wolfard stepped out.
“Oh good. I worried that it was gonna be Higgins.” Nick huffed with relief.

“Wolfard!” Judy cried happily. “They sent you out here?”

“Well, you know… unattached lone wolf with nothing better to do with his life,” the grey-toned canine chuckled, pulling a suitcase out of the car. “I’ve never been here, Nick. This is a sweet little town. Hey Vivienne!” Wolfard barked sunnily.

“Hello, Timothy!” Vivienne chirped sweetly. Nick folded his ears back. He always felt it was weird that his mom called him that during card games or trivia night. Pawlander remained at the car, discussing things with Sheriff Honeybadger. Wolfard went up the stairs to the porch. He then folded his ears back.

“Why is Jack Savage here?”

Nick gasped. “What, seriously? Bogo sent you and didn’t even tell you what’s going on?” the fox inquired incredulously.

“Mayor Bogo’s got a bunch on his mind,” Wolfard stated, openly staring as Jack tilted his head back to let Skye nibble on him some more. “Oh. That… that’s uhh… Something new.” he said in a much softer tone. The buck grinned, apparently enjoying the reaction.

Nick gestured politely to his lupine coworker to grab his attention. “Well, then we got a bunch to catch you up on before you can be our babysitter. Come inside… so, first, the emergency numbers are all up on the fridge… Don’t let the lion sisters have any pudding if they haven’t made their bed…” Judy’s partner led Wolfard inside. The doe watched Jack and Skye hold each other, seeming to care about nothing else in the world. It could be so complicated, and it sometimes felt like the whole world was working against her, but the bunny had persevered against so many adversaries. The only thing that ever really stood in her way with Nick had been caution. The pair had experienced another brush with death. They had come out on top again. What had she ever really been afraid of?

“Not gonna hide it at all, huh?” Judy finally asked with a smile.

“I’m glad,” Judy crooned, sitting down beside the pair on the bench. “Because when my parents get here tomorrow, I intend to claim my fox.”
Judy shifted in bed just a little and found herself tragically fox-less. She sat up and pulled her ears back, trying to wake up. She and Nick had stayed up very late to discuss the possibilities that their dual promotion opened up, as well as some problems it was likely to cause. Nick was certain that they would still get to work together enough that it wasn’t going to be a problem, and they got to spend all their time off together, so they would finally have a real reason to want to end their day. As it was, they logged a lot of hours they didn’t have to because there wasn’t much incentive to go off the clock. The new work arrangement, if it happened, might be ultimately good for them. Nick was more concerned about the change in leadership.

Bogo was used to all of his officers, but the sudden influx of changes could make things unnecessarily hard, and Nick admitted that he did not have a lot of patience for mammals who were not well established demanding his respect. He hoped that Tora, who he still thought would be standing in as Chief, would be humble and patient.

After their long conversation about work, they found themselves just cuddling and enjoying warmth and softness and that led slowly, naturally to more involved adoration. Slow, calm, careful and sweet, the lovers got as close as they could and stayed that way well into the late evening hour. Nick fell asleep afterward, but that was fine for Judy. At about eleven that night, she started getting text messages from Vivienne. The line… the vows that the bunny needed, were finally delivered. As Nick silently slept, she committed to memory every single syllable.

Waking to an empty bed was disorienting to the bunny at first, but a moment later she understood why the bed was vacant. The scent of really nice coffee had permeated their room. Judy was sure her lover and partner went to investigate the source of that. She dressed herself and headed downstairs. What the doe discovered when she arrived as she arrived was not what she expected, and the bunny was not prepared for it in the least.

She could hear it before leaving the dining room, fortunately. Stu and Bonnie Hopps spoke back and forth to Nick, who was in the living room with them. Judy halted immediately, ears falling back. Her mom was going to kill her. She knew that. The Hopps family had enough bunnies, and this one was causing too much stress. Time to drown the troublesome daughter in soup or something.
But her parents actually sounded pretty happy as Nick talked to them. Judy swiftly moved to the doorway leading from the dining room to the main room. She was able to hide to the right of the door against the wall and listen. It wasn’t the most polite thing to do, but it at least allowed her to test the mood of the room before the reluctant doe made her entrance.

She was glad that she did this. It appeared that her arrival would have been embarrassing at best. Her mom and dad were not the only ones there. Cassie and Honey were also there, interjecting on what they were watching. On the TV, from the sound of it, was the Ewetube video of the infamous Munch match. Stu was giddy about how good a job he did as an announcer to a video that had so many views. Judy had never really paid attention to how much traffic it had. Was that even a big deal? Judy hadn’t considered that she might end up known for anything but her work as an officer. Would some mammals think, as she did, that it was offensive to play Munch, given that it painted foxes as predatory against bunnies? The bunny hoped there was no fallout to be had from that.

The doe remained where she was, listening to her mom laugh about Angela getting taken out. Judy widened her eyes as she heard her black-furred sister’s voice chime in.

“He plays rough! I know you might think it was a drag, but I hate being treated with kit gloves ‘cause I’m a bunny. I’m having real fun there!” Angela was there. Why? Why would they bring her?

“Foxes can be gentle.” The new voice was also familiar and Judy sank down against the door frame. Did they bring everyone?! It was Sammie!

“Is Judy like… the only one left?” asked Honey.

“Listen to the announcer!” bragged Stu. He sounded cheerful enough. Judy closed her eyes. It suddenly made complete sense. Nick got up early to deal with her parents and to get them to calm down and be in a better mood. Of course he would. Judy smiled and listened.

“You loved that end chase, I remember.” That voice was Vivienne. Judy pondered just slinking back upstairs. Nick was stuck entertaining everyone. There was a final cheer that Judy knew by heart. She’d watched the video a few times by that point, including just recently at the Diner. Judy captured Nick’s tail that one last time she needed to win, and then Nick captured his final bunny. At the time of the match, Judy had no idea the fox had already decided he was going to keep that last rabbit for himself. Cassie applauded loudly.

She stated eagerly, “Okay. I was messing around before, but don’t let me outside. A fox will go missing,” she laughed. “What a fun match! I haven’t thought about that game since I was a cub.”
Nick laughed. “If you grab a fox, I’ll have to arrest you. We don’t take kindly to kit-napping here.”

“Then I’d have two foxes.” Cassie laughed, earning the soft thump a throw pillow from her somewhere. Judy assumed that it was from her sister.

“My turn for a video,” Honey chimed. “It’s my favorite one, here.” There was some murmuring in the living room as she apparently switched the video on the TV. Judy remained hidden, trying to get a feel for her mom. She sounded so mad on the phone. What could Judy have done any differently, though? She wasn’t allowed to really give any details of the case.

The TV provided the sound of whatever video that Honey had chosen. Judy’s tall lapine ears perked immediately. It sounded familiar. Was it a video Judy was in? It sounded like a busy market place. Then she heard a thump. There were two more thumps. Her heart froze. No, not that video! What was Honey thinking?! Judy moved into the room quickly to try to stop it. If Nick was attempting to brighten the mood for her parents, this video was the worst possible thing.

“Honey, turn that off! No one wants to—…” the entering doe started, but her mom shot her a patented bunny death glare. Judy recoiled from it.

“Oh man, it’s this one,” Kijvu said darkly. “This is the one I was talking about, Mom,” he added to the older hyena beside him. The four family members were all sitting in a row on the couch. The lions had staked claim to their chairs. Wolfard and Pawlander were likely upstairs in the camera room. Nick was sitting with his mother and Judy’s parents on the couch which was opposite of the dining room entry. Her sisters, Sammie and Angela, were standing over by the couch with Bonnie and Stu. Jack and Skye were absent, but it could be safely assumed they were cuddling somewhere, messing with the buck’s fans. Judy looked at Nick and his mother. Both had serious expressions, but she couldn’t read them otherwise.

“Mom…” Judy glanced at the older doe. Bonnie crossed her arms, focusing on the TV as muffled swearing was heard under the ground. Judy gave a panicked gesture to Honey, who moved to turn off the video, seeing that it was distressing the bunny.

“Leave it,” Bonnie countered coldly. Judy knew why. Her mother was upset with Judy about the risks that she and Nick were expected to take. This video, while Honey had not intended it, was Exhibit A in a big way. The badger obeyed the elder Hopps.

“Have you seen this, Mom?” Nick asked softly. Judy recoiled again.
“Yes, I saw it in the hospital, sweetie. It’s okay,” she whispered.

“I’m sorry, Judy. I didn’t think…” Honey started.

“Shhh…” she was shushed by Motti.

“What’s happening?” Charisse asked. Living in The Interior, they had likely not much cause to see that. It was big news in Zootopia, but not really outside of the city.

“I’m gonna go get some coffee…” Judy murmured, not caring to hear her own screaming. She was going to throw that badger all over the front yard for this.

Judy walked into the kitchen and sighed slowly, still able to hear it anyway. She poured her coffee and added sugar but no cream. It’s how she could tell the difference between her coffee and Nick’s. The fox used a lot of cream, but almost never any sugar. She teased her partner about it, stating that he just liked coffee-flavored milk. He did not disagree.

As the video went, Kijvu explained to the lions what had happened to lead to that. They had not been with him when he described that to his family. Judy sat at the table, waiting for it. She knew it was coming. That terrible primal scream. This was immediately followed by a chorus of hyenas saying ‘Sungura ya Shetani’! The bunny dropped her head in her paws.

“What’s that mean?” asked Sammie. Judy inwardly groaned and covered her face unhappily. *Don’t dig deeper, Sammie!* The uncomfortable doe pulled her ears back in frustration. Nick tried to help. She knew her fox tried to lighten her parents’ mood.

“It’s legend,” Kijvu replied. “Very powerful bunny, she carry the wicked to the darkness and keeps safe the humble and the meek.”

“Really? And you call her that?” asked Stu. His voice was awed. Of course. He loved dramatic things like that.

“She is *Shetani,*” said Motti, bluntly. “I act badly when officers from ZPD bring back remains of my brother. I attack her fox. Shetani quickly defeated Motti and then fight half of the village. Village
“Won’t ever fight Shetani again.” Judy whined softly. That was not what she needed her mom and dad to hear. She heard a frustrated sigh from her mom and a bit of comforting from her dad.

“Judy can scrap, yeah,” came the matter-of-fact reply from her sister, Angela.

“She saved us from the mine…” Kijvu stated. “Her and Nick, they fight a huge guy with a gun. When the rest of the world was being silent, they come and help and they give everything to save us. We are here now because of Shetani, and because of Officer Wilde.”

“Hey, you stopped calling me Janga!” Nick laughed.

“I still call you Janga,” said Motti with an obvious level of mirth.

“What is Janga?” asked Sammie. She was such the curious one.

“It means something like ‘disaster’,” Nick answered playfully.

“What? Why that?” asked Angela.

“Nick has many misfortunes. Motti get to know him while treating him for buibui injury,” Motti explained.

“Buibui?” asked Bonnie. Judy buried her face in her paws. She was openly glad not to be the one explaining this stuff and having to see her mother and father’s faces. This was a complete Janga.

“That buibui still is harassing the village?” worried Motti’s mother with concern.

Motti replied proudly, “No, Shetani helped to kill it.”

“What did Judy help kill?” insisted Bonnie.
“Buibui,” repeated Kijvu helpfully, “It is giant spider. Poison to even touch it. Very dangerous.”

“Oh, good heavens!” cried Judy’s mother.


“Oh good, they need to know that too Angela, thanks.”

There was a collective gasp in the room. Obviously someone gestured the size of the one that Judy had helped Motti dispatch.

“Yeah, I’ve seen one even bigger than that.” Cassie added.

“Well, guess where I’m never going,” stated Sammie. Judy knew that she hated spiders.

“When I get my paws on that little bun…” Bonnie growled.

“Would you have told her not to go?” offered Motti curiously. Judy lifted her head.

“Of course I’d have told her not to go! What mother wants their daughter to have to do any of that?!?” she cried, exasperated. Judy suddenly worried that her mother might really be there to tell her to change her career choice again. She had always been in her corner after she got to Zootopia.

“No one else saved us.” Cassie said. Judy got up. She didn’t want her friends to have to defend her. She needed to have this conversation with her mom, not them.

“She could be killed,” argued Bonnie as Judy entered the room. “Judy, you could be killed. Why do you need to do these things? Is there no one else in the whole world that can deal with these things?” Judy clutched her paws into fists beside her.

“I want to do this, mom. Yes, I can say no. I can refuse any mission that I feel would provide unnecessary risk and then have that choice evaluated. But I was obviously not sent to do any of those other things. I was sent to take Ukweli, Motti’s brother, home to his family. I was there to do
that, and ask a few questions about the death of Professor Lupin.” Judy stared fixedly at her mother. She did not want to have it out with her in front of everyone, but she could not leave it to friends to defend a position Judy thought her mother, of all mammals, understood.

Bonnie turned and regarded the two foxes. “Well, Vivienne, how do you feel about your son getting pulled into these things?” That made Judy’s heart lurch. That was a low blow. “You heard her! They don’t even get sent to do these things…it just happens. How is that even a rational circumstance to end up in?” Nick also looked a bit horrified at the question, gazing intently at his mother. The vixen smiled gently at the irritated doe.

“I’m proud of my son, Bonnie. I know he would give his life to protect Judy and the city she adores…” Nick’s ears went back and Judy’s eyes became wet.

Bonnie gestured furiously. “You nearly lost him. You went to his funeral, for crying out loud!”

“…and because of your daughter, I was there to bury a hero and not a scoundrel,” the vixen stated icily. Judy winced. She wanted an eject button for this conversation. No one else dared to speak. The topic had become too heavy.

“You need not bury him at all!” cried the older doe.

Stu interrupted. “We all find our way back to the ground, Bon…”

“Stuart!” snapped Bonnie, “We discussed this! Whose side are you on?” Judy growled under her breath. They were absolutely not going to sit there and fight in front of everyone.

“Stop trying to defend me, guys. It’s okay. Mom, are you going to tell me to stop being a cop?” she asked, point blank.

“No,” conceded Bonnie. “I know that would be a waste of my breath. I just think there’s something you can do to not be almost killed every couple of months. This isn’t good for you. How do you even sleep?”

“On a fox,” stated Cassie casually.
“What?” blurted Angela.

Bonnie sighed heavily. “Sweet cheese and crackers! I haven’t told anyone else, but I guess that’s out in the open now.”

"I was told it was a secret, but does just... every mammal here already know?” blurted Angela.

“They almost got killed, I bet they made no attempt to hide it out there.” stated Sammie, nodding sagely. Judy grimaced. That did not help her case.

Bonnie crossed her arms. “The evidence mounts!”

Angela grinned broadly. "Though we would love to know more about the sleeping arrangements.”

