Shards

by DrekkDeina

Summary

A power lost and found, born from the destruction of an entire system and cast into darkness to keep it from the clutches of those who would abuse it. So powerful it was, that the power split itself as two. The raw energy and the limiter. Now two souls must work as one in body and mind to stave off the forces that threaten to destroy their home for the sake of power.
Chapter Summary
Imagine, if you will, a system in such perfect synchronized orbit with itself that one would wonder what makes it work as such. A series of factors coinciding at the most opportune of moments billions of years ago? A sequence of events slowly altering a flawed system into the groove it fluidly stayed in? Maybe even some form of artificial manipulation from an unknown benefactor?

Both fortunately and unfortunately, none of those were completely true, and such a system was fated to be discovered and battled over by any and all parties that could do so.

Oddly enough, it wasn't the planets in orbit that were of interest, neither the raw materials that were present in great quantities.

In the core of a beautiful Tri-Star system, was something far more valuable and worthy of a galactic battle. At least, that was the view of those who invaded the system. The not so natural inhabitants of the system were exploratory colonists, nomads and highly advanced, but none so in a military manner. They had ventured from lightyears away, to settle the plentiful system, growing a fast expanding civilization over a thousand years. The system consisted of twenty-one orbiting planets and two asteroid rings at varying degrees. By a miracle that none chose to question beyond those of safety, eight of the planets were safe and bountiful for living upon. The others were either gas giants or planets plentiful with raw materials for production.

It all meant nothing when the war began. For the most part, the civilization that called the system their home was ignored in favor of some unseen goal, though that didn't preclude the occasional collateral damage. It was unclear how many armies clashed in the space around their planets, the debris fields growing with each passing year. Even despite their efforts to create a more substantial defensive force, it wasn't enough to combat the far more numerous combatants that could crush them if they took real notice.

When an exodus appeared imminent, a light of revelation came from other, smaller, civilizations that wished to offer their assistance. They revealed the nature of the war… and it was a bleak outcome for them no matter who won.

In the center of the three stars, so perfectly in orbit, was a gravitational mass of dark matter.

And every army fighting for control wished to induce a supernova, turning the system into stardust.
and kickstarting some form of fusion of the three stars exponential energy release into the dark matter at the very core of the system.

The end result was something called a Nova Shard, and quite possibly the most powerful one in existence. It was a higher degree of something called a Star Shard, of which was a dense mass of dark matter that absorbed energy from a star, whether by supernova or simply by inhabiting it. Over years, usually thousands or millions, a shard would be expunged, the dark matter becoming a battery of unfathomable power density. Through some quantum mechanics that couldn't be properly explained, the shards always sought sentient life to house it, binding to them like a symbiotic lifeform.

With this knowledge in their grasp and a civilization to save, the ones who called the system home made a decision. They cast themselves out. Allowing all who could to escape in newly made ships for deep space flight, a core group stayed behind to enact a plan that would shift the focus of the battle.

They planned to destroy the system themselves. Other civilizations joined their think tank, donating all means at their disposal and bringing the best of their minds to bear. Decades past as the battle raged around them, clandestine operations took place to set up all factors of their plan.

Over a hundred years since the war began, the conglomeration of systems that sought to keep the power that would be from the greedy armies that tore their once great home down enacted their machinations.

Annihilation.

The complete and utter obliteration of matter and turning it into energy. Using a combination of various technologies, they had done it. They caused a reaction in each star, one red, one blue, and one yellow, that made them feed each other in an increasingly violent cycle until they reached critical mass and created a supernova like none had ever seen…

Nor would ever see again.

Before the energy could be expunged outward, it was funneled into the dark matter at the core of the system. While never seen, it was believed the dark matter mass at the core was of substantial size to somehow keep three stars in orbit as they had. It was no more than the size of a small asteroid.

Though small, it absorbed the energy of the supernova with seemingly no limit to its capacity. Glowing a violent purple as the energy of the three stars swirled around and into it like a celestial maelstrom. Cascading flares from the dying stars cracked the closest planets and shattered numerous battleships of the varying oppressive invaders that could only look on as what they intended to do was enacted by others they paid no mind.

At a safe distance, for the time being at least, the ones who stayed behind began the last part of their desperate plan. Using an experimental technology that was barely tested, they activated a device that pulled the dark matter mass into its maw, jettisoning it through time and space. With no limiter to keep the stars from expunging their unrivaled fury, the residual energy leftover from the event radiated outward and decimated the remainder of the system. All armies were obliterated and what was left of the home to billions… was gone.

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The night sky was always an entrancing sight. No matter how often one viewed it, or how little it seemed to change, it was hard to view it as something stagnant and uninteresting. The way the stars
glimmered and twinkled would always spark a fire in the soul.  
The darker the night, the more beautiful the sky.  
At least…  
That's what the fox thought.  

Red and cream fur bristled in the light breeze of autumn as the tod reached back to brace his back with a paw. He panted slowly, feeling the taxing draw upon his reserves of stamina as he straightened, looking upon all that he had done.  
The field that lay before him had now been properly worked. Earth overturned and seeded with due diligence in preparation for a spring harvest. Soon he would need to make haste to harvest the neighboring fields, brimming with produce that he would gather to bring to market.  
Picking up his various tools, caked in dirt and mud, the fox softly treads the ground upon which he had worked so hard to prepare.  
In the peak of spring, he would be able to reap the benefits of a likely arduous winter, if previous ones were any indication. Like the previous autumn and one before, he had planted such things like onions, kale, cabbage, peas, and his least favorite but most numerous… carrots.  
The neighboring regions were plentiful with mammals that ate the strange orange vegetable. Rabbits mostly. No wait… bunnies? Which did they prefer. He shook his head. It didn't really matter to him. He didn't have enough contact with the species to care about giving them a consistent thought. Most of them avoided him at any rate, some latent sense of fear from generations of an ancient time still permeating their minds, labeling such predators as himself as dangerous.  
It was the reason his parents decided to keep out of the public eye, living off the land and providing what extra they had to the market within the nearby village, so as to provide a means of monetary boost.  
They figured it was best to provide from out of sight rather than become some merchant that deals with their customer base muzzle to muzzle.  
Every day that he had produce to bring to market, the red fox would pull a hefty cart along the well-traveled road to the village. Before any of the mammals would be in the market to buy, he would drop off the goods and collect his earnings for the produce from the merchants, being of more well-respected species that one might feel inherently more comfortable buying from. It meant his family got to keep less, but when one farmed for a living, a mammal could provide well for themselves without need of money.  
Now though, it was just himself and his mother, the fox tod's father having passed due to sickness not two years prior. To keep the land from falling into a deplorable state, the son made sure to work himself every day to keep everything going smoothly.  
Despite being only fifteen at the time and now approaching eighteen come the end of winter, the young fox kept the land from becoming stagnant and unusable. Thankfully, it wasn't overly large but still took considerable time with his mother to keep everything in order.  
He had to rise early every day, working the fields, pulling in harvest, and making sure the irrigation systems were still flowing evenly. As luck would have it, the creeks nearby were plenty filled from the recent rain showers.
Heaving a deep breath, the fox tod stepped livelier upon seeing the homestead in the distance. His mother was simply a silhouette in the window, a flickering light throwing her shadow around like a skittish kit hiding from strangers.

Gently setting the tools inside a wooden crate wedged against the side of the house, the fox found a small rucksack of items he set aside earlier. Opening it, he pulled out a handful of blueberries. They were so sweet to smell and tart to the tongue. He couldn't grow much of these, seeing as the demands weren't so high around here for blueberries and they didn't keep long, but his mother kept a small patch watered and properly cared for near the house. Every now and then, she would leave a sack with a helping from the ripened batches.

It was definitely a pleasant treat at the end of a hard day and he was exceptionally grateful for it.

He examined the house, looking to see if anything new needed to be done. Despite the darkness, his night vision offered him a clear view of all he needed to see. The walls were a combination of clay and wood, crumbling at the edges but still sturdy. The roof was a layer of sod and hay, layered over wood slats and did well enough during the heat and rain.

He pressed the door, letting it squeak slightly upon opening. His mother was across the room, boiling ingredients into a pleasant and savory stew that made his mouth water and tongue want to hang out as he wished to pant again.

"Good evening, Nicky," the fox tod's mother called to him in a voice as soft as cotton and sweet as the blueberries he loved. "How is everything out there?"

"Quite well, actually," Nicholas replied evenly, a light-hearted tone accompanying his underlying exhaustion. "We actually had greater profit at market because a couple contributors had their fields damaged by flood. Terrible really…. But it gave us a small boost."

The red fox looked over to the source of the flame he noticed earlier. The wood stove was burning brightly. It was small and cost them a pretty penny to obtain but, since it was small, it was savings in their pockets for not paying for delivery. The tod had carted it back himself just in time for winter to start rolling in last season. With both the range and wood stove going, it felt appropriate to keep the windows open, at least for the time being. As the night continued further, a chill was sure to set in.

Sitting at the already set table, Nicholas poured water from a pitcher into a small wooden cup. A bowl of thick, savory stew joined the table, as his mother set it down, kissing his head as she did every evening and every morning.

It was embarrassing to say the least, but his mother had once told him when he complained, "I won't be around forever… and if your father's passing has taught me anything, I want the last thing you remember of me, should my untimely end come, is that your mother loves you. Always and forever."

He couldn't refuse her that comfort, and he couldn't deny that it was a great comfort to himself. He was a rather lonely kit and spending the days working a field with little room in his busy days to search for a potential mate, or even friends for that matter, he was happy he had his mother to care for him.

He was still young, but if the rest of his life would be like this, he found it difficult to imagine finding one who he would be able to court, much less fall in love with. His parents were nomadic by nature and wanted to settle down to give him a more stable life and home. He couldn't deny that he had both in droves.

"What wonderful dish did you make this time?" the tod asked his mother, knowing exactly what she
did, but allowing her to bristle with pride.

"I was able to find a quail in one of your traps," she divulged slowly, letting her son show a surprised expression, genuinely shocked as he had missed that. "So, today we have a little meat."

Nicholas licked his muzzle hungrily and looked to his mother for permission to eat. She nodded and set her own bowl down, dipping a spoon in the thick mixture and watching her kit dig in eagerly.

His first bite was savored but his stomach growled at him to pick up the pace and he obliged with gusto, taking in every spoonful he could before the meal cooled. Getting up after having cleaned his bowl, his tongue having licked it clean, the fox went to grab seconds, followed by a comforted gaze of his mother.

She was probably glad that he hadn't been eating light as he had for a long while after his father's passing. The stress of having to step into the paw prints of his father at fifteen, to tend a field, was no burden he should have shouldered at such an age. It led to sleepless nights, worrying that the next day he would wake to see the fields dying; to loss of appetite, his anxiousness killing much of his desire to eat, and to a dysfunctional and empty mind, his thoughts barely focused on living and just trying to hold himself together mentally.

A short while later, after cleaning up and closing the shutters, allowing the heat to properly permeate the small home as the night chill set in, Nicholas and his mother settled in a couple of chairs, staring at the crackles of the fire.

It was the most relaxing part of the night, being able to just sit and let the warmth seep into his fur. Soon enough, he would get to bed, but he enjoyed being able to properly unwind and let the day's troubles slowly bleed away in the heat of the fire before setting his head upon a pillow.

"I think I hear a storm brewing," his mother said, her ears perked towards one of the windows. The shutters were closed, but a clear flash bled light through the slats enough to make her observations accurate.

Nicholas started to rise, knowing he might need to make sure the window shutters and such were braced from the outside. Stretching and popping his knuckles, he padded towards the door.

"I'll be right back," he said. "The bracing bars are in the shed."

"Alright, just be careful," she offered to him with a smile.

Unlatching the door, Nicholas opened it and stepped out, taking in a long draw of breath through his nose. He frowned in slight confusion. There weren't any clouds out. It was still as clear as earlier. The stars a little brighter than before. Even the air didn't have that tinge to it that he could smell. If it were about to rain, he would be able to sense a drop in temperature and rise in the moisture of the air. Neither had changed from earlier.

Shrugging, the red fox ambled over to the shed that was built about a hundred yards from the house. Looking like an old tent in design, it helped keep errant wind from blowing it over.

Before he could touch the latch on the shed with a paw, he looked up to see a flash of light. It was much like the one from before, mimicking lightning. But again, there were no clouds in the sky. 'What was it? Where did it come from?' were the looping thoughts that plagued his mind.

Nicholas had heard tales of many strange events that happened, but he assumed most were said in a drunken stupor to make oneself seem more interesting. This though, wasn't so farfetched but felt like it might throw those rantings into another light.
Keeping his gaze on the sky, the tod noticed another flash, bright and nearly white. It came from the same spot as before.

Again, the light flashed, though this time, it glowed brighter and appeared to persist in the sky much like a star.

He was tempted to run back to the house and hope all was well, but his inane curiosity made him firmly plant his paws and stare, hoping to see what would come of this.

A sparkling blast of green and white tore apart the sky above him, making his ears drive back in fear as something burst forth and fell from the heavens.

He didn't dare try to examine it as his legs made a decision by instinct, running away with all the speed he could muster. The fox had no real direction or plan in mind. He just bolted for the tree line of the forest and went behind the thick trunk of an oak tree.

Ducking down and holding his ears down, his eyes squinted as he expected whatever it was to impact the earth with a fury like lightning, the red fox tod became confused as seconds passed with no real sound of impact or anything for that matter.

Peeking out from behind the tree, he saw nothing.

He turned back and sighed, wondering if he had imagined the whole thing.

When he looped around the tree to pad his way back to the house, he was stunned and frightened beyond all capability for rational thought as a black amorphous being stood in front of him, encompassed in something that looked like green lightning.

The longer he stared, his breathing reaching a pace bordering on hyperventilating, the more he saw that the being was starting to resemble him.

He wasted no time, fear taking over as he ran further into the forest, brushing aside branches and brush. He spared no looks back, as that would slow him down. Whatever that being was, it wouldn't know the forest like he did. He grew up here and explored the forest around his farm for years as a kit.

Finding the wide creek, he started leaping over it, using the jutting stones to accomplish his goal. Upon reaching the other side, he turned tentatively to see if the being was close. he yelped when it was directly behind him, as if it had never lost an inch of distance to him.

Tripping over a root at the edge of the water, Nicholas fell back onto a bed of leaves. He would have scrambled back, but the being lowered itself gently onto a knee, reaching out. The fox tried to snarl in defense but it came out as a whimper when the paw moved faster than he could see and pressed to his chest.

An explosion of pain radiated from his heart, spreading outwards quickly as the being seemed to fade away. Before making contact with him, it seemed to fully copy his looks. Well, as far as a being made of pure darkness wrapped in green lightning could mimic him.

The pain became a permeating heat that felt like he swallowed and was covered in hot coals.

"Stop!" he begged, barely able to let out another word as it felt like his body would burn away and turn to ash.

The being never flinched, slowly fading from existence.
The fox tod clutched his chest with one paw, and head with the other. He tossed and turned in the leaves, vaguely aware of his surroundings but not focused on it beyond knowing there was a creek right next to him.

When the black and green lightning being disappeared, to his fear and relief, Nicholas couldn't quell the heat in his body and dove right into the water, drinking in gulps of the cooling fluid as he felt instant relief.

The pain still resided and remained fresh in his mind, having been the most painful experience he could ever recall in his short life.

No… the loss of his father was worse… but as far as physical pain went, it had no equal.

Finally having the presence of mind to climb out of the water and onto the bank, Nicholas sucked in air in rapid pants, almost tearful in his relief. When he calmed himself somewhat, he kneeled over the edge of the creek, breathing deep and slow. His eyes were shut, the cool air and water having settled in now and making him feel chilly.

Lowering his muzzle to the water, he took tepid laps, letting his swallows regulate his breathing. His mother would worry soon. He needed to return to the house.

Opening his eyes, he looked at the reflection of the water, flowing, but still smooth on the surface enough to see his eyes clearly.

He had amber eyes, tinged with an earthy brown on the edges.

Or at least…

It's what he used to have.

The mammal staring back at him now, the fox he could make out in the reflection, now had eyes as green as summer leaves and brilliant as emeralds. They were so bright, they nearly glowed.

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The most annoying noise ever conceived by mammal kind broke the haze of the morning.

The constant beep of a very offensive alarm clock blared at a mammal unwilling to rise from bed.

"Oh, come on!" a voice yelled through the wall. "Shut that thing up!"

A groan and moan later, there was a paw slapping the snooze button, giving an extra hammer strike of the fist, as if to potentially beat the clock into being silent.

The paw slid down, slamming painfully into the frame below at the wrist.

Judy Hopps jerked upright with a hiss, her ears perking awake now as she held her wrist, trying not to curse.

"I'm up!" she shouted to no mammal in particular.

"We don't care!" another voice yelled.

The doe frowned and glared at the wall, as if her stare might be felt by the mammals on the other side.
"We know you're giving us the look. It won't work."

Judy's face deadpanned as she relented and sighed, rolling her paw to work the jarring pain from her wrist.

Her roommates could be quite annoying when they wanted to be, and were still so when they didn't care to try.

Growing up in Bunnyburrow, the grey bunny doe was anything but a homebunny, having itched to explore since certain events in her kithood. It didn't play well with her parents for years, but since a couple years ago, she had been able to make them reluctantly support her decisions. It came with provisions, like weekly calls and showing them records of her living arrangements, so they knew she wasn't homeless in the city.

The city of Zootopia. A wondrous place where all mammals got along in peace and harmony. Or so she was told….

The truth was far more abrupt and anticlimactic, with dysfunction being the staple around the city as much as carrots were the staple food back home. Upon moving in with Bucky and Pronk Oryx-Antlerson nearly a year ago, she made to apply to any and all places she could for work, but her dream was to become a journalist. So far, she only ran a blog. A very popular one, she felt confident enough to admit to herself, as well as a few others who asked.

For now, she worked as a receptionist to a doctor's clinic, setting up appointments and dealing with general paperwork and billing. It paid well enough, even if the job itself was rather monotonous. The plus of it all, she had to concede was that the hours were good and allowed her plenty of free time to pursue more fulfilling endeavors.

Padding to the bathroom, the bunny pulled a stool in front of the sink, the facilities having been made for the larger bovids. Leaning over the sink, she pulled a contact case from the vanity and looked in the mirror, ready to guide her paws to place them in just right.

Her eyes were a brilliant purple, shining with a gleam like amethysts as they darn near glowed. They hadn't always been like that though. They used to be grey. Dull and stormy grey.

When she was a kit, maybe 9, she ventured away from the farm, wanting to desperately explore. She didn't get too far before feeling too tired to venture further, but she found a creek that was gleaming and glittering in the sunlight.

Cupping her paws, she went to drink from it, taking great pleasure in the cooling fluid as it refreshed her.

In her interest, she noticed an odd black stone on the water's edge. It was odd simply because there was none other like it there. She curiously picked it up, rolling it in her paws as she noticed the slight cracks to it, as they glowed violet.

To her surprise and fear, the stone sank into her paw and seemed to be absorbed. She couldn't make sense of it but being a kit, it was easily passed over since nothing bad seemed to come of it.

When she returned to the house, her parents were quite shaken to see that her eye color had changed. It went from grey to violet. Soon to follow were many doctors' visits to figure out what was going on. No one could give a straight answer but most assumed it was a shift in the pigment of her iris due to some genetic condition. Neither of her parents had purple eyes so they worried about extended family and conditions they had.
Little Judy wanted to recount the strange stone to them, but she wasn't that naïve back then. One mention of that and a whole new breed of doctors would be examining her. She kept it quiet.

It began a lifelong interest in the strange and extraordinary though, leading her to journalism.

She wanted to investigate that which was unexplained and find the truth in it and expose that which wasn't.

Having expertly placed the contacts in her eyes, Judy blinked to let them center, looking into the mirror to see a set of grey eyes staring back at her. She smiled, satisfied at the results, following up with a lazy salute to herself and hopping down to slide the step stool aside, wanting to make sure her roommates wouldn't complain. They loved to do that. They had a heart of gold when they wanted, but their mouths were just ripe with sour notes.

She would have been proud to show off eyes hued like her own now, but years of teasing in school left her a little lacking in confidence concerning that feature of herself. She got defensive one too many times when she was in her teens and actually attacked a student who was being overly hurtful, earning the annoying nickname of the Violent Violet. It stuck with her for years and she made sure to get contacts as soon as she could afford to do so.

She actually needed glasses to a certain extent and had a spare pair in case her contacts ever became unusable, but she felt like it was a double whammy to have her purple eyes on display AND wearing glasses. A few mammals refuted it, but she couldn't help thinking it.

Settling back into her room, she turned on the TV, hoping to hear some news concerning her favorite subject. It was pretty much the basis of her entire blog.

Nearly a year ago, these strange robotic things dropped from the sky, wrecking havoc and causing damage. They seemed to be nearly unstoppable as conventional methods had little to no effect. They looked like robotic versions of certain reptiles she had seen pictures of but not really viewed in life. It was like a komodo dragon tried to stand and walk like a civilized mammal.

After causing a lot of damage and using strange vocalizations to shout at anyone they came across, something amazing happened.

Like some sort of comic or tv show, a hero appeared. Clad in some sort of exoskeletal armor that seemed more alien than the robotic menaces, the hero struck them all down with little to no effort. He was well armored but it was pretty clear from the snug and well fitted design that the mammal inside was a fox. How did Judy know there was a mammal inside the suit? It was something she could barely explain well.

Ever since that stone turned her eyes purple, she had these images and dreams of russet fur and brilliant green eyes. Nothing was clear but a few such images in her head let her view the armor-clad hero…. Months before he revealed himself. It wasn't visions of the future, she had surmised. No image she saw had actually come to pass. But it couldn't be some coincidence. These images and dreams plagued her since she was a kit. She just knew it was real.

For the past year, these robots, simply called Drones, since they never seemed to have a pilot or anything in them, kept falling from the sky, causing havoc and trying to fight the hero.

After weeks of trying to get the scoop on him, a name finally came to be, snowballing out of control and taking the media by storm.

Flux. Flux the Fox. The hero of Zootopia and armor-clad defender of the mammals of the city.
Nothing of note was on the news, so Judy pulled her phone out and scrolled through the blog she pulled up on her phone, checking reviews and comments about her updated links and articles. Too many to count.

A picture of Flux rolled into view on her phone's screen and she stared. His suit of armor looked so alien and beyond the level one would think of as modern tech that it was hard to believe Flux was from their planet. It was a sleek black and grey all over, with these light bars all over it that glowed a vibrant green.

She had seen many videos of his fights, knowing the lights weren't just for show. She read and watched enough comic/anime/superhero movies to make educated guesses as well as more extraordinary and odd assumptions about his suit's powers. The light bars on his suit seemed to either repel incoming attacks or propel him by using some form of thrust, allowing him to fly.

Flux could also send out waves or bolts of energy, much like sci-fi movie blaster shots. Like his suit, the energy he released glowed green. The superhero also used more powerful forms of attack or defense on rare occasions when the number of Drones was overwhelming or some of the more heavily equipped ones got an upper paw (or claw?) on him. Her favorite method of attack was a cascading electric shock that started a chain reaction from one Drone to another in a link that destroyed a condensed grouping of them. Her favorite defense was one she ran to when she was nearby the location as it was happening. A tunneled roadway collapsed, but Flux was able to project a type of force field large enough to keep it open just barely long enough for mammals to escape.

After the catastrophe, she waited outside the disaster zone and took a picture when Flux looked her way, his head tilted in mild curiosity. It wasn't a minute before she posted that on her blog, with plenty of her subscribers commenting on her hero encounter. One fan of the site even took the pic and turned it into some sort of meme, attaching various photos to the top and leaving a text on the pic of Flux saying "Do I look like I give any Flux?" Her first reaction was to roll around laughing and giggle as she basically fangirled from the moment.

Snapping from her reverie, Judy noticed something was happening on the news. A new drone showed up and unlike the previous Drones, this one was more advanced looking and... was glowing red?

She pressed a button to lock her phone screen, pocketing it and grabbing her keys and wallet. Feet pounding the floor she left the apartment, shouting a short goodbye to her roommates, who seemed a little irate that she woke them up by neglecting her alarm clock. Could they blame her? It was a day off from work.

From what she saw in the news, she knew exactly where the new Drone showed up. It was the Central Plaza in front of the Museum of Natural History.

Sprinting harder, Judy couldn't wait to try catching Flux take down this new Drone. It looked mean, but maybe that would make Flux use more advanced capabilities. Her teeth bit her lower lip in excitement, the image of gleaming emerald eyes crossing her mind as it had at random moments. It didn't deter her strides and bounds as she blazed a path to her goal.

"Here I come, Flux!"
Paws and hooves pounded the pavement, scrambling in all directions. Smaller mammals scurried desperately to cover to avoid being crushed under hoof or paw by much larger and none so mindful mammals as fear drove them away from the scene.

A lone rabbit eagerly sprinted against the tide, weaving in between legs and expertly dodging mammals she couldn't effectively slide under or jump over.

Devoid of any fear, the bunny doe's smile denoted her increased exhilaration as she pulled out her phone and readied it to record the scene before her.

Flux had appeared like usual, darting in from the rooftops and descending like a mighty hammer upon the new enemy. She pressed record just in time to get a wonderful shot of the Drone with glowing red accents becoming the hammer's target.

A resounding clang was heard as Flux twisted in midair and drove his foot into the Drone's shoulder.

The Drone barely moved. Instead of being crushed or thrown, it swung a large arm and batted the much smaller Flux away. Judy gasped at the sight but kept her camera trained. Flux impacted a light pole a few dozen feet away, skewing his trajectory. Before smashing into a small business, the green of the light bars running along Flux's suit glowed brighter and he slowed in the air, floating and shimmering in a green hue.

The red Drone spoke, something never done by previous Drones, its tongue strange and foreign to the rabbit's ears. She couldn't understand the words being spoken, but her eyes trained on Flux, whose mechanical ears twitched, as if the armored mammal could somewhat understand what it was saying or was in the process of translating the words.

A burst of speed had the rabbit trying to keep up with the camera's view, as she found refuge behind a postal drop box. Flux had fired off some form of boosters from the rear of his armor to propel himself forward at a phenomenal speed, catching the red Drone by surprise as Flux was prepared for the defensive strength of his foe.

Just before his body impacted the Drone, Flux let loose a wave of energy into the chest plating of his enemy, forcing the red Drone to topple back and roll across the pavement of Zootopia's Central Plaza.

The red Drone struggled to recover, having not expected a much smaller creature to overpower it. A red shield of sorts surrounded the being from further attack, making Judy gasp at the sight. This drone was different than the rest that landed. Most others that invaded Zootopia had armaments that seemed conventional, even if they used advanced weaponry. They fired off rockets and tracking missiles, used something akin to Gatling guns to shoot bolts of energy that were far inferior to Flux's own, and some even wielding varied melee weapons like swords and war hammers that had glowing edges to them. The doe surmised they used some form of energy to make them able to cut through armor and such if they connected with it. She once witnessed one such sword from a Drone cleaving straight through a mammal's car as cleanly as a vegetable knife through a tomato.

The point her mind tried to round back to, was that she had never seen a Drone use abilities that mimicked anything Flux was capable of. He had projected shields like that before and she loved it, especially when the fox would use it to protect innocents. This new Drone was tainting that now, making Judy scowl as she made sure to record everything with as steady a paw as she could muster.
It wasn't very easy when Flux leapt into the air and released a series of green bolts into the shield, the energy he expended splashing over the red encompassing barrier and rumbling the ground of the entire area.

Landing back upon the ground, Flux seemed to be scanning the area for civilians and assessing the new information. A new foe with higher defensive capabilities than he was prepared for and speaks.

The bunny wanted to bounce in excitement at how Flux would figure his way into exploiting a weakness. She couldn't do that though, because it would ruin her shot.

The red Drone was still as well, seemingly waiting for Flux to continue his assault.

Neither had to wait too long as the red shield faltered, and Flux took the chance to land a series of blows, accompanied by a blast of green energy just before each hit would have made contact. In seconds, the shield dispersed in a fumy cloud of red energy, with the Drone hitting the pavement. It rolled and sidestepped, using arm mounted guns to pepper Flux with scores of red bolts.

The fox lowered himself onto all fours, a surge of energy lighting up his suit. In the blink of an eye, he zipped in close, sending a fist into the knee joint of the red Drone. It misstepped and took a tumble…

Right towards Judy, still hiding behind the drop box. Her eyes went wide and she leapt away just in time to miss the large Drone falling upon the blue metal box, crushing it.

She missed a step herself and had to brace a paw against a street lamp pole, nearly dropping her phone in the process.

Aware of the impending danger, the grey bunny doe was giving in far more to the inquisitive journalist in her, safety be damned. True to that note, the bunny got a grip on her phone and turned back to record the Drone attempting to get up. Its leg, that Flux impacted, was heavily damaged. Red sparks of energy cascaded from the damaged portion of armor as the leg tried to move futilely.

Excited at the proximity she had to the Drone, Judy was barely comprehending that the red being was now looking at her and lifting an arm to point its arm-mounted gun at her. She gulped in realization, blood draining from her face and ears as she realized this thing actually wanted to kill her. Why?

*All the others wanted to do was look around, tearing apart whatever lay in their way and only attacking when attacked, as if working by some basic function of programming or something, Judy mused in passing. She could only assume with the limited amount of info she had. This intent though... it was... sentient...*

The gun glowed red as a bolt left the barrel…

A green blur surrounded the bunny, with red dispersing over green. A hiccup escaped her as she felt a relief from knowing what happened to a certain degree.

Flux stood beside her, looking down with glowing green eye slits. His paw was outstretched, a beam of energy diffusing into a spherical green shield around them. No amount of danger could stop her from internally fangirling at the prospect of being inside one of Flux's shields, being protected like so many others. It never happened to her before.

"Dumb bunny," Flux's filtered voice rasped at her. "Why in blazes are you still around?"

Judy was flabbergasted, having lost her ability to speak upon hearing Flux do so. The fox tilted his
head, a sigh leaking through his voice filter. He might have been used to this reaction, a small, still functioning part of the doe's mind surmised.

Flux didn't bother being patient for an answer as he turned back to the red Drone, as it regained its footing and released a constant beam of red energy on the hero's shield. He grunted beside Judy, her phone still recording but it was pointed down as she was absorbed in the event happening.

"Woah..." she squeaked out.

"Now she speaks," Flux said evenly, sarcasm dripping from his voice.

The fox was obviously having trouble defending against the intense looking onslaught, the red beam causing shimmers in his shield as the armored arm producing the shield energy began to sizzle and smoke.

"Oh, screw this..." he muttered next to Judy. Rearing back his other arm, a brilliant amount of light gathered in his paw, creating such a radiating heat that the bunny's fur stood on end.

Dropping the shield, he pulled back the now damaged arm and released the energy collected in his other paw, a condensed beam intercepted the still firing red beam from the Drone. The image was worthy of being from a scene of top tier film franchise. Ultimately though, Flux's power outmatched the Drone's, with its beam being pushed back and the green energy ripping through the mechanical arm and tearing it apart.

Surprising both Flux and Judy, the Drone let out a deafening roar of pain upon the arm being obliterated from existence. A motley collection of warped metal parts and molten slag made up the stump that was left of the upper arm.

In a fit of rage, the Drone flailed its other arm towards the pair, with Flux pulling Judy in his arms and drifting away with all due haste.

The bunny clutched as tight as she could to the armored chest of the fox, taking some twisted, and probably untimely, joy in being held by her hero.

The duo rounded a corner of a building, with Flux landing on where his paw pads would be beneath the armor, haunches raised. He gently set the doe down, turning to dart away to finish the battle.

The rabbit bounced on her heels, ready to pop back out there and keep recording. As she tried to follow, Flux whirled on her.

"Stay!" he near yelled, pointing a paw to her muzzle, an inch from her nose. She went cross-eyed looking at the metal tip of the digit, gulping at the authority of his single word.

"But I want to see you do your thing," the doe defended meekly. It was odd being chastised by her hero. He seemed to mean no ill will and she could understand his need to keep her out of the fight, but she wanted to do this. She was drawn into it.

"As much as I appreciate the enthusiasm... Stay," Flux ordered once more. "I can't fight that thing effectively with you continuously getting in the way. I'll come back to check on you, but only if you stay here. Got it?"

Judy nodded, the thought of her hero showing her compassion and returning to check upon her made her fur bristle with excitement. A smile broke out on her muzzle, being answer enough for the fox as he glowed brighter and hovered away, whipping around the corner to pursue the red Drone... or what was left of it.
Judy fiddled with the video editing features on her phone, the battery now below half-life. It had been nearly half an hour since Flux left the alleyway to take care of the Drone. She had plenty of video to use for her blog, with loads of great close up clips. If a potential employer saw this, it might interest them, knowing she would be willing to get close to dangerous situations.

Growing impatient, the doe released a long sigh, tugging the sleeves of her hoodie to cover her paws partially. The cold air was nipping at her a little too much. She still hadn't properly grown into her winter coat yet and the temperature was a bit colder than normally should be this early into autumn. Looking down at her pants, she lamented it was probably a bad idea to go running outside in this weather in cut off jeans. She had taken pants and cut them just below the knee, wanting to make them more... sporty.

Her stomach growled, reminding her that she hadn't the chance to take part in a proper meal as of yet today. Getting up to leave the safety of the alley, she heard mammals conversing and beginning to resume a normal flow along undamaged avenues.

"I guess he isn't coming," the doe surmised with a sigh.

"Hello?" a voice cut through the alley. Judy froze, her first reaction to keep hidden next to the stack of boxes that obstructed the view of any mammal that cared to glance down the alleyway. "I was told there would be a bunny over here waiting for someone?"

Judy perked up at that, feeling both elated her hero remembered to check on her, but immediately deflated when she realized that he sent someone else. Stifling the urge to become grumpy and thump her foot, the grey rabbit dared to leave the cover of the boxes and let her eyes peruse the new mammal.

Her breath hitched.

Before her stood a rather tall and lean fox, paws in his pants pockets and black-rimmed glasses set upon the bridge of his muzzle. His fur and eyes were what struck her to the core most of all. It was him. That red fur and gleaming emerald eyes. It was those two details that she caught glimpses of in her mind at the most random of times, with no clear image to give her a good guess at how he would look over all. For all Judy knew, the mammal she caught those glimpses of could have been female.

The fox looked her over, his jaw tensed, holding back a few words as the rabbit flicked her eyes along his form. He had a small black shirt on, snug to his chest with fur spilling out from the V of the neck. It was a creamy color, to which Judy instantly found appealing.

A few conflicting thoughts entered her mind about having such thoughts about a fox… What bunny would? More specifically, what normal bunny would? she deadpanned in her own mind, realizing she was anything but.

"That's me..." the doe supplied weakly, smiling awkwardly. The fox pressed his glasses further along the bridge of his muzzle, giving the rabbit a close look.

"I was asked to make sure you were fine," the tod mentioned as more an explanation than a question.

"I am fine. Thank you for checking," Judy replied, beginning to pad past the mammal, trying to shake loose the thoughts that became her first reaction to him.

"Why did you get so close?" he asked, surprising the bunny. "You must have a death wish..."
"Excuse me?" Judy asked, in wonder as to how he knew. Curious, she stopped and turned to the red fox before walking past him.

"Flux made a mention of you and told me you got too close to the fighting," the fox replied evenly.

The doe chose to ignore his somewhat irritating tone, focusing on the small details of his fur and form. Everything she had been seeing in her mind for years appeared to be present on this fox. The flashing images and such fit him perfectly. The blend of his cream-colored fur into red. The luster of his coarse fur. And the brilliance of his green eyes, nearly sparkling like emeralds.

His facial expressions, however, denoted irritations and cynicism. He didn't want to be here and he wasn't making any effort to hide it.

"Oh, I see," the grey bunny mumbled back. Her demeanor changed as she tried to answer his question, her tone perking up as she said, "I'm a journalist… or at least I'm going to be… and I wanted to record the battles of Flux for my blog."

The fox's ears lifted slightly from their pinned back position, giving her a clue to his potential interest. The ears settled back down, his expression hard and continuing to look irritated.

"Blog?" he inquired. "Why have a blog for a guy like him?" Judy wouldn't have cared for the question if the fox hadn't spoken the line with such tepid indifference.

"But he's SO awesome!" she blurted before thinking. "He defends the city and has always done his best to make sure mammals are safe. Can't discount the cool armor and all the skillful move he uses…"

"What makes you think it's armor? Or a he?" cut in the red fox. "It could be some sort of robot." He shrugged, starting to tick the rabbit off.

"I just know," Judy said in a clipped tone. "And by the way, my name is Judy Hopps. What's yours?"

The fox raised an eyebrow.

"I don't think my name matters," he spoke, his tone more agitated than even now.

"I disagree. I want to thank you and it's a bit difficult when I don't know you're name."

"You say 'Thank you' and walk away," the tod mentioned, dry sarcasm evident in his voice. "Pretty simple if you ask me."

"Just tell me," the rabbit ordered. The fox sighed.

"Flash," he breathed. "There… you happy?"

Judy raised an eyebrow and felt this twinge in her mind. A far-off voice muttered something almost incomprehensible. It was like a recording of something. A memory. It was soft… sweet… loving?

"You're lying," the doe bluntly spoke.

"So, what if I am?" he fired back. "I don't care to let somebunny know my name just because she asked. Look… can we get out of the alleyway? I'm not exactly in the mood to make bystanders passing by think I'm using you like some escort."

The grey doe was now livid. How dare he say such insulting things?! Who was he to get all high
and mighty over being in an alleyway?! She wasn't exactly there by choice.

Taking in a shaky breath, Judy stepped close to the fox and grabbed the collar of his shirt to drag him in close, angry eyes boring into his.

"Listen here you stupid excuse for a caring individual," the infuriated doe began. "I'm not some cowardly bunny that's gonna lie back and take an insult like that and I resent that you would refer to me as an escort. I expect an apology. Now."

Her foot thumped angrily as she awaited any sort of reaction from the fox, whose expression was frozen, jaw slightly slack. He was staring into her eyes as if they were lit aflame.

After nearly a minute, her tail began twitching in impatience, the fox having not moved and his eyes wide as he seemed to be comprehending something.

"Well? I'm waiting."

His jaw tried to work, failing as he continued to stare into her eyes, disbelief in his.

"Sorry…” he mumbled. Judy didn't release him though, instead tightening her grip.

"Name," she bluntly demanded. Not asked, demanded.

"Will."

"Nope."

"Fin."

"Next."

"Penny."

"Wrong gender buddy."

"Melvin."

"Are you even trying?"

The red fox tod tried to pull away, being tugged back by the smaller rabbit. he wasn't trying too hard, but he didn't think he would need to. A groan escaped him.

"Nicholas."

Judy almost wrote that off as another joke. Almost. The voice that echoed in her head before resounded a bit louder. Nicky.

The other tell he was being truthful was his averted gaze as opposed to the other names he blurted, whereas he simply held eye contact with an irritating twitch to his eye.

"Alright Tricky Nicky," the bunny softly spoke, loosening her grip and letting the fox stand straight once more, "was that so hard?" she rested a paw on her hip, swaying a bit as she spoke.

Her bravado was shaken a bit when she saw Nick staring down at her with a venomous look in his eyes.
"Never call me Nicky again…" he near growled. "Are we clear?" Judy nodded in reflex, now realizing she might have overstepped a bit. Or… more than a bit. She bit her tongue though. It wouldn't do good to get hyped up again.

"Now then," Nick started, "I'm going to take my leave. I've checked on you and I'm sure by your ferocity and such that you can easily make it home on your own. I'll let you do as you will now."

"Wait!" Judy blurted before she could stop herself. The fact remained, despite his obviously callous and abrasive demeanor, that he was the one she was seeing in her head for years. She had to pursue that curiosity, even if it ended with disappointment.

"What?" the tod sighed, evidently lost for patience now.

"Dinner?" she asked simply. Her eyes bugged out. "I mean…! Would you like to grab dinner? Not a date! Just a thank you… or… something. I don't know." Her ears fell as she realized she couldn't create a coherent sentence any longer, devolving into mumbles and haphazard whimpers.

The red fox's expression softened the tiniest amount, his seemingly permanent scowl now upturning slightly to a thin straight line. He appeared to be giving the prospect thought, real thought, and looked to the side, his gaze raking over the uninteresting wall in its way.

Judy stood there, unable to figure out how to follow up with that. She hadn't much experience in dealing with males in the aspect of what asking one out implied, having been too strange a doe for any buck to ask out. Anytime she took an interest or was taken interest in, those green eyes and red fur interrupted those thoughts, like some sort of compass telling her that the current interest was wrong. She didn't want to romanticize mental images of a mammal she hadn't met yet, but it always seemed to pull her away from said interests.

She didn't really regret it though. Usually, Judy figured out those bucks didn't have her best interests at heart. They wanted her to settle down, brace for impact, then be a rapid firing kit cannon for the rest of her youth. She wanted to be free and explore many things. The world was so large, so why should one stay with what they have always known?

"I guess…" Nick tentatively spoke, shaking the doe from her thoughts, "I could succumb to one meal with you."

"You make me sound like a vampire…" the grey bunny replied with a confused expression at his choice of words.

"I wouldn't doubt it," the tod deadpanned. The words should have been a joke, but his voice was so devoid of humor, it left her confused with how to read the mammal before her. "So, where to?"

"Oh… uh… we could… meet there?" she supplied, not meaning to make it sound like a question.

"Yes, I assumed that," said Nick, "but I meant where would we go? I'm pretty sure you're not asking me to your place… are you?" His brow shot up as he considered that she might have actually, unintentionally, implied that and he missed it.

"What?" Judy blurted. "No no no…. just no. I'm not that easy. NOT that I'm easy." She groaned and dragged a paw over her muzzle. "Just… give me your number and I'll figure it out for later. Alright?"

"Fine." The fox tod pulled out his phone and typed up his number in a text box, showing it to her. Getting out her own phone, the rabbit copied the number into her contacts and sent a quick text to ensure he wasn't blowing her off. The screen pinged with a new message and she felt satisfied that the fox actually trusted her with his number.
"Thank you very much," she chirped sweetly. "I'll let you know when I make a decision."

"Sure," Nick replied with his even and hollow tone returning. "I shall wait with baited breath, Fluff N Stuff." With that, the red fox swiftly walked away, leaving a flabbergasted Judy to comprehend that he just called her Fluff N Stuff. Now she was back to feeling annoyed at the idiot who now disappeared in the crowd of mammals outside the alleyway.

She had tried to pursue him once more to give him a piece of her mind, but she gave up when she realized there wasn't much she could do. She did have his phone number, so maybe she could vent her frustration at him that way. No, that would possibly keep him from dinner with her. She had to stifle her anger for now until she could figure out what was what.

She didn't even know what she would ask him. It wasn't like she could go, "Well hey there, fox. I have been seeing flashing images of you for years and was wondering why that was. Know anything?"

He would probably quirk an eyebrow and leave without a word. That sounded like the best-case scenario. Worst case, she gets maced and ends up looking like some delusional stalker. Just great.

With her ears down, though still inwardly a little happy knowing she had probably the best footage she has ever gotten while chasing down a Drone vs. Flux battle, Judy padded away to find something to eat. She was starving now that she thought about it.

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Nick slammed the door as he walked in, grumbling to himself. Taking off his glasses, he set them down on a stand nearby with a level of care that barely seemed gentle.

"Are you quite alright, sir?" a voice asked from nearby.

"Yeah yeah, Leo. I'm fine," the fox replied with an ambiguous grunt.

"If I might make my daily reminder, my name is actually Galileo," the voice said in a polite and even tone.

"Noted," said the tod, as he ambled into kitchen area nearby and grabbed a granola bar from a cupboard. "Same time tomorrow?"

"Of course," was the reply.

"Right…" Nick spoke with a roll of his eyes and a bite of the bar. "So… what was that new Drone all about?"

"It wasn't a Drone."

"What?" the red fox asked, nearly choking on his second bite of the granola bar. "Are you saying it was a…"

"Another Shard, yes."

Nick came back from the kitchen, finding the source of the voice. He found it and stared at the figure in confusion and disbelief.

Galileo was some sort of mechanical being, standing thin and tall. Probably a good six feet, two more than the fox himself, with amorphous facial features that were just meant to be functional
instead of aesthetic. It had the stature of a gazelle or antelope like mammal but looked wider and more built like a buffalo. It was hard to quantify what species the mechanical being was supposed to resemble, though it wasn't even from their world.

"I thought you told me it would be years more before they could come through…"

"I made calculations that gave me that assessment, though I did note there were variables I couldn't account for," Leo, as Nick liked to call him, explained.

The mechanical being fell to Earth some time ago, apparently being sent to follow a power he would oversee and protect. When the fox had been infused with that strange entity, he was left confused for years before being approached by the being. At first, he wouldn't hear a word of the machinations rantings, viewing them as preposterous and wanting nothing more than to ignore it.

It refused to leave him alone, his parameters concerning Nick being perfectly clear.

Over time, he accepted his guidance and was told that he was something called a Shard. They were beings of sentience that were infused with dark matter that had absorbed the energy of a star. Depending on the time a Shard spend in a star and its method of being cast away into the rest of the galaxy, it could be quantified by varying levels.

Red Shards were the least powerful, with the dark matter only having been infused for a few thousand to a few hundred thousand years in a star, likely being expunged due to a solar flare or sunspot. These were the most common but still extremely rare Shards.

Blue Shards were the next tier and exponentially more powerful, with the dark matter having been saturated for potentially millions of years. They were usually expunged in the same manner as Red Shards, though just 'charged' for longer.

Red and Blue Shards were part of a bracket known as Star Shards, being the staple name across many civilizations in varying languages.

The next level up, were the Nova Shards. These were the rarest shards, seeing as they are created under the right conditions during a supernova. In such a violent spread of energy, the dark matter that resided in the star at the time would be exposed to a massive influx of power. Supposedly that was what Nick had infused into himself, though he was 'incomplete' as Galileo reminded him.

Sent in to monitor and protect that which was infused with the Nova Shard, Galileo explained that Nick's Shard was cultivated and sent away to protect the galaxy from its power.

However, something unexpected happened. The power from the Shard was so great that it split a piece off as a 'Limiter' of sorts. At least, that was the mechanical being's analytical assessment based on science that Nick didn't always understand.

Ever since being infused with this power, he felt this growing hollow spot, metaphorically speaking, like a pit in his heart. It was like he was incomplete. It hurt, almost physically so. He'd spent a long time trying to find it, but to no avail.

Although… that rabbit made him forget that feeling for a moment. When she grabbed his shirt and pulled him in, he was shocked to feel that pit disappear. He felt so relieved for that brief moment that he couldn't properly address whatever the doe had been asking. It took him a short bit to remember and process what she said and reply in kind.

"What did you do to the Shard then?" Leo asked, his tone polite as ever but with a tinge of worry. Or at least, something that equated to worry for him.
"I dragged him off like I did the others and obliterated him," the fox replied easily. "Shard or no, I wasn't letting some governmental whatever get their paws on all that tech."

Nick walked over to a doorway across the way, opening it to reveal a very messy workshop. In the back of the room, walking around on autopilot, was his exoskeletal suit of armor. Upon his entrance, the suit looked over at Nick, scanning and recognizing him. Finding a point in the center of the room, it stood still and separated at certain parts to reveal the emptiness inside it.

"Just doing maintenance for now," the red fox tod told it. It closed up and sagged a bit as it powered down. The arms both looked burnt out, with one of them still smoking a bit from being overloaded.

Since Nick didn't have his limiter, he couldn't properly harness his Shard abilities. To that end, Galileo spent years helping him acquire a semblance of expertise in mechanical engineering and offered specs and designs modified from ones based on blueprints from his creators. It allowed him to draw upon his power without too much stress on his body, provided he didn't go overboard like he was forced to today.

The cultivation of both their efforts was the Flux power suit. Nick himself basically became the power core for it, with residual energy being able to fuel it should he need to call it from far away or send it away without him in it.

By that logic, it acted like an artificial 'Limiter'. It was crude to say the least, despite it being a marvel of technology to most in Zootopia, but did the job it was supposed to.

"A pity…" remarked Leo. "We could have used the Shard to collect info."

"I couldn't even understand him properly," the tod rebuked. "And your translation skills weren't helping. What you told me he said sounded like both a greeting and a threat."

"What can I say?" the being defended. "It was an abrasive language."

A ping sounded through the workshop as Nick pulled plating off the Flux suit's arms, trying to make sense of the damage inside. He stopped his work and looked to the workbench near him. Shaking his head, he turned back to his work.

Another ping sounded and the fox both sighed, then groaned, picking himself up and grabbing the phone making the offending racket.

He unlocked the device and looked a bit shocked to see a text from the bunny.

*Hey, it's Judy. You know the bunny from earlier?*

*Anyways, I decided on a place.*

*Technically it's a bar but it serves both prey and pred food so... yeah.*

*Let me know. It's near the police precinct in Central Plaza.*

*Tonight at 7 then?*

There was a second message attached with an address that Nick knew the street to, but was fuzzy on the establishments down that way.

Walking into the foyer and picking up his spectacles, he donned them and let the lenses adjust to his eyes.
He didn't actually need glasses but technically, what he was wearing were not glasses. They were a type of miniature computer that displayed info on the lenses and crossed the fields to create a 3-D effect. Much like a projected hologram but without being able to be touched. Using his phone to link to it, he searched the address and looked at the floor, a virtual map adjusting to be displayed through his vision on the floor like a strange diorama. It showed his location in the Tundratown District and highlighted a path to the establishment just outside of Central Plaza, heading into Downtown. A page blinked into existence, showing the places name and a picture of it.

"Yay," he cheered, his tone devoid of any such exuberance. "She's taking me to a cop bar."

His eyes bulged as he nearly sputtered laughing, something he hadn't done for a long time.

"And who names a bar the 'Drunk Tank'!"
Despite living in the city of Zootopia for as long as he had, the fox hadn't felt the need to explore a
city he felt would always be the same deplorable place it had always been, ripe with bigoted views
and means to enact them. He explored the city when he could to remember the layout and pathways,
as well as scope out locations he could call in his Flux armor without much unwanted scrutiny.
Suffice it to say, Nick's knowledge of the city was purely for function, getting around as fast and
efficiently as possible, etcetera.

He never really cared to frequent certain establishments and such for social purposes. He felt it was a
vastly useless waste of time, especially considering his circumstances.

The red fox shifted his glasses and looked around, letting the scanning function peruse the crowd of
mammals within the bar and grill thusly named the 'Drunk Tank'. Little windows popped up as facial
recognition pulled up files and social media links for each mammal his gaze raked over.

The tod had arrived a couple hours before needing to meet with Judy, not liking venturing into a new
venue without properly scoping out potential exits and means of escape. It was part of the reason he
kept away from social obligations since the Drones started falling from the sky. If they fell while
socially engaged, mammals might catch onto certain things from disappearances at the most
opportune times. Thankfully, the rabbit appeared to accept his spiel about being told to find her after
Flux left, even when it was obvious he was a similar build and the same species.

"Dumb bunny," Nick muttered to himself with a scowl. Her fiery spirit did strike a chord within him
though. Most rabbits he met, or even most prey smaller than himself, would exude a rather pungent
aura of unsettling nervousness around him. He knew he wasn't the most pleasant mammal to spend
time with, but he wasn't that inherently dangerous to look at. The fox sighed, shifting his spectacles.

An earpiece was hooked around his ear, the audio turned on and Leo making observations from the
other end, able to see anything he did through the glasses he wore. It made certain things concerning
his outings easier since the mechanical being could remotely fly the Flux armor to Nick and even
engage combat protocols when it was necessary.

"I don't understand your innate desire to scout out places like this as if they were crawling with ne'er
do wells," Leo complained, the polite inflection to its voice ever present, making its statement more
annoying.

"I don't like not knowing my environment," was the fox's curt and quick reply. "Why do you think I
spent years getting to know the city inside and out?"

"Because you are obsessed with averting your focus from social interaction with other mammals due
to an ingrained fear of getting close to others that you view as important, only to know that regardless
of their personal desires and promises, they are incapable by the very definition of being able to
remain by your side in the capacity you both crave and need," the android explained. Nick rolled his
eyes and grunted ambiguously, having heard this prolonged psychological breakdown of his mindset
a few times before.

"That question was rhetorical, Leo," the fox tod fired back, taking a sip of his drink.

"And you have heard my analysis before," Leo replied. "We both know exactly what we are doing.
All you have to do, as I have explained before, is find your Limiter."
The tod let out a short snarl of disgust. His 'Limiter'. He had heard about it for years from the somewhat annoying android. His body was infused the raw energy of his Nova Shard. Using it damaged his body if he wasn't careful, though it didn't mean he couldn't draw larger amounts of power. He usually couldn't do so because the flow of power was harder to stem with his willpower the more he drew upon. That was why finding his 'Limiter' was exceedingly crucial. They could not only limit his power so it didn't go rampant, but the Limiter could act more like a regulator as well, allowing Nick to use greater degrees of power without losing control. He had lost control before in emotional fits and it had cost him dearly. That was years ago though and he had since learned to mostly suppress his emotional responses to stimulus so as to mitigate that end.

"And how will you or I know when we have found this so-called Limiter?" Nick asked a little bitterly. Leo wasn't fazed though, simply remaining thoughtfully silent as the being calculated its answer.

Mammals occasionally looked over at the fox seemingly talking to himself, turning away in response to seeing the earpiece device in his ear. The tod rolled his eyes repeatedly as each awkward stare turned into an averted one.

"A certain… reaction… is likely to take effect," the android explained. "My data is limited in this case, but I surmise it would be something that registers a change in you that you would absolutely detect. Right now, the power within your body is akin to an unstable reactor. Your mental fortitude and sheer force of will is all that keeps it contained, as well as an upkeep of your regimen using pseudo limiter devices to contain everything."

The red fox narrowed his eyes, remembering the reaction to Judy getting close to him. He felt the burden he had grown used to being lifted for the briefest of moments by mere physical interaction. He couldn't decide if that was worth pursuing for no other reason than fulfillment or did she actually have something to do with this. Leo did direct him to the city of Zootopia due to the fact that he could scan that the Limiter was in this vicinity. Unfortunately, he couldn't gauge a more pinpointed location than a few hundred-mile diameter search area. With Zootopia being the most condensed populated area, logic dictated it was a justifiable choice to migrate here.

On another note, Nick refocused on the bracelet he wore, with the talk of his pseudo limiters drawing his ire once more. Even with mental conditioning and constant meditation, his power was beyond organic means to restrain properly. Leo and himself used whatever means they could to devise different ways to keep everything under control. The thick grey-blue band he wore was a means of doing so.

With a level of technological understanding that he had to expand upon over the years, Nick was able to help create this band, amongst other means, that helped control and regulate his power flow within his body. He was still in relatively consistent pain and prone to bouts of severe episodes akin to epilepsy when he couldn't control the raw energy infused into his body.

"That rabbit made me forget the metaphorical painful pit in my chest for a brief moment," Nick divulged. "Does that count as anything noteworthy?" Despite the android lacking the capacity to show or vocalize noises denoting things like surprise or fear, Nick had become adept at understanding when certain things shocked the mechanical being for a brief moment before its calculating mind kicked in to analyze the information provided properly.

"You mean the symptom you have complained about constantly for years without any such relief before?" the being asked in rhetoric. "Yes, I would say that denotes something quite worthy of mention. Why didn't you say anything before? I could have researched the individual."

"Don't," the fox chided with a little venom in his tone. "I doubt it was anything I would be interested
in…” A ping sounded in his ear as a small window displayed through the lenses of his faux glasses. Nick sighed and pinched the bridge of his snout. Unable to deny the curiosity and urge to properly scope anything unknown he would have to deal with, the red fox focused on the information displayed, raising a brow upon seeing the origins of her lineage displayed alongside her current endeavors and transcript information for journalism courses. The tod scanned over the basics.

Judith Laverne Hopps. Currently 23 and living in an apartment complex near the Central Plaza with two other mammals. She took up residency in the city since the past year, nearly as long as he had been publicly fighting in the Flux suit of armor, and has been pursuing any means she could to enter a profession in journalism. In the meantime, she headed up, moderated, and pretty much controlled a blog website devoted to his ‘superhero’ side. She called it Flux Facts and Features. He made a scoffing noise at her apparent need to keep it all pertaining to the letter ‘F’.

"I take it you read my preliminary analysis?" Leo asked.

"Yeah, but she didn't reside in the city for as long as you have had me here looking for my Limiter," supplied Nick.

"She has resided within the search zone her entire life though," the android replied in kind. "She was born and raised in the Bunnyborrow area."

Nick's heart felt like it stilled as something icy took a hold of it. He didn't like remembering that part of his past. He actually resided in Bunnyborrow… once upon a time, and was unlikely to ever venture back there again. Too many memories he wished to run from.

"So, you think she might be the Limiter? How would we test that?"

Leo remained silent over the line, thinking as fast as his synthetic brain could go in an attempt to come up with the most logical means of approaching this without potentially revealing Nick as Flux should it be wrong.

"You might have to spend time with her on a regular basis and attempt more physical contact with her," came the calm reply after nearly a minute of silence. Nick's eyes widened slightly as his mind skewed from the innocent and he groaned at the prospect of having to make socializing with another mammal as an obligation.

"I am not going to explore that option, Leo."

"I didn't say it would have to venture into physical contact of a sexual nature, though if that should be your method, I have no objections," the android commented. A blush came to Nick's cheeks and ears, lamenting the prospect that Leo’s mechanical and logical indifference towards saying such things seemed to only make his saying as such even more embarrassing than if another mammal said it in a teasing manner.

"Please, Leo, just stop," Nick pleaded with a grumble. "I have no intentions of doing anything like that."

"Try engaging in whatever works for you then," came the calm reply. "Your method of approach is yours to decide."

"Can we change the subject?" the fox asked, nearly growling.

"Of course," Leo politely spoke. "How about discussing the fact that a Red Shard showed up when the Gate hasn't produced one before?"
The tod grunted in affirmation. Another thing to lament and add to the pile of things causing him trouble. Nearly a year ago, the wormhole that Leo told him transported his Shard to their world reopened in a limited capacity. Nothing much could come through besides the Drones. They were robotic soldiers that were sent to acquire the Shard and keep it guarded until proper extraction could be arranged. According to Leo, the wormhole, or Gate as it called it, was so virulent that no living being could survive transit. Even mechanical beings were mostly destroyed in the violent vortex that transcended space. Only a fraction of them made it through with the functionality to carry out their mission parameters.

"I'm guessing that thing you told me about spatial stability being too low has been rectified?" the red fox tod inquired, barely watching his surroundings anymore. He sipped his drink once more.

"I don't have enough data to correctly answer that," the android began to explain, "but it at least appears that they might have reached a bare minimum of stability to send another Shard into the Gate, since they would have the greatest success rate as compared to conventional biological beings."

"I agree on that note," Nick conceded. "I suppose I should step up my search for my Limiter if I am to be able to go head to head with these other Shards without burning out my suit and myself with every fight."

Speaking of the prospective devil, Nick spied the rabbit entering the establishment, with the fox looking at his watch to see it was just over an hour before the time she said to meet. He couldn't actually say much against that, since he was there two hours before the anointed time.

Her shocked face and wide eyes were a sight to behold, the edges of his lips tugging upwards ever so slightly in mild amusement at her barely suppressed reaction to him being there. He raised his glass, filled with nothing but tea, and waved her over to his two-mammal table.

"I thought I mentioned 7pm..." she muttered to no mammal in particular, her eyes bugging out as she frantically pulled out her phone. "Oh! Butter biscuits! Don't tell me I mistyped and you have been waiting for a good long while..."

"Relax, Fluff," Nick chided her. "I wanted to see what this place was like. Taking me to a cop bar, huh? And why is it called the Drunk Tank?"

Visibly relaxing at hearing his explanation and putting her phone down onto the table, Judy waved down a server, asking for a drink that Nick paid no mind to listen to. He was focused on measuring up the bunny before him. Dressed in a small yellow blouse, blue light jacket, and blue jeans, the grey-eyed doe appeared to be trying to make some sort of impression. As if the theme for the night was casual but mildly professional.

"I don't know too many places to go and the service here is rather good," she replied with a nervous smile. "And they call it that as a reference to that cell cops keep those arrested for public intoxication in..." the grey doe pointed towards the strangely decorated V.I.P. section. "They even have fake bars surrounding that section for the heck of it."

"Right..." drawled the fox. "Well I can't deny everybody seems friendly."

"For sure!" Judy exclaimed, clearing her throat upon realizing her outburst, flicking her eyes between the fox and her phone. "I've made a few friends through here and I figured it wouldn't hurt to overhear a bit of chatter when it comes to a story for my Flux blog."

Nick acted surprised, raising a brow while asking, "Blog? I remember you getting exuberant earlier
over Flux but a blog?"

"Yeah…” the grey bunny spoke softly. "I follow his fights across the city and try to put together stories to show how great I and others like me think he is. Probably comes off as an obsession."

That's an understatement, the tod thought, forcing down the urge to say as much out loud.

Instead, he settled with saying, "If you don't mind me asking, why the 'obsession'?" Nick used air quotes to accentuate the word 'obsession'.

"Ah, well… besides Flux being… awesome?" Judy meekly replied inquisitively. Nick nodded. "It's difficult to explain."

"Try me," the red fox bluntly stated. "I've heard a great many strange tales. I'm sure yours won't faze me much."

The doe stared at her phone, tossing it between her paws as she mulled the thought over. Her eyes looked over to the side and down, her bottom lip being nibbled upon as the idea of divulging something teetered on the tip of her tongue.

"I guess… but please don't laugh. Non-negotiable." Her head tilted down, ears slicked back, and eyes flicked up to the fox, locking with his own emerald orbs. Nick nodded slowly, unsure what to think of her reserved nature as opposed to before. Judy let out a breath and blinked.

"I see… these images sometimes, ever since I was nine," she began, her grey eyes barely able to hold a gaze with Nick as they darted downward anxiously on occasion. "I don't see much, but they have shown me a few things that seem to be inexplicably linked to Flux. And no, I know they aren't visions or whatever. It's like…"

"Quantum entanglement," Leo finished over the earpiece. "If she is the Limiter, she might be experiencing a bleeding effect from your mind to hers. Flashes of memories." The fox had nearly jumped at the unexpected intrusion into the conversation by the android. The doe had stopped talking for a moment upon seeing him tense up, but he played it off by rubbing his thigh, implying he had a small cramp, gesturing for her to continue with a tepid smirk.

"It's like… something is telling me…” she trailed off again, with the fox actually waiting expectantly, for reasons he couldn't fathom.

"Judy!" a new voice chirped through the bar. The grey doe turned, ears popping up and swiveling to the source of the voice. The tod raised a brow, trying to hide his irritation at being cut off from potential answers.

The two mammals spotted an African wild dog approaching them, dressed in ZPD blues and having apparently just entered the bar. Taking off her hat, large, round ears perked up from under the hat, looking rather unbalanced on the more moderately sized mammal. Her muzzle was mostly covered in black with white marbling over the top of her head across either side under her muzzle.

Without much delay, nor waiting for a reply, the female wild dog zipped over to Judy and picked her up in a very enthusiastic hug.

Nick was struggling to keep a straight face as the poor rabbit looked like she was being squeezed like a stuffed toy in a young kit's grasp.

"H-hey Essie," the rabbit choked out from her crushing embrace.
"Who?" the red fox asked by reflex. Both of the hugging mammals looked at Nick, the wild dog narrowing her eyes at him.

"Nick, meet my good friend, Esther," Judy politely said, still held by 'Essie'.

"Esther?" he spoke, instantly seeing the fierce look emanating from the mammal embracing Judy.

"It's Essie or nothing, buddy," shot the wild dog. "And how do you know my cinnamon bun?"

The fox raised an eyebrow in slight surprise.

"Your…? Are you two…?" Nick began to ask, seeing the grey doe's eyes start to bug out.

"Oh no… we're not…" she started.

"And if we are?" Essie interjected, relieving Judy from the embrace, setting her on her own shoulder, whereas the bunny didn't fight it and sat there with an admonishing glare to her friend.

"Essie… don't go spreading rumors," chided the smaller mammal.

Essie's muzzle broke into a smile as she started laughing good naturedly.

"Sorry there. I get a little carried away sometimes." She offered a paw, to which the fox tentatively took. "She's straight by the way, in case you were interested..." Judy scrambled to clamp a paw over her friend's muzzle, giving Nick a nervous smile.

It failed utterly as the small rabbit's paw couldn't encircle her friends mouth to shut it. Essie laughed and flicked her blue-grey eyes between the two, probably making mental assessments of everything, Nick assumed.

"If I didn't know any better, I would say he looks like that description from your dreams…. Red fur and green eyes?" the female wild dog revealed, enjoying Judy's struggle to now wrap an arm around her muzzle to shut it. This time it worked but the damage was done and the doe gave up with a groan, jumping down to her seat once more.

Nick was taking all of this in, mostly focused on the dream thing. If he linked that to the unfinished description from before, then….

His blood went cold.

I don't see much, but they have shown me a few things that seem to be inexplicably linked to Flux.

That information, loosely translated, meant that she might know exactly who he is. Maybe he was too obvious by coming back in his civilian form. He should have actually conscripted a nearby mammal for help. Someone NOT a fox.

That might explain her sudden interest to invite him out instead of letting things go at that.

"Anyways," Judy spoke up, interrupting her friend and jarring Nick from his own thoughts and fears, "Essie here is an officer in the ZPD, as you can see from her blues. She's pretty much my best friend in Zootopia."

"Aww," the wild dog cooed, holding a paw over her heart in a dramatic flair and patting the bunny's head with the other. "Thank you."

Judy ran a paw through the fur on her head, smoothing down the ruffled parts.
There was a strangely awkward silence for a moment before Essie piped up again, "I'll leave you to it then. Don't forget you and I are going to see the new Savage film." The doe nodded and wished her friend goodbye as she joined a few of her fellow officers.

"Excitable, isn't she?" the fox inquired plainly, a slight smile tugging one side of his lips upward.

"You get used to it," the grey bunny replied with a shrug. The server took the chance to bring Judy her drink now, probably having waited till the commotion died down a bit.

"So then, I was saying something about mental images?"

"Sure?"

"Well…"

A ping went off on her phone and a beep sounded in Nick's ear as a warning was broadcasted to him from Leo.

"Nick, there appears to be a problem," the mechanical being began. "Your Red Shard showed up again. I thought you said that you obliterated him."

Judy looked confused at the notification on her phone, narrowing her eyes.

The red fox couldn't speak out loud to Leo, lest the bunny overhear. His maw opened slightly, unsure how to respond.

This is why he didn't like socializing.

"I'm going to change the channel of a television in the bar to the news coverage. Hold on." Nick patiently waited a few seconds, noticing a television screen hanging over the bar alongside three others switched channels and the volume was driven up to a moderate level with subtitles on the screen.

"…uning in, it appears that the Drone from earlier may not have been completely destroyed, showing signs of heavy damage and red glowing portions of their armor. Flux seems to have failed in eliminating this one this time but will hopefully return to dispatch the enemy."

Judy darted upwards in her chair, ears focused on the news coverage.

"What?" she meeped.

The tod was staring at the live camera coverage of the Red Shard, seeing that most of the armor was damaged or missing, but whatever creature inhabited the armor, appeared to have healed, the lost arm reconstructed and subsequent wounds he inflicted to 'obliterate' it.

It looked like the Shard was close to them, judging by the streets. Nick had to wonder if it was somehow tracking him.

He hadn't time to contemplate it. Soon enough there were panicked sounds from nearby and something that resembled roars coming from a short distance.

To his horror and annoyance, the grey doe jumped up, quickly leaving a larger denomination bill to cover their drinks, and darted out the door with all due haste. Her phone was in paw and already primed to record.

The rest of the patrons in the establishment were getting up to hurriedly leave. The officers in the bar
were a bit more collected than the other patrons and helped them leave in an orderly fashion.

Nick didn't wait long before breaking off in a sprint to follow the rabbit.

"Leo, how's my suit?" the fox asked into the earpiece.

"Almost ready, but the emitters on your forearms still need a bit of work," the android answered smoothly. "If you call it there now, it may take a few minutes, provided the thrusters don't burnout. Using them for defensive measures is a bit more of a stretch."

"Any back-ups primed?" Nick tried to sound hopeful.

"Afraid not," Leo replied. "I wasn't expecting to have to deal with another event until next week. This complicates things."

"Blast it," the tod cursed. "I'll try and wing it. Maybe I could test the band's emergency feature…" he looked down at the limiter band he wore. In the direst of situations, it could be used as a one shot offensive measure. At least… that's the way he attempted to design it. Testing for it didn't quite work as planned.

Not even worried about pacing himself, Nick gave his sprint everything he had, with his paw pads being the only thing touching the pavement as he ran almost akin to his ancient ancestors, haunches raised as he ran and leaning so far forward he was almost on all fours by default.

The rabbit had a head start, but he was gaining quick.

"How could she be so stupid?!" the fox muttered to himself between deep breaths as he ran. The Red Shard wasn't too far ahead, having raised its head from looking down at something to focus on the rabbit.

Judy appeared to realize her mistake as she turned tail and tried running for cover, having fully expected Flux to already be on the scene.

Nick watched, still drawing closer, as the Red Shard used what little weaponry it had left to try lobbing some sort of energy bomb towards the bunny doe. She squealed and covered her head, bracing herself.

In a burst of energy that seared him from the inside out, Nick released a small amount of energy to give himself a semblance of super speed. It worked the smallest fraction of a second as the world slowed to him and legs moved faster than one could blink. In a brief rush, his body burning from not having the proper means to draw out his power, he flashed over to Judy, picking her up and zipping away. He got far enough away to dodge the energy bomb but his legs gave out due to the green wash of energy emanating from them, making them feel like superheated jelly.

Wrapping himself around the doe protectively, Nick rolled painfully to a stop a few dozen yards from the ensuing explosion of the energy bomb, red energy washing outward and heating the air.

Unable to move for the time being, the red fox kept a hold of Judy, who got up to figure out what happened. She looked around and saw the location she had been, the Drone that appeared to be focused on the cloud of red energy that was left in the aftermath of its bomb, and the fox that had somehow miraculously saved her.

Doing a double take, Judy gasped in horror to see it was Nick, injured and shaking as his body exuded a green energy from various places on him. His legs were smoking, as if they had been lit aflame, and various patches of fur were either burned off or scraped off from the fall and explosive
energy. He was curled up in a fetal position, seething and hissing in pain.

Judy, to her relief and utter guilt, was completely unharmed excepting some aching muscles. Her head was swimming as she knelt down to the fox tod, tears burning hot as they began to drip from her eyes.

"I'm sorry…" she squeaked. Then she froze.

A heavy thump sounded behind her, followed by another, then another.

Turning slowly, she saw the red Drone looming over her, poised to strike.

Letting out a scream, Judy threw herself protectively over Nick, knowing it wouldn't do much against the hulking mass.

The red fox, however, was spurred into action by her scream, a surge of adrenaline coursing through his veins as he lifted himself up, the band on his arm morphed and expanded, mechanical parts sliding outward and wrapping around his wrist, forearm, and most of his paw.

An emitter of sorts assembled in the palm of his paw, quickly glowing brightly as it charged, pain ripping through Nick's arm as it readied to fire. The Red Shard raised an arm, preparing to smite them with an overbearing and mighty blow.

Judy curled into the fox's chest, whimpering and pressing a paw to his heart. Images flashed through her mind much clearer than she had ever seen before. She willed them away, only wanting to protect the fox from her own stupidity.

Feeling a warmth within her heart, as she pressed herself against Nick, something shifted in her that she couldn't place.

Nick however, was funneling everything he could into the band unit. All the parts that could, glowed green, the pain reaching a barely tolerable point.

Suddenly, he felt something…. shift… in him. The pain began to become mitigated, subsiding but not disappearing. He thought he was losing it…

Until his arm unit glowed brighter, green turning to purple and a heavy 'thrum' vibrating the air.

"Now or never," the fox muttered to himself, fairly sure his pain had only just begun.

A cascading beam of purple light tore through the air, hitting the Red Shard full force in the chest and ripping through it like it was made of nothing more than cardboard.

The resounding 'thrum' rumbled everything and anything within the vicinity.

Nick on the other paw, was losing feeling in the arm he used to fire the beam. Bright violet light, violent and vibrant encompassed his arm. He wanted to stop, but he couldn't let up. He couldn't chance that the Red Shard would come back. Before he only assumed he had killed it, disabling it like the Drones, but he didn't realize it might have survived his onslaught when he disposed of it in a crevasse near the city.

The beam arched into the sky, piercing the clouds and tainting the star strewn heavens as the sun faded away into dusk.

When the beam of light thinned down to nothing, the air becoming eerily still, the Red Shard was no
longer moving, no longer glowing, and no longer alive.

In a nearly soundless way, that which was left began to fall apart and blow away in the breeze like ashes. This time, it was well and truly obliterated.

Judy could barely believe it, suddenly taking in what the fox had done and the implications of what he did meant. Nick was Flux. Flux was Nick. She was right. There was a mammal within the suit of armor.

Turning to thank him, she noticed something that horrified her as she clapped a paw to her mouth to prevent herself from screaming again.

Nick's arm, that had wielded the partial armament, had completely burned away, leaving a stump as he collapsed in the street. The doe looked around, noticing there were no witnesses and no news copters within range. Street lights nearby were off while far away ones appeared to be flickering in a minimal level of operation. She assumed whatever he did had an EMP effect to a degree.

Helping the fox up, the grey bunny pulled him to his feet, practically dragging him along. She needed to get him where he could get medical attention.

The thought no sooner passed through her mind when she looked up to see Flux's armor float down in front of her. She took a step back warily, shifting Nick's weight upon her shoulders. She could barely carry him, much less run if need be.

"I'm glad to have been proven right," a voice emanated from the suit. "It appears you are his Limiter."
Judy could only stand to the side and watch.

The fox before her was a mess of a mammal, with burns everywhere on his body and a missing arm. The doe wanted to cry but the sheer horror of what she saw, coupled with the recent revelation that Nick was Flux, made it difficult to react at all.

The armor she knew Flux to don flew the two of them to a home where a large, amorphous looking, robot helped them inside a small house at the edge of Tundratown, barely explaining that it brought them here by remote control of the suit.

The mechanical being that Judy assumed was another armor suit, said it was an aiding android to Flux, but not much more, as it carried the limp and mostly unconscious fox to a table inside.

“Can you help him?” she asked meekly, eyes burning to release their tears but barely holding back.

“Not directly, no,” the being said bluntly, if not politely. It turned its head to witness the bunny’s morbid expression. “Let me clarify… He will be fine and there is nothing I can do to aid him as he needs none.”

“You mean… he’ll heal?” the grey doe inquired tepidly. She could only assume it meant that Nick had regenerative abilities.

“He…” the android paused, mulling over the right words, “will recover. Healing would be too general a term for what he does.”

“I don’t understand,” Judy breathed, growing more frantic. “Shouldn’t we take him to a hospital.”

“They can’t help him…” the android softly spoke. “But…”

“But?” she interjected, quieting down when she realized the being was interrupted.

“But… you might be able to speed up the process.”

“I don’t understand,” the doe candidly revealed. While unmoving and incapable of being read, as far as Judy could see considering the being before her looked entirely robotic, she felt the robot seemed… contemplative, processing the moment.

“You are his limiter,” it plainly stated.

“Yes, you mentioned that… but what do you mean?” the doe asked with a shaky voice, unsure how to take whatever this situation was in.

The mechanical being seemed to ignore her for a brief moment as he attended to Nick, grabbing instruments and placing an odd looking bulbous plate on his chest. Parts of it glowed green as tendrils of green energy spilled from his wounds, like miniature solar flares.

“Are you willing to listen to what I have to say?” the android asked calmly. Judy nodded slowly, flicking her gaze to the unconscious fox for a second before riveting her attention back to the being.

“First of all, my name is Galileo. I am an artificial entity tasked with protecting a power that is being sought as a means to implement galactic dominance by whoever should obtain it.” The bunny doe nodded once more… even more slowly.
“So, you’re some sort of artificial intelligence?” she inquired tentatively.

“No,” Galileo answered instantly. “I am more synonymous in scope to what you might refer to as ‘virtual’ intelligence. I have much in the way of information and analytical analysis programs to make assumptions and observations in reference to learning, but I do not have the capacity for emotional growth or evolution of said intelligence. I am the mechanical cultivation of several cultures that worked together to preserve and protect the power that was sent here. So, I am a semblance of a ‘Guardian’, so to speak.”

“What is this power? Are you and Nick…. Flux… protecting it?”

“A logical assumption, but no,” the android remarked. “Nicholas is the power, or at least, he is infused with it… as are you…”

Judy blinked.

“What?”

“I called you his Limiter, because, while Nicholas here has the raw, unrefined energy,” Galileo explained. “You have the part of the power that regulates everything. I’m sure you can see what happens when he draws his power out like this?” it gestured to the tod’s arm stump. “You activated the bond between the both of you but it was incomplete and he was unprepared for it. You did save him though.”

“What? No… he saved me… with that purple beam,” the rabbit doe stuttered, attempting futilely to make sense of everything. She heard it all just fine, but the concept eluded her for the time being, her focus still mostly on worrying over the red fox before her.

“That was a partial bond created by something I wish to ask you about,” the mechanical being remarked curiously. “What did you feel or experience right before Nicholas fired off the pulse beam?”

“I… uh… what does that matter?” the grey doe sputtered, blushing. Galileo cocked its head oddly, examining her reaction. Judy took a step back and tried to compose herself. She felt so exposed and vulnerable in the gaze of that things eyes, optical sensors, or whatever it might refer to them as.

“Please, Judith,” it pleaded politely. “It’s important in regards to helping him.” The android pointed towards Nick, breathing more evenly, but still out. She paused and dug deep, taking in a long and slow breath.

“Fine,” she vented tepidly. “I was… scared, but I suppose the thing you want to know is… I felt safe in his protective embrace and only wanted to protect him from my mistakes in return…”

The things that amounted to eyes in the droid’s face plate shuttered closed and open, much like a blink, as it appeared to be processing the information. It then gestured for her to continue. The doe sighed.

“And… I guess… I felt something ‘shift’ within me. Between us. I don’t know how to describe it. It was like… there was a sudden flow between us…”

“I believe I understand now,” Galileo surmised. It got up and tinkered with the device on Nick’s chest, the lights and energy cutting off its flow. Removing and setting it aside, the android beckoned Judy over, lifting her onto the table.

“Place a paw on his chest please,” requested the robot. The grey bunny looked at him in confusion,
to which it gestured again, and she did as she was kindly asked. “Now, I need you to try thinking about that mindset again. I need that ‘shift’ to happen again. Focus on Nicholas and your sense of protectiveness. He needs your help. Otherwise, he may not be the same again.”

The wording sounded ominous, sending a hollow feeling of dread through her body. Her heart pounded in her ears as breathing became more difficult. He couldn’t die… This was her fault and she couldn’t let her hero die because of her mistake.

She couldn’t understand what Galileo wanted from her. A sense of protection wouldn’t save him. And she still didn’t understand this ‘Limiter’ deal. What power could she hold in concern to this fox? He was the one who took on all those Drones, not her. He was the one who protected the city for a year, not her. She was just a fangirl with an obsession over a superhero, blindly following images in her head that, while somehow accurate, could only be delusional thoughts she imprinted on Nick in some form of desperation. Her reasoning fettered out as she tried to refocus on the original goal.

She breathed, in and out, in and out, attempting to pull her thoughts into the same mindset from earlier when the red Drone was bearing down upon them. There was no danger to her this time, but the fox needed her help this time.

She remembered, briefly considering how small she felt curled up against him, russet fur encircling her and a large padded paw pressing into her and keeping her close. She remembered her overwhelming guilt and desire to protect him, a desire that resurfaced within her as she tearfully gazed upon the broken fox before her.

Protect. Protect. Protect.

A slow breath escaped her, purple light engulfing her body as the world around her seemed to fade away and she felt as if her body were pulled into a warm pit, her very essence filling the hollow pit within the warmth. It was… comforting.

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Galileo watched in observatory interest. The rabbit had pressed a paw to Nicholas’s chest and stayed in that position, knelt over him and clenching her eyes shut. She occasionally opened them to steal a glance and looked rather solemn and stricken with guilt.

For several minutes, this was the norm. the android was fairly certain she wasn’t even aware how much time passed.

As a machine though, Galileo had patience, and the rabbit appeared to need all her focus.

Finally, something occurred worth documenting for future examination and exploration.

The grey bunny doe began to glow violet from her irises, her eyes open once more and trained on the red fox tod below her. The glow emanated from there and encompassed her entire form, ears to feet. Her body then began to fade from the visible spectrum, becoming an amethyst incorporeal entity.

Judy’s body then seemed to flow like water into the point of which her paw was pressed to Nick’s chest, cascading energy pouring into the fox and making his chest rise with a deep raspy breath. It didn’t take much longer than a few seconds for the doe’s body to flow completely into the fox.

With all sensors and imaging means at the android’s disposal activated, it kept a riveted focus upon the two, now one, mammals.

“Curious,” it voiced to no one in particular.
Nick’s body arched up and purple energy flow out from and around all of his wounds. His legs stretched out and claws extended as the internal damage from his unrestrained speed boost that seared the flesh from the inside was reconstructed back to a point of peak health. Scraps, cuts, and other small injuries spit out small tendrils of the violet energy as they sealed quickly, healing as if they never occurred.

His arm was the longest running outpouring of energy. The purple hue spilled out like a foggy flood, bones, muscle, and sinew reconstructing his arm as the incapacitated fox whined and whimpered from the supposed pain, the primal sounds being rare for Galileo to hear from the red fox.

After a good minute or so of regenerative actions, the flow stopped and Nick calmed down, his arched back resting back upon the table.

Nick opened his eyes slowly, feeling a strangely intense feeling of fulfillment. He expected inconceivable pain. The last thing he knew that he saw was a stump of an arm where his restrictive band used to be.

“Oh,” he muttered in realization. “I must have had a reversion episode…” A distinct feeling of lamentation tried to work its way into his heart, but all he could feel was this calm sense that everything was ok. The hollow pit he had become so accustomed to for years felt like it was gone and it confused him.

“You’re awake, sir,” Leo mentioned in almost irritating rhetoric.

“Yeah… so, did I experience another reversion?” the fox asked tentatively. The tod was terrified to hear the answer but he needed to know. In the past, when he received damage to that level or thereabouts of such, the power within his body would enact something like a survival mechanism. Massive amounts of raw energy would flood from his body, washing the area in a destructive wave of energy. Depending on the severity of his wounds, the damage could be much like the aftermath of a military grade explosive and range up to something that could level a small town. The process would heal him in seconds, basically reconstructing and reverting his body back to a point of peak physical condition.

“No, the bunny helped you,” the android stated. “In order to protect you from a reversion event, which I neglected to explain, she… helped you heal. I’m assuming by using her abilities as your Limiter to focus your energy on healing only instead of the rather violent reaction you are accustomed to.”

“Oh… so she really is…?”

“Yes.”

“Where did she go?” Nick asked, looking around for the bunny doe that saved him.

“I’m right here,” a voice came from some place he couldn’t pinpoint. It was like a soft whisper spoken into his ear. The tod whirled around, looking for Judy. His eyes narrowed and lips tightened into a thin line as he noticed that besides Leo… there didn’t appear to be…

The red fox looked down beside him and saw something that confused, baffled, threw him for a loop, and et cetera.

A small pile of clothes lay next to him, in a heap and looking rather out of place.
Leaning down, the fox looked around once more and picked up the jacket. It looked just like the one Judy had on before. The jeans and blouse too. A deep purple hue attracted his attention as he instinctively reached for it, blushing profusely beneath his fur as he lifted the fabric up and realized it was the rabbit’s undergarments.

“DON’T TOUCH THAT!” the voice from before shouted in desperation, a small whimper following it.

Nick dropped the intensely colored panties and raised his paws in surrender, looking around for the source of the voice he could only surmise was the doe.

“I’m sorry… I didn’t mean…” he stopped upon still not noticing where the rabbit was.

“Who are you talking to?” Leo asked, eyes scanning the room for something else.

“You don’t hear her?” Nick asked a little unnerved. The android shook its head in the negative. The fox could tell the mechanical being was analyzing everything and coming up with a comprehensive and detailed assessment of the event.

“I believe I understand…” it trailed off. The fox tod waited for a good minute, the voice staying silent as well for unknown reasons. His eyes leveled as he gestured sarcastically for the robot to continue.

“Ah, right, still analyzing, but I believe your body and hers have now merged to complete the Nova Shard. You also might be sharing one mind, or at least capable of communicating in a fashion that is like an open frequency between you two.”

Panic started to take a hold of Nick. The doe merged with him. He couldn’t figure out if that meant the two were stuck like this or if she could disperse the bond.

“Calm down…” Judy’s voice cooed within his mind. To his surprise, it helped.

“I don’t understand,” he said aloud. “Are you OK?”

“I think so,” she spoke, a slight tinge of worry tainting her tone. “This is odd to me of course, but I don’t feel at all afraid. Are you feeling better?”

Her worry for him, despite apparently having lost her physical form and trapped herself in his mind, touched his heart in a way he was foreign to and had trouble understanding properly. It wasn’t a bad feeling at all, quite the opposite, but he didn’t like being unable to comprehend something, especially about himself.

Nick raised the previously disintegrated arm, looking it over and moving everything that he could in terms of muscles and joints. He then kicked his legs out and stretched a bit, feeling them having been returned to normal.

“Much, actually…” Nick revealed. “I assume this is your doing?”

“Me?” both Judy and Leo voiced at the same time.

“Both of you,” he responded.

“All I did is experiment with something to try helping you regenerate again and help her confirm herself as your Limiter,” the android calmly wrote himself off. “It was pretty much all her.”
“So, you have regenerated before?” her voice cut through. “Why did you need me, then?”

“Why don’t we have this conversation face to face?” Nick asked.

“Uh… right… how… how do I do that?” the doe tentatively murmured. The fox turned to Leo.

“Know how we can separate her into her physical form again?” the tod inquired towards his robot companion. The android processed everything for a moment and raised a finger in an “Aha!” moment.

“Try seeing if she can imagine feeling her body again, moving her legs, arms, or maybe concentrating on a heartbeat,” it offered.

“You get that?” Nick inquired towards the grey bunny. There was a moment of silence. “You know I can’t hear you nod, right?” The red fox rolled his eyes.

“Oh! Right… sorry?” came her nervous voice. “Still getting used to being a…. what am I right now?”

“Let’s stick with Limiter and maybe we’ll discuss that later,” the fox tod offered her, to which she gave an affirmative ‘Mmm’.

Waiting patiently, Nick felt this small tickle as purple tendrils of energy vented slowly from him. The outpour became greater as he sensed something comforting leave him, the energy creating a stream from over his heart and coalescing in front of him on the table.

Judy’s form began as edges and curves, like the outline of a sketch, with everything about her figure laid out for Nick to see. He was riveted, even if he could not see anything of consequence yet, the shapely curvature of her figure was a sight that stirred something within him he long since believed was a frozen pot.

Unlike his regenerative process, Judy returned to her former self in a much more elegant fashion, the energy creating a violet being in her image, entirely made of light. Upon the last dregs of said energy bleeding from over his heart, a flash occurred and the grey bunny doe was back to her physical form.

Nick forgot all sense of reason and logic of the situation as he let his eyes do as they so wished. She returned to her physical form facing him, kneeling on one knee, the other leg raised, her thighs crossing. Her waist was smaller than the jacket she had worn portrayed her to have. A silky soft looking column of cream colored fur lined her belly and came up her front and stopped just under her muzzle. Her arms were instinctively crossed over her chest, as if knowing she would be naked, even if her facial expression denoted ignorance to that fact. He also noticed the flare of her hips, though bunnies were sort of known for them, coupled with the fullness of her legs they looked even more pronounced than what could be considered normal for bunnies.

“Sorry miss, I hate to inform you, but your clothes…” Leo implied to her, leaving the statement open ended.

Judy’s ignorant expression quickly turned to one of horror and then embarrassment, as her ears flopped forward and muzzle pointed down, her breath becoming rapid and panicked. A blush radiated across her cheeks and ears, present and quite visible even with fur.

The fox tod didn’t sway his gaze, keeping a neutral expression as best he could.

It was shattered though, when she dared to peek up from beneath her ears, nose twitching and mouth slightly agape as her breathing deepened, making her chest heave slowly but surely. The most
appealing feature to all of it though, was the brilliantly violet eyes that figuratively glowed in contrast to the color Nick had seen them as before. Gone was the grey sheen to reveal this brilliant purple as deep and entrancing as the setting sun, with an intensity as sweet and sultry as blueberries.

Unaware of his own changing expression in response to the naked rabbit before him, Judy was equal parts ashamed and anxious with an undertone of tempered rising confidence at seeing the red fox tod’s radiant emerald eyes wash over her. She saw his muzzle part, exposing a few fangs, and his brows rise in surprise. Though she couldn’t tell if his face was flushed, she could see the insides of his ears, facing forward and perked alert, were tinged heavily of red against the white fur inside them.

“I dare say, I haven’t seen him this shocked by a lady’s appearance for the better portion of eighty ye….” the android began.

“LEO!” Nick shouted, his embarrassment forgotten and expression equally livid and frightened. “Don’t…”

The mechanical being looked between the two mammals, Judy snapping from her stupor, as the fox’s attention was riveted elsewhere, to quickly grab her clothes and put them on before he could turn back to see anything he shouldn’t. She did catch the wording in the robot’s statement though. Eighty years? Her mind ran that through dozens of times, trying to make sense. Nothing else fit, at least none in that context.

“Doesn’t she deserve to know, being your Limiter and all?” it asked, the artificial tone properly implying the question was rhetorical.

“I… it’s just,” Nick started, his voice fettering out as soon as he began. He then stormed from the room, letting out a grunted, “Fine.”

“Eighty years?” the doe asked Leo. The being nodded.

“He’s been kept alive for a long time by the power within him,” the android stated. “I suppose I should give you a run-down of everything concerning that to a degree, as well as basics to what we know of you as a Limiter.”

Judy found a comfortable position as Leo went into a very lengthy explanation, though still basic and limited in scope, about what a Shard was, the concept of her as a Limiter, and the Drones that fall from the sky to search for her and Nick’s conjoined power as a Nova Shard.

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Nick stormed off down the hall, angry that Leo could divulge that piece of information so easily. He knew why but it still remained a sore topic on occasion.

As the android had so often reminded him though, its duty was to oversee the protection and development of the Nova Shard. Leo had no true loyalty to him and him alone, so he couldn’t just order it around like he controlled it.

Now the mechanical being would be splitting his duties between the two mammals, in order to ensure they work well together. It wasn’t like he wanted to though. He felt he worked well enough on his own.

Excepting that you failed to destroy a Red Shard and almost allowed it to hurt yourself and kill Judy, a voice in his head chastised him. He sighed and raised a fist to slam it into the wall as he turned a
corner, with no real direction in mind. His fist wound up to hit hard, only for him to barely tap the surface as his anger flared out, realizing the voice was right.

Despite all the injuries he’s ever received in his life, he always recovered. Every time. Though the bunny was revealed to be his Limiter, he had no clue as to whether she had the same factor he did in that regard. Living for as long as he did, he slowly realized that despite his constant pain, his body needed no concern. He still felt pain, oh so very much, but when his own well-being meant nothing then he had to make sure he could protect all that mattered to him, lest he be all that remained.

Finding the door he wanted, Nick opened it and went into a room filled with replacement parts and devices for things he had to replace often. The restrictive band that burned away, along with his arm, was one of those things. They fizzled out, broke down, and just plain malfunctioned over years of use.

It made him feel safe enough to go out into the world and expose himself to the life outside his home.

Home…

He may have lived at this place for many years, but it never truly felt like a home. It was more like an expansive bunker built into the base of the mountain at the western edge of Tundratown. The outside looked like any normal house, with a yard and ugly lawn ornaments, but the interior and linking bunker system that went deep into the mountain side housed all sorts of things meant to help him pursue his endeavors in stopping the Drones and Shards that threatened the city. A series of tunnels were dug into the mountain over years to let him fly out and exit at varying points, depending on where a Drone incursion happened.

Grabbing a nearby band off a shelf, the tod placed it around his arm, letting the device adjust automatically to his arm to fit well and not move like a loose bracelet. The light on it glowed purple instead of green, telling him that maybe something from the rabbit changed him.

His paw went to his chest, as he closed his eyes, focusing on the hollow pit in him that plagued the fox for so long. It was gone. Cautiously optimistic, Nick let himself smile just a little, hope that maybe for a short while, he could enjoy this feeling that he felt… whole.

Looking down, he noticed the purple glow of the light on his band slowly turned to green. Apparently, her more refined role as the Limiter for the red fox changed how his energy became displayed.

“Interesting,” he mouthed.

Figuring the two had enough time to themselves, Nick began to walk back to them, his anger subsided and the pit in his heart still gone.

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“I think I get most of what you’re telling me…” Judy divulged timidly, still processing a lot of information. She did, however, feel that Leo did exceptional at explaining everything simple and clean. No overbearing scientific terms and far-fetched references.

“Good,” the android replied politely. “Did you have any more questions?”

“Yes, actually,” the doe instantly shot back. Not waiting for an invitation, she continued, “How old is Nick?”

“I… don’t know if I should tell you, considering his reaction earlier,” the mechanical being revealed
with an obvious reservation the tone it used.

“I’ll answer that,” the fox interjected, entering the room, looking over Judy with eyes that made her remember the faux paw from earlier and blush as she swept a paw back over an ear, averting her gaze.

