A Better Place

by Ytodd

Summary

Bellwether's plot has failed, but does it mean that everything will be fine? No, no it doesn't. Every mammal has problems to overcome, demons to face... If only those personal struggles were the only ones our characters were pitted against...

This fic has also been posted on fanfiction.net.

English not being my first language, I apologize in advance for the mistakes/off-wording you will find in my work.

I'm open to critics and suggestions, and it's in fact the reason why I publish my work.
"You're dead, red pelt."

_No shit._

Thought Nick while he crawled to get the bottom of his body out of the icy water at the foot of the ice wall. At this rate, he knew he would get a cold before the end of the afternoon. It was the third time he tried to get past it, along with three other comrades. He shook himself to get rid of the water that drenched his fur.

_I'm giving up for today. I almost got above it, next week will be the one._

It clearly was the one thing that gave him trouble. Social studies and criminology were a walk in the park. He could have written the books himself. Law was easy for him too, you don't get to become a good hustler if you can't learn it and how to get around it. He knew he had a good memory and kind of impressed himself about how he could learn this fast and remember it all. Then again, to be a good liar, he had to have a good memory to keep track of the layers of fabricated reality he wrapped himself into during his previous career.

The physical side of the job was another matter however. His strength was rather... Lacking. He worked as hard as the other aspiring officers, if not more, but as a fox, his little size would remain a limitation. At least he had good stamina. Avoiding and running for danger were a fox's specialty, especially if said fox was a con-mammal trying to squeeze others for all their money's worth.

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The fox had to squint in the dark to look at the smartphone screen. The bright light was hurting his eyes. Being evolved from a nocturnal predator, there was a reason why he always had his big aviator glasses on him. He was almost tempted to use them now. The earphone was in place, he tapped the screen, beginning the call. The exhausted but happy face of Judy appeared on the screen.

"Hey slick Nick" came a tired but cheerful voice.

"Hey officer Bunbun" he answered in a whispered tone so as to not wake up his bunkmates.

"You know you're paying for those nicknames when you get back to zootopia ?"

"Counting on it, Fuzzball."

"How is it going at the academy ?"

"Well, the bookworm I am is getting the best grades in all the writing stuff, so you know, that's always good."

"But ?" Judy had caught the subtle change of tone he had when he wasn't as happy as he wanted to appear.
"Passing the ice wall still gives me trouble."

"I know you'll get through... Above it," she said with a joking tone.

"I'd be on a slippery slope otherwise." Smug grin.

"You didn't."

"What about you. You had an interesting day it seems?"

"What makes you say that?" yawned her.

"I don't know, it's only *PM and you're already sleepy."

"I'm a diurnal mammal."

"Avoiding questions is usually my specialty." Playful tone again.

Judy rubbed her eyes, so as to wake a little, reminding herself of the events of the day.

"Well first, this boar was harassing female preds around the city-center's mall. I had to go myself since I'm currently partnered with Wolford and I didn't want to escalate the situation with him being around. You know, males butting head, protective instincts... He stayed in the back, tranq-gun at the ready."

"Did it escalate?"

"A bit, the guy was clearly under the influence, he screamed at me saying I wasn't a real officer and made a swipe to flick my nose. Or so he said afterwards."

"Drug? Alcohol?"

"Both, vodka and crack. He had also traces of coke on his snout."

"Nice mix."

"I know right? Wolford reacted as soon as the guy made his move, he had to tranq him three times and taze him while we were cuffing him since he woke up again."

"Since when is Wolford that twitchy?"

"Since I'm Precinct One's public face."

"Yeah, I understand, I wouldn't want your- the Precinct One pretty face to get hurt either."

_Oh crap, the tongue-slip, did she notice it?_

"Me neither, I rather like it" she answered in an even more sleepy tone.

_Phew, she didn't._

"What else? It was just an arrest, you can't possibly be tired from just that?"

"A couple of snatch'n'runners, and this guy taking the city-streets for his personal racing circuit. He clearly took a page in flash's book. Oh and Fru-Fru delivered her triplets."

Nick's eyes were now wide open, a bit of a worried look on his face. He knew it was usual for
shrew to give birth to multiple kits at a time, but it didn't mean that it was an easy feat. That, and birth wasn't due for another month.

"So now we have three other cute little Judy in the city" he said, hiding his concern under a joke.

Judy was too tired to comment on the c-word.

"Fru Fru is fine, I know you were worried. And no, we don't have three other Judys. Only one, and also a Vito, named after the great-grandfather as I hear it. And a Nicholas."

This time, Nick couldn't hide his flabbergasted expression, his mask of coolness was instantly shattered by the news. He wasn't able to regain his composure before hearing the familiar sound of a screenshot.

"This one is going straight to furbook."

He gave her a an annoyed looked ruined by his laughing eyes.

"She named one of her kits after me?"

"Isn't it usual to name a kit after his godfather?"

"She wants me to be his godfather?" His tone shifted to whisper to choke. He had to punch himself several time on the chest to be able to breathe normally again. Judy was giggling, it wasn't often she saw Nick completely taken aback.

"Well mister Big isn't keen on the idea, but you were reinstated as a member of the family, so yes, she does."

"Gee, I'll have to find another skunk-butt rug for the kid's bedroom."

"Yeah, you do that, while I fill the forms for your burial. Anyway Nick, sorry to cut this short, but I'm really tiAAAAAWred", she yawned again.

Click, screenshot. This one he was keeping for himself, Judy's yawning face was just too cute to not make Furbook implode.

"Nighty-night Carrots."

"M'night Nick."

The call ended and he couldn't keep himself to smile like an idiot. Someone wanted him as a godfather. Someone thought him responsible enough to take care of a kit. Sure it was the daughter of the biggest crime lord of Zootopia but still, it had to count for something. Five minutes later he was asleep, the smile still plastered on his snout.

"You're dead, duster-tail." Nick shook his head to get rid of the grogginess.

The punch had caught him right in the chest, making him fly across the ring where his head, protected by the boxing helmet, had hit the corner pillar. Facing him was a horse, smug grin on his face, looking at the fox like he was half-sorry half-mocking.

"It doesn't count, Hooffington pulls his punch."

"Am I now?"
"Of course, I still have a ribcage."

The white bear, major Friedkin, looked at Nick, an annoyed look on her face.

"When you're finished horsing around, no offense Hooffington, get out of the ring. Others are waiting for their turn."

"Can I have another go? I'm sure I can do better this time."

"Go ahead, it's your face after all, I'll go get the stretcher."

"You're such a ray of sunshine."

The mischievous grin was back on Nick's face. He had begun to see the pattern on Hooffington's moves. He knew, on the street, he wouldn't have the time to do so. But on the street he wouldn't have boxing gloves stopping him to use all of his arsenal of movements. It's wasn't self-defense course, it was boxing, the goal was to teach them to take punches and stay in the fight. To learn to move with their adversary, to size the opponent. To find openings in one's defense. Nick didn't like boxing, it took time for him to stop considering it as a waste of time. Now he still didn't like it, but saw it as an opportunity to learn how to stop being afraid of violence.

It all took him back to the scout event, where he lost a fight he didn't seek, and his first and last big dream. From then on, he always did everything to avoid physical risks, to avoid fighting.

Now boxing was his therapy. It made him learn to accept that sometimes violence is unavoidable and that defeat wasn't so bad as long as you lived to fight another day.

The horse's first punch was easy to avoid, the second one too. Hooffington always did this, throwing two easy punches to put his opponent on his toes. A fighting warm up, a way for him to check the opposing fighter was in the moment. Nick appreciated the fairplay. A second series of jab, Nick used his little size to get under them and close the distance. A sudden kick from the right side forced him to get back. It was Savate, kicking was allowed, he knew it. That was how Judy got the best grades in this class. New jab series, punctuated by hooks right and left. Still evading. Once again Nick got under and didn't wait for the horse's kick, getting right between his legs, jumping and, in the rotation, hitting him right in the middle of the back. His opponent stumbled across the ring, using the rope to face him again. He was right where Nick wanted him. The fox closed the distance for the third time, knowing that by now Hooffington would change tactics, using kicks to keep him from getting closer and waiting for an opportunity to punch his lights out.

Nick was jumping from right to left, trying to slowly bring the horse to a punching habit, an easy pattern to read. At his fifth jump, he sent himself right at Hooffington's kick. Taken aback, the equine tried to use the opportunity to violently kick the fox. All according to plan. Nick jumped above the hoof, using the knee as a boost, he went above his opponent shoulder, kicking it as hard as he could on his way down, launching himself on the third rope. Behind him, the equine mammal was once again stumbling, but quickly got back on a stable position. Just before he turned around to face Nick, he heard a loud GAAAAAWWWW. Just as he had turned, he saw a big bright light, with a warm and pulsing sensation coming from his snout, slowly invading all of his head.

Major Friedkin recognized the move a soon as she saw it. Clearly Nick had learned a lot from Judy, she was the one that set the trend to use the ring's rope as a springboard for the small mammals during boxing course. Hooffington was toast, there was no way he was going to see this coming and it put a smile on her face. Not that she had anything against the equid, but seeing one of her pupil succeeding in something he usually struggled with always made her happy.
"You're dead, hoof-face."
Prologue, Chapter 2

A Better Place : Prologue

Chapter 2 : Bullseye and Bets

The shooting range, bane of Judy's existence.

The loud noises of the weapons were muffled by the noise-suppressing headset, but even that wasn't enough to protect her sensitive ears. For a time, she could slip her earplug under the headset, further cancelling the noise of the firearms and letting her listen to music while performing the tedious training, but she was caught by Bogo who gave her a really long and loud lesson about gun safety and young officer's stupidity.

Now she simply put some wax earplugs, which were a bitch to take out afterwards but helped her resist the urge to bounce out of here as quick as she could.

*Rabbit's weren't made for loud noises. Well they are, but we are made to run from them, not produce them.*

She took place in front of her target, took out her gun, checking that it was loaded. She didn't like real guns, as far as she knew, no one here did. Possession was illegal throughout the city except for police officers. Which didn't stop thugs and criminals to occasionally use them. She knew for a fact that mister Big had a well maintained armory. She sometimes had seen some of the crime boss' bears take them out to the gods knew where.

She really did like the shrew. He was nice for a crime boss after all. His business only included, drugs, alcohol, contraband, and a bit of racket. He didn't take part in mammal-trafficking and protected his own. But the fact that he possessed real guns was something that she couldn't really accept, as much as she loved Fru Fru like a sister.

The ammo she used were only 6mm, hollow point to compensate the stopping power lost because of the small size. She could have handled 9mm, she had trained for it, but Bogo insisted she used small ammo. At first she thought he was still underestimating her, thinking that she would injure herself or wouldn't be able to shoot straight. He took her shooting himself, making her try both calibre. He then explained to her that he knew she could handle 9mm. Hell, he was fairly certain she would find a way to shoot Grizzoli's .45 if she had to, but that wasn't the point. If she had to shoot repeatedly, using 9mm would strain her arm, making her lose aim and even causing injuries to her aiming hand in the long run.

She admitted that Bogo was right, and that he was honestly trying to make it easier for her. She was the only one in the precinct using 6mm, but then again, she was also the only small mammal there too.

The gun was loaded, the target was at regulation distance. She took aim and emptied the magazine, four in the head, eight in the body. She pushed a button, making the target come to her and started checking it. Two near-misses in the head, the last bullet she shot in the torso was a bit off-mark, almost a miss. But she was only warming up. She put another target in place and emptied another magazine. This time all the bullets went right where she wanted them. She was still far from being the best shot at the ZPD, but she was a good enough shot that no-one could complain. She was about to put her third target in place when from the corner of her eyes she saw someone she never thought she would see here. Benjamin Clawhauser. She shook her head. Who was stereotyping.
now? The fat cheetah was as much of an officer than her, even though his physical training,
mainly his stamina, was lacking. He had to follow training, the same as anybody.

But was the cheetah a good shot? She was there for 8 months now and she had never seen him
train at the shooting range. Perhaps he was avoiding to come when there were other people around.
She couldn't stop herself thinking there was no way he was good at this. It seemed she wasn't the
only one. Looking around she saw Wolford, Fangmeyer and Rhinowitz swap jokes with other new
officers she didn't know, pointing and looking at the Cheetah. Half of herself wanted to intervene,
to teach them that looks weren't proofs of one's ability to perform, but she didn't want to make a
scene. And maybe it was better that Clawhauser didn't know what was said in his back.

He approached the stand next to her, waving at her to say hello and turned back his gaze to the gun
he had taken out of his holster. She couldn't hear him because of the sound cancelling headset but
she was certain he was humming Try Everything from Gazelle, fitting at the moment. At second
glance, she saw that he had earplugs connected to his phone under his own headset. She looked
around again, hoping that chief Bogo wasn't there to see it, fairly certain that he would tear the
cheetah a new one otherwise. No chief Bogo on sight.

She caught a glimpse of the half dozen-officers who were now focused on the two of them. At her
side, Clawhauser was checking his gun, a regular Pawretta 9mm, he seemed to have trouble arming
it. She went to help him, but he had already begun dismantling it, quicker than herself could have
done so, checking every part for a problem, while still humming the song. It was common for this
type of gun to have mechanical issues. It was obvious in hindsight, being a more experienced
officer, using his gun for longer than her, that he would know how to fix the problem.

The chubby feline expertly put back his gun together, playing with the mechanism a few time to
check that everything was in place, armed the gun, took aim with a distracted look on his face and
quickly emptied the magazine on the target. Inspecting it behind him, Judy thought that he wasn't a
bad shot. Perhaps not great but good enough. A few round were off center, one almost completely
lost its mark, but all in all, it was acceptable.

Her target was in place, she took aim and emptied her third magazine in it, not missing a single
shot, at least a third of them dead center. Next to her Ben was watching with a big smile applauding
with his pig paws. She took a smug playful pose as to say 'i'm the best'. He answered with a
cheerful expression, gave her another target, putting one on for himself, winking playfully at her.

Oh it's on, big guy.

She didn't like to shoot guns. But this was a challenge. And she loved a challenge. They both
emptied their gun at the same time. She was proud of herself, it was her best work yet, bullet holes
less than 3 inches apart on the target. She took a look at Clawhauser's target, his cheerful smile still
plastered on his face as he was holding it to show to her, like a kid shows a drawing he made to his
mother. His a target had an unique irregular hole, a bit more than 1 inch wide.

Did he just?

She looked around, Wolford, Fangmeyer and Rhinowitz trying their best to keep their bad poker
faces to break into hysterical laughter, the three other new recruits had a look of utter astonishment
locked on their faces, their mouth agape.

What the hell?

She turned again toward Clawhauser who had already put back his gun in its holster, waving at
Hopps to follow him.
Five minutes late, they were both in the cafeteria, she was drinking a carrot-flavoured decaf while he was eating the first of a dozen donuts sitting neatly aligned before him.

"You're a great shot!" He began.

"I'm good at best. But I've never seen anyone shoot like you. You're light-years ahead of me." She ended her sentence with a blank expression of disbelief. Clawhauser had an embarrassed look on his face.

"Well, I mean... You're not... Like... Upset? I like to show that I shoot well, but that one time Herold thought that I was making fun..."

"No I'm just... surprised."

"I don't really look the part, I know. No one could guess that the chubby cheetah tending the front desk is a good shot. I like to surprise people."

"You sure are full of surprise."

"I'm mostly full of donuts." He had a large innocent smile on his face.

"You're adora-"

"Tutut" he said on a playful tone. "If I can't say the little bunny cop is cute, you can't say that the fat donut-eating cat is adorable. Wouldn't be fair."

_Damn, he is right._

"Sorry."

"Kidding, adorable isn't a racial stereotype, do as anyone else, call me how you like. Besides, I AM adorable."

Did he just pull a joke on me? Okay, I really must learn to take him more seriously, you don't land a front desk job in precinct one by being an idiot. He's just easily distracted.

"Okay I must know. Where did you learn to shoot this well?"

"Well, at first I wasn't that good. When I was at the Savannah Central Precinct I wasn't really that good of a shot, or at anything physical. I was already tending the front desk for this same reason."

"And then what happened?"

"Well for some reasons, I got transferred here. Chief Bogo didn't really like that I wasn't performing great in physical activities, so he forced me to train."

"It doesn't really surprise me. Though knowing the chief, he wouldn't have let you stop your training until you were as fit as him."

"Again, for some reason he did, but he still insisted that I learned to shoot as good as I could. He even sometimes trained me himself."

"I have a hard time imagining Bogo taking from his time to train someone."

"So did I. Anyway, I was really grateful that he did so. You know there is a grading system for
officers in precinct one. If you fail, you get reassigned somewhere else. Well thanks to my training and how good I got, I was able to compensate my physical... flaws with my good aim. I'm thankful, I've made tons of friends here, thanks to that I can keep working with them."

"Deep down, Bogo is just a big softy."

"Other officers said that I was one the best front desk worker they ever had, I think he mostly cares about efficiency."

"Logical."

"Yep. Anyway, I better get back to it. Those files won't store themselves. Bye."

The cheetah left her a her thoughts, a bounce in his step.

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Judy kept drinking her carrot-flavoured decaf, staring blankly at the the table, trying to process that the donut-loving happy-go-lucky cheetah was in fact the best shot in the precinct and probably in the city. And that he was way more clever than he appeared at first glance.

*I tend to judge books by their covers, don't I ? First Nick, then Ben. Who knows who else I could be wrong about ?*

She was taken out of her thoughts by the rattling of chairs around the table. Six officers were now sitting with her. She recognized Wolford, Fangmeyer and Rhinowitz, but the other three were unknown to her. A male wolverine, a female deer and a female... Panda?

*I really need to work on those bias of mine...*

She hadn't come to the bullpen in the morning, and didn't check her mailbox yet. This was probably the reason why she didn't know there were new officers on the force. She had been assigned with Wolford to public patrol for a week and Bogo already explained that if she needed her to come, he simply would have called her on the radio. It was the way he did it. You had a task, no point on repeating it to you everyday.

"Hello guys ?" A string of 'Hey' and 'Hi' answered her greetings.

Wolford spoke :

"Hopps, meet Bailey FitzAntlers" finger pointed to the deer "Yiska Clawfith" finger pointed to the Wolverine "and" he struggled to keep a straight face "Wight Blackfur" finger pointed to the panda.

"You can snicker Moon-Moon, at least my name isn't Pandaford." She delivered it with a deep voice on a deadpan but not unkind tone.

"Would make for a good name though" he joked. "Anyway : guys meet Judy Hopps, face of Precinct One, hero of the city and slayer of scheming sheeps."

"Big fan" said the wolverine, shaking her hands.

"Yeah you did a great job" added the deer.

"I had to, I screwed up big time and put all the predators in a bad position. It was the least I could do to make amends." She was a bit embarrassed by all the praise.
"Don't sell yourself short, in your place most mammals would have quit on the spot and gone into hiding." Stated Blackfur.

*That's exactly what I did.*

"Thanks, it means a lo-"

Judy did a double take. "You're first name is White and your last name begins with Black ?"

"Its spelled W-i-g-h-t. My parents didn't have the heart to pull the joke all the way."

"Beside," said Rhinowitz, "you know how it goes with the old names. I wonder what our forefather were thinking."

*Do all the rhino have this deep of a voice ?*

Fangmeyer had come back with coffees and donuts for everyone. Judy waited until he was seated then she began speaking.

"So how come we have three new faces ? With the trainees who will soon come from the academy, there won't be desks for everyone."

"From what I've heard when leaving the academy at the end of last year, the new promotion seems to be good but not great. So most of them will be assigned to other precincts. Me and Bailey are coming from Tundratown. We were on the force for like 3 months. I hope our ex-colleagues aren't jealous." The Wolverine had a quick voice, almost aggressive but his face was composed.

"Glad you're out of the blizzard," cheered Judy, toasting with her second decaf.

"I myself comes from the rainforest district" said the panda. "They needed a senior officer here, I applied."

"How long have you been on the force ?"

"Almost twenty-one years."

"Sheesh, reacted Fangmeyer, and you're only sergeant ?"

There was the shadow of a smile floating on her face. "I didn't become a cop to gain rank."

"Why did you do so, if you don't mind my asking ?"

"Free donuts." The ursine had still her little smile on her face, but Judy saw through it. It was subtle.

_Fake smile, it's good but Nick wrote the book on it. Whatever her story is, there is something sad in it._

"Well" said Fangmeyer. "We have now two females in the precinct. I don't know about you, but I find it refreshing."

"Uhm, I'm right here..." Said, Judy.

"I know you are. What you are also is : too little for my taste."

"You're a pig Fangmeyer."
"Aren't we all? Don't be upset Judy, everybody knows he has a thing for Francine," joked Wolford.

"Yeah, when will you declare, Anand?" asked Rhinowitz, in his usual stern and matter-of-fact voice.

"Never. I don't know about you guys, but I prefer my females without a trunk... Too risky. " The table instantly broke into a half-disgusted laughter, Judy hiding her red face in her paws. Rhinowitz lips had a slight twitch in their corners. "Beside" he said showing his paw, revealing a ring, "may I remind the crowd that I am happily married? Please keep your hands to yourselves ladies."

Everybody was still laughing except the rhino, still his stern expression locked on his face, Wolford let escape a laughing howl, and Fangmeyer was trying to keep his composure as best he could.

Fangmeyer wasn't considered a joker, it was usually Wolford's place to crack one. Judy had learned it while on patrol with him. He always had a pun for every sentence, a joke for every situation. The tiger, most of the time had a warm smile on his face but always stayed serious. Like a fatherly figure watching over everyone. And the rare times he made a joke, it was always a dirty one.

The laughter slowly died down. "Alright, now that you're all quiet again, it's time to get back to a more serious matters." Fangmeyer was back to his smiling but serious self. Judy's ears immediately shot up, ready to take in the important matter that the tiger seemed to want to share with them.

"Pay up newbies." Judy's ears flopped around her head. She shot her eyes to the ceiling. Again with their bets. Officer Clawfith and FitzAntlers took their wallets out and gave some banknotes to the tiger.

"What was the bet on?" She asked, although she had a pretty good idea what it was all about.

"Who, between you and Ben, was the best shot." Answered Wolford while Fangmeyer collected the money and redistributed it to the winners.

"How did you know to bet on Clawhauser, Blackfur?" he asked to the panda.

"Twenty years on the force, I know how to recognize a hustle when I see one. I was still impressed by his skill though. By the way Judy, did you take the last shooting between you and Clawhauser as a challenge?"

Judy looked at the table, she felt her face heat up, red appearing under her fur.

"Yes, I did."

"Pay up, Wolford." The panda had a slight grin hidden under her serious look. The wolf gave forty dollars to the female ursine.

Oh, I'm sure Nick will like her.

"You bet on me taking this as a challenge?"

"No, we bet on you admitting you did."

Nick will absolutely love her. Am I this easy to read?

Fangmeyer stood up. "Well kids, not that your presence is annoying but I still have quite a bit of
paperwork to tend to."

"Me too" followed Rhinowitz in his deep and stern voice.

Everyone quickly got up, throwing their paper-cups in the trash bin, quickly leaving the cafeteria. She was walking beside Blackfur who let herself slowly get distanced by the other officers. When they were alone in the hallway, the panda spoke.

"You want to ask me something, do you?"

She had fallen on one knee, so that the rabbit wouldn't have to bend her neck too much.

"Yeah, how did you know that I would take it as a challenge and that I would admit it afterwards?"

"As I said, I worked twenty years on the force. I've seen my share of young officers trying to find their way, to get recognized. Hey, I even trained some of them to help them pass rank. You're a young officer, first rabbit on the force, trying to show the world that you can do a job that most people think you can't. I would bet you spent your life running after that dream. Of course you would take it as a challenge. Everything is one to you."

"It's not-"

"I'm not judging. I think it's a good thing as long as you don't let it go overboard. Would you be where you are today otherwise?"

Judy shook her head.

"And about you admitting it was a challenge to you... Well, you made a mistake, and a big one toward predators, and even toward prey 6 months ago. You did so because you had a bit of a bias toward predators. Saying that we could reverse to our savages selves easier than preys showed that."

Judy was trying to keep looking the ursine in the eyes, fighting back the tears that threatened to pour.

"I'm so sorry." she apologized in a meek voice. She knew the stigmates of her mistake were still there. The damaged still hadn't been undone.

"I must say, I hated you for that. A little bunny, first one to become officer, and you were a bigot like any other." The panda lifted her paws "And then you saw your mistake, worked your ass off to make everything better. Putting your life on the line for people that resented you. And after that you pushed acting mayor Swinton so that your friend, the fox, could go to the academy and have a chance to be the first fox officer."

"You know about that?" Nick's presence at the academy had been advertised, but not who had vouched for him to get in.

"Friedkin is my step sister. Anyway, That showed me that I didn't know everything. You were able to see your mistake, get past what you believed, I was ready to bet that you had grown enough to accept your flaws."

Judy sniffled, taking back the tear she didn't want to show to someone she didn't knew much.

"And I made 40 bucks from the wallet of the snickering wolf. Good deal overall."
She read people well. I'm not sure Nick will like her so much.

"Sergeant Blackfur, it was nice talking with you, I hope that we will learn more about each others in the next months."

"Likewise officer Hopps, Likewise."

They both got back to their office. Judy had a bit of paperwork to tend to but it had been a slow day. She knew that in one hour she would have finished, and would be at home around 8PM. She looked forward to call Nick, tell him about her day and the Precinct One's new recruits.

The bright rectangle of the screen flashed before her eyes. Earphone plugged, she tapped on the little green logo, beginning the call to her friend. Nick's face appeared, showing his exhaustion. For once, he was the one that looked the most tired. And beaten up ?

"Howdy officer, said the playful voice of the fox. How did you fare on this beautiful daAAAAAAAY ?"

A yawn from Nick ? Everything could happen.

"I faired quite well, and you ?"

"Well also. Glad you asked."

"What happened today ? Your right eye looks a bit swollen."

"You know Hooffington ? The one that boxed a bit in college ?"

"You lost again ?"

"You wish. KOed him in the second round."

"How did you do it ?"

"I used the rope as a springboard. Punched him right in the snout. Your legend paved the road for us little mammals in the boxing ring."

"Oh gods, it worked only three times, and I'm sure my opponent knew what I was doing the last time and let me do it anyway, just so that I could pass the class with flying colors."

"A victory is a victory. I still can't pass the icy wall though."

"Cold bath again ?"

"Nah, I learned to use the wall on my way down to get back on the solid ice. It doesn't get me above the damn thing but at least I avoid getting sick. And you, anything interesting today ?"

"We have three new recruits. A wolverine, named Yiska Clawfith."

"Strange name, male ?"

"Yup, a female deer named Bailey FitzAntlers, and listen to this one, a female panda named Wight Bla-"

"Wight Blackfur, big girl, big paws, big heart."
"You know her?"

"Believe it or not, I had a life before meeting you. And remember that I know everyone." His smug smile was plastered on his tired face, happy to have surprised his friend.

"And how do you know her. A friend of yours?"

"She arrested me a couple times before I was fifteen."

"Why?"

"That would be telling agent Carrots, and you know the suspect ain't a snitch."

"It's not snitching if it's about you."

"Who said that was only about me?"

"Won't tell me?"

"Not about what I did, and not about who I did it with, but if you wanna know what I think of her... It was almost twenty years ago. I only remember that she was nice. She didn't use the muzzle, although she should have." His smile turned to slightly embarrassed.

"You bit her?" Judy had a genuinely shocked expression painted on her face.

"Maybe. She let me go in the end with the promise I wouldn't steal again. If my record is clean it's partly thanks to her."

"So you stole something."

"Yes. Will you let it go, please?" Judy sighed. Each time she was about to learn something about the fox, he would close like a clam. She hoped he would someday tell her more about his past. She was sure he was someone great that had made a lot of mistakes to get where he was.

"Alright mister secretive. I'll let you get your beauty sleep, you look tired."

"Thanks Carrots, Nighty-night."

"Good night."

Nick let go of the phone, turning on his bed, his gaze fixed on the white ceiling. Once again he had almost talked about his past. Part of him wanted to share, to talk about all of what he had done. It was never things that were really wrong or really bad. He had never badly hurt anyway, not on purpose. It was mostly stealing, conning mammal out of their hard earned cash, contraband, tax evasion and other things. But he was afraid.

Of course Judy suspected his past wasn't pretty. But there was a huge gap between suspecting and actually knowing. What if her opinion of him changed, if she saw him again as the dishonest con-mammal he once was? Reflecting on his past, he saw in himself a bitter and cynical old fox letting no one in, living his life from moment to moment, scraping to make ends meet. Well scraping was going overboard, he had always lived quite comfortably.

If you asked him, Nick wasn't pessimistic, only realistic, and prudent. Stuff could go wrong, you had to be prepared and have a backup plan, which would often revolve around running faster. The past couple of months, with Judy in his life, he had found himself able to believe that, at last, everything could be okay. He would remain cynical, he liked this part of himself, but he tried to be
a good natured one, to stop seeing each mammal as an opportunity to make a few bucks or to have a good laugh. Nah, the good laugh part was good to keep. Everyone needs a good laugh from time to time. And so, he was afraid to talk about his past. He had spent his life not giving a flying fuck about what anyone thought of him.

And then, there had come that bunny. A bit of a bigot at that. And she became his friend. And now, he didn't want her to know that he had been, and partly still was in fact, everything she thought a fox should be. The irony wasn't lost on him, and he chuckled silently, slowly falling asleep.
A Better Place: Prologue

Chapter 3: Hustle and Drinks

Finnick pulled over before a large construction site, with a big sign 'Beaverston & Co, site forbidden to public'.

Guess stereotypes are sometimes true.

He saw a beaver smoking a cigarette and hailed him.

"Hey mister, can you call your boss?"

The beaver was taken aback by the deep and strong voice the fennec possessed and quickly got back inside the construction site. A few seconds later, a large beaver went out with two other workers in tow.

"What do you want fox?"

"Easy big guy, I'm here to sell ya stuff."

"What stuff?"

"Wood."

"How much do you have, and how much do you want for it."

Finnick liked to work with construction workers. They were simple to deal with. They always needed raw material and most of them didn't give two craps about where it came from. He opened the rear doors of his van, showing the neatly piled sticks that were there, secured with ropes. He even had found pallets to stock them on.

"Half of what you usually pay for the stuff. Pallets are free."

The beaver inspected the merchandise with a professional look on his face.

"Where do they come from?"

Finnick simply looked him in the eyes, a blank expression on his face.

The foreman made a sign to his workers to take them out. He got his wallet out and pulled a couple of banknote, giving them to Finnick.

Still a blank expression on his face, Finnick raised an eyebrow. The foreman got two other banknotes out of this wallet. Finnick snatched them from his hand, half a smile on his face.

"Glad to do business with ya. Havanice day."

The foreman had already turned back, returning to his work. Finnick had made a good haul. Time to hit the bar and get a beer or five.

He parked his van on his new favorite spot, in the back alley behind the Swimming Shrew. It was
a little pub that served food in the evening, mostly homemade stuff for predators. The place had closed and reopened a few time in the last thirty years. The last time it went down, it was because of some prey meat that had found its way in the client's plates. It so happened that the last owner had been a bit of a murderous and cannibal maniac. The police had found half a dozen skeletons in the basement. Stuff like that happened, and it gave Finnick the dark satisfaction that the prejudice against his kind was partially founded, even if by accident. It made the world a bit more fair, if a bit more sad.

He pushed the door and entered the pub. It smelled like sweat, beer and loneliness. Most patrons were alone at their tables, no discussion, just drinking away a long day of tedious work.

The fox hopped on a stool.

"A pint please. And plate wit' whatever the fuck you fill'em tonight."

"Hard day, big guy ?" Asked the barman, a badger, while filling the absurdly big mug and placing it before his client.

"You better believe it. Worked all day long. "

And it was true, every muscle in his body ached. The pawpsicle hustle was easier when he had the kid to help him. Perhaps he would find another apprentice, the thought made him smile in disbelief.

"What are you doing these days ?"

"Oh you know, the usual."

It was the best answer to this question. Honest people assumed he did physical work. The others knew not to ask too much about it.

"I see. Today's special is some bird's meat in a stew. Doesn't taste gross, but it's not the best. Sure you want it ?"

"I'll take some. I'm hungry as a wolf, no offense Steve."

An old grey wolf sitting two stools over, facing his own pint and mistakes in life, raised a paw as to say 'don't worry about it'.

The little fox downed the pint in three gulps and asked for another just as soon as his plate was placed before him. The badger was always impressed about how much the little hustler could absorb, being beer or food.

Finnick dug in. As the barman had said, it wasn't gross, but it was the only redeeming quality he could find to the content of his plate.

_OKay maybe I'm being a bit harsh, it's a warm meal and I shure won't be hun'ry afterwards._

He finished the second pint at the same time as his dinner. He asked for a third one. After this one, he would be packed and ready to hit the sack.

"You sure about this big guy ? I don't want you to have some sort of accident on your way home."

"I live near here, I'll go on foot. Gimme my goddam pint."
The fox was walking unsteadily toward his van after having left a handful of coins and banknotes on the bar. He turned right to the back alley, holding himself to the angle of the wall. He saw his van in a blurry fog, but there was also a dark figure hovering around it.

*Shit, I'm in no condition to get rid of a thieving fucker tonight. Time to act tough.*

He breathed slowly, trying to find his balance, advancing slowly and stealthily toward the figure. As a few steps separated him from the aspiring intruder and he said in voice as calm and firm as he could.

"The van ain't for sale. Getchur paws outta my property."

The figure seemed startled at first but began to walk toward him calmly. It was bigger than him but not too much. Perhaps a weasel or a badger.

*Clearly not in a good state to fight. Or to run. Shit. where is my knuckle-duster ? Wish I had my bat.*

"Don't take another step, I'm warning you!"

The figure stopped, made a movement with its paw and a ray of light suddenly caught his eyes. Finnick closed them instantly, the contrast with the darkness of the street-lampless back alley sending spike of pain in his booze imbibed brain. He backed one leg, raising his fists in a defensive position, squinting his eyes as to see but keep them protected from the light.

"It's me, asshat." Came a female voice.

"Who the fuck ?" Finnick knew the voice. He opened his eyes completely, the familiar voice partly washing out his brain from the alcoholised slumber.

"It's me" repeated the female voice, "Vivienne."

"Shit, Vi ? tha's you ? Don't scare old me like dis"

The vixen was leaning over him.

"Where's my son Finnick ?"

He could smell her perfume, light touches of lilac, and a slight womanly musk hidden beneath it. His brain had gone back in the comfortable slumber zone.

"Where is who ?"

She shook him.

"My fucking son shithead, where is he ?"

"Dunno a son, who's your son ? I know of him ? Don't shake me like dis, I don't wanna puke tonight."

She smelled him.

"Oh for fuck's sake and all that is unholy, you reek of beer."

*He's drunk, how could I not have noticed this sooner.*
"Yeah, I reek. Now let the reeker go to its van and have his deserved sleep." He walked a few steps. "Shit, where are my keys?"

He felt paw fondling his pockets.

"Easy there lady. You cute and all but I ain't no easy fox."

As an answer he received a slap on the snout. He then heard a tingling. She had taken his keys.

"Hey tha's mine givit back!"

He felt himself lifted from the floor, taken through the door of his van and lied down on the right seat. He slipped into complete slumber, rocked by the movement and the sound of the van.

... 

Where the fuck am I. Sheets? A bed? Did I score last night? Drunken' me isn't as out of the game as I thought.

The fennec opened his eyes. Light. Light, and a million darts attacking his brain.

Okay, three pints is one too many, lesson learned. Still, where am I?

Smell of lilac, and the musk of a vixen. Familiar. The brain still hazy, he felt his opened eyes slowly getting attuned to the light. He again risked his head out of the sheet. Smell of coffee, toast... And anger? He looked around him.

On the bedside table, to the right, was a plate with coffee and toasts. The walls had a brownish redish tone, the bottom being old looking wood paneling. The large window had a pair of open crimson curtain. All this gave cozy and warm feeling to the room. He didn't recognize the place. However he did recognize the pink bathrobe wearing vixen sitting in an armchair to his left. She was staring at him intensely.

"Vivienne?"

He looked down on himself, he was naked save for his brief.

"Am I in your bed? The fuck am I doin' in your bed?"

"Oh, I don't bloody know. Take a guess big guy." She had put an emphasis on the big.

What did I do? What did drunken me do?

He felt his face become warmer and found he couldn't maintain his gaze.

"Did we..." He trailed off.

And she didn't answer.

"Don't fuck with me Vivienne. I was drunk, I don't remember nothin'."

His voice had cracked. He had hidden his face in his paws. It was his best friend's mother, all of it spelled disaster. Part of his brain screamed at him that it was impossible that he did anything with her. The other reminded him that could be extremely stupid when he was drunk. Beyond that, and as much as he tried to remember anything beyond his second pint, his mind remained blank.
He risked an eye between his fingers. Watching her, he knew who gave Nick his excellent poker face.

"Calm yourself Finnick, we didn't do shit. I slept on the couch."

"Why didja have to make me doubt?"

"Payback. I didn't hear from my son for three months now. You know you're the only one that give me news about him."

"Buy a TV, you old hag."

"TV's a load of bullcrap. Never had one, never want one."

"You don't read the paper?"

"To what goal? They are full of lies."

"Damn, you didn't change a bit, still the paranoid."

"It's called being healthily cautious."

He chuckled, she did too. The tense atmosphere dissolved instantly. They knew each other since Finnick met Nick. He was the one that brought Nick's parent what the kid thought they deserved, meaning the money he didn't really need to survive. That had been hard at first, they believed he had kidnapped Nick, forced him to work, but they soon understood, through one of Nick's early letters, that he wouldn't come back until he was, in his own words 'a fox they would be proud of'. To this day, she hadn't seen the kid in the flesh save from one time in the hospital when he and his father spoke for the last time. She hadn't dared to talk to him. She had been too proud. She had been too stupid.

But then again, he was truly her son, for he acted the same way.

"So my son. Where is he?"

"You won't believe me."

"Try me."

"He's trying to become a cop."

"I don't believe you."

"Toldja."

"No, seriously, what does he do?"

"Gimme my phone."

"What for?"

"Proof."

An annoyed look on her face, she threw him his pants. He caught the pair of cargo with one hand, taking the Zoorola and flipping through the photo album. He, at last, found a picture, Nick wearing the trainees uniform, adorned with a big ZPD logo on the chest.
"C'mere."

The aged Vixen approached the bed and looked at the screen. Finnick barely stopped himself from sniffing her, for she had placed her neck two inches from his snout.

*Lady, shoot me dead right here, why don'tchu. I'm losing it. Really need to get laid.*

Instantly her face showed a mix of disbelief and surprise, and... Something else. Was it pride?

"My kit is studying to become a pig. Best one of the year."

"Yeah, he had to send me this very picture for me to believe it. I even saw it on the furbook thingy, couldn't bring myself to believe it before. Even now I sometimes struggle. The habit of asking him for help on a hustle is still there. But I don't wanna fuck up his chances of doing something he wants."

She sat on the side of the bed, her expression still locked for a bit. She then turned to Finnick.

"Still, why the hell did you not show your face here those last 3 months?"

"Well, since the kid's now earnin' money in legal ways, and there is no way for me to grab what I'm sure he'd like you to have to give it to ya, I thought... Well you, know... There wasn't too many reasons to come down those parts, wos it?"

The shadow of a sad expression hovered on Vivienne's face, her and Finnick's gaze locked on one another.

"Yeah, you're right..."

That one stung more than Finnick thought it would.

*Did I say something bad? Shit. Did I say something hurtful to her?*

The awkward moment lasted five seconds, Finnick wondering if he should say something or apologize. But she went back to her usual, half cheerful half mischievous expression.

"Well it seems to me that your sorry ass will have to be happy with cold coffee and stale toast."

Free food was better than no food, he didn't even complain.
Prologue, Chapter 4

A Better Place: Prologue

Chapter 4: Cold Sweat

It was the last day.

He was here and there it was.

The last day.

The day which would be his last here.

The last fucking day.

And he was absolutely and utterly terrified.

He had sweat blood and tears to get there. And it wasn't an expression. Every day was marked by some invisible scar, some new blister on his paws, some new self-destructing doubt about what he was doing here. He had memorized every knowledge he could, every regulation that could matter. He had completed a training tailored for mammals twice his size.

He had climbed the ice wall. The first time he did so, it took him around ten minutes to get there. Using his claws and his fangs, almost dislodging two of them. All he had needed was the proof that he could do. After that, he jumped it instantly at almost every try, having found the best places to put his paws, the best way to use his claws.

He still struggled in boxing, winning one every five match, but his grades were good enough to pass the class.

His grade were good enough so that tomorrow, he could call himself an officer of the ZPD.

But still, he worried. Contrary to Judy, he was far from being valedictorian. He was the best on some classes, mainly social ones, having totally aced the hostage situations and interrogation matters.

But for the rest he wasn't great. He was good. Good enough to feel good about himself, good enough to be proud. But maybe not good enough to get assigned to Precinct One. That thought ate at him.

Hey, worst case scenario, me and carrots can see each others on our days off. We will simply need to synchronize.

Well, there was still what he was now waiting for, seated on the chair in the hallway. An interview with a Jury that would determine what to do best with his talents, what precinct would have the best use of him. He felt a knot in his belly and prayed all the gods he didn't believe in, that his bowels would stay calm and not fuck him over during the life defining event that was about to happen.

One of the other trainees, a brown bear, got out by the door behind which waited Nick's destiny. The poor guy seemed completely drained. This didn't help the fox to relax. He would usually crack a joke, but he couldn't do so for two reasons.
The second reason was that it was absolutely forbidden for trainees waiting for their interview to speak with those having already got through theirs.

The first reason was that every trace of humour had definitely vanished from his adrenalin filled brained. Every coherent thought had done so too.

"Waaly Adalbert !"

Called a voice from behind the door. It belonged to Major Friedkin. The sheep next to him stood straight up. The guy totally looked like a startled prey about to be eaten by a pack of wolves.

"You're gonna be fine buddy," said Nick, "with an encouraging tone."

The sheep glanced at him, a pale smile on his face, and slowly marched toward the door.

If I didn't know better, I'd think there was a firing squad behind this door.

What kind of name was Waaly anyway ? He repeated it in his head.

Waaly, waaly. Is it a bleat ? Did the guy bleat while giving his name ? Oh my fucking gods, that is hilarious.

He let escape a nervous chuckle.

Okay I'm losing it, deep breath Nick. You're about to be interrogated by cops. It's far from being the first time. You shouldn't be so nervous. Deep breath.

He looked around, he was alone in the hallway, save for the hippo that was supposed to keep an eye on the trainees, sound asleep, sloped against the wall. What a good idea to be called Nick Wilde. Wilde, starting with one the last letters of the alphabet, always last called.

But Wilde was the coolest name anyone could have. That made up for the slight impracticality. Like for instance the ball of impending doom and slight stress locked in his throat.

The sheep got out of the room, his look of fear replaced by one of utter despair. He stared blankly at the floor while making his way through the hallway.

This is how I die. Not by an angry mobster, not by a hail of bullet fired by a stupid cop. By a heartstroke at the gate of my future.

He chuckled again.

I'm gonna lose it before the end of the day. Call me in and let's be done with.

"Wilde Nicholas Piberius” came the voice, as to answer his silent prayer.


He put his most confident smile on his face and walked to the door. Only the slight twitch of his tail could betray him. He put his paw on the handle, turned it, got in the room, closed the door behind him, and looked at the jury. He recognized major Friedkin to the left, but not the Rhino to the right. And in the center was...

What the fuck is chief Buffalo Butt doing here ? Wait, Is he wearing glasses ?
The three officers were taking note, probably about the last trainee. There was also a camera on the
side of the table, pointed toward the center of the room.

He had almost lost his composure, but didn't even bat an eye. He went right into hustle mode, right
into his comfort zone, approaching the chair in the center of the room. It was Fox sized. Along the
wall to his right were three other chairs, adapted to the size of any mammal. If it was supposed to
let him be comfortable, he was gonna take all the comfort he would need.

Nick took the chair and stored it neatly next to the others. He went back in the center of the room,
where the chair was a moment ago. He struck his most confident pose. Warm fake smile and paws
in his pocket, sometimes shifting legs as to not get numb.

It was a gamble, they didn't tell him to sit when he entered, but if they asked him now he would
like a complete fool. Fortunately they didn't.

Chief Bogo spoke first.

"Good morning mister... Wilde" he read on the file.

_Seriously dude, you know who I am._

Nick's tail twitched slightly in annoyement, but that did nothing to his perfect composure.

"My name is Adrian Bogo, chief of Precinct One. You already know Major Friedkin."

Nick glanced at her, she gave him an encouraging smile.

_Smiling Friedkin, no way this isn’t a trap._

"I am Lieutenant Herold MacHorn" spoke the Rhino. "Second in command to chief Adrian Bogo." His voice was so grave it seemed to come out of a stone. His tone was totally devoid of any
feeling.

_Wat a cheerful fellow._

"I" continued Bogo "will conduct this interview, which will be recorded. Is there any issue you
wish to bring up before we start ?"

_Joking : bad idea right now._

"No sir, please proceed."

The cape buffalo pushed the record button and began talking.

"Your name is Nicholas Piberius Wilde, is that correct ?"

"Yes, it is."

"Son of an alive Vivienne Octavia Wilde and a now deceased John Lycus Wilde, is that correct ?"

New twitch on his tail. Why did he have to bring that up ? Nick felt his paws starting to get covered
in sweat. Composure maintained however, everything was still fine.

"Yes, it is."
"Could you describe your life before you entered the academy?"

"At what point do you wish for me to begin?"

"Tell us what you believe being important."

Nick began to talk about his life. How he ran from home at twelve, deliberately omitting the reason. How he performed odd jobs with a fennec fox nicknamed Finnick, never mentioning his real name. He avoided talking about the things he did that were outright crimes, but didn't shy away from his conning and hustling. He also told them how he sent most of what he earned to his parents to help them since they spent their lives in a financial tight spot, being foxes.

He talked briefly about the death of his father, his paws were two balls of sweat in his pocket. He didn't tell them about his mother, but simply that he had continued to send her money although he knew she didn't use it. He talked about how he met Judy, that she did hustle him into helping him, but not exactly how, and how she inspired him to try to become an officer himself.

By the time he had finished, he was struggling to maintain his cool exterior. There was nothing that he hated more than talking about his past. He was facing Bogo the entire time but he caught Friedkin by the corner of his eye gulping and scratching her eyes.

_Mama bear is a big softy after all. Should have known. All bear are, after all._

For some reason, it gave him back a bit of his courage.

The buffalo and rhino had finished to scribble their notes. Bogo returned his gaze to the fox.

"Thanks Nicholas. I wish to speak about your grades a bit if you don't mind."

Nick nodded. The grades were marked on a one hundred scale.

"Firearms skills, 80, that's good. First-aid/CPR, 90, but there is a note here 'unusual methods', care to explain?"

"In the street, I had to learn to tend to my own wounds with what I had under my paws. I may or may not have stopped a bleeding wound with lighter fluid and a match."

The chief seemed satisfied by the answer.

"Emergency vehicle operations 85, Self-defense and boxing 58. Is there a reason why you're lacking in this skill?"

"Beside my size, no. No valid one."

"Is there any invalid ones?" It was the first question the rhino had asked. Still with his stone-cold deep voice. It had surprised Nick, although he didn't show the faintest sign of discomfort in his attitude.

_So it's you I must be wary of. Thanks for the heads-up._

"I abhor physical violence. I hate to see it, I hate to use it" he delivered in his most calm voice.

The rhino and Bogo scribbled on their papers.

"Continuing" said Bogo "Domestic violence, Ethics and Integrity all above 70. Investigation, and Criminal Law above 90. Impressive."
"Useful knowledge for a con-mammal" he half-joked.

Nick caught the glimpse of a smile on the corner of the buffalo's mouth.

"Use of non-lethal weapons, 75, there is a note 'depending on the weapon'. Do you wish to make a comment ?"

"I believe I already did."

Both chief Bogo and MacHorn scribbled away.

The one with which he was the most proficient was the tranq-gun. He hated the baton and didn't care for either the taser or the pepper-spray.

"Stress prevention and management 82, Hate crimes and bias crimes 78, mediation skills and conflict management 94, impressive."

Nick nodded with a smile.

"Domestic preparedness, Computers and information systems above 70."

The cape buffalo closed back the file.

"All in all you have a good dossier, your presentation was as complete as anyone could hope for, but I still have a couple questions."

Nick nodded in agreement.

"Why do you want to become a Police Officer ?"

"As you know, I've spent most of my life simply wasting it, aspiring but never having the opportunity to work toward something important. Now I have the opportunity to do good. To be good. I refuse to waste it."

"It says in your dossier that you applied for Precinct One, even though you cannot be called the best among the trainees of your promotion and this precinct only accept the best."

"What is the question sir ?"

"Why did you apply to only this one ?" The Rhino had asked the question.
"Two reasons. First: Precinct One is the most prestigious precinct, operating on all districts, coordinating between all agents. Second: I already know people there." The rhino scribbled something, but the buffalo simply observed Nick.

"And why do you think Precinct One should take you in instead of another aspiring officer."

"I know the ins and outs of the criminal world. I'm the closest thing the Precinct One could have to a legal eye on the inside. To put it simply, I know everyone."

It was his ace in the hole and he just played it. He just offered his criminal network to Bogo on a silver platter. But that was also admitting he did still have connections with criminals.

He knew both those questions were coming and he had prepared for it. Now, he just had to wait for them to release him and wait for the deliberations with other trainees.

The rhino began speaking. Nick felt every word like a lead weight dropped on his shoulder.

"What if I told you that Mayor Swinton expressly asked for you to get into Precinct One. That no matter the deliberation of this jury you would be transferred to it."

The rhino had made a slight pause. Nick throat felt dry. He thought that he really didn't want to know the question that would follow the statement. He had to use every last drop of his willpower to not flinch, to not drop his confident expression. He felt his tail twitch.

"What would be your thoughts on the matter, mister Wilde?" Asked the rhino.

This, he did not foresee. His throat was still dry. His brain was fired up by the adrenaline. What if it was true? Sure he would get into Precinct One, but what if his colleagues learnt that he got here by patronage. What would they think? What would Judy think? She worked her ass off to be Valedictorian, and even if the mayor at the time put a bit of pressure so that she could get the place she deserved, she actually did deserve it. Could he live with himself if him achieving his dream of becoming something that he was proud of, was simply the result of another petty hustle? He couldn't, all would have had been for nothing. What would Judy say in his place? No, it was the wrong way to think about it.

What would he say?

"Mister Wilde?" Came the voice of chief Bogo.

Nick blinked, getting back into his body.

"Do you need me to repeat the question?"

"No sir. I got this."

Nick dropped the composure, dropped the act. It was simply another gamble. He looked at his paws before him, turned to the ceiling. For once he was in an open and honest posture.

"Here is the thing. It would be unfair. To the other aspiring officer who could be better suited to the post than me. That could have worked more, that could deserve it more. It would be unfair to the other officers in the precinct, to impose them an unsuitable officer, to make them work with someone that could be less suited than another officer. Basically it could be a huge liability, and it would be especially unacceptable and irresponsible from the mayor to do so and putting at risk other officers just to pursue some obscure political agenda."
He took back his breathe, ready to continue. None of the interviewer were writing, they were simply listening to him. Since they didn't interrupt, Nick took it as his cue to continue.

"But all this is futile compared to what the real problem is. Placing an unsuitable officer in Precinct One would put a risk upon the citizens of the city. Citizens who I, as an aspiring officer, will soon vow to protect and serve. And betraying the trust, and putting at risk the civilians... It is, I think, something that can be in no case acceptable."

The faces of Bogo and MacHorn were as expressive as stone. Friedkin's face was a mixture of surprise nervousness.

"Thanks mister Wilde. You can leave now."

Nick felt his entire body move toward the door, like getting through an ocean of icy water. Next thing his back was leaning against the wall on the other side of the door.

_I botched it. I botched it. Fuck. Moron. Never lose your cool. Never let them know. I botched it. You absolutely moronic ass of a fox. You just gave them your benediction to not accept you into the precinct. To not accept you into the ZPD. AND IT WAS FUCKING RECORDED._

As he got through the hallway, he took out his phone. He was about to turn it on. He wanted to talk to Judy, apologize, say that they weren't going to work together after all.

But he didn't.

_Fuck this. I should go pack my stuff like the others. Hope they won't send me to Savannah Central. I will never be able to get used to the heat._

It was now noon, but Nick wasn't hungry, he felt a big stone on his stomach and it was here to stay.
There were nine officers around the large table. Towering over them was chief Bogo, next to him
at each side, were sitted Major Friedkin and Lieutenant MacHorn. With them were a badger, a
bear, a wolf, a tiger, a pig and an elephant, respectively precinct's chiefs of Meadowlands, Canal
District, Tundratown, Rainforest District, Sahara Square and Savanna Central.

At the end of the table was sitting a laptop for all of them to see. MacHorn controlled it from his
seat with wireless keyboard and mouse. He launched the call to Mayor Swinton. A warm smiling
face appeared on the screen. Her discreet make-up was tastefully applied, all on her physical
appearance showed kindness and professionalism. She acted as she looked. No wonder why she
landed the job after her brief time as acting mayor upon Bellwether's demise. For a time, Bogo had
suspected they both worked together but the last months proved that he was wrong. That or she was
extremely discreet in her actions.

"Good afternoon mayor, as promised, I'm calling you to examine the last file of the day. The
application of one Nicholas Piberius Wilde."

"Good afternoon to you all. Please proceed as if I weren't there" she answered in her usual high
pitched but calm voice.

By the very act of watching, the observer affects the observed reality.

Chief Bogo showed none of this in his demeanor, opened Nick's file and began talking.

"I won't come back on everything that was said and I won't show you the details of his grades. Just
know that he lacks a bit in physical skills, especially hand to hand combat, and everything that
could involve violence. That being said, he still is fit for duty. His grade in communication are
however completely overwhelming. For the rest he is good, better than most, but not top of the
class."

He put off his glasses waving at MacHorn. The rhino put the video of the interview on screen,
sharing it with the mayor. They all knew that this examination would be the longest of the day. The
cases of the other applying mammals were closed in about ten minutes. None of them would be
surprised if this one took more than half an hour.

"I'd like you all to take a look at this."

The video started, showing Nick in the center of the room, recalling his life before the Jury. At the
end of the monologue, the rhino paused it.

"He's quite composed" said the wolf. "I've seen people that could control their expressions but
speaking about things that clearly eat at him like this and not letting anything show... That's quite
the feat."

"He left out at least as much as he said though" calmly spoke the bear. "His tail was twitching. He
was clearly nervous. You think what he choose to hide will come back to be a problem?"

"Honestly, I doubt it" answered Bogo. "He hides his emotions, but I don't think he lies when he
says he wants to turn his life around. Besides, he wouldn't be the first mammal with a shady past to get into the ZPD."

"He's a fox though, said the tusked mammal."

Everyone stared at the elephant in the room.

"What? It's statistics. There are more criminal and recidivist among foxes than among any other mammal groups. I'm not saying that he's trying to infiltrate the ZPD. I simply want to express my concern toward having a potentially conniving fox among the ranks."

Bogo sighed.

*Bigoted twat.*

"Getting back to this I'd like to show you his answer to the three standards question."

MacHorn skipped to the bit where Nick said why he wanted to be part of the ZPD, Precinct One, and why he was best suited than other mammals.

"I fear, began the badger, that mister Wilde wants to be part of the force for all the wrong reasons. Sure he wants to turn his life around, but is it a reason good enough to become a cop? It's more than a job. Besides, it looks to me that part of his motivation is so that he can stay near his friend, officer Hopps."

"Friendship between colleagues is encouraged, don't you know?" Asked the wolf, a bit of irony in his tone. "And I have among the rank of the Tundratown's precinct, mammal's that had way better reasons to become cop. Let me tell you, they all aren't the best officers."

"Friendship is one the reason why he wants to work in precinct one." said Bogo. "The fact that he did state it shows to me how much he knows about himself. A quality in my opinion."

"And how about the answer he gave to the third question?" Asked the trunked chief. "It clearly shows that he still does have connection to the criminal underworld."

"Yes, those are called indics." retorted the wolf. "To me, it seems like a huge asset, if he knows how to maintain them. And judging by his profile, he does."

The elephant had a slight upset look on his face, but quickly hid it. Clearly his concern didn't seem to be shared by anyone.

"Never liked that last question." declared the pig. "Whatever you answer, you have to be dishonest by assuming things about the others that you have no way of knowing. I know how it's an useful one, but it's still a low blow."

"In his case though, he didn't have to assume much." answered the cape buffalo. "What he said was completely true."

"I think we can now deliberate chief Bogo." declared the bear.

"Not quite," cut MacHorn "there is one last thing you must see."

He pushed play, showing the last question asked to the fox. All people in the room, except for MacHorn, Bogo and Friedkin had a look of astonishment mixed with concern.

MacHorn paused the video.
"Before you ask, no it isn't true. The mayor didn't order such a thing. It was my idea to ask this and chief Bogo didn't completely approve of it. Now before anyone talks, I want you to see how he answered."

The other mammals were still aghast. The rhino proceeded to play the rest of the video.

They could all see the exact moment Nick decided to throw down his mask. The exact moment he decided to give an honest answer to a really dangerous question despite what he showed of himself during the rest of the interview. When the video ended, they all had to take a minute to breathe. The tension seemed to have seeped out of the screen and wash out on all mammals in the room.

"Did he just.. ?" Began the bear.

"There were a lot of way to answer this. He chose the most risky, honest and fair one" stated the elephant. "I changed my mind Adrian. If you don't want him in your precinct, I call dibs."

The buffalo chuckled.

"If this isn't another hustle, and to me it doesn't seem like one, the most incorruptible cop of the city will be a fox. It's not that he's ready to not be working in precinct one, he's ready to abandon this chance if it had come to this. It was written on his face."

"Still," said the bear " though mister Wilde's heart is in the right place, I'm not completely convinced him in Precinct One, or even as cop is the best idea."

Silence had fallen on the room. The mayor ended up breaking it.

"So what will it be Adrian ?"

The interview videos were supposed to be erased after the examination, however Bogo made a copy for himself on an USB drive. He called it insurance. It was information and information was power. Better keep it in his pocket.

Nick was sitting in the classroom with the other trainees. The usual chatter had been replaced by a nervous silence. They were all waiting for the deliberations. Nick was slumbering on the table, unable to cope with what was for him the biggest failure of his life. And seeing how it hadn't been a fairy-tale, it surely meant something.

He never really connected with the other trainees. Most of them were wary of him. He knew why, he was a fox and an ex-con. Most of them knew it. Besides, they were all cops in training. It wasn't the crowd he was used to perform with.

The door opened.

"Atten-HUT !" The loud voice of major Friedkin called everyone's attention.

Immediately, every mammal sat right up, getting as straight as they could. Nick thought that he should play the part until the end and followed, straightening up his back on the chair.

"You will now be called one after the other to get your letter of assignment. Read it carefully, the diploma ceremony date and location are also stated on it. Do not lose this paper, it can serve as an acting diploma in case something happens to the real one"
She called everyone. Nick tried to keep his attention focused on the bear. Around him, the other mammals began quietly chattering about seeing each other at their one precinct, or saying goodbye since they weren't being sent at the same place. He closed his mind to what was happening around him.

Nick was now half-asleep, still straight on his chair, when he heard his name being called.

"Nicholas Piberius Wilde."

The fox got down from his seat and walked straight at the white bear. She gave him the last envelope and a cheerful wink.

*What?*

He didn't take the time to get back to his seat to tear through the paper. In less than two seconds, he had the letter in hand, reading it frantically.

'Mr Nicholas Piberius Wilde

The city of Zootopia and the ZPD are honored to announce your that you have passed your examination.

You are hereby notified of your transfer to...'

*What?*

"What?" repeated Nick out loud, an expression of shock and disbelief on his face.

Every trainee was looking at Nick. Slick Nick was wearing something that wasn't his usual smug grin. Conscious of the stares, he quickly got back to his trademark smile.

"What's the matter Nick" said a lion, "you're transferred to Tundratown?"

Nick showed the whole room the paper he was holding in his hand, his biggest smile of victory plastered on his face.

"Worse. Precinct One."

It was the last day.

She was here and there it was.

The last day.

The day which would be her last waiting.

The last freaking day.

And she was absolutely and utterly overjoyed.

Nick had finished the academy for 4 days now but he had been so completely busy, he hadn't been able to come and see her.

First he had to work on paperwork for the bank. There had been a problem and they wouldn't release his money. They were suspicious of a new client, coming with all this cash, opening an
They had instantly froze it as soon he had it deposited. He had to call the precinct so they would vouch for him and let him be able to use his own money.

Next he had to find a flat, and if possible near the Precinct. He did need to call in a few favours but he ended with something decent, for a fair price. It was in a nice old building in the center of the city, most of his neighbors were families and they all looked surprised to see a fox living in this part of the city. The downside however was that his new home was on the eighth floor, and that the elevator refused to go above the sixth.

Lastly, he had to buy loads of stuff that he never really needed. Like a bed. And sheets. And a fridge. He tried to buy as little as possible. In his mind, all situations remained temporary, that meant that the more he would buy and store in his flat, the more he would have to move later.

Judy had received the permission from Bogo to attend to the graduation ceremony. Mayor Swinton had called her and said that she would have to do a speech. After her last debacle in front of the cameras, Judy wasn't sure it was such a good idea, but the mayor convinced and helped her to write it.

She was now seated backstage, her heart pumping and racing.

_This will go well. I now the speech by heart. There is no way I'm gonna screw this up. The press presence was kept to a minimum. They won't question me. I'm good..._

_And I get to see Nick!_

Her heart was racing even more now. The perspective of seeing her new best friend in the flesh after six months of absence was overwhelming. She was bouncing on her chair trying to calm down. Bogo's head showed between two ZPD blue curtains.

"You're up, officer Hopps."

She jumped down from the oversized chair, containing the bounce in her step as she passed the curtain and walked to the lectern, on the center of the stage. There were fewer people than at her own ceremony. Most of them probably from the new officer's families. In front of the stage, in neat ranks, were the ex-trainees in their new uniforms. As she made her way she barely contained herself to run at Nick and hug him.

_Gosh, I missed him._

She stood behind the lectern, tested the microphone and began talking.

"When I was a kid, I thought zootopia was this perfect place where everyone got along, and where anyone could be anything. Turns out life is a bit more complicated than a slogan on a bumper sticker. Real life is messy. We all have limitations, we all make mistakes. Which means, hey, glass half-full, we all have a lot in common."

She made a slight pause, taking her breath.

"And the more we try to understand one another, the more exceptional each of us will be. But we have to try. So no matter what type of animal you are, to the biggest elephant, to our first fox... I implore you, try. Try to make the world a better place."

Raising his aviator mirror glasses, Nick had winked at her in encouragement. Her last words were spoken with a big smile.
"Look inside yourself and recognize that change starts with you. It starts with me. It starts with all of us."

The officers went on the stage, one after the other, shaking Mayor Swinton's hooves and getting their insignia placed on their chest by Judy. A little flight of stairs had been set on the stage so that she wouldn't look ridicule trying to reach the biggest officer's chests.

Last came Nick, and this time, he was happy to come last. She approached him and hanged his badge.

"Congratulations officer Wilde."

"Thanks officer Hopps."

"I'm so happy I want to hug you." She blurted in a whispered tone.

_I said it. I thought I would only think it._

She felt her face slowly get warmer under Nick's smiling gaze.

"Time for that later. For now we have to smile for the cameras" answered Nick as low as her.

She turned back and all the new officers stood on a line, while the journalist took picture upon picture.

"Nick, how does it feel to be the first fox officer ?"

"Judy, are you comfortable working with a fox ?"

"Is it a political statement from the new mayor ? Did she push for it ?"

Chief Bogo and officer Pennington went to stand before the cameras, and slowly drove the journalists away from the stage.

"I said, no questions" spoke the deep voice of the cape buffalo.

"Now what ?" Asked Nick loudly, as the voices of the crowd were slowly dying out.

"Now we party !" Screamed a voice from the public.

Judy recognized Wolford who had thrown his cap in the air, quickly followed by all the officers, new and otherwise.

They quickly all got down from the stage, Wolford and Clawhauser had begun distributing papers to all officers presents. There was an address and a time. The dresscode was 'uniform, with no stripes'. In ZPD language, that meant anyone could come as they want, and that rank had no meaning during the festivities. Judy quickly got her own piece of paper followed by Nick. Next, they went away from all the people that had begun chatting with each other. They turned around the stage, a bit recessed from eyes and ears.

"Nick, I missed you so much !"

She jumped at his neck, giving him one of the biggest and warmest hug he had ever received. He returned it gladly.

She let him go, putting back her hind paws on the ground. She wiped a happy tear that was
threatening to fall from the corner of her eye.

*I missed you too, Carrots, more than I thought I would.*

"You rabbits are so emotional."

"Daw, you missed me too." She teased.

"Okay, just a bit" His said, wrapping his arms around her shoulders, pulling her in a second hug.

Judy was surprised by this half-spontaneous show of feelings. She let herself go in Nick's warm embrace, closing her eyes. Nick couldn't stop himself to smell her scent. It took him back to their first hug under the bridge, emotions flowing like-

*Is she nuzzling my chest? I think she is nuzzling my chest... Is it weird? Yes it is. Does it bother me? No it doesn't.*

As Judy pulled back from him again he told her.

"Okay, enough hugs for one year, a bit more and I'll smell more bunny than fox."

"And it's a problem because?" She asked in a challenging tone.

"I wouldn't want mammals with a good sense of smell thinking I'm an easy hustle."

"You are an easy hustle, sweetheart" she stated turning back from him and giving him a teasing glance, while leaving in the direction of the other officers.

*You're gonna pay for this one, Carrots.*
"So" said Nick, as they were closing in on their destination, "is it usual that the new recruits get wasted on the eve of their first day at work?"

"I don't know, I played it safe on my first day and stayed only an hour, drinking orange juice."

"Because they didn't have carrot juice?"

"Yeah."

"I'm impressed Judy, you're more of a party-mammal than I thought you would be."

"Hardy-har, could you be even more sarcastic?"

"I sure can, but my sarcasm is so advanced than simple-minded mammals end up thinking I'm stupid."

She lightly punched his arm as an answer.

It was around 7PM when they had arrived before the door of the building they were looking for. Nick pressed a button, calling at the intercom.

"Who is it?"

With the background noise and the static coming from the intercom, they couldn't make out whose voice it was.

"Nick and Judy" the bunny answered.

A loud noise signified the unlocking of the door and they entered the building. The inside was dim-lighted, the wall were made of a nice wood-panelling. The was no way some low-ranking officer at the ZPD could afford a flat in a building like this. They made their way into the elevator, going up to the tenth floor.

"Who could afford something here?"

"Firsts who come to mind are chief Bogo and the Mayor."

"The mayor, you say?" Nick's brain had instantly gone back to hustler mode, a predatory grin slowly creeping on his face.

"You're reformed, remember? Officer and all?"

"You mean, I have now the best cover."

Mischievous grin, mocking eyes. It was something she hated at first, now she loved seeing it. She giggled, she had to admit he was funny.

"Besides, I highly doubt the mayor would set a cop party in her appartment."
As they arrived in the tenth floor hallway, they heard music and cheering coming from one of the doors. The knocked, and a big smile plastered on the big face of a big feline appeared as the door opened.

"Heeeey" squealed the cheetah, "you guys made it, please come in."

He took their coat and hand put them on them table in the corridor.

"You both look fabulous."

Nick was wearing his signature green hawaiian shirt with a pair of short. Judy was wearing a pink shirt and brown khakis.

"Is he already drunk ?" Whispered the fox to the rabbit.

"Far from it, it's the most calm you'll ever see him."

"So" asked the big cat in a distracted tone, "do you both always wear shirts matching your eyes ?"

They looked at each other.

He's right, thought Judy.

But her eyes are more sparkling amethyst than pink, thought Nick

What the hell are we doing ?

They broke their interlocked gazes and turned back to face the cheetah. Whose happy face looked like it was waiting for something to happen.

"You alright Big Ben ?" Asked Nick.

"Sure" came a giggly answer. "Follow me."

They entered a large room, one of the wall was a giant bay window, opening to a long balcony. In one corner was an open kitchen repurposed as a bar for the evening.

It was a flat alright, one that had to cost around three thousand dollars a month seeing where it was placed in the city.

"I must ask, did you rent this place for the evening ?"

"It's mine actually" answered Clawhauser "inherited from an uncle."

"I don't suppose you'd rent out part of it to your colleagues ?" Asked Judy.

"Already do, I'm living with Wolford and MacHorn."

"Wait" stopped Judy. "You live with Wolford and MacHorn. You live with Herold ? He's okay with you throwing parties here ?"

"When I do, he crashes at his friends. I try to restrain myself though, since he's paying rent. I don't want to inconvenience him."

"Wait" stopped Nick. "MacHorn has friends ?" He had delivered it in the exact same tone as Judy, even mimicking her higher pitched voice.
They stared at him for a second and cracked into laughter.

"Yeah, he does" answered Clawhauser between two giggles, "I never met them though."

To Nick's opinion, it was going to be a big party. Judy pointed to him the mammals from Precinct One, not a fifth of all those that were here. Clawhauser had invited officers from all the precincts around the city. There had to be around thirty mammals mingling in the large living room and the balcony.

"I meant to ask you before but I had forgotten" said Nick to Judy. "Were you listening to gazelle when you were writing your speech ?"

"Maybe" she mused.

"It showed. I thought it was nice."

"Thanks."

She presented him to Clawfith, the only one of the three new recruits who didn't have to work this evening.

"Nice to meet you Nick, the name is Clawfit-"

"Yiska Clawfith, I know."

The wolverine raised an inquisitive eyebrow.

"Don't be surprised, I know everyone."

"Yes, he does." Completed Judy.

The mustelid raised his glass, with a conniving look.

"To knowing everyone."

They all downed their drink.

"Judy, tell me you spiked your carrot juice with some alcohol."

"I don't intend to roll under the table tonight officer Slick."

Nick and Yiska looked at each other, mischief on their face. They both took her by the shoulder, dragging her near the bar.

"Guys, I'll drink a bit, but later."

"You won't escape this, Fluff." He showed his teeth, in a carnivorous grin. "I'm a predator, I genetically cannot allow it."

She shivered a bit, the sight of fangs always did that to here. It wasn't only fear, but also something else that she didn't understand. And it made her wary.

"I'm okay guys, really..."

"Hey, Clawhauser, I need your help here !" Shouted the fox, across the living room. Some mammals turned around with smiles on their faces then got back to their mingling.
The cheetah emerged from between two groups of people, a bounce still in his steps.

"What is it Nick ?"

"The ZPD's face refuses to drink." Answered the wolverine.

"Ooooh, I'm afraid we can't have that officer. You are at a party, you must at least down a few. It's standard procedure."

Clawhauser turned back to the bar, taking a bunch of bottles and starting to brew some mysterious cocktail.

Judy looked at the ceiling, she didn't foresee the potential of Nick, Ben and the newbie had to cause her trouble.

"I said I would drink. At my own pace."

She tried to put on a serious face but the cheery mood of those three was just too contagious.

"Well, I ask that you at least try this." said the chubby mammal, giving her a strange blue-colored drink. "But if you don't like it, I'm afraid my diagnostic of your condition will have to be quite severe."

"And what would it be, officer Donuts ?" She asked, drinking a bit of the strange blue mixture.

I taste blueberries... And carrots ? And rhum... And a bunch of other stuff I can't identify. It's excellent !

"I'd have to declare you unfit to party."

The cheetah's expression stayed serious for two seconds, and then he wiggled his eyebrows, grinning from ear to ear.

The wolverine choked on his drink, Judy struggled to keep from spitting hers. Nick, having seen a joke coming, had had the precaution to wait for the punchline, he simply gave a chuckle.

*Okay this time, he must have drunk.*

Not waiting for the laughter to die down, the cheetah started going back to his previous group, pointing a big bowl with his chubby paw.

"There is more of this cocktail in the punch-bowl. Help yourselves to it."

Judy fondled her pocket, getting a small pillbox and took two of them, making them slide with a sip of her drink.

"You sick Carrots ?"

"Nope, girl stuff."

Nick's ears slumped.

"Oh. Sorry."

"No problem slick. Come, let's mingle."
At 10 PM, the party was slowly nearing its peak. The speaker were playing some Gazelle and some mammals had started moving their body to the beat.

Judy was only at her second drink and dancing with the arm that wasn't holding her drink. She was looking at Clawith, who had drunk more than enough, hitting on a hyena officer from Savanna central.

Nick appeared at Judy's side. She was fairly certain it was his fifth whisky, but if the fox was drunk, he was showing none of it.

"I didn't know Yiska was gay" he said.

"It's male he's talking to ? I don't think he is. With all he has drunk, I wouldn't be surprise if he thought he was actually talking to another wolverine."

The male hyena seemed to be drunk as well. He had a weird expression on his face, between amused and disgusted.

"Well, said Nick. Either our good drunken gulo will end up having a weird regretful night, or a punch in the face. And as much as I'm always up for a good laugh, this is not how I want this party to turn."

Nick approached the wolverine, putting a friendly arm around his shoulder, whispering something in the mustelid's ear. His eyes instantly shot wide open. He looked at the hyena, seeming to apologize and got back to Judy, Nick helping him to walk.

"I think you should go lie down for a bit buddy."

They went to find Clawhauser who helped then set him up in his bedroom. The place was a shrine to Gazelle, but also to every music icon. Freddy Merclawry, Michael Jackalson, The Bleatles to only name a few. His tastes were really eclectic, and they saw a huge collection of vinyl records in pristine condition. They seemed to have been stored here, along with an old but clean record player, for the duration of the party. Clawhauser went back to the bar to make some more punch and switch the empty bottles for full ones.

"I thought the guy was just some kind of predictable pop-loving ball of happiness. He has great taste in music. And those vinyls... I'd have made a haul with them. He knows what's good."

"Clawhauser is full of surprise. There is more to him than meet the eyes."

"Are you in love officer Carrots ? I thought you only loved me" the fox said in a fake hurt voice. "Dumb fox. But just so you know, the big happy cat is the best shot in all Precinct One."

"You're bullshitting me."

"Not even a bit."

Still in the corridor, their heard loud knocks against the door.

"ZPD, OPEN UP." shouted a loud muffled voice.

As they warily opened the door, they saw FitzAntlers, Bogo, Wolford and Blackfur, the arms full of bottles and pizza-boxes. There was also a big box of donut on Bogo's pile of pizza. They let
them pass and heard a loud squeal come from the living-room.

"Ooooooooh guys, you shouldn't have brought anything. Well, you can put this here. And let me hold this. You brought me donuts? Thanks so much!"

Nick and Judy went back to the party. FitzAntlers had already gone to spend time with her ex-colleagues. Wolford was helping set up the pizza while talking with Blackfur. Clawhauser was trying to pick a donut while Bogo was holding open the box, an annoyed look on his face.

"Hey Adrian, how's it hanging?" Fired the fox.

"I'm good, officer Wilde" answered the buffalo, "I hope officer Hopps is keeping you out of trouble."

"I sure am, chief."

Judy had almost finished off her second drink. She wasn't even tipsy yet, but she still was asking herself if another drink would be a good idea. Nick with a smooth sleight of hand switched her almost empty drink to a full one.

*Guess I'll have to drink this now.*

Bogo lifted a brow, and got back to his annoyed expression while the cheetah was still hesitating. They abandoned the chief to the hands of his tormentor, to approach Wolford and Blackfur who were having an animated discussion.

"What are you both talking about?" asked Judy.

"Well" said the wolf "I was saying to officer Blackfur here, that the best pawsian restaurant was two block from here, the Eastern Pawgod. They have the best nems, and their fish is the freshest."

"And I'm simply stating to officer Wolford that if you want to taste real pawsian food, the place to go was the Violet Blue Sea Horse in Tundratown. Best gyozas in town. And their fish is way better than in any other places."

The panda had her arms crossed and a playful challenging expression on her face.

"Yeah, if you care for frozen sashimi" retorted the lupus with a chuckle. "The Pawgod's are still the freshest."

"You know Wolford" intervened Nick, "Everything freezes in Tundratown. And I know for a fact that all the Pawgod calls salmon is trout fished from the city's canals, more or less legally. But on this I must agree, they're probably the freshest."

With a suspicious smile, the wolf turned to Nick.

"And how would you know that?"

"That would be telling. In an unrelated topic, I really should renew my fishing licence."

They all chuckled, Wolford raising his paws.

"I admit my defeat, but I'll have to verify this myself. We should go together at our next common day off."

"You're on your own" said Nick. "I can't digest pawsian food."
"And I don't eat meat, fish or otherwise. Sorry Wolford" added Judy.

"It's just you and me then, big guy" smiled officer Blackfur.

The two officers shook on it.

"I didn't introduce myself properly, the name's Nicholas Wilde. Please call me Nick" He shook both Wolford's and Blackfur's hand.

"Augustyn Wolford."

"Wight Blackfur." She looked at him suspiciously "I'm pretty sure we already met."

Does she remember?

"Did we now ? I'm sure I would have recognized your charming smile." 

"Yes, I remember now, you were working in an electronics shop if I recall..."

She had a smile that clearly said there was more to it. More that she would tell.

Okay she does remember. Abort, abort.

His warm smile still on his face, he cut the conversation.

"Oh you know, I did a lot to get by before joining the ZPD. I'm sure you've been to a few of the places I worked to at the time."

"How long ago did you meet ?" Asked Wolford, not really interested by the conversation, his gaze turned toward the bar.

"More than a decade ago I think, it's kind of hazy" answered Nick, who could perfectly recall the time of his first two arrests.

The panda acquiesced, nodding her head, her eyes looking right into Nick's. He had, however, no trouble maintaining his front of serenity. Judy was looking at them both.

Please don't hate each other. Please don't hate each other.

"Come, let's take a drink Wight" said Wolford, attempting to pull her by the arm, oblivious to the slight tension that had begun to grow.

"Sorry guys" apologized the ursine while looking at her phone. "Chief Bogo and me have to go, we just dropped by to say hi and help carry the pizza. We have work to do and with us gone, the precinct is understaffed. Perhaps next time !"

She waved at them, leaving through the corridor, where Bogo was waiting for her.

"She's nice, said Nick."

"Yeah she's great, but a bit distant." Nodded the wolf.

"You think ?" Asked Judy. "I didn't really notice. Maybe just to you" she joked.

"Maybe" he chuckled. "But you know me, I grow on people."

"Like strangling vine ?" Deadpanned Nick.
All laughing, they made their way to the bar.

"Damn it, the punch bowl is empty" Nick didn't care much for carrots, but he was curious to know how it tasted.

"You haven't tried it yet ?" Asked Judy.

"Nope. Well too bad, another time then"

"Try it in my glass" She said giving him the almost full drink.

"You sure carrots ?"

"Afraid to catch cooties ?"

Nick took the drink, and tasted it. He was immediately hit by a flavor of carrots and blueberries. Usually he didn't like the taste of the root, but the mix, was great.

"It tastes kind of like us." he blurted, surprised.

"I know right ? Blueberries and carrots, it shouldn't be mixed, but works perfectly well."

He took another sip and gave her back the glass, trying to find where the rhum could fit in the metaphor.