“No! No details for you!” Judy said. Her black-furred sister wilted.

“What your mom means,” Stu stated, pulling the conversation back on track, “…is that Chief Bogo needs to vet your assignments a little better. Or you need to be willing to let other officers take dangerous assignments. I’m gonna bet it’s more a problem of the latter.”

Judy pinched the bridge of her muzzle. “Well, as sergeants, we will be more likely to have to respond to incidents that are already difficult for larger officers, so that’s not likely to change much.”

Bonnie sighed, “Look, I get that it’s a dangerous job, but I really worry about you, Judy!”

“And I do too!” Stu added, backing his wife up.

“And you should.” Vivienne stated, training all eyes back on her. “You should every single day because that is where Judy came from.” The vixen stood up and moved in front of the doe’s parents.

“Where she came from?” asked Bonnie.
Viv nodded slowly. “That’s right. You’ve worried and cared for that bunny her whole life. So tell me, Bonnie… Stu… would you face down death itself to get her back if you knew you could?” Judy flattened her ears. Viv’s tone was so cold, and her eyes were locked on the slightly shrinking pair of bunnies.

Stu sat up straighter and answered, “Of course we would. Heck, we have! I jumped into flood waters to save her when she got swept up trying to retrieve a tool box for Miles back when she was 10. Always getting into trouble trying to help someone!”

Bonnie added, “I pulled a beam down under the ground to help prop up a sagging tunnel so she could get out after snow-melt nearly trapped her and her friends in a play-den they were making. Thought I was gonna be crushed that time!”

“And you tried hard to keep her from being a cop, I have been told,” Vivienne said, paws clasped behind her as she gazed icily at the doe’s parents.

“We did. And we aren’t wrong for it!” Bonnie snapped.

“Why? Why did you want her to stop trying to be a cop?” asked Vivienne slowly.

“Because it’s dangerous! Can’t you understand that, Viv?” cried the older doe, “We didn’t want her to get hurt. We didn’t want to lose her! I love my daughter and I want to protect her. That’s normal for a mother!”

Vivienne turned away, paws still behind her back. “And the whole time, you gave everything you and your husband had to protect Judy, show her the way, make her stronger, and make her life better. She wasn’t blind, you two.” Nick’s mother turned around, a peaceful expression on her lovely, angular face. “…Your daughter committed to memory every selfless act you two gave to guide her. She watched closely every time you protected her and every time you rushed to her aid when the world was too much for her to handle alone. She learned from you the meaning of honor, self-sacrifice, and exactly how to protect something she loves.” Judy cupped her paws over her muzzle, barely able to breathe with what was said. The wide eyes of her parents made it obvious that those words were striking them just as deep. Judy immediately recognized where Nick’s ability to ‘know’ others so deeply came from.

“I know she watched…” Bonnie bitterly admitted, her voice starting to crack.
“Bonnie, Stu…” Vivienne half-whispered softly. Everyone stayed perfectly quiet to hear, “Who your daughter is today is absolutely the product of all the love and care you have given to her… You two should be scared because you never stopped loving and caring, but please understand… It is because of that love… that fear, care and worry that she became what she is. *Sungura ya Shetani*, clad in guardian blue. Were it not for the heart that you two cultivated in her, I would be without a son, and more than half the mammals in this room would be dead. The ZPD prepared her to be a cop. You prepared her to be more than that.”

The room was dead silent. Cassie got up abruptly and padded out. She was a bit proud, so the tears in Stu and Bonnie’s eyes were off limits to her in mixed company, perhaps. Judy lowered her paws slowly and she sighed.

“Mom… Dad… I promise, I will tell you everything I can, okay? I won’t hide anything, I won’t shelter you from it… but I only did it because I know you worry, okay? I hate worrying you like that. I hate knowing that the life I love is making you unhappy.” Bonnie got up and moved to Judy, hugging her tightly. The doe winced a bit at her mother’s hug. She decided not to remind her right then that she was injured.

“Judy,” Bonnie cried. “We are proud of you, and we are not unhappy with you. Just… Please take care of yourself. Not just for us. For Nick too. Don’t let him go through what we watched you go through a few months ago. You’re never gonna slow down. I get that, but don’t think that you have to do it alone!”

“She not alone,” Motti said, “Skye is there. She blow someone up into many pieces! And *Janga’s* mom shot a crazy spear-sheep with an arrow!”

Bonnie and Stu both cried simultaneously, “What?!”

Judy groaned miserably.

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The small grey bunny relaxed a bit, tucked in against Nick’s side on the swing that faced the lake. She’d talked to the fox’s mother a day before in this swing. New Reynard really was such a nice place for foxes. His fur looked even more beautiful contrasted with the brilliant hues of the autumn leaves. Judy had never really considered that color to be nice in the past, preferring blue for obvious reasons, but she found herself noticing it more and more. And she now saw it in abundance out in the forests of this small, lovely town.

The previous hour had been a flurry of everyone trying to explain to Judy’s parents the things that had happened. The doe bet that Agent Bay would have been mortified at what was shared, but if her mom hadn’t even told Angela about her dating Nick, she felt that she could keep a secret. Nick had the same trust in his own mother, and Judy felt a little guilty that she had not been more willing to be transparent to her own mom.

After a while, her mate nudged his bunny a bit to encourage her to take a break from the somewhat rambunctious conversation. Judy protested a little at first because she didn’t like leaving a discussion that had been about their work. Some of the stuff wasn’t even able to be discussed, but they were talking about it anyway. However, Jack finally came down with Skye to see what all the laughing and talking was about, and Sammie went appallingly fan-girl about it. She had seen the announcement and had no idea that Jack and Skye were even there.

For Sammie, there was an additional fold to her excitement. Jack was suddenly, to her, a kindred spirit. While it wasn’t a huge secret with family, outside of that, she kept her feelings about foxes to herself. Here she saw a celebrity who openly had no fear of it, and Sammie was over the moon to actually meet him. She had seen the pictures of Jack with her mothers, and knew the buck to be friends with Judy, but had not thought she would get to meet him. Her excitement was a little awkward to Judy, though Jack was probably pretty used to it, so he and Skye happily talked with the albino doe. Angela gladly got into the conversation too.

It was at that point that Judy gave in to the nudging. She went outside with Nick to get away from the somewhat cringe-worthy gushing of her white-furred sister. Judy was immediately glad she listened to her fox. She needed a break, despite having been up only an hour or so. She swung slowly on the swing with him, reminded of the peaceful moment so long ago on the hammock on her family farm. It felt like none of the past few days had even been real, except now they were not in Zootopia and everyone was visiting them and it felt like some kind of weird holiday.

“So, we haven’t talked about it really with everything going on…” Judy said, laying back slowly on the bench swing, head in her lover’s lap. “How do you feel about your mom coming to live in Zootopia?” Nick smiled down at his pretty bunny.

“Well, I think it will be okay. Fortunately you don’t have much stuff. She will be cozy on the couch.” Judy looked at Nick, eyes wide in shock.
“What?! Wait, we never discussed any of that!” the bunny squeaked. Her partner gave a smug grin. Judy sank into his lap again. “Of course.” She put her little paw over his muzzle and shook it a bit playfully. She knew Vivienne would be mortified at the thought of imposing like that. Judy gazed up happily at her fox. “Silly fox.”

“I’m actually very glad she will be there. I want to be closer to her. She knows that. I am sure that’s part of why she’s coming out. I want to find out the details about it… What she’ll be doing, where she will live, all of that, but I think she’s got a plan buttoned down already. I don’t think she’d have been ready to tell me about it otherwise,” he chuckled.

“I’ll be happy having her closer by as well. Taking care of a fox can be a pawful, and I still can’t make your shrimp dish. I’ve tried. I just don’t have that particular talent.” Judy laughed.

“Well, you would spoil me with it if you could,” the fox replied, “I deserve it only after I’ve saved a bunch of mammals from certain death.” He leaned down and kissed Judy between the eyes. “Or on my birthday.” She laughed a bit at that. The doe then sat up abruptly.

“Wait… I’ve known you over a year.” She stared at the vulpine. “When’s your birthday? I … I missed it!” she cried, suddenly feeling rotten.

“No you didn’t.” Nick laughed. “I never told you when it was. If it makes you feel any better, you didn’t have access to me on my last birthday.”

“What? Why?” she asked. She then lowered her ears a bit. She couldn’t talk to him during the two weeks of his examinations at the academy. “Your exams. It was while you were in training.” Nick nodded at that. “So, that means it’s coming up… in a few months, right?” she asked.

“I will let you try to figure it out on your own” he laughed.

“I can just get your ID while you are sleeping,” Judy smirked.

“Yeah, if you’re boring and don’t want a reward for figuring it out.” Nick wore a smug expression. Judy folded her ears back tightly. Oh, that was his game. She’d play it. She didn’t care what the prize was, but to never even find out what it was made her blood boil. He knew her too well.
“Guys!” Judy looked up, seeing Jack running up to the bench. “I am so sorry, I messed up.” Judy sat up, fearful a bit. Was it not over? Were there more bad guys? When would it end? She saw a very grumpy-looking Bonnie hopping along behind the panting Jack.

“What… did you do?” Nick growled.

Jack cupped his muzzle. “I had no idea. You never said anything about it!” he whined, “How could I have known!?”

“Judy! Oh, little bun, you!” Bonnie cried, “Yooou!”

“They were asking about why I was there!” Jack flailed a bit. “I told them I got you onto the case to find out who killed my friend. Told them I sent you to the MSO, under cover. Your mom asked what the MSO was and when I told her. She was so mad!”

“You were there!” shouted Bonnie. Angela was coming around the side of the house at the same time.

“Mom! What’s going on?!” she yelled.

“You couldn’t just tell me? Even when I was right there?!” Nick looked at Judy and then smiled weakly at Bonnie.

The fox surrendered, “It’s not like I expected you guys were going to be there that very day. What are the chances of that?” Judy groaned, having nearly forgotten that Nick was the one who gave Angela those tickets anyway.

“What’s going on?” came a voice from a wolf who was following Angela. Judy covered her face. Bay was there too. Why not? Why not air this out in front of everyone in the house?

“Oh, hello. I don’t know you,” said Bonnie sharply to the wolf. “I was just informed that my daughter and her foxy friend forgot to mention to me that they were disguised at the time they met me in a naturalist’s club!”
“Wait, what?” Angela predictably asked. Judy rolled her eyes as she saw Sammie following Bay.

“Look, guys, we were doing our jobs. We were under cover. We couldn’t break our cover. You have to understand.”

Bonnie gestured wildly. “We were right there. We would understand!” she huffed.

“Wait, they were…” Angela backup up a little, eyes wide. “Wait, really? Like.. The fox and the bunny?”

“Yup.” Judy mumbled. “Dee and John.”

“Gerald! Gerald!” cried the fox, “John was my dad’s name, why do you keep doing that?!” Nick laughed. Judy winced at that.

“Nick saw me naked?” asked Angela, obviously stunned.

“What?” asked Sammie.

“We were naked too, remember?” Nick stated. “That’s the point of a naturalist’s club!”

“I’m out.” Bay said flatly, turning on his heel and heading back toward the house.

“You have to believe me, I didn’t…” Jack insisted.

“You’re in the clear, Squeaker.” Nick sighed.

Judy held up her paws a bit to try to calm down the situation. “We were the only ones who could really take the undercover operation because our relationship is not a common thing in the ZPD. We certainly didn’t expect to run into you guys there, you have to believe me.”
“Nice squirrel-punting though.” Nick said. Bonnie slapped her paws over her muzzle with a gasp.

Judy then smiled, looking at her mother. “You want to know everything, Mom? It starts here. You told Dad about the squirrel thing, right?”

“What? No! Of course not! There wasn’t a need to mention that, it was…” Bonnie looked down. “That was appalling behavior on my part and in a very compromising situation. It wouldn’t do to have your father worrying about whether or not there would be more trouble from that! It was done.”

“Well, you can tell dad all about that, and I will keep you informed about everything my partner and I are doing.” Judy said.

“You sly bunny.” Nick said behind her softly.

“It has nothing to do with your father.” Bonnie scoffed.

“But it has to do with you, and he cares for you, right?” Judy asked. The bunny spotted Honey as she rounded the side of the house, perhaps wondering why Bay was seeking refuge in the house from all of this. The badger was the curious sort, after all.

“I saw Nick naked,” said Angela.

“Sweet,” purred Sammie.

“Tell us all about it,” teased Honey.

“I’m right here!” cried Judy.

“Your family is so fun, Judy.” laughed the badger. Of course, Honey was having a good time. She seemed to thrive in chaos. It was a surprise that she could stand living in such a quiet town.

“Right… So I get it, okay?” sighed Bonnie, finally. “You have your reasons not to share
everything. Just… don’t be so cagey. If it’s not a danger to you or someone else, okay?” She sat down on the bench. Angela chased Sammie out in front of the water. The albino bunny had perhaps said something teasing that Judy had missed. It was so peaceful for just a little bit of time. Jack pulled out his phone. It was ringing with the opening theme music to his last major hit movie, Savage Seas. He pulled it to his ear.

“Ace, what’s up?” he asked in a chipper tone. He pulled the phone away from his ear again, wincing.

“Hold on, Mom.” Judy sat up, noticing a pained expression from the buck.

“Calm down, Ace, you are gonna end up back in the hospital,” Jack said. He listened some more.


“Okay. Okay, stop, Ace. You listen to me. You are my agent, but you are not my… my…” He pulled the phone away from his ear, then put the agent on speaker phone.

“…entire career is volatile at best as you get older. Everyone’s pulling for supernatural thrillers and you want to play kissy-face on a swing with your fox bodyguard and post that on your social media!” His voice was small and jittery, his pace of talking rapid and panicked.

“I’m not playing kissy-face! She’s the one, Whiptail,” Jack growled.

“The one is a fox?” the small voice explained on the other side. Whiptail was a jerboa name. That certainly accounted for the small voice. Judy and Nick leaned in as Jack brought the phone closer. She had a suspicion of why he was letting them listen to this.

“Yes, she’s a fox. The best possible one,” Jack said proudly.

“It could be a tiger or a wolf for all I care, but why pick a fox, Jack? You know how that looks?” asked the smaller mammal on the other side.

“It looks like I’m the happiest rabbit alive. You saw the picture, right?” Jack asked, grinning. Nick
folded his ears back however. The slight against foxes was not lost on him.

“You gotta drop this, or keep it on the down-low, or something Jack!” cried the agent, “I can’t protect your brand if you are playin’ lose with the girls.”

“Ace. Pal. Buddy,” Jack growled, “It seems you are taking issue with the happiness of the buck you swore you would always honor the best interests of. My pay has been negotiable. My comforts and my hours have always been negotiable. My heart is not negotiable.”