“And?” the grey bunny asked eagerly. Nick sighed heavily, digging deep and doing his best to do what he never did before in respect to the info he was about to reveal. Trust another mammal with it.

“I, Nicholas Wilde, who goes under the name Reynard Fawkes and is the armored Defender of Zootopia, Flux the Fox, am approaching the three-hundredth and eleventh year of my life.”

Silence.

Judy’s eyes were wide and contemplative, simply locking onto the fox tod’s own determined stare as he awaited her recognition and reaction. He knew it might take a minute or two for her to properly react and was going to be patient.

Besides, any follow-up on his end upon saying all that felt like it might come off as self-serving or aversive, depending on what he said.

Leo was thankfully being still and staring out into space between the two, awaiting their exchange.

The bunny doe began to open her mouth to respond, Nick becoming tense and anxious of her reaction.

Why should I care? He thought. Her opinion on the matter shouldn’t mean much.

Bracing himself, he prepared for anything from a calm inquiry to shouting accusations that inferred his lack of sanity.

“Judy, you forgot to put on your purple undergarments over there,” came the calm and collected voice of Leo, completely ignorant of the level of nerves the android just figuratively slapped aside.

The rabbit turned a horrified stare towards the purple panties that lay out in the open on the table from earlier.

“Sweet cheese and crackers!” the doe exclaimed, yanking her ears in morbid shame.

She did a double take when she turned back to see Nick was now staring at said undergarments.

“Don’t look!” she pleaded, leaping across the table to grab them.

She overshot her goal, succeeding in grabbing the forgotten garment, but with her upper half falling off the other side of the table as she slid across. The stunned fox looked on with perked ears and a tilted head as the grey doe fell off the other side of the table, her rump and legs still laying over the far edge of the surface.

There was an annoyed groan coming from the other side and Nick padded around to see Judy, faceplanted into the carpeted floor, ears splayed out, and paws clutching the small piece of fabric to her chest in an attempt to keep it from further scrutiny.

“Need any help?” the fox offered, holding out a paw. He was doing his best not to laugh, and he very much wished to do so, but the poor doe appeared quite humiliated by her own actions. The tod didn’t want to add to that if he could help it.
Still faceplanted, but with enough room to look at him from below, she shook her head and fumbled to get up, shoving the errant undergarments into a pocket.

“I’ll be fine…” the grey rabbit murmured. Nick withdrew his paw and smiled gently.

Her heart skipped a bit upon seeing a smile cross his muzzle. She hadn’t really seen him smile much before this, and never one so gentle and sincere.

“You have wonderfully colored eyes,” the tod mentioned in passing, confusing the bunny. “Why did you hide them behind contacts?”

She froze.

“What?” was her barely audible reaction.

“You eyes,” began Nick, “they were grey before but now they’re purple. My eyes changed when I got my power and I assume you were the same… so I figured you hid them with contacts.”

“I… they… I was teased about it,” Judy stuttered. Her eyes flicked up to Nick. “You really think they’re wonderful?”

The fox nodded slowly, resulting in a tempered smile from the bunny.

“So… back to before our interruption…”

The grey doe perked and interjected, “That’s right! You’re over three hundred years old!? HOW!?”

“Knew that was coming,” remarked the red fox, “but do please tone it down.”

“I’m sorry, but how?” Judy asked more gently.

“Better, thank you. And it’s the Shard. It forces me to stay young looking like this and keeps me in a semblance of my peak physical condition and health. It also regenerates me in moments of severe injury. The drawback I’ve usually had though… is that regenerating like that usually releases more energy than is safe to the surrounding area and it mimics something like an explosion.”

“So, you’ve had other times where your healing… causes damage to your surroundings?” the grey bunny inquired curiously. Nick nodded in the affirmative.

“Not for the past few decades, but yes.”

“I have so many questions,” Judy mentioned, nearly hopping with giddy energy.

“And you shall get answers to many of them soon enough,” Leo cut in, “but I do have a point of interest we need to address.”

Nick’s face became stern looking and Judy appeared justifiably musing. The android took that as a cue to continue.

“The presence of a Red Shard tells me that since the Gate is stable enough, if only barely, for living beings to come through, we will need to prepare for more Shards and expect the higher tiers to attempt to break through. That means we need to make sure you two can work in concert with one another if we are to defend the city from them. On that note…” the mechanical being gestured to the wall behind them, pressing a button on the underside of a nearby counter.

The wall opened up to reveal a room filled with a plethora of armaments, ranging from partial armor
pieces, like fingerless gauntlets, to various full body suits with different modifications to denote varying strengths and specialties.

“Nick has been using a rather sturdy suit of armor recently,” began Leo, “since it is capable of being more easily repaired and has a higher degree of durability when he loses control of his power flow, but these designs are far more refined in scope as a way to prepare for him finding his Limiter. So, now we can use these, provided you’re willing to work with us…”

Judy looked rather entranced by all the Sci-Fi like equipment before her, a purr of excitable contentment escaping her. Biting her lower lip and bouncing on the balls of her feet, she turned to the fox and android, exclaiming…

“When do we start?!”
"So…" a voice cut through the air as sweet as honey, yet annoying the fox as if it was as ragged as an old grumpy mammal, "what do you call that one?"

"Jackhammer," Nick responded mechanically, using his paws with practiced ease to modify a piece of armor on his normal Flux suit. He barely peeked in her direction as he noticed where she pointed. He knew all the suits by heart, having worked on all of them.

"And this one?" Judy followed up, giddy as a kit in a candy store as she perused the collections of suits the tod had worked on for countless years. While he kept his excitement in check, he was cautiously optimistic that he might be able to use them now.

"Shock Sage," he answered.

"This one?"

"Leglock."

"And this?"

"Scarab."

"What about…"

"You know…” Nick decided to interject, sighing heavily at the overexuberant rabbit obstructing his workflow. The grey doe smiled nervously, obviously embarrassed by her loss of control in her string of questions. "…it would do us both a world of good if you could just… tone it down… please?"

He didn't want to display his growing frustration or make her think he was angry at her, seeing as her emotional fortitude appeared to be hard to gauge the strength of. Some moments she was easy to turn from smiley to frowning, and others she would let things pass over her like it was just a light breeze.

It had been roughly two days since being inducted into the fold of knowing about Shards and having been told the doe was a Limiter to the fox tod.

While Nick and Leo had little to offer her in the case of immediate involvement, not knowing her social obligations or the extent of what she could do in their favor without drawing unwanted attention, they did give her a few things to think over.

The furst thing was offering to house her and pay for her continued lifestyle. Leo, at that point, had given the rabbit an envelope filled with ten thousand dollars' worth of Zootopian bearer bonds. It was meant to help her settle any debts and pay for any such expenses for moving and the like, though the promise of extended pay to the same effect was heavily implied. Nick had many years to accumulate wealth to further his protective goals as well as fund his activities as Flux.

The second thing was that she had to decide whether she would need to continue her job or put in her two weeks' notice to devote all her time to this new venture as a sidekick to Flux. It did make her decisions concerning her blog all the more confusing. She couldn't very well post the identity of Flux, despite her giddiness at knowing who he was.

The third and final thing, at least for now, was the decision of whether she was alright with possibly putting herself in situations like Nick did as Flux. Her role, as of yet, seemed a bit fluidly ambiguous.
They may have merged together once, to which Leo borrowed Judy's mention of it, calling it 'shifting' as a term of reference.

Judy had gone home that day to make her own arrangements and appeared to have made a couple decisions, denoted by the fact she almost immediately returned to the fox's den with a case filled with her belongings. Not all of them, of course, but a great deal of what she would need to live elsewhere for an extended period of time.

The doe mentioned that she would be quitting her job, once she could make sure she could cut ties on good terms. Her reasoning, that she explained, was that the job was nice, but a means to an end. Nick was confused at the time how she could so easily and readily agree to something like this. All of this. He had lived for over three centuries and he still had trouble accepting certain parts of this life.

"Sorry," she murmured, drawing the fox from his thoughtful focus on the past couple days.

Since that time though, Judy had to work and take care of her business, only returning late at night to sleep, with today being the first time since then that she truly hung around to investigate the place and everything in view.

"I'm just really… really… excited to see all of this and be a part of it," the bunny continued, bouncing on her toes.

The red fox sighed again, scratching at the underside of his muzzle, trying to get a good read on the bunny in front of him.

"You are quite the enigma," the tod mentioned passively. The grey bunny turned her gaze to him, paw on her hip and stare turning saucy. He smiled at the slight stirring in his chest it incurred to witness the sight.

"I'm not sure whether you mean that positively or not," the bunny doe remarked with a bit of spice to her tone. "I am curious though," she spoke, her gaze softening, "if you call yourself Reynard Fawkes as a pseudonym, why did you tell me your real name back in the alley?"

The question threw the fox for a loop, which was slightly ironic because he had been asking himself the same question since giving her his name.

"I honestly don't know," came the simple answer as he averted his gaze, paws dropping into his lap as he swiveled his chair around to properly face the rabbit he had been giving a sidelong glance the entire time. "You seemed to see through my stupid attempt at avoiding a conversation, so… I buckled."

"I got the mighty Flux to bend to my will," Judy teased, to which Nick growled slightly, making the rabbit squeak out an apology. "Sorry…"

The fox rubbed a paw down his face, pinching his muzzle on the way down. He hadn't meant to growl at her, but she touched a soft spot with the jibe.

"No need to be sorry, Fluff," the tod spoke softly. "I just have a bit of baggage concerning a few things and I try to keep a level head about it. Doesn't always work."

"I can only imagine, being as old as you claimed, that there are plenty of things to be a bit sour about," the doe stated in slight understanding. Nick figured in for a penny…

"Let's just say that me being powerful and such isn't a big thing I like about myself," he explained.
"Immortality is lonely."

"Are you even sure you're immortal?" Judy inquired, leaning in and sitting down in a chair near Nick, tucking her legs to her chest. Her contacts were in again, showing stormy grey eyes instead of the brilliant violet that the fox came to find appealing. The rabbit found them after their little merge and separation awkwardness, feeling more comfortable with them in. The doe did, however, complain that her contacts felt odd now.

"Not really, but I heal when injury or fatal wounds are inflicted upon me, through the power within me," the fox started. "And considering I haven't aged the least bit since I was infused with this… power… I can only assume that I won't be growing old anytime soon." He looked at his paw, weathered and calloused, strong and sturdy, but devoid of actual marks of age.

Judy adopted a look of growing understanding, her ears falling behind her head.

"You can't get close to anyone…" the grey doe said, no inquisitive inflection being used in her tone. Nick froze, eyes casting themselves downwards. His breathing became quicker as he took in the words and her thoughtful stare, the violet hue from underneath her contacts metaphorically bleeding through.

He was about to attempt a response, when Judy filled in the blanks, "You're afraid that everyone you befriend or come to love will pass by in the blink of an eye, lost to the ravages of time that you aren't even sure apply to you anymore…" Nick's paws clenched over one another, claws digging into his own pads slightly. "If you love and are loved in return, you fear the loss because that loss is inevitable for you."

The red fox tod nodded.

"What's the point of wanting to spend my life with someone, friend, family, or mate, if I'll only lose them all most assuredly?" he asked with no expectation of an actual answer. "Three hundred years makes the quality of such a life seem useless and the prospect that it'll never end more so…"

"You don't have to go through life alone though," the doe tried to convey to the tod. At that, the fox seemed to have his eyes glazed over in thought, getting up and padding closer to Judy. Her nose twitched in slight apprehension.

A paw raised up and ruffled the fur on her head, a gentle smiling beaming down from Nick.

"I'm headed off to bed for now, Fluff 'n Stuff," he remarked, "and I suspect you should do the same."

The red tod turned away and walked off, leaving the rabbit with the remainder of her own thoughts. Thoughts she so desperately wished to relay to the stubborn canid. He was so closed up and distant, as if the world around him wouldn't last and he dare not chance mourning it by making himself ignorant of it.

She knew he wouldn't listen to her so easily, but Judy felt he could have listened to her more and possibly recognize her opinions might hold validation.

_He's had three hundred years, Judy, her thoughts supplied. It's likely he already thought a lot of those things through and came to this conclusion he now lives._

The grey bunny brushed her feet together as she tried to formulate a plan to break past the emotional walls the fox has erected.
Leo appeared from the doorway, the slight whir of his mechanical servos in his limbs echoing in the large workspace room.

"Hey there, Leo!" Judy chirped.

"It's rather late," came his polite reply. "Are you thinking about turning in soon?"

The rabbit nodded slightly and stretched out, face contemplative and eyes darting around aimlessly as she organized her thoughts.

"I heard all of what you said," the android bluntly divulged. "And I couldn't agree more."

Judy jolted upright, taken aback that Leo would eavesdrop on them.

"How did you…?" she started.

"I have acoustic receiver equipment installed as part of my design that can differentiate vocal patterns at great distances," explained Leo, "as well as decipher vibrations from afar. It helps to... 'read the room' as some call it, though I suppose it's a literal thing in this instance."

"That's pretty cool," was the only response the bunny could muster.

"Thank you, but back to the matter I wish to discuss." The android knelt down to be at proper eye level with the grey rabbit in her chair. "I need to ask you do something for me... call it a mission of sorts."

A mission. Judy was intrigued. Her muzzle spread a bit as she grinned at the prospect.

"What do you need from me?" she asked.

"I'm sure you're aware of Nick's... abrasive qualities," Leo began slowly, but calmly. The doe nodded in the affirmative. "I wanted to explain a portion of that, if you're willing to listen." Another nod. "Good. What may follow is entirely up to you."

"Is he okay with you telling me this?" Judy asked with all due justification. "Does he even know you're doing this?"

"Not likely, but I've researched enough scenarios concerning the withholding of psychological information that could have very well mitigated certain deplorable unfolding events should the knowledge have been shared," explained Leo. "And I'm not about to have the two of you enter into that problematic situation without being aware of a few things, regardless of his wants to keep it private. I am here to protect and nourish the one wielding the Shard, which is split between both of you... thus... I do not answer to Nick only. Make sense?"

"Yes. Go on."

"Alrighty then," the android complied. "Shards are temperamental existences that are based upon a set of strange laws that are accepted but the why of such are difficult to pinpoint. One such law is that the capability to draw one's power out can be exponentially made more powerful by a Shard's emotional state. Emotions like anger, fear, and happiness can be used to increase the flow of power, not to be misconstrued as the emotional state making the Shard more powerful. They are just able to release more in a shorter period of time. Are you following?"

Judy nodded.
"You are quite an astute listener. A vast difference from when I first met Nick. Anyways, all other known Shards are capable of an even and non-destructive power flow because they are 'complete', while Nick is not. For that reason, with the absence of his Limiter, his emotional state could and has caused his power to fluctuate out of control. To prevent such disasters as the ones he inadvertently incurred, I have since trained him to keep his emotions under control. For nearly two hundred years since finding him, he has followed my teachings, which is a culmination of techniques from my creators. To this day, he has had few 'episodes' that could be caused by loss of emotional control."

The grey bunny doe looked rather thoughtful, her ears perking up slowly as she became engrossed in the detailed explanation.

"You want me to help him keep his emotional state under control?" Judy interjected solemnly. The android shook its head in the negative.

"I want you to break it," came the swift and sure reply. The doe was rather confused now, squinting her eyes as the contacts felt off once more. "I see your eyes have adjusted back to normal."

"What?" the bunny asked in surprise, her eyes doing a double take back to Leo, who looked as pensive and calm as ever.

"I can scan your vitals and such to a certain degree," the mechanical being divulged. "And your eyes have adjusted back into a normal standpoint, at least for rabbits, making your contacts rather useless except to hide your eye color."

Judy reached up to remove her contacts, noticing that Leo was right. She could see like normal now, the watery edges and strain to focus gone. Blinking, she turned back to the android, saying, "How is this possible?"

"My assumption is it's a type of bleeding effect when you 'Shifted' with Nick. When he was healed, I believe it may have corrected some issues you may have had, like your vision. Any other ailments that might be fixed?"

The rabbit took to examining herself, finding nothing… at least she thought it was until she noticed the stiffness in her wrist from the events with the Red Shard a couple days ago was no longer an issue for her.

"Huh," she mumbled out. "So, I can heal too? Does that make me immortal like Nick?"

"That remains to be seen," surmised Leo, "but back on the subject, I want you to try and break his emotional control over his own feelings. Now that he has found you, he can stop trying to limit himself with devices and suits, which could only draw out miniscule amounts of power compared to his exceptional reserves that seemed bottomless. If he can once again embrace his ability to feel, he could become a better defender of their world by drawing out great power with less risk to himself and others."

"But… what do I do to make that happen? I'm just another rabbit to him probably," the grey bunny spoke.

"I've seen the way he reacts to you," Leo supplied without reservations. "His heart rate rises and pupils dilate. He has interest in you that I have not seen in a long time, whether emotional of physical, friendly or romantic, you could play to that somewhat to get him to open up and trust himself to feel once more."

Judy blushed a bit. She knew the android was being analytical about it all, but the rabbit couldn't
help feeling a bit happy that her hero was having such a reaction to her. She never really felt she was attractive or even that interesting. Sure, she knew she was a bit over the top and 'spunky' as her best friend Essie put it on a few select occasions… one of which was while drunk, but the knowledge of what Leo revealed gave her a little boost in confidence. Before she could reply, Leo continued…

"I have also noticed your reactions to him, lacking in subtly as they may be. Though, I must admit my logical analysis doesn't have a proper amount of data yet to ascertain whether your reactions are fan-based, romantic, or just a social awkwardness that you have in general. Further analysis is required."

"No, it is not!" the doe barked at the android, who shifted back a bit at the unexpected outburst. Judy stilled herself and took a breath. "Sorry, but I would prefer you to keep that information to yourself if you could, Leo."

"Fair enough, but I won't withhold any information if it becomes critical to your cohesion as a team," the mechanical being concluded, rising and turning with a polite bow, to which the rabbit gave a tepid nod of reluctant approval. "You should get some sleep," Leo said softly as the android vacated the room with a gliding stride.

Taking Leo's advice, Judy ambled down to her new room, flopping into the large bed with a severe lack of grace.

She lifted her head to take a look around, impressed by the cleanliness of the room. It may not have been used before now, but apparently it was well kept in the event they found their Limiter.

A swell of giddy excitement rose in her belly. She was ecstatic to be working with Flux, Nick, her superhero crush.

Wait… crush?

She never really thought of it like that before. She never really cared to analyze her obsession before either. It was simply one that pulled at her and she followed.

"But… crush though? Seriously" the bunny voiced aloud, confused by her own mental slip-up/admission. She laughed a bit in anxious trepidation of her own thoughts. It wasn't like she was entirely opposed to the idea of finding Nick attractive with his… slim but lean build, large arms, and sinewy legs. The doe shook her head, trying to reason they were objective observations.

"Besides," she continued aloud, "regardless of whether or not he finds a 'bunny' attractive, he's got a few hundred years on me. Who's to say he even has an interest with that age gap?"

A strained squeak of floorboards had Judy perking her ears up and looking towards her closed bedroom door. After a few seconds of nothing else, she wrote it off as nothing and deigned to lay her head upon the cushiony soft pillow that rest below her.

Walking down the hall, away from Judy's new room, Nick pulled an ear of his in irritation. He'd unfortunately heard her little comments about the 'age gap' that he was very well aware of.

The fox had meant to wish her goodnight, as an attempt at being more personable towards the rabbit after his abrupt departure earlier. Hearing a reminder of a pretty big reason of why he still had trouble forming relationships didn't help him to find the strength to knock. Instead, he padded away in silence, sighing heavily once he was out of earshot.
He couldn't control the whole age thing about himself. It wasn't like there were other beings out there like him who could relate in that aspect… excepting other Shards possibly… but that meant little if they all wanted to apprehend or kill him.

Nick slammed a fist against the wall near his own bedroom door, seeing the green energy flowing out a bit at his emotional release. It didn't hurt nearly as much as it did in similar instances from years past. Maybe Judy being nearby or having 'Shifted' with him recently left some residual semblance of control over his power.

Thinking back to his initial frustrations, the fox couldn't help but lament the situation. Because of his age, he could never truly relate to the young mammals that he might take an interest in or whom take one in him.

Sure, he could lie about his age, seeing that he still looked to be a fox in his prime, but the tod's lips curled into a frown at how rotted a foundation such as that could be. In all truth, he felt as if his supposed immortality would be a huge drawback in any relationship. He couldn't grow old with another mammal and death wouldn't reunite them eventually, if one believed in an afterlife like that. Any mammal he chose to love in that capacity would likely have reservations about loving him when they might believe that to him, they would just be another point in the life of his that would never end. At least… that was how he felt others would respond to him if he poured his heart out to them.

Judy's little admission did nothing to sway those thoughts.

A new thought entered his mind.

*Maybe the bunny would be the same as me?*

Nick couldn't decide whether that was something that appealed to him, or revolted him to imagine another mammal stuck in a situation like his own. It wasn't like she lived long enough to discern for herself that she was blessed or cursed with extreme longevity. And he never asked if she had any moments where power like his was present.

He scoffed at himself.

The grey doe would have mentioned it in an excited huff if that were the case.

The red fox opened his door finally, after having stewed in his thoughts for long enough. His room was a mess, but he liked it that way. Small and dark, the room was sparsely decorated with random tools and parts lying about from late night tinkering. A glowing apparatus, with a tiny screwdriver set down next to it, was the only real illumination the room had.

Closing the door behind him, and allowing his night vision to kick in, Nick settled into his bed and stared at the ceiling.

Much like a kit, he found a joy in certain things others might find immature for one of his age. The ceiling had glowing dots and shapes from cheap plastic adornments he bought in a nearby party store. It reminded the fox of nights long past where he would view the sky outside his bedroom window.

With that sweet memory in the forefront of his mind, Nick let the pull of sleep take him into its embrace.

Judy awoke abruptly, perking up and scanning her surroundings with anxious eyes and a twitching
nose. It had been this way for the last couple mornings waking up in the new living arrangements. A bunny was very attached to their warren and though she broke away of her own free will and desired to explore other venues, the feeling of waking up in a new place was still a bit unnerving. It was the same way when she moved in with Bucky and Pronk for the first week or two.

Knowing she wouldn't be able to sleep properly any more, the grey doe slipped out of bed and padded out her door, down the long hallway. Opening up into a large kitchen and dining area, the bunny's nose wiggled as she smelled something pleasant wafting her way.

Looking around, she noticed the form of Leo, arms moving about rather quickly and deliberately. She rounded the island counter that obstructed her view of the android and saw that Leo was cooking something, shuffling a couple skillets and expertly multitasking to season and prepare certain elements of the meal in progress.

She had yet to witness the mechanical being cook. For the two mornings she had spent so far, when she woke, the food was already prepared and Nick was off doing whatever he does most of the day. Judy had to admit to herself it was a bit nice to wake up early enough to see this… and then Leo turned towards her.

The poor doe had to literally clamp a paw over her mouth to withhold the snickering giggles that threatened to burst forth from her and devolve into full on laughter.

The android was wearing a very lacy pink apron across the chest with words in bright magenta that said…

_Nuzzle the Cook_

Noting her laughter and waiting patiently for the rabbit's frenzy of fervorous giggles to die down, the android resumed cooking, loading a plate with one of the skillet's contents and setting the dish on the island.

"I take it you find the apron amusing?" the rhetorical question came from Leo, drawing another short errant stream of chuckles and a little snort from the bunny doe.

"I do, one hundred percent," she stated with a beaming grin, now far more awake than before. "Did Nick get you to wear that?"

Leo nodded before saying, "I think it was his attempt at trying to demean me, but I have grown rather fond of the clothing article."

"Well I can't fault you for that," Judy conceded, still suppressing a laugh now and then as she hopped up to a stool and leaned over the plate of food prepared specifically for her.

Leo apparently prepared some form of a vegetable stir fry with an amalgam of ingredients. There was broccoli, green beans, spinach leaves, and some mushrooms for flavor, with ginger and honey sauce. Judy let out a 'Hmm' of approval as her stomach gurgled to signify its appeasement of such a delightfully simple dish.

"Out of carrots?" the grey bunny asked, trying not to sound ungrateful.

"I'm afraid I haven't had the chance to procure any as of yet," the android explained. "I don't usually grab them, seeing as Nick despises the vegetable."

"Oh," came her soft-spoken response, unsure how to follow up. She let it be as not every mammal
would like them.

"Don't fret. I shall acquire some for you as soon as I am able."

The doe perked up, slightly confused.

*How does a mechanical being such as Galileo go about and grab groceries, much less shake off curious looks? Judy thought in retrospect. Someone will have noticed and brought it to the public's attention at some point.*

"How..." the grey bunny started.

"Online shopping," came the blunt but very clear and concise response. Judy's mouth parted in an understanding 'OH' as she delved into her dish with a fork, tasting the sweet and soft taste of her breakfast.

A few minutes of eating later and Leo placed a plate across the island counter from Judy, putting a cover over it.

"Would you mind terribly if I asked you to get Nick up?" the mechanical being inquired politely. "I'm afraid he's rather terrible with mornings recently."

The grey doe pushed her plate away as she finished the last of the delicious food, asking in return, "Recently? Is he usually good at mornings?"

"Quite so. It comes with growing up on and taking care of a farm for most of his life before I found him."

"He's a farmer?" Judy asked with ears perked in interest and focused on the android next to her.

"Was. He still tends a small garden as a form of... stress relief I guess one might call it. He likes to work with his paws," Leo explained.

Accepting the answer but making a mental note to ask about everything later, Judy found her way out of the dining room area and through the house, trying to remember where the tod's room was.

It took her longer than she liked, opening a few doors at random, before swiveling her ears as best she could and tracking the soft, steady deep breaths from behind a nearby door.

Opening it, she almost cooed at the sight she saw.

Nick was curled up in a small bed, head on his paws, legs tucked to his chest, and tail wrapped around his front. The strange fox had made a 'den' like nest out of his blankets and pillows, creating this crater looking divot that he nestled himself into. His ear flicked as the door squeaked on its hinges, drawing a soft 'awww' from the rabbit.

"You are too cute," she whispered more to herself than anyone or anything else.

Getting in close, she jostled the red fox, biting her lip lightly as she enjoyed the feel of his fur beneath her padless paws. He was so soft, yet with a slight silky sheen to his fur that made her smile as she ran a paw over his shoulder to jostle him again. He didn't stir, barely uttering a small sleepy whine as he breathed.

"Nick... Nick," the doe gently called him, leaning in close to his ear. It flicked her nose and she shifted back, her nose twitched at the unexpected contact. Adopting a grumpy face, she leaned back
"Nick, you lazy bum," her voice rang out louder than she meant, "get up now or I'll go find cold water to throw on you."

The red fox tod finally stirred, groaning a bit and uncurling himself a bit to look up at the rabbit.

"What's got your tail in a tizzy, honey bunny?" Nick sleepily slurred. Judy's eye twitched, her cheeks and ears blushing, as the doe felt equally embarrassed and angered by the phrasing of his question. It was after a few seconds that the tod's eyes widened quite a bit to look almost completely awake, realizing what he said. "Great..." was his only follow-up. With a heavy sigh, which appeared to be a default reaction for him concerning various things, the fox tod flipped the cover from himself and stretched to get out of bed...

"I can't believe you called me tha.... OH, YOU ARE NAKED!"

The grey doe cupped her paws around her eyes and darted out the door to look away.

"Hey!" Nick barked in a chastising tone, "You came in here of your own accord. What I want to be in my room is my business. And I be naked."

"At least throw something on, please," Judy begged, still looking away.

The fox rolled his eyes and grabbed something to placate the rabbit, turning to say, "This better?" The bunny doe dared to look and her ears fell behind her head as she was met with a shirtless fox in cargo shorts that barely held onto his hips, riding low.

"Barely," she mumbled, to which Nick used both paws to wave her off in annoyance.

"Did I forget to tell you he sleeps in the bare fur?" Leo voiced as he rounded the corner of the hallway. The tod shot the android an absolutely venomous look.

"You did that on purpose..." he accused. "Didn't you?"

Leo was oddly silent for a few seconds of awkwardness before saying, "Of course not."

More silence.

"Bull!" he shouted back, to which Judy began laughing, disarming the fox with her vibrant giggles.

"I had to come and warn you two that the Gate is opening again," Leo continued, ignoring the doe's laughing fit. "You will need to head out to intercept the Drones. I have also prepared...."

"Wait wait wait..." Nick interjected, pinching his muzzle. "Can you at least remove the apron while telling me all this? I just... can't take you seriously with that thing on."

"But I like it..." the mechanical being mentioned in a soft tone that almost sounded like sadness. Almost, but not quite.

The red fox facepawed himself, while the bunny doe tried to stifle another fit of chuckles that threatened to come out once more.

"We'll launch as soon as I'm dressed, provided Fluff here has no objections," Nick said with the smallest degree of snark in his tone.

"Are you flirting with her, Sir?" Leo inquired bluntly.
Judy stilled and stared at the fox as she could have sworn, for the briefest of moments, that he was blushing beneath his fur, eyes averting to literally anywhere else.

"Let's just go," he groaned. "Which suit should we take?"

"I think it's Jackhammer time, Sir," the android spoke evenly. Nick gave him a deadpanned expression.

"Yeah, I still can't take you seriously with that apron on… and that line did NOT help your cause any."

"But I like the apron…" Leo said once more.
Exhilarating was barely the word to explain the feeling, flying high above the city of Zootopia as an incorporeal entity.

Judy was once again merged with Nick, with him donning the armor thusly termed 'Jackhammer'.

It was a rather bulky piece of armor, sleek in it's design, but densely built in certain areas. Namely, the arms and legs were bulky, almost buff looking. As explained to her in short, it was a specialized armament design that was meant for close combat with few projectile weapons. Using a series of highly condensed micro-actuators, linked together in a tight weave throughout the suit. Leo compared the concept to muscle fibers before sending them on their way.

Looking around, the doe found herself feeling a bit… removed… from reality. Her physical form was gone but she could look at herself, paws in front of her vision, legs lazily hovering beneath her. Her entire being was pretty much a purple glowing version of her physical body. Every sign indicated she was without clothing, but she didn't feel naked. The bunny seemed to be floating just behind Nick by default, though with the freedom to stray and look around, having the ability to see and feel many things surrounding her.

"Has the Gate dropped our new visitors yet?" the fox spoke, breaking the grey rabbit's line of thought as she listened in.

"Affirmative," came the even tone of Leo. "Thirty-seven seconds ago, four units landing in the Rainforest District. I have given you an approach vector to follow. But sir…"

"Yes, Leo?" Nick inquired.

"Are you going to play with the Hammerfall function?" came the reply.

"Oh ho ho, you better believe it," the red fox growled out eagerly. The propulsion units on his arms, legs, and back kicked into a higher gear, increasing their speed as Flux turned in an arc, skirting the edge of Zootopia's outer limits, to dive down towards the aforementioned coordinates with alarming speed. "I've always wanted to do this…"

"Uh… Nick?" Judy sounded, placing an ethereal paw on Nick's armored shoulder. "You know you're going to hit the ground…?"

"Kind of the point," he replied, his tone almost implying he was smirking in excitement.

"Approaching target," the android called over the comm. "Distance to impact, 600 meters and closing."

The grey doe couldn't actually brace herself but she did feel that sense of trepidation of seeing the Rainforest District rapidly 'rising' to meet them. In the last couple of seconds before 'impact', she noticed the four Drones they were heading towards. Large, heavily armored units, and glowing blue on certain parts.

Just as Nick was descending, head first and powering forward on thrusters, he cut the thrusters, rolled forward and extended his legs down, braced together. Clutching his arms close to his chest, a cascading glow permeated the whole suit in a purple luminescence…

As it pierced straight through the closest Drone's chest and tore into the other side. Plating, servos,
and various mechanical parts were rent asunder as the 'Jackhammer' proved its name.

Having dispersed most of its vast speed and momentum into the Drone, Flux parted his legs to land, impacting the ground and digging up a large amount of asphalt with his mechanical claws as he dragged noisily to a halt.

"Oh, that felt good," the tod mumbled happily to himself. "Leo, what's the readout on these guys? I see blue lights on them… so… Blue Shards?"

"All current scans indicate a lack of biological data," the robot relayed to the two, with Judy listening in and attempting to learn all she could. "They do appear to have the same energy signature as a Blue Shard…"

Nick turned and dodged a reaching downward blow from one of the three remaining Drones, with the first one having collapsed to its knees and leaning slowly forward, sparks and bolts of blue energy arcing from the gaping hole Flux made.

"Talk about ripping a new one," the ethereal rabbit remarked. The fox tod barked out a laugh as he sidestepped a sweeping blow and rolled away, stretching out an arm to fire off a purple beam from his paw palm mounted beam emitter. The short beam burst pushed back the Drone it hit, with it bracing its legs against further pushback.

"I take it our new compatriot made a joke?" Leo inquired.

"That she did," the fox confirmed. "Now about what you were saying…"

The android instantly replied, "I believe we're facing off against Flare model Drones."

"Flare what?" Judy asked softly, not wanting to distract the tod from his evasive tactics as they surmised the capability of their opponents.

"Drones that are modified for high energy usage and infused with Shard energy, much like a power transfer," Nick quickly explained, using a chance to strike a Drone's knee joint after evading the strike of another. "I've never seen one before but Leo says they're more advanced and powerful than normal Drones, being 'charged' by a Shard and used to implement their will."

"Nick look out behind you!" The doe nearly screamed, having looked around in her form and saw what he did not…

A Drone charged some sort of shoulder mounted cannons and fired away, sending dual orbs of swirling electrical energy at them. At her behest, Flux turned towards the source of Judy's worry, knowing it was too late to do anything but brace himself…

A haze of purple coalesced instantly in Nick's vision, taking Judy's form and with paws outstretched in a protective manner, all within the span of the fraction of a second it took for the orbs to make contact…

With a barrier that formed around Flux as a spherical shield. The orbs of sparkling energy exploded in a swash of overflowing electrical discharge, encompassing the two within their shield. Nick couldn't see anything other than bolts of blue energy outside the unexpected bubble. While he had no way of scaling or scanning the shield, the tod knew it was by far more powerful than anything his suits had been able to conjure to date.

"Leo! How is she doing this?" Flux yelled, trying to make his voice heard over the electrical storm outside the bubble, as thunderous rumbles echoed within the shield.
"Judy is doing this? Not you?" the android asked simply.

"No. No. It's all her. Don't you see her through my optical sensors?" Nick hurriedly inquired, not knowing how much longer the shield would hold. Judy was looking a bit shaky on her… well she was floating, so just plain shaky. Her ethereal ears fell behind her head as paws were still up and wobbling unsteadily.

"I see nothing except an encompassing purple shield," Leo spoke in observation. "I will tag all data concerning this phenomenon and analyze later."

The fox tod didn't have time to respond, as the doe's form faded once more and the shield fell away. Whether she held out until the assault was over or had great timing to fetter out in stamina just in time for it to make no difference, Nick couldn't say, but he didn't waste time and leaped away from his current position to arc overhead.

Getting a better view away from the obscurity of his previous foothold, Flux saw that the wash of blue energy damaged the nearest Drone, when it was deflected by the shield Judy had erected. Fortunate to say, nothing else in the area was harmed greatly. No mammals to speak of and the street was wide with few parked vehicles. The other two seemingly undamaged Drones followed his arc and tried to fire off multiple missiles and energy bolts to intercept.

"Judy!" he cried, unsure if she was okay. "Are you still with me?" Flux had to use his thrusters in a whirling display of evasion and strange acrobatics, dodging and circumventing all the measures brought against him. A few of the bolts hit him, but they were too weak to do any real damage. The Drone that fired them was going for quantity over power, firing them off in a rapid staccato.

"I'm fine… my head though… it hurts…" She sounded quite strained and possibly disoriented. Nick dodged another attack, rolling away from a barrage of bolts and recovering by putting himself on all fours for balance.

"Well we still have two and a half of them to deal with… so let's try to finish this quickly, OK?" the tod gently told her, not liking the idea of pushing her too far. A soft "Mhmm" was his answer, making him determined to end this post haste.

Charging both palm emitters, Flux braced his legs and charged them as well, using the energy in them as a speed boost. Padding forward with alarming speed, but a perception to match, the red fox sped onward in a blur that the Drones could barely keep up with. Still charging the emitters in his paw palms, the armored fox settled for using the momentum from his speed to charge in an arc and spin around to deliver a powerful kick to the ankle joint of the already damaged Drone. The move bent in and warped the mechanical leg, bringing it to its knees.

He then proceeded to leap up and drive a flurry of hits into the already nearly decimated chest plating to finish the job. It took a few hits and some thruster assist, seeing as it would be difficult to stay in the air that long hitting a target nearly three times his height, but nearly a dozen punches and kicks later, the chest armor buckled and crushed inward on whatever mechanical parts kept the Drone functional. The blue light died out as it slumped forward, nearly trapping Flux beneath it.
Nick flipped up, bouncing off what remained of its head and jettisoning into the air. He targeted the other two Drones, beam emitters charged well enough to dole out some serious damage. Leo silently calculated the vectors from the fox's current angle, to rule out excessive collateral damage or civilian interference, giving a green light to Flux's HUD.

A dual explosive 'THRUM' sounded, much higher in octave and shorter than other times. It was something he felt was relatable to an energy bolt version of a shotgun blast. Large, purple, elongated bolts burst forth from each palm emitter, a contrail of lightning being left in its wake.

One Drone was impacted just below the head, but above the center of the chest, melting armor and internal parts before the bolt exploded in a burst. Its head was disintegrated nearly instantly, along with the upper portion of its chest. The gap created by the explosion reached out from shoulder to shoulder, the Drone's arm units barely attached to what was left of the torso.

The other Drone was either more responsive or luckier. It held up an arm to deploy some sort of shield it seemed, but had no time to erect one as the bolt entered through the arm and ripped it apart through the volatile expansive force that was the detonating energy bolt.

Upon losing an arm, the Drone fell back from the blast, using its other working arm to steady itself by grasping a street lamp. It appeared to work, making Nick click his tongue in slight disappointment as he landed with a short burst from his thrusters to keep him from landing too hard.

Its head turned to look at the useless appendage that sparked and sputtered, then looking around at its fallen comrades, and finally resting its empty stare upon Flux. the fox shifted his footing, waiting for another attack.

Reaching some sort of conclusion that evaded Nick's current understanding, the Drone knelt down in place putting the only working arm over its chest. At first, the fox took this as some sign of submission, like a knight kneeling to a queen or king.

"Sir," the mechanical being's voice echoed in his ear, "I scan the Drone's energy reserves are converging within the reactor in its chest. I believe it's trying to self-destruct." The tod made a very annoyed expression, impossible to see beneath his face armor, but somehow necessary nonetheless.

"Blast radius?" came his simply inquiry. There was a slight pause as a descriptive readout displayed on his display.

"Undetermined," Leo replied, "but with the energy reaching critical levels, I surmise it might take out the entire block if you don't find a way to contain it. I calculate you have thirty-two seconds until detonation occurs."

"Do my thrusters have the power to lift this thing high enough to go off safely out of the range of any buildings," the red fox asked quickly, running up to the Drone to prepare to lift off with it in tow. His thrusters charged up.

"Negative. The thrusters on Jackhammer are meant for speed, not power." There was a slight pause, the seconds that passed nearly felt audible in Nick's hammering heartbeat. "What about that shield? Invert it to surround the Drone and contain the explosion within it."

Without caring to confirm or thank Leo, the seconds that passed too precious to spare the breath on that, Nick called out to his bunny partner, "Hey Fluff, did you catch all that? Still with me?"

"Yeah, but I don't know how long I can keep it up…" the doe nervously and fearfully murmured.

"I'm going to use my suit to channel it, so just try focusing what you did before through me, OK?"
"I'll do my best..." came her disembodied voice and tone.

With seconds to spare, as the Drone began to glow brighter and heat poured from its chest, Flux had Leo use all means to funnel his power into the beam emitters. Though they weren't meant to create barriers of any sort, the two were relying on whatever guiding force Judy used before to create the shield before to enact once more and make an inverted shield to contain the oncoming explosion.

"Ready, Leo?" the fox asked.

"Affirmative."

Flux fired his emitters in a wide spread, not doing any real damage but spreading the energy out as far as he could. It created an aura around the Drone, but there was no barrier created, as of yet.

"Eighteen seconds," the android reminded them.

"I can't do it!" the little bunny cried out.

"Yes you can," Nick calmly answered, doing his best to sound sympathetic. He needed her. They were partners now.

"I'm trying! It's not working..."

The fox tod sighed and turned his head to see a faint outline of the bunny, a violet aura keeping her visible to him. What he could view of her face was contorted in fear and anxiety.

"Judy..." Nick breathed, making her glowing amethyst eyes train on him and her face soften, "I believe in you..."

The seconds passed extremely slowly as the two locked gazes, the bunny doe's eyes and face changing expressions from fear and trepidation... to a newfound sense of determination and courage.

Her form glided closer, head resting on his shoulder and incorporeal paw and arm sliding along Flux's own armored arm.

The energy that was cascading from his emitters finally began to coalesce into something cohesive, the swirling cloud of effervescent electricity forming a shell around the increasingly glowing Drone. Nick kept up the flow and let Judy do whatever she was doing, the shield fully forming into something similar to earlier.

Just as the barrier solidified as best as they could make it, the Drone went critical and the glowing core within its chest sent out cascading waves of power outward, slowly at first, then a resounding 'Boom' jarred the barrier, testing its limits.

The rabbit's ethereal paw gripped his arm tighter, teeth clenching, and eyes narrowing.

"Just a little more..." the red fox whispered to her.

"I know... I know..." came her struggled reply.

Nick gave her a flickering look of concern, not knowing whether she was in pain like he was when he pulled too heavily upon his power, or suffering something else entirely. For all he knew, she was just having trouble keeping focus.

The seconds passed by achingly, as the violent release of energy was still trying to break its way out of their shield, cracks and stress points showing up in the walls of it. The inside of the sphere looked
like a nebula storm of blue lightning and fog.

Leo spoke to them both, "My readings show the energy expulsion is waning. Give it 7.42 seconds more…"

A readout on Flux's internal display showed up, but it felt like eons as it counted down, the tod's mind nearly feeling like it was reading each tenth of a second like it was a full second itself. More cracks and stress points were making themselves apparent in the surface of the purple shield. It was going to be close.

Judy was overly focused forward, keeping her mind locked on the spherical prison she created for the Drone gone nuclear. She couldn't falter, couldn't let it break.

Just as the counter reached 0.07 seconds, the shield gave way and the residual blast was minimal, but enough to knock the fused pair back several feet as blue energy cascaded outward.

Nick groaned and slowly got up, feeling his head and body aching from holding that last pose with anxious tension. He looked around and saw the damage was… severe, but only limited to the sidewalk and road itself. Cracks and splits in both concrete and asphalt were very apparent, hopefully not leading either or to collapse into the drain ducts below.

"Damage report," demanded the fox to the android over the comm.

"You've suffered damage to your chest and left arm," Leo began. "Electromagnetic discharge has impaired optical sensors by twelve percent. Structural integrity field is down to sixty-two percent. Lastly… your energy flow appears quite normal. Having Judy keep you under control appears to mitigate your usual preclusion to damage from energetic outbursts."

"Seriously," the tod deadpanned. "A pun now?"

"What pun, Sir?" the android bluntly returned. While hard to pinpoint any sort of tone from the robotic being, Nick had had a couple hundred years to get use to Leo, having now figured the ins and outs of its 'tones' when Leo so desired to make something resembling a pun. Unfortunately, getting the android mentioned to admit to having done so was a useless endeavor, so the fox heaved a sigh and turned to look at the still present hazy form of his partner.

"You doing okay there?" he asked simply. She nodded but looked very dazed and unsteady, despite being no more than a ethereal being at this point. Wasting no time, he spent the next few minutes gathering up the remains of the Drones and either flying them away to dump them where he could dismantle them properly later or disintegrating their remains so only scrap parts remained with no technological salvage being viable.

It took a good long while and his efforts pulled a few onlookers in to record or take pictures of him.

"Probably liking the new suit and color scheme," he mumbled to himself. Leo stayed quiet, knowing the tod was merely talking to himself.

Roughly half an hour later, mammals were crowding the area, either trying to use the street again or get a good look at Flux. Nick didn't really care as he had finally finished his work and jettisoned away on his thrusters, circling the city in an effort to confuse any investigative mammals that wanted to track his movements.

The rabbit was rather silent the whole way back as Flux found an entrance in the mountain side at the edge of the Downtown Area. A large boulder moved aside to show a small portal to fly through. With expert and practiced precision, the fox flew through, with it opening into a far wider tunnel for
easy flying.

Upon landing as gracefully as the bulky suit would allow, it opened in a rapid display of moving armor parts, the red fox tod stepping out of the rear of the suit and sucking in a deep breath.

He felt relieved to be out of the armor, giving the shoulder a pat as it closed up and walked slowly over to a repair station.

Leo was already waiting, holding out water bottles on a tray that also had crackers on it. His other arm had clothing for Judy draped over it.

"Hey, Fluff' n Stuff? You can come out now," Nick voiced aloud as he stood still, closing his eyes. "And I closed my eyes so you don't have to worry about me looking." There was a small 'hmm' in the back of his mind and a snaking chord of violet energy flowed from where his heart was, once again forming the grey bunny.

She stood there, gazing at the fox, whose eyes were actually closed and head tilted down. Judy turned towards the android, who lowered an arm to allow her to take the clothing items.

Nick heard a slight slip and thump, daring him to open his eyes. He held firm though, hoping the rabbit just fell trying to put on her pants.

"Sir… she's unconscious," the mechanical being remarked.

The fox's eyes snapped open as he bolted to her side from the chair he sat in. Still in her bare fur, Nick blushed a bit but shook his snout and turned her over, grabbing a clothing item that Leo offered him to cover her. A long gown like shirt now covered her chest and navel area as the tod leaned down to check if she was still breathing. It didn't appear that she was.

"Leo, analysis," the fox bluntly demanded. The android looked her over, using various hardware at his disposal in his optical sensors to ascertain her well being.

"Heart rate is steady and over all vitals appear normal, though her lungs aren't taking in air. She may need CPR."

Nick looked frantically down at the bunny, her lips parted, nose still. He then looked up at the android.

"Don't look at me… I don't have lips nor lungs to comply with such a procedure," Leo explained. He then walked from the room and left his charge to deal with his own issue as only he could.

Nick groaned to himself more than anything else and leaned down tipping her chin up, lips millimeters away from Judy's own. In a moment of overcoming his own lack of comfort with the situation, he closed the gap and pressed his lips to her own.

Before he could attempt to blow any air into her mouth though, a soft sigh made its way into his. The rabbit tensed up as the tod looked at the now open amethyst eyes staring in surprise, embarrassment, and mild trepidation at him.

Putting his paws up, Nick hopped backward and awaited the tongue lashing he was assured he would receive.

Nothing happened for a few seconds as his eyes squinted shut.

In his slightly panicked state, he blurted, "I'm sorry! You weren't breathing and I was going to do
CPR but then you woke up and… uh… this…"

"Oh good, she's up," came Leo's voice from the door. "I'm glad you are alright, dear Judy."

"Thanks, Leo," the bunny doe meeped out weakly, sparing a glance towards the flustered fox as she donned her clothing.

"Relax, Sir, she was just in shock and mildly exhausted," chided the android. Nick sputtered.

"Just in shock!" he called loudly. "You said she wasn't breathing. That she needed CPR!" The doe looked rather embarrassed and averted her gaze as the fox stared down the mechanical being, who appeared unfazed.

"I never said either of those things," Leo corrected him. "I said her lungs were not taking in air. In fact, they were expelling it slowly at the time. So slowly, that I mentioned she MAY need CPR. You merely assumed what you wanted." A bunch of things began to click in the tod's mind as he raised an accusing finger to the android.

"You tricked me… on purpose," Nick growled in a low tone that made Judy's ears fall behind her head.

"In the words you so eloquently put many years ago…" Leo stated, "'It's called a hustle, Sweetheart'."

Judy began to snicker and laugh loudly, while Nick looked rather livid with his jaw dropping in shock.

"What's the story behind that?" the grey bunny asked curiously.

Leo turned to her and explained in short, "When we first met, and I refused to leave him alone, he got me to explore a cave to see if it was safe to sleep in for a night and collapsed the tunnel entrance, keeping me trapped. That line was the only response he gave to me asking why he would do that. Took me a few days to find my way out without resorting to weaponry."

"Really?" the doe drawled slowly, looking teasingly back to the red fox. He grumbled and groaned in response.

After getting his grumblings out, he turned back to Leo and asked, "Why did you do that, really?"

Without missing a beat, the android responded, "I was trying to get you over the fears and such you have concerning being close to other mammals. This seemed like an opportune time to attempt such an action and I took advantage of it." Leo then turned to Judy, gesturing politely and bowing a bit. "I do apologize for using you in such a manner."

The grey bunny doe blushed and shrugged as a tepid reply, to which the mechanical being tilted its head in a musing way.

"I would think from your rising heartbeat and facial expressions, as well as your current posture, that you actually have no objections to anything that happened… I could also ascertain…"

"LEO!" both fox and rabbit yelled at the android. He stopped and straightened up, realizing pressing further might lead to disastrous results. It was at this time that the duo finally paid Leo some mind and noticed he was wearing a new apron. Judy giggled and Nick facepawed at the words embroidered on the red apron.
"Do you have a whole collection of aprons or something, Leo?" the doe inquired before laughing again.

"I actually do have a modest collection, when find the time to search online," the robot explained. "I usually have to buy a lion large. Took me a little while to get used to figuring out the sizing method when applying which mammals they used as size brackets. Furst one I ordered, I mistakenly got it rabbit sized, if you were interested in wearing it yourself."

"I'll pass for now, but would love to see it sometime," Judy relented. Leo nodded.

"In the meantime, I made brownies…"

"Brownies?" Nick chirped, his ears shooting upward and all previous transgressions forgotten. His energetic speed and happy expression threw the bunny for a loop as he tore past her and the android to make his way to the kitchen. The doe looked at Leo with a confused expression.

"I… he… brownies?" she asked, hoping the mechanical being would get her implied, fully formed question.

"Yes… you could say it's his greatest weakness," the android divulged in kind, to which Judy padded off to follow the fox and get a good look at this.

Rounding the corner, with Leo calmly walking behind her, she found that in the ten seconds of separation, Nick had stuffed two squares of a rather large pan of brownies into his maw. Crumbs and small smears on his paws and muzzle, mouth open and ready to scarf down another delicious looking square.

When he noticed the two enter the room, he froze, the sweet smelling square held between his open jaws and eyes wide.

Leo leaned down to speak in a low volume to Judy, "It is moments like this that one forgets he is over three hundred years old, don't you think?" The bunny nodded slowly, hearing the words but not exactly registering them yet, as Nick lowered his paw and held out another brownie square.

"Want one?" he offered, having had the presence of mind to wrap the brownie in a napkin as Judy took it and nibbled. She let out a soft purring 'Mmm' at how delectably delightful the treat was. Having more decorum, the doe managed to take small bites with far more grace than the tod's near frantic scarfing.

"I think I've embarrassed myself enough for one day…" he grumbled, grabbing a paper plate and half the tray's worth of brownies to have to himself.

As he walked away, he stopped next to the little grey doe, looking her right in the eyes and saying, "Thank you… you did very good out there and saved a lot of mammals." She nodded, rubbing her paws together nervously as she tried to find her voice.

A few seconds later, as the fox began to pad off once more, he felt the soft embrace of small paws around his middle. Looking down, Nick noticed the bunny giving him a warm hug, her face nuzzled into the side of his chest and ears down as she mumbled something.

"Thank you for trying to save me earlier…"

Both mammals blushed quite a bit, with the fox giving the top of her head a short pat with one paw.
After a few seconds, they broke apart and Nick continued to leave the room, his tail swishing happily as he rounded the corner and went down the hall.

Leo watched on in interest, making many notations for future use. The android looked down to see the grey bunny doe standing in front of it, grinning widely.

"Teach me how to make those brownies!"
A sight to behold, for sure, being that a rabbit in an apron was not a sight he was used to in the slightest, but the view before him now… was odd.

Nick raised a paw, digit extended and mouth agape with a deadpan expression, as he struggled to find the words. Lowering his paw and clamping his muzzle shut under the smiling stare of the rabbit before him, the tod cleared his throat.

“Really?” was all he could muster in response.

Judy now wore the apron that Leo had spoken of, also while holding out her first completed batch of brownies. On her apron, it said…

*I’d make a veggie joke, but no one would carrot all.*

Right in the middle of the whole quote, was a carrot with a frowny face. The fox looked over at the android, sporting its own apron, saying,

*Do you wanna Taco ‘bout it?*

On that one, a taco was printed after the lines.

“I see both of you got into the apron spirit today,” snarked Nick lightly, eyeing the appealing pan of brownies in the doe’s mittred paws. The fluffy brown pastry was steaming with a delightfully sweet smell that made the fox’s nose twitch involuntarily.

His mouth watered at the sight, though which sight was something he refused to fully comprehend, choosing instead to focus on the treat before him.

“I made them with leftover blueberries from my family farm,” Judy stated, finally pulling the alluring tray from the range of his still twitching sniffer to set it down. She then cut it into squares, putting one on a small plate and pawing it off to him. “Careful… it’s still hot.”

Nick cared little as he fingered the square into his maw, working his jaw as he tried to quickly breathe the excess heat out, chewing it slowly as it cooled. The small doe giggled, shaking her head in admonishment as she seemed to come to some belated conclusion of sorts.

“You really don’t act your age, do you?” came the pointed question, the rabbit eyeing him with a chastising look, eyebrow raised. The tod huffed, mouth still full, and turned to chew in peace.

“I find being mature is overrated,” he retorted upon swallowing the last bit in his mouth. “Trying to act as such is simply complacency for the comfort of others.” Nick turned to leave the room, another couple of brownie squares on the plate that was given to him. The grey doe was a bit perturbed by his departure without knowing if he liked the product of her hard work… until…

“And thank you for the brownies, Carrots,” the red fox remarked from just around the corner. “These are delicious.” The bunny’s muzzle broke into a wide smile, looking to Leo, who nodded slightly.

Then, confusion twisted her face as she asked to no one in particular, “Carrots?”

“I believe he took the name from your apron,” the android pointed out, gesturing down to her pun based attire. She made a silent ‘Oh’ to that effect, and figured it was better than ‘Fluff N Stuff’...
The television in the kitchen area began to show something of interest, drawing Judy’s attention in full as she picked up the nearby remote and turned on the volume.

“...ay, having dispatched the Drones with a newfound level of proficiency and using a new color for his armor accents,” the moose anchor spoke, a recorded video playing in the upper rightpaw area of the screen. It was pulled from the most recent attack and subsequent defense by herself and Nick. The doe bounced on her toes in giddy glee, excited to see that something she was a part of was on the news.

The broadcast continued, “With the reveal of this new armor and possible upgraded level of technology, federal authorities might make some headway this time in persuading Flux to allow the use of his older tech and designs for the benefit of military defense. A public press conference has already been scheduled for later today in order to make such a request.”

“That’ll be the forty seventh such attempt in the past year at garnering his attention to sell or share the Flux suit designs for defense use,” Leo voiced aloud. “One would think they might ‘get the hint’, as Nick puts it.” Judy turned to him, confused, but understanding a bit of what he meant. In the past year, since Flux began taking down Drones and disposing of them, authorities have been at odds on how to address the technical ‘vigilantism’ that was being perpetrated by Flux. As such, the public story is that the two parties are in negotiations, with Flux being labeled as an agent of the government with free reign to stop Drone threats while they talk him into releasing armor designs. The internet, however, is full of theories and conspiracies that the government is trying to track him down and steal the designs, all in the name of global defense. A new thought occurred to the bunny.

“I thought there were only a dozen attempts?” she mentioned with a questioning inflection. The mechanical being gave her a neutral stare, processing what he would say.

“The ones that were made public, yes,” Leo explained, “but there were other numerous attempts through alternate means. Means such as open channel communications over military radio frequencies, or even more direct ways with liaison officers making inquiries in the aftermath of a battle.”

“Have either of you two said anything in return?” the grey bunny inquired with perked ears.

“There isn’t much point in doing so,” the android revealed.

“Why?”

“Because the basis of the armor designs is too heavily power reliant on Nick as a Nova Shard,” divulged Leo in kind. “No level of technology exists on your planet that would be able to sufficiently power such a design. Even conservative designs would be too power reliant for any efficient usage, thus, it serves no party any purpose to trade. We’ve tried making that point and it was met with hostility. So, Nick and myself have resolved to let it go, letting them make their useless pleas as they will.”

“I see,” Judy supplied slowly in recognition. Some details felt a bit loosely answered, but overall, Judy was satisfied with the robot’s lengthy and well thought out reply. She herself wondered as to that subject on occasion as well, but figured the reasoning was more of a moral one than a technological restriction.

The two then set to cleaning up the mess made from mixing the brownies. The rabbit noted the android’s slow and studious movements while cleaning and scrubbing dishes and countertops. It
countered her memories of him being quite fast and expeditious, when considering the prep work she has seen Leo do for meals or teaching her to make brownies from scratch.

“Why so slow when cleaning up?” Judy asked thoughtfully and curiously. Leo continued to clean, adjusting its stance to face her slightly.

“As opposed to other tasks,” the android began, “cleaning is best done steadily, allowing the soap to do its work. It's much like carpentry, farming, or sketching. The work is best done slow and steady to make sure it done correctly, instead of making numerous errors in one's haste to finish a task, making one do it again to correct.” Judy's ears perked, remembering a short-lived topic she wished to revisit.

“Speaking of farming… I don't remember getting clarification on Nick's past with farming,” the doe commented, inferring a few potential questions. The mechanical being picked up on it right away and evenly began an explanation.

“Nick was born and raised a farmer. I met him long after he left his farm, having been a wandering nomadic fox when I found him. He did tell me many things though, and not all of them favorable to listen to. Are you sure you want to know?” Leo paused long enough to allow the grey doe to nod, brilliant amethyst eyes now trained on the android. It then looked back in the direction of the hallway where Nick's bedroom was and simply looked for a short few seconds, then turned back to Judy. She assumed it was ascertaining if the fox was in earshot.

“Understood,” Leo confirmed. “As I was saying, Nick was a farmer, much like your family in Bunnyburrow. He grew many things to bring to the market, and worked the land with his mother for many years, even after being fused with his portion of the Shard. He spent years not knowing the extent or nature of his power, since it never had much reason to reveal itself. After about ten years though, he and his mother were accused of bringing poisoned produce to the market. According to Nick’s account, it was an ill conceived plot to ruin their reputation. Someone swapped their produce at the market with tainted versions and bribed the merchants to say it was Nick and his mother that supplied the tainted produce.”

At this point, Judy was riveted. She had only expected a short explanation, but wouldn’t deny she’d hoped for more. This though… this was beyond her expectations, and she surmised the story might get worse from here.

“Nick was quite irate with the scheme,” the android resumed, “having tried doubly so to recover their lost reputation. With the population of the town being mostly rabbits and stigma towards foxes being far worse then, it only served to further rile those accusing him and led to attempted arrest. When he tried to flee, they got overbearing with their methods of restraint and ‘killed’ him. Much of the townsfolk were witness to it all, including the merchants that were bribed. He learned later that a couple came forward upon his ‘death’, revealing the scheme. Too little, too late, as they say. Nick was buried, but he awoke in a smoking crater, to which I surmise he had his first reversion episode and regenerated, the likely explosion of energy causing the crater that was his grave. Apparently, he has been gone for a few days and had to convince his own mother he wasn’t some lingering spirit.”

“That’s terrible…” the grey doe vented in a whisper. “Is that really how things were for foxes back then?” Leo nodded. She then fiddled with her paws for a few seconds before asking, “Was there more?” Another nod. She gestured for him to continue.

“For a short while, Nick said he was able to keep himself hidden. He worked the land and his mother brought the produce to market. That arrangement couldn’t last long though, as the town caught word of his survival. Instead of being ecstatic that he was alive…”

“Let me guess,” the grey bunny interjected, “they called him a demon of sorts and tried to stone him
“Burned at the stake, actually,” a familiar voice joined, the red fox rounding the corner, clutching the small plate he was given earlier to his chest. He unceremoniously, though still somewhat carefully, deposited the quite literally licked clean plate into the sink.

“I see you decided to join the conversation,” Leo mentioned. Judy looked between the two with widened eyes, and Nick tensed up upon realizing he was outed.

“You mean… he was listening the entire time?” the doe inquired.

“For the most part,” the tod mumbled. “I couldn’t find a good time to butt in… and just figured then was as good a time as any to cut the chatterbox off.”

“You know she deserves to know,” the android chastened him lightly. “Besides, I have a favor to ask that makes it necessary to tell our dear Judy the entire story.” Both fox and bunny cocked their heads at that, exchanging confused stares and shrugging.

“I… I guess… you can continue,” the fox tod conceded, curiosity doing him in.

“We don’t have to…” Judy attempted to comfort him. Nick waved her off.

“No… no. It’s alright, Carrots,” he rebuked. “It couldn’t hurt to have someone else know. I… I trust you…” A swell of conflicting emotions filled the small rabbit doe’s heart, driving her to clutch a paw to her chest. The level of vulnerability she saw displayed by the fox both warmed and twisted her heart a little. The fact that the cynical and abrasive tod was beginning to open up to her, even if by proxy through Leo, made her feel rather… appreciated. The fact that he said that last line while averting his eyes and scratching at his ears did little to keep her heartstrings from being pulled further. She contemplated having a possible attraction to the red fox before, in the form of a crush, but now she gulped in realization that she, Judy, a bunny, might be having the stirrings of something deeper concerning the mammal before her.

“Alright,” the doe vented in a breathless whisper. Leo’s gaze was locked onto the exchange, with the pair turning to the mechanical being, silently waiting for it to resume the story.

“Interesting,” voiced the android. “Anyways, to continue, once Nick had been ‘ousted’ as some demon-like entity, the town basically went into a frenzy to ‘purify’ the problem. At this point, Nick had no grasp on his power and when mammals decided to attack, fights usually ended badly for everyone involved. Effectively, the two eventually were left alone, with Nick farming the land and taking care of his aging mother for years. Though he forgets how many years passed, eventually his mother did the same.” Judy then looked to Nick, worry on her face as she dreaded to hear some terrible details that alluded to his mother’s potentially untimely demise at the paws of bigoted and fear ridden mammals.

Noticing this, the fox spoke up with a slight upturn of his lips in a gentle smile, “Don’t worry, Fluff. She lived her life well and died peacefully in her sleep. I made sure of that. It was just her time.” The rabbit breathed a slight sigh of relief and turned back to Leo, who nodded to Nick.

“On that night,” the android explained further, “Nick buried his mother away from their home, in the forest. It was near the creek, almost on the bank. The only issue though, was that when he was gone, a most stubborn group took the chance to burn their fields in Nick’s absence. There were too many for him to care to fight, having no more reason to stay on the land any longer. So… he ran. Never
looked back and became a nomadic fox for years, eventually figuring out his life had extended longevity when his years reached into triple digits with no signs of aging.”

“That’s a fairly… intense tale,” Judy divulged slowly, still processing everything. Something clicked and she furrowed her brow, looking between the fox and robot. “Wait… what does this have to do with a favor?” Nick then copied her furrowed look and gave Leo a look denoting his own want to know as well.

“Well,” Leo started, “I’ve had difficulty trying to pinpoint his mother’s grave, seeing as Nick refuses to return. When he ran, his greatest fear since is that it had been desecrated by those that burned his fields. And… since your family’s farm property overlaps with his old farmstead, I thought you might….”

“What!?” came the shouting question from both Nick and Judy, the two exchanging looks and averting their gazes with light tinges of a blush on their muzzles and ears.

The red fox recovered furst, clearing his throat before asking, “So, her family has purview over the land I once worked?”

“That is correct, Sir.”

“Well… even upon hearing that,” Nick sternly spoke, “I don’t feel confident enough to go searching there, regardless of any permissions that might be given by her family, should they even trust a fox on their property.”

Leo and the tod were in a back and forth debate about the fox overcoming his fears, and meanwhile, Judy was trying to remember something. Something extremely important. It was knocking around in her skull like one of those gumball machine bouncy balls. She couldn’t metaphorically catch it and remember what in blazes it happened to be. A name. It was a name on a small stone, wrapped up in twisting and winding roots at the base of a large oak tree. And there were... blueberry bushes.

What was the name? the bunny thought to herself. I know it sounded like a hero from an old tale.

Her eyes popped open as she finally got it.

“Robin!”

The mammal and mechanical being stopped their debate, focusing on the now suddenly aware and flustered rabbit, who crossed her toes and looked down in tepid embarrassment.

“How do you know that name?” Nick asked carefully, eyes full of a newfound hope as Judy dared to look up into them.

“I… uh… it’s on a small headstone near the creek at home,” the grey doe explained, noticing the fox’s eyes glaze over somewhat. “The last name was worn away, but ‘Robin’ is still clear as day on it. I assumed it was a male, but if what you say is true… I believe it’s your mother’s grave.”

“Yes…” the red fox breathed, his head nodding as eyes blinked. “It’s… it’s still there? After all these years…”

“Y-yeah,” Judy confirmed, worried for the tod’s strange display. “It’s surrounded by blueberry bushes, which is how I found it.”

“Does anyone else know about it?” Leo cut in suddenly, nearly making the bunny jump. She took a second to collect herself then answered.
“I have no idea, honestly. With over three hundred siblings, I wouldn’t put it past a few of them to have wandered across it at some point and keep it their own little secret like I did.”

Nick sputtered quite audibly, “T-three hundred?!... Boy… they weren’t kitting with the saying that Bunnies are good at multiplying…”

“What does mathematics have to do with Judy’s siblings?” the android questioned in sheer ignorance. Both rabbit and fox stared at him with unamused expressions. “What?” the being asked in what appeared to be genuine confusion.

“Don’t worry about it…” the tod mumbled, now sitting at the tail end of Judy’s slightly venomous stare.

“Anyways…” the grey bunny drawled slowly, eyes narrowed on the red fox, whose eyes were averted from her, “I know exactly where to find this grave and, providing something drastic hasn’t occurred since I last visited, it’s still there.” Nick perked back up, turning towards the doe with eyes that resumed the look he had earlier. “I can take you whenever you wish.”

The fox tod closed the gap between them and pulled the smaller mammal into a tight embrace, her vision catching the beginnings of tears leaking from his eyes.

“Thank you…” he whispered into her long ears, now having draped down her back. At first, the embrace was a bit awkward, what with Judy being pulled from the floor, legs dangling and her chest pressed to his. The awkwardness faded quickly as the doe’s nose twitched, a comforting scent flooding her nose. She’d never really been close enough to foxes that often, now that she thought about it, but the stereotype that they smelled odd was far off from what she was getting from Nick. Sure, it was a bit musky, but sweet and almost… flowery, like violets. Bringing up her paws, she completed the embrace, encircling the tod’s lean torso with her small arms and paws.

“I didn’t really do anything… but… you’re welcome…” she murmured into the fox’s chest. A new sound surprised her slightly, making her tense. It was a deep rumbling that vibrated from within Nick’s chest.

_Is he… purring?_ came the not so unwanted thought that brought a renewed blush to her cheeks.

Instead of giving in to the potential reaction her nervousness denoted in her mind, Judy buried her muzzle in the tuft of cream colored fur that peeked from the v-neck of the fox’s shirt. His large paw cupped the back of her head, keeping her braced to him.

“Oh, I understand now,” Leo’s even tone cut through. “Nick was implying a sexual joke about the supposed stereotypical nature of rabbits.”

“Leo…?” Nick calmly asked from his position, never budging or letting up, probably in some attempt to not let the moment be ruined by the most inopportune interruption.

“Yes?” the android inquisitively replied.

“Shut up.”

“Understood.” Was the immediate and monotonous reply, the mechanical being now focusing elsewhere and leaving the two mammals to have their moment in peace.

It felt like quite the eternity, being clutched as close as she was and shown a level of affection that she knew had to be extremely rare for the tod. Regardless, it was warm, sincere, and almost… loving. The grey bunny wouldn’t have thought the last so much, if Nick hadn’t cradled her head like
he did. It forced her, none so reluctantly, to breathe through the fur on his chest. Before, the scent was an odd boon, but now, it was a heady fume that clouded her mind. Her feet tried to find purchase on the floor once more, stubby claws barely scraping the tiles. Her tail shivered a bit, making her a bit overly self-conscious about their predicament.

With both a sense of lamentation and relief, Nick finally let her go, gently lowering her to the floor like she was as physically fragile as he appeared emotionally in that moment. A slow sigh escaped him, chest rising and falling as he began to take deep breaths, eyes closed and relishing some sense of fulfillment that the rabbit couldn’t place.

For Nick, he was feeling one of the greatest burdens of his long life being lifted partially. He still had to go visit the still present grave, but the fact that someone else just removed the ideas of his fears of over 250 years by confirming his mother’s rest lay undisturbed… was most likely by far the most relieving moment of his life.

Aside from that though, the fox tod was mulling over something else. That pit in his chest that always pained him one way or another… was so far gone now, that the world felt new to him. Opening his eyes, he knew who was to ‘blame’ for that. The small rabbit before him, caring eyes gleaming at him in all their amethyst glory, was the beginning of some form of recovery he never knew he needed. That pit was now filled with something else now. Something he couldn’t quantify or completely comprehend properly, but he was able to surmise one thing. With his paw clutching close to his chest, feeling his own heartbeat rise upon looking deep into her eyes, he knew that Judy was someone he didn’t want to lose.

A twinge of fear spiked across his thoughts, reminding him of his predicament concerning his longevity, the idea of attachment reminding him he would only lose it eventually. To his surprise, it was quickly washed away in this instance, replaced by her gentle smile as the doe cared not to question his gaze, instead letting him revel in the comfort of her purple pools.

“I love your eyes,” he spoke, eyes then widening, as a paw clapped over his muzzle. Judy’s eyes widened slightly and averted downward, a blush creeping through her ears as she slicked them back. With seconds of silence between them growing to almost a minute, the doe chanced a darting glance up to the fox.

“I… You… you really like them?” Judy tentatively asked in a low whisper. The red fox scratched the back of his neck and muttered a ‘yeah’ before turning to leave, lest he say anything else out of place and awkward. The grey bunny called after him, “Thank you, Nick. You have pretty nice ones yourself.”

“I… thanks,” the tod said in kind, letting out a nervous chuckle.

Leo came back in the room, cutting short Nick’s intent to leave.

“Hey, Leo?” he voiced to the android. “I had a concern about the battle earlier.”

“Yes?”

“Why couldn’t you see Judy’s form?” the fox tod asked. In all honestly, Judy was quite curious about that as well. It wasn’t much of a concern at the time, but now it felt a prompt time to listen in and learn something potentially new.

“I have analyzed the data to a certain degree and have come to the preliminary conclusion that what you saw was a physical representation of her when bonded to you during your ‘Shift’ state,” explained the mechanical being. “I have no idea if this is correct or not, but it’s the best my analysis
could come up with for now. I surmised it must have been like the communication between you two that only you could hear, Nick.” The fox nodded in tepid understanding, the theory making sense but still leaving him a bit confused. Judy appeared to understand to a certain degree as well, making no arguments either way.

Seeing that the two had no objections to the explanation presented, Leo lifted two items being carried in its arms. One looked like a small box, barely large enough to hold her phone. The other was an oddly ornate looking orb, bright purple and black, about the size of a grapefruit.

“What are those?” Judy asked bluntly, seeing the android approach her with them, mild trepidation in her eyes as she put on a false smile.

“No need to worry, dear Judy,” Leo tried to comfort her. “I was able to solve a couple of problems for you over the past couple of days, if you will allow me to present them to you.”

“Oh… OH! Sure! Go right ahead then.”

The android set the items down and slid the small box over to her.

“I was able to use some laser equipment to alter your current contacts,” the robot began. “They won’t serve any prescription purpose but can still serve to hide your eye color, if that is still your wish. Otherwise, the other item in here will be of great use for you.”

The doe grabbed the box and opened it. A smile broke out on her face, looking in to see a contact case, obviously with her altered color contacts in it. The thing she smiled most about though, was the glasses that were half-rimmed and yellow-orange in color. She grabbed them from the soft lining of the case and tried them on.

“Much like Nick’s, these are multi-purpose glasses with functions comparable to computers and phones,” Leo divulged. “It has low volume, miniature speakers in the ends of the earpieces. Only you should be able to hear it. It can also project 3-D readouts, like maps and such, to assist you in whatever endeavors you pursue.”

“Oh my goodness! These are awesome!” Judy squeaked, bouncing on her feet. Allowing her a few seconds to calm down, the android then gripped the orb, lifting it in the air.

“And now onto this… if you will remove your glasses please,” voiced Leo with a polite gesture for her to place the glasses on the counter once more. She did as asked and followed the mechanical being’s directions to stand with clear space around her and in front of the orb.

“This,” it continued evenly, “is my solution to your problem concerning your ‘Shift’ and needing a method to cloth yourself outside of the house. I call it simply… the Lagomorph Suit. You can change the name as needed or desired if you don’t like it, but…” The android then pressed a button on the orb, releasing it into the air above Judy. “…hold still, please.”

The grey bunny doe braced herself, standing as still as her nerves allowed. The orb glowed a faint purple hue for a brief second, hovering in place. Suddenly, multiple lasers traced over her body, scanning and tracing over her. She did her best to stay still, both anxious and excited.

In a surprising move that almost made her flee, though she held her ground firm knowing Leo wouldn’t endanger her intentionally, the orb rapidly expanded and flared out all of its mechanical parts, black fabric unfurling and spreading like a net. The whole apparatus encompassed Judy’s form, overlaying onto her current attire but remaining comfortable.

Nick watched on in curiosity and interest as the doe’s body was wrapped and enclo
efficiently. Conservative versions of powered armor clicked into places over her joints and paws. A face mask of sorts form-fit to her muzzle, lights coming on as the optical sensors aligned with her eyes. Even her ears were covered in a skeletal structure of mechanical parts, with the black fabric covering anything that would otherwise be exposed.

Once the suit was in place and properly secured, the light up accents began to glow purple. Black fabric hugged her entire figure, making everything look smooth and flowing. A lightweight structure of armor parts spider webbed their way over the fabric, looking like a very minimalized version of the Flux armor.

“I had to come up with something that was easily capable of being transported with you,” the robotic being began, “as well as protect you well enough in both physicality and identity. The black fabric is actually a blended design that is highly resistant to small arms fire, concussive blasts, and moderate levels of physical force. By channeling the Shard energy with you, Judy, it can also simulate something akin to bionic muscle enhancement. By that, I mean it will assist in your actions, allowing you feats of strength around tenfold of what you can normally do and has the side benefit of minimizing your expended effort during activities. So, by proxy, it extends your level of endurance.”

Judy appeared to trying to speak, with only garbled noises coming out.

“Oh… allow me to adjust the voice functions…” Leo mentioned, leaning in to touch the mask. A few whirring noises sounded as a recalibration appeared to be occurring. A static white noise ‘whir’ sounded through the speakers and denoted that the voice function might be operating now. “There we go…”

“Is it working now?” she asked with a modified voice. Both fox and android nodded to her. “Oh good… because… sweet cheese and crackers… THIS IS SO COOL!!”

The fox clapped his paws over his ears, pinning them down. Leo made no moves whatsoever, but noticed that, in that moment, something happened.

As Judy yelled out that last declaration, a resonant screeching tone cascaded through the kitchen, cracking glasses and windows. The glasses resting on the counter closest to the doe, outright shattered in the wake of her screech.

Letting the ringing in his ears die down, Nick rubbed the side of his head, yelling over the ringing to Leo, “Why did you give her suit the Sonic Scream function…?”

The android looked over to him, shaking its head in the negative. The red fox tod’s face fell into a deadpan expression upon realization.

“You didn’t put that in there… did you?”

“I did not,” was Leo’s calm and blunt reply.
Eight

The rabble of the establishment echoed stagnantly within her ears, with recent events pervading her thoughts and driving her emotions along some roller coaster of highs and lows.

Shaking her head to rid herself of the thoughts, Judy focused on the image before her.

Essie was out of work and… not exactly ready to go, but internally excited about their movie outing to see the new Jack Savage film. The poor wild dog had a long shift for the day and only just got out, barely having enough energy to change at the station and make her way to the Drunk Tank to grab some grub with the bunny doe.

A small cup of something steaming was placed in front of Essie’s muzzle, which was currently resting on the table.

“What’s this?” she asked the server that dropped it off. “I said I needed a boost… not a drink.” The tall deer doe server turned and placed a hoof on her hip.

“It’s an espresso shot,” the deer remarked with a smile. “Figured you could use something quicker acting than a small dose of caffeine.” The female dog eyed the small cup with obvious trepidation.

“Ugh… bottoms up?” came the inflected statement, sounding more like a question, as Essie lifted the cup and nodded to Judy, who looked on in curiosity. The African Wild dog tilted the glass back quickly, nearly choking on the contents. “Are you sure this isn’t a drink?” she coughed in the direction of the server, who shook her head with a giggle, getting back to her other patrons.

“You know, you could have just had an energy bar or something,” remarked Judy, sipping her own tea.

“Yeah… but I really needed the boost, like… now,” the doe’s friend chuckled. Her grin then turned a bit sinister. “Now… on another note, how are you?”

“I’m good,” the rabbit answered as evenly as she could. “Not much to tell.”

“Seriously?” Essie questioned skeptically. “Flux has had to battle the same enemy twice, comes in like a comet not a few days later sporting some new awesome piece of armor, and you mention getting a new place… and you aren’t freaking out with details to tell me?” Judy shrugged, somehow goading her best friend into laughing. “Who are you and what have you done to Judy Hopps?”

The grey bunny began to laugh whole heartedly. Pushing away her glass of tea, she mulled over how best to describe the last several days without giving anything away. She didn’t want to outright lie to her best friend in Zootopia.

“Let’s just say I’ve had an eventful move and it kept me away from being able to observe the last couple of Flux battles, making my exuberance over telling you less so because I’m a bit ticked at myself for missing all of that,” the doe explained. Most of it was true to a degree. She did have an eventful move in with the fox and robot. She hadn’t been able to observe the battles as she usually did, being a part of them in a certain respect. To top it all off, her blog wasn’t as well updated as she would have liked it to be. It was difficult to figure out what to release, now that she was in on the ground floor of all the info as well as prolonged involvement.

“Oh, right,” the wild dog female breathed. “You moved into a new place. When do I get to see it?” She then cradled her head in her paws, giving the bunny a teasing stare, watching Judy squirm in a
nervous attempt to come up with an answer.

“Not for a few days,” the bunny doe drawled slowly, still working on follow up details in her head. “I… the owners… are repairing some window damage in the house, after some normal wear and tear.” Judy flinched as she nearly laughed at the half truth memory of the previous day.

Her filtered voice had reached a high enough pitch, that the frequency ended up causing a lot of the home’s glassware and windows to crack and fracture. Most stuff in other rooms or cabinets were perfectly fine, but objects in the open were not. According to Leo, her Shard energy expelled through her voice in her moment of over excitement, making the android reiterate the part about emotional levels causing an outward flux of energy, when not careful.

Thankfully, Leo was able to supply her with another pair of those techno-glasses, the first pair being shattered by her voice. She was not currently wearing them, for fear of looking out of place as compared to her normal attire. It shouldn't have bothered so much but her eyes were still a tentative issue.

“Oh, alright,” voiced Essie in concession, pulling Judy from her sea of thoughts. “Must be a good arrangement if you’re getting away from your exceptionally cheap housing before. The owners hot?”

The grey bunny nearly spit out her tea in surprise, having been in mid sip. Her canine friend merely smirked wider, as if having caught the proverbial tail.

“I’ll take that as a yes,” she saucily stated in answer to her own question. “So, who are they? Rabbits? Hares?”

“Nope. And what does it matter to you?” Judy deflected, sipping her tea once more in feigned nonchalance.

“Honey, I’m just curious because I have trouble finding a male and I’m living vicariously through you,” Essie sassed in a tone that made the grey doe unsure whether her friend was joking or not. At least until she followed with, “But seriously, I like knowing if you’re getting any interesting guys in your life.”

“Fair enough,” the bunny murmured. “They aren’t rabbits or hares though.”

“Oh! Let me guess…” the canine began, tapping her chin, “Koala?” Judy shook her head…

“Platypus?”

“No… and why?”

Ignoring her, Essie continued her mental list, “Capybara?”

“No,” the doe deadpanned.


Essie trailed off, having noticed that her friend’s ears perked at the mention of ‘Fox’. She grinned devilishly in a victorious smile, resting her head in the V her paws made.

“Oh my goodness! You shacked up with that fox from last week? I knew there was something going on there.”

“No… NO! It’s not him,” Judy rebuked with a blush. “It’s someone, anyone else.” Her head
lowered and ears flopped forward. “Ugh… I’m terrible with this lying thing.”

“Only to me,” the wild dog tried to comfort her with. “You do pretty well with your parents whenever I’m around to hear those conversations.” She winked at the rabbit.

Judy had to roll her eyes at that, but also felt a bit nervous. She got regular calls from her parents but kept the whole ‘Chasing down Flux at every opportunity into dangerous situations’ downplayed to watching it on the news or being across town at the time. They appeared to accept that explanation well enough, especially when she clammed up and refused to say much more when they repeated the question pertaining to it.

“Fine… it’s him,” the grey doe admitted reluctantly. “BUT do not, I repeat, do NOT go throwing your usual level of innuendos around should you come to visit me. I can’t take it, especially in front of him.”

“Boo, you’re no fun,” teased Essie. Her ears perked as a thought occurred. “Aww… you said owners. Don’t tell me he has a mate?”

“Actually…’” Judy started, finally having come up with a good way to make up for her previous faux paw earlier mentioning multiple owners.

“Boyfriend?” the female canine interrupted, making the bunny scowl at her friend. “Sorry… continue.”

“His roomie is more like a ghost roommate,” mentioned the doe. Essie tilted her head in confusion. Judy tried to further explain her recently devised lie, “He’s someone who works a lot and barely shows up, but still pays bills and uses it for a home address to deliver mail to. Other than that… he’s apparently almost never around.”

The African wild dog nodded her understanding, slowly getting the idea. The grey rabbit mentally sighed in relief as her best friend appeared to accept that as pawsible. The moment was short lived, as Essie checked her phone for the time and bolted upright.

“Our movie!” she exclaimed so loud, the entire bar could hear. Looking around, ears pinned back and an awkward grin on her muzzle, the canine muttered apologies to mammals who barely even registered her outburst over the returning din of the bar.

The two paid their tabs and hurried from the Drunk Tank to catch their movie.

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“Howlitzer! Anchor down and release a spread shot. Pick your targets.”

A hulking suit with heavy plating and even heavier weaponry stepped slowly, but surely, legs locking into position and anchor plates extending. Bolts drilled into the ground, effectively anchoring the large suit into place. Shaped rather ambiguously, almost like a large legged bull without horns, the ‘Howlitzer’ swiveled its twin, shoulder-mounted, plasma bolt cannons.

Inside the suit, Judy was using the general purpose cockpit, modified for her temporary use, to drive the suit and act as support for Flux outside their Shift. Nick was in the armor known as Slipstream. From the brief summary afforded to her, it was explained that the Slipstream suit was a fast flying suit with variable thrusters for quick course corrections. It could also supposedly fly at speeds in excess of Mach 3. Another feature, that the doe found rather enticing, was the fin blades that were used to minimize drag when in flight but also could serve as vibrational cutting blades in combat.
Judy felt out of place in the giant suit, but made do as the excitement of being able to unleash a one rabbit barrage of bolts in a firestorm of destruction was compensation enough to counteract her slight discomfort.

“Howlitzer in position!” chimed the grey bunny doe, having donned her recently presented morphsuit. She refused to call it what Leo mentioned, hoping to come up with a different name before the android’s name stuck.

“Good,” Nick said to her. “Enemy cluster is 5 kilometers out. Use the zoom function and auto target system to segregate signatures and fire missile pods at extended range, then use cannons for suppression and clean up. Got it?” Judy nodded enthusiastically, adjusting her system settings and making alterations. Despite the advanced level of tech, the controls were rather simple and easy to learn, probably due to her affinity for gaming.

“You know i can’t hear you nodding right?” The fox chided her in a lightly teasing manner. The doe blushed beneath her mask.

“Ah… uh… sorry,” she murmured. “I got it.”

The grey bunny made to use the features mentioned, zooming in from a distance on the cluster of enemies. Something was wrong.

“Nick…? It’s only one target.” She waited to an explanation, only hearing a tepid grunt. The answer to her unasked question came soon enough.

The one target she was examining suddenly broke apart… into several, dozens, hundreds… it was a swarm. Her head hurt a bit, causing her eye to twitch beneath the mask. Ignoring the pain, Judy brought up the firing controls and locked on with missile pods. Shoulder, bicep, and thigh mounted pods angled themselves for a salvo.

“Firing,” the rabbit confirmed, pulling the trigger as soon as a max limit lock was denoted on her screen. The pods flared to life, spouting and spitting smoky plumes, the missile launches shaking the Howlitzer suit of armor. Over a hundred projectiles were fired in a single salvo, the pods automatically loading the next salvo.

In the distance, her optical zoom allowed her a limited view of the multitude of explosions happening within the swarm, still rapidly approaching.

“Excellent work,” Leo commended her, “Seventy-seven targets eliminated, Twenty-four targets heavily damaged. Out of one hundred and twenty five launches, that is a wonderful success rate.”

“Thanks, Leo,” Judy nervously and quickly replied. The doe adjusted her angle and prepared for the next attack, anxious over the encroaching force that still retained a high threat level. “Why so many though?”

“All the drones that come through the gate technically cluster together on a carrier apparatus,” explained the android. “However, most of them don’t survive the virulent storm within the Gate. It’s a quantity over quality method of approach.”

The targeting system reached its limit once again, inciting Judy to stare at the progression of the reloading process for Howlitzer’s pods. It pinged a few seconds later, to which she remarked firing once more, loosing another salvo of missiles that roared from the towering armament.

“Why do these things always come down on Zootopia?” Judy more or less muttered to herself. This time, Nick intervened with some helpful details.
“Leo told me a few times that it had to do with moving the wormhole leading to Earth,” the fox began, his form circling above Judy, waiting for a closer target to engage. “It takes massive energy to do as such, and they tried to move it from the original position to hover over the two of us. They had a general idea of our location and now we have to deal with those Drones regularly.”

“But wouldn’t it be prudent then to move ourselves so they drop somewhere else?” the grey doe inquired, adjusting the cannons into a firing position and charging them, using her Shard energy to do so.

“Unfortunately not,” the robot’s voice echoed in her ears. “It takes massive quantities of energy to move a wormhole, especially moving the exit from the other end. It would be a gamble to assume they would care to do so again. Barring that, we would still need to respond to any threats that emerge from the Gate, giving off the continued belief to our enemy that we are based nearby.” The rabbit ambiguously hummed her understanding, as a sudden thought occurred to her. She just hoped there was enough time to ask before…

“Targets in range. Fire when ready,” the red fox tod calmly told her. Judy jerked in reaction by firing the cannons upon hearing that.

In alternating succession, the two cannons vibrated, as bolts of energy left the barrels in a rapid staccato, showering the oncoming targets with pelting plasma rounds that tore through armor and melted internal mechanisms.

“Lovely,” voiced Nick, turning about in Slipstream and arching his flight path around to engage the straggler units that lie outside of Howlitzer’s line of fire. A burning burst of his thrusters pushed his speed swiftly upwards, body spinning around, as he used his predetermined path to close in towards three targets.

Cutting the thrusters, allowing for free movement, the fox tod whipped his arms and legs out, energy funneling into the fin-blades attached to his limbs. The edges glowed bright as they thrummed in vibration.

A glowing fin-blade sliced through a drone, rending its chest section apart and making it take a downward arc towards the ground. Whether it was from reaching internal parts that disrupted function or simply screwing up its flight path with a hole torn in its chest, Judy could only surmise from a distance. She watched him continue the flow of his motions and slice through two more drones in much of a similar manner. The second lost an arm and part of its head, with the third having its head cleaved clean off its shoulders.

“You might want to dial back your power consumption per shot, dear Judy, and increase the frequency of the shots in turn,” Leo cut in above the thrum of the cannons firing madly. Her head was hurting worse now, but she found the will to suppress her discomfort.

“I’ll get right on that. Thank you.”

She used the controls of the physical displays, as well as the projected ones, to modify the power output and recycled the cannon fire rate.

A stutter of the bolt cannons shook the suit as they readjusted, increasing their firing frequency and loosing a faster barrage with less recoil.

While tending to the controls, a sudden spike of pain permeated her skull, blurring her vision and making the world around her lose its pixelated cohesion.
“Are you alright, Judy?” came the even tone of the android. Judy tried to hum her affirmative conveyance. It didn’t quite take as effectively as she had hoped. “I can sense stress in your vocal patterns as well as variations in your physiology that are causing you discomfort. I’m ending this.”

Nick interjected now, saying, “What’s going on?”

“I believe my adjustments concerning Judy’s attunement to the neural devices is incomplete,” recited Leo. “I’m terminating the simulation.” Before the grey doe could argue against it, relief flooded her as the world around her fell, giving way to darkness.

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Nick pulled the neural net interface from his head, the sensory deprivation attachments slipping away from his ears and eyes. The light in the room was dim, but still somehow blinding. He raised a paw to it, lamenting that he could never truly get used to waking up from the simulation network that Leo used for training.

He looked over to Judy, who was breathing heavily and attempting, rather unsuccessfully, to pull the neural device from her head. Her movements became more desperate and panicked, as she grew frustrated with the object.

“Woah, woah!” the fox chided her. “Calm down… it’s ok.” Even with the portion covering her ears, she seemed to somehow hear him as the doe stilled slightly at his voice. He rested his paws on her arms, making her stop moving altogether. All except for her nose, which was twitching wildly.

Nick carefully loosened the straps and removed the device slowly, watching her eyes flutter open, only for the rabbit to cover her eyes and groan slightly in pain.

“Yeah, I know,” the tod remarked with a roll of his eyes. “My ugly mug wouldn’t be the furst thing I’d normally want to expose you too after an experience like that.” He counted the seconds, wondering how long it would take for….

Judy’s head shot up, her eyes training haphazardly on the fox in guilt.

“No… I… that’s not what I…” the little bunny started in a stutter. Looking at her with a more gentle smile than he was used to displaying, Nick put a paw over hers, the other still holding her arm.

“Calm down,” he soothed. “I meant it as a joke, Fluff.” The grey rabbit visibly relaxed, letting out a long breath that she hadn’t realized she was holding in.

“Good…” she breathed. “Because you’re not ugly… you’re pretty…” Judy’s eyes bugged out, but instead of clamping up like usual, she spilled her words further, “Pretty hot! I mean hot… NO! Handsome! Wait… I meant attractive! Yes… attractive…”

The poor rabbit facepawed and cupped her muzzle to look down at the floor, unable to face Nick in her frazzled state.

“My head hurts,” the doe murmured, as if it were some sort of excuse for her lack of filter on her words thus far. “My brain feels like it has been in a microwave.”

“While inaccurate, the metaphorical implication holds some truth,” voiced Leo from the control console at the other end of the room. Both the fox and bunny looked slightly worried over his revelation, knowing he wasn’t one for making jokes, at least on purpose.

“You mean you tried to actually microwave my brain?” Judy asked in skeptical confusion. The
android shook its head in the negative.

“I meant the concept is metaphorically similar,” Leo corrected. “The device uses a method of intercepting signals between brain functions like sight, smell, touch, and hearing, supplementing them with ‘interference’ to overlay it and project a virtual reality of sorts. My creators implemented it as a form of training for soldiers, pilots, and commanders, though there were infinite alternative uses for it.”

“I can only imagine the ‘entertainment’ it was used for,” the red fox snarked lightly, garnering a small smile from the bunny before him.

“Indeed,” the mechanical being confirmed. “Back to the main point though, the neural interface needs to be calibrated to each individual, with regards to their physiological variances in brain chemistry and such. I’ve been able to take the time to calibrate everything to Nick, but having to adapt the configurations to you, Judy, being of not only a different gender, but a different species altogether, could take a few lengthy modifications and brain scans to properly attune.”

“I think I got it,” Judy half-heartedly replied. “I think I want to take a migraine pill and get some shut eye.”

“A prudent decision,” the robot supplied. “I am quite sorry for causing you pain and discomfort to this degree though.” Leo walked closer to her, holding out a cup of water and a couple of pills in a smaller plastic cup. “I had these prepared in the eventuality that this would happen.” The grey doe took both, with Nick having released her paws, still looking on with concern and mild shock at her words from before, having been unable to formulate a proper reply.

“I did have one more question, before I forget,” the bunny divulged with a curious inflection. Leo and Nick provided her their undivided attention. “Who is our enemy?”

The two exchanged glances, both nodding slightly.

“To be perfectly honest, Judy,” Leo began, “We’re not quite sure.” The doe frowned, enticing Nick to try picking up the explanation from there.

“After sending the Shard through the wormhole,” the fox revealed with a softer voice, so as not to agitate the rabbit’s condition, “Leo here assumes that the following three hundred years were either an effort to seize the Gate by other civilizations or break through the spacial barrier that obstructed the Gate since. Quite possibly a combo of the two. Anyways, several civilizations were fighting each other before the Nova Shard was sent away. The drones and such that have been sent through have different enough tech to the recorded technology that he knows of, that Leo can’t specifically point out which is our enemy.”