"Your attention please ?" The cheery voice of the now half-drunk cheetah was amplified by the loud speaker. He had a microphone on his hand. Everyone had turned their eyes to him.

"It's now past midnight ! And I think our new recruits deserve a toast on their first day of work." He raised a glass of some alcoholic beverage. Bottles were taken around, refilling everyone's glasses, Wolford was distributing plastic cups. Judy saw Clawfith from the corner of her eyes filling a glass with apple-juice, he looked like he was going to slow down for the rest of the night. Near him, FitzAntlers was raising a half-empty bottle of vodka. Nick simply opened a light beer. The Rabbit had her fifth half-finished drink in her paw. She had taken it slow, but she felt her head was a bit light and decided it was her last drink for the night.

"TO OUR NEWBIES !" he shouted while punching some keys on the laptop serving as a DJ console. Immediately, a 'Try Everything' techno remix began blasting from the loudspeaker. Everyone downed their drink and the cheetah jumped on the dance floor, dancing to the choreography of the song. Most mammals followed suit, the until-now slow festivities turning into an all-out dance-party.

... "You sure you don't want to sleep in tonight I wouldn't want you to have an accident on your way home." A drunken Clawhauser was holding onto the open door. A dozen of mammals were slumped on the floor of the living room on improvised beds. As much as Nick was drunk and tired, he longed to sleep in a real bed, preferably his. Judy was half-asleep, leaning on his arm.

"Thanks for the offer, but I'd prefer to go home. It's only fifteen minutes away on foot, perhaps a bit more with how packed I am" For all he had drunk, Nick was still holding up pretty well. Knowing how to handle drink was a skill he had had learnt to master years ago.

They left the building, starting to walk through the night, the street light rhythmically brightening their steps. The cold of the early morning sobered and woke Judy a bit. She didn't drink much, but
she wasn't used to drink this much.

"We're working tomorrow. I mean today. We shouldn't have stayed this late."

"It was a great party, I'm glad we did. I simply hope my assignment won't be too taxing. I will be in no condition to do anything physical today"

"I don't know what task will be assigned to you. As the 'token bunny', my first day was parking duty, I hope the chief won't do the same to you"

"I still can't believe we met on your first day of work. What a coincidence."

They turned at a street corner, a comfortable silence stood between them. Their steps resonated on the empty street, only the sound of sirens in the distance were disturbing the calmness of the city night.

"So you worked at an electronic store?" at her tone, Nick understood that she knew it was something else entirely.

Nick took an annoyed expression, but he slowly sighed, a tiredness creeping in the corner of his eyes.

"More in than at. Better I tell you the story than you learn it from sergeant Blackfur I guess." He took a deep breath, remembering the events of each of the two nights she had caught him.

"I was fourteen, she caught me the first night as I was picking the lock from the backdoor of an electronic store in Rainforest. I didn't even triggered the alarm, she was simply on night patrol. I was careless and unlucky. Told her I was simply looking for a place to sleep for the night. It was what I usually said when people caught me where I shouldn't belong at the time."

"Really?" Judy had a hard time people would believe anything a fox could say after catching him picking a lock.

"It usually worked, believe it or not. People tend to believe the scrawny kid that knew how to pull a poor and innocent look. After I became an adult, though, I had to find other means of persuasions. I thought she believed me at the time, in hindsight she clearly didn't."

"And what was your second arrest?" refocused the rabbit with an inquisitive expression.

I'm drunk, am I? I wouldn't tell her this story if I wasn't.

"The first time I was simply doing a bit of sight spotting, assessing the security. She caught me two days later, just after I broke in the store. I had filled a sports bag with phones and handheld consoles. The other cops were running after my mates. That was how it worked, if the cops came, we were to disperse, every-mammal for themselves. There was a rendezvous point where we shared the haul afterwards."

"How did she catch you?"

"I like to think she was really good, but I was simply careless. I had run two blocks with my stash on the back, she caught me by the arm on the corner of a back alley, shoving her badge to my face. I tried to resist, she tried to pin me to the wall, I panicked and that's where I gnawed her arm."

"She must have been pissed."
"I thought she would be, I had the taste of her blood everywhere in my mouth. Let me tell you, panda blood tastes weird. She gave that look between 'I'm not here to hurt you' and 'is this little tantrum of yours over?'. After that, I calmed down, she let me back to the ground. And gave me the biggest slap to the face I ever received. Hooffington's punch were a joke compared to that. Then she gave me a choice between putting my ass in a cell or a promise I wouldn't ever steal anything again."

"That's not really a promise you kept, is it?" Asked Judy in disbelief.

"You hurt me Carrots, I always keep my promises. I kept this one like the others. I don't know how she could believe I would, though."

"You still hustled."

"It's not stealing if a mammal willingly gives me their money, even if it's because of a lie. Politics do it all the time and most of them don't end up in jail."

"You have a twisted sense of logic."

They were now in the hallway to Nick's flat, he struggled to slide the key into the keyhole. Soon they were both inside.

"You're the guest, you take the bed. I'll sleep on the couch" Nick had gotten rid of his tie and had started opening his shirt.

"No way, I'm not letting you sleep on your own couch" retorted Judy.

"Believe me, it's one of the nicest place I've ever slept, I'm even doing myself a favor" He let himself fall in the squeaking old seats. "It's clearly more comfortable". The mischievous grin was here once again.

"So you'd let me sleep on a rough bed while you get to have the snug couch ? Way to be a gentlemammal..." She answered with her own taunting expression. Nick got up, scrambling in the direction of his bedroom.

"Okay, I lied, the bed is clearly more comfortable" He got rid of his shirt, revealing a well maintained red and cream colored fur. "Since we both consider each other's comfortableness to be way too important, why don't we both sleep in the bed ? It's clearly big enough" he continued.

Judy, couldn't see his face, since he had now his back turned toward her, but she was certain the fox was still grinning.

"But I must warn you" he said, unzipping his pants, turning to face her "I sleep naked"

There was only one way to call what was on Nick's face : a shit-eating grin.

"Well I don't, so you better lend me a t-shirt. And no peeking while I take off my bra."

Later, Judy would put the responsibility of her actions on the alcohol, but she wasn't even a bit tipsy. It was a challenge. And Judy never backed down from a challenge. She walked past him, unbuttoning her own shirt.

To Judy's disappointment, that didn't even faze the fox. Though that did take him aback, he wasn't
drunk enough to let it show.

He gave her something to put on while holding a paw on to cover his eyes in an overdramatic pose. They both crept up under the sheets, Nick had kept his brief, not wanting to shock the little rabbit.

"I'm glad you're here, Nick"

"You mean, with you in bed?"

"Dumb fox. I'm glad you became a cop. I'm glad you're coming into Precinct One."

"I know you can't do anything without me. What kind of mammal would I be if I let a poor little bunny on her own in the big city?"

She shot a tired fist to his shoulder. He caught it effortlessly, holding it in his paw for a few seconds, his emerald gaze locked into Judy's sleepy amethyst eyes.

"I'm glad too Carrots."

He let go of her paw and they both closed their eyes, going to sleep, with smiles on their faces.
Waking up was hard. With how late they had left the party, they couldn't have slept more than five hours. It was particularly hard on Nick, foxes being nocturnal mammals. He groaned as Judy shook him to wake him up.

"Nooo, let me sleep."

"No way I'll let you be late on your first day, get up while I take a shower"

"I've change my mind" cried the fox "I'll go back to selling pawpsicles, waking up is too hard" He hid his face under his pillow.

Big problems asked for big solutions.

Judy pulled the sheet off the sleepy fox, letting it fall on the floor.

"C-cold, you sly bunny" The fox got up and stretched, Judy glancing at his lean and discreetly muscular figure.

Not so bad for a fox.

She took her clothes and went to the bathroom, while Nick, still only wearing his briefs, started the coffee machine and put some bread in the toaster.

She had finished to wash herself in around five minutes, and looked at the only towel hanging from the wall.

Hope Nick is okay with sharing this.

She wrapped herself in the large towel. It had the pleasant smell of her friend. The bunny began drying herself but stopped when she spotted an absent feature from the shared showers of Grand Pangolin Arms. A wall-mounted fur drier. She quickly turned-it on, getting rid of most of the dampness in her fur in a matter of seconds. It hot air blowing on her body was a delight. She then used the towel to get rid of the remaining moisture and put back her hairs in place. Dressed with her clothes from the day before, she exited the bathroom.

The fox was already wearing his uniform.

"Hope you like black coffee, Carrots, I don't have any milk. Or sugar."

"I only drink decaf. Caffeine is like cocaine for bunnies. With a heart failure risk"

"What happens if a bunny snort cocaïne ?" asked the fox with an interested look.

"They explode. Boom" She answered, miming an atomic mushroom with her hands.

...
locker room, where she always kept a spare uniform.

The officers were talking and horsing around in the bullpen. Half of them had dark rings under their eyes. Most of them were talking about the party from the previous night.

"Hey Clawfith, were you hitting on Hyenston last night?" asked Grizzoli.

"What makes you say that?" The wolverine asked in return, a broken poker face on his tired snout.

"This picture!" Answered Fangmeyer, showing his phone screen where the drunken officer could be seen trying to smooth-talk the Hyena. "Hope you got his number!"

"I didn't, he was out of my league." joked the mustelid, trying to look less embarrassed than he was.

"You three shouldn't tease the newbies, you know there is way more embarrassing proofs on each one of you"

"You got nothing Rhinowitz" shouted Wolford.

"Christmas 2012" Simply answered the Rhino. The other officers stopped teasing the wolverine, but that didn't mean the bullpen got more quiet.

Chief Bogo walked in, looking at his files.

"All right, all right, enough. Shut it!" He shouted the last sentence, the room instantly getting quiet. "We have some new recruits with us this morning, including our first fox" Nick was in fact the only one from the last promotion to have made it to Precinct One. "Who cares."

"Ha! You should have your own line of inspirational greeting cards, sir!" Retorted the fox, with his trademark grin.

"Shut your mouth, Wilde!" All the officer in the room snickered silently.

"Assignments: Officers Grizzoli, Fangmeyer, Delgato, - Tundratown SWAT. Snarlov, Higgins, Wolford – undercover." As he enunciated each officer's assignment, they got up and left the room, taking a file while passing near the lectern "Hopps, Wilde... Parking duty. Dismissed." Judy and Nick gave a shocked look to the chief.

"Just kidding!" Grinned the buffalo, happy to have caught the fox off-guard "We have reports of a street racer tearing up Savannah Central. Find him. Shut him down."

... 

Judy was behind the wheel while Nick was licking a pawpsicle to cool down. Savannah central was a warm place. Too much for the foxe's taste.

"So, are all rabbits bad drivers or is it just you?"

Judy slammed the break, sending Nick forward, getting the pawpsicle stuck to his face.

"Oops, Sorry." She grinned, not sorry at all.

"Sly bunny"

"Dumb fox"
"You know you love me."

"Do I know that ?" she began, a reflective look on her face "Yes. Yes I do"

Her answer sent a strange unfamiliar and warm feeling into Nick's chest. Before he could answer, a red car zipped right in front of them, way over speed limit.

I think there is our perp. This is going to be fuuuun.

They chased after the car through Savannah central, revolving light on, siren screaming. The chased car was more agile, but the police cruiser made up for it in power-horses. They ended up stopping him on an avenue after he almost failed a turn and had to halt to a complete stop to take back control of his vehicle.

"Sir, you were going 115 miles per hour, I hope you have a good explanation." The window rolled down, revealing a nervous Flash. Judy couldn't hide her shocked expression.

So sloth can be fast.

"Flash, Flash, hundred yard dash !?" said the amused fox's voice.

"Niiiiiick" came a slow voice.

... 

"I'm sorry I had to take away his licence Nick"

"Don't apologize Carrots, maybe Flash is a good driver, but I don't have any trust on the guy's reflex. His car might be fast, but he is still sloooow."

"Stereotyping the sloths ? I thought you were better than this Slick."

They were sitting on the outside of a coffee-shop, looking at the passing mammals. The other customers glanced at them, surprised expression on their faces. Judy wondered if it was because a fox and a rabbit were sharing a snack, wearing uniforms, or they simply had recognized her. Lost in her thought, she didn't see the sheep that had approached her.

"Hello officer Hopps, I personally wanted to express my gratitude !"

She looked at the sheep in a surprised expression. She was used to predators coming up to her, to thank her, but not to prey. And since Bellwether's case, she couldn't help herself being suspicious around caprines.

"Huh. Thanks, but what for ?"

"Not all prey agree with me but the divide between us and predators is far from being a good thing"

Well that's nice to see open-minded mammals.

The sheep offered his hoof and she gladly shook it. She was a bit ashamed to take all the credit, even more since Nick was sitting right next to her.

"You know, officer Wilde here took an equally important part in the case, he also deserves your gratitude"

The sheep glanced at the fox, an unsure look on his face, as if he had just spotted him. Nick put on
his warmest toothless smile and offered his hand. The sheep hesitantly shook it, his expression of disdain badly hidden under a fake smile.

"I'll let you two to your coffee, have a nice day" nervously waved the caprine, taking his leave. 

As he was leaving, Judy shook her head in disbelief.

"He comes to thank me about the case, and then he acts like a frighten kit around a predator. What was his deal ?"

_You're to good and too innocent for this world Judy, I wish you'd never change._

"He didn't react like this because I'm a predator Carrots" began Nick in an uninterested tone "He reacted like this because I'm a fox." He said it like he was stating the obvious, his gaze lost in white space.

"What ?"

"Please Carrots, you're not so naive. There was a time you too had your fair share of bias toward the likes of me"

Judy blinked. He was right, she had been quick to judge him before knowing him.

"If a dumb bunny like you could learn not to judge books by their covers, there must be hope for this city yet" He still wasn't looking at her, but she could see the corner of his mouth slowly turn into a grin.

"You can't be serious for more than five minutes can you ?"

"You know what happens if a fox stays serious for too long ?" Nick had a dead serious look on his face.

"No, what ?"

"They explode. Boom" he answered, miming an atomic mushroom with his hands.

_The End_

_Of the Prologue_
"Where are we going Nick?"

"It's a surprise"

They had just got down from the ZUG and were now walking side by side in the street of the Rainforest district. Judy had gotten used to see surprising things in the city. The infrastructure was a wonder to look at. Mammals of every size could find ways to get to every point with minimal risks. Of course the shortest ones had more chances to be crushed by the biggest ones, but everything was made in way that it could be prevented. Distinctive paths, underground passages, and even slides. In this part of the city, there were also waterways so that the marine mammals could use it as a mean of transportation, if they chose to do so. From an untrained eye, it could all look like utter chaos, but the rabbit could now discern the patterns in the crowd's movement. To her, it was a testimony to what unity could accomplish, even unconsciously.

"Are we there yet?" asked Judy in an excited voice, mimicking a impatient kit. Nick had promised to make her officially meet Finnick, his only best friend beside her, and she was eager to talk with him for the first time.

"Yes, we are. Can you stop bouncing around, you're giving me a headache" Nick wasn't so sure he wanted his two friends to meet. They were polar opposites and he feared their personalities would clash. Well he feared more coming from Finnick that Judy, the fennec wasn't known for his calm temper.

"No can do. That's what we bunnies were made for." she said in a giggly tone, taking few exaggerated jumping steps in front of him. He looked at her bouncing on the paving, glancing at her rump going up and down. He felt something inside him wake up. An incoherent primal deeply buried part. It scared him a little.

*What the hell brain? I'm not eating my friend.*

They at last arrived before a little diner which could have known better days. The paint was chipping and the sign lacked a few letters. Its name could still be read though.

"Jack Rabbit Slim's? Is that a joke?"

"Nope, I don't know where the name comes from but they serve the best fried fish in the city. And they have a good carrot salad, if that's what you care for."

"You know, bunnies don't only eat carrots."

"I'm sure they don't."

They entered the diner, smell of cooking, frying and fresh vegetables filling their snouts.

"Over here Nick" shouted a deep voice. Finnick was sitting at a booth in a corner, a vixen waitress leaned toward him, an elbow on the table. The waitress took her tray, giving the newcomers a smile as she went back behind the bar.
"Who was your foxy friend?" asked Nick, as he hopped on the bench seat.

"Rosie, the waitress, nice gal. She kept me company. Are you not introducing me to your date?" he had said that while turning to face Judy, who had just seated next to Nick. She felt a warm sensation creeping on her face, trying to show none of it. If Nick had been fazed, his mask of coolness didn't chip a bit.

"Not my date. It's Judy, Judy Hopps. I think you already know about her."

"Shure I do, her face was all over the TV a few months ago. And ya told me lots about her. We also met once before remember? Pawpsicle hustle and when she was looking for you. The name's Finnick, little miss. Nice to meet ya again."

"Nick told me a lot about you too, Finnick. Nice to meetcha again!"

They opened the menu. There wasn't a lot of choices. A half dozen fish-based and prey friendly burgers and the same number in salads. Judy felt adventurous and chose a seitan burger with a side of carrot fries, Nick took a fish burger with fries, Finnick asked for the fish triple-bypass, no side dish.

They had all placed their order and Finnick asked Judy "So, how much does Slick Nick get on yo nerves?"

"Once you learn how to cope with the bad puns, there is not much to it."

"You know you love my humour, little punny."

Finnick looked at Nick. "Tha'wos bad, dude. Honest work is doing a number on you."

"Keep your venom, my humour is as perfect as my looks" Nick had rested his elbows on the back of his seat, a look of total confidence on his face. "What do yo do those days?"

"Oh you know, the usual."

Judy looked at the little fox with an inquisitive look on her face "and what is this 'usual'?

"Bit of this, bit of that. Carrying goods, selling stuff..." evaded the fennec, a mask of honesty on his face.

I see where Nick has learnt how to hide his emotions.

"And you Nick, what do you do those days?"

"Whatever the cops do. Give tickets to the taxpayers, run after the hardworking criminals, waste the public's money, that kind of thing- ouch" Judy had given him a punch in the ribs, and gave him a disapproving glance. She didn't like when he joked like that, mainly because she knew he was only half-joking. "Sorry Carrots"

"Sheesh, the lady gotcha, you hafta walk straight now."

The waitress came back with their order and gave them a soda refill on the house. Looking at the bar, they saw the cook bear give them a wave. Judy didn't like to get free stuff from her celebrity, but she understood that most people liked showing gratitude.

She heard Nick make a strange noise.
"You're alright Nick?"

"I just noticed. Um. I'm about to eat meat in front of you. Maybe I should have ordered something else."

"You won't make me uncomfortable Nick, I've already seen your fangs. I even have had them around my neck."

"Wot?" The fennec had his eyes wide open, looking alternatively to both of them.

*That came out wrong.*

Nick chuckled and wiggled his eyebrows. She could still see red creep on his face under his fur though. She herself suddenly felt warm at the idea, her own face slowly starting to burn.

"I-I mean, in the museum, when he had to fake killing me to trap Bellwether."

"Oh, that. Yeah Nick tol' me about it. A nice hustle tha' was."

The smell of the food was divine and they hungrily dug in. The seitan burger tasted weird but good, and the carrot fries had just the perfect crispy texture. The food price was ridiculous compared to the quality of the food and Judy promised herself to leave a huge tip. As they ate, they stayed mostly silent. Judy shot some glances at Nick, watching his fangs tear the fried fish, grease and sauce dripping down his muzzle. She felt weird feeling in her stomach again. There was fear. But there was something else also. More subtle but powerful, and at least as primal.

Everyone's plate was mostly empty. The little fennec had eaten up to every crumb of his meal and Judy wondered where he had put all of it.

"So Nick, now that we ate, I think I should tell you." Finnick had begun, a serious look on his face. Nick was waiting for him to continue, a happy sated looked on his snout. "your mother asked me for news about you. She didn't believe me when I told her you were a cop, but I ended up convincing her." Judy saw the slight shift on Nick's composure, his tail twitching behind him.

"You did good, buddy. Thanks." answered Nick.

"She's doin' fine by the way." the red fox didn't answer to that. Judy felt him stiffen on his seat. Still his expression didn't move."I think it's time ya went and talked ta her now." Finnick was looking at Nick straight in the eyes. The mood had totally shifted and everything in the primal side of Judy's brain screamed danger.

"That'd be good for both o' ya"

Nick had left his slumped posture, calmly taking a sip of his soda.

"Nah. I'm good." He had maintained eye contact with Finnick. The tension was still rising and Judy was looking for a way to defuse it. The silence between them was deafening, and the rabbit began to wonder if her heart would explode because of how much it pounded.

"Judy can you move? I have to go take a leak." she got off the bench and he left the booth. All was left between her and Finnick was an awkward silence.

"What's this about his mother, Finnick?" she finally asked.

"Not my place to tell kiddo." The little vulpine was looking at his drink.
"I know Nick's really private about his past, I'm sure there are reasons for it. But I'd like to help. He's my friend too." The fennec lifted his gaze from the table and looked at her, sadness in his eyes.

"It's a big messy pile of bullshit. I don't wanna lay that on ya."

"Let me be the judge of what I can handle, alright?"

"Okay nosey little missy. Here is the deal" Began the fennec fox "Slick ran away from home after something that scarred him deeply, what it was I won't tell."

"The scout event." Finnick looked at her with a surprised look.

"He trusts ya more than I thought. Anyway, I found 'i'm two weeks after he ran from home, sleeping in a dumpster. I was kind of looking for him, I knew there was a new inexperienced pickpocket on mah turf. Wary people, they make for bad hustle victi-" he scoffed. "Anyway, I found him and he refused to tell me where he came from. Since I couldn't bring mahself to let the poor kid starve, I took him in an' taught him the only job I ever knew." If Judy had thought she would be happy to learn more about Nick's past, she was now realizing she had been wrong.

"I won't tell ya every detail, but as it happened, the kid wos fucking talented. And being young and all, people tended to trust him mo-" he took another sip. He had to remember he was talking to a cop. "Two months in, he told me about his parents, asked me to give 'em part of his money and some letters. I told him he should go home, but he would have none of it, rambling about how it made no difference but that at least he wanted to help provide for them, that they deserved more than the poor lives they had and the worthless son they brought into the world." Finnick felt he needed a stiffer drink. Too bad the most alcoholised thing sold here was light beer.

"I wos a coward and didn't insist. He wos the first friend I had in a long time. His parents wanted him back, but they said that if he was happy not seeing them a making a life fo' himself all was for the best." He scratched his eyes "If you want my opinion, the Wildes are a looney bunch wis' a twisted sense of logic. How can it be best for a kid to be raised by a hustling fennec and away from his parents". Judy thought Nick took his sweet time in the bathroom, but she wanted to know more.

"The kid wos making a haul everyday, and still sending most of it to his folks. And every two week I had to bring them the cashbag with a side of news and sometimes a letter from their kid. They didn't even touch the money. Well, his mother Vivienne didn't but-" He had stop in the middle of his sentence, looking at something behind Judy's seat. She turned around and saw a happily whistling Nick approach the booth. Judy noticed that a tear was about to drop from her right eye. She quickly smeared it.

"You guys having an interesting conversation?"

"I wos telling her 'bout the pawmart hustle" improvised the fennec fox.

"Hey, don't steal this one, I love to tell it!" Said Nick, a bit too enthusiastic.

"Well go ahead, I had just begun."

Nick put his paws on the table, striking a pose as was about to tell an epic story.

"At the time, we were running with the Raving One"

"You partnered up with a rabbit?" reacted Judy with a puzzled look on her face.
"What are you talking about Carrots, the Raving One was a fox like me."

"They totally looked alike" added Finnick "The other guy had a bit more of a squarish face and darker fur and couldn't give a straight smile to save his life".

"Yeah, I still remember his cackling laugh. Shivers down my spine, he gave me. What's he doing now ?"

"Oh you know, the usual." Fennec winked.

"Continuing. So we had this con, an idea of Finnick, where we would go and fill two enormous shopping cart with everything we could fit in it. The two had to have the exact same things inside it. The Raving One would go first, pay for everything, give me the receipt and get out. Five minutes later I would come to the same checkout with one more item and the receipt saying that I forgot a thing the first time around and that I didn't want to leave my cart unchecked. A charming smile, and it would work every time."

"As long as we did not do it too often in the same place."

"That's clever" said Judy, with a disapproving but amused look.

"I thought so too" answered Nick, as if he was completely oblivious to the annoyed face of his partner.

They had left the restaurant and since it was a beautiful day, they decided to go home on foot. It took them about an hour, and they had to shelter themselves from the rain in an electronic shop. Nick browsed around for a new phone, but found nothing he liked.

As they were approaching Judy's place, she had slowly mustered the courage to talk to Nick about his parents. She knew he wouldn't say anything right now, but she had to tell him he could open up to her, even if it wasn't today. The fox looked up at the Grand Pangolin Arms building.

"Sheesh, Judy, this place is a dump."

"It's cheap."

"I hope so, or else you're getting ripped off. You want me to come renegotiate a better contract ?"

"Nope, I'm good, thanks"

An awkward silence slowly crept between them. She let it drag a bit and then sighed. "Nick, I'd like to say something."

"If it's about my parents, drop it Carrots. I don't feel like talking about it" The confident mask was up. No cracks. Just Nick.

"Nick, it's important" She protested.

"Carrooots" He cut, lifting a finger.

"Please Nick. It's not about them, it's about us !"

*What about us ? What does it have to do with us Carrots ?*
"Go ahead."

"I know you don't like talking about your past. I don't know much about it, but from I could gather, it wasn't pretty."

"Way to understate it. Are you finished?" The confident grin was present on his face, but not in his voice.

She took his paw.

"I know you trust me, and I trust you. You're my partner and my friend. If you ever need to talk about it, know that I'm here for you. I want to be here for you. So please, don't shut me out of your problems. How you feel is important to me."

His eyes were trapped in the pool of amethyst that was her gaze. He felt something inside, something sad and happy at the same time. It felt like gratitude. It felt like longing. It felt like something long forgotten. The mask was at an inch to crack.

"Hey Carrots, I'm okay. I don't want you to worry about me." He made a pause. "Emotional bunnies..." he sighed. She lightly punched his shoulder. "See you tomorrow, slick." with a smile, she turned around and went inside the building.

"Not if I see you first, Judy" his voice was but a whisper.

A feeling of unbearable loneliness washed down on him. He had turned his life around, become a cop, become someone he could at last be proud of.

Why don't I feel good now? What is wrong with me?

He began to make his way toward his own apartment building. The thirty minute walk felt like an eternity as he was lost in thoughts and feelings he had kept bottled up for years.
Part 1, Chapter 2

Part 1 : A Shared Hustle

Chapter 2: Godfatherhood and Birthday

It itched, it was stiff. It restrained his movement and he hated it.

Nick was wearing the tuxedo he had rented for the occasion. It was simple, black vest, black trousers, white shirt and a bow-tie he had asked Koslov to tie when he had arrived. Despite his looks, and annoyed expression, the white bear had complied, wanting everything to be perfect for the event. He himself had ironed his Clawdidas tracksuit for the occasion.

They were waiting near the limo that was parked in front of Judy's building while they were waiting for her. Nick was wondering how they looked like, discreetly looking around to see how people reacted. Most people switched curb as they so them.

*We look like mobsters.*

Nick took out his reflective-glasses and put on a confident grin, completing the picture.

Judy got out of her building. She was wearing a short pink dress over black leggings. It complimented her figure nicely. Nick clenched his jaw, happy that the glasses he wore concealed his staring.

"Hey Nick, you look foxy"

"You're not bad yourself, officer carrots" He opened the limo's door to her as any gentlemammal would have done.

The limo driven by Koslov took them through the city, to tundratown, at Big's estate. They parked right in front of the habitation, a massive bear opening the car's door for them and leaning over them as they were making their way to the massive house's door, as to protect them from the falling snow.

They already had come there in another situation, they felt it was in another life. In Nick's case it was through. The house felt way more welcoming now, there were balloons and they could hear music playing the background. The bear led them into a large room. In the center was a large table where were hosted the festivities. Nick had missed the baptism, and FruFru had insisted he'd come to meet his godchild having sort of a ceremony for the occasion.

"Judyyyyy !" came a squeele. Frufru had jumped from the table into the doe's open arms. "Have you come to arrest my dad ?" It was her usual greeting joke.

"Not today. Not anytime soon I hope." she chuckled

"So do I" came a voice with an heavy accent. "How are you doing ?"

"Fine mister Big, and you ?" She gave him a kiss on each cheek that he returned.

"I'm doing well my dear."

The shrew turned toward the fox. "And you son ? How is life on the force treating you ?" They
both kissed cheeks as the fox answered. "Better than the street."

"Then all is well."

"Come see your future godchild!" squealed Frufru to the vulpine, grabbing him by a finger. He followed, going around the table.

The kits were minuscule in their cradle, even smaller than any of Nick's finger. That meant he had no way of holding them. He was relieved, he never knew how to handle kids this young.

"That's Judith, Vito and Nicholas," she pointed toward each toddler.

"Daw, Judy is so cute!" Nick had said, loudly enough so that his partner would hear it. He had put his paws on his cheek in an exaggerated expression. He glanced at Judy that discreetly waved her fist at him, promising a punch to his shoulder.

"I know right? They all are!" answered Fru-fru, oblivious to the joke.

They, and all the guests were assembled around the crib that had been put near an end of the table. Mr. Big was raising his glass, beginning his speech.

"To my grandchildren, Judith, Vito and Nicholas, a wish that they will live long and happily." Everyone raised their glasses.

"To their godparents, Judy, Frank, and Nick, who was introduced back to the Family." Everyone cheered. Nick gently kissed the forehead of his godson as was the tradition in the family.

"And to the Family, may it stay strong and prosper." They all drank.

Judy wasn't sure she should drink to the health of the biggest crime family in the city, but then again, Fru Fru was like a sister to her, and she really liked mister Big.

"So now, it's official" said Nick to mister Big. "I'm forgiven." He had understood the real reason he was the kid's godfather, beyond the fact that he had greatly helped the predator cause, and that he was friend with Fru Fru too, Was that the mob boss wanted him back into the family.

"You still owe me a wool rug."

The fat Cheetah was at his desk. It had been a good work day. Well half-day. He had come to work at 2AM, covering for the end of the night shift. The officer had had a bad case of food poisoning and had to go to the hospital. It was supposed to be Clawhauser's day off.

But he didn't mind, having been promised a full day off in return of him coming for only half a shift.

There was a bit of a problem though. The cheetah was hungry. And he was his full cheerful self when he was hungry. He was only half-cheerful.

But he didn't mind, he was trying a new diet, and what better way to start it than missing on a few delicious, sugary, sweet, glazed donuts.

Only an hour and he would be able to pack up, go home for a quick night and get on with his free day. He took out his phone, browsing through furbook when a voice came from the emergency radio.
"Patrol 1123, Wolford speaking. We have a 11-81, with 11-41 at the angle of the 48th and 51th in downtown District. Looks like a 481, 505 with possible 502. We're on pursuit on the 51th."

Accident caused by a possibly drunk drive, passengers of another car needed rescue. Clawhauser immediately reacted, sending an ambulance at the place of the incident. The officers were pursuing the perp.

"10-4 1123, do you require assistance?"

Another voice came from the radio.

"Patrol 1258, Rhinowitz speaking. We have a 505 with possible 502 on the 51th, Sahara square. Beginning pursuit"

"10-4 1258"

Clawhauser pushed a switch on the radio, both car could now hear him and each others.

"Precinct One, Clawhauser speaking to 1123 and 1258. You're both on pursuit of the same 505. Be careful and good luck."

"10-4 Precinct One. Race you, 1258" came the excited voice of officer Wolford.

"10-4 Precinct One. Focus Wolford" answered the cold voice of RhinoWitz.

Clawhauser separated back the channels with a nervous smile. He was always nervous when a code came in. That meant risks for his fellow officers. He loved them like family and couldn't bear to see harm come to them. But he was their lifeline, and he would never let them down. Better him on the front desk than anyone to support them.

He began filling the paperwork for his fellow officers, waiting for the radio to give him news. Hopefully good news. A few minutes later, the radio called again.

"Patrol 1123, Wolford speaking. We caught the 505. It was indeed a 502. 10-72 but everyone's fine, no 11-71. 390D, we had to tranq him. 11-42, we are bringing him in. And we won the race again 1258. Please note that this officer wants a raise. Over and out."

The drunk had taken out a gun but they had tranq'd him before he could use it.

"10-4, 1123" giggled the cheetah "Please don't overload the channel with the rest of your nonsense. Over and out."

"Precinct One, Clawhauser speaking. The 505 has been apprehended. You can get back to regular patrolling."

"10-4, Precinct One. Over and out."

Clawhauser sighed. Everything went fine. He had no reason to worry. The suspect had been armed but taken care of. The cheetah looked at the time again, only ten minutes had passed. He continued filling the paper, hoping what remained of the hour would pass quickly. He suddenly heard sound of hooves on the tiling coming from behind him. He didn't need to turned around to recognize chief Bogo's step. He didn't lift his gaze, still filling his paper.

"Chief, how are you doing?"

"Fine officer." He had concern in his voice.

"Do you need something? Is everything alright?" The cheetah didn't look around, still working on
his paper, he liked to look professional when the chief was around.

"Yes and yes. Do you still have your network access to the record?"

The cheetah lost a bit of his cheerfulness with the memories at his horrible time in the basement.

"Sure, you didn't order to revoke it yet."

"Could you look for and send me the file from this case please?" He put a piece of paper with a reference number on it on the desk.

"Of course chief!" answered the feline, happy to be of use.

He immediately went into action, looking through the unkept database. He wondered why chief Bogo was staying here, looking over his shoulder. It made him a bit anxious. He also wondered why the chief didn't simply give him a call or send him a message. He was the chief, he if wanted to come down and see his officer, he could, but the absurd thought that the chief came here especially to see him made him giggle out loud.

"Found it sir! Want me to print it?"

"It won't be necessary. Send me the link in an e-mail."

The feline was about to get back to his paper but the chief hadn't move. He turned around.

"You're sure everything is alright sir?"

The chief was holding an open box of donuts. All were the same so that the cheetah wouldn't have to choose which one he would eat first. He had remembered the party's lesson.

Every resolution he had for is diet flew away as the feline's stomach growled. He kept the squealing to a minimum.

"Oh chief you shouldn't have!"

"You came to work on the night of your day off." stated the the buffalo.

He, like the other officers was always impressed by and a bit afraid of the cape buffalo.

Clawhauser knew that his colleague liked to joke about the chief being a big softy. But he never joked about it, because it was simply not true. To Clawhauser, the chief was simply a caring mammal, strong enough to push every officer to become the best version of themselves.

He took the box of donuts and gave one to the chief with a smile. The hooved mammal accepted it and then looked at his watch.

"You're out in thirty-four minutes. Have a nice day officer."

"Will do, chief"

The cape buffalo left, chomping on the donut. It was too sweet for his taste.

But he didn't care.

Clawhauser had just woken up. Home at 6:30 AM, he had taken a three hour nap, so he would still
have the full day to himself. He stretched, bending in every direction, his fat figure more flexible than one could think at first glance. He took a quick shower, already thinking about the long the bath he would take in the evening. As a breakfast, he ate an only donut, not wanting to be sate for the brunch he was about to go to. He put on the clothes he had chosen the evening before. A light and dark blue square shirt with a jacket, and a simple jean. He took his satchel and threw it on his shoulder, ready to go. As he left, he heard the snorting of Wolford and MacHorn coming from each of their rooms.

As Clawhauser walked in the street, he happily waved at the people he recognized, mostly shop workers. They wave back, the chubby cat's good mood being really contagious.

He had taken the ZUG to Savannah Central, walking in the hot street his distracted gaze flying from a thing to another. Suddenly he heard an enthusiast voice calling him from his right.

"Beeen !"

It was a lean and athletic female cheetah. She threw herself into Clawhauser's open arms. They hugged themselves tightly. She was a head taller than him.

"Oh, I missed you big guy."

"I missed you too little sis."

They split up and he looked at her.

"You've gotten bigger, Jenny" he giggled. "soon you'll be taller than me."

"You've gotten fatter, Ben" she answered " soon you'll be larger than me."

"I hear jealousy" he smiled, but he looked down to his belly with a worried look "Perhaps I did gain a bit though"

"If I remember well, I bought you those clothes."

"Yes ?"

"I chose them a bit tight on purpose" she put a hand on his shoulder, observing him. "They fit you perfectly. You've even lost a bit."

A huge grin brighten the chubby cheetah's face. "The diet's working." He liked himself as he was, the chubbiness didn't worry him and he knew some mammal found it attractive. Too bad most of them were hippos and elephant. But he was conscious of the medical risk that came with this body type.

They went inside a buffet restaurant name Tiana's Palace, specialised in food from New-Clawrlean. The officer had chosen it because he knew his sister loved spicy food. Him not so much, but there was lots of other pepper-free specialties.

The ceiling was so high, that they had to bend their neck to see it. Half of the walls were made of red bricks, the other were wooden, painted in a golden brown, and on them were hanged a multitude of paintings. Some of them had prices, patrons could actually buy them. But what impressed the most were the huge crystal and copper chandeliers.

"I'm not sure I can afford this place, Ben."
"You don't need to. I'm inviting you."

"With a cop salary?"

"Do I need to remind you that I don't have a rent to pay and that I have two flat-mates that rent-out part of my flat? Besides, I forbid you to deny me the pleasure of spoiling my little sis."

"Fine." she laughed "you'll make an insufferable brat out of me."

"The damage is already done."

A waiter came and showed them their table. The settled their stuff, took a pair of plates and went toward the buffet. As he saw he sister eat, he was glad they restrained themselves from turning the meal into a competition. He wasn't sure he could have won.

"I can't understand where you put all this," he said, in amazement.

"Sports. Lots of it. If it was the season of competition, I wouldn't eat that much."

"You're still aiming for the Pawlympics?"

"More than ever."

"Isn't fifteen a bit young for this?" He joked.

"I'm seventeen since wednesday, and you know it."

"Yup, happy birthday little-sis" He took a big paper bag out of his satchel. Inside it was a craft-covered box.

"You shouldn't have Ben." she squealed, opening the present. It was a shoebox. "No you didn't!"

Yes I di-id.

It was a pair of On Clawd. Her mouth was agape before the present.

"If you don't like it, I still have the receipt" She jumped at his neck, hugging him as all the other patrons were staring.

"Jenny, can't breathe." came his strangled voice. She let go and gave him a big smooch on the nose.

"You're the best brother ever."

It was more than sibling love between the two. Ben and Jenny's parents were hard working, and loaded, but barely present. As the big brother was ten years older, he had mostly raised his sister himself, taking the responsibility as serious as it could be. She was more strong-headed than he was, but her heart was just as big. As a result their link was unbreakable. Ben adored his sister and would have given her everything she wanted. All she wanted was to shine in his eyes, realizing her potential at the fullest.

"Seriously though, here is the receipt. If they don't fit you can switch for another pair until the end of next week. It's a gift, so do NOT look at the price."
They were back on the street, the chubby cheetah had paid for their meal, a sum that his sister
didn't want to think about.

"Is it okay if we hit a couple of shops ? There is this new record-shop that I really want to see."

"Of course Ben. But no more gifts. I'm embarrassed enough as it is."

"But it was only a teeny-tiny pair of shoes." pouted the tubby cheetah.

"I don't need to look at the receipt to know how much those cost. No. More. Gifts. Or else I'll have
my coach give you a personal training"

"How personal ?" He had an unchaste grin on his face.

"You're impossible"

They first stopped at a pop-culture shop. There was a gazelle's figurine new series, and the big cat
absolutely wanted one of them. Along with other memorabilia. He stepped into the boutique,
humming a famous song from the aforementioned artist. He took his time browsing every Gazelle-
related article. A tiger approached him.

"Can I help you sir ?" he asked in warm voice. The tiger was wearing a slim jean, and the shop's t-
shirt, tight around his muscular build. The tiger reminded Clawhauser of Gazelle's back up dancers.
Clawhauser had to fight to keep from staring.

"I wish you could, Joe" the cheetah had glanced at the nametag. "But I'm not really sure I know
what I'm looking for"

"Perhaps I can be of counsel, then"

"Why not", smiled the plump cat. "If I was looking for something really particular about Gazelle,
what in this store should grab my attention ?"

The tiger took a few steps looking around, took a mug and glanced at this client, hesitated and put
it back.

"How much of a real fan are you ?"

"I possess a copy of the Magia album. First Pawlombian edition."

"Give me two minutes" The tiger disappeared through the door, going into the back of the shop.

"You found something interesting bro ?"

"Dunno yet, the clerk has gone to fetch something." a few seconds later, the ripped feline had come
back with a box the size of a vinyl record. He presented it to the plump cat. It was some kind of
framed enlarged picture of the magia's album cover. At second glance it was made of a lots of
separated layer of different paper, making a nice embossed picture. Clawhauser squealed, making
every head in the shop turn in his direction.

"Oooooow, this thing must be hanged to my walls, how much is it ?"

"15 bucks. We received a bunch of them a year ago and they never sold."

"I'll take it." He snatched the picture from the tiger's paw. "Thanks Joe" he cheerfully winked,
getting back to looking at the figurines. The Tiger kindly smiled and got back behind this counter.
"What did you ask him so that he would unearth that ?" Asked his sister.

"I asked him what in this store should grab my attention."

"You sure grabbed his."

"What ?"

"Did you see how he was looking at you ?"

"What ?" he glanced at the tiger. Who distractedly waved at them."You're imagining things, sis."

"Of course I am. I'll let you browse." she left him alone, straddling into the boutique, discreetly approaching the counter.

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"I think I've found something that might interest you, Ben" She gave him a piece of paper, a line of number was written on it.

"What is it ?" The plump cheetah had chosen what figure he would buy, he was cradling it along with the framed picture. He took out his hand and looked at the paper.

"The sexy shopkeeper's contact."

Clawhauser mouth slightly opened, he glanced at the the feline who waved at him again, an embarrassed smile on his face. Was it suddenly really hot in here ?

"Oh. Okay. Tha-thanks. I think I should go pay for those now." The cheetah approached the counter really slowly. His face was burning. He put what he had chosen on the counter. Behind him, his sister was silently cheering on him.

"You found everything you wanted ?" asked the shopkeeper, trying to restrain himself from blushing or showing too wide a grin.

"And more" blurted the cheetah, giving him his credit card, his eyes firmly fixed on the counter. He looked like he was trying to make his face disappear into his neck-chub.

"That will be 40 dollars sir." came the warm voice of the seller.

The cheetah paid and they exited the boutique.

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"What just happened ?" The pudgy cat had an expression of utter disbelief above a nervous smile.

"The Gazelle back-up dancer lookalike gave you his number."

"I was so embarrassed. Oh god, I can't ever come back here again." He hide his burning face into his hands.

"And break the poor guy's heart ? You wouldn't dare."

"Why did you do this Jenny ?" he asked in a meek voice.

"My favorite brother deserved no less than the best article in the shop."
He looked at the piece of paper, holding it with a trembling paw. "What should I do with this?" it was half rhetorical, his sister answered anyway, taking him by the shoulders.

"You send him a text to say hi, and you fix a date in a nice coffee-shop. Or go see a movie with him. Just go with the flow." He put the paper in his smartphone case and stored it back in his satchel. "Wasn't there a new record shop you wanted to visit?"

They walked a few minute until Ben made them turn in a rear-street. A little shop was hidden between two garage door. As they entered, a smell of pot hit their face. It was clear that the shop itself had been set inside a garage. It was either an hommage to the early punk-rock bands, or the owner hadn't found anything else. In both case, it gave the place a sense of authenticity.

There was nothing but rock records, mostly old ones, which pleased the chubby cheetah, he had only a few in this genre, and wanted to complete his collection.

"Hello" greeted the vulpine shopkeeper in a coarse voice. Even the guy smelled like old rock. It was so authentic Clawhauser had to hold back a squeele. "Hello"

He began browsing the vinyls, losing track of time, as his sister looked at the covers in a distracted fashion.

He had found a few interesting things. Early records of David Pawie and the Clawing stones. Even an old Fang Division record. He was still searching through a pile of unsorted vinyls when he heard his sister's voice.

"I like this one's design" she was holding a copy of Pink Snoud – The Wall. The border of the box were a bit worn but it seemed to be in good condition otherwise.

"Can I?" She gave it to him and he took out the record, revealing an orange colored Disc.


He put back the disc in the sleeve as ceremoniously as he could, and went straight to the seller, his records in hand.

"How much?"

"One thousand and seven hundred bucks" stated the seller.

"What the fuck?" Jenny had sweared, but he let it slide, having done so himself less that fifteen seconds ago.

"One thousand bucks."

"Are you kidding man? You know what it is? One Thousand six hundred."

"The pocket is worn, the disc sticker has bleached a bit. One thousand." Jenny had never seen her brother haggle. It was the most serious she ever heard him speak.

"Seriously man? One thousand five hundred"

"One thousand and one hundred, you know no one else ready to spend this much will walk in here."
"You're bleeding me man. One thousand four hundred"

"Only if you give me the other records with it"

"Cash. No credit, no check."

They shook on it.

"Jenny could you come over here please?" Still agape, she approached. Her brother put all the records between her hands, The Wall hidden in the middle of them. "You don't let anyone look at those, you don't let anyone even approach you. I'm back in one minute." He rushed through the store at a speed she never thought he could possess. Less than fifty seconds later he was back with a handful of cash, a perfectly composed expression on his face. He put the banknote in the fox's paw, who took his time counting them.

"Nice doing business with you."

As they got out of the store, the fat cat slumped against the wall, slowly sliding to the floor. He was winded, his breath made a wheezing sound.

"What is this record Ben?" She asked, puzzled.

"This is- hhh – The Wall- hhh – orange – hhh – vinyl version -hhh."

"It's rare?"


"Okay, this is rare."

The cheetah stay slumped for a whole ten minutes while his sister had sat beside him. Once his breath had gone back to relatively normal level and most of the red had disappeared from underneath his face's fur, she helped him.

"You alright Ben?"

"We were supposed to be celebrating your birthday and I got more gifts than you. I'm more than alright."

"I think I'll still accompany you home, You don't look so good. Did you buy this bike-machine I talked to you about?"

"Nope, not yet, I'm thinking about it."

They went back to the ZUG, Clawhauser had a staggering bounce his step, his sister holding him straight when he threatened to stumble.
One of the perk of working at Precinct on was that most of the patrol Nick and Judy were put on took place in the Downtown District. The climate was mild, so they didn't either needed big jackets or their summer uniforms. Still there was a downside. The people of downtown were way more irritable than any other district. City centers would do that to you.

The duo had been called to an accident at an intersection. No-one had been injured but the discussion between the two drivers had begun to get heated and an onlooker had called the cops. They pulled over near the scene of the incident and looked at the two cars. One was a blue convertible, the other a dark-green cruises which was way less damaged.

Each one had come from a different street. It seemed the cruiser had come from the right, crashing in the rear right wing of the convertible, and had sent it skidding across the intersection.

"You ruined my car, you stupid pig !" shouted a bull, near the blue vehicle. "Couldn't you look where you were going ?". He was facing a boar with an annoyed look on his face, who was holding assurance papers.

As Nick and Judy approached the scene, two other police cruiser pulled over, the officer went and tried to regulate the now hectic circulation. Soon, there would be barriers around the scene, but for now their priority was to take the civilian out of the road.

"Please leave the road, it's not safe here." said Judy in a calm but commanding voice.

None of the two people even glanced at them, the bull keeping shouting at the boar who slowly looked more and more annoyed.

"ZPD" she said louder taking out her plaque "Could you two gentlemammal please leave the road ?" They both turned to her, disbelief on their faces, and then complied. Nick could already tell those two were going to be a handful.

"I take the bull, you take the boar" said the fox.

Nick asked his version to the horned mammal. He spoke his part with a look of mistrust on his face. Nick was used to the attitude and paid it no mind. As the bull told it, he simply had begun to drive after the light had turned green when out of nowhere the the cruiser had come and crashed in him, surely passing at red light. He added that he was going to miss an important meeting because of it.

Judy asked his version to the more calm boar. The light had just turned green so he hadn't need to brake too much before crossing the intersection. Then out of nowhere, at a speed way too great, the blue convertible rushed past his nose, coming, from the left. He had just had the time to turn the wheel, his hoof to slow to push the pedal, trying, and failing to avoid collision.

Nick and Judy compared both version, looking at how the car were placed on the street.

"Both versions are plausible." Began Judy. "But, despite his attitude, the bull's version seem to be more logical"
"I don't know, look at the car. If the cruiser had really gone as quick as he was saying, it should have spun way more."

They were both puzzled, there was no way of knowing who was telling the truth. And in those kind of situations, the witnesses statement wouldn't help. The details they would need wouldn't have been noticed. And to make matters worse, none of the drivers had a dash-cam.

Cams.

Street cameras.

"Judy ?" called the fox, pointing at the corner of a building. The camera he was showing her was perfectly placed to have filmed both traffic-lights.

"Of course Nick. Can you make them wait while I ask Clawhauser to send me the feed ?"

The fox went back to calm down the two drivers, their conversation had started again and was slowly heating up.

"You passed right under my nose. You ran the red light." The boar looked calm but he was heavily breathing through his snout.

"And I maintain that you don't know what you are talking about." The bull had put a hoof on the hog's large chest.

"Gentlemammal, please calm down." Nick had put on the 'defusing a situation' mask, the one with the benevolent smile. "You're both fine and unhurt, I think we can all be thankful for that."

The boar said nothing but the bull answered in an angry tone.

"And what's this ? First a rabbit, now a fox ? If they had sent real officers, the situation would already be resolved."

Nick switched to the nice but firm mask.

"Sir, me and officer Hopps over there are as much cops as any other else. Please calm down."

"Say what you want, I know of the mammal inclusion initiative. Your kind has no place in the ZPD."

Nick took out his notepad and a pen.

"If not for the meddling of our good mayor, the likes of you would never make it as officers."

Nick began scribbling, the notepad tilted just enough so that the large mammal couldn't see what he was writing.

"No way you could have passed the police exams without her pushing for it."

Nick had almost flinched at that. He continued scribbling. His gaze was firmly planted in the bull's eyes. His mask was now a cold and professional expression.

"What are you writing here fox, you think your little notes can put me down ?"

Scribble, scribble, scribble.
"You can't do anything to me, you pelt, I know people." he said in an assured voice.

Scribble, scribble, scribble.

"You're losing your time"

Scribble, scribble, scribble.

"Really, you can stop writing now." His voice had slowly lost its assured tone.

Scribble, scribble, scribble.

"I said you can stop writing."

Scribble, scribble, scribble

"Stop writing !" Shrieked the bull. He had lifted a hoof. Nick raised a stern brow.

Scribble.

The bull hesitated.

Scribble.

He left his arm fall down.

Scribble.

Nick let the corner of his mouth grin, showing carnivorous fangs to the bull so that only him could see them. The large mammal sighed in defeat just as Judy was coming back.

"I have the video feed. Sorry mister Bullroy, it seems you run the red light." She showed them her phone screen and at the bull expression, one could see he perfectly knew it all along. "We'll need you both to come to the precinct to give your full statement on the incident". There was no way Nick and Judy's cruiser was big enough for the mammals, they turned them over to Rhinowitz who was helping to regulate the circulation and took his place.

The work was simple, but they had to stay standing for long periods, regularly stopping car that didn't respect their instruction. Not soon enough for their taste, a tow truck had come to take away the crashed vehicle. As they rested in their patrol car, Judy asked.

"What was the bull saying to you that you were so eager to write ? Was it important ?" He gave her the notepad explaining.

"Not really. It's a little trick that Blackfur taught me. If a civilian starts to be disrespectful you just take out your notepad and start writing. You can write anything, the trick is that he doesn't know what exactly you're doing. In my case, I usually note what they say. Shut them up in a minute, but it doesn't work on drunk or drugged mammal, it mostly make them angrier. Plus I don't want to waste energy correcting stupid bigoted mammals."

She looked at the notepad, her eyes widening.

"He really said that ?"

"Yeah, why ? It's not the worst thing I heard. And my pelt is clearly red, he did not get it all wrong."
"The mayor part, I mean. That's low. I know your worked harder than any mammal to get there."

Nick stayed silent, for a bit, pondering what to answer. He had meant to talk about it for a long time now, and he hadn't had the occasion yet. Now was as good as any.

"That doesn't really mean shit if my hardest isn't up to the part, though." the mask of coolness was in place, like he didn't really cared about what he was about to drop.

"What are you talking about?" she asked, with a surprised expression.

He told her about the last question that had been asked of him during the last interview of the police academy. Quoting it, as it had engraved itself in his memory

"What if I told you that Mayor Swinton expressly asked for you to get into Precinct One. That no matter the deliberation of this jury you would be transferred to it. What would be your thoughts on the matter, mister Wilde?"

Her surprise turned into shock and disbelief.

Shouldn't have told her. Dumb fox.

"So now you see Carrots. I'm a cop. I should be proud of myself. I proved everyone wrong after all. But chances are, it's just all a lie. I'm just a byproduct of some political bullshit. Sure I'm working my ass off helping undeserving and resentful mammals, I'm trying to make the world a better place with you. And it's one of the most wonderful thing that ever happened to me. But it feels wrong. I'm still not sure I belong."

The mask hadn't broken. It showed little cracks that even Judy had trouble discerning. How could he be saying those things and showing so little emotions?

She stayed silent a moment, taking in all that he had said. Then she began speaking.

"No, Nick. I've seen you work. You're a good cop. Even if, and I highly doubt that, the mayor had meddled so you could become a cop, she did good. Because you are a good cop. I'm sure you'll get better at this than you ever was at hustling. After all, I hustled you. I know what I'm talking about" she joked. "You shouldn't care about what that stupid bull was saying. You're great at not caring about what people think of you."

I didn't Carrots, but now I do. Why do I care? Why, now that everything is supposed to be so great.

"And if you're still not sure, you can still ask the chief if it's true. You can be sure he will tell you the truth." he had thought about it, but he still couldn't bring himself to it. The truth scared him.

It was the end of the patrol. They got into the precinct's parking lot. As left of the car, Judy asked.

"You haven't told me what you answered to the question."

"What do you think Carrots? I told them that all that I wanted was to be at Precinct One, no matter the way."

You're lying Nick. I know you well enough to know that's not what you said.

"Should've guessed."

They went their separate way, each of them going home. Judy was happy still. He had opened to her. Shared with her one the things that ate at him. She knew it would still be a long road before he
would be completely comfortable sharing everything with her, if they ever reached that point. But still, they were making progress.

Nick was happy too. He had feared Judy's reaction, but as always she had showed him only kindness and support. She was like that with everyone, no reason she wouldn't be like that with him. He felt stupid to have doubted her. Glancing at the setting sun, he made the resolution to learn to be more trusting, if not for his sake, at least for hers.
He was late. He had promised to join her at the restaurant but his work had taken longer than he had anticipated. He was trying not to run, not to be too excited. The satchel he was carrying in his left hand bounced against his leg, sometimes scraping the floor but he didn't care. He was actually happy that she asked to see him. Sure, he was gonna come see her eventually, but still. It was nice.

He was late. She knew he was going to be. Punctuality wasn't his forte. She had called to meet him at the restaurant. The place was by no mean nice, but she liked the mood. She knew most of the people here as it was just across the street from her apartment and she had work here on and off for the last twenty years.

It was a simple diner, called Mr Smiley's. The last thing you could call the place was fancy, and the fox felt a bit overdressed. Still, he pushed the door, hearing the tinkling of a bell. Looking around, she saw her, already sitted in a corner, looking distractedly at the passing cars through the window. She was wearing a simple dark green robe under a light jacket, highlighting her lean frame.

"Hey Vi." The fennec fox hopped on a sit, facing her. "Sorry, I'm late."

She silently smiled, looking at him. The little vulpine was wearing his brown cargo pants, but had put on a short-sleeved cream shirt, with a black tie that he had found in Nick's forgotten stuff. The mix was strange but it suited him.

"Hey Fin, don't worry, I've not been here for long."

The silence grew between them, and they let it install itself for a bit. Finnick didn't really know why she had called him here or why he had accepted to come. Well he had one, but it wasn't really his own. Vivienne felt conflicted, she felt a bit of resentment toward the small mammal. She had tried to convince herself as she was waiting for him that it was the reason why she had called him here. To lay on him all the negative emotions that she felt. But it wasn't it, and she knew what was this thing, gnawing at the back of her mind.

"What will you have, miss Wilde ?" An hippo waitress had cut their thoughts. Her voice was tired and jaded.

"Burger and fries combo with coke." Answered the vixen.

"Same for me." They gave her the folded menu, which they didn't even look at.

With the waitress gone, the silence turned awkward. Finnick chose to broke it.

"How's the food here ?"

"Cheap." Deadpan. No emotional cue.

He chuckled. "Sheesh that bad ? If I knew ya'd make me eat at place like 'dat, I wouldn't have moved my ass."
She chuckled back, setting a better mood between them.

"What are you up to these days?"

"Oh, ya know, the usual."

"It can mean lotsa things coming from you Fin."

"I mostly deliver stuff. There is a company which needed someone wid' a van to move stuff around. Mostly legal. And it pays good-" He stopped.

Yeah, she's making conversation.

The waitress came back and gave them their order without ceremony.

"Enjoy your meal."

"Thanks Patty."

The waitress straddled back to the counter.

"You wanted to talk to me about something Vi?"

She took an inspiration, looking for her words. She didn't feel ready to throw what she wanted to say at his face.

"How's Nick?"

*Of course, that's what you want to talk about. Knew it.*

He bit in his burger. It was stale at best. He answered between two bites.

"He fine. Working with dis friend of his, the bunny."

She herself had begun eating her meal.

"He's happy, he gets to help people. A good kid, you have." Continued the fennec.

"Yeah I'm sure he is. Not taking time to come and see his mother." She had said it in a perfectly calm tone. It was meant to be taken as a joke. But the mask had cracked.

The fennec lifted a brow, but said nothing.

"You know, I have his address, you could go see him."

The vixen hesitated, she wanted to go. She wanted to see her son. But if he had wanted to see her, she thought, he would already have come. He was a cop now, she was proud of him now. He had no reason to hide anymore.

"He'll come see me in his own time."

"You're both as stupid. I see where he takes it from." They both silently laughed at that.

... 

They had both finished eating and the waitress had come and taken their plates, leaving only crumbs and half-empty soda glasses on the tables. They had asked for dessert. She had chosen an
apple pie slice, and he a blueberry milkshake.

The fennec took the bag from under the table and put it on it, sliding it to Vivenne.

"Nick told me to give you that, it's what he could save this month."

Vivienne was staring at him, a mix of sadness and anger on her face. She was angry at him for not getting anything and at herself for not being able to clearly say what she wanted.

*Okay, what did I say this time?*

As the situation wasn't awkward enough, the waitress chose that time to put each of their dessert before them, shoving the bag on the side. Seeing how they were looking at each other, she quickly retreated to take care of other patrons.

"I didn't call you here so that you could give me my son's money." Her voice was shards of glass.

"Yeah but still, he wants you to have it." He was trying to use his most soothing voice, but he himself was starting to get pissed. She had called him here, for god knew why, and had been distant all evening. He knew she was hurting. Hurting for not seeing her son, for being alone. But whatever he did say, did try, she always shoved him back.

"I don't want it." her voice was now chilling cold. She was looking him in the eyes and he felt her resentment wash over him. He faced her nonetheless.

"The fuck do you want then, Vi?" He had almost shouted, standing on his seat, paws on the table. "Why are you angry at me?"

She punched the table violently, making every head in the diner turn, tears slowly filling her emerald eyes. He couldn't stand to see her cry. He had seen her do so too much, and each time it had been harder. He had to use every ounce of his willpower to not flinch.

"Why didn't you come, those last few months?" her voice was still controlled, but it was at the breaking point.

"Ya... Ya said to me I had no reason to..." He didn't understand anymore. He was lost. Utterly lost. "But I-I... I missed y- I missed my son!" She shrieked. She had backed down at the last second.

She was too proud. She was a coward. As always.

"Then go and see him!" He shouted in return, making a large motion to point at the door with his paw. His arm caught the milkshake and send it flying, crashing into the counter, breaking it in pieces, sending bits and splatters everywhere. Now the whole diner was staring at them.

As she was sobbing, he took a piece of paper and quickly wrote Nick's address on it. He left it on the table with a banknote, hopping down from his seat.

"It was nice to ya, Vi." He felt a tear in his chest. Something he didn't know was there suddenly went missing. He put his paws in his pocket and let his shoulders slump. He didn't even glance back when he left the diner, slowly making his way back to his van.

...
going to a night-club and dancing all night long. Then, they had spoke until morning and after that, his date had escorted him home. What had made the pudgy cat doubt was that Joe had refused the 'last drink' he had offered. But in his text, Joe had asked him for a second date. And it made him all happy, and giggly and warm inside. Joe truly was a gentlemammal.

Now he was waiting for Nick and Judy to arrive to his apartment. They all had a free day, and had decided to spend it together. Since Clawhauser had the biggest place, he naturally had invited them to come. The invitation had turned into a movie afternoon and each one of them had chosen a movie the wanted the other to discover. The chubby feline had chosen Hot Fuzz, a buddy cop movie parody, which was way more clever than it appeared at first glance. Judy had chosen Fantastic Mister Fox, a movie she had seen some part on pawtube. It was as 'stop-motion animated masterpiece' has the websites would describe it and she was sure Nick would love it. For his part, Nick went with Bun-raku, a strange action movie with a Clawmurai without a sword and a Cowboy without a gun. He had seen a long time ago found that it was completely unique. Particularly the environments.

They were both almost at the felines building when Judy stopped Nick.

"Ho before I forget. I had to put down five days of vacation for the week after the next" She looked embarrassed. "Bunny Burrow tradition and all, I can't really avoid it."

"You don't need to explain to me Carrots. I know how it is to have a family... Well I don't, but I can imagine." he smiled.

"I wanted to tell you sooner but with work and all, my mind was too taken."

"Hey don't worry, I'll probably be put on patrol with Wolford or Clawfith. Worse case scenario, meter maid."

"If so, I want to see a selfie with the vest." she giggled.

"Only if you tell me what's happening in your little town."

"..." She looked away, red creeping under her fur.

"It's carrot related, isn't it ?"

"Maybe."

"If you don't want to tell me, I can simply look it up." He took out his phone.

"It's carrot's week. A local holiday about the thing that made Bunny Burrow prosperous." Nick now had his most beautiful shit-eating grin on his face.

"Daw, you rabbits are so..." Don't you dare say it ! "stereotypical." She punched him on the shoulder. "Ow, I didn't say cute." She punched him a second time, more gently.

"Now you did. And what you said was worst."

"Dumb bunny."

"Sly fox."

...
fail. It never did, but he'd rather be cautious. Intercom rang, and he ran to answer. His friends had arrived.

Nick had brought carrot-juice and rum, Judy Blueberry-juice and donuts.

"Aaaaaw guys, you shouldn't have !"

They chatted a bit while Clawhauser stored the bottles into a mostly empty fridge. He let the donut box on the counter. "So, asked Nick. How was your date ?"

"It was fan-tas-tic. He had a VIP pass to the Hakkapaw. I don't know where he got that but it was... I can't describe it. The DJ was so good, not just a guy with an USB stick. He was really mixing stuff on the fly." The feline had star in his eyes. His bright smile was infectious and soon Nick and Judy were beaming too. "Look at that, I took photos".He showed them pictures on his phone, quickly swiping. It was mostly selfies with indistinguishable background. At one point, a muscular tiger appeared with the cheetah. "Woah, he's ripped" blurted Judy. Both male looked at her giggling. "I'm not into those kind of males. I'm more of a lighter framed, leanly muscled mammals".

* A bit like Nick. Huh, what the hell brain ?

"Let me tell you, he's a great dancer. We left at 2AM, I was really hungry from all that dancing." To someone who didn't know the pudgy feline, he didn't seem like the dancing type. But Nick and Judy had seen at the party that he had moves, and more flexibility than his heavy frame let appear.

"He found us a place that was still open AND that served donuts. We talked all night long. You know how I met him in this pop-shop ? It's only his part time job, he's a dancer. And get this, he has appeared in some of Gazelle's clips."

"Really ?" reacted Judy, "That's amazing !"

"I know, right ? Anyway, in the morning he escorted me to my building, and I asked him if he wanted to go up for a last drink. I think I was so happy I didn't know what I was thinking." Judy felt warmth crept to her face, placing her paws on her mouth, holding an exclamation. He was more daring than she thought he'd be. Nick was now wearing a slight grin .

Ben, You player, you.

"You know what he said ? I think it would be too unreasonable" He had tried to mimic the tiger's deep voice."and then he said 'but that isn't', and he kissed me !"

"Heeeeeeeeeee" Squealed Judy. Nick's grin was now connecting his two ears, he had a brow raised.

"On the snout" the feline added. "But it still counts"

... 

They installed themselves on the couch. The fluffy sensation felt very comfortable. "So which movie should we put on first ?" asked their feline friend. "Mine is more of an evening one." answered Nick. "Mine is better with a few beer, and I don't really want to open one right now" added the cat.

"Then it's settled" said Judy. We'll begin with mine, then Ben's one and will finished with yours Nick."
"I'm fine with this."

"Me too."

The TV was a giant 4K LED model. It was like being in a cinema, without the sweat smell and crying kits. Clawhauser had served glasses of the different juices they had brought.

They put on the first movie. It was about a family of foxes. The father was an ex-con who wanted to do a final heist before retreating. Of course without telling his wife.

The heist turned south and it led to the destruction of his village. In the end, he made amend and helped everyone settle somewhere else in even better conditions that they were before. Strengthening in the process his family's bonds.

"I wouldn't think you'd show us a movie that glorified criminal activities." Joked Nick.

"I see it more like this. The renard made mistakes and everyone suffered from it, but in the end and through hard work, by standing together they could all make it through. And despite being a con-mammal, the fox was a loving father and a great mammal." If it took Nick by surprise, he didn't show it.

"I get the message, thanks Judy."

Did he just call me Judy?

While they were talking about the movie, Clawhauser had disappeared and gotten back with a case of beer. He opened them for his friend. He even had carrot-flavoured ones for Judy.

"You're the best Ben."

"I thought I was the best, Carrots. I bet you say it to every sexy male." taunted the fox.

"Keeps you on your toes. Do we put up the second film now ?"

"I say we wait a bit" answered the cheetah. "This one was real nice and I want it to rest a bit into my mind."

They sipped all a bit of their beer. Nick broke the silence.

"The creatures they stole from wear very strange though. Tall, no fur."

"They were kind of nightmarish" added the feline. "I'm glad we didn't watch this one in the evening."

"But their hairless faces really made them look dumb. It was easy to root against them"

They ended up playing the second movie, Hot fuzz. After having order pizzas by phone, a vegan option for Judy.

The movie was about an over efficient, overzealous and overachieving cop transferred to a town where nothing ever happened. He made friend with a pudgy underachieving cop that slowly made him more open, and taught him how to have fun. In the end, they unearthed a big conspiracy by a ridiculous secret society that was controlling the village from the shadows. The film cleverly made fun of all the buddy-cop and action movies cliché by using them and twisting them around. In the end, both cops ended up staying in the village, acting like two hard-boiled agents.
By the time the movie was over, they had down half of the beer-case.

"Okay, Ben. Understood. I'm uptight." joked Judy, trying to have a severe look and failing miserably.

"The unlikely friendship was nice too. But the second protagonist looks more like you than me" said Nick to Clawhauser.

"So now you see Judy," declared the feline "every situation can't be resolved by following regulation."

As an answer, she punched him lightly in the shoulder.

"Was I the only one to notice the gay subtext, though ?" asked the vulpine, a mischievous grin on his face.

"The what ?" reacted the doe.

Before any of them could answer, the intercom buzzed.

Clawhauser and Nick reacted at the same time, raising their paw both cheering "Pizza !"

...  

They ate it at the table before watching the last movie. They wanted to rest their eyes a bit. The TV was nice, but staying in front of it for four hours had drained them. They talked cheerily about their week, the feline getting more into the details of his date.

"Crap, we don't have any dessert." said Clawhauser.

"Um, I brought donuts."

"That you did." said Nick, showing her the empty box.

"Oops ?" laughed the fat feline. "Maybe there is something in the fridge." He opened the door and looked inside. Judy crept near him. Nick at gotten back to the TV, readying the last movie.

"What's this ?" she asked, pointing at a squarish half empty cake platter.

"A milk and white chocolate brownie, it's Wolford's. He brought it back from his day off three days ago and didn't touch it since. I don't know if it's still good. Looks to me he won't finish it."

She took a bit of it, it had a strange taste. Chocolate and mossy, like the one they made at Bunny Burrows, but heavier on the vegetables.

"Tastes good to me."

"Yeah let's make Wolford a favor and clean the plate for him" giggled the cat.

"You coming guys ?" called Nick's voice.

Clawhauser had given each one of them paper towels and plates, so they would avoid put to much crumbs on the couch. All three were slumped on it as the film was about to begin. "Do you want a slice Nick ?"

"You know, us canids can't really digest cacao.".
"I think it's mostly milk and white chocolate, a piece or two won't make you sick." Said Clawhauser, giving Judy a slice.

"Perhaps later then."

The movie began. It was the story of two polar opposite heroes, battling against hordes of deadly henchmen to get to a tyrannic mob boss that ruled the city. Each hero had a reason to fight, but the one of them was more mysterious, more lonesome. In the ended, he battled the villain himself, even refusing the help of his friend when he offered it.

Twenty minute into the movie, Judy got up and went to the fridge, a stumble in her step.

"This brownie calls for rum". She opened the bottle, sipping directly at the neck. Nick only now smelled something strange and sniffed the cake.

What the hell?

"I'll have a piece of this after all." The pudgy cat served him a slice with a giggle, and then took the bottle drinking in turn. Nick tasted the cake.

This not regular cake. It's space cake. Our good wolf will have some explaining to do.

He quickly ate a second piece to catch up to their level of giddiness, hoping his stomach would hold up. He then took a sip of the bottle of rhum.

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"I don't get it, why are they fighting each other?" asked Judy.

"They are trying to determine which one is the strongest"

"This movies is weird." the doe giggled, taking another piece of the cake.

... 

"Who are all those people?" asked Clawhauser.

"The henchmen, they must fight them to get to the boss."

"This movie is strange." the cat chuckled, taking another piece of the cake.

... 

"Why did the fox break his friends last arrow?" asked Judy.

"Because he wants to beat the boss himself."

"But it's stupid! He should accept his friends help! He's already badly hurt!"

"Maybe he thinks he must do this for himself. Maybe it's the only way his mind will find peace."

"But it's- so- sad." sobbed the doe. "He thinks he must do everything alone because it's the only way he knows of."

Nick ate the last piece of the cake.

They were all completely baked. The cake wasn't too strong but mixing it with the rum had made it
a bit more interesting. Nick had taken the feline's phone just in time before he had sent a text he could have regretted in the morning and hidden it on the fridge.

Clawhauser was giggling on the floor, crawling behind the empty bottle that was rolling around.

Judy was snuggled into Nick's arms, nuzzling his chest.

"You know, I understand why you wanted me to see this movie" she said. "Sometimes you want to face things alone. It's the way you got stronger until now."

"Yes but your movie had a point too. I should learn to trust and rely on my friends more."

He kissed her between the ears. She giggled "It tickles". She raised her head. Her amethyst gaze locked into his green eyes. The light of the crescent moon was lighting up her grey fur, making it look like silver. She was mesmerising. Both their heart skipped a beat. He gave her a strange fanged smile and she tenderly kissed his snout, then caressed it with her own soft pink nose.

They fell asleep, snuggled one against each other, their paws interlocked.

... 

Strangely, Nick woke up first. As a nocturnal mammal, he shouldn't have but it was well past 10AM. His hazy brain slowly recalling the event of the precedent day, he felt something strange tugging at his tail. It was wrapped around Judy and she was holding it with her left paw. His heart raced.

*What happened last night ? I'm not hungover, so not much alcohol. Think dumb fox.*

Suddenly, the memories washed over him, drenching his mind a sort of warm, weird and slightly uncomfortable feeling.

*Ooookay, high-me kissed her on the head. That's okay, friends do that.*

*But she kissed me on the snout.*

*Friends don't do that.*

He scratched his head, thinking about what he should do of this.

*Well, she was kite-high. And drunk. And she's an emotional bunny. I supposed it's what they do.*

He raised his shoulders, trying to think nothing of it. But there was something stinging at his heart.

Now he had to make her let go of his tail. The body part was deeply personal to foxes, and they didn't let anyone touch it. Judy wasn't anyone to him, but still. He lightly shook her.

"Morning fluff-butt"

The doe rubbed her muzzle with her paw, letting go of Nick's tail. Suddenly he could breath more easily.

*She's so cute when she does this !*

But he would never tell it to her, the few time she had slept at his, he was delighted to see her do so and didn't want her to refrain herself.
"Mmmmmf'ning Nick." She hadn't really understood how Nick had called her, luckily for him, but she didn't care.

Her foggy brain was trying to make sense of where she was.

In Nick's arm. Everything is fine, don't panic. Why am I so tired?

She only remembered the strange feeling she had felt. She hadn't been herself during the evening and the alcohol clearly hadn't been the only cause.

Okay what did happen ? He kissed my head. That's okay, friends do that. And then I kissed him on the snout. Not okay. So not okay. Friends don't do that.

She blinked a few time and pulled away from her friend, looking at him with a flustered expression.

"Nick ? Did I- What happened was-

"What happened was you- well us, being high as kites" He was grinning from ear to ear, half-devilishly, half-apologetically.

"What ? How ?"

"The brownie. It wasn't regular. It was a space brownie. not really strong, but I'm fairly certain there wasn't only weed in it."

"Oh" That explained a lot, their attitude, the kisses... But a buried part of her knew the drug wasn't what made her kiss him. "How can you be sure ?"

"As I was working in the street, I learned a bit of cooking."

"Cooking what, brownies ?" She had a puzzled expression. He hesitated before answering.

"Yeah, that's it, I cooked brownies".

The doe scratched her head, squinting her eyes as memories slowly flowed in her mind "You- you remember everything ?"

"Mostly yeah. Our discussion about why we showed each other those movie. It was nice of you Carrots." She had been more subtle about it than he thought she could be.

"And after that ?" she looked a bit anxious.

"Hazy" he lied, not wanting to embarrass her or to make it awkward between them, in case her kiss had only been a drug induced spur of the moment. "I think I kissed your head. Then I kind of fell asleep."

So he doesn't remember. Maybe it's for the best.

She didn't believe a word of what she had just thought.

"Yeah, that's what I remember, too." she said. She thought she saw the shadow of a sad expression crawl upon Nick's face, she blinked and it was gone. The shit-eating grin was back.

"Too bad, I really wanted to ask you if I made a comfortable pillow."
"I'm sure it wasn't. But I had to make due."

All tension was slowly fading as the jokes were spoken. The weight on their heart felt lighter and sharper at the same time.

"Sly bunny"

"Dumb fox"
He had been sloppy. Very sloppy. And it wasn't the first time he had screwed up this week. First he had scratched the cruiser while parking it, then he had failed to defuse a situation with an angry civilian he had fined. Judy even had to intervene. He didn't know where his mind was, but certainly not in his job. The event of the week prior crept in the corner of his brain, and the fact that Judy was not going to be with him during the next week shadowed his thought.

Now he had not only put himself in trouble but he had dragged down Judy into it with him. And he would never forgive himself if anything ever happened to her because of him.

He had failed to notice the kid was drugged out of his mind, he had failed to notice the gun, he had failed to follow every last regulation simply because the kid was a fox, and he had seen too much of himself in him.

Now bullets were flying, civilians were running, and he and his partner were taking cover behind the cruiser which slowly looked more and more like swiss-cheese.

"Patrol 1123, Nick speaking. We have a 10-71, with 10-50. Requesting assistance ASAP, at the 148 on the 37th street, Downtown"

"10-4 1123, I'm sending back up, they'll be there in 10. hang in there" came the voice of Clawhauser.

"Carrots, back-up are on their way, but we can't wait."

"Agreed, if he keeps firing at us randomly, he's bound to hit a civilian. How do we play this ?"

"I'll create a distraction, you tranq him from the side."

Nick took out his real gun, slowly creeping to the other side of the cruiser.

"Nick, do we have permission to use lethal force ?"

"I'm not aiming at him"

How did this kid could have gotten an automatic weapons he could not know. And how much bullet could contain his magazine ?

The fox risked an eye, looking at the kid. He was looking blankly at the cruiser, firing bullet after bullet into it, foam coming out of his mouth. He seemed oblivious to what was happening around him.

"Change of plan Carrots." He switched to his tranq gun. The clip contained four darts. He aimed at the kid who was mechanically reloading his gun and shot him once. He didn't even flinch but looked at Nick, this time aiming at him. The fox officer saw four darts coming from the right, hitting the youngling right in the center of the chest. Immediately, he turned to face his new attacker and began emptying the weapon in their direction. Judy had barely the time to jump back into cover.
Nick heard a squeal, and lost it, lunging at the shooter with a vicious growl, exposing himself and closing the distance in the blink of an eye.

As she saw Nick’s dart hit the young vulpine and him not even batting an eye, she understood that the drugs were keeping him to feel the effect of the tranquilizer. She saw him aim at Nick and immediately emptied her clip. She thought he was going to fall this time but what he had taken was way too strong. As soon as she saw him turn again, she got back into cover, loudly squealing when bullets hit the place she was occupying a second ago.

She heard Nick's growl and the shooting stopped. She shot her head out of cover and saw nick punch the kid right in the snout, sending the PM flying. She hoped it wouldn't shoot as it hit the floor and it luckily didn't.

Nick was struggling with the kid. He was bigger but the younglings strength seemed enhanced by the drug. No matter, he had had six months of physical preparation and three months on the street. As his opponent was trying to strangle him, he twisted his arm, forcing him to fall flat on his chest, emptying his lungs. Part of him wanted to crack the kit's head into the pavement but he refrained himself. Immediately, he saw Judy at his side, holding the other arm and helping him cuff the shooter. He tried to bite them, but their training had taught them to keep out of reach. Nick breathed a long breath, seeing that his partner was alright.

"Glad you're okay" He immediately froze as he saw what she was holding."Carrots. No Muzzle."

"He's out of it. It's necessary."


"But the regulation-"

"Fuck the regulation, I'll take the fall if I must. No muzzle." he had angrily shouted immediately regretting as a hurt look came to the doe's face.

Before Nick could apologize, the tranquilizer began to work and the kid stopped moving. Nick put him on his side, in a secured position while Judy called for an ambulance and signaled to the precinct that the event was over. The young fox had started to puke white bile and Nick was freeing his mouth with a handkerchief. The kid couldn't be more than sixteen. There was something in Nick's eyes that she not often had seen. Pity.

"You all right Nick ?"

"Ask this to the kit. I hope he won't OD on the tranq." He glanced at Judy, who had put her paws on our mouth. "Oh, sorry Carrots, I didn't mean this like that. I'm not saying it's your fault. I mean-" He had left his voice trailed of. The bile had gone through Nick's handkerchief but he didn't seem to care, keeping sweeping the kid's snout with his tainted hand. She approached him and put a paw on his shoulder.

"You're not yourself."

*I am more myself right now than I usually am.*

"There is something on your mind, isn't it ?" She asked. Actually there was a lot on his mind, but he decided to give her something else to chew on. He wasn't really ready to talk about what truly ate at him.