“This is your whole image, Jack. You are risking your whole image!” Ace cried.

“Then spin it!” Jack shouted. They had Angela and Sammie’s attention at that. They moved over to the bench.

“I am your agent,” panted Ace, “But I don’t have to be, and if I say so, Jack, you can be made toxic to other agents. That’s the risk in dealing with the biggest name in the business. I don’t want to do that, but if you want this fox, you keep it quiet. You are in contract negotiation for two major films, and you just cast doubt on your whole brand because you like it strange. I have your best interests in mind here, Jack. I am protecting your image. I won’t let you destroy it from some flight of fancy or sexual experimentation.” Jack laid his ears back, baring his teeth.

“Are you threatening me, Ace?” he frowned. “You really think that I will change my mind about something like this?”

“It’s a fox, Jack,” Ace stated again. “They make up less than three percent of our target demographic. Almost half of your fan-base is small prey species. Foxes are diametrically opposed to them. You will lose ad revenue over this!”

“Who? Who am I going to lose because the love of my life is a fox?” Jack inquired darkly. Judy’s heart was racing. This was it. This was the thing she had been afraid of. This is what she hoped she and Nick would not go through. Would it be like this? She was strong, but how hard would it be?

Ace sighed on his end. “Oh, I don’t know… ‘Lapis and Lazuli’ for certain!”
“I don’t even know what they sell, but I am sure we can exist without them.” Jack huffed.

“They are the parent company for the Fox-Away brand deterrent devices. So they definitely will not approve of this.” Ace stated flatly.

“What?! You sold ad revenue to Fox-Away?!” Jack shouted. Judy sat up a little straighter. She’d never seen Jack absolutely furious before.

“No, their parent company! They have other stuff—…”

“I don’t care! Drop them! Do not put their name beside ours, I can’t believe you! I will be putting out an apology on social media myself.”

“Okay, hold on, Jack.” Ace said coldly, “You don’t control advertising, we do.”

“You control advertisers, but you do not control me. If you want me to set foot on a Unifursal Studios set again, you will thank those kind mammals for their payments as received and inform them that we will make up the lost revenue. Or we will humble ourselves and eat it!”

“If I need to get you under control I will make some calls! Jack, don’t make me do this.” Ace hissed.

Without warning, Bonnie grabbed the phone. Judy recoiled, having not expected her to lunge for it. The insides of Jack’s ears were red, and Judy could actually feel the heat coming off of him.

“Hello, Whiptail, sweetie! Darling!” cried a very sunny-sounding older doe. Judy widened her eyes at her mother. What was she doing? Jack was too stunned to intervene either.

“Who’s this?!” cried Ace. “Is this that fox? Oh, you have tangled yourself in a real mess, girlie,” growled the rodent at the other end. “…you happy with wrecking a bunny’s career?” The sound of his voice was dripping with disgust. Judy felt a bubble of rage form in her gut. Had he said that to Skye, Jack would likely have quit on the spot, she felt.

“Oh no, no… I’m just a friend,” Bonnie announced. “So, Ace, I bet you’re wondering… why is it you have been on speakerphone this entire time…?”
“Uhh…” Ace said cautiously on his end.

“Obviously I have been recording this lovely speech of yours, Ace.” Bonnie stated coldly. Judy flailed at her mother. What was she doing?!

“Why? What good will that do?” asked the jittery mammal on the other end of the line.

“I want you to think… really, really hard, my little friend… about the exact words you have used, and who in all of Zootopia might just hear them… And I want you to ask yourself... what is the absolute worst thing someone sufficiently crossed could use those words to do. You don’t own the studio, do you, Ace? You have bosses. Your bosses have bosses. Is there maybe… one of them who might not have enjoyed some part of that speech?” implied the doe.

“I… I…” stammered the jerboa.

“You let this buck worry about his image, and you just worry about how he looks on film,” growled Bonnie, “Any advertisers who bail will be back when the shock wears off, and you can charge them more upon their return. You do not discuss Jack’s personal life. He is yours on the set, and there alone. Do you understand?”

“There might not even be a job for him if I can’t get this under control!” whined Ace.

“That’s my problem, not yours.” Jack countered coldly.

The agent sighed, “Most of my commission comes from your work, Jack! You know that!”

“I thought you were worried about my well-being, Ace.” Jack pressed. “It would seem you are not the one in control, after all. Perhaps it’s time I should retire. I’d have more time for my philanthropic pursuits you seemed to feel so strongly about curbing.”

“You can’t be serious,” Ace whimpered.
“Oh, and we will be reviewing all contractual obligations with mediation.” Jack growled. “We will start with lime soda in my dressing room being a non-negotiable requirement.” He grinned at that. Judy sighed heavily. That could have gone worse. Jack was so mad she could see him quitting. Skye would have felt terrible about that.

“I hope you know what you’re doing, Jack. The higher ups are steamed.”

“Then they should have got a real agent to convince him!” Nick said in a smug tone.

“I’m off the radar ‘till Monday, Ace.” Jack informed. “No one contacts me.” He hung up abruptly and then just turned to hug Bonnie.

“Wow, that was cool, Mom!” cheered Angela.

“Where did that come from?” asked Sammie.

“Are you kidding?” Bonnie asked, a little flustered at the hug from a celebrity. “I’m a mother of 18 kits. I’m a master of guilt-fu,” she laughed.

“Guilt-fu?” inquired Honey.

“Yes. See, I never even told Ace what I was going to do with that ‘recording’. I had no idea what in the world I would use it on, but if you tell a mammal to think of the worst possible thing, they know their fears and weaknesses better than anyone. If I give them the chance to imagine their own punishment with the belief that I know exactly what they are thinking, then I can boast the ability to dole out a punishment custom tailored to their worst fears.”

“You hustled him.” Nick gasped, cupping his long snout in his paws.

“Scary,” murmured the lady badger.

“It’s hard to keep a family the size of mine in line. You have to learn some really efficient tactics,” Bonnie said meekly.
“I almost quit my job.” Jack chuckled uneasily, “I think I need you as my agent!”

Nick pulled Judy tighter against his side and chuckled too. He half-whispered to his bunny, “More and more… I am learning why it was that I never even had a chance.”
The fear and distress from the previous day had mostly faded. The inclusion of the two ZPD officers who both took their purpose there so seriously increased the sense of safety. Judy was sure that it also helped that she was obviously Wolfard’s friend. He was easier to trust because the bunny had earned the confidence and respect of those present. Pawlander mostly stayed out of the way in the video room when he was on duty, but occasionally came down to provide Judy and Nick with updates concerning the case.

There were not any real surprises, and while the officers requested information concerning Pembe, all they knew was that he had been arrested and has confessed to the crime of kidnapping and conspiracy. There wasn’t any information available to them on why he did it, or why he changed his mind and gave Jack the key that allowed them to escape. Judy hoped that the court could be lenient with him when that fact was verified by her report.

As the morning drifted into afternoon, almost everyone participated with lunch. Bonnie and Vivienne both helped Honey in the kitchen, and everyone else went outside to hang out on the porch. It was a lovely Fall day, the air slightly warm and dry with a breeze. Judy could almost forget the insanity of what had happened if it were not for the fact that they still had lions and hyenas with them. Kijvu and Motti had fun emulating the moves they had seen in the Munch match, which ultimately devolved to them fighting in the leaves. The bunny cop was a little concerned about that at first, but Motti’s mother said it was perfectly normal and they would not actually hurt one another. Still, it was rowdy enough that agent Bay came out to check on them.

Cassie and Charisse found it agreeable to just lounge on the stairs that led down from the porch and enjoy an appetizer of sunshine. They talked about their plans for the coming days. Judy was not surprised to find that the lion sisters would not be returning to the Interior and that they would be going to Zootopia instead. They had family there and were ready for a new start with the hope of forgetting the unhappy things that had happened to them. Jack and Skye had gone to the diner together despite being instructed that it was not a great idea. Jack was too high profile and it would get out that he was in New Reynard. The buck was not concerned about it, as they would be returning to Zootopia tomorrow. They had already been cleared to do so.
The black wolf let everyone know that it was almost lunch time. Shaking leaves off and reluctantly coming in out of the sunshine, everyone headed into the dining room. Judy had almost forgotten what her mom was capable of in the kitchen, and the combination of doe and vixen teamed up as they were made for a very noteworthy lunch. Everyone was pleased. Fish and chips were provided to most of the predators there. Nick, Viv and Wolfard both enjoyed a shrimp salad instead. The bunnies all enjoyed delectable steamed veggie wraps with a fruit salad on the side.

During lunch, Nick and Judy talked about some of the genuinely funny things that happened to them on duty, and explained what fluff assignments meant for them. The purpose was pretty transparent: Nick wanted to make it clearer to Judy’s parents that they were not dodging bullets or being sliced and diced by bad guys every day. It was much more about service to the community than actual fighting.

Laughing at the antics of the pair went a long way toward lightening the mood that Judy’s parents displayed when they arrived. Nick never explained to his partner if having Vivienne show up to counter her family had been intentional, or if she had just wanted to visit. Vivienne had taken the day off, and Judy knew why. While Motti’s parents, Uzuri and Nyeusi, talked about Ukweli growing up with Motti and her brother as a sibling, Judy considered how to do the thing she had been distractedly thinking about all day.

As lunch ended, the slightly nervous doe finally decided to make her move. She looked at Bay, who was nabbing another apple shamelessly from her fruit salad. Bonnie had prepared a sauce for it that was divine, and he couldn’t stop eating it. Judy was fine with that, since his obsession over it was boosting her mother’s self-esteem.

“Richter…” the bunny officer asked, making him flinch as if he might finally have filched one apple too many. “…After lunch, is it alright if Nick and I take our parents for a walk out to the park in the center of town?” She did not want to give away too much information and spoil the surprise for her partner. It felt like a reasonable request.

“Can we go too?” Angela requested. Sammie nodded at that as well. They had both wanted to explore the little town. Judy had hoped they would want to stay. She intended for this to be just her, Nick, and their parents.

“I can’t really watch over you all there, unfortunately,” Bay apologized. “You guys will be heading back to Zootopia soon, but until then, I am very much responsible for keeping the situation under control.

“I can go with them,” Wolfard stated. “I think it should be fine, honestly.”
“Not your place to say, unfortunately,” Bay sighed.

“It’s personal, and it’s important,” Nick retorted in an authoritative tone. Judy looked warily at her fox, worried that he might have figured out what was up.

“You’d have to make a pretty strong argument, Officer Wilde,” Bay stated.

“And I am to make personal arguments to you?” he asked, a slight baring of his teeth. Putting his mother in danger had not genuinely endeared Nick to the ZBI agent.

The wolf was unimpressed. “While I am in charge, yes. You’re a sergeant, so you should certainly understand.” Bay smiled back, baring his own teeth. Judy tried think of another way to make this happen before fur started flying.

Nick growled, “I have put off visiting my father’s grave every other time I’ve been here. I do not intend to delay that any longer.” The bunny’s heart lurched. Was he serious? Bonnie put a paw over her muzzle, but Vivienne was expressionless.

Bay recoiled some, seeming not-so-gently shamed. “Argument… uh… Argument accepted. Wolfard, please accompany them. No one is to move out of earshot from Officer Wolfard.” The grey lupine officer nodded in agreement. Judy felt it a little uncharacteristic of Bay to cave in so quickly. Nick’s demand was pretty important, yes, but it was also not Bay’s problem. The trigger, Judy felt, was likely that this was not merely Nick’s father, but the late husband of the fox who had, with a bow and arrow, saved his entire agency the dishonor of possibly a couple of dead ZPD officers, if not worse than that.

“Thank you.” Nick glared, his ears laid back. Judy inhaled deeply, looking away from the somewhat awkward moment. If Nick was serious, this might not be a great time to act on her grand intentions. She looked to Vivienne for guidance, a worried expression on the doe’s face as her fox finished his food. Vivienne just smiled and nodded. She probably felt that it would still be alright. Judy sighed discreetly and settled back in, finishing her food as well.

Bay volunteered to assist Honey with the dishes, which surprised Judy. Maybe he wasn’t so intolerant of their hostess after all. The badger certainly seemed happy about it as everyone else left the table. Motti’s family gathered in the living room to watch TV and the lions headed out to the back yard to view the lake.
Vivienne, Stu, and Bonnie went with Judy and her partner out the front door for that leisurely walk out to the center of town. As promised, Wolfard accompanied them. Sammie and Angela hung back some to pester Wolfard with questions about embarrassing things Judy had done on the job. He fortunately did not share the really embarrassing ones. He instead opted to talk about the strange things the other officers had to get used to while working with a power-house bunny. The distance from the bed and breakfast was enough that it let them relax and talk about family, friends, work and everything in between.

Despite the light, happy mood, Judy found herself feeling almost ill at times, so unfathomably nervous. She hadn’t even talked to her parents about what she was about to do or its meaning, but nothing was going to stop her from doing it. Creating any conflict by bringing it up first would not serve any purpose. Lost in her tumbling and chaotic mind, the doe padded zombie-like behind Nick, barely aware of more than snippets of the conversation.

Judy was so distracted with the mess of her thoughts and going over her lines again and again in her head that she never saw the three fox kits barreling toward her. She looked up just in time to see Nick’s mom hip-check a little fox practically out of the air to make the little furry red missile miss its intended mark and somersault a few times on the soft lawn with a comical ‘thumpa-thumpa-thumpa’. Judy flinched at Viv semi-tackling a kit, but then realized that the playful little fox would have popped a stitch or two on her oh chest if he’d connected. She felt bad for not being on guard for that. The other two kits went to the grass, howling with laughter at the fate of their friend.

The kit got up, dusting off grass and dirt off his black t-shirt and jeans. Judy immediately recognized those bright blue eyes. It was the little fox she had met briefly the first time she came to New Reynard. He laughed, “Nice block, Aunt Viv!”

“Be careful, Samuel!” Vivienne scolded. “The bunny got hurt at work.” The little kit rubbed the back of his head at that.

“Oh my goodness!” Bonnie gasped, visibly enraptured by the unmitigated adorable that the sudden presence of fox kits represented. Sammie squeaked with completely unrestrained enthusiasm. Judy glanced back and forth between them. So, maybe her reaction to these little vulpines hadn’t been so much about Nick.

“Sorry!” the little fox chuckled nervously. “Hey Nick! Did you bring your cards?” he asked, changing gears with bright, eager eyes.

“No, we hadn’t expected to be here today.” Nick explained. His partner clung onto a single word in the conversation.
“You’re related to Vivienne?” Judy inquired.