“So, we have no idea who we’re fighting?” Judy bluntly inquired, to which Nick shrugged and Leo looked rather unresponsive, probably processing something.

“We do have several candidates, but no, we do not have a choice that merits more attention than others at the moment,” the mechanical being mentioned.

“That sounds… odd,” came her tepid response. The red fox laughed at that.

“What? Did you think our ‘nemesis’ would show up in full space regal attire, an armada at the ready, and make wild monologues about our ‘imminent demise’ at their claws?” Nick jibed with a roguish grin. A brief laugh later and he resumed, “If only we were so lucky. No, our enemy has only made endeavors to acquire us by regularly dropping teams or individual units.”
Judy finally cared enough to take the water and pills, still paying attention to what was being said. Upon swallowing and clearing her throat, the bunny presented a new question.

“Why not send an entire army?” she calmly asked. “I mean… it’s not like I would want that level of destruction, but they must have thought of that?”

Leo supplied the answer rather briskly, “Imagine the Gate is like the bandwidth on your internet connection. Only a certain amount of data can flow through it at a time. Apply that thinking to the Gate. Basically, if they send too much at one time, the wormhole stabilization could utterly fail and break the connection between their position and ours. It’s also the reason why the attacks we’ve defended against are spaced out by several days.”

“Oh! That makes so much more sense now!” Judy cheered in realization, the past year’s worth of rather regularly timed attacks having gained some semblance of explanation to them now.

“It does?” Nick inquired with a confused expression. “Boy, you are one adaptive mammal. How do you take all this in as if it makes all the sense in the world?”

“Uh… I guess… since I know that it happens, the best I can do when presented with an explanation is to give it consideration, even if it doesn’t make complete sense…” the grey bunny doe belted out. She yawned. “And as much as I would love to continue this… I’m much too sleepy. G’night, guys.”

Leo gave her a short wave, while Nick reached out a paw, but pulled back at the last second. He muttered a short farewell to her, eyes downcast, as he wished to relay something more meaningful.

“Why do you hold back?” the android asked, Judy having already left the room. “I can tell you like her.” Nick scowled at the robot. “You do know your attempts at intimidation never work on me, right?” the fox tod sighed in exasperation.

“Yeah… I know,” he vented. “I just… am having trouble trying to approach her for some reason. It was easy before… because…”

“You didn’t care,” Leo finished his thought. “But now, you show all the signs of romantic interest in her, as afforded by my knowledge of nonverbal communication pertaining to biological beings.”

Looking rather shocked, Nick dragged his paw down his muzzle, stating between grinding fangs, “I won’t even try to refute you, seeing as you seem convinced, but do keep all those delusions to yourself.”

“You know I can’t suffer delusions,” the android rebuked him. “And you can deny but you can’t truly refute it.”

“Oh, shut up,” blurted the red fox.

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The night proved a stale and stuffy one, the darkness usually a lukewarm comfort for sleeping alone, but was merely a reminder this passing twilight. The moonlight trickled in through the blinds, painting the floor with dull grey streaks of light.

Nick turned over, trying to get back to sleep, his own thoughts being the bane to his ability to do so. It did him little good to be so contemplative during a time for rest, with his mind being so ineffably preoccupied with the violet eyed bunny doe that shared his home now.

Home still didn't feel like the right word, but the fox couldn't deny that Judy was pulling his line of
thinking in that direction. Her enthusiastic personality and unrestrained energy brought a pleasant
glow and flow to living here now. The grey bundle of exuberant fluff made it bearable, if not
outright pleasing to wake up in the morning, knowing Judy would be around doing something
entertaining. Whether that entertainment was to herself or him did not really matter, since it gave
Nick an appealing warmth in his chest.

The ever present pit in his chest was not replaced by something… by something there that wasn't
there before.

A sudden and sharp pain coursed through Nick. He instantly bolted up and clutched his chest,
confused and greatly shocked by the happenstance. His breathing became laboured, with the tod
feeling as if water had somehow invaded his lungs.

The red fox grasped at his chest, pulling lightly at tufts of cream fur. He quickly came to the
realization that he obviously wasn't drowning. Furrowing his brow, Nick tried to figure out the cause
of this.

He didn't need to wait long, as the fox's head spiked with a new sense of phantom injury. Blurred
images and off key noise echoed within his mind, with Nick attempting to use the chance to make
sense of everything. The images cleared slightly, but they still didn't make much sense.

Focusing all he could, Nick saw the whole of Zootopia in a flood of fire, buildings collapsing and
fields being scorched as Drones fell like comets. They impacted the Earth, each resulting destructive
collision opening a new fracture in the surface of the city and its surrounding areas.

In the distance, a group of hulking and armored Shards, glowing various colors, trampled everything
in their path as they caused unwarranted mayhem.

The red fox was woefully confused, unsure what he was seeing but knowing one thing…

It wasn't real. It wasn't a vision. And it certainly wasn't a dream. More like a nightmare….

Nick leaped out of bed, racing for the door to very nearly rip it open, making his way to tear out of
the room. He halted his advance, facepawing himself as he turned back to grab a pair of athletic
shorts to throw on, almost forgetting his nightly routine to sleep in the bare fur.

As soon as the piece of clothing was properly secured, the red fox once again bolted from the room,
nearly bounding off the wall as he rounded the corner and made his way in front of Judy’s room.

His paw clenched tight as he raised it and went to pound on her door.

Nick stilled himself, hanging his head and trying to calm his breathing. He hadn’t a clue if she was
actually having nightmares. He was merely jumping to that potential conclusion due to that thing he
vaguely remembered Leo going on about concerning the mental bleeding effect between the two of
them. That idea popping into his head made him react, but, if it weren’t viable in this case, then all he
would have succeeded in doing was disturbing Judy’s sleep.

Regretting his freakout just a bit, the fox tod gently rested his forehead upon the door, lamenting his
own supposed stupidity. He let out a languished sigh, clenching and relaxing his paws a few times,
before daring to make his way back to his own room.

A whimpering cry froze him just as his head parted with the door, ears perking to full attention. He
turned his head and cupped an ear to the door, hearing her breathing and the scraping of her paws on
the sheets.
The red fox placed a paw on the door handle, silently hoping he wasn’t being overly paranoid. Another whimper affirmed his resolve and he opened the door carefully, night vision easily accommodating the room’s lower light level.

Judy was lying in an awkward position, curled up partially in a fetal position and legs splayed out, as if she had been kicking them sporadically. To further confirm his thoughts, she started to whine, her nose twitching and legs kicking wildly. The sheets tangled up oddly around her feet, only seeming to spur her into further fear induced movements.

Images once again assaulted his mind, to which the fox tried to pay no mind, knowing full well now they weren’t real or of any consequence. Nick knelt down next to the bed and pressed a paw to Judy’s shoulder, trying to gently shake her awake.

“Fluff… you’re having a nightmare,” he tried to softly say, hoping to stir her without jarring her awake too harshly. The only thing he succeeded in doing was make her roll a bit towards him and grip his arm, the doe’s lips trembling as she tried to hug his arm close. Nick’s muzzle twitched, his lips tugging upward in an involuntary reflex to smile slightly.

“You’re quite adorable, Carrots… but I really need you to wake up.”

The fox attempted to retrieve his arm, pulling and tugging it away. It didn’t quite take well as the grey bunny muttered some form of murmured lamentation that he couldn’t quite hear and tugged back at him, a tear streaking from her eye and trickling over the fur of her cheek.

Nick didn’t believe it was possible, but he could almost feel his heart melting at the sight. He turned away, blushing profusely and trying to take a few deep breaths to calm his now pounding heartbeat.

He turned back to the sleeping rabbit, eyes going wide as he was just in time to witness Judy nuzzling his paw in a show of desperate affection. The images were starting to fade into darkness now, losing whatever cohesion they had in his mind.

“If you’re trying to make me fall in love with you with that display,” the fox muttered in mock annoyance to himself, turning his head and sighing, “…then I think it’s working…”

He tried once more to goad her into wakefulness, saying more loudly and clearly, “Fluff… Carrots… Judy?”

The grey doe barely even stirred, the only indication of hearing him being her ears flicking slightly and flopping back down at hearing her name being spoken. The fox groaned and tried the only thing he figured might help, remembering the nights as a kit where he was comforted by his parents. Mainly, his mother.

Carefully, he moved his paw, slinking into the bed with Judy, adjusting her as necessary and making sure he wouldn’t fall off later. The rabbit instinctively curled against his chest as soon as he settled in. The tod was a little unsure how to proceed with placing his paws, extending his arms out and trying to find a place to put them without appearing too creepy in his approach.

He groaned again, internally this time, and placed one paw upon her head, and the other halfway down her back. The small bunny arched at his touch into him, her head and chest pressing into his own chest.

“Just breathe,” he told himself, gulping heavily at feeling the inadvertent brush of her muzzle into his chest fur. The paw upon her head now began stroking her fur, willing her to calm and sleep more soundly. It seemed to be working, with her whimpers and whines dying down to a slow and steady
breathing pattern that seemed to be relaxed, as well as relax Nick, too.

He could feel his eyelids grow heavy now, the small bundle of warmth against his body doing well to lull him into sleep.

Nick felt he was wrong before. This place wasn’t becoming home. Right here, with this bunny, with Judy, in her embrace. *That was home.*

The red fox tod ran his chin over her head, his paw now caressing her ears as the bunny doe nuzzled up against him.

He might get the pulp beaten out of him tomorrow, but for now, he didn’t care if it meant she was calm.

“Worth it,” Nick breathed, as sleep began to overtake him.
Nine

Darkness enveloped her like a velvet blanket, with such warmth that she surmised whatever it was felt like a living, breathing furnace. It was pleasant, counteracting the chills that wracked her body and caused her fingers and toes to curl in, preserving what little heat she felt was left in them.

Much of her night was pervaded by nightmares of a future she feared might come to pass if she were to fail in her efforts with her partner.

Her partner. Judy felt the jagged sawtooth edges of her previous nightmare grate against the sensitive shell of the doe's now worn mind.

Nick was dying in the latter part of her nightmares and she couldn't stop them. The other Shards. The enemy. They would drive him through with a blade of cascading energy, his body disintegrating in a swash of glowing particles and explosive heat.

The darkness surrounding her closed tighter, causing her to take a breath.

The ensuing moments after were delightful though, with the tod reaching out with a large paw from the void and cupping her cheek, wiping away a tear she didn't even know she had shed. Judy would try to speak and no words were formed. An echo reached her ears, sounding so real, but she couldn't tell where it was coming from.

Her eyes opened, vision and mental faculties groggy and barely functioning. A blend of black and near black surrounded her vision. The grey bunny's nose shivered and twitched, taking in the air, warm and a bit musky. She could only assume that she might have sweat during her nightmares, tossing and turning as well.

Wiggling her way around, she came muzzle to muzzle with Nick, eyes closed and breathing slowly. Her mind couldn't quite comprehend the sight, knowing she went to sleep in her own bed, with the only explanation being.

I'm still dreaming, Judy thought, smiling to herself. Her paw snaked up to cup the side of Nick's muzzle, loving the lucidity of her dream. His fur felt so silky, with a mild coarseness to the longer, thicker coat of fur. It rivaled her own short but velvety fur with a contrast that the doe rather enjoyed.

Taking in his scent, nuzzling her head under his chin, everything felt and seemed so real. He couldn't possibly be in her bed though. That somewhat repressed and antisocial fox in her bed… It nearly made her laugh aloud imagining the possibility. Instead, she held her tongue…

… or figured she could put it to greater use.

Tilting her head up, the rabbit gave tentative licks in the nook of the fox's neck connecting to his muzzle. He responded with a gentle throaty rumble, sounding almost like Nick attempted to growl. Leaning back, Judy pressed her paws to his chest, biting her lip in some sense of pleasing surprise. The red fox, at least in her dream, was solidly built. Wondering briefly if this was her fantasy playing with her, or just a mental representation of what she thought he would feel like from what she had seen, it didn't really matter.

The tod opened his maw in a yawn, tongue slipping out to lick his lips. Judy's breath caught, as her tail shivered and eyes widened. Those fangs, curved and pointed, some short and some long, dominated her vision, setting off a chaotic storm in her mind. Parts of her were scared of the pointed
ivory teeth, made for tearing into flesh and snapping bones. Another part became a bubbling warmth that rose from deep within, taking a belated pleasure in the sight and not minding the display in the slightest.

When his maw closed, something snapped and Judy pulled him down abruptly, planting her lips upon his awkwardly.

*If this IS a dream, why not have some fun,* her thoughts concluded, paws now digging into his muzzle fur and pulling his lips harder against hers in a passionate press of soft lip flesh. Nick was starting to part his mouth and join the kiss as well, whether still sleeping or not, it wasn't clear to her.

She lifted a leg to toss over his hips, pulling herself closer and feeling the permeating warmth soak into her fur from him.

"You're pretty hot," the grey doe mentioned between kisses. That did it.

Judy's eyes bolted open, suddenly realizing a few things that felt way too real. Her voice cut through, clear as day and the feeling of her lips on the fox were all too dangerously vivid for a dream.

Nick's eyes slowly opened, his own brain apparently still waking up and formulating observations of what was going on.

Back in the rabbit's mind, her brain was going from ignition to a high gear in such a short time that it was almost like gears were grinding in every corner of her head, her mind desperately trying to catch up and make sense of the events unfolding before her. One of her eyes twitched in a short circuit moment.

*Had she sleepwalked into his room?* Judy's thoughts began, a downward spiraling flare of questions threatening to break what was left of her mental capacity. *If I did that, the… HE'S NAKED… wait… no. This is my room. Why is he in my room? More importantly, why is he cuddling me? Why am I cuddling BACK?!!*

Their lips were currently frozen together, tepid breaths between the two making it very clear that the other was awake and aware to a certain degree.

The red fox was going over the line she said, having only been awake enough to think it was a rampant imagination giving him pleasing morning thoughts.

*You're pretty hot.*

*You're pretty hot.*

*You're pretty hot.*

The words repeated in an infinite loop within his head, the voice Judy used having left an almost physical tingling touch to his ears with her heated tone and unfiltered divulgence of them. Coupled with the fervent way she practically made out with him, he couldn't delude himself any longer. In such a short time, this adorable and vibrant bunny had smashed through his emotional barriers erected over hundreds of years and gotten him to feel something other than stale complacency and the ever present stagnancy of his life feeling endlessly useless.

He opened his muzzle to try formulating a sentence to try portraying as much…

Only for Judy to have quite a different reaction. Both her feet planted firmly into his chest, a tiny shriek of delayed surprise and humiliating embarrassment escaping her as a blush set her cheeks and
ears ablaze.

The fox felt the air void itself from his lungs, nowhere near prepared for the impact. Tumbling off the bed and taking to course of gravity as the bed ended, Nick’s head smacked rather loudly on the nightstand positioned just off the edge of the bed. The rest of his body thumped awkwardly against the floor, any other pain forgotten as he grasped at his head, groaning loudly.

The grey doe's shame was all but forgotten as she scrambled over the edge of her bed, leg catching on her sheets.

"I'm so sorry… Are you...AH!"

The bunny fell forward, on top of the tod, her head burrowing heavily into his chest and sheets being dragged with, covering them partially. Still freaking out somewhat, Judy fidgeted quite a bit, moving the top of the sheet back to come back up under Nick's chin. She cowered back, ears slicked back and mouth working open and close, trying desperately to find words.

"I… should we…"

The door swayed open, both mammals perking their ears and swiveling their heads in its direction. The red fox still held his head in pain.

In the open doorway, Leo was standing in a different apron, mixing something in a large bowl with a whisk. The apron the android wore today read:

**I make bad science puns… Periodically.**

Unfortunately, neither mammal was in a mood to laugh and only averted gazes from one another in slight shame.

"I thought you said pursuing a physical relationship wasn't in your interests," the mechanical being stated in slight inquiry. Nick no longer had a paw to his head, clearly mortified at the most impromptu reveal of the worst information in the least appealing setting that one could offer in such a situation.

Turning to Judy, who looked equal parts confused and angry, he vented out, "No. LEO! No… Carrots… That is nowhere near the right context." The android appeared to be ready to speak up again, only for the tod to point a threatening paw at Leo. "You shut up. And Judy… I'm sorry I scared you…"

An open paw slapped him across the muzzle. It didn't hurt so much physically, but the emotional toll it took on him after having felt so exposed was severe. His chest felt like it was closing in on itself, even after Judy got up, relieving him of the physical burden but not the mental one.

"Wait… Judy!" Nick pleaded, reaching out to grasp her wrist.

In an angry huff, she whirled on him and slapped him again.

"How DARE you!" she belted out, the tod too shocked to speak. "A 'physical' relationship? For what? A better 'Shift' for more power as a Shard? Am I just a tool to you? A piece of tail that allows you more power? Tell me!" The red fox worked his jaw, almost tearing up as he tried, in desperate despondence, to find the words to get across to the furious doe that it wasn't what it seemed.

"Tell me…" Judy pleaded more quietly.
"No!" Nick burst. The bunny looked taken aback by his refusal.

The tod noticed his mistake and hurriedly tried to correct it by venting, "No… I meant you aren't a tool. You mean alot to me… and… I was in here… because you had nightmares." Judy appeared more complacent to listening now, even if still quite abrasive.

"How would you know? It's not like I was screaming or such loud enough for you to have any reason to be in my room… was I?"

"It's… difficult… to explain," Nick divulged carefully. "I could see portions of your nightmare… images and things like that. I thought it might have been like what you experienced with me… so I went to check on you." He took a deep breath. "I couldn't wake you, no matter what I tried, so I did the next best thing."

"You decided to crawl into bed with me and sleep with me? Smart plan…" sassed the obviously still ticked off rabbit.

"Yes… fine. I made a terrible decision," the fox conceded. "But in all fairness, when I tried to wake you, you grabbed onto me and wouldn't let me go. Started making sad noises and I couldn't…" He tilted his head back and sighed heavily. "...I couldn't leave you like that. I'm really sorry. Very well and truly."

"If I might interject," Leo stated, causing both mammals to turn to the android, "in clarification of before, I mentioned the physical relationship thing as a means to discover if you were truly the 'Limiter' we needed. Nick refused and I suppose this set of circumstances made me question that in the wrong way. I am sorry for worrying you. I can assure you that Nick here has the utmost respect for you and has only displayed the wish to make sure you are comfortable. He has even made preparations to invite your friend, Essie, over in an attempt to earn your favor."

"What?" the doe blurted, looking between the robot and fox, the latter of which was trying to wave down Leo. He stopped and began to scratch the back of his head, nervous of Judy's reaction. "I thought you were against it…"

"I was anxious about it, not completely opposed," Nick clarified. "But back to the main matter at paw, I want you to know I had no ulterior motives towards you like that…"

"I… I know," the grey bunny doe near whispered. "I guess I was just scared and that turned to anger." Now the fox was confused again.

"Scared of what?" came his inevitable inquiry. Judy wrapped her arms around herself, rubbing her shoulders slowly, feeling a chill set in now.

"Of being used… of being in this… emotional knot over you, because…" she trailed off.

"Because?" the tod goaded gently.

"Because I think…" her voice then dropped lower, making Nick have to perk his ears towards her to hear properly, "I think I might be falling for you." Those last words left her so raspy and in such a wispy manner, that the fox couldn't help but feel a small measure of sympathy for the bunny, having likely felt so fearful speaking those words aloud.

The red fox gulped loudly, seeing the bunny's bottom lip give a quiver as her eyes locked on him, unwavering and imbued with an anxious trepidation as she waited for some sign of recognition from Nick.
Despite his thoughts earlier, sudden fears rose to the surface. He hadn't been in this position before. It wasn't like he never tried to date, but after meeting Leo and having had his condition revealed to him, he lost all interest and hope in thinking he could find a mate that could possibly relate to him. Over three hundred years and he'd never really gave himself the social exposure to be confessed to with a profession of love.

Other such fears continued to swirl in his now woken mind, a virulent storm of reservations making themselves known. He had never endeavored to make anyone other than his mother happy. He never cared to invest emotionally in another mammal. He barely even made any real connections with others whatsoever out of the inescapable fear that they would part with him one way or another.

Why am I worth falling for? Nick asked himself. He averted his gaze down, daring to ask the question aloud…

"Why?"

The tod couldn't look her in the eyes, only then realizing that Judy might take this as a form of rejection. He, by no means, wished to do that, but the fox had so much self doubt. He felt he had no capability to give her anything she would need, want,... or deserve.

"You're infuriating," the doe began, voice affirmed and steady, "abrasive, a bit thoughtless, and somewhat selfish."

"Those are odd things to fall for…" Nick whispered, knowing full well Judy could hear him.

"But," she continued, "beneath all of that… I have seen how you try and treat me with respect. You have shown me compassion and trust I suspect does not come easy to you. And while I can't think of every reason right now," Judy raised a paw to his chin, lifting his head so he could look at her once again, "I have come to love being a part of your life. And I want more than to be your 'Limiter'."

"I know it's probably a dumb question… but what do you want to be?" the red fox tod asked slowly. He knew where this might be leading, but needed to hear it. Needed to know, without a doubt, what this energetic and vibrant rabbit wanted from him. Judy placed a paw upon his chest, over his heart and lightly raking her short claws through the fur, the tod almost having forgotten he was still shirtless.

The grey doe's violet eyes trained on his emerald ones, a glowing vibrancy creating a swirling storm in her irises as she breathed the next word…

"Yours."

Nick's breath caught and his heart nearly stopped. It was simply amazing how one word, a single word, could provoke such an ecstatic feeling within him. A tingling surge of something electric coursed through his body, warming him from the tips of his ears to his toes and tail. The tod's fur fluffed out, as if statically charged, making the doe furrow her brow and dart her eyes around in slight bewilderment. The fox assumed she might not know whether this was a good thing or not. He chose to allay those fears as best he could, placing his own paw over her own and keeping it pressed over his heart.

"Would it be too selfish of me if I wished for that, too?" came his clearly voiced reply. Judy's eyes glazed over a bit and appeared to get a bit teary as she slowly but surely smiled.

"Does that mean you…" the doe started, before being interrupted by the fox before her.

"I don't truly know yet," he spoke, making the bunny's smile falter a bit, to which he followed up
with, "but I want to find out. I want more as well."

Nick cupped the doe's cheek and gently pulled her in for a tender kiss. It was awkward at first, with the fox's longer snout and the bunny's stubbier muzzle. They bumped noses, with Judy's twitching against Nick's steadily, her breath washing warmly over his lips as they parted to try again.

This time, they tilted their heads a bit, interlocking their lips with tentative grace. It was nowhere near ideal, though the two were making it work for them. Somehow, the awkwardness of it all made it feel all the sweeter, with the imperfections fitting together like some misfit puzzle, creating an abstract image that none but the two could comprehend.

Neither of them would have it any other way. The slight moisture of their morning lips made their flesh stick together with each slow pull from their kisses. The sound echoed within each of their ears, the light 'smacks' an oddly welcome sound as the tod and doe continued to give each other chaste kisses in an attempt to hear that sound once more.

Eventually, they parted, breathing strained and chests slowly rising and falling as both caught their breath, only then realizing they had forgotten to feed their lungs what they so desired.

"So, does this mean we're…?" Nick began to ask, to which Judy nodded enthusiastically.

"I sure hope so," came her response, preceded by an almost breathless laugh.

"I have a few years on you. You good with that?"

A furrowed scowl met his vision.

"You are only as old as you are perceived to be," the doe explained, "and from what I've seen, I have a few years on you in that regard."

"Did you just call me immature?" the red fox sassed with a growing grin. The rabbit thumped his chest playfully.

"Got a problem with that, Scruffy?" her sultry tone echoed in his ears. Nick barked a short laugh.

"Who's Scruffy?" he inquired in mock hurt.

"You are."

"Hmm, how dare you," the tod muttered, drawing a giggle from the purple eyed doe. His expression fell a bit as he contemplated something else. Judy noticed and brushed her paw up to his shoulder.

"What's wrong?"

"I'm a fox."

The bunny clapped her paws to her mouth, gasping dramatically as she spoke, "No way! Seriously! I had no idea. Is the condition curable? I can help if you…" From there, Judy devolved into unrestrained laughter, Nick shaking his head and joining in with light hearted chuckles.

"Forget I cared to think that mattered to you," the red fox said with a lopsided grin, still shaking his head in the way the… no… his, his bunny cast aside his worries and reservations like they were ridiculous to begin with, but in a good way. A new thought occurred to him, making him look to the doorway.

The android was gone.
"Are you still there, Leo?" Nick raised his voice in question, his face going into a deadpan expression and Judy blushing as the robot poked its head within sight from out of the doorframe.

"Yes, sir," Leo simply replied. "I figured I should give you some privacy in your moment."

The grey doe bore a muzzle fraught with confusion as she turned to her fox. Said fox sighed and pinched the bridge of his snout.

"That's not exactly privacy, bud."

"I was under the impression this was a moment where the phrase 'Out of sight, out of mind' might take precedence," the android explained. The bunny laughed a bit, holding a paw over her mouth as she saw Nick's eyes roll.

"That's an idiom, you know?"

"Actually, sir, it's a proverb with literal implications," corrected Leo. The red fox appeared a bit flabbergast and shrugged in resignation.

A clapping of paws together grabbed both Leo's and Nick's collective attention, focusing on the bunny before them.

"Now… as much fun and unintentionally dramatic as all of that was," Judy mentioned slowly, "I would like my room back so I may get dressed, unless you want to watch." The last part mentioned was obviously a joke, to which the android took the rare hint and left. The tod, however, felt a bit playful and raised a paw, grinning almost stupidly.

The grey doe's scowl and raised eyebrow made him look down in slight shame and lower his paw slowly, muttering, "Sorry… too soon." He pointed with both paws out of the doorway, following their direction. "I'll just… yeah."

As he closed the door, Judy threw him a mischievous look, making the fox stop for a brief second as the doe turned her back to him and slipped the pajama shorts she wore just low enough to let her tail slip from the hole just below the waist band. It bounced up and wiggled enticingly at him, making him blush profusely and shut the door quickly, not wanting to wear out the invitation. A stifled giggle bled through the door, making Nick grip his ears and pull them back slowly, willing his hammering heartbeat to calm down.

"I'm in trouble…"

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Leo cleaned up the leftover food and dirty cooking utensils, the fox and bunny having finished their breakfast in relative silence. Only awkward smiles and nervous chuckles were exchanged between them.

"Is this an example of the saying 'tension so thick, it can be cut with a knife'?" the android asked out of the blue. Judy slicked her ears back and averted her gaze to the floor. Nick stared at the doe and worked his jaw before clamping it shut. "Maybe I can tell a joke to break the tension?"

When no one responded, the robot resumed speaking, "What do you do to a dead chemist?"

Both mammals jerked their heads quickly in Leo's direction, not so much enraptured by the joke as confused to the morbid nature of it.
"Barium."

Nick facepawed, smiling beneath the paw, shoulders shaking in a silent laugh. It was unclear whether it was a response to the joke or merely its absurdity. Judy looked rather dumbstruck.

"I don't get it…" she finally divulged.

"Barium is an element on the periodic table," the fox clarified. The grey bunny's mouth formed a silent 'Oh' of realization, nodding slowly.

"Guess your apron was correct," scoffed the bunny to no one in particular.

Leo nodded, getting back to cleaning. Unfortunately, the awkwardness continued. It wasn't as if the two were unable to talk to each other, but the recent unveiling of events and feelings made it difficult to follow up on. Neither wanted to be the one to potentially ruin the warm, fuzzy feeling that permeated them both.

Choosing to let it be, Nick got up quietly, giving Judy a slanted grin as he left the room.

"Where's he going?" the grey bunny asked the android.

"I would imagine he is going to work on his personal project," Leo stated, scrubbing dishes methodically. "Most of the armor designs you have seen or heard of, as of yet, have been influenced by technologies of my creators, as well as assisted in their construction by me. This one, though, is an original design of Nick's with his own paws being the only laborious factor in their creation. I've at least looked over his specs and they are quite… ambitious, but still within the realm of possibility."

"Interesting," Judy mused, another thought coming to her. "That reminds me. If you and your creators have had all this advanced tech and wondrous designs, to which the both of you have used far before me to dispatch the Drones, why weren't your creators capable of defending against them?"

"The simple answer would be that while quality can trump quantity, numbers do count for something," the mechanical being divulged at length. "My creators were highly advanced and intuitive, with great strides being made in propulsion technology and life support functions. It made long journeys rather efficient and easily maintained. During the incursion of the many civilizations that wanted the system the Shard was created from, they fast tracked their military and defensive growth. The biggest mitigating factor, unfortunately, was that the civilizations fighting over their system were many systems and star clusters in size, with fleets and forces to match that. Even such a bountiful and innovative civilization as the coalition that resided in the system couldn't protect against the overwhelming numbers and production of empires that had war engines exponentially larger than one system could possibly muster."

"Right… that's… something," murmured the doe, still processing everything said in such a short span of time. "So, you're saying that if you had equal opportunity to create a large empire with all that stuff you mentioned, your technology and such would have beaten theirs?"

"Easily," was the robot's blunt reply. "Though, they had a few other factors in their favor. The most prevalent of which was the multitude of Shards aligned with each of the forces fighting for control."

"Did you witness any of the fighting?" the grey bunny asked. Leo finished the last of the cleaning, tossing aside a dish towel and carefully undoing and setting down the apron it wore.

"I did not, technically," the android replied, sitting to converse properly with Judy. "I was only brought online a few hours before being sent through the Gate in the interstellar craft that transported me here."
"A ship?" the rabbit chirped, leaning forward in her seat. "So, where is it? And is it big? Oh! How does it run?"

"Calm yourself, please, dear Judy."

"Sorry…" she muttered, sitting back down, but still bouncing a little.

"Now then, to answer, yes. It is a ship. It's at the bottom of the sea, buried beneath sand and coral. It uses a form of fusion with an artificial star as the core, sealed within a magnetic suspension chamber. As whether it is big, I do not know what comparison you are using as a reference."

"Oh… uh… like… compared to other ships constructed by your creators. And wouldn't that be unstable as a reactor?"

"Then no. It is not big by that comparison. As for the reactor, it has been shut down ever since my landing. The ship itself was built with another potential core in mind, equipped with propulsion, shielding, weapons, and support systems to match it."

"Let me guess," the doe surmised, for once being able to predict an answer before being told. "It's me and Nick as the Nova Shard, right?"

Leo nodded.

"Very astute. Eventually, should the need arise, you will both be able to board it and raise it from the depths. For now though, it is unnecessary."

"Aww," she cooed, a little disappointed that she wouldn't be able to see a potential marvel of interstellar ingenuity. The rabbit splayed out her paws and rested her chin on the counter in a huff. "It sounds pretty cool."

"Might I now suggest that you pursue Nick?" Leo inquired. The grey doe perked slightly at that.

"I… don't know what to say," she mumbled nervously. "What if I say something stupid?"

"Then, I'm sure he'll feel better knowing you are in the same line of thinking he likely is right now," advised the robotic being.

"Oh my goodness, you're right!" Judy exclaimed, bolting off her elevated seat and barely gaining traction before running around the corner and down the hall…

"Excuse me," Leo's voice cut through the air. "I believe he went the other direction."

As a result, a dragging sound of claws on carpet echoed, with Judy quickly turning around and padding the other way. Rapid thumps could be heard as the doe blazed a path past the kitchen and dining area, only showing up within the android's view for a split second.

"Thanks!" she bellowed back in belated gratitude.

"You are most welcome," came the unheard response.

Working with one's paws was usually rewarding. Even if the work itself served no purpose, it calmed the mind and became a form of stress relief for most.

Nick felt he was no exception to that.
Time would fly by when he did such things, with the world itself fading away. He wouldn't have to care about any worries or have any cares. It all mattered not.

He smiled to himself.

*Maybe it can matter a little,* he mused, thinking of the new 'worries' he had now. Mostly referring to the almost over energetic bunny…

... of which raced through the door and stood before him, waiting for something.

The anxious feeling of before returned, making it difficult to ascertain what he should say to her.

Judy gave him no chance to tense up and put up barriers of any kind, slinking up into his lap and sitting there, looking up at him.

"What… what's going on?" he tentatively questioned the bunny.

"Nothing really," she bluntly replied. "I just didn't want this nervous wall between us so I'm 'breaking the ice' by doing this…" Upon finishing her short explanation, Judy leaned up and kissed her fox on the lips, giving his chin a scratch and letting her eyes cast down a bit. Nick's tail was swishing back and forth in happiness. The doe giggled. "Better?"

"Yeah," the tod responded, nodding awkwardly and rubbing a paw over the rabbit's head. "Sorry I got so…"

"Me too," the grey bunny replied to his unfinished implication. "I'm not really used to this. Dating, I mean."

"I'm a little new to it as well," Nick divulged, wincing as he wasn't sure how she would take that info. She looked at him, a bit shocked.

"Really? Not to sound skeptical but I figured you would've had many decades to court the ladies."

The red fox nervously rubbed his muzzle, thinking how best to explain things.

"I've… had a few opportunities, but nothing felt right," he began. "As the years passed, I just lost interest and care in finding anyone."

"Well just make sure you show me interest and care," demanded Judy jokingly, her paw grabbing onto his shirt. "I'm no easy bunny."

"I'll take that knowledge to heart," replied the red fox.

"Oh? You might have two if you're lucky."

Nick looked at her in confusion, clearly not getting the joke. Judy laughed warmly, slipping up to put her mouth next to an ear, paws bracing his shoulder and chest as she whispered in answer to his unasked inquiry…

"Because I might give you mine…"

The tod's jaw went partially slack, leaning back to stare deeply into the grey doe's eyes. A playful glint danced around in her amethyst orbs, teasing his emerald gems.

"I'm in trouble…" the fox breathed again, eliciting a string of giggles from the bunny.
"Are you?" Judy asked in rhetoric, leaning in once more to kiss him softly on the nose. "Yes… yes you are."
Walking through the halls of the house, Judy looked out the window, watching the artificial snowfall of the Tundratown district. Despite its lack of aligning with the natural order of the region, considering it was actually autumn right now, it was a beautiful sight all the same.

Getting in close to the pane of glass, the doe let her breath fog up the window, liking the translucent layer of moisture that formed. She smiled as the bunny pressed a nose to it, enjoying the mild chill to her nose, as it twitched slightly. The fur on her head felt like it was trying to stand on end as a chill coursed through her.

Pulling back to look at the strange print of her nose, Judy noticed another print, larger in scope, left behind on the glass. Considering that Leo had no soft flesh to speak of, the grey doe could only surmise the print was Nick's. She let out a small giggle, opening her maw to fog over the area with Nick's nose print.

Her laughter increased as she noticed that below the nose print, was a tongue print.

"Dumb fox," Judy whispered to herself.

In sudden response, she heard a groaning whine in the distance, her head and ears swiveling to account for the noise's direction and origin. The rabbit turned about, legs twitching with a need to jump into action.

Another elongated groan reached her ears, the sound being more attentively focused upon this time and giving Judy a good sense of the location of origin. Her legs pumped forward in an attempt to outrun something she wasn't sure of.

Finding herself at the doorway to Nick's armor workshop area, Judy pressed an ear to the door. Rapid pants and the occasional groan bled through the wooden barrier, making the small doe question her intent on intrusion.

"We should probably stop soon, sir," came Leo's even tone. "This is no longer truly serving a viable purpose if you have to strain yourself as much."

"Just a little more," Nick's voice grunted between pants. "I'm not too interested in letting Judy deal with this."

The grey bunny's thoughts bounced between the innocent and not-so-innocent, wondering what the blazes was going on in there. She resigned herself to listen intently for a while longer.

"All you're going to do is make yourself unable to focus during future Gate openings," the robot tried to reason once more. Directly after, the fox could be heard letting out a most disconcerting and misunderstandable whine.

Judy had enough and burst through the door, a blush lining her ears but knowing that whatever was going on was likely evading her current ability to think of anything else besides the strangely implicit things she was hearing.

"Oh, dear Judy," Leo chimed in the most expected lack of surprise, "I see you decided to join us."

She would have addressed the fact the mechanical being already knew about her having been outside
the room, but was more perturbed and confused by the sight of Nick at the present moment.

He was focused on her, nervous smile plastered on his muzzle, his body seated almost uncomfortably in a strange device that had him reclined with armament pieces on his arms and chest. Long cables and tubes crisscrossed and led to and from the reclined chair mechanism.

"What the heck is going on?" she barely managed to acquire the mental clarity to ask, gesturing wildly to all the mechanical devices she had never seen before. The android was standing next to a large station, looking much like a science fiction control console of sorts. It had many screens and dials, buttons lighting up in seemingly random patterns. Against the wall, were various containers, no larger than a twenty ounce drink bottle, glowing purple on certain accents. One of the containers appeared to be lacking in the purple glow, having been locked into some device that looked like a futuristic coffee machine. Some of the largest cables went back and forth from that to the recliner.

"I'll leave this one up to Nick to explain," Leo bluntly stated, resuming some form of whatever task the being was engaged in before having been interrupted. The fox slowly craned his head towards the android, an accusing scowl growing more apparent on his face.

"Why?" the tod seethed slowly, Judy feeling a bit left out of the loop for the moment as she thumped her foot in impatience.

"I warned you this could interfere with your focus, and I would like to see if I am correct in doing as such. So, do explain this to her and I will monitor your neural efficiency for abnormalities."

Nick groaned and settled into his reclined position once more.

"This is a siphon unit for extracting my Shard power," the red fox started, giving the grey doe a chance to take in the simplified statement. Her gaze once again raked over the equipment around her and attached to him, examining everything with a new perspective.

"So those are… power storage of some sort?" Judy inquired, to which the tod nodded in mild appreciation of her assumption. "I thought the power was supposedly too unstable to harness… if what I was told was correct."

"Impressive," remarked Nick, giving his bunny a roguish smirk. "Yes, they are basically power cores. And you are also correct in remembering that my power was unstable… before you."

"Me?" the doe mentioned in a double take look at her fox. "I thought you were only stable during our Shifts…"

"Well, actually," the fox began, Leo stepping forward to wave him down. Nick furrowed his brow. "I thought you wanted me to explain."

"Only as a means to gauge your cognitive functions and ascertain your health in terms of brain chemistry," divulged the mechanical being. "I am satisfied with the readings and scans I have here as being within healthy parameters, so, I'll take over from here."

"I was only talking for about ten seconds," the tod grumbled, not at all against having the android explain anything but feeling as if he's being tossed between two conflicting decisions.

"That was all I needed," Leo replied, turning towards Judy to resume Nick's cut off explanation. "To further clarify, Nick's power as an incomplete Shard was raw and unrefined. We tried containing it before with the same apparatus, to ill effect. However, as of late, your continued interactions and Shifts with him have reintroduced the machine as an applicable alternative for protocols of which we had previously left dormant. Even outside of your Shifts, Nick's power has remained rather stable
and I can tell that you are more capable of using Shard energy to greater effect now as well."

"You mean our interactions and Shifts are stabilizing factors?" the doe asked hopefully, feeling a bit excited at the opportunities this sounded like it could open up for them, even if she had no clue what was in store. Leo nodded curtly in affirmation. Judy began to bounce happily, wondering what this meant for her. She suddenly stopped, questioning the robot, "Wait... what's the purpose of extracting energy from Nick though?"

"A variety of reasons," the android mentioned, turning to a power core, "but most prevalently, it is for the 'Rally Call' protocols." the grey bunny tilted her head at that. "I'll explain in due time, but I would like to remove Nick from his constraints for now, if you please."

"Alright."

Leo then set to unclasping and helping the fox wiggle and work his way from the restraint system and armament units attached to his body. It took a couple minutes, with various parts being form-fitted to Nick. When all was said and done, the red fox tod leapt out of the recliner, bouncing a bit on the pads of his feet, shivering and shaking off something Judy couldn't see. He was almost primal in his display, making the bunny giggle a bit.

"What?" the tod asked in defence. "I do that when i'm uncomfortable. I feel much better now."

"Oh, I figured that," the rabbit snickered, pointing to his tail, "but it's so cute how you got all fluffy doing that." Nick's muzzle reflected a much more deadpan expression, clearly unamused at being called 'cute' by a species that usually found such a word insulting. Even he knew at least that much about bunnies.

"I thought 'cute' wasn't something bunnies liked hearing or saying," the fox gently said with an inquisitive inflection to it. Wiping a tear, the bunny doe sucked in a breath to give him a proper reply.

"Well," she teased him, leaning in close to press a paw to his chest, the fluff of mussed fur peeking from his v-neck shirt feeling quite plushy beneath her fingers, "it's usually demeaning for other species to call bunnies cute, but..." Judy stood on the tips of her toes, barely able to bring her muzzle to his ear to whisper, "I can make an exception for you, as long as you truly mean it." She slowly lowered herself back to the floor, taking great pleasure in the flustered look of the red fox.

"I'll... I'll... make a note of that..." he muttered, locking his eyes on the rabbit's now blushing cheeks, her lower lip being chewed on in a small display that almost made him want to make immediate use of his newfound privilege.

"Now then," the grey bunny started, thumping the tod lightly in the chest as her voice adjusted back to her normal pitch. "What's this about a 'Rally Call'? Sounds very interesting."

"It's a protocol meant to use these power cores to temporarily provide sufficient energy any suit or suits we choose to aid as support in combat during dire circumstances," Leo supplied. "I would brief you further, but my internal chronometer notes a rather infortuitous countdown towards Essie's visit to the estate."

The fox and rabbit's eyes went slightly wide at the mention of that. Whilst they had made preparations, it was nearly completely forgotten with the events of the previous couple days. Their confession of interest in each other, even if not quite reaching the degree of love, definitely dwarfed the other items on their plate that they gave attention but hadn't really committed to memory. Since said confession, the two have been talkative to one another, with Judy doing most of the talking. She didn't mind, but figured Nick would open up when he was ready of feeling the flow.
In any case, the two were brutally reminded that Essie's visit was very soon. They looked to the
android, a single question exuded from their hopeless muzzles.

"Thirty three minutes and seventeen seconds until scheduled arrival at noon," the being mentioned in
brisk reply to the unasked question.

Nick and Judy rushed around, cleaning the area up and making last minute prep work for the wild
dog's arrival.

"Why didn't you mention this sooner?" The grey doe fired at Leo.

"It was not my prerogative to keep track of that, nor did you or Nick ask me to give you such
warning," the robot responded, unmoving and complacent as the two mammals worked in a fervor
around it.

"What prompted your warning just now?" the red fox inquired, eyes flickering in slight annoyance.

"I needed a way to deter Judy's interest in the 'Rally Call' protocol for the moment."

Both tod and doe halted their movements, slowly turning to Leo to mutter in unison, "Really?"

"What?" The android mentioned, almost sounding defensive. "I did not want to raise her
expectations, should my endeavors and testing phase turn up little, inciting me to explain as minimal
as I could while exploring my theories."

"Sometimes I think he's too blunt," Judy voiced to her fox. He nodded with closed eyes, the duo
returning to their cleaning efforts.

"A bit late, but welcome to my world."

Leo looked on wordlessly for nearly a minute before saying, "You do remember she won't be seeing
this room, with all the Flux items in here? I will be hiding in here, the false wall keeping any curious
paws from giving into temptation."

Nick groaned and Judy slapped a paw to her muzzle, noting that the robot was correct. They were
still in Nick's armor workshop. A place that would not, by any means, be intelligent to reveal in any
way to any other mammal not involved in their machinations.

With their initial fervor lost in the wake of having wasted such spontaneous energy on the wrong
things, both mammals trudged out into the 'house' area and began straightening up. The tod began to
pull out ingredients and prepare something the bunny was not privy to. She instead made her way to
her room and began making it look far more presentable than the doe found acceptable.

Luckily, they had already been upkeeping the cleanliness of the house, with the only frantic factors
being their nerves with a visitor. The fox hadn't many of those. None in fact. In all his time at the
Tundratown house, Nick had never entertained any visitors. The house was effectively removed
from certain registries in terms of utilities and other such civil services. Leo was the one who made
sure of it. It was basically to keep their dealings under the radar out of public purview.

He smiled to himself, relishing in the new potential feeling of having a visitor the fox could impress.
In this case, especially so considering it was his new girlfriend's best friend. He even found some
recipes to use to his benefit. The tod loved to cook, though his preclusion to his Flux duties had
mitigated his allowance to do so for himself the past year. Besides, it was a bit lonely and
unsatisfying to cook for oneself so often.
Looking up, in mid prep, Nick saw the bunny dart through the room, dressed more appropriately and freshened up, if her recently smoothed down fur was anything to go by. He let out a near silent chuckle, sniffing the air to smell a sweet perfume tickling his nose. A part of him liked it, and another, slightly more prominent part, found it a bit regretful that Judy would cover such a wonderful natural aroma, such as the one she exuded.

Now that he had stopped ignoring the part of his mind that found her rather attractive, the red fox noticed all kinds of things he never cared to take in before, or at least recognize at length. Regardless of who she was, Judy's eyes were never something he could deny were entrancing, with a violet hue that rivaled gems in brilliance. Her fur was another such feature, being predominantly of a stormy grey that reminded the tod of cloudy April showers. Nick couldn't deny the curve and sway of her hips and legs as well, the figure she sported rather sleek and slim for a bunny. At least in comparison to those he has seen and met in years past. Her leaner figure only made those hips of hers pop out more, looking way more…

A knock sounded at the door, jarring the red fox from his reverie as he focused back on cooking. He could hear the front door open and a resulting squeal followed by a very disturbing grunt.

"Woah there, Essie…" came the struggled plea of Judy, from the other room. "I like my bones in my body."

"Oh, you're fine," came a chipper and energetic response. "I gotta say though, you undersold how big and spacious this place is. I thought i was going to walk into a den."

"It's just a place to live," Nick heard the doe argue back half heartedly.

"Just a…" Essie repeated, barking out a laugh. "As somewhat lonely as the decor looks, This home looks like you could let a stampede run around in here with room to spare. I would kill to live in a place like this."

"You can't say that," Judy giggled. "You're a cop."

"Eh… details," the wild dog said in humorous dismissal. The two now rounded a corner from the entry area into the kitchen, with the grey bunny re introducing Essie to Nick.

"You remember him, right?" the doe asked rhetorically. The canine held out a paw, with the tod wiping down his own on a small dish towel and shaking hers.

"Of course I would remember a young, handsome guy like this."

Judy let out a short giggle, to which a look from the fox made her clap a paw over her muzzle and try not to laugh. He rolled his eyes and turned back to the wild dog, knowing full well that she was laughing about the 'young' part of that sentence.

"Reynard Fawkes," he stated simply. Essie's brow furrowed in confusion.

"I thought your name was Nick?" she asked with a look to her smaller friend and separating their paws. The red fox thought fast and lamented that oversight on his part. When he was initially introduced before, Judy had used his real name. He didn't even think much of it at the time, seeing as he held no care to meet her again in that moment. It was obviously different now.

"It's a nickname… no pun intended," voiced the tod. "I didn't know Carrots here at the time, so I didn't want my real name known to her. Please though, call me whatever you like." The brighter smile from before returned again, the canine appearing satisfied.
"Alright then," she said, giving the kitchen a once over and setting her small bag down where the
doe gestured. The canine then found a seat to rest on, pulling it up to the island counter. "So,
whatcha cookin, good lookin?"

Nick froze slightly, not used to such… blatant mentions in reference to his looks. It was odd, but
refreshing in its own way.

"I'm making something I was told you are crazy about," the tod explained, pushing a few glasses
around, full of water. "I hope you like my version of it, since I wasn't exactly used to eating or
making these..." Nick put a large covered platter on the island, pulling off the lid to make the female
wild dog sniff hungrily.

"Tacos…?" she asked slowly, licking her muzzle.

"Yep," the red fox replied proudly. "I used a meat substitute for ours and a veggie combo version for
Fluff's here. There's plenty to go around, so dig in." Essie barely waited for the last word, rubbing
her paws together in a menacing manner and grabbing a taco.

Biting into it, she had a look of pure bliss. Steam still wisped and curled from the hard shell encased
meal. Judy bit into one of her own, wrapped in a soft tortilla, per her request. The doe's eyes fluttered
as she let out a muffled 'Mmmm'.

Doing his best not to laugh, Nick grabbed one of his own tacos and began taking his own advice.

"You sure know how to greet people, giving me food as soon as I walk in," the canine
complemented, swallowing a latent bite of her food just before. The tod shrugged.

"What can I say? I had a good mother to raise me."

"Well tell her 'Thanks' on my behalf," Essie replied, grabbing another helping of food. The grey doe
looked at her fox with a slightly worried expression...

Only to be met with a soft smile. Nick had taken the complement with no angst or scowl in his
expression.

"I will," he said softly, biting into his own taco and eating in silent solace, a smile keeping his lips
upturned.

"So, what do you do?" the wild dog asked, resting her chin on a paw. "You have to have a very
lucrative job to be able to afford this place. It's practically in the historical zone for homes. Lots of
money to buy anything here."

Remembering to keep his story straight, the red fox tod had to tread carefully, with the canine being
an officer and likely able to sniff out an obvious lie.

"I'm basically an unofficial inventor," he explained, having rehearsed his story with Leo and Judy. "I
know my way around certain kinds of equipment and can tinker with it or rebuild it better.
Companies pay me for my alteration designs to their stuff and I get paid large sums. I don't like
contracts, since they mean a company owns all your ideas if you aren't careful. So, I play the
freelance game and it works for me. It also means my so-called 'paychecks' are sporadic, but I get
plenty of requests and such that I don't have to worry, provided my expertise remains at a level they
like."

"Huh… So," Essie started, taking another bite and swallowing, "why take on a roommate? Lonely?"
The fox let out a false sigh, saying, "I am quite terrible at taking care of myself. Without someone to keep me grounded, so to speak, I lose track of time and my surroundings. Upon meeting her, hearing of her story to a degree, and seeing her deterministic personality, I offered her a live-in job. It's not much and she is free to take on other part time opportunities, should she wish, even in my employ."

"What do you ask of her?" the wild dog questioned with a sip of water.

"I can clean and cook on my own," he began, "but I basically ask her to keep an eye on me, among other general things." A devious smile curled the female canine's muzzle.

"I sure hope you aren't ravishing my pure and gentle best friend," Essie cooed with faux concern, pulling Judy to her side and smushing their cheeks together, looking directly at the unamused fox. "She's a delicate flower." The grey doe rolled her eyes and playfully pushed at her friend, trying to separate from her.

"Essie… remember what I told you," Judy chided her friend cautiously.

"Boo, you're no fun," her canine friend groaned. "I only wanted to tease him." Nick sipped his own drink, a grin slowly growing on his face at the entertaining exchange. "See! He's not opposed to it!"

"Opposed to what? The jokes or ravishing her?" The tod asked in clarification, putting down his drink. Now Essie was at a partial loss for words.

"Both… or… the furst one?" she spoke with wavering confidence. "Wait… I meant…" There was a long sigh, followed by her resigned scowl as the fox began to smile roguishly. "I'm gonna quit while I'm ahead."

"Good idea," the grey doe agreed with the wild dog. "Any more embarrassment and I might go say some… things to your wolf friend in the force."

"You wouldn't!" Essie gasped with a paw to her chest in mock hurt.

"Wolf friend?" Nick decided to interject with a confused expression. Both females turned to him, with the larger one attempting to put a paw over the rabbit's muzzle. She removed it and hopped on the counter.

"She has a 'friend' on the force she is quite… uh… snitten with," voiced the bunny. "He's supposedly very good at his job and a nice guy, but rather useless with talking to the ladies. So, Essie here somehow finds that rather adorable. She's made a few flirtatious moves on him and enjoys making the poor wolf flush with embarrassment."

"Sounds like fun," the red fox supplied to the African wild dog, who giggled in kind.

Their talk continued on much the same for nearly an hour, both canid mammals doing and saying plenty to embarrass the smaller rabbit in their presence.

Leo watched on in silent curiosity from the refuge of the workshop, using the system of cameras set up around the house and surrounding region to look in on the exchange. While a sense of emotional empathy evaded the android, a logical level was understood from the conversation. It appeared that Nick was getting some much needed social fulfillment from having two mammals to talk to.

The mechanical being's other processes were working on a variety of other things, one of which being new suits for Judy. While the robot couldn't properly do any such construction until after Essie
left, it could continue to go over blueprints and modifiable designs.

With the aforementioned stabilization of their powers outside 'Shifts', Leo wanted to advance their capability to use suits and equipment independent of one another. It would do well from a strategic perspective and give each of them some experience, in case one or the other becomes incapable of performing their duties towards an objective.

A ping sounded off a console, alerting the android. It routed the notification to its internal drive, processing the event and making adjustments.

Sensor equipment was reading a flux in the dilation of the wormhole. The Gate was opening soon. It wasn't surprising to Leo, however, the spike in certain energy signatures warranted further analysis. The process was almost too quick, reading as something that was scanned before. Checking the past occurrences, there was only one possible explanation.

The previous Flare model Drones that were infused with Shard power had their scans logged and analyzed for further study. The Blue Shard energy that charged those Drones emitted a specific signature that was easily capable of being catalogued. And now, this signature was being identified as the same as whatever was coming through the Gate. It was far more powerful and causing fluctuations in the Gate.

A Blue Shard.

Shutting down all previous processes, Leo was spurred into action, readying every suit he could and ascertaining the potential combat prowess and capabilities of their unseen enemy.

Flare model Drones were a good place to start. They were usually modified from basic designs by the individuals that charge them, giving insight to their preferred battle tactics. From the size and weaponry of the previous Drones, it could be justly assumed, but not relied upon, that the Shard approaching would rely on heavy weapons and strong arm battle tactics. Brute force and short range devastation.

Considering the risks of sending one of such power through the Gate, the robot surmised this was a potentially expendable Shard. Not to be underestimated, but probably on the lesser side of intelligence and adaptive nature.

Best course of action…

Speed and piercing attacks. Evasion and circumvention.

One suit fit those specifications best right now. Technically two, but Leo needed the duo in a 'Shift' until it could safely ascertain how well they could work separately.

Starting up sequences and readying the armor for immediate use, a name showed on a diagnostics display next to the suit.

Ricochet.

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Having a good laugh and heartily enjoying each other's company, Judy was quite content having been able to bring her friend to her new abode.

They had toured the house somewhat, with Essie taking peeks at her bedroom and making inferences to the two of them shacking up or 'breaking' in the bed. Thankfully for the doe, the scent of Nick had
faded since his time 'sneaking' into her bed. Otherwise, she might have a whole new problem to deal with.

The two made their way back through the kitchen, having been a quickly passing few hours since her arrival. Nick was waiting in the kitchen and cleaning up the dishes he left earlier, giving the two time to catch up and converse.

"Well it was great being here and all, but I'll leave you to get all cuddly by yourselves," Essie teased, winking at the fox and bunny. Both mammals shook their head at the canine, with Judy seeing her off.

As soon as the door closed, a strange bolting mechanism sounded and an intercom system clicked on.

"We have a Blue Shard incoming," came Leo's voice across the entire house. "Gear up and get ready to Shift. We have about an hour before Gate dilation allows for it to exit into our atmosphere."

Jarred by the revelation, both Judy and Nick dropped everything, rushing to the armor workshop. Having been unlocked and revealed from behind the false wall, the android was rushing around with smooth grace, methodically taking care of all their needs in respect to launching.

"Ricochet?" Nick asked slowly. "Why?"

"It is my assumption from various factors that it would be wise to use a suit like this," explained Leo. "It has the same signature as the Flares from a few days prior. An adaptive and evasive approach may be needed."

"What about the mammals?" Judy piped up in concern. "Evasion may work for us but won't we need something to protect them?"

"I have a plan to that," replied the mechanical being. "You will meet the Shard in high atmosphere, altering their course by provocation to follow you or using excessive force to alter their landing site. Try to find a flatland or empty area nearby. My suggestion is a small valley to the north. It is capable of housing whatever battle may ensue and keeps their weapons from firing too far in any direction without hitting a mountain or cliffside."

"Got it," both mammals said in almost synchronized harmony. The red fox turned to his grey doe.

"Ready to Shift?" he inquired in short, resulting in a nod from the bunny.

"Ready."

The now most familiar feeling permeated both their bodies as Judy's form turned ethereal and turned into the purple tendrils of energy that siphoned their way into Nick's heart, joining their bodies in a most peculiarly welcome way.

A new resonance seemed to be passing between them, giving the duo an exhilaratingly electric excitement that felt almost… embarrassing.

"I must say," Leo voiced, "I am reading quite the high level of output from you two. I am not quite sure what has spurred this degree of resonance, but do please keep it up."

The tod looked over his shoulder to see the purple energy form of the doe floating next to him, giving him the same partially knowing look he was giving her.
"Let's get suited up then," chirped Nick, lopsided grin firmly in place. He stepped next to the suit, the android keying in a few commands, allowing Ricochet to open up, allowing the fox to step inside from behind it.

Mechanisms locked and servos whirred, sealing the two inside the armor, a tail armament unit wrapping around his rear appendage carefully.

"You think we are ready to beat another Shard?" the small bunny asked in trepidatious fear. Nick gave her a devious smirk that said everything.

"With you around, I know we are."

Tracking Gate fluctuations," Leo spoke over the comm. "Breach in thirty seconds. Charge deflection field and discus cores. Standby to engage redirection towards valley area."

"Understood," both mammals responded, though only Nick could be heard.

Flux's Ricochet suit was approaching high atmosphere, ready for intercept. It was a highly energy reliant piece of armor, using speed and circumvention to take down an enemy. It had strong shields and dense armor, with a polarizing power grid adding rigidity to the armor. In concert, it allowed the armor to take a fair amount of punishment. It was necessary though, since the suit used a rebounding technique to bounce effortlessly from surface to surface.

When no such surface was available, discus modules could be used in variable situations to act as offensive weapons or deploy fields to rebound from. They had many other uses as well, depending on their ingenuity.

Leo's plan, however, was to use Ricochet's rebound shields and cause a course change in the falling Shard.

"Ten seconds..." came the continued countdown.

"Five... two... breach."

A cascading burst of light flared into existence, violently painting the sky a slew of warm colors and looking like an ephemeral second sun.

As the light waned, the two could see a round and rotund dark object approaching them.

"Incoming object is thirty-seven meters across," the robot told them. "Intercept in seventeen seconds."

"Thirty-seven meters!?" Judy exclaimed. "Please tell me we aren't fighting something that big?"

"It's likely a shell for travel," the fox replied. "Charging repulsor field." There was a high whine sound as the shield emitters on the suit reached peak power flow and surpassed the 'safe' limits.

The large object quickly grew in their sights, with Nick flipping forward in midair and firing off his thrusters to reverse course and steady his speed to fly alongside as the craft rapidly approached them. Exceptionally large and robust looking, the craft was shaped much like a spinning top, pointed at the tip but with a wide arching rounded cone from the tip. It had drag fins splaying off the rear, keeping the thing stable. A contrail came from the center, denoting an engine of sorts propelling the thing.
The red fox wasted no little time, getting in close and expunging all the energy built up in the suit's rebound field. A vibrative thrum sounded as the shield burst outward, skewing the craft's trajectory ever so slightly.

"Target's path adjusted by 3.7 degrees. Not enough for full transition. Try using the armor's thrusters while magnetized to the tip of the craft."

"Got it," the tod replied, increasing the thruster output and using the magnetic coils on the feet clamp to the falling capsule. "Ready, Fluff?"

"Yep! Let's hurry," the rabbit fired back. "I don't like how fast the ground is trying to meet us." The fox laughed a bit, before putting the thrusters in high gear.

The resulting powerful flare of energy from the various thrusters all over the suit caused the capsule to shudder and groan as it began to sway slowly from its predetermined path towards the valley they wanted it to impact.

"Almost there," Leo confirmed to them. "Another few…"

An explosive force blasted Flux back, armored portions of the craft breaking off and revealing a core unit within the shell. More like multiple units. One was in the center, glowing bright blue with a multitude of accents. Five other such units, looking exactly like the Flare units the two faced before, were placed within a metal frame structure that held all the units in place.

"What in blazes…?" Nick breathed, barely keeping stabilized after the problematic jarring from the disengaged plating. He looked at his HUD and noticed there was no damage to the suit, sighing in relief.

The fox's heart jolted when all the units moved with stunning speed and jettisoned from the leftover frame, using their own version of propulsion units to steady themselves in midair.

The Blue Shard was last to 'wake up', ripping through the frame with aggressive swipes and spinning around to cast the pieces in all directions, making Flux twirl to dodge a piece of the frame and pull back. He cleared the immediate vicinity of the enclosing Flare units, using his superior speed to get outside their perimeter.

"Leo, I'm deploying the discus units," warned Nick. "You ready to calibrate for all angles. This is gonna be a tough fight."

"Acknowledged. And I'm ready anytime you are, sir."

"Good," he vented out, making Judy wonder what was about to occur. She felt like a backseat driver for the moment, but hoped she would get a moment to shine soon. "Deploying."

Spinning in place, various discs with wide middles and thin, razor like edges broke away from the Ricochet armor, flying off in sporadic arcs. Charged with Shard energy, they whizzed and zigzagged, loosely forming a wide net to surround the enemy units. Numbering twelve in total, the discs emitted repulsor fields, ready for use.

"Hey, Carrots?"

The grey doe snapped her eyes on her fox.

"Yes?" she managed to say without stuttering.
"I'm going to be doing some… strange moves," Nick began slowly. "I need you to keep an eye on my systems and check that I'm not stressing the armor too much. I've logged a lot of hours with this suit in the simulator but never in real life."

"Alright. Light em up, Scruffy," Judy sassed. The red fox scoffed a laugh.

"Remind me to talk to you about that name later."

Before the doe could reply, Nick fired off the thrusters heading for the nearest Flare. It hovered there, attempting to take a swipe at him. The rebound fields diverted the strike as Flux dipped just below the mechanical appendage and bounced off the hip joint of the unit, aiming for a discus.

With the field deployed, the armored fox bounced from the barrier, colliding fields repelling each other like same magnetic poles with magnets. The rebound added energy and speed to Flux's trajectory, the arc heading to another discus.

There was another resounding bounce and another increase in speed and energy. The Flares and Blue Shard were beginning to look around, attempting to pinpoint the discs and fire upon them. Leo was controlling the units, keeping out of the line of fire and still making adjustments as Nick bounced around with vastly increasing speed.

Finally, reaching some peak speed and resulting buildup of momentum, Ricochet fired off the deployed field of another discus, the armor's own integrity field hardening the armor as it pierced through the nearest Flare's chest.

"Exceptional results," the android spoke. "Rebound speed was Mach 1.1. Loss of speed from impact is roughly half of that. Adjusting for another pass."

"Negative," the fox rebuked. "I have to get these guys out of the sky. We're fighting over the streets of Zootopia still and I'm not letting these things fall on the city. Speaking of…"

Flux dipped down and chased after the falling Flare model unit. Getting an armored paw under a shoulder plate, he whirled around with thruster assistance and redirected the falling arc towards the unpopulated valley.

The discs followed his suit, keeping a wide defensive net around Flux. Judy turned around to see the other Flare units and the Shard following, firing off energy bolts and a few rockets. Rolling and banking in a sharp turn, the two watched the Flare Drone impact a couple trees and tumble to a stop against a stone bluff. The rockets followed, inaccurately darting forward in an attempt to collide with him.

Weaving in a random pattern between the taller trees, the rockets couldn't keep up and either misfired, exploding in a fiery inferno, or impacted the ground, initiating a similar effect.

One of the Flare Drones attempted to drop from above and land a blow on Flux, with Nick rebounding off a tree and landing. Sliding backwards to a stop, he watched the Drone strike the tree, missing him entirely.

"Aww… what did that tree ever do to him?" Judy snidely sassed.

"Heh, I haven't a clue, but I have a feeling that one isn't the only one who hates trees," the tod said, dodging another Drone and the Shard as the tried to entrap him and the bunny. The Ricochet suit was living up to its speed and evasion factor, making it easy to avoid getting hit, but more difficult to land a solid blow. Now that they were aware of the discs importance, the Shard and supporting units made a note to keep track of them and attempt firing on them.
Leo was doing a spectacular job of making them evade incoming fire, but the fox and rabbit didn’t want to rely solely on the mechanical being's savvy in anticipating the enemy.

Readying a powerful energy bolt from a paw emitter, Nick fired off a bolt at full power, missing the seemingly intended target and rebounding off a deployed field. It bounced a couple more times before hitting a completely different Flare in the back of the head, disorienting it.

Nick was doing his best to eliminate the weaker targets, knowing that fighting the Shard on a one to one basis would be the best course of action. Until then, it would be best to eliminate potential factors that could tip the scales against them.

Flux fired off a flurry of powerful shots, each subsequent bolt following a random pattern and impacting various Drones in vital areas. Several minutes and evasive tactics later, the remaining units were approaching a level that could be counted as 'critically damaged'.

The Blue Shard acted defensive at first, but caught onto the tactic the fox playing at, giving up on defense temporarily and launching a slew of bolts at the armored tod. Judy was easily able to warn him, resulting in a very embarrassing moment for the Shard when Nick dove under the armored Blue Shard and expanded his repulsor field to knock its legs out from under it.

Whatever creature piloted that suit, apparently had little tactical adaptivity, giving into rage and anger instead of trying to assess the situation. It worked out almost too well for Flux, who knew that an angry opponent may be a bit sporadic, but was usually very predictable.

Dodging several powerful swipes and intended strikes, the tod occasionally loosed a bolt that rebounded a few times, eventually impacting another Flare Drone and doing more damage.

One of them attempted to charge its cannon and aim at Nick, to which he fired off a small bolt and allowed the android to deflect it to just the right angle, bouncing off a couple discus fields and striking the charged cannon just as it fired. The altered course put the Blue Shard in the line of fire, with the resulting blast knocking it back with a heavy boom.

Nor Nick or Judy could account for everything, being caught off guard by another Flare and slapped haphazardly aside, flying over a hundred yards and impacting a rock face wall, falling onto a ledge that was a few stories up from the ground.

The grey bunny felt no pain, but knew from some strange sense or connection that her fox was.

"Nick," Leo called out. "I'm reading no notable damage to the suit, with integrity fields holding, but sensors show your humerus bone is broken and skull is fractured."

The armored fox slumped to the ledge, limp as a rag doll.

Judy shouted at him, hoping to snap him out of it, "Nick! Nick! Wake up!"

"Nick," the android called again. A few seconds passed and there was no response. "Judy. If you can hear me, see if you can speed up the regeneration process. We don't have much time."

Hugging her ethereal form around Flux, Judy willed something to happen.

"Come on you stupid fox. Wake up. Heal…"

In the distance, smoky contrails spawned into existence, numbering in the dozens, possibly over a hundred.
"Heal…"

Purple energy exuded from the fox, spilling from any crevices in the suit, giving hope to the doe that he was healing.

"Hurry up, Nick. I need you."

The rockets loomed in the distance, closing in as the world appeared to slow down.
"Activating limited external controls," Leo supplied over the comm, knowing Nick might not hear but Judy would.

Thrusters activated and jettisoned with great power and precision efficiency, aligning Flux in a perfect vertical climb and resulting arch towards a jagged ridge, using it as temporary cover.

Judy was thrown for a loop, but knew the android could override certain functions in cases like this. In the distance, a maelstrom of small explosions echoed through the valley, denoting the multitude of rocket impacts and detonations of their previous position.

Landing in a small crevice, an overhanging ledge hiding them from direct line of sight, Leo let the suit settle into a kneeled position. Nick was healing, but still wasn't waking up. The impact must have done more damage than she initially surmised. All the discs returned to the suit, snapping and locking into place at their docking spots.

"Judy, we need to stall for time so Nick can heal."

The doe perked up, about to speak, but knew it wouldn't do any good without her fox awake to relay her messages.

"I know you can't respond properly, but I have an idea," the mechanical voice stated. "If you remember the simulation and how that worked, I have a neural link device like that in all the Flux armaments. I have readjusted the modulations to your brain since the last problematic usage of the device. In short, I'm turning it on so you can control the suit and stall with more efficiency than my limited command functions over the suit could."

Without much time for her to brace herself, the ethereal purple doe clenched her teeth, awaiting the pervading pain she was sure would come.

A tickling pain, much less so than she feared, began to permeate her mind. It was far easier to bear this time around than the incident with the simulation. The pain was dull at first, but waned after the initial few seconds, feeling more like a mental version of a soft bruise. If what Leo said was true, she would easily tolerate this.

"Connection appears to be formed," began the android. "Can you respond, Judy?"

"Yeah… can you hear me?" the bunny asked tentatively, holding a figurative breath.

"I barely registered a response. Allow me to adjust."

Another resonant tingle of pain echoed in her head.

"And now?" she supplied.

"I hear you quite clearly," Leo replied, the sounds of the Flares and Blue Shard armament stomping closer, likely searching for them. "You should be able to mentally interact with the Flux armor systems. I'll need you to keep moving and defend until Nick wakes up. The armor will automatically adjust to your brain signals denoting muscle movement."

True to his explanation, as Judy moved around in her form, the armor mimicked her movements, getting up from a kneeling position. Her vision was overlaid with the Flux armor HUD and all of the
connecting functions to the suit.

Being basically trained with the armor, the doe could at least fly and fire the bolt emitters. The advanced functions were beyond her, unfortunately. From everything her mind could process, most of the advanced stuff was either automated or turned off. The robot probably didn't want to overload the rabbit with an influx of information.

"Don't let the more advanced functions be a distraction," Leo told the grey doe. "Just focus on keeping out of the line of fire while Nick heals."

"Acknowledged," Judy said almost mechanically. If she weren't in such a precarious situation, she might have geeked out a bit at getting to say that word in the current context. She'd read it in various books and comics, as well as heard it used in various movies and shows.

She kept Flux moving but under the cover of the vegetative canopy, darting between areas of dense cover, opting for large rocks or crevices when she could. The tod's condition was displayed, showing his bones and brain were healed, but consciousness wasn't clear yet.

A roaring blast, sounding like a jet engine, gave way to the Blue Shard dropping in from above, cutting off Flux from the current evasion route. It tried to step on the armored fox, with Judy firing thrusters in a sidelong leap towards a large boulder. Crouching behind the mass of moss covered stone, the bunny tried to collect her thoughts, willing Nick awake in the back of her mind. There was a resounding explosion on the other side of the rock, with it shaking under the force of some sort of detonated plasma bolt. The aftermath of it left the area a heated orange and red from the discharge melting or burning everything it washed over.

"Wh… What's going on?" Nick finally groaned, appearing to finally gain cognitive capabilities once more. Judy sighed in great relief at the fox waking up. "Woah…"

"Readjusting command functions," Leo remarked to the two. "I'm migrating your mental input to the supervisory role as an assistance program."

"Wait… what?" the tod asked, moving around slowly at first, but a rush of adrenaline bringing him back into the fold with a sharp mind. "Oh, blast."

A Flare closed in, firing away with energy bolts at their cover. Flux leapt away, initiating his thrusters and flying away in a low arc, following the landscape. While disoriented before, Nick quickly acclimated to the situation. It wasn't his first time waking up in an unfamiliar location and having to run as soon as he woke up.

"You were out for two minutes and seventeen seconds," the android explained to the fox's earlier question. "Judy is now mentally connected with your secondary functions under the role of a support program. I'm still controlling the discs and their rebound trajectories."

"I see," he breathed.

"The impact knocked out your energy fields, I'll need a few seconds to reestablish…"

A blast detonated in the air next to the armored fox, throwing him and Judy aside. Flux was blown into a swaying tree trunk, grasping tightly to a branch. It barely held under the weight of the suit and fox combo, making straining cracking sounds.

"Strike that last. The automated assistance system I was linked to has been compromised."

"What? No… no no," Nick vented out, bracing himself on the top of the tree. "What did we lose?"
"Nothing technically," explained Leo. "All the systems are there, but your automatic systems and functions I link to have been damaged. I can talk to you and monitor things, but everything is now in manual."

"I can't work a manual system with this many advanced secondary features," the fox nearly yelled in exasperation. "It would take a supercomputer…"

In Judy's mind, the dialogue trailed off as the two attempted to find alternate ways to deal with the matter at paw. The Flares and Shard were a distance away, but not closing in. Her neural link was still active to the system, looking like a mess of...

If she had a body at the time, she would have done a double take. The system still made little sense to her, but her mind felt it become more fluid and easily relatable. The thought made no sense but also fit. In that moment she noticed why it wasn't so confusing. All the automated functions were deactivated. It was like all the cars on a highway were cleared and the road was now free.

Still concerned why the Shard wasn't closing in, Judy looked out, scanning the area for any sign of aggression from the Flare units or Shard. She internally groaned upon seeing something familiar in the distance.

From several directions, more rockets were inbound and closing in. It appeared to be as many as before, numbering over a hundred.

"Oh great…" the fox released in a sigh. "Leo, can the discs take them out?"

"Not without an assist function working," the robot bluntly answered.

Judy was thinking again, seeing the system as if it were something physical. Her mind was going at lightspeed, picking through science fiction files in her head and weighing the options for what could be possible. Nothing appeared to relate directly to her current situation but ideas still flowed like a spigot with a broken valve.

Seeing the rockets close in, the grey doe had enough, ditching all premise at thinking and acted by instinct.

She honestly had no idea how it happened, but her mind was somehow funneling all of its processes into the Flux armor, using all of its functions in tandem with her own brain power. It was like she was the system running the suit. All the features were there. All the devices were hers to modify. Everything about the armor suddenly felt like it was an extension of her.

The world slowed.

Well, more like her perception of everything sped up. Judy was now viewing everything around her like a high speed camera. The rockets approached at a snail's pace, with the very leaves that swayed barely moving now.

As if it were just an everyday happenstance, such as stretching or blinking, the bunny's mental commands functioned like nervous system impulses that made muscles move. The discs disengaged from their locked positions with astounding speed, flying out in all directions and following her every command.

In a fluid motion that was wholly organic, instead of the calculated angles and movements from before, each discus spiraled out in a defensive sweep, charged and with fields deployed.

Encroaching into the line of fire of a rocket, Judy had the discus send out a concussive energy blast
wave. It obliterated the warhead and caused a premature detonation of a couple other rockets nearby. The energy blast wave also served the secondary measure of acting as a cancelling force against the explosion of other rockets. Continuing on its path, the discus struck another rocket from the side, using the force to throw it off course and rebounding to impact more rockets in rapid succession.

The other discs were faring equally well, following Judy's fluid commands and bouncing around in seemingly sporadic and unpredictable patterns. In her vision, everything appeared slowed.

In Nick's vision, however, he was utterly amazed and baffled by the arcs of purple streaks that jettisoned from his suit, taking rockets out by the tens in a matter of seconds.

Seeing a clear path opened up, he bolted for the air, thrusters on full power and acceleration reaching a stressful point.

"I thought you said my auto assist features were down," he stated with heavy implication behind his words.

"They are. The current events are evading my current level of understanding."

"A lot of things do, buddy," sassed the tod, a little breathless from the fast climb. "How are you doing, Fluff?"

There was silence as the last of the rockets tracking them was dealt with, an eerie silence causing him worry.

"Carrots? Judy?" he followed up with, speaking more softly as he used her actual name.

"Hm…? Oh. Yeah, I'm here," the grey bunny piped up. "I'm just… ah… dealing with a big headache now."

"Wait… you're talking over my comm channel," Nick spoke in rhetoric. "How?"

"I have no idea," Judy replied. "I was watching the rockets coming and just acted. I'm… in the suit. I think."

"Leo?" the red fox asked.

"I heard her," the mechanical being said, making the tod let out a small sound of surprise, still finding it shocking that Judy could now talk with Leo while Shifted with him.

There wasn't any time to worry over it, as a flurry of blue bolts of energy raked through the air and attempted to shred them to pieces.

"Argh," came Nick's frustrated grunt. "My rebound fields are still inactive."

"Oh! I can fix that." In record time, the structural fields and rebound shielding reformed themselves, allowing the armor to take a few errant hits without damage.

The fox decided not to question what was going on, deciding to focus on the Flares still active. One was destroyed with two heavily crippled and another two at moderate functionality. He couldn't effectively assume the current condition of the Blue Shard's armament.

"It's gonna be difficult closing in," he remarked. "They are pulling all the stops out on this one. Any ideas?"

"I have one," the rabbit near mumbled.
"And?" Nick and Leo both inquired at the same time.

"Well, it's based on science fiction stuff I've watched but could the discs be used to create a confinement field… for the suit's beam weapons?"

"I don't get it," the fox replied, dodging and weaving between salvos of energy bolts. As usual though, Leo was able to process her implicative statements, coming up with a comprehensive explanation.

"I believe she is talking about an optical focusing of our emitter beam through magnetic flux."

Nick barked out a laugh at the mention of his armored superhero name in its more relevant usage.

"I still don't get it," he unashamedly admitted, firing off a couple bolts of his own to nail the Flares in the head, the armor protecting them well enough at a distance.

"Basically," the android began, "we will create an artificial convexing lens from a warped magnetic field projected from the fields the discs can form. It would be like focusing the sun through a magnifying glass. Make sense now?"

"Yep, that'll do it," Nick confirmed with a twist in the air and letting a large bolt fly past. "Well, Fluff… what are you waiting for?"

"Hold on," she snipped. "I'm trying to figure something out…. And got it."

The discs split into two groups, the first one made of four discs and the other eight forming a shield a short ways out. Energy flowed from the four discs, coalescing into a strange purple looking lens made up of energy. It flexed and warped, as if fluidic.

Nick chose not to question further and aimed a beam emitter at it, charging to full and aiming the resulting beam through the focusing field, with the other eight discs making a gap in the field to make way. The beam remained steady for several seconds, with Judy altering things slightly to make the beam sway and slice through a Flare unit, bisecting it diagonally from a thigh upward and across to the shoulder. The beam died out, with Flux charging for another. The Flare Drone fell apart in two directions, molten slag starting a fire or two as it made contact with vegetation.

"I really like this," the tod softly spoke with a smile. "You are quite the innovative bunny."

"Thanks. Now go ahead and fire again. I found the other three Flares."

Going for a lower power, longer lasting beam, Nick fired the emitter at half power, draining the charge over several more seconds than the last one.

The grey doe's fluctuating modifications allowed the confined beam to cut across the landscape, easily cutting through two more Flare Drones and scarring the armor plating of the third, as the beam died out upon hitting the Drone.

Sparks and fizzes of blue energy arched from the mechanical wound, denoting a significant amount of damage. It still appeared to be working, but made no efforts to resume an aggressive counterattack, as it had each previous time.

The two braced themselves when the Drone lifted an arm to charge its mounted bolt cannon…

Only for it to explode and destroy the arm in a violent discharge of of cobalt light. The damage cascaded up the arm, short circuiting the joint at the shoulder and sending some sort of surge into the
power core. The partially exposed core in the chest thrummed with a feedback of energy, causing the chest to belch out a smoky plume as the Drone tilted to the side and fell over heavily.

"Well that worked out better than expected," the fox bluntly spoke, looking at the fading glow of his recently fired emitter. "Now to find our Blue Shard. Have you got a lock on it?"

"Me?" Judy and the robot both asked. The tod rolled his eyes.

"Either of you," he belted out with a little bite to his tone as he could. The recent head injury may have healed, but the memory of the pain was fresh on his mind. A dot showed up on his display, marking a point on the map scan of the area. "Thank you."

Leaning downward, Flux propelled forward, making his way towards the marked position. The red fox couldn't see the Shard but the cover of the trees and canopy that benefitted them before wasn't going to discriminate between two opposing forces.

Nick raked the area with rapid fire bolts, trying to flush out the Shard. On lower power, it kept any more fires from potentially starting.

Both the tod and doe were caught slightly off guard, but not entirely so, considering the recent events, when a powered plasma bolt burst from the canopy with stunning accuracy and headed for the armor's center mass.

In a split second of reaction, Judy was able to redirect the unstable expulsion of energy via the discus fields, bouncing a few times before being deflected back at the Shard. It missed but the resulting blast wave parted the canopy enough to get a clear line of sight on the massive armament.

"Hey Judy? Ready to unleash on this guy?"

"Heck yes I am!" the vibrant doe exclaimed. In a correspondence of mental synchronization between the two mammals, the fox began firing off bolts, with the bunny both rebounding his bolts as well as deflecting the ones from the Blue Shard. It jumped up and tried a more direct assault, using it's own thrusters to retain a hovering position over the canopy.

The two armored Shards battled it out, trading bolts and occasionally blows. One of the Blue Shard's strikes came down to bear upon Nick's head. Just in time, Judy had a discus fly past and parry the strike, allowing the fox to grasp under a piece of armor plating and swing the armored Shard around to toss them at a boulder.

The large rock was rounded but still oddly shaped enough that the armor was dented and thruster ports torn apart. The Shard attempted to recover, but Flux's flying discs began impacting the armor with great force, striking joints and supposed weak spots. Nick threw in a few bolts as needed, and the Shard teetered and attempted to stand up in desperation, only to be struck from all angles.

Its armor was greatly damaged and servo units reacting slowly, as the strikes and shots to the joints appeared to be disabling the enemy's suit.

"Just to remind you both," Leo voiced in the midst of their renewed forward advance to victory, "it would be preferable to bring the Shard in alive."

"Why do you think I'm striking the joints?" the bunny doe fired back with sass. "I'm just hoping there isn't a being as hulking as the suit might suggest."

In a surprising turn of events that stunned Nick, he saw the blue accents fade away and Shard armor go limp.
"Leo, what's going on?" the fox asked briskly, ceasing fire and seeing the discs hovered in place around him, with the rabbit keeping them on standby.

"Power levels are depleted," the mechanical being remarked bluntly. "It appears the Shard has no more power left."

"What?" Nick near yelled. "How is that possible? Are you sure the being inhabiting the suit didn't just eject from it." In reaction to his own assumption, he began looking around the area for anything moving.

"No. Now that there is no interference from the suits systems, I can see that there is a biological being inside. Their Shard power has run dry. As to the reason why, I do not have the ability to surmise that at this time."

Flux dropped down, landing heavily on the chest armor of the Shard suit. Confining the beam emitters to fire a short bolt beam, Nick began cutting through the plating, in an attempt to break open the armor and pull the alien being from inside.

The beam made short work of the armor, cutting through it in a slow but steady pace. Reaching under the lip of the breach, the armored fox ripped the plating up and away, shining a light inside to see what was going on.

The sight wasn't what he was expecting.

Inside was a creature of proportions that were likely on par with a timber wolf, moderately sized and bulky in the chest and leg regions. Their skin was scaly, much like reptiles. In fact, the being residing in the suit looked much like a Komodo Dragon. That wasn't exactly the sight that was now creating a swirl of confliction with the tod.

Unlike Nick, the reptilian alien wasn't fitted into the cockpit of the armament. It was more like the being was strapped into a reclining mechanism, tubes and cables crudely attached to or inserted into the reptilian. Venomous alien eyes bore through the darkness, staring down the fox in his armor.

Judy was becoming conflicted as well. It was if the creature never left the suit, forever bound to it as if it were it's very life.

"Life signs are fading," the android interjected. "Without their power to sustain them, all life support functions are failing. They have only a few seconds of consciousness."

True to the predictions, the reptilian's eyelids closed heavily, all the residual energy within the cockpit housing fading away. Lights and monitors blinked on and off several times before everything shut down.

"He's dead, Nick," the mechanical being stated plainly.

"No… no no no!" shouted Nick. "We were SO close!" He punched a clenched paw into the upturned plating, snarling in frustration. "Another one lost."

"Why do we need them?" Judy inquired curiously and quite innocently. Leo supplied the answer.

"Information. If we can gather what their plans are or a supposed manifest of subsequent forces to be sent through, we could prepare more readily for them. Potentially, we could cut them off and knock them from the sky the moment they would breach the Gate."

"Oh…" breathed the doe.
"Most importantly," the robot continued, "we could try finding out who is behind this repeated incursion. Such information might help us formulate a plan to counteract known tactics employed by the leader, if it is one that I have in my databanks."

"But that means NOTHING if we can't take them alive!" barked the red fox.

"We do have a rare opportunity," mentioned the android. Both Judy and Nick took notice of this statement, giving the droid their full attention. "We can pull the data within the Shard's armor and decipher it."

"That won't work," the tod grumbled in increasing annoyance once again. "We've pulled the data on other Drones before and none of them had anything useful." The fox froze, mulling over his last words and backtracking within his head. "...this isn't a Drone."

"Correct. I would imagine its data banks would be far more comprehensive than short term navigation data or other such useless information as that which we recovered from Drones thus far."

Wasting no time, Flux leapt into the housing and searched all the equipment, finding a few different such storage units for data and disengaging them from their connections. He had done this before on similarly constructed units, allowing the fox to recover what he needed with practiced paws.

Upon safely removing the data units, he let a storage compartment open up on the side of his thigh armor, carefully putting everything in.

"What about the armor and Drones?" the tod asked. "I don't think I have time to dispose of everything."

"Burn and Turn protocol," Leo said.

"Acknowledged," Nick responded.

"Burn and Turn?" Judy questioned.

"It's a tactic we have to use sometimes when recovery is tough," explained the red tod. "We don't want the government getting their paws on this tech, so we drop explosives in the armaments and turn them to slag. The only salvageable thing will be scrap metal."

"Isn't it some alien metal or something?"

"No. Most elements we know of are very common in the universe," he answered in kind once again, pulling out a small orb and tossing it inside the Blue Shard suit. "Composition may change but the elements aren't exactly anything different than what we use."

Putting his thrusters into gear, Flux flew away, discus units following and locking back into place.

Judy saw a bright flash and slow burning explosion destroy the suit and everything inside. True to his explanation, the device turned the suit into an useless piece of scrap metal. Even the corpse of the alien would be incinerated and likely only register as a lump of charcoal. Nick did the same thing to the other units, pulling any data he could, then dumping an explosive inside and verifying the resulting detonation.

With the multitude of Drones now turned to partially molten and twisted metal, Flux turned and flew back towards Zootopia, intent on making a pass over the city to make sure all was nominal.

"Nick…" Judy murmured, sounding like she was in pain.
"Yes? Is everything alright," the tod voiced, concern now noting his tone.

"My head… now that everything is over… I'm in a lot of pain. Can we land?"

"What?.. I mean yes! Descending now."

Flux arced his flight path almost directly down, finding his altered path taking him into the Savannah Central district.

"Leo, is the unit prepped?" the red fox blurted, as he flipped forward in mid air and slowed his descent with a burst of the thrusters. Landing gently in a random alleyway, saw the familiar tendrils of energy leaving his body, starting to form the physical features of his new girlfriend.

"Yes," the android confirmed. "I revised the design a bit and locked it in place as a disc unit on your back."

The fox tod, promptly reached back and nearly tore the unit from his back, looking at it and allowing it to activate. Just in time, the terribly named suit splayed out like a strange net and wrapped around the still forming rabbit, engulfing her figure and preparing for her ethereal form becoming grounded in reality once more.

The suit locked into place, with the energy having stopped pouring from Nick. He breathed a sigh of great relief, looking around to see if there were any onlookers.

"Great…" the fox groaned. Outside the alleyway were many mammals recording the whole event. Luckily, there was no chance Judy was exposed, since the suit encompassed her before returning to physical form. He chose to ignore that problem until he knew his bunny was okay.

Picking her up, he fired off his thrusters once more, gently rising so as not to agitate the doe's condition. He still flew in a wide arc around the city, throwing off any onlookers or government surveillance from tracking him effectively. Taking one of the further away entrances to his Tundratown house, Flux dropped into an old pipeline in the Rainforest District, with said pipe looking like a decrepit and abandoned part of an unused water distribution system. It was repurposed and reconstructed by Nick and Leo to divert into one of their tunnels leading to the launch bay and armory.

Once again slowing his descent, the fox landed as gently as he could, carrying the bunny in his arms.

"Still awake, Fluff?" he cooed softly. The rabbit stirred in his arms and nodded. "Let's get you to bed." Another nod in affirmation.

Setting her down on an armory workbench, Leo came in, giving the two a once over. The tod activated the remote release on her suit, with it unfurling and peeling away, to retract itself back into the modified disc unit.

Nick then shed the Flux armor, feeling rather free and breathing a long sigh of relief.

"Alright, Carrots, I'm taking you to bed."

"Are you implying that…" the android began as the fox rounded the corner with Judy cradled in his arms.

"SHUT UP!" he yelled back.
A few hours later, Nick was cleaning up the kitchen, with news footage of the most recent exchange displayed on the big wall mounted television. There was multiple clips concerning the moment where Judy was reforming in the alleyway. Nothing notable or recognizable could be seen, but the armor on her was what got everyone in a tizzy, trying to ascertain the reason she was there and who she was.

Considering the way she 'materialized', there were even many posts and sources trying to start up a super hero name for her.

Phantom.

That was the most popular choice thus far and the tod could see the reasoning, in light of the footage that everyone was fretting over.

The one group he thought would be making the biggest uproar was being oddly silent.

Before he could think that through much further, the grey doe padded softly into the room, grunting a short greeting as she entered.

"Doing alright now?" Nick offered, pouring her a glass of water and sliding it close to her as she hopped carefully onto a stool to rest her chin on the counter. Giving him a look he could only describe as gratuitous, the doe lifted her head enough to sip the water.

"I think so," the bunny answered in a low mumble. The tod grabbed a small bottle from under the counter, giving it to Judy as well. Reading the label, it was a bottle of minor pain pills for headaches. "Oh… thank you."

"No worries, Judy," he mentioned in a rare moment of using her name, "it's the least I can do for you saving my tail a few times in a row out there."

"I feel like my brain was turned into goo."

Nick was about to fire off a snarky follow up, when the news shifted focus from the retelling of the previous battle to a press conference at City Hall.

"We come to you live from City Hall with a broadcast concerning the recent developments with Flux and his potential partner in fighting the Drones. Mayor Lionheart has come to us today with an announcement for the city of Zootopia…"

The anchor snow leopard allowed the camera to pan over to the podium, where a large lion took the stage and cleared his throat, waving down someone off camera.

"I come to you today, citizens of the great city of Zootopia, to bring you some unfortunate news. It appears that the agreement between the government and Flux was conditional upon a few provisos concerning the usage of his technology in accordance with the goal to protect our wonderful city and its inhabitants. The overwhelming proof that Flux now apparently has a partner, that the media has named Phantom, is in violation of some of these provisos. Therefore, our government is forced to issue a warrant for their arrest for the crimes of vigilantism and destruction of property, along with a few others. Flux is hereby ordered in the name of the law to turn himself and partner over, as well as any technology that could be used for the betterment of our defenses against the incursion of Drones."

The television shut off, with Leo having pressed the button on the remote.

"There is no need for the two of you to subject yourselves to that dreck," the android told them both.
Judy could care less about what was said about her, but she knew her fox had protected the citizens for over a year. To be cast aside by the government and labeled a criminal had to be a terrible...

Nick burst out laughing, dropping to the floor and rolling around in an almost disturbingly maniacal display of chuckles and deep throaty laughs. At a couple points, he appeared short on breath, only to take a few deep breaths and resume his previous laughing session with renewed fervor.

"It's about time!" he barked between gasps.

The laughter was a bit infectious, as the grey doe herself began to giggle a little, unsure what reasoning the tod could possibly have for thinking this was funny.

"Did I miss another joke?" Leo asked, to which the only answer was more laughing.
"To repeat my previous inquiry," Leo started, "what is so funny?"

Judy let her laughter bleed away slowly as she eyed the fox with the same unspoken question. Nick, however, was completely oblivious to all stimulus as he rolled around, making cackles, yips, and hollers of amusement. The two patiently waited for him to calm down, letting the tod wipe a tear and take a deep breath.

"I've seen this coming for a while," he bluntly stated with a smile. "Ever since they called me an 'agent of the government' honestly." The grey doe rolled her paws around each other, her eyes becoming contemplative as she realized the weight of the situation they could be in.

"I'm sorry," she nearly whimpered. The red fox suddenly twitched his ears in her direction, processing the reason behind those words. It didn't exactly hit him suddenly, but more or less came as a more anti-climactic realization. She felt she was the reason for the government turning on him. Sighing as he raked a paw through the fur on the back of his neck, Nick padded closer to his bunny and gave her a pat to the head, watching her nose twitch.

"No need to fret, Judy," he cooed to her. "They've been searching for any and all reasons to turn me into a pariah since I furst exposed my existence, galavanting around in a very advanced and specialized piece of technology. It was made worse when I upgraded to the newer models. Seeing that I had a partner just gave them the excuse they wanted to come after me publically."

"So, it wasn't my fault?" Judy asked with hazy eyes, as if ready to cry before.

"Your revealed existence was definitely the catalyst for such an endeavor by the government," the android explained, looking over to see the tod giving him a steely glare and shaking his head, "but, as Nick said, any reason would have been used to further their ends. Using you was simply an unfortunate coincidence." The robot looked over at Nick, seeing him slide a paw down his muzzle, rolling his eyes, but nodding as if saying, 'good enough'.

The statement caused a shifting thought process that flipped between the belief she was to blame and one which could see the logic that any reason would have been used against Flux. Even if she believed any other excuse would have been taken, it was her episode that caused all of this. Her ears failed to stay up, falling behind her head heavily.

"Try not to think too much on it, Fluff," the fox tod softly comforted. "It was going to happen in due time, no matter what. I would rather get it over with and let public outcry win out. I don't exactly believe my 'fanbase' will call out the government, but mammals look for any reason to call the institution into question and scrutinize them. In time, they'll be forced to back down with a target on their back for misbehaving in the public eye."
"What about the call for our arrest?" the rabbit questioned. "Won't they come breaking down the door and apprehending us or something?" The fox let out a resounding guffaw at that, wiping a tear from his eye.