"The kid. I saw myself in him. Not the gun thing- Just, I've made a lot of mistake."
"I know Nick."

"No you don't" he chuckled. "You so don't."

"That doesn't matter to me, you're a great mammal. You've always been."

*You're wrong Judy.*

But he said nothing, letting her words soothe him.

The siren of the ambulance and the other police cruiser filled the air. They let the medical mammals take away the unconscious kid, one of them raising a brow when they saw he didn't wear a muzzle.

..."Clawhauser" came the angry voice of the chief from the front desk radio, "as soon as officers Hopps and Wilde are here, I want you to send them into my office." just as soon as the radio stopped talking, the aforementioned officers entered the precinct. Nick was scrapping his hand with a piece of paper towel.

"Guys, the chief asked me to send you to his office ASAP. You better go now."

"Let's go officer Carrots" joked the fox "our torment are far from being over."

She frowned at him as to say it wasn't a great time for jokes.

"Guys, no one died, you're going to be fine." tried to cheer the tubby feline.

..."You both screwed up big time today officers. I've looked at the camera feeds. What were you doing ? What were you thinking ?" He tapped a key on his keyboard and showed them the screen. The feed came from a traffic camera. They had been called by a citizen notifying them of a weird-acting fox teenager. Nick was seen approaching the kid, raising a paw toward Judy so she would stay back. He had leaned over a clearly twitching young mammal.

Even a this distance, you could easily see the bulge under his sweater. Nick seemed to say something to him but the kid pushed him back angrily, taking the gun out of its hiding place. Nick slowly backed down, his paws raised. The video then showed Judy tackling Nick out of the way, as the kid started shooting. And then both of them taking cover behind the cruiser as civilians were running from the drugged mammal.

"I couldn't list every mistake you made during this arreestation. Not checking him from weapon, approaching him without caution, and then not asking for the use of lethal force... I'm glad the kid's alive, but you took too much risk. It's a miracle no-one has been hurt or killed." He made a pause. "And why the hell wasn't he muzzled when the medic took him in ?"

He pinched his eyes with his hoof.

"Nick, what the hell are you doing this week ? The grazed cruiser, I can understand, but the altercation wednesday, and now this ?"

"I don't know sir. I'm just not in it this week. I apologize."

The cape buffalo turned his stern gaze to the doe.
"And you Judy, as the senior officer, I expected more of you. You should be watching over your partner, It's been only three months since he has been transferred here."

"I'm sorry sir. It won't happen again." she said in a meek voice.

"I hope it won't. You're responsible for his actions."

At that, the fox reacted.

"What do you mean responsible for my actions? Don't take it out on officer Hopps, sir. I'm the only one at fault here."

The chief turned back to the fox, his frown dangerously lower, not keen on his officers contradicting him.

"No, you're not. You screwed up both. Equally. You're a Corporal, she's a lieutenant. And as the senior officer, she has a part of responsibility on everything you do when you work together."

"It's not fair!" Nick had raised his voice. He was now standing on his chair. The cape buffalo had stood too, towering over the two officers.

"Stand down officer. If you don't want your partner to take the blame for your mistakes, maybe you should learn to make less of them, like a proper agent of the ZPD!" The chief had spoke in a loud tone, slowly leaning toward Nick, to get his point across.

"Then maybe you should assign a proper agent to her!" He had shouted at the chief's face. All the tension he had held back for weeks, for months, suddenly bursting and rippling toward every mammal in the room.

This is how he dies, This is how Nick dies.

But instead, the chief's brows slightly rose. Still leaning toward the fox, he asked.

"What the hell are you saying, Wilde?"

The fox looked around, a startled expression on his face, realizing what he had said and done.

"It's nothing sir." he sighed, slumping back on his seat.

"No Nick, it isn't nothing." Said judy, looking up to him with sad eyes, her hand on the side of his leg.

"What are you going on about, you two?" the chief's voice was calm and stern, but he had a concerned attitude.

The fox pinched his eyes taking a deep breath. He was used to have things eating at him, but usually he cold keep them from affecting his attitude.

"It's about the question sir. The last one during the interview. Do you remember?"

He did, he had meant to talk about it with Nick during the party three months ago but he had been held back by Clawhauser and completely forgotten about it.

"Yes I do remember."

"Well, it stayed stuck here" Said the fox, pointing toward his head. "And maybe it's stupid, but I
can't help myself but think that maybe my place isn't really here."

It was the chief's turn to sigh.

"I knew it wasn't a good idea." he mumbled to himself, making both Nick and Judy raise their eyebrows. "Not you being here." He quickly clarified "I meant the question. It was MacHorn's idea. He wanted to test you, to see if you could show something else than the mask, and what would be your principles as an officer." he scratched his head. "I had already decided that I wanted you into my precinct. Your grades were good enough, and you knew enough of the criminal world to be an asset. But your answer was great. Really great. If by then I hadn't been sure of your potential, it would have convinced me."

Nick wanted to thank the chief for his words, but if he tried to talk now, he was sure his voice would crack. He simply nodded.

A silence installed itself in the room. the buffalo scratched his head, while he was reflecting on what to do with the situation. Finally, he came to a decision.

"You're okay, fox. Nor you nor your partner are in trouble. Your mistakes will cost money to the city. Cruisers aren't cheap. But no one was hurt and that's what's important."

He put back his glasses on, looking at a file.

"You're to take a week of vacation as of tomorrow. Since your partner was going to be absent for the week anyway, it's best you're not here to bother the other officers."

Both Nick and Judy were now smiling.

"It means that I want your report on the incident before 10PM. You're dismissed."

Their smiles faltered a bit but stayed on their faces. They left the room.

..."Carrots wait." He stopped her in the middle of the hallway, as they had just left the chief's office.

"What is it Nick ?"

"I wanted to apologize about how I acted. With the muzzle thing and everything else."

"It's alright Nick. I understand why you acted like this. I'm not upset with you." She gave him a reassuring smile, lifting a bit of the weight from nick's troubled mind. She started walking again in the direction of their desk. "So, since you're free, do you want to come with me at Bunnyburrow. You know, for the festival. And you could meet my parents."

"Meeting your parents ? Aren't you going a bit fast ? We're not even dating yet." He regretted the half-joke as soon as it left his mouth. He had to put on the his most mischievous mask to sell it as a joke.

"What ?" Her mouth stayed agape, eyes staring blankly at him. She blinked and forced herself to chuckle. "Real funny slick. Anyway, the invitation stays open."

"I'm gonna have to pass. I need time alone to think about all this, about what the chief said. And I doubt a full burrow of hyperactive bunnies is the best place to reflect upon my life."

They both had finished their report and as they were leaving the precinct, Nick had proposed that
Judy and him took a drink at a coffee-shop. The doe had to decline, her train was leaving soon in the morning and she still had her briefcase to fill. They promised to call each other during the coming week and then went their separate way.

Judy was already gloomy at the idea of not seeing Nick for a week, but she had passed six months without him. A one week vacation with her family couldn't be that bad.

Nick was already lost in his thought, thinking of how he would go see his mother. If he would dare. If he would ask Finnick to come with him. He was also sad that he was not going to see his best friend for a week but the perspective of confronting one of his biggest mistake was taking most of his brain's capacity. He had had it postponing it for too long, using his failure at being an honest mammal as an excuse. His shame and sadness were like a sharp throbbing pain in his heart.
They had invited Fangmeyer to come with them but he had declined. "I promised the lady I would be hers tonight, and you know how that is. I don't want to disappoint her." he had said. "Don't go choking on a fishbone.". It was around 6PM as they had left the precinct. They had taken the ZUG to Tundratown.

Blackfur was showing Wolford around. She had grown up and had worked in the district. She knew every corner of the district. They were both still in uniform, having forgotten to take a change of clothes as they usually didn't need it.

"Why did you leave here for Rainforest. You seem to like it here !"

"I grew tired of the cold, I guess" she answered in her usual calm tone. He didn't catch the thin layer of regret underneath it.

They went through a massive mall. There were bright lights blinking, calm music playing from speakers, cheery people were passing around them. 'It's always Clawsmas in Tundratown' was a common saying and this evening, it seemed true. It gave a boost to Wolford's already happy mood. He was about to comment about it to Blackfur, but when he glanced at her, she had a strange look on her face. She looked focused, looking around for something, listening and humming the air.

"You okay partner ?"

She shushed him from her paw, hesitated and then rushed to their right, into a perpendicular hallway. The wolf searched with his eyes, looking for what had the panda all flustered.

He saw a lonely cervid kid, probably no more than four. He had a worried and sad look on his face, tears pouring from his eyes. People went past him without really noticing. He was looking around him, mumbling and stuttering, obviously lost.

With her large stature and the uniform that gave her an air of authority, Wolford was afraid her colleague would scare the poor kid, but she already had approached him, having put down a knee to appear less big than she was.

She had leaned really close to the youngling. He was in her back a bit recessed so that two people wouldn't overwhelm, the child. He couldn't see her face, nor hear what she was whispering to him, but the kid immediately seemed to calm down. They seemed to talk a bit and then she gave him her huge paws. He took it without hesitation.

"The kid's lost his parents, I'm going to the information desk and make an announcement for a lost Gabriel Deantla. You're going to try to help him retrace his steps, we stay in contact by radio."

"Wouldn't it be simpler to both go to the information desk together ?"

"No it wouldn't." she turned to the young cervid, her tone had gone from serious business to mama bear in an instant. "Can you take care of officer moon-moon here for me ? He's a bit shy, so be nice to him."
"Okay ma'am" The kid gave his hand to the Wolf, who took it without thinking.

"But, Bla-" tried to protest the canid.

"You're going with him. That's an order officer." she stormed away.

_But I don't know how to take care of kids._

He scratched his head and looked at the kid. He was staring at him expectantly.

"So big boy, do you remember how you got here ?"

He pointed to a shop "I was looking at dis !"

Of course, distracted kid looking at a toy store front.

"So let's go see it and work from there."

...  

"The little Gabriel Deantla is waiting for his parents a the information desk. I repeated, The little Gabriel Deantla is waiting for his parents a the information desk."

The panda's voice came from the wolf's radio. "Wait until they call, saying the parents are waiting for their kid."

"Ooookay ?"  

"Thanks."

_What are you playing at Blackfur ?_

They had entered the toy store. The kid had completely forgotten where he had come from and the wolf found it simpler to take him to a place he wouldn't want to leave. He was still holding his paw though, the kid seemed easily distracted. He felt a tugging on his tail that made his hairs and ears stand up. The kid was playing with it with his free hand.

"You shouldn't play with wolves tails son."

"Why ?" He looked genuinely surprised.

"It's like, um... Antlers. You know how you're parents said to you shouldn't touch anyone's antlers without asking first ?" The wolf had taken a course on mammal sociology, couldn't hurt to know what and what not to do with other species. He wished more people did like him, but he didn't blame the kid. Kids were curious, and curious was good in his book.

"Oh yeah, mom said that. I don't understand that but she said I shouldn't, that cervids didn't like that. Do you fight with your tail too ?"

"Huh ? Oh no. It's more of a personal thing. Like tickles but more uncomfortable."

"Oh. Sorry."

"That's okay kid, I'm not upset."

"If you don't have antlers, what do you use to fight ?"
"I'm a cop, so tranq-gun to make people sleep."

"I thought wolves used fangs and claws." he seemed disappointed.

"We have them but we don't use them."

"Why ? Is it bad ?"

"Yes, very."

"Can I see them ?"

_I really shouldn't do that._

But he couldn't resist the excited and expectant look on the kids face. He looked around, making sure no one was watching.

"Okay, but you're not telling to anyone. Not your friends, not your parents. I could be in big trouble, so you need to promise."

"I promise !"

_Okay, here goes._

He took out his claws and bared his fangs, taking the least threatening expression he could muster.

"Woah !" The kid had taken an amazed expression, his hands were shaking lightly. Wolford couldn't know if it was from excitation or fear, so he hid his natural weapons.

"You okay kiddo ?"

"Your fangs look so cool ! I wish I had fangs !"

"You'll have big antlers, it wouldn't be fair if you also had fangs."

... 

"Gabriel Deantla is awaited by his parents at the information desk, I repeat Gabriel Deantla is awaited by his parents at the information desk"

_Seriously, what are you doing Blackfur ?_

They made their way to the information desk. As they approached, Wolford saw a couple of deer that were watching down on their hooves and a stern officer Blackfur with crossed arms. Behind them, the desk clerk, a badger, looked like he was holding back from grinning.

"Mom, Dad !" The kid let go of the wolf's paw, running to his parents.

"Son !" they both cried at the same time, raising him from the floor and hugging him.

The panda nodded at them "Take care now." She went back to the wolf officer.

"Care to explain to me what you were doing ?" asked the canid who had a pretty good idea what it was all about.

"I didn't want the kid to be here while I was chewing them out. Bad for authority."
It was Blackfur for you. She could be the most rule-driven and professional cop in the precinct, stare down any mammal, be great with kids and lecture parents on how to take care of their child.

"How did they lose track of him ?"

"Looked away while they were shopping for clothes. They should have paid more attention."

"It's a common mistake, doesn't make them bad parents." He raised his shoulders.

"You never lose sight of your kid." It was a statement. The tone she used dissuaded the wolf to challenge it.

... 

They arrived at the restaurant and hour later than they had planned, but their table was still free and waiting for them. The ursine had called to warn that they would be late. The place was small, with discreet and elegant decoration. The wall were of black varnished wood, with paper paneling separating the tables. It looked fancy but as he glanced at the menu, the wolf found that the food wasn't overpriced. In return, the menu didn't have a lot of choice. In his experience, that usually meant good food.

"So I take it you'll take gyoza ?" asked the wolf.

"I don't know yet, still thinking."

The waiter, also a panda, came to their table "Wight, long time no see !" he put down his glasses and shook the other ursine's hand, genuinely happy to see her.

"Likewise Jake, is Oscar doing okay ?"

"Yeah, he is. He left the city though, installed himself in Greengarden, opened his own place at last. Who's your friend by the way ?"

"Augustyn Wolford" presented himself the Wolf. "Nice to meet you." He shook the waiter's paw.

"Jake Slumbstill, nice to meet you too." He put his glasses back on "But you didn't come here to make the conversation with the waiter, what will you take ?"

"It depends on the cook's mood."

"It's a calm evening, so he's not in a rush. Kind of bored."

"I'll have a sashimi assortment. The extra-large one. Side dish of gyoza, twenty-four pieces. Both at the same time."

Not knowing why she had asked about the mood, Wolford played it safe and asked for the same thing with halved quantities. He saw the waiter scribble VIP on the corner of his notepad. He then bowed and went away.

"Good choice" said the female panda.

"Thanks." answered the canid "You know the waiter, are you two related ?"

"All pandas aren't related." she had crossed her arms with a stern expression.

"Sorry, I didn't mean-" He began with an apologetic look.
"I know, I'm just making fun" She reassured him "Plus, we are kind of related, he's my step-brother"

The last sentence left a wide blank in the conversation. The wolf wanted to ask more but he kept his questions for himself though, not wanting to put his hinder paw in his mouth. A thing he was usually expert at.

The waiter came back with a bottle of Alpawrino, a strange sight in this kind of establishment, opened it, made Wolford taste it and when he approved with a confused look on his face, filled both their glasses.

"What was that about the chef's mood ?" asked the wolf, hoping to deviate from the precedent topic.

She chuckled.

"When he is calm, let's say on a regular evening, he's a great cook. But his mood string can be a bit... Erratic. In a rushing evening, his sashimi can get unequally cut. Too bored and he forgets the dumplings in the cooker. When it's calm like this, you ask for both, since he has to juggle between two types of dishes, he gets into 'working mode' and nails it all perfectly." She made a pause, taking a sip from her glass. "Even when he 'screws up' and I use those words broadly, he's still the best pawsian chef in town."

"You seem to know a lot about this place, did you eat it here a lot ?"

"I worked here. When I was young and needed a bit of money. The chef was an apprentice at the time, now he owns the place."

The waiter came back with their order. The wolf smelled the plates, the scent was mouth-watering.

"Itadakimasu", the panda had clapped her hand.

The wolf raised an eyebrow, a piece of sashimi already between his chopsticks.

"It's an eastern black bear thing" She explained "I picked the habit with a friend of mine. She was way into traditional stuff."

"I hope I'm the first to point out that you're weird, Blackfur." he declared, his brow still raised.

"Off duty it's Wight."

"I hope I'm the first to point out that you're weird, Wight." He smiled.

The sashimi was divine. Clearly better than the Eastern Pawgod's. The salmon really tasted like salmon and the red tuna brought water to his eyes. The wolf didn't use the soy sauce, preferring the untainted taste of the fish.

He tasted a gyoza, the mix of crispness and mushiness, and the vegetables' flavour was perfectly intact.

"You win, Wight. It's the best pawsian restaurant in the city." He admitted. She nodded at him in agreement. He raised a finger. "But I maintain that the Eastern Pawgod's trout is still the freshest."

She chuckled at that, gulping another sashimi, nearly choking herself.
"Hey, I wanted to say, you were great with that kid. I don't know how you could calm and reassure him so quick but that was impressive."

"That was nothing." she said, shrugging.

"But that was something!" He interjected "Most prey are instinctively afraid of predators, whether they admit or not. And in the kid's state of distress, he could have reacted way worst. Well I suppose since you're married, you probably have kids of your own. You must have experience as a moth-"

Wight had a frozen expression. "Wolford." she interrupted him.

The panda officer had put down her chopsticks, and was staring at her mostly empty plates, jaws clenched, breathing slowly.

"Wight ? Are you alright?" he had leaned toward her, concerned by her sudden change of attitude. She glanced at him, a mix of anger and sadness in her eyes. It made him back down instantly.

"Oh shit. I'm so sorry." he played with his food on his plate, not knowing what he had said to put her in that mood. He was afraid that the next thing he might say would only make it worse. "I assumed you were married with the stepbrother thing and that maybe you had a kid and-" he hesitated.

She was just staring at her plate, not reacting to anything he tried to say. He had tripped on something big, whatever he was going to tell wouldn't be what she needed now. He had screwed up and wanted to make it right, though, but he didn't know where to begin.

"I'm sorry. I put my paws in my mouth all the time. Do you want me to leave you alone?"

"No, just give me a moment." she said. The wolf hesitated, already half-standing. The panda was now wearing an unreadable expression. He sat back, his head bowed, glancing at her, trying to read her face. He was hoping she would be more openly upset, feeling that the silence was worse than being yelled at.

She looked up from her plate at the wolf. She was upset. At him, but mainly at herself. She had let show her emotions a bit too much, not that she was usually a well-guarded mammal.

But with the face he was making, she simply couldn't be mad at him. She took a breath and he seemed to lower his head even more, like he was expecting her to shout at him.

"I'm not upset. It's a delicate topic, and I'd rather not talk about it right now." His head was still low but his worried expression had receded a bit. She contained a chuckle "You can drop the omega attitude now. As you said, you put your foot in your mouth, but that's no reason to be angry."

"Huh? How do you know?" His worried expression had been completely replaced by surprise.

His answer took her aback. She didn't understand what he meant.

"Know what?"

"The omega thing, how do you know?" He was staring at her in disbelief.

"I read about it, mammals behaviour. Your attitude matched." She still didn't understand his reaction. It was usual for officers to learn about other mammals traits. It was important since it helped mediate in tense situations.
"Oh." he said, coming back to a more composed attitude. "It was just that."

There was something else, Blackfur could sense it, but if it was private she didn't want to pry. She simply lifted an interested eyebrow, hoping he would say more.

"It's just, the way you said it, it seemed like you knew."

"Knew what ?" She couldn't keep herself from asking.

"The pack thing. Fangmeyer knows about it, MacHorn too but he's a prey, so he doesn't really understand." He saw her interested expression and decided that he wanted to share that with her, partly to make up for his mistake from earlier, partly to get away from the previous topic and save the evening from being a total fiasco.

"I'm in sort of an association, the Wood Howlers. It's a sort of... pack. We try to assemble and go... hiking and live off the land in the woods, north to the city, for few days at a time. There is a lot of howling involved. We try to be more close to our nature, express our instincts freely."

"Like nudists ?" she half-joked.

The wolf smiled at that, he had successfully diverted the conversation from the previous topic. Truth was, she had understood what he was doing, and was grateful for it. And the matter interested her anyway.

"No. I mean, for some of us yes, some get in their underwear, some go completely naked. And then there is the whole pack thing. We name an alpha for the duration of the event, the title rotates between members, some like other positions better, like beta or gamma. I'm most comfortable being omega."

"Doesn't it create tensions between members ? If multiple alpha personalities are in the group ?"

"It does sometimes. The strongest mostly tend to be betas when they can't be alphas. Some prefer not to come, to not ruin the experience for others. We sometime make multiple groups to accommodate everyone. We're open to non-traditional stuff too, we've had female alphas from time to time. We even accept guests, even if most just come only one time out of curiosity."

"Pass, I'll feel like an intruder."

He chuckled, "Yeah, that's how most non-wolf guests feel. Beside maybe you're right not to come, those little gatherings can get... frisky. With all the instincts kicking, and half naked mammals, it's not uncommon that two members fool around." He had a slight naughty grin. "Like I said, lots of howling involved."

She snorted, putting a paw on her snout to hide her laughter. The wolf was happy, he had been able to make her forget about what was eating at her earlier.

"That explain a lot though." She began.

"Explain what ?"

"Your attitude. You joke all the time, you try to cheer people up, learn about and try to befriend every-one. But you don't really want everyone to like you, you just want them to be happy."

The wolf scratched his neck in embarrassment. The panda was spot on in her observation. She continued talking "I mean, I've seen you take the blame for some of your coworker mistakes, and
deviate anger toward you. It's textbook omega comportment"

Silence fell as the wolf was containing a blush while the panda emptied her glass.

"It's that obvious ?"

"No it isn't. I'm observant, that's kinda my thing. For instance, I can say you hate silence since you nap with your earphones plugged in and tap your leg when no-one talks." She kept for herself the smell of cannabis he sometimes had when he came back from his days off, she could now guess it came from his gatherings. But from her standpoint, as long as he did his job correctly, there was no reason to call him out on it.

The wolf chuckled, embarrassed. "You're really perceptive. Between that and you're diplomatic skills, I see why you got a position at Precinct One. You do that with every one of our colleagues ?"

"I do that with every one I spend enough time. It tends to creep people out though." she smiled unapologetically.

"I hope I'm the first to point out that you're weird, Wight." Smiled the wolf, equal to himself. He wasn't mocking or making fun. It was his way to express he accepted her weirdness.

"Top twenty" She answered, her smile giving a hint of relief.

"I'll take it."
The train ride lasted longer than she remembered, stretching itself through the country, through multiple towns. People got in and people got out, their unknown faces only passing through Judy's mind.

She was a cop for nine months now, and proud to be one. It had been a challenge, to get accepted by her colleagues and to make her family accept that she wasn't going to change her mind. Now, 9 months after the night howler case, she was going home to visit. She was anxious, apprehensive. Even if she tried to talk with her parents at least every two weeks, seeing them in person would be different, and every comment on her well-being and their fears would be more real than in a simple face-call.

"Bunny Burrow, the train has arrived at Bunny Burrow, please don't forget any luggage on board and mind the gap between the train and the platform." It was around 8AM.

She stepped out, holding her luggage with her right arm, looking around to see if her family was waiting for her.

"Judyyyy!" Multiples shouts came to her. A wave of big ears and little noses washed over her, and soon she felt more Clawsmas tree than bunny. A part of her siblings had come to meet her, they were hugging her and only part of her face was still visible.

"Kids, let go of her, we'd like to see her too." came a motherly voice. Judy's mother was a bit larger and smaller that her daughter.

"Yeah, kids, she's not your personal hoping ground." her father had what one could call a country voice. Thick farmer accent, jovial tone.

The kids finally let go of her, she went to hug her parents.

"Mom! Dad! I missed you!"

"We missed you too, girl."

She was sitting in the truck, next to her mother. Her father was driving while her siblings had piled up in the trunk. She had cringed the idea. Since she was a cop she had seen a lot of accident and the more gruesome often involved kids with no seatbelts. There was nothing she could do, beside rationalizing that her father was a prudent driver and that there were few people on the road at this hour.

They arrived at her home. It was a massive repurposed shed, were many dependencies had been added each generations. She couldn't believed she had missed the place. As big as was this place, with all her siblings, it always feesed cramped. The noise and activity never ceased and it wasn't the best place if one wanted to take a nap. Still, it was more her home than the shoebox she currently lived in.

They entered the large house, accompanied by the chattering of Judy's siblings.
"So what's the program for Carrot's week. Do you have a booth ? Are you selling stuff ?"

"Of course we are Judy. We're selling carrots, radish, shallots..." began Stewart

"So much stuff we can't all list them."

Judy greeted the siblings that hadn't com the train station to meet them. Not all of them though, since it would have taken the whole day. She then took her luggage to her old room. Aside from the dusting, it had not been touched since she had gone back to zootopia. Contrary to most of her siblings, her room wasn't shared. She had insisted to have one so she could study more.

She signed in nostalgia, looking around her, detailing her room. She felt like an archeologist, going around a long forgotten place.

Decoration had been kept to a minimum aside for two posters. One about the ZPD, showing a bunch of officers with a big "Join us TODAY" written at the top. The other one was from Gazelle. There was also a now mostly empty cabinet as they passed down their clothes from a sibling to another.

She opened the luggage and hesitated to unload it in the cabinet. It was ultimately pointless, she decided. She then left the room to join her family in the common room.

The carrot festival had evolved as the year passed. In the beginning it had been created by the first farmers of Bunny Burrow. They were all rabbits that had assembled their belongings and money to create a carrot farm. As the years passed, the quality of their products was well known. The year came when they finally had established themselves as the main carrot providers for the region. The celebration ensuing had evolved in a five days festival. Since then they had opened the event to the city's outsiders, using it to promote their products and culture. The production had evolved over the years, they weren't only selling carrots but a whole lot of different type of vegetables.

As an aspiring ZPD officer, Judy had never really paid attention to the celebrations. She thought of it being more of a chore she was forced to participate to than something she could be proud of. But now, as she had matured enough, it made her happy to see everyone so busy with the preparations. Her parents and siblings were proud of what they made and she could now see how that was important.

Her parents were not in the common room, one of her cousins informed her that they were working near the barn.

As she went outside she saw her mother filling a large basket with carrots, neatly aligning them. Judy came to help her.

"You don't have to do that Judy, you're on vacation. And I know how you always hated doing this."

"I want to help, mom. I can't really look while you're all work, can I ?"

"You wouldn't really be a Hopps otherwise" The Jovial voice of her father came from behind the two does.

He was carrying a pile of square basket that was towering over his head. He them down and hopped to take the one at the top. Judy was aware that rabbits had legs made for high jumps, but seeing her chubby father jump this high always impressed her. He began to fill his own basket with the orange roots.

"So what's the day's program ?" asked Judy
"We fill the baskets with as much product as we can, we load the truck, when the truck is full I go an unload it at our booth while you fill other baskets. Rinse and repeat until 5PM. And then I'm going fishing with Gideon."

"You're going fishing ?" the doe had a puzzled look on her face.

"Yeah, Gideon introduced me to the practice. It's relaxing. I release what I catch though."

"And you mom ?"

"Me and the girls are having an aperitif at the house. You can join us if you want."

Judy perfectly knew what an aperitif meant. Her aunts, cousins and all other rabbits would be present and she'd have to face waves of questions and concerns about her personal life. Did she have mate ? why didn't she have a mate ? Was she dating someone at the moment ? Would it be serious ? Had she considered having kids ? Did she know her internal clock was ticking ?

At the moment, she wasn't seeing anyone, and there wasn't anyone she was interested in anyone. At this thought, images came in the foreground of her mind. A lean and athletic silhouette, a red and cream fluffy tail, pools of emerald were she would let herself drown into. Feeling red come to her face, she chased the pictures.

Don't be foolish Judy. There is no way- just don't think about it.

She decided to take the cowardly way out.

"I'm think I want to try fishing. I've never done it and it would be nice to see Gideon again.

If both of her parents had perfectly understood the real reason behind her choice, they didn't show it.

"So this evening it's me and Jude the dude. You'll see, it's less barbaric than it appears."

... 

Judy felt her every muscle screaming in agony. As a cop, she was always training to keep in shape, but the farmers work solicited parts she didn't usually use. She had lied down in the weed, looking at the cloud while her father prepared the fishing gear. The perspective of getting back up wasn't pleasant. The good news was that she would spend the morning after sleeping. There were perks at being on vacation.

"Get up Jude, we're going." Her father had come and offered his hand to help her up. She took it and soon they were in the truck, making their way to the fishing spot. As they arrived, she saw Gideon having already put up his equipment. A simple handmade fishing road, two seats and a portative radio.

"Hey Stu ! Judy ? Oh sorry, I didn't know you were coming, I woulda put up 'nother seat otherwise."

"Don't worry Gid" said Stu, "I have brought mine."

She shook the fox's hand and helped her father set up her equipment. In reality she mostly watched him, since she didn't know how to proceed.

"Hey, big girl, can you give me two hooks from inside the little pink box ?"
She rummaged inside her father's fishing bag, found the box and opened it.

"Now Judy, be careful, the hooks are barbed. If you stick one in your finger, chances are we'll have to dig to take it out."

"Yeah, I've the scar ta prove it!" Gideon showed his right paw, wearing thin scars. "Painful lessons" he added. It was enough warning for her to be extremely careful around the hook's little boxes. She gave two of them to her father.

The radio was playing relaxing ambient tunes from one of Gideon's CD. Judy's father was slumbering on his seat, his cap covering his eyes. Gideon had an empty gaze turned toward the calm stream.

"So how is the blueberry pie business?" She had asked in a low voice not wanting to disturb the fish nor her father.

"It's good. The shop's doin' great!"

"How did you get into the baking business?"

"Oh. Uh. You remember I dropped high school after repeating 10th grade twice or thrice. Well after that I didn't do much, I was still hangin' wid' Travis but he was trying to become a mechanic so he didn't 've so much time anymore." He scratched his head. "I had began stealin' booze from pa at the time. Ah think he knew but wid' work and all, he and ma didn't have time to talk to me. They sent me to some kinda squirrel counselor after I crashed the car at the entrance of the garage. 'wos so drunk I didn't see the wall." He looked a bit ashamed

"The guy said he could help me to get out of the drinking habit, find a job and all but for that I had ta want it. I didn't really care anymore so just so my parent would lay off mah case, I kept going twice a week." He tugged at the rods. "In the end, I stopped drinkin', and he said to me that there wos a job for me at the Ol'Leaper's Bakery if I wanted it. I said there wos no way I'd work for some stupid loser rabbit. The way the squirrel looked at me, I thought he was gonna shout. After that he said I needed some kinda real therapy cause I had some real problems. I don't remember the terms he used but I mostly answered that was bullshit. He gave me the address to the 'real therapist', friend of his, I went and the guy wos a rabbit." he chuckled

"I was a real jerk wid' him too, kept calling him a loser but he wouldn't quit, called my home when I didn't come or was late. So neither did I. I wanted to prove he was useless or whatevah. He said I had self-doubt and anger problem and projected on people to feel better." Gideon leaned back, looking at the sky with a smile "In the end, he got through to me. I can't understand how he did so with the pig-head I wos, but he did. When I thank'd him he said he just asked the right question and I found the answers mahself. Then, when I went back to dah squirrel, he said the baking position wos still open." Judy was still listening. The fox yawned and she couldn't stop herself to do so too.

"I worked at Ol'Leaper's for three years. The ol' owner wos even more speciest than me, kept telling that foxes were red because they were made by the devil. He wasn't so bad, he still gave me a job, and he was the most honest mammal I ever met." he chuckled again, recalling the event.

"Beside Ol'Leaper, there were other employes, rabbits too, a Carlin sum't'ing and a Jessica Hopps-"

"My cousin?"

"Yeah. She didn't like the job though, I had been hired to replace her. Anyway, the ol'guy wanted to
retire, saying that he would let the best baker buy his bakery. Loved the job, loved the place. And I wanted to prove the geezer species didn't mean shit. As if I learned that somehow." He snorted, containing his laugh.

"Three years, I worked my ass off. First to come, last to go, skipping off days, watching him work and learning as much as I could. In the end, he had to admit I was the best baker he ever had. Toldja he was honest. And he accepted ta' sell me the bakery. Pissed Carlin off so much he quit on the spot. I didn't really wan' it in the beginning, but since I love baking and' the patrons liked me, I thought I might as well go through with it."

"I renamed the shop 'Gideon Grey's Real Good Baked Stuff', I wanted it to be my own. I know it doesn't sound as good as Ol'Leaper's Bakery, but I wos a bit too enthusiastic... After that, I associated with your parents and added the rest of the name to my delivery truck and on the front of my shop".

After he had told his story, a silence installed itself. Judy was taking in the fox's whole story. Finally she said:

"I'm impressed by you. I would never have imagined you could do all that."

"Hey don't beatcha self up. Neither did I!"

"Maybe but still. I owe you an apology."

He looked at her with a puzzled look "Why? I was a jerk to you, not you to me."

"No you're wrong. Well, you were a jerk to me, that's true, but I was a jerk to you too. I called you small-minded, I thought you were small-minded, and always suspected you when bad stuff happened at school."

"Yeah, but mostly it were my fault, 'remember the laxative fed marked chicken?' He had a fanged grin akin to the one Nick wore sometimes.

*It must be a fox thing.*

"Numbered one, two and four. They looked for the third one for weeks. I must admit, it was hilarious." they laughed quietly but Judy continued "I still want to apologize. I was a jerk to you. I assumed that you were a complete idiot, and that you couldn't change. And that was partly due to my bias against foxes. So I'm sorry. Will you forgive me Gideon?" She offered her paw and he immediately shook it.

"I change, you change. I don't see no reason to be upset with you."

As he said that, one the rods began to bend, the wire stretched. Something was pulling at the hook.

"We caught something!" said the vulpine as he rushed to pull the fish out. "Judy, get the net! Stu, come an' help me, tha' one's gonna be big!"

... The day before, she had fallen into her bed of exhaustion. She hadn't worked that much but the emotional and physical weight of her police work had suddenly washed over her. However she had trouble falling asleep, there was something amiss, something she couldn't pinpoint. She stared at the ceiling, trying to understand what was happening, and the image of a fox appeared again. She chased it back to where it came from and turned to her side, burying her face in the pillow. Sleep
slowly came to her, and she slipped into a calm slumber.

As she woke up, the sun was up, and she could tell it was already late. She felt icky, still wearing her clothes from the day before. The doe went straight to the shower, then dressed herself quickly and went down to the kitchen to take her breakfast. The house was calm. Sure, there were still bunnies, but way less than usual. As she stepped into the cooking room she saw a male bunny that she didn't recognise, back turned, going through the large fridge. He turned back to face Judy as he had heard her come.

"Hey sleepy head, you up at last ?"

"Uncle Terry ? Nice to see you ! How are you doing ? What are you doing here ?"

The rabbit took out a pack of soda-bottles from the fridge. "I'm good, thanks for asking. Your mom asked me to come and get those, we don't have anything to drink to the booth anymore."

"What ? What time is it ?" She took out her phone, she hadn't thought to look at it when she had woken up. It was past 3PM. "Oh carrots. That never happens."

"Seems to me you had hours of sleep to catch up to. Lots of them."

"Probably, yeah. Can I accompany you back to the festival ? Can I help you carry anything ?"

"Sure, there is another pack that I need to take. Carry it and I won't have to make two trip."

The car was running down the road, toward the city's center, where the festival took place.

"Did I miss anything important ?"

"Beside your father telling how he was so proud of you to everyone that came at the booth and your mother saying him to shut-up and serve the client, no, not much."

"Uneventful morning, so ?"

"As a carrot's festival day can be. There are thousands of people from towns around that have come this year. It's not the most we've ever had, but that sure is something. Oh, and Gideon's booth is right next to ours. It's always fun to see people react at him and your parents being so familiar with each others. You know what people think of bunnies with foxes."

"I know. Stereotypes die hard."

"But they do eventually. You opened lots of people's' eyes, your parent's and mine included. No wonder your parents are proud. I know I am."

She and her uncle weren't so close, but she was really friend with his daughter Jessica, he had seen her grow up.

"Thanks, that means a lot."

The streets had been decorated with carrot themed posters and garlands. If anyone had been allergic to the color orange, he would have immediately died of choc. The town wasn't big, it was mostly a meeting center for farms around, so when the festival was up, there was not a place that didn't partake in the festivities. Music was played, people were loud and kids annoying. She and her uncle made their way to the Hopps' family booth.
It was probably one of the biggest in the festival, selling and presenting a wide variety of fruits and vegetables. Her parents and family were busy, cheerfully chatting with every client, boasting the quality of their products.

Judy went behind the booth with Terry, carrying one of the bottle-packs. She put it down and tapped her father's shoulder.

"Hey Jude, Jude the Dude!" he hugged her.

"Hey, Judy! I thought you'd never wake up." said her mother.

"Yeah, as said Terry, I had hours of sleep that I needed to catch up to. I was more tired than I thought. Do you need help with the booth?"

"No, not really, go and visit the festival. You can go say hello to Gideon, he is right next to us."

Before leaving, she came and said hello to every present member of her family. It took her a whole fifteen minutes before she would be done. She then came around to Gideon's pie and bakery smelling booth.

Gideon was having a conversation with a doe in his booth. It surprised Judy at first, but since her best friend was a fox, there was really no reason to be.

"Hey Judy, you're here!" greeted the fox

"Judy?" The doe turned around. It was Jessica. She leapt to her and hugged her. "It's so nice to see you! It has been so long! How are you doing? How is Zootopia? How is being a cop? Wha-"

"I'm good. Jessy, calm down, breath."

She and Jessica had been friend since they were little. Her cousin had left the house to live on her own in bunny-burrow a few weeks before Judy had left to get into the police academy. They were as close as siblings with complete opposite interest could be. Her cousin was easily excited and a tad hyperactive. For a bunny, the combination could be deadly. She had stopped talking but she was bouncing in place, keeping at bay the metric-ton of questions she wanted to unload.

"Slept well?" the fox asked.

"Like a log. I hadn't slept like this for a long time. Never in fact. Almost twenty hours."

He took out a plate with a slice of blueberry pie "Hungry?"

She was about to politely refuse, but at that moment Judy and her body remembered they hadn't eaten that morning, or at noon. Her stomach loudly gurgled.

"Of course, thank you!" She devoured the slice in a matter of second. "Sorry, I haven't eaten today yet."

"In that case, you can have this." He took one of his carrot-pie and cut a large slice that he gave her.

"That's nice, but I'd like to pay." She didn't like handouts, it made her embarrassed and it happened a lot in Zootopia. Some people even paying for her groceries to thank her for the Bellwether case.

"Nonsense, those are your families' carrots. Take it, really." She hesitated but the fox's warm smile put down her resolve. And she was still hungry.
"Fine."

She glanced at Jessica. She was still bouncing in place but at a way higher frequency. Judy ate her slice of carrot. It was delicious, perfect mix of sweet and salty. Gideon really was a great baker. She finished the slice and turned back to Jessica who seemed about to implode.

"Okay Jess, go ahead, but one question at a time."

"How is Zootopia?"

"Big. No gigantic. There is always something happening and it can be scary, but it really is a nice place."

"How's the police life?"

"Well it's tiring but really rewarding. People are not always happy to see us, but sometimes you get to really help someone and I think it's really what it's all about."

Jessica would have kept asking question for a long time but Judy had some questions too.

"My turn to ask something. I know you and Gideon met when his bakery was still called Ol'Leaper's Bakery. I thought you quit after that."

"Oh, I did. The work was too boring. I wanted to do something more interesting, where I could move more. We didn't work long together but we stayed friend. When he needs an extra-pair of hands, I'm happy to oblige."

"Yes, during the festival and near holidays, I can need part-timers. She's the first I call every time." Added the fox.

"And what do you do now?"

"I'm a post-woman, I deliver mail."

"I can't imagine how that is a more interesting or exciting work."

"It can be if you know where are all the speed-traps and side roads." Jessica winked at her. She had never been the last to cause mischief. Judy rolled her eyes but said nothing. Bunny-burrows wasn't her jurisdiction, and as long as she stayed careful and did not hurt anyone, she could let it slide.

After that, Judy visited the festival on her own, sometime recognized by acquaintances. She was impressed by how much people had come to a festival that was at first a simple town gathering. Soon it was the end of the day and she helped her parents pack-up the few things they hadn't sold. They closed-up the booth and went home.

... 

That evening, Judy called Nick to take news, a bit concerned about him since he hadn't really been okay the week before. His face appeared on the screen.

"Hey officer Carrots, how are you doing?"

"Fine and you officer Slick?"

"Good. Having fun with all your carrots? You're not feeling too lonely?"
"I have 275 siblings. If I wanted to feel lonely, I'd have to try pretty hard. Yeah I'm having fun."

But the truth was, she was feeling lonely. Even though she really loved her family, she couldn't talk, couldn't share with them like she could share with him. She missed him, but having the opportunity to see him on muzzletime made up for the time they spent apart.

She recounted the events of the two days to Nick.

"You slept twenty hours. Sheesh, you really needed those vacations!"

"Seems that way. Maybe I also needed a calm place to stay. I can't believe how loud Buck and Pronks can be compared to my siblings."

"You really should move."

"I don't have time to look for a new flat."

"You're on vacation, you have time. You could even leave your dump and crash at my apartment for a few weeks. I've meant to buy a new couch anyway. Or you could sleep with me in the bed, my sexy body didn't seem to faze you last time." He had the shit-eating grin again. It used to drive her nuts, know she liked seeing it. Most of the time.

"That's sweet but no. Bad idea. If I crash at yours, I'll get too caught up into work and end up never moving out."

"And the downside is?" Still that grin. He was only half-joking but she couldn't see it. And she had no answer to that.

Hoping she wouldn't see her blush through the phone screen, she switched topic.

"Unrelated, but how were your first days of vacation."

"Well..."
That ceiling had a nice texture. The wood was old and worn, there were traces of water but the roof had probably been repaired before he came to live here. The steel beams were visible and where someone could have thought they were ugly, he found them oddly comforting. He thought it was because he had spent time sleeping in warehouses. He also liked how he could hear the rain when it was falling. It had a relaxing effect on him.

But now there was no rain. And even if there would have been, he wouldn't be able to relax. He hadn't slept for two days, or barely. He had spent the his first vacation day roaming in his flat and the whole following night thinking about how he needed to meet his mother. And it was already morning.

There was no scenario he could imagine where that ended in a good way.

In one she didn't even recognize him, in one she shouted at him it was too late and she never wanted to see him again, in one she had adopted and replaced him, in one she threw him out when she learnt he was a cop.

He knew that objectively, very few of those scenarios were likely to happen, but that did nothing to calm his worry.

Part of him wanted Judy to be here, to be with him when he would face this, but he didn't want to show her how vulnerable he could be. Not that way. Too many variables, not enough control.

Finnick. He could take Finnick. The fennec knew his mother, hell, it was him that gave her the money. He could pick the little fox up and go see her. Even ask him for advice, he probably knew her more than Nick did.

He took out his phone and dialed his friend. The phone rang, and rang, and no-one and answered. He tried again. And again. He decided to leave a voicemail.

"Hey Finnick, buddy ! How is it going ? Say, how about we meet today ? It's been a long time ! Call me when you get this message. Bye !"

He put down the phone and went to fix himself a breakfast. Omelette and coffee. He needed proteins and caffeine. He gulped his meal quickly and slumped into the squeaking sofa, turning on the TV. It was mostly morning garbage, the kind that sucked at your brain, hours at a time, just to shove advertisement in your brain when it was properly relaxed. Exactly what he needed.

But he couldn't relax. He stood up and went straight to his phone, it had ringed, he was sure of it.

It didn't have.

Screw this, I'm gonna see him now.

Nick put on proper clothes, a coat, and went out.
A mild cold breeze shuffled his fur. He had always liked the cold air for the morning. It kept him awake, aware of his surrounding. He was walking in a quick pace, trying to remember his friend's favorite parking spaces. He had already gone to three of them and he was nowhere to be seen. He decided to try a dive where they often went together in their hustling days called the Krispy Krab. It was at the frontier between Downtown and Tundratown.

He entered the diner and the smell of frying and poorly cooked meat met his nostrils. He didn't mind, in his brain food smell always meant good news.

"Hey Bob, how are you doing ?" He said hopping on a barstool

"It's going well." answered Hyena holding the fort. "What can I do you for ?"

"I need Finnick's current parking spot. You wouldn't happen to know where it is ? Or who would ?"

The hyena scratched his head, thinking and then answered.

"I know he found a new place he liked a while ago. I knew where it was but memory is hazy..."

He had put his open paw on the counter, palm up. Bob knew things, a lot, about everyone, it was the main reason why it was the first place Nick had tried to ask.

And every piece of information had a price to him.

Nick was tempted to flash out his badge but that meant the information he would receive in exchange would be the last Bob would ever give him. Instead, he took out twenty buck and placed it in his informant's hand. The bills disappeared in his pocket.

"I won't give you more."

"That's enough for me. The guy new parking spot is in a back-alley near the Swimming Shrew, East of downtown. Want a coffee with that ? It's on the house."

"Thanks Bob, but no thanks. Kind of in a rush. Have a nice day" He lept off of the stool and went out.

"Have a nice day too."

... 

As Bob had said, the van was parked in the back alley behind the Swimming Shrew. The last time Nick had lost Finnick's trail, a week passed before the little fennec reappeared and Nick had never known why or where he had gone. All he remembered is that he had resorted to live in a bunch of cardboard box until his friend had returned.

He came at the door of the van and knocked. No one answered but he heard muffled noises. There also was a faint smell of bad booze and vodka. He reached out for the handle and opened the backdoors. The inside was filled with empty bottles and a half naked and probably hungover fennec fox.

"Finnick ? Is everything alright ?"

"Hhhgn." was the only answer he got.

Definitely hangover.
The last time Nick had seen him in this state, the little vulpine had taken three days to get back to his decent self. Nick closed the doors and went to the nearest store to get a water bottle and a bottle of advil. Finnick hadn't moved when he was back.

"Okay Finnick, wake up. It's me buddy, it's Clawsmas in advance, I have advil and water."

"Hhgn. Leave me alone." The Finnick rolled to show Nick his back.

"Not gonna happen. You need to hydrate."

"I don't care. If you're not a booze, I got no time for you."

"You can take what I have or I can go light up your car stereo and blast something through those sweet loudspeaker you have installed. Your call."

"Fuck you Nick. I'm up."

Nick opened both advil and water bottles and gave them to his friend

"Here you go."

The fennec fox took two advils and downed a quarter of the bottle. Every move he made seemed to send pain in his body.

"Whaddya want?"

"Can't a friend go and see one of his just to take news?"

"When ya want news, you call. If you wanna meet, you call first."

"I did call first."

"I didn't answer. Ya came anyway. Dontchu take me for a fool and ask whatcha gotta ask. Sooner you get the fuck outta here, sooner I can go back to sleep. Or to drink. I don't care."

Nick didn't mind his friend's crappy mood. He knew he was like that only because he was in pain, physically and probably emotionally. He began to talk.

"Well, you were right. It's time for me to meet my mother, so I think I'm gonna go see her."

"What do I care?"

"I thought maybe you could come for moral support. Like today or tomorrow before I lose my courage. But I don't think in your state you can or want to be a support to anyone."

"Good guess kid. Anything else you wanna ask to Ol'useless me?"

"Not really."

"Then fuck off."

"No."

"I don't need help. Get."

"Listen Finnick, you were there for me when I was a kid. I didn't do it a lot, but I could confide in you. You wouldn't have shit-faced yourself that much over nothing." Nick thought that his friend
needed to talk about what troubled him. Talking about one's problem could help, he was slowly starting to realise that.

"Ugh"

*I'm not about to talk about that to the kid. He has enough on his plate as it is.*

"Please buddy, talk to me."

*Fuck it.*

"If tha' means you'll get outta mah fur, okay. Let's do this." He looked around. "Shit kid, got a cig?"

"I never smoked tobacco."

"Good for you. Hah, here they are." He took a half crushed cigarette pack, got rid of two broken coffin nails and lighted and intact one. "Aaaah, that hits the spot." he inhaled two or three times before beginning to talk again.

"Okay, it's about a lady. -Don'tchu put on that smug smile, I'll punch you- Like, you know, a proper lady. Bit older than I am." Nick raised a brow and quickly put it back in place. Finnick rarely spoke about the females he saw or dated. He had one night stands sometimes, but rarely anything more. "Anyway, I know her for like, a bit of time. Like we know each other for a while you see. She had a husband but h-"

*If I say the kid she's a widow, he'll put two and two together.*

"Basically, he left her. It was long time ago but she maybe hasn't put dat behind her. And maybe she got other problems. Or maybe I'm a fennec fox and she ain't. Whatever. Everytime I try to be nice, or to talk to her, I do something stoopid or she gets upset over something I can't understand. Last time was pretty bad. And now I'm trying to get her outta my head." He shrugged "And that ain't gonna be. So I'm trying to cope how I can." he said pointing at an empty bottle with his thumb.

"I'm sorry buddy, I don't know what to say."

There was a long silence between them, both staring blankly at the distance. Finnick took another sip from the water bottle.

"Then say nothing. There ain't nothing to say anyway." He made a pause, his blank gaze still lost for a bit, before putting it back on the kid's face. He felt a rush of violent emotions tearing at his guts, first he thought he was about to puke, bile coming from his throat, but he was something else. Hangover always did that to him, made him blurt out things he'd never say otherwise.

"Don't be as stupid as me kid. People you l- People you love" *Shit, I said it.* "You tell 'em. Don't wait like me for things to get all screwed up. You got chances to make things right, make things work, you take 'em." He put a finger on Nick's chest. "You don't, I'll have my bat meetya head."

The red fox had nothing to answer to this, so he stayed silent and nodded.

"Thanks for listening. Sob-fest is over, now fuck-off."

Nick left his friend hoping he would quickly get better. Seeing Finnick fall this low had been hard but it strengthened his resolve. He had to see his mother before it was too late.
"So that's everything Carrots. Finnick's down the drain, trying to forget some lady that broke his heart. And I'm about to have a sleepless night while I wait for tomorrow to see my mother. Perhaps she'll break my heart, as his lady did him, but good news is, I'll have someone to drink and mope around with." That wasn't really a joke. The smile was on his face but not in his eyes. On the other side of the phone, Judy saw through it instantly but decided to leave his mask on.

"You're going to be okay Nick. No way your mother's going to reject you. If she does, I'll go talk to her myself."

"I'm not sure a bunny-cop would be able to change her mind about anything. She's not too fond of the cops."

"Why not?"

"She's a fox."

"You? Stereotyping your own species?"

"Old habits die hard." The fox yawned "I think I'm going to hit the sack. With a bit of luck, I may be able to shut my eyes long enough to believe I fell asleep. Nighty-night Carrots."

"Good night Nick."

I somehow highly doubt that.

But he had slept. He had switched on and off all night, waking up bad dream after bad dream. In one, he was trying to find someone, running through the precinct's hallways. The architecture was nonsensical and he had ended lost and alone. In another he was at a burial, of whom he couldn't remember. People's faces were hidden, and also he was sure he knew them he still felt lonely. In his last dream, he was in a hospital bed, feeling life slowly escape his grasp a feeling of regret washing over him. As he had woken up for the last time, he felt his face being wet from tears. He was shaking and hoping the night would soon end, too scared to go back to sleep.

Luckily, it was the early morning, around 7AM. He was far from a morning mammal, but got up and fixed himself a quick breakfast. Immediately afterwards, he got dressed and went out. He felt he needed the cold breeze and humid morning air to clear his head. He was walking lost in his thoughts when a voice came to him.

"Hey, Nick, how is it going? What are you doing here?" It was Wolford's voice. Nick lifted his eyes to look at the smiling canid.

"Hey Wolford, I'm good. I was just walking around randomly- Oh." His steps had taken him to the precinct.

"You miss work that much?"

"Seems like it. Want to grab a cup of coffee before work?"

The wolf officer looked at his watch.

"Sorry, not today, I'm waiting for Wight- I mean Blackfur. We have paperwork to do and she
wanted me here early."

"Ah, no paperwork for me. Am I glad to be on vacation..."

"Yeah, twist the knife, that's right." laughed the good natured canid.

"Anyway, if you don't have time for coffee, I'm going to go. I still have some wandering to do. Have a nice day !"

"You too !"

Nick left, thoughts swirling in his mind. He had unconsciously come to the precinct. He didn't know what to do with the thought and choose to discard it. It was only 7AM, but he decided to go to his mother's house, he could still wait for a decent hour to show-up in a coffee-shop near it.

The building her mother lived in was situated in south Downtown, near Savanna Central. His mother had moved just after his father's death, probably not wanting to be reminded of him by living in the house they had shared for several years.

Now, he was on the curb opposite to that building and he was feeling his resolve falter. He looked around and saw an opened diner. It was strange this early but not that much. He made his way to it but stopped in his track with a certitude. If he entered the diner now, if he delayed meeting his mother any more, he would give up. He knew himself well enough that 'being too early to go now' was only a false pretense. He turned around and went straight to his mom's building. He entered the dimly lit hallway, and the inner doors were closed. Guest had to use an intercom to be able to go in. He didn't want to use it. He wanted to see his mother, to not risk her denying seeing her.

He waited around five minutes to see if some inhabitant would show up and in the meantime checked his mother's apartment number. 503, fifth floor.

_Fuck this._

He searched the pocket of his old coat and found a pair of thin metal rods. He inserted them in the keyhole, thankful that the building was old enough to not use magnetic cards. It took him only a minute to get the doors to open.

_Haven't completely lost my touch._

He found the stairs but no elevator. Of course there were not going to be an elevator. His heart was pumping by the time he reached his mother's floor. He wasn't tired, he was terrified, facing the 503's door. He approached a shaking finger to the doorbell and rang it.

He waited for a minute. No one was coming. He tried to ring a second time.

_She's not here._

A part of him was disappointed but the other was relieved. He was about to turn around and go when a bathrobe wearing vixen with an annoyed expression opened the door.

"Perry, I told you, I'll pay the rent tomorrow, no need to come this early to-"

"Hi mom." It was a mix between the cool and serious mask. A combination he used only for important occasion.

She stayed frozen in place for a few second and then moved away from the door. He took it as his
cue to enter. He could feel the thump of his heart in every part of his body. His brain was blank. He took a few steps inside and turned to face his mother.

"Mom ?"

She approached him in quick steps, her expression switching to anger and slapped him heavily across the face.

*Anger scenario then.*

As he closed his eyes, ready for another slap, she hugged him. "It's been so long. Why the fuck did you wait for so long ? You fucking dumb kit !" He wrapped his arms around her, a mix of emotion washing over him. They were too strong to bear and his legs gave in. They both fell on their knees and Nick felt something tearing in his heart. Something old, sad, something like regret and loathing. He cast away the mask, slumping in his mother's arms, letting go of twenty years of tears. She rocked him during what he felt like an eternity, he couldn't stop sobbing, words were stuck in his throat.

When he finally calmed down, he lifted up his head to face his mother, she was crying too.

"Oh mom. I'm sorry, I'm so sorry. I'm nothing but a dumb fox. I should've come sooner. I should never have left." He helped her up and held her. He found the living room and a sofa where he sat with her.

The room had cream colored worn wallpaper, an old buffet and shelves full of old books.

"I was- I don't know-"

"I thought you'd come back on your own. I should have come and bring you back."

"Don't blame yourself, it was I that left."

"I'm your bloody mother !" she cried "I should have done what was best for you ! Even if it was against your own will !"

Nick didn't really know what to say. He knew she was right. But he also knew why she didn't do it. She had always respected and supported his choices as a kit. She was the kind that let people do their own mistakes, helping them back up when they fell.

"I don't blame you. You respected my decision even if it was stupid. And I wouldn't be who I am today otherwise."

"And I'm proud of you Nick. I'm proud to call you my son, I always have been, and so was your father." She was holding his face between her paws.

"I'm proud to be your son."

They hugged again.

... The mood had slowly lightened, they had stopped talking and were simply enjoying each other's presence. Having not slept much, Nick yawned. Immediately his mother stood up.

"I'm going to make some coffee, do you want some breakfast ?"
"I already had one, but I'm not against a second one." He was about to stood up.

"Wait here. I didn't prepare breakfast for my son in twenty years." She looked excited, and cheerily left to the kitchen. She had aged but to him, she looked the same as he had left her.

The smell of coffee, pancakes, sausages and omelette had filled the apartment. Nick had had to struggle not to go in the kitchen and help his mother. He understood how much it meant for her to do this for him.

"It's ready" came the vixen's voice.

He bounced off the couch and went in a controlled pace to the kitchen. What he saw wasn't a breakfast, it was a feast.

"Mom, you didn't have to..."

"But I wanted to. I never had the occasion to spoil my kit, you won't deny it to me now."

"Alright, I give up." He sat down and she poured him some coffee, and then sat down facing him. They both ate silently. It tasted good. Great even. He was struck by the wave of memories that rushed to his mind brought back by the food placed before him. Tears slowly filled his eyes and by the time he had finished eating, they were rolling down his cheeks. His mother came and hugged him.

"You were always such an emotional kit."

"I changed during those twenty years you know. I'm not a kit anymore." He joked. "And I'm usually not that emotional."

*Maybe I should slow down on the 'emotional bunnies' jokes with Judy.*

"You can't hide from your mother, Nick."

"I successfully did so for twenty years."

*Did I just say that ?*

He lowered his head. "Sorry mom."

She burst into laughter "Fuck, Nick ! You're your father's son. The best jokes at the worst time !"

"What ?" He hadn't expected this reaction.

She was still chuckling when she answered. "He had really slowed down on his humour when you grew up, but if there was a bad situation, he was always the first to point out the irony. That did for some awkward silence when he met my parents. Oh god, they hated him so much at first."

"I knew my sense of humour couldn't come from you."

"Yep, I only gave you my good looks, pride and stupidity."

"Thanks mom. They were really useful."

... She was washing the dishes while he wiped them. At first she was reluctant to let him but he had
insisted, saying there was only so much he could accept to let her do without helping.

"So what did you do those last few months ?"

"Well, I'm a cop, as you probably know by now."

"Yes Finnick told me do you like it ? Is it the thing you always wanted to do ?"

Nick thought for a moment. "I like it, I really do. At first I wasn't sure it was for me. I've spent my life hustling mammals, trying to take advantage of others. When I entered the academy, I only did it because Judy believed I could do it. It was the first time another mammal believed in me."

"Hey, I always believed in you !" retorted her mother with a hurt look.

"Sorry, I mean, someone other that my family. Not that what you feel doesn't count, I mean-" it wasn't how he wanted the conversation to go, his shoulders slumped and he gave her a glance. She had a discreet sly grin. "-and you're toying with me."

"Your father wasn't the only one with a sense of humor. So you were saying this bunny believed in you ? It's why you tried to become a cop in the first place ?"

"Yes. She believed in me, encouraged me. Not in a patronizing way, she genuinely believe deep down I was a good mammal. I must admit she sees more in me than I do." he shrugged.

The vixen didn't answer. This bunny was really something else, being an influence big enough to motivate this pig-headed fox to turn his life around. She said nothing though, waiting for her kit to tell more.

"So I entered the academy. And let me tell you, it was hard. Hardest thing I've ever attempted in my life. But this time I couldn't give up, not with Judy behind me. So I pushed myself and here I am, corporal at precinct One, working with the best the city has to offer."

"That's quite the achievement. And so, the job do you really like it ?"

"Yes and No. The job in itself isn't the most interesting or exciting I've ever done. But the fact that I can help people, that I feel I'm doing a difference from my mere presence in the force is great. Showing the city that one of us sly fox can be as upstanding as any other mammal... Those are great feelings. And I wouldn't trade it back with my old life. Not for anything in this world."

That, and he could spend most of his time with Judy, which was a non-insignificant bonus.

The washing continued, the clinking of the dishes and cutlery the only ones to break the silence. Finally, the vixen spoke again.

"And what about the nighthowler case. I know you were involved, but how much did you do ?"

"Oh well..."

He recalled to her the events of the nighthowler case, and how at first he had been hostile to Judy. He could see his mother tense up about how he had treated her, deliberately risking the case just to mess with her. Her expression turned to horrified when she learned about the events with mister Big and how he risked his life dealing with Manchas, the panther turned savage.

"You really took lots of risk s Nick."

"Yeah. But in the heat of the moment, I didn't really think about it that much."
He explained how they had found the asylum, using the camera system and how the mayor Lionheart was arrested. He then recalled the press conference and how he was angry at Judy for what she had said, and how he had again let someone close to him.

"She was a bunny who grew up on a farm, I should have understood that her bias wasn't really her fault. I came back to the precinct some times later to speak with her, to lay down to her how much she had hurt me, but they said she wasn't here anymore, on vacation or something. Immediately I understood she had quit. She had hurt the city, she had hurt me, and discarded her dream because of it."

The memory was painful, but compared to what he had felt that day, it was close to nothing.

"And then she came back. She apologized about what she had said, and how stupid she had been. Truth is, she didn't even need to. I'd have come and help her either way."

Then he recalled how they found out about the night-howler, the metro tracks, the museum and the ruse they used to get Bellwether's confession.

"She accepted that you put your jaws around her neck ? She must have been pretty terrified, and desperate to use this plan."

"Truth is, she wasn't. She was the one that suggested it. There was no smell of fear from her during our play."

"What ?"

"Yeah, she's the most brave and crazy rabbit I've ever encountered."

"If only she was a vixen." Taunted his mother. Nick barely held back the blush and embarrassed smile.

Yeah, if only.

Then he talked about how Judy had pushed for him to get accepted by the police academy despite his background. He talked about being partners with Judy, and how that was the best thing that ever happened to him. He talked about how the interview's question had shattered his beliefs about deserving his place and had made him lose control the week before his vacations.

"That's part of the reason I'm here today. I had to stop letting my unfinished business affect my life. You know, learn to face my demons."

"That's very brave of you, few mammals have this kind of courage."

I know I don't.

"The other part why I'm here is Finnick."

"Finnick ?" she had been able to control her reaction at the last second. The plate she was washing slid from her paw but she caught it before it could crash in the sink.

"Yeah. A few weeks back, I was having a meal with him and Judy, he talked about you, how I should stop being stupid and come see you. I dismissed it. I still hadn't taken care of the problem with the interview's question at the time. I didn't feel like a legitimate cop and butted head with chief Bogo because of it."
"You butted head with a buffalo ?" she asked, half-joking half-worried.

"Not literally. I shouted at him about not giving Judy the partner she deserved."

"You shouted at your boss ?"

"Yep. To punish me, he gave me a week of vacation." The shit-eating grin was back.

He's so like his father.

"Anyway, about Finnick." he continued "I kind of avoided the conversation at the time, but I went back to see him yesterday." He made a pause, trying to find his words. "I wanted him to come with me today, for moral support. I wasn't sure I'd have the courage to come alone. I had to ask around, since he had moved his van." He scratched his head, leaving aside the detail of how exactly he had found his friend.

"Well I found him alright. He was the most hangover I had ever seen him be. Moping about a lady friend of his. He said that I should go and tell the people that I loved how important they were to me. I think that's what gave me the most resolve." Still wiping the dishes, he didn't see how his mother was affected by what he had just said. Her jaws were clenched and her she was squeezing the sponge so hard her joints ached.

"I don't know who this lady is, but I've seen nothing affect him more until now. Maybe he was still a bit drunk under the hangover and that's why he told me all this. He even said maybe it was because he was a fennec fox and she weren't..." He trailed off. "I mean, species shouldn't count when love enters the equation, should it ?"

Vivienne had put down the last plate and was looking at her son. She had a kind smile with a hint of mischief. "For how long ?"

"For how long what ?"

She raised her eye to the ceiling. "For how long did you love that bunny ?"

"What ?"

"Oh please Nicky" He cringed, he always hated this nickname, she used it when she was about to drop some hard truth on him. The vixen began counting on her finger s "She hustles you, drags you around the city, risks your life for her investigation, risks her life for yours, and then you confide in her about the reason you left our home. And then, when she hurts you, betrays your trust and leave the city, you mope around and try to find her. And when she comes back, you immediately go back to risk your life, easily putting her words behind you. Then you turn your life around and become a cop. Maybe it was because you wanted to become someone else, but you can't pretend it wasn't because you wanted to be near her. Have you heard yourself or seen your face when you talk about her ? And do you honestly think my joke about her not being a vixen was innocent ?"

She had a smug smile, he recognized it as it was the same he used when he had hustled someone.

Embarrassed was too weak of a word to describe Nick's state of mind. He could only look at his hind paws, his face burning red.

The vixen crossed her arms. "So how long ?"
"The carrot-pen hustle. I couldn't help it. But, I mean, she's a rabbit, I'm a fox. We're polar opposite. And she only sees me as a friend."

She chuckled. "Nick, I hate the idea of you getting hurt. I've spent those last twenty years being worried sick. And even I, have a hard time imagining how a predator and a prey could get along as a couple. But if you don't tell her how you feel, you'll never know how she feels. Trust me, I know how a situation can deteriorate when you keep your feelings bottled up." She was cupping his chin with her paw. "It's the first advice I give you as a mother in twenty years. Please, for your sake and for hers, tell her. As soon as you can."

His eyes seemed reflective, he looked around, then took off the apron he was wearing.

"You're right. I must tell her." He began walking to the door of the apartment and took his coat. His mother followed him.

"What? Right now? You know, you don't have to rush this."

"It's been almost a year, I wouldn't call this rushing. Sorry to leave you like this but I've stood around enough waiting for things to happen when I should have acted."

The vixen chuckled. "You're just like your father, you know? He was always making big decisions in spurs. He was always so much braver than I was."

This last sentence was all he needed as a last boost. He had put on his coat, going back to his mother giving her a business card.

"The card's obsolete, but the number is still valid. It's mine, so don't hesitate to call." he hugged her a last time "Life's too short to act like a coward. I'm glad I finally came to see you. I promise, I soon as I come back I'll spend time with you." as he pulled away he gave her a peck on the cheek. She answered with a mooch on his snout.

"I've waited twenty years to be reunited. I think I can wait a bit more, but you better tell me everything about this when you get back. I love you son. Take care."

... 

Nick had left the apartment and his mother was alone again. She took off her own apron and came to sit on her old couch. She stared blankly into space for a while, a storm of conflicting emotion howling inside her. Finally she took her head in her paws, massaging her temples. She felt happy, her son had finally come back to her, they had talked, even joked.

She knew there was no way they would make up for all those missed years but she swore herself that she wouldn't waste what time she could have with him now. Her thought turned to Finnick, to the realisation of her hypocritical attitude. How could she have given her son advices on how to treat the people he cared about when she wasn't able to follow those same advices herself?

*Fuck this, I'm through being a coward. I'm through running away.*

She took her own coat and left.
Part 1, Chapter 9

Part 1 : A Shared Hustle

Chapter 9 : Reckless Foxes

Nick was running down the street, toward his apartment, he was trying to make up some sort of plan, some sort of way he should tell what he felt to Judy. To the bunny he loved. He didn't have a car, but he could ride the train, all he needed now was to know where the doe exactly was in bunny burrows. He took out his phone and dialed a number quickly.

"Hey, Nick" came the jovial voice of Clawhauser. "how are your vacations?" He heard the fox's panting. "Are you running ?"

"Hey, Ben. Good and yes. I need a favor, I need Judy's address."

"Why ? Don't you already know it ?"

"Her address at Bunny Burrows !"

"Oh right. Why do you need it ?" The cheetah's voice was like a purr, heavy with undertone. "I'm not supposed to give you that kind of info."

"It's really important and really personal. Please Ben ? I'll buy you a box of donuts."

"You'll have to tell me what this is all about afterwards. Do you want me to say or text it ?"

"A text would be perfect."

"Okay, you'll receive it in a minute"

"Thanks buddy, bye."

"Bye Nick."

Now to get to the train station.

He arrived at the station as his phone rang with Judy's address. The next train to Bunny Burrow was in more than two hours.

Shit. Think. You need a car. Who has cars ?

An idea came through his mind, his smiled mischievously and dialed another number.

"Hello, Fru Fru Big speaking, who is it ?" came a squeaky voice.

"Hey Fru Fru, it's Nick. Could you make me a favor and lend me a car ?"

"Of course Nick, what do you need it for ?"

"I have something important to do, and I really need one as soon as possible."

He heard a muffled discussion, and soon another voice with a heavy accent spoke to him.

"Hello Nicholas" It was mister Big's voice "I heard you needed a car ?"
"Yes, I do. For no more than five days."

"Why do you need a car. Don't try and avoid answering this question."

"It's about Judy."

"Is she in danger? Should I send bears with it?"

"No. Not at all. It's just that I have- huh- important business to discuss with her."

"Oh. Of course. In that case where should I send it?"

"Downtown train station please. Could it have a removable flashing light? And a manual transmission? Oh, and I may abuse some traffic regulations."

"No problem. It will be here in three minutes. And Nick?"

"Yeah?"

"Good luck." He heard a chuckle before the shrew hung up.

As the shrew had said, a car driven by a panther came and pulled over near the minute-depot. It was a dark blue Clawdi TT.

*Okay, that's a car alright.*

As the driver got out Nick recognized Renato Manchas. He was a bit too big for this model and had had to squeeze himself to drive it.

"Hey Nick. How are you doing?"

"Great, You?"

"My job is to drive those cars around, what do you think?" he winked.

The panther gave him the keys.

"The flashing light is in the glove compartment. I've taken the liberty to put some snacks with it."

"You're the best Manchas."

"I try. Have a nice trip."

"Thanks."

Nick climbed in, immediately putting up the flashing light and lighting it on. The siren screamed, he pulled out quickly and launched the car on the city street in a way too high speed to be actually safe. It was stupid, he was probably putting his job at risk by doing this. But he didn't care, it all felt too good.

He was out of the city in less than ten minutes, cars were pulling over before him to let him through. He technically wasn't abusing authority since he didn't use his badge. People simply assumed it was a cop car. He even passed a police car and saw the officers saluting him. They couldn't have recognized the fox, the glass was tinted. Quickly, he was on the highway, at a speed
still way too high, but he still didn't care. The engine was roaring under the hood, and it called all
his primal instinct to push it more. He felt like a hunter closing in on a prey. His heart was pumping
blood, his adrenaline was near the highest it could get.

She was facing him, not sure about what to do or what to say. She had a plastic bottle of cheap
wine in her hands. The vixen sighed, closing her eyes. She left a few second pass and opened them.

"I- It's been a long time since I did come to see you. Since we did speak. I wanted to say I'm sorry.
About everything. About those things I said, about how we always fought in the end. I know I have
a short temper, but that's a thing I can't really change about myself." Tears had began rolling down
her cheek, ruining the makeup she had quickly put on while she was in the ZUG, but she didn't
care.

"Nick came back. And I'm so proud of him, he became someone he thought I could be proud of.
We could be proud of. But I always was proud of him and I'm sure you always were too." She fell
on her knees.

"It's important that you know that I love you. And I always will. But now I need to move on. I now
that's what you want me to do, that where you are, you are cheering for me, that you want me to be
happy." She wiped her eyes, but tears were still pouring. "You'd make a snarky remark too, I don't
know which but you would."

She looked at the plaque 'John Lycus Wilde, a loving father and husband'. The dirt had been
reworked, probably so that weed and flowers would grow again. The people who tended to the
cemetery were diligent.

"You were right all along you know ? Even if I would have never admitted it when you were still
alive. I was too proud for my own good. And too much of a coward to try and change. How much
time have I wasted because of this ? Well I'm done, you can have the last laugh now. You really
were right all along."

She opened the bottle and gulped a quarter of it. "I'd have bought something better but I don't have
a corkscrew on me."

She emptied the rest of the bottle on the tomb. "Here is to you, John Lycus Wilde."

...  

She caught a few people staring at her in the ZUG, but a few irritated glances made them return to
their own business. She took out her make-up kit and tried to arrange the disaster that was now her
face. She did what she could and got out at Hill street, in the northern part of Downtown. She made
her way into the street, Steeleing herself before arriving to her destination.

It looked like a different place during the day, more clean than she thought. The van was still here,
its doors were open and a shirt-less cigarette-smoking fennec was putting soaked clothes on a
drying rack installed near his vehicle. She approached him but Finnick didn't face her. She was
certain he had recognized her from the corner of his eye.

"Fin ?"

"Wot, Vi ? Came to shout at me again ?"

Okay. Deep breathe. Don't lose it yet, he has a right to be pissed.
"Face me, Finnick."

He sighed and flicked down his smoke between his hinder paw, stepping on it to put it out. He then turned to face her, crossing his arm looking with a half annoyed, half expectant expression.

"Wot ?"

*Deep breathe, you can do it.*

"I- Came to apologize. I'm sorry about how I acted."

"Wot ?" The fennec’s tone had now hints of surprise.

"I was confused and sad, and... you gave me that money like everything was normal, and it pissed me off."

His look was now balancing between surprise and confusion.

"What I wanted that day was to say that, yeah I missed Nick, but I- I missed you too."

"Huh ?" He couldn't even articulate, his face was blank from surprise, his eyes slowly opening wide.

She leaned toward him, their snout were almost touching.

She tilted her head slightly and went ahead, giving him a hesitant kiss. "I'm telling you that I love you Finnick." she kissed him again, more deeply this time, and he returned it. He tasted like tobacco, cheap vodka and bad coffee. She tasted like breakfast, hopes and dreams. They stayed like that, his right hand caressing her cheek, for a few second before breaking it up.

"I love you too Vivienne." She was blushing and he was too.

*Oh for fuck's sake, I'm not a high-school girl anymore!*  

The realisation of what just happened slowly made its way into both their brain.

"Shit."

"Fuck."

"I just kissed my best-friend's mom."

"I just kissed my son's best-friend."

They nervously laughed.

*What should I do ? What do I do ?*

He was looking for something to say that would break the slowly growing awkward silence. He looked around took a few steps and hopped in the back of the van.

"So, um. Wanna do that again ?"

"Oh, fuck yes."

He had climbed there so she wouldn't have to lean that much. Their lips met again, more passionately this time. He was caressing her cheek again and their bodies were pressed against each
other. She tried to move into a more comfortable position but she stumbled and they slumped into
the van, still kissing. She felt his left hand in her back pressing her against him and she wanted
nothing more than to abandon herself to his embrace. Her right hand was against his chest and she
could feel his muscles moving under his fur. He was more muscular than he seemed. Each of their
movements pressed them more against each other, their breath had synchronized.

But they slowly separated looking fondly at each other.

"We- we should stop. Maybe."

"Yeah. It'd feel wrong to do a homerun before a proper date."

"You're quite the charmer Fin."

"Doin' mah best Vi."

He helped her up, she arranged back her disheveled fur.

"So, um. Wot are ya doin' this evening?"

"I think I'm going on a date with a charming fennec fox."

"Nice. I'll pick you up at your building around eight. It ain't gonna be too fancy, so maybe don't
overdress."

"You know I don't have any fancy clothes."

"Doesn't seem that way to me when you wear them."

She felt herself blushing again. She turned around trying to hide her embarrassment.

"I'll see you tonight then."

"Yeah, tonight, have a nice day Vi."

"Have a nice day Fin."

He had left the highway some kilometers ago but that hadn't made him slow down. The country
roads around those parts were well maintained and as long as he wasn't driving way too recklessly,
there were few risk to go off road. He saw a sign, Bunny Burrows was less than two kilometers
away, and in the forty seconds it took him to actually get to the town's outskirts, the realisation
slowly had dawned on him. He had come at Judy's hometown with no plans, no change of clothes,
with the goal of declaring to her. He had broken most roads and cops regulations to come here, and
when she would learn about it, she would be very pissed. But he also realised he didn't care.

He had arrived at bit after noon. He slowed down where zoogle maps told him to turn. It was a dirt
road leading up a hill, with an arrow sign displaying "Hopps residence".

Must be here.

He drove up the hill and when he arrived on the other side, there was a large barn.

No it wasn't a barn. It looked more like a hangar. With windows and dependencies. It was the
Hopps's residence. He knew the doe had a large family but until now, he hadn't realize how much it
was true.
He pulled over in front of the house, in a place where he thought his car wouldn't be a nuisance. The fox looked around and thought that for a house this big with as much rabbits, it was really calm. Then he saw them. Dozens of rabbit ears, connected to rabbit heads, peering with curiosity through the windows at the vulpine. He put on his most casual and non-threatening mask and waved at them. Some of them disappeared and he saw the large doors opening. An unsure rabbit slowly approaching him. Behind him, several little heads were looking at him, hidden behind the doors.

"Um hello? Are you lost?"

"Depends. Am I at the Hopps' residence?"

"Yes. And you are?"

"Oh, where are my manners, the name's Nicholas Wilde. Nick for short."

"You're Nick? Oh it's so nice to meet you, I'm Terry. Judy's uncle. She told us a lot about you but she didn't tell us you would come."

Nick saw the rabbit glance several times at the sport car, he probably hadn't seen such a fine model this close.

"I didn't know it myself." He looked at his phone "four hours ago. An urgent matter, really. Do you know where she is?"

"At the festival of course. I was about to go there myself to help, you can follow me."

The rabbit glanced again at the car, but went to an old machine that seemed she had had better days.

"Or you can ride with me and show me the directions."

"Oh, I wouldn't want to inconvenience you."

"You wouldn't be, really. Hop in." Nick's pun went undetected, the rabbit was too excited to step in the car.

The fox started the car, making a u-turn, skidding on purpose on the dirt road, grinning at the gleeful squeeele Judy's uncle couldn't help but let out.

"So which direction mister Hopps?"

"Oh, it's Springer, I'm from Bonnie's side. To the right when you get out of the dirt road and then to the left at the roundabout. Then you only have to follow the siiieeeek."

Nick had skidded again when leaving the dirt-road. Driving like this was fun, but even more when he could frighten a passenger. Despite this, he decided to be more prudent, not wanting to risk anyone's life when he would get to the heart of the town.

"So why have you come here looking for Judy?"

"Oh, it's quite important sir. I don't think I have the right to tell you."

"I understand. Police business."

Nick nodded.
They were nearing the festival. There were lots of pedestrian and Nick had slowed to a walking pace, looking for a parking space. People were looking at the sport car, having rarely seen some like it, and asking themselves what it was doing here.

*Screw this, if I'm going to do something reckless and stupid, I should be doing it to the end.*

He took out the flashing light he had put down on the highway, and stuck it back up on the roof.

"Terry, it seems we have the priority."

He switched it on, the siren screamed. People quickly let them pass, Nick flashed his badge through the window and the country cops even opened the barriers that kept the vehicles to get into the street. He stopped the car right in front of the Hopps' booth.

...When she had heard the siren, Judy had immediately shot her head up, her hand reaching for a radio that wasn't here. She had looked around, in the direction of the loud approaching noise. When she saw the car stop before the booth, a lot of possible scenarios and possibilities played into her head. Did the ZPD sent for her ? Why didn't they call her ? Was it urgent ? Had something happened to Nick ? The window rolled down and she saw her friend's serious face looking at her. It was nice to see him, but the circumstances didn't seem to call for warm greetings.

"Judy, it's urgent, I need you to come with me right now."

She didn't even think twice, leaping over the counter, sliding on the hood of the car.