“Yeah, she’s my aunt,” little Sam said, getting up and brushing himself off. “I met you at the statue a while back, remember?” he inquired. Judy looked up where the kit was pointing. They were at the edge of the park where the statue was clearly visible through the gold and red foliage of the trees. Judy also noticed Skye and Jack sitting on a bench by the statue, talking to another kit. It was nice to see them relaxing. The bunny cop glanced back to Sam.

“I do remember! You were gonna capture me if I didn’t respond correctly, I seem to recall.”

The little kit wiggled joyfully at being recognized. “I didn’t know who you were then. I know now, though. Aunt Viv told me. Trying to capture you would have been a terrible idea!” He bounced gleefully on his toes.

“Probably!” Nick chuckled. “How’s my favorite little cousin?” he asked.

“Doing great. Jack Savage is here! Did you know?” He pointed. “Like… right in our town!” Nick arched a brow. “I’m serious! He’s sitting right over there! Wanna go meet him? He’s pretty cool!”

“Jack and I are friends, actually,” Nick laughed. “He’s here with us.”

“What?” Sam gasped. “No way!” Wolfard, standing a bit out of the way, snickered at that.

“Yes way!” Vivienne offered.

“Let’s go talk to Jack!” Stu proposed brightly, urging the kits toward the park. Judy got her father’s hint right away: They could easily end up tangled up with the playful little foxes half the day. Nick had a reason for being there. Sammie and Angela started over toward the happy-looking fox and bunny couple on the bench. The albino doe was still giddy over finding out that Jack was openly dating a fox. It was super relevant to her.

“Nick,” Vivienne half-whispered, “…do you want me to come with you?”
“No, it’s alright, Mom,” Nick replied softly, “I know you visit, I just want to say a few words is all. Keep Bonnie and Stu and the girls out of trouble over there. I hadn’t realized that it was fall-break, so there’s probably about to be a bunch of excited kits in the park to see the bunnies.” He shook his head with a smile.

Judy gazed up at her vulpine lover. “Did you want me to wait with them?” she asked, supposing that this was a very private thing for her fox.

“No, Fluff… I want you with me.” Nick took her paw. She stifled a gasp, but moved along with him away from the park. She looked back at Vivienne who only smiled and nodded at the bunny. Judy went with him quietly. The fox didn’t say anything else for a while as they walked. Originally, the bunny thought perhaps her love had mentioned going to see his father as merely a way to get Bay to approve their going to the park, but it was obvious now that his intentions had been genuine. Judy worried about the emotions involved, but was also happy that Nick wanted her there. She figured he’d been beating himself up pretty badly over not visiting, so she could be there to comfort her fox.

They ventured into the cemetery, the second time Judy had passed through those tall iron gates. It was immediately quieter, as if the short stone walls completely blocked sound from coming over them. Even the birds seemed more distant and muted in this calm, hallowed resting place. There wasn’t anyone else walking the stone-lined paths, but this time she didn’t care if anyone stared at the odd arrival of a bunny. She belonged. She had family here. Nick got a few steps up the leaf-littered and aged gravel path, and then sighed softly.

“Are you okay?” the bunny whispered, holding his paw a little tighter.

“I should have asked Mom to come. I’m so dumb,” he grumbled to himself.

“Why’s that?” Judy murmured caringly, perking her ears.

“I have… no idea where to find my dad in this place,” Nick admitted in embarrassment.

“It’s alright, I know where he is,” Judy said, leading Nick with her.

“What?” the fox murmured as he stumbled along behind her.

“Remember, I came here looking for your mom. I’ve been here before.” She smiled at that, happy
be able to help him after all.

“Wait, so you found him?” Nick whispered.

“Yes?” the bunny peered back at him curiously.

“And he didn’t just get up and walk off?” Nick gestured in amazement.


“Alright, alright. I’m sorry. But I’m nervous. You know how I am when I’m nervous,” he said softly.

“Why nervous? You don’t really remember him that well, right?”

Nick shook his head, following close behind his bunny. “I mean, I know about him through stories Mom told me, and she’s talked about him a bit more with things being nicer between us. It’s why I wanted to pay my respects… but I’ve never really known what to say. My reasons for coming back to New Reynard are about to be a lot less though. So putting it off won’t do. It’ll start eating at my Mom. And if you go with me, she will know I actually paid my respects.”

“Why didn’t you ask her to come?” Judy inquired.

“She already knows what I want to say. I wanted her to have a fun and happy day off, and visiting Dad makes her understandably sad. She gets lonely so I’m really glad she’s coming to Zootopia.”

Judy cheered up quite a lot at that subject. “I’m really happy both our families will be working together like that. It makes things feel more unified. It’s really common in Bunnyburrow. You have families join farms, properties, all that. It’s really encouraging.” Judy knew perfectly well she was priming him for the speech that she was still so nervous about giving, but her mind was made up. She just hoped that Nick still felt up to it when he was done here. She didn’t know how hard this would be on him.

The bunny was surprised that she actually remembered what part of the cemetery John Wilde had
been laid to rest in, but it was more because she remembered the big tree than anything else. It was also not a huge graveyard. In a few quiet moments, the bunny stood with her fox before the tidy, quiet grave of his father. Nick looked down, his ears up, peering at the memorial. It wasn’t very large, it certainly wasn’t fancy. The red vulpine was very quiet for some time, eventually just closing his eyes and standing there. Judy was sure he was saying what needed to be said in his mind. That was fine. She was the same when she visited her grandmother. It had been a while. She made a mental note to do so soon.

Nick finally spoke, shaking Judy from her thoughts. “Well, here I am… finally. Not a little kit anymore, I guess.” He took Judy’s paw in his again and smiled. “I owe you two things Dad. The first is an apology. You did a lot for Mom… for me… and you got taken away. You tried to do a good thing, but it didn’t turn out so great. I took that as an excuse to not always do the right thing. And then I latched onto another excuse to straight up do the wrong damned thing, and not even give a damn. Mom tried to fix things and I did the wrong thing there too. The worst thing that she ever went through was leaving you here.” Judy felt her chest tightening. She knew what was coming. Nick hung his head. “But in a close second place… was me walkin’ out on her. You never meant to leave. I did. And I did for the worst reason.” His voice was strained. Judy held her breath. “You probably counted on me to take care of her when you were gone, and I just… left her crying in the night.” He was quiet a moment.

Judy glanced up at her fox. He wasn’t crying but his face was tensed, making her think he was trying not to. The bunny pushed in a little closer to Nick. He was confessing what he had done, and while she wanted to comfort him, to tell him it wasn’t that bad, he had his reasons. It was a mistake he was working hard to fix, so the doe did not feel it was wise to interrupt him. This was why he didn’t want his mother to come. She would have certainly stopped him from agonizing over it. But he felt real guilt over it and he needed to do this.

The fox continued, softly, “I’m sorry dad. I’m sorry I wasn’t there for her when she needed me most, and I’m sorry I blamed you for leaving us. I didn’t understand before, but I do now. I… I’m sure you know from mom, but I’m a police officer now.” His voice cracked a little, but was a little lighter as well. “I’ve ended up in the water while saving someone else too. And I understand. I thought it was for nothing, but it’s not. You wanted this world to be just a little bit better, and you tried. You didn’t get to stay, but the part of you that you left behind… will carry on and make it better. And I have the best kind of help.” Nick pulled Judy closer.

“This is Judy Hopps. The second thing I owe to you is a special introduction.” The doe swallowed at that. “I know this might sound… a little odd, but I’m vowed up to this bunny. She’s the source of my happiness, and the good I have found in the world. Through her I have made myself into the fox that I think you always wanted me to be… at least close to it. And she’s given back the joy Mom and I had all but forgotten.” Judy closed her eyes, a tear rolling down the bridge of her muzzle. Nope, couldn’t take it. “I’m gonna take Mom back to Zootopia with me, and Judy and I are going to
fill all the rest of her days with happiness and life. When you finally see her again, she’ll have quite a story to tell. I know you forgive me Dad, and thank you for that. You rest, and know that I will take care of Mom the way she deserves, and I will be the happy and clever fox you wanted me to be.” Judy choked out a little sob. Nick, who perhaps hadn’t realized how emotional she’d become, sucked in a breath and pulled his doe close, leaning down to hug her.

“I’m sorry,” the bunny sputtered.

“Carrots, it’s okay… This is a happy time, not a sad one. This is good for me. I’ve needed this for a long time.” Nick nuzzled the bunny between her ears sweetly.

“So emotional,” came a graveled voice from behind the pair. Judy jerked but Nick actually jumped and spun 180 degrees.

“Gah! Fffff-luff me… Who?!?” He clutched his chest as he regarded the ancient-looking fox in a light grey suit who had managed to sneak up on them.

“Oh, Elliott!” Judy exclaimed, wiping tears from her eyes.

“Ah thought it were you, Julie,” the old fox rumbled.

“Judy,” the bunny corrected.

“Shuffle your feet or something!” Nick gasped, pulling his ears back.

“Vivienne said ya’ll were here. Little Nicky, all grow’d up, eh?” he asked, putting his paw out to the other fox. Nick looked at it like it was likely to come off but kindly shook it.

“We are, but not for long. It’s work related.” Nick explained.

“And yer little bunny friend I already met,” he stated, taking Judy’s little paw in his. Judy was less apprehensive.
“I’m actually really glad to see you again,” Judy expressed, ears up. “I wanted to thank you for helping me the day I came looking for Vivienne.”

Elliott’s paw moved behind his head and he rubbed it, glancing away shamefully. “Ah, yes, my apologies for being a little on the secretive side, but… I hadn’t a clue what kind of troubles might have come out from the city lookin’ to give our fair Vivienne, and I wanted to properly get to know yer intentions first. But you seemed like you were shore genuine enough, so… I gave you yer chance. Took it, from what I hear.”

“I did, yes, thank you.” Judy smiled. “Things turned out quite nicely.”

“Lad, this bunny done you a big service. Ah hope ye’ thanked her proper,” Elliot insisted, shaking his cane at the younger fox.”

“I vowed up to her,” Nick said abruptly. Those heavily-lidded old blue eyes went wide open. He needed to lean a bit on that cane.

“Ah see… Well, yeah… Heh, Yeah, that would be some kind of gratitude,” he provided incredulously. Judy was actually startled that Nick told him, given the age of the fox. He might not be able to take big surprises!

“I’ve said my piece Judy, if you’d like to get back to our families.” He nodded out beyond the graveyard, at the park in front of the statue. Angela was chasing Jack, and Skye was doubled over, laughing. He probably said something insulting.

“I’m happy to see you visitin’ John. He was sech a kind lad,” stated the aged vulpine. Nick snapped his attention to the silvering fox.

“Did you know my dad?”

“Oh yes. Taught him archery. One of the best. Your Ma learned from him too. I bet you didn’t know that!” laughed Elliott.

“It came up recently.” Nick deadpanned.
“Well, he was good. Real dedicated sort. Vivienne’s been so happy since you started visitin’ her, Nicky. John woulda been happy about that.” Elliott nodded.

“How do you think he’d have felt… about my affection for this particular bunny?” asked the younger fox. Judy was still surprised that her fox would so openly talk about it with the possibly old-fashioned caretaker. Then again, something about Elliott made him seem so genuine, so trustworthy and understanding. It felt like she could just tell him anything, too. Even when she first met him, she felt a sense of reverent trust toward him.

The caretaker had enough time to digest the revelation, it appeared. He leaned on his cane and smiled broadly, his grizzled muzzle tipping down as he gazed at Judy. “Ah, now… I knew John well enough to know exactly what he’d say about that.” The younger fox and bunny both stood straighter, listening. “He’d have said that he never wanted his son to settle for second best, but he knew for a fact he already got the best vixen… so what was a poor young fox to do? Well, Nicky, it seems you done figured it out! Take the best bunny instead! Your dad would laugh, but he’d be happy for ye’.” he chuckled. Judy gasped and covered her muzzle, blushing as the laughing old fox turned and shuffled away.

Nick looked after him with a bright grin, flitting his tail back and forth. While Judy thought it was a rather funny thing to say, it visibly struck a chord in her fox. He then turned and smiled at his dad’s memorial.

“Seems you aren’t… so far away after all,” he said in a soft voice. “I’ll visit again, don’t worry. Sleep well.” He nodded quickly and took Judy by the paw. “You ready, Fluff?” he inquired. His doe nodded and padded along with Nick. He stopped short watching Elliott vanish over the hill they had both come over.

“Nick?” Judy asked.

“Just… he’s so quiet. It’s creepy. Don’t you think it’s creepy?” offered the fox.

“Nick, come off of it. He’s a fox. You sneak up on me all the time… even with these ears.” She took Nick by the paw and led him casually from the graveyard. The task Nick had in mind was, thankfully, not so heartbreaking as she feared it might be. He was actually in a pretty good mood after that. Judy exited the cemetery with her partner, noticing that there were a few other foxes who were, as they walked about, watching her. It was about the same as last time. Perhaps they were that way for any visitor.

Through some manner of providence, more mammals had not shown up to come see Jack and Skye.
The little kits were corralled by Vivienne and whatever she told them caused them to scatter. Judy’s heart raced. The older lady fox was setting the stage.

“Aw, and here I was, wanting to take some pictures of a cute bunny playing with little foxes. It would be so adorable!” Nick sighed. Judy slammed him in the shoulder. “Ow, hey, what was that for! You said I could call you cute! You, Officer Hopps, have set a bad example for the children, and you should apologize at once.” Nick crossed his arms, giving a mock frown of indignation.

“Sorry to have hit you so softly, Slick.” She held up her little paw, balled into a fist with a grin.

“I yield!” cried Nick with a laugh as they arrived in front of the bench where a panting Jack had returned. Angela and Sammie both sat on the bench on either side of the other fox and bunny.

“I would like to report an attack, Officer Wilde.” Wolfard said, leaning against a tree opposite of the bench, away from the statue. Bonnie and Stu were committed to something entirely predictable. They were inspecting the myriad of flowers that surrounded the base of the statue.

“You need not report it! I saw Savage being assailed by a dark, mysterious bunny,” Nick laughed with a smirk.

Wolfard nodded at the male fox, stating, “I was gonna save him, but she got taken down by a bunch of little foxes.” Nick laughed at that heavily. Wolfard continued, “I don’t see why I was needed as a chaperone, no one can do anything bad in New Reynard without getting an arrow in ‘em, or else buried in little nibbling kits.” Nick laughed at that even harder. Judy’s willpower swelled with that. Humor was always a good way to put her fox in a fantastic mood. The bunny glanced earnestly to Vivienne. The older lady fox was carefully watching the doe, so she reacted immediately. She moved to the back of the bench, behind Skye, and whispered softly into one of her ears.