"They don't know who we are," he simply divulged, allowing Judy to rethink her position. Her eyes lit up a small degree at remembering how little contact he has had in the open and the great lengths to which he has gone to keep himself and his identity a secret. Continuing, Nick said, "Leo removes my identity, the house, and any traceable expenditures from all systems that would record them."

Now confused, the bunny offered a look to the mechanical being, asking to no particular individual, "How does Leo do that? I would think those systems are pretty tough to crack." She suddenly let out a short laugh and smacked a paw to her forehead. "Duh. You are a hyper advanced robot from the stars. Our systems are probably kit's play." The android looked over to Nick, who shrugged.

"Actually, considering that I have been around since before your civilization's electronic age came to be, I found a way to install a mutating virus on all servers from their creation," explained Leo. "Since there would obviously be upgrades to equipment and such, with the likelihood that venues for such equipment could change, I've had to make micro machines that sneak in like bugs and hook up directly to any such equipment, allowing for direct manipulation of the system to my advantage."

"Why not just hack it?" Judy offered with a tepid smile.

"Unwise," the robot spoke bluntly. "Despite my exponentially more powerful processing power, any such intrusions would hold a risk of being discovered upon repeated intrusions. Passwords change and firewalls adapt as updates allow. Another problem with such a tactic though would be that, even though I would be altering or erasing information, all they had to do was double check everything for validity and find the discrepancies. I can change electronic records but if they go by their own senses and use physical mediums like paperwork, I cannot alter that."

"Wouldn't they check everything anyways?"

"There is no reason to check what you do not even know is altered," Nick chimed in. "By all records that this house exists, it is listed as a private residence owned by a mammal with a trust fund who bought the house with a one time payment. All other transactions that matter are made through various third party means and cash. Leo and I have been careful for a long time, even in this new information age with everyone carrying around a means to document their entire lives on social media."

At that mention, the small rabbit pulled out her phone a bit meekly.

"So… will this be a problem?"

"Nope," the fox replied briskly, popping the 'P' at the end of the word.

"I already found a way to ghost the phone from all systems," the robot spoke. "It shows up as you will it but any such attempts at tracking or back tracing certain functions reads as a technical error within the phone's design." Judy shrugged, only really understanding half of what the android tried to explain.

"Your phone will register on social media or whatever and use local towers and wireless data sources," the tod translated for her, "But attempts by authorities and such to trace your exact location or turn on things like the phone receiver to listen in to anything will read as a mechanical error in the phone's design. Basically, your phone will appear broken or malfunctioning to them. It happens more often than you think. Dropping them, getting them wet, dust and grime build up. It all leads to
malfunctions that are completely normal."

"Wow… you really have thought of everything…" whispered the doe, more to herself than for the benefit of the other two.

"I do have a bit of other news," Leo supplied after a few seconds of silence. Judy and Nick turned to the mechanical being.

"Is it about that info from the Shard," the red fox asked hopefully.

"Unfortunately not," Leo answered. "I will need more time to translate the information and adapt to the different style of formatting used to archive the data concerned. Actually, I had news concerning the Gate. I was able to scan and gauge the stabilization of the wormhole, affording me a very fortunate outcome with my endeavors to figure out when it would next be able to open."

There was another few seconds of silence before the bunny asked, "And?"

"And I have concluded that, because of the energy flux created within the Gate from sending in a Blue Shard, our supposed enemies will be unable to efficiently send anything through for at least a month." Nick began to smile wide and bright, imagining all that he could do with some time away from weekly engagements with murderous machines from some far off enemy in the stars.

"So, that means…" he began, letting the sentence remain open to the possibilities.

"You could both visit Judy's parents in Bunny Burrow," Leo finished for him…

Causing the fox's wide grin to instantly wither and die on his muzzle.

Judy, on the other paw, had begun to bounce and hop on the balls of her feet, clasping her paws together in an attempt to keep them from clapping too giddily. Her smile radiated out like a beautiful solar flare, almost figuratively blinding her fox with her positive reaction.

"Why so despondent looking, sir? I was privy to the understanding that you wanted to go there to see your mother's grave site."

Nick's expression froze, his mind having not put that in with the whole equation until mentioned. A small, possibly sad, smile stretched over his features, the feeling of relief he felt before returning. There was still the trepidation of seeing his mother's burial site once more after having never looked back since the day he buried her, but if Judy saw it undisturbed, after so many years having passed, he could hope it wasn't yet changed since then either.

"Yeah, you're right," he responded. "I pretty much forgot about that."

"This'll be so great!" Judy nearly exploded saying. "We'll visit my family's farm and all my siblings. We can see the nearby forest and maybe they'll even…" She stopped upon seeing the red fox's face, split between nervousness and something similar to being crestfallen. "What's wrong?"

Nick's paws drummed the counter as he worked his jaw to speak words he wasn't decided upon as of yet.

"I... don't have the most amiable history with that place," he began. "And we're together. What will they think of that? Your parents I mean." A paw rested on his forearm, giving it a squeeze.

"I'm sure they'll be fine. Not excited about the dating thing, but I'll keep them civil. This isn't like back then."
"I know… but despite times and ideals having changed," the tod mumbled, relishing in the feel of her paw upon him, "I've seen many mammals still resort to the same treatment and mannerisms pertaining to certain things. They just wrap it up in a new package to blend in with the status quo of the era."

"I guess that's true," she resigned to say, "but I promise to keep them reserved on the matter. I want you to be able to visit. Whether boyfriend, mate, or as a friend, you are still someone important to me that I want to have meet my family." the tod sucked in a breath and let it go in a long sigh, subsequently clapping his paws together.

"Alright then!" he chirped. "When do we leave?"

"Well… If I call now… probably tonight," Judy mentioned, thinking it would be too short notice for her fox to summon up the courage to go. She also figured it would be better to get him there before he potentially lost his nerve. True to her expectations, Nick turned to her to give her a shocked look.

"Really? That quickly?" he spoke speedily. "I guess… uh… yeah, that's fine."

"Great! I'll make the arrangements. You just worry about packing. Wait…" the doe paused. "How will we get there? I doubt the Flux armor is in the equation…"

"We'll take the Zootopia Express out there," the red fox answered definitively. "Taking the armor would be problematic."

"Sounds good."

"Leo… hold down the fort will you?" Nick asked gently with a smile, still apprehensive about the impromptu trip.

"Aye aye, sir," Leo replied in kind.

"Did he really have to see us off wearing that ridiculous thing?" the red fox tod complained, hefting his duffel back into a comfortable position over his shoulder. The two mammals were now walking around the platform of the train station, attempting to find a place to sit down and wait for their departure train.

"Oh relax," chided the grey bunny doe, rolling her luggage along with her. "Leo just wanted to give us a laugh with another apron… I think."

"But really… 'I turn grills on'?" Nick complained. "Where does he get those things?"

"He said it was a specialty site for that sort of thing," Judy replied blankly, shaking her head with a mild smile. "Why? Jealous?" A resounding guffaw belted out of the fox at the presumption.

"Bah! Of course not," the fox vented. "As much as I like a good pun… I'm not of the mind where I would want to showcase it like a billboard. I like my deliveries of such things to be by mouth."

"Why not tell him to stop wearing them then?" the rabbit asked with a slight roll of her eyes. "I'm sure Leo would listen to you as he does with all other requests." The tod scratched under his chin in contemplation, but more so of his next words than actually giving her suggestion any real consideration.

"I couldn't do that to him," he responded gently. "Despite him saying he's only a 'virtual' intelligence,
I do believe he finds some degree of entertainment from something like that. He already does so much to take care of me, so I couldn't take that away from him." The doe let a soft grin slowly grow on her muzzle, a rising surge of warmth filling her chest and giving her a renewed sense of affinity for her fox in a different light.

"You know, you're a lot nicer than you sometimes portray yourself," Judy mentioned in observation. The red fox showed her a lopsided grin and let out a short barking laugh. "I'm serious. You open up to me a lot easier now, but you still put on this whole 'I'm annoyed and uncaring' facade. Beneath all that, I see a kinder, more gentle mammal. Why do you pretend?"

"Haven't we already discussed this somewhat?" the tod returned in kind, his previous grin faltering into something more awkward and uncomfortable.

"I suppose, but I would like to get a more refreshed perspective before we meet my parents," the grey doe supplied. "And I know some of the reasoning, but you know you don't have to act like that all the time. Be yourself."

"Myself is a very goofy individual," the red fox explained. "Think you can handle him?"

"I've had to deal with a goofy and exuberant best friend since coming to Zootopia. I think I can handle a fox who is probably far more repressed than she could ever pretend to be."

"Fair point," came his reply.

"Zootopia Express train to BunnyBurrow is ready for boarding," the recorded voice playback emitted over the platform speakers. "Departure will be in 15 minutes."

Both fox and rabbit secured their respective grips on their luggage and stepped onto the train as it opened its various doors. None too surprisingly, there were very few mammals getting on for the same destination they had in mind. The two found seats up in the observation deck, taking the seats with the widest view and felt like they were sized just for mammals their size.

Shimmying his way into the seat, duffel bag tucked underneath the seat, Nick spoke, "Wouldn't there be more places this train goes towards than just BunnyBurrow?"

Judy gently placed her bag on the floor and slid it under the seat next to her fox, popping her head up to say, "Well…. Yes, technically. BunnyBurrow is just the most prominent stop. There are other big stops but that means a track switch and…. Wait… how do you not know where the train goes? I would've thought you've been using it for years."

"I haven't had much inclination to use the lines leading out and around Zootopia," he answered with a mild shrug. "I've used the intercity lines often enough and try to keep a mental note of all their destinations, stops, and such. Part of my whole 'know the city better than any other mammal' bit."

"But you've been here for so many years!" Judy giggled, hardly believing he didn't know about the ins and outs of the city's transit system, even outside the city. "I figured you would know the area quite well."

"I do," Nick affirmed, "but what I know is by my own wandering feet. I saw Zootopia in it's beginning stages as a small village with a monastery embedded into the mountainside. I've seen it over the years as it grew to the towering skyline you see almost daily."

"That must have been something to behold, the rising of a city that is," the rabbit inferred.

"Not really. Honestly, it's a shame," he stated, eliciting a frown from his bunny. The tod attempted to
clarify himself, "What I mean is that such a city as Zootopia, along with others, generally feels like a shame for so many to congregate into one place and create a cesspool of cultural seclusion. You get things like class separation and slums. Gaps between the rich and poor get further spread as the city grows into something fantastical. My main point is that I have seen smaller communities work far better in harmony when all are treated equally to a certain degree. They help each other to influence the community to betterment."

"Oh… that's… well thought out," replied the near speechless bunny, having climbed up into a seat to relax next to the red fox. "And that's a rather cynical way to look at it."

"I know, but when time passes and you see many things change, you notice the gap growing wider in a place such as that… and I became a bit despondent of it happening," he continued.

The train began moving, with both mammals surprised, having apparently missed the announcement over the intercom system of their departure. Leaving the confines of the large, ornate building, the railcar sped up steadily, taking the long loop around the city and gaining momentum.

The two watched as each district passed by their view, with the towering structures of the downtown area in the center remaining in the same perspective, like a focal point they pivoted around on a wheel. Everything went dark for a few seconds, as the train cars passed through the mountain tunnel.

Nick felt something grip his shirt and pull him sideways…

Only for a soft press of warm flesh to hinder his movement, with Judy having tugged him into a tender kiss in the dark. It lasted for a few seconds, until the light from the other end reflected and refracted throughout the curved glass dome, illuminating her muzzle as she pulled back. Her eyes were closed but fluttered open in the light, the sudden encompassing white seeming near blinding.

"Feel better, Scruffy?" the doe inquired gently. He nodded slowly, breathing deep and letting it out in a long sigh.

"Much."

The fox looked around and saw no one in the area, making him smile as he surmised her kiss was meant to surprise him instead of keep it from the public eye.

"It's been awhile since I left the city," remarked the tod.

"How long?" the grey bunny questioned curiously. The fox appeared to go into a mild trance, attempting to rack his brains for an ample time frame.

"Something around… twenty years i think," was his ambiguous sounding response. "I spent a lot of that time creating my newest suits and coming up with new designs for equipment."

"Does that include your 'special' project?"

"Yep."

"Wanna tell me what it is?"

"Yeah… but I won't. Gotta leave some things as surprises." Nick gave her a wink. The bunny pouted in return to his display and crossed her arms. "Don't be like that. We have a couple hours till we get to BunnyBurrow and I'm sure we'll need to keep boredom at bay somehow. Judy pulled out her phone, a sneer lining her muzzle.
"I have games on my phone to play. You?"

The fox tod's expression fell, looking at his phone and realizing he barely uses it for anything other than practical things. He tried to open up the shop for games to download and was utterly flabbergasted by all the convoluted games that were crowding the display.

Giving up on even attempting to understand how any of the games worked, he turned off the screen, groaning, "This is gonna be a long trip…"

The time until arrival passed fairly smoothly, with Nick having enjoyed the view outside and Judy playing her games for a good long while. He was okay with that though. It gave him time to admire the view.

The fox has spent so long traversing the world with his eyes on his feet wherever he went, that he hadn't often enough just looked at the beauty surrounding him. The city of Zootopia was another such factor of concern keeping him from admiring beauty that was as natural as this, but he couldn't blame an unmoving city for his lack of drive to leave with perfectly good legs.

Various shades of amber, auburn, gold, and crimson painted the landscape in a mosaic that flowed and rustled with the changes in the wind. Creeks fractured the fields of green and yellow grass, with ponds speckling the area as well, shifting air currents causing gentle ripples to disturb the almost mirror like quality of the water's surface. Even the sky was becoming a cascading collection of hues, with the sun dipping below the horizon slowly. Despite the districts of Zootopia fighting nature with controlled environments, the outside world was awash with the warm colors of autumn.

The other such view he was enjoying, though, was that of the grey bunny doe before himself. She'd dressed herself in jeans and a lilac long sleeve shirt, the jeans cut off just below the knees and shirt split with lacing strings over the shoulder areas. She had earbuds planted firmly in her ears, tongue stuck out and to the side in concentration as her eyes were locked onto the phone, playing her game. Apparently, the bunny was making some sort of amiable progression, with her legs kicking at one point and toes curling as she pumped a clenched paw in victory.

Nick chuckled lightly, with Judy doing a double take towards her fox and curling up instinctively in embarrassment as she assessed what she must have looked like in her excitable state. It didn't last long as the bunny looked around, seeing something the fox didn't. She smiled enthusiastically and pulled out her earbuds, beginning to pack them away and grab her luggage from underneath her seat.

"We're almost there," she stated happily. As if to denote her accuracy, the intercom softly pinged and offered a recorded warning to that effect. The red fox barely paid attention to the actual words as the train began to slow and a station appeared in the distance. Even from a distance, Nick could see the overwhelming yellow that seemed to dominate the front of the building, with strange protrusions off the window arches and such.

Seeing his confused look, Judy's smiled widened as she very mildly understood what he could be looking at, speaking up to say, "The station has bunny ears." The tod barely reacted, with his only tell to the rabbit being the arching eyebrow that rose slightly in response to her clarified statement to his unasked question. She giggled a bit and leaned against his chest, nuzzling her head into him.

"Just curious… what are we telling them?" the tod inquired with a worried look down to his bunny. "Your parents, I mean," he then clarified. Judy tilted her head back to look up at the fox, who was averting his eyes to look outside, the station slowly approaching.
"I left out certain details, leaving it for us to tell them when we get there… if you so choose," the doe explained. "We can tell them whatever you want, though I would prefer the truth."

"What?" asked the shocked fox. "Truth?" Judy rolled her eyes.

"I meant about our relationship… not the Shard stuff," she elucidated for him. A moment later and the thought registered on his features.

"Ah, my mistake."

"No worries," the grey bunny replied. She patiently waited as long as she could allow for Nick to contemplate what to tell her parents, with the station so close now. Her muzzle parted as she was about to renew her inquiry to him, until he interrupted the action.

"I suppose," he started slowly, "we can tell them the truth. I'm still a bit… fearful about reception, but I don't want to start off any interactions with your parents with lies, barring the obvious stuff about Shards." Judy nodded wholeheartedly, glad that she didn't necessarily have to separate from her fox for the sake of looking like she was 'just friends' with him. Her nose nestled into the V-neck of his shirt, soft cream fur being a comforting feeling to her in that moment.

The train came to a creeping halt, the wheezing of the brakes and small squeaks of the wheels on the tracks grinding to a complete stop. Hydraulics hissed to life, with the multitude of doors of various sizes opened to allow mammals to board and depart.

Nick grabbed his duffel, taking deep breaths and closing his eyes to focus on keeping himself calm. He had faced robotic drones equipped with futuristic weapons, superpowered aliens from the stars, and even an almost overly energetic African Wild Dog that was also a police officer. Surely, he could handle his girlfriend's parents.

Out of nowhere, and grounding him back in reality, a paw grasped his own. Intertwining her much smaller digits with his, Judy let her paw explore his pads briefly before tugging him down and away from the observation deck, approaching the door.

Nick could already see the sea of rabbit ears waiting outside.

"You know I don't believe I asked," the tod began, "but how big is your family. I know bunnies tend to have a few more kits than the average species…"

"Three-hundred and thirteen," the doe interrupted, almost reveling in the look of shock on his muzzle until she felt a slight amount of pity for his predicament. "Don't worry though. I only see about fifty or so of my siblings today."

"What a ringing endorsement that is," the red fox sarcastically quipped, gulping slightly as the doorway opened up onto the platform, his paw still grasped firmly in his girlfriend's own.

Two older looking rabbits, pretty much joined at the hip, stepped forward and opened their arms to receive Judy in an embrace. She let Nick's paw go, with him noticing a few rabbits in the crowd locking their previously errant gazes on him. He was having a bit of a panicked reaction internally at the looks a few of them were giving him, but he breathed deep and tried to keep calm.

"This isn't anything like before, he thought to himself in an attempt to comfort his subconscious. They aren't anything like the rabbits or others from before. They might speak ill or give you crude stares and gestures, but they won't act like those before.

Another deep breath later and Nick focused on listening to the conversation unfolding just a few feet
"We've missed you so much, Judy," the mammal he noted as her mother said. "You still working at that grocer we recommended?"

"Uh… no," Judy mention with a confused look. "That was the first job I had in Zootopia. I've had a few more since. Currently I'm doing some freelance work for a private firm."

"Oh…” her mother spoke in realization, brightening a bit as she changed the topic. "Did you at least try going after that buck we mentioned? He was quite interested in you when we talked about you to him."

The purple eyed doe giggled nervously and threw a trepidatious look back at the fox, who appeared unfazed by the topic, the only denotation of his listening in being the flick of his ears.

"No… no. Sorry, mom. I had…” Judy's paws twirled around each other as she fought for the words, "nothing… in common with him."

"Enough about that," the father said with a smile, waving her down in an attempt to diffuse the nervousness he sensed. "Where is this friend you wanted us to meet? They sounded important to you."

"That's right!" The younger doe exclaimed, turning back to grab her boyfriend by the arm and tug him forwards, the tod plastering the most charming smile he could muster on his muzzle. "This is… Ni- I mean Reynard Fawkes." There was an expectant pause as she let the words flow out of her mouth as fluidly as she could release them.

"My boyfriend."

The pause that followed was even devoid of the comically obligatory cricket chirps. All eyes trained on Nick and he felt as if he could lose his 'cool' any moment. His 'charming' smile turned nervous rather quickly and Judy sucked in a breath, awaiting some level of judgement from her parents.

"Is he behind the fox?" her father chirped, looking behind the tod expectantly. The heights of his supposed delusion made the grey bunny facepaw herself in frustration.

"No… the mammal here that I am latched onto in an affectionate manner is my boyfriend," Judy spoke bluntly and definitively. "Rey, these are my parents, Bonnie and Stu."

The fox waved a bit stiffly and very awkwardly, trying his best to look as pleasant and friendly as he could. Bonnie gave them an expression that seemed to say, *I am not amused*, whereas Stu appeared to be letting his mouth work open and close in an attempt to formulate a cohesive sentence to address whatever issue they had.

"Judy, I know you like to joke sometimes but this taking it a bit too far, honey," her mother said in a chastising manner. Judy looked aghast, giving a concerned look to her fox, who appeared rather stoic about the whole thing.

"Mom! This is not a joke!" the younger rabbit exclaimed, pointing a digit at her mother.

"Don't raise your voice like that to your mother," Stu defended, finally deciding to throw his two cents in the conversation. Judy closed her eyes and splayed out her paws to her sides, taking a deep breath.

"I'm going…." the fox tod started, pausing when a mixture of gazes retrained on him again, "...to
step over here and give you some space…” Pointing away to give direction to the far away bunnies who didn't hear him, the fox followed his own paw and turned to seek solitude at the other end of the platform.

"Ok… now that he's out of earshot," began the elder brown buck, "you can tell us what this is all about."

"What what is all about?" The younger bunny asked, doing her best to hold back her mortified fury at her parents lack of decorum with a guest. "He's not part of some joke or game. I like him… maybe even more."

Judy had almost used the word love in reference to her boyfriend but realized the two haven't exactly said that to each other yet. It would be unfair, at least in her eyes, if she used that word in this situation without telling him first in a more amiable context.

"Now don't get ahead of yourself on this, Sweetie," her mother mentioned with an outstretched paw. "You don't know him that well yet, right?"

The purple eyed doe gave her parents a hard stare, flickering her gaze between them, opening her muzzle to slowly say, "I know him well enough to know that he hasn't had a very good history with mammals like rabbits and such." Judy had to think through her words so as to not reveal too much, but she needed to get a point across before the subject and accusations got out of paw. Her stare raked over the red fox, checking to see that he couldn't hear her before continuing, "He's had some… past abuse concerning that and it took him quite a bit of courage to come here along with promises from me that you would be kind. And… so help me if you don't give him your warmest welcome, I will pack up and take he and myself back to Zootopia where I will not be answering your calls or anything like for a while."

She watched to see her parents take in the threat and all of its 'provisos' under consideration before they stared at one another, then back to her, looking rather concerned.

To finalize her point, Judy followed up by voicing, "If you have anything unkind to say or any worrisome reservations to divulge, I can just turn around and leave right now. Understood?"

Bonnie and Stu nodded reluctantly, to which the younger rabbit let a genuine smile spread across her features and clapped her paws together.

"Great!" she exclaimed, turning to wave Nick over once again. "Rey! You can get over here."

The fox perked up from looking at his phone, which Judy noticed was on a black screen, making her wonder if he was actually listening to the entire exchange and even more so… could hear it.

Leaning in as he approached, Nick rested a paw on her head, letting his claws dig in a bit as he gave her a pleasureful scratch, speaking softly into her ear, "Yes… I heard. And thank you, Judy."

The doe allowed herself to thump her foot in reaction to the wonderful feeling he was giving her.

"Alright kids!" Stu hollered to everyone. "Let's get packing and head back to the warren!"
Evasive, Abrasive, Pervasive

The ride back to the Hopps warren was rather awkward, what with the ultimatum being made. While Judy was on edge, Nick was rather comfortable in all actuality. It was an awkward silence. He could deal with that. It was no awkwardness on his part, but only because of him.

Upon arrival at the home, the fox was mildly surprised. He hadn't seen a bunny home in many years. He remembered the ones he used to see in the distance or pass by on the road when trudging his path around the land being of substantial proportions, though he had never truly come close. Rabbits tended to get a bit skittish or defensive with a fox around. The grey doe's parents felt like no such exception, accepting the guest he was only at her behest and their reluctant consent.

Shifting the duffel, the red fox made his way towards the large double doors of the home.

Before he could pass through them, with Judy giving them a pull…

A horde of smaller bunnies flooded out of the fresh opening, tackling the newcomer and making excited a cacophony of excited squeals.

"Is this Judy's friend?"
"He's a funny looking bunny."
"Why is his tail so long?"
"Your fur looks like fire."

Both Judy and her parents were ready to rush to his aid, poised to start pulling off bunny kits off the possibly overwhelmed fox.

It was almost unnerving, seeing the fox sit up calmly, looking around from his fallen state and smiling gently in the midst of the overly curious kits. He raised an arm and saw one hanging off his arm, grinning nervously. The tod smiled back and raised his arm behind his head, letting the kit ride his shoulders.

"Careful with my ears, Squirt," he softly spoke. "Much like your own, they're sensitive."

"O… okay?" the little bunny buck said. The other kits froze and looked to their sibling, whether in jealousy or surprise that the fox wasn't possibly more perturbed by their strange advance, it was unclear to the adults. "My name isn't Squirt though… it's Kale."

"Well Kale, pleased to meet you and your siblings. I'm Rey and I'm actually…"

"Come on, everyone," Bonnie chided the kits nervously. "We should leave him alone for now."

Judy gave her mother a hard stare, daring her to say more. The older doe shifted uncomfortably and gently goaded the group of kits away from the red fox, a few uttering "awww"s of lamentful disapproval.

Nick carefully lowers Kale to the ground, patting the kit on the head and giving him a gentle boot to the back to get going with his mother. The little buck turned back to utter a soft 'see you later' before rushing off with the horde.

Entering the foyer area, the tod should have been less surprised to see its grandeur and impressive
size. Scores of Judy's siblings, their potential mates, and quite possibly their own kits, were scurrying about and padding throughout the vast and open area. Some paid him mind enough to raise an eyebrow, with the smaller grey doe giving a hard stare to any who lingered too long with an icy glare. They quickly appeared to weigh the risks of ticking off their sis and decided to back off whatever thoughts they were implying with their looks.

"You seemed rather calm and collected with the little ones," the elder brown buck began, stepping to his side. "You work with kits?" Nick eyed Stu with trepidatious skepticism, unclear of his intentions in this moment.

"Nah," he voiced non-committedly, choosing to take a path of caution. "I just get along with them better. Younglings are so curious and honest with themselves usually. That kind of wonder and energy can be quite… infectious."

"Oh," Stu muttered, possibly taking that as a jibe against him for the earlier whispered reservations against Nick. The fox chose not to correct the thinking, hoping he would either brush it off or take it under some unheeded advisement. "So… what do you do for a living?"

"It's quite boring honestly, doing the same thing most days and getting to sleep only to wake up and do it all over again," Nick offered. In a move that slightly shocked both Bonnie and Judy, Stu laughed heartily at his comment.

"I'm sure I can understand, Bud," the buck stated. "I mean… that sounds like the farming life most days, but it feeds yourself and keeps you busy."

"True enough," the tod agreed. "I'm technically a stock trader. Make my living investing and turning it into profit, one day at a time."

"Wow… you're right," Stu mentioned. "That is boring."

"Dad!" Judy hissed at her dad, to which he put his paws up in defense. The red fox started laughing in earnest, waving his girlfriend down from her inciteful state.

"Oh relax, Fluff," he chided her with a smile. "That was in all good fun. Besides, I called it boring first. He gets free reign to do it too." It was Stu's turn to laugh in kind.

"I think I'm starting to like him," the older rabbit revealed. Bonnie rolled her eyes and appeared rather annoyed by the good natured laughter coming from the two. The younger doe watched her mother walk off, still ushering the kits away and off to do whatever it was they needed to do currently. Judy was almost certain though, that Bonnie was uncomfortable with the kits being around her boyfriend. And that… that infuriated her.

Turning to the tod, she softly spoke, "I'm going to let you two talk while I catch up to ask mom something. Will you be alright?"

"Huh? Yeah. Sure," Nick answered, not having caught it all, but getting what was going on. Judy wasted no time in pursuing her mother, taking the same hallway she did. It led into an open room where the kits had many toys and a small indoor playset.

Bonnie left the room, some older siblings already present to watch over them. She left the area and went down the hall towards what Judy remembered was the kitchen common area.

"Is there something you wanted?" her mom sighed. "Or are you going to follow me around until you think we're completely alone?" The two were now in a rather unpopulated hallway, with Judy realizing it was one of the guest bedroom wings. She then noticed her mom probably did this on
purpose, mustering the will to ask her questions.

"I want to know what your problem is with… Rey," the younger bunny demanded, arms crossed and stare hardened. "You work with Gideon and appear on good terms with him, at least since the last time I was here. So, it can't be that he is a fox."

"That's different," Bonnie defended, turning to face her daughter. "I was fine with you moving out, even if it was to pursue that strange thing about seeing Flux in the fur… or metal, but dating a fox? You have so many differences. Are you sure he'll be able to attend to you as you need? And on that subject… how did you two even meet?"

The grey doe was thrown for a small loop, having not quite come up with a story of their meeting yet. She could use their actual meeting but felt too… revealing. Running a paw through the fur on her head, the rabbit chose a near truth option, hoping the backlash wouldn't be too terrible.

"Rey… saved me during one of those attacks from the drones, a few weeks ago."

"You got caught up in one of those?" Bonnie voiced in sudden concern. Her voice then dropped and eyes narrowed as she then surmised something else. "You were there on purpose, weren't you?"

"That doesn't matter…"

"YES it does!" her mother nearly exclaimed. "You go off to Zootopia, where all this danger is, and expect us to be okay with you willingly seeking it out?"

"We're getting off topic here," Judy said, trying to steer the conversation back to her side of angry. "I still want to know why Rey is a problem to you."

"We don't know him," Bonnie definitively stated. "You don't know him. The kits don't know him. And for all I know, he's using your infatuation with a now outlawed super 'hero' to gain your favor, being of the same species."

"Wow…" was all Judy could muster in response for several seconds, amethyst eyes wide in sheer shock at her mother's audacity to so boldly make such a biased claim against Nick. It took as long to see her mom's face go from its stern look, eventually melting into something of bitter remorse.

"Honey…"

"No, Mom," the younger bunny interrupted. "You said quite enough. If it weren't for a certain reason of many why I'm here, I would be leaving without a word."

"What reason is that?" Bonnie dared to ask in a meeker voice.

"Rey… his family lived on what is currently our property some many generations ago. They were… ousted from the land and he wanted to see if some remnants of their home was left. It's like… a searching for one's roots type of deal."

"That seems very suspicious," her mom mentioned, part of the previous venom returning at the implications that idea could incur. "Sounds like some prelude to a lawsuit."

Judy laughed almost mockingly, though unintentionally, before belting out, "Yeah right! Rey wasn't even inclined to come. He actually fought me on this. I had to assure him many things before he would even consider the possibility of coming. And now… now… you're just making me regret convincing him in the first place. My selfish wish in all this was to have him meet my loving and supportive family."
"Judy…” Bonnie attempted to speak.

"Just try to give him a chance,” her daughter interjected, almost sounding pleading. "He's rough around the edges but it comes from a long life of people basing their opinions on stereotypes. If you can see past that… he's very gentle and caring." The doe laughed. "It's part of what drew me to him, getting a little overly worried about me for no reason that is."

Choosing to bite her tongue, seeing her mouth might get her in further trouble with her own daughter, the older rabbit decided to nod affirmatively.

"Thanks," Judy near muttered. "I know it's your house… and you shouldn't have to put up with a guest if you truly don't wish to, but he means a lot to me."

"He really does, huh?"

The grey doe nodded to her mom.

The relationship between herself and Nick hadn't been official for long, but sharing a body and mind on multiple occasions had a way of giving the two a bond that felt dependent and fast tracked the emotional attachment process of a coupling. Plus, the way Nick worried over her repeatedly while attempting to seem as if he were detached was… quite adorable when she realized what was going on. Just as well, his innate sense of protection when it came to her was also quite endearing. Independent female or not, Judy couldn't deny a swell of positive emotions accompanied her reactions to his mannerisms that most might link to 'being male'. He was protective and kind, willing to spare her certain things he saw as problematic, not because she was female but because he cared about her.

The purple eyed bunny's mother cleared her throat in an attempt to get her daughter's attention. When their stares met, she opened her mouth to speak, appearing to think carefully.

"I think I might be able to help out with that family roots thing," the mother spoke finally, twiddling her paws together a bit nervously. Judy perked up, quite relieved her mom was now dropping the whole 'awkward' discussion and moving onto helping her.

"What is it?" she asked curiously. Bonnie gestured for her to follow along.

"We'll have to see your Grand Pappy's study."

"What do you think they're talking about?" Stu voiced, with it having been a few minutes since mother and daughter left the room.

"I couldn't even hazard a guess," Nick supplied in turn. He wasn't completely lying. Though he could probably actually guess, there were too many theories in his head to properly pick one to say out loud. The fox figured it was best to let things play out and hear about it later. In the meantime, the tod was being shown to his room for the night, being of a larger variety than the usual with furniture to match. Of this, he was quite grateful. One thing bothered him though.

"Where is…”

"...the bathrooms?" the elder buck finished for him, to which Nick nodded. Stu pointed down the hallway. "Just that way and on your first right. For now, we're still doing dinner if you'd like to take some for yourself. You're free to join us or dine away from everyone.”
"You seem more… friendly than earlier," Nick bluntly pointed out. The buck sighed, shifting his cap on his head before thumbing his suspenders.

"I was… cautious," he admitted. "Not everyday you see one of your kits bringing home a boyfriend. And fox or no, I was surprised anyone could gain her favor. She's always been a bit…"

"Different, strange, quirky?" the fox tod offered, when Stu seemed at odds with how to finish that thought. He tilted his head in ambiguous agreement. "Good thing I like all of that. I'm a bit of an oddity myself. I'm mostly glad she accepts me as I am. You raised one heck of a daughter."

The brown buck's chest was pushed out a bit as he felt a swell of pride at such praise given to him in reference to his daughter.

"Oh… well… Thank you, Rey. I'll be off for now, but feel free to explore."

The red fox laughed a bit, saying, "As much fun as that sounds, I'll likely eat and crash, hopefully in that order. I hope you don't mind me being an early riser, however."

It was Stu's turn to chuckle, offering an admonishing head shake to the tod.

"I'm a farmer, buddy. I have no problems with that. You have a morning routine or something?"

"Just a couple things I want to do. Might explore this creek nearby Judy told me about often," Nick explained in short.

"Just stay clear of the western fields," the rabbit warned him, making the fox do a double take to the buck, who backtracked a bit to clarify his cryptic statement. "We are harvesting those fields tomorrow. Best not to be around when we run our equipment. The tall stalks are difficult to see through sometimes, even with fur as bright as yours."

"Oh… Noted, Stu. Goodnight, then."

"Night, Nick."

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Hours later and Judy was pretty happy with her recent findings, as well as some semblance of reconciliation with her mom. She may not have meant to in this fashion, but she provided an almost too good to be true lead into something rather uplifting about both her family's and Nick's past.

Taking the directions given by her dad, who seemed quite taken by the fox's polite nature, the doe found this was hopefully a peaceful resolution to a previously foreboding visit as she made her way to her boyfriend's guest room. She should wait until the next morning to spring this on him, but couldn't very well wait, hoping the tod was awake currently.

Reaching the doorway, Judy dared to knock lightly, hearing heavy breathing. She waited a few seconds before opening the door to see her fox curled up at the head of the bed, pillow somehow cast aside in his primal urge to sleep like foxes of old.

His tail was wrapped around his body, head resting on his arms. Nick's ears were flicking instinctively with each creaky step she made on the old flooring. In one paw, she had a notebook, to which she gently set down on the nearby nightstand. Choosing to pay him back for his previous trespass, Judy pulled his covers back and shimmied her way into the bed, curling around her red fox from the back and wrapping her paws over his form.
She would have tried to wiggle her way into his arms, but figured he might need the comfort this time. To illustrate her own point, the grey doe began petting her fox from the head down, making sure to scratch behind his ears and sides of his neck. It was endearing to an almost heart melting degree when Nick started making pleased whines in his sleep and kicking a leg sporadically in response to her ministrations.

Judy would most definitely need to tease him about this later. Making a mental note of it, she also decided it would be better to leave the news til the morning. If what she knew about him so far was any indication, the poor fox would likely be too excited to sleep and spend the whole night tossing and turning, crashing around noon the next day.

She made herself comfortable as well, knowing full well she was given a separate room, but feeling also that he and her deserved some sense of emotional comfort in each other.

Her thoughts then circled back to the earlier events in the day. The rabbit was given a nickname by the media.

Phantom.

She internally squealed a bit, loving the idea of officially being labeled as a superhero.

Then, the following bit on the news resurfaced in her mind. Being named as violators of some non-existent agreement and officially named criminals by the government. So now, she was Phantom, the vigilante rabbit that could now somehow inhabit armament systems.

Judy’s eyes studied the back of Nick’s head in thought, still quite conflicted on how that occurred and why it was possible. Leo appeared to take it in stride, even though he was unable to properly analyze it himself, barring vague descriptions of theories with little to no merit.

Shard powers or not, it was terribly confusing to think of how her 'spirit' form was able to simulate compatibility with an established system, using programming protocols and functions beyond her level of conscious understanding.

Her head hurt thinking about it, causing the doe to cast aside her thoughts on the subject and bury her nose in the fur on the back of Nick’s neck, taking in a deep breath. The rabbit's eyelids fluttered and nose took in the sweet smell of her boyfriend. To her recollection, she hadn't really done this yet. It was relaxing somehow, the scent permeating her mind and clouding her thoughts. It quickly pulled her into a trance like state, to which she felt far more at ease than before, sleep coming so much sooner now.

With one last nuzzle to her fox, Judy succumbed to the warmth, allowing herself to be lulled into the darkness that felt so comfortably encompassing to her.

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An echo on the wind, jaded sliver of light in the corner of his vision, acrid burn in the air. Something wasn't right.

He was surrounded, shapes and shadows with glowing eyes, bearing their judgement upon him. They coalesced into rabbits, eyes a threatening red, like the light from a digital clock. The shapes closed in on him, paws extending towards him with claws on them that had no earthly reason being there.

Nick pulled out a small metal tube, knobbly parts protruding from it with openings from both ends. He funneled his Shard energy into it, sparking a blade into existence, made purely of electricity and
looking as if it were a continuous stream of lightning, ending about eighteen inches from the emitter.

A paw grasped his free one, splayed out behind himself, as if protecting something. He looked back and saw Judy, eyes wide with worry and the world around her form becoming less hazy than he first observed.

He wasn't dreaming anymore and was wielding a defensive weapon he brought long, blade extended in a bluish purple hue.

"Nick… what is that?" Judy asked as calmly as she could, nose twitching from the recent shock.

"I… it's…" the tod began to mutter, still coming to grips with the sudden transition of dream to reality without realizing it. He switched the blade off, the sizzling lightning blade sputtering out of phase and receding into the projector. "It's a little prototype I was tweaking."

"Alright… but why bring it?" the doe followed up asking. "It seems like something dangerous to bring around my family."

"Sorry… it's also a flashlight," he explained, pressing a different switch, to which the bunny flinched a bit. A light beamed across the room in all the traditional function of a normal flashlight. "That's mainly why I brought it. This thing won't spark up that blade unless I funnel energy into it."

"Okay… next question then," Judy continued with a leveled tone, still properly waking her mind up. "What made you go all crazy and 'spark' that thing up?"

"Nightmares," Nick divulged rather bluntly, clamping up as soon as he mentioned it. His girlfriend squeezed his paw in concern, biting her lip as she wanted to pursue the issue and get him to open up. He cut her off with a sigh, saying, "I honestly don't know really. It was a scary but very vague nightmare. Before I knew it, I was awake and feeling your paw in mine."

"Then, I'll leave it be, for now."

"You want to know how this works?" the red fox asked, holding up the projector, almost feeling the gaze she had on it in the dark of the room in the approaching dawn. She nodded fervently, eyes locked onto the device. The tod chuckled lightheartedly. "It's basically a lightning projector, like a taser, it connects two points with an arching charge. The difference is that this thing creates a negative charge focal point at a predetermined spot away from the emitter. The emitter focuses a positive charge just inside the handle, funneling energy between the two to create a blade literally made of lightning."

"So, it works like a taser, too? Only… more reach?" the grey rabbit inquired curiously. The fox shook his head in the negative.

"Not unless you know any tasers that can cut through metal," Nick supplied evenly. "Lightning heats up to over fifty thousand degrees… Fahrenheit. This blade heats up to about half that when turned up high and is capable of cutting through metal and such quite easily." The bunny doe looked a little perturbed by the new information, ears falling behind her head in slight despondence.

"Did you really feel the need to bring such a thing here?" came her almost hurtful question. The red fox instantly became rigid with realization, knowing to a certain degree how this could look.

He turned to his bunny, paws up in defense as he frantically spoke, "No no no! That's not what… It's…" Nick sighed heavily, trying to gather his wits. "I'm not used to walking around without something to keep me… safe. I've always had those compact bracelet things or something else like that, but now that I don't really need them lately, I still felt like I had to bring something."
The small grey doe yawned, stretching before telling him, "Alright then. Just make sure to only use that as a flashlight while you're here. On another note, the sun is officially up." True to her remark, the fox tod looked out the window and could see the light bursting forth across the sky, the magnificent luminosity of the sun piercing through the morning fog.

"Hmm… breakfast then?" he asked somewhat excitedly. "I want to visit her grave as soon as possible, if that's ok." Judy nodded, rubbing the sleepiness from her eyes and yawning once more.

"Just let me go grab clothes from my bag…." she told him before groaning slightly, "...back in my room." The fox laughed softly.

Suddenly, the rabbit perked straight up, ears included, remembering she had news to tell her fox. Her tail shivered in excitement, wondering how she should tell him, as well as when. A few seconds of thought told her it would be most beneficial to leave that to when they actually found the grave. She remembered, for the most part, where she should be going to find it again. With the renewed sense of purpose, she dashed from the room and powered down the hall to go get ready, uncaring of who might see her leaving her boyfriend's temporary abode.

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A little over half an hour and a fulfilling breakfast later, and the two were walking the dirt path down towards the forest area. From the best that Nick could recollect, it looked as if the tree line was slightly diminished. He could only assume it was a result of the practice of expanding the fields. Luckily, no one decided to eradicate the area entirely for new fields.

Judy carried a small pack for their lunch, seeing as she wasn't sure how long they'd be out there. The fox surmised she had other plans as well, when his offer to carry the pack for her was met with near frantic refusal. Whatever his girlfriend was scheming, the tod was sure it would be pleasant.

The light of the sun has since officially grounded the morning fog, now gleaming off the dew of the grass and rocks of the path before them and fields surrounding them.

"Do you remember the way there?" the doe asked him.

"Well… it's been a couple centuries," he started, "so… I would imagine what I remember isn't as correct as what you know. Trees fall and water erodes the land. Knowing the headstone I placed is still there gives me hope that I will recognize a fair amount though."

"Good point, but you would be surprised with how little the Earth changes, even if we do," Judy pointed out to the tod.

Looking up to see the canopy of the trees overtake them, Nick was beginning to understand what the bunny was talking about. Despite the view being different, it was overwhelmingly familiar in a general sense. It may have been fall, but the leaves were still clinging stubbornly to the branches, only a few having fallen as of yet.

Though he had been putting this off for so long, Nick suddenly felt far less of the nervous rush he was sure he would be suffering from at this moment. He was content with allowing Judy to lead the way, looking rather unsure of herself as she tried to seem collected and in control.

The grey doe darted off in a seemingly random direction, stopping almost instantly as she turned to let her boyfriend stride in step next to her.

The earth beneath his paws felt like a far off memory closing in, the gap of hundreds of years feeling like only moments since he last set foot in the forest. The soft loam of the soil, knotted roots roping
through the dirt, smooth stones as cool as fresh spring water. It was all so fresh, both literally and mentally.

"You know… I didn't think about it till now, but what do your parents think of you not using your contacts?" the red fox inquired simply, watching as the rabbit perked up and turned to him.

"Huh? Oh!" she began in a stutter. "Yeah, that's not a big deal. I mainly used the colored contacts in public and at work or such. My family already knows of my… 'defect'. Both my parents have brown eyes, so that's what they call it."

"Gotta," he replied, unsure how to properly word a response that might not sound like he was giving unwanted pity.

"You don't have to step on eggshells around me after a statement like that," came her retort to an unspoken mood between them.

"Eggshells?" Nick questioned while grinning a bit. "I was pretty sure those things back there were pinecones, not eggs."

"Oh, you know what I mean, dumb fox," Judy jibed at him in return. Her head turned back to face forward, previously smug expression changing into something more befuddled. "Alright, it's official… we're lost."

The red fox tod barely slowed his stride as he took the lead and looked back with a smug grin to see the doe fall in behind him.

"Correction: You're lost. I'm actually remembering all of this pretty well now."

They passed through some brush, avoiding anything thorny or sappy looking, coming upon a crystal clear creek. It wasn't very substantial, but wide and deep enough to look like more than a dredging run-off.

The fox saw both flashing memories of that black shadow infusing itself with his body… and all the pleasant memories as a kit and adolescent fox playing around here. He was sent down here so often to bring back fresh water, with the natural flavor of the water being a highlight to accompany some of their meager meals.

Choosing to kneel at the water's edge, the tod cupped his paws together and scooped up the chilled fluid, filtered and cleared by the stones that littered the creek bed en masse. His cupped paws and head tilted back, the cool water slowly running down his throat and dribbling through his muzzle fur.

Letting out a pleased sigh, his ears perked and head swiveled to see Judy kneeling beside him, doing the same as he did. The fox smiled gently, looking down the stream to see a familiar tree, large and imposing. It was also surrounded by a plethora of small bushes, brimming with small green leaves.

"Is that it?" Nick asked cautiously, pointing a wet paw towards the elderly looking tree.

"Hmm?" Judy mumbled, still swallowing some water. She gulped and nodded. "I thought you would know."

"Still a bit… unreal to me, honestly," he revealed, the two making their way over to the tree. "And the tree seems to have aged quite a lot in my absence." The small bunny giggled with a paw over her muzzle.

"Well, you've been gone a while."
"Too long…" the tod breathed somberly, parting the bushes and kneeling at the base of the tree, looking for something.

It didn't take long to find it.

It was an ancient stone, with a chiseled name 'Robin' awkward inscribed in it, the name having been worn and weather by the many years since its setting. Tears pricked at the corner of his eyes, a wet laugh leaving his maw.

"It's still here," he vented out, pulling out a small chisel and hammer.

"Uh… what are you doing?" Judy questioned in slight worry.

"A lot of it is faded from when I originally put this here," the red tod explained. "And my paws were… a bit unstable at the time. But now…" He began the slow and laborious task of carefully chiseling the letters to renew them, adding in 'Wilde'.

Reaching in her pack, Judy pulled out a small notebook, figuring this would be as good a time as any to give him this beautifully good news on top the already pleasant moment she surmised he was having. She deigned to look over his shoulder, brow arching as she saw the name once more, freshly engraved once more.

"Robyn?" came her inquiry. Nick smirked softly and nodded.

"The 'Y' became faded over time I suppose, but yes, her name was Robyn… and she would have liked…" the fox paused, having turned to look at his bunny, spying the notebook she held out in her paw. "What is this?"

"Well," Judy started softly, "I talked things over with my mom, as tough as that was at furst, and was able to get her help in figuring out something I really wanted to know. That revelation that my family works the land you once owned left me with this fear that my ancestors were some sort of pillaging vagrants that moved in on the land and took it over. With her help, and this transcribed journal by my Grand Pappy, which was rewritten from a much older journal I would be extremely afraid to deal with because of how old it is, I was able to get some rather informative answers for myself… and hopefully for you too." She pushed the notebook into her boyfriend's paws, opening it to a bookmarked page.

I don't write in this infernal thing as often as I would like, but recent events have given me little chance to properly record as I wish.

A most disturbing event happened months ago that has shaken the core of the village. My family talks of it often, denoting of the fox vixen and her demonic son, raised from the grave some years ago as a wandering spirit. It is a shame that I must admit some of my more rambunctious and misled siblings bragged about taking part in burning their home and fields to the ground, believing they were cleansing the land.

Now there are families arguing over this vacant land, with many believing that it is still haunted and others wanting to use the land to their own benefit.

Not choosing to believe all the whispers and gossip myself, I ventured out to this land. I was horrified by the nature of those of my own kind inflicting such measures against those we called 'savage'.
In my venture of this travesty, with months having passed, I saw a small ray of hope in the charred remains of this home. A blueberry bush was growing in the fertile soil, created through fire.

I followed up with many such return visits, watering and caring for this bush, hoping to atone for my family's sinful trespasses against this family in some small way. After many such things I have heard, one detail came to light by strangest coincidence. It was revealed to me that the only reason they saw fit to burn the land was because the younger fox was carrying his mother's possibly lifeless body into the forest.

A new determination arose and I spent many weeks searching the forest, wanting to know the answer to a question burning inside me. "Did my family disturb their rest?"

I finally found a headstone with a grave that looked aged enough to have been dug within the time that would have coincided with the burning of the farmland. With talks growing rather violent concerning the land and wealthier families throwing their gold around to sway opinion in their favor, I knew the blueberry bush i kept alive would not last forever.

I moved it. Planted it upon the grave of the deceased and prayed for her continued rest.

It must have been by some fate or design that it was blueberry. My family described them as symbols of spiritual protection and a means to replenish an optimistic spirit. It might be years before I could return, given the surveys of the region, but by the grace of nature, I will do all I can to atone for the sins of my family and those others.

Gabriella Ward

Nick looked up to his girlfriend, tears freely streaming now. Judy only smiled sadly, turning the pages to another marked entry, tapping the page.

"Just a little further, Nick."

He wiped his face and gave her a tepid nod, resuming where she entreated him.

It's taken years, but I have finally been able to acquire the land burned and forsaken by a congregation of families from those who would use it to their own benefit. As a female, it was no easy feat, but my husband of much of that time has helped me greatly and though we are too well aged to properly care for such a gracious amount of land ourselves, our many sons and daughters have so generously offered to act in our stead.

They are such wonderful kits. I hope they and their young will continue to keep the land, giving it the same level of care I have often heard as a kit about the foxes who lived here before. The tales of their demonic nature have long since died out and now the truth will out.

Now that I own this land, I regularly visit the grave, keeping it well and planting more blueberry bushes. I can only hope that, when I pass, no one will disturb their rest.

Gabriella Hopps

Pawing back the notebook, the red fox tod looked around at all the blueberry bushes, with none being in bloom, as they were out of season, but vibrantly colored.
"A plant with meaning in spiritual protection, huh?" he voiced in a whisper. Judy's paw rested upon his shoulder as he clasped his own over hers, looking back down at the stone. "Hey mom… it's been a long time and… I have someone I want you to meet…"

The walk back, after letting her fox spill his tears and words upon a long rested grave, was rather quiet, though not uncomfortably so. Nick held his bunny's paw tightly, staring at the ground before him with a gentle smile and a soulful glow to his eyes that she had never seen before.

She wanted desperately to say something, anything, to diffuse the silence, but decided against it when she figured it might ruin the moment. It wasn't her moment, but his to revel in.

Suddenly, he stopped, smile widening as Judy jarred to a stop, getting pulled around to face him. The tod took her chin in his free paw and tilted it up to kiss her ever so softly on the mouth. It was pure and void of any furious passion. It was a sweet and simple kiss, long but only filled with the best of his emotions.

Enjoying the press of their lips together, the grey doe let her free paw rest upon his chest, feeling the thump of his beating heart beneath his clothing and fur. It was quite possibly a full minute of kissing before they separated slowly, eyes locked onto each other.

"I love you, Judy," the fox released in a breathless whisper, making the bunny gasp and begin to tear up herself. Her gaze tried to make an embarrassing retreat to her own feet, unequivocally pulled back upwards to face her fox in full view. Her cheeks flushed red beneath her own fur, ears doing the same.

She barely had to voice to tell him in kind, "I love you, too… Nick."

While she could feel his heartbeat calm underneath the paw resting on his chest, her's skyrocketed and left her feeling short of breath. The moment continued for so many restless seconds, neither wanting to follow up on such simple but powerful words to be spoken, either one knowing it wasn't easy for the other to say as such.

They resumed walking, leaving the cover of the canopy and reaching the edge of the forest, sunbeams more liberally littering the air before them as they peaked through the leaves.

A ringing shocked them both, with the two frantically searching for the source.

Nick grumbled as he realized it was his phone, looking at the caller ID and answering, putting the phone on speaker.

"Pardon my intrusion to your relaxing excursion to the country," Leo's voice cut through evenly, "but I had a troublesome query to present dear Judy with."

The fox looked over his bunny with a slightly worried expression, interjecting on her behalf, "Is everything alright?"

"No," came the android's reply. Judy could feel her blood slowing in dread of what it could be, holding her breath….

"I went to her room and was determined to sort through her clean and dirty clothing, but have become rather confused as to the state of her room."

"What?" the tod asked, expression falling and eyes narrowing.
The mechanical being continued, "She appears to have thrown her clothing about in what appears to be some cliched frantic example, if pop culture references are any indication, of searching for the right clothing to pack. My main concern is knowing which is dirty and which is clean because most of the aforementioned mess is made from her various undergarments. I surmise she was making some choices so as to impress you or some such similar reason, but I have yet to…"

As Leo prattled on, Nick watched Judy, seeing her mortified blush turned into furious anger, with him mentally counting down until…

"LEO!" she nearly screeched into the phone, her voice echoing into the forest and scaring many birds into taking flight beyond view of the forest canopy. The fox tod could only roll his eyes in response.
Divided but not Conquered

"So… Squirt."

"Kale."

"Same thing."

"No it's not."

"Can we agree to disagree?" the older voice asked.

"Why would anyone do that?" The younger voice squeaked.

Putting a paw on his chin and huffing slightly, the red fox smiled, saying through a light chuckle, "No idea. Always wondered that myself."

Having come back from their outing to the woods and Nick's mother's grave, the two arrived in time to see the aftermath of a messy warren when most of the family had just left to work the fields.

With the number of Judy's siblings that likely were capable of helping with the farms large fields, an equal amount of preparations were needed for the lot before they would set out. Those that stayed behind, whether too young or just not of the type to work well with heavy labor, were cleaning up leftover leavings of their morning preparations.

Nick had asked his bunny what it was all about, with all due confusion.

Apparently, totes and containers were put out in the morning with various things needed for working the fields. Work gloves, clean overalls of varying sizes, and sometimes foot wraps for those having to walk more punishing routes through the land. Paw friendly food was left out on a multitude of tables as well… for those that didn't wake as early as the rest to grab a hot meal before the day started.

The tod was under the impression that the whole lot would have been early risers, much like he had to be or how Judy was often, but it wasn't too unexpected to see that a family of this size had ones that rushed at the last minute to hop to their duties.

With that in mind, the two decided to take a short walk around, as understated as that might have seemed considering the enormous size of the warren.

Suffice it to say, the walk lasted mere seconds before the mostly unsupervised young were swarming to get a fresh look at the fox. Getting a 'look' was an understatement though. They crawled all over him and did as much as they had the time before.

Judy was able to chase off the lot, following to make sure they made it back to wherever they were supposed to be. That left Nick alone…

Or so he thought.

The one rabbit who didn't get chased off and stayed behind was the young one from before.

Kale.

Nice name… if it weren't for the fact it was because of a bland vegetable, the tod thought with a slow smirk.
"...do you have a question?" the larger mammal asked with a shrug. When the little one was quiet for several seconds, the fox reached out, eliciting a small flinch from the young buck. The Nick only paused for the briefest of moments, before giving him a kind smile and resting his paw pads on Kale's head, giving his fur a slow tussle. "How about you tell me what you do for fun around here?"

He was patient as the small bunny seemed to think over something in his head, to which the fox assumed was figuring out what to tell him that adults wouldn't call stupid.

His light blue eyes lit up, apparently coming up with an answer as he said, "I like to build stuff."

"Oh? Me too," voiced the red fox. "What do you like making?"

"Spaceships and stuff," came his reply. "I use those toy building blocks. What about you?"

"I like to tinker with gadgets and make odd inventions when I have the time."

"Like the stuff from spy movies!" Kale squeaked excitedly. The tod gave him an ambiguous nod.

"You could say that. Most of them aren't that… interesting… but they have their uses."

A breath of silence.

"How about you show me what you make?" Nick resumed, attempting to not let an uncomfortable silence ensue.

The little buck fiddled his paws and looked at the floor, muttering, "Okay."

The red fox lifted the small brown bunny, making him yelp slightly at the surprising action, letting him rest on a shoulder. Kale frightfully grasped at his head, gripping an ear with a free paw. Nick withheld a hiss of pain and put on a smile, asking for Kale to point the way.

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Judy laughed as she scooted the last of the crowd of young siblings down the hall and away from her fox. It shouldn't have mattered, but she wanted a little more alone time with him.

Great… I'm wishing for alone time with my boyfriend, she started in her head, while at my family's home with hundreds of siblings who don't exactly get personal space. That logic fits perfectly. The doe let out a languished sigh at her own mild delusion.

Turning on heel to double back towards where she last left her fox, the grey rabbit was stopped by two of her brothers. They appeared to be blocking her path intentionally and she knew only one or two reasons why they would, rolling her eyes in annoyed realization. A few others seemed to be nearby, but waiting for something.

Before they could even open their mouths, Judy interrupted and spoke, "If this is about my boyfriend being a fox and gonna go on about things that you disagree with… then save it. I've heard it, ignored it and will continue to do so."

"We're just looking out for you, Sis," the darker one mumbled. "You can't expect us to just back down when we think we can help you."

The doe wanted to lash out in righteous anger at her siblings, insinuating she needed some form of help for her choices. The flare of emotional turmoil settled as quickly as it rose. Pinching the bridge of her nose, Judy let out a slow breath and attempted to think clearly through the fog in her mind.
"While I love you guys for your intentions to hopefully protect me," she started, seeing another couple siblings close in to listen to the conversation, as well as likely donate to it, "I don't like being told I need help like this. It's not like I'm doing drugs or succumbing to alcoholism."

The other sibling, a lighter brown, twisted his hat in his paws, working up the courage to speak.

He finally sputtered, leveling out his speech and forming a cohesive sentence to say, "A-are you sure you're not being used?" She expected that and was about to respond, before he continued, "Are you sure you're not… using him?"

The grey rabbit let her jaw hang slightly, caught completely off guard by the question. Appalled was the closest thing to what she thought she was feeling, but there was a touch of anxiety in there too.

"How… dare… you…" Judy seethed in a hiss with a breath in between each word. "I…"

"Before you react, just think about it," the light brown sibling resumed hurriedly. "You have this fan obsession with that Flux character. Most of us here know about it and while that's all well and good, we wonder if you are dating a fox… because of that."

"Harold is right," another sibling, Judy's sister Louise, mentioned as she closed in. "Regardless of your fox boyfriend's intentions with you… it's not fair to either of you if you're only using him."

"I'm not using him!" the doe exclaimed, becoming more defensive than she probably felt she should have been. "I have a real connection with him. And he cares about me…"

"I'm not gonna argue that point one way or another," Louise said, sighing slightly, "but we don't want either of you getting hurt because you wanted to chase some fox from a misplaced hero worship."

"Besides," the darker furred buck piped up, "your so-called 'hero' isn't so great anyways. Now he's some sort of criminal 'cause he ripped off the government."

The grey bunny was still a bit flabbergasted by the accusation that she was using Nick for some 'misplaced' interest in foxes like Flux. It was becoming difficult to collect her thoughts well enough to make any logical replies. Tears threatened to prick at the corners of her eyes, stinging them as she willed them away with everything she had.

It wouldn't hurt so much if her mind weren't warring over the prospect of it now.

Was she dating Nick because she was enraptured by him as a hero? Was it because he saved her life? Would she inevitably hurt him?

All these questions now fogged her mind and, while she logically knew that these questions were fairly preposterous, this aching pit of doubt sprouted within her heart, causing her a growing pain that made her feel that the foundation of all they had thus far… was only based upon delusional thinking and reasoning. The doe couldn't disperse the feeling, clutching at her chest in an attempt to stem the sharp pain that now tore through her chest.

"Leave that alone, Gerry," Harold demanded. "We're not here to discuss that."

"Just… stop," Judy barely whispered, drawing the attention of all listening. "I'm done entertaining this absurdity." Turning abruptly, she walked at a brisk pace down the hall and as far away from her siblings as she could get before their stunned sputters could coalesce into actual phrases.

A tear had formed in her psyche, the accusations and insinuations bleeding in and poisoning her
thoughts. It was one thing for her parents to be nervous about her dating Nick and still terrible but somewhat expected for her siblings to emulate the same worry, but it felt like another thing for them to call her feelings for Nick a mistake or a delusion because of his alter persona as Flux.

She knew the rhetoric was wrong but she couldn't pry the vice grip it had on her heart.

"I've had enough," she whispered to herself, powering off to find her fox.

With practiced paws from years of making his own machinations, Nick happily and patiently pieced together the toy building blocks, his eyes flicking over occasionally towards Kale. He was in his own little world, creating a strangely shaped spaceship that looked more like a submarine than something capable of interstellar travel.

A smile curled the edges of his muzzle gently.

"Unconventional design you got there, Squirt," the tod voiced.

"Kale," the buck corrected him without much pause. His ears then perked as he turned to face the red tod. "What does… unconventional mean?"

"Means something that's not normal…" he stopped short in his explanation, worried the little one might be insulted, then continued with an adjusted wording, "but still works like it's supposed to."

"Oh…" Kale breathed. "Well normal is boring."

"Ain't that the truth. By the way, how old are you?"

"Nine and a half," the small buck answered bluntly. There was a brief silence before Kale looked up at Nick with curious blue eyes, asking him out of nowhere, "Do you love my sister?"

If the fox had been drinking anything, he might have done a spit take. Despite knowing his answer quite truly from recent events, it was still fairly unexpected for a kit of his age to bring that up so easily. Then again, most young mammals lack a sense of filter and usually get right to the point when they want to know something.

"I most certainly do," Nick replied with a toothy grin, dialing it back when he realized his fangs were bared. He didn't want to scare the bunny just when he seemed to be connecting with him.

"Why?" Came the follow up reply, to which the red mammal somewhat expected this time, but felt woefully unprepared to answer.

"That's… hard to answer, bud," Nick started, rolling his tongue as he tried to come up with a respectful and thoughtful reply. "I could list all the cliche reasons… but… ever have that feeling you can't explain properly but you act on it anyways?"

He did a double take mentally, berating himself internally for assuming Kale might be old enough to even understand that.

Regardless of his fears, the buck nodded rapidly, smiling carelessly.

"I feel like that when I build stuff with these blocks. I know I love it because I enjoy it… but I don't know how to explain it when others ask."

The fox smiled again and reached up to give the little rabbit's head fur a tussle. He giggled and tried
to swat his much larger paws away.

It was almost tearfully refreshing, being accepted and talked to by a bunny as if neither of their species mattered. The fact he was a kit made it even more affable. Most younglings were kept away from him by fearful parents, not that he cared much to get close before, but the gesture itself was still somewhat insulting.

"I like you," Kale said. "You don't treat me like a stupid kit."

"You aren't?" The red fox retorted, arching a brow, a small degree of sass peeking out from its repressed state. He then felt a small fist strike his arm, with Kale letting out a cacophony of giggles as he did so. The fox was relieved the kit could take a joke.

"I can't be if I wanna be an engineer!" the buck exclaimed proudly.

Nick paused, considering the serious nature of the little rabbit.

"What do you want to build, Squirt?"

"Kale."

"That's what I said."

"...I want to build these," Kale told him, holding up the spaceship he made, apparently pretending the fox wasn't trying to be annoying. His eyes became downcast, however, upon thinking it over. "Well, I'd like to... but I'm probably gonna make boats. I want to make things that help people explore."

"Oh? That's quite the path you have in mind," the tod began. "Why not try to make spaceships then?"

"No one really wants to explore space right now... with all those drones and threat of aliens or whatever..."

The smile on Nick's muzzle dropped a bit, turning in a slight grimace. He felt a bit responsible for that, somehow.

"You shouldn't give up on that possibility," the fox mentioned in an attempt to revitalize the young buck. His long ears did perk up a bit.

"Why not?" Kale asked with hopeful eyes. "You think Flux will beat the Drones and aliens?"

"Flux? Isn't he branded a wanted criminal now?" Nick asked by obligation, knowing the answer, but wondering why Kale would inquire to that.

"He's the only one who fought well against them, isn't he?" was his innocent reply. "Criminal or not, he's been fighting for us."

_Fighting for us_, the red fox repeated inside his head. He hadn't stopped to think often enough about why he fought. He had few, but they were more than enough to keep him going. If he could remove the threat of the Drones and other Shards, maybe Kale could eventually pursue his dream.

_I suppose that gives me another reason to reaffirm my resolve in this..._ Nick thought with a sigh. _Hopefully, I can give this one rabbit a chance to follow his dream._

Interrupting his thoughts, a sharp pain pierced his heart, making him double over to clutch at his chest.
"Did I say something wrong?" the small rabbit voiced in concern.

Gathering himself, the red tod stood unsteadily, moving his paw lower to his abdomen as he replied, "Y-yeah... just some stomach trouble, kit. I'll be back." At that, he turned to leave the room, knowing this pain was not his own.

For a brief moment, he stopped, giving the worried buck a last look.

"I can't promise much on another's behalf... but I'm sure Flux will fight for everyone. I don't think those like him would give up just because others turn on him."

He didn't wait for Kale's reply, choosing to round the exit of the room and break into a sprint.

He needed to find his Limiter.

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Running aimlessly, the grey doe followed no real path except to avoid colliding with anything. She could barely do that much, however. Her vision fogged with tears making their marks on her fur.

At first, she planned on finding Nick, but found herself giving no care to the direction she ran once the tears started falling. She didn't want him to see her like this. The doe knew he wouldn't care in the slightest, though she didn't like worrying him over her personal issues, especially since he wouldn't likely be able to do much for her except comfort. She felt like that would just burden him further, along with all the issues as Flux he has to deal with already.

Wiping her eyes and blinking a bit to clear her sight, Judy noticed she had left the warren and made her way into the open fields outside.

Looking back, she noticed Nick passing by a window, nose upturned and trying to catch her scent. Her paws gripped her lazily hanging ears, giving them a nervous squeeze.

*I don't want him to see me like this,* she frantically thought. *My eyes are probably all red and there's no way I can hide...*

"Judy!" came the voice she both dreaded and longed to hear. A chilling jolt made its way through her body. With it came a momentary lapse in all thought.

In that moment, she ran, giving in to her need to not let her fox see her like this. The tall stalks of the grain fields closest to her gave her ample cover as she weaved through them, riding on an adrenaline rush.

The red tod scowled a bit and dug his claws in the earth beneath his paws, breaking into a full sprint.

The pain in his chest seemed to heighten when the doe caught sight of him, giving him all too many ideas on what was going on in her head. From the murmurs in the halls and such on his way to find her, he could only surmise some of her siblings made for a rather dramatic confrontation.

Before he could make any more summations, he noticed a static arc of a purple hue flaring out from Judy's shoulder. It connected with a nearby cluster of wheat stalks and dispersed without any real effect.

Eyes now wide with fear, the surge of adrenaline that now fueled him gave him a burst of speed that allowed him to close the distance somewhat. Another arc sparked from the rabbit, grounding itself before any harm to the surroundings might be brought about.
"Judy!" he called desperately. "Please stop!"

"No!" she exclaimed in response, her voice slightly broken.

There was another pang of dull pain that resonated within him, telling him she was scared. Whether it was of him or for him, he couldn't clearly determine. The energy coming from her might be dangerous though, making it where he couldn't afford to give her any space if what he thought could happen… would.

For a brief second, there was a coursing electric charge that seemed to cover her form, dispersing in a flash but not giving the fox any comfort that it would pass.

Gathering his own energy, he did something similar to what he did to save Judy that day, energizing his body for a short burst of speed. It was far more limited this time, allowing him to overtake the grey doe within a few seconds, but still leave him unharmed as opposed to before.

The two tumbled together, rolling downhill into a clearing.

She fought and flailed, trying to push him off. Nick instead tried to keep her gripped close to him, hoping to get through to her before it was too late.

"Fluff… stop," he pleaded. "I'm trying to help. You're in trouble."

The bunny stopped fighting, breathing hard and nearly hyperventilating, but not giving up on pushing slightly at him to keep her distance as much as she could.

"What do you mean?" came her ragged reply.

"I… it's… I think you're having an 'episode' of sorts," Nick tried to explain. "Like my reversions I told you about when I healed before you."

"What?" Judy squeaked, her anxiety rising once more, causing an arc of purple energy to spring forth and strike her fox in the abdomen. She saw it and nearly screamed, clapping her own paw over her mouth as she realized it might draw the wrong kind of attention from her family, if they heard.

The tod doubled over, but kept his firm hold on his bunny, pulling her head to his chest.

"Leo kinda warned me of this possibility… but I never thought it would happen," he spoke to no one in particular. "I think your emotional state is triggering this. Try to calm down."

"I can't…" the grey rabbit whimpered into his chest, paws grabbing at the fabric of his shirt and gripping it tight.

"What has you upset then?" he asked, a grunt of pain following the question as another burst of energy left her, making her feel worse.

"I…"

"Please tell me," the red fox cooed in her ear, soothing her slightly. "Don't hide from me. I can feel your pain. That's why I looked for you."

Oh yeah… Judy sighed internally. That link or whatever. He saw my nightmares. It would make some sense if he felt when I was extreme distress.

"My siblings… said some things," she breathed. "I didn't listen at first, but something in my mind spread doubt. I was worried they were right…"
"About what?"

"They said I was dating you because of my admiration for Flux."

That should've felt like a metaphorical gut punch…

Should have…

But Nick somehow felt pretty calm about it. He awaited her to finish the thought, trying to keep her covered beneath him.

"I was worried I would hurt you if they were right… fearful that my feelings were delusion. I don't… I don't want to do that to you."

He couldn't see them, but he knew from the stuttered syllables and small hiccups that Judy was in tears.

"Focus on me," the tod gently demanded. "Breathe. Listen to my heartbeat. Alright?"

She nodded slightly and attempted to suck in a slow breath, with it becoming a bit broken. The exhale was smoother, with the fox's large paw softly petting the doe's head. She could hear his heartbeat, somewhat rapid and nervous, but slowing as he too calmed down.

Taking in a breath through her nose this time, to keep it slow and steady, she was taken off guard by the musk of his scent from being so close. Both thankfully and unfortunately, her muzzle was buried in his chest, furthering her embarrassment, though it was good she couldn't be seen with her cheeks burning from a blush she knew was there.

"Since you are so worried over hurting me to throw yourself into this emotionally desorable pit," Nick began in a kind tone, "I know, even if you doubt it, that you care deeply about me. I don't think you are one to lie when you say you love someone, so I trust you meant it."

Not knowing how to respond, Judy simply nodded again, hearing the slower, steady beat of his heart, giving way to calm her own.

Now that she could think clearly, her body felt heavy, and not because she had a mammal about three times her size on top of her.

"I'm sorry," she finally said. "And you're right. I knew… but I couldn't keep that fear I might hurt you away. I still technically hurt you though."

"Oh, stop you're whining, Fluff. I'll be fine. I've taken worse hits in fights with Drones."

There was a few seconds of silence before the red tod sighed.

"Are you alright now?"

"Yeah, I think so."

"Should I get off you, then?" Nick asked in a whisper, making a move to pull himself off of her. Judy gripped his shirt tighter and kept him in place.

"On second thought, I'm not really sure I feel better. Best to stay like this for a little bit longer… Just in case."

The fox let out a chuckle, pulling her close and petting her head once more as he told her, "Sly
After their tumble in the field, the two were able to clean themselves off and make their way back to the house, paw in paw. Aside from the questions of why they were out there, leading to embarrassing misinterpretations, the majority of Judy's family stayed civil around the two of them.

Over the next couple of days, the siblings who collaborated to confront her about her boyfriend came one by one to make some semblance of amends. Not all of them apologized, but they did say they could have handled their end of the conversation better, being that all of them basically swarmed her with accusations.

Judy thought she might have felt it was unresolved, but she found she actually cared less than she assumed she would, making it easier to move on. Trying to garner approval from each individual sibling or family member would only prove a long and arduous process mentally. As long as her parents were on board, the rest would hopefully fall in line or keep their opinions to themselves from then on.

The grey doe was pretty happy that Kale and Nick had formed a rather endearing connection, the little buck trailing her fox around by the tail, literally, at any chance he could. Such displays, as well as Nick's caring and earnest interactions with the young rabbit, began to sway those in the warren with reservations towards giving the tod a chance.

Much too soon, the two had to leave. Leo was calling them back, saying he was getting strange energy readings from the city, but unable to properly locate the source. He used a fueled power cell to send Nick's old suit, refurbished from the previous damage it sustained back when the two met. For now, the two had found a far field at the fringe edges of the Hopps property, with a treeline to hide them while they were extracted.

"Why that suit?" the red fox asked with a tinge of annoyance over the phone.

"This was the only suit with radar masking modifications that have been proven to work, so it won't show up on any scopes," explained the voice of the android. "I didn't want to fly an untested suit out to you and chance the government could follow the trail."

"And you're saying no one would notice a flying mechanical suit over the countryside?" Nick remarked sarcastically.

"How many mammals would be expecting to look up and see a flying mechanical suit roughly 200 miles from it's most frequented location?" was Leo's answer.

"I guess that makes... some sense, but couldn't we just take the train?"

"No time. I need you two take the suit and hurry back. I'll need your help to pinpoint the disturbance, as well as respond to any threats."

"I thought the Gate couldn't open up for a month," Judy chimed in.

Leo took a few seconds to consider her comment and come up with a proper reply before the phone spoke again, "It can't. That's a fact my equipment has confirmed. I believe we might be dealing with
some Drones that have escaped our reach and might be functioning in a low power status. It should be easy to deal with, but I do not want to wait until the populace is exposed to any threats."

"Understood," the fox and rabbit chirped together, looking up just in time to see the Flux armament dropping and slowing its descent from straight above. The mechanical being had already hung up, knowing the two would be in the suit soon enough so they could converse through internal comms.

"Ready?" he asked his rabbit, reaching out to grasp paw in his own. She took it and nodded, allowing her form to flow into his as the bonded together in a Shift.

It was barely seconds before it was done and Nick stepped into the armor, it's plating and form fitting structure wrapping around him and locking in place. He looked behind him, seeing a new addition to the back of the unit.

"What's this?" the tod asked Leo.

"I took it upon myself to adjust and attach dear Judy's suit, in case the circumstances call for it," the android divulged evenly.

"With luck, we hopefully won't need it," the red fox stated.

"While I don't believe in it as a construct," the being started, "it is my understanding that 'luck' favors the prepared."

"True enough," the grey doe voiced inside Nick’s head. He nodded in turn and grunted his approval.

Using the thrusters on low power, to avoid a noisy launch, Flux took to the sky, planning on using the moderate amount of clouds to mask their approach vector and keep sky watching civilians from noticing too much. It could hide from radar, but it didn't hide the suit from plain eyesight.

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As opposed to the train, it only took Nick and Judy in the Flux armament about twenty minutes to return to the city and start making sweeps of the area. They couldn't see anything obvious and Leo was still having issues with pinpointing the disturbances.

"Any info at all might be useful," the android commented for the fifth time since they came within sight of Zootopia. The fox groaned at his repetitive mentions and the ethereal bunny giggled slightly at his irritation.

"I understand that, but this suit doesn't exactly have good sensors compared to other suits," Nick fired back. "How about I land and switch suits at the house? Staccato would be much more suited to this… no pun intended."

"Alright, I'll prep…"

The mechanical voice stopped short.

"Nevermind that," it resumed. "Picking up an energy spike. It's not a Drone core… or a Shard signature."

"What is it?" both fox and bunny inquired.

"Nuclear."

"That doesn't sound like…" the tod started before a spark of light shone in the distance.
"NICK! Look out!" Judy called out, her form coalescing to his right side and extending a barrier as quickly as she could in the blink of an eye.

It wasn't enough and the shield gave from a piercing shot that blasted through the barrier...

...as well as Flux's armor.

Nick felt his shoulder and left arm being ripped apart, a howl of pain escaping him. He could hear the doe's concerned voice calling out to him as his body repaired itself with a purple glow.

It wouldn't stop the descent the two were already in now. The suit was damaged too much for a continued flight and the two began falling from their path high above the city.

Still groggy and mentally recovering, Nick noticed that, as soon as his body appeared fully healed, Judy's presence was fading. A frantic look around him that her body was reconstructing nearby, falling alongside him and out cold. He had no time to wonder why and assumed she was knocked out by the shock of her barrier being broken and healing him so rapidly.

His comms were down, meaning Leo wouldn't be able to hear him make any emergency protocol activations.

The first and foremost thing he had to do was save Judy from hitting the ground at terminal velocity. He and the android were sure she was capable of healing to a certain extent, but Nick preferred not to test it in these circumstances.

Desperately searching, he noticed the compact mechanical morphsuit still attached to the back of his armor, seemingly undamaged.

Grasping at it and disengaging it from its locked position, the red fox tod hurled it the falling rabbit, seeing it quickly scan and expand to wrap around her.

As soon as it completed its task, emergency thrusters fired and slowed her descent, angling her fall to the roof of a fast approaching skyscraper.

As Nick fell past the roof, clearing Judy from his sight, he had to believe she would be alright. Once he activated the suit, Leo should have taken over functions to land her safely and he would make sure she gets back to the house unharmed.

His predicament was a bit more precarious. He was falling alongside another tall building, without the means to activated his thrusters to slow his fall. Growling at himself, he hoped there was still some residual healing effects and used the one good armament arm to drag along the side of the building, attempting to grasp anything to slow his descent.

The ground looked to be fast approaching, though the fox knew he slowed somewhat, he just had to try a little harder. The suit arm dug into the wall as he slid down, the vibrations and jarring shock feeling like that alone would tear his arm apart.

At the last few stories, he pumped his legs into the structure and kicked away with all his might; Nick hoped to turn his vertical movement into a more horizontal one.

It worked to a certain degree, but the resulting roll as he hit the pavement of the road was still quite painful. The suit began to shut down entirely, with the mass of metal becoming a heavy burden on his body.

Seeing a slew of large vehicles approaching that appeared to be government affiliated, what with all
the black and unmarked siding, as well as the heavily tinted windows, the fox summoned up one last
ditch effort to make things more difficult for them. Using the energy within him, he fried the suits
circuitry and such from within, turning it into a scrap heap of metal alloys.

A shot rang out and the tod looked down to see a tranquilizer dart embedded in his exposed
shoulder.

Looking up as the world faded away, he noticed a large, well dressed wildebeest calmly walking up
to him, entourage in tow to apprehend him.

All he could wonder in that moment is whether Judy was safe or not.
The room felt like it was spinning out of control, a bright light cascading across the expanse and disorienting the mammal more.

Attempting to get up, they found they were strapped down, unable to move beyond shifting or shuffling their form to adjust for comfort.

A tall and dark form, blocked out by the light, rushed in and attended to them, asking questions in a rather monotonous tone.

It took the mammal a few seconds to adjust their ears, trying to force themselves awake enough to process what was said.

"Are you alright?" The even tone asked.

"Why am I tied down?"

"You were thrashing in your sleep. I needed to keep you from hurting yourself."

A series of clicks could be heard as the mammal felt their restraints slacking.

The full force of their muddled memories hit the mammal like a gut punch, making her gasp.

"Nick!" Judy squeaked, looking around frantically, her nose uncontrollably twitching. "What happened to Nick?!"

"Calm down, Judy," Leo spoke calmly. "He was taken by the government, but we'll get him back."

"Taken!" Her heart felt like it would tear itself apart with all its rapid beats; breath fast and shallow. She knew if she didn't get a grip, she might suffer another "energetic" episode.

The doe felt a warmth permeate her body, not exactly soothing her, but at least making her frantic mind and body calm.

"What's going on…?" the rabbit murmured, slightly confused.

"I placed an inhibitor device on your head," the android explained. "It works somewhat like the simulation gear, but this only inhibits brain functions that incite a panicked state. Think of it like the Neuromedical equivalent of a paper bag for a hyperventilating mammal."

"Oh…" was all she could say. Judy felt quite lethargic now. She couldn't be that mad that Leo did this, considering the alternative.

Now that she could think more clearly, even with the fears and worries still battering at her psyche like angry neighbors, her mind tried to figure out what should be asked.

"Who took Nick and where is he?"

The mechanical being stood tall and faced her, saying, "It was a military detachment, under orders from an unknown source in the government. It doesn't really matter who ordered it though. As for where, I was able to monitor their vehicles' movement from security and traffic cameras throughout the city. My ability to track them ended as they headed up into the mountain area. The only thing out there is an abandoned mental institution."
"Then, let's go and investigate," voiced the grey doe. "We can't sit around here while he is being held against his will." Her voice was trying to sound angry, but the inhibitor was still active, keeping her mind restricted from freaking out too much. If she took off the headgear to allow herself that freedom though, she might have another episode… and Nick wasn't there to calm her down.

"I'm taking all measures to investigate, but we can't go in without knowing what we are up against. They took you two down with a weapon powered by nuclear energy. It seemed to be a hybrid of Drone tech combined with something akin to a rail gun. I have limited data from the scans before you two were shot out of the sky. After that, I had to make sure I devoted all resources to get you back here and keep track of Nick's whereabouts."

"That's right… how did I get here?" Judy inquired, looking around and remembering her last conscious thoughts were of trying to shield her fox from the oncoming attack.

"I took control of the morphsuit," Leo divulged, "and used the autonomic functions to get you back here as quickly and quietly as I could. You've been unconscious for only a couple of hours."

The rabbit was finally calming down internally enough to think with lucidity. The government wants access to Flux's technology. Hurting him would do them no good, unless he refused to cooperate. With it only being a couple hours since his capture, she couldn't accept they would be that impatient for results as of yet. Besides, he has the ability to heal any wounds and has Leo looking out for him. Surely, in the couple hundred years that they have known each other, they would have come up with contingencies to respond to these sort of threats.

A rising anger that felt belated came to the surface of her thoughts, making her livid at the government for taking her fox away. She let out a breath and forced it back down for now. She could use it later, but needed a cool head for now.

*I'm still going to knock all their teeth in later,* the bunny mused to herself.

"Do you guys have plans for this sort of thing?" the doe asked, clenching her paws nervously.

"Technically, yes," the android confirmed. "Although, it basically entails me finding out where Nick is and going in myself with modded armaments. Recent developments have made me recalculate and adjust the plan." Leo slowly put a small phone in Judy's waiting paws. "I'll need you to look over these files and give me your opinions. It has files that you and only you can view. With facial recognition cameras on it, any other viewer will make the device wipe itself clean and burn out, becoming a small piece of scrap. Can you look over this for me?"

The doe nodded.

"What are you planning on?"

"With a stockpile of Shard energy infused power cores… we can implement a latent protocol that hasn't been possible until now. For now, just know it's a rescue mission."

Judy perked up, remembering something mentioned to that effect before, wracking her head for an answer.

"Does it have to do with that 'rally' thing from before?"

"Yes, but I need to familiarize you with your potential lineup before enacting the protocol," the mechanical being mentioned. "I also need to do some reconnaissance on this 'Cliffside Asylum'."

"Anything I can help with on that end?" she asked with a hopeful stare.
"Afraid not," Leo replied. "I'm already violating a protocol or two by letting you in on this rescue to begin with, given your state, but it was either this or bar you from it and have you force your way in later, given what I know of your tendencies."

The grey bunny slumped down and pouted, knowing the android was likely right. The least she could do is give him some consideration for his respect towards her. She turned on the phone and scrolled through some design specs and data entries tagged to them.

At first, everything just blended together, making her skim it all in disinterest. She needed her mind sharp and while the fear of having an episode like before was there, she felt taking off the inhibitor would be more beneficial.

Raising her paws to remove the device, she noticed the android look at her, though only nodded to assure her it was fine.

Upon lifting the strange device from her head, the fog in her mind lifted…

Making way for whatever was left of the frantic emotions that were partially suppressed earlier. There was fear, worry, anxiety… and anger.

It was far more manageable this time around and Judy kept herself calm and collected. As much as she wanted to get frustrated and flip out over the situation, she would do what Nick might and focus that fury on something productive.

The bunny took a deep breath and let it out slowly, refocusing on the data and diving in.

Leo left the room, which she hadn't paid much attention to until now, but appeared to be in another room she didn't really frequent, looking like a split off room from the workshop with medical devices and such around.

Her actual phone vibrated nearby, causing the doe to look around and perk up to grab it from the countertop nearby. Opening it, she was surprised to see a text from her friend, Essie.

*Hey Judy, I'm just curious if you're still in your hometown. If so, I would recommend staying there a bit longer. There was quite the fuss this morning. I'm not too sure what's going on yet, but there are rumors that the government caught Flux and took him away. My superiors say they don't know anything, but there are a few riots in the streets from some mammals. Whether they are just causing drama or actually Flux fans… I have no clue, but try not to do anything reckless if you are back.*

The grey rabbit had no clue how to respond to that. Their return was a bit rushed and impromptu, so she could easily lie and say she's not home yet.

Another message came in to her phone.

*Just enjoy your not so alone time with your foxy friend. XD*

Judy let out a watery laugh, feeling a bit hurt that it was rather impossible at the moment to do as she said. It was also disheartening that she was lying to her best friend in the city. 'It's for her own good' just didn't feel like a justifiable excuse right now.

Getting up from the bed, the bunny was somewhat stunned to find she was naked. She reflexively pulled the covers to her, feeling a bit foolish, since no one was around. A languid sigh later and she lowered herself to the floor and grabbed some neatly folded clothes on a table nearby that the android must have left for her, dressing herself slowly.
Exiting the room, she found her suspicions were confirmed, when she found herself in the massive workshop with all the suits and machinery to maintain or modify them.

Judy then made her way into the kitchen, feeling rather parched and needing her fair share of liquids.

She sat down at the island in the center of the kitchen, mulling over a few thoughts in her head. The doe was tempted to turn the television on and see if anything was being reported on Nick's apprehension. She worried it would stoke the fire of her anger a little too far, but she needed to know.

Grabbing the remote, she turned it on, quickly finding the news channel.

Contrary to other times, the timing was not good, with fluff pieces and sports being reported, making her shut it off in frustration and use her phone to look up any clips.

It wasn't that hard to do so. It was the hottest news topic on social media at the time, with various onlookers to Flux falling from the sky taking videos as fast as they could press record on their devices.

Choosing to mute it, knowing most of the mammals recording were commenting frantically or just spewing random nonsense, she watched a few clips before seeing that it definitely looked to be government types who took him in. Just as well, Judy was at least relieved to see that his wounds from the blast were healed.

The last thing she could vaguely remember was her barrier being broken and trying her best to will him to heal as fast as she could muster. She must have overextended herself in her state and fell unconscious after healing him.

Shooting off a quick and ambiguous reply to Essie, the doe chose to lie for now, saying she hoped her friend was safe and that she was still at her parents. It ate away at her, but she couldn't very well come out and say 'Hey, my boyfriend was taken by the government for his affinity with technology because surprise, he's Flux the Fox'.

The grey doe resigned herself to looking over the data that Leo had supplied her, familiarizing herself with every aspect of the designs that she could.

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The red fox struggled slightly, testing the strength of his restraints. His paws and feet were encapsulated in these large orbs of great weight and size, seemingly magnetized to the large ring he was suspended in.

The tranquilizer from before wore off rather quickly, with the residual heightened metabolic state from healing working it from Nick's system. The difference between being dosed for an hour or ten minutes meant nothing though, when the tod was amply restrained in an armoured vehicle with multiple mammals ready to shoot him full of additional doses of sedative.

Instead, he played the role of an unconscious fox and tried to keep track of where they were going by turns and sounds.

From all the turns, it felt like they were going in circles on occasion, probably to keep any tails off them.

Eventually, the fox grimaced, feeling his observant efforts were wasted, when he heard a roaring waterfall that could only be one place.
After being driven into a very well soundproofed area, Nick was offloaded and taken to a chamber, where they awaited his awakening.

Careful to avoid scrutiny, he peeked through a barely opened slit, opening his eyelids a tiny fraction. He could barely make out three shapes of mammals. Two were medium, possibly wolves or felines, and a larger form, looking like the silhouette of the wildebeest from before.

Nick played a waiting game, keeping his ears alert for whatever exchanges they might make. The wolves were exceptionally quiet, though the wildebeest seemed impatient, walking back and forth sporadically while chewing on something the whole time.

Soon enough, he left the room, mentioning something unintelligible to "Privates Perralte and Perralte."

The same last name? Nick mused to himself.

He waited a few minutes, hoping the wildebeest would become engaged elsewhere, before piping up and saying, "You two don't look like brothers."

The timber wolf and arctic wolf stiffened noticeably and focused on the tod, raising their rifles in a defensive posture. The red fox simply gave them an unamused look.

"So?" he continued in inquiry. "Are you two brothers?"

They looked at each other, the white one grabbing his radio, saying, "Haetes. Flux is awake."

"We're adopted," the timber wolf replied, whether in earnest or to simply occupy Nick, he was unsure.

The radio crackled as a deep tone emitted from it, "I'm on my way."

"Adopted huh? And don't act so threatened. I'm wearing bowling balls on my paws and feet, while a super magnet keeps them attached to this ring."

"They're for precautionary measures," the deep tone from before sounded, marking the return of the wildebeest. "Even without your suit, we are uncertain of your capabilities and strength."

"Alright. Fair enough," Nick voiced, attempting to shrug but finding little room for movement. "Why don't we get to it, then?"

The gnu huffed and stepped closer to the restrained fox, hazel eyes inspecting him.

"Good. We can get straight to the point," he hummed, appearing to relax slightly. "Basically, it should be obvious what we want and my superiors want me to see to it that you give it to us. Technology and designs of your various suits, as well as any such related information to corresponding things like weapons and energy storage for each suit."

"You have one suit. Why not take a look at that?" The tod snidely asked with a sneer.

"You know very well that that thing is burned out beyond all use," the frustrated wildebeest sighed. "Our techs are taking it apart but have little hope we'd get much more than scrap metal and melted circuitry. Even then, you must have ejected the power core before our arrival, or we destroyed it, since there was little evidence to suggest it was still in the suit remains."

"How about you answer some of my questions?"
"As if you're in a position to make demands or ask questions," the gnu snorted, crossing his hooves.

"The way I see it, I have all the leverage. You have no useable tech to reverse engineer and I'm sure answering a few simple things won't kill you."

"Fine, but keep it simple."

"What's your name?"

"Connor Haetes."

"How did you target me?"

"A combination of spotting you with the naked eye from sentries and zoning in on you with pinpoint lasers to gauge distance."

"Alright… the question itching at me most at the moment… what did you shoot me down with? And be specific."

"I wouldn't be telling you this if I weren't a little proud of it," Connor divulged. "We have been procuring any amount of tech from your fights that we could, using agents that would act like frantic citizens or homeless vagrants scrounging for food. Most of it was easy enough to figure out, but the problematic obstacle was power consumption. So, we heavily upgraded the defunct reactor that was built here many decades ago as a way to provide cheap electricity to the citizens, until bad press and protests forced the government to abandon it and cover it up. Next, we knew it was only a short leap, choosing to use what we had so far to build a large nuclear powered plasma bolt cannon. Now answer my questions."

"I thought you had demands, not questions," the tod sassed. In the back of his mind, he was trying to figure out why the gnu's name sounded so familiar.

Haetes snorted angrily and stomped closer to the fox, shoving a digit in his face as he snarled at the top of his lungs, "Stop with the inane idiocy and start cooperating with us or I'll…!"

A whistle cut through the air in the room, making everyone's ears twitch and eyes wince at the high pitched sound.

Conner turned, ready to chastise the one who interrupted him…

To which Nick noticed his previously furious demeanor now withered like a dead flower.

"What did I tell you about controlling your temper?" a professionally dressed deer doe admonished the far larger wildebeest from a few feet behind him, hooves on her hips and carrying an electronic tablet.

Clearing his throat and backing away, he spoke in a low voice, "Sorry, Bella. What did you need?"

Without breaking her gaze, the deer lifted the hoof with the tablet in it, to which Connor took it and read something, scribbling a note or his signature and giving it back.

Bella smiled and patted the gnu's chest lightly, who huffed slightly.

She then leaned to the side and spoke to the captive fox, awkwardness ignored, and said, "I'm a huge fan." Conner rolled his eyes and shooed the doe from the chamber, subsequently pinching the bridge of his snout and groaning.
He heaved a sigh, the two wolves doing their best to appear inanimate and unengaged in the conversation.

"We are not your enemy…" Haetes started.

"Says the guy who shot me down with a nuclear cannon."

"And all we want is to work with you for the betterment of all…"

"Says the guy working for the government that called me a criminal."

"PLEASE… just… listen," Haetes shouted at furst, lowering his voice as he collected himself and sighed once more. "We could use someone like you to change the face of the world. To protect from these Drone threats. All we wanted was to entreat with you to attain that goal. Why won't you help us?"

Nick grimaced, not unable to respond due to a lack of reasoning, but indecisive as to which reasons to spout first. He could see and hear that the wildebeest seemed very sincere in his pleas, making it difficult to outright hate or loathe him.

"As much as I might possibly believe you're doing this for good reasons," the fox spoke, "your government won't abide by using this tech for altruistic reasons. Almost every instance in mammalian history where a significant technology is created or attained that supersedes their own civilization, it becomes twisted into a weapon or warred over for control."

"So you refuse once more," Connor spoke as more of a statement, rather than a question. "Fine… rot in here for all I c…"

"OH! I got it!" Nick excitedly exclaimed, making the wolves jump and Haetes narrow his eyes.

"Adam. Your agent name in the government. I knew that your name was familiar. You're Adam… the Beast."

Conner's eyes widened noticeably, making the tod take that as some form of confirmation.