"Mom, Dad, gotta go, bye ! I'll call later !"

Terry had gotten out of the car and let her take his place.

"Hi Judy."

"Hi Terry."

"Thanks for the lift Nick."

"My pleasure Terry."

The does parents were frozen in place, when the car had disappeared, they looked at each other and shrugged. It wasn't the first time their daughter had surprised them.

He let the engine roar, so that the people would get out of his way quicker.

"What do you think this is about ?" Bonnie asked to Stu.

"I don't know honey but it must have been pretty important and urgent for a car to come pick our daughter up here."

"Yeah, and her fox friend was here. He came all this way to get her, that's dedication to the job."
"So what's happening ?" She had the police business attitude. He struggled to keep a straight face.

"Important stuff, I'd like to get out of here first."

"Right. I'll need to take my stuff from my parent's."

"I'd like to discuss the matter a bit before we go."

They left the festival, the cops opening the barriers again to let them through.

"Isn't it urgent ?"

"Quite so. Is there a quiet place we could talk ? Somewhere a bit private."

*She's going to kill me. She's so going to kill me.*

"Huh ? Sure, take to the left here. Then to the right in about five hundred meters there is an old abandoned store. We can go on the parking."

The place looked that nobody had come here in years. Tall grass had invaded the place, and a growing tree had collapsed a wall of the building. He got out of the car, she followed him and he faced her, paws in his pocket, his serious mask slowly dissolving into the discreetly grinning one.

"Nick, what's happening ?"

Nick chuckled. She frowned.

"Nick, this isn't ZPD's business is it ?"

"Nope."

"Where did you get the car ?"

"Mr Big."

"And the flashing light ?"

"Same."

She pinched her eyes.

"Nick, what the hell are you doing here ?"

"Came to see you."

"But why ? You could have waited five days. You could have called. You could have taken the train. Wait, When did you leave the city ?"

"About four hours ago."
"Four hou- how many traffic regulations did you break?"

"About all of them."

If Judy didn't look so pissed, he wouldn't have been able to resist grinning from ear to ear.

"Nick, this better be important or I swear to god, I'll punch you so hard you'll fly back to Zootopia."

Nick took a deep breath. It was going to be hard, but after the ordeal with his mother, it seemed the task would be far from impossible.

"Okay, hear me out. You know how about today I was going to go see my mother. It all went well, don't worry. More so than I could think of. Anyway, before that Finnick had told me I shouldn't lose time and tell the people I knew how important they were to me, and my mom basically gave me the same speech when I talked to her about you. So there it is. I like you Judy."

Judy blinked several times, her face switching between pissed, embarrassed and something he could quite get.

Did he say what I think he said? He can't have said what I think he said.

"Huh ? Tha- I mean, that's nice Nick. You're a good friend too, but you shouldn't have come all this way just to tell me this. I don't- I doesn't make any sense." He noticed her ears were twitching and her paws were lightly shaking. He took them in his and locked his gaze in the amethyst pool of her eyes. He lost himself for a few second before speaking again.

"No it's not- I like you as a friend too. But I also- I- I'm in love with you Judy." It didn't come out perfectly as he had envisioned, but he had said it. He could see the red slowly invading her face. Now he hoped she would return his feelings. No matter the fact that otherwise he would look like a complete fool. He had to admit his feeling toward her to himself and couldn't bear the idea of her not returning them.

Her thought process had come to a complete halt. All she could hear was a high pitch noise, that same one could hear after having been punched hard in the face. The fox's sentence slowly made its way to her brain, only then she could answer.

"So you're saying that you've borrowed a car from a mob boss," Anger in her voice was slowly rising. "violated too much road regulation to count," Anger still rising, Nick took a step back, "Abused your authority as a cop," She took a step forward, fist clenched. "and all this too tell me you love me." she had crossed her arms sternly.

"That's what I did." The fox tried to put on a brave front, but his tail was twitching nervously. This was not going well at all.

"You dumb fox." Was it going to shit? He was certain he could see red creep to her cheek. And it didn't really look like anger.

"I'm in love with you too." She almost shouted in an ecstatic tone, jumping at his neck, hugging him tightly. Nick wasn't ready and he fell down, the bunny cuddlingly burrowing her face in his chest.

*Happiness feels like bunny hugs. Should've known.*

He returned her embrace, nuzzling and kissing her between the ears. She looked up and gave him a deep kiss. If happiness was bunny hugs, bunny kisses were a battering ram in the heaven's door.
She was lying on his chest, looking at the sky, sometimes glancing at him above her head as to make sure he was really here. Each time she met his eyes, watching her fondly.

"You had me worried for a second there." He said.

"That was a hustle sweetheart."

"I have some bad news though." He tried to say in a serious tone, but couldn't.

"What is it Nick ?" She hadn't bought it but humored him anyway.

"You're in love with a fox."

"How am I gonna tell my parents !"She said, mimicking a panicked expression. They both laughed. They loved each other. Nothing was more important to them at this instant.

He chuckled, tenderly caressing her head. She heard his stomach gurgle. The fox had eaten a bit of Mancha's snacks, but he didn't really eat consistent since breakfast. The doe rolled over and stood up.

"Seems my predator is famished. Bad idea for a poor bunny to stand around a hungry fox."

"Yep, best way to get eaten."

"By you, I wouldn't really mind." She had blurted those words without thinking. She instantly pulled her eyes on her face with her paws, trying really hard to disappear.

"Carrots, did you just say what I think you just said ?"

"I didn't say anything." She answered in a meek voice. Even with her ears hiding her face, he could see how red she was.

"If that's what you want, I can eat you right now." he joked with his most predatory smile.

"Eeeeep" She squealed, getting away from him as he was slowly approaching her. She stopped after a few step and he hugged her from behind, nibbling at her neck.

"As I thought, tastes like embarrassed wabbit." She shivered.

*Using fang, maybe not a good idea with bunnies!*

"Are you alright carrots ?"

"I'm so embarrassed, why did I say that ?"

"I have several theories, but there is none you'd like."

She finally calmed down and pulled away from him. "So we were talking about getting you something to eat." Nick's shit-eating grin was instantly back. "Don't you dare say a word Nick. You're still on probation for your driving antics." he lifted his paws trying to muster his most innocent mask, but the mischievous smile still appeared underneath.

"There is a lot to eat at the festival, not only carrots. I'm sure we can find something for you. Gideon makes the best blueberry pies around." New gurgle sound.

"Blueberry pie it is." She suddenly punched him hard on the shoulder.
"Ow, Judy, what was that for ?"

"Oh I don't know, the traffic regulations ? You using you badge to get into the festival with a car ?
You using our job to get me to come with you here ? Pick a favorite."

"Okay, fine, maybe I deserved that one."

She hopped and kissed him on the cheek.

"And that's for driving four hours in a spur of the moment just to tell me you love me."

... They had parked the car near the center of the town. As they were about to get out of the car, Judy
spoke.

"But really, how am I gonna tell my parents ?"

"You just, uhm, tell them ?"

"Nick, don't play dumb for five minutes. They are bunnies. Farmer bunnies. You know how biased
I was ? From who do you think that came from ? It took them time to understand that there could
be fox police officers, and even more to stop saying that I should ask for a more trustworthy
partner, even if you were the one that helped me solve the Bellwether case." She sighed "Now, I'm
dating you. I mean, we're dating right ?"

The fox nodded, barely keeping his smile to reach his ears.

"Cross-species relationships are frowned upon and pred-prey even more so. I don't want them to be
disrespectful to you, to us, even if chances are they will be..."

"We can hide it for now, I don't mind."

"What ?"

His serious face was back up, he looked her in the eyes. "Listen Judy. I know people don't like
foxes, and I'm not stupid enough to think your parents will instantly like me. Plus it would be
pretty dumb to just go around the festival holding paws. Let's hide it for a bit, test the water, see if
they can appreciate me before they learn we're together. You'll tell them when the time is right. As
long as we're together, I can take it."

She leaned forward and kissed him on the snout.

"Why did we wait for so long ?"

"Because I'm a dumb fox and you're a dumb bunny. Let's get out now, I'm hungry and you
promised me blueberry pie."

... Just as they exited the car, Nick smelled something. He sniffled again. Now that they were out of
the car, his suspicions seemed to be true.

"Carrots ?"

"Yes ?"
"Did you scent-mark me?"

"What? What are you saying?"

"In the car it was hard to tell since your smell was very present in closed space, but now, in the open air, I'm pretty sure. You have marked me. When you were nuzzling my chest."

She hid her mouth with paws, eyes wide open with surprise and embarrassment.

"I'm so sorry, I was so happy, I didn't know what I was doing."

He approached and leaned toward her, sniffling.

"No problem, I have marked you too, just between the ears."

"What?"

"Yep, It's subtle though, so as long as you don't hug someone, they shouldn't notice."

... The festival was an avalanche of colors, smell and noises. From everywhere people were shouting, trying to sell their product, propose activities. Food was being cooked, kids were running around, laughing and screaming. Even at the most busy hours, Zootopia never seemed that alive. In the city, people were busy, working, looking at their phone screen. Here people talked, cheered, laughed. Nick had never been to a place like this and it brought a genuine smile to his face. In this kind of moment he knew how much Judy had changed his life. Being here, and truly being enjoying it, his old self would never have been able to.

"This way Nick, you must meet my parents!"

"This soon?"

"Don't start. They'll be happy to meet you."

They made their way to the Hopps' booth, going through the back.

"Hey, mom, dad!"

"Wha- Judy? We thought you were going back to Zootopia." Said Bonnie.

"Yeah, what was that all about? Is everything alright?" asked Stu.

"Uhm-"

"It's all a bit silly. There was some urgent matter, that of which we can't reveal any details to the public, but it was resolved while I was on the road. And I didn't learn about this up until your daughter was in the car." Nick's expression was professional, not a hint of joke. The doe was always impressed, and slightly annoyed, at how he could fabricate a lie this quick and sell it to anyone. "Sorry I thought Judy had been told of my arrival. Terry, your brother as I understand it m'am Hopps, was kind enough to direct me here. The ZPD's communication is not always what it should be. I apologize for the inconvenience."

Judy's parents were a bit taken aback, but soon they were back to their cheerful selves.

"Oh, it's no problem really." began Bonnie "Oh where are my manners, my name is Bonnie, you
must be Nicholas."

He offered his paw.

"Nick, for short."

"Don't be silly, if you're a friend of Judy, you're a friend of ours. No handshake, we're hugging."

Nick hid a startled expression, afraid she would smell her daughter's scent on him.

"The name's Stu, thanks for having our daughter's back in the big city." The male bunny's hug was quicker and more stiff.

"The pleasure's mine. She's my partner and best friend."

"Yes she talks a lot about you."

"I'm sure she does." discreet sly grin.

"So Nick, Are you staying for a bit?"

"I don't see why not, I was supposed to be on vacation on the first place." his stomach gurgled again. "I really don't mean to be rude but I didn't eat, would you please direct me to the nearest blueberry pie? Judy assured me some Gideon made the best around here."

"The booth right next to ours. Go through the back with Judy, she'll introduce you and you'll have a discount."

"Thanks a lot. See you later!"

... They went around the back to the next booth and arrived behind Gideon and Jessica, busy talking to their clients. They respectfully waited for them to be done before greeting them.

"Hi Gideon, Hi Jessica!"

"Hi Judy!" They answered, turning around "Oh, who's your friend? Is it Nick? I'm Gideon" asked Gideon, shaking his hand.

"Carrots, how come everyone seems to know me here, did you show my photo to everyone here?"

"I'm Jessica, and no" answered Jessica, shaking Nick's hand in turn "She simply talks a lot about you. Plus she left with you less than an hour ago, dad told us. Why are you back by the way?"

"A matter that resolved itself while he was on the road. Since he was on vacation in the first place, I suppose he will spend some time with us."

"For now, I'd simply like to spend times with those blueberry pies over here. I made no pause getting here from Zootopia and I'm famished."

"Oh, of course, help yourself!" said Gideon "I'll make you the family discount since you're Judy's friend"

Nick paid, took out his pocket knife and carved a slice. Saying the pie was delicious was an understatement. Nick had a sweet tooth for blueberries in the first place but this pie was the best he had ever eaten.
"Oh crap, you weren't lying those are the best pie I've ever eaten. Anyone else want a slice?"

"I'll have one!" Jessica approached him with a bouncy steps. She took the slice and opened her mouth, but it was to talk rather than eat.

Oh no.
Judy pinched her eyes, ready to put a stop to the unstoppable wave of question that was about to come out.

"So Nick, how's the big city? How is it for someone that grew there to come in a small town like this? Is it strange to see so much rabbit at the same time?"

Judy was about to intervene but Nick nodded at her, as to say to her that he was okay with it. She turned to Gideon who was back to selling his pies and bakeries and took Jessica's place.

"You don't have to, Judy."

"Your help is focused on my partner, I feel a bit guilty. Don't worry, if I wasn't here, I would be doing the same for my parents."

People were coming buying and leaving, sometimes asking Judy how she was doing in Zootopia. Occasionally she glanced at Gideon. He was so different from what she had known growing up. He was smiling, genuinely smiling, happy to talk to other people's, greeting them as they came, a kind comment for everyone. It put a bit of courage in her heart. If Gideon had been able to change this much, surely her parents wouldn't be that much trouble.

"Judy, I meant to ask. Why do you smell so much of Nick?"

What? Oh my god, the mark. Fox and their high smell sense.

"Uh, I was driving on the way back here, I suppose a bit of Nick's scent rubbed on me since he had driven this car for four hours straight."

"Oh. Okay."

The explication seemed to satisfy him.

..."You know Judy, when I met you, I thought you were way too energetic, but your cousin... Textbook definition of bouncing hyperactive bunny."

They were helping Judy's parents moving the unsold product to the truck. The festivities had ended for the day and the sun was slowly coming down at the horizon.

"She's always been like this. In standard mammal definitions, most rabbits are considered hyperactive, but she is even by bunny standards. You can tell her if she gets on your nerves, she gets it."

"Oh she doesn't, besides I got to ask her a ton of question about you."

"Like what?" Judy was suddenly a bit wary. "What did her cousin tell to him?"

"Something about a play, 'blood, blood, blood... and death' she showed me the pictures. You were already quite the actress. No wonder you could fool Bellwether."
Judy felt warm spreading on her face. Nick didn't need to glance at her too see in what state she was.

"Oh, and she also showed me a photo of you little, in your pretty little police uniform." The smirk was as mischievous as ever. 'I couldn't believe you could actually be cuter than you are now."

She dropped the crate. The embarrassment was mixed with anger.

"You didn't just say that !"

"I guess I di-id !" He sang, beginning to flee, still holding his own crate. It slowed him down and she quickly caught up, heavily punching his shoulder.

"Ow. Police brutality, I'm filing a complaint !"

"Try that and I file one for public harassment !"

"It's not harassment if it's true !" He playfully taunted. The second punch was lighter. As she was about to jump on him and kiss him, Bonnie's joking voice came from behind them.

"Kids, when you'll be finished playing, maybe you can help us finish to pack up."

*Oops, close one.*

They were all sitting around the table. Well not all, around thirty bunnies were sharing a large table in the Hopps' house living room. The chatter was pleasant. Nick as an only child was impressed at how Bonnie and Stu could handle all those children at once, even if most of them were grown enough to not need them.

"So Carrots, you have 275 siblings ?"

"Yup, most of them live here."

"You didn't lie, you bunnies are good at multiplying."

"You know, it's more of an extended family that just my parent's children. Uncle Terry lives here too with his, and there must be another dozen relatives living in our home with their family."

"Oh, I thought..."

"Yes, like most people. It's like this with country bunnies, we burrow together as families. There are at least five other houses likes this around Bunny Burrow, more or less related to each other." Said Bonnie.

"And the sign at Bunny-Burrows entrance ?"

"A joke, the numbers can't move up after the thousands." answered Stu.

"You guys are really comfortable with your stereotypes."

"Beside the C-word, yes." answered Judy.

The meal ended with no notable event. Judy's parents gave him a towel as he needed one, wishing to take a shower after this emotionally draining day. And the four hour drive. Judy took one too,
right after him to try to get rid of his scent. It was comforting but she didn't want to give away how close they now were.
Part 1, Chapter 11

Part 1 : A Shared Hustle

Chapter 11 : Sweet Evenings

The night was calm, despite the number of mammals that were actually living in the house. The city nights were so much louder, there were neon light flashing all the time, activity in the street. So much that the city seemed to never really sleep. And neither could Judy right now. She turned and turned under the sheet but sleep was escaping her.

I need to drink something.

She silently got out of her room and went down the stairs. When she was little, the silent corridors had scared her, although she would never have admitted it. Now, they were soothing, familiar. She could navigate them eyes closed.

In the kitchen she took out the carrot-juice bottle from the fridge and served herself a glass. She then went back up the stairs sipping it. As she was about to get to her room she saw some light under the guest's door, three room from hers.

Nick can't sleep either.

She decided to knock, to see how he was doing.

"Yes ?" came the muffled fox's voice.

Judy entered the room. It was dim-lit by the night-stand lamp. Nick didn't really need it to see in the dark but he had his phone in his paw. Chances were he didn't want to hurt his eyes while looking at the screen. He looked a bit comical in the bunny sized twin bed. The doe closed the door behind her.

"You can't sleep either can you ?" he half-asked, his voice down as to not wake anyone up.

"I lost the habit of sleeping with so little noise around." her voice was quiet too.

"Yes I understand, it's strange to me too. Though it's not really the only reason I can't sleep." Judy approached Nick's bed and sat on the side, he scooted a bit on the side to leave room for her.

"What's the other reason ?" She asked.

He extended his paw and caressed her cheek.

"Guess."

"You were thinking about me ?" She asked with a smile.

"You're on the right path." He answered, leaning forward to kiss her.

She was now wearing a naughty smile as she closed her eyes. "And you want to have se-"

He and his paw jumped back in an instant.
"What ?" He had almost raised his voice. "No. I mean yes, but no. I'm not- I want to take this slow."

She looked at him with a strange expression.

"Is that okay with you ?" he asked.

"Yes ! Of course. Sorry, it was- Oh, this is so embarrassing." She had taken her face in her paws. "I always forget that other mammals are different from bunnies."

Nick's mischievous grin was slowly growing on his face.

"You want to-"

"No ! I mean yes, not yet... Maybe ?" She was still blushing, her voice had sped up, as it did when she was stressed. "Okay, we'll have to talk about sex sometime so we might as well do it now."

"Do what now ?" Nick was still grinning.

"Nick, this is important." 

"Alright." He sat legs crossed and turned to face her, putting his paws on his thighs. "What specifically should we talk about ?"

She sighed and scratched her head.

"You know how us bunnies have this reputation with multiplying and having lots of sex ?"

"I'm sure I heard about it before, yes." The grin was still here, but discreet.

"Well it's... Mostly true. It's not a very big deal to us. That doesn't mean we aren't faithful, on the contrary, but it's not unusual for new couples to- uhm- do the deed the first, second or third day they're actually dating."

Nick said nothing, taking in what she had just said.

"Most of us, females and males take some kind of hormonal suppressants. Some of us twice the dosage when we're in- Uh- in heat." Her voice was so low that Nick had trouble hearing her. He struggled to keep his serious face, the reality was even funnier than his suspicions.

"Let me get this straight. You bunnies have to suppress your, uhm, hormones, or else you'd all be bouncing sex addicts ?"

_Keep the serious face. Keep it a bit more._

She punched him in the shoulder.

"Not funny. We are all perfectly functioning mammals, and we would still be without the pills ! We simply would have to make more, uhm, pauses during work."

This was too much for him. He broke down into a fit of muffled laughter as he shoved his own face into a pillow. He slowly calmed down and faced the doe again. She was looking at the mattress, and he could see her face all red under her fur.

"Are you done ?" Her tone was half-angry, half-mortified.
"Sorry Carrots. I shouldn't laugh. Thanks for explaining all that to me."

There was a bit of an awkward silence before Judy spoke again.

"I don't know much about other species. What they do, how soon they do it. I didn't have a real reason to ask myself until now either."

"Well, for vulpines, it's different, pretty much the opposite actually."

"How so?" She looked genuinely interested.

"There is a saying that we foxes mate for life and it's mostly true. Generally when a fox mates, or to put it bluntly, has sex, it's a big deal. Literally. We only do it with the one we're sure will be the one. It changes us, we become very protective of one another, and our bond is strong. Like crazy strong. Only some life-changing event or a really long time can alter it. There are of course some cases of total incompatibility where the couple can't stand each other. It mostly happens when the mating was too rushed. So yeah, we're all about taking it slow."

Judy's face was suddenly thoughtful, but he could discern a hint of smile behind the slowly fading grave expression.

"You mean" She began, unable to suppress a giggle "that you never actually had sex? You, slick Nick, you never... ?"

Nick sighed, as annoyed as he was amused.

"Well, I've had some experiences. We foxes can still fool around a bit. As long as there is no- uhm-penetration." It was Nick's turn to be embarrassed but Judy was diplomat enough to not rub it in his face. "I mean, I've had a couple girlfriends. Never anything serious. And you?"

At the question, Judy's ears dropped.

"Maybe I've had a couple of boyfriend." her voice had turn to meek.

"Your mouth say couple but your face says dozen."

"Not that much! But you know, high-school was stressful, I was young and stupid, stuff happened."

"So, how many?" The mischievous grin was more present than ever.

"None of your business" The fox kept staring at her mischievously. "Five" Nick was about to say something but she raised her paw to shut him up "I didn't sleep with all of them. There was never anything really serious either. And it's all that you'll learn on the matter."

"Still, I have a hard time imagining your parents being okay with you doing this in high-school. Or maybe bunny parents are more permissive."

"Trust me they aren't. I had to be discreet. Dad almost caught Devon in my room. He had entered fork in hand, because he had heard his poor guy had just had the time to take his clothes and jump through the window."

They both chuckled.

...
"Okay, so sex matter's taken care of. Do we agree that we need to take it slow?"

"Yes. Beside, you're a fox, I'm a bunny. I don't see myself running head down into this."

"Neither do I."

They remained like this a bit, facing each other. Nick slowly raised his paw and caressed her cheek again. She leaned into it cupping his paw with her own and closing her eyes, losing herself in the contact. She felt him kiss her. She kissed him back and gently pushed him on his back, crawling toward him. They stayed like this a long time, lying on the bed, kissing and nuzzling each other. Nick was spooning her, she felt protected his arms wrapped around her, like in a furry, warm and cuddly cocoon.

"So the real reason you couldn't sleep was?"

"I couldn't keep my mind off you" He kissed her between the ears "It went all so fast, I told you I loved you, we kissed and then we were back at the festival with hardly time to see each other alone."

"Yeah, I couldn't stop thinking of you either. I'm glad you came." She burrowed herself in his chest and he tightened his arms around her. It was so perfect, like he had been made just so they could fit like this.

"Still, I can't stop thinking. You came to see your mother this morning and immediately after you came here. How long did you stay with her?"

"A bit more than two hours."

"What? You wait for twenty years to go see her and that's all the time you spent with her?" She had pulled away and was looking up at him with a puzzled expression.

"Yeah, I know how it looks. It went well though, she actually encouraged me to come here and declare, saying that I shouldn't wait for things to turn sour. I don't know what I did to deserve her. I'll spend the last two days of vacation with her to make up for it."

She got back into the spooning position.

"Finnick was right, you Wildes are a looney bunch with a twisted sense of logic."

He chuckled at that and she felt his chest move in her back. From one hand, Nick pulled the sheet on them. A part of Judy was telling her that it was a bad idea to sleep here but she and him quickly fell into a blissful and deep slumber.

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He was wearing his usual pair of cargo, and a clean white shirt that he had had to dry with a hair dryer. He was also wearing a tie, the same that he had taken from Nick's old stuff. He had taken time to clean his van, in and out and had made a reservation in a restaurant. Now he had been waiting at the corner of Vivienne's street for at least fifteen minutes because he had arrived twenty five too soon but didn't want to park his van in front of her building for too long.

We kissed, she likes you, no reason to stress out... It's my first real date in five years, maybe some reasons to stress out.

He decided it was time for him to move and go wait for her in front of the building. He started the van, turned left rode fifty meters and parked it again.
I'm here. Should I call her? No, It's not quite eight.

He got out of the van and leaned against a street lamp. He took out his phone and began browsing the web to pass time. He didn't use internet much but he had taken a habit of visiting art websites. He really liked street art it reminded him of his youth. He even did some graffiti himself, almost got arrested a few times because of it.

He was lost in his thoughts and didn't see that Vivienne had gotten out of the building, she was standing in front of him a few meters away.

"Good evening Finnick"

Immediately, his head snapped up, looking at the Vixen. She was wearing a simple light-green dress, with a warm but elegant coat over it. In the dim-litten street, with the contrast of the streetlight, he couldn't take a good look. He approached trying to look confident.

"Good evening Vivienne."

She leaned and they kissed quickly. He accompanied her to the van, hopped in and pulled out.

"Nice outfit" she said.

"Uh, 's just a shirt wid' tie. I wanted to make a good impression. The dress looks nice."

"Thanks. Where are we going?"

"The Fishmarket, a restaurant in Rainforest."

The conversation had been a bit awkward and the silence that followed it was too. They were staring at the road, both looking for what to say. As much as they had waited before confessing to each other, they both felt they had completely rushed into it.

Finnick easily found a parking spot and they walked to the restaurant. Vivienne didn't really like this part of the city, the dampness of the Rainforest district made her fur impossible to brush when she stayed too long. Luckily, as they entered the restaurant, she found it had a sas and dryer air on the inside. She walked a few steps and looked around. It was medium sized joint, the colors were predominantly blue, with a fish-themed decoration. She found it kitsch but in a good and warm way. Finnick, who had held the door open for her, watched her enter as she got out of her coat. He could know clearly see her in the faintly blue light of the place. Her dress was simple but elegant, underlining her lean shape. Her makeup was nice and discreet, only highlighting her natural beauty. Despite the years, than the few strands of grey in her fur, he found her gorgeous.

Don't stare, don't stare!

But he stared and she noticed, giving him a slight wink and a gentle smile.

A waiter came and sat them to a table, giving them the menu.

"It's a nice place" she said "you chose well"

"Thanks, reviews were good and all. I don't know lotsa nice places. Hope the food's good."

He chose a simple Salmon Filet with rice on the side and she a shrimp salad. They let the waiter decide which wine would fit with their meal since none of them knew what would be best with what they had chosen.
As they were waiting for their order, Finnick decided to try to break the lingering silence that installed itself between them.

"So, how was your life those last few days?"

"Not a lot happened until this morning. And I'm not talking about us kissing. Nick came to my flat."

"No shit? What did you do?"

"I- I slapped him."

"Wot?"

"And then I hugged him. You- I must thank you. He said that if he came it was because of those things you said to him, that he not should wait to be with the people he loved."

"Oh. He talked to ya 'bout that."

"Yes, I know for the drinking, the hangover. The heartfelt speech." She had a slight grin, but not a mocking one.

"I ain't real proud. I took our fight pretty hard. Should've understood you."

"How? It's not as if I had been that clear with you. I was a mess. You know it was to confess to you that I had invited you to the diner?"

"It's kinda clear now, yeah. I understand how givin ya the bag would piss you off."

"If anything, I was mostly pissed at myself because I couldn't bring myself to tell you what I wanted. I took it out on you and I'm sorry."

"I'm sorry too, I shouldn't have lost my temper."

"You don't have t-"

"No, I have to. I was frustrated. I was scared that you didn't return my feeling. We're two stupid foxes, both of us had to apologize." He had an embarrassed grin, he wasn't used to say sorry. It's not something street life had taught him to do.

The waiter brought the plate and the wine, opening the bottle for them. Finnick served them both.

..."So Nick came ta see ya dis morning? How come you came to see me? I'd have thought you'd spend the day together."

"I thought we would too. But something important came up and he had to live. We had time to talk though."

"What didja talk about?"

"He told me about the Nighthowler case. I knew he was involved but there are a few things that the press had left out. Or didn't know. Like the involvement of mister Big or how much he had risked to get through it."
"Yeah, he told me too. If I'd known what would've happened, I'd've dragged him out."

"Don't kid yourself. He's a Wilde, you don't drag one of us out of anything."

The fennec chuckled. "That's true, y'all a so pig headed."

"If anything, you would've ended up caught into the mess. I know you well enough to know that you wouldn't have let him take all the risks."

"Ya think I'm the kind of mammal to risk my pelt for others?"

"No, only for the people you love."

Finnick smirked. She knew him well. He took his glass and raised it.

"To the people we love."

"To the people we love."

They sipped the wine. And it was good.

Finnick was driving, the dinner had gone well and now he was taking Vivienne home.

"I went to see my husband too."

"Huh?" at that, Finnick had turned the wheel slightly but easily took back control of the vehicle.

"His grave, I had to tell him that I was moving on. I never could before. With Nick coming back, I think it gave me the strength."

"Even then, it must've not been easy."

"You know, I gave a speech similar to yours to Nick, that's the reason he left so quickly."

"What do you mean?"

"He's gone to declare to his bunny friend, Judy. That's why he left this quick."

"No shit? He had it bad for her! You're okay with that?" Finnick was grinning, the thought made him more happy than he would've thought.

"Am I okay? With what? Him leaving that suddenly to apply my advice? Fuck yeah! A kit should always listen to his mom. Or him dating a prey? That, I don't know. It's alien to me, I don't really see how it could work. But from what I understand, they both have already exceeded any expectation anyone could have toward fox and bunny species. If anyone can make this work, it's them."

"You're right about that. They're crazy, and the right kind."

"He, leaving that quickly, I think that's really what gave me the courage to come and see you. If he could take this decision, not knowing how it would go, I couldn't keep my feelings to myself even though I knew how you felt."

...
Finnick pulled over in front of Vivienne's building, hopping out and accompanying her to the door.

"I hope you had a nice evening." he said.

She looked at her watch.

"I'm still having a nice evening. Do you want to come up for a last drink?"

Finnick had to blink a few times.

"I- I don't want to intrude."

"You're not."

She looked at him, calmly waiting for an answer.

"I guess a last drink can't do no harm."

They entered the building, and took the stairs.

The vixen was fiddling with her keys in her pocket.

*Are you really doing that big girl?*

Behind her, the fennec fox was trying real hard to not lift his gaze as the wagging tail acted like a magnet for his eyes, keeping them on the steps.

*You're here for a last drink, Finnick, nothing more.*
They entered the flat and the vixen hanged her coat. Finnick wandered in the modest living room.

"That's quite a nice place you have there."

"Not really, but it's enough for me. It can get really cold in winter."

"I live in a van."

They shared a chuckle.

"I hope you like whiskey, I don't have anything else."

"S' alright with me."

She poured them a pair of glasses and they sat on the couch. They silently sipped it.

"You remember the first time we met?"

"You mean, the time you punched me in the face and threaten to break my legs if I didn't give you back your pup?"

"Yep that time." They both laughed. It hadn't been a pleasant start for their friendship but none of them resented each other because of the event.

"Yeah, John stopped you. He believed me immediately, I don't know why."

"He was always more impulsive than me, but he could read people so well. He-"

She went quiet, looking at her glass with an embarrassed look.

"I'm sorry."

"Why?"

"We're on a date, having a drink and I'm talking about my dead husband. It's not really the best thing to do with a boyfriend."

_Boyfriend. Okay, it's official, I'm a highschool girl._

"If it can make ya comfortable, I can talk 'bout the girls I dated, to even the awkward field." He said, trying to cheer her up.

"Something specific in mind?" She was smiling again. She found the idea funny.

"There is not anything really remarkable to tell. Except that time I dated a skunk."

"You dated a skunk?" She poured them another glass. "This, I must know." She was grinning, an
"Yeah, some four years ago. Didn't end well. She wanted commitment, and I lived in a van. For me it wasn't anything serious, just a couple doing a bit more than what regular friends do. I tried to explain that I didn't think it would work out on the long run, she insisted we try and move in together."

"What did you do?" Vivienne had drunk half her glass during the story.

"I was already in love wid' you at the time, so what do you think? I dumped her ass." he took another sip. "Let me tell ya, you don't wanna piss off a skunk."

The vixen snickered, trying to keep the laugh for bursting out.

"You can laugh. Took me a week and a dozen shower to take the stench off my fur. Worst hustling week I ever had."

The laugh burst ed. The fennec fox sipped his glass with a slight grin. He wanted to divert the conversation to a more cheery matter. If it was at his expense, he was okay with it.

"Thanks Fin" She wiped a tear of laughter.

"No problem."

"I mean, thanks for everything. I know why you told me this story."

He sipped again, not knowing what to answer.

"After- Well, you know... You were always here for me." She continued "I was always waiting your visits. You listened to me and tried to cheer me up. It kept me going and- "

She leaned forward and kissed him.

"No problem, I- I simply wanted to be here for ya. Still do."

He kissed her this time.

"I love you Vivienne." He felt a warmth enveloping him, he couldn't take his eyes off her.

"I love you Finnick." She cast aside all barriers, all things that have held her back all those years.

They both leaned, lips locking in passion. Once again he was pressing her against himself, his hand caressing her face and her shoulder. Their lips interlocked refusing to part, their minds so lost, they couldn't hear the slight growls of craving their throats gave.

Her hands explored his collar, untying the tie, and slowly opening each button of his shirt. Without thinking, he had began unzipping her dress in her back. As they were both half-naked, the realisation of what they were doing settled itself in their brain.

They pulled apart looking at each other.

"You okay Vi?"

"Fuck yeah!"

Half a second later, they were in her room, on the bed, resuming what they were doing on the
couch. The cargo pants were sent flying across the room, and he helped her out of the dress. They felt the passion burning within themselves, their hands caressing, exploring every secrets their body held, their mouths locking in and out.

All was left were their underwear, quickly discarded. He held her against him, as he let his paw under her hips. The moan she gave sent spikes of primal desire in his mind.

"Fin ?"

"Yes ?"

"I want it. I want you !"

What she had just said, her gaze locked into his, broke down every last doubt they both had.

They fully gave themselves to each other, abandoning the last ounces of rational thinking that lingered in the fringes of their minds.

They loved each other and at that moment it was the only thing that mattered.

The sun was brushing his face. He blinked several time and pulled at the sheet, putting it on his face to shield his eyes from the light. There was warm fur against his, bringing him comfort. Like an automatism, he nuzzled the person lying in his arms, a pair of long ears moving and brushing his face. Slowly, slumber left his mind and he could remember where he was.

"Morning carrots."

"Hhhm, don't wanna work today."

"You're on vacation, you don't have to work."

"But festival-"

He squeezed her against his chest and she let escape a sigh of satisfaction.

"You can't go, you've been captured by a devious fox."

"Yes, I can never get up now."

"Never."

They stayed like this for a bit, the slumber hovering above them, leaving them in a satisfying half-asleep mode.

Suddenly, a knock on Nick's door was heard. It immediately woke them up like a cold shower.

"Nick ? Are you taking your breakfast with us ?" It was Jessica's voice

"Yes" he answered "I'm dressing up, don't come in."

Nick and Judy looked at the door with a frighten look.

"Oh, and don't wake Judy !" he added "She likes to sleep until late when she's not working." This was a complete lie but the doe's cousin seemed to buy it.

They heard the steps slowly going away in the hallway. They looked at each other, worried
expressions on their faces.

"You've got to get back to your room."

"Yep. But I'm in my underwear, and I don't think the sleep-walk excuse will take."

"I'll go take a look outside, your room is near, you'll just have to make a run for it."

He quickly dressed, opening his door, looked to the right and to the left. No-one was in sight.

"Wait for me, I'm taking breakfast with you."

"Okay. The way is sure, go, go, go."

Judy launched herself into the hallway. In a matter of second, her door had opened and closed. No one had seen her. A few second later, as Nick was waiting in front of her door, she got out wearing a pair of pants and a t-shirt.

"If I'm to stay here a couple days more, I'll have to buy a pair of underwear and shirt." Said Nick.

"We can go buy some after breakfast if you want."

They walked to the kitchen where a dozen bunny were already eating, Bonnie and Jessica were making pancakes, Stu was serving the kids.

"Hey sleepy heads, It's past 8 already."

"Jude the dude, Slick Nick, how are you doing this morning ?" Welcomed them Judy's father.

"No honest mammal should wake before 10 on vacation." Answered Nick with his eternal smirk.

They made their way to the table and sat down. Quickly, Stu served them hot cocoa and some pancakes.

"Dad, why are you staring at Nick ?"

"Oh, sorry. I was just wondering how old he was."

"Thirty-three, why do you want to know ?" Asked the fox

"Well, there are grey strands in your fur, you looked young but sometime looks can be deceiving."

Nick kept the confident smile, easily hiding his worry. At his side, Judy choked on her cocoa.

"Hey, you alright Judy ?" He approached her with a rag, wiping the table. He looked at her, approached his paw and took something off her head. "Oh, red strand must've come from you Nick. Another, you have quite a few on yo-"

He had gone silent, and quickly the whole room was voided of any chattering noise. He took a stumbling couple of steps back, as he had been punched.

Judy and Nick look at everyone present, time had seemed to stop, all bunnies staring at them. A noise of tinkling metal was heard as Bonnie had let go of a spoon.

Shit.

Crap.
"What did you do to my daughter?" The male bunny's voice was a whisper.

"Nothing sir, simply talked a bit before heading down, hugged, that's all. Some hair must have come off of each other's and-" It was his worst lie yet. There were way too much red fur on her to have simply come from a hug, even a blind mammal could see it.

Stu's paws had begun shaking, anger growing in his eyes.

"What did you do to my daughter?" His voice was louder, his nose was twitching.

Okay, he is entering panic mode, time to calm him down.

Judy got up, went straight to his father and hugged him patting his back.

"He did nothing, everything's alright, breathe. Nick did nothing."

"Must've done something, you smell more fox than rabbit." He was whispering again. Judy's face immediately heated up. Her father leaned against the table, slowly slumping. Judy took a chair and helped him sit.

"I knew it would happen, my daughter manipulated by a devious fo-"

"STU!" It was Bonnie's voice. "You can't call foxes devious. Gid is a fox too and he's not devious."

"I was talking about this one specifically." answered the male bunny pointing a Nick.

"DAD!" Judy shouted. "Don't you call my boyfriend devious."

"But what if your boyfriend likes being called devious?" Interrupted Nick in a joking tone.

"Not helping!"

Bonnie took out a bottle of carrot vodka and served her husband and herself.

"Mom!"

"Don't 'mom' me, young lady. I need something more stiff than cocoa and so does your father. Kids, take your plates and go eat in the leaving room, grown-ups need to talk."

All the younglings left the kitchen chattering between themselves. Jessica didn't move, she was looking at the new couple with a blank expression.

Judy's parents downed half their glasses.

"Since when are you two together?" Asked Bonnie.

"Less than twenty-four hours." Answered the fox.

She looked at them blankly.

"And you already had se-"

"NO!" They answered simultaneously.

"Then how come you're covered in each other's fur?" Stu had talked, raising his glass that had finished so his wife could serve him another.
"We slept in the same bed. But we did nothing!" Judy felt like a high-school girl again, trying to justify herself, and her actions to her parents.

The Hopps had gone silent. They were looking for their words, worried looks on their faces.

"He's not.. Manipulating you?" Asked her father.

"No. I trust him."

"I would never do that, mister Hopps. I love your daughter."

"Kids, I can't say I approve but, by experience, whatever we say, Judy will do what she wants." Bonnie had talked this time, slowly approaching Nick. "But if you hurt her, if you use her, I'll show you how predatory bunnies can get. Am I clear?"

"Crystal clear." Nick didn't look even a bit frightened, but his tone was serious.

Judy put a paw on her mother's arm. "Mom, he won't hurt me."

"I'm your mother, Judy. If you don't listen to my advices, I'll do what I must to protect you."

The young doe sighed.

Stu had taken the bottle and was about to serve himself a third glass. He changed his mind a directly drunk at the neck. Before Bonnie could stop him, he had already downed most of it.

"Stu, for carrot's sake!"

"My daughter's dating a fox, I've earned the right to drink." He loudly put down the bottle, got up and stumbled toward Nick. He raised a finger as if he was about to say something but he changed his mind, stumbling in the direction of the living room. "Get off the couch kids. Daddy needs a nap." A few seconds later they could hear loud snoring coming from the sofa.

"Is he going to be okay?" Asked Nick.

"He took the news better that I would've expected." answered Judy.

"Really?"

"Oh yes! A few years ago, he would've immediately thrown you out, shotgun in hand." Answered Bonnie. She had said it with a smile but she wasn't joking.

The silence grew for a few second before Jessica broke it.

"Maybe he should have."

"What?" Shot back Judy and her mother at the same time. Nick simply sipped his cocoa, a half-amused look on his face.

*Here it goes. I'm surprised it's from her.*

"You can't be serious Judy!" added the cousin "Dating a fox! Are you crazy?"

"What because he's a fox he's not worth it?"

Jessica dismissed it with a wave of her paw.
"I don't care that he's a fox. You're dating a predator! It's just wrong!"

Nick gave Judy's cocoa cup to Bonnie who sipped in it. Jessica wasn't her daughter and this discussion wasn't her battle.

"How so? How is it wrong to date a predator?"

"It's unnatural, there is no way you can be compatible. And I'm not talking about sex, not even kits, I'm talking relationship wise."

"Jessy, we love each other. I'm not stupid, we'll both have to make efforts and compromises-"

"It won't work, it's just a fling. You're simply attracted because of the challenge, the taboo!"

"And then what? Maybe I'm attracted to him partly because it's against social norms. But I know my feelings, and I know I love him. You don't get to tell me how I feel or should feel!" She shouted that last part, her paws shaking and her ears twitching in exasperation. Tears were slowly rising and she wasn't sure she would be able to hold them back.

"You're making a mistake!" She turned to the fox "I'm sorry Nick, it's not against you but I don't want my cousin hurt because of both her and your stupidity!"

Nick took another sip of his cup, looking alternatively to Judy and her cousin. His girlfriend was upset, fuming and he decided it was time to say something. He got up and went straight to Jessica. He leaned forward looking her in the eyes.

"Just because you can't understand how something can work, doesn't mean it can't work, dumb bunny." His mouth was grinning but his eyes weren't. "Yes, your cousin can be a bit impulsive, but you're not giving her enough credit. She will prove you wrong, as she did with everyone and everything she's done so far." He went back to Judy taking her paws into his. "And I can't wait to be part of it." He whispered, leaning and kissing her between the ears.

"You both are so- Screw this, I'm out." Jessica left the kitchen and they sound heard the entrance door slam behind her.

"This, I didn't see coming" Admitted Judy, leaning on her fox.

"She'll come around, give her time." Said her mother. Judy as surprised, though she had taken it a bit hard, her mother was bouncing back quickly. Maybe a bit too much.

They all finished their breakfast and helped to clean the kitchen. Not long after, Stu woke up and they went to the festival. Nick and Judy went to visit but soon went back to their booth, not really in the mood. Being here with Judy's parents felt awkward so they went around to greet Gideon.

"Hey guys." The fox wasn't as cheerful as usual, he gave them a strange vibe. Next to him, Jessica was serving the clients ignoring them.

_Oh no Gid, not you too._

They greeted him. He waved a paw at them, so they would follow him in the back of his booth. He started talking with a low voice.

"So you are... ?"

"Together yes. I suppose Jessy talked to you about it."
"Also explains Nick's scent on you yesterday. And today."

The three of them awkwardly looked at each other. The chubby fox lifted his paws.

"Guys, I've nothing against it. I don't know if it will work, but my therapy opened my eyes a bit. If it doesn't hurt anyone, I don't see no reason to be against it."

"Thanks Gid, it means a lot."

The fox scratched his head.

"It's nothing. I'm more worried about Jessica, she's really upset about all this. I know it's not my place to tell you what to do, but maybe give her space, so she can sort out her thoughts. I'll try to talk to her later okay?"

"You're right, we'll leave her alone. No point in insisting. We're going back to our own booth, have a nice day."

Nick's face was blank, no look of worry, but Judy seemed a bit upset by all this. Sure, she knew her family wouldn't take it well, but her cousin's reaction was a big blow. As they were about to enter the Hopps' booth, they overheard her parents conversation.

"I don't understand it Bonnie. Why does she always do the most- the most bizarre things?"

"I don't know. I really don't. She's a nice girl, she always does her best. But it's like she must choose the hardest path."

"And what if the fox really is toying with her? You know how those guys can be."

"Stu!"

"What? A species can't earn such a reputation without it being a bit true."

"I don't disagree with you, but we can't judge people on what their ancestors did. That's what Bellwether wanted, and it wasn't pretty."

"You're right. I'm sorry. I simply can't get over it. Not yet. I can't stop thinking she's making a mistake. Damn, this week's going to be hard."

"We'll pull through, don't worry."

They hugged, trying to give themselves a bit of courage.

As the conversation had ended, Judy took Nick by the paw and went to her parents. Nick glanced at her and she was wearing a fake mask of calm and confidence.

*Judy, if there is one thing I didn't want you to learn from me, that was this.*

"Hey mom, dad!"

"Hey, Judy!"

"Hey, Jude the dude!"

The three of them were using a cheerful and warm tone, but to Nick, none of them sounded convincing.
"So Nick and I were talking and- Uhm- I think it would be best if we got back to Zootopia."

"Why? Are you sure?" asked Bonnie, disconcerted "You've been here for only a couple of days and he just arrived."

"I think we all need a bit of space, and time to think about all this. Jessy's upset, and I know you both can't be taking it too well. I think it's best for everyone if I leave for now."

The doe's parents were now wearing embarrassed looks. It was obvious they tried to put on a brave front for their daughter, but this was a bit too heavy. They knew there was nothing they could do or say to change her mind, but it was too soon for them to roll with it.

Judy's father broke the silence. "I hate to see you leave this soon, but you're right. Us, Jessy, and both of you, we all need time to think. Don't worry, we'll be okay. What's important is for you to be happy."

She came and hugged them both.

"I love you guys."

"We love you too."

"Have a nice trip, text us when you're home."

... 

The walk from the festival to Nick's car was silent. The fox knew the bunny was upset and sad but didn't really know what to do or say to make it better. He unlocked the vehicle and they hopped in. As he was about to start the car, he heard Judy beginning to sob. He grabbed her and wrapped her in his arm, trying to give her comfort.

"I kn- I knew it wouldn't be easy. I- I'm sorry if what they said hurt you."

"Shhh, I'm alright, don't worry about me." He caressed her head as she was burying her face in his chest. Her sobbing died down in a few minutes.

"Not to complain but my shirt is soaked. If you wanted for me to drive shirtless, you could've just asked."

The bunny wiped her tears, chuckling at the joke.

"It's just- every decision I take, everything I want to do... They're always so pessimistic. 'It's great to have dream as long as you don't believe in them too much', that's what they always said to me. I know they said that so I wouldn't be too disappointed if I failed."

"That's a fucked up thing to say to a kid. But maybe if my parents had told me this, I wouldn't have taken the scout thing so hard."

They stayed snuggled against each other for a bit, before Judy began to move.

"Enough bad thoughts, we have to get back to Zootopia."

... 

They quickly packed Judy's belongings, she said good bye to every bunny she saw. As they approached the car, a voice called them.
"Nick, Judy, leaving so soon ?" It was Terry, he was carrying a large basket full of vegetables.

"Hey uncle Terry. Yes we're leaving. I have things to do in Zootopia and-

"And you're giving space to your parents while they take in all this couple stuff."

"Yeah, that too."

The rabbit scratched his head with a thinking expression and gave them the basket.

"Then take a bit of the farm with you. I know you will miss it. And sorry about Jessy, I know how she reacted. It surprised me, with how close she is with Gideon."

"That was strange to me too."

The silence lingered for a bit before Terry broke it again.

"Well ! On my end, I don't see no problem with you two being a couple. A guy driving this distance just to declare a girl can't be all bad. For what it's worth, this bunny thinks you're a perfectly fine. For a fox." he winked. "Drive safely."

"It means a lot sir." Said Nick, shaking his hand. Judy hugged her uncle and both bunny and fox got in the car.

"How long until we get home ?" Asked the bunny.

"I made the trip in four hours, but it's more like a seven hour drive if I respect the road regulations. Sleep if you want, we can take turns."

"Thanks Nick."

She wrapped herself in her coat and soon she slipped into slumber. Nick put on his headphones and went into driving mode. He resisted the urge to crush the gas pedal, knowing that Judy wouldn't be okay with him over-speeding.

Hours passed, the bunny waking-up and getting back to sleep a few time until Nick made a stop at a gas-station where he refilled the tank. Judy got out too to stretch her legs.

"You alright Carrots ?"

"Yes, I am. I want to drive a bit, if that's okay with you."

"Of course, I wanted to take a nap anyway."

They switched seats and Nick used Judy's coat as a blanket.

*Smells like Judy !*

...  

They arrived to zootopia around 6PM. The sun had started to go down in the horizon. Nick was back at the wheel, calmly driving around in the street.

"Do you want me to bring you to your place ?"

"No, not really. I don't want to be alone right now."
"Want to stay at mine tonight?"

"Yes, please."

She was always so easy to read, at least to him. He pulled over in front of his building and helped her carry her suitcase.

His flat was still mostly empty. A single bed, a single sofa in the living room with a coffee table, and a kitchen with only a fridge and a microwave oven.

"Nick, remember the offer you made me a few weeks ago?"

"What offer?"

"Coming to live with you."

"Yes, I remember. It still stands."

Judy smiled at him.

"I think I'll take you up on it. I don't have a lot of stuff so I won't invade too much."

"You can invade my flat whenever you want, Carrots," he joked, as he leaned to kiss her. He took her in his arms, lifting her from the floor. "I'll have my very own cute bunny."

She struggled to get out of his embrace "No calling me cute!" but she couldn't resist the kissing and nuzzling and soon she was kissing and nuzzling him back.

"I think I found your weakness, you can't resist foxes. Your survival instincts suck." he began tickling her. "You're lost in the big bad fox's den, and you will never escape." She finally grabbed his arms and pushed them back, giving him a passionate kiss.

"I don't see any reason why I would want to escape." Their gaze locked, and suddenly Nick wasn't so sure he was the only predator in the room. And it was more exciting than scary.

"So" he said, cutting the burning sensation he had felt rising inside himself "We can still move your stuff now. You live close, I have a car. I can order food to be delivered in an hour, we can make the trip there and back with your stuff in less than forty minutes."

"Okay, let's go. The sooner it's done the better. I'll talk with my landlady about the paperwork while you carry the suitcase."

The trip took less time than Nick had expected. Aside from clothes and a laptop, there was nothing Judy needed to take in her room. She had a word with the landlady and went back in the car.

"Everything's good Carrots?"

"Yep, all I have to do is to send her a registered mail, come and ascertain the state of the apartment and I'm good."

He pulled out, making his way to his own block.

"You don't feel like we rush this a bit? I don't want you to force yourself."

"Maybe we're rushing, maybe not. To me, it all feels right. We've waited for too long, maybe I'm just trying to make up for lost time."
She was wearing a genuinely happy smile. All the sadness she had felt while at Bunny-Burrow seemed to have disappeared.

"Now I must meet your mother. After all, it's partly thanks to her that you confessed to me and that we are together."

"Yes, you must. What about we go and surprise her tomorrow morning?"

"Deal."
She slowly rose from her slumber. The sun was up and it had been years since she had slept this well. No bad dreams, no worries. Only blissful sleep and the sound of her mate's breath at her side. She felt a big turmoil of feeling inside her. Strange forgotten sensations. Happiness. It felt like happiness. She couldn't keep herself to giggle, nuzzling the fennec fox who was sleeping next to her.

He turned toward her and she planted a kiss on his snout. He grunted while sleeping. She kissed him again and he grabbed her face with his paws, returning her kiss.

*Is he awake ?*

A snort answered to her. She caressed his face. Part of her wanted to let him sleep, but another wanted a second round. And that part was stronger. She nuzzled him again and kissed his forehead. The fennec fox woke up in turn and blinked several time, chasing the last traces of sleep in his eyes.

"Hello beautiful." He said in a raspy voice.

"Hello, slept well ?"

"Made a strange dream. There was a naked vixen, sheets and a whole lot of kissing."

"Strange how dreams can be premonitory."

She gave him a short kiss that he returned.

"Using such fancy words this early ?"

"See if you can understand this better."

She gave him another kiss, burning with passion. Instantly, he felt his body filled with envy, every trace of tiredness disappearing.

... 

They were lying down on the bed, facing each other, their paws intertwined. The sheets had fallen on the floor. They were wearing satisfied and loving smiles, but the vixen expression seemed somewhat strange to the fennec.

"Something's bothering you Vi ?"

"No. Not really. More like something feels... Different."

"How so ? Is everything okay ?"

"Yes ! It's, uhm- how should I put this..."

"You don't need to use gloves with me."
"Right. You know how when foxes mate for the first time, it create a kind of bond between them. Something really strong and primal ?"

"I know, it's a bit different for fennecs, the bond is weaker for instance."

"Well, since John, I didn't really mate with anyone. Didn't date anyone either."

"What are you getting at ?"

"Since you're my second mate, it seems that this time, the bond is a lot weaker than my first. It feels strange."

*Does it mean her feelings are weaker than she thought ?*

The Vixen scratched her head, reflecting on what she had just said.

"I don't know a lot about mammals behaviours, I didn't study it. Most of us kept remnants of our primal nature, and I know it can shape us for some part." She made a pause. "I don't think it has any meaning per se, if anything, I think it's because you are my second mate and thus, the bond can't really form like the first time."

"I don't really understand what you are trying to say."

"What I'm trying to say is : contrary to most foxes' relationship, me being with you after we mated won't be in any part due to my instincts pushing me toward you. I feel more free than ever. I love you Finnick, and I'm with you because I really want to."

He kissed her, relief and happiness flowing inside him.

"I love you too Vivienne."

Their breakfast was composed of sausage and eggs with coffee. And lots of kissing. They stayed together all morning, laughing and talking about their life outside of their meeting, trying to catch up on the years they had wasted.

"I must say, I don't look forward to being back in my van." joked the fennec.

"You don't have to go back to your van. You can crash here."

"I don't want to impose. Seems to me we should take it more slowly than that."

"You mean slowly as in 'taking one last drink' on our first date ?"

"Hey, lady. You came at me wid' all that foxy charm. What could little-me do to resist all this ?" He said, making a gesture toward her whole body.

"I don't see what you're talking about." she had a devilish smile similar to Nick's, wagging her tail in a languish manner. "But the offer's out there. If you need a place to stay, the door's open."

"If I crash here one night more, I'll stay here forever. And living outside my van isn't the best motivation to continue the hustling life. I'll end up being a couch potato."

"You can't hustle forever. This kind of job, either you end up creating your own 'business', or you end up like all the other hobos in the city."

"Hey, I know that, but as a fennec without any diplomas or experience in any fully legal job, I don't
They stayed silent, the conversation had taken a serious turn. Finnick had thought about it for some time now, he couldn't keep doing this job forever. Without the kid and after the nighthowler case, it had become more and more difficult to get by. He would have to put his mind to it if he wanted to change, like the kid did by becoming a police officer.

_No way I'll become a cop._

Finnick chuckled at the thought.

"Let's leave this conversation for another time, alright ? I don't really feel like talking about this today."

But as they silently cuddled in the sofa, he couldn't keep his thoughts to come back to the matter. He had been a hustler for the last twenty-five years and he liked it. But there was really nothing else he knew how to do.

So what to do now ? If his relationship Vivienne was to be serious, he would have to find something more respectable, more legal. And that would earn him more money than what he got to get by.

He turned the problem in his head, trying to look at it from different angles, see how he could adapt what he knew to another job, but another problem always appeared. He was fox, well a fennec fox. But still, people wouldn't trust him that easily.

Wolford was his usual cheery self, whistling as he entered the precinct. Today was going to be a good day. Well, most days were good days to him anyway. First he'd go greet Clawhauser, then he'd make his way to the cafeteria and have a nice warm mug of coffee, then he'd go to his office and fill some paperwork he hadn't finished the day before while waiting for Blackfur, his partner.

He crossed path with Fangmeyer and they exchanged a few words before he went on his way. Still whistling, he served himself some coffee and took a couple donuts, bringing one of them to his favorite chubby cheetah. With them being flatmates, they had become close friends, and Clawhauser's smile could brighten anyone's mood, not that the wolf needed it. After making his way to his office he began working. It took him about thirty minute to see the end of his paperwork and he began wondering why Blackfur was late.

_Traffic probably._

Just as this thought as formed, his desk phone rang.

"Officer Wolford, ZPD, Precinct One" he mechanically answered.

"Hey Wolford, Clawhauser speaking."

"You need something Big Ben ?"

"No, I'm calling to tell you that Officer Blackfur just called in sick. Bogo assigned you at parking duty for the day."

"Blackfur's sick ? She was perfectly fine yesterday."

"Perhaps she caught a cold last night ? I don't know. Anyway, the joke-mobile is waiting for you."
Nick had nicknamed the little vehicle and it had stuck. Now everyone called it that way.

The wolf sighed. He didn't like parking duty. He didn't like to be the one to punish people. Arrest them, he was okay with, helping them, it was what he lived for. But giving parking ticket wasn't how he liked to spend a day.

Wolford had put on the vest and was driving down the street, looking at the parked car. Sometimes, one of them hadn't paid the parking meter in time and he had to write down a ticket. Sometimes, a civilian gave him a 'kind' word on how he was really helping the city by doing this job.

The wolf passed in front of a sushi place and made a stop.

*I could order something to take out for later and bring it to Blackfur. I think I still have her address.*

He entered the restaurant.

"Hello, is it possible to order in advance for noon ?"

"Of course" answered the clerk, a red panda in a suit. "What will you have ?"

The wolf took a quick look at the menu.

"A menu B4, and three boxes of D6" He had chosen a simple menu with sushis for himself but he knew that only one wouldn't be enough for the panda, that's why he had chosen to take a bunch of them. Worst case scenario, she could eat them this evening.

The morning was nearing its end and he had written about forty tickets. I wasn't a bad score but since Hopps had set the bar above two hundred in half a day, it seemed like nothing. He went back to the restaurant and went to Blackfur's place. As he was parking, he saw the large frame of his partner leaving the building. Nothing in her demeanor showed that she was sick. If anything, her pace was quick even if her head seemed a bit slumped.

*What the hell ?*

He wanted stop and ask her where she was going but having called in sick, maybe it was personal enough so that she wouldn't want to talk about it. He wanted to follow her but with the car, he knew he wouldn't be discreet enough, and he didn't really want to intrude on something personal. In the end, his curiosity was stronger. He opened the little trunk of the joke-mobile, taking out the first-aid kit, emptied the bag and put the sushi boxes inside. He also put down the orange vest as it was too visible and began following the panda.

He saw her stop at a flower-shop, the owner seemed to know her as he greeted her by calling her by her own name. She bought two bouquets and resumed her walk. As he was walking behind her, trying to stay hidden he began understanding where she was going. Pawgate cemetery was near, that could explain why she had called in sick and bought those flowers.

He had made a good guess and a few minutes later, she passed the gate of the graveyard. From uncomfortable, the wolf's mood went to downright shitty.

*Okay, I screwed up this time. I really should go now.*

But he couldn't dampen his curiosity and followed her from a distance, staying behind trees, out of her line of sight. She ended in front of a tomb stone. He couldn't hear from where she was but she
seemed to talk with the one which had been buried here. She put a bouquet on the grave, wiped her eyes and walked back to the gates of the graveyard. The wolf turned around the tree behind which he was hidden so she wouldn't see him and made his way to the tombstone.

'Darren Friedkin Blackfur, a loving husband, a kind brother, and a caring uncle.'

*Friedkin... Why does the name ring a bell?*

He turned around, the panda wasn't in sight anymore. He ran to the gate and looked right and left. He saw her turn to a corner, the second bouquet still in hand. As he continued following her, he was still trying to figure out where he had heard the name. He almost had it, but each time the memory was in his grasp, it slid and went back in the darkness.

They walked more than twenty minute. Wolford's pause was nearing its end but it made no difference to him, he wanted to know, he felt that for some reason, all this was important.

He saw her taking the stairs of a building. He lift his eyes to see what it was.

'Downtown Principal Hospital'.

*Of course it would get worse.*

He entered the building five minutes after she did and went to the information desk tended to by a female zebra with too much make-up.

"Good day officer. What can I do for you?"

"Hello, I'm looking for a patient of yours called Blackfur."

"Room 512, fifth floor. Take the elevator to the left. I just saw her mother come in, is everything alright?"

*Fuck no, it isn't.*

"Of course. Just some routine work."

The hospital had a gift shop, and he decided to buy some flowers, just in case.

He decided to take the stairs so he wouldn't risk being seen leaving the elevator. With his cop training, five floors were an easy climb.

As he left the stairs and entered the hallway, he heard part of his mind screaming to leave, to get back to the joke-mobile and act as if he knew nothing. But he knew himself enough to know that he would put his foot in his mouth soon enough and give away what he knew. He shut out the voice of cowardice and found the room he was looking for.

Through the open door, he could see her partner sitting on the bed of an unconscious panda caressing her cheek. The smell of sorrow, anger and alcohol hit the wolf like a brick. Judging by her size, the unconscious panda could be no more than fifteen, but at the same time she looked old and worn-out. The medical instrument were beeping at a steady rhythm, but beside that, the room was perfectly silent.

He looked at the scene for a few second and knocked at the door, entering the room, trying to control his expression to not look too embarrassed. He kept the bouquet in his hand, not knowing what to do with it.
The silence lingered for a bit, he didn't want to break it. Whatever he would, he was persuaded it wouldn't be appropriate.

"Come and say hello to my daughter, Wolford." Blackfur's voice a mix of warmness and sorrow, something that the wolf had never heard from her.

He approached the bed and stood next to his partner.

"Uhm- Hello..."

"Lauren."

"Hello Lauren. My name is Augustyn Wolford. I prefer to be called Wolford."

The panda officer turned to her daughter.

"He's my partner on the force, he's a good officer and a nice mammal."

"Your mother is too, I wouldn't want anyone else having my back on the field."

"He's the one that tries to always cheer up everyone. Never stops joking."

"I try, your mother isn't really receptive to my humour. But I haven't lost hope on her yet." the panda chuckled but couldn't hide her sadness.

Silence fell again on the room. A feeling of uneasiness slowly grew into Wolford's mind.

I really shouldn't be here.

"I- I'm sorry I-"

"Could you stay for a bit?"

"Huh?"

"Could you stay, please?"

"Of course."

He would be late for his shift but he didn't care.

*Screw my shift, this is more important.*

He put his paw on his partner shoulder. She didn't move, keeping caressing her daughter's face.

"I went to see your uncle this morning. He said to say hello." She made a pause, swallowing her emotions. "Sorry I didn't come those last few months, I was transferred to precinct One at last. It's a lot of work but the people are really nice. I met Judy Hopps and Nick Wilde. The ones who solved the nighthowler case. You'd really like them, they are two of the most dedicated cops I ever met." Tears were rolling down her cheek.

She got up, leaving the room and waiting for the wolf outside.

The wolf followed her, not knowing what else to do.
The ride in the elevator was silent, the wolf didn't dare say anything until they exited the building.

"I'm sorry I followed you Wight. I wanted to bring you some food since I thought you were sick and all. I saw you leave your building and-

"I'm not mad Wolford. Maybe I should be but I'm not. If anything, I was glad you were there."

"You were?"

"My family, my husband... Most of them won't come anymore."

"Have they- given up?"

"My daughter has been in a coma for the last nineteen years. I'm the only one who hasn't given up."

She started walking, the wolf followed her. She lead them to a park and sat on a bench, looking into the distance. He sat next to her, putting down the bag he was carrying.

"No, it's not about giving up. I simply can't let her go." She made a long pause, the wolf didn't dare to ask her why. "If you have followed me, you've seen me enter the cemetery. I was visiting Darren, my brother." She took an inspiration. "Lauren was six at the time. We were going back from a restaurant, she was here, Darren too and so was my husband. I don't remember why, we stopped in front of a shop. I let her out of my sight ten seconds. Ten bloody seconds, and she was in the middle of the street. My brother- he tried to push her away from a truck and was hit by it instead. There was a car coming from the other way. It hit her head and her back, she fell into a coma instantly."

So that's why she was so mad at those parents.

"Oh my god, I'm so sorry."

"You now what the most fucked part is? I should let her go and grieve, that would be best for everyone. But I can't because if she dies, my brother's death will have been for nothing. And I can't accept that."

He put his paw on her arm, since she was too big for him to reach her shoulder.

"You know Wolford, we see those kind of tragedies every day on the job. Destroyed families, grieving mammals. I thought I would get numb to all this but it doesn't work that way. It teared me and my husband apart too. We're technically still married but we separated about a year after the accident. When each time you see someone, you're reminded of what you have lost, it's inevitable."

"If there was anything I could do or say..." He gave her the bouquet.

She took the flowers and looked at them. "Thanks, Wolford."

"I also bought lunch, but I don't know if you're hungry." He opened his bag and took out the sushi boxes.

"I am, I always forget to eat when I'm in this state. Thanks." She took a box and opened it.

"I wouldn't be a decent partner if I didn't have your back."

They ate silently and soon after, Wolford had to leave her. She insisted he went back to his duty, not wanting for him to get in trouble because of her. They parted ways in front of the hospital,
Wolford waving as she went back inside.
Part 1, Chapter 14

Part 1 : A Shared Hustle

Chapter 14 : A Surprise Visit

She woke up in a ball of fur and warmth. Once again, she had slept in Nick's arms and began to wonder if she would ever be able to sleep alone again. The sun was up and her boyfriend was still sleeping. She buried her face in his fur and took in his scent. She heard the faint growl of his breathing and the throbbing of his heart. As she was nuzzling him, Nick slowly woke up, squeezing her gently in his arms.

"Didn't know I had plushies in my bed." he yawned. She giggled.

"I'm not a plush, I'm your gir-"

He shut her up putting a paw on her snout "Shh, plushies don't talk, they're made for cuddles." He nuzzled her between the ears.

"Could a plush do this ?" She asked, kissing him a giving a gentle bite at his lip. He answered by slowly running a claw in her back. He felt her shiver as her kiss went from gentle to passionate. He ran the claw again and her kiss became more pressing, her breathe shortening.

"S-stop. Bad idea."

He stop his claw in the middle of her back and nibbled her ear. New shiver.

"Why ? Are you afraid of the predator's claws ?" He said in a playful tone.

He straightened above her, locking his emerald gaze into her amethyst eyes and ran his claws from her chest to the bottom of her belly. She was holding the sheets with her paws with all her strength, her joints aching, arms shaking.

Am I scaring her ?

"You alright, Judy ?"

"Y-yes."

He took out his claws in front of her.

"If those are scaring you, I can take them away." he said in a gentle tone.

"No, they're not scaring me. It's the complete opposite." she blurted.

Immediately she saw the subtle change in the fox expression.

"Carrots ?" The tone was mischievous, his face slowly leaning toward hers.

"Yes ?" She knew this couldn't mean anything good for her.

"Would you happen to have some sort of fang-fetish ?" He was still leaning, his grin slowly revealing his teeth.
"N-No ?" her voice was meek.

"So if I do this, you shouldn't react to it." His face changed course, his fangs now completely revealed, and he nibbled at her neck, while he caressed her shoulders with his claws. Judy's shudders were punctuated with low moans.

"S-stop, I can't take it. If you want to take this slow, please stop this." he slowly stopped, tenderly kissing her.

"Sorry, I couldn't resist torturing you a bit." He caressed her cheek. "No fang fetish, you said ?"

"Only yours. You're the only predator I could imagine letting do that to me."

"You told me to stop though." his grin said that he perfectly knew why she did, but he couldn't resist taunting her.

"Because if you didn't have... Let's just say the 'taking it slow' wouldn't have stood for much longer."

"Understood Carrots. I'm stopping this for today." He stood up and said the three words she wanted to hear. "To be continued."

...  

He went in the kitchen to fix her some breakfast. She quickly joined him, with the pack of decaf she had brought from her old place.

"So what's the program for today, slick ?"

He looked at his phone. 9AM.

"First, breakfast, then shower, then we're going to see my mother, with which I must spend at least half the day to make up for last time. Then, I'm going to see Finnick and try to cheer him up a bit and make him tell to me who was the lady he had it so bad for. Then probably dinner. Oh, and we must make plans to see Ben too."

"Yep, I want to know how things are going with his stud of a boyfriend."

"I mainly want to announce to him that we're together before he discovers it by himself and make sure he doesn't tell the whole planet."

Judy snickered.

"That too."

They ate their breakfast and took a shower. Then they took Nick's car to see Vivienne.

"I wish I could keep this car. I never had my own and I must admit it's really handy."

"How did you get it anyway ?"

"When I said to mister Big it was to see you, he didn't hesitate."

"Don't you owe him some sort of debt now ?"

"Probably yes. But he is reasonable, whatever he will ask of me will be mostly legal and
comparable to what I asked of him. He knows how to adapt the 'debts' to the people who owes them to him. Don't worry about it."

"Mostly legal ?"

"Carrots, as I said, don't worry. I spent my life up to this year doing mostly legal things. And I won't accept to do what he asks if it's not ethical."

The answer seemed to satisfy the bunny, even if she didn't like the idea of Nick running some errands for a mob-boss.

... 

He pulled over in front of his mother's building. Once again the door was closed. Judy was about to call at the intercom but Nick stopped her.

"Talking about mostly legal things." he said with his most mischievous grin. He took out the two metal rod he had used two days ago and began unlocking the door.

"Nick !"

"What ?"

"It's breaking and entering !"

"I'm not really breaking anything. As for entering, I'm sure if we called, she would invite us inside."

As he finished the sentence, the door opened and they went through.

"How many of those hidden talents do you have ?" She looked upset but underneath was hidden a slight smile.

"Too much to count." The shit-eating grin was firmly in place and he kept it for most of the ascension. As they arrived at the door, Nick rang the bell, a few second later, her mother opened to him in the same bathrobe she was wearing when he had come from the first time.

"Nick ! So nice to see you !" She hugged him briefly. Her tone was cheerful, but Nick sensed something strange.

Must be nothing, she's probably only surprised.

The vixen turned to the doe with a small smile, but also a light frown.

"You must be the reason why my son left so soon."

"Yes, sorry." Answered the bunny, a bit embarrassed"The name's Judy Hopps."

"Don't worry about it. I'm Vivienne Wilde. You can call me Vivienne, or Vi for short."

She made them enter into the living room and sat them into the sofa while she sat in the armchair facing them. Nick smelled some weird and familiar scent but put it on the account of him not noticing it the last time he was here.

"I didn't think you'd get back so soon. Did something happen ?"
Nick looked at Judy. She began to speak.

"Well, Vivienne, as it happens, I'm dating your son."

Vivienne's smile immediately grew on her face.

"I kind of already knew it. No point in bringing you here otherwise."

"And we accidentally outed ourselves to my family. They didn't take it well, but better than I thought they would. Except for my cousin who said some- uh- hurtful things."

"Is she some kinda bigoted asshat?"

"Apparently yes. Though it seemed to be more about us being prey and predators than me being a fox." said the fox.

The vixen scratched her head, she didn't like what she heard, but it didn't surprise her.

"As I already said to Nick, I don't know if pred-prey could work, but anyone have the right to be with whoever the fuck they want."

The dirty language used by Nick's mother phased her a bit but strangely it suited her. She looked like someone no one should mess with and it seemed to come with the package.

"Anyway, I thought we all needed some space and I got back to Zootopia with Nick."

"She lives with me now."Added Nick "She has left the shoebox that pretended to be a room."

"That soon? You didn't lose time. I hope you know what you are doing."

Nick lift his eyes to the ceiling, in a half-annoyed half-amused manner.

"Mom, I know. I'm being careful, we did nothing yet. I know it's not something someone should do the first day they are together. Or even the first week."

Judy felt a bit embarrassed at where the conversation had gone but it seemed that the matter wasn't something to be ashamed about for Nick and his mother.

"Yes, it would be very irresponsible."

Nick heard the weird tone she had used. The weird smell lingering in the flat was kind of familiar and mixed with something else. Something more primal. He lifted a brow.

He stared inquisitively at her for a few second, she held his gaze, but he felt something was afoot. Family instincts.

"Mom?"

"Yes son?"

"Is someone else in the apartment?"

The attitude of his mother shifted instantly. Instead of the focused and proud woman she usually was, she looked now a bit embarrassed and uncomfortable.

"Maybe?"
Nick chuckled, a sly grin slowly growing on his face.

*This gon' be good.*

"Mom ? Did you do something very irresponsible while I was gone ?"

Judy looked at her partner with wide eyes. Even if anything like that happened, she herself would never have dared to tease any of her parents about it.

The vixen didn't answer right away. Her gaze was locked into her son's but she was clearly struggling to keep it here. Judy still felt embarrassed, they had come by surprised and clearly their timing couldn't have been worse for the vixen. The female vulpine blinked and then called.

"You can come out, they are onto us anyway."

They heard the door of Vivienne's room open and a few footstep approaching.

"Hey kids. It's me. How you doin'?" Finnick came to face them trying to keep a straight face, but the embarrassment was clearly showing. Judy's jaw immediately dropped, Vivienne covered her face in shame, and Nick stared blankly at his friend.

*Should've known.*

The silence grew, awkward and tense. Neither Judy nor Vivienne knew what to say or what Nick was thinking.

Nick stood up and slowly approached the fennec. His face, like his voice was completely serious. If it was a mask, it was one of the most perfect he had ever worn.

"Finnick."

"Nick."

They were face to face, tension still rising.

"You hurt my mother, I burn down your van."

"Wid' dis kinda logic, you shoulda burn a van each day for the past twenty years."

The atmosphere had gotten so tense, Judy could hear every pound of her own fast beating heart. They stared down for a few second more, none of them breaking.

Nick chuckled.

"Glad to see you're out of the pit."

"Glad to see you finally manned up and declared to your bunny."

"Right back at you."

They both broke into laughter, fist bumping each other. Nick went back to sit on the couch next to Judy who was trying to put her jaw back in place.

"But seriously. I'll burn down your van."

"Got it."
Finnick took another chair and placed it next to Vivienne, sitting and gently grabbing her paw.

"I'm sorry I didn't tell you Nick" said his mother "I didn't know how you'd take it."

Nick stood silent for a few seconds, pondering what he could say. He didn't feel angry, he didn't feel betrayed but it hadn't come to his mind that her mother would look for another lover. He felt more okay with it than he thought he should be.

"Dad's been dead for fourteen years, Finnick's one of the most decent hustler I know. Sure it's strange to know my best friend is getting frisky with my mother. But hey, I'm dating a bunny, who am I to point out what's strange and what isn't."

The doe lightly elbowed him in the ribs.

"Hey, I'm right here."

"I know you are." He said, kissing her between the ears. "So yeah, maybe you should have talked to me about it. Maybe Finnick should have talked to me about it. But maybe in the two days I suppose you've spent together, you didn't find the time to call and tell me." he raised his paws "It's not an accusation. Two days is an awfully short time. And I'm sure you like us are still trying to sort out your feelings. So no, I'm not upset. If anything, I'm glad both of you have found someone. And I find it fun that you found one another."

It was one of the few times Judy had heard Nick talk from his heart without a joke, without a smirk, without a mask. He was proving to be the caring and loving mammal she always knew he was, and it filled her heart with pride and joy. And love.

Everyone in the room stayed silent for a few second, taking in what Nick had said.

Finnick ended up breaking the quiet mood.

"Getting frisky ?" he asked with an amused tone.

"Should have I said 'Shaggin' the hell out of mah mothah' ?" Nick joked, parodying the little vulpine's accent.

"Nick !" shouted Judy, punching him in the ribs, hard this time. Vivienne's had put her paw on her mouth, trying to keep from bursting into laughter.

... 

Vivienne had brew some coffee and served everyone. She had also made some toast and put a platter on the coffee table between them.

"So Finnick, I must know for how long you were wooing my mother."

"Didn't really woo her. More like, I came 'round giving her your money, stayed a bit to give her some news, talked about stuff and tried to cheer her up. Didn't really understand I had fallen for her until six years ago."

"And you waited this long to declare ?"

"I made the first step. This idiot would never had done so otherwise." Said Vivienne.

"True."
Nick sipped his coffee and asked "So since when are you two together? Yesterday? The day before?"

"I went to talk to him right after you left to see Judy. He bought me dinner, and then we went home. I don't think you need to hear more."

"You're right, I don't. And you, when did you discover your feeling for him?"

"The six months you spent at the academy, though I think I fell in love a long time ago. He stopped coming since he had no money to give me from you. Something about 'not having a real reason to come'" She stopped talking and turned to the fennec "Were you testing me?"

"Yep. Completely backfired." His shoulder had slumped.

Nick began grinning and slightly switched topic.

"So now, this begs the question: Finnick, should I call you dad?"

"Not if you want to keep your teeth, kid."

---

He had spent most of the morning in the kitchen, preparing the meal. As an appetizer, he had made a salad with Kale, cucumber, avocado and dried fruits. Following, there was the vegan option with curried eggplants, tomatoes and basil, and the carnivorous option was chicken marinated in coconut milk with sweet potato fries.

The cheetah didn't seem like the patient type but he could spend hours in the kitchen, as long as people would be there to eat what he made. Sometimes he asked himself he shouldn't have been a cook but he preferred to keep cooking as a hobby.

Wolford had come several times to ask if his roommate needed help, but Clawhauser turned into some kind of obsessive mammal in the kitchen and had refused.

Instead, the wolf had put on some music on the record-player, handling the vinyls with care. As noon approached, he heard the intercom ring. He let the guest in.

"Hey, Wolford! How is it going?" Nick shook his hand.

"Peacefully since you two aren't at the precinct."

"Har har. I'm sure we'll have to pick twice the workload when we'll be back." Judy said, shaking the wolf's hand in turn.

They entered the living room. Goodbye Blue Sky was playing on the record-player.

"Smells like heaven in here!" said the bunny.

"Sounds like purgatory in here!" said the Fox.

"Sorry guys," said the cheetah as he was taking a plate from the oven "I'll put something more cheery on, The Wall's not the most happy Pink Snoud's album."

"The record sounds old, perhaps it would be time to buy a new one."

"I don't know, there is something nice about hearing the music from the Orange Vinyl Version."
Nick's jaw dropped, Judy looked at him without understanding.

"What's the Orange Vinyl Version?"

"Oh carrots, it's nothing much. The price range is only from one thousand and five hundred dollars to three thousand."

"For a record? Ben, tell me you didn't pay this much."

"Nah, only cost me one thousand four hundred. And the guy threw in a bunch of other stuff."

It was Judy's jaw's turn to fall.

... 

They sat at the table and began eating and talking about what they had done in the few days they didn't see each others.

"How is work these days?"

"Believe it or not, we've had another case with a drugged guy carrying a gun. A zebra. He went completely nuts as soon as people tried to talk to him. Emptied his weapon in direction of civilians."

"Holy crap!" reacted Judy "How did I not hear about this?"

"No civilians were killed. The few that were injured, the mayor was able to convince them to not talk to the press. Since the body count has stayed to zero, the story died down quickly." Explained the wolf.

"Don't say anyone you got it from me, but it's not the only one aggressive drugged mammal that has been arrested." Began Clawhauser "Seems there is a new drug on the street, and some speculate there are traces of Nighthowler in it."