The white vixen’s eyes shot wide open, ice blue and full of emotion. She got up from the bench abruptly and tugged Jack upward too. Judy led Nick to the bench. He watched the departing mirror couple and nodded happily. He was just as stoked as Judy that they were open about their love. Their public announcement and the support of his fans had done much to allay his fears of what to expect when others inevitably learned of their relationship.

“C’mon Nick…” Judy insisted, pulling him toward the bench. “We should sit.” Angela and Sammie looked at one another curiously and got up as well, perhaps not wanting to impose on their sister’s personal space with her fox.
“What? Sure. Are you okay? It’s been too much walking, hasn’t it?” Nick asked, immediately concerned. Judy smiled, looking over at Vivienne. Nick’s mother had walked a few steps and leaned down to get her parents’ attention. They surely had no idea what was coming. Judy felt a little dizzy, running the first lines through her head again. She did not want to mess this up and it suddenly dawned on her that this was a public speech. The bunny loathed public speaking, given her unfortunate past with it. But this one was both unavoidable and might well be the most important one of her life. No pressure, right?

She took a moment to take in this very important moment. The sun was still high in the sky, blue with the occasional white, fluffy cloud. A gentle wind plucked and cascades a perpetual gentle shower of gold and red leaves through the park as they sat in the shadow of the tall bronze statue of the town’s vulpine hero as he offered a gift of hope to a raccoon child. Sammie and Angela watched their sister, and her parents were approaching with Vivienne in tow. The landscape was a peaceful contrast of cerulean blue and white with gold and yellow and green. It was a perfect fall day, and Judy inscribed every detail into her heart.

She got onto the bench on her knees beside Nick, who sat rather normally. He turned to face Judy, still appearing concerned. The bunny slipped a small paw under Nick’s chin and leaned in, touching her mouth to his very gently, feeling him tense slightly. They were right in the center of town, kissing. Hiding their love was over.

“Hey, nice to see you too,” he chuckled, trying to dismiss his nervousness with humor pretty much as she assumed he would. The bunny then put her thumb under his chin, tilting his head back and cupping her small mouth along his throat. Early on, the feel of his soft fur in her mouth was certainly odd, but she quickly learned the allure of it, and she pushed her teeth tight against him, earning a whine from the fox. Perfect. She had his complete and undivided attention.

“Did she just bite him?” Angela asked.

“Fox thing.” Sammie said.

“Of course you know that.” The black doe responded.

“Uh, late night cable TV kiss there, Fluff,” Nick expressed in a raspy tone.

“I know. Whatcha gonna do about it?” Judy dared with a smug expression as she regarded the nervous red vulpine.
“Ask that you think of the children?” squeaked Nick as the bunny drew closer. She had everyone else’s attention as well, though no other foxes that had been walking about bothered to wander closer. This was splendid. Judy sucked in a deep breath, summoning up all the false bravado she could.

“And here I thought we were too playful – ow!” Jack was silenced by Skye. Vivienne had probably told her exactly why they were surrendering the bench.

“Nick…” Judy took her fox’s chin and guided him back to face her. She gazed into his emerald eyes longingly. She wanted to kiss him again, to feel his arms around her. There would be a lot of that. He smiled brightly to her, and then his expression melted some. He could surely sense her nervousness, and was trying to figure out what was wrong.

“Judy…” Nick said softly.

Finally, with all eyes on her, and feeling almost as much nervousness as she had the first day she walked through the front gates of the ZPD academy, Judy spoke.

“Nicholas Piberius Wilde…” she let the words roll off of her tongue. Angela stifled a giggle at the fox’s middle name, but quieted herself immediately. It was obvious to anyone watching that this was something important. Nick, however, tensed up heavily, eyes going wide as the only reason for Judy to have said his whole name likely dawned on him in an instant. He glanced around frantically at those around him, perhaps to take stock of who Judy had brought and how likely this was to being what he suspected. He swallowed dryly and locked his eyes on Judy’s, not daring to look away. The small grey doe looked into his emerald irises intently and spoke in a sure, if emotionally unsteady voice.

“From this glad day, and all that shall follow,"

“All that you’ve given me I take now as my own.”

Judy felt a wave of emotion strike her as Nick sucked in a deep breath and was helpless to prevent tears from rolling down his soft vulpine cheeks. She stumbled a moment from the sudden show of emotion.

“… I accept in my heart,”
“Your gift to be true…”

“All that I am, all that I was, all that I ever shall be… I give unto thee.”

“To love and protect, to honor and aid,”

“Unconditional and unwavering,"

“I choose you as my mate, in this life and the next.”

There was a hard squeak from Bonnie. Judy did not dare look away from her fox. His jaw dropped, ears high. The very distinct addition to that line Judy had just spoken made all the difference to what this vow truly meant. Nick said the final line in unison with his bunny.

*May fate never bear us apart.*

Her claimed fox then carefully pulled his mate to him, embracing her achingly, if still gently, mindful of her injuries. He shook a little, trying to keep his tears quiet with a great deal of effort. Judy let herself cry freely as well. She did it. She actually claimed him. She could let the tears flow.

“Uh… Did my sister just get married?” demanded Angela.

“Yeaaahhh…” replied Vivienne in a dreamy tone.

“Wait, what!” gasped Stu.

“I… I…” Bonnie yammered.

“I need to sit down.” There was a soft thump as Sammie just sat right where she was.

“Wait, are you… this isn’t…” Wolfard stammered. “This is actually…?” He looked at Judy
expectantly. Judy nodded slowly to Wolfard. He cupped his muzzle.

Bonnie cried out. “Oh, no! I wasn’t recording! I didn’t record my oldest daughter’s marriage!” whimpered the suddenly panic-stricken older doe.

“Married?” whimpered Stu, slightly dazed.

“Don’t worry, Mrs. H, I gotcha.” Skye held up her phone. As Vivienne had prepared her with that whisper for the event, Skye had dutifully played photographer the way she had for the fox and bunny’s first date.

“For real? Just like that?” added Judy’s father, still cupping his muzzle. Vivienne moved over to Nick and Judy and pushed her cheek onto both, claiming them as family once again. This time, it carried a more defined purpose. Then, Judy found herself transfixed as Vivienne moved to Angela, Sammie, and her parents and did the same. She claimed all of them. Sammie squeaked happily about it, but Angela was still so deeply in shock that she remained perfectly still, standing there in front of them.

Bonnie huffed. “I need to be taking pictures of this stuff too!” She took out her phone and fumbled, dropping it on the grass and bumping heads with her husband as they both went for it, falling onto the lawn. They both laughed, rubbing the impact points.

“Still rolling, guys, no worries.” Skye purred.

“You mean for foxes there’s no reception… no gift table, no formal dance?” clarified Stu incredulously, still rubbing his cranium. “… no wedding planner, no top-dollar photographer, no dress for six weeks pay? No renting a space and… and…” Bonnie was glaring at him as he clung to how painless this was as a wedding. He wisely stopped talking. Judy chuckled at her dad.

“Judy Wilde now?” Angela finally asked.

“If she wishes to be.” Vivienne added.

“I wish it.” The newly married doe expressed, getting another barely audible squeak from her cuddled up mate.
Judy’s black-toned sibling indicated the clinging male fox. “He… He seemed completely shocked. I missed the part where he got to say I do,” she offered with some concern. Nick shook a little, this time laughing.

“Nick was already vowed up.” Vivienne explained for him.

“Yeah?” Angela responded.

Skye crooned happily, “When a fox gives that vow, the recipient can claim him at literally any point for the rest of his life. It can be the same day, or years later.” Her tone was wistful and happy.

“Wait, you could do that?” asked Jack, finally speaking up.

“Scared, Squeaker?” purred the white vixen.

“Never…” whispered Jack.

“One day…” Skye whispered back, “Be patient, Squeaker.” He melted slightly as Skye hugged him.

“Seriously?” Angela said bluntly. “Wow. Just… Wow.” She sat down politely beside her sister on the grass. Judy smiled at them, then to Nick’s mom, and then slowly, lovingly kissed her mate. She had been thinking about this non-stop for days, and it still felt like a dream. She had wanted this and now it was hers. Yeah, when they got back to Zootopia, there would be the matter of paperwork. However, to all who really mattered, she now had the only thing she’d ever wanted more than to be an officer. She got to be her fox’s wife.

Sure, there was uncertainty in their futures, and likely to be some roadblocks along the way, but in that moment, she cared for nothing but the wet-eyed joy she saw in Nick as he embraced her in a way that made it seem that she’d never get out of his arms.

“I love you, my darling husband,” she whispered, meaning every single syllable of everything she’d said. She was his bunny now, just as much as he’d made himself her fox.
“I love you too, my clever, sneaky bunny wife,” he whispered back. “I will enjoy spending every day of the rest of my life sharing that with you.” Vivienne finally broke, giving a sputtering sob and holding Bonnie who fractured along with her. Stu hugged them both. Judy ignored the emotional parents and cuddled into her perfect lover’s embrace, bound in his arms and wrapped up in his soft, fluffy tail. On this day her life changed, but most of all in what way she’d vowed to keep one thing the same. This moment, timeless, bound their hearts as one.
Chapter Notes

And there we have it. A fox and bunny marriage and a fantastic new life ahead of them. This double-length chapter will mark the end of this fun and wild season, and the beginning of Season 3 to come. I will be taking a break at the close of Season 2, but do not despair! I will be uploading a five chapter short series immediately after this chapter goes up. Watch for it! Also, if you haven’t seen it already, there is a Fall Festival one shot, understood to be in the timeline right at the end of this season. Check it out if you run out of fluffy foxy goodness.

Guardian Blue: Season Two

Episode 26: Return

Judy felt her entire world glowing around her. She could see and hear the mammals close by as they talked, played in the park, or just sat around and enjoyed the happy moment, but she could hardly pay close attention to any of them. She was focused entirely on the fox holding her in his arms, stroking her long ears and wrapping his tail over her smaller form. This was her happiest day. No one dared do a thing to detract from the beauty of the moment she’d just enjoyed. If Angela, Sammie, her mother or father had any objection to what had happened, they had concealed it perfectly. They were, at first, stunned at the revelation of what Judy had done with those carefully delivered words, but they at least acted delighted for the newly wed bunny. To her, the weight of this was greater than what she even understood a wedding to be.

The doe didn’t make some formal marriage agreement. She wasn’t given away by her parents to her suitor. She didn’t beg the light for the opportunity to have a happy marriage. Judy took her fox. Nick gave himself to her, and she claimed him… mind, body and soul… as her mate. He was completely hers, and she gave herself back to him just as eagerly and completely. There was absolutely no room for miscommunication. It was so clearly stated in the vow that it was every bit as firm as a legal agreement. The words, as presented, were old and carefully crafted to be insurmountably binding. They were One.

Judy had never experienced happiness of the kind she had in that moment. It was so intense, as she pushed her cheek into the crook of her fox’s neck and held him, that the presence of rain would have been a mystery. That is, it would have been if her father hadn’t finally suggested that everyone get
somewhere sheltered. Judy gazed up, surprised since it was still sunny.

For some reason, Vivienne and Nick seemed delighted that this sun-shower was happening. The older vixen in particular squealed with delight and danced around in it, stating that ‘it actually happened’. Judy had no idea of what she was talking about. There was a little commotion as they searched for a place to get out of the rain before Nick’s mother directed everyone toward the diner. Judy liked that idea, rain or not. She wasn’t hungry, but a nice snack and something to drink while she celebrated her union with her fox was as welcome a thing as she could think of.

“Go slow, okay?” worried Nick, holding her close.

“I don’t mind the rain. I grew up on a farm, Slick.” Judy moved slowly alongside him.

“Yeah, but unless you became a carrot since last I checked, you don’t need to be drenched in water regularly. This won’t do those stitches any favors,” her fox chastised. The bunny was also not particularly mindful of ruining the ‘borrowed’ outfit she was in, at least. The slightly oversized light blue button up and more oversized skirt that was folded in back and belted so it looked like a gauzy dress was not something she would be pained to part with.

Angela darted past her. “See you there, Mrs. Wilde!” she chimed. Judy blushed at that. Skye and Jack giggled at her sister eagerly using the new name as they rushed by as well.

The actual Mrs. Wilde fell into step beside her and Nick, with her biological mother and father following close behind.

“Well, now I actually do get to call you my daughter. It’s a very original honor,” chuckled the vixen.

“I’m sure this kind of thing has happened before.” Nick laughed. “There’s just been too many foxes and bunnies in the history of the world for it to not have.”

“If it has, there’s never been a record of it,” Vivienne chuckled sweetly. “I checked.”

“Really? Wait, seriously? We’re the first?” Judy asked. When she was mulling over how to actually give herself to Nick completely, the bunny had considered that there would be some kind of precedent at least, and they would be able to say that while it was rare, it was not unheard of. Surely it was at least heard of!
The mother fox answered, “You’re at least the first to take fox vows. Sure, there may have been some who had been a romantic couple, but nothing of official note. I couldn’t even find a mention of it on the internet that wasn’t linked to a fictional tale or a less… reputable site.” Viv said as they reached the sidewalk and began walking toward the diner.

Wolfard walked slightly ahead of them. Judy and Nick were the only ones in the group that he was responsible for watching. The rain was slowing. It was an unusually warm afternoon, but it had seemed too dry for a sun shower. Judy looked up. There were clouds. They just weren’t over the sun. The rain had been perhaps blown over them.

“She likes being the first at things, Viv!” Stu laughed from behind them.

“We’re family now, Stu! You seem pretty calm about the change.” Vivienne smiled back at him proudly.

“It’s a good family!” Stu chimed, wiping more than just rain off of his cheeks. Judy was happy that he’d gotten himself composed quickly. She worried that her father’s emotional state after her vow would have drawn a lot of attention.

Bonnie held close to her husband and nodded emphatically. “He and I have been preparing for this day emotionally, Judy. There’s never been a doubt that you were with ‘the one’, so while it came maybe sooner that we had figured… It certainly wasn’t a world-shaking surprise. I will say, however… it’s gonna be a noisy realization back in Bunnyburrow whenever you two are ready for it to become common knowledge.”

Nick answered that. “I’ll certainly not hide it… that is… if Judy’s done being in the shadows. If I were a wolf, I’d be howling out it in the streets.”

“We do that.” Wolfard laughed.

“What, after weddings?” Nick asked.

“Especially after weddings,” the larger canine officer replied.
“I’ll howl with you,” Judy’s vulpine husband remarked.

“What?” asked Wolfard, staggering to a stop in front of the foxes.

“To celebrate. I’ll howl,” Nick repeated.