Instead of addressing the name or topic discussion thereof, the wildebeest angrily trotted from that room and ordered the door sealed. A large steel door descended and locked into place, making the fox's only company the rather few of words guard wolves.

"Know any jokes?" Nick asked earnestly.

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The mechanical being was nowhere to be found for quite a long while, with hours passing, making Judy worry that she was just given busy work so it could rescue Nick without her interfering.

That thought made the bubbling fury beneath rise within for a few seconds before she took a deep breath and tried to calm down.

"As long as Nick comes back safe and sound," she spoke to herself in mild lamentation, "I shouldn't complain too much about the how."

"I appear to have missed a portion of your dialogue," Leo spoke from the entryway into the room. "Might I inquire as to what you mean?"

Initially, the rabbit was a bit startled, but her relief to see the android quickly replaced that feeling.
"I thought you might have gone to save Nick without me," she mumbled.

"The idea was one of many I entertained," Leo divulged unabashedly. "However, I have come to the conclusion that I need you running point on this. I was able to come up with a vast amount of intel since leaving you to study the specs on other Flux suit designs."

There was a deafening pause as the doe awaited the mechanical being to continue.

"And?" she goaded with a paw gesture.

"I was able to come up with a comprehensive schematic of the Cliffside Asylum."

Setting down a device on the table, a holographic projection showed the structure, perched precariously on the edge of a waterfall. A lattice network of brighter colors, which the bunny assumed was basically a highlight of the schematics under the ground, overlaid onto the image.

"I spent the past few hours breaking into government and corporation systems, attempting to find access to multiple satellites that could do deep Earth scans of the area," the android explained. "After fruitless searching, I came across a geological survey satellite using some new and experimental technology. I was able to appropriate it for my own use and came up with this detailed survey of the region. While the denser areas of concrete or bedrock were beyond my ability to scan further, I could easily ascertain the defensive measures, as well as get a good look at the weapon that took you both down."

"Wait… they have a weapon in the asylum?" Judy piped up in inquiry, eyes wide with confusion and remembering there was something she should have retained from before.

"A great amount of them," the being confirmed. "Most are on something that look like rising platforms, meant to hide beneath the water when not in use. Those are conventional weapons, however, using normal shell and hardpoint ammunition. The weapon that shot you both down though, was a modified cannon using unknown components centered around a nuclear power source. From my scans before the blast that took you down and the data from the satellite here, I can only surmise the military has somehow come into possession of some Drone weapon components and integrated them into a new hybrid weapon, with a subterranean nuclear reactor to power it effectively."

"Alright… and you think this is where Nick is being held?" the grey doe asked, trying to process everything, but feeling like she was lagging behind in some aspect.

"Most certainly. The government was using their own satellites to keep watch over the area, for reasons I haven't cared to pursue as of yet, and that ended up working well to my end. Instead of hacking into their satellites, I merely used it as a waypoint to figure out where the recordings they took were logged. It was a simple, if not slightly time consuming task to track them down, scan the footage and follow the vehicles that took Nick. They took a detour into a nearby tunnel and never came out. The geological satellite confirmed my theory that they had a tunnel that led under the asylum."

A path lit up under the water and shoreline, showing where the tunnel would have went, out of view of cameras and such. From the not so natural shape, Judy guessed it was reinforced with concrete or something. They couldn't scan inside it but it led to the rest of the mass that couldn't be viewed. Enough proof to see that was the only place they could have gone.

"So… what now?"
"Rally Call," Leo stated, standing and gesturing for the rabbit to follow.

Judy's ears perked as she fought to remember what that meant. They talked about it while Nick was hooked up to that really weird power core charging thing that sucked energy from the fox.

"Forgive me… I'm a little short on remembering what that was," the rabbit admitted with a paw rubbing the back of her head. "I just know it was an emergency measure."

"The Rally Call protocol is a two stage process to give Nick/Flux a means of a supportive force in times when a singular tactical response just isn't enough," the android detailed. "The first stage entails filling power cores with Shard energy that has been stabilized. The second is using said cores to fuel a multitude of Flux armaments, running on automatic functions with oversight by me. Depending on the number of units activated, I can adjust my involvement in the system of each, optimizing their combat ability and efficiency."

"You mean…" Judy started, hope rising, "we're going to take an army of suits to bust down their doors and take Nick back?"

"Calling it an army might be overselling it, but yes."

The grey bunny doe was feeling a renewal of energy and righteous fury. She wanted… no needed… to take the fight to those that dared shoot Flux down. They needed to be knocked down a few pegs and shown a lesson in humility. She knew it was probably a vindictive or vengeful way of thinking, but if this was how she could focus well on her task and summon the courage to fight without her fox… she would use it as long as she was able.

With the two entering the workshop once more, Leo ventured in deeper, interfacing with a panel that was connected to a closed and heavily tinted pod. It opened up…

Revealing a bunny sized suit, far more heavily armored than the flexible morphsuit Judy had been using till now. She gaped at it in awe, reaching out tentatively, as if she needed some permission to do so.

"W-what is this?" the doe barely stammered.

"Gravitrix, your first fully functional Flux suit," the android stated, confirming her hopes. She squealed in excitement. "Though, in this case, I suppose it should be the first in a line of models we should call Phantom."

Judy took in the suit, loving the sleek and rounded design. It appeared well armored around the chest and legs regions, with light armor on joints, telling her it was meant to move around alot. She couldn't complain about that. Her thoughts would be that an agile suit design would fit her best, no pun intended. The only confusing part was the sizable metal sphere that was embedded into the chest armor, looking somewhat out of place.

Choosing to ask the obvious question, the grey bunny spoke up, "What can it do? And why the metal sphere?"

The mechanical being pulled up a specifications report on the panel, allowing the doe to peek at it while it began to explain the important details, "As the name would suggest, it focuses on using gravity as a means of combat. The metal sphere is a composition of elements meant to amplify the effect of using your Shard energy to create your own gravity field, effectively making it where you can alter your personal space to your benefit in terms of gravitational forces. As an example, you could use it to jump from surface to surface, wall to wall, as if each surface you contact with is where
gravity is pulling you to. It works much like a miniaturized version of the Earth's core. There are other benefits to the suit, but I'll explain them later. For now…"

The android logged onto the central computer in the workshop, beckoning Judy over, who was still enamored with her suit.

"Did you familiarize yourself with the specs of the suits I listed?"

The grey doe nodded, padding over to investigate the console that was activated. It was one she had seen before but never that often. It appeared to have several command protocols listed with various descriptions. She assumed it was independent from the regular systems, with how sensitive some of the commands looked.

The mechanical being pulled up and initiated the protocol labeled 'Rally Call: Strike'.

"We're going to assemble a team. Ready?"

Again, Judy nodded, growing worried and nervous of what was to come. She took a breath and fed on the anger and fury beneath to harden her resolve. It sounded like a dark path, but she was using her emotions instead of the other way around. They wouldn't control her.

"If you're ready, speak the protocol activation phrase."

The rabbit looked at it and laughed, knowing this had to be Nick's strange dramatic flare wiggling its way into his craft.

"Seriously? I have to say it?" she asked in a slight blush.

"I know it seems stupid, but we can't have our protocols accidentally activated because we pressed the wrong button."

"Fine… Fine…"

She took a deep breath, ready to take on whatever was necessary to liberate her fox.

"Rally Call: Strike!... To the Queen!"

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The console whirred and buzzed to life, the screen scrolling information by at an extremely fast pace that likely only Leo could follow.

On the far wall, the storage unit with all the power cores came to life, startling the bunny, who laughed nervously. One by one, the cores were pulled out of a dispenser, rolling along a rail of sorts to each suit, with a couple taking more than one core.

Various suits came to life, their accents and ports lighting purple, limbs moving deliberately and slowly. From small to large, the suits left their pods and assumed a ready position near the console, surrounding the two as they awaited commands.

A synthetic voice sounded from the console, once again startling the poor bunny, "Activation of Rally Call confirmed. Five units activated per request. Howlitzer, Shock Sage, Staccato, Jackhammer, and Slipstream. Fully functional and awaiting command input."

"Including Gravitrix, that makes six units," Leo remarked, gesturing to the partially activated suit, opening at the android's behest and ready for Judy to climb on in.
"Ready to suit up?"

The doe gulped but remained resolved, replying, "Am I ready?... Yes. Yes I am."
"Reaching peak altitude," a voice in Judy's ear stated. "Adjusting to position above the target area."

"Are you sure this is the only way?" the doe asked, unsure of her part in this.

"We can't simply approach by normal vectors," Leo began, "since that weapon is still assumed to be operational. As best I could tell, it isn't omnidirectional. With all the power cables and strange modifications, it only looks as if it can fire with a forty-five degree range of movement with the horizon."

"So… the best attack is from above? Right…"

All six units were in the air and flying formation, though not the type one would imagine of a strike force.

Judy was in her newly completed Gravitrix suit, nestled safely into the pilot cockpit of the Howlitzer, guns ready and outfitted for defensive measures. As opposed to the use of the rocket pods in the simulation, the android knew that all the other anti-air measures besides the nuclear cannon could still target them easily. Therefore, the pods were removed and replaced with modulated shield barrier emitters.

Staccato, a stealth type suit with highly advanced sensor capabilities, hung from the right arm of Howlitzer. It looked like some sort of gunslinging western outlaw from movies, with a polyalloy fiber duster that emanated a cloaking field, making it invisible. On its head was a large rim 'hat' that served as an omnidirectional sensor dish. Two pistols, linked to the suit by cables, supposed to use invisible stun rounds to fire from a cloaked state.

On the left arm hung Jackhammer, the fursuit that the bunny helped Nick fly. From an operational perspective, at least Judy would be able to make calls in the field knowing Jackhammer's capabilities first paw.

Shock Sage rode clinging to a leg, a suit of a weaker make than the others on the team, but made up for it in versatility, having an arsenal of attacks using electricity and long range plasma bolt guns mounted on the arms.

Riding the rear was probably the suit with the most precarious job, almost literally. Seeing as Howlitzer has no high altitude flight abilities, only able to fly low and make leaps with thrusters, and Staccato only used control thrusters for leaps and glides, since a cloaking field might be ruined by heat or other such emissions, a load bearing suit capable of heavy thruster power was needed.

That's where Slipstream came in, a suit about as bulky as Jackhammer, though for different reasons. It's body was covered in multidirectional and exceptionally powerful thrusters. It was meant as a way to carry out rescue response operations, more inclined towards lifting fallen rubble or reaching terrain not traversable by conventional rescue crews for extracting citizens from danger. Since not every mammal would be small or medium sized, Slipstream was outfitted and designed to carry the equivalent of ten metric tons with enough power left over to jettison that weight to a safe location for drop off.

Slipstream was clamped in to the back of Howlitzer, being the largest centric force needed to maintain a steady balance in the high altitude.

"Staccato is scanning the geography below and marking all weaponized platforms we'll expect to see
"rising above the water or from hidden alcoves to fire at us," Leo remarked. "He'll then cycle the refined portions of the data to Howlitzer for targeting. It has the longest range of all the suits and will neutralize their defenses for a safe ascent. Ready?"

"Let's take them down," the grey doe seethed with venom in her tone, still nervous, but focusing her just rage towards the objective below.

"Drop."

Slipstream cut it's thrusters, dropping the entire team into the clouds, terminal velocity reaching rapidly and the screeching of the wind sounding as air met metal.

Judy's…

No… Phantom… the rabbit thought to herself, knowing she had to adapt a mindset different from her usual habits.

Phantom's suit filtered the sound, taking less of an impact on her sensitive hearing as it was muffled to a bearable level.

Despite the significant cloud cover around them, a three dimensional model was forming in front of her on her displays for Howlitzer, Staccato's scan data detailing every possible target below and showing heat signatures for bodies.

One thing, amongst the slew of other things, that Leo made clear to her, was that they should avoid killing or fatally wounding any mammals at all costs. The public swayed in their favor, but if deaths were a result of their operation, the government would have fuel to throw on the fire to turn the people fearful of Flux and Phantom.

Most of the platforms in question were likely remotely operated, with no heat signatures nearby to denote an actual crew to operate them.

"Data scanned," the mechanical being stated. "Targets acquired. Shields engaged. Let it rip, Phantom."

The doe gripped her control sticks harder, aiming the shoulder mounted bolt cannons and picking her target. She pulled the trigger.

A resounding boom tore across the sky, as Howlitzer held true to the name. It was far more intense to fire the cannons in real life, as opposed to a lifelike simulation.

The first pair of Shard energy bolts impacted an exposed turret, turning it to slag and spare parts in a matter of a second.

Lights flared into existence below, painting the sky and searching for their strike team.

Giving them no time to properly locate them, Phantom started using Staccato's sensor data to take aim at more targets through the thick cloudy cover. The fact that it was late at night would only make it more difficult for the asylum defenses to respond, even with radar.

The large cannons bucked and roared, releasing subsequent salvos, raining destructive blasts onto other entrenched defenses. The platforms that the android spoke of began rising to the surface, releasing their own answer to the armored bunny's rather loud introduction, starting up their rather aggressive munition conversation.
"Approaching launch point."

Having freefallen to the point that cloud cover was dissipating, the thrusters on Slipstream began to fire again, altering the course of the group and making a circling pass to allow Howlitzer to rake salvos of bolts across the defensive platforms and alcoves.

At a closer range now, some of the turrets and armed mammals were able to land some rounds. Blasts obscured the normal view of the cameras, but Staccato's sensor data was still filtering through all the things that would be obstacles, overlaying a detailed readout on the display for the grey doe to see.

"Shields are holding," the mechanical being confirmed for Phantom's unasked question. "Energy flow to the barrier projectors is stable. Try not to give them too much of an easy target though."

"Got it," Phantom responded. She adjusted her vectors and cannon power, not needing the higher levels when range wasn't an issue any longer. Too much of a blast from close range and she could cause injury or fatal wounds. Despite her anger, she didn't want to leave a path of death. Destruction… very much so.

With the parameters ready, she fired off rapid-fire bolts that peppered the defensible areas where mammals fired back, unleashing rounds that were set to stun.

Slipstream made to land the entire group at the entrance to the Asylum, the shield expanding to allow the other hitchhikers to jump off and form a defensive ring around Howlitzer.

Staccato engaged it's stealth field and took off, clearing their perimeter of hostiles. Though technically invisible, Phantom's display had an outline tagging his location. Jackhammer stood at the door to the asylum, bracing and giving the door a mighty kick, caving in the door and blowing it inward with the force.

A multitude of mammals, ranging from wolves to bears to rhinos, took up positions inside and released a torrent of bullets and various rounds, with a couple being impact explosives. The heavy hitter suit darted back to the safety of the shield barrier, letting the rounds impact harmlessly from it.

"Shock Sage! You're up!" called out Phantom. The electrically inclined suit bounced from the larger suit and barreled through the door, popping off a slew of bolts for suppressing fire. The mammals in the line of fire took cover, allowing Sage to close in and make a dive over them, spinning wildly in the air.

As it spun, Sage let loose a large number of small pods, roughly the size of a hard candy. Upon landing quite deftly on the other side, the suit fired off a continuous electrical impulse at the pods, to which it linked to the others and created a net like field of electricity, stunning the soldiers into unconsciousness.

"Shocking development, wouldn't you say?" Leo's voice asked. Judy paused for a moment, not believing what she was still processing she heard.

"Did you just…?" she began to ask, letting the inquiry fetter out to let the android answer on its own.

"What?" it asked in defense. "Nick has been telling me one-liners are important, and since he isn't present at the moment, I assumed I should attempt to fill the gap. Did I fail?"

"I would say yes…" the doe remarked with a dry laugh, "but you actually made a better attempt than Nick on good days."
Alright then. Back to the mission. There should be a large door that leads into the compound below, according to our scans.

Taking up a defensive position inside the asylum, Howlitzer and Shock Sage covered the door, with Jackhammer moving all the unconscious mammals against a wall that was out of their way. Slipstream detached from Howlitzer's back and began moving around the room, finding a large door, hidden by bookshelves and a desk. It ripped the furniture and mechanisms away, revealing a very heavily armored looking door.

"The door is roughly twenty-two inches thick," explained Leo. "Even our weapons won't be very helpful in an efficient manner." Phantom did a double take towards the door, feeling a sense of dread.

"Does that mean we can't get through?" she asked meekly.

"I said weapons," the android reiterated. "If you remember Slipstream's specs, it is a rescue operations Flux armament. Its engines mounted on the arms have alternative functions. For example...

Slipstream then held an arm with a large thruster pointed at the door. The exhaust portion funneled itself with a cone like device and began to fire, the confined thrust turning into a powerful beam.

Judy then remembered the specifications to Slipstream's design that Leo was talking about. As part of its rescue function repertoire, the thrusters could modulate their energy output to match something like a plasma cutter, allowing it to cut through obstacles that might trap victims in a disaster. It could potentially cut through several feet of bedrock to complete its tasks. A metal door would be of only moderate issue.

"Please focus forward, dear Judy," came the even tone of the mechanical being, calling Phantom's attention back on the doorway, where multiple hostiles were trying to position themselves from a firing position.

She fired off a few rounds of suppression fire, scattering the formed ranks of soldiers. A few shots of their own were fired off, impacting randomly around Howlitzer and the barrier.

It felt like an eternity, the adrenaline making her heartbeat hammer in her ears, as Phantom waited for Slipstream to cut through the door. In actuality, her internal mission clock had only added about two minutes since the suit began cutting. Thankfully, it was almost done.

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The booms and vibrations from above were a strangely welcome sign to the fox. He had to spend hours alone hanging out with two wolves who appeared at odds with engaging in a conversation with Flux. On the one paw, they were apparently fans of a sort. On the other paw, they were under orders to view him as extremely dangerous and a hostile combatant.

He did learn that they were indeed adoptive brothers, names being Larry and Gary. He also learned they were assigned together, usually being a conflict of interest with family, because of their exceptional ability with non-verbal communication in combat situations. It seemed rather ironic to consider when Nick decided to play a prank on them and start howling until they did. After that point, he got little out of them except disconcerting stares.

"Haetes, what's going on up there?" the white wolf, Gary, asked over his radio. Static was all that answered him.
Larry sighed, "It's not like asking fifty more times will make them answer quicker."

The large door unsealed and opened abruptly, with the wildebeest lumbering through, snorting in anger and Bella behind him, whispering at him to 'calm down'.

"You!" he called out, hoof extended and brushing off the deer doe's attempts at keeping him calm. "What are you doing?"

"I'm hanging out. And you?" the fox offered calmly. Much too calmly for the gnu.

"You know what I mean! Tell me… NOW!"

"Please, Connor…" the doe begged, a hoof on his shoulder. Her gaze moved to the tod, unsure how to speak to him.

Nick let out a breath as he spoke slowly, "I have contingencies for such events as the predicament I am in. I cannot stop this. I cannot deter it. If you let me go… it will end."

"Not for me. Not for us," Haetes divulged. "We will be forced to pursue you by all means available, regardless of the risk to ourselves."

"Sounds like a government who cares…" Nick said dryly. "Why would you take this post if it meant that?"

"Because, if I did not…," began Connor, "any other potential backup might have tortured you to death by now. Someone who wouldn't care for those beneath their command. But I do!"

The red fox clenched his muzzle in thought.

_He seems of a different type than I was imagining_, he mused. _Maybe…_

Another trembling boom sounded from above, shaking the dust from the ceiling and causing the wildebeest to refocus upon him, rage renewed.

"I am here to convince you to help us further the cause you fight for. We could work together and you refuse to entertain the concept. Why?"

"Haven't we already gone over this?" Nick sighed in question.

"Fine… another question then."

"Shoot," the tod stated with another attempt at a shrug, body growing sore from being suspended for so long.

"How did you know my agent name?" the gnu inquired, gaze turning curious and concerned.

The fox smiled gently, opening his maw to explain, "With technology like mine, I like to know a bit about those in the government to gauge how much I might be able to trust it as a group. Your name was one of many that I came across. Connor Haetes. Otherwise known in agency circles as Adam Prince, the 'Beast'. If I remember right, the file I looked at said you were terminated after a mission went sour."

"You didn't really answer my question."

"Simply put, I hacked government servers and broke into certain compounds to search for hard copy files."
It was technically a lie, considering it was Leo who did most of the reconnaissance work, but the method and who would matter little to this mammal at the moment.

The red tod continued, asking his own question in kind, "Why was that information about your termination incorrect?"

Bella stepped in, putting herself between Connor and Nick, saying, "He refused orders that were... unsavory... to say the least. He's been known to do the unpleasant, but only as a means to avoid others who were crueler with their tactics. That led to some... misinterpretations of what he was willing to do in terms of violating certain morals. Because his skills were exceptional, too exceptional to simply write him off, a compromise was formed. Adam the agent died and Connor was able to take up certain posts to keep using his skills to their benefit."

"And your higher ups aren't concerned he knows too much?" Nick supplied.

"Enough of this," the wildebeest voiced. "Don't tell him too much. He might use it against us."

"To the contrary... I'm actually becoming mildly convinced of your drive to do good with what I might have to offer."

"What?" Connor rasped in great disbelief, exchanging glances with Bella. "Then you'll..."

"Afraid I can't," interrupted the fox. "What you want... I cannot give you. It is not that I am unwilling, but simply unable."

"What do you mean? You have an army outside and at your disposal, breaking in to rescue you! You obviously have the means to make more than just one suit and you could share that with us."

"There are factors that make giving you such things impossible."

"We'll just see about that," grumbled the gnu. "We have more than just that cannon to make an attempt at apprehending your technology."

Nick was surprised to hear this, but tried to contain his expressions of such, narrowing his eyes at Haetes.

"What might that be?"

Once the door had a hole cut into it, the plug that was created needed to be removed. Jackhammer used its strength to punch away at it, slowly inching the plug inward and making it fall noisily inside.

To which a barrage of bullets and other such munitions greeted them. Leo accounted for it, having Shock Sage cover the doorway and Phantom place Howlitzer at the opening, barrier extended to keep any resulting fire power from damaging them outright.

"Slipstream is currently at 19 percent power," the android remarked to Judy. "I'll keep it on conservative power settings until our escape. It took a bit more energy than I calculated to cut through that door."

"Any others having power issues?" the doe asked in slight concern. The operation appeared to be going well, with only minor issues happening, though still within the scope of 'tolerable'.

"Staccato is operating at 77 percent power," was the mechanical being's answer. "Most of that was
the deep scans from before and initiating the cloaking field. It should be fine, as long as no one is able to land any hits on it. All other suits are working above 90 percent power, which is more than plenty, considering the circumstances."

"Can we supplement them somehow?" the grey bunny offered in an attempt to advise.

"Howlitzer uses several units to power it from the Rally Call protocol, but I would prefer to not extract them for transfer until it becomes of critical need."

"But I'm powering the suit right now…"

"And I'll have you get out right about now, unfortunately," the android followed up with. "The Howlitzer is meant for open field combat. It's weaponry would be problematic to use in the confines of this compound. I'm going to have Staccato, Howlitzer, and Slipstream, attached to Howlitzer once more, keep the surface defenses busy and distracted. You, Sage, and Jackhammer will venture further within and free Nick from his imprisonment. For now… please clear the way within."

Phantom charged the cannons and scanned the room within. The incoming fire that was impacting the shield was coming from remote operated weaponry, allowing her to pull the trigger without worry and release a rapid fire salvo of powerful rounds to neutralize all targets.

She couldn't properly see through the fog of exploding rounds and her own Shard powered energy bolts, but the return fire gradually calmed down, until a single turret was left sparking and attempting to fire a gun that was no longer mounted upon its mechanism.

"Room is clear."

Opening the suit from the front, Phantom leapt out, relying on her own suit's sensors now. Leo took over the suit and closed it up, retraining the cannons on the door and keeping any stragglers from getting too close with occasional suppression fire. Shock Sage and Jackhammer followed her lead, with the latter sticking close and the former taking up a ranged cover position.

It was still amazing to the doe that the android could so effectively control so many suits without faltering in some sort of response time. At least… she didn't notice anything that appeared lacking in its responses.

Taking off along the route that was mapped out on her HUD, the bunny turned corners and zipped along hallways, noticing a strange lack of any other soldiers to guard the compound.

Suddenly, there was a yell and a firestorm of bullets rained down the hallway at the three. All of them took cover, knowing the rounds would do little damage, but wanting to remain vigilant for more weapons like the cannon.

Phantom tilted her head from cover to peek at the enemies down the hallway. She couldn't look for long before getting shot at by a barrage of bullets, but her display recorded the peek and played it back, enhancing the frames to see two bears and a tiger aiming rifles down the hall.

Engaging her own suit's barriers, the armored doe darted from cover and leapt towards the opposite wall, activating another feature of her suit.

The metal alloy core embedded in her chest armor began to glow a light purple, emitting a field that disoriented her at furst. Adapting as quickly as she could, the bunny landed on the opposing wall…

Running along it as if the wall was where gravity drew her.
The three mammals seemed confused to begin with, ceasing fire to contemplate what was going on. But that moment lasted all of a second before they resumed shooting. Shock Sage laid out covering fire, taking out one of the bears with a multitude of powerful stun blasts.

The bear slumped, nearly crushing the tiger next to him as he fell. The tiger dodged well enough, though was taken down when she left her cover to avoid the bear. The last bear looked over, distracted for a moment, allowing Phantom to close in and land a blow to the bear's head.

The force wasn't nearly strong enough, only making the bear angry. He slugged Phantom, tossing her from her position on the wall and impacting the floor.

She wasn't quite used to the suit yet and knew there were measures to make things easier on her. If she had inverted the gravity function she was using, it would have simulated an increase in her mass density, allowing her greater force in a hit or making it more difficult for the bear to force her away with a hit.

The bunny got up, attempting to learn quickly from her faux paw and making a bounding leap off the wall, to the ceiling, back up from the floor and inverting the gravity function just in time to impact the bear's chest. He wasn't knocked out, though most definitely wheezing from the hit. Jackhammer closed in and finished the job, loosing a stun bolt to incapacitate the bear.

The tiger from before rose, apparently having not been wholly stunned, and made a fierce strike against Phantom.

The armored rabbit dodged rolled to the side and splayed out a paw, letting a preloaded sphere launch from the emitter in the palm of her paw. The sphere exploded outwards, a netting of cords creating a lattice, heading for the tiger…

It missed.

Well, more like it didn't make it to the intended target. The tiger dodged the net for the most part, with it wrapping around her arm and paw.

Smiling, she laughed at Phantom, rearing to throw the engulfed fist at the armored bunny. By reflex, the doe swiped a paw, choosing to make do with what she could…

The tiger's paw prematurely curved and turned back.. Striking herself upside the jaw and giving herself a dizzying blow.

"What the…" the tiger began to growl, grasping her aching jaw with the other paw.

Judy smiled inside her suit, feeling at least partially accomplished for using the feature. Gravitrix could manipulate its own gravity using the metal core, but not others nearby. To overcome that obstacle, the suit could fire nets laced with rare earth element alloys in it, allowing Gravitrix to push, pull, and somewhat manipulate the ensnared object or being.

Seeing the tiger attempt a strike once more, she darted back and swiped her paw again, causing the netted paw to spin the tiger around. The compromise of their balance gave Phantom the chance to jump up and plant both feet firmly into the tiger's chest, increasing her gravity field to push without tossing herself across the room.

The tiger was thrown several feet, landing with a crash into other miscellaneous items, slumping after groaning for a few seconds.

Sage stepped closer, checking on all their vitals.
"They'll all be fine, barring any unknown medical complications," Leo divulged from its analysis.
"Thank you for keeping your more powerful hits from the head area. If you weren't careful, your use of the mass density functions might have caused them much more injury."

"Oh… right," Phantom mumbled, thankful that she was lucky in that regard, given that she actually forgot to show restraint in her state.

"This way," the android's voice evenly directed, with the two suits accompanying Phantom taking off down another hallway. The armored doe kept pace, keeping her senses and sensors wary of more combatants that might try to ambush them nearby.

"Why are there so few guards in here?" Phantom asked in passing, leaping across an expanse with a raised catwalk to land on the other side, rattling the grating. "I was expecting an army or something, with them apprehending someone like Nick."

"Unclear," the mechanical being curtly answered. "I'm assuming our distraction worked better than we predicted, but I am also inclined to think they were woefully unprepared for us to find them so soon after his capture."

A high thrum sounded in the distance, the cavernous chamber they were in echoing with the noise as it rose in pitch.

"Cover," Leo commanded. Judy wasted no time and darted for the nearest thing that could effectively protect her. Jackhammer dove behind the same large support beam that she did, with Sage finding a giant metal crate to hide behind.

It wasn't in the nick of time, but still relatively close as three heavy blasts rocked the area.

"What was that?!" exclaimed Phantom, knowing it wasn't normal explosives or ordinance.

"Drone technology."

The doe rolled her eyes, remarking sarcastically, "Oh… great…"

An image rolled across her display, showing a passing glimpse of two heavily armored mammals. One was a rhino and the other a buffalo. They looked to be fully enclosed in exoskeletal suits, vastly protective and heavily armed. Both mammals held something that looked like an improvised version of the bolt guns that were mounted on a few Drones from previous fights.

"Are they anything like the real thing?" she followed up inquiring.

"Hard to tell. Power consumption is high, though I read no internal power sources," the android explained. "I'm betting they are hardwired to an external power source, with the likely source being the nuclear reactor. The good news is that they won't have much in the terms of mobility, but the bad is that it will take more than some brute force or well placed strikes to take them down. Even with limited mobility, these things could take on a battalion of tanks and survive with minimal damage, if the readings I'm getting are close to accurate."

"Yay… So… got any ideas?"

"Give me a minute."

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"YOU WHAT!?!" Nick seethed in anger.
Connor grinned a bit maliciously, taking solace in the small victory of getting some sort of reaction out of the fox.

"Our scientists were able to create prototype suits from what we could scavenge and reverse engineer," he repeated for the tod. "Like I said before, while the power consumption was a problem, we could still at least test the combat capabilities by hooking up lower grade designs to the nuclear reactor. Though crude, they are still formidable and capable of deterring your comrades…"

"Shut them down!" the fox yelled, straining against his bindings. They didn't budge in the slightest, but that didn't stop him from trying.

"Why?" the gnu questioned, slightly curious at why he would be so worried.

"Drone tech is unstable and has a multitude of problems," Nick tried to explain calmly. "If you're using designs based on them or the parts themselves, you're going to have quite a few feedback power problems. With a stable power source… which the Drones had, it's not a huge issue. However… you have yours hooked up to a blasted nuclear reactor!"

There was a few seconds of silence as the red fox's glare attempted to pierce into the wildebeest, who stood contemplative, until…

"You're lying," Haetes bluntly stated. "You just want them shut down to make way for your comrades."

"No! You don't get it… If those suits have too many irregularities in their power supply, it'll feedback and cause the power source to overload. You're looking at a meltdown if those things favor heavy armament over stability."

Connor remained stern in his expression, conflicted over whether to believe him or not. The mammals behind him looked far more concerned, exchanging looks and watching the fox panting in fearful anger.

More explosions sounded, the Drone-based suits blasting away with their bolt guns, unconcerned about their aim. It appeared the vast room they were in was mostly cleared of vital supplies or equipment, giving them free reign ahead of time to defend the door they stood in front of. It was the only mapped way down to reach Nick a few levels below.

"Well?" Phantom asked a bit impatiently. "Ideas?"

"Still processing," the android spoke. "Stun bolts won't do anything to short out the suits, with a power source of such a high capacity. Besides, the armor is too heavy to breach in that respect. We have another problem, however."

"Hit me with it," the armored doe snidely commented, figuring 'What's one more problem?'.

"Each time they fire their weapons, I read a surge of radiological energy from the reactor below."

"I know you think I'm smart and I've guessed a few things thus far, but do pretend I know nothing of nuclear energy or what's going on," the grey bunny grumbled in frustration, adjusting her position as another energy bolt slammed into a wall nearby, exploding with savage force.

"The suits are unstable, causing feedback loops back towards the power source and making it unstable," Leo detailed. "If they don't stop firing soon or we don't cut off the suits power sources,
we'll be dealing with a potential meltdown of the reactor."

"So… bad?"

"Extremely. It could irradiate the majority of the Zootopia metropolitan area."

"Then I have an idea," Phantom stated. "Can my gravity functions alter bolt trajectories?"
“Can my gravity functions alter bolt trajectories?”

“If you were more adept with your suit’s functions, it would be easy, but we may not have…” Leo answered in part before stopping short, supposedly processing something. Phantom worriedly waited, hoping to hear words of comfort, or at least a plan for a pleasant turnabout, but…

“I retract my statement,” the being said, countering its previous words. “There is no time. With our situation as it is and those weapons keeping us pinned, we have about thirty-three seconds until the reactor below reaches a critical state of no return. Unless those suits are disabled before then, we have no chance to…”

Judy had stopped paying attention, a shocking chill stiffening her body in place and forcing her mind into an overactive state.

She needed to save Nick.

Regardless of his healing abilities, she knew it was no treat to regenerate each time. Getting injured was painful, as was healing. She could only imagine what such a fate could be, to have radiation destroying one’s body as it constantly reconstructed until he no longer could.

Judy’s paws clasped over her head, gripping at the base of her ears as her thoughts continued.

She needed to save Nick.

Aside from that, there were numerous mammals here and in the city that wouldn’t even have the chance to escape without possibly being irradiated. The death toll would be terrifying to say the least.

*I need to save Nick*, the doe nearly screamed in her head.

31 seconds.

Her rapid heartbeat drummed away in her ears, the tempo seeming to slow as her perception of time increased.

Looking over the cover she was hiding behind, the armoured rabbit spotted her targets, the two heavily protected mammals with guns haphazardly aiming at their covered position.

“I… have had…. ENOUGH!” Phantom bellowed, a powerful reverberation shaking the walls and causing the two soldiers to flinch visibly.

27 seconds.

A swirl of emotional turmoil threatened to erupt from within, Judy’s own resolve keeping it check and funneling all these emotions into something useful.

Fear. Anger. And love.

The maelstrom in her heart poured forth as a volatile fuel…

Pushing her armor into overdrive.

The accents glowed a brighter, more intense purple. A corona of Shard energy emanated from her
armored shell. The metal core on her chest even thrummed with power.

Her power output readout was flickering with rising numbers, a brief glance seeing it in the 400’s. Using the increased perception to her advantage instinctively, the doe leapt with unbelievable force, her gravity core simulating a gravity well in the direction she was traveling.

Just before impacting the wall, she twisted and landing with a near weightless force against the wall. Barely letting that contact last long enough to call it a landing, Phantom bounced away, turning herself into a missile.

Increasing her simulated mass in an instant, the armored bunny struck the rhino in the shoulder with the force of an artillery shell.

There was a sickening crunch as the rhino cried out in pain, his shoulder now dually dislocated and shattered. Phantom turned about, using the residual momentum to push off to the side and dart behind the rhino, grasping at a piece of armor plating and dragging the mammal down with a force deceptive of her own size. The two impacted the floor, with the armored bunny continuing the force she used to sling the rhino against a wall.

23 seconds.

In those few seconds that she took to take down a rhino, the bear hardly had time to react, bringing their own bolt gun to bear and ready to release a charge against her. Phantom put her armored paw on the opening of the barrel, charging and firing a bolt from her palm thruster into the gun before it could fire at her. The resulting blast decimated the gun from the inside, sparks and parts flying out from the main housing.

Not wasting any time, the bear dropped what was left on the floor and threw a powerful punch at the bunny. Increasing her simulated mass/density with the gravity core, she held firm and barely moved when the strike connected.

Phantom then let the energy buildup release, creating a vast bubble of zero gravity. She subsequently swiped a foot beneath the bear, rotating their now weightless form around, their limbs flailing to find a sense of balance.

Letting out chittering growls, Judy kicked upwards, lifting the armored bear a few feet. Then, she bolted up and bounced a couple times before positioning herself above the bear’s torso. Once again increasing her power fluxuations to the gravity core, she turned her body and armor into an object with the simulated density of something even more so than lead, kicking off from the surface she was on at a furious speed.

The bear gasped as they were not only impacted by Phantom in the chest, but was also struck down with great force back to the floor. While large, tenacious, and sturdy, the bear was suddenly out of breath and finding it hard to get it back, wheezing in their suit.

The armored doe left nothing to chance, seeing the bear stir, grabbing any surface she could and expanding her anti-gravity influence to lift the soldier and toss them away from the doorway. Once outside the literal sphere of influence, its weight became normal again. The mass of half useless armor now crashed and rolled across the floor, the momentum of which tore the reinforced power cable from the wall.

11 seconds.

Jackhammer had used the momentary distraction to sneak in and rip the other cable from the wall,
disallowing the other suit to keep pulling power for any usable systems.

Judy was panting and looking around in a fevered haze, looking for anything else that could be threatening her. In her suit, she was still counting the seconds, realizing they needed to move.

“Leo! What about the reactor?” she nearly screeched in desperation. “If we don’t get there in time…”

“I lied,” the android spoke over her comm. “I said that to get you to use your emotions to draw forth more power. We have plenty of time and more so, now that the Drone suits are disabled.”

Phantom’s emotionally unstable aura diffused in an instant, attempting to focus on the words spoken to her.

“You… lied?” she mumbled in both relief and confusion.

“I’ve found you are most effective in a fight when fighting for the sake of others,” explained the mechanical being. “Nick may be captured, but you and I both know they don’t care to harm him yet. That limited how effective you seemed to be. I’m sorry for the deception.”

The doe groaned, facepawing herself.

“Are you serious?”

“You can berate me and question my logic later,” Leo bluntly spoke. “The fact is that I don’t know if more of those weapons are around and we now have a new objective to stabilize the reactor. It’s not critical but I would prefer to keep moving and keep it that way.”

“R-right…” the doe begrudgingly confirmed to herself and the android.

Phantom and the two accompanying suits took off, with Jackhammer busting down the door, a powerful kick turning it into a warped piece of scrap. Just past the door was a large platform lift.

Boarding the lift, Leo had Shock Sage interact with the simplistic controls, mostly levers and large buttons, to lower the lift.

“I would have thought they would have better security measures for operating a lift,” the armored bunny mentioned in passing.

“It would be detrimental to a facility like this for everything to need access commands to operate. Besides, I’m fairly certain they never expected anyone would be able to penetrate this far into the compound.”

The lift dropped steadily, an electric whir sounding from the large motor working underneath the platform. It took naught but a few seconds before the bunny impatiently tapped her foot, the metal plating of her armor pinging against the metal platform.

Reaching the level they needed, the large bay doors to the level opened…

Revealing another squad of mammals training their rifles on the three armaments.

Leo spoke to them through Sage, altering voice patterns to sound more imposing, a deep undertone lining the voice.

“We have bypassed your security thus far and only want to recover our comrade,” the being began. “If you wish to remain uninjured or have any sense of self preservation, do disarm yourselves and allow us to pass unhindered.”
The multitude of mammals stared in silence for several seconds, with Phantom bracing herself for the worst.

A few minutes earlier…

In the heat of his riled anger, Nick felt a more furious surge of emotions flowing through him, making it quite obvious that it was from his bunny elsewhere.

He felt a flood of anger and frustration, bleeding away into a desperate worry that seemed heavily focused on him. The fox couldn’t read her mind so clearly as to give him a detailed picture, but he could feel the concern and deep affinity towards him in that moment.

It fueled him in a way he barely believed he could be.

With a strained breath, doing all he could to calm himself from the outburst before, he directed his gaze forward, a piercing stare of glowing green eyes causing the mammals witnessing to stiffen.

“I’m done playing your games…” he muttered more to himself than others. Though uncertain whether he wished to use his Shard power before, he felt a familiar comfort in the stabilization of its power. The red tod figured it had to have something to do with his partner being nearby.

Refining his mental focus and allowing the power within to exude from his core, Nick funneled the energy to a single limb. He turned the raw energy into an electrical surge, making the arm he used cringe in pain, but delivering a massive surge to the magnetic ring and engulfing orbs.

While there were plenty of surge protection and breaker trips to avoid extensive power flows from overloading the equipment he was being imprisoned by, the fox figured those measures wouldn’t be prepared for a surge from the opposite end of a power source.

It worked. The jolt he sent to the device of his imprisonment made a few select parts spark and sputter, the spheres dropping from the ring and dragging him to the floor. They were heavier than he imagined they might be. All four spheres impacted the flooring and split apart, a series of their own electromagnets shorting out as well from the disconnection with their power source. It was like looking at a mechanical version of a pomegranate sliced in half. Many diodes and wires filled the inside, wrapped around a cuffing mold that held his paws firmly in place within.

Larry and Gary raised their rifles, ready to fire at will, with Connor moving to put himself in front of Bella as he drew his own version of a sidearm.

While unsure of the exact factors of his ability to control the Shard power more efficiently than usual, the red fox tod could feel a newfound resonance and rise in his power stability.

“What’s going on?” Haetes breathed, hoof shaking as his eyes widened, attempting frantically to understand what was going on. He could accept robotic suits duking it out with advanced weaponry. He could wrap his mind around the concept of life outside their planet. However… this supernatural energy that exuded from the small mammal in a hazy purple aura, piercing green eyes aglow within, was something he couldn’t even hazard a guess.

They scanned his body upon entering the faculty, stripped his armor and clothes, put him in a form fitting suit to see that nothing was later smuggled under his clothes by a potential sympathizer, and suspended in a device that could withstand far larger mammals trying to break free.

This was impossible.
“How...?” the wildebeest questioned once more, attempting to steady his hoof.

“This is why I can't help you as you wish,” the tod seethed, tossing his head to the side in a non verbal signal to tell them to move from the doorway. The wolves whined slightly, ears dipped down, and shuffled away from the door. Bella looked worried but stepped to the side, trying to tug the gnu with her.

The larger mammal refused to budge, still processing things, huffing slightly as he spoke between his teeth, “Explain... and I'll move.”

“I am what powers my suits. Now move,” Nick commanded. Connor’s eyes widened further in recognition. He didn’t get why or how it was possible, but the sincerity of Flux’s words struck him to the core.

If that’s true... then all our thoughts concerning the acquisition of the power source he uses to fuel the tech we have seen so often... mean nothing, Haetes mused in frustration realization. But... how...

“If that’s true... how are those others suits operating? Who is piloting them?” the gnu inquired, watching Flux halt at the door.

He could have ignored those questions, but Nick felt he needed to say something that might bring some sort of cautious trepidation to any future attempts to apprehend him or Judy.

“My... partner... is bound by the same condition as I,” he spoke carefully, struggling to choose the right words without inadvertently inciting the mammals present to pursue some misconceptions. “They can operate them from a range.”

I sure do hope I’m not making a mistake saying this, Nick contemplated. Although, I do believe I can trust him. I might need this mammal later.

“And Conner?” the tod called, making Haetes perk his ears in attention. “Don’t let the roots of your past shackle your future...”

Not even giving the mammal a chance to respond, nor himself to see his expression, Nick took off as fast as he was able.

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“Sh... should we go after him, Sir?” the white wolf asked their commander.

The wildebeest was contemplating the words said by Flux, reevaluating everything he had to consider and trying to come up with a course of action.

Before he could however, the doe behind him gasped and rapped a hoof on his shoulder, making him turn to see a screen shoved in his face.

Connor read the reports, all remarking upon server errors and system command prompts that made no sense.

Against the grain of his previous demeanor, the gnu let out a bellowing laugh. It unnerved the others present, with all of them exchanging looks, silently encouraging the other to say something.

“Looks like that fox covered all his bases,” Haetes belted out after calming his laughter down.

“Sir?” the timber wolf asked.
Bella stepped forward to explain, “All logged data in our off site servers concerning images, medical records, and samples taken from him have been deleted. Our servers saved this data without a connection to the outside, so that means it had to been an objective of coming here.”

“We don’t have backups?” Gary asked worriedly. The doe shook her head in the negative.

“We do, but that’s what one of the command prompts were. They sent a subsequent file to all previous sources, under the guise of updating data. It must have located all the file sources that were saved and allowed them to be deleted.”

“We know what he looks like and spent a lot of time looking at him,” Larry supplied. “We could describe him in detail to put out a viable sketch…”

“We could?” Haetes spoke clearly, drawing attention to him.

“Sir?” they all voiced in confusion.

“I do believe that my memories may have been tampered with,” he began with a small smile. “Not sure what Flux did, but I don’t seem to recall his face, voice, or anything that was said between us. How about all of you?”

“What are you talking ab-” the white wolf started, before the timber stopped him with a paw on his shoulder.

“I think I’m suffering a similar problem,” Larry said.

Bella sighed, shaking her head, but grinning a bit as she spoke, “You guys are idiots, but I’m on board.”

It took a moment longer, but Gary scratched the back of his neck in slight embarrassment at his delayed lack of understanding, nodding to the others.

With all in agreement, the gnu turned to the deer doe, speaking gently, “Purge the room’s recordings, if they haven’t been compromised already.”

A few swipes of her tablet later and she perked up.

“Done.”

“You or them?”

“Does it really matter?” Bella fired back with a sly smile.

“Not one bit,” Connor replied simply, giving her a wink that seemed uncharacteristic of him.

Nick bolted down the hallway he had entered, following the signs and map displays that detailed the levels of the facility.

There was a disturbing lack of soldiers around, to which the fox chalked up to keeping basic grunt soldiers out of the loop with seeing who he was or knowing too much about what went on around the facility’s lower floors.

It wasn’t but another minute before he turned a corner, seeing a large grouping of mammals waiting in a massive loading area, guns leveled and ready to fire away…
Pointing away from him.

Nick doubled back and flattened himself just out of sight, his heart hammering fast and breathing ragged. He clutched a paw to his chest, trying to calm the scare he had, thinking all those mammals were there for him.

A thought occurred to him, making his brow furrow.

*If they aren’t waiting for me… then…*

A metallic grinding reached the tod’s ears, eliciting a clench of his jaw and paws to his ears at the sound.

He also heard the grouping of soldiers shift and make ready their arms, the door to the lift opening.

A familiar voice cut through the air, modified by filters, but still recognizable.

“…If you wish to remain uninjured or have any sense of self preservation, do disarm yourselves and allow us to pass unhindered.”

“Leo,” the fox whispered to himself. Nick leaned forward from his position against the wall, peeking for the briefest of moments around the corner to see the mammals with weapons steadying their aim at three Flux suits on the large lift platform.

Taking a deep breath, the red fox tod, strode out and let out a bark, jolting most of the soldiers into either looking behind them or fully bringing their weapon to bear on the source of the disconcerting and surprising noise.

“Hi there!” he vents in feigned excitability with a wave. “I was looking for a snack. Know anywhere I can grab one?”

Two mammals, a zebra and bison, trained their rifles more accurately on the fox.

“Unleaded if you don’t mind…” Nick spoke with a deadpan tone, crossing his arm with an unamused expression.

“Put your paws behind your head and…” one of the mammals finally dared to say, being promptly cut off by Nick powering forward with incredible speed. Much like the incident where he saved Judy from the Red Shard, he focused his power on speeding up his body temporarily. Only this time, it didn’t feel like it was tearing him apart. There was a burning sensation, to be sure, but it was far more manageable with a greater chance for him to use this with longevity in battle.

The zebra he bolted towards flinched, awaiting a heavy blow from the tod…

To which the red fox simply slapped the rifle away and twisted in the air to use the mammal’s shoulder as a vault point. He soared in an arc over the group of soldiers, landing deftly next to Jackhammer, giving it a once over.

The bulky combat suit stepped forward to protect Nick, with Shock Sage opening up behind him and the fox falling back to slip right in, all the mechanisms and such locking around him to fully enclose him in the armament.

The first thing he heard, upon the communication lines being secured, was Judy’s frantic tone asking if he was okay in various manners, along with a multitude of blubbering apologies.
“Has she been trying to do this since she saw me?” the fox asked, knowing Leo had to be listening.

“I muted her external voice functions as soon as the lift reached the level and the doors opened,” the android explained in its usual even tone, with Nick feeling quite comforted to hear it again. “I couldn’t have her inciting the soldiers to shoot if she said something wrong. But yes, she started yelling as soon as she saw you.”

“I will get you back for that,” Judy seethed. “Anyways… are you okay, Nick?”

“Just purr-fect,” Nick joked, rolling the ‘R’ slowly in his speech.

“I… are you making a pun? Now?” the bunny asked, confused.

“Aww,” he cooed, “but I missed you.”

Judy was so flabbergasted, unsure how to respond, that she simply devolved her speech into haphazard stutters.

“Now, what we should do with these guys?” the tod asked, hearing the doe finally quiet down and listen.

“Unclear,” was Leo’s response. Judy also mumbled something ambiguous.

“Well that’s good, because I didn’t want to step on any paws here… but…”

Flux raised his armored paws, firing off a couple of gas canisters that pinged to the floor in the middle of the soldiers. They all began to shift nervously or panic outright, a few holding their noses or breath.

Inside the Shock Sage suit, Nick smiled a bit devilishly. The gas wasn’t toxic or meant to knock out. It was a device that used aerosols to spread out particles in a closed space to create an ionization field. With it, Flux could…

Shock Sage fired off a high voltage arc of electricity that contacted with the growing gas cloud and cascaded the electricity across it, permeating the cloud. It created a storm of lightning within the confines of the bay area they were in, basically acting as a stun cloud.

All the mammals within it spasmed and fell unconscious to the floor.

“Can we get out here now?” the tod complained. “This suit is less comfortable than I might have thought. Darn thing is pinching my tail…”

“Affirmative,” the mechanical being concluded in response. “Howlizter is still keeping them occupied above and I had Staccato split off to purge their servers of all info concerning you, as well as anything else I deemed worth noting.”

“Sounds like a party…” Nick mumbled, Jackhammer engaging the lift once more, getting it to go upwards.

“What about the reactor?” Judy asked worriedly. “Isn’t it still a risk to let them operate that?”

“Oh yeah… I wondered about that too,” Flux breathed, waiting for Leo to address that to both of them. The android appeared to have covered all the bases so far, so why not see what it says to that.

“We don’t have the current power reserves as a unit, nor the time, to engage much longer in battle,” the being detailed to them. “Besides, I had Staccato lock down the reactor with multiple codes and a
newly installed layer of security. They won't be able to bring it back online for a while. Right now, they're running off the normal grid with their power. No high power capacity weapons can fire for now.”

The lift reached the upper level once more, with Nick whistling low at the sight of the still groaning armored mammals that Phantom laid out not but a few minutes before.

“Impressive,” he remarked. “Was this you?”

The armored doe pointed to herself in question, nodding slightly in embarrassment.

Several minutes later and the whole group was amassing near the heavily battered and war torn entrance to the facility, with a slightly beat up Howlitzer loading up with all the suits. A recently revitalized Slipstream, with power cores borrowed from Howlitzer, made ready to take off.

Howlitzer engaged its shields to full coverage for the array of suits, stepping through the gap shortly after and allowing Slipstream to jettison them all into the sky.

Only a minor amount of gunfire followed their ascent, with most attending to the injured and stunned from the battle.

“Any deaths?” Flux asked the two. Phantom felt a bit of worry for the mammals she injured, but was unsure of their resulting condition.

“None, thankfully,” the android responded. “If they report any, it is likely they would be lying or some subsequent event afterwards was at fault. Regardless, I took a good portion of their files, leaving behind some notations of my own to encourage them to leave us be.”

“You mean blackmail?” Nick countered.

“Insurance,” Leo corrected.

“Right…” both the fox and bunny murmured to the mechanical being.

“Wait!” Judy piped up in a short panic. “Won’t they be able to find us again if we head back?”

“Highly unlikely, as I’ve released a bug into their system to trip the radar with multiple hostile readings,” the android detailed. “Either they’ll be seeing a garbled scan of the area with various alarms tripped or they’ll simply get annoyed and shut the whole thing down.”

At that, the two mammals stared at one another in silence, hanging off opposite shoulders of Howlitzer in peace. That silence lasted a few minutes, as looks were thrown around to watch for potential tails or incoming fire.

After a misleading flight pattern, the group split apart, flying into various entry points for the tube system that led back into the loading area of the workshop below.

All the suits, excluding those encompassing Nick and Judy, made their way into their assigned alcoves, the power cells ejecting into dispensers to be refueled later.

The face plating from both their suits unlocked and split apart to reveal a gentle smile from the fox and a flickering gaze from the bunny.

“Thank you, Fluff,” Nick spoke calmly. “I know it was probably hard to throw yourself into all
“A little…” she relented. “I should be thanking you though. You saved me, from what I heard.”

“Well… you protected me furst,” the tod fired back, stepping closer to his rabbit.

“But I couldn’t keep you from being shot down… and I…”

Judy squeaked, her prelude to a panicked ranting interrupted by Nick grabbing her and pulling her close to give her a full mouthed kiss. The metal plating of her paws scraped against the chest armor of her fox’s suit, the surprise of the move making her scramble by instinct.

Following the initial shock, Judy fell into the kiss, lifting and turning her head to adjust Nick’s muzzle upward. She then slid her head over the side of his muzzle, giving tentative licks to his jawline.

The red tod gave her his own licks, getting her cheeks and turning her head back to get her nose as well. It made the grey doe giggle slightly, to which she disengaged the suit, letting it unlock and fold away from her. He stepped back and did the same, instantly locking with her lips once they were free again.

They nipped and nibbled at each other’s lips, the duo’s lips creating a flurry of kisses. At furst, it was breathtaking. But now, neither could hardly breathe, paws cupping their respective necks and heads, with mouths pecking away almost aimlessly.

One such aimless peck missed Judy’s waiting lips, his open maw and foremost fangs nipping slightly at the flesh and fur of her neck. Nick was about to back off and apologize profusely…

Until he heard a breathless gasp escape from her lips and into his perked ears, followed by a ragged sound that struck him as borderline between pain and pleasure. It was hard to gauge what her response was, but her paws tightening on his fur and smelling a spike in the scent pouring from her, he ventured to dip his muzzle down once more, gently wrapping his jaw around her neck/shoulder area.

There was a small squeak from the doe as he bit down slowly, feeling her shiver in his arms. A newfound sense of primal attraction bubbled to the surface, making him lick her fur slowly.

“Wait…” she suddenly gasped, pushing at him slightly, but patiently waiting for her fox to release her and step back, his head swimming. He looked at Judy, seeing her own eyes were glazed over, ears and cheeks ablaze.

“I’m… I’m sorry,” he belted out near silently, feeling he may have pushed too far. The bunny smiled tepidly in response.

“It’s not you… I promise,” she comforted. “It’s just… if I didn’t stop you there… I might not have been able to. Know what I mean?”

Nick laughed nervously, rubbing the back of his neck with averted eyes.

“I suppose you’re right. I guess that kind of… ‘venture’… might be a bit too early.”

Judy could only nod in response, stepping closer to pull the fox into one last, long but gentle, kiss.

“I suppose I am interrupting something,” an all too familiar and frustratingly even tone butted in.
The red fox tod turned to give the android a piece of his mind, per the usual…

“Give us a minute!” the grey bunny doe yelled before he could even speak a single syllable.

The two stared at Leo, holding out two plates full of steaming food and wearing one of the ridiculous aprons.

The one worn currently said, *Lettuce be friends.*

“Understood,” the being remarked, promptly turning and leaving the room, to which the door closed behind it.

Nick and Judy closed the distance to finish their moment in peace, with the tod rolling his eyes at a realization and turning to yell, “Stop actually counting down! She meant it metaphorically and you know it!”

There were a few seconds of silence, to which the fox wondered if he was actually wrong about the assumption…

Until Leo spoke, “Countdown halted.”

He leveled his gaze at the closed door, curious if the android was merely patronizing him.

“Oh shut up and kiss me,” Judy vented, grabbing his muzzle and giving him another heated kiss.

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One minute turned to five, more or less, with the two finding Leo waiting outside with plates of delicious looking food.

“Did you do this while the operation was going on?” the doe asked.

“I had some spare processing power, so I decided to ready a meal, seeing as the operation was progressing well,” it explained.

“You can organize an operation, run multiple suits to great effectiveness, break into government systems, and make us dinner, all at the same time, but you can’t crack that series of coded files from the Blue Shard we defeated before?” Nick jibed at the mechanical being, smirking playfully as he ate his meal.

“Actually, I decoded a subset of standard files from them a few hours ago,” Leo plainly stated, causing the two mammals to freeze in mid bite and turn slowly to stare at Leo.

“And?” Nick goaded, a few seconds of silence pervading the room beforepaw.

“I believe I can now explain a few things about who we are dealing with and what they’re intentions are,” Leo divulged. Seeing the lack of care in their following expressions, the fox and bunny resuming eating their meals, it continued by saying, “Aren’t you more curious?”

“We just had a long day and night,” Judy breathed with a long sigh. “So, I think I speak for both of us when I say we’d like to eat before moving from one crisis to another.”

“Should I resume discourse directly after your consumption then?” the robot asked evenly.

Tired and reaching a level of cranky, both Judy and Nick turned to Leo, telling it bluntly and with a mouthful of food, “Shut up.”
Chapter Summary
I have a new piece to debut for this story!
This was commissioned by a lovely fan of mine.... Strange to consider I have fans. Ew...
My ego... it's trying to claw it's way out. lol
Anyways, commissioned by Combat Engineer and created by Ittybittykittytittys. So....
all credit to them for this. I am quite excited to have this made for me and it oddly
enough emulates something I hope to unveil eventually.

“Are you sure this is alright?” Judy spoke up from next to Nick, the two walking through the streets,
with the former darting her eyes around as if they could be assaulted any minute and the latter
making his stride as if he hadn’t a care in the world.

The fox paused in his step and turned to face the rabbit’s darting eyes, saying, “Am I sure what is
alright? Walking through the streets so soon after the government made us out to be enemies and
held me captive long enough to know my face? Telling Leo to ‘shove it’ for a day so we can have
our furst date? Or are you talking about going out on the aforementioned date like we’re normal
mammals with needs and desires to connect to one another without dramatically timed
interventions?”

The grey doe’s face went disturbingly blank, ears and nose twitching slightly at some prospects she
hadn’t thought of coming to the surface. If she wasn’t aware of those possibilities before… she sure
was now.

“...and now my concern feels extremely stupid,” she barely squeaked out, a blush lining her cheeks,
paws fiddling with her short dress. “I was actually wondering if this dress is really alright for me to
wear. I don’t usually wear such… girly stuff.”

Nick sighed, rubbing the back of his neck as he considered her form. What he saw stunned him into
silence and sparked a most predatory flame within his soul. Judy was dressed in slim fitting grey
leggings and a navy blue long sleeve dress shirt, with a flared skirt that stopped just below the curve
of her hips. Her knees pressed together, one arm was raised to rub the elbow of the other, Judy’s violet eyes flickering between him and the ground.

“You know there is a limit to how cute you can look,” the tod remarked with a deadpan expression, trying not to let her see how she was making his heart beat so rapidly in response to her look.

Her ears stiffened and expression hardened as her previously timid demeanor evaporated in an instant, her paws on her hips and eyes trained on the red fox as she stated, “You know how that word is for bunnies.”

A small smirk curled at Nick’s muzzle, eyes flitting downward to see the bunny’s foot thumping away in irritation.

He leaned in to one of her upright ears and whispered in a soft voice, though confident tone, “I wasn’t calling a bunny cute… just you, Judy.”

The fox then stood back up to watch the aftermath of his mention. The effects were not disappointing, to say the least. Her ears fell back, the doe nibbling on her lower lip. Her nose even twitched as her cheeks returned to blushing as they had before.

“You suck,” she mumbled out, continuing to walk alongside him again. Nick grinned broadly, taking some twisted pleasure in her frustrating misery of both hating and enjoying the implication of calling her ‘cute’.

“Aw, I love you, too, Fluff,” the fox tod teased, bringing a paw up to rake a his claws along her back. She shivered, ears perking straight up as she threw a paw in his direction to swat him away.

“Just tell me what we’re doing in Sahara Square in the middle of the day?” she vented with a slight frustration lining her tone. “They keep this place pretty hot, even if we’re falling into winter, so most things here are only really busy or open for the nightlife.”

“Did you just pun?” Nick asked, raising an eyebrow in question. Judy made a pouty face and stepped in line next to him, grabbing his paw wordlessly. “So fiery today. I like it.”

The two walked along the sun soaked path, the warmth of the sidewalk being a welcome change from the chilling wind that blew across the landscape. While the climate wall permeated the region with an ample amount of heat, opposing winds would often offset the atmospheric conditions. With a cloudless sky and beaming sun, the wind gusted freely upon the sandy terrain and streets.

Giving the moment its due silence, taking in the view of a blue sky and the numerous buildings, sand dunes in the distance, the two said nothing. Their paws clasped together tightly, warmth pervading each of them from that spot and spreading further.

Sucking in a breath to break the silence, the red fox tod spoke, “We’re going to the Palm Hotel.”

“Oh… and prey tell… what will we do there?” the bunny doe asked, her anxiousness and overactive imagination causing her to slow in her pace for a brief moment.

“Lunch,” Nick answered rather bluntly. “They have this place at the top that’s called the Palm Top Grille. Very good food and exceptional view.”

“Wait!” Judy exclaimed, nearly pulling her paw away from her fox, until he tightened his grip. “You mean the ritzy place on top the tower that takes most people months to get a reservation?”

Nodding, the tod gently pulled her forward to keep a pace, continuing their journey towards the
standalone tower of the district.

Resuming her barely answered inquiry, the rabbit said, “How in the blue blazes did you get a reservation?”

“I helped build the thing,” he began, “Both literally and by funds given towards its construction. Because of that, I have a free pass of sorts to reserve a table when I so please.”

“But the place was built over fifteen years ago,” Judy fired back. “They are still honoring that agreement?”

“Quite so,” Nick mentioned. “It’s not like I ever really use that favor. This would be the first time.”

“Then why even help build it?”

“You see those leaves coming out of the top?” the fox asked in passing, raising his paw to point at the top of the large tree-like tower. “I helped to construct them using a new form of construction material, taken from Leo’s many designs. It’s nothing overly worrisome to give a civilization, but it allowed me some much needed revenue and gave me an opportunity to work directly on the building to tweak things towards some specifications I needed. Those leaves basically act in correspondence with one another and with a hidden central processing core to relay sensor data back to the house. It’s like a strange satellite array.”

Unsure how to respond, Judy simply tried to think of other things, looking down at her outfit… then gasped.

“I can’t go to such a fancy place dressed like this!” she exclaimed. “That place is known for being formal and very exclusive.”

Nick only rolled his eyes, grinning gently as he scoffed in all good nature, “Trust me. It won’t matter to them. We’ll have a private venue. It’s kinda like box seats at a sporting event.”

Without waiting for her to soak in the information or come down from her almost frantic reaction, the fox pulled his girlfriend along. Her tepid squeaks and minor complaints fell on deaf ears, the two approaching the grand entrance at the base of the tree tower.

Judy’s voice was quelled and face blank upon seeing the imposing structure so closely. The base of the tower flared out elegantly, even if decorated similarly to the main police precinct, with tall blue panes reflecting the high noon sunlight. She forced herself into a more relaxed pace, not wanting to look too frantic next to her fox. He, on the other paw, seemed exceptionally calm. Looking upon his smiling muzzle, she began to wonder if he wasn’t a bit excited.

The enormous glass doors opened automatically, with the bunny being overly conscious of those around her. Mammals small and large made passing glances at the mismatched pair, their faces barely hiding the range of emotions. Some were doing double takes emanating silent confusion. Others didn’t bother hiding the disdain they had, making grunts and scoffs at their appearance.

“Ignore them,” the fox tod whispered in her lowered ears, his paws pushing her through the doors and into the lobby. “They scoff at what they do not understand.”

“Oh… I… sure,” Judy mumbled, unsure how to properly react.

It wasn’t like she was given much room mentally to do so anyways, what with the new view leaving her in awe. The lobby of the Palm Hotel was rather simplistic in its design, yet resoundingly brilliant
to look at. There was the feel of an oasis in the middle of a desert, with the walls a sandy blonde color and designs that looked like ancient cave drawings and spirals. The ceiling appeared to be a parabolic dome, with a large, lush tree filling the space all the way towards the top of the room. The wide trunk sat rooted in the center of the room, a receptionist/concierge desk surrounding the base and roots.

Coming out of a knot in the trunk, several feet up, was an outpouring of water that fed into a small reservoir. It then turned into a small waterfall that allowed a small rushing noise to fill the vast chamber. The noise helped soothe the bunny a bit, her nervous tail and nose twitching settling down.

Letting go of her paw, the red tod reached into a breast pocket and slipped out a card. The grey rabbit could only catch a silvery glint before the tremendously imposing rhino attending the concierge gave a polite “ahem” to signify she noticed them.

“Might I be able to assist you?” she asked, her voice as sweet as honey. Judy wondered if it was forced, considering the already ample amount of attention they were getting in the negative for being a fox and bunny in each other’s company.

Maybe it was just her being paranoid.

“We're here for a table at the Palm Top Grille,” Nick smoothly replied, presenting the card he had a hold on in full view now, as if it were a beautiful flower. “This should suffice instead of a reservation.”

The rhino, whose name tag said ‘Eve’, took the card gently, considering it was small enough for a fox to hold but miniscule for her digits. She placed it on a large glass surface, to which laser readers scanned the top and bottom of the card for verification.

There was a ping, with Eve scrunching her snout at her screen. Back and forth she looked between the screen and Nick, looking confused, but ultimately shrugging and giving the two a polite grin.

“Right this way,” the female rhino mentioned with a guiding arm, pointing towards an elevator. “One of our attendants will take you to the top and get you situated. Since your coming in without forewarning, I am obligated to mention that your meal might take a while to prepare, depending upon your choices.”

“Oh, don’t worry,” the fox spoke with charm. “We’re in no hurry today.” He picked up his card once more, pocketing it quickly and pulling out his wallet. He thumbed a couple bills out and laid them on the counter. “Thank you for your help.”

The two walked away, where a well dressed goat attendant joined them to call the elevator, with Eve doing a double take between the tod and the bills she was given. Judy saw her gather herself and quickly pull the money out of sight, a bright smile of pleasant surprise lining her face.

The doe remained rather disturbingly quiet the whole ride up, noticing the goat was purposefully keeping his gaze from going over the two of them. When the doors opened, some multitudinous levels up, the goat left the elevator.

“This way please,” he called out softly. The two followed him into a welcoming foyer with varying sizes in seats. “Feel free to relax here while I grab an attendant for your services.”

Seeing the goat ram round the corner briskly, the doe let out a breath in relief. She felt like she was far beyond where she should be, with the whole hotel being out of her normal affordability bracket.

“What’s wrong, Fluff?” Nick inquired of her, laying himself out on the nearest seat, arms and legs
spread out, in the most improper manner befitting the establishment.

“How are you so calm being here?” she vented breathlessly. “It feels like everyone is looking at us.”

“Probably,” he replied evenly. “We are an odd and rare coupling. Many mammals might see something wrong, but despite their disapproval, this place isn’t likely the place to make any disagreements known. I mean… the owner is a Lion whose mate is an antelope. So… again… not the best place to make those ideals known.”

The bunny’s ears perked up, with her finding the new information oddly comforting, as well as able to settle her nerves.

“The owner of what exactly? The building or the restaurant?”

“Both,” the red tod barked back with a laugh. “Rather boisterous and a fast talker. Makes the mayor seem soft spoken when you get him on the right topics.”

Nick patted the seat next to him, goading her to curl up against him. The grey doe was contemplating his offer…

When a professionally dressed lion walked in, smiling broadly.

“Is that the owner?” the bunny asked her boyfriend simply. He shook his head in the negative, returning the grin.

“This, my dear, is the cousin of the owner, Wesley right?” Nick responded, turning at the last mention towards the lion.

“And maitre’d to this fine restaurant!” Wesley boomed enthusiastically.

“Oh really?” The fox questioned with a sly smirk. “Feels like yesterday you were a kit hanging by your uncle's tail at meetings. You've grown up quite well.”

“And you don't look like you've aged a day,” the lion fired back with a blunt expression, the look melting gradually back into his former grin.

“Well you're only as old as you feel,” the tod said with an ambiguous shrug. “And I figured, while I'm at it, why not look the part? So… how are you? And your uncle?”

“Both of us are well, but, for the sake of your date, how about I show you to your table? We'll catch up another time.”

The red fox looked back to Judy, who waved awkwardly. He then nodded excitedly and the two followed Wesley from the foyer waiting area.

Entering into an opening, the restaurant’s music and occasional chatter could be heard. They were on a large walkway overlooking the main seating area for the establishment, with their path leading to another elevator.

“This will take us up to private level,” the lion explained in short.

Another elevator trip and a short walk through an arching hallway later, and the fox and bunny were escorted to a private booth, looking exactly like Nick has said. It was more elegant than his initial impression implied, but it was like a much fancier box seat at a sports stadium.

The room was sized for them, along with appropriate table and chairs. She assumed there were
rooms of varying sizes with booths to cater to all types of mammals.

In theirs, the walls were a aptly decorated much like the lobby, with green and sandy colors present, as well as plants lining the rooms edges.

On the far side from the door, a wide, curved, window dominated the wall, giving them a wondrous view of the water bordering the Sahara district and the green landscape beyond it.

“This is beautiful!” Judy squealed in awe, bringing a refreshed smile to Nick’s muzzle.

“Ah, she speaks,” Wesley stated, stepping in. “Do forgive my earlier rudeness, but I failed to properly introduce myself to you, miss.”

“Oh! Right,” the doe spoke in embarrassment at her lack of engagement before. “I’m Judy Hopps.”

“Wesley Shrivens,” the lion offered back, extending a paw and kneeling to be at a height more comfortable for Judy to shake it. She grasped his paw firmly and gave it a tug. “I do hope to see you two around more often from now on. To entice such a custom, your experience today will be gratis, on me.”

Nick barked out a laugh, saying, “Oh well. More money to tip the staff with.”

“I’m sure they’ll appreciate it,” Wesley replied with a bow. “For now, I leave you to settle in. When you are ready, there is a panel to call for someone and make your orders. Menus are on the table but do not be afraid to order off menu. We do specialty orders and our chefs do so much revel in a change of pace and a challenge.”

With that, the lion stepped out of the room and closed the door softly, allowing the two to take in the view and their booth.

Judy seemed to melt somewhat, finally relaxing enough to look around and gape freely.

“What in the brownies?” she breathed.

“Hey!” he chirped back defensively. “Don’t take the name of the holiest of desserts in vain.”

The doe almost felt a true twinge of guilt, until seeing the playful charming smirk plastered on Nick’s muzzle. She took to elbowing him gently in the ribs.

“Jerk.”

“Shall we sit?” the fox asked, barely waiting for an answer before picking the grey bunny up and setting her in a chair next to one he took for himself.

“Apparently, I needed not answer that,” came her snarky retort.

“Well, we finally have time to ourselves… mostly,” Nick began. “I intend to use this time to appreciate and get to know you more.”

“Aww,” was all that Judy could really muster in response, reaching out to clasp his paw in hers. There was a moment of hesitation though, when tickling arcs of purple energy connected the space between their paws. Nick closed the gap with little lag in his reaction, the energy lighting their fur aglow, with their digits intertwining. “Well… that was something. Know what happened?”

The most sincere of smiles spread across the red fox tod’s muzzle, his eyes losing themselves within her own gaze as he spoke, “Emotional resonance.”
“What?” came her inquiry, voice soft as she looked at their paws clasped together. “The term for invoking emotions through writings to a reader?”

“Well… sort of. Leo used the term as ‘the nearest applicable means of describing the potential circumstance’ when he explained this a short while back,” detailed the tod. “The longer version is that our emotional states are synchronized. Whatever you are feeling in this moment… I’m feeling something so similar that this is the result. Our power is manifesting as such because we both are feeling something that draws out more power.”

“You mean…” Judy started, unsure how to finish her statement.

“Shards can draw forth more power, based on their emotions,” Nick continued in her wake, as if to answer her unspoken question. “It’s like a valve, to which one entices a reaction within themselves to coax more power from themselves. Anger, hatred, despair. The negative side of all this can be easy enough to funnel a Shard’s power through. It’s easy to hate those that stand in your way. Easy to be angry at an enemy you barely know, but know they aren’t on your side.”

“So, negative feelings are more powerful?”

“Absolutely not,” the fox rebuked bluntly. “They are easier to use. Easier to give in to.”

There was a silence that permeated the air, dragging on for seconds. Nick’s paw separated from Judy’s, his claws dragging the palm of hers and those tendrils of purple energy sparking between them with renewed force.

“Joy, hope…. And love,” He resumed. “Those emotions are far more powerful, but difficult to draw upon unless the target of those emotions are within reach. That’s something I never understood or cared to know about. Leo though, told me that our situation could make us powerful, not because we have the most powerful recorded Shard infused between us, but because we share the power and have become lovers. Our growing emotional dependence on one another. Our need to protect the other. The love we have come to know for one another.”

“You’ve never struck me as one to care about that,” the grey doe voiced with a faltering expression.

“I didn’t. Not really…”

His expression softened somewhat, eyes glazing over in thought.

“…until you saved me.”

On the last syllable, with Judy making a small gasp, Nick leaned in and kissed her gently upon her open mouth, their noses touching. A soft hum left the grey bunny’s mouth, her nose twitching excitedly against her fox’s.

Just as suddenly as the kiss started, it ended. The red fox backed off and smirked wide, getting up to grab a menu from the table and open it up.

“Why don’t we make an effort to make a decision concerning our lunch?” he asked her, pulling her by their still clasped paws to sit in his lap.

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Nearly twenty minutes, along with two glasses each of a choice wine, later, and the two were laughing over Nick telling a couple old tales of Leo’s past misunderstandings.
“So, we’re watching the news… and Leo is fixated to the screen,” the red tod recounted. “I leave to get something to drink and come back to the anchor talking about a gathering of clowns that was creeping out a neighbor, who called the police. It was basically a joke piece to give viewers a laugh. Anyways, Leo misunderstood and asked me why people were afraid of clowns. ‘Are they not a species like any other?’ He asked me.”

The two began to laugh, with Nick trying to calm himself well enough to finish.

“‘The poor robot thought clowns were a species and not a type of profession.”

Judy clapped a paw over her mouth to keep her giggles from escaping, unsuccessfully.

A soft chime sounded from the door, alerting both mammals.

“Your orders are here,” a voice firmly informed them.

“Come right in,” Judy mentioned, loud enough for the mammal to hear. The door clicked open and a platypus entered. Fox and bunny were stunned into silence. The doe had seen a couple of them before, but only from afar and never for long. The strange anatomy of them was… disarming to say the least.

The name tag said ‘Perry’ when their eyes raked over it.

The mammal grabbed a serving dish and grabbed two covered plates off of it, sliding them gently onto the table and uncovering them. Steam billowed off the two dishes, looking like it could be compared to the thickness in fume to smoke from a fire.

As soon as Nick gave the platypus a few large denomination bills, he made to leave with a slightly stunned expression, not wanting to outright bolt, but briskly making it through the door and closing it as gently as hurried paws would allow.

“What… did you give him?” the bunny asked with a raised brow.

“Oh… he might have doubled his income this week,” the fox said with a lopsided smirk. “How about we dig in and focus on us?” His expression fell slightly, when he noticed that the grey doe already had the same idea and began stuffing her face, eyes darting up to look at him like she was caught with a paw in the cookie jar. Slurping a noodle from her pasta, she cleared her throat to speak.

“Way ahead of you,” the grey rabbit mumbled through another mouthful.

Barking out a short laugh, Nick passed over the obvious chance to make fun of his girlfriend and began to dig in with the same fervor that Judy showed.

The two let out the strangest noises during their intake, on the brink of laughter every so often with how freely the two were enjoying their meal, all pretense at decorum indicative of the establishment dropped.

“You are something else entirely, Judy Hopps.”

The doe paused, looking up with shining amethyst eyes.

“Oh? Mind telling me why…. Or how you mean that?”

The red fox raised a paw and made to swallow his latest bite, giving his chest a thump as he tried to speak further.
“I’ve lived a life longer than most can muster and plenty might be envious of,” he began. “But... you have brought more meaning and energy to my life in the last several weeks than I’ve ever had hope of achieving in the past three hundred years combined. I’ve felt like I’ve been stagnantly stuck in the same loop for so long, I didn’t even know I could feel this warm smolder settling in my soul. It’s… comforting, to say the least. Thank you.”

Judy stopped eating for a moment, taking everything in, a pervasive blush heating her cheeks. Her ears fell, her paws running over them and slicking them back.

“You... You’re welcome?” the bunny spoke in slightly nervous confusion. “It’s good to know I made a difference in someone’s life. Coming from a family with so many siblings... it’s sometimes really difficult to feel like you’re special and not just another pair of ears in a crowd.”

“You literally have the power of a shining star within you,” the tod laughed. “Hard to get more special than that.”

“It’s strange to consider that all that power resides in us...” Judy mumbled, her perspective changing to look at their predicament from a new angle. They had the energy of the most powerful force of destruction in the known universe contained within their bodies. “Will we ever run out of this power?”

“Ha! That’s a question I’ve been asking myself and Leo for years,” the red fox said with a light chuckle. “Let’s just say that our ‘battery’ is unquantifiable in its scope and there isn’t any true way to figure out how long it’ll last. From information I’ve learned from Leo though, Reds can last for thousands of years, Blues some tens to hundreds of thousands, and Novas are the vastly unknown factor. All of them, excepting us, have their power shown in green hues. Don’t ask me the mechanics of that reasoning. I don’t know. But we... we’re a hue that has never been known to be associated with a Shard thus far. For all I know, neither of us will ever be allowed to run out of this energy.”

“How do you even know I’ll be around that long?” she questioned.

“Oh... didn’t Leo tell you?” Nick fired back evenly, smiling. “He told me that his scans of you most recently show a growth and emission of energy that mimics my own. Our repeated ‘Shifts’ have been stabilizing and balancing the power between us. We still need each other, but like when you were able to deftly work your suit without needing me, in order to rescue me... we don’t have to Shift to fight all the time. You could and should have the same regenerative abilities I have and predisposition of longevity.”

“Alright... enough of that,” Judy stated with a curt wave of her paw. “As much as I would love to discuss and take that in... Can we decide on a dessert? I think i have a little more room.”

“Certainly, Fluff.”

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Bursting through the door, two mammals were in a tight embrace, though still making many attempts at pulling each other closer. They fumbled and stumbled through the threshold, somehow remaining upright with all the haphazard steps and unbalanced leanings.

Nick wasn’t planning on it, but with Judy getting rather tipsy, he chose to bother Wesley to find them a room to recuperate in for the time being. Suffice it to say that the doe was rather affectionate and forward when she felt they were alone enough to release what little remained of her inhibitions.

The tod realized he wasn’t going to win that bout and gave in.
Making their way through the room, they fell onto the bed, side by side and breathing heavily. Their muzzles were within millimeters of one another, ready to resume their previous kissing session.

Judy took the initiative, as per her usual tendency, reaching out to stroke the fur on the side of Nick’s muzzle. She scratched with her stubby claws, letting him guide her with his own head tilts and rolls. A rumbling purr emanated from the fox’s throat, the bunny’s smile widening as she dug her paw into the fluffy white fur under his snout.

“Is it wrong of me to think this makes you extremely cute?” the slightly buzzed bunny mumbled to her boyfriend.

He let out a low growl, rising and turning over to grab the doe by the wrists and pin her down. She let out a squeak and pulled her knees up, nose twitching and breath ragged.

“And now?” the red tod growled enticingly in her ear, watching the blush work its way through her ears and cheeks, his nose brushing over the insides of her limp ears, giving a tentative lick and sniff now and then.

Judy didn’t fight back, nor give any indication that she was displeased by the events. In fact, she arched her back to lean up and kiss his neck gently, giggling as she settled back onto the bed.

“Very much so,” the grey rabbit spoke. “What are you gonna do about it?”

Nick dipped his muzzle and clamped his maw around her neck and shoulder with controlled force. A surprised gasp escaped Judy’s own mouth, followed by a long and breathy sigh, her teeth biting into her lip to keep from letting herself make any further noise. Especially ones she might embarrass herself with and regret later.

Her legs stretched out, shaky moans slipping from her lips. Upon reflexively trying to free her wrists, the red fox immediately released her, to which she gripped his shirt from the front and pulled him into a passionate kiss.

“I blame you for this,” the doe voiced almost breathlessly.

“If being blamed gets me this treatment…” he started between kisses, “do please blame me for things more often.”

They were now locked together, rolling across the bed repeatedly. Neither were really trying to be on top or bottom, but the pure instinct to tussle with one another had them in a playful conflict that went back and forth.

After what felt like several minutes of the tussle between the two, they finally released one another, collapsing on their sides on the bed, facing one another. With their breathing heavy and chests heaving, fox and bunny both began laughing in spite of the mood they portrayed only moments before.

“Today has been wonderful,” spoke the doe, her voice low and tired sounding.

“Good to hear it,” Nick replied in a whisper, reaching out to stroke his girlfriend’s head gently. She let out a cooing sigh, eyelids fluttering and closing slowly. The fox blinked, slightly stunned and fairly confused.

“Did… did you just fall asleep?” came his surprised and reflexive inquiry. Her slow and deep breathing, as well as the way she began to curl up for warmth, told him the silent answer he already knew.
Pulling his paw away, he noticed the tendrils of purple energy once more, arching from his claw tips to the fur on Judy’s head and ears. It did comfort him to a great degree that their emotional states, even after going to sleep, were in some synchronized state.

Grabbing her paw and pulling her in towards his chest, the fox allowed her the reprise for rest. Whether due to his warmth or some subconscious sense to be closer to him, the grey bunny doe shimmied closer, burying herself within his embrace.

“Heh… try not to stay out for too long,” Nick joked, more for his own benefit than her ears. “I really wanted to explore the city more with you.”

As if by proxy of her own state, the fox’s eyes began to grow heavy, his own mind fading into sleep with their last pervading image being that of the rabbit before him.
Revelations

Sitting in a room, surrounded by darkness, Judy took everything in. Sitting next to her was Nick, another blip in the pervading darkness.

The two of them were hooked into the simulator once more, though with far better calibration. The doe's previous neural obstacles with the program were no longer an issue. When asking Leo how he fixed them, the robot merely said it was from basing it on a known control sample.

A new entity materialized, taking on the form of a glowing orb that expanded and contracted in a green mass.

It pulsed in its glow as it spoke, Leo's voice cascading through the darkness, "Neural input seems stable. Ready for briefing."

"And why not do this in the real world?" the fox questioned with a cross armed stare.

"The data requires some context, as well as some compression transmissions into your brains," explained the android. "Normal dialogue would be insufficient."

"Alright then," Judy piped up, not wanting to debate further. "Compress away."

"Understood."

The red fox gave her an unamused look, raising an eyebrow, then turning back to yawn in mocking at the mechanical being.

A brilliant light emanated forth from Leo's strange visage, coalescing around them into a system. Three stars rested at its center, rotating around an invisible axial point. By the grey doe's count, there was a representation of twenty-one planetary masses, with two asteroid rings to accompany them.

"I've seen this before…" the tod sighed. "Do you have anything new or not?"

"Patience is a virtue," the android detailed. "Besides, dear Judy hasn't had the pleasure of seeing this yet."

Watching intently, the system cycled through the events that led to the forced supernova and subsequent implosion, to which a craft followed the dark matter into the wormhole created.

"I have been able to delve into the data standard for what we recovered from the Blue Shard's suit and backtracked pieces of the information to correlate what happened after I and the Shard was sent through the wormhole three hundred years ago," the robot began to explain. "It appears that after my entrance and landing on Earth, the system was pretty much wiped of all living matter. Suffice it to say that the battle ended that day. At least on that front. There was still a vast war being fought, though the scope of which was not being focused on the now non-existent stars."

"What about the Blue Shard?" the rabbit asked.

"I'll be getting to that," Leo replied, the simulation changing to show a representation of multiple fleets battling in space. "It turns out that our enemy now is actually an assimilative coalition of many civilizations that destroyed enough of the others to force them into subservience. It took a little under a hundred Earth years to do so, with the others scattering or becoming absorbed. The next couple hundred years were then spent almost religiously trying to find a way to reopen the wormhole using
scavenged technology. Obviously, it worked well enough, though they can't send in massive armies. Instead, they send in pods with a predetermined amount of drones, built to survive the turbulent conditions of the vortex."

"And the Shard?" Nick inquired, bolstering his girlfriend's question before.

"That Blue Shard was unfortunately a product of circumstance," the android mentioned. "This coalition, whose name can only be loosely translated as 'The Sun Children', was one of almost devout religious foundation, using indoctrination to make the masses follow them and turn any Shards that turned up into loyal soldiers for their cause. Essentially, the anthropomorphic extraterrestrial reptilian was labeled by the system as a 'Host Factor'. The being was apparently one that was infused with a Blue Shard some hundreds of years ago and found by this coalition. Infusing it with cybernetics and using means of indoctrination, they were able to turn it into a warrior against others."

"Anthro… what now?" the doe voiced tentatively. Her fox turned to her with a caring smile.

"Space Lizard basically," he denoted.

"Ah. Continue…"

"Right. So, both Shards sent through were greatly weakened by the wormhole they reopened. Going into such a virulent anomaly is greatly energy costly. My own ship was stripped of most of its power, whereas I was unfortunately made to crash land in the water. I surmise that their own efforts to enter the reopened wormhole have led to similar power constraints. It was likely why the Blue Shard was weakened on arrival."

"He seemed plenty tough to me," the tod mentioned with a shrug.

"That is a great flaw in your thought processes," the machine chastised his quarry. "You have barely tapped into the potential you both hold, and as I now understand… what you could hold, if the newer information I have retrieved is correct."

"And?" goaded Judy.

"This coalition has loaded quite the informational hub into the Shard that you extracted this from, whether as a means of recruitment or indoctrination of your own planet, I can't amply attest. I can't vouch for its validity either, seeing as my own cognitive functions can't definitively refute these claims at this time."

A pause left the two mammals holding their simulated breaths as the android processed their reactions and came up with an appropriate follow up.

"It appears that two key pieces of information have dominated the primary mission of the Shards and Drones sent out way," Leo kept explaining. "One is that they label your Shard as the first of its kind, being able to regenerate its power with any radiation or forms of energy that come into contact with you. The second…"

"Regenerate?!" Nick shouted. "You mean this power in me… in us… will never run out?"

"I have been able to see some effects within you two to assume it could be possible, but not definitive," replied the robot. "However, my theories conclude that you can only draw in so much energy in your current forms. The energy you can and have expunged is not so easily replaced as saying it refills to a 'maximum' promptly after using said energy, but I have noticed that certain energy waves seemed to be nullified by the two of you. Take for instance neutrinos emitted by your
sun. over 99.9999999 percent of them pass through you and the Earth without being retained in any matter. They are so small that it is like firing a bullet into space and expecting to hit a planet out in the cosmos. Your bodies, however, absorb nearly 57 percent of these particles, along with a much higher percentage of other such energy particles, thusly charging your Shard."

"Strange that we haven't burst into flames at any point," Judy snarked.

"It is because of the dark matter within you both. It is acting in an almost extradimensional fashion, storing the energy in an infinitely complex pocket space folded within both of you. It is the universe's form of a near perfect battery."

The fox sighed, having put his head in his paws, "What... was the second thing?"

The glowing orb that was Leo seemed to shimmer, something that the rabbit took as uncertainty as it spoke, "The second thing is that they are saying they can extract the power from you and transplant it into others."

"I thought that wasn't possible..." the grey doe voiced softly, letting the robot come up with a response.

"By all information I have been able to review, as well as investigate from the data retrieved, it shouldn't be, but as I stated previously, I can't definitively refute these claims. I do not know the extents of their technology, nor the limits of their research concerning the subject. I am limited in my ability to analyze and need more data to potentially put the theory to rest, but the fact of the matter is that false or true, the Sun Children must at least be using this as a means to drive their people to attempt to claim your power for themselves."

"If they can't even survive the trip, how do they expect to take us on?" the fox tod piped up. "Aren't they getting some sort of reports that their methods aren't working?"

"Actually, they aren't," confirmed Leo bluntly. "From the data here, it appears that these units are being sent at regular intervals and given orders to bolster the invasion until future endeavors can be enacted. Apparently, the wormhole acts only as a one way trip, with physical launches being the only way to make it. Signals or any kind of communicative waves are so distorted by the vortex inside, that nothing comprehensible is able to be retrieved from either end."

"Future endeavors?" the two mammals spoke together in question, looking at each other with small smiles.

"I couldn't decrypt all of the data as of yet," resumed the mechanical being. "I was only able to so far open up all the standard protocols of data. Anything further will require much more time."

"How much time?" the red tod voiced.

"Unclear," came the even reply.

"I thought you said there was going to be data compression or something," the small rabbit voiced.

"I have already done so during the course of our conversation," detailed Leo. "I was able to compartmentalize and compress the data necessary to relay to both of you into memory engrams that can be recalled like latent memories. Drone suit schematics and weaknesses, Shard weaponry and tactics, and as much data as I could incorporate into your minds about the enemy we apparently face. It would appear that the 'leader' of this coalition is actually a council dictatorship of three other such Nova Shards, if the information is accurate, accruing power and tracking other Shards for their army to expand across their galaxy, as well as others."
"Well then," began the fox as he stood up from his sitting position. "I'm guessing we're done here then?"

"Wait…" Judy voiced in trepidation. "Are we really able to do this ourselves?"

"Of course we can," Nick fired back with a confident grin. It faltered as he saw the bunny's ears seem to wither and fall behind her head. "What's wrong?"

"Besides this welcome break, you have been fighting these enemies on an almost weekly basis with success that is well deserved… but not always certain," detailed the doe. "From what we were shown and what I'm gathering from everything that was 'compressed' into our minds, these guys have vast resources that far outweigh us. This is a battle of not only skill, but endurance. If they figure out a way to send more than some weekly allotment of forces… we could be facing a much worse force over time. I may be new to all of this and haven't fought for long, but even your intellect and resources can only go so far with just the three of us. We need help."

A moment of silence passed, spanning what felt like several minutes.

"She is right," Leo's voice called out. "We should consider the Expansion and Citizen Soldiers Protocols soon enough."

"I know…" the tod relented with a paw scratching the back of his neck. "...I know."

"Expansion and Citizen Soldiers?" the grey bunny inquired curiously.

"Since we can now extract Shard power and store it rather efficiently," the robot started to explain, "a few new options are now open to us, as opposed to before. The former of which is a limited manufacture and expenditure of weapons and defenses against the Drones using Shard power cores to fuel them. The latter is a means to support the former, using liaisons from outside our group to keep watch over our technology and possibly even aid us in their own suits. Automated or stationary defenses can only do so much. Also, I can only simultaneously run a few suits at a time by remote operation before functions and necessary responses become slowed and more simplistic."

"Oh… I don't suppose you have a list of candidates?" the doe asked in revelation.

In answer to her question, a floating screen of names and other such data scrolled across her view. Names, personality traits, occupation, as well as inferred levels of trustworthiness were noted in all the screen, with it showing a much larger list than she expected.

"That's… a lot more names than I might have expected," she murmured.

"Three hundred seventy four names to be exact," Leo supplied for her. The doe's surprised face said it all, including 'How did you come up with that list?'.

In reply to her unasked inquiry, the being stated, "Social media has made so many decisions concerning this list much easier. You might be stunned to see what people will post thinking no one cares. All of it helps my ability to gauge certain personalities for our purposes…"

"Woah! Wait!" she yelled out in shock, pointing to a name on the list. "Essie is on here? As much as I love the girl… she's an incorrigible gossip and I doubt she could keep our secret. No offense to her…"

"On the contrary," the robot refuted evenly, "I've been monitoring her fairly closely. Despite her nature for talking almost overly much, she is quite apt at keeping secrets when asked and has never leaked details for a case in her course as an officer. Her training and discipline could make for a
valuable addition."

"And you have that flipping manure shoveling Adam on here? Seriously?" she further griped. "I don't think I need to remind anyone what he did." Judy crossed her arms and let out a sighing huff of disapproval, to which Nick rested a paw on her shoulder.

"I know he did us wrong, Fluff…” he began, the doe looking away from his eyes, "but the guy actually isn't that bad. Don't get me wrong though. Next time I see the guy, I'm giving him a slug across the muzzle. Anyways, I believe his help will be quite exceptional as means of leverage when it comes to the government."

"I guess…” the rabbit breathed, still averting her stare from her boyfriend. "But if anything happens, I'm not pretending to like him."

"Deal,” the tod automatically agreed. "Besides, it's not like this is happening right now, but as an option for the near…. Ish… future."

"I'll keep that in mind."

Having left the confines of the simulator, both Judy and Nick divided to keep themselves busy with whatever respective tasks they wished. The doe began to wonder what she could possibly do, doubling back immediately to trail her fox in kind.

"Oh," he breathed in mild surprise. "You didn't have something you wanted to do?"

"Watching you work seemed a fun thing to do," the bunny replied softly. "Is that a problem?"

The red tod raised an eyebrow, saying, "Not really, but it's going to be boring. If you won't have any complaints, then feel free to watch. I was just about to tweak a new suit like thing."

She wordlessly followed her tod, letting him lead the way into a room with tools and other strange devices around.

"So… whatcha workin on?"

He ambled over to a table and picked up something that looked like a chest plate, though a bit too bulky to be usable for the fox.

"Well," he began, "your Lagomorph suit…"

"Don't call it that."

"...and your recent rescue of my sorry tail got me thinking about certain situations where I might need to respond more effectively and have something that a suit could easily wrap around. So, I started work on my own underlayer suit."

Nick pressed the plate to his chest, the device gleaming with red energy and splitting apart. Armor plating encircled and wrapped around the fox's torso, with other more flexible looking parts cascading out and partially covering his legs and arms.