"What?" reacted Judy "No way, the moment you take nighthowler, you immediately turn feral, there is no delay."

"Maybe there is if mixed with other stuff. And there is also the memory loss symptom. As long as the drug is in control, no memory is recorded. But as I said, it's only speculation."

"And if the effects of the drugs are consistent, there has been only a few case yet, so it seems to be small scale." added the wolf.

"How do we know it's not another Bellwether incident?" asked the fox.

"Preds and prey have been affected alike. Looks more like a new drug market than a plot. In any case, we'll stay vigilant."

The topic had slightly dampened the mood and silence installed itself for a bit. Until Wolford broke it.

"So Judy, I hear you went back to your hometown. How's the life away to the big city?"

"Usually I'd say boring, but with the festival and some of the stuff that happened, it was more animated. You know, large families. We can't really spend time together without being at eachother's throats."
She glanced at Nick to see his reaction to her almost slipping up. The calm mask was up, no cracks.

"Must be strange to have a family that large. I mean, I have 5 siblings and that's a lot by wolves standards."

"Only one sister here." said the cheetah.

"Seems like I win then, only son."

... 

The dessert was simple lemon sorbet with whipped cream.

"Sorry guys, didn't have the time to make a cake."

"That was already plenty Ben. And the sorbet is really good." Said the bunny.

"On another matter, how's it going with your tiger Ben?" asked the wolf.

The cheetah made a slight pause. His composure seemed to falter slightly but he recovered.

"Oh, we've stop seeing each other."

*Crap, I did it again,* thought Wolford.

"Sorry to hear this, was it him or-" comforted Judy.

"I ended it. I wouldn't have worked out."

"Why? If it's not too personal."

The cheetah played with his spoon in the melting sorbet.

"In the beginning, it was alright. We've had several dates, fun discussions, and fun other stuff." He gave a playful wink to his audience "He's as fan as gazelle as me. Yes Nick, it's possible. But well, how to say that. He wanted to help me lose weight."

"I don't really get how it's an issue." said Judy, with a puzzled expression.

"He was a bit insistent, too insistent. Like he couldn't understand that I didn't want to lose weight. Not that I specifically want to be fat, but to me, being thin is not worth the effort." He's voice slowly died down as he seemed embarrassed by what he was saying.

"What I think Ben's trying to say is : he has learnt to love himself like he is, quality and flaws. Being chubby is a part of him he has learnt to accept. It's not a reluctant compromise." Said the wolf.

"It's not anymore. But he didn't seem to be able to accept it. So I ended it."

"You want to be fully accepted. I get that Ben." Nick put his paw on his friend's shoulder. "Takes gut, pun slightly intended, to not compromise on the matter. I think you were right to dump his ass."

They all chuckled and the joke made the cheetah smile.
"Thanks guys, I really needed to talk about this."

"We're friends Ben, it's what we are here for."

The bowls of sorbet were quickly emptied after the conversation and they went to chill on the couch and armchairs, Nick and Judy sitting next to one another. They both had to keep their paws off each other.

"You're a really good cook Ben. Mammal of many talents."

"You don't get this body by only eating donuts." the chubby cheetah joked.

He was looking at them in a peculiar manner, as if he was waiting for something. The bunny and fox looked at one another and nodded.

"Okay guys, you asked sooner what we did with our week. For my part, I had a little trip to bunny-burrows"

The cheetah's face had brighten to a large expectant grin. Nick couldn't resist making him wait a bit.

"Mainly to taste the local's specialties. I don't care much for carrots, but let me tell you, their carrot brandy is something else. Anyway, it's not the reason why I went. You see, so much rabbit in the same place, the fox that I am had to see it with his own eyes."

Clawhauser was on the edge of his seat, bouncing in place, claws about to pierce the cushion.

"Oh, and I declared to our little bunny officer here." he said, kissing her between the ears, sending tingles in her spine.

The feline reaction was exactly what he expected. He put his paws on his cheeks and-

"DAAAAAAAAAAAWWWW"

"Crap, lost my bet." said Wolford.

"There was a betting pool on whether we'd end up together ?" asked Judy. "Really guys ?"

"Nope, it was a bet on when we'd end up together." answered Nick.

"How do you know about this ? And why did you not talk to me about it ?" She made a pause and squinted her eyes "If you put any money in it-"

"There are limits to my slyness Carrots. And I didn't tell you about it mainly because you'd have freaked out. And maybe because deep down, I didn't want to compromise my chances."

"How much did you bet, Ben ?" asked the wolf.

"You know I don't take part on the precinct's bet." answered the cheetah with an innocent expression.

"I know you did on this one."

"Okay, one hundred, on it being this week. We'll have to tell Fangmeyer."

"Why ?" asked the bunny.
"He's the one holding the betting pool."

"Guys, I'd appreciate if you kept things under wraps. We want to figure out how this will work out before going official." The fox had his serious face on. "Not that I don't find all this betting funny, and you know I'm the first to be in on those shenanigans."

"When you don't instigate them" remarked Wolford.

"-but this time, it's important. It's not a thing that we want to be made public. At least not for now."

"Alright, I'll try to call it off with Fangmeyer. But you may want to talk about it with Blackfur."

"Yeah she's really observant and receptive. Even by being prudent, it won't take her a week before she catches up on us. I prefer to tell her myself than to let her discover it." said Judy.

"Oh, okay. I'll let you handle it." Nick deliberately avoided the panda. He had nothing against her, but she could read people too well, and it made him uneasy.

Friendship and dating between officers and partners wasn't forbidden, but it could bring a whole lot of problems legal-wise. Plus, a reaction of an officer toward an another wouldn't be the same if said officer was his or her mate. In any case, since they were both from different species, it was easier to hide it than to deal with the reaction. And they were certain the second they would leave the closet, the press would put its eyes on them and never let go. First fox officer and first bunny officer dating: juicy story.

They continued talking about their week, what they did at the festival, how Judy's family had reacted to her being with a fox. Their friends showed to be quite supportive. Nick didn't talk about how he had reunited with his mother, it being a bit too personal to share. No one beside the chief and his lieutenant knew about the details of his past in the precinct. And it was the way he wanted it to be.

At the end of the day, Nick and Judy left their friends and went home, watching a movie before going to bed.
Part 1, Last Chapter

Part 1 : A Shared Hustle

Chapter 15: The Ticket Hustle

"Assignments : Officers Grizzoli, Fangmeyer, Snarlov, Rhinowitz, patrol duty. Clawfith, Pennington, Swat support, report to Tundratown's precinct in forty."All agents left their seats one after the others. "Hopps, Wilde, parking duty, whole week. Dismissed"

"What ?" They reacted as the last officers were leaving the room. Chief Bogo waited for the room to be empty before saying.

"After how you messed up a week ago, officer Wilde, you didn't think I'd let you off the hook that easily ?"

"But, officer Hop-"

"-Is your senior officer and as such, she shares the blame. Except if you want to do two weeks of parking duty alone."

"No sir." answered Judy before Nick could.

"Thought as much. Have fun. Dismissed."

The two partners went and put on the meter maid's vests, hopping in the joke-mobile and leaving the precinct's parking lot.

"Sorry Carrots, should've known this would happen."

"Don't worry, I kind of saw it coming. And there was no way I would let you do two weeks of parking duty alone. I don't want to share a flat with a depressed fox."

Nick was browsing the web on his phone as Judy pulled over near a large blue car, probably a hippo's or elephant's. The guy had been parked for at least an hour as suggested the parking meter. Nick wrote a ticket and put it on the windshield.

"Pick up the pace carrots, or this fox will win the ticket race." The shit-eating grin was back.

"You really want to turn this into a contest ?" She asked playfully as she was writing a ticket for another car.

"Why not, I don't think we have anything better to do. If you're afraid of losing, just say it."

"I have the most ticket distributed in one day slick. No way I'll lose."

"Then how about a little wager. By the end of the shift, we compare who wrote the most tickets. If I win, I get to groom your ears tonight."

Judy's face turned red instantly. Grooming ears was an intimate act to bunnies. By a family member, it was a show of love and trust, by a mate, it meant something else entirely. She was about to explain it to Nick, but at his expression, she understood he knew exactly what he was suggesting. The fox had made his homework.
"And what if I win?"

"You get to groom my tail."

Nick let her touch his tail occasionally, but he flinched when she did without asking first. He sometimes unconsciously wrapped her in it when they were lying in bed or watching a movie. As she understood, grooming a fox's tail was as intimate as doing so with bunny's ears.

"Nice, I always wanted to do this."

"You haven't won yet, Fluff. Condition though, we park the joke-mobile here, no using it. We don't have to take a pause for a meal this noon. Is that okay with you?"

"Geographical limits?"

"None, you can get to another district if you want. Though I doubt our good chief Buffalo Butt will be happy with it."

Judy snickered, the childish nickname always made her laugh, even if she knew it shouldn't.

"Okay, I'm game. We compare results here at 5PM."

They shook on it.

"Good luck Fluff-butt."

"Good luck Slick."

And like this, they went their separate ways. He never would've made this wager with her in normal circumstances. She would flat-out leave him in the dust. But those weren't normal circumstances. He had a nice hand to play and if he could gain anything by playing it, he wouldn't hesitate.

... Nick was leaning against the joke-mobile. He had a bored expression and was on his smartphone, browsing Furbook and Nyangag. He looked at the time 4:45PM. He had arrived fifteen minutes ago and knowing Judy, she would use every seconds of the remaining time to ensure her victory.

Just as he had foreseen, she arrived at 4:58, a bounce in her step.

"Guess which bunny broke all previous records and will get to groom her lovely fox's tail?"

She showed him her ticket machine. 487. Nick's face was still showing his trademark grin, not even batting an eye.

"I don't know, you'll have to introduce me, because it's certainly not you."

He showed his own ticket machine. 532.

"Could've done better, but I found this guy who was selling those delicious hot-dogs. I had to make a quick nap for digestion."

Judy's mouth hung slightly open.

"It's impossible." she articulated.
"Or is it?" He took out his phone and showed her the screen. She read it.

"Today, at the Rainforest Convention Center, the Sloth in the City conference, or 'how to thrive in a company as a slow worker.' A sloth convention."

The level of mischievousness on Nick's face got over all previously set records. She heard a faint purring coming from his throat. If dictionaries needed an illustration for 'smug', his face at this moment would have been perfect.

"Nick?" there was exasperation in her voice.

"Yes?" said the voice of pure innocence.

"Did you know this before offering the wager?"

"You wound me Carrots, as if I could be such a vile creature. Luring you into this kind of trap... I would never dare."

"Really?"

"Of course! This vile, never. But this sly..."

She punched his shoulder.

"Hey! No punching. I won fair and square."

"You won, but I wouldn't call it fair and square." she pouted.

_Did I upset her?_

The fox rose his paws in an apologising gesture.

"Carrots, if you don't want me to groom your ears, that's okay. I can give you a massage or something else."

"I just forget how 'hustling' you can be. I like it, I really do, it's part of the reason I fell for you. It's just a bit upsetting. I feel dumb when I fall for your tricks."

He kissed her between her ears.

"Hey, look at me." He planted his emerald gaze into her mesmerising amethyst eyes. "You're not a dumb bunny. You hustled me, sweetheart. You hustled a fox. But you can't win them all."

They had parked the joke-mobile into the precinct's parking lot, put back their vests in place and walked back to Nick's flat. On the way, they had bought take out.

Every time Judy entered Nick's place, she felt a rush of joy. It was her boyfriend's place, but it was her's too. Nick put down the food on the coffee table they had bought together at the end of their vacation.

"Ahhh" groaned Nick, as he slumped in the sofa. "There's nothing like food and a couch after a hard day of work."

"It wasn't such hard day."

"Not to you, if you had written tickets as I did, maybe you'd be tired too."
She punched him playfully.  
"Har har. Hilarious."  
"I thought so too. Let's eat, I'm so famished, I could eat a whole bunny." he joked.  
"We'll see about that later." 

Nick's heart skipped a beat and he struggled to not let it show.  

...  

They were slumped on the couch. A movie was playing as Judy slowly fell asleep come to her. Suddenly, she felt something strange on her left ear. Some sort of scratching. It was really nice and she didn't bother checking what it was.  

Slowly, came a brush on her ear's fur, getting to the more sensitive parts, sending shiver in her body and waking her instantly.  

"Nick, what are you doing?"  

"Well, I'm cashing in my bet. You don't have to stay awake."  

"As if I could sleep while you're doing this."  

She straightened up, and looked at him. Something pulled her gaze.  

"You have a grooming kit?"  

"Yep, I've bought it a while ago, it was supposed to be a gift but I forgot about it until this morning. Now turn around."  

"You're sure you know how to do this?"  

"It must not be that different from tail-grooming. Worst case scenario, I'll improvise."  

Nick had never brushed rabbit ears before, but to Judy, it was the best grooming she ever had. He went from the base of the ear to the top, slowly, as to catch every stray strand of hair.  

Every brush stroke sent tingles in Judy's stomach and she closed her eyes. Soon after, she felt Nick's tail wrap around her. She risked a paw and stroked it lightly. Usually, if Nick didn't feel comfortable, he would waggle it to keep it out of her reach, but this time he let her.  

Between the brush stroke, he began kissing her neck. She let escape a giggle, as it tickled her. Then he gave her a light nibble at the same place.  

"It's usually not part of the grooming process..."  

"Improvisation. Do you want me to stop?"  

"Nope."  

He continued grooming her ears, while nibbling at her neck. Each time she felt his fangs, it sent shivers down her spine. His hand went down her ears to her shoulder, gently massaging her, ridding her of the day's stress. She let out a moan of delight.
"Could you keep doing this forever?"

"You mean this?"

She felt his fangs on her neck again. New shiver.

"This too." She got rid of her shirt. "Easier to massage without it."

"Take off your bra while you're at it" he half-joked.

The bra came off. The fox gulp. The massage resumed.

As he continued massaging her, his nibbling went from her neck to the base of her ears. She turned to face him and gave him a long kiss.

"Seems unfair to me."

"What?"

"That I'm the only one half-naked." she answered, as she helped him off his shirt. They kissed again, going from tenderness to passionate in the blink of an eye. His claws were running along her spine and explored every point of her athletic back. Their gaze locked, they both lost themselves in each other's eyes for a few second. The fox took a slight inspiration, took her up in his arms bridal style and march to the bedroom while nuzzling her belly. Judy giggled and kissed his snout several time as to keep it at bay.

He put her down on the sheet and lay down at her side, brushing her ribs with a claw. They kissed again feeling a burning sensation coming from inside, slowly taking over their bodies and minds. His claws were buried in her fur and she caressed her chest with her paws.

Between two moans she articulated "What happened to being reasonable?"

"It stayed with your bra in the living room." he whispered in her neck.

In a matter of seconds, pants and remaining underwear were discarded, their bodies pressed against one another felt like dancing flame, paws exploring, snouts nuzzling, fangs nibbling and mouths kissing.

They pulled from each other, loud breathes, love and desire in their interlocked eyes.

"Will you be my mate Judy?"

"I will Nick. I love you."

"I love you too."

They let go of every last things that held them back. Fear, doubts, uncertainties, frustrations. And primal instincts took over.

... 

Judy woke up with a fleeting head. The sensation was strange, different. This night had been wonderful, and she knew it was because how strong her feelings toward her mate were. She took a look at her phone. 4AM. They'd have to get up in two hours. She went to the bathroom, and then to the kitchen, to drink a glass of water. As she came back to the room, she saw the sheets move. Had
she woken Nick?

She lied down, crawling toward him. She felt arms wrapping her, and a slight groan coming to her ears. Nick cuddled her in his sleep. She felt a nudge in her neck, the snout of her lover nuzzling her. She repressed a giggle and relaxed herself, trying to go back to sleep.

A nibble. This was definitely a nibble. She turned her head to look at the fox. Still sleeping. She went back to her initial position, surely he had done it in his sleep.

Second nibble.

"Nick?" She whispered. "Are you awake?"

"How could I sleep, when you're rubbing your cute little butt against my-" And elbow nudge shut him up.

"Go back to sleep, dumb fox."

"I'm afraid you woke up a hungry predator. Do you know what predators do when they're awake and hungry?"

"No?" she asked in a meek voice.

"They hunt!" he said, fiddling the doe's tail with his paw.

"Meep!" In a half-second she had shot out of bed and was on the other side of the room.

Did I scare her?

"Well, fierce predator-" she said while walking toward the door "If you want to eat this cute little bunny-" she opened it, turning around, showing her back to him, "come and hunt it!" she waggled her little tail, sending spikes of desire in the predator's brain. She had stepped in the living room, and dodged his grasp as he lunged to catch her, losing his step and stumbling against the back of the sofa. For a half-second, she was worried, but he went back on all four, chasing her around the apartment. If she didn't want him to catch, she could have avoided it, being more proficient than him in close quarter combat. But she let him get her, rolling around on the floor.

He had a large predatory smile, full of sharp fangs, as he began kissing and cuddling her, barely letting her any time to breathe.

It should frighten me, but it's the complete opposite. Worst survival instincts ever.

Each one of his movement, each caress seemed like it could sense where she wanted to be touched. There was something faint in the edge the bunny's subconscious that was pulling at her mind. As Nick's paws explored her, she let herself go and suddenly time seemed to slow down. Her fox's scent filled her, his contact was burning with more passion than before, every sense, every fiber of her body was turned toward him. The feeling was uncanny. If the last evening, sex had been tender and loving, she felt like doing something else. She rolled and pushed him on his back. Their eyes locked and she could hear a faint growl growing from his throat. She answered in echo. He bared his teeth in lust, and she did the same, slowly leaning forward, extending a paw reaching for him. He emitted a slight gasp as her paw found its target and began moving. A predatory grin grew on the doe's face as Nick couldn't keep himself from moaning and panting..

...
They hadn't gone back to sleep, they even almost skipped breakfast and barely made it in time to the precinct after a shared shower. Highly necessary shower. Nick knew foxes' mating instinct were strong but he could never anticipate how heavy they would weigh on him. Every instant, he had to fight himself to keep from touching, caressing, kissing his bunny. His bunny.

More than emotional attraction, it came from the farthest, deepest part of himself. A primal storm threatening to take control from the mammal at any time.

They were rolling around in the joke-mobile when Judy noticed the strange behaviour of her mate. His mood was all over the place, his ears and tail were violently twitching and his claws were buried in his palm. She pulled over to ask him about it.

"Nick, is everything okay ?"

"Mating instincts. They're crazy strong. If what bunny feel without hormonal suppressant is any close to this, I shouldn't have made fun of it."

"How do you feel ?"

"Great and horrible at the same time. I'm happy to be with you, but I really, and mean really want to uh. Basically, I want to be closer, and mostly naked."

Each breathe of her scent made him want to pull her closer, kiss her, to not give a crap about the civilian who could be watching.

"Oh. Do you want to call in sick ?"

"Right after our vacation ? No, I'll be okay. Besides, I don't think hormonal fox is a valid reason for sick leave. Tell you what, why don't we separate for now ? I think being close to you is not the best idea right now. I feel like I might jump on you at any time."

The idea made the bunny blush. She found herself not to be completely opposed to it. They agreed they should work separately for the day and went on opposite ways.

Nick had written a couple of tickets, but whatever he did, his thought would jump back at the rabbit. That was how foxes felt toward their mate. It was the bond.

_You're alright. You're okay, you're just doing your job, away from Judy, because you're a complete hormonal mess right now. She can take care of herself, of a few ticket while you're taking care of yours. She's big enough to do her job alone._

_Alone._

_And if she gives a ticket to the wrong guy ? She's not big, if the guy gets pissed, she could get easily hurt !_

Nick was about to turn around and get back to his mate.

_No. She's alright. Nothing to worry about. She knows how to take care of herself. It's not as if she would end up face to face with one of those drugged assat going around with guns in their pockets._

Nick had stopped dead in his track. A sensation pulling at the back of his mind, but he couldn't tell if it was real or the product of his newfound paranoia. He smelled the air. Definitely something strange here. Smell of anger and frustration. Judy was in trouble.
He sprinted back to the last place he had seen her. She wasn't here, he looked around, smelled the air again and was able to make out the direction she had gone.

Sprinting again, he could hear the shouting voices but not comprehend what they were saying.

An angry hippo was leaning over the bunny, as she was writing a ticket. And clearly he was pissed.

Nick mind came from hazy to full protection mode, he went at a controlled pace and placed himself slightly behind his mate. Judy didn't react at her boyfriend approaching, but she felt his paws on her shoulder, that he had placed in a protective way.

"Hello good sir, is there a problem ?"

The hippo was slightly taken aback by Nick's arrival, but he didn't stop shouting at the now two officers.

"Yes, there is ! Your colleague is writing me a ticket, for only ten minutes over !"

"I understand that you're upset, but we're only doing our job."

"Your job ? Your job is paid my taxes. No wonder you two are on meter duty, no way a rabbit and a fox could make a proper cop !"

Nick felt the tension in Judy's shoulder. She had hardened enough to not get upset by those kinds of comment, but it didn't mean she liked it. The fox had to struggle to not show how the civilian's remark had made his blood boil.

"We worked as much as any officer to get where we are. No one made us any favor. Now sir, before you say anything you could regret to an officer of the law, I highly suggest you calm down, take your ticket and get going."

Judy felt the tension of her fox simply by his contact. Everything about him was different. His calm and nonchalant demeanor had disappeared.

The hippo's attitude seemed to change slightly, fright crept under the angry expression.

"She shouldn't have writ-

Nick cut him mid-sentence, taking the ticket from Judy's paw and pinning it on the prey mammal's belly with a claw.

"Sir, if you have any grievance, you can contest your ticket in traffic court. Now get."

Judy glanced at the fox. Everything in his attitude claimed his dominance over the prey mammal. He stared down the hippo, who let his shoulder slump, turned around and left.

"Nick, what the hell was this ?"

"This was me putting back a civilian in his place."

He looked down at her, she was thumping, an annoyed look on her face.

"No, this was not. This was you bullying a civilian into submission." her tone changed from annoyed to upset.

"He had no right to shout at you." Nick felt an uneasiness creep in the back of his mind.
"That's my problem, I can protect myself." upset to pissed off.

"But-" his shoulder had slumped, he looked like he was making himself smaller.

"No buts, officer Wilde. If a civilian comes at me, you let me handle it myself. I don't need your protection, I'm an officer as much as you are!" she almost shouted, her anger rising dangerously.

Judy being upset at Nick, he felt cold spikes of remorse embed themselves into his mind.

"That's not what I meant! He was- I was- " He felt her anger toward him like physical pain. The fox pinched his eyes and raised a paw breathing slowly. "Let's calm down. Stop shouting at me, please." He sighed. "I can't handle you shouting at me right now." died his voice.

Immediately, Judy calmed down, a worried expression replacing the angry one. Nick clearly wasn't in his usual emotional state.

"Nick are you alright?"

"Nope." He sat down on the seat of the joke-mobile. "So not fucking alright. This bonding thing is making a number on me."

"Care to elaborate?" she sat next to him, waiting expectantly.

He took a few breathe, slowly regaining his composure.

"Okay, here's the thing. I have a hard time keeping my paws off you, each time I see you, I feel drawn toward you. And if I don't see you, I can't stop thinking that you're in danger, that something is happening or about to happen to you. But that's not the only thing. I unconsciously search for your scent. I thought letting some space between us would help but that's the exact opposite."

"Isn't there something like hormones suppressants, similar to rabbit's, that you could take?"

"Nope. It's usually only an inconvenience to foxes, so not a big deal for the rest of society. I'll be okay, I just need to keep you in visual range. And plug my ears if another civilian comes to bother you."

She squeezed his shoulder compassionately.

"Okay, alright. I don't understand everything about this 'bonding thing', so let me ask this: how long will it last?"

"If you mean the bond, probably years, I hope. If you mean my current state, I'd say about a week tops, four to five days if we're lucky. Afterwards, it slowly calms down. It's the early stage of the bonding that are the most- how to say this- emotionally violent." He made a slight pause, trying to put his thoughts in order "It's actually a good thing we're on parking duty. I'll be able to practice handling those emotions on the field, but with fewer risks."

Even in this state, his mind could focus on the practical side of things. The rest of the day, followed by the rest of the week passed without major incident. Nick let his partner handle the angry civilians, occasionally sending deadly glances to cool them down when he felt they were too threatening to his mate. Which was most of the time.

Time went by in a sort of haze for both mammals. Day was composed of ticket writing and night were composed of cuddles, kisses and lots of sex. Judy was impressed on how a fox could be able to follow a near bunny rhythm.
As the week neared its end, Nick felt more and more stable, even being able to leave his mate alone for more than a few minutes without freaking out. Good thing because hearing him scratching at the door while she was on the toilet would surely have driven her crazy.

Nick went and slumped on the couch, it was finally their day off. He felt tired, not that the week had been physically hard, but his emotional state had taken a toll on him. On surface, he was the same again. He could as easily put and discard the masks, use calm and composed expressions, joke. But deep down, instincts, subconscious, they had greatly shifted, the bunny occupying a large part of it. And he loved it.

He heard Judy open the fridge and went to help her prepare their meal, probably leftovers from the day before.

"Nick what are you doing?"

"I'm helping you rummaging in the fridge."

"That is not the fridge you are 'rummaging', silly fox."

"Woopsie, my bad." he said lifting his paws from where they were a moment before.

They put the food in plate and went to sit on the couch.

"How was the day for your troubled mind?" she joked.

"It was okay. I've had the urge to maim civilian only two times so definitely an improvement."

"Good. I hope you will be able to keep the death stares at bay, it's not the image you should want to give as the first fox officer."

Although the bunny wasn't completely joking, it made Nick chuckle. Part of the change he had experienced was in how he reacted to conflict. He had some trouble with angry mammals but as long as their anger was directed at him, he had had no problem being his own charming and conflict-avoiding self. But as soon as Judy had gotten involved, his attitude immediately shifted to protective, and even downright dominant.

Before, if anyone had said to him he could stood up to mammals twice his size, he wouldn't have believed it. Now it seemed almost natural to him. He didn't know if he liked this or not yet.

Judy had noticed it too, her new partner's demeanor puzzled her. Sure, Nick was a confident mammal, or at least, it was what he showed. But the intimidating trait, it was the first time she had seen it. She trusted her partner to learn how to control it and use it in the right situation, but for now, he was still in a discovering phase.

Since apart from his first outburst, it hadn't shown to be an issue yet, she decided to not bring it up again. But she promised herself to not back down from the problem if the need arose to take care of it.

..."Nick ?"

She was nestled, half-naked, in his arms. He had arranged the sheets and pillows to make sort of a
little burrow. At first he had done it for fun, like a pillow fort, but during the week it had ended up becoming a habit. They both felt some sort of serenity buried and protected by the soft walls of their shelter.

"Yes Carrots ?"

"I've seen how you got because of the bond during the first few days since being, uhm-"

"Official mates ?" he proposed.

"Yes, official mates. I can't stop asking myself, what would've happened if I had been a vixen ?"

"Two things : first you wouldn't have been this fluffy." He nuzzled her neck, sending her in a fit of giggles. "and second, you probably would've been the first vixen officer."

"I'm talking about the bonding thing, you silly fox."

"Your silly fox. I get what you're asking. If we would've both been foxes, taking sick leave would've been necessary."

"Really ?"

"Yeah. My mom told me that when she and dad mated, they had to stay home for a whole week. Trust me if you will, but compared to them, I was really calm and composed. And I am talking mood strings as much as sex. A few neighbors even went to complain because of the noise."

Judy hid her mouth with her paw, slightly blushing and giggling. Nick had no problem sharing his family history, even the private details that most people would keep under wrap. He never bothered wrapping the fact in silk fabric, stating things as they were. As long as it didn't directly involved him. Of course, she knew he would keep for himself the things he deemed to private to the parties involved in the events he related.

"As my mom told me 'when the third one came to knock, I thought I would rip the fucker's head off and shove it up his ass' but dad was able to keep her from doing so. Dad was the most protective and kept them out of trouble, she was more aggressive."

"Where do you think you stand on that spectrum ?"

"Honestly ? I don't know. I can make up a few hypothesis though, one of them being that since you aren't a vixen, I may end up having both the protectiveness and the aggressivity in equal parts. If that's so, I rather like it. You know me" he joked "I'm all about balance."

"Would it have been less complicated if I was a vixen ?"

Judy couldn't help to feel a little guilty about what the fox was going through. Because of her, he had to face situation few individuals of his species had faced before.

"Less complicated ? Yeah, but not only because of the bond. I'm more apprehensive of the social repercussions, as well as how difficult our job could become. And I don't wish to compromise the thing you've worked the most toward to throughout your life."

Nick had a more altruistic nature than he had shown during their first encounter. He was slowly revealing it to her and he was aware of it.

To anyone else he would have kept it hidden, but he wanted her to know. She made him want to
become a better mammal, but that he could never admit.

"So again, yeah. The situation's complicated and how things will evolve are uncertain. This will turn crazier than it is now, and we'll have to fight to pull through, of that I am certain." He squeezed her inside his arms, a predatory and defying grin addressed to the world. "And as I said before, I can't wait to be part of it."

The End

Of Part One
Part 2, Chapter 1

Chapter Summary

Disclaimer: Change of tone, violence, blood. Faints of heart, beware. The content warning about graphic depiction of violence was added for this part.

Part 2: Lycus Case

Chapter 1: And the World Went Dark

Friday the 18th of January 2019

The loud and deep voice of the buffalo broke the relative silence of the bullpen.

"Assignments: Officers Blackfur, Wolford, Snarlov, Rhinowitz, Hopps, Wilde, patrol duty. Fangmeyer, Clawfith, Swat support, report to Tundratown's precinct in thirty." The agents left their seat one after the other, but as the bunny and fox were leaving, the chief halted them. "Wilde, Hopps, I want to see you in my office before heading out."

They looked at each other. Being called in the chief's office was usually a bad omen.

The buffalo was writing and sorting papers on his desk when the two friends knocked.

"Get in."

They went and hopped on the chair, facing their boss.

"So." He began "how are you two doing?"

It took them by surprise, this type of question was unusual for him.

"Good I guess?" answered the fox, unsure.

"You guess? I'm giving you a week of vacation followed by a week of calm parking duty and you 'guess' you're okay? I'm asking if your were able to sort out everything that was on your mind, every pending business." They could see the creeping of a smile under the buffalo's stern question. He glanced at both mammals but he was mainly addressing Nick.

"Oh, that. Yeah, everything's good and taken care of. I didn't know you cared." Nick's tone was taunting.

"I don't. The city doesn't deserve less than your one hundred percent." He watched them with an inquisitive eye. The creeping smile was still there. "Is there anything I need to know?"

What kind of question is this? Does he know?

"Nope, everything's good. Nothing unusual to report." Nick's mask of confidence was on.

Apart from your bunny and fox officers being together.
"Then dismissed."

They were driving around keeping an eye on the civilians when Nick spoke.

"You think the chief's onto us?"

"Maybe, I don't know. Ben tells me that there is nothing going in the precinct that he doesn't end up knowing about."

"So we can be sure he will end up in on the matter. How do you think he'll react?"

"As long as it doesn't affect our actions on the field, he won't care." she answered imitating the buffalo's tone making them both chuckle.

They had stopped to a bug-burga drive-through when a voice called on the radio.

"Precinct one to all units near Downtown East-Mall center, we have reports of a 10-71, with 211 in a jewellery in said mall. Sending exact coordinates to your GPS. Investigate and apprehend the culprits."

The voice of Wolford was heard in the radio.

"Patrol 1123, Wolford speaking. We heard the gunshots, we're closing in on the destination but may need other officers for crowd control."

Judy grabbed the radio.

"Patrol 1825, Hopps speaking. We're two minutes away, back-up on its way."

"Patrol 1258, Snarlov speaking. We're 8 minutes away, should we assist too?"

"Positive 1258" answered the cheetah "be safe and good luck."

The sirens began screaming. Nick sent his car at full speed down the street, civilian's car pulling over to let him through. His car skidded in the first corner, as he used both pedal and handbrake to control the trajectory. Judy had never been in a car driven like this before, it reminded her that there was a lot about the fox she didn't know. They pulled over next to the first police car, parked in front of the mall. Civilian's were running away from the scene which was a good thing but kept the officer from seeing what was happening. They jumped out and heard gunshots again.

"Here's patrol 1825, 1123, what's your status?"

"Here's 1123, The culprits are hauled up in the jewellery. No hostages but with the store configuration, we can't enter without being shot at. We'll need a SWAT team."

"10-4" came the voice of clawhauser in both their radio. "Sending a call for a SWAT team, 1123 stay put and try to negotiate their surrender. 1825 you stay on crowd control."

Just as the cheetah stopped talking, Nick and Judy heard a loud screeching sound, made a by a vehicle close to their own car. They glanced at it believing that patrol 1258 had arrived but it was a huge black van with tinted glass, its rear doors flying open as it stopped.

*The SWAT this quick?*
A pair of mammal climbed down. Or more accurately stumbled down, as if someone had pushed them out. A grizzly bear and a sheep. They looked like hobos, their gazes were empty and in their paws, the two officers recognized automatic weapons. The Grizzly's rifle was so big than only one bullet would be enough to rip out any of the two officers limb.

*What the hell?*

They both took their paws to their gun, the other paw in a halting gesture.

"ZPD, put down your weapon and put you hands behind your head!"

The scene slowed down. Nick saw the barrel of the mammal facing him and her partner rising, their eyes and ears twitching and paws slightly shaking. Slowly, the grizzly bared his teeth, snarling, and the sheep bleated an aggressive cry.

The van began moving again, leaving the scene. None of the two officers had had the time to take out their gun. The most logical course of action would be to take shelter behind cover, but they'd have to jump the car's hood which would have them lose some precious split seconds.

Judy's eyes were wide open, she had already started moving, lunging at Nick to take him out of the bullet's way. Her paws caught his collar, and a second later, her powerful legs had sent them flying above the car hood while a rain of bullet ripped the concrete and punched holes in the cruiser's door.

Screams of panic filled the air and the civilians began fleeing from the scene.

He could feel the flail of bullet pierce the air around them as they started to fall on the other side. He suddenly felt a sharp pain in his thigh and saw drops of blood flying in his field of vision.

They crashed on the other side of the car, behind cover. The pain in his thigh was awfully present, but he didn't care, immediately tending to his mate that had crashed on the floor next to him.

Her eyes were wide open, pointed to the sky, she seemed okay but something was off. She was shaken by a first spasm of pain.

He took a step back and the vision almost made him go insane. Were had been her left leg was now a blood dripping stump.

"No!"

Her paw reached his arm, squeezing it.

"Nick" her voice was nothing but pain and fear. Nick was frozen in place, unable to make a move. She immediately took out her belt, using it as a tourniquet to contain the flow of blood that was escaping her body.

"Nick, help me."

Her voice took him back from the haze his mind had fell into.

He tightened it as hard ad his muscles permitted. The bunny let escape a loud gasp of pain. Nick was frantic.

"I know, Judy I know. You're alright!" He couldn't put on the reassuring mask he was trying to muster. Every protective instinct he had were in full alert. "You're going to be alright I promise."
Tears had begun to drip from his eyes, as he saw her eyes slowly close. He slapped her.

"No ! Don't you dare die on me. Don't you dare ! I can't lose you !"

Bullets were still flying around the cop car, digging gash in the hull and the curb. Cement and metal part were flying around but he couldn't see them.

"I'll just n-nap for a b-bit."

"You stay awake. Stay awake ten seconds more."

Ignoring the pain in his leg, he opened the door and quickly found the first-aid kit.

*Please be there, please be there.*

He took out a large syringe and went back to his mate.

"You listen to me Judy, you better stay awake or I swear on my father's grave I'll stick this in your heart and wake you back up." He said with a broken joking smile. But he wasn't joking. He didn't know if the bunny's heart would be able to take it, but he wouldn't hesitate.

She gave him the most painful smile he had ever seen.

"I'm cold Nick."

He secured the tourniquet again, the blood had almost stopped dripping. He took out his police coat and wrapped her in it. "Stay still, and stay awake." He took out his own radio. "Here's 1825, 11-99 send back up and an ambulance. Automatic weapons. Two culprits with automatic weapons. Officer Hopps has been shot. I repeat, officer Hopps had been shot. We need an ambulance right fucking now !"

"Precinct One speaking. I'm calling for an ambulance. Hold on ten minutes more."

"We don't have ten fucking minutes !"

"Here's 1258, we're four minutes away. Hang on 1825."

Nick looked under the car. The attackers had moved and were walking around it, the sheep ahead of the bear. Nick couldn't leave Judy here but couldn't move her either. They didn't have four minutes.

*Fuck ! Fuck !

"Put down your weapons !" he screamed taking out his gun. He felt a movement, Judy had taken out her own gun and was trying to aim it in the direction of the two coming mammals with shaking arms.

"G-go behind cover."

His protective instinct washed his mind. And there was something else. Something dangerous. Something he instantly hated.

He took the weapon from her paws. "I have a plan." he said, winking at her.

*Okay. It's like training. Shoot the center of mass.*
"Here's 1258. Two minutes."

"We don't have two minutes." Nick's voice was calm, firm, and devoid of any emotion.

The plan was slowly taking form in his mind. It was more a gamble than a plan, but that was all he had. He checked Judy a last time, she was looking at him, and he could see her struggling to stay conscious. He took a gun in each paw, putting his left perpendicularly under his right to ensure stability. He would use each weapon after the other, saving the time of one reloading process.

The fox moved away from Judy, trying to minimize the risk of her getting shot in the firefight that was about to ensue. He planted one of his knees in the ground, just as the sheep emerged from behind the police cruiser.

The officer shot two time, right in the center of the sheep's chest, sending him stumble backward and dropping his gun. One down, one to go.

His mind was cold, calculating, in a place he hated it to be.

He saw the grizzly emerge in turn, beginning to aim at him. The two first bullets hit the bear right in the chest, but it was only six millimeter ammo, only a flesh wound to the huge mammal. Slightly taken aback by the pain, he had to take time to aim a second time, leaving time for Nick to raise his own weapon and emptying the remaining 6 bullets in direction of the bear's face.

Just as the bullet hit him, the attacker began firing, the pain and recoil throwing off his aim, buying Nick enough time to switch gun and fire again. The vulpine felt a sharp pain in his ribs but barely flinched, emptying the second gun again in the bear's face. He saw fur ripping, teeth flying and heard the nauseating sound of flesh bursted apart by metal, between the screams of the gunshots.

The bear let escape the rifle, screaming while taking his face in his paws, Nick could see one of his bullet had caught him in the eye, turning it into a pool of blood. The ursine staggered for a few second before slumping to the ground with a loud thump.

The fox let go of the two guns and tried to run to his bunny, but the pain in his ribs and leg was too intense and he fell.

Fuck! Think, think Nick!

He had to get to her. He couldn't leave her hurt and alone. She was looking at him, despair in her eyes, shivering in cold and fear. He took out a syringe from a clip of his tranq-gun, and used it to drip some of the tranquilizer on his wounds. There was only a gash on his thigh, luckily the bullet had only grazed him. The ribs had suffered more, at least two were broken but the bullet had bounced off on them, partly thanks to the bulletproof vest. As he sprayed the liquid, he began crawling toward Judy, leaving traces of blood behind him.

The pain slowly receded, and he was able to reach her, putting her head in his lap.

"Everything's alright, we're alright. The fox caught the bad guys."

He hoped she had seen nothing of it, but she had stayed awake throughout the bullet exchange.

"You sure d-did." she gave him a small smile.

He heard the screeching of tires near the bullet-ridden cruiser.

Another van?
The guns he had let escape when going back to his mate were out of his reach, he took out his tranq-gun and aimed in the direction from where the footsteps were coming.

"Civilian down" called a voice. "Guns, those were the culprits."

Nick put down the tranq-gun. He had recognized Snarlov's voice. The siren's he wasn't hearing suddenly came to the foreground.

"Guys we're here! Judy? Back-up's here, everything's alright."

"It's not alright. B-bad liar. You always call me J-Judy when it's not alright." Her voice was feeble, only a whisper.

The bear officer kneeled near Nick.

"Oh my god, Judy." He stared at her for few second. Blood was still dripping from her leg, but it was only a few drop. The vulpine had done a great job with the tourniquet. The ursine's eyes went back to the fox. "Nick, we must tend to your wounds."

"Not moving from here." The voice was firm, almost aggressive.

Snarlov stood back up and went to the first aid kit that Nick had spilled while looking for the adrenaline syringe. In the meantime, Rhinowitz was checking the attacker, taking away their weapon.

"Dead sheep. But the bear is still alive. How many bullet did you put in him Nick?"

"I'd say at least fifteen. He wouldn't fall."

The realisation of what he had done slowly dawned on him. He had used lethal force against other mammals, and he didn't even hesitate. It was the strength of the bond. Would Judy not have been in danger, he was sure he wouldn't have been able to press the trigger. And he couldn't decide if it was a good thing or not.

The white bear went back to the fox with antiseptic and bandage.

"You may want to bite into something, and let go of her."

"Go ahead, I won't move."

The bear shrugged and ripped Nick's pant leg with a swiss-army-knife, putting antiseptic and tight bandage around it. As he had promised the fox didn't flinch.

"Okay, I'm impressed."

Nick took off his torn bullet-proof jacket and shirt. The bullet had been caught inside the jacket. Once again it was only a gash. A few centimeter to the right and Nick's thoracic cage would've bursted open. He let the bear do his task. No flinch either.

"Nick, what the fuck?"

"I put tranquilizer on my wound to dampen the pain and be able to move."

Snarlov eyes shot open "You're completely crazy." he looked down at Judy, but he really didn't want to see her stump. "I don't think I should touch this." At same moment, Rhinowitz arrived, his coat in a bundle, dripping of blood.
"What's this Rhinowitz ?" asked Nick.

"It's Judy's-" he said pointing at the stump. Nick winced, he didn't want to think about it.

They heard ambulance sirens coming from down the street. The bunny was still conscious but she wasn't speaking. The fox felt her paw becoming gradually limp on his arm.

"Judy ?"

"I'm cold- I'm."

"Don't talk, the ambulance is here, keep your strengths."

"I mus- In cas- " she struggled to find his breathe, Nick fought back the rush of panic. "I l-love you." He squeezed her paw in a reassuring manner.

"I love you too." He saw her eyelids slowly close. "Judy ? Don't do this to me."

Her paw went limp in his.

"P-please, don't do this- No-!"

He shook her gently but she didn't react.

"No ! Wake up, please Judy. JUDY !"

He didn't feel the tears dripping from his eyes, nor the scream of despair that came out of his throat. Paws were restraining him as he fought back, while the paramedics put his mate on a stretcher. He tried to claw his way to the bunny, snarling, biting, but he wasn't strong enough, his wounds holding him back.

He felt a slight sting in his neck.

And the world went dark.
Part 2, Chapter 2

Part 2: Lycus Case

Chapter 2: He Could Hear Only Silence

? of January 2019

The red furred fox got up from his bed. He wasn't hungry but he had to ingurgitate something at least. The coffee tasted bland.

Everything tasted bland.

The world was bathed in grey bland light.

He put on his clothes, black trousers, white shirt, black vest, green tie with floral hawaiian pattern. The one she had offered him at pawsmas.

With a sigh, he made his way down, the war was waiting for him in front of his building. A large limousine with tinted windows. He got in and saluted Fru Fru, Mr Big and Koslov. The car was driven by Manchas.

The deafening silence couldn't be broken, he could see each of the wanted to give him word of comfort but even if they did, nothing could have come through.

The car had finally stopped at its destination and all the mammals got out, the two shrews in Koslov's paws.

They were the first here, but more and more car parked themselves in the parking lot. Clawhauser, Wolford and MacHorn arrived at the same time, coming out from the same car. They greeted each others silently. Blackfur was here, she wasn't alone, a kid was with her, but he didn't recognise her. Next, Fangmeyer, Delgato, Snarlov and Rhinowitz came and the mammals started mingling but the voice couldn't reach the fox's ears.

He was lost in a thick haze. A myst-like labyrinth. He wanted to cry and scream but his whole body felt numb.

The whole precinct was here now, but not only. Other officers he didn't know, thousands of mammals from everywhere in the city. Each and every one she had touched by her presence.

The last ones to arrive were her family in several buses.

They got down, all wearing black.

The hearse finally appeared, rolling slowly down the street, making a turn and going through the gates, rolling up the slight slope of the gravel path.

The tires on the pebbles wear the only noise he could hear as him, like every other mammal present, started to follow behind it.

The short walk seemed like hours, his legs were so heavy, taking him to a place he didn't want to be. Where he'd have to accept the unacceptable. A hoof appeared on his shoulder and lifted his gaze. The chief's frown wasn't the usual one, this one was full of a hidden sadness. The buffalo
gave him a little push and Nick continued walking.

The coffin was resting on planks above the hole. The mammals that had been the most close to her were on the first row, but the whole cemetery was full of mammals. Still, the silence was deafening, no one talked, not even a squeak.

Faces of sadness, tears, they made a large circle around this little box. The rain started to pour, like in every movie, in every book, in every story. There couldn't be any burial without the rain.

But still, he could hear only silence.

Suddenly the silence was pierced. First he thought it was her voice. He almost smiled, he almost had his hope back.

Bonnie Hopps was in the center of the circle formed by the mammals, next to her daughter coffin.

"Thank you. Thank you all for coming."

"I am truly touched, that you all came. I'm sure she would be glad to see us all together."

"Those past few days, many mammals have showed us their supports. Mammals we didn't even know, mammals she didn't even know. They were with us, they cried with us. And I think it's the most beautiful testimony of how dedicated she was to this city."

"So I think, at least in this, the memories of those days won't be all bad."

She made a pause, and Stu came next to her giving her a hug of support. But obviously she couldn't keep going. So he took her place and continued.

"I would like to talk to you about our daughter. The day she was born, we knew she would be different, she would have other aspiration. She always did the unexpected, always achieved more than what we thought she could. She was a dreamer, and she dreamt big. But she worked so hard to make those dreams come true."

"You know what we told her? That it was great to have dreams, as long as you don't believe in the too much. And she did what she always did. She didn't listen to us and made her dreams come true anyway."

"And it made us- It still makes us so proud of her."

Tears had filled his voice, and he couldn't keep going. He and her wife were in tears, like every other mammal in the crowd.

Nick looked around. His mother and Finnick were there too, trying to put up a front to support him, but their faces too were covered in tears.

Through the thick of his hazy emotions, he made his way to his mate's parents.

"Judy came into our lives and changed them forever. She was born a fighter, and I like to think she fought to the end. She was the most selfless mammal I have ever met. She could see the good in every mammal, even though she could sometimes be a bit quick to judge."

He made a pause looking around him. Maybe it was the fatigue, maybe it was the tears that finally had filled his eyes, but he couldn't distinguish the faces of the mammals around him anymore.

"Against all odds, she was the one to close the missing mammal case, and then, when she
discovered how she had hurt the city, and how she had been wrong, she came back and closed the nighthowler case. She could have stayed away, she could have given up but she didn't."

"Even her last act was heroic. I wouldn't be here talking to you if not for her. She saved my life."

"She saved it twice actually, the first time when she helped me turn it around, and the second but pulling me out of the line of fire of those two mammals."

Words were starting to get stuck in his throat. He fought back the sobbing. He had to finish the speech.

"She tried. She tried so hard and in the end I think she succeeded."

"She has made the world a better place."

"And now, it's our duty to continue her work."

As he stopped talking, the coffin was lowered into the hole. The mammals started a slow procession, controlled by the ZPD officers. Slowly, each mammal leaned to take a pawful of dirt and dropped it on the coffin, most of them adding flowers to a growing pile.

Each mammal came after the other. It spanned during what seemed to be hours. Nick thought he was looking at the whole city, dropping their pawful of dirt.

Maybe the whole city had come, maybe that was what she deserved. After all she had worked to make their life better.

It was little ray of hope. If those mammals truly had been touched by his bunny, there was chance to unite them all after all.

"She wasn't cut out for this after all"

Came a first whisper.

Did it come from the crowd ? Nick couldn't tell, but he had heard it.

"He should have saved her."

Who did, who had said that ?

How did they dare ?

"A bunny cop ? How could they think it was a good Idea ?"

The crowd was still circling around him and the tomb.

He turned around, looking at everyone.

"A proper cop would have saved her."

How could they ? He had lost her. He had lost everything.

"He should have died to save her. Not the other way around."

He knew that ! He should have died in her stead !

"Only a sly fox and a dumb bunny after all."
The world began spinning and he lost his footing.

He couldn't take it. He couldn't take the looks, he couldn't take the remarks, he couldn't take the guilt.

Why did it have to happen.

Why did she have to die?

If only he could wake up from this nightmare.
Part 2, Chapter 3

Part 2: Lycus Case

Chapter 3: Dismay on Their Faces

Friday the 18th of January 2019

Hazy voices in a cold void.

"-'s alright, it was only- … -wounds are light- … -did the dressing ?"

The rocking sound of an engine.


Beeping of machines.

"… -must sanitize the wound- … -good job dressing those woun-... -wouldn't let got of the bunny ?"

Moving lights.

"Bunny- … -a lot of blood, she c-.."

The fox's torso shot straight up.

"JUDY !" Spikes of pain rushed in his side. "owh, fuck !" he moved his hand to put them on his wound, but his paws were stuck. He heard a tingling. Cuffs. The leg wound had been sewn up, but not the one on his side. This one had only been bandaged.

It was a nightmare, it was all a nightmare.

He was in an ambulance, next to him was a paramedic putting bandage on Snarlov's arms.

How much of it ? Judy. Where is she ? How is she ?

"What the hell ?" Came the bear's voice. "How can you be awake ?"

"Don't know, Don't care. How's Judy ? How long was I out ?" The fox began fiddling at the cuffs.

"Like fifteen minutes, you shouldn't be able to wake this soon."

The paramedic, a female porcupine, spoke.

"Adrenalin, it happens, but usually with bigger mammals." She approached "How are you feeling ?"


"The blood loss made her lose consciousness, but whoever put on the tourniquet saved her life. She's in the other ambulance five minutes ahead of us. Don't move, I must examine you."

Nick let go of a sigh of relief. While the paramedic shot a torch in each of his eyes and took a look at his wounds, the fox asked.
"Any way to contact the other ambulance?"

"A radio but don't worry, they're taking good care of your partner."

They heard tingling, Nick raising his paws from his side and scratched his wrists.

"Can I have this radio please?"

The porcupine and the bear looked at the fox, dismay on their faces.

"How did you-" began the ursine.

"Can I have the radio please?" He repeated. His tone was polite, mask of warmth and confidence firmly in place.

"I'm not sure it's a good ide-"

"Radio. Now. Please."

He wasn't really asking. The presence of the fox was entirely different from a second ago. Even if Nick was far smaller than him, Snarlov felt threatened. He got up, took the ambulance radio and gave it to the vulpine.

"Thanks. Which frequency?" he asked the paramedic who turned the dial for him.

"Hi, it's officer Nick from the ambulance behind yours. I want to know about the state of an officer Hopps."

"Uhm, she's mostly stable, but she has lost a lot of blood" came an hesitant voice "We just took her out from the ambulance and to the hospital."

"Will she pull through?"

The answer took long to come. Nick felt a mix of whine and growl come out of his throat.

"It's too soon to know."

He tried to calm down. His instincts were kicking so hard he wondered if resisting to the nighthowler would put him in the same state.

"And the leg?"

"We don't know if we'll be able to reattach it ye-"

Nick threw the radio across the vehicle, it exploded against a wall.

"FUCK!" The mask had shattered instantly. Both other mammals were looking at him with wide eyes, not saying a thing. "Sorry guys. I just- I fucked up." He took his head in his paws.

The bear went and sat at his side, putting a supporting paw on his shoulder.

"No you didn't. Your partner is alive, you stopped the culprits. And about my arm... I won't sue you. You thought your friend died and you lost it, perfectly understandable even if a bit strange."

"I wounded you? Sorry man."

"Hey, it was just a little scratch. I have nothing to complain about compared to you."
There was a slight pause, before something came to Nick's mind.

"Wolford and Blackfur! Are they okay?"

"Yeah don't worry. They gave report on radio five minutes ago. Blackfur took a flail of bullets in the bullet-proof vest, didn't even make her move according to Wolford. They tranq'ed the culprits before the SWAT team arrived. Seems they were delayed." The bear looked away before asking. "So you and Judy..?"

"Yeah. Me and Judy."

There was nothing more to say.

The rest of the trip was done in complete silence.

... 

The passengers felt the ambulance stop, Nick hopped from the stretcher and landed with a grunt.

"Sir, don't you want to use the stretcher?"

The fox limped out of the vehicle, every step sending sparks of pain in his wounds.

"Nope. I want to walk."

The polar bear walked behind him, a bit on the side, ready to catch him if he stumbled. He limped to the hospital door, a trip that would've been shorter on the stretcher. As he entered the emergency department, bare chest and pants ripped, fur caked with blood, people stared at him. Their astonished looks were like candy to him. A nurse came to him.

"Sir are you alright?"

"Sure, however I'd like you to check my pal." he said, pointing a thumb to Snarlov "He has a nasty scratch on the arm, and I'm really worried it could be serious. In the meantime, could you please point me to where officer Hopps has been taken?" He had put on the shit-eating grin. Perfect mask, not a crack.

The goat nurse detailed him from head to toe.

"Sir, you're bleeding." The goat said pointing at his side, unimpressed. He turned around and snapped his finger "I need a stretcher here!"

"You're overreacting, a few gun wounds and cracked ribs never killed anyone." he said.

The bear looked at his partner, mouth slightly open, a smile creeping on the corner of his eyes. Is he seriously joking right now?

"However, if you could point in me in the direction to an officer Hopps, that would be absolutely fantastic."

"Sir, I must insist you follow me, please sit here."

Nick felt dizziness come to his head and almost collapsed. He had lost quite a bit of blood, and with the pain, it was starting to be a bit too much for him.
"Alright." Nick hopped on the stretcher and the nurse began pushing it.

*I'll be of no use if I pass out right now.*

"You said you had cracked ribs ?"

"I think I do."

The nurse approached a counter, and looked over it at a few papers.

"Okay, the radiology service has nothing scheduled right now. Your friend can come if you need supports."

"Nope, my friend will go fetch every bit of information he can on officer Judy Hopps and come back to tell me everything. Can you do that for me Snarlov ?"

"Nick, you can't begin to imagine the pile of paperwork I have waiting for me at the precinct after this incident."

"Snarlov, please." This time, the fox wasn't as imperative as he had been in the ambulance. Even with the mask on, there was genuine worry on his eyes.

"Alright Nick."

The bear officer went back to the emergency room.

...  

Nick had his radioscopy made and was then taken to an hospital room where he had been said to wait. His bandages had been changed and tightened. The fox had taken off his blood covered clothes and put on the hospital gown. He wanted to go and look for his mate, but if Snarlov came here, he didn't want to risk being elsewhere. He didn't have his phone on him, having forgotten it in the bullet ridden cruiser and so he couldn't get any news from the outside. He had been pacing and limping back and forth for ten minutes when someone knocked at the door and entered. It was a lioness physician, around forty, wearing a pair of glasses and an annoyed look, behind her was an otter nurse, which was holding a little bag.

"Hello" she said, not lifting an eye from her papers. "My name's doctor Whiskstein, I have taken a look at your x-rays"

"Hello, the name's Nick Wilde an-" She cut him short.

"You're perfectly fine considering the gun wound. Cracked ribs but everything is still in place and will stay that way if you take it easy for the next month. We're keeping you in observation for two days."

"Okay, and how's off-"

"Now I have more pressing matters to attend to, so if you'll excuse me. Nurse Sheila will sew and bandage your wound."

She turned around and began leaving, opening the door, ending up facing a large cape buffalo who himself was about to knock.

"Hello sir, could you please move aside ?"
The buffalo let her go and then entered the room, he was carrying a folded wheelchair.

The nurse approached the fox.

"Please take off your gown."

Nick didn't like the idea of being in his underwear in front of the chief, but the buffalo went at the window, giving them some privacy.

The nurse opened the bag, took out a surgical needle, an electric trimmer and some thread. "Lie on your side. Do you want some anesthetic?"

"No, go ahead, the sooner you'll be done the better."

The nurse took away Nick's bandage shaved around the wound, disinfected it and began sewing it back up. Nick flinched at the first needle prick, but not at the ones that followed.

While the nurse was working, Nick asked.

"Chief Bogo? What are you doing here."

"Snarlov called me, I'm taking it from here. Wilde, are you alright?"

"Fine, our good nurse is doing a fine job here, but no action for the next month."

The nurse finished her sewing, cutting the thread. "Alright, you're good to go, try not to twist your upper body too much if you want the stitching to hold." She put back her equipment in the bag and left the room.

The buffalo unfolded the wheelchair. He noticed the twitch in the fox's tail and the effort he put on staying composed, but the distress he was in was obvious.

"Sit, we're going for a stroll."

"Where?"

"To Judy. And I have a few matters to discuss with you." the chief tone was calm, but Nick could feel he was stressed.

The fox sat and the buffalo began pushing the chair. Nick could literally feel himself getting closer to his bunny. Even if his stress was still through the roof, he slowly began to feel calmer.

"What happened Wilde. Leave out the details, I want the bulk of it."

Nick took a deep breathe, he didn't want to recall those events yet, maybe not ever, but it had to be done.

"Right after we got to the mall, this black van stopped right in front of me and officer Hopps. Those two mammals came out, armed with rifles and didn't comply when we ordered them to stand down. Instead, they began to empty their guns at us. Carrots pulled us to safety but one of the bear's bullet caught her in the leg and- and torn it." He hit the arm of the chair, thinking about it felt physically painful to him. "I made a tourniquet to stop her from bleeding out, and then I emptied both my and her gun at them. I think the sheep's dead but the bear survived." He caught his breathe. "Then Snarlov and Rhinowitz came, Snarlov patched me up and just before the ambulance arrived, Judy lost consciousness." He sighed, slumping his shoulders. "I snapped. I couldn't let her go, I thought she was dead. After that I think Snarlov tranq'ed me and I woke up in an ambulance."
The chief kept pushing him in the hallway, staying silent, reflecting on what the fox had just said.

"You're together aren't you ?"

"Yes. Snarlov told you ?"

"Yes, but I had to be sure. It explains why she changed her emergency contact to you. You're also in charge of the decisions in case of her being unable to make them."

"What ?" reacted the fox.

"What indeed. And here are your phone and wallet."

The buffalo stopped and turned the chair so Nick would face him. He kneeled to put his face on the same level.

"Now important question : do you think you being together affected the outcome of the altercation ?"

The question was loaded. It could mean the end of his and her carrier but he refused to lie.

"Yes. I'm fairly certain that we being mates is what kept the both of us from getting killed."

They stared in each other's eyes for a bit, the chief weighing the declaration. He broke eye contact and sighed.

"I can't say I like it. I'd prefer you two only being friend. But I don't see it as a liability." The cape buffalo went back up and began pushing the chair again. "Yet. Don't make me be wrong, Wilde."

The rest of the trip was spent in silence. Nick wanted to ask the chief if he knew how Judy was, if she would pull through, but he would discover it soon enough and the truth scared him as much as the uncertainty. Finally they stopped in front of a door. It was a waiting room near the surgery block. A bear nurse and a surgeon raccoon were chatting with one another. They stopped as soon as the buffalo and the fox arrived, the nurse left and the surgeon turned toward them.

"Hello, my name's Doctor Procyon, are you the man called Nicholas Piberius Wilde ? I'll need to see ID for legal purpose." He said, trudging in his paper, barely lifting his gaze. Nick wondered if it was a doctor's habit to not look people in the eyes.

"Yes it is I," he said, taking out his ID. "Is she okay ?"

"She lost a lot of blood, we're transfusing some back as we speak. We can't say there won't be any cerebral repercussions yet. If her brain lacked too much oxygen, it could prove to alter it."

"How ?"

"It could range from memory loss to catatonic state."

Nick felt his paws shivering. Could she forget him ? Could she forget what they had ? Worse, could she end up being trapped in her own body, never again being able to move, passively waiting for her life to end ? He pushed back those questions as far he could. He needed to be strong, it was no time fall into despair.

"Understood." He heard himself say. "What do you need me for ?"

"If we're to reattach her leg, we need to do it now. You see, the bullet completely destroyed the
patella, the kneecap if you will, as well as parts of the fibula and tibia, luckily, the femur is completely intact. We're currently 3D printing another patella and the parts missing from her bones. That's the easy step. The hard one is reassembling it all, hoping that muscles and ligament that we will transplant will hold it all together. This will be a long and hard process, with, I'd say, 30% chances of success. With risk of rejection, infections, and all sort of other complications, if the surgery is a success. If we're to do it, we need you to sign this paper."

"Any alternative?"

"The easiest, less risky and less costly one would be to not reattach the leg. She'll have a stump and a prosthetic and would be able to walk again."

The fox looked at the paper, the estimated cost was around 80000 dollars, excluding reeducation. Her shitty cop insurance would only cover around 15000.

"Chief, I suppose we can't have cops with a prosthetic leg?"

"No. It's not something I can allow. It would be a liability to her colleagues and to the civilian. I'm sor-"

"You don't need to apologize. That's fair."

The fox signed the paper gave it back to the raccoon.

"Alright. Let's do this. How long you think the surgery will take?"

"With the printing, I'd say around four hours."

*Don't worry carrots, you'll pull through, I won't let you give up on your dream.*

The raccoon put a paw on Nick’s shoulder. "Even if we can't reattach her leg, she'll be okay. Of that, I'm sure." It was a meager consolation.

The doctor left, and the chief pushed Nick back to his room. The worst part to Nick, was that he wouldn't be able to see his bunny before the surgery. Even if the doctor was confident she'd be okay, he couldn't really bring himself to believe it. The idea of her mate alone, without him by her side to reassure her was painful. It teared at his heart like an icy blade.

As they entered his room, he took out his phone. He had a call to make and with a bit of luck, it would pull him out of his dark thoughts.

"Chief, I have a phone call to make, but you can stay here if you want."

He quickly dialed. The phone rang a few time before someone picked up.

"Hey kid! How's it hanging?" Came Finnick's voice.

"Everything's fine." He lied. "can I talk to my mother please?"

"Shure!" He heard a few noises before hearing his mother's voice.

"Hey son! How's it hanging?" She asked, imitating the fennec's voice.

"Great! Say, would you happen to have kept a bit of the money I sent you over the years?"

"Sure, I never used my part. I have it all in a shoebox."
Nick sighed in relief.

"I need, to borrow around 80000 dollars. Maybe a hundred. I'll pay you back whenever I can."

"Nick, it's your money." Said his mother with a half-annoyed tone. "You shouldn't have sent it to me to begin with. You can have all of it. Why do you need it by the way?"

There was a slight pause.

"Nick ? Are you still here ?"

"Okay, listen and don't panic. Shit happened at work. I got shot but I'm fine. Judy got shot and she isn't. I need the cash for her surgery. She's alive and will pull through, don't worry."

"Nick, where are you ?" Her voice immediately filled with distress.

"Downtown central hospital but you don't need to com-"

"Like hell I do ! I'm coming right now. Fin, dress up. Nick, don't move." She hanged up.

Nick stared blankly at his phone for a few seconds.

"So that's taken care of." he smiled, trying to put on a brave front.

He looked up and saw the buffalo tapping on his smartphone screen with a worried face.

"Crap."

"Everything alright sir ?"

"Yes. I have a call to make too. Don't move."

The cape buffalo got out and Nick was left alone with his thoughts. It felt like a swirl of darkness gnawing at his heart. He pushed them back, relentlessly, during what felt like an eternity. Even though he would never admit it, he hoped the chief would come back soon.
Part 2 : Lycus Case

Chapter 4 : Normal Response to Violent Emotions

Friday the 18th of January 2019

The chief came back twenty minutes later, got behind the fox, and began pushing the chair out of the room.

"Where are we going ?"

"Security ward."

"The what ? Why ?" the security ward was used to keep criminals, cops and witnesses when they had to be protected. Only a selected few knew of its exact location, even of its existence, in this hospital and Nick wasn't one of them.

"Reasons. Trust me. I'll have an officer bring you a change of clothes and a tooth brush."

"Great, I'm a prisoner." he half-joked.

"No. It's for your protection."

They entered an elevator. The chief pushed a button written 'admin', wiped a magnetic card on the reader pushed the fourth button and dialed a password on a ten-numbers keypad.

"All this is very secretive." the fox joked.

The fox felt the elevator move down, probably to make lose the passenger the sense of where they stood in relation to the ground. The doors opened again and they entered in a hallway like any other, except for the security personnel they came across.

"We're underground aren't we ?"

"Yes."

Nick took out his phone. No reception.

"Great."

"There are phones in the rooms. Do you need to call someone ?"

"Yes, Judy's parents, do you happen to have their number on you ?"

"No, but I'll ask Clawhauser when we get at your new room. You'll share it with officer Hopps for a few days."

"And then ?"

"Let me get you to your room, I'll explain what I can, alright ?"

The hallways were awfully empty, the buffalo's steps grimly resonating in their ears. He ended up
opening a door and entered with the fox, closing the door behind him. He took out his own phone.

"You have reception ?"

"Wifi, this floor has its own, I'll give you the password. But first things first."

The cape buffalo took an inspiration. Whatever he was about to say, Nick knew he wouldn't like it.

"Bellwether has disappeared."

_Bingo._

"You mean, she escaped."

"No, she was most likely kidnapped." He showed his phone to the fox. There was the picture of a cell with inscriptions in blood.

"Justice for Predators" read Nick. "Are they serious ? Is it all blood ?"

"Yes, at first we thought it was red paint, but clearly it was blood. And if it's all hers, there is little chance she's still alive."

Nick didn't really feel sorry about it.

"When and how did it happen ?"

"Same time as your attack. There were at least eight other cases of drugged mammal shooting in the street at the same time. And to me, it all looks like a distraction. No way to have any free officer to take care of a break out. We didn't recover the security feeds yet but we hope it will shed light on the case. If I tell you now, it's because I don't want you to learn it any other way. It's also the reason I want you in this ward. I don't know who did this but you're linked to it, since you played a part in her downfall."

Nick looked at the floor. Too much was happening. His bunny was wounded, the pred's worse enemy had been taken, probably killed, and he was stuck in the security ward.

"Is there anything I can do to help sir ?"

"Yes, I'll have Snarlov bring you your laptop and you'll write a report on what happened today."

The chief took his phone and wrote something, a few second later they heard the ding of a notification. The chief showed the screen to Nick.

"Here's Judy's parents number. You can use the phone in the corner to call them. I'll have Snarlov and MacHorn escort them here. And your mother also when she'll show up here. I cannot give you more details as of now, but you'll now as soon as I get anything new. And not a word of all this to anyone. Not about Bellwether, not about any elements of the drugged shooter case. Are we clear ?"

Nick added the number to his directory.

"Crystal clear."

The chief took a few step toward the door and stopped, looking at the fox behind his shoulder.

"Thanks for saving officer Hopps' life Nicholas. You're a better mammal and officer than I gave you credit for."
And with this sentence he left the room.

"Fuck chief," answered Nick to the door "don't go dropping those bombs on me."

... 

He hadn't taken the time to look at the room before the chief had left. There was a bed and room for another. There was also a pair of wheeled tables. Nick went and put the papers on it, he would read and filled them later. There was another wheelchair and a door. In a corner, an old phone was hanging at the wall. Nick stood up and slowly limped to the door, opening it up. Behind it was a small bathroom.

"Luxurious."

He went back to the mural phone. Dialing Judy's parents number.

This is going to suck so much.

The phone rang several time before someone picked it up.

"Hopps household, Bonnie speaking." came a cheerful voice, but the fox could hear the anxiety underneath.

"Hey ! It's me Nick !" he said, trying to sound as cheerful and comforting as possible.

There was a slight pause.

"Nick ? How are you doing ? We know about the firefight in the city. Is anyone hurt ? We tried to call Judy several time but she didn't answer."

So they did know about the firefight but not yet about Judy being hurt.

"I'm fine, thanks. Judy is too, don't worry." He lied "Could you please call Stu, bring a pair of chair to sit on and make everyone else leave the room please ?"

"Is everything alright ?"

"Do that for me, Bonnie, please ? I'll explain everything." He had used his most suave and warm voice. The phone wasn't the best place to use it but he needed every edge he could find. He heard the bunny call her husband and pushing out every other bunny. There was a scraping sound, probably Bonnie moving the seats. He heard a voice coming from afar.

"Is it the fox ? Does he know why our daughter won't answer her phone ?"

"Stu !"

"Alright alright."

Nick couldn't keep himself from smiling. Judy's father was so caricatural.

"We're both here Nick."

"Okay. Nice. Great. First of all, you must know that Judy's okay, perfectly fine, not in any danger."

"Did something happen to my daughter ? If you did something to her, fox-"
Nick heard a smacking noise.

"Sorry honey." came the apologetic voice of the male bunny.

"So, as I was saying, Judy's okay. Now, you have to know, we were in a bit of a firefight and we're now at the hospital. Judy's currently in surgery."

There were gasps coming from the phone.

"She was shot in the leg. She lost blood but not even close to being fatal." he lied again. Still no answers. "I'm sure it would be good for her if you came and visited. What do you say ?"

Bonnie's voice came, trying to hide the anxiety that had risen again.

"Sure, we'll come. We'll take the first train. At which hospital is she staying ?"

"Downtown Central." He gave them the precinct's phone number "Give them your arrival time at Zootopia's train station. Officers will come to escort you, alright ?"

"Okay, that's all written down. Thanks for calling Nick."

"Sorry it had to be in those circumstances."

They hung up and Nick suddenly felt terribly lonely in the empty room and needed to do something, anything in order to occupy his mind, otherwise he would think of Judy. Alone, on the cold operation table. Without anyone to comfort her, on the frontier between life and death. A wave of despair slowly rose and washed over his mind.

A loud knock was heard at the door and it burst open, showing an unnerved and distressed vixen. Behind her were Snarlov, with a half annoyed half amused smile on his face, and Finnick carrying a hug sport's bag who looked at Vivienne with a worried expression.

"Hey mom ! How's it hanging ?" Nick asked, imitating the fennec's voice, immediately putting on a mask of calm and confidence.

Three steps and she slapped him.

Okay so slapping is her normal response to violent emotions.

"Mom, do you think one day you'll be able to greet me without hitting me ?"

She wrapped in her arms. "The city is in shambles, there are cops everywhere ! For fuck's sake Nick what is happening ?"

"Calm down mom. Ow ow ow, don't squeeze me, I'm wounded." She immediately let him go "You need to sit, you're even more stressed out than me."

If it could be possible.

He limped and made her sit on his bed.

Snarlov entered and put Nick's laptop and charger on a rolling table. "I'll be outside if you need me, Judy's parents should arrive in about 6 hours." he said with a smile. He closed the door behind him. And awkward silence fell onto the room's occupants.
"How are ya holdin' up?" asked Finnick.

Nick looked at his wounds. "Honestly? I think I was pretty lucky. I took two bullets and both were only grazes. Cracked ribs though, so no action for me in the next month."

"I ain't talking 'bout that."

Nick sighed. He had perfectly understood what his friend meant but didn't want to talk about it.

"The doctor thinks she'll pull through. I couldn't see her before the surgery. I'm not great, but she had it worse than me. I'll be okay."

His ears had slumped and it was obvious it wasn't a topic he wished to talk about right now. Finnick perfectly understood it.

"And what 'bout the elevator ride and code to enter dis floor? It ain't no standard hospital procedure. They even made us sign some form 'bout not telling no-one what or who we'd see here." he said, not so subtly switching topic.

"We're in the security ward, don't ask me why they put me here, I don't know."

"Nick, what is happening around the city?" Vivienne cut into the conversation with a bewildered tone.

"There were shoot-outs all around the city for some reason. Me and Judy got caught into one. She took a bullet in the leg and now she's in surgery."

"How bad is it?"

The discussion had come right back to where he didn't want it to go. It was inevitable so he steeled himself in order to answer.

"The bullet caught her kneecap, ripped the leg clean off. They're trying to reattach it as we speak."

His mother covered her mouth with her paws, Finnick expression fell.

"Oh my god." she whispered.

"Didja catch the bastards?" asked the fennec. He had his serious face on. The one that said that otherwise he would find them himself.

"They're not going anywhere. I-" he had killed another mammal. His first realisation had been dampened by the adrenalin. Not this time. He rushed to the toilet. Finnick and Vivienne heard gagging and puking noise. The vixen went into the bathroom and helped him clean up, supporting him as he limped back. He suddenly seemed much more tired. He sat on the wheelchair again.

"I shot them. Killed one of them." he put his face in his hands. "Protect and serve, my ass."

"They attacked you! You only defended yourself. Don't blame yourself."

"But they wer-" He stopped mid-sentence. He remembered what chief Bogo had said.

I can't talk about the drug.

"Yeah, they did attack us. Doesn't mean I feel any better..." he stood up and limped to his mother. "I think I need a hug." He had never been one to seek for physical affection but he couldn't cope
with all the thoughts that were swirling in his mind.

Finnick had seen his friend look miserable but this time it broke all previously registered records.

Dark thoughts were piling up in Nick's mind. The shoot-out was playing in a loop, he saw Judy desperate face as she tried to tourniquet her leg. Her absence teared at him like an open wound. The possibility that she could stop being a cop, that her dream could escape her was leaving cold spikes in his brain. And above all he felt guilty. He hadn't been able to protect her like she did him. He was his mate, he should have but he didn't.

His mother's arms were wrapped around him again. He wanted to cry to get rid of all of the buzzing in his head but his eyes felt like dry wells. His shoulders started shaking, he lost his breath, feeling his throat tighten and his muscles tensing up.

"Nick ?" came the worried voice of his mother.

"P-panic attack. It will p-pass."

He thought he would avoid it when they had come in, but it had come to hit him, breaking down all barriers.

He remembered his first and only previous one, more than twenty years ago. Only then he felt the first tear rolling down his cheek. The tension in his muscles woke up the wound he had been able to forget, and he couldn't help himself from slumping on the floor with a groan of pain.

"I'm o-okay." He said.

Finnick joined in the hug. It surprised him a bit, the fennec being even less into physical show of emotion than he was.

"We know you alright kid. Everything' gon' be okay. The bunny and you'll pull through. I'm shure of it."

_I must really be a complete mess if even Fin feels the need to comfort me..._

They stayed like this, Nick feeling the bumping of his heart slow down gradually, the panic leaving him, letting him take back control. He was still shaking but he felt better.

He moved off a bit, to show that he was getting better. "Thanks guys, I'm good now."

"Don't make it a habit, I ain't gonna do dat every day." joked the fennec fox.

"You know you loved it." Smirked Nick.

"Only 'cause you mom was involved."

Nick stood back up, helped by his mother and friend and sat on the bed.

"Sorry you guys had to see this."

"Nick, we're your goddam family, don't apologize. We want to be here for you."

"Judy says that to me all the time. I'm slowly starting to believe it." he chuckled. His face fell a bit. "I called her parents. They knew about the shoot-outs in the city. That was really strange calling them to announce this, but I think it's better I did it than some other officer." he made a pause "I tried to calm them down. Maybe I underplayed the seriousness of her injuries a bit. I think her mom
would've been able to take it but I'm fairly certain her father would've fainted if I had told the truth." He chuckled again. A strange smile came to his face. "Guys, how come those country bunnies knew about what was happening in the city and you didn't?"

"Nick, you know I don't watch TV, and my block isn't- let's say gunshots aren't that unusual so I thought nothing of it."

He looked at them, they look embarrassed. "And we were a bit busy" her voice trailed off.

"I won't ask you how you've spent your day. I've have enough horrors to deal with." the shit-eating grin was back. Fin knew the jokes were Nick's way to cope with what weighed on his mind. "Bonds are hard to deal with aren't they?" he taunted, grin still in place.

His mother and his friend looked at each other. Vivienne talked "The bond's really weak compared to the one with your father." She turned to Finnick with an apologetic look "Not that I'm comparing you two or-"

"Vi, I know whatchu meant." He kissed her paw he was holding to reassure her.

Nick looked at them. It made sense, both of them weren't really young, his mother had had a mate before Finnick, and fennec foxes bond weren't that strong to begin with.

"My mom and my best friend are a pair of sex-crazed and depraved mammal" he said in a fakely desperate tone, raising his paws in a hopeless dramatical move.

"Says the bunny-banging fox." retorted the fennec-fox.

"Kids, the both of you." chuckled the vixen.
Friday the 18th of January 2019

Hazy voices in a warm comfort.

"Did everythi- … -could've gon- ... -ter."

Beeping of machines.

"...-sure the- ... -will take ?"

Faint white light.

"… -ot a fox, but- … -than she looks- …"

She tried to straighten up, but she felt her strength escaping her.

"Nick ?" her voice was weak. No louder than a whisper.

"Judy ?" she felt a paw on her cheek. "guys she's waking up."

"You're here ? You're alright ? I-I don't remember... What happened."

"Everything's fine sweetheart. The doctor said your mind would be hazy because of the anesthesia. It'll come back."

But Nick really hoped it wouldn't. He stroked her fur in a loving manner, reassuring her as she came to.

According to what Nick had been told, the surgery had ended up an hour sooner than anticipated and the doctors believed that bunnies being social mammals, she would be better off waking up to a friendly environment. The only condition being that said environment should stay calm.

Judy looked around. She saw her fox, looking tenderly at her. She recognized the two other silhouettes, Vivienne and Finnick. There was a third one. A raccoon she didn't know with a physician gown. He waved at her.

"Hello miss Hopps. I'm doctor Procyon."

"Hello." She tried to straighten up again, all she could do was lift her arm. The doctor approached her and widely opened her eyes to examine them, shining a light in them. It made her blink, but the raccoon paid it no mind. "Follow the pen" he said, moving it around. She did easily, but blinked a few time. "Do you know which day it is ?"

The bunny blinked a few time. "18th of January 2019, a friday I think."

The doctor scribbled on his notepad. "Good. You're doing as well as one could in your situation."

"Why can't I move ?"
"Anaesthetic. Your lower body will stay numb for a bit more longer. A good thing really, you mustn't move your left leg."

Her eyes shot wide open. "My leg, I remember, I lost my leg. My le-" she began hyperventilating, her shoulders and arms shaking.

Nick took her face between his paws, locking his eyes into her. "Judy calm down. You're alright. The surgeon put it back on, breathe."

The bunny's fit of panic receded.

"B-Back on ?"

The fox carefully lifted her upper body so she could look down on herself. A sheet covered her from her chest to a bit under her waist. She could see her leg, covered with a blue 3D printed cast. The fur had been shaved around the large scar, showing transplanted skin and stitches. She gasped in relief.

"I remember some things. It's foggy. The shoot-out, you being wounded, the tourniquet..."

He kissed her forehead. "We'll have time to talk about this later. It's good that you're awake, the doc wanted to make a few recommendations after examining you."

"Yes, I do. First of all, I forbid you to try to get up for the next week. Don't even try to move your leg, I don't want to have you strapped to your bed."

"Doesn't seem like such a bad idea to me." joked the fox with a naughty grin. "owtch, easy with the elbows Carrots."

"You'll have to take antibiotics to avoid an infection, and other drugs to diminish the rejection risk." Continued the doctor.

"You mean, for the skin graft ?"

"Yes, but mainly for the prosthetic bioceramic bones inside your leg."

"Bioceramic what ?"