“I… You… aren’t teasing?” he asked. Judy’s heart suddenly ached. This was obviously important to Wolfard. He wanted to celebrate the marriage of a friend and he was holding back because there weren’t other wolves present.

Nick answered the wolf’s anxious question by stopping, mate still clutched in his arms, then throwing his head back and releasing a surprisingly convincing howl. It was pure, rising, crystal joy from her fox and Judy joined in. While still effective enough, hers was not so wonderful, being a bit more like a call than a howl. The shorter length of her muzzle perhaps made what Nick did impossible for her. Wolfard staggered a bit and grinned, pitching his nose to the sun and rain as he bayed musically in the exact pitch of the bunny’s beloved. It was likely not as low as Wolfard’s usual tone, but he had a lot of practice and matched it easily. Judy lifted her own pitch to try to match it, and found her eyes watered a bit as her lungs emptied. She could not hold the sound as long as the other canids.

Vivienne didn’t try to match them, and her parents were a bit shocked by it. The canid pair finished their howl and Wolfard put an arm around Nick.

“I didn’t know you had it in ya, Wilde!” he chimed.

“Thanks!” Nick and Judy answered simultaneously. Nick then glanced with a bit of surprise at his bunny and put his ears back with a joyful expression, making it clear he wasn’t used to that yet, and it delighted him. They entered the parking lot for the Diner. It was a simple gravel lot that fit perhaps six cars of a medium size. Sammie and Angela, quick to get out of the rain, were already inside. As Skye and Jack were absent, it was apparent they had done the same.

The bell on the door dinged playfully as the slightly damp mammals entered, all five together. Behind the counter was a fox Judy hadn’t seen before. He looked a bit like Annie, in that he had black fur, and honestly it made Judy immediately think of Nick in his Gerald disguise. He was built pretty similar to Nick, if a bit shorter with a pointier muzzle. He was chatting with Sammie who was sitting at the bar beside her sister. Over by a table where a rather typical-looking fox family sat was Annie herself.
“Hey, V!” chimed the diner’s manager. “Oh, you brought your whole family!” she added in a teasing voice.

“For real this time!” Vivienne barked. Judy tensed up. This would be the first time she was open about everything in a public venue, and she wanted to steel her nerves for what was coming, if it would be anything negative.

“Oh?” asked Annie, moving over toward the counter.

“As of ten minutes ago, in the park,” Nick offered with a kind smile.

“You can’t mean…” whimpered the stunned manager, cupping her angular vulpine muzzle.

“Yes. You are graced by the presence of our very own Judy Wilde,” claimed a very proud Vivienne, not caring at all about the unfamiliar pig.

“You’re serious.” This statement was not from Annie, it was from another familiar voice.

“Hey Aggie.” Jack said, distracting her. Judy snapped her attention to Jack and then realized he was staring at a table toward the back of the Diner where a very shocked-looking pig was now standing. Oh no. This could be ugly.

“What? Wait, what? You two… Jack… but why are you here?” asked the alarmed pig, trying to process too much new information at once.

Annie squealed joyfully, not paying any attention to Aggie as she approached Vivienne, eyes wide. The manager hugged Nick’s mom tightly, bouncing a bit. Aggie got up and approached as well.

Jack finally answered, seeming to loathe interrupting that joyful scene. “Oh, you think I wasn’t a part of all of that?” the buck asked. Judy backed up a little. This was crazy. All of it was crazy. She wanted to get Nick out of here and not have her happiest day marred by the drama that might be forthcoming. If Aggie abused Nick here, Wolfard would have to call Bay for backup.

“I know you were on that plane, but you are actually with them?” asked Porcintia, pointing at the
With pride, miss Piggy!” laughed Jack.

“With you being a hybrid, I suppose this nice but… unusual pairing is not so unusual to you, huh?” she asked. The pig was smiling as she said it, so it was hard for Judy to decode whether or not she meant that to sound at all offensive.

Jack replied by simply leaning way up in his seat, his back against Skye’s front, and slowly kissing her, biting her chin sweetly, and bumping the vixen’s nose with his. That earned a sweet coo of delight from Bonnie and Annie simultaneously.

“I… I see. It’s become fashionable, then.” She seemed completely dumbfounded.

Jack grinned. “You’re getting left behind, Aggie. You need to find yourself a wolf, or you won’t be able to get into any of the nicer clubs.” Skye laughed musically at that. Wolfard tensed up as porcine eyes tracked immediately to him.

“So… It’s all family and friends here then?” Porcintia asked curiously.

“Absolutely,” The manager vixen replied.

“Then… I think you all should get to hear this too…” The pig moved over closer to Vivienne. Wolfard strode purposefully over closer to the mother vixen. The male diner employee seemed confused and stayed put.

“Hello there,” Nick’s mother stated.

“You… saved me. You and your… son?” she pointed to Nick. Judy remembered that Nick had called her Mom when she’d saved Aggie.

“Yes. And my daughter,” Viv said in a gentle tone.
“You… you really are serious. They’re… not just partners anymore?” she asked.

“I promise this is true.” Bonnie answered. The older doe was smiling. Judy grimaced. She had no idea how toxic this pig was.

“You are… her mother and father?” asked Porcintia, holding a pleasant expression as well.

“I am,” stated Bonnie. Stu nodded, holding his suspenders.

“And sisters!” called Angela. She and Sammie were sitting at the bar right where Judy had been the day she met Nick’s mother.

Aggie sighed heavily. She looked less happy, appearing to almost sag as she stood there before the jubilant family. “Your daughter… and new son in law… they’re brave mammals and I have to confess, I have not been kind to them. I have even harmed them, if you can believe it.”

“Won’t take no more of that from any one!” Stu growled. “If you have a single thing against them… well, that just tells us you don’t know ‘em. Put all of it aside.”

“I already have,” Aggie said, drawing a silent gasp from Judy.

“Oh?” Jack asked. “You aren’t someone who likes to admit when they’re wrong.”

“I’ve never been as wrong as this.” the pig said with a grimace.

Judy interrupted, “Aggie, Nick and I were doing our job, and you were not the only one we were protecting there. You have to know that.” She didn’t want her prostrating herself and dragging the mood down, even if for a good reason. This was a happy day and Judy was going to keep it that way.

“Oh, Officer Hopps…” murmured the pig.

“Sergeant Wilde.” corrected a very cold-looking Wolfard. He apparently got the gist that Porcintia
had conflict with the pair, and it made him immediately defensive.

“Right, of course,” Aggie said softly. “Sergeants... I know you were doing your job, and if that is all it was my life would be so much easier to quantify right now, but... Sergeant Wilde...” She looked at Judy’s mate carefully. “You were barely aware of the things I said about you, about predators. I remember that you were just happily looking out the window. I guess by now you know the reason I was on the plane was that I was trying to flee the city because of what Swinton sent to me... However... my stress at the time will never be an excuse. Then... When I found out I was going to a predominantly fox town for protection, I was unfairly furious and the only comfort I had was that the agents taking me were not predators. When those sheep proved to be the real monsters, it was a fox... your own mother who took him down with an arrow.”

“Again?!” Annie cried. Vivienne shushed her. Judy needed to know what that was about, and by Nick’s expression, it would not be something she would be able to get from him. He didn’t know either.

Aggie continued, “You had reason to, of course. Your own son was in danger... and the bunny who apparently was intended to be family.” She nodded to Judy. “You could have gotten closer... or you could have waited. You acted when you did to protect me. And your son and daughter were there to protect me as well, or they’d have barricaded the house and just waited for armed backup. I would have died, but they would have been safe. Thank you. Thank all of you, and I’m sorry.”

The pig hung her head in shame. Jack slowly applauded.

Judy rubbed the back of her head slowly. It was very strange to hear this from someone she had felt was so closed-minded. However, Aggie did get staked to the ground and nearly lanced with a massive spear. That has a way of changing a mammal’s mind about certain things.

“Mom, how many mammals have you put an arrow in?” asked Nick, getting Judy’s immediate attention. She just wanted snacks with her husband, not a discussion about more dark things. However, she really did want to know this part. This vixen was her family now.

“Just one other, sweetie, it’s alright,” answered Vivienne.

“Who?” asked Judy’s husband immediately.

“It was a different time, Nicholas. Things were very different here!” Vivienne protested.
“Your grandfather,” answered Annie.

“What?”

“He lived! That’s not why you never met him!” insisted his mother. Judy looked back and forth between them.

“He tried to make John leave your mom,” explained the diner’s manager.

“And you tried to kill him?” asked Nick incredulously. That was a very serious thing, and Judy could see the worry on her fox’s face. She could almost hear him reciting the statute of limitations for attempted murder in his head.

“We were already vowed.” Viv stated.

“Oh.” Nick responded, as if it suddenly was fine. Judy’s ears fell back.

“I’m staying in town longer.” Angela stated bluntly, ears high. Sammie nodded slowly. They wanted to get to know their new family better, apparently.

“You guys have to kill your parents if they don’t approve of the wedding?” asked Aggie, not at all privy to any of that.

Vivienne covered her face with her paws in apparent embarrassment. “No, it’s not like that. He…” She took a breath, composing her thoughts. Judy could tell it was not a great memory for her and felt bad making her re-live them.

It was Annie who answered again. “Jeremy Wilde fancied John marrying his best friend’s daughter. He’d been trying for years to get them together. They even dated a while. They were just… not compatible.” Nick nodded, having perhaps heard that before. The bunnies were all transfixed, however. Annie continued, “Nick’s dad was good friends with V, though. They spent a lot of time together, getting into the usual kinds of trouble, staying out too late, laughing a little too loud, and talking about leaving New Reynard one day.
Viv sighed dreamily at better memories surrounding that. “We never said it so much in plain words but I loved him more than life itself, and I was sure he loved me too. John’s dad, though… He did not approve.”

“I still can’t imagine Mom as a trouble-maker,” stated Nick softly. Judy blushed slightly, having some first-hand knowledge that suggested she could be, she just wasn’t allowed to tell Nick about the ‘Ewe-Mart Massacre’.

Annie took the floor again, “One day, Viv ended up talking with Sherrie, the vixen that John was supposed to be getting closer with.”

Vivienne continued telling the story, having organized her thoughts better. “Nicholas, you know that I found out what John was expected to do, but I never really told you how all that went down. It hasn’t really come up since things have improved with your life. So I guess… I’ll say it.” Nick nodded, eyes wide, ears up, paying close attention. Judy glanced over at Porcintia. The pig was seated at the bar, turned to face the Wilde family on her stool as if she belonged there.

“If it’s something you’d rather talk about in private, Mom…” Nick offered.

“Oh no, sweetie, it’s common knowledge for most here.” Viv waved a paw at her son. “So, Sherrie knew I was John’s best friend. She wanted to tell me that she was unhappy because she thought that John was going to cave in to his dad and drop his vow on her and she loved someone else. She would not be able to reciprocate the vow and it would leave him alone for the rest of his life. Sherrie wanted me to help her run away to Zootopia. She needed money and knew that I had a bit from working for Elliott back then.”

“You never mentioned that she was trying to run away.” Nick said, listening closely.

“Like I said, the specifics would not have been that useful to you when you were younger, and I felt like you were not that interested later on,” his mother replied. “So, I stood there, hearing her out, and told her I would not help her abandon her mother and little sister. Not like that. Then… I left. But I knew already what I was going to do instead. I went to Elliott’s farm. John was practicing archery there with his dad, same as they did every Sunday. It was late in the afternoon, it was Fall, and the leaves were all over… so much like today… though a good bit colder, I recall,” she laughed.

“Uh oh…” whispered Angela.
“Shhh,” shushed Aggie.

“John was happy to see me, and, as always, his dad wasn’t. I walked right up to him and… I vowed up on the spot. I gave no warning, I didn’t set the tone, I just delivered the words without hesitation. As is custom, your grandfather couldn’t do a thing about it while it happened. Not even supposed to speak when the vows are being done.” Nick nodded, understanding that. “But after I was done, he said I was stupid for doing that and I would regret being alone forever. He said I was a spoiled brat and I treated the old traditions like they were a joke. He said that I could not possibly be serious. I told him I was. He told me nothing I did would prove it and he’d never allow it.”

“That’s awful!” Skye said in a hushed tone, covering her muzzle. That made Judy think maybe that kind of conflict didn’t come up often. It was painful to hear that such a thing had been done to Vivienne, even if she’d been a little more rebellious in her youth.

“No, what happened next was awful,” Nick’s mom murmured. “I took John’s bow and arrow off the ground where he’d dropped them when I began reciting the vow… and without a word, I shot your grandfather in the thigh.”

“Oh sshhh-trawberries…” murmured Bonnie.

“… Uh huh, and cream!” Stu finished. Wolfard wagged briskly at the pair. That delighted him for some reason.

“Yeah, I can… see why this wasn’t a bed time story.” Nick expressed, eyes wide.

“I’m sorry Nick, it’s… a little worse than even that,” Viv said. Annie nodded.

“You said he lived.” Nick offered meekly.

“Oh no, he did… But…” His mother sighed. “It was a different time back then, Nicholas. I wasn’t as patient and I had a lot of anger over everything and…”

“Viv, no one’s judging you.” Annie grumbled.
Her son put a paw on her shoulder. “It’s okay, Mom. It’s a happy day. I can’t get happier than this, so let’s hear it. I really do want to know about this.” He smiled encouragingly.

“So… uh… John’s dad went down, and I stood over him, another arrow ready. I told him to change his mind. He had to see then how serious I was. He said no. He would just never allow it, no matter what. I… I held the point of the arrow over his chest and drew it back.”

“No…” Nick cupped his muzzle. “I mean… you were just threatening him, but you wouldn’t have…” Annie, wearing a very serious expression, nodded slowly to the worried fox as he put his ears back tightly.

“I didn’t have to, fortunately,” the mother fox sighed, “Your dad started saying his vows back to me immediately. At that point… nothing his father could have asked, demanded, or done would have made any difference. I dropped the bow. We were joined.”

Nick’s paws were still over his muzzle, his eyes wide, his voice a little muffled. “Dad married you… under the threat of you murdering my grandfather!??” Vivienne smiled meekly at that then nodded.

“Jeremy never forgave me, of course,” explained the mother fox, “That’s why you never met him, and that’s absolutely why you were born in Zootopia, not New Reynard. Things got really awkward here for a very long time. Your dad never let it be said that he was unwilling to marry me, but for a lot of Jeremy’s close friends, that’s all they saw. I stole John. They felt that I violently forced him to take me as his mate. I didn’t mean for it to happen like that… to look like that… Alas, it did. After you were born, most folks in town softened because they could tell how happy your dad was. We stayed in Zootopia anyway, however, since John had his business ventures and the like.”