Instead of covering his entire body, the suit left his paws, feet, and head out in the open, with small openings here and there. A small shimmer covered the portions of his body that the armor didn't.

"Shielding?" she asked simply. The red fox nodded. "Why is the lighting red?"
"I'm not sure yet about how well our power couples with this thing, so I have it on a lower refinement, thus mimicking a Red Shard's output," Nick explained. "I don't need it to do much anyways. In a pinch, It'll do well to protect me until we can get to our suits or them to us."

"It looks like it works to me, so why are you working on it?" Judy asked.

Disengaging the suit, letting all of it retract back into an amorphous chest plate, he set the suit down, then looked through his tools.

"Let's just say that I'm working on getting the kinks to a minimum," the tod responded. "It only forms to my body about eighty percent of the time while stationary. Even less when I'm moving."

"And…" began the rabbit.

"What happens when… it doesn't work? Uh… let's just say that certain… areas… get a little pinched."

Judy sat back and watched him tinker, resigning herself to a silence that felt almost reluctant, but she also didn't want to disturb Nick in the spirit of his mechanical prowess.

"Like your groin?" the doe finally decided to ask. The fox lowered his head, nearly dropping his tools as he seemed to be stunned by her strange bluntness.

It took him a few seconds to collect himself, whereas he responded, "I was talking about the base of my tail… but I can't say you're wrong on that point either." His head swayed ambiguously from side to side upon saying the last bit.

"So, this suit will be something you wear out and about, letting your other suits wrap around and interlock with it?" the grey bunny resumed in inquiry.

"More or less," he answered in kind, continuing his work. "I can wear this around without much problem, as it is something I can keep under clothes. I've asked Leo to modify your current suit to emulate the same."

"I wonder what type of thinking made you do all this," Judy wondered aloud, pulling up a chair next to her boyfriend and lying down on it, her head now draping over his lap. With the doe's head lying over one of the fox's legs, her brilliant purple eyes beaming up at the now nervously smiling tod.

Nick faced forward again, scratching the underside of his muzzle, as he stated, "It was because of you actually. I really don't want to keep you here all the time, as I'm sure you might feel cooped up sooner or later."

"You don't have to worry about me so much."

"Yes I do," the red tod fired back bluntly. "You may say you're fine now, but eventually it'll feel like we only go out when 'on the job' and let's call this my supposed compromise. Our more conservative suits will be able to protect us in a pinch and make it easier for other suits to wrap around us without potentially pinching… areas."

"Like your groin?" the rabbit asked teasingly. This time the fox gave her an unamused look down to her cheeky grin.

"Are you trying to get a rise out of me or something?" he questioned simply.

"Well… if I were successful…" the doe said slowly with an averting glance, "I think I would be in a
Nick facepawed, ears and cheeks burning at the unexpected insinuation. He gulped and tried to formulate a reply.

"You are going to be the death of me, Carrots."

Her ears perked up, to which she spoke, "Been a while since I heard you call me that. What's the occasion?"

"I don't know…" her boyfriend muttered. "You're being cute and it felt right to say."

Now it was her turn to blush, ears beginning to change to a pinker shade. The doe's thighs pressed together, her eyes glazing over a bit at being called that forbidden word that somehow seemed like a rather endearing term coming from her fox.

Following his utterance, Judy reached a paw up to tug at the front of her tod's shirt, pursing her lips and giving him a teasing whine.

"Gimme," she said simply when the fox didn't move after a few seconds. He snapped out of his staring session to lean down and give the doe exactly what she wanted, interlocking his muzzle with her shorter snout. Their noses rubbed gently against one another, as small smacking noises could be heard from their lips.

Nick began to chuckle lightly, with his nose being pecked with many little kisses from Judy. They parted slowly, a growing smile on both of their faces.

"So… mind telling me what that secret project is?" the grey bunny interjected into the silent gap between them. The fox rolled his eyes in response, letting out a small laugh.

"Nupe. Any other questions I can deflect?" he fired back sarcastically.

The doe pouted for a brief moment, but a spark of realization crossed her face as she spoke up once more, "That second thing bugged me about stealing our power… and I think I know why now."

"Yes?" her boyfriend voiced in kind, a knowing look cast down to her confused expression.

"We already put our power into those power cores," the bunny began. "How is that too far off from them being able to steal our power and give it to another Shard?"

Without missing a beat, the tod took a short breath and explained, "It's a matter of will. I wanted to power those cores… so it happened. I released an expenditure of energy willingly that was captured for use. Even if they could indoctrinate you or me, our power is much like a blood type. Only compatible beings could take the 'infusion' and I think it wouldn't be a far stretch to say that our power is much too different from any to date. I'm willing to bet that their claim is simply a huge ruse to get other Shards under their control to fight for their potential boost from our power."

"Oh… so we're a prize to be won? A bounty to be claimed?"

"That is my assumption here, yes," Nick supplied in earnest. "Leo might not be able to refute it without enough evidence, but I can feel it. I can feel that our power cannot be taken or given to others."

Judy sighed.
"Honestly, I'm a little disappointed," she breathed. "I thought our enemy might be some sort of big scary mastermind… but it's a group of overzealous nuts with a penchant for twisted religious rhetoric."

"I find it rather… genius… in some small way," mentioned the red fox with a shrug, drawing a raised brow from the smaller mammal. "Bear with me for a second. These other Shards have greater longevity and can outlast almost all by any number of years or eons. By biding their time and creating whatever rhetoric they wish, instilling it into a population over generations, it makes for a well directed citizenry that could be focused on whatever goals they wish without much deviance to deter their goals. Simply put… they can control the growth of a civilization. By doing it as they have, it limits the curiosity that would question them as leaders and keep the populace focused on whatever they will of them."

"You admire them?"

"Oh heck no," Nick rebuffed instantly. "What they are doing is terrible and I find it appalling, to say the least. However, I can't refute that there is a method to the madness. If you teach a mammal from birth that to die by combat is an honor, they will throw themselves at any battle they deem worthy. Instill a sense of blind respect for authority, barring something could condemn their very soul, and one would do their best to keep from questioning said authority. They are eliminating the choice that stems from free will. THAT… I do not find at all admirable."

"That… makes sense I guess," Judy relented, confusion still twisting her face slightly.

The fox leaned down to kiss her forehead, petting her head gently.

"No need to force yourself to understand," he whispered. "It's not like I get it completely myself either."

"You really won't tell me about your little secret project?" the small doe renewed her plea towards him. "Shouldn't I be able to know what we have? No secrets. Maybe I could even help."

Rubbing the back of his neck, the tod had to reluctantly relent into agreeing with her. At furst, it was just fun to tease her, but along the way, he was worried about failing and not wanting her to get her hopes high.

"It's a defunct project from the civilization that sent Leo here," Nick detailed. "A system of self rep… repairing nanomachines that could fix our suits in the middle of a battle. With the increasing difficulty our enemies might pose… I wanted something that could keep us in the fight. They started this project but could never get it working."

"Why not?" the grey bunny questioned. "I figure something like nanomachines would be well within the scope of a highly advanced civilization."

"In sci-fi stuff… sure, but with many such advancements, the smaller you go with technology, the exponentially more difficult the obstacles become," he replied. "I'm having the same trouble as the original creators did. The nanomachines only have a small amount of input space for data. I have to figure out how to give them simplistic data but able to carry out repairs without slowing down from lacking processing speed."

"So… you're trying to make each nanomachine capable of repairs?"

"For the most part."

"You know what the nanomachines from comics and sci-fi shows remind me of?" Judy mentioned in
passing, staring up at the ceiling in thought. Nick stared back down at her in attentive curiosity, awaiting her follow up.

"Ants."

"Ants?" the red tod asked skeptically, raising an eyebrow. "Do explain."

"They operate as a group, taking direction from a queen," the grey bunny explained. "They correspond with one another, doing things by precedent. They dig out fairly large and complex homes, while also able to effectively build themselves up in very intricate patterns to construct things like a bridge over a gap or a life raft of their own mass."

Nick's muzzle perked up, looking out into empty space, a look of profound revelation giving his eyes a new spark of inspiration. His muzzle hung agape, slowly curving in a most devious smile.

"That's it…” he breathed happily. Dipping down, he gave the rabbit still in his lap a quick peck on the nose. She blinked, her nose twitching madly for a moment before she sniffed and sneezed. "I know what to do."

Lifting Judy up and setting her on her feet once more, the fox tod got up and began rifling through his tools and opening a bunch of drawers and containers rapidly, grabbing anything he deemed viable for his goals.

"Uh… Nick?" the grey bunny inquired of him.

"Huh… oh… yeah," he muttered in his reverie. "Mind giving me a bit of time to work on this?"

"Sure," she replied simply. "Now that I think about it… I should try catching up with Essie. That alright?"

"I'm sure Essie wouldn't mind catching up with you."

Nick paused for a brief moment, slowly approaching Judy once more to rake his claws over the top of her head, giving her a gentle kiss as he said, "Sorry. I don't mean to brush you off… but I feel if I don't tackle this now, I won't have this train of thought later."

The rabbit smiled. "It's alright, Nick. You're not brushing me off."

"Good. I love you."

The ease of which he uttered such powerful words caught her off guard, her cheeks flushing as she clasped her paws together and mumbled them back in kind, "Love you too."

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"So, do tell…” Essie started with an even tone unbefitting her usual demeanor, "How was the visit with your parents?"

Distracted, the doe barely registering her friend's question, the wild dog tapped the counter of her kitchen.

Knowing her shift was at its end, the grey doe made her way over to Essie's apartment, to which her best friend immediately welcomed her in. Even though she seemed energetic upon seeing her come to visit, the female dog quickly lost her slap happy glow as the door closed.

Judy felt pretty tired herself, though her friend appeared a bit ragged.
"Huh?" she mumbled. "Oh, right. It was pretty good. A bit of a bumpy ride, with my parents being my parents. My siblings being my siblings… but it ended on a good note."

"That's good," the larger mammal mentioned, almost disinterested.

Judy raised an eyebrow, giving her friend a concerned look as she inquired, "Are you doing alright?"

Essie sighed, lowering her head.

"Just tired," she began. "The government is all up our tails at the precinct about this whole Flux and Phantom thing. Getting me some overtime that I don't mind, but it's causing a bunch of drama and fuss."

"Did something happen?" the doe incited curiously, patting her friend's shoulder.

Smiling, the wild dog sassed, "Just your usual government idiocy. When they fail, instead of sucking it up and saying they made a mistake, they double, triple, and quadruple their bets down and try to keep the charade going, even though it's been pretty well revealed that they were probably in the wrong."

"They were?"

"Yep," Essie said with a nod. "They're denying it pretty hard, and I can't really say much without looking insubordinate, but public opinion is not in their favor. Lots of video and pictures of the event where Flux was apprehended, as well as some other stuff that's just…" She paused to sigh heavily before continuing, "...really not working out for the government's image."

"Well… I hope they'll do something about that soon," Judy vented. "I would very much like to get my blog running back to usual business, but all that attention on them in a bad way seems like a good way to get my rump in hot water."

"I've got a bit of good news for you then," revealed the larger mammal, her muzzle curling into a satisfying smirk. The small doe perked up slightly, ears pert and awaiting whatever was to be told. "It's not case relevant… so I think it won't matter to tell you, seeing as I heard it from a friend in City Hall, but they're preparing a statement to exonerate Flux and Phantom from previous allegations."

"I thought you said the government wasn't going to admit to its mistake…" the bunny supplied in confusion.

"They won't, so apparently Lionhart is going to force their paw by playing that out," explained Essie. "If he, as a respected leader, admits to it… then it would be a debacle for the government as a whole to refute it. Just a tidbit to make you smile hopefully."

Judy scoffed lightly in jest, unable to stop the expected smile from spreading on her face, as she shook her head.

"You're so cheeky."
Leaning forward in his chair, a bucket of popcorn between his legs, Nick was intently watching the television.

"I honestly didn't think you were being literal when you said you were gonna sit back with a bucket of popcorn and watch the chaos ensue," the doe finally spoke, gesturing to the television.

Having told the tod about Lionheart's supposed press release that would exonerate them, he seemed excited to watch, taking some slightly justified pleasure in watching someone try to tackle their debacle.

"What's to misunderstand about that?" the fox questioned sarcastically between mouthfuls of his snack. "I didn't think I made it sound like a joke."

"And peanut butter... really?" she continued, brushing his answer aside to gesture to his snack combo, as if it were some sort of heresy against snackdom.

He shrugged, replying, "What? I like popcorn and I like peanut butter."

The doe facepawed herself and gave up, an irksome twitch of annoyance rising within her as she noticed the fox smile in knowing of her frustration. Her eyes rolled as she realized she was being played by her boyfriend.

"Oh don't pout," Nick chided her, reaching out to rest a paw on her head and give the grey bunny's fur a tussel. "I was just teasing you."

The rabbit tried her best not to smile, though her wiggling tail was a dead giveaway of the enjoyment had in his actions. The red tod chuckled, turning his attention to the television as the noted event seemed to be starting.

Lionheart was approaching a podium, flashes and a rolling murmur echoing through the room. He pulled out and adjusted reading glasses on his head, shuffling a small stack of cards in his paws.

"Want some?" the fox tod offered, holding out his bucket for the doe to take a pawful, if she so wished.

Judy smiled but turned him down with a shake of the head, her nerves killing her appetite.

"I acquiesced to making a statement to the effect that both of them violated an agreement with the
government," Lionheart continued, "but… I was unfortunately in the wrong. As opposed to what has been declared about an agreement with Flux, the truth is that no such agreement exists."

"How would you know that?"

"What or who is your source on that knowledge?"

"Does this mean Flux has been operating exempt from government assistance all this time?"

"What about the allegations that the government tried to kill or kidnap Flux to steal his or her tech?"

Many questions were shouted but the spirit of the crowd's concerns seemed to be those four questions.

The lion male took a deep breath, taking his glasses off as he had to address the concerns more directly, detailing, "I cannot in good conscience reveal my source or sources, but I can assure you that, while I am not privy to these higher level details myself, these are real and true. Also, yes, Flux has been operating on their own from the moment we saw them, with the government attempting some form of communication to try getting them to trade technological secrets. By my source's claim, they wanted to seem in control of the situation, revealing Flux to be an 'Agent' of their own to protect the citizens. On a final note of response to your questions thus far, the government did apprehend and detain Flux, with the newly known Phantom apparently coming to their rescue, freeing Flux from their captivity and making sure not to injure anyone at the facility they were held."

"Why are you now coming forward with all of this info?" a larger female pig asked energetically, making sure to get their question out before the rising cacophony of inquiries began again. A tepid silence settled before it could be entirely broken, all eyes back on the lion as he sighed.

"My coming forward might seem like an out to save myself," he explained in an increasingly tired tone, "or it would appear like I'm trying to seem like a whistle blower…"

Lionheart paused for a brief moment, looking around in full expectation that he would be interrupted. When he wasn't, he coughed and resumed his previous thought.

"...but with all the threats as of late, I truly want us to work with Flux and any allies they have, in order to protect our city and give the people a means to feel safer. We can't do that if we are bickering amongst ourselves with all of this useless drama. The enemy is not each other, but the Drones. I should hope that we can take a step back from all of our differences. So… Flux? Don't let recent actions taken by paranoid higher ups keep you from doing what you have always done for us, and will hopefully continue to do."

At that, he mumbled a 'Thank you' to the crowd of press, who all stood up, various shapes of mammals blocking the camera view as Lionheart left the podium and stage.

"Ugh…" groaned Nick, setting his bucket down and resting his muzzle in a paw, face full of disappointment. "Well… that was anticlimactic."

On the other paw, Judy was laughing a bit at her fox's reaction.

"What?" she asked, giving him a playful smirk, "Did you expect they would all be so flabbergasted and angry that Mayor Lionheart would be attacked in some gory stampede of rage filled mammals?"

"Is that so much to ask?" the tod wailed in a tone of false woe.

The grey bunny fell back in her seat, making noises that seemed like she was playing the scenario
out, her paws splaying forth to mime a spray of blood, dramatically voicing, "Blood! Blood!... And…. Death!"

On the last word, she flopped back, going completely limp as Nick began to laugh heartily.

"Alright. Alright," the red fox told her. "Now you're milking it."

"Hey… at least it'll hopefully make things easier for us in the future," she mentioned in a hopeful tone. "Maybe?..."

"Bleh," Nick said, sticking his tongue out. "This is why I really hate politics."

"If you two are done with your… entertainment, should that be the right word," Leo interjected, "I wanted to put the two of your through a newer exercise that I've put together to work on your teamwork in battle."

"Do we have to do it now?" the tod groaned, slinking back in his seat.

"As I've heard you say before, 'Why put off till tomorrow what you can do today?'," the android fired back evenly.

Without missing a beat, Nick raised a paw and snidely stated in return, "And as a counter to that, 'Why do today, what I can put off till tomorrow?'"

"Now you are just being inefficient," came the robot's reply. "I'll see the two of you in the sparring chamber. Nick knows the way."

Looking at her fox, Judy cocked her head to the side, inquiring curiously, "Sparring chamber?"

The red tod only smiled deviously in response.

"You two never cease to amaze me with all your little secrets," Judy spoke in awe, looking around the chamber all three were now in.

It was pretty sizeable, though still confined enough to not be overstated. The ceiling rose in a dome shape, the peak of which was probably about three stories tall. Pillars lined the floor, taking up varying heights that ranged from her height to almost touching the ceiling.

Now she understood the reasoning behind her outfit and why this was underground.

The small doe was wearing a modified and more conservative piece of armor, though it seemed to be lacking armor plating and favored servos and field generators instead of armor and weapons. Nick wore a similarly designed suit, the purple energies emanating from both of them.

"Well this wasn't so much a secret," the tod defended, "as much as it was that mentioning this room never really came up."

"I'm going to have the two of you work on strengthening your bond as two parts of a Shard," Leo began to tell them, seemingly ignoring their recourse. "For that purpose, I gave you both suits that lack any weapons or real armor, instead relying on movement and creating special shields that absorb impacts."

"If you want us to strengthen our bond," the red fox started, "why not have us Shift so we can do so like that? I don't see how facing sparring bots would suffice with us separated."
"You won't be facing sparring bots," the android replied simply. "I've kept them deactivated for now. You will instead be fighting each other. Physical blows only and the suits you wear, as well as the fields projected over the walls in here, are optimized for shock absorption, so as to mitigate potential injury."

The robot exited the staging area, allowing a wash of energy to envelope the walls and pillars. Unlike the usual shields that they both had seen, these barriers seemed more malleable and fluidic. The grey bunny figured this was how it looked when trying to absorb damage instead of deflect it.

"Each other?" Nick sputtered in surprise. "How will that help us?"

Judy smiled in realization, as she seemed to finally understand something before her fox in regards to their role as partners.

"How better to connect than to fight one another?" she told him with a confident tone. "If you and I are subject to each other's decisions and actions in a fight, we can better understand how we will react, hopefully being able to increase our nonverbal understanding of one another."

"Couldn't have put it better myself, dear Judy," Leo commended her. She blushed slightly, feeling accomplished in her reasoning. "Though, there is another reason for this. You two have this mental link that goes beyond the boundaries of any normal means of nonverbal communication. While I cannot begin to fathom it's true potential, the Shard within you would only act to adapt as it has to evolve a better means of survival. It would stand to reason that strengthening that link between you two would benefit your future endeavors."

"Even so, I'm not exactly keen on hitting J-"

Nick's words were cut off when the rabbits clenched paw struck him across the muzzle and sent him flying across the room, impacting and bouncing off the shield that lined the wall. He grunted, getting up slowly as Judy giggled.

"Apparently, she doesn't share your sentiment," Leo evenly mentioned in obvious revelation.

"Well, it's not like he would ask us to do something like this without cause," the doe voiced with a shrug. "And I seriously doubt he would put us in real danger…. Maybe…"

The fox tod got up, taking a fighting stance and immediately advancing on his doe. Her ears fell as she let out a nervous laugh.

Powering forward, he spun in the air and swiped his foot around to kick at his girlfriend. She dodged, seeing the very plain move.

What she didn't expect was that he would use the momentum from missing the blow to loop around and bring his own fist to her chest plating. Suffice it to say, the bunny went flying, her body arching through the air and bouncing off a shielded pillar.

She came to a rolling stop, smiling as she realized she barely felt anything. Sure, the impact knocked the wind out of her, but the shock absorption in her suit, as well as the room's shielding, made it easy to recover and focus on sparring.

Rising to her feet, the rabbit bounded a bit, testing the suit's agility. Once she got a tested feel for it, she bounded up and arched over her fox, bouncing from a pillar and using the field to launch her from one to another. Using the shields like vaulting points, with the doe realizing that they seemed to use a similar principle to the Ricochet suit discus fields, she dove at her fox from behind.
He twisted and sidestepped her rebounding move, using the motion to send her flying sideways with a roundhouse kick to her midsection.

Though quick and agile, the bunny's boyfriend had experience and combat reflexes honed by years of whatever fights he had been in, even before the drones. In fact, given that their species evolved specifically to hunt or escape the other, both were pretty even in terms of physical adaptations. Judy's smaller form gave her a small edge in maneuverability, though Nick's longer midsection and legs gave him an edge in close range leaps and bounds.

One could spend all day comparing their physicality and surmising their prowess in battle, but the current event was making it rather clear that neither held a true advantage.

The grey doe was tenacious, with most blows not hurting her enough to keep her down. Occasionally, she was able to land a blow or two on the tod, her suit able to enhance her strikes to toss him aside.

Instead of becoming frustrated, the two started to laugh and get even more hyped up, landing less and less blows over time, with either seeming to read the other's movements and intentions.

Both of them could feel the link between them, with a small murmur that became clearer giving them some form of hint to the other's thoughts and such concerning the battle. It wasn't exactly cheating, as they couldn't clearly interpret it, but it seemed to be something that aligned with their inherent instincts and supplemented them in kind.

Soon enough, neither of them were able to hit the other, their match becoming more of a dance, with movements that seemed fluid in dodging or attacking instead of abrupt punches and kicks.

The two panted, a chuckle leaving their maws on occasion as blows came close but the link seemed to warn them.

Leo watched patiently and monitored everything he could. Energy readings, vitals, and all sorts of various such things. The robot was internally logging and taking note of the bunny's adaptive strides that seemed to be almost too quick. She was mimicking movements that the fox was using to attack, evade, or defend, having somehow been able to imprint not only the theory, but also the practice.

The being wondered if she was being subject to a bleeding effect of experience and muscle memory from Nick through their link. Whatever the case, it would be beneficial in their future fights.

Another mention worth noting to the android… was the joy that the fox seemed to take in sparring with his bunny. It made Leo wonder if he was holding back on purpose, or simply going with the flow of things as they were for a bonding effect.

There was too much to process currently, with too many factors that the mechanical being couldn't effectively comprehend with the current data it possessed.

"I think it's about time we…” the robot tried to begin, a humming rumble of an energy release shaking the room and cutting him short.

Nick had induced a semblance of his innate speed power, outflanking his rabbit and sending her flying with a lightning fast kick.

Judy's reaction time was superb, increasing her perception of time, with reflexes that almost matched her fox's speed. She couldn't be as quick as he made himself, but instinct took over and she raised a paw in defense.
While being tossed across the room, the doe was able to make a barrier coalesce around her, diffusing the damage and allowing her to bound from the wall and land with a roll back on the floor.

Though they couldn't see each other's faces, both knew the other was smiling in satisfaction, proud of their own combative achievements.

Not quite questioning the feats they were accomplishing, Nick darted around at phenomenal speeds, while Judy tried to react to his increasing expeditious movement with barriers to deter direct hits.

Leo would be in awe if he had the capacity to do so. Instead the android was going through scans of their current state to compare to all known variables that the two had given the robot thus far.

The red fox's mobility and monumental velocity became nearly impawsible to track, with the grey doe erecting whatever barriers she could to keep from being hit. They worked within reason. Her instincts were guiding her true most occasions as his strike would happen nearly an instant later, the tod favoring kicks over punches, and smashing into the floating purple shields like they were brittle shale. They did their job though, diffusing his hits and slowing him down enough to get a bead on where he would bolt off to next.

On one such event, Judy was pulled by something in the back of her mind, a paw rising after having put up a barrier and witnessing the fleeting glimpse of her boyfriend hitting it. From the palm of her paw, a spherical orb formed in an instant and expanded rapidly, almost exploding outward.

Nick was blasted back by a barrier that had expanded from behind the one he just struck, with it striking him. It had the force of a truck, though the rigidity of a bounce house, blowing him away without blowing him apart.

Rebounding off a pillar's field, he rolled and recovered a little ungracefully, truly taken by surprise with the little move of hers.

"Well that's a new one," he remarked to her from across the room.

"I know, right!?" she yelped excitedly, bouncing on the balls of her feet as she pumped her fists up. "I didn't even know these suits could do that."

"I'll have to ask Leo about that," the fox replied with a grin.

"Actually, your suits don't have those functions," Leo interjected, walking up to them and disabling the fields. "Mobility and absorption shielding. That's it."

"So... Fluff here was making barriers like before without suit functions?" the tod questioned, his armored tail swishing back and forth curiously. "I'm jealous."

"Don't be," the robot bluntly remarked. "You were also enacting innate abilities without suit assistance."

"Ha! Don't play me with that," Nick fired back with snark, crossing his arms. "I know these suits can move fast if I put enough power into them."

"Not these ones," Leo answered. "In fact, you burnt out 78 percent of your motivating servos with your excessive speed as of 39 seconds before I ended the session. You've been operating on your own power without suit assistance."

The face plate of both suits opened up to reveal two greatly flabbergasted mammals muzzles, maws agape in true shock.
"Balderdash!" the fox tod blurted out, making Judy cock an eyebrow and stare at him with a deadpan expression. He seemed to notice what he vented and smiled nervously while giving his bunny a sideways glance.

"Did you just…?" she began, devolving into laughter, falling on her back and kicking her legs, holding her belly as she giggled uncontrollably.

"I was a popular means of expressing disbelief way back when!" her fox defended, rolling his eyes and blushing slightly.

"Oh I'm sure that word was worth a parent washing her kit's mouth out with soap a couple hundred years ago," the bunny jibed between gasping chuckles, wiping away a tear from her eye.

Rolling with it, Nick tilted his head back and forth in thought, saying in response, "Well... you're not entirely wrong."

The doe stopped laughing for a second, wondering if she hit some sore spot... until he began laughing too, clutching at his midsection.

"If I might steer the topic back," the android began, "I had a couple noteworthy things to share with you."

Nick nodded for him to go ahead, calming down and giving his bunny a roguish smirk, licking his snout and watching her blush in response.

"What is it?" Judy asked, averting her gaze from the flirtatious fox and running a paw over her head and ears. She almost wished her face plate was still on.

"First of all, it would appear that the sparring event bore more figurative fruit than I estimated," explained the mechanical being. "During your fight, the two of you reached a new level of cohesive resonance, with my sensors reading an increase of Shard energy from the two of you at over three times the peak levels I've observed as of yet, whether during battle or not."

"While that number sounds great... what in the blazes does that mean for us?" the red tod inquired a bit impatiently.

"It means that, given your success and hopeful continued growth in this aspect, we can try to upgrade suits and weapons to accommodate your abilities and maybe even create more specialized suits to pair with your newfound strengths."

The grey bunny doe raised a paw, like a kit in class, to which Leo nodded and gestured for her to speak.

"How come he seems to be able to run fast... but I make shields and... explode things?"

"My summation is that it would allude back to a previous acknowledgement," the robot detailed. "Nick here is a more physically inclined part of the Shard with speed, power, possibly strength, and other such abilities grounded in supporting that. It is not to say you aren't capable of such things inherently, but likely less able to draw forth such things. You, Judy, are more the spiritual or mental portion of the Shard, with your mind being your greatest weapon or defense. I am sure, with time, that you will both be able to unlock further potential of other such abilities. Shards are vastly capable of these things, though it is hard to master, let alone muster the will to enact."

"At some point," the rabbit began, "I wonder where this type of thing will simply somehow cease to
make sense to me."

"Oh come on," the fox barked in reply. "This has to be a dream come true for a science fiction nerd fangirl like yourself."

Judy perked up and hopped over to her boyfriend, a gleam in her eyes as she gushed, "I know, right!? I'm still geeking out about it!"

Letting out a chuckle, Nick patted her head, turning to ask Leo, "So… what now?"

"We build and we train," the mechanical entity spoke evenly, with the small doe practically bursting with excitement that made her fox look at her curiously. "We have about three weeks before the Gate is stable enough for use by the enemy once more, giving us that long to acclimate ourselves and prepare as many contingencies as we can."

An echoing grumble made the fox and android look at the bunny, her face freezing and cheeks turning red, a paw going to her stomach.

"Someone's hungry," the red tod snidely commented. "Whatcha hungry for?"

"I'll go get one of my aprons," Leo stated, beginning to walk away.

"Yay! Another pun apron," both Judy and Nick said at the same time, though the latter had a much less enthusiastic tone than the former, who began to giggle.
"Tell me again why I'm offloading these massive things," a voice sassed over the comms inside the suit, its hulking mass landing on a rooftop with a light landing that defied the look of the armor.

"You did offer to pilot the only suit capable of doing the heavy lifting," another voice sounded over the comms. "That and whatever Leo rattled off when you picked your suits."

"Rattled off?" Leo chastised the second voice in a mild tone. "All I said was that Judy's Gravitrix suit, coupled with the heavy lifting ability of the Howlitzer made it ideal for transporting the generators to their appropriate positions before the next breach."

"Like that," Nick mentioned, barely acknowledging the actual words the android spoke. "Besides, someone needed to clear the way and set up sensor pods, as well as correlate all that sensor data."

"I know I'm the sci-fi nerd here… but… can you explain further for me," Judy spoke with a slight mumble to her tone.

The robot replied evenly and quickly, saying, "Staccato is the only suit with the processors powerful enough to quickly sift through and organize the massive amount of data we are likely to receive from the sensors he is setting up."

The rabbit huffed indignantly, smiling on the inside as she realized she didn't really mind her role, though it did feel a bit monotonous. Having been roughly three weeks since her successful rescue of Nick and the following date, as well as about a month since the last breach event of the Gate.

With relations towards the governing factions and such being tenuous, the team couldn't do what they were currently doing until minutes from the supposed next breach, making sure that interference would be minimal, if at all.

"At least Leo was able to blackmail the government into leaving us alone for this event," the doe voiced with a shrug.

"Negotiate," the mechanical being corrected.

"Buddy…" the fox interjected, "you used information of a sensitive and possibly volatile nature, if released to the public, to strongarm them into acquiescing to your demands. It's blackmail."

"The word seems so aggressive though," Leo remarked plainly.

"Ha!" the tod barked in laughter over the comms. "Take some lessons from Fluff. She's brimming with aggression."

"Bite me," Judy belted out with a sassy tone, her following sneer only known to her at the moment.

"Don't tempt me," Nick followed up without missing a beat, as if the exchange was reflexive. The doe dipped her head in her suit, thankful that her fox couldn't see the pervasive blush as she took that in. biting her bottom lip, she then tried to refocus on her task.

"Maybe later…" she whispered, dropping a pod in the appropriate spot, watching the unit expand on the rooftop she rested and deploy.

She was using Howlitzer to carry and deploy a series of shield generators around the city, leaving
them to activate and substantiate a barrier at the right time. The plan was to protect Zootopia from a
direct impact of a supposedly large incoming craft through the Gate. As opposed to a normal
deflector type of shield, which wasn't designed to give way, the specific design of this one was to act
like an energy based and ginormous air bag. Using the sensor data that Nick was going to correlate,
they could accurately adjust the shield parameters by the millisecond to guide the invading craft away
from falling on the city itself.

They got lucky last time, but Leo was rather adamant that they come up with a proper plan to avoid
future dependence on luck. As such, this was their recourse.

Each unit was rather hefty and large, testing even the mighty lifting capacity of Howlitzer. That made
the grey doe's involvement with her Gravitrix suit all the more vital, being that she was currently and
consistently using a deployed gravity field to minimize the overall weight of her load on Howlitzer.
To supplement the loading capacity and movement, the android was able to adapt the nanobionic
actuator technology from Jackhammer, which operated on a principle that it was acting like artificial
muscles. It was less robust than the giant actuators from before, but acted far more organically and
reflexively, aiding to mobility in combat, while also allowing for a more compact design to
increasing strength.

She had already deployed nearly a dozen of the units, with another four units attached to the back of
the larger suit.

"Alright Judy," the robot spoke evenly in her ear, "I'm getting good projected numbers and
synchronization from here for the field. Time for you to stop with the perimeter generators and take
the last four to set up the center of the field. Nick will be waiting for you with his sensor net."

"Gotcha."

Turning Howlitzer towards the downtown area, Judy locked the legs and fired the thrusters, the
multitude of them going off slowly in a controlled ascent, using her gravity functions to work in
tandem with the thruster control.

"How's flying around in that titan?" the red tod asked in genuine curiosity.

Looking down, seeing the onlookers staring up at her, the bunny laughed, telling her boyfriend,
"We've got some wandering eyes giving me a good peek."

"Oh really?" the red fox jibed with a questioning tone, full of playful energy. "Well… tell them
you're taken."

Judy rolled her eyes, sighing at his newfound snark. Before their night together in heated embrace
those couple weeks ago, Nick had some sass and bite, but now… he was a spicy rogue with
ravenous fangs. It was both a frightful and refreshing change to the previous timid demeanor that he
approached her with before. The doe was still processing how to feel about it, though she was still
enjoying it, seeing that he wasn't treating her any less respectfully or becoming overly focused on her
in a physical manner. Sure… he was flirtatious and made plenty of puns to that spirit, but he still had
that soft look to his eyes and smile that never warped.

"I'll be sure to make a note," she replied, increasing her thrust to reach the tall skyscraper that her tod
would be waiting at.

A small jostle caused the rabbit to twitch her ears and turn her head.

"Oh relax, Carrots," Nick's voice relayed over the comms, with a shimmer warping the air around
Howlitzer's right leg. It dispersed to reveal the very western outlaw looking suit of armor, Staccato, the stealth and sensor suit. The base layer was very condensed and slim fitting, forming to the fox's body well. The 'hat' was a modified sensor apparatus and the 'duster/cloak' was capable of deploying a very effective stealth field.

Staccato, too, was upgraded and modified. The field generator that hid the suit was now able to project a very powerful bubble shield. The catch was that it couldn't activate a shield and stealth field at the same time. The power needs to keep both operational could effectively burn out the suit within seconds. The twin guns that rested on either side of the hips were now able to modulate between stun shots and short range E.M.P. bolts that could disrupt any mechanical functions on a target for a few seconds. As an added function, the guns could be loaded with physical rounds that had a condensed Shard power cell inside. The supposed effect was that it would impact, expunge its energy, and heavily disrupt any shielding that would be in place on heavier units, making way for a more damaging direct hit.

The two of them landed deftly and gently upon the roof to a large skyscraper in the center of their shield and sensor net, with the last four generator units detaching and floating to the outermost borders of the roof.

Opening up the larger suit, the armored doe steps out, looking up and trying to somehow find where the Gate was, many miles above the city. Flux stepped next to her, tapping a few controls on a control unit that rested on the roof before paw.

"Do we have an E.T.A. on the Gate breach?" the armor clad tod inquired of his robotic companion.

"I'm reading no significant variables in the wormhole to denote an incoming breach," Leo remarked simply. "That is not too surprising though, given the information we were able to dig up."

The information that they 'dug up' happened to be a very simplistic manafest that was decrypted of something amounting to dossiers. At first, it seemed too good to be true that they would store such information on another Shard, but it was then surmised from other snippets of information that the list was meant to be a way of making sure the occupying force prepared a proper reception for these incoming forces. Apparently, the Blue Shard was supposed to be one that solidified the occupation.

Whatever the intention, they had a very detailed schematic of what was coming, along with a plan of action from the incoming invasion force.

From what they could gather of the translated data, two Shards would be arriving, with one being drained like a battery to use its power to shield the craft from any damage in the virulent spacial vortex. It was documented that the drained Shard was not expected to survive after transit.

Aside from that, a very powerful Blue Shard, equipped in a pod with nearly sixty drones and eight Flare models, would be encased within. If there was ever a time to plan and pull out all the stops, this was it, because a rare event was likely to happen from this prepared arrival…

.... An entire pod would potentially be shielded and intact, producing a full complement of drones from an undamaged craft.

That left quite the quandary. They all needed to somehow disable, destroy, and decimate the incoming craft before a fully equipped and prepared armada could be unleashed on the city.

"Let's just get this set up and exchange our suits for the new ones," Phantom fired at the two of them, paws shaking nervously as she felt the tension of the last couple weeks of building and planning coming to a head. She wanted their effort and plan to mean something, hoping against everything
that it wasn’t shattered in seconds.

"She's right. Get suited up," the android agreed. As if to answer their need, two pods arched low from above and landed in front of them. Stepping out of their current suits, Nick and Judy let Leo take control of Gravitrix and Staccato, ready to use them as backups or for cover fire from a distance.

Donned by each of them were better forms of the undersuits that the fox was tinkering with before, allowing more seamless fitting with armor and a means of fighting outside of their suits for a short period if they needed. The red accents were still present, as the power needs had to meet the condensed and very versatile nature of the designs, so as not to overload them, emulating a Red Shard output.

Thankfully, the tod was able to solve the 'pinching' issue. It was still a chance, as nothing was ever perfect, but the chance was minimal and less problematic.

"I'm so glad we had time to train with these before paw," Flux spoke with a roguish grin towards his bunny. "Are you ready?"

"No… but are we ever?" Phantom replied with an anxious tone.

"Oh relax, Judy," he rebuked her rare cynicism with a sweet tone that didn't usually fit him. "You've done wonderfully and come so far, as well as pushed me further. Heck… you've darn near carried us a team for the last couple of fights. I should be the nervous one." On the last sentence, his eyes glazed and paw rose to brush her cheek lovingly, bringing a smile to her previously stiff face.

"Thanks, Scruffy," she tried to sass back, hoping to bring a spark back to his eyes.

It worked and he gave her a gentle kiss, before opening the pod and allowing his suit to form around him.

Judy did the same, feeling that these suits were more advanced and adaptive than many previous designs thus far.

Phantom was wearing Slingshot, a collaborative suit of a couple different designs. It used a much smaller gravity core to give the armor acrobatic versatility, along with thrusters and jump jets that easily alter course, or hold it, in mid-air. The main weapon of the suit was a large rifle, loaded with a prototype ammo that depended heavily on the grey doe's increasing expertise with her control over her power.

Each physical round of the rifle was a very condensed and very high capacity Shard battery, with a degrading cohesion rate that was by design.

With Judy's proclivity to make barriers, Nick had the idea of using it in an offensive fashion, with the mechanical being agreeing and incorporating it well.

With practice, the bunny was able to infuse rounds with the barrier energy, able to fire it and, upon impact, induce a barrier to expand with explosive and exceptionally powerful force, like a deployed airbag.

Without the rifle, the suit was still formidable in close combat, able to use powerful repulsor emitters to create barriers with more refinement than the ones she made during her sparring matches with Nick, while also firing bolts or beams with great accuracy.

Flux was donning his new suit, Hoplon. Shielded, armored, and armed for close combat, it was built and designed to take hits, dish them out, and withstand an elongated battle with multiple enemies. A
large shield disengaged from the rear of the suit and slid to lock into place on his forearm, a
cylindrical unit coming from the thigh and gripped in his other paw.

The unit was a much more refined version of the 'flashlight' that he brought to Bunnyburrow, turning
on with a purple arc of solid crackling energy.

Nick would act as vanguard and engage the enemy up close, allowing Judy to pick off and contain
the stray units. Leo would control and use the recently vacated suits to relay information and protect
the generators as needed.

"So… we play a waiting game?" the red fox remarked in question.

The grey rabbit shrugged, standing and staring at the sky.

Nearly an hour passed before Staccato, under the robot's control, seemed to turn its head and spoke,
breaking the tension of the two mammals waiting for an imagined eternity, "Energy expenditure
detected. I believe we finally have a breach."

Sure enough, there followed a crackling flash from above, a bright cloud of energy exploding out
from a point in the distant sky, looking like a miniature nebula.

"Generator's primed and ready," the bunny called out, letting Leo do his work.

"Acknowledged."

Instantly following, all the generators around the city that she dropped came to life, bracing and
pointing strangely shaped emitters towards the sky. A vibrant and shimmering wave of lightly purple
hued energy funneled out and upward, coalescing into a rippling bubble around the city.

The four emitters Judy dropped on their rooftop began bolstering the peak of the shield, with a
resounding echo reaching their ears, sounding like a metallic hum underwater.

"Judy, time for a barrage," the mechanical being reminded her. Leaping into action, the doe hopped
into the large suit, the guns aiming towards the tiny dot of the falling pod, the artillery bracing clamps
splaying out to steady her armor for a clear shot.

Much like her rifle, Howlitzer's cannons were adjusted to fire off solid rounds with her energy
imbibed into it, allowing her to use the expanding barriers to attempt altering their course, or simply
blowing a hole in the pod with brute force.

"Locked on," she voiced.

"Fire at will," Leo confirmed.

She pulled the triggers on both control sticks, both long cannons firing with a huge kick that tested
the stabilization of the armor. Two hard shell rounds blasted through the sky, exiting the shield
coverage.

It was a couple seconds of waiting before there was dual impacts, with the grey rabbit looking at a
long distance camera viewing of the event.

The pod looked like an egg with jagged plating and small protrusions randomly sticking out. She had
little time to peruse the design before aligning the next shot and firing again.
Howitzer loosed a couple of mighty howls from the cannons, with Phantom firing off rounds more rapidly, hoping to destroy the pod before it could even impact the shield. Each shot that she could see impact over the camera view exploded with a purple hue, crackling against the red hue of a shield that covered the pod.

"Trajectory altered by three degrees," remarked Leo. "Keep it up."

"I feel a little sidelined here," Nick complained in minor lamentation.

"Don't worry… you'll have…. Plenty of time… to destroy something," the armored bunny snarked at her fox between firing the cannons.

Unlike popular media conceptions, the shields of the pod didn't buckle outright. Some shots would create a temporary hole that another shot might make it through and blow apart some plating, while others would impact a reforming weakness, much like water gravitating to a low spot to create a level surface.

"You only have a few rounds left," the robot reminded her, with Phantom taking a peeking glance at the numbered icon that counted her rounds. She switched to plasma bolts and saved the last rounds for later.

At this point, the pod was descending quite fast, growing larger over the city and looking like a smoking asteroid that just broke the atmosphere.

"Leo… it might be about time to deploy," the red tod commented, seeing how close it was coming.

"Just a few more seconds."

"Leo…?"

"Hold on…"

"Uh…" Nick mumbled, growing worried at the proximity of the alien craft. He knew the shield was supposed to hold but having something that looked like it could level a city by impact alone was a bit daunting.

"Ready," Leo voiced, with the generators glowing brightly from a burst release of energy.

The shield glowed a more solid violet color, the amorphous bubble looking like water with sun beams reflecting off of it. Following that, the bubble expanded upward drastically, with the pod impacting it and slowing down immensely.

Like a drop of water hitting a leaf, the pod skewed off towards the valley from before, where the two faced the previous Shard. Acting like a cushion, the shield was doing as it was designed to, buckling under the pressure in the right manner to redirect the pod to where it would do the least damage.

There was a heavy series of crunches and grinding, with the pod obviously leveling many trees and digging deep to tear away at the earth and bedrock. As it slowed to a stop, smoke billowed from all the blown apart sections that Judy hit, her lips curling in a small sneer of victory.

Both mammals breathed a sigh of relief, having avoided the most dire initial problem of the city being leveled by the pod impact. This was by far the largest and most intact pod, with previous ones having apparently been destroyed within the vortex on most occasions, according to Nick and Leo.

"Let's move," Flux commanded, jumping from the roof and letting his thrusters do the work,
propelling him forwards with great force. Phantom vacated the giant suit and rushed to the edge of the roof, laying out, almost splooting to line up her large rifle and linking the scope to her optical sensors. With the stabilizers in the suit making swaying a minimum issue for her aim.

"Quick question," the doe belted out.

"Go ahead," the android goaded her.

Judy didn't sway from keeping her rifle trained near her fox as she asked, "Will the shield hold from any remaining units?"

"Uncertain," Leo replied. "Nearly half the units burned out from the stress, with another few draining their cores to keep up. We now have six units keeping the shield up, to which I cannot accurately gauge how much it can take before total collapse. I'll keep you both updated, but do try to eliminate the targets before they can attack the city, should that be an issue."

"Should that be an issue?" she mentioned curiously.

"Remember that they are almost solely focused on us," Flux told her, his distant form reaching a final approach of the ruined vessel. "And they don't know there are two of us. As long as they are focused on me, I should be able to keep them confined to the valley. Just keep me covered, hunny bunny."

She giggled at that.

"Don't get too steamy in there, otherwise I might have to crack your armor open to relieve the pressure."

"...what is that even supposed to mean?" Nick fired back, utterly confused. The grey doe blushed in her armor, feeling she might have forced her line.

"I believe that she was trying to flirt with you," the robot supplied, to no one's surprise as he stated the rather obvious. Not even bothering herself to be embarrassed further, Judy rolled her eyes, knowing full well that Nick was too.

"Gonna have to wrap this up," the fox interjected, with the bunny refocusing on her scope to see plating of the pod blasting apart, with various drones exiting the craft.

"Tear them apart," she egged him on. He chuckled in response.

True to sentiment, Flux arched upward, cutting his thrusters and angling his shield downwards. His thrusters kicked back on, shooting him downward….

Impacting and crushing the head of a drone, to which it instantly slumped and fell to the side.

"One down… a few dozen more to go," the red tod mumbled under his breath, readying his shield and bracing as he saw the numerous drones exiting the pod.

From a distance, Phantom was gauging her targets and waiting for a clear shot. One Drone appeared to be lining up a shot with a massive, rapid fire, cannon. She picked her target and fired off a round.

Finding her mark, she put a solid round rather effectively between some plating, just underneath the shoulder joint that held up the cannon. While the impact did nothing, the resulting energy expenditure, expanding instantly in a wide diameter bubble with seemingly unstoppable force, ripped the arm from its mounting and threw it violently against a neighboring Drone, knocking it over.
The doe pumped her fist lightly, not wanting to ruin her line of sight with too much movement.

"Nice shot," Nick breathed slowly in amazement, a low whistle preceding his complement.

Not one to stand idle when his girlfriend did good work, the fox charged forward, rolling under a swipe and leaping up to evade a lower blow.

Raising his shield, he planted a foot and let his eye slits barely peek over the rim of the shield, a Drone firing a shoulder mounted blaster.

The shot impacted the center of the shield, a reverberate echo thundering out as the bolt was withstood and reflected back at the offending aggressor, the shot now amplified twofold and tearing into chest plating.

Hoplon’s shield had a scaled down version of Ricochet's rebound fields, as the full version required too much reliance on Leo to run the program. So, the tod was able to use the shield to rebound anything that hit it in a frontal attack, giving it a backlash ability.

Throwing the shield at the gaping crater in its chest, as the Drone was still trying to move, the disc impacted the damaged unit and tilted it back, whereas it fell over, sparks and smoke pouring from the expanded wound.

The shield floated in place, able to function very basically like the Ricochet discus as it returned to Flux, magnetizing and clamping back onto his forearm. He barely had time to let it return as another two Drones tried to strike or shoot at him.

Phantom covered him, firing another barrier round at the neck joint of the Drone taking aim. The shot struck, working its way into a crevice once more, going off and popping the head from the large robot like a cork from a champagne bottle.

Taking the chance and knowing she trusted him to deal with the close combat, dived low and slashed his arc saber, with the suspended and confined beam of lightning burning as hot as the real thing. The purple saber sparked and ate away at the metal armor of the Drone's leg, dismembering it from just below the knee and sending it toppling.

As it fell, the fox continued his previous swing and brought the blade upwards, bifurcating the Drone with an uneven gash up across the chest.

It was then that the tod noticed that these Drones were smaller than he was used to facing. Usually the simple robotic enemies were on par with a rhino in size, being difficult approach without worrying over being easily overpowered. The ones he faced now were more equivalent to the size of a lion or a tiger in stature, with speed and power to match. It was a relief that he didn’t have to spend so much time on each giant enemy, but the caveat was that there were far more of them.

To note that fear, Flux was slowly becoming surrounded by the amount of intact Drones pouring from the pod.

None of them were the Flare models or the Blue Shard itself, making the fox confused.

"Leo!? What's going on?" Nick called out, taking a guarded stance and striking only when struck. After the first few fell, it seemed as if the remaining many were playing it safe, adjusting strategies and becoming more evasive of his movements.

"The Shard is assuredly in the pod still, though the readings from the one that shielded them in the Gate is long gone. Dead, most likely, having expended all of its energy," the android explained. "But
if you meant the sudden change in the Drone behavior… I'm surmising that the Shard might be directly manipulating the strategies. Be very careful. This one was remarked upon being a skilled strategist. I couldn't dig up much more than that. Fight smart and diminish their forces as quickly as possible.”

"Got it," he replied, boosting his thrusters and diving towards a Drone. It tried to sidestep, but Flux threw his shield upon leaping, intercepting a leg and making the robot misstep. With that stutter, Nick was able to drive his blade deep into the exposed chest plating, burning out and turning the innards to slag. The entire thing slumped on its back, with Flux standing atop it, hoping to look a bit intimidating to the Shard, wherever they were watching from. The shield returned as well, latching back on.

Phantom steeled herself and fired off a few more rounds, trying to diminish the amount of Drones from her end. She picked her targets, taking out the leg of one to give her fox an edge in approaching it. He took the chance and used Hoplon's shield to bash in the head with a few strikes, cutting the torso to shreds with his blade.

Suddenly, the side of the pod that the tod was fighting near exploded outward, a swash of bolts pouring out and putting him into a huddled stance behind his shield. The move was definitely unexpected and jarring, as it put the normal Drones directly in the line of fire, with a couple blasted apart and one or two more being damaged by the barrage.

Flare Drones trampled through the newly torn gash in the plating of the pod, the new additions looking far more formidable than their lesser brethren.

Nick drove forward fearlessly, knowing Judy had his back.

He closed in, striking and swiping, blocking and parrying. With the smaller size of these particular Flares, he could trade blows with more ease, focusing on controlling the fight instead of avoiding every hit. It didn't hurt his chances that Hoplon was likely his best defense suit, with an integrity field that bolstered his armor plating to far exceed the normal parameters for the alloys that made them. It was like a shield that was infused with his armor. His actual shielding would diffuse energy attacks while the integrity field helped him hold firm against physical attacks.

He had little in the way of ranged attacks, though his entire purpose on the ground was to engage the enemy and give his doe a grouping of targets that couldn't evade her line of fire.

He smiled as a shot rang out…

...only for it to break and burst against a shield above him.

The armored red fox looked around instantly for an emitter, his eyes perusing the pod first.

Nothing.

Upon a closer glance, he noticed the Flare Drones glowing bright, their accents casting out a collective aura that created a collaborative shield between them all.

"Leo, can you still hear me?" Nick barked out, worried he might have communications blocked by the field.

"Loud and clear," the robot replied evenly. "It appears to be a field to entrap you. Keep moving and disable them."

"Don't need to tell me twice," the fox grunted, dodging and darting away from incoming blows and
bolts.

The Flares were cautiously closing in, using their shield to confine the space with which Flux could fight. It was becoming harder and harder to move, evade, and strike without being vulnerable.

He was barely holding his own, with Judy firing away to try diminishing the shield strength. It didn't appear to be working.

All three were trying to adapt their strategies and come up with a new solution.

Suddenly… Flux was sent flying, a strike he didn't even see or hear coming impacting his side and throwing his body against the nearest Flare.

It, in turn, batted him aside. He recovered and braced, keeping his eyes, ears, and sensors attuned.

It did him no good.

He was sent flying again by a blow to the back, tumbling him into the confined shield.

Such was the pattern of events for a couple minutes, testing the durability of Flux's suit to its limits as he tried desperately to defend against something he couldn't predict.

"I don't know what's going on! I need help. A reading. Anything!"

"It's the Blue Shard," Leo supplied rather obviously. The tod rolled his eyes, thusly sent flying once more by his unseen foe.

"I got that! Tell me something to help fight him."

"Maybe he's got telekinesis or something?" the far away doe tried to offer, sounding nervous about the hitch in their plans.

"No," the android rebuked. "The shield has a spike in its energy signature with each attack. From what I can gather, its an exploitation in the shield's refraction rate. I would surmise our foe is using speed or projectiles to hit you."

"Speed?" Nick mumbled to himself. Another hit threw him against the shield, knocking the breath out of him. He was quick, most recently more so with his newfound expertise on a once self harmful trump card, but this speed seemed further than that. "Do a scan and figure out how fast, if this Shard is in fact a speedy one."

A few seconds pass, with the red fox growing tiresome of the strikes and seeing his integrity fields redlining. He needed time, and an out.

"The last strike was from something going 1.87 times the speed of sound," detailed the robot. The tod groaned in exasperation, knowing his current suit was too limited in that fashion to even attempt matching that speed.

"Ready Z..." he began, trying to think on the fly, when he was cut off by a grip to his throat, heaving him clear of the ground.

The armored fox was now staring into the glowing visor of a semi large armored being, about as tall as a strong tiger and proportionally built as such, if the armor did any justice to the creature wearing it.

"Is this all you have to offer me?" a garbled voice growled from the being, stunning Nick into non-
movement, with Judy having heard it over his comms and gasping slightly.

"Uh… Leo?" the tod mumbled. "…it talked…. in our language."
"Uh… Leo?" Nick mumbled. "…it talked… in our language."

"That isn't possible," Judy breathed, her shots still trying to pierce the shield aura. "They just got here. There isn't any way they should have been able to learn our language in the span of ten seconds FALLING!"

Flux's voice came out in a mechanized filter, "How… do you know our language?"

The grip slackened, allowing the fox room to breathe, as it spoke again, "I was able to scan and translate every word from your online database and use data compression to teach myself in the span of time it took for you to shoot me down."

"No," Leo rebuked, more so to the two mammals than the Blue Shard. "This Shard is lying."

Neither of them had time to contemplate their position, with the Shard tossing Nick aside, with it disappearing in a burst of speed and intercepting the thrown mammal with a kick.

The contradictory G-forces knocked the breath out of the tod, who was attempting to recover and strategize a comeback.

His previous interrupted idea came to mind.

Once he picked himself up and steadied himself, he called out over the comms, "Zero!"

"Understood," the android remarked. "You'll need to…"

Flux was consecutively being hit by the speeding Shard, a blinking readout telling the fox that his integrity field was failing, reaching an effective percentage of 23% and still falling.

Finally allowed to hit the ground, dirt encasing him somewhat, he heard the Shard speak behind him, "I was told to expect a glorious welcome from our previous forces… and all I get is you."

The red tod was kicked in the gut, only hard enough to feel but not throw him like previous times.

In his mind, the fox was trying to come up with a plan, unable to collect his thoughts well enough.

One plan did present itself but…

"Ah carp… this is gonna hurt…" he mumbled, the comms not picking it up enough to broadcast to the others.

"I took down all your toys and tin cans," Flux called out. "They weren't really up to the task of greeting you properly. You might want to get some more competent help… or at least something with more tricks than an electric peashooter."

"You dare mock me in such a manner?" the Blue Shard growled, closing in to strike Nick across the armored muzzle.

Taking a breath, he recovered, keeping his tone as suave and calm as the tod could, firing back, "Oh? Then, how would you like me to mock you? I take requests."

"Nick! What are you doing?!" his grey doe yelled at him. "You have to evade!"
"With an enemy that fast..." he told her, "...I got one idea that might work. Plus, that Flare shield is still up. I have a way to punch through... but you need to trust me."

"Okay..." was her immediate, if not slightly reserved reaction. She hated the idea of waiting for her fox to play out some idiotic plan, but he was usually 'fine', so she resolved to let him do his thing, watching through the scope for a breach or gap in the barrier surrounding him.

"Thank you, though be ready to jump in and save me. Goodness knows I'll need..."

Flux was cut off as he was struck again. It seemed the most recent attacks were meant to hit him while he was down, instead of fighting smart. Phantom only hoped that her fox would retaliate soon, taking the enemy by surprise or somehow turning the tables.

That fleeting thought was dispersed with a shocking jab to the heart...

...literally.

The Blue Shard broke through the armor, stabbing an extended 'paw' like a knife into Nick's chest. He was then lifted, the poor red tod grunting and whining in substantial pain.

"I am DONE with your insolence!" the Shard snarled in the armored tod's face. "You will subject yourself to me and my mission will be complete."

"Well..." the fox tried to speak, a fading tone of snark still attempting to come out, "that's one way to bond..."

His paws gripped the arm of the larger armored Shard, more for support than to dislodge the clawed appendage from his chest, liberally pouring out blood.

His comms were still working in the suit, confirmed by the squeal of his bunny worrying over him.

Her input volume was lowered temporarily as Leo spoke, "You have thirty seconds before Zero drops. Best to expedite your plan."

"Almost... There...." he told his robotic companion.

"Good luck."

Tightening his grip on the wrist of the Shard, Nick focused all of his willpower on regenerating. Normally, with his connection to Judy, regenerating would be a very smooth and easy process, but he was well focused on something else entirely.

He held onto consciousness, a purple hue emitting from his wound, making the Blue Shard examine him with curiosity.

"So, you can heal," it voiced in confirmation. The claw twisted in the wound, testing the fox's wakefulness.

He held firm, a mission in mind as the regenerative energy seemed to build...

...and build.... And build...

Until even the Blue Shard looked concerned, pulling his appendage from the wound and darting back.

"What are you doing?" came the panicked tone of the Blue Shard. "You'll overload!"
"Exactly," came his resolved reply.

The Shard took tepid steps back, a form of fear showing that countered the previous confidence and bravado.

"You planned for this to happen?!!" it yelled at Flux.

"It's called a hustle, Sweetheart," the fox barely mustered the will to relay to the fearful Shard.

"You're insane!"

"And you're a coward," Nick spat, releasing all the built up energy in a regenerative burst.

Exploding outward, the swash of violent violet energy tested the limits of the auric shield from the Flares, turning their shield into a bulging mass of virulent destruction. The Shard exited the blast area before detonation, watching as all his Flare Drones were engulfed.

In the epicenter, Nick's body was experiencing the reversion episode that he hadn't in quite a while. The hole in his chest was reconstructing and reforming back together, his skewered heart becoming whole once more.

True to his hopeful plan, the overload of energy from his forced reversion episode broke the barrier and some of the Flares as well.

Phantom bit back her worries, seeing and hearing that her partner meant for it to happen, taking the chance to aim at and take down as many Flares as she could in the confusion. They were much stronger and more easily withstood her assault, though the recent explosion of regenerative energy did damage their defenses.

Above the fray, a pod arched over the skyline, originating from the armory. It was egg shaped with directional thrusters, pinpointing its trajectory to land just a few yards from Nick.

The fox of concern was now armorless, his undersuit also destroyed from the violent regeneration. He stumbled to his feet, scraps of clothing and armor barely clinging to his renewed physical visage. Looking up with a roguish smirk, he quickly shed the last layers, shame of a naked form forgotten.

Hundreds of yards away, his bunny blinked and blushed, shaking her head to keep her eyes from him and focus on covering his tail.

The red tod turned to see the Blue Shard close in again, trying to strike at his unarmored form.

Without the suit to hinder him, Nick was far speedier, bolting in a blast of purple energy and circumventing the Shard's strike. He was nowhere near as fast as the augmented being, though he was fast enough to evade his strikes, numerous though they were.

The pod closed in, deploying descent thrusters and slowing down.

The Shard didn't miss this and swiped an arm out, using its digits to press a few buttons. All the remaining Flares and normal Drones picked out the target and fired, blasting away at the pod, turning it into a fireworks display of fragmented metal bits.

The fox's smug grin faltered, seeing the bits of his armor fall around him.

In his distractive despondence, he got shoulder checked by the Shard, tossing him a few feet with the hit, but not trying to actually hurt or maim him.
"You thought another weapon might beat me?" it gloated. "I am well above the level of prowess of the previous elements sent against you. You might have beat them, through whatever luck you have, but it has run out."

"Luck favors the prepared," the red fox mumbled, still heard by the Blue as he ran off, a sneer on his lips that caused the Shard to growl in frustration, taking after him with a speed that far outstripped his own.

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Up above the battle, Phantom was about done with being patient. She got up, ready to leap into action, only stopped by the even voice of Leo.

"Hold up, Judy. I know where you are going but one thing first."

"Shoot…. Before I do," her tone came across venomously.

"The start-up procedures for Zero were near completion," the android explained. "I need you to get Slingshot close enough for me to link by proxy and complete the process…"

"But it was destroyed," the doe fired back, legs itching to run and her feet bouncing as she watched her fox struggle.

"No. It wasn't. It was simply dispersed. Just trust me."

"Fine! Shifting!" the bunny yelled out, dropping her rifle and letting her suit compact into a disc like her other compact suits. Her body diffused into that ethereal form that usually melded with her fox.

Given their problem with being separated before, Leo had them try Shifting from a distance, feeling that the stronger their emotional bond, the further they could Shift from. Over the past few weeks, they were able to gauge a distance that was predetermined by her sniping position, making it so that her involvement was a fallback plan. The armor disc closed in with great speed, Judy's energy form brimming with anger and the need to protect her mate.

It arched across the skyline, zipping around and between buildings at a speed that would give racecars a scare, the quarry of her protective desire closing in.

"Got it," the robot's even tone spoke from the comms. "Boot up in ten seconds."

Her form cast out of the confined suit, with it impacting the ground as her energy found and merged with Nick's.

"Good of you to drop in," he playfully spoke to her, the doe's incorporeal form hovering behind him.

"Leo is rebooting the suit. You have a few seconds," she belted out in warning. The fox smiled again.

"Finally."

The Blue Shard attempted to close in, bringing the full force of a strike to bear upon her fox. With paws splaying out, and a practiced mind for this, a barrier formed in an orb around them, the strike breaking apart the shield… though dispersing any real force behind it.

The Shard backed off and circled them, a despondent snarl echoing around them as Phantom put up another barrier.
"Fluff…?" Nick called out. "It's been a few seconds… and then some. What's going on?"

"Don't ask me," she vented, trying to watch the aggressor and keep them at bay, another strike threatening to collapse her new shield. "I ditched the comms when I ditched the suit… and you rather explosively disrobed from yours."

Flux sighed, "Fair enough."

A short distance away, the fragmented bits of the suit that was shot down began to twitch and wiggle, attracted or moving by some magnetic force.

A closer glance by an outside observer would reveal that these 'fragments' all looked relatively the same, denoting that they were not debris… but designed to be as such.

Under Leo's command and siphoning off residual energy from the discarded Slingshot suit, he was able to restart everything.

Each piece seemed to resemble something close to a scale, with each of them quivering on the ground, beginning to attract to one another.

Giving a final command, the fragments glowed brighter, swirling around in a storm and making a beeline towards the merged duo.

Seeing the approaching swarm, the grey doe was reluctant to let it by, unclear as to whether it was there to help or hinder. She felt a sense of comfort from her fox, almost a sense of great relief, encouraging her to open her barrier in the right spot to allow the entire swarm to close in.

It immediately wrapped around Nick, the scales interlocking and clasping around his joints, as if using those parts as a foundation for the rest of the scales.

There was a high hum, almost like buzzing electrical impulses, accompanying the swarms whirling ministrations. The fragments locked and formed to the red fox's body, expanding to close gaps or create moveable joints.

Finally, the suit reached full integrity with him, a pulsing purple hue coursing along he accents of the charcoal colored armor scales.

"Good to have you both back," the mechanical being greeted them. "I'm assuming you have a plan?"

"Speed versus speed," Flux growled. "Carrots, drop the barrier. Reform it around the suit."

He looked back to see her crossing her paws, an indignant frown and arched eyebrow greeting his intense expression. The tod realized he was getting to sound a bit bossy and dialed it back by clearing his throat.

"Uh… please."

At that, she grinned and did as he asked of her.

The Blue Shard zoomed in, with blinding speed and a wound up fist ready to meet them.

Flux and Phantom disappeared in a brilliant discharge of violet lightning, without even a boom as they sped away.

Zero was the latest addition to their arsenal of suits, most optimal with the two coming together as one. It was named as such because of the concept that gave it a multitude of minimizing factors.
Nick's natural affinity for speed was amplified by the suit, more driven by magnetic actuators and fields than conventional servos. Judy's barrier affinity helped to both amplify defensive measures, as well as bolster the most important part of Zero.

The mitigating factor to the fox's speed was drag and friction. With the bunny's help, along with Leo's operation of certain functions, the suit turned itself into a superconductor with a frictionless field, able to slip in between the very air itself without drag or displacement.

Supposedly, that would make it easier for Flux to become faster without expending exponentially larger amounts of energy to hold a higher constant speed.


Just… Zero.

With a small trail of arching purple energy following him, the armored fox went around the Shard, trying to strike at its side.

The other speed demon narrowly dodged the blow, striking downward and driving Flux into the ground.

"Not on your life," the rabbit doe seethed, her reaction time barely out matching the strike and allowing her barrier field to bolster itself and keep her fox from being pounded into dust.

The pensive android was monitoring their suit and vitals, contemplating this potential for a peak performance from the two. By putting speed and defense into the same suit, it was like making a smart bullet that could curve and alter trajectory on command. Put enough speed into an unbreakable object and it could gain enough momentum to break through anything. Given their lack of size and strength as individuals, Leo felt this was a most optimal outcome for a suit design thus far, though not to preclude future success from breaking their current limits.

The robot's thought processes were proven right…

…as the next boost of speed, along with Phantom solidifying the barrier, led to the two landing a lightning fast strike the the midsection of the Blue.

With the Shard stunned, Flux took the chance to keep up the barrage of strikes, zipping away to gain speed and closing in to land the next blow.

"Leo. Speed," Nick demanded quickly, trying to mostly focus on not giving his enemy any time for recovery.

"Top speed so far has been Mach 1.15."

"If this guy gets its bearings… we'll lose our edge. We need more speed," the doe mentioned, the tod grunting in affirmation.

The Shard expended some form of energy wave, dispersing the force of their next hit. The fox bolted away, seeing it lock on to him and knowing he had to draw it away. The armored alien followed, outstripping his speed, but lacking the reflexes and perceptive awareness the two had together.

Nick was beginning to notice something about this Shard. It seemed to have natural prowess with technology and a strategic mind… but every strike or blow to him so far had been a cheap shot or only when the being thought it had the upper paw.
"You're a coward!" Nick yelled out, weaving between and around trees, his smaller size allowing for more maneuverability than the larger creature. "You haven't even fought a real battle, have you?!

"I've vanquished many foes in the name of my leaders!" the Blue Shard bellowed, using its greater speed to close in and attempt a few jabs at the armored tod. "None of them could stand up to my might!"

Steadily increasing their speed, the duo was beginning to close the gap, with the Zero armor gaining further and further momentum towards speed. Flux was starting to exchange blows on more equal footing, the lack of experience with a true challenge clear to both bunny and fox in respect to their foe.

"You've relied too much on your power," the fox further taunted the angered Shard. "You've never actually tried to fight on par with your opponent, using your overwhelming power to simply demolish their resistance."

"And you will be no different!" their enemy shouted back, landing a strike, sending the fox into a tree.

They recovered and zoomed off, resuming a high degree of speed to keep evading the Blue.

As if on cue, Leo spoke over the comms to give them an update, "The Shard has peaked at Mach 2.18. You have risen to 1.98. I'm adjusting parameters and giving you greater leeway to increase speed to match. Please proceed with caution."

"Acknowledged," both fox and bunny voiced, a burst of electrostatic cascading out from them as their speed surged upward.

With both parties having an exceptionally high perceptive ability, landing a hit became a task in and of itself.

"You may have done well to dispatch my predecessors," the Shard attempted to voice, the graveled tone grinding at the coupling, "but they were disposable pawns. They were simply sent to make sure you were captured and set up a beachhead upon your world."

"Some job they did."

A flare of anger caused the enemy to haphazardly lash out with a leg, missing Nick and allowing him to sweep the other leg out from under the Shard. He then splayed his paw out and struck upward, charging and firing his palm emitter. A blast of barrier energy sent the alien creature flying, with the ethereal doe snickering in mild vindication of the hit.

"I've had to fight my way from nothing," the red tod barked, soaring skyward to dole out another hit to the Shard's midsection. "I had to learn to fight from below, never having the higher ground." He gripped an ankle and twisted in midair to throw the armored enemy back down to Earth. "I've had to rise time and time again from the mud and filth to become stronger and more enduring than before."

Judy might have felt a pang of guilt and sympathy for her fox if his tone sounded as such.

Instead she heard and felt a sense of pride in his voice, as if he wouldn't change the path he took to get where he was in this moment.

The Blue Shard impacted the ground with a booming crunch, its armor and body being tested by the force of the throw.
Landing deftly a few dozen feet away, Flux and Phantom charged forward, landing strike after strike, darting away and closing in with inexplicable speed. The Shard's armor augmented speed became less and less, as it attempted to defend with reduced speed and accuracy to blocking each hit.

In one such retreating moment, the grey bunny's eyes perused the landscape around them, seeing a glint of something familiar.

"Nick! Over there," she called to him. He looked, guided by her translucent purple paw, grinning devilishly as he noticed exactly what she wanted him to. They zipped over to the object in question, picking it up.

"Thanks, Hunny Bunny," he told her, getting an eye roll from her incorporeal form.

"Leave the name calling for later," the doe huffed with a small laugh.

Holding the arc saber from Hoplon, the fox funneled his energy into it and started up the blade, a crackling blade of violent purple lightning being cast out and suspended at a two foot length from the emitter.

Blasting towards the recovering armored alien, Flux and Phantom readied to deal some heavy blows, hopefully cracking open the Shard's armor.

With an indignant shriek, the alien let loose a swash of energy in a growing wave, creating a bubble shield of its own, deflecting the armored fox's intense strike and allowing it to enter in some commands.

The since forgotten remnants of the Blue Shard's Drones and Flares, equaling a breath over a dozen in total, began surrounding and unleashing a desperate volley upon the duo, turning the forested region into a hellblaze.

Using the increased speed and perception of time, Flux was able to use the blade to deflect and block any incoming bolts that could directly hit him. From an outside perspective, the armored tod probably looked like a blur glowing armor and arcing electricity intercepting many targeted bolts of bright blue energy.

"Why are you sitting in the center of this?" his doe questioned.

"Right now, they're all focused on us, not firing wildly into the distance… where the city is," Nick responded back, in between breaths. "Leo. You in position?"

"As some of your cinematic culture says, 'Locked and loaded'," the robotic being confirmed, a barrage of long-range bolts peppering the area and raking around Flux. While they had momentarily forgotten about the leftover enemies, the alien had also seemed to neglect that they had their own assistance that was reduced to observation during the speed of sound breaking battle.

With the units that previously took cover now focused on Nick and Judy, Howlizter was now able to refocus its firepower on them. Staccato closed in, cloaked and avoiding the area of the larger suit's bombardment, both guided by Leo. The stealthier suit was sticking explosives to the weaker Drones, with the Flares likely unable to be affected by them well enough.

"Howlitzer is switching between Flare targets to keep them busy and Staccato is planting explosives," the android detailed to them. "Ten more seconds and you need to go as fast as you can and take out the remaining units. The shield over Zootopia doesn't have much charge left, in case the Shard decides to try using it as a means of leverage."
"Understood," the doe and tod both spoke loudly in reply.

They mentally counted down the seconds, with each one passing much too slowly for them. Nick's reflexes were being well tested, though he feared screwing up enough to get hit and damage his suit to where he couldn't use it effectively. Over in the distance, the Blue was clutching at its chest, an outpouring of energy cascading from the area, mimicking the fox when he healed. His bubble shield was still up, though the suit was sparking and crackling, to which the doe figured it was some sort of last resort that stressed the alien's suit too far.

"Go," came the simple command, to which Flux crouched low and swept to intercept any bolts he could in a swirling arc, planting a foot as firmly as he could, then blasting forward with an insane acceleration.

In the breath of that moment, explosions rang out in a mottled collection of echos, one on top another on top of another. All of the remaining normal Drones were dismantled rather aggressively, reducing the incoming fire by about two thirds. The remaining Flares, three in total, took turns being targeted by the two cannons of Howlitzer, slower and more powerful bolts taking out what remained of their personal shields.

With two units currently on the defensive, Flux took off towards the last Flare unit, his arc saber making an upward cleaving strike. The unit took a step back, attempting to navigate from the range of the short saber. He struck a barrier instead, the arc blade crackling against the shield.

Giving off a snarl, the fox drove the blade into the shield, tendrils of sparking purple energy cascading from the saber and raking along the shield surface. It overloaded and faltered, allowing Flux to twist the blade in his paw, wielding it backpawed and slash in a flurry of attacks at vital parts of the Flare.

The blade cleaved through both legs, up the chest, then the armored tod leaped and spun around to drive home a final blow…

...down upon the head, using both paws to slash downward and keep forcing the molten hot blade through metal. It rendered wires, plating, and any internal parts to slag, the leftover remnants dripping out and singing the grass and growth below.

Both Flux and Phantom looked around, seeing the destructive aftermath of their improvised counterattack.

It was little surprise to see all the Drones destroyed and the other two Flares sizzling and sparking, either unable to move or twitching its limbs in attempts to do so.

Judy sighed and belted out, "Am I the only one who feels that Leo did most of the work there?"

"You're welcome," the robot followed up. The doe laughed, though Nick groaned.

"That was not a 'Thank you', Leo," he told their mechanical comrade.

"I know," came the even retort. The grey doe devolved into giggles, with the tod looking towards the Shard, its shield failing.

"I'm not done yet!" it snarled, bolting towards Flux. the armored fox sidestepped and swiped the still activated arc blade up…

...with the Blue Shard loosing a piercing howl of pain. Its arm, with the control unit on the wrist, was severed from just above the elbow, with its armor having lost all ability to protect its user.
The alien collapsed, wailing in agony on the ground, the tip of a brilliant purple arc saber now within inches of its visor.

"I surrender!" the creature voiced, a trembling fear lining its tone. "Don't kill me…"

As if to hilariously undermine the statement, the Shard's arm began to regenerate, giving the fox, rabbit, and android a decent preview to the anatomy of the individual before them.

Muscled and dense, the alien seemed fairly imposing by the arm alone, with the suit appearing to have been form fitting. Instead of being an oversized compensation for a much smaller lifeform, like the Blue Shard before, this creature appeared to fill out their armor.

The skin reformed itself as well, showcasing some strange combination of scales and tufts of… Feathers?

"Capture, not kill," Leo reminded them.

"I know that…" Nick responded with a smirk beneath his muzzle plating. "I just want to see this thing sweat."

"That thing is actually a Vilarin," detailed the mechanical being. "Too much to explain, but the summary is that 'He' is something most relatable to an intelligent avian with something more akin to paws than wings. My creators had logs about them."

"Got it. Not important though," the fox had to relay. He then refocused back upon their foe, saying, "I accept your surrender, though you will be taken prisoner without the armor."

The Shard instantly shed the armor, with the portions that still glowed blue going dark and the whole thing falling away in pieces. True to Leo's summary, the creature looked quite avian in the broad scope, with a beak and tufts of feathers around joints and a 'mane' of sorts wrapping around the neck and down the chest.

He wore an underlayer suit, much to their relief, as no one present preferred to deal with a naked alien. The creature had grasping digits like lizards, with anything that made him seem bipedal appearing more reptilian by nature.

"You were right… I am a coward…" he breathed in a rasping tone.

Howlitzer landed behind the alien, bringing to bear something akin to cuffs, allowing them to clamp tight around his arms and claws, with the creature only mildly surprised, but resigning himself to the gesture.

Leo spoke through the suit, "Tell me… how do you know how to speak this planet's language?"

The Shard went silent, casting his head downward and looking rather despondent.

"I would like to let you know," the android further said, "that I will tear off your arm, should you answer with a lie or not at all."

Nick wasn't sure what to make of his robotic companion's intentions, though he and Judy bit their tongues, knowing the logical being had a motive.

Fear registered in the beady black eyes of the avian like alien, clearly going over the pain of having a limb cleaved off, as opposed to one that was slowly ripped off.
Making a quick choice, he spilled out details, "I have cybernetic implants in my brain, able to download and correspond data from an outside source, if need be. Upon exiting the vortex… a full data stream of information was given to me, including a translation of various methods of communications you use… as well as the vocalization commands to use them without learning them. Data compression."

"A download from an outside source?" the android inquired further. "Where from?"

"I… I don't know," the Blue Shard fearfully revealed, eyes flitting back and forth between all the observing armor units. "I wasn't able to fully decompress the data stream before you shot me down."

Using Howlitzer to lift and fly the captured Shard back to their armory, with a capable prison cell already being prepared, though with the expectation that the creature captured might be far larger, the robotic voice came over the closed comms in the suit, "I feel like every victory thus far keeps presenting new issues."

"Meh… that's something I've learned to live with," the red fox belted out with a shrug.

"Same here," the grey bunny said with a smile.

"Well… aloofness aside, we have a new issue that needs addressing."

"Which is…?" both doe and tod goaded, when Leo didn't explain for several seconds, all parties concerned now gathering what materials they needed and heading back to the armory.

"Upon crashing here, it took me the better part of a decade to learn enough language to speak to anyone in an elongated fashion, though I was in an age without the internet," the android explained. "Whatever the case, it would take time to analyze and translate between any two languages that have never had any connection to one another. The syntax and grammar could be well differed and idioms or word pairings would be hard to translate the meaning of. Even in the modern age, with their resources and technology, I surmise it would take them months to learn a semblance of that, much less download it as a data stream to our enemy's head."

"Oh…" Flux sighed in realization.

"What?" the doe incited further.

"Leo is saying that they have a team or something able to do all of that, which has stayed undetected for however long they've been around," explained the fox.

"Oh…" she spoke, mimicking her boyfriend.

"Correct," Leo confirmed. "I have extensive equipment here, but that may not be enough. I know where to find what I need to properly scan for any signatures of a non Terran nature, but it could take some time to prepare the trip."

"What do we do about all the… scrap metal… around here?" Judy asked, reforming her body, with the Slingshot suit being brought over by Staccato for her to inhabit.

"I am allowing the government to use any tech and materials here, within the scope of my purview and under my direction," the android told them. "We need help and allies. Today was testament to that. You got lucky and you both know it."

It felt odd to be chastened by Leo. It always appeared compassionate and logical, no matter the robot's even tone, though this time felt like there was a force behind the words.
"So…" Nick started, bouncing back easily from being 'told off', "Where is the equipment you speak of?"

"In my ship… in the ocean a few miles offshore and buried beneath a coral reef that has kept it hidden."

The grey doe's eyes lit up, with her energetic aura easily discernible, even with her armor covering her expression.

"I'm going to see your ship?!" she shouted in glee, her face armor splitting to reveal her giddy grin.

"We…" Nick corrected her, his own face plates parting as well.

Jokingly, Judy shrugged, giving him a smirk as she said, "Either way."

Suddenly, her arm thrust out and grabbed the fox by the back of his neck, pulling him down into a fierce kiss with the bunny, all manner of being gentle forgotten as their tongues danced together.

Parting with a gasp, a thin strand of saliva connecting them, the violet eyed doe breathed, "That's for being a clever fox with your plan."

Before he could speak, a roguish smirk lining his muzzle, a speed strike to his chest sent the armored tod flying, where he landed with a heavy "Omph!" a few dozen feet away.

"And that's for purposefully getting yourself 'killed'!" Judy shouted at him, a gently grin playing upon her features at having gotten that out.

She then mumbled endearingly under her breath, "Dumb fox."

"I'm okay!" Nick exclaimed, stumbling to his feet and raising his paws…

...to only trip once more and fall flat on his face.

"...less okay," came the far away groan.
"What's your name?" came the inquisitive tone of a fairly small creature. At least by comparison of the far larger and seemingly more imposing specimen.

Bound in shackles and resting upon the floor, glaring with a forlorn gaze at the ceiling of his cell, the alien Shard sighed and let out a sardonic chuckle.

"I've invaded your home, damaged your lands, injured you and potentially others, not even mentioning what my comrades have done..." the creature began in some semblance of belated disbelief, "and you want to know my name?"

Wearing a power suit, slim fitting and mostly a means to protect his body and identity from the intruder, Nick shrugged as he grunted an ambiguous affirmative.

"Best to try introducing ourselves, right?" came the tod's voice, filtered through the suit. "I'm called Flux here. Sort of a persona that was thrust upon me."

The avian alien grumbled under his breath, eyes flicking over the armored fox before pausing and mulling something over.

"They have given you a name as a deity of sorts?"

"What?" Nick reactively asked, truly confused with the question and resulting implication. A few seconds of pondering and he finally understood. "Ah... not exactly. I'm more of a... superhero. A soldier of novelty that isn't entirely bound by the rule of law."

Without any sense of humor or biting sarcasm behind his words, the Shard voiced, "Isn't that what a deity is... in some other form?"

While the Shard couldn't see it, the fox grimaced, wanting to go into a whole spiel of why he would prefer not to entertain nor see it that way.

"Name?"

"Nar'graun Visal Nakta Timulunin," he answered simply.

"O...kay...," Nick began. "I'm going to call you Tim."

The Shard's face contorted in disapproval, though he seemed to relent with another sigh and replied,
"As disrespectful to my name as it is… you are my captor."

"Oh come on," the fox entreated with a flourish of the wrist. "A nickname is a sign of familiarity between people."

"We aren't exactly familiar," mentioned the avian alien, letting the last word come out in a pained drawl.

"In some cultures, trading blows as we have done is the best way to become familiar with someone," Flux explained with an upbeat tone.

"Just ask your questions," Tim groaned. "Losing my arm was less painful than hearing you speak right now."

Nick chuckled in rising enjoyment of his enemy's discomfort.

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On the other side of a false wall that could be viewed from only the outside in, Leo and Judy stood looking in, with the latter groaning at her fox's tactics of 'information retrieval', as the mechanical being put it.

Taking her focus off the current exchange, she turned her mind to something that she had yet to talk over.

It had only been a single night since they and the intruding Shard has fought, though the doe still had a few unanswered inquiries.

"Leo…," she began, the android turning to give her attention, "that suit from before was amazing. Where did it come from?"

"Nick was able to take inspiration from something you apparently mentioned and created a prototype on the design," the robot plainly detailed to her. "Oddly enough, he called it a lazy first attempt... So, I believe he still thinks he has plenty of room to work with a concept of that kind."

"Does that mean we can use the current suit? And can I get one like it? It'll be amazing to go that fast."

"Unfortunately, that suit is in irrecoverable disrepair," Leo enlightened her. "The suit was designed for speed, but you two surpassed the design specifications and burnt out about 77% of the suits motor functions by the end of the fight."

The rabbit's confused expression pushed the being to explain further, "If you are wondering why the suit didn't seem to bog down or show signs of decay, it was due to a delayed fatigue of the items in question. Think of it like jogging at a decent pace and coming to a dead stop without slowing down. Nick was alright himself, though when I took a look at the suit later, I found that your exceptional speed and stopping after reaching a top speed of Mach 3.35 resulted in motor functions fatiguing too quickly from going down to walking speed or simply standing. Another 30 seconds or so in that fight and the suit might have torn itself apart."

"Oh…" was all the grey doe could reply, suddenly less enthusiastic about trying that again.

"Needless to say that the design should be improved, though that shouldn't be a problem, now that we have a baseline of data from the prototype," the mechanical being offered. "So, do not fret, dear Judy. I'm sure we can come up with other models to use that will be up to the task."
Her beaming smile returned, liking the prospect of everything Leo implied.

As if to ruin the mood, the robot spoke up once more, "However, our next focus should be the procurement of allies and expansion of production of defensive and preventative measures to other incursions."

"Ugh… don't remind me," Judy groaned. "How am I gonna approach Essie with this though? I can't exactly come out and say 'Hey! We'd like to include you in a superhero group of armor wearing mammals that hope to save the world from alien threats that…' uh… I don't really know how to finish that thought."

"Well, you have a couple choices here," Leo offered. "One is to talk to your friend in armor and risk exposure to her if she recognizes your mannerisms. Two would be to bite the bullet and talk to Adam, putting aside your supposed hatred of him for our needs in assistance."

The doe went wide eyed for a moment and then narrowed her vision at the robot, grumbling, "I'll figure it out with Essie."

The android only nodded in recognition, not pushing the issue.

Nick was exiting the room, a series of locks and bolts clanging rather noisily into place and an energy field sealing the area.

The door to their viewing area opened, whereas the fox sauntered in, his faceplates opening as well.

"Well that felt pretty roundabout and useless," he sighed. "He knows little and what little he knows, he's afraid to give because that means he has no value of life to us."

"He's being a coward," snapped Judy.

The tod waved her down, answering, "He's surviving. He has no idea what we're capable of beyond our battle and… for all he knows… we captured and tortured every Shard before him before killing them."

She signed in frustration. The grey doe hated that he was right.

Letting her simmer down, Nick turned to Leo, asking, "Did you get anything from his suit?"

"Only a generalized subset of specifications that…" the android began.

"Leo… short version," Nick cut off.

"Understood," Leo replied. "I was able to figure out that the speed it took advantage of was a rather… forced procedure. It was basically like redlining an engine and gas guzzling. Prolonged usage of that suit would have drained this Shard…"

"Tim," the fox corrected with a delightful smirk.

"Tim… are you sure you want to call him that?" Judy questioned, raising an eyebrow.

"If he wants to make my life difficult… then I'm going to enjoy making his the same."

"Right… continue, Leo."

"Of course," the robot resumed. "The energy consumption versus the efficiency of the suit would have eventually killed… Tim. Not likely in this battle, but likely within the year. As with most
previous Shard incursions, they appear to be powerful, though disposable to their masters."

"Yikes," remarked both fox and rabbit.

"I'll watch over our new guest here, while you two go talk to Adam and Essie," Leo told the two mammals, with a look of minor discomfort exchanged between all three at the prospect.

"Can't we just procrastinate?" Judy half complained, half pleaded.

The fox and mechanical being both stared at her, until…

Her face finally fell as she relented and spoke, "Yeah… I thought so."

A mammal that was too small for the newspaper he was holding flinched slightly on the park bench he was sitting on, as another much larger mammal joined him.

"You know…" the larger mammal grumbled, "you couldn't have been any cheesier with your selection of venue that feels like a throwback to old spy films."

To line his mention, the wildebeest gestured generally to the wide open park they were in, with mammals frequenting it but too far apart to care about what was going on with anyone else.

The red fox with the large newspaper laughed and lowered the paper, as well as his sunglasses.

"Ah come on," Nick goaded Adam, giving him a wink. "It's actually a smart idea. No one can approach us without drawing suspicion and there aren't roads for vehicles with surveillance equipment. That and my colleague is jamming all electronic devices near us from recording or filming us."

The gnu's eyebrows raised, impressed.

"Alright then," he noted, pulling out a flashdrive, with small arachnid like legs attached to it. "Mind explaining this little thing then?"

Nick smiled, taking pleasure in the fact he didn't keep it for analysis. It was simply a microbot with a port connector for most computers. He and Leo had it infiltrate his office and display a message for his eyes only on his computer, erasing all evidence of itself on the system when done.

"Just a means of giving you a message without being tracked," the tod explained. "I have a proposition for you and needed to talk to you without a whole hoard of chairmammals breathing down your neck about negotiations."

"I think they're called a 'board' of chairmammals…" Prince tried to correct, but the fox gave him a dubious look.

"Trust me… I know what I said," he fired back with a grin. "Anyways, I'm willing to give you designs for tech and such that your power supply and resources could meet without trying to meltdown Zootopia."

The wildebeest's eyes widened considerably, blinking for a few seconds before he sighed and narrowed them at the red mammal before him.

"What's the catch?"
"I don't know if you would call it a catch," Nick mentioned with a light shrug, rolling the last word as he looked away briefly, "but I'm building a team and need candidates. Ones I can trust with armor to help deter this threat we face."

"I'm sure we can find some candidates that suit your…."

"I need you," the fox cut him off, turning back to eye him, letting him know he was serious. Adam leaned back, genuinely surprised. He furrowed his brow and pinched the bridge of his nose. "Alright… ok. I can see this was a joke."

"No joke," came the smaller mammal's even tone, as if knowing this was going to be the response. "My last couple of battles have gone well enough, but our enemy is something I need help with. Giving the government tech that you want isn't possible, but I have been able to create other suits capable of holding a modified power source powerful enough to use, but not in the mass produced manner I'm sure the government would prefer. It's too unstable."

"And you want me to wear a suit and go gallivanting around like I'm one of you?" the gnu bluntly inquired. "I've been out of combat for a few years and don't have the greatest history the last days of that career."

"I need you," Nick repeated, getting down from the bench and standing in front of the much larger mammal, who looked despondent now. "Your experience and intuitive thinking, plus your morals. I haven't known you well but your record speaks volumes. And my interaction with you, even though I was captive, tells me that you know the burden of your past and you strive to never be that way again. I believe you could do more in this endeavor."

"Captive?" Adam asked with a smirk. "I don't believe I remember that."

Seeing the glint in his eyes, Nick began to laugh. "That explains a lot," he mumbled to himself, now holding out a paw. "And solidifies my claim you would be right for the job. How about it?"

The wildebeest's shoulders slumped as he leaned forward, thinking it over. "So I join your armored crew and you give us tech designs that aren't going to be problematic?"

"Yep!" the tod spoke with a small bounce to his feet. "We'll give you designs we feel safe with and see how you fare… then make sure to give you leeway as you earn it. We do want you to be able to develop new and innovative technology… but not so far as to be blind to its drawbacks until it's too late. I think we know how that turned out."

"Yeah… well… Deal," Adam hummed, grabbing the fox's smaller paw and giving it a firm shake. He then added, "I'm going to regret this, aren't I?"

The red tod shrugged, a lopsided grin growing on his muzzle as he answered, "Probably."

The gnu snorted. "Fair enough."

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Judy slapped her paws to her cheeks, almost forgetting both were covered in armor plating and
ringing out a few metallic clinks that hurt her ears.

She was resting on top of a building near the precinct, waiting for Essie to finish her shift so she could intercept her somewhere nondescript and recruit her.

Leo gave her a few pointers, saying that cutting her off near home might be too invasive. Pulling her into an alley might draw unwanted attention or concern. Do it in plain view and her fellow cops would be asking question the very next time they saw her.

Thus, the doe was pretty sure that allowing the android to hack into her phone and get her into a call would be best so the wild dog could be redirected at her comfort for a private meeting.

To her relief of her dwindling patience and nerves, Essie was exiting the precinct, walking her way towards the nearby tram.

"Leo, go ahead, and mix up my voice so she doesn't get the hint it's me," Judy spoke.

"Of course," the robot replied evenly.

Shortly thereafter, she could hear a call tone, taking a deep breath to steel herself.

"Hellooo, this is Essie," came her chipper tone, ever the professional.

"Greetings, Essie," the grey rabbit voiced as calmly as she could, toning down her usual mannerisms and taking a few points of interest from Leo's tone and vocabulary. "I am Phantom, the associate of Flux. I have called you to arrange a meeting of sorts."

She had to withhold a giggle upon seeing her friend freeze in the distance and look around in jerky movements.

"I… W-what?" the larger female mammal sputtered. "This is a prank, right?"

"I assure you, it is not. I can't come out into the open without drawing unnecessary attention to the two of us. Is there someplace you feel safe enough to meet me right now without being too far for help?"

Taking the mention as some sort of comfort, Essie appeared to relax a bit, likely pulling upon her police training to sound calm and collected.

"Can you prove you are who you say you are?"

"Building to your 7 o'clock, top of the northeast corner of the building," the armored doe answered without hesitation, knowing it would come to this.

The wild dog spun to look, eyes raking up the side of the building and jaw going slack at the armored rabbit giving her a tentative wave.

"Uhh…. Phantom?"

"That's me."

"Got it. Meet me two streets down, behind the bar. It's called the Drunk Tank."

"Understood, Essie."

Both hung up, taking their respective paths to the agreed meeting place. It was an easy thing to make
her way to the Drunk Tank, being a frequent patron of the bar/restaurant.

Trying to remain quiet and discreet, Phantom used her thrusters on low power, hopping across rooftops and dropping into the alleyway behind the bar.

Essie must have been sprinting, as she arrived none too soon after herself.

"Wow… wow…” she breathed, stepping close and catching her breath, the dog splaying out a paw to touch the armored ears on Judy.

"Ahem…” the armored rabbit cleared her throat, causing the larger mammal to collect herself and step back with an awkward expression.

"Sorry," she mumbled. "It always intrigued me how yours and Flux's ear armor worked."

Judy smiled inside the suit, finding her in.

"In that case, your curiosity might be sated soon enough, if you're up for my proposition."

"Proposition?" came the highly expected response.

"Absolutely," Phantom chirped, realizing the tone of her voice was being altered, as per her request by Leo. While it was tough to place, it felt like the modulation was adjusted to sound like she was ten years older, with a lower pitch to offset her usual energetic voice. She had to give a small amount of internal praise towards the android for its ability to do this so easily.

Continuing, she explained, "Flux and I need to reevaluate our approach to increasingly difficult enemies. Basically, we need allies. If you are willing…"

"YOU WANT ME TO HELP, RIGHT?!" Essie exclaimed, interrupting the armored mammal with a high pitched and excited squeal.

The rabbit was terribly glad she had a means of dampening sound in her suit, allowing her hearing to not be horribly impaired by the deafening pitch her voice reached.