"Bones. We've had to replace some bones." The bunny stared at him in disbelief. "I know it's a lot to take in. I can come back and continue this later."

Judy took an inspiration. "No, the sooner the better I think."

"I agree. So, you'll also want to take painkillers, although they're not mandatory. We'll come and check your leg every day, and if by the end of the week everything seems in order, we'll be able to start reeducation. Slow reeducation. I'll say it now and I will repeat it as much as I have to, don't try to overdo it. Don't even think about doing more than what's prescribed to you. The chances of your muscles and ligaments recovering are far from good." He trudged in his paper sand took out an x-ray print. It showed a rabbit leg with bones with different opacity. "To push my point further, I want you to see this. This is your leg now. The bones and bone-parts that are whiter are the things that we had to replace. We've been able to reattach muscles and ligaments but for now they are weak. Strand-of-hair weak. I hope everything is clear."

"So no hopping around." Nick joke, trying to lighten the mood a bit.
"Understood doc. No moving around for a week and be very careful afterwards." Judy's expression was blank.

"If everything goes well, you should physically be able to get back on duty in 7 months. It could be less, it could be more. I suggest to not get your hopes up. What else..." he put back his eyes on the paper. "Oh yes. The unpleasant part. No food for a while, only IV bag. You can drink, though I suggest you don't do so too much. No shower either, a nurse will come and wash you with a washcloth-

Nick tensed up. Maybe it was silly but he really didn't want to accept anyone touching his bunny beside him. The simple idea that the nurse had undressed her made his anger rise. He cut the doctor.

"Would it be a problem if I did that instead?"

"It's not unusual for relatives or friends to perform this task, but you'll have to let a nurse explain you how to safely proceed." He pointed at the cast. "You don't want to disturb the healing process."

Judy looked at Nick with incomprehension but he shrugged away the untold question.

"And for all that is the urinating and defecating business, if the need would arise." He pointed at a chamber pot. "You shouldn't need it too much with the IV bag. Since you must keep your movement to a minimum, you'll need help with that too."

If the washing part had annoyed her, this straight up embarrassed her.

That's only for one week.

"I think that's all. Don't hesitate to call a nurse if you need anything. I have to go now. Remember that she needs calm. If you feel light-headed, it's normal, if you feel drowsy, don't hesitate to sleep." The doctor waved at everyone and left the room.

She felt Nick arms carefully wrap around her. Now that the doctor had said his piece and departed, he could give his bunny the attention she deserved. Vivienne and Finnick gave them a bit of privacy, getting behind the screen separating the doe's from the fox's empty bed.

She relaxed in the fox warm embrace as his tail completed the cocoon he had formed with his body. He had placed his snout in her neck, nudging her as he installed himself. Just for a minute, she was able to forget everything. She felt a shiver in her fox, and heard a discreet whimper in his throat.

"I'm okay" she whispered. "I'm okay, I won't leave you."

"Don't you ever do that to me again."

She had already seen Nick distressed, but never this much. Though she was the one the most badly wounded, she couldn't imagine how the bond treated him.

"I thought I lost you. I'm sorry I couldn't protect you."

"You saved my life, you silly fox. You were wonderful."

"You saved mine. You were wounded because of it."

"And you stopped the bleeding." She tenderly kissed him on the snout. "I'll get better."
"What if you don't?"

The bunny cupped the fox's face, making him face her.

"It's me, silly fox. I will get better."

Before he could retort anything, she gave him a kissed charged with all the comfort and love she had. He kissed her back lovingly, and hugged her again tightly. She felt him slowly relax and they stayed interlocked for a moment, savoring each other's presence.

Nick slowly pulled away, kissing the doe's snout, and installed himself at her side, his arm wrapped around her shoulders.

As if they knew what had transpired, Vivienne and Finnick came back from behind the screen and installed themselves on the other side of her large bed.

Feeling like the mood needed a bit of lighting up, Judy said: "You know Nick, if you hope washing me will end up turning into anything else than, well... washing me, I don't think it will happen."

She was wearing a half-joking, half-annoyed smile. Nick chuckled.

"That's not why I want to do that myself."

"Then why?" She asked, in an inquisitive tone.

"Because his instincts are acting up, no way he can let any other mammal put a paw on you." Answered Vivienne with a smile. "Glad to see you back in the land of the living."

"Yeah, ya scared us bunny. Slick was all over the place." Added the fennec.

"Was I out long? I don't recall anything after Snarlov and Rhinowitz's arrival."

Nick looked at his phone. "I'd say around six hours. Speaking about the time, I'd say your parents are about fifteen minutes away."

Judy's eyes widened. She felt a cold chill run down her spine.

"Oh crap."

"What, you're scared of your parents? They won't scold you, you're a grown bunny." He looked at her with a taunting smile. "I mean, you are right? You all are so little I can barely tell."

"That's not it. They will be completely panicked. They'll try to make me quit the ZPD and bring me back to bunny-burrow." She buried herself into the pillow. "And that's not a fight I want to have right now. Or at all."

"No way I'll let anyone take my bunny from me." He said kissing her forehead.

The door flew open, a pair of panicked bunny erupting from the hallway and into the room.

"Judy!" They looked around the room and saw their daughter frozen on her bed, her paw in Nick's, his own face turned toward them. There were two other foxes, a vixen and probably a little kid.

"Oh thank carrots, you're alright!" said Stu.
"Alright? She's wearing a cast!" Bonnie approached. "Shoo fox, I want to see my daughter." Nick silently chuckled and got down from the bed, letting the Hopps talk to their daughter, waving at her.

"We'll let you have some privacy." He went to his bed and Vivienne unfolded the screen between it and Judy's bed.

Truth is, he didn't let them so much privacy, listening to every bit of conversation they had, ready to come to his bunny's support if she needed it.

He took the pile of paper the doctor had left him and began filling them to pass time.

His mother and his friend had understood he wanted to listen and so, they didn't trouble him. In truth, they wanted to hear too.

The two bunny newcomers went and hugged their daughter. For a few seconds, Judy could actually believe they wouldn't make a scene. But she knew better, and even though she could anticipate the conversation to come, she was actually glad they had come.

"Judy, what happened?" came her mother's voice.

"It's just the job mom, there was a firefight, I was shot in the leg. Don't worry I'm okay now." She answered with a soothing tone.

She saw her mother take a closer look to her leg, detailing the scar and stitches.

"You've been more than shot. What happened to your leg?"

"Nothing, it's fine." She tried, and failed, to reassure her.

Her mother's voice turned to firm.

"Young lady, you're going to tell me everything this instant!"

"Sit dad on a chair then. He's going to need it." she sighed.

"I can stay standing, don't worry about me."

The two female bunnies looked at him in disbelief, Bonnie giving him a chair. He sat while grumbling.

Judy told them how they were called for a jewellery hold-up, the van that came afterward and the firefight. She didn't leave out the part where her leg got torn out by a bullet and how Nick had saved her life with the tourniquet. However, she didn't talk about him emptying two guns at the attackers or that they were probably drugged out of their mind. She said that she didn't remember what happen after back-up came because she fell unconscious but when she came to her leg was back on and she'd have to stay put for at least a week.

At the end of the story, she could see both of her parents were pale under their fur, her father had shaking hands and seemed in the brink of fainting.

"Well, you've done enough for this city. I'll call bunny-burrow's hospital and arrange for an ambulance to take you back. You're going home. I won't let this place kill my daughter." She began fondling her purse and took out a phone. "Crud, no reception."

"Mom, stop. I'm not going back. I'm still a cop."
"No you're not! I can't allow your silly ideas anymore. First you had to go this academy and become a cop, then you arrested two mayors, mated with this pel- this fox, and now you've been shot! You're coming back with us, whether you want it or not!"

Nick's head shot up at that last sentence.

Should I intervene?

Judy sighed again. She would lie if she said she hadn't seen it coming.

Her mother was facing her with crossed arms, her father was sitting on the chair, his elbows on his knees, head in his paws.

"You'll take me back to bunny-burrow and then what? I'll become a carrot farmer? I don't want to be one and I never wanted to. I get that you're scared, I get that you're worried, but after all those years I hoped that you would begin to care about what I want!"

She hadn't shouted, there was no trace of sadness in her voice. Only firmness.

"It's not about what you want, it's about what's best for you and your safety!" Bonnie's voice had left the realm of motherly authority and entered the one of hysteria.

Judy let her calm down a bit. She looked her mother in the eyes and took a deep breath. There was a card she hadn't played yet.

I really don't want to say this.

"No, it's not about me. It's about you. It's about your fear. You're afraid that I'll get hurt, you're afraid that I'll die. And it's normal, you're my parents. But this is my life, not yours."

Her mother recoiled, like she had been slapped.

"Judith Laverne Hopps, don't you talk to me like this!"

"You're acting upon fear. And last time I checked, results of this course of action weren't pretty."

Nick's face was a mix of pride and apprehension.

Sheesh Carrots, you're not using any gloves. That's my bunny.

If Bonnie looked liked she had been slapped before, this time it was more of a punch to the face.

Her voice rose again.

"Listen here, little miss-"

She felt a paw on her arm, stopping her dead in her tracks.

"Honey, stop. Look at your daughter, she won't change her mind."

Her parents looked at her. She was wearing the same defying face than when she had announced she had sent her application to the police academy. Then, they didn't fight as hard, her parents never believing she would make it.

"We can't protect her, Bonnie. And I don't want to force her to be a farmer. Don't you remember how miserable she was when she quit being a cop?"
"But she could die!" shouted her mother, tear rising in her eyes.

"I know that! I think about it every day. But as she said, it's her life. We must accept it and let her make her own choices." He took his wife in his arms "And we must support them. Because that's what parents do."

Judy, surprised, looked at her parents. Her father was usually the emotional one, she had never seen her mother cry before. Him being the voice of reason between the two seemed strange, like discovering a new facet she had never seen.

Soon enough, the three of them were hugging and crying, Judy's parents having come to their daughter.

"Bunnies, so emotional." Whispered Nick.

"You said it." answered Finnick as low with a smile.

They both felt a sharp slap on the back of their head.

"Shut up, both of you." came Vivienne's half-annoyed and half-amused voice.

... 

The sobbing coming from the other side of the screen slowly faded away and Nick risked an eye to the other side. The three Hopps had sad smiles on their faces, Stu having put an arm around his wife shoulder to comfort her. As he saw Nick, he extended a paw to him. "Thanks for saving my daughter's life."

The fox held back the half-dozen of humorous answer that came to his mind and shook Stu's paw with a slight nod. He was a bit taken aback when Bonnie went and hugged him tightly, with a simple "Thank you." She then went back to her husband who wrapped back his arm around her shoulders."Sorry you had to hear that." she said while wiping out her tears.

"Don't sweat it, I know how family discussions can become tearful." Answered Vivienne. Nick glanced at her with a smirk. She smirked back.

Stu took out his free paw "You must be Nick's mother, the names Stewart, call me Stu." Vivienne shook his paw.

"My name is Vivienne, nice to meet you."

"I'm Bonnie, it's a pleasure." greeted Judy's mother, shaking the vixen's paw in turn.

"And who's this adorable little guy?" Asked Stu leaning in direction of Finnick with a fatherly and friendly tone.

Nick scoffed, Judy chuckled and Vivienne turned around hiding a strangled laughter in her paws, with shaking shoulders.

"Dontchu call me adorable, cute lil'bunny, if you don't wanna have yo'ears tied into a knot. The name's Finnick."

The deep voice of the fennec took aback Judy's parents. He wasn't really upset, being used to people thinking he was fox kit.

"But you can call him toot-toot." blurted Nick who had placed himself near Judy, before falling
into a fit of laughter, quickly followed by his mate. Vivienne was holding herself to the screen, biting her fist to contain the laughter.

Finnick reached for Judy's parents paws and shook one after the other.

"Are you guys finished?" He asked.

"Ha ha, ow ow" Nick put a hand on his bandaged ribs. "Hurts like a bitch." Despite the pain, he continued chuckling, slowly calming down.

"Oh, our daughter talked to us about you." said Bonnie to Finnick "You were Nick's hustling partner."

"Yeah, now I'm his mom's" he sent an annoyed glance at the chuckling red fox.

"She hustles with you?" Asked Judy's father with incomprehension on his face.

Vivienne, who had calmed down, came to her mate, leaning behind him and kissed his head. "You can say it like that. We're together."
Part 2, Chapter 6

Part 2: Lycus Case

Chapter 6: To Take Care of Their Own

Friday the 18th of January 2019

Everyone had found a place to sit. Nick had used the wheels on his bed to approach it to Judy's, Vivienne and Finnick were sitting on it. Nick was sharing his mate's bed, lying at her side. The two other bunnies were on the other side of their daughter's large bed.

"So, I'll have to spend a week in bed. Nick said he would take care of me, and then I'll start reeducation. There is not much more to say. This is going to be boring."

"And what about the hospital cost?" Asked Bonnie.

The bunnies looked at each other, worried. It was true that their farm was making them more than enough money to live comfortably, but hospital expenses were another matter.

Nick took out one of the paper the doctor had given him. "With the operation, hospital room and meds, we're talking about at least 80 000 dollars. If not more. And I'm not even talking about the reeducation."

"Oh, dear." Bonnie put a paw to her mouth.

"We'll make a loan. It's going to be okay." said her husband pulling her to him in a reassuring embrace.

Vivienne got down from the bed she was sitting on, took the sport bag she had brought and came back to the other mammals.

"No, you won't." She threw it between the bunnies and Nick opened it. Under a bunch of old clothes, probably belonging to his father, he found a huge pile of cash.

"We're paying for this." said Nick, with a smug smile.

"What? How? We can't let you do that!" Said Stu. "It's our daughter. It's a family's job to take care of their own."

Nick gave him a sly grin.

"Then I'll just have to marry your daughter. That'll make me part of her family."

Judy's parent's mouths fell agape.

"Nick, I can't accept this."

"I'm not aiming to let you chose whether or not I'll pay for your health expenses. I'll just do it." Nick had put on a serious face. "I couldn't protect you, let me at least do that for you."

"I'm not talking about the money, although it bothers me a little bit, I know you will do what you want. I can't let you marry me now. I want to be able to stand and dance with you for our marriage."
"So, let's say, we do that after your recovery?"

"Full recovery."

"So we have time to prepare, get really used to live with each other."

"And possibly move from your apartment. Oh, and you'll have to propose me in a more official and romantic way. Half-naked in a gown in front of my parents is not how I see the perfect proposal."

"So I'll do that at-"

"Nope, don't tell me. I want it to be a surprise."

"Deal."

They shook on it. Bonnie's and Stu's mouth were still agape.

"Hey Stu, I'd like to ask for your daughter's hand, if that's okay with you."

Nick's grin was even wider that before. Judy was wearing the same expression.

"Vi, I think the bunny is learning from yo'kit."

"Zootopia is so fucked."

The bunnies finally got out of their torpor.

Bonnie pinched her eyes and Stu's filled themselves with tears.

"My little girl is getting married." he said with a happy sob.

Bonnie turned to her husband with an irritated look. "And that's your reaction?"

"What? You know what marriages do to me."

"We can't let them rush into it!"

"Mom, it's at least a whole seven months away. And even more with the preparations." half-joked Judy.

Bonnie lifted her paws and eyes to the ceiling.

"And what's next, adoption?"

"What a great idea!" reacted Nick. "Can we adopt a baby elephant? I want a little toot-toot!"

Judy chuckled.

Bonnie pinched her eyes again. "Could we please refocus on the issue of you paying for my daughter's hospital stay?"

"Sure." Nick's grin had receded into a polite smile.

"We can't accept your help. Not with this much money. It's as simple as that. It's not- it's not proper."

Nick sighed. Judy looked at her mate. On one hand, she was bothered by the idea of Nick spending
this much money on her, but on the other, she knew it would be hard on her parent to find such a sum. She couldn't decide which course of action was the best, so she decided to sit this one out.

Vivienne broke the silence. "Bonnie- Is it okay if I call you Bonnie?" the bunny nodded "Bonnie, we're foxes. We don't give two shits about 'proper'. My son is offering to pay for this, and you should accept. If you can't see it as a loan with zero interest."

"Though knowin' him, there ain't no way he'll letcha pay him back." added Finnick.

Vivienne smiled. "That's true. It's not a battle you can win. He's even more stubborn than me." She put a paw on Bonnie's shoulder. "I'm a mother too you know? I understand, I'd want to take care of my kit myself too. Would I be in your place, I'd react exactly the same, but it's not about who should or shouldn't pay. When a mammal gives you a helping paw, you should take it. Trust me."

Bonnie's mind went blank, it couldn't take everything in. In the same day, her daughter had been wounded, she had opposed her, and now foxes were making the most generous gesture any mammal had ever done to her family. "I-I need to g-go freshen up." She hopped from the bed and slowly made her way to the bathroom. Soon they heard sobbing coming from the other side of the closed door.

"Dad, shouldn't you go comfort her?"

"No, she must take this all in by herself. Nothing I'd do right now could help her. I know her."

"You're taking this rather well mister Hopps." remarked Nick.

"Huh? Yeah. I suppose, but to be honest, I think it's the most rational decision to make. We don't have this much money at the moment and we can't let our daughter fall into debts because of this." The male bunny sighed and took an inspiration. "I'm sorry if we weren't the most supportive of you two at the burrows. You're a proper mammal if I ever met one." he shook Nick's hand again with gratitude.

Once more, Judy was discovering new facets to her parents. She had never seen them confronted to such an extreme situation and she was surprised to see how coolly her father took it all. Thinking back, her mother had always looked like the couples' anchor in the day to day life, but her father was the one to take the bull by the horn in difficult situations. Sure, he was prone to let his emotions show, but he didn't let them impair on his judgment on important matters.

Bonnie came back from the bathroom soon after. It was obvious she had cried, but everyone was delicate enough to not mention it. Stu kissed her on the forehead in comfort and she got back on Judy's bed.

"Sorry about that. It was a lot to take in."

The mammals stayed together for a while, talking about their respective lives. Judy's parents were surprised to see that although Nick and Finnick had had an outlaw activity for quite a long time, they had no trouble getting along with Judy and her strong sense of justice. She had always had a strong attachment to rules and regulations, sometimes to the point of being a bit of a pain in the ass for her siblings, but it seemed the time she had spent in the big city had loosened her a bit.

Nick discovered that Judy's parents weren't mere farmers as much as efficient business mammals. It was obvious in hindsight, their company employing much of their large family, they had to be efficient in administration and management. It was strange how professional they could seem while talking about their business but utterly lost when dealing with Judy.
Vivienne, for her part, told of her experience as a parent and vixen in the city. Although Finnick had helped him keep tabs on her and he knew how fox had to struggle to maintain a steady job, it was strange for him to hear about it from the mammal in question. She had worked as a waitress, barmaid, and currently cleaned rooms in a cheap hotel owned by a pair of raccoon.

Eventually the discussions died down as the hour grew late. Judy was feeling a bit drowsy from the meds and a nurse had brought Nick's evening meal.

"Well kids, I'm working tonight and tomorrow, so I'll let you be." Said Vivienne, getting up from Nick's bed. "Do you want me to leave the bag Nick?"

"No, I need to sign some paper first and talk with the hospital's financial officer before paying him."

Judy's parents stood up in turn.

"We need to go too, we're going to have to find a hotel for tonight."

"No need, you can stay at my flat." Nick smiled.

"We don't want to intrude, hotel is fine with us." answered and embarrassed Stu.

"Nonsense spending money on this. If you don't want my generosity, you can still pay me rent for the night." He hopped down from Judy's bed and let escape a groan of pain as he landed "Owh! Bloody ribs!", he limped to the phone hanged to the wall and took out his own phone, browsing his directory. He turned to the Hopps before calling "But you already know I won't accept your money." he winked.

The phone rang a few time before it was picked up. "Hey, Clawhauser, how is it going?"

"Nick, oh my god, are you okay? Is Judy fine? I learned about her leg! It's horrible-" The cheetah's tone was panicked, Nick tried to reassure him.

"Relax big cat. Carrot's alright, leg glued back in place, but no hopping around for now. She's resting but she's okay. Bullets only grazed me, I'm perfectly fine. Listen, I need to ask a favor."

"Sure, anything."

"I'm sending you the Hopps, could you be your usual adorable self and give them the set of key I left in my locker? So they can stay in my flat for tonight."

"Sure thing Nick."

"You're the best Ben. Have a nice evening."

"You too."

The fox hung up the phone and went back to the beds.

"So that's settled. You're staying at mine."

"There is bunny-friendly food in the fridge, so don't hesitate to dig in." added Judy.

"I see you spend a lot of time at his apartment." Said her mother incredulously.

"At our apartment, you mean." She smiled. "I moved in last week."
"And you didn't tell us?" She frowned.

"I thought I'd wait a bit for you to get used to the idea of him and me dating."

Her parents gave an embarrassed chuckle.

The Hopps hugged their daughter and Nick, waved at Vivienne and Finnick and left the room. Vivienne hadn't moved from the side of Nick's bed. She smiled.

"Are all bunnies that complicated?"

"No, we Hopps like to set records."

She hugged her son and Judy and left the room in turn, Finnick following her after having said good bye.

"Well, that was eventful. Almost more tough than getting shot." Joked Nick.

"Almost yeah."

"By the way, sorry but I'm going to eat my food before it goes completely cold."

The food was tasteless, like most hospital food, but it wasn't the worst meal he ever had, so the fox didn't complain. He ate quickly knowing that his mate wouldn't have anything to eat for the next few days. After that he went and lay down next to her.

"I hope it doesn't bother you that I sleep here."

"The bed is big enough for both of us."

It wasn't that late, but even with how long Judy had slept under surgery, she still felt tired. Nick flicked the light switch near the bed and wrapped his arms around her shoulders in a cuddly embrace. She turned her head and breathed in his chest, taking his scent. She felt that it gave her comfort.

"G'night sweetheart."

"Nighty-night Nick."

They quickly slipped into slumber, their presence reassuring each other.
Saturday the 19th of January 2019

The hallway was long and dimly lit. The walls were blank, naked, clean. So clean they made her uneasy, sending shivers down her spine. A shriek, in the distance made her lift her head. Someone was hurt and afraid and she had to help them.

She began running, as fast as she could, the white walls blurring around her. The hallway seemed to get longer as she ran, but she ended up reach the corner. In front of her stood two metal black doors. As she was about to open them, they flew open by themselves. She jumped back, avoiding getting hit, and rolled, quickly getting back up. On the other side of the door were darkness, emptiness. The promise of pain and fear.

The shriek was heard again. Louder, closer. It came from her left and she turned around. She was now in the street, she saw a silhouette slumped against a police car, a paws held against a bleeding wound. It was a fox, wearing a terrified expression. Facing him were two mammals, guns in their hand, slowly raising them in his direction. The scene slowed down, seeming to fall into a pool of dense water.

She reached for her gun but it was missing. No matter, she was close enough to leap and get the fox out of the way, as she had retained her normal speed.

She kept running, confident that she could save the vulpine, but suddenly her left leg gave in, a sharp pain stopping her from moving. As she looked down on herself, she saw that she missed her hinder left paw, and that blood was quickly flowing from the stump. She tried to crawl, screaming in pain and dread as the two attacker still raised their gun to the slumped fox. He turned to her, and although she couldn't hear him, she could read his lips.

"You can't help me."

She heard the two loud detonation and saw life leave the body of the wounded fox.

"Nick ! Niiick !"

She tried to straighten, slightly moving her leg, sending spikes of pain in the wound. She opened her tear-filled eyes and saw a silhouette above her and two paws firmly holding her against the bed.

"Nick ?"

"It's me carrots. Everything's fine."

"Nick, you're alive !"

She raised her paws to him and he hugged her.

"Of course I'm alive, silly rabbit. You were only-"

"-Having a nightmare."
Nick as always was impressed by how quick her brain could be functional after being awake for so little time.

He kissed her on the forehead and nuzzled her ears, tickling her. She chuckled.

"Yep, you were having a nightmare. Want to talk about it?"

He sat behind her, lying her head on his stomach and giving her a relaxing massage.

"There isn't much to tell. I was in the hospital, I heard you screaming and tried to come to you. When two mammals killed you, I was unable to save you because my leg was missing. Standard stuff."

"Yeah I'm sure everymammal dreams about losing their leg and mate every night."

"I mean, compared to what happened. To be honest, I expected something like that. I even expected that you would wake me and not the opposite." She taunted.

"I'm not an emotional rabbit like your are." He retorted in a joking manner but she could hear that there was something else under his tone. She chose to not answer anything, to see if he would talk about it. "Okay, I admit, I had a nightmare too. I'm surprised I didn't wake you up, actually. But you were sleeping so deeply that I think even if the building went down, you'd have stayed asleep." He deliberately omitted to mention he had had it several time. She didn't need to know.

"What was you dream about?"

Nick stayed silent a bit. She couldn't clearly see him, but she felt he was tensing up.

"Your funerals." he simply stated. She heard his throat tighten. She took his paws from her shoulders and wrapped them around her chest. "It was horrible" he continued "people kept coming to throw dirt on your casket. And each of them said something like 'she wasn't cut out for this after all' or 'if he had been a proper cop, he could've saved her'" His tone was still even but she felt a tear fell on her head as he had leaned over her, hugging her from behind. She pulled on his arm and made him come around her, putting his head on her chest. "And how could I say they were wrong, you were shot because I couldn't react as quick as I should have." Still, his tears were flowing but his voice wasn't breaking.

A strange feeling washed over her. Nick was opening to her like he had never done before, showing emotions. It felt good, but at the same time, she could see his emotions and scars ran more deep that she had thought. An abyss of which she couldn't see the bottom yet. It scared and reassured her at the same time, he was only a mammal after all.

She caressed his head. "You're a real cop, you're a great cop. Don't let anyone tell you otherwise."

"It's not anyone, it's me. I can't keep thinking that I should've been faster, that I could've acted sooner. The moment I saw that van, I knew something was wrong." he sighed "I'm a cop for all the wrong reasons. Sure I'm good at it and I like helping mammals. But I became one only because I wanted to be near you and prove the world I could be doing something honest. That fox were worth more than the low-lifes everymammal think them to be."

She cupped his chin with her paw, raising his head so he would face her. Although it was dark in the room, she tried to lock her gaze into his. Nick, as a fox, could perfectly see her. "Nick, listen to me : you saved my life. If you hadn't been there, I would've lost more than my leg. If it weren't for you, I would've died yesterday. And I don't care that you've become a cop for the wrong reasons. You're doing a good job, you're doing way more good than bad."
"But if it was for me, you wouldn't have been shot in the first place!"

"And then what? I got shot, you got shot. You're my partner and my mate. We have each others back. I saved you, you saved us. Simple as that."

"But is it- am I-"

"Good enough? You're doing way more than most mammals! To me, you're far above good enough." She chuckled "What became of my cynical fox? You care way more than you want to show."

"Don't tell anyone." He smooched her on the nose, tickling her "I don't know what I did to deserve you."

"The same thing I did to deserve you, you saved the city." she smooched him back.

He brushed her snout with his, hesitant. Finally, he kissed her. There was love and care in his kiss, but less passion than she was used to. She felt something else, something faint. It was lost between emotions, between sadness and hope, a sort of promise between them. It was pulling at her subconscious and instinct, slowly growing inside her, like a thing they could share, something that only them could understand.

Before he even did, she felt he was about to break the kiss. She raised a paw and caressed his cheek. Nick felt his mind and instincts acting up. An important sensation lost in the kiss. He felt they would never be able to break that connection, like it had created a link that would always pull them together.

It had felt like an eternity and the fraction of a second at the same time. They pulled away, their breath short. They both felt different. To Nick, it felt like the bond strengthening but to Judy, the sensation was new and different, like a bright pulsation echoing the pounding in her chest.

Nick kissed her nose again and chuckled.

"What's so funny?" she asked.

"I think you're infecting me, getting emotional and all."

"That's called opening up to someone."

"It was your plan all along, you sly bunny."

"You finally figured it out, you dumb fox."

"First you hustle me for help, then you hustle for my heart, now you hustle for my mind. Is there anything I'll have left in the end?" He asked in a playful tone.

"Me."

The fox chuckled again. "Just when I thought I couldn't get more cheesy, you come and outdo me." He rolled on the side, Judy turning her upper body slightly to face him.

"I was serious."

"Do you think I wasn't?" He approached her and kissed her again. "I love you Judy Hopps."

"I love you too Nicholas Wilde."
They hugged for a bit until Judy broke the silence.

"Sorry about waking you up, I hope it was not too early."

"You didn't wake me up. It's around 8AM. The nurse already came, gave me my breakfast and checked up your stitches. She left your pills on the table. I'll go fetch them for you."

Nick got down from the bed and approached the table.

"Could you bring the chamber pot too?" she asked, embarrassed. Nick flicked on the light so they would see what they were doing, gave her the pills and helped her do her business. He came back from the bathroom where he had emptied the pot with a basin and washcloth.

"I think I'm going to wash you while I'm at it. The nurse explained me the procedure while you were asleep."

"Yeah, that would be a good idea, even if I don't feel filthy yet."

"Trust my predatory nose, you are." he taunted her.

He got her out of her gown and began by cleaning her injured leg around scared area, using the holes in the plastic printed cast. He then washed her other leg. After that, he washed her head, playfully tickling her ears several times. Slowly working his way down, he stopped around the bottom of her belly.

"If you're uncomfortable, I can manage this part myself." said the bunny.

"I was actually going to ask you if you were okay with me doing that."

An awkward silence followed.

"I already have the washcloth so..." He continued washing her. Judy felt a bit embarrassed but also relieved that this didn't turn into an argument of sort. She could already picture them bickering, her saying how she was totally okay with him doing it and him saying he wouldn't be upset if she didn't want him to-

Nick felt judy tensing up. He slowed down his move and she relaxed, a few second later she tensed again.

"Are you okay Carrots?"

"Sure, no problem." her voice was a bit strange. He continued his move, she got tense. Was she blushing? A grin began appearing on his face.

"Carrots?"

"Yes?"

"Are you enjoying this?"

Her face immediately shot red.

"I think I'm clean enough now." she answered in a meek voice.

"Are you sure? I think I should give it one or two more rubs." he said, grin still in place, acting upon his proposal. A quiet moan came from Judy's lips. He nibbled at her ear. "Should I stop?" he
whispered to her.

"Don't you dare!" Her paw clenched on his shoulder as she shot him a predatory glance.

*Sheesh carrots, with eyes like this, you'd melt Tundratown.*

He was kissing and nibbling at her neck while her moans were becoming louder and louder, her paws hooked to his fur as she was struggling to not move her legs.

They heard knock on the door, Nick only had the time to sit at her side with an innocuous expression and pull the sheet on her while she feigned being asleep, trying to calm down.

"Hey guys, How are you doing?" Asked the chubby cheetah that had entered the room.

"Fine Ben, and you?" asked Nick with a perfect poker face.

"I'm good. Is Judy still asleep?"

"Nope, just relaxing, my leg is hurting a bit." She lied. Well, her leg was hurting her a little bit so it wasn't an outright lie.

The chubby cat hopped on the bed, which was large enough for a hippo, making himself comfortable.

"So how are things going in the precinct?"

"Good, but a bit gloomy since- well you know." The feline looked at the bed and saw the basin and washcloth in it. "Oh you were occupied."

"Nah, we had finished, I was about to go empty it."

Nick didn't lose the confident smile but Judy blushed, which the cheetah didn't miss. Something was afoot, he smelled the air in the room, a grin slowly creeping on his face.

"Guys?"

"Yeah?"

"Did I interrupt something?" He was wearing a blend of laughing and embarrassed expression.

It was the second time in less than fifteen minutes that Judy turned completely red. "Yes, and if you could give us five minutes so we could-" she blurted before putting her paws to her face stopping dead in her tracks.

Nick's poker face shattered as he looked at her with his eyes wide open. Clawhauser looked at her with the same expression.

"Oh my god, I'm so sorry. I didn't have my hormones suppressants yesterday." she said in a meek voice.

"Did you see some among the pill the nurse brought?" asked Nick.

"Nope."

"Are you going to be okay?"
"Yeah, as long as no-one 'provokes' me."

There was a bit of an awkward silence between the three mammals. The cheetah chose to switch topic, sparing them from further embarrassment.

"You guys are good ? I know you'll have to spend time in the hospital Judy, I hope the leg's not hurting too much."

"It hurts less than I thought it would. I think the bullet destroyed a lot of the nerve endings, but I can already feel my foot a bit." she said, moving a toe.

Nick hopped down from the bed and brought back the basin and washcloth to the bathroom.

"That's good. Chief Bogo talked to me a bit about it. I hope the transplant will take. To be honest, he sent me here. Someone's covering my shift."

"Oh ? Why ?" shouted Nick from the bathroom.

"Well, I couldn't really make it because of my hours this week. The visiting hours being limited in the security ward, there was no way I'd have been able to come otherwise. He also asked me to check if there was no one else than you in the room for now." He said, while taking out his phone and sending a message via the wifi.

"Why ?" asked Judy, surprised.

"I don't know. Seems He wanted to talk to you about something important." He glanced at his phone screen. "He'll be here in two minutes."

"Am I the only one to feel like all of this is really strange ?" asked the fox.

"You don't know everything. He actually made Snarlov and Rhinowitz swear to not talk about your state to anyone. Not even at the precinct. His official version is you being into a coma, Nick."

"What ? What the hell ? That's crazy ! What's the point ?"

"I don't know. Actually, I think if he allowed me to see you, it's because he knew I wouldn't buy it, you having called me and all."

"Still, that doesn't make sense. Why would chief Bogo do that ? It's the best way to destroy morale at the precinct. Especially if he can't allow visits. How can he hope to hide this anyway. There are doctors and nurses that have seen him awake. He can't hope to keep everyone's mouth shut." Judy was fuming.

"I really don't know. I find it a bit scary. I hope he knows-"

There was a loud knock on the door and the buffalo, a file under his arm, entered the room, followed by sergeant Blackfur which was carrying three large folding chairs with the hospital logo. The three mammals turned to them, with wide eyes but otherwise blank expression.

"Officer Clawhauser, thanks for your time. You can go back to your duties. And not a word about-" He pointed at Nick with his thumb.

"Sir, what the hell ?" Nick's voice interrupted. Chief Bogo gave him a glance, the kind that said 'not right now'. Judy didn't catch it so she talked in turn "What is this about Nick supposedly being in a coma ?"
The chief slowly felt his anger rising. It really wasn't a good day, and he knew it would only get worse. He didn't need their- well, any kind of attitude right now.

"I too find it very strange sir. What's going on ?" Asked the pudgy cat.

"I do not have any explanation to give you. Please leave the room." the chief said in the most calm voice he could muster. He clenched his teeth, hoping the feline wouldn't insist. But he did.

"But sir, I don't think it's-"

_Do not get angry. Firm. Not angry._

"I don't care. Leave. The. Room." The chief's tone was beyond firm. Any mammal could hear the spikes of anger in the chief's voice. He stared at him with cold eyes. The cheetah felt a shiver in his spine. His shoulders slumped and he went to the door, waving to his friend.

Usually, the time would be a bit more diplomat, but this time he just needed his officer to quickly obey orders.

"Bye guys."

"Bye Ben see you later."

Blackfur unfolded the chair and sat on one, while the chief sat on another.

"Hello chief Bogo, hello Sergeant Blackfur." Nick's tone was respectful but Judy could hear the icy glazing. He seemed to not have appreciated how the chief had dismissed the cheetah.

Judy simply saluted, nodding to the chief and the sergeant.

"Hello officers" answered the panda, the chief simply raising a hoof while trudging in the file, putting the sheets in order.

The chief's attitude started to slowly annoy Judy too.

"Are we waiting for someone else, sir ?"

"Yes, he should arrive in about a minute. How are you two doing since yesterday ?"

"We're fine sir. What was this about Nick being supposedly into a coma ?" Judy was trying keep a calm expression, but the anxiousness was obvious in her voice.

"I'll explain all of it when our last guest will be here."

Just as he had stopped talking, a knock came from the door. It opened on a bunny, which calmly walked in.

He was a grey bunny, with unusual stripes coming from the back of his head to the middle of his cheeks, and one in the end of each of his black tipped ears. He was wearing a simple suit with buttoned shirt, but no tie. To anyone, he looked like he was wearing a mask of confidence but to Nick, it was a mask of nothingness. He hopped on the empty chair and sat on it.

"Officers, this is agent Jack Savage. Mister Savage, here's-"

"Lieutenant Judith Laverne Hopps, Corporal Nicholas Piberius Wilde and Sergeant Wight Blackfur. Let's get right to business, time is a precious commodity."
Nick went from wary, to downright disdain. He didn't like the bunny. At all. Something in his demeanor crept him out. He looked in his eyes, to trying to gauge him. Still nothing. The bunny held his gaze a bit. Nick finally found something. There was danger, something his instinct were never wrong about. But it faded as soon as the bunny turned his eyes to Judy, like he was gauging her in turn.

Judy heard a slight growl coming from her fox, she instinctively put a paw on his thigh to calm him, and the growl receded.

The chief seemed oblivious to the incident. He began speaking.

"Officer Hopps, officer Wilde. Everything that we're about to talk about can in no way leave this room. It's a matter of security for the whole city. Am I making myself clear?"

"Yes sir!"

"Good, mister Savage, I'll let you tell your part."

The chief scoffed before beginning to speak."Approximately 8 months ago, I discovered through my contacts that a new drug was being created, and I'm yet to find the way it's distributed, if it is, which is another matter altogether. And I'm fairly certain that it's partially made with a mix of cocaine and Midnicampum Holicithias, also known as Nighthowler. Since you were both responsible of the rise of power and ultimate downfall of ex-mayor Bellwether, I suppose you know what application the plant in question can have. Now, a new drug and new ring of cooks and sellers wouldn't usually be much of a problem. A few nudges here and there, and the new market would join the other. But it's not only it. There has been mammals under the influence of this new drug going wild and shooting at people. And mostly at cops. All those drugged mammals having been able to put a paw on a gun too, is to me far from a coincidence. And to add to the strangeness of the situation, Bellwether's been kidnapped, and most probably killed, since all the blood in her cell was hers, just as those drugged mammals appeared in all corners of the city, leaving trails of chaos in their path, and killing several officers. To me, it all point toward a form of conspiracy."

The bunny made a slight pause, looking at both the mammals facing him, leaving his eyes planted on Nick's. "That's why I came to recruit you, officer Nicholas Piberius Wilde."

"Recruit me? I feel flattered, but as you see, I've been wounded. I can't really help you right now." Nick's tone was icy. He didn't like the bunny, he didn't like his tone and he didn't like all the secrecy. "I don't even know who you work for. You're certainly not ZPD."

The striped bunny took-out a plaque. "I'm ZIA."

Judy's eyes shot wide open, but Nick stayed unphased.

"Right. Of course. And what? You want to recruit me into the ZIA? Aren't the drug's big cases usually the DEZA's problem?"

"It would, if it was a drug case. But it's not."

"I'm not going to enlist into the ZIA. I'm here to help mammals, not spy on them."

"You're here because of your relation to Judy Hopps." There was a grin in the corner of the bunny's mouth, Nick was sure of it.

The growl came back, louder this time. How could he let this bunny get to him? The growl receded once again.
"And why do you need me, is this case too big for a little bunny?"

Chief Bogo cut in.

"Officer Wilde, enough." he hadn't shouted but his voice was louder than usual "Agent Savage came asking for your help, and even if you have the possibility of refusing, I highly suggest you calm down and listen to what he has to say."

"Thanks mister Bogo." said the bunny, "No, this case isn't too big for me, but it would highly help me to have a fox partner for reasons I cannot divulge to the people present at the moment."

"And why can't you?"

"Because the more they know of this operation, the more they, and it, can become compromised."

"Then what can you tell us agent Savage?" Asked Judy, addressing him for the first time.

"What I can say to you is this. This will be an undercover operation. It will be dangerous and it has more chances of failing than succeeding. It means Nick's life will be constantly at risk. He'll have to change his identity, which only us will know about." He made another pause and glanced at Bogo. "I think I said what I had to."

"Yes, mostly. As Nick's superior I have a few things to add. First of all, this operation could be long. As far as estimation goes, we can speculate about 4 months, maybe even more. Blackfur will also be your liaison in ZPD, so she'll be able to give you all the information she has access to as well as ensuring your psychological monitoring."

"It's something I could take care of." Said Jack.

"I want someone in house to do it."

"You don't trust me."

"I don't trust the ZIA."

"That's fair, the ZIA doesn't trust anyone."

Nick lifted his paws as to interrupt them.

"Guys, not that I don't find all this business to be utterly hilarious, but how can you hope that I could get undercover? My face's been on TV, and I'm not even speaking about the people on the underworld that actually know me. Anyone with half a brain will blow my cover in less than a second."

"You'll bleach your fur grey, trim it around your face and put contact lens on. And about you being in the hospital, a few photos and video leaked to the public and we're set."

"Huh, clever, but I could do better. I have a look alike in this city, I could take his place."

"Whoever he is, he's linked to you, it would be a liability."

"Fine. But don't think I've accepted to help you yet. I still have one more problem. I don't see how I could go four months without seeing Judy." He put a paw on her shoulder and she squeezed it lovingly. "I'm bound to her."

"That's not an unusual problem in undercover operation." Said the ZIA agent. "Though, we've
never had to deal with a fox's bond. We can arrange safe-houses for your meetings with your psychological monitor, twice a month, and have you meet your mate. From that point you'd be able to do whatever you want." Nick heard the slight tinge of aversion from the bunny.

"Seems like you have something against Judy and me being an item."

"I do, but it's inconsequential."

"You're right. It is."

Nick knew he shouldn't but something in the bunny's attitude made him want to antagonize him.

"I think that's all we can divulge without you having accepted the mission." Said chief Bogo cutting short the discussion before an argument could arise.

Nick thought about it for a second before speaking again. "I want Judy kept in the loop of the case evolution, to be part of my liaison and the investigation on your end."

"We can't accept that officer Wilde." Firmly answered Jack savage. "She's emotionally involved with you, and I know first hand of bunny's emotions."

"Maybe, but she knows me better than anyone, she knows how I think and she's one of the best detective in the ZPD, even if she doesn't officially exercise this function." He looked chief Bogo in the eyes with a smirk "Yet."

"She'll be in reeducation-"

"If you could stop talking about me like I wasn't there, I would highly appreciate it." she cut, in a sharp tone. "I don't like what is happening here, I don't like the idea of Nick going undercover, and frankly, I'm totally against it. It's too risky, and even if I know you're a good hustler, I'm afraid it could prove to be too much for you." there was worry in her eyes as she directed them in his.

"I know it's scary, but honestly it seems to be the most efficient way to get to the bottom of all this." Answered the fox.

"There is another way. We can work with the ZPD, follow the regulations, minimize the risk."

"Miss Hopps, I think-" began the male rabbit.

"I don't care what you think, agent Savage." She answered in a brusque tone she rarely used. "What matters is my mate's opinion. So, what do you think ? Let's do it our way." She gave him a hopeful smile.

"I'd usually agree with you Judy. Really I would. And trust me when I say I really don't want to partner up with this guy. He's way less sexy than you are," he joked, slightly defusing the room's tension. "But people's lives are at play, if those criminals want to eliminate pred-haters as they did with Bellwether, a whole lot of mammals could lose their lives. And it's my duty as an officer to stop it. And if it means going over a few rules and regulations to do my job... Well you know me."

He was right, deep down, she knew it and she hated it. But it was the reason she had fell in love with him. His heart was in the right place, he was ready to risk his own life to do what was right.

She kissed his hand, that was sitting on her shoulder, as sign of approval.

"But all this means nothing if they don't respect my request." he added.
"Officer Wilde, you know I can't accept this." said Bogo.

"Chief, she will do what she wants, whether you want it or not." the cape Buffalo was slightly taken aback by his officer openly going against his refusal. "So you better do what you can to monitor her activities, which means probably making them official. Because trust me, if something happens to her because of this investigation that could have been prevented if you had given her officers to watch over her, you will regret it." The cape buffalo lifted a brow, was the fox threatening him ? "And I'm not talking about what I would do, I'm stating a fact." The fox's posture shifted, slightly leaning forward with a grin "You actually will regret it."

The grin on his face was the sly one, but more cunning, more devious than she had ever seen him wear.

The buffalo sighed. The fox knew what string to pull, and how to drive a point home.

"Alright, Judy will work on the investigation, but only as soon as the doctors let her leave the hospital. And she'll have to be supervised by two other officers as long as this investigation takes place." 

"Mister Bogo, it seems like a mistake to me." Intervened the agent.

"Having her in the ZPD seemed like a mistake to me. Those two spend their time proving everyone wrong, I'll give them the benefice of doubt."

"Then it's settled, I accept the mission. When do we start ?" The mask of warmth and confidence was back on Nick's face.

"First you'll have to sign this." The chief stood up and gave a paper and a pen to Nick.

The rabbit and fox read the document.

"What-"

"-the actual fuck !"

In substance, it was a paper stating that Nick had every authority to act as he saw fit, in the context of the case. That included being pardoned of any crime he could commit while undercover. It was essentially a license to kill.

"Nick, you can't sign that !"

"Judy, just because I sign it doesn't mean I will act upon it." he whispered. But himself wasn't so sure he should accept those terms.

Judy's head shot up, looking at the male bunny with narrowed eyes.

"Did you sign one ?"

"Yes but not the same one. Mine is a bit more permanent."

"How many mammals do possess this authorization ?" Asked Nick.

"Beside me and officer Wilde, only two other mammals since the creation of the ZIA. The archive on the first ones have been lost" They could hear the hidden meaning of the sentence. "And the second one, twenty-five years ago was a white bear, now defector, covert name Koslov, codename Snowstill."
Judy and Nick looked at each other.

"What? Koslov is ZIA?"

"Was. He defected. He's partly responsible for Big's family rise to power, under our orders, and I'm fairly certain the shrew knows of everything. I'm the third agent having signed this paper, I've done so eight years ago." The Judy and Nick understood it, it meant that though there were other agent, none had that level of clearance.

The fox signed the paper.

"You'll have to call me Nick if we're to work together."

"No I won't. You'll be given a covert identity and codename. You'll be to use this identity as soon as you'll get it and change your appearance accordingly. Your codename can never be used by yourself in the presence of anyone beside the people in this room and others of my choosing. I'll come get you at the end of the week, so be ready. Have a nice day officers."

The bunny hopped down from his chair and left the room, without a glance to anyone in the room.

Silence fell on the mammals. The buffalo pinched his eyes, breathing by his nose. "I really can't stand the ZIA."

The chief stood up in turn. "I've said what I had to. Sorry if I don't stay, but I have other matters to attend to. Officer Wilde, I'm still waiting on your report. If you could also help officer Hopps write hers, it would be great. Officer Blackfur will stay, she still has things to tell you on the psychological side of your involvement. Now good bye and have a nice day."

Blackfur stayed behind as he left the room.

"I have a few things to say and recommendations to make, Nick. Do you wish to go somewhere more private? This could get a bit personal."

"No, whatever it is, I want Judy to hear it. I have a question though, were you transferred to Precinct One in preparation to this operation?"

"I don't think so. Although I already played an informal role in psychological support for my fellow officers in Rainforest, I actually volunteered for a position here. My ancient precinct's chief encouraged me to it, though. I also find all this way too coincidental."

She took a look at the file the chief had left her.

"First of all, know that your family will be informed of what you're doing. Not in details, but your mother will be told about you in a coma being a cover story. I'll add your friend Finnick to the list and Judy's parents, since they already saw you in good condition. I'll have them sign forms about not divulging anything about your state beside what will be said in the story that will run in the news." she glanced at a paper and went back to the fox. "Now, I don't need to give you a psychological exam, I've observed you enough as you were working at the precinct to know what I need about you."

Nick kept the confident mask on and looked at the panda and then at her mate.

"Am I this easy to read?"

"No, but she's really good at noticing things, you can ask Wolford." Answered the bunny with a
"I studied psychology too. Now, what I can say about you is that you know how to play a role. You're really good at masking your intentions and creating plans on the fly. Those are good qualities that you'll have to use a lot. But I'm more concerned about your sense of justice. You hate oppression and violence and can't stand to see mammals crushed under other's authority. And you like even less being on either side of those kind of interaction. I must warn you, you'll see a lot of it, and you'll have to take part in it." She sighed "To be honest, I'm against you doing this too. There is high risk you'll snap and blow your cover in a situation like this."

"I know how to control myself and keep in character."

"Do you really ? It took you less than two day to ditch your hustling life to help officer Hopps."

"It's different, I fell in love," he said, scratching lovingly Judy's shoulder. She nudged his chin in return.

"Then you let emotions dictate your actions." The fox was about to retort but the panda lifted a paw. "I'm not criticizing, to me it was something good in that specific situation, but I need you to be aware of all the risks involved and all the ways you could compromise yourself."

"And the investigation." added Judy.

"Right now I'm his psychological support and monitor, I don't give a crap about the investigation. I suppose I don't need to go more in depth about your psyche-profile, I know you introspect more than you show. Your humour will be a good safeguard too, so don't lose it." She took another sheet of paper. "Now, to go on a more heavy topic, the repercussions of staying undercover too long."

"Isn't that something you should've talked about before Nick accepted the mission ?" cut Judy.

"Maybe, but I didn't want to talk about his psyche-profile in front of agent Savage, and those two topics being linked... Besides, I doubt it would have had any impact on Nick's decision." she smiled.

"You're right on that."

"I'll even go as far as guessing that he had made his decision the moment agent Savage said he couldn't divulge more as long as Nick wasn't on board."

Nick chuckled, not denying nor confirming.

"Besides, he can still change his mind. So about the risks, a long time undercover can lead to major changes in one's psychology and behaviour. Side and long-lasting effects can include PTSD, since you'll do and see things you won't like, and DID, Dissociative Identity Disorder. Managing two identities at once and keeping track of your lies will drain you. You'll build relationships during this operation, that although based on lies, will result in true emotions and attachment. Chances are, you will build friendships with people you will have to bring down afterwards. And your personality will most likely be affected."

Nick's mask was still on but he felt a cold sensation in his spine.

"Judy fell in love with the fox I was, and that I am now. If I become someone else, could she really keep on loving me ?"

"Together we will be able to get through this." assured Judy, but he had heard uncertainty in her little smile.
voice.

"I think so too." confirmed the panda "Nick has lived twenty years as a con-mammal, and even if I doubt he ever went into really deep criminal activities he always retained a sense of honor. I can see him getting out of this in one piece, but it won't be easy."

Nick felt Judy's grasp on his paw tighten, he squeezed her shoulder and kissed her on the forehead. "We're going to be okay."

"Of course we are." she made a pause. "Wait, as I understand it, the longer one goes and stays undercover, the bigger the psychological risks and damage are. This Savage guy has been doing this for eight years ! How can he still look so... Normal."

Silence fell in the room.

"I couldn't take a look at his psyche-eval. But from what I've seen, he's far from being balanced. He seems really cold, untouched by the situation."

"Untouched ? Do you think I tried to provoke him just for shit and giggles ? He's completely numb to... Anything."

"I was aware of your intentions. He wasn't even phased by your attacks. Be careful though, it doesn't mean he doesn't care. He could prove to be even more dangerous than the investigation." the panda put back the sheet in the file. "But enough on this matter. Do you have any question about what we've just discussed ?"

"Nope."

"Nothing comes to mind."

The panda stood up. "Then I'm off, Wolford is waiting for me, have a nice day and try to rest. I'll tell the officers in charge of escorting your visitors to give you thirty minutes to breath just in case, to take this all in."

"Good bye officer Blackfur."

"Bye Wight."
Part 2 : Lycus Case

Chapter 8 : Only so He Could Be Happy

Saturday the 19th of January 2019

After the panda had left, a strange silence had fallen on the room. Judy broke it.

"Nick, are you sure you want to do this?"

"No, I don't, I don't even like the idea of doing this."

"You could have refused." She let her face rest on his chest. "You should have refused."

"If it's the fastest way to get to the bottom of this, then I think it's worth it."

"Do you really? I don't want you to become an empty and emotionless machine like this Savage guy."

"Hey Carrots." he said, caressing her cheek. "Don't worry. It's me remember? I'll be ok."

"I know it's you. That's why I worry." she looked up to meet his eyes. "I know you're tough. You're more tough than people realise. But you're less than you think you are." She sighed "Let's not have this conversation. If you're going to do it, you'll need all the help you can get, and I must support you." she breathed deeply, taking back the tears she felt wear rising "And I think, even if it goes against the things I believe in, you're actually the only one that could pull it off without too much collateral damage. You'll find a way to do this without harming any other mammal. I know you will."

Nick kissed her head. He was afraid he had made the wrong choice by accepting to be part of this operation, but knowing he had her support gave him strength.

He playfully nuzzled her ear, sending a ticklish sensation down her spine.

"Nick, stop." she giggled.

"Would you rather have me do this?" he leaned her head back and planted a smooch on her pink nose.

"You're impossible."

"Impossibly charming" he tried to smooch her again on the nose, but she moved her head, and their lips met, turning the innocent kiss into something a bit more passionate. He felt one of her paw reach up, and pulling him in front of her by the gown with a strength he didn't think she could have in her state.

"Woh, easy fluff-butt. You'll hurt yourself."

She planted her eyes into his. "I think we have some unfinished business, you and I." she pulled him forward and gave him a burning kiss. Nick's mind went to a total stop for a few seconds, trying to grasp what was actually happening. His senses were completely overwhelmed, focused on only one thing. Her. He returned her kiss, trying, and failing by a hair, to match her intensity. She felt
his hand caressing her, sending shivers of craving into her body.

The fox moved back from her, a devilish look in his eyes.

"Nick, if you think of leaving me like this, I swear to god-"

"No, actually I have an idea." He lifted the sheet, and slowly kissed her chest, getting down to her belly. "I need to practice." he added.

Between two moans, she was able to ask "Practice what?"

The devilish grin was still there. "Going undercover."

"Nick, you dumb foOooh sweet cheese and crackers-" She felt him caressing her thighs and firmly holding her injured leg, keeping her from moving. It was a good thing, because what he was doing to her made her lose all control, tensing all muscles in her body. Nick heard her moans going louder and louder and suddenly stop. He risked an eye up, slightly lifting the sheets, and saw her holding a pillow on her face. Seeing as his actions had the desired effect, he kept going for a while. All the tension in her body suddenly doubled, and he heard her voice through the pillow and sheets. There was a ripping sound, and she slowly went limp, her chest heavily rising as she was trying to take back her breath.

He crawled back up with a satisfied smile, lifting the ripped pillow from her face, discovering her expression of utter bliss.

"You okay, carrots?" he asked smugly.

"amperfecl'fine" she mumbled. Nick repressed a chuckle.

He had lied down at her side, on his elbow, a finger running on her shivering belly.

"I had never tasted bunny before."

"wuzzitastelike?"

"Lust."

He didn't make a move to avoid the half pillow that landed on his face. He rid himself of the bundle of fabric and feathers, approaching his bunny, wrapping her in a loving embrace. "I think I finally get why my ancestors were chasing after bunnies..."

She lost herself in his fur and scent, having momentarily forgotten about all their problems. Nick was perfectly relaxed, until he felt a paw playfully brush his tail.

"Judy?"

"Yeah?" came a falsely innocent voice.

"You know, playing with my tail isn't the best way to let me relax."

The brushing became somewhat more sensual.

"Maybe I don't want you completely relaxed yet."

Nick straightened up, taking a look at her with a puzzled expression. "You want round two? Already?"
She nervously played with her paws, a blush of embarrassment slowly creeping under her fur. "Hormones." she answered in a meek voice.

Nick chuckled, caressing her cheek while nibbling her neck "You know, I'm always up for some bunny-hopping." at the joke, she gave him a light punch. "But this time, I don't know how we're going to do this..."

"Very carefully ?" She proposed.

... 

Nick had been very careful, and there were now two mammals with stupid smiles plastered on their faces lying side by side in a large hospital bed.

"If you want my opinion, my ancestors were stupid to run from your kind."

"Ditto." He chuckled.

"On another matter, I think you'll have to wash me again."

"Sure, because we both don't know how it will end."

"Actually, I think the half-hour Blackfur left us is nearly up. We won't have time for round three. And I feel sticky."

"Okay, understood."

Nick came back with the washcloth and the basin, giving her a quick wash, being careful as to not send her back into full hormonal rabbit mode.

Nick had gotten back in the bathroom to take a shower. Someone knocked at the door.

"Yes, come in ?" answered Judy. Her parents entered the room. They seemed way more composed than the day before but couldn't completely hide the worry on the expression.

"Hey Judy." greeted her mother.

"Hey Jude the Dude !" said her father a bit too enthusiastically.

Judy's mother looked around and saw that Nick was not in sight. She approached the bed and gave Judy a little box of medicine. "I found this on the headstand. I suppose it could be useful." Judy looked at the box and recognized her hormonal suppressants.

"Thanks mom !" she said, immediately taking one, trying to hide her blush.

Both of Judy's parents hopped on the bed, at the same moment Nick went out of the bathroom.

"I knew I heard someone !" he said in a cheery tone. "Hello Hopps." he added, as to greet them. He joined them on the bed, sitting next to his mate. Only then he noticed the disorder of feathers and ripped pillow which was still lying on the bed.

"What happened here ?" asked Bonnie.

"I had a nightmare, ripped my pillow in half while sleeping."
"Sheesh Jude, seems all that police training wasn't for nothing. Pillows have another thing coming for them if they think they can mess with my girl." Laughed Stu. But at his expression, it was obvious he was worried by his daughter having nightmares.

Her father had bought the lie but her mother gave her a suspicious look to which she responded with the most innocent smile she could muster. If her mother had another theory, she didn't bring it up. Instead she asked.

"Judy, Nick, an officer went to find us at your home. He made us sign some sort of paper about not telling anyone of Nick's true condition and that if someone were to ask, we'd have to say that all we knew is what the news say. What's all this about ?"

The fox and bunny looked at each other. There were nothing they could tell them. Judy spoke "Mom, dad, I wish I could tell you, but I can't. The most I can say is that it's job related. It came as a shock to us too."

Nick saw that Judy hated to hide things from her parents. Her ears had slopped on the side of her head and she looked distressed. He scooted closer and wrapped her in his arms.

"That's all right Judy. We expected as much, though it doesn't really ease our minds."

As Stu had stopped talking, the door flung open and a obviously anxious vixen entered the room.

"Nicholas Piberius Wilde, what the fuck is this about you being supposedly in a coma and me having to hide the truth ? Care to explain what the bloody hell this is all about ?"

Behind her, Finnick waved at them with a half-apologetic smile.

Nick repressed a chuckle "Mom, mind your language in front the sensitive country bunnies. And we're in a hospital, so no shouting. By the way, aren't you out of work a bit earlier than expected."

She approached the bed, her attitude unchanged, but she spoke quieter "Do not sass me. What the fuck did you do this time, young man ?"

"Mom, calm down. I did nothing. This is part of the job, and I honestly can't say anything more about it."

It was obvious Vivienne wasn't satisfied with this explanation, but she knew enough about her son to believe he wouldn't give her anything more to chew on.

Silence fell on the room as Vivienne and Finnick sat on the bed, next to Judy's parents.

"You're like your father, you'll do whatever you want without asking or caring about anyone's opinion. I don't know what's happening or what you're doing, but I hope it won't come back to bite you in the ass."

"Hey dun worry Vi, the kid's clevah. Whatever is happennin', I'm shure he knows what he's doing." Finnick wasn't really reassuring his mate as much as he was trying to get Nick to do so himself. But the red fox didn't answer anything.

Finnick's face fell as he best friend stayed silent. "Nick what the fuck ?" he silently articulated, so Nick would be the only one to read his lips.

"Yeah mom, don't worry. I'm gonna be fine."
"You better be, I already lost a husband, I won't lose my son a second time."

"What happened to your husband, if you don't mind my asking?"

"Stu!" Bonnie reacted, elbowing him in the ribs.

*So that's where carrots got it from.*

"Sorry, I was just curious."

The vixen looked around. Nick face had slightly fallen and Finnick was fiddling his paws uncomfortably. Stu seemed embarrassed as he had asked a personal question and Bonnie was looking at him sternly. Judy was trying to hide an interested look.

The vixen sat more comfortably and stretched her back.

"It's fine. Beside, I'm fairly certain Nick hasn't told Judy yet. He should have, though, it's not really a secret."

The bunny nodded but said. "You don't need to tell us about this. I'm sure it's personal."

"It is, but since I'm here and so are your parents, I think it would be good for you like for them to know where we all come from. Settled down kids, it's story time."

Nick sighed. He didn't want to recall this. It was one his most painful memory, stowed away on the shelves of his mind, side by side with the scout event. To tell the truth, it was a story he had wanted to tell Judy for some time, but he had never found the right time or even the strength. Being able to delegate this task was freeing. He had never heard his mother's side of the story either, and he didn't really care if the Hopps learnt about it. After all, they would eventually become family too.

"It begins about fifteen years ago. I think most of you know by now that Nick had left me and my husband's home when he was twelve." Everyone nodded. Nick wasn't surprised to see that Judy's parents knew of this. It wasn't a secret after all, he simply hoped she hadn't talked about the scout event. That was his and only his to share. "Well, as it happened, this moron thought it was his place to help provide for us, so he sent us bucketloads of money each month. I still don't know how the hell a kid his age could earn this much." She made a slight pause, looking for her words.

"My husband and I were never very rich so this money could have made our lives much easier. But we refused to use it since our kit couldn't benefit from it either. So we were stuck with debts we couldn't pay and money we couldn't use. It's funny in retrospect." She made a slight pause, looking for her words.

"And then my husband had this idea. To use Nick's money to open a tailor shop. It had always been his dream, and he was fucking talented. I still wear most of the clothes he made me. John wanted to open this shop and offer Nick a job. Since our son wouldn't come back as long as he wasn't a proper mammal, what better way to make him come back than to help him become one?" She looked around, and saw Judy's parent hanging to her every word, tears filling their eyes.

From the corner of her eyes, she saw Nick spell "emotional bunnies", but she could see himself wasn't okay.

"We had a huge fight over the use of the money. To me, there was no way we could use it, but Nick's father said that since it was to help build our son's future it was worth it. I told him he was twisting it that way to fulfill his own dream. Even now I still can't bear the thought to use what's in
the shoebox, it felt like stealing. I still can't decide if he was right to do so, but I regret that it ended up dividing us. He slept on the couch for a few weeks and then, when he was able to find someone willing to sell him a place, he slept on a couch in the back of his shop." She wiped a tear from her eye.

"After that, he worked a lot, trying to make a name for himself. He wasn't earning much, but I could see it slowly working. We even started to talk again, I sometime came to the shop to see how he was doing. Then, he was making well enough to offer Nick a real job." she sighed, and made a pause. Judy could see the vixen steeling herself in anticipation of what she was about to tell.

"And of fucking course, that's when things could finally start to get better that shit hit the fan. John fell sick. Cancer. Fucking cancer. You know what's funny ? Thanks to Nick, we would've had the money for cancer treatment, but it spread so quick the doctor didn't have the time to do anything. I could only contact Finnick so Nick would have time to talk to his father one last time." All the bunnies were silently crying now. Nick had placed himself behind Judy, his arms wrapped around her shoulders. Her parents had their face buried in tissues, ears slumped back.

"I couldn't bring myself to meet Nick. I felt guilty. I felt guilty about Nick leaving, I felt guilty about rejecting my husband, I felt like he wouldn't have fell sick if had been more understanding, a better mother, a better wife. Like karma had found the most twisted way to punish me. I'd have lost my kit, and now, it was my husband's turn. Nick stayed in his father's room for an hour and when he left, John was sleeping. He seemed at peace, happy. I don't know what Nick said to him, but he did something I'm sure I would've not been able to."

Judy felt Nick's throat tightened before he began to speak. "I felt guilty too. I felt I had broken his heart, both your hearts, that I was the reason he was dying, that if I had stayed he wouldn't have had this cancer. He didn't ask anything from me, we just talked. But in the end, I said-No, I promised to him that I'd come back to you, even if I knew I wasn't going to. At the time I thought you'd blame and hate me as much as I did myself. I lied to him only so he could be happy. Be at peace."

Everyone was in tears now, Nick barely containing his sobbing.

"You Wildes and yer bloody twisted sense of logic." said Finnick discreetly wiping a tear. "He wos my friend too, ya idiot ! Why'd you need to lie to him on his deathbed ?"

"Because saying the truth would've done nothing good. Simple as that."

"Then you should've gone back to her, you moron." almost shouted Finnick as he had gotten up. "I should've forced ya. Fuck, I'm as much of a moron as you are." the fennec voice died, as he had clenched his fists.

"It's okay Fin." she put a soothing paw on his shoulder "He did good. Seeing John with a smile, a more real smile that the ones he had worn in years. It was good. At the time, I truly felt like I had lost Nick forever, so if the last thing he did for me was leave a smile on John's face, I was happy. John died soon after, it was Finnick who organised the burial. I couldn't."

"You did ? I didn't know." said Nick.

"You were so down the drain after yer father's death, I didn't wannit ta weigh on ya at the time."

"The burial in itself was horrible. So little people showed up."

"Mister Big came though." said Nick "Never knew how him and dad knew each other."

Her mother glanced at him "He made him some of his suits I think. I didn't know you had come."
"How couldn't I? I was hiding behind a tombstone. I almost came to support you but Finnick was there for you, so I didn't. I paid my respect when everyone was gone."

Judy knew before that Nick had a tragic past, but this was beyond what she had expected. She would've crumbled into pieces if half of it had happened to her. When she had met him, she thought no one could get more cynical and pessimistic. But he had been way better than what he could've been in retrospect.

Judy saw her parents pull Vivienne into a hug to comfort her, tears pouring from their eyes. She repressed a chuckle when she saw the vixen patting their back with a sad smile.

"Nick, why everytime we see eachotha' it systematically turns into a sob fest?" ask the fennec, while giving tissues to the Hopps.

"Beats me. Maybe bunnies are simply an easy crowd. Owtch, hey easy on the ribs carrots."

"Sorry."

He kissed her between the ears. "I'm okay. And besides, I'm glad we had this sob-fest. I never got to know mom's side of the story."

"You didn't really give yours." Remarked the bunny in his arms.

"There isn't much more to tell" he stated, not trying to hide anything "Dad was dying, Fin came and told me, I came and I soothed his last moments with a lie. And I was a complete wreck for a couple years afterward." he shrugged.

If it had come from any other mammal, with the tone he used it would've looked like he was past it. But she could see the scar ran deep, he was simply good at brushing it off.

Judy's parents tears finally went dry and they noticed they were hugging Nick's mother.

"Sorry about that m'am." said Stu.

She gave them a warm smile.

"No harm done, I had never been hugged by bunnies before. I see what you find in it, Nick." she winked. The three Hopps' face immediately shot red. Finnick snickered and Nick nibbled at Judy's ears.

"You have no idea."

Vivienne was obviously trying to lighten the mood, and Nick was glad to help.

"Oh sweet cheese and crackers" said Bonnie, completely embarrassed.

"Well," said Stu "I can understand what Judy finds in foxes." added Stu in a joking tone.

"Dad!"

"Stu!"

Thwack

"Owtch" Stu was now scratching the back of his head in pain, and Bonnie, face red with embarrassment and annoyance was staring at him. "I deserved that one alright." he turned to his
wife with an apologetic look "You know I only have eyes for you."

"You better." she said, holding him by the collar, and giving him a kiss on the snout.

"Oh, I can see the predatory bunny now." joked Nick. "Not that I have never seen one before." he added nuzzling at a blushing Judy's neck.

"Are all foxes like this?" she asked, lifting her eyes at the ceiling in a desperate tone.

The conversation had switched to more cheerful topic, everyone was having a good time chatting when Vivienne interrupted them looking at her wristwatch.

"Oh shit, I'm going to be late for my afternoon job." She put a peck on Nick's forehead and waved at the rest of them, Finnick following her. "You don't have to come with me Fin."

"I'll accompany you to the ZUG station, I'll come back here afterwards."

Only two minutes after they left, a knock came from the door. A cheerful and round cheetah face appeared. "Hey guys!" He was holding a large white box. Judy and Nick rightfully assumed it was full of donuts.

"Hey Ben!" answered his friends.

The pudgy cat looked at the two other bunnies on the bed. "Judy are those your parents? They look just as cute as you!"

The two bunnies were taken aback by the overly cheery feline attitude, and his body shape. They had never seen a fat cheetah, they couldn't even imagine that such a thing existed. In a motion way to limber for his looks, he hopped on the bed, energetically shaking Bonnie and Stu's paws. "It's so nice to meet you! You must be Stu and Bonnie, my name is Benjamin Clawhauser. Ben for shorts." They didn't have the time to react as he opened the donut box in front of them "Donuts? The orange ones are carrots-glazed."

Stu and Bonnie looked at Judy who nodded with a smile. They each chose one and the feline turned to Judy. She raised a paw, refusing "Sorry Ben, Can't eat, doctor's orders." His shoulders slumped, it seemed he had brought them to cheer her up, he then turned to Nick. "The brown ones are caramel flavored, I know you don't like carrots. I hope you can have one." The cheetah was as thoughtful as ever. Nick smiled "I love Carrots, but only the grey one." he felt a playful nudge on his ribs and a loving peck on his cheek. The fox took a donut "Thanks Ben." The cheetah left himself fall on his rear in a comical sitting stance and chose a carrot-glazed donut.

"I can't really stay long, it's my lunch break. I simply wanted to make sure you guys were okay." His friend heard the subtle underlying implication of his sentence. After Bogo had sent him out rather coldly from the room, he had been a bit worried for them. "I hope what you and Bogo talked about wasn't too grave." Here also, there was something underneath his tone. But it wasn't a question, the cheetah had been a bit shocked and saddened by the chief's attitude. He knew she shouldn't have insisted and hadn't had the occasion to apologize for it since. His friend had picked up on his sadness, but couldn't really say anything, since what they had discussed had to stay secret.

"No, don't worry Ben, only some administrative stuff, and something about psyche-monitoring us about the shooting." Judy lied. Nick felt uneasy. He felt like Judy had picked up on his habit of hiding the truth to protect others and himself. Of course, she couldn't tell the truth, but he thought the lie had come way too spontaneously. It wasn't a road he wished she took. He sometimes
believed she was too innocent, but also rather liked this aspect of her.

"Yes Ben, nothing to worry about."

The door opened again, showing Finnick. The fennec didn't have the habit to knock on door, not having lived in a house for a long time. Clawhauser turned around and Judy could see the squeelee building up on his face.

"Ooooooh what an adorable little guy ! Is it your little brother, Nick ?"

The Hopps used their ears to cover their faces, half-embarrassed, half-laughing. Nick couldn't repress a chuckle.

"Is it a big fella's prerequisite ta call all lil' mammals adorable ?" The fennec's expression had turned to annoyance. "Swear on me mum's name, next one ta'call me adorable eats mah fist. Nick, shut up. Just because ya wounded doesn't mean ah' won't punch ya."

The pudgy cheetah's jaw fell. "Sorry, I didn't know you were an adult, I thought-"

"Don't worry, I ain't mad. The fat rabbit behind ya made da same mistake. He still in one piece." the fennec hopped back on the bed and shook the paw of the shocked mammal. "The name's Finnick !"

"You're Finnick ? I should've known, Judy and Nick talked about you."

"Yep, he's the one with the van."

"The one with the awesome paintjob you showed me on your phone ?"

An idea crossed Nick's mind. "Yup, he did it himself." he said.

The cheetah's eyes shot wide open. "Really ? Are you parked near ? Can you show it to me ?"

"Right now ?"

"Oh pleasease, my lunch break is over soon."

Nick gave Fin a thumbs up. The fennec shrugged. "Why not. Follow me, fat cat." He left the room followed by a wide smiling cheetah.

Judy's parent watched him leave with a puzzled look. "Is he always like that ?"

"To be honest, he seemed a bit off to me." answered Judy.

"Yeah, he looked a bit down." added Nick.

The two rabbits looked each other in disbelief. They turned back to Judy and her mate. Bonnie spoke "By the way, we'd really like to stay, but there are loads of work to do on the farm and we really need to get back there to coordinate. We've left in too much of a hurry. We're leaving Zootopia this evening."

"Judy, you're sure you don't want to be transferred to a hospital a Bunny-burrows ?" asked her dad. "Only while you heal, so we can take care of you."

"Thanks dad, but no. I obtained from chief Bogo to get back to work during my recovery, and I can't really do that from the burrows."
"You what? But you can't work in this state!"

"It's only desk work. Nothing physical. I'm dedicated, not stupid." she joked.

"Trust me, without her, the precinct and the city would fall apart." Added the fox.
Clawhauser was at his desk. It had been three days since all hell broke loose in the city. People were scared, he could see it on the street. Mammals were looking over their shoulder, glancing suspiciously at everyone they didn't know. It was different from Bellwether's case. This time, preds weren't targeted by the people. It was the poor, the junkies, the outcasts. The marginals, already usually looked upon had seen their life fall even lower. The number of beaten hobos had climbed, people making their own brand of justice, despite the efforts of the ZPD.

Mayor Swinton had held a press conference to encourage the people to hold together, to stay united and to remember how things had gotten bad under the rule of Bellwether.

In three days, much hadn't radically changed, and with the public faces trying to maintain the order, Clawhauser believed things could go back to their mostly calm selves. In his idea, Judy needed to quickly get back from the hospital and make a public speech. Even though everything hadn't been perfect for preds, since her last official apparition, the violence and racism was clearly on the downward slope.

The chubby feline, as he was sitting on his chair behind his desk, felt lost in a hazy fog. He didn't really understand what was happening in his mind. The truth was, his optimist outlook on life had been dampened by the recent events. After the crisis from two days ago, he had a hard time focusing on his work. The precinct felt alien, the state of panic had been gone as quick as it had come. It could all seem like a bad dream if he hadn't been able to pick up the stigmates of it on his co workers. They felt tense, stressed. Even Wolford, usually cheerful at the idea to go on patrol seemed to fake his enthusiasm.

The pudgy cheetah shook his head, putting a paw on a file on his desk. It was daily reports he had to give to chief Bogo. He didn't know why he shuddered at the idea of coming into the buffalo's office. It was usually a place he felt safe in. He felt stupid, the chief's attitude toward him at the hospital didn't mean anything, he was only under a lot of pressure. People under pressure could easily snap at little inconvenience and to be honest, he had already forgiven the bovine. Still, he felt uncomfortable. He didn't look forward to go up at the end of his shift.

"Hello Ben."

The cheetah's head shot up at the sound of the feminine voice. It was FitzAntlers.

"You're usually ready to go when I arrive."

He looked at the time, his shift had been over for two minutes already. The deer was slightly late, but he knew she would compensate by coming in earlier the following day.

"Sorry, I was lost in my thoughts, I have this file to bring up to chief Bogo and I was checking if it was ready."

"You want me to bring it to him while you prepare ?"
The feline thought about it. Not going into the chief's office was tempting at the moment, but he really wanted to see him and apologize.

"No, you know the chief, he can be a bit stiff about who should do each task." The feline had already began packing his stuff into his satchel.

"True. Well, I'll install myself."

The feline quickly finished to put his stuff in order and took the direction of the stairs. As he approached the dreaded room, and felt a weight on his shoulder. He put his most warm smile on his face and knocked on the door.

"Come in." came the stern and deep voice.

The feline entered the room and approached the desk.

The chief had his head resting on his hoof, elbow on the table. In his other hoof, was a glass half-filled with an amber colored liquid. The cat noticed a whisky bottle on the desk. He tried to hide his surprise. "I have the daily report. I'll put it here." he said, sliding it on the desk. The chief didn't answer, looking at his glass, a slight motion in his wrist.

The chubby officer didn't want to pry, but he couldn't stop himself from asking. "Chief, are you alright ?".

The wrist motion stopped, but the chief didn't look up nor did he answer.

Is he really upset with me ?

The cheetah tried to keep his composure and took a step back. "You look preoccupied. I'll leave you to your thou-"

"Would you like a glass of whisky, Ben ?"

The chief rarely used his subordinates first-name. Clawhauser had only heard him do so once or twice off-duty. Since himself was technically off-duty, he tried to think nothing of it.

"Uhm, I don't really-" If he would try and apologize to the chief, refusing a glass maybe wasn't the best course of action. "Why not ?"

The buffalo took out a second glass from his desk and filled it half-way. He made a motion from his other hoof to invite the cat on the seat facing him and slid the glass on the desk to the pudgy officer, who took it.

The buffalo raised his glass with an absent expression.

"To what do we drink ?" asked Clawhauser.

"To what should we ?" The voice had its usual stern tone.

"To Nick and Judy quickly getting back at the precinct ?" Proposed the cat. He noticed a sudden imperceptible tension in the chief's demeanor. The buffalo raised his glass, as to approve and took a sip. The feline did the same and couldn't hold back a wince. Whisky was definitely not his thing. He steeled himself and took another sip. He looked up and caught the glimpse of a smile in the corner of the chief's mouth. It gave him a bit of courage, enough to begin speaking.

"Chief, I wanted to apologize."
The buffalo's right brow lifted ever so slightly.

"About the event at the hospital, I shouldn't have insisted about-"

He heard something like a scoff coming from the chief. He was scratching his forehead with his hoof, glancing at Clawhauser. The feline could discern something in the chief's eyes, a mix of annoyance and something he couldn't quite make out. Strangely enough, the cat didn't feel the annoyance was aimed at him. The chief downed his drink and put loudly back the glass on the table, filling it again.

He mumbled something the feline couldn't hear, as he got up from his seat, approaching the window and resting his left forearm on the upper frame. The cheetah caught himself staring at the muscular silhouette cut out in the setting sun light. He didn't know why, but the chief seemed tired to him. He slumped down from his seat and placed himself next to his superior.

The buffalo had lost his gaze in the city's buildings as he spoke.

"If anyone has to apologize, it is me. I snapped at you yesterday for no reason other than my stress. So there it is. I'm sorry Ben."

The cheetah was barely able to keep his jaw from falling. "You- you don't need to-" he began, embarrassed.

"I do."

A silence lingered between the two mammals.

"Then I forgive you." said the cheetah in the most firm and serious tone he could muster.

The chief took another sip, contemplating the city's landscape.

"My city is in shambles. Or it's about to be. People are scared, and I can see things coming. Bad things. Like we've not seen since the foundation of the city and the control-collar act."

Clawhauser's grandfather had talked to him about the act. At the city's beginning, when prey and pred tried to begin living openly together, there had been a few acts in question to ensure the prey's safety. One of those was the control-collar act. Pred having to wear electric devices to calm them down, in case their emotion got too high. It sparked riots and street fights. In the end, the law wasn't adopted, but it left scars in the generation that had lived in fear of it.

"Why do you think so, sir ?"

The buffalo couldn't give a complete answer, it could reveal elements of Nick and Jack's operation. He sighed.

"I feel it in my guts. Do this job long enough and that's something that comes with it." He took another sip. The cat took one too, pulling another wince from his face.

"I'm tired Ben. Whatever we do, it never seems to be enough. And this time, I must admit I'm afraid I won't be up to the task."

Even coming from the chief's mouth, the cat didn't believe for a second that he could fail the city. That to him felt like an impossibility.

The chief felt a paw on the forearm. He surprised himself by accepting the comfort it brought him.
"I don't think this city can fall as long as you are its police chief. If you can't prevent it, I don't believe anyone can."