Nick stood there, still cupping his muzzle. Judy had no idea what to offer to the discussion. It was such a crazy ordeal. The quiet fox finally stated, “Well, I suppose the town won’t be too surprised after all when they find out that the son of John and Vivienne Wilde ended up marrying Sungura ya Shetani.”

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Skye and Jack had left first, leaving Judy’s happy family with a few other fox families at the diner. She and Nick shared a complicated sundae of some sort, and Bonnie, Stu, and Judy’s sisters all shared a steamed veggie medley upon Judy’s insistence that they try it. It was enjoyed greatly. With things calming down and becoming a bit quieter the afternoon ebbed to a bunny and fox just cuddling in the booth. Bonnie, with permission, had announced to the immediate family in a mass text message that Judy was not too seriously injured and would most likely be visiting home in Bunnyburrow for the holidays. This was sent to all of Judy’s siblings and just a few of their closest family friends.

While Judy held off on informing additional family about the sudden wedding, the foxes that came in to enjoy supper at the diner were actually quite positive about the historic thing that had transpired in their town, as Annie was quick to tell her regulars about it and point out the happy booth-cuddling couple. Judy didn’t really mind. This was a special place to her now. It always would be. Vivienne in particular did not expect much in the way of pushback locally concerning the arrangement.

The story of what happened with Judy finding Nick’s mom when it was thought that she had died was heavily circulated in town and it softened the overall attitude about the bunny. Aggie mostly gave the foxes their space, but she didn’t seem as uncomfortable around them as Judy assumed she might be. The pig was waiting at the diner for agent Rosette, she said, so that she could go back to Zootopia. The danger, she’d been told, was no longer a factor. She was polite to Annie and the other server, and talked a bit more with Vivienne. They mostly talked about how long New Reynard had been around, and whether there were any other outside settlements like it. She was much more relaxed.

The pig was still waiting at the diner at the point that Wolfard announced they needed to head back to the Bed and Breakfast. Unwilling to go back to the place she almost got skewered, Aggie had been staying in a room at the sheriff’s office and recovering from her terrible experience. She was glad to be heading back home, and appreciated the Wilde family for the fact that she would be returning alive. She thanked them again as they left, and Judy found herself hopeful that Aggie might actually open her mind a little.

The walk back was a little less warm. The sun-shower had cooled things down, and it hadn’t gotten warmer before the sun sank low on the horizon. Judy kept a slow step with Nick, relaxing and enjoying the newlywed stroll through town. She knew she would come back here someday. She wanted to stay at the bed and breakfast and enjoy a vacation with Nick here eventually, when there wasn’t a threat, any rules or security in place, just a chance to relax and have fun. She wanted to get to know the foxes that lived here a little better, and maybe hear a bit more about where Nick’s family came from. The place was just so rich with stories and emotions despite how small and out of the way it was.

As the sun sank lower, casting long autumn shadows across the leaf-littered ground, they reached their destination. Heading inside they found Motti and her family sitting in the living room. Cassie and Charisse were enjoying tall glasses of iced milk in the dining room. Those gathered downstairs
immediately cheered, making it obvious that the news had reached the bed and breakfast already. Honey thundered down the stairs loudly, likely having been watching cameras when Judy and her family arrived with Wolfard. In jeans and a flannel shirt, she seemed appropriately rustic.

“You! You didn’t invite me!” she cried.

“It really was a family-only kind of event.” Stu said with an apologetic smile.

“I’m every bit as good as family. We almost died together. We bonded!” The badger crossed her short, strong arms, pouting. Bonnie flinched at the reminder that they were almost killed. Judy would have to remember to send the badger a thank-you-bomb.

Nick spoke up sunnily. “Sorry, Honey. We can certainly celebrate together, though.” Bay wandered down the stairs, having likely been in the camera room as well.


“Comfort me,” Honey demanded, pushing herself up sideways against Bay’s front. Judy expected her to get dumped onto the floor or something, but surprisingly, the wolf just wrapped her up in his arms, hugging her, his tail swinging side to side slowly. The bunny perked her ears up. It appeared that he had given up the fight on the loss of his personal space to the badger.

“Does this mean you two won’t get to be partners anymore?” asked Cassie. Charisse gave her sister a death glare.

Nick smiled at her and shook his head. “Actually, our promotion alone likely put that in the bin, I’m afraid.” Judy frowned at that, however, they had come to accept it. It was the unfortunate mark of progress, but at least now they were partners in literally every other aspect of their lives. It would not be so bad.

“That’s not right. Zootopia needs the fox and bunny runnin’ the streets together,” grumbled Stu. His feelings on that surprised Judy a little, though she then immediately considered that it was more likely because Stu trusted Nick to take care of Judy. Some strange officer, or even a rookie being her partner probably frightened her father.
“It’ll be alright, Dad. Nick and I will still work in the same precinct and he will always be there to back me up if I need it. No one gets to be in City Center without being in the top 25% of their class, so I’m in good company no matter what.”

“Shetani and Janga should still serve together,” Motti proclaimed. “They cannot make an exception?” The hyena looked obviously crest-fallen.

Nick answered with a gracious and happy tone, “Given that we are married now, it would actually be pretty unprofessional to ask. We cannot be given any special consideration due to our relationship. Carr… er… Judy’s right though. We will still serve the city together, we will just be helping other officers, and passing down our experience to others.” The bunny felt her new husband was being very genuine in saying this, which lifted her spirits.

Motti’s mother changed the subject, getting up and moving over to Judy. “I am so happy for you both. The story of Shetani… it say… the bunny Shetani never fears the wild, she instead will embrace it… she becomes it. Today, like legend, you become the Wilde. You are Sungura ya Shetani wa Pori… Shetani of the Wild.” The large hyena wrapped her arms around the bunny and embraced the much smaller mammal.

“Thank you so much…” Judy whispered, fighting back tears. She was not that big a deal. She hated being elevated like that. But she didn’t dare argue with the hyena. Symbolism was important to her and she was happy. There was no need to change that.

The older lady hyena said softly, “No, thank you, Shetani. Our village, it has no gold now, like it did in the long ago. What has been our treasure since the beginning, and shall be till the end, is our stories. You have given Siri Shamba a new story to tell. This is a treasure that Ukweli can be proud to have provided us in his sacrifice.”

“Tunafurahi kumbukumbu yake,” Motti said in a low voice. “We cheer his memory.”

“We cheer his memory,” the other hyenas all said in unison.

“I’m so sorry…” Cassie said in a rare showing of serious sympathy from her.

“Do not be.” Motti’s father said. “It is not customary to mourn a hero. We celebrate his rise to his rightful place in the stories of Siri Shamba. We are proud of him.” He nodded. Judy pushed her cheek into Motti’s mother’s neck, unable to stop the tears, so at least she could hide them.
Sammie was not really able to resist crying either, and had to take off her glasses to dab at her red eyes with her sleeves. The white doe was always one of the more emotionally sensitive Hopps bunnies. It was why she wanted to be a counselor in the first place. Angela was stoic, but she was quiet to show her reverence to the moment. Her eyes were locked on Judy, which made the grey doe feel a little meek. She was being put on such a pedestal. It was, to Judy, sorely undeserved. She barely survived that mess at all.

“Skye and Jack are upstairs?” inquired Nick, likely feeling the tension in his mate. Vivienne nodded and smiled at her son, perhaps having given some kind of signal for him to react. Judy knew they had unspoken dialogue sometimes.

“They are,” informed Bay. He was still holding the now even more emotional badger. “Your stuff arrived a little bit ago from the Interior, and they are going through their things and making sure they are ready to head out in the morning tomorrow. They have some kind of photo shoot to go to, they said.”

“I bet they do!” Nick laughed. “The newspapers have already picked up on Jack’s little post on his Snootbook account by now, I’m sure.”

“I haven’t seen anything on the news about it yet, honestly,” Cassie stated.

“I bet I know why,” Vivienne chuckled.

“Oh?” responded Nick.

The mother vulpine laughed a bit and explained, “They don’t believe it. They won’t post or say a damned thing until they know for sure that Jack didn’t get his account hacked by someone with a clever photo edit of him with a fox. He’s gone dark from his studio and all, so no one’s getting in touch with him until he returns to Zootopia.”

“That makes sense,” Cassie agreed.

“Did you guys already file for the paperwork and all that?” Charisse asked, probably seeing that there was an attempt to make the scene less heavy.
“We will do that when we get back to Zootopia,” Nick answered. Judy glanced up at him with a smile. She hadn’t really discussed that part with him yet, but she understood why. It was typical to get one’s marriage license in the town where they reside.

“What will be changing their name? You guys do that in Zootopia, right?” she asked.

“I’ll be Judith Laverne Hopps Wilde,” the proud doe answered, beaming.

“You gonna try to become parents?” asked Cassie. Her sister shot her a look, as if that was forbidden territory.

“Probably, eventually,” Judy responded, ears back a bit. She’d certainly never discussed that with Nick. Nick smiled down at her to show that he didn’t hate the thought of ‘probably, eventually’.

“How?” asked Cassie. She flinched, obviously kicked under the table.

“Adoption, I assume?” offered Bonnie.

“Or surrogacy,” Nick said. “Jack has contacts that are involved in that. Like Judy said, it’s not something we intend to start working on tomorrow, there’s a lot for us to iron out and work on together on before we add that to the mix.”

“Surrogacy… so you’d help Judy raise a little bunny?” asked Motti’s mother. Her tone made it painfully obvious how cute she thought that was.

“I would actually more likely be raising a fox kit,” Judy stated. That yanked a pretty loud gasp out of Vivienne. The suggestion was exactly what Judy wanted it to be. Viv’s bloodline was not going to end with Nick, who looked just as surprised at that statement from his mate.

The badger spoke up at that. “Oh? I thought motherhood was a super-important life-experience for a bunny.” She was still being held by Bay. Judy began to wonder if there was something going on. Where had there been time for anything like that?

“It is,” Bonnie answered, “But… I’ve been a mother to the friends of quite a few of my actual kits,
and it really doesn’t feel much different. I love them all the same. Also, Judy’s helped raise all her little brothers and sisters, and she made some of her spending money during college through babysitting. She’s not missing out on the bunny-raising experience, I promise.” Stu laughed with his wife at that.

“It’s stuff for us to talk about, of course,” Nick expressed. Judy nodded at that. Viv looked like she was about to cry. That pulled at Judy’s heartstrings a little. The bunny recognized that when Nick vowed up to her, Vivienne likely pushed away thoughts of being a grandmother. Now that future was no longer a strict impossibility. For the moment, however, those were not pressing thoughts to the pair.

“Well, I mean… could it be done with medical help, like with Jack?” asked Motti.

Nick laughed at that, shaking his head. “As much as raising a kit that would probably look like a red or grey fennec is a cute idea, there is too great a possibility that, with something so experimental, anything could go wrong and harm the mother or child. I’d feel better keeping both of them safe and happy.” Judy nodded at that, remembering that even Jack wasn’t really a hybrid in the truest sense of the word. He just had certain genetic markers turned on to match those of his mother so he looked the part. At the same time, they removed his ability to have kits of his own. When the two decided to have their own family, they would get to make the same choice. They would have to adopt, or go surrogate and raise a fox-kit together. That idea immediately struck Judy as painfully adorable, and she wondered if it would seem so sweet to others.

“Won’t be for lack of trying, though,” laughed Judy’s black-furred sister.

“Angela, be polite!” chastised Bonnie.

“I can’t be the only one who is at least a little bit curious about how that even works out!” shrugged the more shameless doe.

“You have other sisters to ask that!” Stu barked, obviously trying to steer the embarrassing subject away given the mixed company present.

“Dad!” Sammie huffed.

“I never even said which sister I meant!” the buck laughed. Bonnie thumped his shoulder with her small fist.
The mother bunny spoke softly, “Anyway, we are very happy for you, Judy, but we got up before three this morning to drag our little tails out here, so I fear if I don’t lie down, I won’t have a choice in sleeping arrangements. I’ll just stay wherever I end up.” Stu nodded.

“It’s true, she’ll just drop off all over the house if the grand-kits keep her going too long.” The pair headed upstairs.

“I need to head home myself,” admitted Vivienne. “I need to call Gideon to discuss another possible shop location and I know he goes to bed early. I love you both so much, and I’m so happy for you.” She embraced Judy and her son, and marked them both again, anew.

“Aww…” Honey remarked at the fox-cheek-push.

“I think it’s time for the fox and bunny cops to turn in as well,” Judy sighed, smiling to her sisters. Sammie grinned and Angela nodded. They obviously took it how they were going to take it no matter what.

Nick spoke kindly to those around the couple. “Thank you all for your kindness. I’m happy to have had you all as a part of it.”

“What, no reception?” asked Honey. “Not that you gave me a heads up so I could even prepare one, so forget I said that! You jerks. Mmmn… use your claws, not your fingers.” The black wolf had been ruffling the thicker fur along the badger’s neck, probably to calm her.

“So, Agent Bay…” Sammie murmured curiously, “Is this… a thing?”

“No.” Bay and Honey deadpanned at the same time. However, neither let the other go.
The next 36 hours were spent doing little more than whatever Judy wanted to do. Wolfard filtered any communication from or about work and denied it to them, insisting that the newlywed couple enjoy their short semi-honeymoon while they could. And they did. Most of Judy’s time was spent cuddled up with Nick either in their bed or on the couch. Jack and Skye left before the other sleepy fox and bunny had the strength to get out of bed. The remaining pair had been social from time to time, however the security order had been lifted and for most of the day the bed and breakfast sat empty, save for Bay and Honey who were usually not anywhere visible. Judy was sure something was going on between them, but Nick felt it was more likely that Bay just gave up on resisting her, and it wasn’t really a relationship. Wolfard and Pawlander left with Jack and Skye, as they were needed far more back in Zootopia.

Motti and her family explored New Reynard and spent a lot of time at the Musk Street Diner. They were immediately popular as apparently no hyenas had ever visited New Reynard. Judy was told by Motti that Kijvu played with a few fox kits in the park, letting them climb on him and hold onto the thicker line of fur along the back of his neck. Cassie and Charisse went on a long hike on a recommended wooded trail that went around the town. They both loved the outdoors and the only thing they had lamented about leaving the Interior had been that they could not go hiking in Zootopia quite the same way. They were delighted to find that a suitable natural territory could be found only a few hours away from the city.

As the security order had been rescinded, Nick and Judy opted to end their stay on the second day after they were married. The fox didn’t like leaving so soon, however he did agree with Judy that there was a lot to do and they really would be missing the extra officers. The state of emergency had already been lifted, but those officers who had been working long hours could use the relief. Judy was surprised to find that the rest of her family would be staying until the weekend. Bonnie and Stu wanted to talk with Vivienne more about the arrangements for the new baked goods shop in Zootopia. They would be providing fruit and other materials just as they did for Gideon. Angela and Sammie were enjoying the little town and they had made friends with Motti’s family. Angela had also become pretty close with Motti, from what Sammie had said. Judy was happy to hear that, as her temperament made it harder sometimes for the black doe to make friends. All in all, they were having a wonderful vacation and hopped at the chance to lengthen it as much as they could.