"Y-yes… we want to have you as a candidate to stand beside us as an ally, given your own suit…” Phantom tried to continue, though was once again stopped by the strangled squeals leaving her friends maw.

"You want me to wear armor like you too!??"

Judy was giving her friend a very deadpanned look, willing her to settle down, not that she could see the look herself, being that her faceplate had no real emotive features.

"Essie? Calm down," she told her simply, letting the wild dog take a deep breath and clear her throat.

"Sorry… just… so cool," the larger mammal said, her grin threatening to split her muzzle apart in a new way. There was a small 'ahem' as she gestured for the smaller mammal to continue.

"As I was saying, we're in need of help," Phantom voiced. "You have been selected as one of the first nominees for consideration. Are you interested?"

"DAMN HECK YES!" Essie yelled out, unable to contain herself any longer and hugging the armor clad bunny. She let the wild dog have her moment and counted the seconds before she finally stepped away and took a deep breath.
Judy pulled out a small device, and told the larger female mammal, "This device has everything you need, and will destroy itself once you have properly viewed it. It entails where you must go and when. If there any problems or developments, we'll be in touch."

"Uh… how?" the dog numbly questioned.

The armored mammal laughed gently, "I called you, remember?"

"Oh… right," Essie breathed, rubbing the back of her neck, a broad grin seemingly permanently plastered to her muzzle. She perked up suddenly, calling out to Phantom, who was beginning to make her egress, "Wait! Are there others? Or am I the only one right now?"

"My partner is currently bringing the same offer to another such individual," she spoke softly, seeing the sense of relief in the dog’s eyes. Judy assumed she was glad that she didn't have to be the sole source of scrutiny when they inducted her. The rabbit could understand that. She felt the same when she had both Leo and Nick training her at first, though neither of them judged her and always supported her. She would do her best to be that for Essie, even if she couldn't yet know who she was.

Not waiting any longer, knowing all that needed to be relayed was already said, Phantom leapt up, thrusters powering her up and over the bar, where she landed and used her display to hone in on Nick.

They were supposed to meet nearby to discuss the success or failure of their respective endeavors. ...that and also she had basically begged him to take her on a date. He relented to take her out to a cafe in the park.

Smiling, Judy found a location to shed her suit, letting Leo reclaim it by remote, then walking back into the open at a brisk pace to meet her fox.

Having given Adam his messaging device, like Judy was doing to Essie, Nick hitched a ride with Zuber and made his way to the park that the grey rabbit wanted to visit.

It was larger than the one he just left, with a small cafe on the grounds.

None too soon, the small doe was jogging her way towards him, beaming at him in relief.

"I did it!" she exclaimed proudly. "She's on board."

"Good girl," the fox told her, rubbing the top of her head with a large paw. Her face looked a bit conflicted for a moment as she blushed.

"Don't do that…" the doe mumbled.

"What?" he asked, truly unsure. "Call you 'Good girl' or pet your head?"

"Um… the first one…" came her soft reply. "At least not in public."

Looking around, Nick suddenly understood her reservations. He didn't quite see how it was embarrassing, but he could understand why she viewed it as such.

"Sorry, Fluff," he teased. "I'll be sure to keep it in the bedroom."
As he expected, Judy came flying at him, punching his shoulder and upper arms with a pouting expression, cheeks ablaze.

"Just hurry up and buy me food."

"Wow… so greedy. You know I'm more than a fluffy tail and a wallet right?" Nick inquired rhetorically, pulling out his wallet as he approached the cafe counter. It wasn't table service, but they did have a generous assortment of delightful meals to choose from, with a large variety of tables to sit at once their order was acquired.

Both got their meals and drinks, using a tray to carry it to a table that matched their size.

They were enjoying the brisk air and the sun…

...which was quickly blotted out by the bulky form of a large bear sitting at a larger table next to them.

Judy didn't seem perturbed by it, so Nick brushed it off as well and ate with her.

"So…" the doe began, taking in a mouthful of her stir fry vegetables, "...I was never quite clear on how tackling the 'We'll keep our identities but give others suits' thing."

The tod smiled, knowing that their recent decision might have been a long time coming, though they rushed through the recruitment.

Using his fork to busy himself with pushing around the pasta in his bowl, he started to explain, "Leo and I set up a location to act as an armory for these recruits. All suits will be hardwired with kill controls to prevent one of them from giving it off to any third parties. Just as well…" Nick paused and let out a chuckle, "...let's just say we covered all our bases and skip the boring explanations, huh? We're on a date."

"R-right!" Judy confirmed, eyes averting to focus on her food. The fox was amused and delighted at such an honest and adorable response. She seemed mindful of every bite, as if her eating habits might suddenly seem weird to him. Her eyes seemed to flit up towards his own gaze shyly, refocusing on anything else if she felt them connect too long.

While it baffled him how she was so reserved and shy in moments like this, he couldn't deny understanding that while they spent a lot of time together, little of it felt like it was intended to be just for them.

Whenever he had time to actually think about the nature and validity of their relationship, he still barely believed that he was able to grasp the attention of such a wonderful mammal. Given her obvious idolization of him as Flux, he could see part of it as realistic, but his cold nature in the beginning, emotional distance, and other such numerous flaws he wished to list in his head… made him feel all the luckier she put up with him.

He surmised she would become like this when allowed the chance to think about how real their relationship felt in moments like this, on a date, just them, no Leo hanging over them, and caught up in each other.

The grey doe finally looked up to lock her amethyst eyes upon his emerald ones for more than a brief moment.

He could see the swirling tumultuous storm within her stare…
Nick looked up, knocking over his chair as he stood suddenly.

It was a real storm, reflected in her eyes.

High above Zootopia, there was a crackling maelstrom that was clearly not natural. It also seemed more violent than a normal Gate breach.

Nonetheless, a smoking heap of twisted metal burst forth from the sky, arcs of energy striking at nothing in particular.

"H-how?" he stammered. Judy quickly saw what he was worried about and shot him a knowing glance, wrought with her questions and worries.

Showing up with no warning, the two knew they had to make a break for it and find cover, then await their robotic companion to send them suits.

It was barely a day since the last incursion, by which it shouldn't have been possible to send anything else for a while.

Pressing a digit to his glasses, he let them connect.

"Leo…"

"I see it," the android replied to the yet to be asked inquiry. "I'm sending suits as soon as checks are made."

The smoldering heap of metal bore down on them, hitting the far end of the park, with the fox and rabbit dreading the casualties that might be inflicted. Mammals were already clearing the area, with panicked cries echoing everywhere.

"We're going to close in and take a peek at what we have," Nick detailed, with Judy nodding in the affirmative. "It's hard to figure out what we need to fight with if we aren't sure about the enemy."

"Understood," Leo remarked. "I read no Shard energy, but still… proceed with caution."

"Got it," the red fox tod acknowledged, turning to the grey bunny to say, "Let's go."

With all the mammals running away, it probably looked odd to see two trying to go towards the trouble.

Usually, others were too enamoured with their own fear and safety, or those of loved ones within physical reach, that strangers weren't a concern.

If two small mammals wanted to take a suicide run at a bunch of unknown alien mechanical monstrosities… let them.

That just made the fact that a large bear would scoop the two up in his arms all the more confusing and unexpected.

"Are you two idiots?!" he bellowed down at them, stunning Nick and Judy into silence, with their bodies now pressed together by the enormous arm of a grizzly bear.

The bunny was the first to speak, "Uh… well I know he is… but I'm just clumsy."
"This is a joke to you?" came the more even tone, the bear lumbering away from the scene of the crash.

"Okay, yes, we're idiots," griped the red tod in a hurry. "But we have a purpose and need to be let GO! Please…?"

"What possible reason would you have to go towards that catastrophe?" the bear asked incredulously with a raised brow, still keeping the two pinned against him.

Instead of answering outright, Nick was trying to wriggle his way out of his grip, the grizzly looking rather unamused as he ducked into an alleyway and stopped.

"Nick… stop moving," the doe pleaded, feeling his arms and elbows digging into her uncomfortably as he struggled.

"Ugh… we don't have time for this," the fox tod complained. "Leo, activate the Pods and give Judy her suit. Now!"

The grizzly bear looked utterly befuddled now, his grip slackening only slightly, though not enough to escape from.

Right on cue, the Phantom suit, having collapsed into a disc form and keeping nearby, zipped in and bounced off the bear's upper arm. The move shocked his arm into opening, dropping the two mammals.

Judy was quickly enveloped by her suit, all the plating and joints forming around her.

"What's your name?" Nick spoke in a low tone, locking a fiery gaze onto the larger mammal.

"...uh… Gus… Gus Grizzmund," he slowly offered, unsure whether that was the correct choice, though still taken aback at seeing a rabbit being covered in armor before his eyes.

A loud crunching noise, like concrete breaking, sounded nearby and the din of a thruster closed in on them. Dropping behind the fox, an egg shaped pod landed and broke apart, mechanical arms extended out. In their grip were armor components.

Phantom noticed they seemed more reminiscent of his older designs, but would definitely be robust enough for battle.

The armor was a very bland steel grey and didn't have the normal level of accents that he was known for, with few purple glowing portions that Flux usually had now.

"You get that, Leo?" Flux relayed. "Gus Grizzmund."

Both bear and rabbit were a bit confused as he began to laugh, not hearing the android's reply.

The armored fox tod then continued, "Stay here. We'll be back. We have a few things to discuss."

"I… uh… sure?" his low voice grumbled out indecisively.

The two armored mammals couldn't wait any longer, bolting off to intercept whatever threat lay in the park, leaving the bear to comprehend that he just saw Flux and Phantom armor up.
Woohoo! feels good to put another Shards out.

I don't like leaving my works hanging for as long as they have been. Trust me... not a comfortable thing for a writer.

Now... I know that most who read/follow aren't assured to have followed my other works or me as an author... so ignore this next part if you already read it in Heartbeat (my Miraculous one-shot) but I wanted it addressed to my Zootopia fandom followers.

Most of it will be a bit cryptic because of things I don't want to describe in detail.

So... Back when I halted my writing, My girlfriend ended up hospitalized (for what, I dont want to explain.). Suffice it to say that there were some concerns that needed regular visits to a professional. I stopped doing anything in a writing capacity, since it takes up free time, and focused on her well being.

She was on medical leave from work and I was the only working individual for a while. No big deal, right?

Well her workplace bungled up the paperwork to pay her for her disability during that time, not to mention her medical bills.

That placed more on me to make sure to not only cover our bills alone, but help in any capacity towards her medical needs, financial or emotional.

It didn't help that I took up a training course that was unpaid but provided a potential opportunity that neither of us could pass up, thus limiting how much time I had for work and pay.

Basically, for about 3-4 months, little pay, working two ish jobs (with one unpaid until I completed the training regimen), a girlfriend unable to work, medical leave pay in limbo, and a few other little problems.

I've finally finished the training and got the job I so sorely needed, my girlfriend is back to work and banking money, and I'm recovering from so much time of probably the most strenuous time of my life. Sure, there are plenty others with much worse issues, but I'm just mentioning what I dealt with.

There. Lol. that's the end of that and back to a more lighthearted note.

I'm in a job I'm much happier with. I'm being paid enough to work just one job with enough free time to be me and write as I want.

I never lost my passion for writing, so no worries about that for any followers still awaiting for this to be continued. XD

ALSO... I've set up a very simple set of tiers for my atreon with a "P". No paywalls. No obligation. But I've wanted to do this more effectively for a while. Basically there is a 1 dollar (donation tier), 5 dollar (early access by 3-5 days of any works), and 13 dollars (early access and exclusive looks, excepting finales and cliffhanger resolutions).

On that, I use my pen name Drekk Deina... with a space in the middle. Pun both intended and unintended. AT THE SAME TIME. XD bahahaha.
Until next time, It's been a hustle, Sweethearts.
Convergence

Chapter Notes

Good day to you and you and you: NOT YOU!: and you and you.

I'm so glad everyone is enjoying my return chapter for this. Won't deny... I was worried my writing ability might have gone rusty and my flow with the plot of this ruined.

Part of the reason I did a couple short fics before returning to this. XD

Anywho, back to it! Read, fav, follow, review, enjoy, and grab that strange snack. Mine today is breakfast sausage rolled into balls and encased in hashbrowns to be fried. then i dip them in mustard. But i just love mustard.

Thank you for all your pawsitive feedback so far and I shall endeavor to continue to entice that out of you all.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Never thought I’d have to use this armor,” Nick gripped, a biting tone to his voice. “It pinches everywhere.”

“Old design?”

“More or less,” he groaned, thrusters carrying him well enough towards their destination. “I can’t wait for Leo to send anything. Might be a few minutes too late for anything prep worthy to come along.”

“Speaking of Leo…” Judy began, more gracefully gliding through the air in her suit, “what did he tell you before to make you laugh so hard?”

The fox chuckled a bit at the memory, quoting, “He told me, ‘Oh... Gus Grizzmund was on our list of candidates. Want to make him the third wheel? That is the correct usage of that idiom isn’t it?’ and I just lost it.”

Despite the urgency, the rabbit laughed heartily, with the robotic being now connected over the comm to her own suit properly, remarking, “I don’t see how my words could have been that far in error or that comedic.”

“I’ll explain later,” the armored tod cut off. “I need an analysis, Leo.”

“I’m getting some signatures from the wreckage,” the android detailed. “It impacted one of the park’s ponds, diffusing the overall damage from becoming worse. Further scanning is showing residual Shard energy. I believe it’s part of the shell that protected ‘Tim’s’ pod. I surmise it was the protective outer layer of the pod that was draining the other Shard to protect the one that landed, at the expense of the weaker one.”

“Why did it land later?” Judy voiced curiously.

“Uncertain. Too little information to extrapolate. Top theories are time dilation or simply being lost in
the vortex.”

The two approached the smoking slag, with Nick scanning the area, wrought with thick smog.

“Theories later,” he interrupted. “What enemies will we face? Or is this just a big piece of scary looking salvage?”

“Negative,” Leo replied immediately. “Be on the lookout for Regulators. They are multi-tendril drones that repair, moderate, and coordinate functions on these pods.”

As if to line that explanation with an example, a bulbous, though still moderately sized, looking Drone emerged from the wreckage, with a tentacle like appendage snaking out with blinding speed and stunning accuracy…

...to wrap around Phantom and whip her into the air with little effort.

It looked almost arachnid in basic form, though without a sizable thorax.

“Also watch out for the manipulators… they can act like…”

“Very accurate and strong whiplashing tentacles?” Flux sassed with mild shock.

“How did you…?” the mechanical being started.

“Well, it just used whatever those are to toss Judy like a rock from a slingshot….” the fox cut him off with a ‘It can’t be more obvious’ tone.

“Is she alright?”

An angry battle cry sounded over the comms, with the armored rabbit leaping in, and diving down to land a fist into the chest plating of the offending Regulator that threw her. It appeared to be stunned, teetering from the shock of the blow.

Nick was grimacing inside his suit, mentally chastising himself for even being worried about her with a deadpan expression as he noted blandly, “Uh…. yep. She’s fine.”

Thought initially terrifying to look at, the multi armed Drones were practically armorless and not very mobile. According to the summary of things that the two were able to retain while Leo explained in combat, the Regulators had great processing power and pattern recognition ability, but low combat parameters, though still with enough defensive programming to put up a fight.

The manipulator arms were annoying and powerful, but the lack of ranged combat weapons made a change of tactics easy.

Dodging the arms from a distance was easier, along with targeting the Regulators, while the partners picked their targets and fired away, finding the battle was much easier without needing to engage an enemy that was well equipped with armor and shields.

“These guys had a strong start,” griped Phantom, “but now I feel like I’m throwing darts at the carnival. They don’t really move around much. Too easy.”

Flux was having a good laugh, guffawing at his partner’s seeming dissatisfaction as he retorted, “You’re complaining? I’m utterly overjoyed that, for once, we’re dealing with something as easy as pie.”

The fox was gleefully firing off plasma bolts, quite effectively disrupting and destroying every
Regulator that bared its manipulators. The last one was knocked over with a few well placed bolts and joined the other ten in being non-functional.

“I just feel like something too easy comes with a catch,” the grey bunny softly spoke in return.

“Please don’t jinx it…”

“We have a problem,” Leo cut in.

Phantom shifted her stance and crossed her arms. Flux was looking away but facepawed and pointed back at her, without even looking as he complained, “Don’t say a word. I can practically hear you smiling, Leo. Spill.”

“The remaining shield projectors on the wreckage is slowly irradiating the area. It won’t cause any immediate effects but if you don’t neutralize the growing field of radiation, the citizens might begin to suffer the effects. For that venture, I’ve selected and sent Shock Sage to your location.”

On cue, the suit arced overhead and landed next to Nick, with him shedding his armor and stepping into the far more comfortable suit.

“What can an electric suit do against radiation?” Phantom asked in concern.

The android answered, “The radiation isn't overly harmful but will continue to spread as it is produced from the wreckage. Shock Sage can produce an Electromagnetic Pulse Field that can nullify the radiation outpouring and stop it at the source.”

“So… we’re throwing water on a fire?” the armored rabbit countered in clarification.

The fox shrugged in his newly donned armor, remarking, “Sounds about right. Might want to leave the E.M.P. radius and clear the area of any onlookers.”

“Got it,” she replied curtly, darting off to do as she was asked.

Flux, under the purview of Leo’s system guidance, began charging up a small field around him that arched with purple tendrils of lightning and power. It grew in brightness and intensity, the energy becoming more densely confined and refined for usage.

Eventually, Phantom voiced her confirmation that civilians were clear.

He let the wave of energy release, blasting outward like a slow moving pressure wave, but affecting nothing biological. The leftover remains of the Regulator Drones were tickled with electric arcs and any metal surfaces became magnetically charged. The nearby wreckage was engulfed in the field, the previously strange red glow from its components dying out as the energy leaking from it waned and died out.

Judy flew over to him, the field having been dispersed once Leo confirmed everything was nominal.

“Did it work?” she asked with a flourish of her paw.

“So I’ve been told,” Nick replied confidently to her. “I’m liking today. No hugely arduous surprises.”

As if to contradict his statement, if only comically so,...

...a metal park bench flew from about a dozen feet away to knock him over.
The fox was face planted and slid a good ten feet or so before grinding to a halt.

“Ugh…. ow…” he voiced, getting up slowly, with the bench still awkwardly stuck to the armor on his back.

“It appears your field magnetically charged the metal bench,” came the even tone of the mechanical being over the comm.

The grey doe did her best to withhold a snicker, quickly failing and devolving into full on laughter.

“I can see that!” the tod yelled, trying to reach behind himself and pry the bench off his back.

“Thanks for stating the obvious.”

“You’re welcome.”

“That wasn’t…. Ugh… forget it,” Flux huffed, giving up and walking away with the bench stuck to him.

“What about Gus?” the rabbit reminded both android and fox. The latter stiffened in his armor, reaching up more calmly and prying the bench off of him.

He sighed, “Right…. We should go have a talk with him. Think he stuck around?”

“In this mess? I doubt it,” Judy laughed lightly.

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“Huh… he did stick around,” she remarked with a raised eyebrow, duly standing corrected.

“I’ll be honest,” the red fox tod followed up, “I secretly agreed with you on this. So… this is a surprise.”

Both mammals, sans armor, were now staring at the same bear they had asked to wait, in the same alleyway they asked when they left him. He looked to be thin on patience… but true to his word.

“Well…?” Gus goaded them both, gesturing mildly with a large paw. “You wanted to talk?”

“Uh….” both smaller mammals gaped, now at a sudden loss for words.

“Look… I’d like to think myself a patient mammal,” the larger mammal began slowly, “but I prefer not to stand in an alley too long like this.” He pointed to himself. “Big bear.” He then pointed at the two smaller mammals separately. “Fox and bunny. There’s plenty of wandering eyes and I prefer not to have that one with an itchy claw or hoof calling the cops about an assumed mugging.”

“Oh… OH!” Judy chirped in understanding, just as Nick’s eyes widened slightly. “Right. Of course. We’re sorry. We haven’t exactly had the most…. Smooth day…. Lots of surprises.”

“I just met Flux and Phantom in the fur,” Gus reminded them. “I think I understand how that feels. I’m a big fan of yours… no pun intended.”

“I’m just glad you’re not freaking out,” the grey doe commented, guiltily remembering how many decibels above what was publicly acceptable she went when screeching her excitement.

“Oh I’m leaping for joy like a happy cub on the inside… but I’m from Tundratown,” the large bear offered calmly, turning his head and giving her a toothy smile. “We know how to stay cool.”
The rabbit groaned, sliding a paw down her face. The fox became flabbergasted, clapping a paw to his snout as he withheld a sudden laugh poorly, stuttered snorts expelling oddly.

“I can’t… I just can’t,” Nick laughed between pants and wiping his now teary eyes. “That was too much. Leo, will you explain this?”

On cue, Flux’s Shock Sage suit landed from above and approached Gus briskly.

“I am Galileo,” the mechanical being introduced promptly. “I oversee Flux and Phantom’s operations, as well as offer support to their systems. What these two are failing to relay to you is that we are putting together a team to expand the support that they have in defending this city from an external threat. Candidates of a skilled, and trusted, nature have been listed and chosen to add to our ranks… voluntarily of course. This is an opportunity, not a conscription. You are no obligation to…”

“I’ll do it,” the dark bear curtly cut them off.

“You don’t want to hear the pros and cons?” Leo voiced. “I was honestly expecting more reservations.”

“I’ve seen what you do and what you can accomplish,” explained Gus. “I would be honored to help in anyway I can.”

“Understood,” the robotic entity softly replied, holding out a device similar to what Nick and Judy gave to Adam and Essie, though sized for the bear’s larger paws. “This will explain all but try to take notes. It will only play once and then destroy itself.”

“Uhm… explode?” came the expected question.

“More like it will melt,” Leo evenly answered back, drawing forth a relieved sigh from the larger mammal.

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Back at the house, the red fox tod was pacing a bit, deep in thought as Leo cut up vegetables for dinner…

...wearing another ridiculous apron.

*Donut Worry. Be Happy.*

Below it was a depiction of a bright pink frosted donut.

“You think five members will be enough? Or too much?” the tod asked, probably for the fifth time since everything began.

“I believe it will be a good balance,” the android replied. “Any more might create discord from their inexperience and any fewer might place too much pressure to measure up to you two on the other members.”

“I have an even greater burning question…” the grey doe remarked earnestly, giving away to impatient excitement as she continued, “When are we going to see your ship?!?”

Both fox and robot looked to one another, then to her, with Nick’s expression giving everything away.

Judy’s face fell.
“We’re not going, are we?”

“What for a couple weeks at least,” Leo evenly replied. “There are a few caveats to make such an
ercursion that deep into the water, the first of which is that only Nick has a viable suit for underwater
tavel. I’ve been working on creating yours, though making a suit that small to be watertight from
mense pressure is a tall order and time consuming.”

“Immense pressure?” the bunny questioned in a low voice, mostly to herself. “How deep is it?”

“Approximately 3.5 kilometers off shore from Zootopia and 1500 meters down,” the android detailed
blankly. “I knew that your growing civilization might attain a means of submersible exploration
vanced enough to find my craft, so, when I reached the surface and made a few observations from
otechnology, comparing it to other planet’s technological progression, I sent a command that drained
my craft’s remaining power to restructure the surrounding coral to overgrow the craft. Otherwise, a
atural occurrence to the same effect might have taken thousands of years.”

“Thousands?... Just how big is this craft?” Jude nearly sputtered, trying to comb mentally over
everything she had heard and known about the unseen ship. “I thought you said it was small.”

“You asked me how large it was in comparison to other ships from the same civilization,” the
mechanical being corrected her. “I simply abided by the constrictions of your question. As to specs,
the simple note is that this craft is 5 kilometers long, 2.3 wide at the widest point, and brimming with
defensive measures that could battle a fleet easily. When compared to seed ships or planetary defense
platforms, my vessel is much the same as comparing one of your planet’s naval frigates to a super
carrier.”

The rabbit appeared flabbergasted, her jaw hanging loosely while she processed imagining the
ormity of such a vessel.

The red tod appeared smug, a knowing smirk lining his muzzle at her reaction.

There was a minute or so of silence as she took that in, trying to figure out her next line of
questioning.

“So,... we can’t just have me shift with Nick and swim down in a single suit?”

“Negative,” Leo rebuked her simply. “Advanced it might be, but that ship has been sitting on the
floor of a large body of water for 300 years. I can’t truly attest to how well sealed it is and the extent
of any repairs that may need to be enacted to make the ship flight capable again.”

“If it’s a spaceship, are you even sure it’s still usable, being subjected to all that pressure?” came her
next inquiry. It was a sound argment, knowing that a spaceship is meant to keep everything in,
while a submersible is meant to keep everything out.

“The ship was designed, tested, and intended to go through a violent spacial anomaly that could
rush anything venturing within with the force of an imploding star,” came the even explanation of
the robot. “Water pressure is mild in comparison, though after having traveled through it, crashed
here, and being subject to environmental changes for 300 years... I do not want to keep my
expectations too high. At the very least, I know the control decks and support system matrix will
have been sealed from almost any type of environmental intrusion.”

“I’m guessing that’s our target?” Nick finally interjected, resulting in a nod from their mechanical
companion.

“The support system matrix has a variety of automated functions and drones that could repair and
reestablish the vessel’s functions back to an optimal setting, provided first that we can power the core, which has long since been depleted.”

“That’s where we come in,” the rabbit mentioned, the comment being rhetorical.

“The core is a fusion reactor that has a chamber that acts like a dwarf star,” Leo detailed. “It was initially fueled by the beginnings of the supernova, though can be sustained easily if I hadn’t drained it. So, your power won’t be needed consistently to fuel it, but instead needed to jumpstart it. Suffice it to say that it will take far more power than anything this planet could muster to do so.”

Taking a deep breath, the small grey doe voiced with far less enthusiasm than before, “…and now I think I’ve just ruined my own excitement over this. So much work to do something I thought would be as simple as turning a key.”

“Pfft… since when is anything ever easy for us?” the fox tod sassed with an eye roll and an endearing smirk to his girlfriend.

She rolled her eyes in reply, relenting to him, “Fair point, I suppose.”

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Adam Prince stood before the wreckage and aftermath of Flux and Phantom's latest engagement. According to a correspondence relayed to him and his superiors, the armored heroes were allowing them free reign to salvage this stuff at their leisure. There was even a report attached that detailed the composition of materials and a means of most efficiently turning this scrap into usable designs for what was promised.

“I'll be darned,” he spoke in barely a whisper, huffing in mild amusement. “He wasn't pulling my chain on this.”

“Sir?” the deer doe next to him asked, having heard him mutter to himself.

“It's nothing, Bella.”

“Of course,” she replied curtly, looking down at a tablet and making notes of everything. “I do want to voice a concern though. How do we know we can trust these designs to be taken as is, instead of warped by military ambitions?”

“We're facing technological marvels from offworld that appear incomprehensible to deal with, when considering our military might as is,” the wildebeest began, watching government employees peruse the wreckage, “and having mammals defend us with measures that seem even more so… which makes me think that surveillance won't be an issue for them. Besides… their trusting us to keep it clean. So that's what we'll do.”

Bella smiled gently, her expression breaching the larger mammals hard exterior and warming him from within.

“Sounds like a good idea, Adam,” she spoke, turning her attention to another subject. “So,... what is this thing I hear about you being a liaison… in armor?”

The gnu froze, gulping heavily, and his eyes widening. He had tried to relay as many details as he could to his superior without her finding out about that little piece of info.

“Uh… yeah… they requested that,” he tried to deflect, hoping it might diffuse her coming
chastisement.

“And you agreed to it?” came the icy tone.

*Of course she’s going to hate this,* Adam mentally grumbled in frustration.

“I felt that it was worth the trade,” the larger mammal muttered, earning a sigh from his compatriot.

“You know how it ended for you last time,” she reminded him softly, drawing out his guilt and making him clench his jaw at the memories. Of a dissolving temperament and overseeing agents that enabled his destructive qualities of the job got done. Of all the collateral damage he wrought in his government's service. Mammals who didn't die or become maimed directly by him but through his actions and lack of restraint.

Bella was a coordinating agent that oversaw operations and helped him get out of that life, sticking by his side ever since. Whether to keep him on the straight and narrow, or due to some loyalty he felt he didn't deserve, she was enigmatically attached to him. He has grown fond of the doe, in more ways than one, though his fear that she still held some resentment over his last restrained him from pursuing it further.

“I do…” the gnu replied. “But I’ve always regretted it and don’t just want to hide from that forever. I want to face it and do better. I think this could be that chance.”

“I hate it when you actually make a good argument,” Bella chuckled, her expression breaking into a grin, but just as quickly reforming into a serious expression. “However, you aren’t doing this alone. I’m coming with. No negotiation.”

“I don’t think they’ll allow that,” he tried to tell her. She crossed her arms and tapped a hoof in indignation, unmoving and unrelenting.

“Fine… be ready tonight then.”

The deer doe looked confused.

“That soon?”

“It was in the memory device I was given. There’s a destination and a time of arrival. My free time and schedule were already accounted for,” the wildebeest mentioned with a shrug. “Annoying as they might be, Flux and his associates are very thorough and methodical. I doubt they will just give you a suit though.”

“I don’t need it,” Bella bluntly cut in. “I’m a strategist. Remember, I coordinated many operations, saw how everyone best fit on a team, and directed them to great efficiency. I’ll help you with my mind, not weapons.”

“On that, I agree,” Adam told her with a grin, nerves he didn’t know were on edge calmed by her will to accompany him on this venture.

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“Is this the place?” a higher pitched voice asked of no one in particular.

Blue-grey eyes looked around, only being met with an underwhelming warehouse in the Rainforest District. She sighed in mild frustration.
“Maybe this was a prank?” she dared to muse aloud.

“If that’s true, then I suppose we’re on the short end as well,” a deep voice spoke, making the wild dog jolt and take a defensive posture, her training instincts taking hold.

A softer tone joined the fold, in the form of a small deer doe that stepped into the light, “You should probably clear your throat before scaring other mammals like that. Despite your size, you’re pretty quiet.”

Behind the deer was a much larger silhouette, a hoof reaching up to awkwardly rub the back of his neck as he stepped into the light. With the sun down, the occasional street lamp was all that gave definition and color to the night, as well as the hulking wildebeest that entered Essie’s view.

“Oh thank goodness…,” came another mammal’s voice, with a large grizzly bear joining the three. “I was afraid this was a hoax of sorts.”

“So…. are we allowed to exchange names?” the wild dog chirped happily, glad to see others besides herself awaiting their new fate.

All the other mammals looked around awkwardly, truly unsure how to answer that.

“I’m Gus,” the bear remarked first, reaching out a giant paw to the much smaller mammal. She took it in both of hers and shook energetically. He looked rather stunned at first, likely half expecting that she would be intimidated by his stature, as many smaller mammals were when he greeted them, but the introduction was a pleasant refresher.

“I’m Essie. Nice to meetcha!” came her excitable tone.

The duo then turned towards the other two standing together, faces expectantly waiting.

The doe was the first to speak up, gently saying while gesturing to herself and the gnu, “I’m Bella and this is Connor.”

“Alright… now we’re all well met,” the wildebeest breathed. “What next?”

In answer, the doors of the warehouse unlatched and began to roll open, creaking and squeaking as age old parts began to fight the test of time.

Inside, the vast expanse looked greatly improved and clean compared to the outer structure. All four were drawn in by the strange lighting that seemed more futurist than warehouse like.

The warehouse closed its doors automatically behind them, jarring all but Gus, who was more enamored with looking at the walls and ceiling. There was a lot of soft blue lighting, with all surfaces looking smooth and like a combination of plastic and steel.

There wasn’t much of note in the warehouse, with the entire structure looking empty, save for a couple large crates and some alcoves.

Suddenly, a very calm and even voice, almost sounding robotic, clearly cut through the odd silence and caught their attention.

“I see that everyone has arrived, with an extra addition.”

“Extra?” Essie called out, head tilted and looking at the gnu and doe in curiosity. “If I had known we could have a plus one to this little party, I would have invited a certain bunny friend I know would
“I had only planned on each of you showing up alone, but the addition of Bella is not an unwelcome one,” remarked the tempered voice. “However, if your inference towards your lagomorph friend is to be taken into account, Essie, it would be prudent to say that she is currently not a viable candidate at this time. I need trusted and skilled individuals. Trusted though your friend may be, trained in any martial combat she is not.”

“Oh…,” the dog sighed, slightly crestfallen. She then perked up a bit, saying with a brighter disposition, “I get that.”

“What are we here for?” Connor questioned with an arched brow, a bit skeptical of the whole circumstance.

“Call it an evaluation of sorts,” the voice answered.

A few of the alcoves and containers opened up, showcasing armor components and armaments to fit all three mammals, excepting Bella herself of course.

“I have constructed an array of armor and weapons for each of you to wield,” detailed the robotic host. “Wear as much or as little as you like. I will be watching and taking note of your choices, as pertaining to your combat styles and defensive needs.”

“Does this mean we’re fighting something?” the bear spoke up, eyeing the equipment with narrowed vision.

“Very astute, Gus,” the voice confirmed. “And yes.”

“A test? An audition?” Essie fired off in inquiry energetically. “What are we fighting?” She bounced a bit on her feet, raring for a fight.

One of the alcoves in the back opened up, slow clanks echoing off the solid floor as a tall and broad figure entered, encased from heat to toe in dark grey plating.

It appeared as tall as a wolf, with shoulders squared and broad like a buffalo or some similar mammal.

The being was holding a long staff, blunted at both ends and looking composed.

“I am Galileo…” it remarked, “…and you’ll be fighting me.”

Chapter End Notes

Betrayal! Agony! Drama and Intrigue!

Oh sorry... i'm not describing this. I'm imagining what the members of a Grunge Spice Girls band would have been called.

Back in high school I had a few friends that dressed as them for Halloween at school. they certainly pulled it off. Especially the one dressed as Ginger... that friend was a guy. but in his defense... his afro was perfect for the role.
Speaking of bands or collaborative teams towards a single goal... My team is finally coming together. They have a name yes. One i've been holding onto for years. You shall hear of it soon. Mwahahaa.

I think the team will be a fun and diverse one... should Leo not beat the snot out of them furst... or they beat the circuits out of him? whichever. XD

Until next time, It's been a hustle, Sweethearts.
"So," Conner started slowly, cracking his knuckles to relieve some tension in his joints, "we're not being inducted unless we beat you?"

"I will be surmising your skills and styles of combat, making it supplemental that you must face me," Leo reiterated. "Please select your gear. Everything has labels and simple instructions. I am patient so take as long as you need."

The gnu snorted in affirmation, turning to the racks and shedding his suit jacket, finding a full body suit that seemed like a base for all armor components. Unlike the armaments Flux and Phantom used, everything here appeared quite basic and more akin to a highly durable polymer or carbon fiber.

The caliber of their gear also told him the force of the attacks that would be used. If the craft was any indication, nothing lethal would be used.

The wildebeest geared up, using as much armor as he could on his arms and legs, the chest being lightly plated and joints left unhindered for movement.

Among all the weapons, with things like stun batons, staffs, short range rifles, and even a bladed axe, Conner chose something more in line with his fighting style. Donning the fist armaments, the description saying it could expend energy in the form of kinetic blasts, it worked for his punching style combat techniques.

A blasting sound and resulting squeal turned his head, seeing the wild dog, Essie, flying through the air and crashing into the warehouse wall.

"Oww…" she groaned, followed quickly by a giggle. "I think I broke my visor… got another one?"

The gnu facehoofed.

Gus lumbered over to her, lifting her easily and helping her remove the broken headwear.

The android brought a replacement over, lightly reminding her to be careful.
Essie had donned the full body suit as well, using armor that mainly covered her legs below the knees and arms beyond the elbow. A light plating was put on her back and chest, with speed and agility being her priority.

Her visor, now replaced was a lighter armor as well, the advantage of it being an advanced targeting system and sensitive control functions over her accessories. She picked out boots that had a jump jet ability, allowing her to rebound surfaces and make short distance course corrections. Her overexhuberance was what caused the malfunction which broke her visor.

Hanging from either side of her hip were two guns that resembled a sci-fi version of energy pistols. The wild dog was unsure of their ammo capacity and not familiar with changing out their ammo sources, so she took two to switch as necessary.

She smiled, thinking, *Or use them both at once like some sort of comic book hero.*

The large grizzly bear, on the other paw, went for heavy armor, feeling confident he could bring some power to the fight. However, he was fully aware of a few of Flux's more arduous fights. He would win by smarts and take on a multitude of opponents, each of which were several times his size and weight.

He couldn't afford to underestimate this Galileo, or Leo as he introduced himself before in the alley.

Gus left his shoulders bear, wanting the movement, but kept anywhere else well armored to protect himself. He figured that if he could defend against any precise attacks, maybe he could push through and overpower the smaller being.

Not feeling all that interested in point and shoot weapons, the bear grabbed and equipped claw extensions. They were blunted for this simulative combat session, but the intent was clear. Three large blades extended out from above the forearm, braced against it and held out by the grip in his paws.

As a bouncer at a nightclub, the large mammal was used to leaping right in and taking no chances. He was the 'punch first, and take them down quick' type.

Bella resisted being a part of any combat, reluctantly putting on the suit for protection but selecting no weapons as she stayed near the edge of the combat zone. A helmet rested on her head, with a readout for various observing functions.

"I'll watch from over here," she remarked definitively.

"Understood," was the simple reply from Leo. "Is everyone else ready?"

Grunts and nods were exchanged all around, the males looking nervous, but Essie seemed primed and pumped, ready to kick some tail. The deer doe stood in the background, eyes steady and patiently watching.

"Let us begin," the robot told them, twirling the staff in front of itself and taking a defensive posture.

The wild dog was the furst to move, leaping up and over, using one pistol to try striking from above.

A barrage of small blue bolts came out, met with a spinning staff, whereas they burst and bubbled out.

In midair, Essie tried to recover her position from her odd, arching jump. It was a forlorn attempt as Leo jumped up and swung one end of the staff into her side.
A strange sound, like an expanding bubble of energy bursting, came from the blunted end, with a swash of energy that threw the canine a dozen feet away and onto the floor. She recovered quickly…

…but Gus had taken advantage of the distraction and moved in to swipe his blunt claw blades from behind.

The android intercepted him, parrying the blow and rotating the staff to smack the end into the bear’s armored head. Another stunning energy explosion came from the staff, throwing off his balance and sending him awkwardly to the ground. With skulls as hard as steel, Leo knew he would be fine and recover in a few seconds.

Conner was the last to assault, having watched the other two and trying a more tepid approach, legs itching to use his experience in fighting to outmaneuver the seemingly very reactive being.

The mechanical entity swung the staff upward, trying to take out one of his legs, to which the gnu sidestepped with grace…

…only to be met with a backpawed strike from one of Leo’s arms.

The wildebeest made a rookie mistake and calculated his initial assault based on the fact that this opponent used the same weapon to knock down two mammals. The being dropped the staff for a moment to connect a strike devoid of that thinking and used his former attack to distract him.

Before the staff fell to the ground, Leo knelt down quickly and grabbed it, swinging in a wide arc and connecting a blunted end with Conner’s hip. He was blow sideways by the energy blast bubble, bouncing off of Gus’s armored back.

Essie had well recovered by now and fired away from the side, taking careful aim and shooting slowly. Each blast was deflected expertly by her opponent, with one such bolt being rebounded by a blunted end using the energy bubble and striking the recovering bear in the chest.

He roared in annoyance and charged on all fours, swinging and swiping his claws.

Leo multitasked very well, dodging each strike and making occasional hits to the grizzly. The movements the robot made were also to keep Essie blocked from firing directly on itself with Gus’s larger proportions in the way.

The gnu attempted to attack from the rear, with the mechanical entity spinning on one foot to put the staff to Conner’s back, the blunt end expunging its energy and launching his body straight into the bear’s midsection, toppling them both.

"A brilliant effort, I assure you all," Leo evenly mentioned, "though you should try to temper your assault with precaution. You know about your weapons to a degree, but you are neither trained nor do you know the extent of my capabilities."

"Noted!" the wildebeest bellowed, leaping up and charging back into the fray, with the canine giving him cover fire.

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"I'm bored just sitting here waiting…" Judy griped. "Can't we go there and watch or something?"

"I could put it up on the tv," Nick replied.

"Why didn't you say that earlier!?" the doe chastened her fox. "I wanna see that Adam… Conner…"
whatever his name is… get his snout knocked in."

"And Essie?" questioned the fox with a raised brow of concern.

The grey bunny went quiet for a moment and shrugged with a returning grin, "Nah… I wouldn't mind her getting a bit of a butt whooping. She's been way too nosy, especially about my blog as of late. Call this karmic balance."

The red tod was fiddling with the television in their house, trying to hook up the feed from the warehouse to it for their viewing pleasure.

"You still update that thing?" he inquired in mild surprise, having completely forgotten it.

Her paws teetered ambiguously, with a sound of the same tone coming from her maw as she replied, "Ehhhh… sorta. I still update it occasionally, but I have to take footage from other sources to make do, since I'm now fighting with you instead of following you with my phone. It's actually easier than you think to find terrible phone footage from a Flux versus Drone battle scene. And that whole thing with you and me being labeled outlaws made things work well enough for me."

"Oh… how so?" Nick asked curiously, only half paying attention as he became increasingly frustrated with his inability to link the feeds to the television.

Grumbling to himself, he spoke, "You can take apart and reconstruct a full suit of autonomous armor with energy weapons and shields, but working the inputs and functions to a television from your remote still eludes your understanding… ugh…"

None the wiser of his woes, the doe continued to speak, "Well… when it happened, a commenter coincidentally told me it might be wise to lay low with it, to keep attention from me. I took that reasoning and said I wasn't interested in the government knocking on my door and going through my search history, so I was going to post less for a while. People seemed to take that well and no huge question marks have popped up."

"Uh-huh," mumbled the red fox, having listened, though mostly focusing on the darn contraption of his remote. Giving up, he yelled out, "Leo! Mind giving me a paw with this?"

Rounding the corner, the android was holding a platter of snacks and drinks for the two, the television turning on and displaying the correct feeds, only infuriating the fox exponentially so at how easy the robot made it seem.

"Wait…," Judy remarked, "...how is he here… and there?" Her paw pointed to the screen in confusion, seeing a duplicate of Leo, though in armor plating and wielding a staff, fighting and winning against three mammals.

"You've seen me use your suits as a medium for combat and reconnaissance… and this puts you in a mental quandary?" the robotic being inquired evenly. "I have multiple bodies I can use or replace in case of mechanical failure or disrepair. Besides, I would be remiss to put myself on the line too much, in case the unlikely event comes to pass that they destroy that vessel."

"Oh… that… makes sense?" she remarked as more of a question than a confirmation.

"So," the tod interjected, landing heavily on the couch and propping his feet up, "how are they doing?"

"Better than you when you started," Leo bluntly told him, the doe clapping a paw to her muzzle to stifle a growing giggle, Nick's face falling flat and becoming grumpy as he took the information in.
"Hey! I was a farmboy that barely brandished a knife," he complained. "You showed me no mercy and gave me a stick to hit you with. I still remember you tossing me into a lake with that kick to the stomach."

"Back then, I was ill informed as to your biological durability," the android weakly defended.

"You're saying he was weak?" the grey bunny doe asked, doing her best to keep the smile from her muzzle and giggle in check.

"Correct," Leo answered easily, the rabbit losing all restraint and laughing heartily, blubbering out small apologies to her fox with each gasping breath.

He simply rolled her eyes and decided to let it go.

"Well…?" he resumed his previous question.

"Ah… well everyone is performing as expected," the entity began to detail. "Essie is quick to recover and adaptive, though her energy is her downfall. She's too impatient. Gus is a leap before he looks type. No… more like he is one to power in on impulse and let loose."

"You could say he's a… Bearzerker?" Nick offered with a eyebrow wiggle and gesturing paws. The android unsurprisingly looked stoic, but Judy appeared unamused, much to his infuriating dismay. He then murmured something about 'No sense of humor', leaning back to gesture that the robot continue.

"Anyways," Leo resumed, "Conner, as he has chosen to address himself in front of the others, as I suppose we should as well, is more experienced and approaches with caution, looking for weak points. He takes too long to observe though and it becomes his downfall."

There's a slight pause as the two mammals take it in, watching all three on screen fight with inaccuracy and no team effort, not that they knew one another well enough to do so.

"I'm betting Essie will be the one to deal a critical strike," Judy offered smugly.

"I'll bet it'll be Gus," Nick countered. "He's taking those hits rather well and I think he could push past that to hit Leo. What do you think?"

"I believe you are looking at the wrong mammals," the mechanical being told them abruptly.

"Oh… soooo… Conner?" both mammals asked tepidly.

"There is one mammals, as of yet, to deal any blows, and might be the one to breach my defenses," Leo explained. "I think she will be the biggest threat…"

"Huh?" fox and bunny said, confused as they squinted at the television.

Bella stood back, watching, waiting, evaluating.

1, 2, 3, 4, 5…

Galileo swung in an upward arc with the staff, connecting with Conner's lower abdomen and sending him flying a few feet back with the energy wave pushing him.

1, 2…
The other end rotated around expertly, with the blunted part being shoved like a spear head into Essie's chest. The explosion of energy knocked her backwards violently.

1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, and 7…

The end that connected with the wildebeest before began to glow brightly once more.

The deer doe smiled deviously. One part of her little puzzle was complete. She needed just a few other pieces of info to come up with a plan.

"Um…" the wild dog began timidly, her previous energetic personality being hampered by the repeated hits, "...is there a chance I can grab a different weapon? Or maybe more armor?"

Bella frowned, an irksome feeling sparking her next words, "You picked your armaments. Deal with it. I've seen Flux having to face off foes that put him at a disadvantage with his equipment choices before. You adapt and overcome. If you feel your weapons don't fit the situation… then think outside of the box and MAKE them work for you."

"Though harshly delivered," the mechanical being offered, still effortlessly evading and dealing blows, "Bella is mostly correct. I gave you simple instructions on your weapon's and armor's most efficient uses… but your mind can offer you other solutions."

The doe was able to figure out a crude, but hopefully worthwhile, plan of attack.

"Galileo!" she called out.

"Yes?"

"Do these helmets have a private frequency?" she inquired. "I want to relay a plan."

"Understood," Leo readily agreed. "All comms between you four are calibrated and I'll be excluded for your benefit. Say what you will without my interference."

"I like you," the deer sighed with a smile. "You aren't infuriating to talk to."

"Likewise," the android voiced back evenly. "Your blunt remarks and tone devoid of doubt are quite amiable to take in."

Bella raised a brow in question, not detecting any malice or sarcasm, but still feeling like part of that comprehensive statement wasn't as good as it was intended.

Nevertheless, she nodded and found a button on her helmet to close the channel with her partner and two other new teammates.

"Alright you three," she griped venomously, all nonsense gone and ready to snuff any out, "I've watched you get your tails kicked in long enough."

The gnu and canine stopped moving, taking in her words, though the bear seemed to either not hear her or simply ignored her as he tried to land a few more blows on Leo.

With the robotic figure engaged with him, the doe decided to use that to her advantage and hoped Gus would hear or listen to her.

"I've noticed that staff needs about seven seconds to charge each end of the staff before it expends that bubble force shield thing," Bella explained. "I've also noticed it doesn't knock you back much Gus… just stuns you. Essie… your energy gun appears to have no recoil and good accuracy. Use
them both. In such close quarters, you don't need to aim. Conner… get your horns out of your butt and stop hesitating so much!"

"Er… I… uh…" the wildebeest weakly answered, unable to aptly defend against her observations.

"Stow it," she fired at him. "Gus, if you are even listening, keep taking those hits. Try to keep all his attention on you. Conner, flank Galileo and go low. Try to unbalance him. His staff makes jumping or high attacks hard to do when he can just knock you aside. Essie, fire away from all angles. Make it hard for him to focus on Gus and you. Try not to come at him from the same direction as Gus though. You mammals got it?"

Though not all at once, all three voiced agreements with both her plan and having understood it.

Essie acted first, pulling out the other energy weapon and firing off shots in tandem, the higher concentration of rapid fire shots forcing Leo to backstep and twirl the staff to defend properly.

Gus bellowed and attacked from the opposing side, unrelenting with swipes and inelegant strikes. With the staff still recharging either end for a few more seconds, the android had to rely on footwork, doing a backshuffle that exited the extended range of his claws and closer to the canine.

Conner closed in and performed a leg sweep, with the mechanical being leaping up and over him, landing behind him. A swift kick toppled the gnu…

…straight into an incoming strike from the bear.

Most of the power behind it was restrained as Gus's reflexes slowed his hit, but didn't entirely stop him. The wildebeest ended up with a most annoying hit to his shoulder, knocking him over.

It wasn't bad, with Conner rising and Gus turning.

"Don't let up," the deer doe ordered, using a gentler tone than the commanding one from before, but still pushing them. "Muddle through. He can only keep up with so much."

Bear and wildebeest looked to one another and nodded, resuming their assault. Gus went high and Conner went low.

Bella had to admit it was quite impressive to see a comparatively diminutive armored being deal with two powerful mammals like neophyte fighters.

With the android thusly engaged between the two, the bear trying to purposefully take the brunt of the explosive energy strikes, and the gnu taking advantage of backsteps to trip up Galileo, Essie was able to use her mobility to get around behind the mechanical entity and fire off a couple of charged shots that impacted the back of the android.

Leo was thrown forward, landing and rolling to recover without becoming pinned.

There was little stun time as the robot recovered, dropping the staff on the ground and kicking it forward with it positioned perpendicular to it's foot. The deer saw all too late that each end was charged just in time…

…as both ends found Gus's right foot and Conner's left one respectively. The energy expenditure took their legs out from under them, heads knocking together and either one slumping in a half conscious state.

Leaping up and over the heap made by the two, the robot grabbed the loose staff and threw it like a
spear at Essie, impacting her chest armor and tossing her by sheer physical force alone into the wall.

She was nowhere near unconscious, but the wind was definitely knocked out of her, with the canine resigning herself to sit down heavily, catching her breath.

"Awww darn… I take it to mean we don't get to be one of you?" Essie whined, addressing Leo as it walked to retrieve the staff.

"Where did you get such a notion?" asked the entity. "I never told you that your acceptance as an ally was based upon succeeding at incapacitating me. I merely said you had to face me. This entire exercise was to evaluate your choices of armaments and tactics. If I'm to make you comprehensive and skillset specific suits, I needed to see how you adapted to using advanced technology in a controlled setting."

"So… we're in?" Gus groaned in a hopeful tone, rising to his feet after having them taken out from under him. He helped up Conner as well, with Bella offering some assistance.

"Your acceptance was never in question," confirmed the android. "Now… if you'll follow me, Bella included, I will take you to a scanning station to take detailed information on your anatomy and specs for building form fitting and viable suits of armor."

"Will we get to pick our super names?!" the wild dog vented with spastic energy, suddenly finding the strength to stand and bounce happily, as if the previous fight barely happened.

Leo looked at her, taking in her odd reactions and state, saying, "I am willing to log requests but the public usually picks the names. Both Flux and Phantom had little say in what names they had. However… should the media find the opportunity to interview you in a suit… you are free to offer your suggestions as to a pseudonym."

"Oooh, I wanna be something… bouncy!" Essie chirped. "Hmm… Bouncer?"

"Haha... I don't think that would fit you well," the bear offered, taking off the helmet. "Besides… as a bouncer myself… I think of something different when you say that."

"Ah… that makes sense," she replied. "Soooo, you're a bouncer at a… bar or nightclub?"

"Both," he answered curtly and with a smile. "Depends on what night we're talking about. I freelance between clubs and bars as they see fit… and to whoever pays me more."

"Greedy much?" the canine teased with an eyebrow wiggle.

Gus chuckled, "Nah… just making a living. I have expensive hobbies."

"Alright Mr. Bouncer," Essie sassed, "what do you think is a good name for me?"

The gentle and snide confidence left his muzzle, thoughtful confusion lining his features as he shrugged.

Conner snorted and jested lightly, feeling more comfortable with the mammals he now fought alongside, "Seeing you jump and bounce around like you did reminded me of a basketball on the rebound in a game."

"Ohhh, Rebound!" she piped up, running up to the gnu and thumping his chest playfully. "I like that one. We'll call you Hard Hitter."
"No," the wildebeest deadpanned.

"And Bella can be Brain."

"No," the deer doe replied, unamused.

"...and Gus can be… Bear Bomb!" the canine spoke loudly, gesturing dramatically.

Everyone looked quite disinterested and lacked surprise as the bear offered a simple… "No."

"Awww come on," she groaned, giggling slightly. "At least give it some thought."

Bella was the first to respond, telling her, "I did. I promise. But there isn't a stopwatch with small enough increments of time on it to sufficiently measure how little time it took to think that over."

Without missing a beat, Essie shrugged and told her, "That's fair."

"Guess Leo was right…" pouted Judy, watching the feed play out until everyone exited the sparring area. Nick looked equally frustrated at being proven wrong, though his face quickly morphed into a small smirk.

"I should have known the tenacious female with a brain would come out on top," he voiced in minor revelation. "I should know a thing or two about dealing with that by now." The last line was mentioned with a roguish grin aimed at his bunny.

Her eyes narrowed dangerously, knowing it sounded like a compliment out loud, but sensing the obvious teasing undertones that she had now come to so frequently expect.

"I'm going to pretend you don't have a secret teasing insult in there and thank you for saying I have a brain," came her disgruntled reply to his now infuriating smirk.

"I believe Nick was making a sexual innuendo at your expense as well," Leo remarked from the kitchen.

The red fox choked on air as the grey doe yelled, "I did NOT want to know that."

"LEO!" the tod barked out, suffering a mild coughing fit from having choked.

Both now blushing and averting gazes, the reasons more rhetorical than blatantly obvious, Nick scratched at an ear for a minute or two before working his muzzle uselessly.

He extended a paw towards the bunny, her eyes now on him once more, gesturing blankly, as if trying to get some point across.

"I… uh… would you… ugh…" he began in mild annoyance at himself. "Would you like to see something?"

Her brow raised in suspicion, to which the red tod figured was fair.

"Sure?" she offered ambiguously.

"Great!" the fox chirped happily, taking her by the paw and leading her away from the android and towards his workshop area.
The doors automatically opened for them, with him taking a venture into a side chamber, Judy mentally remarking that it looked very similar to the other room he was experimenting in.

"Are actually showing me something?" the doe dared to inquire. "Or are you just trying to escape Leo's latest critical hit to your psyche?"

Grumbling under his breath, Nick glanced back at her, mumbling a barely audible, "Yes…"

"Which…?" she began, before the tod cut her off.

"Both."

"Ooooh, prey tell, please," Judy teased, softly speaking to him as she gripped his paw a bit tighter and pressed her chest to his arm, nuzzling said arm.

"You'll see…" he offered sheepishly.

The small doe tried to be patient, and was quickly allowed the reprise of not having to be as such for long.

Inside another room that looked like most other workshops that Nick had used, Judy saw the remarkable tech and strewn about tools. While messy and chaotic looking in its initial impression, the doe knew that her fox was methodical in cleaning up after his projects…

...unless he was really really into it.

Only one project seemed to fit under that proviso for her, with the Zero armor having been the fruit of that labor apparently.

"Right over here…" came the soft tone of a smiling fox, letting her go to attend to a console, paws working in a frenzy as he activated something.

A loud clanking sounded as a something disengaged.

The grey rabbit looked around, locating the sound and looking to a cylindrical vat with a wrap around metal casing. It lifted once the locks unlatched and lifted…

...to reveal a transparent tube about the size of an oil drum and filled halfway with a silver fluid. It bubbled and swirled, looking a bit ominous, but she was nonetheless intrigued.

"What… what is it?" the doe barely whispered in question, resting a paw against the container's side.

"It's hopefully my latest prototype to perfect the microbot tech," the red fox tod explained in short. "Your idea about ants spun a few solutions in my head and collected like cotton candy on my brain. I couldn't resist trying all of them. Zero was a haphazard means to test the swarm theory… and it worked, but not well enough. This… this is what I hope will be the final design."

"But it's not a suit…. Right?"

"Not yet, but it will be anything I want it to be soon," Nick continued. "It's a fluidic and programmable metal alloy infused with the nano tech and able to flex and form as if it were a fluid, reforming and solidifying into any design I see fit. I could potentially copy any of my suit designs or merge them as needed on the fly. I could even try to infuse a method of copying enemy tech in the field and copying their weapons against them."

The bunny's eyes couldn't pawsibly get any wider in recognition of that prospect. Her eyes darted
between the swirling mass of fluidic metal and her boyfriend's self satisfied and lopsided grin.

"Does it work?" she duly inquired.

"Not yet… but I'm so close," he replied confidently. "Imagine being able to use a suit that can repair itself on the fly, adjust parameters to match our needs, switch between a well armored tank of armor… and a speed type suit that can strike faster than a bullet. If Leo is right and this is only going to get tougher… we need to up our game and our tech."

"Whatcha calling this silver goo?"

The red fox gave her a mild glare, clearly not liking the term she coined for it offpaw. She smiled with a tinted blush to her cheeks as the doe fiddled with her paws.

"Please don't call it goo… and it's called," the fox spoke, pausing to stare proudly at his work.

"...Blade Storm."

Chapter End Notes

Yessssss! I'm so excited to finally touch upon this.

Blade Storm! growing up with wild ideas of what armor I would make if I could bring Sci-fi to life, this was one of my favs.

And no... it's not inspired by the nanotech from Iron Man's newest armor in Infinity War, for those that know of it.

THIS... was inspired by one of the coolest ideas from an older film that I found so innovative as a cinematic induction...

Terminator 2: Judgement Day. the T-1000 and that programmable metal that could shapeshift into anything the user or program desired for function. Imagine that metal composite being used to form and reform any suit, weapons, or tech that you needed.

One moment, they're making a vast shield to protect themselves, the next they're recreating a huge Howlitzer cannon to punch through their own enemies defenses, then shifting back to defense all in as little time as the metal takes to reform.

I'm also so glad I've gotten to the point to start bringing my team together.

So glad to see all the pawsitive feedback! Thank you all so much.

Gotta say though, quite a few of you had some solid theories about what was coming. I almost wanted to change it up from what I planned but that might have altered some stuff down the line. lol.

Anywho!...

Until next time, It's been a hustle, Sweethearts!
Woohoo! Still alive all! Just distracted.

I got to play that game that took 13 years to come out. Kingdom Hearts 3.

Now my time since the last update hasn't been COMPLETELY taken up by said game, I cannot deny it's deterred my focus. I was still committing dabbles of work here and there but here's the next chapter.

I'm still doing the Pat Reon thingy with early access for all interested (I'm the same name as my author name on there). I'm also going to be doing an exclusive work that is my own original story. More details at the end. You guys just want to read this. XD

Anywho, Read, review, fav, follow, enjoy, and grab that strange snack. I'm just having those strangely delicious candy circus peanuts... dipped in white chocolate.

"I want to see it work," Judy demanded giddily. "Please?"

Giving him her best 'cute' look, ears falling behind her head and eyes half lidded as she snuggled right up to his chest and tilted her gaze upwards, her paws kneading his chest. A gurgled purr rumbled within his chest, with the taller mammal trying to shake away her strange attempt at persuasion.

Who was he kidding… he loved it.

"Fine," he grumbled. To be honest, Nick was wholly looking forward to showing off his most advanced design thus far, but he didn't want to seem too full of himself yet. "Best to stand back."

The rabbit doe hopped back, bouncing on her toes and holding her paws intertwined in one another, awaiting for something grand to occur.

The red fox gave her a gentle smirk and shook his head.

Moving over to a console, he began the initiation sequence for the nanotech. He would have reminded her it wasn't technically ready, but it would do good to at least show her what it could do currently.

"It's not 100% yet," Nick divulged. "So... if it… falls apart… that's more or less to be expected."

"Oh… I thought you were just being overly cautious when you said 'Not ready'," admitted the bunny, her energy waning and face falling in mild disappointment. "You don't have to show me right now then…"

Letting out a chuckle, the fox tod rebuked her, saying, "I feel all the more inclined to give you a peek. Worst that happens is I end up with a puddle of silver on the floor."
The canister opened and the fluidic mass whipped out, wrapping around Nick's outstretched paw and conforming to his body. It flowed and rippled like quicksilver over him and completely encased his form.

Judy's eyes were wide in interest and slight trepidation. It was odd seeing a mass of nanotech seemingly devour him whole.

As if sensing that fear, the fox chortled, offering, "It won't eat me. Simple answer is that it can't. Contrary to science fiction stigma concerning nanotech and infinitely multiplying until all mass is consumed… real nanotech that can self multiply needs similar materials. With the protocols I have in the tech, it doesn't even register organic material as 'edible', per say."

The mass continued to rope and ripple around his body, covering every inch of flesh and every patch of fur on him. His head was left untouched, with the rest of it reforming and changing.

Some fluidic looking parts became more solid looking, conforming to his curvature and turning into plating, the hue artificially changing from the chrome look to a solid black. As if becoming the plating wasn't enough, they slid and locked into another position, sealing the components together.

His chest was completed first, with the rest changing hue to black and coalescing into an intimidating visage of a Flux armament. It looked like his older model, though sleeker and more… 'fluid'. The doe guessed it was a blank template for the armor, at least until he could give it more tweaks for advanced commands.

The fluidic mass avoided his face, but still formed plating to encompass it, with them sliding into place after becoming solid.

True to the usual nature of his suits, the accents began to glow a dark purple, Shard energy invigorating the suit.

"And there it is," Nick voiced in breathless triumph, seeming relieved that it worked at all. His paws were outstretched, both witnessing the last of the nanotech turning from fluidic to solid as the tips of his digits were properly covered in armor. "My Blade Storm, base form."

"So..." began the smaller mammal, reaching out to touch the armor, "it can repair damage to itself and reconstruct components of other suits? What about larger suits? I don't see this thing gaining mass it doesn't have."

Nick smirked devilishly, leaning back and gesturing to a table behind him. It was covered in steel ingots.

"It's a simple matter of matter," he joked, reveling in his strange pun. Judy rolled her eyes.

The fox reached over and picked up two ingots...

...to which both watched them begin to crumble and dissolve like sand, the particles flowing into the armor and bolstering its plating. The suit started to resemble Jackhammer more so, with the arms and legs gaining thicker plating.

Suddenly, there was a stutter in the process. One of the legs began to bubble and shed the excess alloy, falling like scales on the floor. Only a few seconds and the leg distended in an odd shame and lost cohesion.

"Ah... and there's the rub," the tod griped in a low growl. He stopped the process and put down what was left of the ingots, the remains looking like stunted pieces of grey wood having been eaten.
by termites.

"Uhm… are you ok?" the small grey doe inquired with an outstretched paw towards her fox.

"Yeah…" he replied blankly, looking down at certain components dripping away. The tod hobbled oddly towards the container, swiping a recall command on the screen. The armor quickly turned into a silver substance again, flowing into the unit and resuming its previous state as a swirling mass.
"Guess the induction protocols need more work. Oh well."

Nick laughed, a short dry sound.

Judy looked down, seeing the remnants of metal dust, formerly imbibed into the armor.

"You'll get it," she comforted him. "In the meantime, wanna go meet the new recruits?"

His ears perked at that prospect, eyes making the sidelong glance to lock with her own amethyst gaze.

Her smile became infectious, making his own muzzle spread in a grin.

"You think Leo will let us kick them around some more?" he asked, giddy with an unnatural pleasure at the prospect of doing so. The bunny could only roll her eyes.

"I highly doubt it," she fired back. "Besides, do you really think they'll stick around if they think we recruited them to be stand-in punching bags?"

"Probably not…"

"Come on. Let's suit up and 'meet' them," Judy goaded, taking off with a bounce in her step towards the armor repository.

Minutes later and the two had used one of the tubes to traverse the distance from the armory towards the warehouse. One might question the validity of such a large network going unnoticed in the city, but most didn't even know the extent of underground infrastructure that went into the building of a city over the course of several decades. It wasn't hard to add in a few touches to blueprints. Waterways that went nowhere, drainage that didn't exist, and service tunnels that were defunct. That's what it looked like when viewed on old blueprints that spanned the rise of a city. Eventually, these things were written off as construction faux paws, giving Nick and Leo leeway to seal off pathways to alter for their own purposes. City sanctioned and constructed pathways for him to use as Flux.

The two glided along the tunnel walls, a repulsor field active beneath their feet and letting them skate their way to their destination. Phantom was having a blast, using the momentum to corkscrew through the pipe and nearly smacking into a divider when she cheered at her own accomplishments.

"Why don't we do this in combat?!" the armored bunny called out. "This is so much fun!"

"If you haven't noticed… we actually do on occasion," remarked Flux. "We just don't do it often or for very long. Much movement we have subject ourselves to calls for quicker feats of evasion than gliding like we're roller skating."

"That's boring," the rabbit doe voiced.
Nick was about to reply, before hearing a hum of machinery and some bolt guns going off, likely assembling something overhead.

"We've arrived," he commented, finding the hatch in the tunnel and floating up to it. Upon scanning him, it opened with a small hiss and he pulled himself upwards through it. The armor clad doe followed suit.

Phantom noted they were in an assembly lab or sorts. Everything looked either light grey or white, with soft blue lighting illuminating the area. It was much the same as portions of the armory at the house, though less messy, probably because her fox didn't have his paws on this area.

It was all the more proof to her that her boyfriend was an absent minded genius and idiot all rolled up in one lump of red and cream fur. A small giggle left her muzzle in reflection of that.

"Not one word," the armored fox told her off with a thump of his paw to her plated skull.

"I didn't say a gosh darned thing," she laughed through the comms, holding up her paws.

She heard griping and complaints nearby, the pitch and tone indicative of her hyperactive friend. Rounding the corner, Phantom wanted to guffaw at what she saw.

"Someone get these things away from my rump!" yelped Essie, trying to turn in the grip of some manipulator arms that were fitting plating to her arms and legs. An extra arm was fitting plating to her rear, making laser guided measurements and adjustments to the core exoskeletal structure she was wearing.

"I have told you, Essie," Leo chastised from the other side of her, "it would be a quick and effortless adjustment if you stayed still. Your discomfort is noted but the process is necessary."

"Don't stop her from complaining," Gus remarked, cool and collected as components were fitted to his suit. "It's quite the entertaining distraction."

"Welllll excuse me for not loving a robot getting frisky with me!" the wild dog called out. Subsequently, she grumbled after, "Now I guess I know how my perps feel. Ugh… I hate turnabouts."

Flux chose that moment to intervene, trying to bring levity to the weird mood as he voiced, "Try creating the design for these things and getting fitted for many dozens of different suits. I couldn't tell you how often I've gotten my tail yanked by these 'frisky' robots. It does NOT get any easier."

"Is it gonna be like this everytime we have to suit up?" Connor asked from another part of the room, faring better with his fitting.

"Only the first time," the fox explained. "These things need to fit right. Not too loose and not too snug. It's for your own safety. I mean… imagine it like throwing an egg in a strongbox and dropping the strongbox from a skyscraper. The box will be fine but the egg… not so much."

"Though crude, I see your point," chimed Bella, struggling with her own issues. "These suits can take a fair bit of damage but there's only so much you can do to protect the pilot. The snugger the fit, the more you can diffuse a hit?"

Done with her fitting and completely covered in armor, accents glowing purple from the core mounted on the back and covered for protection, the deer doe stepped away from the apparatus, running her hooves over the plating.
"I do have one complaint about such a snug fit…," Bella voiced in a fading tone. "Does this thing really need be so… revealing of my form?"

All heads that weren't looking over at her did so immediately, making the female deer instinctively cover herself uselessly.

The wildebeest turned his head and coughed, the image ingrained into his mind forevermore. Besides the cough though, he remained silent.

The large bear let out a low chuckle, stepping forwards upon his own fitting being complete as well.

Phantom and Flux simple fist bump, both wordlessly appreciating the results.

Essie was the first one to break the silence, giving the doe a catcall whistle as she called out, "You have curves, girl! Your pantsuit had to have been hiding them before."

"You can just call it a suit…" Bella defended weakly, unsure how to address the other comments on her appearance.

Gus began laughing heartily once more, adding, "Gotta say, she's not wrong. No need to be ashamed. In fact… I think you just scored a few points with mister gnu over there." At the last mention, the bear jerked a thumb towards said gnu, indicating his wide-eyed stare and subsequent embarrassment.

The deer blushed heavily herself, the usual calm demeanor cracking under the focus of attention as she fumbled her words, "Y-yeah? Well it's a workout itself to keep up with him. Can't skip a leg day when he's so restless and work focused."

Nick snickered beneath his muzzle plating, earning a thump from Judy, a silent gesture that said, 'Stop laughing at their embarrassment.'

Instead of taking her insistent gesture, the fox spoke up, "Having difficulty keeping up with Connor?" He then tilted his head and looked at the aforementioned mammal, who shook his head to tell Flux silently to 'shove it'. "Way to go, big guy."

"That is NOT what I meant and you all know it!" the deer doe nearly shrieked.

Everyone began to laugh at the two mammals suffering, though Bella and Connor's expressions seemed to soften as the mood became something less stifling.

"I would say that was an impromptu but highly successful team building moment," the android plainly relayed from behind a few consoles, coordinating the fitting of all four mammals simultaneously.

"Actually," Bella interjected once more, "now that I think about it… why do I need armor?"

"You seem to be the type that needs familiarity with equipment she might have others use," explained Leo. "I figure you would have a better understanding of the capabilities of such armaments in the field if you were subject to their capabilities yourself. That and your record indicates you are a capable fighter. One can never be too careful about preparing for all contingencies."

"Is it strange that you sound a lot like her, just less hot?" the wild dog interjected from nearby, having finished her fitting and testing out the movement of her armor.

All eyes turned on Essie, including the chastising stare of a wildebeest and blushing muzzle of the
concerned deer doe.

"What?" she barked in question, looking sincerely confused. "You guys don't see it?"

"Called it," Gus murmured with a victorious grin. "She likes females."

"Hey!" Essie giggled in turn. "Just because I appreciate her winning features doesn't mean I'm attracted to her like that. I mean… maybe? But, I'm pretty sure Connor already has a claim staked on that cutie."

"I'm choosing to ignore that," the gnu grumbled, gyrating his arms to test the joints, finally complete with his fitting as well.

"Notice he didn't deny it…" the wild dog teased, making sure everyone heard it, though leaning more so towards Gus, tapping his chest lightly.

"Huh…" Flux sighed in relief, turning to address his partner, "This is going much better than I thought it would."

"And I'm far less annoyed with Connor than I thought I'd be…" Phantom relented with a shrug.

"Now that I've been able to tailor the designs and measurements of your suits," the robot interrupted, silencing the murmured conversations from all, "I think we can proceed to take in some data with calibrations. For that, I'll need you all to line up over here and do some movements as I direct you."

"...Annnnd here comes the boring part," the fox tod complained mildly. "I doubt you want to stay for this."

"For what?" the armored bunny questioned with a slightly tilted head.

Right on cue, the four newly armored mammals began to take instruction from Leo, following his movements in very stiff mimicry.

"Oh…" she followed up with, the tod nodding.

"It's like that tutorial in a game where you learn the controls and adjust sensitivity… only this goes on for hours and is really boring," Nick detailed.

"Why didn't I do this?" came the rabbit doe's just inquiry.

"Leo was taking in data from your morphsuit and used the data from that to do the same as what their doing will accomplish. The difference here is… that their suits are made to be mostly autonomous from his input or overall intervention, unless absolutely necessary. So… the suits use a user interface system that will learn their motor functions and limits, making usage easier."

"Like breaking in a pair of stiff jeans?" the armored bunny offered in question.

"Ehhh… close enough," her boyfriend shrugged. "How about we check in on our prisoner?"

"Wasn't that an annoying task before?" Judy quipped, smiling beneath the face plate. "Besides… we JUST got here!"

"I had an idea pop into my head, and I would like to play it out before it fades from my mind," Flux described in a low tone. She nodded, watching him turn to go.

"I'm staying though," she told him. He waved at her and gave the bunny doe a thumbs up.
"Prepare for boredom," he forewarned his girlfriend in a faux ghostly tone, mocking her.

Phantom tossed a small tool at him, the fox tod chuckling, before dropping through the hatch and disappearing from sight.

The Shard sat still, posed comfortably and meditating in the chamber he was left to, walls covered in a lattice of wires and spikes. Any attempts to escape would be painful at best. Before, he was in a bland looking interrogation chamber, but now… he was obviously incarcerated in a holding cell.

A door opened rather suddenly, the creature sighing heavily and trying to diffuse the fear in his limbs.

"Meditating?" the armored figure questioned curiously. "I never got the reason why anyone does that. It's so boring and only serves to make me irritated with the crushing silence. I love to tinker as a hobby… maybe throw paint filled balloons at a wall."

"It's a means of calming the mind and body," he relented. "To each their own method of relief to that end."

"And if that method of relief is to use you as a pin cushion or skinning you?" came the smaller being's reply.

He bit the inside of his cheek, unsure of the validity of the threat. At the very least, he knew this threatening individual wasn't overly worried about his life. He would regenerate over and over… until his power ran out.

"I suspect this threat was used against you already…" the armored being continued.

The avian Shard didn't expect that.

"I saw the information provided to me about your suit… and my companion updated me on your species a few minutes ago," he began in explanation, turning his back to the Shard. "Did you know, Tim?"

"Know what?" he answered, shrugging off the name.

"Your suit was meant to overcharge itself and drain you to fight with great power… but at the cost of your Shard energy."

"I knew," Tim confirmed. "Not much I could do about it."

"Another thing," his adversary began. "Your species has been and is still logged as…"

"Non-sapient… according to your language," the avian alien interrupted. The comparatively diminutive creature turned to look at him, waiting expectantly. He sighed, deciding the knowledge wouldn't do anything harmful, and continued, "I was the same. I was a mindless monster of the wilds… or so they told me. At random chance, I was infused with the power of a Star Shard. It happens more often than one might imagine, unfortunately, but my… sponsors… had methods to overcome that obstacle. Cybernetic implants and biologically induced hyperactive learning methods through them. I was elevated, though the threats and torture that accompanied it were meant to instill fear in me. Wavering loyalty or simple hesitation made such threats of this treatment return."

"You were raised from a simple creature to become a weapon of war," came the statement from the
smaller Shard.

Tim nodded.

"Well… if you're telling the truth, that does change things, but we can't simply release you."

Again he nodded, remarking, "I understand."

"Another question… if I may? If you have been brought up to the height of intelligence with all the means they provided you, how are you not ingrained as a mindless soldier to their whims?"

"I am a coward," he reiterated, clasping his claws together. "Most embraced the teachings or succumbed to the will of them. My fear made me question everything… but it also made me keep quiet in the same fear. I silently knew I was only a means to further their goals, but if I was useful… I wasn't going to be killed or tortured."

"I see…" breathed the armored being. "I've seen your armor force the boundaries of speed from you, but is it actually an affinity you possess?"

"No," Tim bluntly told him. "I would lie but I suppose it matters little. If they find out I lived but failed… they'll wish to terminate me anyhow. My affinity is useless."

"To them, maybe… but tell me for my own curiosity."

The avian Shard clicked his beak in mild irritation, saying, "It's called Ghost walking. I can view a place from a distance as if I traveled there physically. The reason it is useless is that my 'ghost' is still constrained by the laws of physics. I could explore this entire chamber in such a manner… but unless I used my ability while the door was open… I couldn't walk through it."

The armored being titled his head, likely frowning in confusion as he spoke, "That's oddly specific…"

"Many Shards are constrained by such things," the alien snapped. "We aren't all so lucky."

"Why tell me such things now… and not earlier?" he followed up.

The details came quite easily this time, with Tim stating, "I had time to think. No one knew where that spatial anomaly led… nor how to get anything back. So… now that I'm here… I realized something important, especially realizing you defeated all the forces I would have been subject to…"

The armored being remained silent and patient, allowing him to continue.

"...I'm not under their rule anymore," he breathed in slight relief. "No more oppression from them or stigmatic dogma about their goals and my place in all of it. No more suffrage as a pawn. I know I'm trapped in a needle cage right now… but with them unable to reach out and keep their stranglehold over me… I feel free."

"Does that mean you would be willing to give us information?"

"I see no reason for it to hurt anymore," the Shard replied in a tired tone. "For now though, I just want to rest, if I may…?" He didn't expect that comfort, seeing he was a prisoner, but the smaller Shard surprised the avian alien, getting up with a nod and leaving the room slowly.

"I'll be back with some… 'comforts'," he spoke.

Tim narrowed his gaze at him, unsure what to say.
He eventually found his voice, telling the armored creature before the door closed, "They want to use your planet's resources to create two separate devices. One is a transmitter to broadcast the location from afar. The other is a stabilizer of sorts for the wormhole."

"I see..." his captor barely muttered, letting the cell shut and leaving Tim to let out a sigh of relief.

Disengaging his current suit, Nick shed the metal shell outside and approached Leo, having been using two bodies currently to carry out the tasks of monitoring Tim and dealing with the others at the off base facility.

"Your take?" he inquired of the observant intelligence, the aforementioned being interacting with a series of equipment and consoles.

"He was telling no lies," the android began. "Though anxious and guarded, he presented little signs of actual deception. I am aware of the cybernetics, having had to check them upon apprehension to make sure no further communications were made to or from and disabled what I could safely."

"You think he'll help us?" the fox asked, his tone clearly skeptical of any pawsitive answer.

"Maybe," Leo offered, surprising Nick, "but the level of indoctrination is unclear and I just don't know enough to give you a definitive answer. The safe answer here is continued observation and imprisonment would be the most viable option. He can offer little in terms of combat, especially if facing his former captors and their forces might trigger more flight than fight. Information retrieval should be our main priority. Low risk and hopefully high yield of results, as opposed to giving him the tools to hinder us if our trust is misplaced."

The tod sighed heavily, remarking, "Yeah... I thought so."

"As for the two devices they want to make, I'll need to make haste to get us down to the ship, so I can properly scan the planet for any tech capable of doing what he explained."

"And in the meantime?" Nick questioned, a paw of his making a slightly dramatic flourish.

"Give our new members some time in the suits," the robotic entity detailed evenly. "If I recall correctly, a massive portion of a pod ship fell into a park and caused some damage. Give them all limited license to help with the clean up and reconstruction. It would give them much needed hours in the suits without subjecting them to nervously stumbling through battle simulations or more sparring matches."

"Ha!" the red fox barked in laugher. "Agreed."

"Should I give them the good news?" Leo asked simply.

"Be my guest," the tod confirmed for Leo, beginning to walk out of the room. "Also, let's give the guy some better amenities. Less spikes and more cushions. I think he at least earned that."

"Understood," the mechanical being affirmed.

Her fox was right... this WAS boring.

Insanely, unequivocally, and surely... boring.
She'd spent nearly the better part of an hour watching Leo's current body direct the four recruits through suit calibration exercises to ascertain the boundaries of their current physical limits. It wouldn't do well if a suit tried to enact upon a neural command to do the splits when the concerned wearer was well out of practice.

It was still funny at least to see Essie try to do exactly that.

"It's been a while…" the wild dog pouted, still trying to force her limbs to listen to her.

Phantom had to admit that, if she didn't feel the need to compete, her friend might not be trying this at all. Yet, lo and behold, next to Essie… and stunning all…

…Connor was the one doing splits, accompanied by Bella.

"How?!!" the canine finally gave up and complained towards the two.

"I go to yoga classes," the gnu remarked plainly, not wanting to elaborate.

"Ahem…" came the small noise from the deer doe, eyeing her larger companion with skepticism.

The wildebeest snorted and corrected himself, "I mean Bella makes me go to yoga."

"Much better," Bella told him with a satisfied grin, earning a string of grumbles from Connor.

"You could have let me have that one…" he groaned in complaint.

"Oh please," the deer doe sassed, earning the beginnings of a giggle from Judy, "when I first offered it, you jumped at the chance but misunderstood, thinking I was taking you to a new frozen yogurt place."

"Yoga… Yogurt," Essie voiced, testing both words on her tongue and nodding. "Yeah, I could see the confusion."

"Please tell me you're being sarcastic," the small deer seethed in mild annoyance.

The canine female let out a nervous chuckle, shrugging as she replied, "Uh… yes?"

A bellowing cacophony of laughter erupted from the bear nearby, simply quietly listening to everything transpiring. He wiped as his eyes, apparently chuckling hard enough to draw a tear or two.

"You guys are too much," Gus remarked, holding his gut.

"I agree with the big guy," Phantom provided, finally giving her voice to the fun going on that was pretty lacking through all the boredom. "I'm loving this."

"So… Phantom… Miss?" Essie addressed her, being almost overly polite in her nervous nature.

"When do we do… whatever we're going to do?"

"To be honest," the armored bunny began, "I can't say for sure. Most of my training has been on the fly because we weren't as prepared as we wish we could have been. Now… we're trying to actually set forth a plan of action that could make things easier on not only myself and Flux, but help give a bigger safety net to the city of Zootopia. You're the first we've inducted and so we have no real set guidelines for all of… this." Upon the last word, she gestured to all of them and the facilities armaments.
They seemed to look to her for answers still, faceplates gone for their comfort for now. Thus, she could see their expressions and felt her answer was woefully inadequate.

Thankfully, Leo stepped in and seemed to perk up with new purpose.

"I can answer a portion of that concern right now," the being told them all. "Since combat training has its risks, and giving rise to that danger so soon in your training would be detrimental, You're going to be doing some familiarization with your new suits in the field. Non-combat but still important. That wreckage in the park will need some work to remove, aside from what has already been done. I want to show the public that you are an extension of the people on their behalf and give you something simple to learn what you can do inside those suits. Does this seem agreeable with all?"

"Sounds good to me," the large bear replied easily.

Bella and Connor nodded, their expressions somewhat neutral.

Essie bit her lip, as if to restrict herself from saying something bad, then sighing and venting out, "Finnnnnnneeeeee. This feels like community service or trash clean up… but at least I get to do it in a hyper awesome sci-fi suit. So, whatever."

"Good, I'm currently notifying the proper authorities," the android told them all. "All of you will show up at 6 a.m. here to don your respective suits and we'll make our way there to start working at 7 a.m."

"Awww come on..." the wild dog complained. "I thought I was going to be able to sleep in… This certainly feels less superhero-y than I might have imagined."

"Oh yes," the grizzly started. "We're going to suddenly become fantastic because we're wearing high tech hardwear." He smiled down at her, crossing his large paws.

"Shove it, Battle Bear!" Essie barked, earning a substantially deep rumble of laughter from said bear.

"Am I the only one who thinks this one will be our unofficial mascot?" Gus asked all in witness.

There was little hesitation as all but the canine's paw/hoof went up.

"Hey!" she groaned uselessly, the start of giggles drowning out the rest of her reply.

Chapter End Notes

Well that was fun.

Transition chapters are always so much fun to write... *insert sarcasm here*

I feel more confident about writing them now... lol. but it's like trying to clasp those itty bitty teeny weeny necklace chains together behind your own neck. gotta thread the bit through that hole just right, otherwise it won't connect well.

Now then, about that exclusive thingy... I've been writing the storyboard and outline to a work of fiction entirely my own. Not technically a fanfic, so I can use it as an exclusive work on Pat Reon.
It's an original story, inspired by the idea of Red Riding Hood and the Wolf. Basically, I've always loved and romanticized the tale for my own benefit as a child, but now I have made plans for a full blown story with a long and in depth plot. Scarlett Ryder is a tailor and novice alchemist, crossing paths with a wolf boy, who only gives his name as Fen. He looks mostly human, but lore of the region cultivates fear against something that makes him seem demonic. The tales simply call his "kind" werewolves, but she only sees a frightened soul seeking a connection. Forces of all kinds will test their newfound friendship and connection. It's set in an alternate world that will emulate various elements of the Renaissance all the way to the Victorian age. So, there is no technical set year or real world location.

Fumbling back on track, there's the teaser for it. I'm just trying to come up with a solid foundation of a few chapters written before releasing it.

In the meantime, I hope everyone is enjoying this story.

I shall don my hat and leap out of the balloon to fall on a bed of hay, whereas I will emerge cartoonishly unharmed.

Until next time, It's been a hustle, Sweethearts.
By Any Other Names

Chapter Notes

Did ya miss me?

Nah... I'm sure most of you didn't. Otherwise all these bullet holes wouldn't be here. Good aim everyone.

Anywho... another chapter!

I finally get to resolve something I've wanted to for a long long long while. A team name! Always wanted to name a team. No spoilers, just read.

Now enjoy, read, review, fav, follow, and... grab... that strange snack. I'm munching on a jar of cake. Yep... found it at the market. Someone literally bakes cakes in mason jars. I love it. this one is lemon and lime. Tastes like sprite in cake form.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Nick was pacing his armory, Judy having not even woken yet, Leo at his side and awaiting his response.

"You think it's about time?" the fox asked almost somberly.

"You have their attention and their understanding," the android explained evenly, "but you most importantly need their trust. As it is, this knowledge you need to share may change the way they fight with you. Suffice it to say, they may act differently now, if they were ignorant to a few facts. We can't have actions in the field based on information that makes certain actions inefficient."

"Like shielding me?"

"Yes."

"I can't believe I didn't think about this til this morning... barely an hour before they are supposed to arrive," the red tod groaned to himself.

He had a small mental revelation concerning the team dynamics and the potential risks of keeping information about the Shards to himself. Only Connor had even an inkling of the knowledge he had to offer, and even what he knew the gnu was told was predominately just a few implied details in his escape.

The main concern became knowledge that Nick and Judy were effectively in far less danger than the other four. Their power made them a bigger target, but also healed their wounds and extended their life, not to mention the superior abilities that transcended normal biological capabilities. If they weren't aware of that fact... any one of these people could see a moment of misinterpreted threat to their lives... throwing their own in the way or risking theirs unnecessarily. The robotic being agreed that they could be trusted and needed to know to best operate as an efficient team.

He has his prime candidates...
...but now he needed them to be true volunteers.

"Should I reveal Judy and my identities to them?" he questioned in passing.

Leo seemed to process the outcome of that, remarking swiftly and plainly, "I predict your chances at allaying any fears and solidifying trust would be nearly thirty percent higher if you did so out of the suit. Over seventy percent if Judy chose to do so with you as well. A word of caution though, it would be wise to ask her before proceeding with your own reveal, as Esther knows of your cohabitation and may either be smart enough to figure it out rather loudly in front of everyone else, or simply assume one of many variants that may make her angry."

"Ah..." Nick replied thoughtfully, scratching at the back of his head in slight anxiousness. "I'm gonna go wake Little Miss Fluff and get her opinion then."

"A wise choice," the mechanical entity agreed, staying put while the fox ambled off on a mission.

Walking towards the doe's room, haunches raised and paw pads stepping silently, he knocked lightly on the door, hearing no answer.

He knocked more insistently, though still making it light and polite. A groaning sound emanated from the room.

"Whaaaaat...?" Judy moaned from within. "Just because we have to meet them in an hour doesn't mean I have to take that time to look pretty.... I'll be in armor. Let me sleeeeeep."

Nick chuckled, opening the door slowly, a bunny spread out and face down in her covers, which happened to be haphazardly draped over her, both legs and an arm uncovered. Her tail wiggled and peeked out from beneath the rumbled edge of her covers, making the fox smirk.

"I need to ask you about something," he entreated her softly. "Can you get up?"

"For the time being... this bunny is comatose," the grey doe sleepily grumbled.

"So..." the tod began, reaching out a paw towards her tail, "...you won't mind it if..." His paw and claws found the furry nub, raking through the plush fur and making Judy gasp, her rump rising as he teased her. "...I do that?"

Stubbornly, she pulled the blanket over her head, pulling her legs up and looking like a little hermit crab. Regardless of his question, she remained quiet.

He gripped her tail again, rubbing a paw pad in little circles just above her tailbone, one of her feet twitching and jerking to the stimulation. It took a few seconds, but the fox eventually got the intended reaction, with the doe's foot thumping in the air.

"Erg... Stoooop..." Judy pleaded, immediately followed by a her throwing off the covers and bringing her flushed muzzle to peer angrily at him with sleepy purple eyes. The anger also came across as sleepy, making her look more pouty than anything, and Nick couldn't help but smile warmly at her.

"There's a limit to how cute you can be, you know, Fluff?" the tod fired at her, snarky grin firmly in place. That seemed to stun her into confusion, unsure how to respond. Ever since she understood that him calling her that was an honest compliment, Judy would suddenly short circuit at the C word being thrown around.

"What do you want?" she mumbled out, the sleepy haze settling over her briefly once more.
"Advice… and permission," the red fox mentioned rather seriously, making his girlfriend perk slightly in wariness at his tone.

"Permission for what?" she voiced in trepidation, scooting closer to give him her full attention.

"I started wondering about how we are asking a bunch of mammals to fight with us," he began to detail. "Yes… I know it's what we need, but that isn't what concerned me. We are basically self healing immortal ish beings, much to my chagrin. Anyways, I'm planning on revealing the nature of our power to our team. Most preferably I want to do it out of the armor…"

"... but you would like me to do that with you?" she finished for him, mildly yawning. "I don't see a problem with that. Essie is gonna have a field day and probably break glass with her screeching but this was your idea to hide it in the first place. Why the change of heart?"

"Team dynamics, I guess," Nick plainly spoke, shrugging. "In battle, there isn't any reason they should risk their life for ours, potentially getting themselves killed. Us two will endure… but they have only one life. If they don't know that…"

"... oh..." Judy mouthed in realization, the last dregs of sleepiness clearing from her face. "I can see how that's a problem."

"The big thing is… they need to know I'm just another mammal," the red tod further relayed. "I want to do this out of armor… but if I do…"

"Then, Essie will easily put the pieces together and very likely let it pour from her like word vomit," the bunny doe surmised. "Why do we trust her to keep secrets again?"

Both mammals giggled, though they knew the wild dog was trustworthy, even if overly energetic.

"I'm with you, no matter what," the grey rabbit soothed to him, allaying his fears easily. He sighed in relief, making to leave her room.

"Sounds good then. I'll be sure to greet them in armor at the warehouse, but we'll just take it from there. In the meantime, you go ahead and get a little more sleep. Sorry to have disturbed you."

"It's fine, Scruff," she told him, stretching and getting off her bed. "I probably needed to get up anyhow. I was just playing 'ten more seconds' over and over until Leo got me anyways."

With a gentle nod and a warm smile, the fox closed her door, leaving her to get ready.

He felt quite a bit more confident about everything now, with plenty of anxious doubt at facing his hopefully not former teammates.

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Now donning their suits and sitting in a common area with a circular amphitheatre setting to it, the centerpiece being a holo matrix through their visors, the whole group was awaiting a debriefing.

Thankfully, their suits were far easier to put on than the prior fitting/calibration, with everything sliding and locking into place like a form fitting glove.

Gus was splayed out in the back, barely awake at such an early hour for himself. Connor and Bella were pert and wakeful, used to being up at the crack of dawn. Besides… this would have been their morning anyways, only without the suits. Essie was energetic about being in the suit, though still griping about being up so early.
Entering the room, Flux and Phantom waved at the present armored mammals, with Leo walking close behind.

"Do we really need to do a debriefing?" the wild dog complained. "I do them almost every morning anyways… and believe me… Bogo's voice is one to command attention, but that doesn't make any of the information seem any less redundant sometimes."

"Do you know what your specific tasks would be?" the armored bunny asked curiously. The canine pinched an armored ear in her metal clad paw, unsure how to answer. The rabbit answered her own question, "In a suit, you will have things to do that may not be safe for normal personel. If I am to understand it correctly, this is a means to both familiarize ourselves with suit capabilities and mitigate danger for less protected individuals."

Judy's head hurt trying to recite all that wordy rhetoric, to which the android's head thankfully nodded that she was indeed correct. At least that felt satisfying.

"Fine…" Essie grumbled, crossing her arms and nodding her head for them to continue.

Gus, still looking half asleep in his position, let out a rumbling chuckle, voicing, "Best to stop questioning them so much, Rebound. You don't usually end up looking smarter for it."

"Hey!" the wild dog barked indignantly. "I would have half a mind to call you Bear Butt as your name just for that."

"Pfft," came Phantom's laugh. "This idiot mentioned calling him Bearzerker or something…" she recalled, jabbing a paw towards the armored tod, who puffed his chest out proudly.

To their surprise, the grizzly perked up, looking down at them with interest as he spoke, "Hmm… I like it. Can I be that?"

"Uh… seriously?" the armored bunny doe guffawed in mild humor. "You actually like it? Huh… way to go Scruff. Nailed that one on the head."

"I should hope so," the aforementioned fox piped up. "Now we just need to come up with names for the other two." At the last words, he pointed towards the oddly silent pair, who now looked stunned, as if caught in headlights on a dark street.

"Us?" Connor inquired bluntly. Everyone else nodded, with Bella looking just as confused.

"I don't think I want a name…" the deer doe told them slowly. "Not my cup of tea to be a superhero or something. I'm here for support and to use my head… not look like I could smash skulls."

"It would good to go with monikers for the sake of secrecy from the public or media," the robotic being relayed in kind. "I'll log Esther as Rebound and Gus as Bearzerker. There is another matter though, that we must address first. Flux? If you will…"

Leaving that trailed off, the red fox tod nodded, grateful that his mechanical companion gave him a bump to the topic, as he had no idea how to bring it up.

"Leo is correct," he relented, a bad taste forming in his mouth. "I have something else to share with all of you before we embark on this venture as a team…"

"Don't get too campy on us now, Flux," Essie sassed.