"No pressure." Chuckled the buffalo, taking another sip. Clawhauser hadn't answered yet and chief Bogo glanced at him.

The feline's expression was cheerful but his tone wasn't "I'm serious."

The chief downed his second glass and turned toward the cheetah, meeting his gaze. He put his free hoof on the feline's shoulder.

"Too often, I take the support you bring to m- to this precinct for granted, Ben. I don't say it enough, but I think you're a great officer."

It had come out of nowhere. Clawhauser mind went blank for a few second, trying to process what had just happened. It wasn't completely unusual to the chief to pay a compliment to his officers, but it usually came with some sort of snarky remark or critic. Not this time however.

"Thanks chief." he answered in a meek voice, blank noise filling his brain, and a strange warm feeling washing over his mind.

The buffalo patted his shoulder. "Off you go now. You shouldn't stay here when you're off work. Even great officers need their rests." The chief took back the second glass as the cheetah went toward the door, trying not to stumble.

"See you tomorrow chief." he was able to mumble.

"See you tomorrow, officer Clawhauser." And just like that, the chief was back to his usual formal self.

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Sunday the 27th of January 2019

The next week had gone by quicker than Nick and Judy had thought it would. That wasn't a surprise to them though. Having to share a room alone for a week was far from their definition of hell. Of course, they missed their job, Judy having the most trouble with inactivity. Even though they were both worried about the doe's injury, they found comfort in each other's presence.

Vivienne had come to visit a couple of time, but Finnick hadn't been able to make it as much. According to Nick's mother, he was busy working on something. Nick hoped he wasn't in over his head on a new hustle.

There had been discussion on where Judy should stay when she would leave the hospital, since it was risky for her to live alone due to her condition. The solution of their predicament had been simple, since Nick wouldn't live in his flat for the next few months, Blackfur decided to crash at his, since she and Wolford would be the liaison with Nick and the official investigating team on Bellwether's abduction.

At first Judy felt embarrassed by the idea, but the motherly panda bear had convinced her it was the best alternative. Beside, her own flat was a shoebox she meant to leave and she'd welcome the change in scenery.

Nick and Judy were cuddling in bed, such was how they spent most of their days since they had
been in hospital. Half-way through the week, Wolford and Blackfur had come to stage and take some photos of Nick in a coma. Some of them were supposed to be leaked two days prior to him getting out of the hospital. It had taken a bit of time, Nick not being able to stop himself to do faces and play with the medical equipment borrowed to make it more authentic. In the end, they had around two dozens photos and four or five shaky videos. Enough to leak at different periods of time if need arose.

Now they were dozing off in bed, after having finished both their reports to chief Bogo.

They heard a knock from the door. They unstuck themselves from each other's while their visitor entered the room.

They recognized agent Jack Savage who was carrying an oversized suitcase.

"Hello officers," he flatly greeted.

"Hello agent Savage," they answered in an uncertain tone.

They hadn't seen him since they met five days ago. The bunny hopped on the bed and gave the suitcase to Nick. The fox opened it an trailed through its content. There was a flip phone, a map with multiples markings, ID papers, a directory book, a bundle of money attached with a rubber band, a set of keys, a fur bleach kit, a contact-lense box, a set of black clothes, a gun in a holster and a telescopic baton.

Judy's eyes widen at the sight of the content.

"What's in there is your 'undercover kit', the map and directory contain information that will prove to be useful. The ID papers are your new false identity." There was an ID card, a driving licence and a piece of paper with a single word marked on it : 'Jaeger'. According to the ID, his name was Frank Grayfox. There was a photo of a light-grey furred fox with brownish eyes.

"Jaeger is your codename. The money is what you'll be provided for the first month. If you need more, you'll have to find some on your own. The flip phone's sim is paid by the ZIA, you can't take your personal phone. You'll find a few names and phone numbers in the book, 'psycho' is for officer Blackfur, 'bouncer' is for officer Hopps, 'Herd-head' is for chief bogo. Mine is 'Rodent'. Undercover, I go by Jack Savage."

Nick had guessed Savage wasn't the bunny's real name.

"Too bad I can't go by Nick Wilde. Team 'Wilde and Savage'... It has a nice ring to it." Was it a smile that had crept on the corner of the agent's mouth ? No, he was imagining things.

The bunny continued "The set of keys is for your new place. You're lucky, it's one of our undercover safe-houses so no rent to pay. You'll have to learn to use the bleach kit by yourself, use it for you face, back and tail. Never forget to put on your contact-lense before going out." Nick didn't like the idea of bleaching and damaging his fur, but it was for a good cause. He hoped his vision wouldn't be impaired by the lenses.

"The gun is unmarked. Nine millimeters. I know it kicks more than what you're used to, but trust me when I say you want the firepower. There is also a baton, even if I highly suggest you spend some money on a big knife."

"No taser or tranq-gun ?" asked Judy.

"Where we're going, one's means of defense must look lethal, even if only for the deterring effect."
The more she learnt about the operation, the less the doe liked it.

"I'll come get you tuesday at 7AM. Be bleached and ready."

The male bunny left as silence fell on the room. Judy looked at Nick, trying to decipher his expression as he detailed each of the suitcase's items a second time. She could see the slight shift on his composure, the most obvious was when his gaze met the gun. A mix of uneasiness and fear.

"Nick ? Are you okay ?"

Nick shrugged. "I don't know, a sociopathic bunny just gave me the date of beginning of what could be a long and painful death sentence. You tell me." His sense of humour had taken a turn for the darker. It was a coping mechanism she already saw him use, and she didn't want to get used to it.

Nick took the gun out of the brief case. There was a few full mags with it, some of them filled with blank round, for pretending to shoot at innocent mammals he supposed. The fox put one in and armed the gun.

"Nick ?"

He took aim at the wall. Nothing. He felt alright. He took out the mag, took out the blank bullet from the chamber and put it back where it came from. He took a live round mag, put it in the gun and armed it again, aiming in the same place.

"Nick, what are you doing ?"

Nick felt a slight tremble in his arm. Not something alarming. He thought the shooting event would replay in his mind, but it didn't.

"I'm testing." he answered, putting back everything where it belonged.

"You're afraid that the shooting would-"

"-haunt me? Yeah. It doesn't seem to, though. And I'm not sure it's a good thing."

"You can't be sure until you get into a real situation again." she stated.

Nick turned to her with a raised brow.

"If you're trying to reassure me, you're not doing a great job." he joked with a half-smile.

Judy stared at him "I didn't mean it like that ! I mean, I don't think you're numb to what you've done, maybe it hasn't completely hit you yet."

"So you mean that I'm in some state of denial, and will probably snap at the worst moment ?" He asked, his expression slowly falling.

"No I meant that I think you're perfectly fine and not sociopathic or-" Judy felt panic rising, she had a point but is was hard to convey, and she wasn't sur the fox could understand it now. She caught the gleam of mischief in his eyes.

"Nick are you toying with me ?"

He smooched her on the nose. "I can't help it." He took out the bleaching kit and closed the suitcase. "I got what you meant, it was a hard situation that no mammal would know how to
handle, and though it hasn't hit me as hard as it could have, doesn't mean I'm an imbalanced individual. Oh and that it doesn't mean it couldn't come back to hit me unexpectedly later either."

Judy looked at him in disbelief before kissing him back. "It's frustrating when you know what I mean better than I do."

"That's why you love me!" He said, nudging her cheek with his snout.

"I love you despite that, sly fox." she answered, giving him a light punch.

The fox slumped from the bed with the bleaching kit.

"You're going to do that now?"

"Why not? It will leave you a day to get used to it."

The fox stepped into the bathroom. Judy heard some fur scratch noise, a lot of swearing and the sound of the shower. A few minute later a foam covered fox got back.

"Fear me, I'm the foam monster!" He was walking with arms and legs spread apart so the foam would stay in place.

Judy, still in the bed, giggled at his sight.

"Aren't you supposed to get rid of the foam?"

"Nah, it must stay in place at least 10 minutes. The thing also gives a greyish color to the fur. Our good agent knows his way around fur-bleach."

"So you'll have to stay in this position for ten minutes?"

"Yep. Good thing my wounds are almost healed, I'm sure this would've hurt like a bitch. I'm getting back in the shower, I don't want to foam up the whole room."

A few minutes later, a white-greyish fox came back from the bathroom. He looked really different, but his emerald eyes made it easy to recognize him. Nick took the contact lenses from the suitcase and put them on. He put on a mask of seriousness and turned to Judy.

She had a shuddering reaction, but with a bit of focus, she could see her fox underneath the disguise. For anyone else, it would be unnoticeable. He hopped on the bed and approached his bunny.

"Hello miss, my name is Frank Grayfox."

"Hello Frank, my name is Judy Hopps."

She gave him his hand and he kissed it.

"Charmed to make your acquaintance miss Hopps. Are you coming here often?" he winked

"Only when I lose a leg."

The fox had to keep himself from wincing at the dark joke. "I see. And how come you're alone in here by yourself, I can't imagine someone like you could be left alone."

He approached and gave her a peck on the snout.
"Mister Grayfox, I find you quite daring." she cooed.

"Please call me Frank."

"Only if you call me Judy."

He gave her a deep kiss, which she returned twofold. She felt his paws on her but she slightly pushed him back.

"Nick, if we're going to do this now, I need you to put away the lenses."

"But miss Judy, I'm not Nick, I'm Frank."

"Nick, I'm serious."

The fox's ears fell a bit and he put away the colored lenses.

"Sorry, I was only joking."

"I know, dumb fox. I'm not upset." She waved at him to come back and he obliged with a large grin on his face.
Part 2, Chapter 10

Part 2 : Lycus Case

Chapter 10 : Nothing More Than a Pleasant Conversation

Tuesday the 29th of January 2019

It was the morning and a nervous Nick was finishing preparing himself. He had tried not to wake Judy up, but it seemed that she had had trouble sleeping too. He put on the clothes the agent gave him. It was a plain t-shirt, a black hoodie and a pair of blue jeans. It was way more discreet than his signature hawaiian green shirt.

"You're ready, Nick ?"

"Not by a long shot."

"I meant, do you have everything ?"

The fox shrugged.

"I know what you meant."

He gave her a peck on the cheek.

A knock came from the door and it opened before they could answer.

It was 6:55AM and a bunny entered the room.

"It's time mister Grayfox." the voice was firm, no trace of irony in his tone.

"I'm coming." Nick's voice was calm but Judy discerned a bit of annoyance.

The agent stared at him for a second. "I'll wait for you behind the door." And he left them alone.

They hugged trying to cram in one embrace all the love and caring they could muster.

"I'm scared Nick. I'm scared for you." He felt her shiver but she didn't cry. She had hardened a lot since they had met.

"I'm scared too Carrots. I'm scared for you." He kissed her between the ears "But it's me. I'll be okay."

"I love you, my sly fox." They kissed longly. It wasn't the usual passionate embrace. They felt sadness, but also hope, a little shining light in the darkness. An anchor they could hold onto in the storm.

"I love you too, my wonderful bunny."

He hopped down from the bed with the suitcase, waving at her a last time as he opened and closed the door behind him.

Suddenly, the room felt awfully cold to Judy, loneliness washed over her and she felt a sob coming in her throat. She didn't let it take her. The light of hope was here to stay.
The walk from his room was silent until Nick noticed something.

"It's not the way to the elevator."

"Not the usual one."

The steel door of the other elevator seemed old, and 'out of order' sign barred them. Unceremoniously, the bunny pushed the button and got under the sign when the door opened. Nick followed him. Inside, the bunny tapped on a dial and the machine went up.

"Secret passage, nice."

"In case someone needs to get in or out unnoticed."

They got out in an emergency exit sas. As they got out, Nick saw that they had entered an underground parking. They walked to a little car. Nick thought they'd use some kind of nice sedan, but it was obvious the trope he was used to see in spy flicks were romanticising the reality. The first thing that came to mind to the fox was 'unnoticeable'.

Both mammals got in and the bunny started the car.

"From now on your name is Frank. You're officially undercover. Put your lenses on."

While Nick did what he was ordered to, he asked "What would happen if someone recognized me ?"

"Deal with them as you see fit, as long as it does not compromise the operation."

From the cold tone, it meant by any means necessary.

"Great. Any other advice ?"

"Yes. As an undercover agent, you'll have to build a persona to interact with other people. I highly suggest for you to create one not too far from your real personality, otherwise you will have trouble maintaining it. Beside that, there is no way I can give you a significant advice you could apply without being confronted with the reality of it first."

"I'll have to wing it." The fox felt strange. It was like he was waking an old muscle he hadn't used in a while. It felt strained, but eager. It was the Hustle, slowly getting back on. And the worst part was that he was feeling excited.

"Yes. Be focused and keep track of your lies."

Silence fell as the car made its way around the city, the thin traffic of the morning slowly getting denser.

"I have another question : why did you need me especially ?"

"I didn't need you especially. I needed a fox."

"Then why choose me ?"

"You're loyal to the city."

Nick's annoyance was rising. He scratched his head to keep focus. How come this bunny was able to get so easily under his skin.
"If we're to work together, I'd appreciate a bit more intel sharing."

The bunny emitted a strange sound, was it a chuckle?

"I chose you because you're a fox and an officer. I need someone to infiltrate a fox-only business, or more precisely, predator-only, fox-mostly. I could have tried to recruit any fox, it's true, but your kind tends to stick together. Understandable since all other mammals are out to get you. Or so your kind believes. You on the other hand aren't loyal to your kind."

Nick winced at the sentence, he was about to retort but the bunny kept talking.

"You're loyal to all civilians of this city. 'Betraying the trust, and putting at risk the civilians... It is, I think, something that can be in no case acceptable.' were your exact words."

"How do you know of this?"

"I'm ZIA. We know everything."

"Wonderful."

They slowed down in front of an old building, the old weasel reading a journal on the stairs leading to its door didn't seem to notice them.

"It's your building. You'll get off at the corner of the street. Be careful, it's a ZIA hideout but it's filled with as much agents than civilians, some of them being criminals under surveillance."

"How come they don't know?"

"We're ZIA, we know how to keep secrets. I'll come and get you later, in the meantime go and buy a change of clothes. Not anything remarkable, plain dull colors if you can."

The car pulled over and the fox got out, calmly making his way to the building. The weasel didn't even lift his gaze when Nick entered, climbing the stairs to the third floor and entering a small flat. It couldn't be defined as nice, but it was far from the worse place he had ever slept in. And it had a fridge and oven.

The fox woke up after an attempt at a short nap. He had spent the last hour mostly staring at the ceiling and had barely slept. Not that his neighbors were noisy, if anything everything was suspiciously quiet. It was his mind that had kept him awake. That, and the fact that he had now trouble sleeping without being wrapped around his bunny. The bond was pulling at him, and there was no way for him to stop having grim thought on Judy's well being.

He should be with her. He should be here to support her, to help her get around with her broken leg. He had accepted to put the need of the city before his and hers, and even though he knew the bunny was proud of him for it, he couldn't keep himself from feeling like crap.

But now wasn't the time to wallow in self-pity. He had a job to do, and that job consisted in buying clothes. Bland and forgettable clothes. He left his apartment and nodded at the old weasel as he got down the stairs of the building. It seemed the mammal hadn't move during the night. Nick wondered if the guy was an agent, a criminal or if he was simply living there. That didn't make any difference in his mind and he decided to take a stroll around the block.

It wasn't a part of the city he was really familiar with. Buildings were mostly made of red brick, looking at the back alleys, he could see multiple service stairs. He made a mental map as a habit, they were a great way to get in and out unnoticed.
The streets were not overly dirty but it was obvious it wasn't the most rich part of the city. During the day, the streets were safe, but obviously, getting around during the night would be way more risky, not that the fox would feel in any danger. Most mammal knew better than to mess with a sly fox at night, it was one the few perks there were at being from his species.

The vulpine made his way to the ZUG. He had to find a cloth shop, and the best way was to find a mall. He could have gone to a thrift shop, but the flea markets had their names for a reason. And even when he had financially struggled, the fox would always buy his clothes new.

As he straddled around the shelves he noticed the moose security guard was staring at him. At first he thought he had recognized him, but as he moved around he remembered it was because he was a fox. Shrugging, he continued his browsing and at last found a pair of jean that weren't slim-cut. He liked the resistant fabric, but never understood why some mammals wanted to be restricted in their movements. He chose a blue and a black one, and went to take a couple of sweat shirt and added a dozen t shirts to his bag. Lastly, he found a thick synthetic leather vest, best to complete an innocuous look and provide a measure of protection against blades and claws. He never liked the idea of wearing this kind of fabric, simply because it was a reminder of long past times when leather was worn. The mere idea of using the skin of another mammal to make clothes sent shudders in his spine.

He tried on a couple of what he had chosen and wasn't surprised when he saw the security guard in the trying booth alley. The fox kept himself from giving him a sly grin. If he hadn't been undercover, he wouldn't have hesitated to cause a scene and put the mammal's snout in the mud showing him his police badge. But he had to lay low, so he simply faked not noticing anything and switched the clothes that weren't fitting him. He paid and left the store, getting back to his flat.

The day passed uneventfully, the fox going back and forth from being bored to death to worrying about his bunny.

He spent a bit of time in front of the mirror trying his clothes on. The vest made him look a bit beefier than he was, even if it fitted him well enough. It wasn't a bad thing, it changed his appearance even further and would make other mammals think twice before trying to cross him. He could also easily hide the holster inside it and there was a number of inside pockets were he could store his stuff.

Finally, as he couldn't take the loneliness anymore, he decided to take part in the neighborhood social life and find an opened pub. He wouldn't drink. Much. But it was always a good idea to test the water in places one would stay for a time. It was around five when he found an establishment that didn't seem too bad, but not too luxurious either, a few blocks from his building.

The place was called 'the wormtail'.

Charming.

Agent Savage not having given him a precise time, he hoped he would have a bit of time acclimating himself to the place.

He entered and immediately was hit by the smell of smoke, old sweat and cheap booze. A few patrons glanced at him as he walked to the bar. They were mainly predators. Tired, old and worn. The kind of mammals that begin to drink at noon and don't stop until it's time to get back home.

"What can I do you for ?" came the raspy voice of the bartender. It was a rat, and the biggest Nick had ever seen. He was even bigger than Judy. Despite the reputation of the rodents, this one looked clean, his clothes were probably the cleanest thing in this place, beside the newcomer fox of
"A pint of beer please."

"A beer with a please? You're a newcomer in the neighborhood, are you?" asked the rat as he filled a relatively clean mug with what looked to be booze. He put it in front of the vulpine and leaned on the counter with an interested look. The fox tasted the brew and barely kept himself from wincing. It wasn't the worst he had ever drunk, but definitely flop 3.

"And fancy tastes at that." chuckled the rodent as he had noticed the fox's reaction.

Nick gave him back his smile. "I'm not really a newcomer. Not my first time in the city either, but it's been a while." He said nothing of the beer, not seeking to antagonize the barmammal.

"How long?"

"Long enough to see that a lot has changed. New mayor, new politics. Strange how things can change in only a few years." Nick was testing the rat. He needed to know where things stood. This kind of joint stayed open thanks to its regulars, and it usually meant most customers shared the same views.

"You said it. Shit hit the fan a few months back when this air-headed cop ran her mouth about how the predators were all savages in waiting." Nick held back a growl and hid back his claws that had went out. Luckily the rat didn't notice anything as he kept talking. "She made it straight though, putting this scheming cotton-head behind bars. I wouldn't say no harm done, but nice to see she wasn't the entitled asshat she seemed to be. Here's hoping the lamb's escape won't come back to bite her in the ass."

Nick's brow furrowed, this information hadn't been made public yet. It had been a miracle no guard had told anything to the press and no pictures had leaked. The rat took the vulpine's reaction for an interested expression. "Yes, it's not in the news, but be a bartender long enough in those parts, and you're bound to learn a couple of juicy stories."

"I've bartended for a bit. I know what you mean" said the fox, and it wasn't a lie, it was one of the odd jobs he had performed.

"So you're a colleague!" laughed the rat. "Next one's on the house then." he said pointing at Nick's beer. "The name's Joe by the way."

"Frank, nice to meet you Joe." answered the fox, shaking the rat's paw.

Nick took another sip, not sure if he would even finish the mug. He leaned toward the rat with a conniving look.

"Say Joe, from colleague to colleague, would you have some sort of job for me?"

The rodent took a reflective expression. "We don't really have any bartending openings right now." He pointed at a little stage in the corner of the room. There was a worn piano on the side. "If you know how to sing or play an instrument, you can borrow the stage from time to time, you get half the profit I make for the evening, plus what any mammal will give you. Not the Wednesday and Saturday night though. Those are already booked."

"By whom?" the fox asked with an interested look.

"Scarlet, my barmaid. Red fox, golden eyes. And a voice that could melt the ice cap. You should
"Come tomorrow night. I'm sure you'll enjoy it." The rat gave him a coy smile that Nick mimicked.
"I'm sure I will. But about that job, I'm not looking for something specifically bar related. And I'm not much of a singer."

"So what else would you have in mind?"

"The usual." Nick had put on the hustler mask, mix of mischief and connivance.

The rat's smiled turned to slightly carnivorous. "I don't have any usual job in store for now, but if you give me your contact, I'm sure I could come across something."

Nick took a napkin and wrote down his phone number, it quickly disappeared in the rodent's paw. The vulpine felt his phone vibrate in his pocket and took it out, looking at the screen. It was a text from 'rodent' "I'll be at yours in ten, be there.". The vulpine downed his mug, and winced as the drink went down his throat. "Well Joe, it was nice meeting you, but I have to run." The fox left a banknote on the bar.

"Come back anytime," he heard behind him as he exited the establishment.

He made his way back to his building and stopped in front of the stairs. He hadn't taken the time to look at it in the morning. It was an old building, and it had been made to look worn down. But as the fox observed it, he could see the discreet renovation that had been made. Nothing too noticeable, but it was in better shape than any other building in this block. The old weasel was still there, his journal in his paws, but he didn't even give the fox a glance. Nick was about to start a conversation but he heard a car pull over near him. He recognized the bunny's car and got in.

"Right on time." said the agent as salute.

"Where are we going?" asked the fox as he strapped on the security belt.

"See an old friend. A potential ticket inside the underworld and the crew I can't investigate myself since I'm not a fox."

"He only hires foxes?"

"No, my 'friend' hires anyone with enough guts and know-how to do the job. By the way, I've taken the liberty to build you a bit of a rep during those past months, as a negotiator and smuggler."

The fox reacted at that. "Those few last months? How long ago did this operation start? Since how long did you plan to hire me?"

Nick noticed the predatory grin that appeared in the corner of the bunny's mouth. "There is no start nor end to this operation. I take on what I reckon being a threat to this city, with the help of a few other field agents and analysts. As for me planning to hire you, I started considering it seven months ago, when all this started to take proportion big enough that I would take notice."

Nick fought himself to not let his jaw fall. "I wasn't even out of the academy."

"Nope, you weren't. I already knew of you though. Your name appeared a couple of times in mister Big's file."

Nick fell silent. It was insane, how many steps ahead could this bunny think. "Why didn't you act sooner? All this could have been prevented! Judy's injury could have been prevented!" Nick snarled.
The fox's aggressive behaviour didn't even faze the bunny, he continued driving, and talking, like all this was nothing more than a pleasant conversation.

"I do not possess the power of prediction. If I had been able to infiltrate the gang I want you to, I think I would have been able to do something. I never thought they would do something so reckless, and nor did I that they'd try and kidnap ex-mayor Bellwether. I had a hunch something big was about to happen, but I didn't know what or when. What was I supposed to do, put a warning on a probable 'big situation' with no indication of date or place ?"

Nick struggled to regain his composure. "You're right, I'm sorry."

"Don't sweat it. Even though I don't approve of your relation, I can understand your anger. I suggest you keep it and direct it toward the right target."

It almost sounded like genuine concern, but that last cold comment destroyed all empathy the fox thought he had detected. "So your 'friend' has a way for me to get in those guys gang ? Do they have a name ? Or a boss ? How did you even got to know about them ?"

"I'm certain he has a way, yes. I've seen him work with a lot of foxes those last few weeks. I followed some of them, and most of them knew each other, though they did everything they could to hide it. I don't know if they have a name, or a boss, so I'm fairly certain there is someone up top coordinating everything. And as for me knowing about them, I know some, if not all, of the weapons used by the shooters a week back were provided by my friend to those foxes."

"Okay, that's solid, as far as shady leads go... Wait back up, you said they started working with your 'friend' a few weeks back but you started considering hiring me months ago. That doesn't make sense !"

"It does if you consider the fact that you are a fox with a sense of justice, duty, and good knowledge of the city's underbelly inner workings. In other words : you always were a potential asset for the ZIA. And just because they started working with him only a few weeks ago doesn't mean they did nothing to peek my interest before. This whole situation hammered the last nails in the coffin."

"Here's hoping it won't be in mine."

The bunny emitted a short chuckle.

The car pulled over in front of a large warehouse. Nick had the faint sensation he had come here before, which was probable. He had worked with a lot of people over the years, most of which were buried deep in his memory. They entered through a door on the side of the building, the security guard saluting Jack. They passed through a hallway, another door and were now inside the warehouse. It was well maintained. Not a trace of rust on the steel beams, the humidity was low for a place like this. The fox looked around and saw dozens of crates and a few aligned containers.

They approached a lean grey wolf, his back turned, scribbling something on a pad. The bunny stopped at a short distance from the canid.

"Hello Vlad."

"Jack ?" the wolf turned around quickly to face his guest, and Nick found his face to be familiar. "Jack ! Dearest of all my friends !" exclaimed the wolf with a thick eastern accent, rolling his r's. They shook hand with warm smiles on their faces. Nick couldn't tell if the one on the bunny's face was genuine, but he was certain the one on the wolf's face was. "And who is your friend ?" he said
approaching the fox. "The name's Frank." he said, putting on his most charming mask and shaking the canid's paw in turn.

"Vladimir. My friend call me Vlad, and as the saying goes, the friends of my friends are mine too!" As he was now closer, Nick recognized the mammal facing him.

_Holy shit, Vladimir Zimovitch. The mammal trafficker._

Nick repressed his wince, keeping a perfectly straight mask. He had had a run in with the wolf more than a decade ago. A job he had screwed up as he had almost turned into one of the wolf's cargo. It was a memory he would prefer to keep buried. Now, even if the guy had never clearly seen his face, he hoped his disguise would be good enough to fool him.

"Nice to meet you Vlad."

The wolf let escape a big and deep laugh, patting Nick on the shoulder. "I'm sure we will become good friends. Jack told me lots about you. Is it true you negotiated your way out of a DEZA drug bust ?"

Nick glanced at the rabbit who nodded.

"Only two times. It's part of the reason I had to leave the city for a while." He lied. It sent the grey wolf in a new fit of laughter.

"You're funny, fox. I like you ! But we're not here to swap pleasantries. Please, come into my office, and let's get down to business."

He lead them into a dim litten room at the back of the hangar. Though it looked than an old utility room, it had been redecorated with drapes and curtains. There was a sofa and a couple of armchairs. With a gesture, their host invited them to sit and served each one a glass of vodka.

Jack didn't drink it and nor did the wolf, giving an expectant glance at the fox.

_Hope I won't screw up the pronunciation._

"Na Zdrowie !"

The three of them downed their drink. The familiar burning sensation came up into the fox's throat. The vulpine didn't care much for vodka, but he had to admit it wasn't the worst he had ever tasted. And it washed away the awful beer's aftertaste.

"Now to business !" said the wolf enthusiastically "I have a job that would require someone of your talent. One of my associate had found himself in a bit of a pickle, and I'd like to have him back with us."

"Do you want me to bust him out of somewhere ?"

"Eager, are we ? No, I want you to conduct a negotiation and exchange for his release."

Negotiating for the release of someone wasn't too different from making a deal on a territory or a sell, but there was always the 'honor' factor. If the wolf's associate mistake was big, it was possible no price could be big enough to buy him back.

"I believe I can do that. Who's keeping him and what has he done ? And what would my bargaining
"He has trespassed and conducted some activities on mister Big's territory." Nick hid his reaction at the mention of the mod boss name. It was obvious the wolf didn't want to reveal what his associate's activities were, but knowing him, Nick felt better not having a precise idea. However, having to negotiate with mister Big could prove to be risky. The shrew knew him well and the fox wouldn't be surprised if it blew his cover. "And as of your bargaining chip, I suppose a big pile of cash could do the trick, but I believe you'll have to appeal to his business sense."

Playing with fire, great. He'd have to convince the shrew it was in his best interest to give up on a hostage that seemed precious enough to the wolf that he'd negotiate to get him back.

"Their hostage is called Robert, he's a hyena. If you give me your phone number, I will communicate you the time and place of the meeting when I'll have set it up."

Nick gave his number to Vlad.

"You're putting a lot of trust into someone you just met." remarked the fox.

"Do you think ? If I am to trust Jack's words, and I do, you should be more than qualified." smiled the wolf, filling his own glass. He motioned the bottle to Nick, but he refused with a wave.

"From what I know about mister Big, he could prove to be quite stubborn. Even with my skillset, I can't guarantee I'll succeed. In this situation, I don't know any mammal that could." The fox preferred to play it safe. If this was a test as he thought, he didn't want to blow it. But he was being honest, there was no way he could be sure to buy the hyena's ticket out of the mess he had put himself into.

The wolf chuckled "I'm sure you will find a way." the smile was warm, but his gaze spelled 'don't disappoint me'. It was a thing Nick had always hated about mobster. They pitted you against improbable odds and then acted all offended when you failed their assignment. It was one of the numerous reason why he had chosen an independent career as a hustler.

From the corner of his eye, he saw Jack glance at his phone. "I'm sorry to cut this short Vlad, but we should go. You know how it is."

"Jack, always on a job. Of course, I understand, friend. It was a pleasure to see you and to meet your friend !" He shook his guests paws as he accompanied us to the exit. "I'll talk to you soon, Frank."

... 

Nick and Jack were in the car, the bunny still on the wheel, making their way back to Downtown.

"You could have warned me we were going to see Vlad." Declared Nick, easily hiding his anger.

"I could have, but I didn't know you knew him. And even so, it's good for you to be confronted to mammals you know. It trains you to conceal your true identity."

"So this was a test ? Is it a habit to test your partners this much ?"

"Every last thing you will do from now on will be tests. And, Frank, we aren't partners. You're an agent, like me. You simply have an interim contract. I'm doing what I must to ensure you're able to see this through the end."
"And what if I had blown it? If my reaction had given me away?"

"I would have had to protect my cover." The implications of the sentence was obvious. The bunny was proving to be ZIA to the bone. Nick fell silent. Never had he wanted more to punch another mammal in the face. But the mask was still perfectly on, only giving away an expression of reflectiveness. After he was back in a more calm state, Nick asked.

"Are you trying to infiltrate him too and bring him down?"

"No, I'm after more important targets."

"More important targets? The guy deals in mammal trafficking. He takes away kids all over the town and sells them to the highest bidder!"

"It was years ago, this side of his activities has highly diminished, and I'm partially to thank for it. And if you must know, he was the better of several evils, it's one of the reason his business is still standing."

"The better of several... There were other like him?"

"Of course. Though most of them are now wearing concrete shoes in the canal district." There it was again, the predatory corner-grin. It was a thing Nick sometimes wore, but it would never be as genuine. However, even if his instinct told him to stay silent, the fox refused to back down from the conversation.

"So that's it? Vlad isn't 'so bad' so he walks free, while continuing his business."

"You're one to give lesson. Aren't you the godfather of the city's most feared mob boss grandson? How does he get a free pass?"

Nick fell silent. There was no good answer. He and the shrew went way back, and the crime boss' help had been invaluable during the Nighthowler case. Of course, he knew of mister Big's business. Arms dealings, drugs, a few rackets and a lot of blackmail on the most influential politicians in the city. But to the fox, mammal trafficking was worse than any of those crimes.

"I know what you think Frank. Vlad is worst than Big. I partially agree, even if the shrew has the paws in way more pies. The stability of this city is in part due to our rodent's business. We can't get rid of the crime and corruption. The city is too big, the mammals are too greedy. It will always be there, stepping on the weak, taking what it can. But we, meaning the ZIA, the ZPD, the DEZA, can control it, shape it to minimize the pain it brings to the honest citizens. It's a reluctant compromise, and I long for the day this city will stop needing mammals like me. But this day won't come. Ever."

The bunny's voice was low, and Nick heard inside it a sort of resigned weariness.

It didn't put down the fox however. He understood that Judy had seriously rubbed off on him when he heard himself answer "It simply means there will always be room for improvement. We'll always be able to make the world a better place."

... 

Nick had slumped on his bed with a groan, face first into the pillow. The day hadn't been especially tiring on a physical standpoint, but a lot had happened. He hated the idea of doing business with Vladimir, and had no more pleasant feelings about having to conceal his identity to Mr Big. All this reeked of disaster and he was fairly certain the whole thing would blow up in his face sooner
Probably sooner than later.

He rolled on his back, and winced. The gash on his leg wasn't very painful, but his ribs were another story altogether. With a groan, he stood back up and made his way to the bathroom. He took out the bandage and took a quick shower, he then more thoroughly cleaned his wounds. No trace of infection, but he'd have to be careful anyway. The stitches had started to be assimilated by his body, except for the knots he would have to cut off. Clean bandages were applied and he went to the kitchen to fix himself some sort of makeshift dinner. It wasn't late, only 7PM, but the exhaustion crept on him. He decided to call it a day and went to bed, subconsciously wrapping himself around the pillow as he fell asleep.
The doctor Procyon was in Judy's room, looking at her charts and last x-rays. He had entered a minute ago and the only thing he had said to her patient was 'hello'. Now, the doe was waiting for her doctor to give his answer about letting her out or not.

"Everything seems in order. Meaning : as much as it could be, considering the loss of your knee."

The raccoon hadn't lifted his eyes from the file.

"Does that mean I can get out ?"

There was a slight pause, while the doctor took of his glasses.

"To be honest, I'd prefer you stay here, if only for your peace of mind. But your mate now being in a 'coma', I know your level of stress will only raise if you stay here without occupation. So I'm letting you out."

He planted his eyes into her, and she could feel all the seriousness in his next sentence. "The only moment you should be standing up is to take a shower. Meaning ten minutes a day. It's the only exercise this leg should get outside the reeducation."

"Understood."

"Do you really ? I've had the chief forward me some of your reports. You don't know how to stay in place. So I want you to really take this in : if you don't do exactly what I say, you will disturb the healing process. If you disturb the healing process you will lose your leg. It's not a matter of probability, it is what will happen. And if you lose your leg, you won't be able to be a cop anymore."

Judy stayed mute.

"I think now, my point went across. An ambulance is waiting for you to bring you home." The doctor gave her a piece of paper "This is the address and time of your first reeducation seance. You don't want to miss any of them. I'll leave you now, a nurse should come and help you soon."

As he was about to pass the door, he stopped and looked at her over his shoulder.

"And Judy ? Thanks for all that you've done and hopefully will keep doing for this city."

It put a smile on the doe's face. The doctor Procyon was professional to the extreme, never hesitating to use what he deemed necessary in order for his patient to heal. But Judy was beginning to get used to mammals not showing that they cared, and she understood that it was his way of ensuring everyone's well being.

After the nurse had come and helped her dress up, she insisted to roll herself to the ambulance in a wheelchair. It took her a bit of time to get the hang of it but she managed. It was a bit hard though,
most of her physical strength came from her legs, having to use her arms would prove to be a challenge.

Soon enough, she was back at her apartment. Since the last floor didn't have elevator access, the boar paramedic had to carry her. A problem that Judy had forgotten to anticipate. As the door opened, she reached for the light switch, flicking it on.

"SURPRISE !"

Came multiple cheery voices. As a reflexe, Judy reached for her absent tranq-gun. The paramedic behind her chuckled at the sight of the three mammals present. Judy recognized Clawhauser, Wolford and Blackfur. Chances were they had used the key double Judy had given Blackfur.

"I see you're in good paws, officer Hopps. Have a nice evening and be careful with your leg."

"Thanks, good bye."

The paramedic left and Clawhauser took control of the wheelchair, pushing Judy to the center of the room. There were snacks, food and alcohol on the table and they had quickly decorated the living room with garlands. There was also a long gift box with carrot themed wrapping.

"Guys, you shouldn't have !"

"But we wanted to !" answered Clawhauser, while opening a champagne bottle. He gave everyone a glass but Judy declined.

"Not a good idea, I still have meds to take, and I'm pretty sure it's not compatible." Instead she took a carrot juice.

She opened the present and discovered a pair of telescopic crutches. They had had the taste to pick them cop blue and not orange, but she noticed the discrete carrot stickers on the handles.

"Thanks a lot ! I don't know when I'll be able to use them, but they will come in handy !"

"All the precinct pitched in." Said Wolford.

Everyone chatted a bit, Judy drank her juice but didn't feel like digging in the snacks.

If anything, she wanted to talk a bit about the investigation on Bellwether's disappearance but with Clawhauser present it was risky, since it could lead them to mention Nick's undercover operation, which he wasn't supposed to know about. She let herself relax a bit and cheerfully chatted with her friends. She felt the little reunion drag on as a slight gloom came to her, she couldn't really get to a party mood. Her friends felt it too.

"Guys, I think I'm going to call it a night. I work tomorrow and to be honest I feel a bit tired." said the pudgy cat diplomatically, not wanting to impose on the drained bunny.

Wolford downed his champagne glass. "I think I'm going to do the same, no point letting him go home on his own".

The bunny felt a bit of guilt, they had organized all this for her comeback and she wasn't able to enjoy it. She didn't stop them however.

"Okay you two, have a nice trip home." Judy glanced at the table "you can leave with the donut
box."

The cat felt embarrassed, but he didn't decline, closing the box of glazed bakeries and putting it under his arm after having put on his coat.

"Bye guys, see you tomorrow." he waved, leaving the flat. Behind him, the wolf made a hand gesture.

The panda and bunny were now alone in Nick's flat. Judy slumped a bit on her chair with a sigh.

"Are you tired Judy?"

"Not physically but Nick not being here and staying undercover... I feel a bit overwhelmed."

"You could stay here tomorrow if you want."

"No, I want to get back to work. If I stay here alone, I'm sure I'll turn mad." she stared at the table covered with snacks and unopened bottles. "It's not how I envisioned the return to my flat."

"How did you envision it?"

Judy shrugged "I didn't. Until you, chief Bogo and this agent came in, it all seemed like a fading nightmare. I could slowly put it all behind. Now it's so... Real." She looked at her casted leg hidden by her pant's leg. "I don't know what to think. I don't even know what I feel beside exhaustion and emptiness."

The panda took a reflective look. "It's pretty normal to not feel anything in overwhelming situations. A lot is happening at the same time and you'll need time to adapt, and even more to overcome. Trust me, when reality will hit, it will hit hard."

"You're not doing a good job at reassuring me." grimly chuckled Judy.

The panda pushed the wheelchair to Judy's room. "I'm not trying to reassure you. I'm trying to prepare you."

The bear helped the bunny undress and get into her bed. Before falling asleep she had taken her meds and called her family. They didn't talk much, Judy simply wishing to tell them she was back at her apartment and that she was okay. Her siblings didn't seem overly worried, since she had sent messages to reassure them during the past week. However they asked a lot of question about Nick, to which she answered she didn't want to talk about it. It wasn't an outright lie, but it still made her uneasy.

When she let herself relax on the pillow at last, she thought she wouldn't be able to sleep. But in a matter of minute, she had fallen into slumber.

Wednesday the 30th of January 2019

The alarm clock on her phone rang, waking her up. She had lost the habit of waking up early during the week and she felt she hadn't slept enough, even if it wasn't the case. A hardly awaken panda stumbled into her room.

"morning Judy." She said, unfolding the wheelchair and helping her get sit.
"Good morning Wight."

The panda made them a quick breakfast and emptied her coffee mug while looking through the window.

"Crap."

Judy raised her head from her toast and looked at the panda. "What?"

"The press is in front of the building."

The bunny raised her eyes to the ceiling and rubbed her face with her paws. "I don't want to deal with this."

The panda took out her phone. "I'm texting Wolford to come pick us up."

Then, she helped Judy clean up. The bunny could stand, as long as she rested on her good leg, and didn't need much help once she was in the shower.

They had finished preparing themselves and Blackfur carried her down the only floor without elevator. As they entered it and pushed the button for the ground floor, Judy steeled herself. Since the incident a few month prior, she dreaded having to talk in public. She had been able to make another speech at Nick's graduation ceremony, but only because she had written it in advance and she wouldn't make an unfortunate slip up.

As they left the building, the press rushed to them, barely leaving space to go through.

Questions came from everywhere, and even if the bunny had wanted to answer she wouldn't have been able to. She resolved to give the same answer over and over.

"Judy, what happened to your legs?"

"No comment."

"Did you know your attacker?"

"No comment."

"Is it true they were drugged?"

"No comment."

"How come you got away only with an injury while your partner is in a coma?"

"No comment."

"Will he pull through?"

A loud siren came from behind the reporters, making everyone jump. The panda took advantage of the short confusion to force through the pack of mammals and get to Wolford's cruiser. She opened the door and picked up the bunny unceremoniously, sitting her on a backseat and installing herself at her side.

"Vultures" She mumbled as the car began moving.

"Hello ladies, how are you doing?" came Wolford's cheerful voice.
"I'm good Wolford."

"I'm good too." said Judy. "I hope those guys won't be here tonight."

"They probably will be. I wouldn't be surprised if they followed your every move for the next week or so." answered the wolf. The panda glared at him through the rear-view mirror. "Or maybe not." He quickly added in an apologetic tone.

The remaining of the trip to the precinct was silent and uneventful. They weren't surprised to see some reporters in front of the precinct's doors, but weren't bothered by them since they used the underground parking lot to get in. As Judy got out of the elevator in the precinct hall, Clawhauser greeted her.

"Hi Judy! How are you doing today."

The few other officers that hadn't noticed her yet turned toward her. Most of them looked tired, some of them wearing worried expression. It was logical since Nick was officially in a coma and knew how close they were.

Well maybe they don't know how close we are, but they know we're each other's best friends.

Clawfith approached her and patted her shoulder in an encouraging manner.

"Hey Judy. How are you hanging up?"

"I'm good, how are you Clawfith?"

"Fine, fine..."

The other officers came to greet her, most of them gave her an encouraging comment, but it was obvious they felt sorry both for her and her partner.

An awkward silence had fallen on the precinct's hall. The mammals didn't know if they should stay and comfort her or get back to their usual occupations as if everything was normal. Judy rose from her chair and used it to stay up, not putting any weight on her injured leg.

"Guys, I'm fine and Nick's not dead." she declared, loud enough so everyone could hear her. "Could you please drop the funeral faces, please?" Her words seemed to wash over her colleagues like a cold wave, waking them up from their concerned state. "I know it's a hard blow, but it's not with this attitude that we will make the world a better place!"

A few smiles appeared on her colleagues faces, some of them scratching their neck in embarrassment.

"Besides, Nick would never let you live it down if he knew how worried for him you were."

Her last sentence triggered a few chuckles.

"She's right guys!" Said Fangmeyer. "We have work to do, and it won't get done with that attitude."

"Yeah!" came a voice.

"Judy's right!" came another.

The mammals slowly scattered.
"By the way, chief Bogo wants to see you after roll call, he'll wait for you in his office." said the pudgy feline.

Judy looked at her partners "Shall we go then ?"

"Nope, we already have our assignments, we're working on Bellwether's disappearance. We have a lot of files to compile and interrogations to compare." The panda pushed Judy's chair toward her office.

The bunny didn't like desk work, but this would be all that she would be able to do for the next few months. She would have to be patient, one of the things she always had trouble being. She sighed as she rolled the chair in front of the computer, turning it on and pulling a file from the pile on her left.

To her right, she could hear the wolf tapping rhythmically on his leg. Usually this kind of noise would be irritating, but there was something soothing in the discrete melody he produced.

She turned her focus back on the file. It was on a jaguar named Matias Wilkinspots. He was the one on camera room duty the day of Bellwether's disappearance. During his interview, he had said that nothing unusual had happened on screen and it had looked like the ex-mayor had spent all her time in her cell. There was a bunch of photographs attached to the file showing a perfectly normal cell, with the lamb lying on her bed, seeming bored to death.

That opened a few questions, and on the top of her head, Judy came with a few of her own. Did the kidnappers have access to the prison central computer ? If so, how could the jaguar not have noticed it ? Did they have someone working with them from the inside ?

As of now, the computer engineers hadn't found any trace of obvious tampering. Even though the prison's security system was up to date, it was recorded on analogic bands in real time, that were kept for a few months. And the footage was also copied on a hard drive. This double security had a purpose, it was easy to notice tampering on analog bands, and the hard drive footage could be kept indefinitely.

Sadly, the analogic band didn't show any sort of tampering and the footage was completely similar to the one on the hard drive.

It added to the theory of someone working from the inside. Someone could have taken old footage and recorded it on the analogic band, and put the same video on the hard drive. Or he could even have modified how the system work, changing what was recorded on the bands in real time. She didn't know enough about how that worked, and her imagination was running wild. But to Judy, the jaguar wasn't the first suspect on this. Taking all of those precautions simply to be here at the time of the kidnapping and ending up being the prime suspect was nonsensical.

Judy's computer was now on and she opened the common file on the disappearance. She quickly looked at who could access it. Her, her two partners, the chief, MacHorn his second in command, and Clawhauser.

She read the temporary reports and pictures of the case. There had been corrections to the first draft, the first one that she noticed was the quantity of blood used to write the message in the cell. According to the forensic later exam, the lamb could still have been alive with that much blood loss, even if barely. And probably not without side effects. Even though the bunny didn't like the lamb, she felt somewhat relieved. In her book, no one deserved this kind of death. But it didn't mean the ex-mayor was still alive either.
She continued down the report and saw that her partners hadn't spent their week sitting on their thumbs. There was a complete schedule of what happened at the prison that day, with the interesting elements highlighted. Even though she would have to take everything in, she knew she wouldn't have the time to do so before going to see the chief so she chose to focus on what seemed the more important.

In the early morning, a prison truck had come to deliver a new prisoner, but no security footage could show any of the passenger faces. And the new prisoner file was surprisingly empty. She found another strange thing. The database showed an order to move the lamb to another cell, more secluded place in the facility. It would explain why no one saw or heard what was happening. A few cameras caught their feet and partial pictures of their body, it seemed that the camera in front of the lamb's cell wasn't the only one from which the recording had been altered or lost. Now she was pretty certain there was a mole at the prison.

She studied the few pictures there was. They showed mostly paws, so considering their size: predators. She tried to not make any hasty deduction and continued studying the schedule. Beside that, nothing came to her as peculiar. The prison truck had left at a time that fitted with the lamb's disappearance. And she found a partial picture of them leaving with a bag. Or what looked to be a bag, the picture only showed a portion of it. Now this was a huge coincidence.

She had been so focused on her screen she hadn't seen her two colleagues approach behind her, looking at her screen.

"Any theory officer Hopps?" came Wolford's voice.

The voice barely made her jump, she was used to it, Nick loved to surprise her by coming quietly in her back. "This truck seems suspect to me. And see this picture, I'm sure this is a bag here." she said, pointing at it "If we compare it to the leg size of the one carrying it, which look like a tiger or a lion to me, I'm fairly certain it could contain a lamb."

"We came to the same conclusion." said the panda. "But we couldn't obtain a good description of them from anyone. Each prison guard and inmate see hundreds of faces every day."

"And even if they were unusual, none of them focused on those guys at the time since they had no reason to."

"Crud." she scratched her head reflectively. "And what about the mole? Obviously someone tampered with the security footage, do we have a suspect list?"

"Beside the half-dozen mammals that have access to the camera room? No. We interviewed them, but none of them seemed really suspect. We checked their schedule and there is no obvious match. We've started some background checks though, I can send you the file if you want to take a look."

The bunny nodded "For now, we don't have any obvious lead, so yes, I'd like to take a look. Honestly, I think we should run background checks on every prison guard but I doubt we have hundreds of years to close the investigation." She looked at her phone. "I should go now, I'm sure chief Bogo is waiting for me."

"Do you want me to bring you there?" asked the panda.

"Nope, the exercise will do me good." She answered will rolling away from her desk and out of the office.

The trip took longer that she had expected. Her short time in the hospital had taken a toll on her
physical shape and her arms felt slightly sore from pushing on the wheels. No matter, it was an opportunity to work on her arm strength, something that she had neglected since her best assets had always been her legs. And what linked her leg to her back, according to her mate.

She knocked at the door and heard the chief's deep voice answer. "Come in"

As she entered she saw a grim looking cape buffalo, his chin resting on his hooves. Facing him was an elegant and well dressed female pig. She turned to Judy with a warm smile and Judy recognized her as mayor Swinton. They had only spoken a couple of time. One of them was to write Judy's speech for Nick's graduation ceremony.

From what she knew about the mayor, she was an honest mammal, working hard for her city. She was less about appearance and more about efficiency. She had taken a few stances that had triggered strong reaction from the public. One of them being a tolerance zero toward racist behaviour, being toward predators or prey. To Judy, fighting racism was a good thing, but it should be more about changing mammal's opinion than fighting it with an iron fist. In any case, she approved of most of the mayor politics, but was still surprised to see her here.

"Officer Hopps, it's so nice to see you again !" She said, approaching her and shaking her paw.

Judy quickly hid her surprised expression, smiling back at the mayor. She glanced at the chief who gave her nod and gestured her to take place in front of him.

"Before we tackle the matter at hand, I want you to know how sorry I am about what happened to your partner." Said the mayor with genuine concern.

"Thanks miss mayor, it means a lot." smiled Judy, hiding her embarrassment. The show of support was nice, but it made her uncomfortable that people felt sorry about it.

The buffalo let the moment pass before saying his piece.

"Judy, I know what we will ask of you won't please you, so I won't beat around the bush. The mayor intends to hold a press conference with you as a guest."

Of that, the bunny wasn't surprised. She knew it was coming and had wondered when this hammer would fall. It didn't mean she liked it though, but there was no reason for her to refuse other than that she hated to be in the eye of the public.

"Are you sure this is a good idea ? I've been willingly on camera two times, and one of them didn't end so well."

At the memory, the buffalo repressed a wince. He remembered all too well how her first appearance on camera had ended. But he was surprised she hadn't outright refused this time.

"I think the people need to see and hear a face they like reassure them." Began the mayor. "Those are dark times, and according to our chief of police, we're only seeing the beginning of them. It will be an occasion to honor the officers who have fallen on the day of the shootings."

"I won't force you to do this officer Hopps, but can you at least consider it ?" asked the cape buffalo.

"There is nothing to consider, I accept. Honoring the dead, bringing comfort to the living, and reassuring the civilians. It's part of what I believe my duty is."

At that, the mayor shook the bunny's paw again. "That's fantastic. Preparations are already under
way."

Obviously, the mayor had anticipated that she would accept. "Though I would appreciate if you
could help me write the speech like last time." added the bunny.

The swine made a slight pause, the shadow of an embarrassed expression on her face "Of course,
but you should understand that since it's a press conference, you'll have to answer a few questions
from the press." That wasn't what Judy would consider good news, her expression fell a bit. "I'll try
to keep them a minimum though.

"And you won't face the press alone, I'll be behind you at all time."

_To support me or keep me from screwing up? Alright, I'm beginning to think like Nick._

"I suppose I can go through a few questions from the press. When will this press conference take
place?"

"Tomorrow, at noon."

It wouldn't leave her a lot of time to prepare. Part of her wished to delay the event as long as
possible, but the sooner she would put it past her, the better. Beside, it couldn't be worse than being
shot in the leg.

"Alright. I'll send you a first draft on the speech this afternoon miss mayor." smiled the bunny.

"Thanks Judy, I'm counting on you." said the pig as she got down from her seat. "See you
tomorrow." She saluted both the chief and the officer and left the room.

Silence fell on the office. The chief ended up breaking it. "I'm sorry officer Hopps. I know you're
not fond of talking on camera."

"It's okay chief. I can't do a lot in the state I'm in, so if me being a public face can help in any way,
I'll gladly make the sacrifice. Was there anything else?"

"No officer, you're dismissed."
Part 2, Chapter 12

Part 2 : Lycus Case

Chapter 12 : To Face a Firing Squad

Wednesday the 30th of January 2019, 11:42AM

The fox went on and off a couple of times before waking up. His mind in a haze, the only thing he could think about was coffee. He scrambled to the kitchen and made some. As the coffee machine heated, he turned on the old TV set. The image was glitchy and the fox hit the machine a couple of times before the thing accepted to work properly. He switched to the news channel and poured himself a mug. It was almost noon but the vulpine didn't feel hungry, even though he hadn't had breakfast yet. Slumping on the worn couch, he looked at the image that were fed to his slumbering mind.

"-That's all the ZPD has accepted to divulge about the disappearance of ex-mayor Bellwether, but our journalists-

So the ZPD has released the information. Good, better that than a leak.

-is now eleven past twenty and we're reminding our spectators that a press conference will be held today at noon. The mayor will answer questions about the shooting, the ZPDs actions and the future of our city.-"

Of course, that's what politicians do. Press conferences, reassure the public, while mammals like us do the dirty work.

"-will have the hero of Zootopia, officer Judith Laverne Hopps, as a guest. She'll answer a few questions as the ZPD's spokesperson."

"WHAT ?" almost shouted the vulpine at his screen. He rushed to his room and took his phone, quickly dialing the bunny's number. He wasn't supposed to contact her aside from emergencies, but to the fox this was one.

Wednesday the 30th of January 2019, 07:00AM

Her left leg felt sore. It was a good thing she couldn't use it, she would never have been able to with how much her muscles and ligaments ached. The evening prior she had her first reeducation seance. Her leg had been put in a machine that made it move slowly in all sorts of directions. The procedure hadn't been painful, but the aftermath was another story altogether. She stood up with a groan, her weight on her only valid leg and put on her clothes, letting herself slump on the wheelchair. She rolled to the living room where her friend was already preparing the breakfast. She too was already in uniform humming a tune as she filled two mugs, one with coffee and one with decaf.

"I could have helped you dress up, you know ?" Said the panda with a smile.

The bunny shrugged. "I don't like to feel dependant."
"I know."

As she took her breakfast, the bunny asked her friend. "Are you sure it doesn't bother you to drive me to the clinic for my reeducation session in the evening?"

The panda lifted her gaze from the newspaper she was reading. "It will only be three times a week. And as your partner's, me and Wolford have obtained a more consistent schedule. No more change in our hours for the next few months. So no, the perks outweigh the drawbacks." she answered with a slightly devious grin. "If anything, I feel a bit guilty towards our colleagues."

"Why?"

"As your caretakers, Wolford and me will get preferential treatment in term of working hours. And since you're working with us on Bellwether's case, it's not like you could switch partners to make it fair."

Judy reflected on it. It was true, but there wasn't really anything she could do about it. "Everyone has been very supportive, but it's only been a day since I went back to work. Maybe we should take care of this before it becomes an issue."

"Do you have anything in mind? We can't really ask the chief to have us on the crew rotation. Your doctor was adamant on you needing to have a consistent sleeping schedule."

Judy knew enough about the panda and her motherly attitude to understand that she wouldn't permit either.

"I was thinking about something more along the line of telling everyone officially why we have those privileges and apologies in advance."

"You're back to work even though you're still injured, if anyone should do that kind of statement, it would be me and Wolford. I think it's a good idea though, to smooth things over before they could get ugly. Wolford will agree to it too I think."

They had arrived to the precinct a few minutes ago and had quickly greeted the pudgy cat working at the front desk. Judy was now in front of her desk, neck deep in the case's multiple files. She was trying to isolate the most likely prison moles suspects. So far, she only had selected a dozen that were likely. She would be willing to interrogate all of them, but she knew the chief wouldn't greenlight such a procedure. Especially since the prison security had tightened and they had doubled the rounds.

In the meantime, Wolford had made a request to have access to the prison's camera room. He wanted to check thoroughly the ways to access it and the way one could have to tamper with the video system. They already knew it was in a closed loop, preventing anyone to hack it from outside. And if the investigation couldn't get much harder, the prison guard were reluctant to talk, even to cooperate. Their job was hard, and it was obvious no one in their position was too fond of regulations. It wasn't unusual that they would step over some lines to make their job easier.

This infuriated Judy. She had made a lot of work on herself to accept that some rules could be overseen or overstepped. She had to accept that some of her acquaintances could bend the laws and not seen them as criminals. But this was beyond her. A mammal had disappeared, most likely kidnapped, and was in danger. And all those guards, figures of the laws were putting their well being before an innocent mammal. Well not innocent, but it was the same to her, the lamb didn't deserve whatever fate her captors would make fall on her.
She went over one of the files a third time when a detail captured her attention. It belonged to a raccoon named Peter Racton. There was a schedule of each mammal's presence in the prison and this one seemed off. The mammal was supposed to be on his day off, as was written, but the handwriting was slightly different. She only had a photocopy of the schedule but upon closer inspection, she could see traces of corrective white ink. Maybe the guard had simply switched schedule with his colleague. The bunny looked around the file to see if switching schedule was usual. As a matter of fact it was, some files showed traces of corrective ink, but none of them had another writing. The schedules were made by the prison's head warden and only he had the authority to make modifications. She checked the writing on Wilkinspots' schedule on the same day and it seemed to match.

The bunny pinned the files aside with a sticky note. She wanted the handwriting checked out by a graphologist even though she was fairly sure it was the raccoon's.

She hadn't shared her discovery with her colleague. Wolford was writing a report with earphone on his ears and the bunny knew how focused Blackfur got when she was analysing files. She took out her phone and looked at the time. Almost eleven. They'd have to leave soon, the mayor having asked of her to be present at least half an hour prior to the press conference at city-hall. So much for not breaking their focus.

"Guys ?"

Both her colleagues lifted their head from their work.

"Yes Judy ?" asked the wolf, as he unplugged his earphones.

"I think we should go if we don't want to be late."

The panda glanced at her screen. "Yes, you're right. I'll prepare the cruiser, Wolford, could you accompany her ?"

"Sure thing Blackfur."

The panda left quickly and Judy began rolling herself out. She had explained to the wolf she wanted the exercise but could see he wanted to help her. It wasn't because he believed she needed the help or was too slow, if anything, she managed to move in a walking pace and was certain that soon she could be even faster. It was simply the wolf's way.

They took the elevator down to the parking lot and were surprised to see the chief at the wheel of the cruiser they were about to take.

"Chief ? Are you coming with us ?"

"Yes, there's no way I'll let one of my officer face this kind of ordeal without proper back up." He had said it with a straight face, but one could discern traces of humor in his declaration.

The wolf helped Judy sit on the rear seat and installed himself next to her. The panda was sitting shotgun.

"Are you ready for this, officer Hopps ?" asked the cape buffalo as he started the car.

"Not by a long shot. Let's go."

The cruiser started and the buffalo drove it out of the underground parking lot. As everyone was here, Judy found it to be the best time to announce her discovery.
"While I was reviewing the file on our suspects, I came across something interesting." Every mammal focused their attention on her. "It's not much of a lead but there was a modification in the schedule of one of the guards. Seems he switched place with the one on duty, the day of Bellwether's disappearance. In itself, it doesn't mean much, but I'm certain the writing on the two schedules aren't the wardens."

"Could the head warden be out of the loop on this?" asked Wolford. "Even if he didn't know at the time, it seems unlikely to me he didn't discover it afterwards. You think he could be an accomplice too?"

Panda chimed in "If the schedules are made in advance, it's possible he didn't remember. And he's not really in on the investigation since he's a suspect too. So if he didn't check this by himself, it's possible he hasn't noticed it yet."

"In any case, it could be a good idea to interrogate this Peter Racton." remarked the bunny as the cruiser stopped in city hall's parking lot.

... "Officer Hopps, chief Bogo, I'm glad to see you! And you must be the officers Wolford and Blackfur." said the mayor with a professional but warm smile as she shaked the paws of the mammals she hadn't met before.

"Nice to meet you mayor Swinton." said Wolford.

"Pleased to meet you also." declared Blackfur.

The mayor accompanied them to a lounge where a snacks and drinks had been served. Once they were all installed the mayor gave the bunny a piece of paper. "It's your speech. I made a couple of modifications that I'm sure you will like."

Judy took a quick read. It was obvious the mayor had a long experience on writing those kinds of things. It was unusual for a politician to write their own speeches, but it simply proved than Swinton made a point to master every aspect of her job. Though there was a few expressions the bunny wouldn't usually use, it all seemed good to her. As she was about to thank the mayor, her phone rang. She took it out as force of habit. Unknown number. She clicked the green icon and put it to her ear.

"Officer Judy Hopps?"

"Hello, Frank speaking." came a calm voice, with slight hints of stress, that she immediately recognized.

*What the hell?*

She couldn't keep her eyes to shoot wide open and every mammal in the room noticed her startled expression.

"Is everything alright Hopps?" asked the chief with a concerned face.

"Yes, everything's fine but I really need to take this right now. Privately." the doe answered in an apologetic tone.

The mayor pointed at a door in the corner of the room. "You can take it in here, it's a meeting room."
Since she had her phone in hand, the wolf pushed her to the door and closed it behind her.

"Is everything alright? What's the emergency?" she almost shouted at her phone.

"Are you really having a press conference right now?"

Judy froze. Was it about that? How on earth could he consider this important enough to call her.

"Yes, I am. Tell me it's not the reason you're calling me."

There was a slight pause. "I was worried." Came his apologetic voice.

Judy sighed "Nick, you're not supposed to call me except in case of emergency. Don't call me just because you're worried about a tiny little press conference." She underplayed it a bit. The thing had made her stress climb sky high, but it was still no reason for him to risk his cover.

"Sorry Carrots. It's just... Last time you had to answer question from the press-"

"You're afraid I'll put my paw in my mouth again?"

The fox thought about it for a few seconds, but that was not it. He knew how much public attention could be stressful to her. She liked how mammals recognized her in the street, but he had seen her repeatedly having trouble to deal with crowds. But that was not why he had called.

"I'm sorry" he said "It's just- I know how you don't like to be in the spotlight. I wish I could be here to support you. I should be."

"Ni- Frank" she said, a habit she had to take not to risk blowing his cover at the most inopportune time. "I can deal with this on my own. And I'm not really alone, the chief is here and so are Wolford and Blackfur. I think you're even more stressed than I am."

Nick had flinched at her calling him by his alias, but he understood the necessity. "Yes, you're right. I'm sorry. It's the bond. The more we're apart, the more it pulls."

"You think you'll be able to make it to the end of the week?"

The fox chuckled. "I will, don't worry... It was good to hear your voice."

Judy blushed "It was good to hear yours. I have to go, I don't want to be late at the conference. See you soon."

"Love you."

"Love you too." she said, hanging up.

Her heart was beating fast, his call had made her realize how much she missed him. And they had been apart for less than three days. This operation was going to be hard.

She stared blankly at the wall, as to regain her composure, then headed back to the lounge where the mammals were having a quiet discussion about the ongoing investigation.

"Sorry about that." she said as she closed the door behind her.

"Is everything okay?" asked Blackfur. The bunny understood the underlying implication of the question.

"Perfectly okay." The bunny looked at the time. "Only fifteen minute left. Any last
"You know the drill officer. You don't divulge anything about the investigation, and you stick to the facts."

Even though he hadn't meant it like that, Judy couldn't help being sent back to the fiasco of her first press conference.

"The journalists will try to press you with a lot of question. The best way to calm them down is to answer the question of those who are the most respectful." explained the mayor "Do that a couple of time, and they should begin to act more civilized." she had a discreetly sly grin "Stay calm, you run the show."

As they approached the city hall's front exit, Judy couldn't shake the impression she was about to face a firing squad. She had had the time to study the speech the mayor had given her. The doors opened and she rolled out, her partners and the chief behind her. The mayor approached the rostrum. She tapped the microphones a couple of time and began speaking.

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**Wednesday the 30th of January 2019, 11:48AM**

Nick had just hung up and tried to relax, but he couldn't get rid of the knot in his guts. He knew her bunny was strong enough to face the press, that she could hold herself in front of a crowd. She wasn't the type of mammal that did the same mistake twice. But still, he was worried. He had this vision of his mate alone in front of a crowd of predators ready to lunge at her at the first mistake.

He felt silly. She was much stronger than that. Judy could take on anything, any challenge, any task, and complete it with a smile. It was why he had fallen for her. The upbeat attitude she kept while facing adversity.

The fox left his room and went to the kitchen. Food had been stored in the drawers prior to his arrival, but there wasn't much choice beside canned food and instant noodles. He chose the latter and put it to heat in the microwave. His lunch was ready in a minute and he went back to slump on the couch, in front of the old TV.

It already showed live feeds of the press event, a journalist was speaking in front of the camera, detailing what the schedule would be.

First the mayor would say a few words and then Judy would come to make a speech and answer some question. After that, the mayor would be back and deal with the press.

The fox, his noodle cup between his knees, waited with growing apprehension for the beginning of the event. He saw the mayor approach the rostrum.

"Hello, ladies and gentlemammals, I am delighted that so much of you have joined us for this event. The key topic of the day are the attacks on the city perpetrated by outlaw mammals. First, officer Judith Laverne Hopps wish to make a short speech, she has accepted to answer some questions afterwards. Lieutenant Hopps, the stage is yours."

The mayor took a few steps back and Nick saw a pair of mammal coming with a ramp so his mate could be high enough to be seen behind the rostrum. The bunny made a sign to stop them, took out the telescopic crutches and stood up, slowly making her way to the center of the stage.
Nick almost spilled his noodle cup "What the hell are you doing Judy ?" he shouted. She stared at her face, anticipating an expression of pain, as he buried his claws in his palm. She was careful not put any weight on her bad leg, and so made it to the microphone without so much of a hint of discomfort. The fox slowly exhaled the breath he was holding.

It had been a spur of the moment. The bunny wanted to show she didn't think herself as beaten or diminished. She didn't need the help. As she settled in front of the crowd, she noticed it had fallen completely silent, some of them staring at her with blend of apprehension, disbelief and respect.

She took advantage of it and began talking.

"First and foremost, in behalf of the ZPD, I'd like to express again our deepest sympathy toward the mammals, officers of the law or otherwise, that have fallen or been injured during those dark events. I can assure you nor I, nor my colleague will find rest until those responsible are brought to justice." She made a slight pause, looking around the crowd to see the effect of her words. The journalists not carrying microphones were scribbling frantically, and most mammals seemed to be hanged to her every word.

"I know the good citizens are growing restless. I know some of you are afraid, desperate... I know I was." She said giving a glance to her leg. "But we must not lose hope. We must not turn against each other. We must find in ourselves the strength to unite. Poor or rich, predator or prey, old or young, to the smallest mouse to the biggest elephant, our differences do not matter. United, we're stronger than those who have attacked us." She punched the wooden board, making some of the microphone vibrate. The crowd had begun to liven up, some citizen behind the journalists and the security barrier were cheering and waving in agreement. She gave it time to let it die down before ending her speech in a more calm and encouraging tone.

"All we have to do is try, and we will make the world a better place."

The crowd exploded in cheering. The bunny's positive nature had sipped to the civilians as the mayor had planned. Now she hoped the journalist wouldn't come up with question that were too tricky. She knew she'd be able to spin them well enough to obtain the desired effect. But she knew the bunny didn't have that sort of skill.

"Now, I know the press have some questions for me. I'll try to answer them the best I can."

The moment those words had left her lips, the questions started raining upon her. She felt the overwhelming sensation of her first press conference wash over her but she held back, her paws firmly holding the rostrum's edges.

Nick felt a growl growing in his throat as the journalist assaulted her mate with questions. That was the thing he had anticipated. The thing he feared. He saw the shift in her expression as she held herself against the roaring wave. He could feel her fear from where he standed. But the resolve came back, and her professional expression too, firmly locking itself on her face.

The fox felt pride. That was his bunny, facing her fear head on. He saw her point to a journalist, a moose with a grey shirt, so he would repeat his question.

"Is it true you're already back on duty ? Isn't your injury a liability ?"

It was an easy question. "It's true that I am back on duty. But I'll stick to desk tasks as long as my injury isn't fully healed. The chief and me have agreed on it."

Just as she answered another journalist cut in. "How serious was your injury ?"
The bunny remembered the advice the mayor had given her, to keep control, to chose the questions, but she decided to answer nonetheless. "I was shot in the knee with a high caliber ammo. My hinder leg was ripped off but the doctor made an excellent job reattaching it."

The answer cooled down the spectators. Nick himself winced at the memory. The camera panned and zoom on the crowd to show their reactions, most mammal wore shocked, concerned or empathetic expressions.

The journalists fired their questions again, Judy chose to answer one from a jackrabbit. He wasn't shouting as loud as the others but seemed to be bouncing in place.

"Officer Hopps, we know that your partner, Nicholas Wilde is in a coma. Some sources and witnesses declared your injuries were worse than his when you left the scene."

"What is your question, mister?"

"Well, I wonder how come, if his injuries were lighter than yours, his condition is now worse."

Judy had anticipated this question. The doctors had fabricated a fake file with plausible injuries and complications. The doe had studied it, just so she could give an answer. "His injuries only seemed to be less threatening than mine. A bullet caught one of his lung and he lost a lot of blood. As a result, his brain lacked oxygen for a few seconds and he has fallen into a coma. I know there were other complications, but I couldn't explain them to you since I am not a doctor."

Some other journalist tried to ask question on the same topic but she chose to ignore them. She wasn't the best liar and would rather tread lightly. "You there, the lamb, with the pink dress" she said pointing to one who seemed more quiet and shy than the other journalist.

"Do you believe the disappearance of Bellwether is linked to the mass shooting case? They happened at the same time after all."

This was a difficult question. She considered dismissing it, but she knew a silence could be worse than a guarded answer. She recounted in her head which elements could be made public and which couldn't, glancing at the chief. His face was a blank mask, but she could feel he didn't like the question either.

"For now, we do not have any element proving that the two cases are linked. We're still treating them at separate cases. But rest assured the officers in charge of those investigations communicate on their leads. There is nothing else the ZPD can disclose at the moment on the matter."

The doe could see her answer wasn't satisfying, but she wouldn't give anything else. Judy's team was working both cases, but it was better to let believe that they were a bit behind on the matter. She chose another journalist.

"The weasel, on the edge of the crowd."

"Miss Hopps, there are some theories on your relationship with your partner. Some of them imply that you are more than friends. Do you have anything to say about this?"

That came out of nowhere and almost threw the doe off balance. All the other journalists had now a highly interested expression and the crowd behind them had fallen mostly silent.

She knew that sooner or later, their relation would have to come out, but she refused for it to happen like this. Not alone facing a crowd, away from her mate.
"As a matter of fact, yes, I have something to say about this. Me and my partner are more than friends. Nicholas Wilde is my best friend, and the most kind and trustworthy mammal I know. Doing this job without him is the hardest challenge I've ever had to face."

When the question had been spoken, the vulpine had winced in front of the screen. That was bad. Even though he sometimes wanted to scream the love he had toward his bunny to the world, it wasn't how he envisioned it would discover it. He anxiously waited the doe's answer, gnawing at his fist. It hit him like a truck. She hadn't lied, she had said exactly what she meant. It was written on her face. He felt a tear of joy and longing rolling down his cheek.

"I love you so much, you wonderful bunny." he wiped the tear and chuckled. "This bond is turning me into an emotional bunny. Great."

Even though she couldn't see who did, she could clearly hear one of the journalist mutter "Even though he's a fox ?" With the calm that had reached the event, the sentence was loud enough to be relayed by the microphone given to the journalist, and through the speakers. If the mood was calm before, it fell down to complete silence, each mammal looking at one another to guess who had dared say this.

Judy felt warmth come to her face, but fought the anger that rose inside her. Instead she took a page of the chiefs book and ran her coldest glare on the group of journalist. Some of them looked like they tried to shrink. Her voice was an icy shard as she answered. "Yes. Even though he's a fox."

This had dampened the mood. The bunny wanted nothing more than to leave the stage, but she couldn't leave the situation like this. It could give a bad image to the ZPD. She pointed to a wolf among the other journalist that seemed like he felt less guilty than the others.

"What kind of action is the ZPD taking to prevent another shooting incident."

It was a good question. The bunny couldn't talk about the undercover operation, but she had something else to give. "As some of the citizen have probably noticed, we have reinforced our presence in most part of the city, mainly those that could be targets, like malls and major traffic intersections."

She chose another journalist, a giraffe that was towering above her colleagues. "Some sources have reported that the shooters were drooling and had a strange attitude, stumbling steps, snarling, like they were drugged. Could it have any link with the nighthowler ?"

The doe knew that this question would be asked sooner than later. The presence of nighthowler in the drugged mammal system hadn't been divulged yet, and she didn't have the authority to talk about it. "The shooters were on drug, that is true. About the nighthowler, this is a lead the ZPD has not excluded, but the blood is still being analysed, so there is nothing more I can say at the moment."

She heard the mayor approach behind her and put her hooves on her shoulder. "I think we can all thanks officer Hopps from having given us some of her time. She's a reminder of the good work and sacrifices the mammals of the ZPD do for this city."

The mayor shook the bunny's paw as the two females turned to face the flashes of the camera, both wearing warm smiles. As Judy went back to sit on her wheelchair and left the stage, she gave a sigh of relief.

"That wasn't so bad." Said the chief.
"Not so bad ?" chimed in Wolford "Don't listen to the chief Judy, you were perfect."

"Thanks guys. I must admit I thought I'd do worst."

"Remember we have started a fund to help the shooting's victims. You can donate your money through City Hall's websi-"

Nick turned off the TV with a big smile. He was proud of his mate, he couldn't have done better himself, and he was the sweet talker. He began cleaning the mess he had done with noodle cup when his phone rang. It was an unknown number.

"Hello, Frank Grayfox speaking."

"Frank ! It's your good friend Vladimir." Nick had recognized the voice as soon as he had heard the first word. The overly cheery tone put him on edge. "Your rendez-vous will be today at 4PM at mister Big's house. Come to my place to get the cash and a car."

"I'll be there in three hours."

"Great ! See you soon."

The wolf hung up. Nick sighed. He thought he would have more time to prepare, there was no way he could think of something in such a tight timeframe. He'd have to wing it.

Even with the lack of time, he appreciated the straightforward way of the mob. Contrary to the police, there weren't several layer of bureaucratic crap to go through before being allowed taking actions. And no reports afterwards. Scratch that, he'll have to report on his actions to his liaison at the end of the week.
Part 2, Chapter 13

Part 2 : Lycus Case

Chapter 13 : A Target On His Head

Wednesday the 30th of January 2019

The fox was driving the car lent by Vladimir, a big bag of cash on the passenger seat. The fox smirked. If he hadn't reformed, it could have been his easiest con ever. He'd simply have to go back to his identity as Nick and keep the money. Simple as that.

The mammal Vladimir wanted back had to be important, it wasn't every day mobster would be ready to pay fifteen thousand dollars simply to get one of his mammals back.

Nick tried to formulate a plan as the road took him to his destination. He'd first have to formulate this in a way that would make the negotiator think letting the hostage loose was good for them. It was especially hard since he didn't know what the hyena had really done. Maybe he could discover it once at the rendez-vous.

He pulled over near the gate of Big's estate, pushing the intercoms button. "I have an appointment with Robert." he said, the sentence he was supposed to say to be let in. The gates smoothly opened and he parked himself next to a limo. He left his car and shivered, Tundratown was a cold place, linked with some of his worst memories.

He nodded at Manchas, leaned against the hood, a smartphone in hand. The panther distractedly nodded back, seeming like he hadn't recognized the fox. As Nick approached the large doors, they opened, showing a large white bear in a tracksuit, motioning him to come inside. He was searched and disarmed, but didn't mind. The fox was lead to a small lounge. There were a few armchairs and a sofa around a coffee table. One of the seat was facing all the others and Nick knew he'd have to sit in this one, but he waited to be invited to do so.

"Sit here and wait." said the bear in an eastern accent. The fox obliged, putting the bag at his feet. Anyone in his stead would be stressed out, but the fox knew the place, the people and their habits. The negotiator would make him wait at least ten minutes to crank up his discomfort and let him talk first.

Nick regretted not to have his smartphone to pass time. He leaned back and rested his mind instead, preparing himself for what would follow.

Soon enough, the doors opened again. Koslov got in, with two others white bears. He sat heavily on the couch and stared at the fox.

Nick tweaked his own expression a bit. No signature smirk, but a mask of professionalism and confidence.

"My name is Frank, and you must be Koslov." It wasn't a risk to mention his knowledge of mister Big's second in command. He was relatively known in the underworld.

"As you know, I've come here to negotiate for the release of Robert. Whatever the hyena has done, I'm sure it can be overlooked. I would even risk saying it's an opportunity." The fox locked his gaze into the bear's. He had been deliberately evasive. He had to establish communication and the best way to do so was to provoke some curiosity, and have the guarded ursine saying something to
him.

"How so ?"

*Bingo.*

Still hidden behind his mask, Nick leaned forward, putting his elbows on his knees, chin on his paws. "I know Big's and Zimovitch's family aren't in the best terms, especially after this incident. But I believe cooperation is better than war." Again in this battle of gaze. The fox was used to it, it had multiple applications. It could be flirty, to get one to buy what he had sell. It could be intimidating, to get one to back down. And like here, it could be resolute, showing the absence of doubt and his good faith. Pretense good faith.

"It doesn't tell me how this is an opportunity."

*But you want it to be an opportunity, don't you ?*

"The other minor families could interpret any of ours showing a willingness to cooperate as a proof of weakness. Any movement, shift in a mob business is a play on a large board, wouldn't you agree ?"

The bear nodded in agreement, but his stern expression was still perfectly unreadable.

"Then" continued the fox. "I think this hostage negotiation could be turned into a cooperation negotiation. No one would know of it, of course, but it could set the foundation of an alliance."

Nick was playing with fire. He knew of Vladimir's opportunistic nature well enough and was pretty sure he wouldn't refuse an alliance with Big, but he didn't have the authority to make any promises. The shadow of a smirk appeared on the bear's mouth. Good news or bad news, it was too soon to tell.

"Allying with another family, or at least sharing some business could be a good idea, yes. But this family doesn't need it. Nor does it want to ally itself with the likes of Zimovitch."

*You're making the right move here, Koslov, but I can't say it's convenient to me.*

"Besides, you're new to this city Frank. You know the underworld, but not this one. And I doubt you have any authority to strike a deal between us and Vladimir."

So the family had had the time to dig up some info on Vladimir's negotiator in such short notice. They knew he was new, they knew he wasn't really part of Zimovitch's crew. Big's informant network was as good as ever, if not even better. They had moles everywhere, and it was pretty obvious some were inside Zimovitch's family.

"I'm simply a new piece on Vladimir's side of the board. Do you think he'd have sent me here without any bargaining chip ?"

"I think he's trying to see if you'll get killed by being too insistent on a task you can't complete. All you have is that bag at your feet."

The fox had a last card to play. Nick knew Frank needed allies, and powerful ones. It was the best way to draw the right kind of attention, the one that opened doors and made mammals want him on their side. It wasn't enough to show that Frank could survive a stupid and impossible task, he had guessed it was a simple test. But he had to complete it. Nick took a decision. He picked up the bag
and opened it, letting it fall on the coffee table, spilling a bit of its content.