The train ride home was uneventful but happy. The fox and bunny had the entire car to their selves, and didn’t for a second fret the display of their affection. Judy felt better to be dressed in her normal, appropriately fitting clothing, and her wound wasn’t hurting nearly so much as it had been. They had been very careful with it and that was paying off. In a few weeks she would have the stitches removed and she would be back on the beat.

They were only at their apartment for a short time before taking a bus to the precinct. They didn’t want to get too comfortable, and they both had to check in at some point, even if they were not supposed to return to active duty until the next day at the earliest. It took effort for Judy to drop Nick’s paw as they got off of the bus. They had not made any announcement of their marriage to
anyone else in the ZPD. Only Wolfard and Pawlander knew, and they were not supposed to tell anyone until the pair had a chance to talk with Bogo about it. It would not do for the Chief to be one of the last to find out.

The first to greet them as they walked into the ZPD was predictably Benjamin Clawhauser. He moved quickly from behind the desk in obvious hug-mode. Nick tried to block him from scooping up the still-wounded bunny and got picked up himself instead. He struggled a bit but eventually surrendered to the cheetah-squeezing.

“I missed you too, big guy,” he grunted.

“I was so scared when I heard that there had been an actual battle out there!” Ben cried. “And they wouldn’t tell us for the longest time what actually happened, only that there were casualties. I thought it was last summer all over again!”

“It’s not that bad. We’re fine.” Judy smiled as the cheetah put Nick back on his feet carefully.

The fox intervened quickly, trying to avoid their reunion with Clawhauser becoming a long and drawn out story time. His access to the records department meant that he could read their report whenever he wanted. They didn’t have to regale him with the story themselves. He said, “We came in to report back for local assignment, and to check in with Chief Bogo.”

“Mayor Bogo is at City Hall, actually,” offered the cheetah. Judy gritted her teeth, having not realized how quickly that change would take place. “Chief Tora does want to see you both.”

“Told you!” Nick chimed, giving a smug grin to the bunny.

“I didn’t bet anything!” she laughed.

“You two are so cute together.” Clawhauser sighed. He then gasped and shook his plump paws at the bunny. “Oh I’m so sorry. I did it again.” He frowned.

“It’s alright, Ben,” the bunny replied. “Well, let’s not keep the new chief waiting.”
Nick and Judy headed up to what was Bogo’s office. The doe was a little apprehensive. While her fox had met Tora during special technical training, she had never seen the new chief herself. She had heard that she had very high standards and expected those working under her to meet and surpass them. Bogo was the same, but Judy at least already knew him. Nick tapped on the door to the office.

“Yes?” came a somewhat frustrated female reply on the other side.

“Sergeants Wilde, here to see Chief Tora,” Nick said clearly.

“Right up front, huh?” Judy whispered with a smile. “I like that.” Nick winked at his bunny wife. That melted the does heart.

“Oh yes. Please, come in,” announced the voice from the other side. It became more cheerful, perhaps because Nick made a point of calling her chief. Judy opened the door and stepped into the office. Standing at attention to receive them behind the desk was a somewhat sleek and slender white tigress. She wasn’t nearly so large as Fangmeyer. The desk was different too. Instead of bearing the weight of too many files, it was neatly sectioned off with decorations. There were little artistic figurines, medals, tokens, and folded metallic origami as well as a couple of neatly tended bonsai trees. The tiger’s bright green eyes peered curiously at both officers.

“Good morning.” Nick stated, saluting their new chief. Judy saluted as well.

“Did your partner not deserve an introduction, Wilde?” asked Tora with a hint of concern and a bit of eastern island accent. Nick and Judy glanced at one another and then smiled and looked back, not responding right away. They wanted to drop the hint before they said it. “Officer Wilde, speak up!” demanded the tigress in an authoritative tone.

“Yes Ma’am.” Nick and Judy both replied.

“No, Sergeant Hopps, just your partner,” grumbled Tora.

“I’m Sergeant Wilde,” Judy stated matter-of-factly.

“What?” asked Tora. The uniformed tigress stood tall again. “Do you mean to tell me that the fox is Sergeant Hopps?” she asked with disbelief.
“That would be silly, Ma’am.” Nick grinned. Judy felt a pang of anxiousness. Nick was on the verge of smug, and that might be hard for a hard-edged tiger to stomach. “I’m also Sergeant Wilde.”

“Then who the hell is Sergeant Hopps?!” Tora growled in a darker tone.

“I used to be,” Judy responded quickly, not wanting to make her angrier playing with her. “We got married.” Those feline eyes shot wide open, then slowly narrowed.

“I… see. You got married. Because, of course you did that.” She crossed her arms, her own claws threatening to puncture her uniform as she glared at them. “I had been… warned that you two delighted in making the life of your superiors more… interesting. Do you have the paperwork to prove what you’ve just told me?” Nick gazed curiously at his partner and then back to Tora.

“Not yet, we just got back into town. We would have to file first. We got married in New Reynard a couple of-…” He was cut off as the tigress slammed her paws on the desk loudly. She leaned forward, snarling at Nick who, to his credit, stood stoically still.

“I may be new to your precinct, but I am the damned Chief of Police! I do not get hazed!” Judy recoiled at that.

“We aren’t hazing you, it’s true-…” Judy started.

“Silence!” Tora hissed. “Or are you trying to get yourself assigned to another precinct?”

“No Ma’am.” Judy stated solidly, alarmed at the feline’s quick anger. “I assumed that we would no longer be partners after our promotion. Our relationship should be a non-issue.” The tiger glared at Judy hard enough that she had to actually glance at Nick to make sure he wasn’t bristling back. She was surprised to see him remaining calm despite his injured mate being in the hot seat.

“Ah yes. Your ‘promotion’. A mistake I would not have made.” Tora put her paws behind her back.

“You feel we have not earned our promotions?” asked Nick in an oddly disinterested manner. Judy’s anxiousness rose. Tora had lost her fox’s respect. That could be a problem for everyone in
“It’s not a matter of earning them,” stated the white tigress. “It is a matter of what we can possibly expect from you. You are supposed to show up as backup for larger officers? A bear is supposed to have the same kind of respect for Officer Hopps as he might a large mammal?”

“Officer Wilde.” Nick said. The tiger ignored him.

She continued. “You get the rank, you get the pay, but it’s nonsense to think you can work in a command situation. Bogo might be eager to dispose of you by putting you in these horrible situations meant for someone even bigger than me, however, I’ll be damned if I am gonna be the chief the city holds accountable when that fox is made two-dimensional by a hippo during a failed robbery attempt. I won’t be the one explaining why I sent a little bunny to get pulled in half by a pachyderm off his meds! You still get to have your place on the force. It is I will be deciding what that is, do you two understand that?”

The fox sighed softly. “Yes Ma’am, I do understand how you feel. However, we trained hard to do the same job as every other mammal on the force. We would not be here if we didn’t meet or exceed those expectations,” Nick said in a rather irritated manner.

Tora sneered. “No, you got through because there’s a Mammal Inclusion Initiative that exists to allow it. It’s one thing to be able to knock out a rhino in the ring, like Miss Hopps here…”

“Mrs. Wilde,” Judy growled, beginning to share in Nick’s irritation.

That was again ignored as the tiger continued, unabated, “It’s quite another to be ready to deal with four of them armed with spiked clubs after a bar-room brawl in Savannah Central.”

“Chief Bogo had the fullest confidence in our abilities. Why can’t you?” demanded Judy.

Tora sneered. “Oddly, Bogo saw fit to warn me about no other officers except for the two of you. Made it a point to tell me that I should not underestimate you two, and I can see why. But I think you full of yourselves. It comes from the city’s insistence that your faces be on the news every time you do more than ticket a car.”

“I feel like Bogo did not mean anything negative about not underestimating us.” Nick stated plainly.
“Well, he also gave me the command to run this as my own precinct, my own way, as it would be a good challenge for my future opportunities as chief of police.” She leaned over the desk. “And that will be best served by you two not being allowed to screw that up.”

“So, we are to assume we will not be treated fairly under your command?” Nick asked. Judy held her breath. Those words were chosen by her fox very carefully.

“Oh, no! You will be treated fairly. However, I intend to keep you together, despite your claims of a relationship or your promotions. I specifically asked Bogo if I would have to separate you two if I did not wish to, and he said that he would not have wanted to separate you. I understand him completely. I’m not going to shut down the capacity of another two officers by making them responsible for your survival. I can control your assignments better with you as a single unit. This is what Bogo was doing before, right?” she asked.

“It is, but-…” Judy started.

“And you understand why that was, right?” she asked.

“Well, obviously no one wants to give someone an assignment that’s impossible,” Nick clarified. “Judy can’t flip over a truck like McHorn can, however, McHorn can’t climb down into a storm drain to get someone’s kit like I can. We filter, sure.”

“Then you understand why I do not want to make other officers responsible for you if I can keep you both in the same place,” Tora stated sourly.

“So our promotions are just platitudes?” Judy asked.

“And a raise, unless you wish to give that back.” The tigress arched her brow.

Judy frowned, “Well, I-…” Nick nudged her with his elbow. She glanced up at him and he quickly shook his head. Judy then looked down a moment, and back to the tigress. “So, you are saying that we would continue to just do what we were doing?”

“Exactly. Unlike Bogo, however, I won’t be handing you ridiculous investigations that put you in a
“We will follow your command, Chief Tora. I hope that as we get to work together you will come to trust in our abilities,” Judy said, saluting the tigress. “Thank you for the opportunity to do so.” Tora appeared skeptical at the reversal of the bunny’s attitude, but she nodded.

“We will be available to return to active duty tomorrow,” Nick said, his tone a bit hollow, much closer to how he sounded when Judy first met him. He was hiding his emotions.

“Actually, you will both be performing administrative work until Hopps is cleared by medical and by Doctor Carlisle,” Tora stated. Judy saw a flash of Nick’s teeth at the tigress’ refusal to use her married name. The bunny decided to drop it until she was able to put the paperwork on the new chief’s desk. That’s what it would take for her, the bunny assumed.

“Carlisle?” Judy asked, keeping on subject.

Tora sighed. “You were almost killed on duty, Hopps. You have to know you’d be getting a psychological review. In fact, when I told Carlisle to expect you in the coming days, she seemed uncharacteristically... excited... about the prospect of seeing you.” Judy sighed a bit and nodded.

“Understood. I will take care of that as soon as possible,” the bunny surrendered.

“In the meantime, you, Officer Wilde...” she indicated Nick as if taunting the pair, “...will be assisting with PR involving this recent firestorm of a case, as I don’t want your partner’s wiggly nose anywhere near a camera while we have the city on the edge of eating itself alive in a species conflict yet again. Don’t think I’ve forgotten the Bellwether fiasco.”

“A mistake which she corrected,” Nick growled. Judy’s heart went into her throat.

“I’m sorry, what was that, Wilde?” asked the tiger, baring her fangs at the fox, leaning over her desk.

The fox glowered, but immediately switched gears. “I will give this assignment my full attention, Chief.” She leaned back, nodding slowly. The fox nodded down at the desk itself. “So... if I might ask... The decorations on this desk are extremely fascinating.” He regarded the little figures,
medallions, and origami art. “Is this a collection?” he asked. This instantly changed Tora’s demeanor as well.

“Well, yes. These are cultural tokens from all over. I have travelled extensively in my training and education, and each place has had something different to offer of itself. Each item is a precious representation of my growth toward this moment, and I like to look back on the path I’ve taken to remind myself what was done to improve myself.” Judy saw Nick smile, but knew through experience that it was his artificial one. She doubted the tiger could tell.

“I thought it might be something like that. I see a lot of culture here,” he marveled. Judy wondered what he was even trying to do. It was obvious the tiger immediately did not like either of them. He was only going to irritate her. She did not seem irritated, however. The chance to brag about her journey put her in a better mood. Was Nick really that good at reading and manipulating mammals? It was uncanny.

“I imagine you foxes have your own culture,” stated Tora casually.

“We do. We tend to be a bit more secretive about it, though. Do you know much about it?” he asked.

“I admit that of your culture I know very little. I know they have traditions like everyone else. However, you are obviously the first fox I have directly worked with.” She nodded.

“Well… then please, accept a cultural gift for your collection.” Nick stated, reaching into his wallet and extracting an object. Judy’s paws immediately clenched tight as she watched the exchange.

“YOU… GOT,” murmured Tora as she examined the lovely bright silver token. This was a little different from the older pewter one that Nick had given to his bunny. It was large in his paw, but fit hers better. Judy slipped into quiet panic mode. What was he doing?! He could not have been serious. This wasn’t happening.

Nick spoke warmly. “Foxes have a deep respect for the power of promises and the nobility of returning a… favor. This coin is a token of that special favor. It’s traditional, and very meaningful.” Judy tried hard to keep from hyperventilating. This was a disaster. She couldn’t even stop it from happening.

Tora nodded again with a sage smile. “Well, thank you Sergeant Wilde. I will keep it here with my
collection. I appreciate that very much. You two are dismissed. Take the rest of the day off so Sergeant Hopps can get checked out by medical and released for duty as soon as possible.” Nick smiled smugly at her and nodded. Her turned and left the office with Judy close behind.

Once they were a fair distance from the office, Judy pulled Nick’s tail. She hissed, “You can’t do this! Whatever you’re thinking, stop thinking it! Don’t you dare!”

The fox turned around slowly in the hallway of the ZPD, standing alone with the smaller bunny. “I have tolerated a lot of what this city has thrown at the both of us over this past year because of what we are, no matter what we gave them. The long game, I told you. Well, the game may be long, but it’s still our game. She’s about to learn a very important lesson about fox culture.”

“And what if you get yourself fired?” Judy asked in exasperation.

“Do you trust me?” Nick asked.

“Of course I do! You know I do!” she whimpered plaintively, still holding her beloved fox’s tail.

“Then you are gonna help me with the aggressively earned industrial strength getting of our new police chief!” Nick chirped.

“This is insane. What are you even going to do?” Judy whimpered.

“I have plenty time to think about that, Fluff. That’s the beauty of a fox getting. And I have as long as I want to give it to her.”

“Oh dear heavens… You’re serious about this…” Judy said with heavy dread.

The fox grinned back at her, a very genuine smile this time. “Mayumi Tora has unwittingly strapped herself in for one Hell of a ride.”

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