"...right. Haha. Anyways, I want you all to trust me," the tod continued. "Suffice it to say, I'm not all
that normal of a mammal. And before you say anything about 'of course' or 'that's obvious', I need you to know the why because it may change how you view yourself as part of this team."

As much as humor might have lifted the serious mood, none decided to break the line of thought that Nick had going, and rightfully so.

He took a deep breath and resumed, "I am in fact a very old mammal. I'm kept alive by an otherworldly force that we call a Shard. It's not really as simple as I'm making it out to be, but basic line here… I'm able to heal and am pretty much immortal as I am."

There was silence that met his revelation. He expected some outrage or calling him out as being exaggerative.

"So… you are telling us because you think this would make working as a team difficult because our lives are at risk and yours… not so much?" came the surprisingly accurate and level headed assumption from the large bear.

The armored fox was flabbergasted, feeling a little stupid for severely underestimating how easily his candidates might assume this end.

"Uh… yes?" he barely murmured.

"Ha!" Gus bellowed, patting the armor of his belly as he laughed heartily. "I'm a bouncer in an iffy district. Big as I am, I still worry about being threatened by a mammal with enough gall to wave a gun or big enough sharp object my way."

"I'm an officer who puts her life on the line every day with far less perks and no armor," the canine added with a shrug, smiling easily. "Oh… I guess a little… but those vests are sooo itchy."

The two outspoken mammals, along with Flux and Phantom, looked over to the gnu and deer doe, who shook their heads easily.

"Don't look at us," Bella deflected. "We live under constant supervision of a fickle governance that might sooner dispose of us than allow our knowledge of certain dealings become their downfall. This is considered an improvement in my book." Wildebeest grunted in agreement.

"We're used to working under a shroud of secrecy and deception with a threat of danger," the larger of the pair voiced further.

"Shroud!" Essie yelled out, stunning everyone, all in attendance now staring at her, awaiting an explanation.

It took a few seconds for her to stop smiling and calm down enough to clear her throat and clarify, "Ah… ahem. Shroud… that could be… you know… Bella's super name? I don't know. Haha."

The looks then gravitated back towards the deer doe, her sigh being the only thing that echoed as she relented with a dragging tone, "That… actually sounds like a good one. I'll admit it…"

The wild dog’s fist pump was almost audible along with her hissing, "Yessss."

The canine's eyes then leveled at Connor, narrowing as he squinted back at her, saying in a low tone, "Don't… you… dare."

She smirked, replying, "I'll let you simmer a bit before trying to tackle that, Breaker."
"You hear that? I'm Breaker," the gnu called out, telling all as if the matter were settled.

"What!? I wasn't even trying!" Essie whined. "That doesn't count." She huffed and crossed her paws, clearly sour about having the wind taken from her sails at messing with the larger prey.

"Alright," Leo confirmed, taking note and reciting for all to hear and potentially dispute, "Bella is Shroud, Essie is Rebound, Gus is Bearzerker, and Connor is Breaker. Now… Flux…"

"Right. Right. We got off track there, didn't we?" the armored fox spoke in a mildly flustered state. "Allow me to explain…"

In as little time as could be allotted, given that they had pushed back, but not entirely cancelled, a service standard, the tod went through a short synopsis of what he was, how he came to be, what was really attacking them and why, as well telling them their progress on trying to stop it.

"...and also," Flux added onto his explanation…

His suit opened up, allowing him to step out and into the open.

He really expected the reactions, given only one mammal had any reason to be surprised, as Connor and Bella had seen him before, with Gus as well, but Essie's ear splitting shriek as she screeched, "WHAT!?" still made his head hurt.

Her body leaped upwards almost involuntarily as she made not for him, but Phantom's suit.

The metal clad doe stepped back, seeming to have expected this outcome as the larger female's paws groped and gripped at her face plates, trying to spread them apart.

"Who's in here?" the canine demanded. "Is it Judy? Come on!"

The face plates opened, making Essie squeal as she jumped back, seeing nothing inside.

"Come on, Carrots," Nick softly chastised, tilting his head back to look at something no one else could see. "Don't be cruel to her. Joke's over."

A bleeding purple aura left the fox, funnelling back into the empty suit, a voice function coming online to say, "Aww… She deserved it for being so nosy."

Judy's face formed from the ethereal violet, fur and flesh reforming inside the suit. Her eyes were the last thing to retain the amethyst glow, color fading but still a naturally brilliant hue. The doe's smile was just as bright, smug in the fact that she freaked her friend out.

"You cheeky little liar," Essie accused with a cocked hip and playfully pointed paw. "You've been hiding this from me for weeks." It wasn't a question.

"Too much to take, Drama Queen?" the grey bunny sassed back.

"You two know each other," Bella piped up, having recovered from her end of the sonic attack before.

The red fox rolled his eyes as the girls began to giggle.

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Even considering the strange delays, and the oddly calm manner in which everyone seemed to take the information about Shards, as well as Nick and Judy's potential immortality, the team found their
way onto a specially modified transport to take the group to the crash site. Government sanctioned salvage teams, not to mention the media circus, were already working in full swing when they arrived.

The armored fox almost wished they had a less anti-climactic reaction, chalking it up to modern science fiction mediums that ranged from mild to outrageous in theme desensitizing the masses. He grumbled a bit when he remembered there had been events of the past year with Drones and Shards that probably shattered the long standing ideals of what reality was to the Earth, with Zootopians as a whole probably having to adapt to odd circumstances. Still… he couldn’t deny he wanted more of a wide-eyed reaction.

Bella and Connor had no reason to disbelieve him, considering what they saw together. Gus seemed rather uncaring, either not deigning to refute the story or internalizing his surprise, if any. Essie simply shrugged and complained that, by comparison, at least they don’t have to pay for a health plan and skydive without a parachute.

Judy took exceptional joy at seeing his grumpy face.

Regardless of his melancholy at having the supernatural quality of his life reduced to just another thing in this crazy universe, he was at least glad that no one got up and walked out.

Fears allayed, the tod now twisted himself to look out the one way tinted windows in the transport. Leo was driving it by remote, the others talking amongst themselves.

Nerves twisting in his gut, the transport stopped, well behind the erected barriers marking the area as closed off to his relief. Armor or not, he did not like being the center of media attention.

The back doors opened up, an entourage of people leaning in for a peek, along with a few administrative mammals to receive them from the government.

"I would like to formally welcome you, Flux," a stubby, suited beaver chimed, looking over a clipboard and adjusting his square rim glasses. "As per the request, we have accommodated certain teams for your… associates."

The last word seemed to be spoken rather venomously, a gruff snort sounding over the comm from the suits. It was clear to Nick that Connor had something to say.

"Mind explaining, Bud?" the red tod called out, engaging in obligatory replies to the beaver male.

"That’s Kent Cast," the gnu remarked with obvious distaste. "He’s not a bad mammal, per say, but he’s so up his own tail with rules and regulations that he would have you sign papers in triplicate before allowing you the release needed to sneeze. Annoying for anyone that wants to relax and even my superiors don’t like him in the room."

"Think that’s why they tossed him on field duty?" Phantom murmured with a snicker.

With no small amount of satisfaction, the wildebeest could almost be heard smiling as he snidely admitted, "I’m going to pretend that’s the case. He hates the outdoors."

Reengaging with the stuffy beaver, Flux rolled his eyes as he spoke, "I shall send my team out once I give them a final debrief."

Kent didn’t even look at him as he nodded and chuffed, turning to address someone else, as if the fox weren’t worth his time.
Inside his armor, the tod's brow arched in confusion.

"Don't take it too personally," Connor remarked, the team coming out and standing behind the armored fox. "Once he checkmarks anything, including conversations, off his 'To do' list, you don't exist to him until you resurface as something to be dealt with."

Nick shrugged, replying to the gnu, "Alright. I'll take your word for it. It's easier to talk to you if he's ignoring me anyways."

After letting everyone surround him, he closed outside speakers down and kept the line open only between their suits.

"Now then, no names. If you introduce yourselves, you commit to your new names," he explained. "Only the proper authorities know anything about who is in the suits you don and I don't want any unfortunate characters knowing. Identity protection and all that jazz. Breaker and Bearzerker, you two are doing heavy lifting in the construction zone on the buildings needing repair. Rebound, safety checks and emergency response. Your suit has jump thrusters. Quick and reactive. If someone falls or drops something, you have the quickest suit to catch or intercept anything. Shroud, your suit has deep scanning tech in it. You will coordinate the techs and salvage crew to find the safest spots and pinpoint weaknesses to address or avoid. Phantom and I will be flexing where needed and likely dealing with making sure your suits are functioning properly. Understood?"

Grunts, yips, yeps, and nods all around.

The armored rabbit stuck her paw in the middle, surprising most as she said, "Come on."

Essie joined without hesitation. Gus joined a moment later, then Connor and Bella shortly thereafter. Nick was the last and seemed confused. His paw was the last to join, a sense of inclusion and connection making him tingle.

Nick had a team. He had people at his back to help. Sure, there was Judy, but this was different. It was something he missed most of his life. A herd, a pride, a warren, a skulk. The tod lacked being able to put himself in with others, especially since he would likely outlive them all. He mostly abstained simply because he thought he would be alone no matter what, but Judy changed all of that for him.

"Break!" the doe chirped, to which the group split apart, Flux looking over at his plated paw, smiling all the while.

"I think it would be wise to address the media at the border of the salvage zone," the android's voice cut through evenly.

"Ah… yeah," the red tod relented, holding onto the feeling and padding smoothly to a gaggle of reporters, beginning to shout incomprehensible questions as quickly as a rapid firing machine gun.

"Who are the mammals in the new suits? Are they piloted or automated?"

"Are you working for the government now?"

"Is this a new tactic for the Drone assault?"

"What has changed since your apprehension?"

"If this is a joint effort, how have you resolved the differences from their attempted capture of you?"
Many more were asked, but those were the ones Leo caught and scrolled across his display in text, like subtitling this circus of a gathering with microphones and paws shoved in his face from behind the red tape.

He splayed out his paws, calmly signalling all to calm down and let him speak. They thankfully acquiesced.

"First of all," Flux began, voice modulated through the suit and given higher volume to cut through the crowd, "I would like to address the potential misconception of my joint effort with the government. I am working WITH them. My capture was not a means to force my paw to cooperate with them. To the contrary, I wanted nothing further to deal with on their end. However, I and they cannot afford to squabble over anything in the face of something so daunting."

"What about the new armored mammals?" a goat bleated loudly, yelling over a few other murmured questions. "Do they work for you or the government? If the latter, can we trust them not to try anything like seizing your tech and doing your job for you?"

"They are from a privately accrued list of individuals that I researched and investigated as prime candidates for a teammate," the armored tod relayed in detail. "They are not contracted or thrust upon me without choice. In fact, I have given them all opportunities to turn this down. At the core of their induction… they are purely volunteers… and I have my volunteers."

The crowd exploded in question, most of which to the spirit of "Is that what you're calling your team?"


It was too late, the media running with it, some of the mammals turning to their cameras to make comments and solidify the name.

"Might as well let them run with that," the mechanical being told him plainly. "You would have unlikely gotten to name them otherwise. Be sure to take control over who names the members themselves, however."

"That's not the name I imagined though," the fox complained in a hushed tone over the comm. "I didn't have a name picked out exactly, but that sounds like we're a fire department… not a team of defenders."

"Fire fighters are just a different form of damage control and mitigation, which is the core of your mission," Leo rebuked him. "Best to run with the fact they gave you a very versatile name instead of something that made you sound like an assassin squad with big guns."

"I guess you're right… Volunteers, huh…" Nick sighed to himself, trying to see all the pluses of such a name.

"What do we call the others?" a new voice asked. That perked the fox up, knowing he had to jump on that before some fool tacked on ridiculous names.

Pulling out an expandable black screen, the pictures of his new members, all in suits of course, showed up, to which he denoted for each mammal, "They are Breaker, Shroud, Bearzerker, and Rebound. And they… are the Volunteers. We… are the Volunteers."

Chapter End Notes
YAY!

Got to finally put together a team AND name it. well... Nick didn't get to like he wanted, but still. XD

I'm a down home country boy from Tennessee, so the Volunteer name means a lot to me. Whenever disaster struck in the country, my hometown was one of many that banded their workforce together (Electricians, Infrastructure, general construction, etc.) and ended up being shipped to the regions in peril. Like the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina.

I'm really glad though about the positive feedback about my original characters. This is the first fic I feel I've delved so deep into investing into widening my character base in a fic. My other works may have had one or two with depth, but I felt they didn't have enough to stand on their own. These ones though... with Essie, Connor, Gus, and Bella... not to mention Leo... I love these guys and writing them.

Until next time, It's been a hustle, Sweethearts.
“Volunteers, huh?” Bella hummed to herself, watching a stream of the news from her HUD, dually so eyeing Flux from her position nearby.

They had open comms between all the members of their team, allowing the others to hear all that was said.

“I’m not so sure the name sounds… edgy enough,” Essie offered with a regretful inflection to her tone, as if she were trying not to sound insulting. “Plus, I’m not sure what to think. Are we basically community service people now?”

“I would figure you, above all of us, would know what that means,” Gus offered with a slightly snide tone, the grin apparent in his voice. “A volunteer isn’t just one for charity work. The very core of it’s concept is those who willingly give themselves to service without being forced or conscripted, usually for military service.”

“You sound like you Zoogled that…” the wild dog remarked accusingly.

“What can I say?” the grizzly bear grunted. “I love military history. That’s a huge part of it. The most pivotal battles were won mostly by armies that were invested in the cause, rather than forced to fight.”

“I for one am finally glad to have a name associated with me that doesn’t sound grueling or gory,” Connor fired over the comms with a strange giddiness.

The deer doe arched an eyebrow, finding this vigor odd… yet slightly welcome.

The team were set upon their tasks, coordinating their efforts with salvage teams.

Bella kept her words short, as she didn’t want a potential co-worker among them noticing who she was. She shouldn’t have cared, but the more she thought about it, the more she liked the idea of being able to be more blunt with a few select people who couldn’t pinpoint who exactly to complain
about.

Using her suit functions, the doe was able to scan wreckage and detail safe points for others to investigate and survey.

“Our next focus point is that opening about thirty feet up,” one of the techs remarked, pointing upwards to a hole in the jagged chunk of alien wreckage.

“On it,” Shroud called out, using her hooves to bring up a virtual projection screen that only she could see. To others, it appeared she was simply splaying her arms around oddly, but she was using a very intricate interface to more efficiently interact with her scanning tech.

A readout scrolled through her view, with a 3D render of the scanned wreckage and any pockets of space or harmful readings. While the tech was advanced and a bit of a sensory overload, Bella found it was somehow streamlined for ease of use and a learning curve.

Seeing a potential issue with getting up there, the armored deer turned and waved down her wild dog companion from nearby.

“Hey Es… Rebound, I need your help with something,” she entreated in short, to which Essie perked up and hurried over, the doe not realizing she was currently being berated by the very stiff beaver.

“Thank GOODNESS!” Essie all but yelled out, her voice an exasperated mess. “That Kent guy is soooooo BORING! I didn’t know leaning against that vehicle with my suit would mean denting it… Hard to think this suit is heavy when wearing it feels light as a feather.”

“Wait… is that why he looked like he was chewing you out like a little pup?” Bella added, holding back a snicker.

“…yeah…”

A roar of laughter could be heard over the comms, both Connor and Gus having overheard and chortling like deep voiced hyenas over where they were working.

“A… Connor…” the deer doe seethed in a breath, to which the gnu cleared his throat and shut up, Gus having started to settle down himself as well.

“While the suits enhance strength and agility,” Leo began to explain, unbidden, “they do still weigh a substantial amount. Yours in particular weighs 2.2 times your own weight, being nearly…”

“Don’t you dare finish that sentence,” Essie growled in a deadly tone. Though she may have known somewhere in her mind that the android is immune feeling the gravity of that tone, it definitely worked for the others listening in.

There was seconds of silence, before the robot finally spoke up once more, “I don’t quite understand the fascination of females keeping their body mass measurements a secret. With as many species and such as there is…”

“Best not to think about that too much, Leo,” Flux cut in curtly. “If the males of thousands of years of civilization haven’t been able to completely grasp it… I doubt you will either.”

“Understood.”

“....Anyways… Rebound,” Shroud refocused on the armored wild dog. “I need you to jump up there
and investigate an electrical issue. If the salvage crew…”

“Got it!” the energetic canine barked, leaping upwards using her jump jets. With precision that seemed more practiced than her current known expertise with the suits, she bounded upwards and dove through the hole, much to the waning protest of Bella below.

A resulting zap and energy expenditure blew her out of the gap, where she arched downwards and impacted the ground with a thump.

“Rebound! You alright?” the armored deer called out in worry.

There was a groan to allay her fears slightly, with the dog raising an armored paw, “Uhm… what was it you were about to say?”

The deer doe sighed, rolling her eyes as she finished her earlier thought, “I was trying to say that there were exposed components with random electrical surges that could hurt salvage members. Use the capsules of insulation foam in your suit to keep them from hurting you or others…”

“Ah! Got it!” she yelled out, jumping to her feet and bouncing back up to the gap, Bella rolling her eyes.

“I can see how she fits the name Rebound,” the doe vented out in a low grumble.

Some of the others on the comms snickered a bit, though not replying or remarking any further.

“Hey… Leo?” she called out, an irksome feeling rising ever since earlier in the morning.

“Yes?” his even tone echoed through her, as well as the other’s comms.

“While I’m doing this, I would like some answers. The explanation earlier felt woefully insufficient.”

“Alright,” it answered. “Go ahead.”

“First of all,” she began, the line going somewhat silent as the others either shut off their input or stopped speaking to listen in, “I can accept that Flux is three hundred years old and has a power that does what it does to keep him alive, but how is it that Phantom shares the power AND is apparently NOT the same age?”

“A Shard works in odd ways,” Leo began to explain. “It adapts and evolves to give the host the best survival chances. It’s power was so unstable at creation, that it split apart to keep one host from being destroyed by it. Judy found something that completed the connection, so to speak, fully spreading the burden of their power between her and Nick. As they have interacted and fought together, not to mention her ability to turn into an energy form to ‘Shift’ as the two call it, the power between them has stabilized and grown.”

“I think that makes sense,” Bella remarked, multitasking with her interface and giving data to both Essie and the salvage team for safe exploration of the wreckage. “Next question. Why can’t you find a way to disrupt the wormhole from our end? You said in short that it was unstable, making sense of their periodic incursions, but couldn’t you just energy beam that thing into fading out?”

“Imagine it like trying to fire a bullet into water,” the mechanical being detailed. “Any such effort is useless, since it flows in one direction, making interference from the opposing direction exponentially problematic. We can scan for coming breaches, but can’t interfere directly.”
“We’ve seen their Drones fight on automation,” the deer doe spoke, blowing right into another question, with a whole list of them to rattle off in response to the quick, comprehensive, though lacking in detail explanation from earlier. “Couldn’t you just use a big automated army to fight them back? Why us?”

“They run off basic combat programs with no learning capabilities. It’s why Flux had fighting them down to a science until a new Shard showed up. I could run a few suits, as you have witnessed, though my ability to effectively balance quality of function with quantity of units becomes very tenuous beyond five or six suits. Therefore, more intuitive and less automatic assistance is required. Besides, I don’t think the populace would trust an artificial army with no empathy or emotion.”

“So… we’re convenient flesh bags to fill the suits for empathic and political purposes?” Connor spoke up.

“Absolutely not,” Leo rebuked evenly. “We could create an army of our own Drones to protect you, but the history of your civilization and others have a consistent theme that doing as much can make for a complacent population for when actual crisis arises. Build walls high enough to keep out threats for generations, and descendants have no skill or will to fight when the walls finally fall. You are a means of both representation and evolution in technology. Flux and Phantom have become akin to heroic deities, as much as they dislike the insinuation, resulting in many feeling there is a gap. They can’t amount to what the pair have achieved and never will. You however… break that belief for some hopefully.”

“I see…” the gnu answered, sounding deep in thought.

“So, we’re the normal mammals to say it’s possible to be like them?” Rebound chirped, a pant to her tone as she was engaged in other activities.

“I would hardly call a mammal like yourself ‘Normal’, Essie…” the being began.

“Awww, Thanks,” the canine interrupted with a sincere tone that she took it as a complement.

“…But the spirit of your assumption is as you say.”

“If you’ve been here this long… why haven’t you taken Nick off planet?” the doe asked, causing a stunned silence.

“Would you like the long answer or short one?” Leo remarked in kind.

“Uh… short first?”

“Very well,” the robot replied, awaiting for all that wished to hear this to tune in. “In order of chronology, the first issue is my ship, which was drained of all power upon first going through the wormhole. It crash landed in the water offshore of what was going to be Zootopia. My next issue was that I was now without any assistance from the tech on the ship. Sparing you exact details of my search and such, finding Nick was an incomplete mission. I was tasked to protect the Nova Shard. He was only half of it. Therefore, even if I could leave the planet with him under the guise of protection, my mission parameters wouldn’t allow that. Barring that, there was no means for me to produce anything significant until about one hundred years ago. Since then, Nick and I have been taking advantage of the rise of industry and innovation to recreate my creator’s technology enough so to prepare for the potential arrival of those that wish to take the Shard by force.”

“That sounds like a long string of bad luck,” Gus told Leo in a sympathetic tone.

“Indeed, though the biggest reason we simply couldn’t leave is this. I ask of you… If we couldn’t
close or seal the wormhole behind us, and left as you say, what would have happened?”

An almost morbid silence ensued for several seconds. Everyone in the team knew of the first arrival of the Drones. Large, well armoured, with a linear goal that seemed devoid of interest elsewhere, those lumbering, walking tanks appeared immune to conventional weapons and easily counterattacked to neutralize any aggression against them.

If that were left unchecked with no Flux to drop in and “save the day”, their planet might very well be under siege, totalitarian alien rule, or simply eradicated.

“I… don’t know…” Shroud admitted.

“My best case predictions would be that the civilization after us now would commandeer your planet for resources and use as a staging point to effectively transit more forces and search the local systems for us,” Leo further spoke.

“How would that be best case?” Bearzerker asked simply.

“I guess…” Breaker replied. “I guess they could simply eradicate the planet or subjugate our population as slaves?”

“Unfortunately, I can’t refute either possibility,” Leo responded evenly.

“Wait, I have a question now,” the wildebeest cut in. “It’s been nagging at me for a while, but nuclear power runs off of heat induction through a generator that’s more or less a steam powered unit. How in the blazes did you figure out it could be prone to a feedback power loop?”

“I got this one, Leo,” Flux finally said, breaking away from the melancholy of dealing with reporters asking all the same, boring questions. It was nice to answer a question with more mystique and thought process. “I made an assumption based on how much tech you were basing off salvaged Drones. Remember… I tried to keep as much of that out of your collective paws as I could for a while.”

“Right… you’re point?” the gnu goaded further, wanting to hear the how.

“Well… yeah… Drones use a form of nuclear power that’s more of a direct induction to a power supply. Hard to explain… but basically they have dampers to keep excessive power use from causing a feedback to disrupt their power supply. It’s a very intricate piece of tech that I missed during my first few times reverse engineering the tech… I figured you did too.”

“Oh… I actually don’t know that much about the power source we used,” Connor admitted. “I knew it was nuclear but it was built by another team that was working in tandem with us. I’ll be sure to ask about that.”

“Do as you will, but be assured I have already notified the proper people about that,” the mechanical being mentioned.

“I have one last inquiry,” Bella interjected. “If there are Shards all throughout the cosmos… what makes these two so special?”

“To explain,” Leo denoted, “I must tell you about classes of Shards. There are two. Star Shards and Nova Shards. Star Shards are charged in a star for a number of years and discharged by solar flares or the like, with two subsets of Red and Blue, with the latter being more powerful. Until Nick and Judy’s power, Nova Shards were only green, having been created from the virulent storm of a supernova. However, those Shards only imbue what power they can while being cast into space.
This new Shard, being purple in hue by energy expenditure, was created from three stars going supernova in an artificial fashion, a vast majority of the energy being imploded upon the space where the dark matter was, thusly imbuing the power. It is the most powerful Shard ever created, not by any small margin, but by exponential value.”

“Does that mean they could explode?” the female canine asked in a slightly joking tone.

“The energy they hold is definitely that which could eradicate the whole system, as well as many beyond, if released in its raw form,” the robot replied. “But it is combined with dark matter, fused with their very existence. Best to say the power resides in an inert state, much like a battery, in an alternate pocket dimension.”

“That doesn’t really answer my question…” Essie, sharp as ever, less confidently inquired.

“Fine… Fine,” the armored fox answered. “I… can… ‘explode’, but it’s happened rarely and only affects things in a dozen feet or so.”

“It hasn’t happened recently,” the rabbit doe added easily, trying to add security to the explanation.

“Wait can Judy explode, too?” the wild dog barked in surprise.

“I uh… no idea?” the aforementioned bunny responded, tone unsure of the possibility. She did remember an episode at her parents’ farm that seemed near that level, but she didn’t want to bring that up.

“... hmmm… I would say that it would be hard to give you hugs now… but I still think it’s worth it,” Essie followed up with easily, getting over her implied trepidation quickly.

“Definitely worth it,” the red fox agreed. Judy groaned as the two seemed to find some new resonance to tease her with.

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The salvage job, while slightly interesting, continued without further incident after Rebound’s little escapade.

Even though they were delving into and taking apart alien ship remains, the group found the previous conversation the highlight of the trip, gaining more specific insight to the fight that Nick, Judy, and Leo were battling on their own before.

After dispersing the team, Leo having given them all watch-like devices that could track, locate, and communicate with them, everyone went home for the day to rest.

Nick and Judy parted ways at home, with the fox seeming well preoccupied with something that drove him to head to his Blade Storm repository. The bunny doe shook her head and smiled, figuring something in his brain clicked. She made a mental note to check on him in a few hours.

Until then, she found some reading material, switching between a relaxing book and some schematics for her suits. She liked trying to figure out how some of her suits’ functions worked. Especially so since she went in blind during her rescue of Nick with Gravitrix. The memory brought a sense of pride in her success of doing so, but also a bittersweet tinge at the thought of how she fell, faltered, and nearly failed while using it.

She wanted to be better and know better.
The time passed easily, going right into sunset outside and making Judy realize how long she’d been sitting and staring at the mess in front of her. Leo was kind enough to have schematics and such printed out, instead of having her stare at a bright screen to read them, resulting in a mess of papers on her desk.

Jarring the silence, and surprising the rabbit a bit, her phone began ringing, with the doe automatically picking it up, believing it was Essie, with a long overdue freakout she couldn’t have in the suit.

“Hey there,” she responded upon answering.

“Hey Judy!” a familiar tone rang across the phone line. She was shocked to hear a male, letting her brain catch up in its addled state.

“D-Dad?” the grey bunny stammered slightly. “How are you?”

“I’m great, Kitto. Just calling to let you know something,” Stu belted out cheerfully. “Your mom and I are making a trip out to Zootopia. You know? That time of year again.”

“Oh… OH! Right. I almost forgot,” Judy replied, smacking her forehead lightly and smiling.

The time of year he mentioned was more like a quarterly visit. Even before she moved to the city, her parents had to make a trip to Zootopia to meet and greet with the grocers they supplied. As the economy changed, so too did prices and such. Technology now afforded them far more ease to just email or something to negotiate or trade details on such things, but her parents liked the polite nature of an in mammal meeting and actually shaking paws instead of short and curt messages.

She couldn’t disagree or complain, as these semi-frequent trips meant some of her siblings, as well as herself when she got lucky, could be picked by lottery to tag along. It was how she got to see the city for the first time as a young kit and loved the grandiose scale of the city, even when it frightened her parents. ‘Big city, big problems’ they would say.

“I hope you get your fair share,” she told him.

“I’m certain of that,” he chirped happily. “We even got three new grocers in the city to talk to about contracts. So, I’m confident we’ll do good.”

There was a pause.

“We did, however, want to see you when we came to town,” her mother voiced over the line, clearly having taken the phone from her father. “We’re staying in a place in the Central District for a few nights and hoped to spend a little time with you. Rey is welcome to come with. Turns out Kale won our little lottery to come and really wants to see him again.”

“Kale?” Judy laughed. She remembered a little about their exchange, but she had the impression that he was rather annoyed with her boyfriend. “Well I’m let him know. No promises, but I feel like he’ll do his best to come.”

“That’s all we wanted to call for,” Bonnie remarked. “I would talk to you more but getting the kits ready is taking up our whole night. We’ll be in the area in the morning, but don’t worry about finding time for us until at least the next day. The whole group of us will be busy tomorrow with the negotiations and visitations.”

“Alright. Thank you for telling me. I’m sure we can make time. Love you, Mom.”
“Love you too, Judy,” her mother replied softly.

“Hey! Don’t hang up without letting me say it too!” her dad shouted from somewhere a ways from the phone. “Love you too, Bun. Say Hi to your boyfriend for us.”

“I will,” Judy mentioned, with both parties hanging up. She sighed in relief, not realizing she was holding a breath.

It wasn’t a problem that her parents called, but after the last visit, she still felt there was tension there in the form of a metaphorical trip mine if she wasn’t careful with her words. Not to mention, she has to keep her affiliation with Flux and being Phantom a secret, making mention of living with him something to avoid.

She stopped herself, knowing she was overthinking things. Regardless of her decision to live with him, they, nor anyone in particular, would know to make the leap in logic to believing either of them were armored heroes for the city.

Sighing once more, rolling her eyes at her own dramatism, Judy figured it was about time to check up whatever Nick was working on. Given the look on his face earlier, the doe surmised he had a moment of clarity or inspiration to tackle something with his suits.

Taking the short walk to his armory/workshop, she found the right door to where she last remembered his Blade Storm project being.

Sure enough, as the door slid open, he was inside, eagerly scurrying about with a crazed and mad look in his eye, like he had been up for three nights subsisting on extreme amounts of caffeine.

“Hi, Fluff,” he voiced without looking at her, reaching out a paw to point at a strange probe-like electrical device. “Would you give that to me, please?”

“Sure,” the grey rabbit doe mumbled, looking around and trying to make sense of the mess. Whatever the case, she grabbed the tool by its grip and let the fox tod take it gently from her waiting paw.

“Thank you very much,” he chirped in a sincere and cheerful tone.

“Mind if I ask what’s got you looking like you worked up?” Judy inquired, trying not to seem worried in tone, but her expression having a hard time keeping that sentiment. Thankfully, he wasn’t looking at her face.

“I was listening to the conversation earlier and got something in my head that seemed to click with my Blade Storm problem,” Nick explained. The doe perked up, glad to potentially see more of the project come into play.

“What was said that triggered it?” she asked simply.

“Honestly, I haven’t a clue. It began as a foggy thought from the whole conversation, then I tried to look at my problem from different perspectives,” he continued, the probe lighting up as it hovered over another piece of unrecognizable tech. It looked like a module for storage. “It’s like looking at fire and thinking about S’mores. The two aren’t exactly related, but they can be short leaps for the mind in the right context. I just started berating myself for trying to use the nanotech as both armor and constructor. I guess when I tried to pretend I was criticising my work from another angle, why would I make it act as a fluidic metal and hard armor. No sense whatsoever. So… I changed it.”

Tossing aside the probe, Nick stripped his shirt, attaching the module, of which there were many
Judy sucked in a breath as he pulled his shirt off, but was slightly disappointed at the result, even if the tech was intriguing.

The red fox finally looked over at her, brow arching up and smile creeping onto his muzzle. “Expecting another sight, Carrots?” he teased. The doe promptly blushed and turned her head to pout, ears flopping over her face as she crossed her paws across her chest.

“N-no…” she rebuked weakly, eyes flitting back.

“I mean… if you want…” the tod began, stepping towards her, “I could forgo showing this off and show you something else?”

“I uh… that’s…” the bunny stuttered, amethyst eyes locking onto his emerald ones before traveling lower and blushing. “...just show me what has you so excited.”

Nick began to snicker, voicing with a laugh, “Poor choice of words there, Fluff.”

Judy became embarrassed and indignant, huffing and choosing to stare with impatience until he got to his point.

“Alright. Alright. I gotcha,” he finally relented, the remnants of a chuckle doing him no favors. “I basically had to tweak the overall core programming of the nanotech, but I was able to correlate it so that… well best if I show you.”

Before she could react, Nick reached out and allowed the modules to open, fluidic nanotech spanning his form into a chrome-like layer. Like before, it looked malleable and with a sheen to it. Gripping a couple of ingots, they crumbled in his paws and were absorbed into the chrome mass.

Unlike before, plating and metal scales surfaced, interlocking over the nanotech, instead of with it.

From her examining gaze, it appeared that the fluidic tech was inhabiting the space between the plating and his fur, acting like a cushion and some sort of muscular network, like servos to move the suit.

“You made the tech build the suit like an actual exoskeleton over it,” she muttered to herself, giving it a closer, more thoughtful look.

“Yes!” the fox belted out, proud of himself. “The nanotech contracts only, instead of trying to imbue itself with the materials to create a pseudo suit of polymorphic integrity. I figured trying to meld a flexible element with a rigid material was stupid, once I actually thought about it. But this way, the suit is created like a shell, with Blade Storm mimicking everything from servos to scanners to bolt emitters underneath and changing the suit to match my needs… or yours.”

“Mine?” she questioned with a glance up to Nick’s softer smile.

He nodded, a paw reaching up to lift her chin. She smiled a bit, before nearly darting back in surprise.

A stream of the nanotech coursed from the armor, running under her chin and layering itself over her clothes and fur, quickly constructing a suit.

Her trust in him held her still, allowing a suit much the same as his to contract itself over her, with his
paw on more ingots and more fluidic metal coming from a small vat, supplying the material for her suit without diminishing his.

As his paw withdrew, the last of the suit formed and closed in plating over her eyes and ears, with his doing much the same.

“I can copy any design I’ve made thus far, as well as use the tech to scan and appropriate adaptable designs from foreign technology,” the red fox tod detailed.

To line that thought, his armor changed, the fluidic nanomachines reconstructing the paws with beefed up armor and repulsors, mimicking the Jackhammer suit. As Judy noticed this, he switched it up once more, with the armor changing into Ricochet, quickly formed discus units detaching and just as swiftly reforming into his suit.

He gestured to her, the doe letting her HUD respond to a neural command, then seeing a few selections pop up. Mentally focusing on it, the suit picked up on the intent, changing her suit from the basic form into Gravitrix, with the large orb constructing on the chest plating.

“Wow… this is… amazing,” the grey rabbit breathed out, recognizing just how significant it was that Blade Storm succeeded. Now she and he could change tactics in the field without having to wait for a saving grace from above. Not to mention, the armor could likely repair itself, if the construction was any indication of its ability to form what wasn’t there.

Without answering her complement, Nick changed the suit once more, the nanotech reforming the plating and tech into an unrecognizable design that seemed sleek, well formed, and almost devoid of any offensive capabilities.

“What is that?” she dared to ask.

“This… is finally the catalyst we needed to start the next step in our journey together,” he slowly and in a low voice remarked. “It’s our deep sea diving armor.” At that, he input a command, making her own suit adjust to reconstruct itself into a comparable design derivative of his, but adapted to her size and proportions.

Before she could ask the obvious questions, her display added in new functions. There was a depth meter, hull integrity functionality, and a life support display that showed the air stored in the suit and oxygen being filtered from the water. The air storage slowly rose, denoting the suit was preemptively storing air for immediate use.

“Oh my cod…” Judy rasped out, smiling in mild shock. “FINALLY!”

“Yep,” Nick replied with a chuckle, knowing she realized exactly what it meant. “I already told Leo. He wants me to continue testing and making sure it’s safe, but we should be able to make the trip in a few days. Time to find his ship.”

“Yes yes yes!” the doe yelped out, hopping and leaping around. More shouts and incoherent babbles of positivity left her maw for several minutes, the translation of her squeals and chirps being lost on the awkwardly smiling fox. He was glad. Glad it excited her so much and that he could provide that level of… crazed happiness.

Finally, she seemed to calm down, allowing the tod to continue, “You sure are excited.”

“Damn right!” the bunny exclaimed. “I’ve been waiting all my life to see a spaceship from beyond the stars! Now I get to see what seems to have been described as being as large as some sort of sci-fi battle cruiser that could decimate an entire city merely by landing on it. I’m soooooo excited to see it.
You think it looks like a saucer? A giant sphere? Oh… Maybe a squid like creature with prehensile manipulator arms?!”

Nick crossed his arms, face plating gone and smirking at his bunny.

“You are so adorkable. I love this,” he softly spoke about her.

Judy suddenly stopped and crossed her feet, toes overlapping as she blushed and twiddled her paws together. She wanted to be a bit infuriated at his look, but it was so full of endearing energy towards her, that she couldn’t get one word out to refute his sincere compliment.

“Thank you…” she murmured timidly.

“Geez… you’re going to break me, Fluff. One can only look so cute.”

The usual rising infuriation at being called ‘cute’ was second nature by now, but was quickly quashed by the expression on her fox’s face as he cupped a paw over his muzzle, blushing at her display.

Instead, she merely let her ears fall and whimpered a little.

“You’re like a strawberry shortcake,” Nick continued in thought.

The doe’s muzzle contorted in confusion slightly, feeling like this had a catch to it.

“How?” Judy asked him incredulously.

The devious smirk he wore did not assuage her reservations.

“Well… you’re small, fluffy, sweet…” he spoke, trailing off with a flick of his tongue over his snout.

She simply stood there, waiting for the penny to drop.

“…and maybe a little tart,” he finished.

“Hey!” the grey rabbit yelled out, tapping her foot angrily and crossing her arms. The tod simply looked at her, raising an eyebrow as her pouting lips began to quiver slightly. She then let the facade fall and smiled gently, sighing out reluctantly, “…You’re not wrong…”

“I love you for it though,” Nick comforted her.

Throwing a snarky grin his way, Judy shook her head and snapped back, “You better!”

Chapter End Notes

Finally got that bleh

I mean... just... I didn't want that awesome armor to work like a snap of the fingers, but I've been trying not to drag the snags in the design on for too long. XD
I hope everyone had a wonderful 4th of July (for those celebrating it) and Happy Canada Day (to those who celebrate it). Regardless of the problems we gripe about in any country, we should at least celebrate that the government that came about from our freedom at least follows democracy within reason to accommodate what we vote for.

I'm merely trying to survive the gaggle of kits near me trying to scare any passerby (animal or human) with an arsenal of pyrotechnics they probably shouldn't be allowed to possess. My girlfriend is about to lay down the law on them and I'm going to enjoy that sight with a soda and buttered popcorn.

Until next time, It's been a hustle, Sweethearts!
Looking up at the sky, the grey hue of the cloud cover seeming more calming than gloomy, Nick took a long draw of air in, ears twitching as the rolling thunder reached them.

It was strangely relaxing to let it permeate his senses, the smell of rain now flooding his nose as it began to fall in a sprinkling amount.

He found it odd that many mammals thought rain or grey skies were indicative of melancholy or a lack of pawsitivity whatsoever.

The red fox, however, loved the rain, especially when infused with the rumble of thunder. It reminded him of far off memories from his youth, when rain was a blessing for a farm, invigorating the soil and making a coming harvest easier when the plants were well watered. Back then, it was always a great thing to see rain. More so when it wasn’t cold out. He loved playing in it as a kit, as well as taking walks in it as an adult.

Such was the circumstance now, with his paws padding the street and droplets coming down.

He knew it was coming, but couldn’t experience the full breadth of it near his home in the Tundratown district. Downtown was an easy trip though, giving him an apt opportunity to walk in the rain without worrying over it being turned to sleet or just plain freezing by the climate wall.

Forgoing an umbrella for a water resistant hoodie, the tod pulled the hood over his head and ears, relishing in the cool and refreshing air as the rain picked up.

Judy was back at the house, training with the new suit. Being that he had quite the length of time working on it and expended tons of effort expended from various things recently, the fox felt he deserved a bit of down time.

The news she shared about her parents coming to the city was actually welcome. He looked forward
to the chance to see her parents again, despite the odd start they had. Not to mention the small kit that he had taken a shine to.

“Squirt,” he voiced to nothing in particular, grinning softly. That caramel brown bunny kit grew on him quickly, and apparently the feeling was mutual for the small buck, going by what his girlfriend told him.

Looking upwards, he saw a flash of lightning, not hitting the ground or even coming near it, but instead going upward. Nick raised his eyebrows in confusion.

While building his arc blade, the red tod got to learning some more in depth and intimate knowledge about conductivity and lightning. While lightning traveling upwards was part of the process of a current being completed in a lightning strike, it usually didn’t travel from a lower cloud to a higher one.

Narrowing his eyes, he noticed another arc of lightning strike… going upwards to a similar location.

He’s seen enough breach events to automatically know that the lightning strikes were gravitating towards that path.

Pulling out an earpiece, he began talking into it, knowing Leo always kept an ‘ear’ out for his transmissions, “Leo, I need to know what’s happening at the Gate. Now.”

“Understood.”

Turning around, the fox began to make his way back towards the house.

“Get the others up and running if anything happens,” he barked in a low voice, trying not to alarm any nearby mammals with his urgent tone. “I want to keep this contained if it’s another event…”

Nick gasped as a shorter mammal rounded a street corner and thumped into his abdomen. His paw whipped out to steady the tumbling creature, realizing it was a rabbit.

“Stu?” the red fox vented out in question. “I uh… wasn’t expecting you…”

“Oh Hi there, Rey! Good to see ya, Bud,” the older buck cheerily chirped. Looking around, both mammals found Bonnie and the kits that came with them coming around the corner to follow the elder Hopps.

There was a few older ones, in their teens likely, along with some of varied sizes that had to be around ten or so… including…

“Rey!” a certain caramel bunny buck shouted in joy as he tackled into one of Nick’s legs and hugging him.

“Wow… Judy wasn’t kitting,” the tod remarked in a whisper to himself. He liked the youngling, but didn’t even think his fleeting interaction left any impression on Kale. “H-hey Squirt.”

“Kale,” the small bunny corrected with a pout, his face betraying a smile as he seemed to not care too much.

“That’s what I said,” Nick automatically fired back with a chuckle.

“Whatcha doing out here?” Bonnie asked gently, keeping her younger kits corralled from straying too far from the group. “I mean… I know you live here, but the chances of running into you seem so
slim in such a large city."

“Just taking a stroll in the rain,” he told them honestly. “It’s refreshing…”

“I say the same thing,” the elder buck belted out. “Been hearing others around here complaining about it all day. I don’t rightly get it.”

“In a city full of temperature controlled buildings and easy access to the internet,” the fox began, “lots of mammals complain about even minor discomforts to that end. It’s almost annoying how easily some get annoyed.”

“That sounds awful,” Stu replied, laughing mildly. He then adopted a more thoughtful expression, asking, “We were actually just about to go get some food. Want to come with?”

“Actually… uh… I have to…” the taller red furred mammal started, looking around at the expectant faces. Stu and Bonnie seemed to be politely holding a smile regardless of his tepid response. Kale, however, gave him an expression of innocent eagerness. If he didn’t have nearly a dozen pairs of eyes on him, the fox might have rolled his eyes and groaned, instead sighing slowly and amending, “I would love to join you. Let me have one moment.”

Pulling out his phone, though only pretending to use it, he turned away and addressed the robotic being still on the line of his earpiece, “I’m going to be a short while. Alert me immediately if there’s a problem.”

“I heard. Should I tell Judy that her parents have detained you?” the android questioned evenly.

“Uh… yeah… best to mention it,” Nick answered, rubbing the back of his neck. “She might worry about her family being in the city during a potential Breach. Knowing I’m around might… ease her worry?”

“Sounds logical,” Leo concurred.

The tod sighed.

“However,” the android continued, much to the red fox’s annoyance, “Judy is far from logical in many cases. She either defies it or seems immune to its influence often. I promise nothing of her reactions to be in your favor.”

“Ugh… got it.”

“I can currently tell you that my equipment detects too much electrical from the cloud cover to properly read Gate fluctuations,” Leo detailed. “If it comforts you, breaches have all recorded at much higher energy levels that would override the disturbance. If it happened or would happen soon, a storm would not be able to hide it.”

Nick huffed slightly, grunting his assent and turning to re engage with the Hopps.

“So… whatcha hungry for?” he asked the lot.

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In the warehouse, Gus and Connor got together for a little breakdown of their suits. Leo felt it was necessary to equip them in a more specialized manner right away.

Essie had some semblance of her suit figured out, with it being a reactive rescue suit, full of gadgets
and gizmos to fulfill that end. Bella’s suit was indicative of her own personality, coalescing the data for strategizing.

However, the bear and wildebeest used suits that were basic heavy lifter models. Large and in charge but not equipped for a fight yet. The android was overseeing their familiarization, giving them pointers and such when needed, but allowing them free reign of the design and fabricator functions to modify their suits as desired.

The gnu was focused and sternly staring at the interactive display for his suit, manipulator arms taking his direction to modify and alter whatever he so chose.

The grizzly bear was enjoying the process, combing through functions and thinking of it like some sort of game. The protagonist has to alter their equipment to match their affinities and mission objectives.

“Be warned,” the robot’s voice came from overhead speakers. “We might have a potential concern with the Gate. Nick was reporting strange activity he witnessed from the area of cloud cover surrounding it.”

“Explain what you mean by ‘potential concern’,” Bella asked, entering the common area with Essie and standing next to Connor.

“Nick didn’t elaborate before being detained by non-hazardous circumstances, but my readings suggest some irregular electrical activity around the wormhole, drawing lightning strikes towards it in a strangely consistent manner,” the mechanical being told them.

“I take it that’s not supposed to happen?” the wild dog questioned aloofly.

“During inert states, the Gate reacts to nothing,” Leo detailed in short. “It can be scanned, but no natural forces are altered or affected. When active, it disturbs everything. This isn’t like the events of the past where my equipment picks up the disturbances easily. This is potentially a low level event that needs investigation.”

“Alright,” the deer doe spoke, stretching and heading for her armor station, “let’s get geared up and take a peek around.”

“I agree with her,” Essie supplied, dragging her sleepy self towards her own suit. “Loathe as I am to say it.”

Connor and Gus looked at one another, with the bear speaking first, “Why not wait? It could be nothing.” The gnu next to him nodded his own agreement, the two finalizing their choices and letting the fabricators do their work.

“I’m not about to sit here when something seems off, hoping NOT to hear some sort of alarm,” the doe chided the larger predator, who smiled awkwardly. “I’d rather be prudent than procrastinating.”

“I’m glad you think that,” the robotic voice came over the comms. “Luckily, your suit is well prepared. I took the liberty of fine tuning the scanning tech and adding in cloaking tech, as well as small support drones to aid you. Careful though, your power cores won’t sustain all of them for too long. As opposed to the armor Nick and Judy use, all of yours are dependent on efficient energy usage models. Keep track of your levels when weighing equipment usage.”

“Got it!” the female canine chirped, already in her armament and seeming far chipper than a minute ago out of armor. Clasped to the thighs of her armor were two energy pistols, much like the ones Staccato had, but modified to shoot burst bolts of E.M.P. to damage only electrical components. At a
high enough power level, the bolts could also stun living targets.

“Fine,” the wildebeest relented, “but we have to wait for our suits to finish being modified. We’ll catch up.” At that last line, his hoof patted the bear on the shoulder, to which Gus gave the females a curt nod of affirmation.

“Good,” Leo spoke evenly. “Judy is already aware now and gearing up, same as you. I’ve given you all coordinates to head to. I’ll make sure the others join you as soon as they are able.”

“Ohhh! We should have a call to arms phrase!” the wild dog exclaimed. “All super teams on TV have it.”

The bear and wildebeest looked at one another with blank expressions turning to Essie and telling her in a scary amount of synchronization, “No…”

Face turning into a puppy like pout, she whined, “Awww… you guys are no fun.”

Phantom was waiting on a rooftop, trying her best to scan around with both eyes and ears for anything out of the ordinary. Sensors weren’t picking up anything, though that meant little when the storm was throwing enough electrical discharge around to distort any readings.

Shroud and Rebound hopped up over the edge of the roof, both quickly joining the armored rabbit.

“The guys?” the rabbit asked.

“Indisposed until the fabricator is done,” the taller deer doe revealed. “Just us girls for now.”

Judy nodded, already knowing now that Nick was caught up with her family. She worried of course, for him and her family, but she couldn’t do much other than make sure there’s no threat to them.

“So… what do we do?” the armor clad canine asked innocently. “I feel like we’re trying to do the sci-fi equivalent of bird watching and waiting for something oddly specific to show up.”

“Yeah…” the grey doe relented, rubbing a paw to her shoulder. “Not exactly sure what we should be doing.”

“Mind if I take over then?” Bella interjected politely. The other females shook their head in the negative, showing they weren’t against it.

Pulling up some projected holo displays, Shroud began looking over a map of the city. She found the option to share the display, with a rendering overlapping their visors and projecting into the space between them. Much like augmented reality through a camera, one could only view it through their visors.

She pointed to a tall building and addressed Rebound, “You’ll take the higher ground. Your thrusters are better with controlled descents than powered ascents in case there’s trouble below. Keep an eye out and report what you see.” Essie nodded. Bella then pointed to a circle with highlighted points inside. “Phantom has better flight capability. You can go around this perimeter and take closer scans. All the previous landings were in this zone, excepting the one you guys redirected into the forest. If there is anything, it is most likely to be here.”

“Sounds like a plan,” the rabbit agreed, then smiling under her face plating. “Gotta say, Be… Shroud… You’re really good at this.”
“I’m no stranger to having to adapt in the field,” Bella remarked easily, her tone soft. “The tech is new… still a bit frustrating to work with, but that’s my problem. Not the tech’s. But… thank you.”

The rain began to pick up, with a thin mist forming on the roof.

“Let’s get going, then,” the wild dog goaded them with a lazy salute, leaping from the roof and using her thrusters to jump to the next one.

Shroud stayed where she was, small units disconnecting from her back and fanning out. Phantom grinned a bit, liking how well this seemed to be going, jumping from the roof as well and letting a boost from her thrusters push her a few stories higher in the span of a second or two.

The rain and foggy mist seemed to affect her flight pattern, but some time in the simulator gave her a semblance of ability to feel used to it. Thankfully there were no gale force winds. Otherwise, highly advanced tech or not, it would be tough to pilot herself with a sense of balance.

Passing by the building Essie was supposed to be climbing, she saw the canine sliding down the siding.

“Rebound?” she chuckled into her comms. “Having trouble getting up there?”

“No,” she remarked, tone somber enough to cause Judy to stop and hover in the air. “I saw something halfway up and… I don’t know.”

“You should have reported it as soon as you noticed,” Bella firmly spoke to her, voice trying to remain even though still giving off an air of chastisement.

“I… just saw a shimmer…,” Essie tried to say. “I didn’t want to cause problems if it was just me seeing things. It’s raining. I figure it was a puddle on a roof…”

“But?” the grey bunny prompted her to continue, knowing the canine female had to have had better reasoning to do what she did.

“It… was just odd. I couldn’t ignore it.”

A sign from Bella sounded over the line as she assented, “Fine. Just… try to get back up there quickly if it’s nothing.”

“Copy,” Essie confirmed, her voice being what Judy imagined it was on duty as a cop.

Seconds passed and neither of the two species different does said anything.

They finally heard a gasp from the female dog and were about to voice concerns when her stiff voice called out calmly but with a hint of urgency, “Get down here. We have a problem.”

Nick cautiously scarfed down his sandwich, a few of the kits in the group trying to get a look at his fangs as they dug into his meal. Thankfully, none of them appeared afraid, being mostly curious.

Being mindful of his company, the fox simply got a veggie option for a sandwich.

The whole group was at a nearby place he recommended, with plenty of choices for prey, as well as divided seating so one didn’t have to witness predator patrons chowing down on anything meat or meat substitute. It might seem a bit discriminating, but the tod knew it was simply a means of being polite, like a smoking and non-smoking section.
Kale sat next to him, at his own begging to his parents. They simply gave him apologetic smiles as he waved them off and welcomed the little one being attached.

Having already given the establishment prepayment for the bill, with excess for a tip, just in case he had to leave at the drop of a hat, the fox enjoyed the company for the moment.

“So, how’s our Jude been doing?” Stu inquired eagerly.

“She’s doing fantastic,” Nick replied back in comfort, seeing a broad smile grow on the older buck’s face. “You raised a daughter that makes me smile everyday. Don’t let her know that, though. I have a reputation of being a grump to uphold.”

The kits giggled, with Stu chuckling and leaning back, Bonnie rolling her eyes with a smile that seemed pleased at hearing as much of her grown up kit.

“I hear good things about you from her,” the elder doe told him, gesturing for him to pass a condiment for one of her kits. He graciously picked it up and obliged.

“I’m sure she complains just as much,” the red tod joked. “If the stuff I hear to my face is any indication, I’m sure she gives you an earful.”

Bonnie appeared confused and Stu looked cautiously optimistic.

Thankfully, Nick didn’t keep them waiting before clarifying, “I mean… with all my horrible puns she groans about, I can only imagine how it sounds from her to gripe about it.”

A few laughed, with others shaking heads and smiling. The elder paternal buck let out a “Ha!” of recognition, going into a spiel of some such moments with him telling similarly bad jokes.

A chirping tone sounded in his ear, letting him know Leo wanted to talk.

Excusing himself politely, he found a quieter place to talk near the restaurant’s entrance.

Rain poured outside, dripping down the windows and pooling in the streets.

“Alright, Leo,” he sighed. “Lay it on me.”

“Shroud, Rebound, and Phantom have deployed, taking up positions to investigate,” the android detailed. “The other two will follow, once their suits are out of the fabricators. They were doing some mods, per my request that they upgrade from the simplistic design we fitted them with initially.”

“Do I need to join them?” Nick questioned, slightly lamentful he would have to leave if the robot said yes.

“Be ready to, but currently I think…” Leo started before pausing.

“Leo?”

“One moment. Essie appears to be investigating something,” the mechanical being noted simply, letting the line stay silent as they waited.

The fox, however, was raking his eyes through the pouring rain. Something strange caught his eye.

On the other side of the street, there was something akin to an imprint…
...in a puddle…

The water wasn’t frozen and nor was the thing that made the imprint still there…

Nick’s eyes widened, pupils going to slits as they traveled upwards.

The rain wasn’t hitting the concrete of the sidewalk in that area, as if an object was in the way. Furthermore, something in the air was collecting said rain water, rolling over it like a clear umbrella.

There was something there.

Something that was moving.

Something that was breathing, as a heated fog permeated the air in front of it.

Something living…

...and it was cloaked.

“Leo, I have a…” he tried to call out, before the glass of the entrance exploded inwards, something with weight and force knocking the fox aside. His body impacted the wall, wood panels buckling and splintering from the sheer force.

Screams sounded instantly from various mammals of every shape and size. The Hopps were further back in the restaurant, making him at least be glad they weren’t caught up in this travesty directly.

He couldn’t technically see it, but from the movement of everything around it as it bumped against chairs, tables, and all sorts of items, the tod had to guess this thing was about the size of a tiger or buffalo.

A heavy huffing could be heard, like a predator sniffing out a trail.

The red fox realized it just in time to dive towards the destroyed front of the establishment before the area he was in became trampled.

“Leo! There’s something cloaked here!”

“Sending the team now,” it replied evenly. “Use your suit.”

“I need metal for it to infuse,” Nick barked, bolting around the front of the building and into an alleyway.

The snorting of a creature followed, with heavy steps bounding behind him.

Bolting to the side and seeing a very large lamppost, the tod dove for it and let the fluidic nanotech shoot out in a multitude of tendrils to interact with and absorb the metal, infusing it to his suit.

It was more than enough material as his suit appropriated the metals and formed his armor quickly.

Turning on heel, he faced the threat, turning on thermal imaging.

Something impacted his chest plating, tossing him a dozen yards before hitting a brick wall.

It didn’t show up on thermal.

“I need Shroud,” he yelped, leaping high with his thrusters to avoid the creature. He could try other
imaging methods, but not while being chased. He had to escape or put some distance between himself and the creature before trying to locate it. If he couldn’t, Bella’s suit could use a broad spectrum of means to scan the thing.

He was swatted from the air like a bug, with the tod barely seeing the structure next to him crumbling in places from what he could only guess was claws of a sort gripping to its surface.

After catching his breath from impacting the ground, he told the robot, hoping each modicum of info would help, “I don’t think it flies but it just crawled up a wall to get me.”

“Help is on the way,” Leo supplied.

A few minutes earlier….

“…We have a problem…” Essie had said, sounding almost somber.

Both mammals made it down to her in record time, seeing no shimmer but instead a structure of sorts.

It was metallic and black, long and egg shaped. One end of it was open, the inside full of frayed and cut wires, as if something inside went rampant to get out. Deep gashes could be seen in the non metal surfaces, likely a means to provide comfort to whatever was inside.

“Is this something you guys set up?” Bella asked, directing her query to Leo on the comms.

“I’m afraid not,” the being countered. “I’m still reading your scans but the preliminary results say this is a support pod. Whatever was inside likely filled this thing entirely with no room to move. There is enough tech here only for life support and propulsion. It also appears to have run dry on energy, the source of it being… gone.”

Judy got the message instantly, fear gripping her as she blurted out, “A Shard. It powered this thing? Where did it go?”

“I don’t…” the robot started, stopping like its voice was on pause. “Hurry to Nick’s position. It appears our quarry found him.”

“My family!” the small bunny doe cried out, taking off with stunning force.

Shroud and Rebound were close behind, following an indicator on their displays to find the fox.

“He’s drawing it away from others and initiating combat,” Leo told them. “You’ll be within range in ten seconds. Patching comms together.”

Suddenly, the whole group could hear the tod’s pained grunts and groans, with him naming off random things he noticed to give them info.

“We’re coming!” Phantom called out, descending on his known position and landing just in time to put up one of her barriers in a bubble, with it being impacted by something she couldn’t see.

“Nice timing, Fluff!” the armored fox wheezed, lifting himself up once more.

“Is my family alright?” she couldn’t help asking in a desperate tone.

“Good to know you’re worried about me too,” he jibed almost playfully.
“Please, Nick…” she whimpered in kind, with him dropping the jokes.

“They were out of the area of combat,” Nick said in a soft voice, trying to comfort her. “I noticed this was after me and made a run for it. They should be fine.”

Letting out a breath she didn’t know she was holding, Judy relaxed slightly, focusing on her barrier as it was assaulted multiple times with no effect yet.

Up on the roof overhead, the deer and wild dog saw the two within a barrier, trying to figure out what to do. Neither could just jump in, being that the foe wasn’t able to be seen.

Shroud let Leo adjust her sensor functions, trying to find a discrepancy to help them.

Rebound tapped an armored foot, itching to dive in and help.

“Wait…” Bella breathed, a lightbulb going off in her head. “Rebound, I need you to fire off a spread of your E.M.P. shots.”

“But they won’t hurt it,” Essie seethed between clenched teeth.

“They can, however, disrupt it’s cloaking,” the taller doe told her. “Leo. When she gets a hit, scan for anything… ANYTHING… that would give this thing away.”

“Understood.”

“Now!”

The armored canine pulled both pistols out and unleashed her fury, growling and snarling as she peppered the area around the bubble barrier Judy made.

When she finally hit something, Essie honed her aim in on the area, increasing her firepower. Multiple hits...

...and the cloak dispersing well enough to get a glimpse of the creature.

It had six legs and a lot of fitted plating. The head had gaps, likely to allow it’s eyes, nose, and mouth to use its sense freely. It had two forward facing eyes, much like any predator, with two enormous fangs protruding downward, looking like a sabertooth tiger. The ‘paws’ appeared to have spread out digits, looking more akin to a gecko or other wall crawling animal.

Before they could see much more, the technology enveloping it appeared to readjust, cloaking field coming back up and making them unable to see it again. Splashes in the street from puddles could be seen as it ran off, likely to reevaluate and gain the hunting advantage again.

“I got it,” the android told them. “There’s a low level frequency to their cloaking shield. I was able to lock on and give you the means to locate them. You can only see them on your visors, and only when looking at them. I had to tune each of your sensors to a high powered directional scan, much like sonar.”

“What in the blazes is it?” Flux huffed, catching his breath from the beating he received.

“Orix,” Leo mentioned simply. “No time to explain. It’s feral and a hunter. It will come back. Find it before it does more…”

A piercing scream drew all of their attention to the alleyway that Nick had come from.
“Go! Now!” Flux commanded.

A few minutes earlier…

Seeing the fox suddenly excuse himself with a strange look on his face, he couldn’t help but be curious.

Kale looked around, seeing his family enraptured with each other and, in some of the older one’s cases, their phones. Wanting to see what Rey was up to, he stealthily waited for the right moment and whispered his intention to “go to the bathroom” to his neighboring sibling.

It was doubtful they heard, being they were occupied talking to the sibling on their other side.

Dipping his ears down so as not to be spotted easily, his height allowed him to sneak towards where he thought he saw the tod go.

There was a terrible sound of ripping, splitting, and crashing, followed by screams and yells from mammals around him.

He covered his ears and saw the front of the restaurant looking like a car smashed through it.

Rey dove out from behind a partition, just as something Kale couldn’t see barreled through it and impacted the wall.

Keeping his gaze trained on the fox, he saw him bolt outside, turning down the street into the alley between the restaurant and building beside it. Breaking into a sprint for the side door that led there, he opened it to see a lamppost falling over and cowering behind the door as something rumbled past.

His heart hammered in his large ears, but he wanted to see what was happening. It took him a minute to catch his breath, hearing the frantic cries and wallowing complaints from others inside near him. Worried his family might be angry he was missing, the small buck snuck out the door, following the path of destruction to its source.

He barely peeked around the corner of the wall to see what was going on.

There they were. Flux and Phantom. Both were encased in a bubble of sorts and water flung oddly around them as something impacted the glowing shield, a resounding crackling sound of static hurting his sensitive hearing.

Opening his eyes, he saw something else happening, with bolts of energy raining down from above.

Eventually, he saw the thing that was causing the damage.

He couldn’t fathom such a thing being from Earth, with it looking so savage and alien.

Turning quickly, Kale ran back towards the door of the restaurant, realizing that it had no knob to grab. It was an emergency exit only.

A growl sounded behind him, with the small buck whipping around to be met with a misty snort and something sniffing him. The cloaking crackled around the thing’s head and revealed the intensely predatory eyes and fangs of the alien creature.

Kale screamed…
The cloaking reformed, but not before the creature cringed at the sound and skulked to the side, its tail snapping around and flinging the small caramel bunny into the side of a dumpster.

He squeaked in pain and opened his eyes slowly, head in substantial pain and the world around him fading as he heard the echoing screams of someone else crying out in anger… as well as more bolts firing away…..

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Nick and Judy arrived into the alleyway just in time to see Kale whiplashed into a dumpster, with the latter charging forward and screaming, “NOOOO!”

Her arms quickly became enveloped in bolt firing weapons, courtesy of the nanofluid. The fox quickly joined her, trying to fight their way past to check on the small buck’s condition. As much as seeing that pained him, seeing his girlfriend’s reaction only bolstered his need to remain as calm as possible, even when her emotional strife course across their link and ravaged his own psyche.

The cloaked Shard took advantage of her lapse in tact and struck her into the wall. The armor protected her well and she got right back up to charge in again.

Essie tried to find a shot, having to withhold due to the armored rabbit’s reckless charge. Bella cursed under her breath, realizing they needed something else.

Flux stepped back, inputting a command and awaiting the results. His suit morphed and reconstructed itself, with diodes and coils surfacing, mimicking a suit he hadn’t really used all that often yet.

The progression meter made it to 100 percent and blinked green, to which the fox charged his armor and let loose a cascading storm of electrical pulse waves.

He had used the specs for Shock Sage to try shorting out the cloaking field of the… Orix… as Leo called it.

It appeared to work for a moment, bringing down the field, though the creature still moved as if nothing was wrong, snapping and striking at Phantom.

She was too fazed and unbalanced, unable to properly fight a much larger foe in the confines of the alley.

“Incoming,” two familiar voices interjected.

The armored tod leapt forward and grabbed his bunny by the waist, using his thrusters to jet away.

The Shard snarled and followed, opening its maw to devour them…

A pair of armored paws intercepted the creature and used their own momentum to swing them around and down the street, where another armored mammal struck the Shard with an uppercut. A wave of kinetic energy knocked the foe upwards and back a bit.

The Shard recovered and looped its apparently prehensile tail around a light pole, pulling itself into an alternate direction and clinging to a nearby building wall.

Flux wanted to use his pulse wave again, but there were too many friendlies nearby. Since it wasn’t directional, he feared shorting out their suits. While this creature looked like it could move with it on, he wasn’t so sure his team could do the same if theirs went down for a few seconds at least.
The cloaking reformed itself, hiding the Shard once more. Breaker, having struck the blow that seemed to stun it, took a defensive stance with his bracers at the ready.

He’d equipped his suit with light armor and more powerful servos for speed and power, as well as giving the forearms kinetic shockwave bracers. Being a fist fighter, the gnu gave himself weapons to augment that. They could expend concussive blasts of energy with each punch. He also gave his suit a specific sensor upgrade that could scan for structural weaknesses and tailor the kinetic blasts to resonate with it.

The cloaked enemy tried to hit him, with Connor sidestepping and parrying the blow. He wasn’t used to fighting an invisible foe, per say, but he wasn’t new to fighting in nearly blinding circumstances. He’s had to fight when someone maced him, when he’s gotten tagged with dirt or sand, and even when someone got a lucky shot on his eye and he had to fight while it was still swelling shut.

Trusting his instincts, he was able to see the shimmer of water covering the creature, avoiding where he imagined it would go for a strike.

A second blow knocked him sideways, bringing him back to humility as he realized this experience didn’t mean he had the reflexes to match.

Essie charged in, honing in on the Shard and loosing as many bolts as she could quickly.

The Shard launched at her, the cloaking becoming disrupted enough to give everyone a position on it.

“Zerk! Now!” she shouted, initiating her jump jets and boosting away from the attack. Gus, fulling decked out in his newly remade armor, barrelled in from directly behind the canine as she removed herself from his charging line.

A sizable armored fist, reared back and wound up, was propelled forward by a thruster in the elbow of his suit.

The Shard’s jaw was dislocated with a sickening crunch as the only mammal on the team that could equal its size made a connecting hit. His other paw swung upwards to continue the onslaught, the still airborne creature twisting in midair.

Finally, he brought his knee up to impact the side of its head, tossing the thing a few yards away in a heap.

Judy was heaving and panting inside her suit, nearing hysterics and with Nick unsure what to do for her.

His logical side took over and remembered this was a Shard. A broken jaw and other such debilitating injuries would stop it only for so long.

Sure enough, blue energy enveloped the Shard, finally denoting its overall rank on the power scale, and healing it in seconds.

“They need your help,” the android told both fox and bunny.

“I don’t… I…” the armored rabbit mumbled.

“Then Shift,” the fox told softly told her. “I’ll take care of things, but I still need you… please.”
With her eyes lowering to the ground, she didn’t even offer a word or nod as her body simply bled away, purple tendrils of energy that was once her body fusing into him. Her own armor and nanofluid merged with his, bolstering his suit further.

The Shard snarled and got back up, with Bearzerker and Breaker trying to draw his ire, allowing Rebound to try doing some stun damage.

Flux bounded forwards, feeling the tempest of emotions that pervaded his partner’s essence fueling him with an almost overwhelming energy. Her anger… Her shock… Her sadness… Her sense of protection…

He felt some of that himself, but her emotional dissent was so much greater.

Thinking about his approach, he knew trying to kill the thing was out of the question for now, choosing instead to restrain.

His armor reconstructed itself, forearms beefing up slightly with cable shooters.

He might have gone with net launchers, but the Shard was far too large and mobile to get a good shot on and actually keep it down.

“Bear. Breaker. Keep him down for a moment. Rebound, stun his face,” Flux commanded in a softer tone than he wanted to. He felt a bit raw and shocked himself from what just happened, but trying to stay in the game. All of them acknowledge nonetheless, keeping the thing from moving too much and the canine female giving it a good jolt.

Using his thrusters, he jumped and hovered above it, firing cable anchors all around the Shard. The first shot would start the line, with the second anchoring the line over a concerned target. Nearly two dozen such lines later, and Flux watched as their foe became less mobile.

The armored red fox landed and fell backwards, clutching his head.

“Don’t quit yet, Flux,” Connor chided him. “We still have to…”

“Look out!” Bella’s voice cried over the comms.

The tail on the Shard whipped out from under the cables and impacted the gnu. He was tossed into the air, with Gus in the line of fire. The bear was thankfully reactive enough and haphazardly caught his teammate, being pushed back a foot or two by the sheer force.

Cables snapped with a creaking metallic twang, allowing the Shard to get back up and roar loudly.

Though Judy had gone eerily silent in their connection, Nick could still feel the emotional torrent from her. What came next confused him slightly. Her feelings and the intensity of them, having been like a slow expanding explosion, suddenly became… the fox couldn’t comprehend it precisely. It was like the explosion was still happening, getting stronger and more powerful, but it was turned into a more controlled one. Almost directional.

His suit was glowing a purple hue all over, power overwhelming him. It was like the few times he was wired on caffeine times a few dozen times. If he didn’t work this energy out, he felt he might explode.

“Take… Him… DOWN…” the doe’s voice echoed inside his head, sounding both lividly angry… and tearfully strained.
Feeling the resonance between them, as the fox found himself reflecting on what he saw, instead of avoiding it, he found his own emotions began to mimic Judy’s.

The armored bear and wildebeest were back at it, using their collective weight to shoulder charge into the Shard from the side and fling him aside.

Flux pulled upon his speed and zoomed forward enough to create a whip crack from the dense, rain infused air. His clenched paw arched up, impacting the creature’s chest and tossing it several yards into the sky.

He then jumped to its ragdoll form and twisted in the air to gain the most amount of momentum he could, delivering a powerful kick to the Shard’s body that caused a concussive blast to ring out and create a bubble devoid of moisture.

All eyes widened as the Shard suddenly wasn’t there anymore.

Even Nick was so stunned that he forgot about landing and collapsed to the ground, aided by Rebound in getting up again.

“Where did it go?!“ Shroud called out in a panic. “I don’t know where it went. Leo?“

“I don’t believe it,” the robotic entity mentioned.

Until there was a proper reply, Rebound kept watch over Flux, with Bearzerker and Breaker pressing their backs together, expecting reprisal from the once more invisible foe.

“Leo…” Nick growled in a deadly tone, wanting an explanation.

Not waiting for anything to be explained, he felt Judy’s panic rise again, her form coalescing back into a physical body, armor reconstructing around her.

Once whole again, she took off towards the alley murmuring fearful, ‘No’s.

“We’re clear,” Leo told them all. “I’ll explain later. Tend to Judy.”

The red fox waited no further and broke into a dead sprint after her.

It wasn’t a far distance, being that the entire battle seemed restricted to a single street. It certainly helped to have a whole team able to keep an enemy corralled into a singular confined venue for confrontation.

Reaching the dumpster, Nick clutched his chest as a renewed wave of negative emotions flowed into him from Judy.

Having had her head armor recede, the doe was clutching her little brother to her chest, unable to form words as she cried, mumbled pleading and apologies to no one in particular.

With his visor automatically displaying vital signs and bringing up a laundry list of issues from the scan that ultimately ended in the diagnosis: Fatal, the tod could see why she removed her face plating.

There was frantic screaming from inside the restaurant, with the door opening as Bonnie popped her head out, calling for Kale.

The entire team went mournfully silent as the mother went silent, a light in her eyes going dark.
Judy clutched him tighter to her chest, the older doe seeing her armor and company, recognition settling in.

“Oh no… no no no no,” she began, her lips trembling as she closed in and fell to her knees next to her kits.

“M-mom… I… this isn’t… I’m sorry,” she voiced weakly.

She wanted to give in to her worry, her panic, her maternal instinct that said ‘Get him to a hospital’, but the look on her daughter’s face said it all.

There was no use.

Grabbing her small son’s paw in her own trembling one, she saw his faded blue eyes hazily lock onto hers, breathing shallow and mind far off. Whether he wouldn’t speak or simply couldn’t, he simply did not, with a last gasp being the only thing the two heard before being broken into a mess of tears, the bunnies cradling the kit.

Behind them, Nick was frozen.

This was his fault.

This was his fault.

It was because he was here, with her family, with her brother, drawing the attention of something that wanted to hunt him.

Here he was again, trying to connect with others and become attached. He gets focused on for what he is, with many speculations… and then because of that attention… someone else gets caught up as collateral damage. While it didn’t cause his mother’s demise, he always blamed himself for her inability to have a more quality life.

Now… who he was didn’t only get someone killed, but hurt the person he had come to love the most.

Tears began to fall in a steady stream, armored paw clutching uselessly to his muzzle as he fell back on his rear and repeated the same thing in his head.

*This is all my fault.*

Chapter End Notes

Just curious... should I be running for my life or... are we good?

(Narrowly misses being hit by a harpoon)

What the!?! Ok. First question... Who threw that? Second... what prompted that weapon choice? Gotta say, Nice pick.

(Another harpoon)
Hey! I like my blood stuff staying inside me.

Anywho... Yeah... Not much to say.

Next release is soon... trust me.

Until next time, It's been a hustle, Sweethearts.
Two chapters in one day! Am I MAD!?

The answer is yes... yes i am. Not exactly for that reason... but tons of them. If you want to accuse me of it, I'm probably guilty of being mad as a hatter for it.

Anywho... Did all of you really think I would leave things like that and NOT give you follow up? (All paws are raised)

Wow... way to have faith in me. -.-

Lol. Kitting. But I'll let you get to it and save the rest for later. I would mention a strange snack... but I'm still working on the one I mentioned before. Mmmm.

One last thing. I've done a good friend of mine slightly wrong when I was pretty sure I mentioned it before, but looking around has made it clear that I missed this.

The OC Gus Grizzmund is not of my creation. He is a Grizzly bear OC created by my friend Gusthebear. He has given me gracious leeway to use his character in this story. Before one asks, "Did he ask for the OC to be included?" Nupe. I requested it of him. His OC matched a few things I wanted and I'm happy with my friend allowing me to use his OC.

Okie. All done. XD

See the end of the chapter for more notes

This is all my fault.

I'm a despicable mammal, Nick internally told himself. I've caused so much strife and pain simply by being there. Why does WHAT I am get people hurt? I never wanted this. I didn’t want to be this! The fox had his comm muted from his end, unable to keep in the sobs that wreaked havoc on him and tore him apart from the inside.

He couldn’t even look at Judy properly, feeling that there was no way she would forgive him.

Suddenly, some part of him gave him a mental headcheck, shouting within his own consciousness, This isn’t about YOU! Self pity won’t get you anywhere and your depreciation is just useless.

“I… what do I do?” he remarked to no one in particular.

Seeing the sight before him and staring at his own paws, they clenched as he tried to think.

His visor still showed that Kale was still alive, but nearly gone.

Nothing came to mind. Nothing he could do and nothing he could even think to try.

Looking over at the power core on Rebound’s back, Nick began to wonder if thinking was the
Turning his comms back on and retracting his head armor, he stepped next to Bonnie, resting an armored paw on her shoulder.

She quivered and turned, eyes blowing wide upon seeing him.

“I’m so sorry, Mrs. Hopps…” the tear ridden fox barely spoke, his paw armor rescinding to reveal his pads. “I never wanted to put any of your family in danger.”

Grabbing Judy’s paw, her armor doing the same to allow them to hold one another, she greeted expression with a pained grimace, tears renewing as she saw his face.

He smiled meekly, bringing both their paws down to rest on the little bunny buck’s chest.

“Wh-what are you doing, Nick?” the doe asked in a wavering tone.

“Nick?” came the justly confused tone of a mourning mother rabbit. “I thought… Rey?”

The fox tod didn’t reply, simply looking down at the small rabbit in his partner’s arms and saying, “I can funnel energy into the cores to fuel these suits… and I know it’s not the same… but something in me says I can do something. Just focus on me and let it out.”

The grey doe in her armor might have thought he meant her tears and emotions, but she saw his look. It was both remorseful… yet… hopeful?

Something in her told her to trust his instinct, vague as it may be. She’d helped him fuel the cores a few times, tapping into that feeling and venting energy as he did so as well.

From the two, a crackling surge of purple hued energy flowed from them and straight into Kale.

It didn’t appear to do much, with Nick grimacing and pouring more into the effort. Judy saw him do as much and doubled down herself.

Bonnie had no way to comprehend what was going on. She wanted to wail, to scream, to call out for her husband inside, but she remained shocked into silence.

Waves of energy emanated from them, creating a small whirlwind that seemed to affect the air and make random items in the alley float.

The other Volunteers stepped back in mild worry, not understanding what was happening. The only two that appeared calm were Nick and Judy, though only because they were so focused on a specific goal.

The younger grey rabbit had little actual idea what her partner wanted to do, but she would give it all she had if it meant trying to undo what happened, however the fox planned it.

The red fox, however, really only had an inkling what he hoped against all astronomical odds to achieve. Initially, he only wished to enact some sort of pseudo regeneration in the little buck.

Unfortunately, that was far from being successful, with a distraught Nick doing the only thing he could, which was keep trying.

His will and his hope, aligned with Judy’s own, was simply to give this bunny the life he so well deserved. He should be able to grow up, pursue his dreams, make his spaceships, possibly fall in love and start a family of his own.
The armored fox felt he had been the one at the most fault for taking that away from him.

He WOULD make it right.

The energy pouring out of him began to reach a peak, with both his eyes and her own glowing a brilliant amethyst, armor accents brimming with the same color and intensity.

“Nick…” came his girlfriend’s soft voice.

He looked up, forlorn and beginning to lose hope his endeavor would do anything.

“You can stop,” she told him with a broken tone.

Biting his lip until it bled, he cried out, “I can’t… I can’t let him pay for my mistakes… Never again.”

Her face turned into a remorseful shadow, turning into one of understanding.

Before she could reply to him, a blast of light stunned them both and cut short the process they were heavily investing in. They had withdrawn their paws, a burning tingling sensation causing them to cradle said paws, chest heaving from pants.

Looking to Kale, they noticed nothing seemed to be happening, with Judy’s face contorting in renewed despair upon having her hopes crushed.

Nick felt even worse now, having tried something to help, but ultimately bringing himself and his love further down.

He dipped his head forward, paws clutching his ears and pulling back as he let out pained whines.

Turning away, the fox tod got up to try breathing.

“Uh… guys?” Essie got their attention, both looking at her before she pointed to the little buck. “Is that… what you wanted to happen?”

Unable to breathe, everyone locked their gazes on Kale. It was almost imperceptible at first, but tendrils of energy arched over his body, wounds beginning to pull together and heal. The speed picked up as it went along, wounds and all going to a state that seemed as if they never happened.

Once the work was done, they looked him over, realizing he still wasn’t breathing.

As Judy leaned in to start CPR, the bunny buck gasped and thrashed around, letting out whimpers and cries of panic.

Frightened eyes looked around, both Bonnie and Judy ecstatic that he was alright. Nick, though, was seeing something else and wondering something.

“I’ve picked up another Shard signature,” Leo spoke into his ear piece.

The whole team panicked, looking around for the one they supposedly just defeated.

“No, that one is gone,” the robot further told them. “I mean in front of you. Right now.”

“You mean…” the armored bunny started.

“Yes… You two have somehow just made him into a Shard,” Leo confirmed.
Supplementing the fox tod’s suspicions, Kale’s previously faded blue eyes now shone an intense blue, his body now thrumming with a foreign energy.

“Alright, Leo,” Connor piped up. “Can you please explain?”

“Which piece of data do I need to explain?” came the simple request.

“All of it,” Bella cut him off at the end. “Where is the other Shard? What was that thing in the first place? And what in the blazes is happening?”

The team was a little shocked. The deer doe had rarely lost her cool thus far, with this being the furthest break from her usually calm demeanor, going straight into unchecked rage and frustration.

“In order of your questions,” the mechanical being began to detail, “the Shard was pulverized on an atomic level. It was something called an Orix. Think of it like a tracking hunter animal with an almost spider like ability to climb up sheer walls. I surmise the tech encasing it amplified the tracking instinct to hone in on Shards, which is how it found Nick. As for the last question, I have no data to rely upon besides what just happened. For all intents and purposes, what they just did should not be possible, but the result is clear. My equipment and yours now read that Judy is now holding what appears to be a brand new Shard.”

“Do you know how it happened?” the gnu asked, almost sounding eager.

“Connor…” Bella warned.

“Unclear,” Leo answered the previous inquiry. “I have no preset of data to draw upon, therefore, I can only rely on conjecture.”

“How did I… We… supposedly pulverize a Shard?” Nick questioned, looking down at his paw. “I just felt a rising energy that seemed to burst out.”

“That is actually something I have data on,” the entity remarked in answer. “It’s something called ‘Kinetic Shunt’, of which there has only been one recorded case in a Red Shard. I’ll explain later. For now, you have been lingering too long. Best to get a clean up crew to the scene and return the youngling to the rest of his family, though I would like to inspect him at a later date.”

“Oh uh…” Judy stuttered, helping lift Kale into his mother's arms, of which Bonnie was surprisingly silent.

As she wordlessly began to take her newly resurrected kit towards the end of the alley, having to go back into the smashed entrance to rejoin her husband and other kits, her daughter ditched the suit and grabbed her arm, eyes pleading.

“Please…. Don’t tell them,” she begged, voice cracking. The younger doe might have explained her reasons, her fears, and her worries, but she knew none of them would make any more of an argument, seeing as her mother appeared in a thoughtful trance of all the same reasons.

Silently, she nodded and began to trudge with heavy feet towards her goal, with Kale beginning to ask questions, barely murmuring them as he began to get sleepy in her arms.

Letting her armor surround her body again, Judy turned to Nick, saying in an exhausted manner, “Should we… just go home?”

“Yes… all of you do what you need to,” the red tod told them. “I have to go back inside. I’m going to make sure you’re family is ok, alright?”
The doe turned her head to the side, nodding and sighing, happy that things seemed to turn out well, but now feeling empty from the emotional exhaustion.

“Is he… is he really gonna be fine?”

“Yes,” Nick simply spoke, confidence filling that single word to her as he embraced her and let her walk away, turning towards the restaurant, his team dispersing.

His nanofluid began to find its way beneath his clothes once more, the armor plating falling away, having been eaten into scraps, so it couldn’t be recognized as armor.

Entering the building, most of the mammals appeared to have left in the bustle. The Hopps remained though, likely unsure where another safe area might have been in an unfamiliar city and choosing to remain indoors.

Smart, he thought.

Stu and Bonnie, along with a few of the older siblings, were fawning and doting over Kale, the buck looking too tired to respond to the concerns and chastisement thrown his way. His mother wouldn’t stop stroking his ears, letting him fall asleep on her shoulder.

The group appeared surprised and relieved to see him, with the elder doe giving him a blank look.

It killed him that he couldn’t read her in this moment. He felt this rising need and concern with knowing if he should be awaiting judgement… or potentially receiving some level of forgiveness, not that he felt he deserved it.

“Glad to see you made it back alright, Rey,” Stu proclaimed with a quivering voice. “Never actually been in the city during a Drone attack, if that’s what that was. All the noises outside and those armored mammals make it seem as much.”

“Yeah, it was a strange one,” Nick agreed. “I didn’t even see whatever they were fighting. But uh… yeah! I’m good. Sorry if I worried ya. I kinda got pushed out of the place with part of the panicking crowd.”

“No worries then, Bud,” the elder buck chirped. “We thought something similar happened to our little Kale here, but looks like he wandered off right before it started. Good thing Bonnie found him, right Bun?”

“Huh? Oh… yes. Of course, dear,” his wife responded half-heartedly, quickly going back to cooing into her sleeping kit’s ears and stroking his head like he was a toddler. Meeting the fox’s eyes with more than the blank expression, she finally gave him a warm smile that spoke volumes to Nick… and releasing some stranglehold on his heart.

“That’s great!” he fired back, smile turning down a bit. “Listen… I have to go for now, but…” the fox paused to find a piece of paper and pull out a pen, “here’s my phone number and address. If you need to drop by, please don’t hesitate to ask.”

On the last mention, he gave Bonnie a look, with her nodding in understanding and slight concern for her sleeping kit.

He knew that Kale needed to be examined and the mother needed to know her little buck would be alright after everything that happened.

“You got it, Bud,” Stu replied kindly, unaware of anything that transpired.
Everyone was at the warehouse, with both Nick and Judy there as well.

The quiet was almost something that seemed mandatory at that point, with no one wanting to speak first.

Leo seemed to take a rare hint, keeping silent as well and offering food and drink to all. Most took it out of politeness, but let it remain untouched.

“That was a travesty…” Essie mumbled, finally shattering the lack of sound with her voice.

“Yeah…” Gus agreed in a low and solemn tone.

The other two nodded, with Judy unable to do more than stare at her paws.

Nick, however, had time to think, to wonder, and to come to a conclusion considering what he knew would be the exact issue now. His new team, on their first mission, believed themselves a failure already.

“I want to clarify one thing right now,” the fox stated, seeing the others take on expressions of shame and awaiting chastisement. “None of this… was your fault. What happened sucked, no doubt. However, all of you performed exceptionally well. I could go into a big speech about it… but I know we’re all too tired. Bottom line though… is that Judy and I would have been fighting that thing all day… with far more damage. There is no question of that. So… thank you.”

The wild dog seemed to be the first to brighten up at that, then grimacing as she rubbed her neck awkwardly.

“Um… I’m glad you think so… but uh… can I ask a favor?” she entreated.

“What is it you require?” the android countered in the usual tone.

“I… live alone… and today’s been the kind of day that makes me wish I had some company… do you think…?”

“You wish to stay here?” the mechanical being finished for her. The canine nodded. “Of course. This location was outfitted for all needs you might require, including bedding and medical facilities. In fact, I recently cleaned everything for just such a potentiality. Would anyone else wish to join her?”

With very little hesitation, even if the paws/hooves went up slowly, the whole group was almost unanimous in their vote to stick around. Even Nick voted with them.

The small bunny doe, however, still appeared distant.

“Judy…” the fox cooed softly to her. “You still in there?”

“Y-yeah… Just… a little… uhm… raw?” she replied in a shaky tone. “I nearly lost a family member today, and I don’t know what to think. I’m not that horribly close with every single sibling I have, so it’s not like I wouldn’t feel anything… but I guess I’m a little numb and feeling bad because I thought this would have hit me harder…”

“So… you’re sad over the fact you don’t think you’re sad enough about having almost lost a sibling you don’t know as well as those you’re closer to?” the wild dog clarified with crossed paws, offering
a kind smile.

The bunny nodded.

“I think you’re acting exactly as one would expect,” her friend mentioned, laying a paw on her shoulder. “Stop trying to figure out if you’re a terrible person for reasons you can’t control… and seize the second chance to know your sibling more.”

“That might be relatively easy in the coming days,” Leo remarked. All heads except the fox tod’s turned to meet the robot. Seeing the expressions of curiosity, the android saw fit to continue, “Kale Hopps is now a Shard, no matter our questions to figure out how it’s possible, the result is clear. We must now take responsibility to help him with his new state of being. Suffice it to say that chances are high that his mother will be coming to us for answers, as well as potential care to keep her son’s safety and well being.”

“You aren’t suggesting we’re bringing a young kit into this?” Connor spoke, voice filled with a sincere concern, along with a regretful question to be asked.

Nick was the one to respond to the gnu, standing to address him directly, “I don’t plan on that, if I can help it, but he’s infused with something that took me almost a hundred years to come to grips with, and I had no support system. I’m not going to endanger him myself, but as a Shard now… he’ll need guidance. I… We… can give him that, if he and his mother wish it.”

The wildebeest seemed to accept that, nodded curtly and leaning back.

“That reminds me,” Bella spoke up. “I heard that thing about a kinetic shot or whatever. What was it and how did it ‘pulverize’ that thing?”

The whole room perked up in curious expectation of an explanation, with Leo promptly supplying one, “Kinetic Shunt, actually. It’s such a rare ability that only one recorded instance is known. A Red Shard. Although, little information could be gleamed from it.”

“Why is that…?” the fox tentatively asked.

“Through whatever precursor that set off the usage of it, the Shard expired shortly after using it, having created a massive crater in their planet,” came the solemn and enlightening information. “This ability takes Shard energy and turns it into potential energy, amplifying any kinetic strike, like a punch or kick, with an exponentially multiplicative result. For comparison, imagine striking with the same force on a single target in two instances. One strike is your force and momentum alone. The other, with Kinetic Shunt, translates your Shard energy to make that strike simulate a kinetic release that could be like striking as if you were something much larger and faster.”

“So… it died from using it?” the wildebeest questioned in a gruff tone.

“Not quite,” the android refuted politely. “The energy expenditure equalled what the Red Shard had left. Its ability was rare, demanding, but belonged to an unfortunately insufficient host. So, it died from having no energy left afterward.”

“I still haven’t heard how that could do what it did to that Shard…” the deer doe told them all, trying not to sound impolite in her insistence, though a sliver of annoyance did break through her tone. “Wouldn’t overwhelming force have simply pushed the other Shard, or likely put a hole in its body like a bullet?”

“Viable ideas, but the kinetic energy released from Nick’s fist into the Orix was so great, that it coursed through its body like a concussive wave and deconstructed all matter contained within. The
result was as you saw, with its entire body becoming annihilated on a molecular level. In that moment, that Shard expired on my sensors and wasn’t regenerating. I have no answer yet as to why.”

An uncomfortable silence ensued, the team digesting that knowledge in their own heads. One mammal had had enough of the somber attitude, getting up to make a change….

“You and me get to bunk together tonight!” Essie called to her friend, grabbing Judy by the wrists and tugging her away with squeaked complaints. “Nuh uh. You need a distraction… and I’m a very annoying one. We’ll play mindless games and watch trash tv while having Leo get us drinks.”

“As you will,” the aforementioned android told her in kind. “Alcoholic or no on the drinks?”

“All of the alcohol!” the canine exclaimed happily.

Dually so, the grey doe told Leo, “No alcohol.”

As the two exchanged looks, with Judy finally cracking a smile, the mechanical entity took stock and remarked, “I shall bring a healthy assortment for you to choose from.”

Following the robot as it walked away, the red fox tod inquired with a small amount of humor to his tone, “You’re not really gonna let them get drunk… are you?”

Leo stopped and faced him, appearing to be processing an answer before speaking, “I see no reason to subvert that endeavor. In my experience and research, it appears the best course of action after such circumstances is too allow the rare unhealthy indulgence in something that comforts and distracts. Regardless of the non-lethal poisonous chemicals they ingest, Essie’s company may well do Judy much good. Far be it for me to diminish that… for now.”

The fox tod couldn’t help but chuckle, waving the android off to continue its task.

Turning and sighing to himself, he realized he was probably the odd mammal out, with Gus having somehow stealthily slipped into his prepared quarters, as well as Bella and Conner likely going to remain each other’s sole company.

To his surprise, a dainty hoof settled on his shoulder, the red fox turning to see the deer doe giving him a kind smile.

“You look like you need your own company,” she denoted. “Wanna join Connor and I? We’re going to just take a peek at some of the suit options. I wouldn’t mind someone with knowledge of the tech to help us out.”

Nick grinned under her heart warming gaze. He knew exactly what she was trying to do… but that wouldn’t stop him from happily accepting the offer.

“Please,” he agreed. “I would welcome that.”

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Back in their hotel room, after having his parents give him quite the earful of complaints and worries about him going missing, as well as his mother’s doting concerns when the two were alone over having nearly lost him, Kale finally was able to find an inkling of rest.

He was so tired.
From everything he was too out of it to respond to, but still witnessed, the little buck apparently should have died, being saved by Flux and Phantom, who were his sister Judy and Rey… though he heard the name Nick being used towards the fox. Maybe it was a middle name, called out like when his parents were super mad at him.

Stumbling into the room before any of his other siblings, being that they all had to share a bedroom in a suite that his parents got for the trip, Kale found the bed and flopped onto it, ears and all.

He crawled sleepily over to the pillows at the head, finding a lump beneath him now.

With a lazy paw, he found it and grasped it, instantly realizing it was one of his siblings’ phones.

Barely upon knowing that, however, his head began to flash images and information, like recalling something for a test. He dropped the phone and scrambled back off the bed, chest heaving from panicked breaths and heart hammering in his long ears.

Taking a moment to calm down, the bunny buck found that, while thinking about that phone, he now seemed to be able to recall and understand everything technologically relevant to its design.

How the battery stored power. How the display translated data from the memory core into colors for every pixel. How it could transmit wireless signals with such ease.

His brain now felt wired, with the strange rush of information boosting his body to wakefulness…

...for all of five seconds.

Once the rush and head trip ended, he settled back into being very sleepy and achingly tired.

Not even bothering to change into pajamas, the small rabbit just wrapped a blanket over his body and tucked himself against a pillow, choosing to care about any new issues when he woke up.

Eyelids slowly closed, the vibrant blue of his irises gleaming with a new energy before they were hidden from sight.

Chapter End Notes

I would ask if you guys might forgive me...

But I have a feeling I'll be checking my food and drink for poison, as well as pulling various sharp objects from my body for weeks to come. XD

I had more reasons than just to do what most people might glean as the most obvious plot point here. I promise.

Like... big question I haven't even had anyone ask yet that I'll have sit in your heads...

"How did that Shard get there without alerting them like all previous Breaches?"

Alrighty then, now I'm going to recover from some wounds of thrown pointy objects at my bleedy parts and collapse into a mini coma in pieces.

Until next time, It's been a hustle, Sweethearts.
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