"You're right. The snow still falls on Tundratown. Our time is too precious to wait for it to stop. Time to talk seriously."

Nick could see the effect of the emphasis he had put on those words on the bear's face. It was subtle, but the bear winced, one of his ears twitched and his gaze turned to murderous.

"Both of you out." Said the bear to his henchmen. They left without a word, perplexity on their faces.

Even though the temperature was always kept to mild in Big's house, the fox felt like it had dropped significantly.

"Give me one good reason to not execute you where you stand." The bear's tone was colder than death.

"It all depends on how stupid you believe I am. Would I have dropped this without insurance?"

"Mr Big knows."

Alright, bluffing time.

"But not the rest of the mob. Can you imagine what it would do to the family's reputation if everymammal knew Mr Big cooperated with... Your ex-employers." Nick couldn't control his smirk. This was too good. He didn't have anything against the bear, if anything, he respected him. But having the power over Mr Big's second in command, on his turf, was exhilarating.

"It's not something the ZIA would give you the authority to divulge." the bear growled. So the room was secured, Koslov wouldn't have taken the risk of saying those three words otherwise.

"Who says I am ZIA? All this is beside the point, all I want is you giving back Robert, and I'll get out of your fur."

The white bear leaned forward, threateningly showing his teeth.

"It's not a good idea using blackmail against me, little fox. You'll get what you want, but you will pay for it sooner than later."

"It's not blackmail. I'm paying you to release him." Nick's smirk was still in place, but he knew he was way past playing with fire. He had just painted a target on his head, and there weren't many ways to get rid of it. If he played his cards well enough, he could turn the table. He knew it. "But since you seem so eager for me to blackmail you, why don't you ask Mr Big to come here, so we can all discuss this like civilized mammals. Please." He said, making the 'please' sound awfully like an 'or else'.

The bear was fuming. This little fox was putting the family at risk. And he did so with a contempt smile, completely oblivious to the danger. It wasn't the first time Koslov wanted to kill someone, but not this much. The bear took out his phone and quickly dialed a number. "Hello mister. I need you to come to the lounge in the left wing. It's about the hyena. Yes it's very important." The bear took the coffee table and put it aside, putting a high chair in its place. Nick knew it was to put the shrew on it, he didn't like to be looked upon from above. A bear opened the door and placed Mr Big and his armchair on the one Koslov had put in place. The second in command came back to sit near his boss.
"Hello son, my name is Mr Big."

"Nice to meet you, I'm Frank Grayfox."

Nick bowed, showing respect.

"So, Koslov here seems to think my presence is necessary. I highly suggest none of you make me lose my time over this hyena."

Nick had put back the professional mask and simply uttered two words. "Snow still." He should have revealed his true intent right away, but he couldn't keep himself from playing a bit first. The occasion was too good.

The shrew's stern demeanor turned to cold and threatening.

"I have already played the ZIA's game. If you believe you can blackmail me or threaten my family, know that I'll burn this city to the ground before I let it happen."

"As I expect you to. I suppose you didn't have any intent to release Robert in the first place, so I want to know why you put in place this masquerade of a negotiation."

"Word goes around mister Grayfox. I don't know why, but there are quiet rumors about you. I can't pinpoint their origins, so I wanted Koslov to gauge you himself. I couldn't pass up this opportunity." That sentence meant someone in Vlad's entourage had given his identity to the shrew. Rumors were true, the Big's family had informants everywhere. "I now know what I need. You're a crazy ZIA agent with a death wish. One I am willing to grant." Nick would never have believed a shrew could have such a predatory grin. He repressed a shiver. It was time to drop the bomb.

"So I suppose an alliance would be out of question ?"

"Yes it is."

"If Frank Grayfox can't convince you-" began the fox, theatrically taking off his contact lenses, and putting on the trademark grin "-what about Nicholas Piberius Wilde ?"

Blowing his cover to the most powerful crime boss wasn't the smartest move. As Nick saw the shrew's mouth slightly open in surprise, the fox decided it was worth it.

Koslov shifted from contained anger to indignantly pissed. The fox had made a fool out of him after all.

"You sly little piece of-" began the ursine but a wave from mister Big shut him up. The shrew opened his arms in a welcoming gesture, and Nick gave him what could come as close a hug considering their difference in size. "Nick, I thought you were in a coma !"

"It's my cover story, I'd appreciate if you keep all this under wrap." The fox put the contact lenses back on.

A silence fell on the room, and the shrew ended up breaking it. "What's happening Nick ? Why are you working with the ZIA ?"

"I'm trying to infiltrate the group that organized the attacks around the city. I'm following a lead. Vladimir should be able to put me in contact with a group that only recruit foxes. I think him sending me here is a test, and I'm trying to blow him away by actually succeeding his impossible task. And keep my pelt if I can."
"Maybe threatening me from blackmail wasn't the smartest move then." snorted the bear.

"You wouldn't have given me the hyena otherwise, am I right?" laughed the fox "Besides, I'm sure we will be able to work something satisfying for all parties involved."

"You threatened to blackmail Koslov about his ZIA past? You know I'm aware of it."

"You are, not the rest of the city. Don't worry though, I would never put you, nor your family at risk. You know me, always bluffing."

The shrew sighed, and put on a mask of reflectiveness. The fox was polite enough to let him go through his thought process.

"I can give you the hyena, but this money won't be enough. You will owe me unless you have anything to add to the table."

"I'll owe you as Frank, not Nick, then. Which means there won't be the same legal limits to my actions, but I will not harm nor kill another mammal for you."

"That's fair. I'll also appreciate if you could give me any information you would come across, regarding things that could interfere with my operations. Coming from Vladimir, or this group you try to infiltrate."

"Of course. I don't have extensive knowledge of what you do or do not control though. And I won't give you information that would put this infiltration at risk."

"Then it's settled." The shrew extended his paw and Nick shook it lightly.

"I forgot to ask, what did this hyena do for you to capture him?"

"He was trying to kidnap some mammal. The daughter of some shop owner under my protection. Seems our good Vlad hasn't completely given up on his favorite business. He got caught by some of my bears as he was trying to push her in a van."

_Wonderful, I just saved the life of an asshole._

"Knowing you, I'm surprised you didn't ice him right away."

The shrew shrugged. "I must be getting soft."

_Sure, and I'm a sheep in disguise._

The fox left the house with an empty bag and a twitchy hyena on his heels. He had a bruised eye and was limping. They entered the car and Robert took the passenger seat, Nick started the car and left the estate. As soon as they had passed the gates, the hyena seemed to relax.

"Happy to be out, I take it."

The hyena glanced at him but didn't answer.

"How did you get caught?"

"The bitch woke up and screamed."

Nick wanted to punch his passenger in the face. He wanted to make a U-turn and give him back to Mr Big. But he kept driving in silence and soon they were back to Vlad's hangar. Nick parked the
car and they entered the premises.

"Robert! Dearest of all my friends, you're safe!" The wolf hugged the hyena, and helped him limp to a chair near the back of the hangar.

"Yes chief. After the beatdown, I don't know how I can still walk. Thanks for sending someone to get me."

The wolf served the hyena a glass of vodka. "You know I take good care of my associates."

Nick looked around, this part of the hangar was a bit secluded, hidden behind shelves. There were brown traces on the walls and floor, some paint must have been spilled at least a few weeks back. And there was a strange lingering but disturbing smell.

"Ah! That hit the spot!" Said the hyena downing the drink.

"Cigarette?" Proposed the wolf. The hyena took one and Vlad lighted it for him.

Nick smelled the strange scent again. It was faint, but was associated with ominous feelings.

"You should be more careful Robert. You're getting sloppy." The canid patted the hyenas shoulder in a fatherly fashion. "It's the third time you screw up this year. And we're only in February."

Chuckled Vlad.

Nick recognized the smell. It was the smell of dry blood.

"I'm sorry boss, I won't disappoint you again."

"Of course you won't." Nick caught the glimmer in the wolf's eye before seeing the blade in his paw. Even then he knew what would happen and had to fight back his reflexes to not act. Vlad pulled back the hyena's head and slit his throat in a swift and controlled motion. The hyena jerked and slumped on the floor, pressing his paws on the gaping wound. His gurgles almost made Nick gag. There was nothing that could be done now. In a matter of second, he stopped moving.

The wolf looked at his paws "I should really think about putting gloves on before doing that." he said casually, while going away and motioning the fox to follow him.

"If you were going to do that anyway, you could have spared us both the trouble and let mister Big do it." Said Nick as casually as he could while the wolf was rinsing his paws.

"Of course, but I wanted to know what kind of mammal you were. There was plenty of way this could go, but I didn't think you'd be able to bring him back. What did you tell the shrew so he'd let Robert go?"

"Trade secret." smirked the fox. "Why kill Robert?"

"There is only so many mistakes one can make before being caught up on by the consequences. My other associates must understand that my mercifulness has limits."

Nick shrugged. "I suppose we all must pay for our sins. Did I pass your test?"

"You're a direct mammal, I like that. Yes you did. I will probably have more work for you and I'll get the word around that you are as skilled as Jack says." The wolf took out his wallet and pulled some banknotes. "Here's your payment."

There was around a thousand dollars that Nick quickly pocketed. He didn't like the idea of taking
blood money, but he would have to get himself used to it for the time being. He left the hangar and went back to his apartment. It was almost 6PM when he closed the door behind him and slumped against it.

Two days. It had only been two days and he was already responsible for another mammals' death. He went to the bathroom and splashed cold water on his face. No he wasn't responsible. The hyena would have died anyway, either killed by Mr Big or Vlad. It didn't make any difference.

The fox punched the wall.

But it did, the fox did have time to react, he could have disarmed the wolf. And risk destroying what trust he had started building between them? Was the death of one low-life worth risking the operation?

He knew what path led to this low-life's position, he had almost taken it himself.

He punched the wall again.

"FUCK!"

Nick was not looking forward to the weekend. Sure he would be able to see his bunny, but what would she think when she would know what he had done. Or more precisely not done. A civilian had died because of his inaction. He could have acted, he could have sweet talked his way out after having saved the hyena's life. But he had chosen the safest route.

His phone rang in his pocket. It was a text from Jack. "I just talked to Vlad. Congratulations, you did good." The fox almost threw his phone across the room. Instead he splashed his face again.

*Do not let this get to you. You're stronger than this. You know you are.*

And maybe he was. He chased the dark thoughts to the back of his mind, like he had done countless times before. He couldn't afford to let himself drown in guilt. He left his flat and went shopping for food, it was the first thing he had found to occupy his mind.
Chapter 14 : There Had to Be Something Else

Wednesday the 30th of January 2019

Judy was back at her desk, she unlocked her computer and looked at the pile of files. There was something amiss. If Racton was the one that tampered with the camera system, he had to have extensive knowledge of the system. It meant a technical know-how way beyond standard computer skills. Forensic had already analyzed the camera system and found only minor traces of what could have been abnormal activity. And it could simply be glitches in the stream of data, things that happened to every system.

They'd have to run a background check on the raccoon. What kind of studies he had pursued, what kind of acquaintances he had, did he have hacking as a hobby?

The bunny sighed. All this was only a hunch, conclusions drawn by different handwritings on a schedule, it was minor at most. The chief had to have a lot of faith in her to accept pursuing this lead with so little evidence. She had to find something else. There had to be something else.

There had been eight black vans, which meant at least eight drivers. As she recalled, the drugged mammals stumbled outside of them so chances were they had been pushed out. Considering that, there were at least eight more accomplices. Excluding the four that had taken the lamb, if the two events were linked.

Were the shooters accomplices? She doubted it, they were all drugged out of their mind. Almost all of them had succumbed either to their wounds or the drugs, the few that remained were still in a coma. From what the ZPD labmammals had gathered, it was a mix of Nighthowler, BZ, alpha-PVP, and Benzodiazepines with a few other supposed compounds. According to the scientists, the cocktail was deadly and they still wondered how the shooters could stand, let alone be still alive. Even some of those that hadn't been shot had fallen due to the drugs. Heart failures and extensive brain damage.

Ironically, from all the mammals involved, the one that was in the best shape was the grizzly that had shot her. He was still unconscious. And along with him, three others were still alive, but according to the doctors, those three were as good as dead, their brain activity was non-existent.

The theory on why the grizzly was the less affected by the deadly effects of the drugs was simple, he was the biggest of the shooters, so chances were the dose he had received was smaller by comparison. In any case, the bunny looked forward to him waking up. She didn't have a lot of hope he would be able to give them informations, since the Nighthowler and Benzodiazepines were the best recipe for memory loss. But still.

There had to be something else.

What would Nick do?

What would he think of?

If he was a driver, where would he dispose of a van?
This wasn't the good question, all of the vehicles had now been found, including the one that had been used as a makeshift prison truck, each in a different place and burned to a crisp along with the evidence. The only clue that had been gathered was that their model was different. So where did they come from? No license plate, no traces on the matriculation records, which meant undeclared sales. Obviously. So she had to find a mammal willing to sell one or several trucks undeclared. There were some of them in the police records, ex-convicts, suspects, with shady garage business, but nothing big enough to deserve a warrant.

She had to find another angle, someone that could know this from the inside. Of course, Nick was out of the question, sending him to ask about those vans was the best way to blow his cover. But there was another fox that could do the trick. She had to call Finnick.

She quickly dialed his number and soon heard the deep voice of the fennec fox answer.

"Hey lil' missy, how are ya doin' ?"

"Fine Fin, you ?"

"Terrific. How's da leg ?"

"Healing, I hope. Am I catching you at a bad time ?"

"Nah. I wos working, but needed a breather anyway. Didja need sum'ting ?"

"Yup, I need a favor and maybe a big one."

"Let me put down mah things 'den." She heard a few clanking and the ruffle of a fabric. "Okay, watcha need ?"

"If you needed to buy one or several non-matriculated and undeclared vans, where would you go ?"

There was a silence on the other end of the line.

"I hope you ain't implying anything on mah baby." came the suspicious voice of the paranoid little vulpine.

Judy repressed a chuckle. "No I'm not. Are you alone where you are ?"

"I'm in back-alley, so no guarantee. Wait a sec." There was a slamming noise. "Okay, I'm in mah van, the thing's sound proof. So why you needin' this kinda info ?"

"I'm trying to pinpoint from where the van used in the attacks came from."

"I could help you do dat. If ya have the van models, I'm shure I can dig sum'ting up."

"No, just give me somewhere I could look for, I'll go see for myself."

She heard the fennec chuckle. "Shure. 'Cause if some mammal has anything to do wid' the attacks, they'll have neatly kept the evidence and will giv'em to ya wid' a smile."

Judy bit her lips. If her and a couple of officers came to so mammal business, it would draw attention, and she preferred to not give anything away as long as she could. Ideally, she wanted them to found the culprit before they could even realise the ZPD was onto them.

Or she could send some officer as a civilian. But the fennec knew this world, knew who to talk to and how to talk to them. It was a risk. Giving info on an ongoing case to a civilian could end her
career. But she trusted the fennec. "I can send the models to you by text later. How do you intend to proceed?"

"If it wos me dat wanted to get dose vans, I'd buy 'em all in different places, and maybe in separate pieces. So I'll go an' see some scrap yards and shit like 'dat. I'll be careful, dontchu worry."

"Thanks Finnick, I'll send you all this right away."

"Okay miss, havanice day."

"You too."

She hung up and quickly sent a text with the model list to her friend. She'd have to keep this under wraps. If it birthed no results, she could simply forget about it, but if the fennec was caught snooping around it could lead to heavy repercussions.

In the meantime, the bunny had another idea. If the culprits had bought separate pieces to put together the vans, chances were that a few websites would have stored their selling history. She made a pause, it was probably something the computer forensic were already looking into. She decided to call them just to be sure.

"Officer Mouser." came a squeaky and bored voice.

"Hello, Officer Hopps speaking. Can I take a few minutes of your time?"

She heard a sigh coming from the other side of the line. "Have you tried turning it off and on again?"

"My computer's fine. I'm calling about the shooting investigation. It came to my attention that the van used could have been bought at some scrap yard and that the part used to put them together could come from different places."

"And?"

"Well, maybe some of them have been bought on some websites, like Yakslist or something like that. Maybe we could take a look at their selling history."

There was another sigh at the other side of the line, with mumbling about 'computer analphabets'

"It's technically possible, but if the mammals that did this had half a brain, they would have used a VPN and false identity to connect to the website. And if I was them, I would have used several different accounts. And I'm not even talking about the number of things that are sold on the internet everyday. So as I was saying, it's technically possible, but it would take at least two months to peel this data, with everymammal on the team working on it full time. And this would be on a hunch that maybe those van were put together with separate pieces, so no guarantee we would even get the warrant for that."

Judy slumped on her seat. That what all she had. Hunches and breadcrumbs. "You're right. I had to try."

"Yeah, yeah. Anything else?"

"Not at the moment."

The mammal on the other side hung up unceremoniously.
So that was a dead-end. All I can do now is wait for the graphologist to analyse the schedules and Finnick to dig up something. I hope the grizzly will wake up soon.

She slumped back on her chair and huffed. She heard a thud and saw a mug on the corner of her desk. It was too far to reach, but Wolford slid it to her with a smile.

"Carrot flavoured decaf with cream. Four sugars."

Judy raised an eyebrow as she reached to take it. "Since when does the cafeteria have carrot flavoured decaf?"

The wolf shrugged dismissively.

"It doesn't, he went to the Stagbuck next door and poured the coffee in a mug." Came Blackfur's voice as she entered the room, her own mug in hand.

"Wolford, this costs 4 bucks. Let me pay you back." She reached for her wallet.

"Nope. You're not doing that. In fact you're not doing anything for the next hour." He took the wheelchair handles and pulled her away from her desk.

"Wha- Hey, I still have work to do." she protested.

"The first thing you did when we came back from the press conference was to get back to your desk. You didn't even eat this noon."

"I had snacks in the lounge at city hall." she protested more weakly. She felt a bit hungry, but her task had priority.

"You had like, one little toast and you didn't even finish your carrot juice. I've bought some take out, let's go to the cafeteria."

"I can eat it here." She crossed her arms.

"While working? Sure." Said the wolf with a taunting scowl "You need a pause Judy."

Judy turned to Blackfur. She was casually leaning against the door, sipping her mug. The panda smiled. "You'll get no support here, hon. I suggested it."

The bunny raised her eyes to the ceiling as Wolford pushed her away. The panda followed them. She relaxed a bit and found that maybe her partners were right. She needed a pause, the healing process was tiring her, she didn't sleep well the night prior because of the press conference anticipation. She wasn't exhausted, but a good meal would do her good.

Blackfur got in front of them to open the cafeteria doors and held it for them.

"Welcome back Judy!" came multiple voices. Judy's eyes shot wide open with surprise

It seemed almost the whole precinct had gathered. All her colleagues were smiling warmly and there was a huge cake on the tables in the center of the large room.

"Oh guys." she said, putting her paws to her mouth, whispering. "You shouldn't have."

Wolford was grinning from ear to ear as he pushed her toward her colleague. They all came in turn to greet her, some shaking her paw, some, like Clawfith or Fangmeyer, giving her a high five. Clawhauser gave her a warm fluffy hug, almost raising her from the wheelchair. The bunny had to
fight back the tears of emotion.

"We wanted to do a proper welcome back party!" explained the excited cat as he was giving glasses around to everyone. Since most officers were still on duty, it was only fruit and vegetable juices. Chief Bogo was the one cutting the cake. Like his work, his slices were perfect, all evenly cut. Rhinowitz gave the plates around to everyone.

She took a bite of her cake. Of course, it was carrot flavoured. She sometimes wished everyone would stop assuming bunny loved carrots, even if most of them did. Everyone was chatting cheerfully and Judy was happy simply being there. Because of her wound, she mostly stayed in her office and missed the activity and chatter of the precinct. It was usual for Nick and her to take their laptop and go write their report in the cafeteria, where most of the precinct's social life happened.

Gloom came to her as she thought about Nick. She missed her fox, more than she had anticipated. She decided to put that in the back of her mind for now. It was a time of celebration and she refused to let her melancholy affect it.

Fangmeyer approached the bunny. "We wanted to do that for your arrival, but we didn't know you'd come back yesterday."

"Hadn't chief Bogo told you?"

"No, he kept it a secret, he didn't want a leak and risk you being forced to face the journalists as soon as you left the hospital. The only ones that knew were Blackfur, Wolford and Clawhauser."

"Beside." said Clawhauser as he had come back with his own plate "The chief thought you'd need a little pick me up after the press event."

"Yeah, it went well, but it was still stressful."

"You nailed it though, the part where you talked about Nick was very nice too. And you made a perfect impression of the chief with your stern look."

"That you did!" confirmed the tiger. "I didn't know you had such a death stare."

"I learnt it from the best. By the way Fangmeyer, I have a question."

Wolford noticed the corner of a sly grin on the bunny's face.

"Yes?"

"Is there a pool on how soon Nick will stop being in a coma?"

The tiger's eyes opened wide and he took an embarrassed expression. "Yes, there is."

He expected she would scold him, but instead she said "I'd like to pitch in. Two hundred bucks on him waking sooner than anyone else has bet."

The tiger expression switched from embarrassed too surprised. "You never bet."

"This time, I'm betting for Nick. I'm sure he'd like that."

*Even more than anyone realise.*

"You know someone has bet he will wake up at the end of next week."
"Then I bet he'll wake up sooner than that."

The tiger was puzzled. Was it her way to wish the fox would come to sooner? He didn't want to squash her optimism so he simply accepted the banknotes she had taken out from her wallet.

The tiger went away, keeping his stunned expression.

Judy looked around and saw her temporary partners and Clawhauser giving her a half-puzzled and half-conniving look.

"What?"

"Judy, that was a very 'Nick' thing to do." Said the cheetah with a smile.

"I know. But if he's not here, someone needs to take after him." she answered with a grin she had borrowed from her mate.

"I'm not completely sure chief Bogo would agree." Said the wolf with a chuckle.

The bunny finished her cake as Wolford trudged away, paws in his pockets. He jumped on a table and hollered at every one.

"Francine, I can see you from here, stop putting your trunk in the punch bowl. Just because it's alcohol free, it doesn't mean you should drink all of it. And that's gross." His intervention had made all mammals in the room chuckle and turn to him. Judy wondered what he was doing, she understood when she saw Blackfur leaned against the table he was standing on. She tried to join them but her wheelchair wouldn't budge, Clawhauser was holding it by the handles while wearing an innocent look.

"Since I now have your attention, I have something to say. Officer Blackfur and me wanted to be upfront about this. Since we're partnered up with Judy on the new Bellwether Investigation, we'll have regular hours for the next few months. We don't think it's very fair to you, but it's not like we could do anything about it." He made a slight pause. "Well we could, but it would either impair with Judy's healing or put us on different schedules. So that's that, we'll be having an unfair privilege for the next few months and we're sorry about it."

Most officers looked at each other with perplexed faces. They didn't really care, they were all glad the bunny was back, and if her well-being meant two of their colleagues would have preferential treatment, they were mostly okay with that.

"That's not really an issue," came Rhinowitz's deep voice "And if the investigation is resolved sooner than the end of her recovery, she could switch partners to make it even." As always he was the voice of reason.

"I'm not sure, I've been partnered up with her a few times, I prefer the calm of a disrupted schedule over this crazy bunny. Have you seen her drive?" It was Fangmeyer's voice. Judy gave him an annoyed but amused glare.

"You're just mad because she didn't wreck her cruiser on the first month and you lost your money in the pool. Beside, she can't really drive right now." shot back Wolford, still perched on the table.

"You made a pool on me crashing a cruiser?" asked the bunny loudly in an outraged voice.

"We've even made a pool on you crashing the joke-mobile." deadpanned Grizzoli.
"Just because I'm a female, or a bunny, it doesn't mean I don't know how to drive! Beside, I wouldn't count on you to catch the runaways. You drive like my grandma, Wolford."

He could have shot back, but Wolford prefered to let her have the last laugh. She didn't have Nick's retort and he felt like she needed to have the upper hand for a bit. The laughter in the cafeteria slowly died down and Rhinowitz talked again.

"I think I'm talking for any mammal here when I say we don't mind. It's not as if you asked for it with those reasons in mind."

Wolford nodded. "Yeah, that's true. So if no one cares, I think it's settled." The wolf jumped down from his perch. "Nice, a few months of relaxing desk job, and no one to complain about it. I could get used to this." He felt the light smack of the panda's large paw on the back of his head. It made him chuckle. The large ursine had taken a liking for his humour, he poked fun at the others as much as at himself. The bunny had started working with them for only two days, but having spent time with them on the job for several months she could discern the pattern in their relationship. Technically, Wolford was the highest ranking officer of the two, as he was, like the bunny, a lieutenant, having spent three years at the academy. But the panda had a way longer experience on the field, she was the voice of reason even if she was less set on the rules than he was.

They were back at Judy's side and Clawhauser had let go of the handles. "You asked for Ben to keep me from coming didn't you?"

"Yes. It was our issue, not yours." said the panda.

"It's related to me though, I think I could have been here with you."

"It's better this way. We can't be one hundred percent certain that everyone in the precinct is alright with the situation. That way, there is more chance all this will only fall on us if it does." Explained Wolford.

They were right, there wasn't really anything she could do about this, but if she hadn't insisted to get back on duty, her friends wouldn't be in this situation.

The festivities slowly died down. Technically every mammal here was still on duty, so they couldn't stay for too long. The bunny and her colleagues were on their way back to their office when she heard Snarlov hollering behind them.

"Hey Hopps!"

She stopped in the middle of the hallway and waved at Wolford and Blackfur. "Go ahead, I know the way." she smiled. Her colleagues left her as the white bear approached. "What is it?"

The ursine looked around making sure no one could hear him. "It's not really important, but I think you should know that I'm aware of you and Nick being together." the bunny was a bit taken aback by this declaration. How could he know? Nothing in her memory could shed light on this, so she simply asked. "How?"

"What's the last thing you remember of the day of the shooting?"

She jogged her memory and answered hesitantly. "You and Rhinowitz arriving at the scene. Then I lost consciousness."

The polar bear scratched his head. "You don't remember everything. Don't worry, it's pretty normal."
Judy's brows furrowed. "I did something after you arrived?"

Snarlov felt a bit embarrassed but answered anyway. "Yeah, just before you really lost consciousness, you told Nick you loved him and he said he loved you back."

Judy's face shot red. "Oh." she looked down at the floor. "Did anything else happen?"

"No, you lost consciousness and-" he was about to tell her the state it had put Nick in, but chose not to do so. It was a resolved matter and she didn't need to worry about that. "and the ambulance arrived. They put you on a stretcher and you know the rest. Rhinowitz knows too, but we've decided to keep that to ourselves. It's your business."

Judy nodded. She appreciated her colleagues discretion. "Thanks, we wanted to keep this under wraps for now. I know some people won't approve of this so we've decided to wait before revealing it."

The Rhino shrugged. "Yeah, I understand. A few months back, I would have found it really strange, but I've seen how you are around each other. Hell, most of the precinct did. I don't believe anyone here would really have anything against it."

"That's good to know." smiled the bunny. "Do you need anything else?"

The bear looked around again. No one was coming. "Yeah, actually. What is it about Nick being in a coma. Rhinowitz and me have kept our mouth shut too since the chief asked us, but he didn't say more."

The bunny bit her lips. She couldn't give a straight answer to that. She chose the middle path. "I don't have the authority to say anything about this." This way, the bear knew something was afoot and that it was important enough that he should not try to find out.

"Understood. I think that's all I had to say." he said straightening up as he had leaned to talk with her.

"Just so you know, Blackfur, Wolford, Clawhauser and chief Bogo know about me and Nick being together. I'd bet MacHorn knows too, but I didn't check."

"Okay. I have to get back to my office now, have a nice day."

"You too Snarlov."
Part 2, Chapter 15

Suggestion: look for Sway Jennifer Connelly on youtube, the 1:41 version. You'll see why later.

Part 2 : Lycus Case

Chapter 15 : Sway With Me

Friday the 30th of January 2019

Nick got up from the couch. He had fallen asleep and wiped off the drool on his cheek. He went to the bathroom and checked himself out. His hair was a bit of a mess so he arranged it. Not that it would really matter at the place he was going to spend the evening, but he hated to look unkept. Any con-mammal knew that good looks mattered.

He couldn't recognize the fox he saw in the mirror. The grey furred and brown eyed fox, wearing the blue jeans and fake leather jacket was so alien. Would he have crossed path with himself, he probably would have been wary. The fox took his most menacing expression. Yeah, he could see it work with the extra buff his jacket faked. But he'd have to gain a bit of muscle to back-up his demeanor. Sometimes, being scary wasn't enough.

The fox had left his apartment and took the direction of the dive he had found the day prior. On his way, he took a hot-dog at a booth. He hadn't eaten this evening and since he was probably going to drink, he didn't want to do it on an empty stomach.

The bar wasn't crowded, but there were much more patrons than the first time he had come. The fox took a look at them, they all seemed like they didn't know how they had ended up here. The ambient chattering wasn't loud, the mood was calm. He made his way to the bar and the rat greeted him with a smile as he was serving another customer.

"Hey Frank, I knew you'd come tonight. Can I serve you something?"

The fox had already the cat piss that was called beer in this establishment so he chose to go for something less risky and more heavy.

"Do you have any good vodka?"

The rat's smile grew wider. "Do I have any good vodka? Oh son, I think I do." He filled a shooter with an unlabeled bottle he had taken from under the bar. "Be careful, this will turn your breath to fire."

Nick emptied the glass. It was good vodka alright. It had a grassy flavor and like all good vodkas, the burning sensation came from the stomach instead of the throat. That was the stuff of good evenings and awful mornings.

The already dimlitten bar slowly fell into darkness, a spotlight turned toward the little stage was the only ray of light. As a fox, Nick could see in the dark, but with the sudden change, his eyes would need a bit of time to adapt.

"And you're right on time." Whispered the rat as he gave the fox a second drink.

Nick heard the silk-like voice before seeing who was emitting it.
"When marimba rhythms start to play,
Dance with me, make me sway.
Like a lazy ocean hugs the shore,
Hold me close, sway me more."

The silhouette of a vixen appeared, slowly undulating in the spotlight. Nick had stopped his paw holding his glass mid-way to his mouth.

"Like a flower bending in the breeze,
Bend with me, sway with ease.
When we dance, you have a way with me;
Stay with me, sway with me."

She was wearing a slightly dark red dress, highlighting both her lean figure and her deep red fur. Nick, with a grin emptied his glass. He had finally recognized the song.

"Other dancers may be on the floor,
But my eyes will see only you.
Only you have that magic technique:
When we sway, I go weak."

Her gaze ran around the silent crowd, locking eyes with each mammal as she sang. Each one of them slightly froze and Nick could see the effect of her golden eyes on the patron. When came his turn, he was surprised to not be fazed and he gave her a slight nod.

"I can hear the sounds of violins
Long before it begins.
Make me thrill as only you know how:
Sway me smooth, sway me now."

The fox closed his eyes, letting the music take him where it wanted. He found himself on a dimlitten dance floor, slowly dancing with his mate. He could almost feel the brush of her fur, the breath of her mouth. He savoured the next two verses, lost in his fantasy, singing them in his head as they were the same as the previous ones.

"Other dancers may be on the floor,
But my eyes will see only you.
Only you have that magic technique:
When we sway, I go weak."

"I can hear the sound of violins
Long before it begins.
Make me thrill as only you know how:
Sway me smooth, sway me now.

Sway me sweet,
Sway me now..."

Her voice became a whisper in the end of the last verse. Nick expected the patrons to clap, but they all simply nodded and raised their glass. The mammals respected the silence, something the fox had rarely seen. The vixen got down from the stage as the light and chatter came back, and approached the bar, sitting on a stool next to the grey fox.
"Joe, could you be a dear and give us two of whatever this handsome fox is having." It seemed the silk in her voice wasn't only reserved to the stage.

Joe took out the vodka bottle again and Nick nodded.

She leaned against the bar and played with her glass, giving him a side glance. "You're new here."

"To this bar or to the city ?"

"Yes." the mischievous smile wasn't on her mouth, but clearly in her eyes.

Is she flirting with me ?

Nick chuckled. "Scarlet wears scarlet. Makes you wonder what one should look at." he raised his glass and she did the same. They emptied them.

"One is free to choose."

Okay, she clearly is.

It usually was not something he could tell. He decided to roll with it.

"Then I choose those amber eyes." he said locking his gaze into hers. He had always considered himself smooth when he was in the dating-pool, but this move was not. In fact, he was being so unsmooth that he thought that all he'd get would be a snort and an annoyed glare. He didn't really care, knowing that it would lead nowhere. Maybe it was why he had dared say that.

She gave crystalline laugh and turned her gaze back to the scene.

"You know my name, but I still don't know yours."

"The name's Frank."

"Nice to meet you Frank." He had extended his paw but she didn't seize it, instead she ran a claw along his palm, slowly getting back to the stage. This time, the light only faded a little, and the chatter didn't top completely around the back where Nick was.

The fox absently turned back to the bar. The music was soothing, it was exactly what he had needed. He looked up and saw the rat wearing a strange smile while filling mugs for other patrons. The fox lifted a brow as a query.

"I had never seen Scarlet blush before."

"I guess it's usually the other way around." smiled the fox. "You were right, a voice to melt the ice-cap."

From the rat came a raspy chuckle. "I told you."

Nick felt a bit guilty. Not toward his bunny. It was only harmless flirting, and even if he doubted Judy would appreciate, he knew himself well enough to know there would be nothing more. He felt guilty because he didn't want to lead on and deceive the vixen. There was nothing he could do now, she was back on stage and seemed to be here to stay.

The fox had stayed around an hour but the singer hadn't come back to chat with him. She was still on stage, going from a ballad to another. He decided to call it a night. One more hour and he would be drunk, and that wasn't how he wanted this evening to end. He paid his bill, waved at the vixen
and left the bar.

The walk to his flat in the cold evening air cleared his head. It took away his stress and questions. The fox took in his surroundings as he walked the street. On the day, it was a block like any other. Maybe a bit old and poor, but not unwelcoming. It was another story at night. He could regularly see cars stop near groups of females, and once in awhile, one of them got in. Hooded figures loomed in street corner, pouches and money going from one hand to another. The night activity was bigger than the day's and it didn't surprise the grey fox. Usually he would get strange looks, and sometime hear a snicker, his way of dressing was unusual in his old line of work, but with his looks, he was right at home

A fox kid, no more than sixteen addressed him as he passed near. "Hey, 'need something for the evening ?"

Nick stopped and turned to him. "What do you got ?"

The kid seemed twitchy, clearly he used his stuff as much as he sold it. He looked around suspiciously to see if anyone was watching or listening. But if anyone was, in his state the kid wouldn't have been able to tell.

"Bit of this, bit of that. Coke, heroine, pot... and this new thing." He took out a capped vial.

Nick kept his eyes to shoot wide. The clear liquid had a slight purplish color. This had to be a coincidence, there was no way in hell he could fall on this while walking on the street.

"The good stuff, but it's not cheap."

"What is it ?"

"Secret brew. You're interested ? Sends you through the roof, this thing."

"How much ?"

"New customer, so three hundreds. I'll throw in the syringe and tourniquet."

"Deal." Nick took out a bunch of banknotes and shoved them in the kid's paws. He put the tube and pack he was given and put them away in an inner pocket. Under a sudden inspiration the grey fox asked.

"Could you give me your phone number ? If this thing is good, I'll probably buy you more."

The young fox seemed taken aback, not believing his chance at a new regular. "Uh, of course !"

Nick took out his phone and added the number he was told.

"Nice doing business with you."

"Same here," answered Nick as he walked away. He didn't know the kid's name but it didn't matter. He had a phone number, and would recognize his face. The chances were slim but he'd give it to Judy to have it analysed. If this was any close to what the drugged mammals had in their vein, this was a lead, and maybe a good one.

That night, he didn't dream. No nightmare induced by the violence he had witnessed. He woke up a couple of time but he easily slipped back into slumber. For the first time in almost two weeks, the song playing in his head in a loop he had a good night sleep.
Interlude.

The song was 'Sway' written By Anita Kelsey, but I prefer Jennifer Connelly's interpretation in Dark City (excellent movie too).

I was going to stop that chapter here, but I thought it would be waaaaay too short.

End of the interlude.

Last week of January 2019

The week had gone by uneventful. Judy was still waiting for the graphologic analyse on the schedules and the grizzly's awakening. After the press conference, only a handful of journalist were waiting in front of her building and they number had thinned every day. They hadn't found any other lead beside what they had, now all that remained to do was wait.

She couldn't accompany her partners on patrol, and since it had become useless to go through the files again and again, it left her with a bit too much free time on her paws. She had talked to Clawhauser about it. The pudgy cat had asked and obtained to tweak his schedule a bit, and so he could spend a bit of time with her at the shooting range. Judy was already a good shot, but with the cat's advice, she could see her own progresses. She was far from his level though, as she saw every time they competed.

The handgun wasn't the only weapon the cat was proficient with. He really enjoyed scope-shooting with a preference for bolt-action rifles. It was a big contrast with his energetic personality. He was perfectly able to take his time to do a perfect shot.

He had told he wanted to take her to an outdoor range. The target in the precinct weren't far enough to be fun to shoot at. And there were even moving targets at the place he went. Strangely, the cat didn't enjoy hunting. Sure, he loved a challenge and had tried a couple of time, but the idea of taking a life solely for sport was appalling to him.

Saturday the 2nd of February 2019

After the evening at the bar, the rest of the week had been completely boring. He didn't want to get out though it would have been a good idea to do so. The TV was uninteresting as always, so all he had done was run around in circle in his flat, looking for a way to distract himself. Sadly, all the places he knew were linked to his real identity, so he couldn't really go there without a good reason.

Well, if he had nothing to do beside waiting, he should at least make it productive. The fox had bought a bunch of sport equipment. Tracksuit, dumbbells, sport mat... He'd make his body match the appearance his new looks gave him.

The fox had taken the ZUG, a taxi, he had made a large detour around downtown but he knew he hadn't been followed. It was simply his procedure to check. The last step was to enter a building by the back entrance and make his way up by stairs. The rendezvous point was in a flat on the seventh
The smell of his bunny was stronger and stronger as he went up the stairs.

Nick knocked on the door. It opened showing the silhouette of a large panda.

"Hi" he waved.

"Hello" she answered motioning him to get in. The fox obliged and quickly got into the living room where his bunny waited, sitting on her wheelchair.

The vulpine didn't take the time so say hello, he rushed to her and wrapped her in a loving embrace. "I see you've missed me, slick."

He was nuzzling her and taking in her scent, so he didn't answer. She buried her snout in the groove of his neck. "I missed you too."

Their mouths met in a passionate kiss, which would probably have gone further if it had not been broken by the panda clearing her throat.

The fox sat next to his mate on the sofa, not letting go of her paw.

"So, we're here to debrief you on your week."

The fox wanted only one thing, to take his bunny on his lap and cuddle with her on the sofa. He had to fight every fiber of his being to not let go of a whine. Judy, having felt his distress, ran her thumb on his palm. This small contact was enough to give him some determination.

The fox began talking, but there wasn't much to tell. He told about his first meeting with Vladimir Zimovitch, on how him and Jack seemed to know each other. Blackfur wasn't surprised, it was obvious the bunny kept a lot of connections with the mob. Then the fox told of his assignment to get the hyena out of mister Big's paws. Judy tensed up. Fru Fru being one of her friends, she sometimes forgot that her father was in fact the most powerful and feared mafia boss in the city.

He explained to them that since Frank needed allies, he had blown his cover to Big and that supposedly Jack didn't know of it, and that he'd prefer for it to stay that way. Blackfur wasn't happy to hear the news, but Judy was certain that the shrew wouldn't betray Nick.

The fox made a slight pause in his story as he steeled himself for what he was about to tell. How Vladimir had slit the hyena's throat and how Nick was certain he would've had the time to react.

Judy had put her paws on her mouth and Nick, despite his calm and composed mask, didn't dare look at her in the eyes.

"I can't say I like how this all went down." Began Blackfur. "But that was the most clever thing to do. According to the reputation Jack build Frank, it's not something that would faze him. Considering all this, you took the right decision."

Nick gave a laugh of irony. "The guy was a complete asshole, that doesn't mean it was right for him to get killed."

"It's not what I said. You took the most prudent decision, and that was the right one. You needed to keep your cover intact in order to continue this operation. It's regrettable that this hyena died, but it's not the result of your decision. Vlad had decided he would die. And do you honestly think if you had stopped him then, he wouldn't have killed him later?"
The fox shrugged. The only certainty was that he could have done something and he didn't. The hardest part was his bunny's silence. He had sworn an oath to protect the mammals of this city and he had betrayed it, how could his bunny let that slide.

"I feel like I should have done something." he still couldn't look his mate, but kept the mask on. "Judy, you said I could prevent collateral damage, avoid for innocent mammal to be harmed, and I-"

The doe sighed. "This wasn't collateral damage. You didn't cause it, you didn't kill this hyena. I hate the idea of any mammal being killed like that. He wasn't innocent, but it isn't wasn't justice either. You're not responsible for this mob boss action." she put a paw on his cheek and made him face her. "I won't say I'm happy with the outcome, but I don't blame you."

The fox shrugged. "No one's blaming me then, great. I felt a bit guilty about this, but if it's not my fault, then it's not."

Nor Judy nor Blackfur bought the sudden turnaround on the fox's thoughts on the situation. It was obvious he still felt guilty but was trying to brush it off, as always. But in the end, it was only one incident, and this was something he would get past on his own eventually, so there was no reason to linger on the matter.

"Anything else ?" asked the panda.

"Yes ! I almost forgot." Nick took out the vial. "A kid sold me this on the street. I didn't tell me what it was, some sort of new stuff. It would be a hell of a coincidence but I'd like to get it analysed."

The ursine took it between two fangs and stored it in a bag. "You have something else on him ?"

"We didn't exchange names but I have his phone number." He gave it too. "Something on your side that I could use ?"

Judy sighed "No, the investigation is at a dead end for now. I think at least on prison guard was an accomplice, but we're still looking into it."

"No one came to ID the shooters yet ?"

"There weren't even declared missing. We've divulged some of the photos but we don't want anyone to know the grizzly that attacked us survived. If he knows anything, we don't want to risk him being killed."

"Makes sense."

The panda stopped writing on her laptop and slid a bag to Nick. "Jack asked me to give you this." The fox opened it and found a pair of gloves, a bulletproof vest, a balaclava and a smartphone. There was also a note.

"When did he give you this ?" asked the bunny with a puzzled look.

"I found it on my desk after lunch two days ago. I didn't bring it up, since Wolford isn't up to speed about all this and I'd prefer for it to stay that way. He's not really good with secrets."

Judy nodded. Even though he had managed to not say anything about her Nick, she knew it was because it wasn't a topic that could usually be brought up.
Nick read the note and summarized it to the mammals present. "Okay, so I'm supposed to always wear this under my clothes when I get out." he said pointing to the vest. "I should wear my gloves whenever I do dirty work. That's obvious. And the balaclava could be useful too. The smartphone comes with some ZIA software to communicate with him and he say he'll provide you all with the same devices, so we can communicate securely and even do conf calls. And it has an untraceable internet connection. Sweet." The fox put everything back into the bag.

The panda stood up, stored her laptop back in its case and strapped it on her shoulder. "I'm sure both of you have a lot to talk about." she said with little grin. "I'll leave you to it. There is food in the fridge. I'll come back to get you tomorrow Judy."

"Okay, see you tomorrow."

"Bye Wight."

The ursine left the flat, leaving them alone.
"That was torture." The fox leaned give a peck on his bunny's cheek.

"What ?" She asked turning to him. The fox mouth captured her lips with his and for a few seconds she completely forgot what was happening around them.

"Being near you and having to keep myself from touching you."

"Nothing's stopping you now." It was true, the fox got up and took his bunny in his arms bridal style. He made two paces before halting. "Is there a bedroom somewhere near ?"

"Room to the left." She said, pointing at a door. Having his paws taken, the bunny turned the handle and the vulpine laid her down on the bed. He put his vest and sweater on the back of a chair, put his contact lenses in their box, and nestled himself around her, like they had done dozens of time before. The bunny's broken leg was slightly in the way, but it didn't stop them to get in their usual cuddling position.

They didn't talk, simply enjoying each other's presence. Both of them simply wanted to press against their loved one, taking in their presence. They dozed on and off during almost two hours, and when they finally completely woke up again, they felt they had gotten out of a strange dream. Judy had been afraid that his absence would dampen her feelings for him but they were more present than ever. She felt his snout in his neck, feeling his warmth and pleasant breath on her fur. She buried herself a bit more in the fox's chest and felt his paws wrapping themselves around her waist, fangs playfully scraping her fur. She could sense his grin when she shivered at the sensation.

"Agent Slick is getting quite undertaking."

"I don't know what you are talking about." came an absolutely not innocent voice. The bunny reached with her paws over her head and caught nick's shirt at his shoulders. In a smooth motion, she pulled it and he let her take it off. She rolled and buried her face in his fur.

"ah wuv dis" came her muffled voice.

The fox snickered. "What is my wuvely wabbit saying ?"

"I'm never getting my face off your chest." she had turned her face upward and all the fox could see was her amethyst eyes and her ears sticking out. Her face was hidden by his white fur were her paws were buried.

"You're so cute." he blurted. That was the first thing that had come to his mind, it was how she looked at that moment. He expected her to scold him or at least give him a glare. Instead she sank back her face where it was as second ago, but not before he could catch a glimpse of her blush.
What? What just happened?

"That's not your usual reaction."

No response, only her face pressing harder, as if she was trying to disappear.

"Care to explain?" he asked in a taunting tone.

She shook her head in negation, rubbing her face against him.

*If cuteness could kill, I would die on the spot.*

"You don't want to say what it is?"

New head shake.

"I could call you cute until you talked." he proposed mischievously.

"Don't call me cute." the meek voice was different from what she usually used against this kind of attack.

"How can I call you then? Carrots?"

A nod.

"Dumb bunny?"

Slight hesitation followed by a nod.

"Fluff-butt?"

Longer hesitation followed by a reluctant nod.

"Wuvely-cutesy wabbit?"

Head shake accompanied with a punch to the ribs, "I'm not cute." The voice embarrassed, but there was not the usual sternness that usually answered the c-word.

"I disagree. You're the most fluffy and cute bunny I've ever had the chance to lay my eyes upon."

"Stop calling me cute!" she was facing him again, the red was completely visible under her fur, and totally destroyed her try at an angry scowl.

"I will if you explain to me what's happening. To be honest I'm getting worried."

The doe sighed. There was no way around this, she'd have to explain this eventually.

"You know how we bunnies don't like being called cute by any mammals beside bunnies?" The fox nodded "You know why?" The fox had several ideas, but wasn't sure so he simply shook his head. "For most mammals, cute has a relation to something little, with big eyes, fluffy, a bit dumb and relatively defenseless. So bunnies fit right into the description for most of the bigger mammals. I'm speaking broadly, but you get the gist."

Nick nodded. This was what it meant to most mammal yes, but it wasn't always how he saw her when he used. He didn't know why but he thought cute was fitting. She was little, yes, she had big eyes too, but she was as far from defenseless than she was from being dumb.
"It's different for bunnies. It can have all sort of meaning depending on who says it. Parents call their kits cute because they can't see them any other way, probably the same way a mother sees their kits as beautiful in other species."

"My mom called me cute when I was little." smiled the fox.

"And I'm sure you were." She laughed "To an adult rabbit, calling another cute is a real praise, not something we throw around like other species do. For example a husband call his wife cute, and he better not do so with another female, except if it's someone from his family."

"Then I'm not wrong if I call you cu-"

She put a paw on his snout. "It has a different meaning. From an adult to another, it means beautiful, desirable, the thing you want to be close to because it's so near perfection, but also the thing you want to keep for yourself and protect. And we don't use it in public too much."

"So I'm using it right !" he gave her a smooch on the snout.

"Not always. And I'm not cute."

"By what you just said, you a-" She cut him.

"It also has a meaning toward physical appearance."

Nick stared at her. Judy was the last female he thought would have insecurity about her physical appearance. He raised a brow and the bunny answered the silent question.

"I wouldn't call myself cute. There are things that could be 'better'" she said by making a quote gesture with her fingers. "How do you think I got the nickname Jude the Dude ? I'm too lean, a bit too athletic, my face isn't very round, my fur is a bit dull. I know how it sounds like, but I perfectly like it the way it is, and not only because of its usefulness. I simply don't have the 'looks of perfection.' " There was no sadness in her voice, no resignation. It was simple statement.

"What you mean is : you are not cute by bunny standards."

The bunny chuckled. "Yeah, you could put it that way. Would I be by fox standards ?"

"Well, you don't have a long fluffy tail." he said tickling her round tail, almost making her jump. "You have long and round ears instead of small pointy ones." He nibbled them, sending shiver down her spine. "You don't have sharp claws." He clasped her paws into his. "You don't have predatory fangs." he gave her a deep and loving kiss. "So I'm sorry to announce that you are not cute by fox standards, whatever that could mean." He kissed her snout to punctuate his sentence making her giggle.

He took her face between his paws, locking his eyes into hers.

"But I can promise you that you are by mine."

Her face came back to its red blush in a matter of seconds.

*If he keeps this up, I'm going to have a heart attack.*

She had broken eye contact and was playing with the tip of her ears, as she always did when she was really flustered. Nick had let go of her face and had pulled her back against his chest.

"Nick ?"
"Yes ?"

"Could you say it ?"

"What ?"

Nick tried to look at her face but she obstinately hid into his fur. He suddenly understood.

"You're cute."

And he meant it. Not the way the other mammal would say it about a bunny. He said it like a mate. She pressed herself against him. He meant it and everything was so perfect.

"You're the cutest bunny I've ever met."

He brushed her ears back and felt her move. She was looking at him.

"Only the cutest bunny ?" She had tried to make a stern voice, but the most she could come with was meek and vaguely inquisitive.

As she was facing him again, he took advantage of the occasion to place a big wet smooch on her nose, making her rub it several time.

So cute !

"You're the cutest mammal I've ever met," he said with a wide grin.

"This time you didn't mean it like cute, you meant it like cute."

Maybe an outside observer wouldn't have understood, but Nick did. He fell silent for a few seconds before asking. "You can tell ?"

"Yeah, I can. Cute is the bunny word. What I told was only a fraction of how subtly this word can be used."

"What do you mean ?"

"Say to a bunny you don't like they are cute and it's probably one of the meanest insult you can use."

"You know we've come from 'subtle social context' to 'utterly nonsensical' ?"

The doe chuckled "As I said, cute is the bunny word. Refrain from using it with bunnies if you don't know them well enough. And certainly do NOT use it against agent Savage."

The sly grin was in place "I wouldn't dream of it."

"For whatever reason, I'm not inclined to believe you."

"So do I have a free pass on calling you cute ?"

The doe reflected on it for a few seconds. "It depends on the context. A bunny would know when it's appropriate, and I'd find it unfair to forbid you to do it."

"So I'll have to figure out myself when I can, and when I can not do it. I suppose I should be careful on how I mean it too."
The bunny played with the fur his chest. "I'm okay with both ways since it's you. Anyone else I'd have to correct. But you know me well enough to not associate the negative significations to the word."

"You put a lot of faith in this sly fox."

"Yes I do."

They had fallen silent. The fox was pondering on what they had just talked about and something about it seemed a bit... Strange. Amiss.

The fox scratched his head.

"Isn't the c-word also a matter of interpretation?"

"You mean, another mammal would call us cute and we would wrongfully assume what they meant by it?"

"Yeah."

"I suppose it can happen, but I think it's rare at best. I don't jump on the throat of mammals who do so, and most other rabbit don't either, but you can be sure everyone of us will feel stereotyped."

They had stopped cuddling and Nick was massaging the bunny's shoulders and back. She had gotten rid of her shirt and bra. Nick sensed she had been awfully stressed by her week, her back was a bundle of knots.

"I can't believe desk work is putting you in this state. You know the doctor said stress could impair with your recovery."

"Would be worse if I did nothing."

The fox rubbed a point in the bunny's back and she couldn't keep herself from moaning.

"You could take a subscription at a massage parlour."

No response, the bunny was so relaxed she had trouble understanding what the fox said. He wondered if she would start drooling.

The vulpine was not the best massager, but the simple feeling of his paws in her back was enough to send her in state of bliss. He alternatively used his palms and the tips of his fingers, his claws slightly out.

Nick felt a reaction when he let his paws stray from her back to a place slightly lower. She didn't protest however. He continued his motions, going back and forth from her back to the lower part of her body, flicking playfully her tail.

She gave new moan that had nothing to do with a relaxed state. She had her face buried in a pillow but Nick could see a rowdy smile in the corner of her mouth. He continued playing with her tail and what was around it while nibbling her ears.

New moan.

He turned her to make her face him and the kiss they shared was as much lust as it was love. He felt her hands fussing around his belt and his pants were loosened.
"Got your tail !" giggled the bunny.

Nick had frozen. "It's not my tail." He said, beginning to pant.

She slowly moved her paw. "Can I play with it anyway ?"

"Hhhgn." was the only answer she got when acting upon her query. The level of mischief in her eyes could finally match what his mate was capable of. She rolled and put him on his back, not even stopping her motion.

"I see the fierce predator has lost his words."

The fox, accustomed to take the lead didn't know what to do with his paws. His brain seemed to have totally stopped all coherent activity. The only thing he could do was keep himself from drooling. She carefully moved down, the gleam of mischief still in her gaze.

"Foxes aren't the only ones that can go undercover."

Nick loudly gulped "Are you sure... ?" he felt a bit embarrassed, it wasn't something he expected her to do for him.

"Nick, we bunnies are accustomed to handle carrots."

New short freeze.

"You dumb bunnOooh gods." He wanted to say something, but there was absolutely no way to elegantly compliment this type of interaction. Soon he had lost the capacity to say anything and his paws were gripping the sheets, holding onto the last shreds of his sanity.

"You sh-should really s-stop now." He articulated, feeling the familiar warm sensation rise up.

She crawled back up with a wide grin of satisfaction. "How was that for going undercover ?".

"There is no classy response to that."

She got rid of her pants and pulled him into a burning kiss.

"Classy is not what I'm looking for right now."

Clothes, pillows and sheets were scattered around the room. The two lovers were nestled into a duvet on the floor, in a perfectly snuggled and interlocked position. Because of the fur color, no one would have been able to tell where the fox ended and where the bunny started. It was the middle of the night when hunger woke the fox. He liberated himself from his bunny and went to the kitchen to fix them something to eat.

There was nothing to cook as a dinner, only two instant meals, one for prey and another for predators. He put them in the microwave and as he turned it on he heard a voice coming from the other room.

"Nick ?"

He went back and he found his bunny sitting in the bundle of sheet waiting for him.

"Yes Carrots ?"

"Could you help me get up ? My chair and crutches are still in the living room."
He took her in his arms and she shivered because of the sudden cold. He took the duvet and wrapped it around them, walking back to the kitchen.

"The ZIA safe houses sure are great." He said, sitting her on the kitchen counter. "Food, warm bed, cute bunnies..."

"And sexy foxes. When we came here, I feared this would be some kind of abandoned squat."

There was a loud ding a Nick took out their meal, giving her a fork. They dug in.

"Since we're both here and nobody's around to hear-"

"We're in a ZIA safehouse, you can be sure someone is listening, Carrots." smiled the fox.

She blushed at the idea of someone listening in on what they were doing earlier but quickly regained her composure. "No one that could reprimand me on what I do with the investigation intel. I have asked Finnick to look around on where the vans were bought."

"Good idea, if someone know how to find van, or van parts on the black-market it's Finnick."

"I hope he'll be okay. I don't want him to take risk."

Nick shrugged. "The little guy is paranoid. He'll have taken each and every possible precaution."

They had finished their meal and were back to cuddling on the bed. It was very reminiscent of their time in the hospital. Silence and playful nuzzle and nudges.

"Hey, Judy ?"

"Yes ?"

"When all this is over, the operation, the investigation, I’d like to take you on a date, a real date, if it's okay."

The bunny was puzzled. "Of course it's okay, why wouldn't it be okay ?"

"Well, we’re in a different-species relationships, and pred-prey at that. We had agreed to keep this under wrap for now."

"I don't care what other mammals can think. Well no, that's not true, I do care. But on this, their opinion doesn't matter. If a few stuck-ups have anything to say about us, let them talk."

She had turned to him and he was wearing a big bright smile. "What ?"

"I get to take you on a date." His tail was wagging.

"Of course you do. Did you think we'd just go from declaration to marriage without a few dates ? Just, don't go overboard."

"You know me, overboard is not my style."

"Not your style at all, you wouldn't borrow a car from a crime-boss, explode all previous records on traffic regulation violation simply to declare. You never go overboard."

"Never."
He had left the safe-house first, leaving from the back entrance as the sun was rising. Judy had shed a tear when he had hugged her just before going, and he had struggled to not do the same. But he had to put the mask back on. He had to be stronger, tougher. All this was going to get worse before it got better. He thought back at the discussions they had the day prior and one of them gave him an idea.

He took out his phone and dialed. A few ring later, a deep voice answered.

"Hello, Finnick talking. Who's dis ?"

"It's me." He hoped the fennec fox would recognize his voice. "I go by Frank these days." He added.

There was some silence before the fennec's voice came back. "Frank, 'course. How ya doin' ?"

It wasn't the first time he had used a false name, so the fennec hadn't been completely taken aback.

"I'm doing fine Fin. How are you ? And how's your lady ?"

"I'm doin' gud. The lady's worried for 'er son, but she doin' okay too."

"Great. Say Fin, I need a favor."

"I knew it weren't no social call. Shoot."

"I need you to run a search on our old associates. Stinky, Red and Black."

Nick didn't want to say any name by phone and Finnick had picked up on it immediately. If it weren't for their physical differences, they sometimes acted like twins, almost capable of reading each other's thoughts.

"You askin' me to unearth stuff 'dere buddy. Stinky's still more paranoid 'den me, I doubt I'll find her. Black is Black. No way I'm findin' her unless she wanna find me. Red, I could find."

"You're the best buddy. I owe you."

"You ain't owing me nothin' 'til I deliver sum'ting."

"Great. Gotta go, have a nice day."

"Ya too, take care."

Nick stored back the phone in his pocket. He felt a bit guilty only contacting his friend for work related matters but truth was, he shouldn't even have contact with him. He shrugged. This was a difficult situation, he needed all the help he could find, and Finnick's was precious.
Monday the 4th of February 2019

Judy was in the cruiser. She tried to refrain herself from bouncing around. The last few days had been gloomy after the time she had spent with her fox. She thought seeing him would do her good. And it did. But it was even worse now, knowing that the next two weeks would be spent without him. Not even the shooting session with Clawhauser had been able pull her thoughts from her mate.

But it was different now. She was excited. The grizzly had woken up and according to the doctors he was fit enough for questioning. Wolford helped her out of the car and pushed to the hospital entry hall. They took the elevator to the secured level and quickly found the ursine's room. Blackfur knocked and opened the door for them.

The brown bear was resting on a sitting position, back against the wall. One of his paws was cuffed, in the other he was holding a glass. There was no one else in the room. As he saw the uniforms of the newcomers, he seemed to try to shrink in his bed, with a frighten expression.

When he had turned to them, Judy had taken a glance at his face and couldn't help but wince. Nick's bullets had left multiple gashes in his face, his right eye was probably gone, there was a patch on it, and his ear had been shredded and stitched back.

Blackfur talked first. "Hello, we're officers of the ZPD. Your name is Herbert Growlsky, is that right?"

"Yes."

"I'm Sergeant Blackfur, here are Lieutenant Hopps and Wolford."

"Hi." he said shyly. "Miss Hopps, I's a big fan." he added with a little smile.

"Thanks." the bunny answered.

"Do you know why you're here?"

"No, not really. I know I been shot, but I dunno when or why."

"What can you recall of friday the eighteenth of January?"

The bear look like he was thinking really hard. "Not'ing. I can't recall a thing. I'm sorry."

"You were involved in a firefight. You've been shot multiple times. You don't remember?"

"No. I don't even remember how I got 'ere, in dis room."

Blackfur scribbled something on her notepad. "What's your last memory before waking up here?"

Once again, the bear made a strong effort to find something. "It's hazy. I was wid' mah friends in 'dis squat south of downtown. Dere was a new guy, a wolf or a fox. He was little so I think a fox. He made us try some 'free samples' or whatever." He made a pause, he looked like he was
struggling to pull the memories from the depth of his mind. "It's so strange, I dunno why I came wid him afterwards, He just asked and we did. We were in sorta van and we arrived to 'dis storage building. 'Dere were people in strange yellow suits. 'Den I remember ah wos scared. Like real scared. An' angry. 'Dere was roaring inside mah 'head. But it wos all black, 'dere wasn't no sound, and no light. And I wos so scared." As he was talking, he had huddled up, wrapping his knees with his free arm and started shivering. Judy couldn't recognize the raging and drooling mammal that had shot at Nick and her.

Wolford came and patted his arm. "You're okay buddy. No one is going to hurt you now."

The panda sighed. Seeing this mammal like this, she knew she would hate to have to tell him what he had done while he wasn't in control of his actions. The good news was that since he was under the influence of nighthowler, he would be judged innocent. A meager consolation, she didn't how she would react if she learnt she had hurt people.

"Mister Growlsky, I can tell you part of what happened while you weren't conscious, but I doubt you will like what you will hear. It's better that you know, and maybe it could trigger some memory."

"If It can help me remember, I wanna know. No one here wan'ed to tell me what I did."

The panda was about to talk when she felt Judy tap on her arm. "Can I ?" The panda shrugged, it made no difference.

Judy approached the bed and started talking. "I can only tell what I saw."

"You wos 'dere ?"

"Yes. We had been called for a jewellery store robbery."

The bear's eyes shot open. "I-I robbed a jewellery ?"

"No, it simply was the reason we were there."

"Oh. Uh- great." He looked relieved.

"We were about to secure the street, when this back van pulled over. At first me and my partner thought the SWAT was already here but instead you and a sheep came out."

"Ah ? What happened 'den ?" he asked eager to know more.

Judy took an inspiration, she was about to give a metaphorical punch in this bear's face and she didn't like it. Not at all.

"The van left. You were both holding assault-rifles and you shot at us. We now know that was because of the drugs in your system."

"I shot at you ?" He pointed at her leg. "It was me that did 'dis ?" he looked like he was about to crumble.

"It was not you, it was the drug. And I'm getting better."

He was staring blankly into space. "I shot Judy Hopps." The bunny thought he was about to cry but he didn't. He put his free paw to his forehead. "I don't remember. I ain't remembering nothing." He turned to her but couldn't directly look at her. "I'm sorry."
"Don't be. It's really not your fault."

"I took the drug. It's my fault."

Wolford chimed in. "I think you're the only one here that believe it's your fault. There was nighthowler in what they gave you. Would you have accepted to take it if you knew that?"

"No! Of course not! But if I hadn't."

The wolf shrugged. "Screw the 'ifs'. Maybe you shouldn't have taken the drug, but those guys shouldn't have given it to you, and certainly not given you a weapon and let you lose on the street. They're the guilty ones. You are a victim. Still feeling guilty?"

"Yeah."

"Okay. I'll try."

The wolf patted his arm again in an encouraging manner.

"If he was here, my partner would apologize to you." she said "I'm sure he's sorry for what he did to-" she pointed at his face. The bear slid a finger on his scars.

"If it kept from doin' more harm, he did good. I 'seen him on TV when he entered the police. He seems like a nice guy. Is he okay?"

She had to give him the official version, but she tweaked it a bit to spare him. "It wasn't from your bullets, but he fell into a coma. He's stable and the doctors are confident he'll pull through."

"Oh. I'm sorry."

"It could have been much worse. Don't worry."

Blackfur had put back her notepad in her bag and was about to stand up.

"Officer wait. Is 'dere gon' be a trial or something? I don't have no lawyer and..."

"There won't be any trial. You were drugged, nighthowler was involved and no one was killed. You're still considered a suspect but I doubt you'll end up being anything more. I'll ask for the shackle to be removed."

"But I-"

The panda took a few steps and approached him. "You feel guilty, you feel at fault. You think there are things you could and should have done to prevent it. Maybe there were, but who knows? You think you did something wrong? You think you owe a debt to society?" She pointed to the card he was still holding. "Here's your punishment: get clean, find a job. Can you do that?"

"I can- I can try."

"Great. Trying is the first step."
They were walking in the hallway. Wolford was pushing Judy's chair and Blackfur seemed lost in thoughts.

"So we didn't learn anything new." said the bunny.

"It wasn't a total waste of time. With a bit of luck he'll turn his life around. It's a bit sad it took something like this." Answered Wolford.

Blackfur chimed in. "But we did learn something. It seems the mammals that took him gave him a drug that made him highly responsive to suggestion, or really obedient before taking him to a hangar. It must be where they gave him the gun and the second drugs. They must have used something like scopolamine or GHB to make him comply. Since it seems he survived the second drug because of the smaller dosage he received, it could explain why he has minor recollection of the event. They must have given him a small dosage of it too."

"Makes sense. It's not much to go on, but it gives us a second lead." said the wolf. "We can investigate who buys and sells scopolamine."

They were now in the cruiser. Blackfur was driving and her partners were in the back seats.

"How come you have a detox center business card in your wallet ?" asked the bunny.

The wolf shrugged "I have a bunch of those. Along with AAs, group therapy, cancer support group, stuff like that. As a cop, I know I'll come across a lot of struggling mammals. I can't help everyone, but I like to be able to give them the possibility to help themselves."

It was an idea the bunny wished he had had herself. "Do you have others you could give me ?"

"Of course. I have a stock in my desk drawer, help yourself to it."

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\textit{Tuesday the 5th of February 2019}\n
Her leg ached, but according to the doctor it was normal. The ligament, muscles and tendons were forming on the artificial bone. He had feared they'd have to operate her again, sometimes things could develop in a strange way, but it was healing perfectly fine.

The constant throb kept her from concentrating however and she couldn't keep her mind focused on the files. She felt drained, the last week hadn't brought anything new to the investigation, and no amount of efforts seemed to do the trick.

The phone number Nick had gotten came from a disposable phone, so, no possible identification. And unless the fox actually used it to call a number under surveillance, there was no way to find its location.

It was at this moment of slight despair that the phone chose to rang. It was forensic, and more precisely the graphologic expert. The writing on the schedule matched Racton's writing, their prime suspect in who tampered with the video feeds in the prison.

In a few minutes she had gotten the authorisation to bring him in and question him. She was sad she couldn't go and fetch him herself, but she was sure Wolford and Blackfur would do a perfectly professional job. All she had to do know was wait for them to come back. She went to the cafeteria and prepared herself a decaf before going down to the interrogation room. She had it prepared and
went to the room at the other side of the one-way mirror.

Despite the aching in her leg, she had dozed off and woke up only when she felt a light tap on her shoulder. Wolford was here with a wide smile giving her a handkerchief.

"You have a bit of drool."

She wiped it off as she straightened up in the chair. Blackfur was there too, sitting on a chair, scribbling on a notepad. On the other side of the glass was a raccoon with an expression between pissed and anxious.

"Have you been here for long?" asked Judy.

"Nah. We just put him in the room. We're letting him cook a bit."

"Did he give you trouble?"

The wolf snickered. "He tried. When I knocked on his door, he pretended he wasn't dressed. He gave himself away when he began running. We were on the second floor so I knew he'd try to go through the emergency stairs."

Blackfur voice was heard. "I thought he would fall in my arms. I was waiting under them at the back of the building. But just as he saw me he immediately went back up and entered a window on the first floor."

"Yeah. I had to crash his door, and I saw him get inside from his window. I got back inside and rushed to the stairs. He could have outrunned me, but the door of the apartment he took was locked and he took just enough time for me to tackle him when he got out."

"Did he try to fight you?"

"Yep. But it's not easy when one has both arms pinned on his back. I threatened to taze him and strangely he calmed down instantly."

"All we had to then was to shove him on the backseat and bring him here." added Blackfur.

"How long are we letting him 'cook'?"

"Twenty minutes more. I like them well done." There it was, police dark humour.

"Who is conducting the interview?"

"I am." said the panda. "Wolford doesn't like them."

"I can't hold my serious face for long. It works in a good cop/bad cop dynamic, but I think this time you'll want to be there too, Judy. And I think you've never participated in an interrogation. It will be a good experience."

It was true, the bunny had never interrogated a suspect, but she had read a lot on the matter, and thought she could handle it. Of course Blackfur would be there as a security net.

... 

Blackfur opened the door to Judy and entered after her. The bunny rolled to face the raccoon on the other side of the table and the panda slid his file in front of her. He had recognized, obviously, his
eyes had briefly shot wide before returning to his previous expression.

"You are Peter Racton, guard at Zootopia's prison is that correct?" Judy asked. They had decided she would conduct the interview. It was a gamble, but they didn't have anything to go on anyway. This first interview was only to put a bit of pressure on the prison guard.

"Yeah."

"Do you know why you're here today?"

"I suppose it's about Bellwether, but I don't see what it has to do with me."

"Don't you?"

The suspect stayed silent.

Judy smiled "Why did you try to run when my colleague came to get you."

Still no answer.

"You see, running is a clear sign of a guilty conscience, but it's not enough to get you convicted. Well not of tampering with the prison's video feed. To resisting arrest however... Of course a good attorney would attribute that to panic. It happens, mammals snap sometimes for very little reasons."

She scruet his face. He gave her nothing, but she hadn't placed her first punch yet.

"But this however, he would have a hard time justifying. An irregular modification on the prison schedule by your hand. An unofficial switch between you and Wilkinspots."

"I didn't do anything. You have nothing on me."

"Nothing? Your writing was identified by our graphologists. It's not much, only one slip up, but can you guarantee it's the only one you made?"

The raccoon was still silent, but seemed less sure of himself. Judy took a page in Nick's book and put on the most sly and predatory grin she had.

"Let's talk about what you risk by not talking. If the escapes are linked to the shooting in the city, you won't only be an accomplice to a kidnapping and what is probably the murder of a prisoner. I can promise you will be judged as an accessory to murder of multiple citizens and officers of the law. We're talking at least fifteen years, if not life." That was the stick, now came the carrots. "But we're willing to strike a deal. Talk now, and we can do something about having you only judged for kidnapping. Minimal charges."

She saw a slight shiver in his paws, and sweat rolling from his forehead.

"I've done nothing, you can't prove anything."

Alright, bluffing time.

"Yet. But I'm sure the writing on the schedule was not your only mistake, and I can assure you we will get anything there is to find. And do you think you are our only lead? You would merely be a shortcut. We've found where the van have been bought, and with that, a good lead on the mammals that have taken the lamb. We will find the culprits, the heads of all this. And when we do, they will give us everyone that worked for them in order to reduce their sentences. You can be part of the names I'll get later, or you can be part of the mammals who give them to me now."
The raccoon was now wearing a startled expression. But his jaws were still clenched.

"Do you remember a few months back when I caught Lionheart closely followed by Bellwether and then brought them both to justice?"

He nodded.

"At the time I was inexperienced, had no support and was desperate."

She leaned toward the raccoon, saying her next sentence in the most threatening way she could.

"This time, I have experience, I have the whole ZPD behind me, and I'm pissed."

The tremble in paws had reached his jaw.

"You're going down Racton. It can be a soft landing today, or a big splat later." She turned and began rolling toward the door, not giving a second glance. Either he broke right now, or they'd have to come back with more elements.

Just as she was about to reach the door, a voice came behind her "All right, I'll talk. But I want an attorney."

...  

"You know, just because Nick isn't there, doesn't mean you should try to match his level of slyness." joked Wolford as he was reviewing the answers the raccoon had given them.

As they had expected, he wasn't in on the workings of the operation. Only a pawn. He had been paid twenty-five thousand dollars to plug a special USB drive in the security computer during his whole shift. He had done so a first time three weeks prior to the kidnapping, and again two days before. It was probably how it had been hacked, but the hacker had to be extremely talented to do his job without triggering any alarms in the system and leave so few virtual prints.

The guy who had paid him to do the job was a red fox, but he was hiding under a hood. They had met at a bar in Sahara square one night. The fox knew a lot about the raccoon's life. He knew about his mortgage, his job, his divorce. He had shown him five thousand dollars and that's what had convinced Racton to work for him. The raccoon was about to be evicted from his house and needed the money. The fox also asked him of everything that went on in the prison. How tight was security, how thorough were the search. He even had a plan of the premises and asked where were the security checkpoints.

Beside that, the raccoon had also seen the mammals that had taken Bellwether get in and out. He wanted to see them, simply to ensure the plan would go smoothly. If it went to shit, he needed to know on the spot and be able to leave the city immediately. He had parked himself in the prison's external parking lot. From his spot, he knew he could see the mammals get in and out of the van. There were three mammals disguised as officers. A lion, a brown wolf and a panther with a scar on his eye, the last one was a red fox in a prisoner jumpsuit, he supposed it could be the same that had proposed him the job, but he couldn't be sure. He didn't know how it was possible, but the paper they presented to get in didn't get them arrested, and no one stopped them either when they got out with the prisoner they had just brought in. And for whatever reason, they were carrying a bag that wasn't even searched.

Judy had shaken her head. She knew that for a big city, Zootopia was very calm, and their prison was an example of peacefulness. But even for a low security prison, what happened was unbelievable. She wrote a complete report to the chief, and knowing him, he'd have a long talk with
the chief warden. She was happy to not be in his shoes.
Tuesday the 12th of February 2019

The fox had spent his first week end without his bunny two days ago. The last week and a half had been a nerve-wracking hell. Vlad was supposed to be his best way to get in contact with the fox-only gang, and he knew it could take a bit of time before he would get introduced. But working for the wolf was taking its toll on him.

He was very discreet about his operations, and all Nick had done those past days was drive around, either his temporary boss, or some trucks. The attitude and actions of the mob boss was slowly driving him mad. Everything about him was false, pretense, lies. He had fabricated a face that he showed to his associates but Nick was a master at seeing through it. And what stood behind the mask was nauseating.

The wolf had no morality, no limits on what he was ready to do to gain power. A couple of time he had driven him to a hangar in the outskirt of the city, north of meadowland. He had stood, guarding a door while the wolf conducted his business and was certain he had heard screams of pain coming from the other side. The worse part was the satisfied smile the canid was wearing afterwards.

The fox needed an outlet, something, someplace where he could cool down for the evening. It was Wednesday so he decided to go to the bar. Listening to Scarlet's songs would do him good. He simply would have to avoid getting drunk. Being undercover and under the influence would not be a good mix, he was certain of it.

The bar was more empty than what he was used to. Scarlet had already begun singing but the fox didn't pay mind to it, he simply waved at her while going to sit on a stool. Less chatter, less smoke and less drunken mammals. Nick took a pint of beer, it still had an awful taste but he didn't feel like going for something stronger.

"You okay fox ?" Joe had put the mug on the bar and had his usual little smile.

"of course. Why wouldn't I be ?"

The rat shrugged "You're starting to look like my other patrons. Doing a job you hate to keep on living a life you don't even like."

Nick chuckled "It's way too accurate. Any wise advice to give to a future drunkard ?"

"Yep, if you become one, do it here. Better I get your money than anyone else."

Nick's chuckle turned into a frank laugh. "Ha ! I'll think about it. No promise though."

The vixen had stopped singing and was moving toward the bar to get a drink when the door opened, showing two bighorn sheeps. The way they stood at the door and looked around before sitting at the bar, the fox knew these two were going to be trouble.

"You were right Don. It's a dive. Reeks of predators." said one of them.
Some of the less drunken patrons gave them a glance and came back to their drinks. They didn't want to get involved with them.

The vixen had sat beside Nick and the rodent had given her a glass of whisky. She didn't talk though, she knew too well that it was the best way to draw attention to Nick and her.

"Beers, rodent, and make them quick." said one of the sheep.

The rat shrugged off their attitude. He didn't want to antagonize them and dutifully gave them their drinks. One of them took a sip and immediately spat it.

"I asked for beer, not catpiss !"

"I only serve this beer. You can order something else." he said calmly. The newcomer's aggressive attitude obviously didn't get to him.

The vixen was going back to her stage, she had chosen not to pay those two any mind as she got past them. It wasn't the first time trouble seeking mammals had come to this bar and it certainly wasn't the last.

On his stool, Nick hoped his evening wouldn't be too troubled by the pair of assholes that had sat near him. His hopes were dashed when he heard them talk again.

"Hey, at least the singer's good looking. Ron, you think she bounces as good as she sings ?"

"I only have twenties in my pocket and no change, so no way I'll check tonight."

They weren't speaking that loudly, but purposely high enough that everyone in the bar's relative silence could hear them. One of them gave a flick on the tip of Scarlet's tail, making the vixen twitch when she passed near him and it's what sent Nick over the edge.

Any normal evening, he would have kept his mouth shut. It wasn't really his business, he could simply pay and get out. He always avoided conflict. But this evening, he needed calm and relaxation, and those two morons were pissing all over it.

"I can ask your mom for change the next time I give her a ten."

Nick took a glance. It was obvious they had both understood the implications of his sentence. He heard the scraping of the stool as the two prey got off of them. It was far from his most clever move, but it felt good to insult the two sheeps. It helped him evacuate his frustration.

"What did you say, you little fuck ?"

Now obviously he would have to fight them, so he slid a pair of banknotes to the rat. "For the damage." he whispered. The rodent discreetly gave him something in turn. It was a knuckle-duster. The fox couldn't help himself from smiling. Joe took care of his patrons.

Nick wasn't the type to seek trouble, to seek fight deliberately. But tonight was the wrong night. Tonight he was pissed. And if evacuating his anger meant whooping the ass of two specistfuckers, he would gladly do so.

If Nick had to fight, he'd do it honorably, he'd face his opponents, and he'd let them give the first punch.

But tonight, he was Frank. And Frank didn't fight fair.
He felt like going through water as he went down his stool in turn, his armed hand slightly hidden behind his back. In the distance, he could see and hear Scarlet had begun singing again.

"They say that you're a runaround loveR
Though you say it isn't so
But if you put me down for another
I'll know, believe me, I'll know"

_Really Scarlet ? This song ?_

He could feel him and the two sheeps had the whole bar undivided attention.

The two sheeps looked like they were still waiting for his answer, arms crossed in a menacing manner. The fox was way smaller than them, they had nothing to fear. Only now that he was facing them, Nick could see their t-shirt slightly hidden by their jackets. A white and red logo he had seen a couple of times before. Prey supremacist. Typical.

He took a pause like he was about to repeat what he had just said, but instead he lunged forward and upward, sending his armed fist in the left one's lower jaw.

There was a satisfying crunch as the knuckle duster connected with his opponent's face. Nick was glad he had it, otherwise he would really have hurt his fist. The sheep stumbled backward and in a smooth motion, Nick used his chest as a launching pad toward the second opponent.

"'cause the night has a thousand eyes
And a thousand eyes can't help but see if you are true to me
So remember when you tell those little white lies
That the night has a thousand eyes"

With how close he was, he couldn't land a good punch and the sheep was already anticipating his attack. Nick extended his arm and gripped one horn, throwing off the prey's balance. He used his momentum to swing sideways and land with his feet on the sheep's shoulder. His armed hand fell like hammer on the sheep's forehead. This time the damage was minimal, blood was drawn but mountain sheep's foreheads could be used to ram doors.

Nick leapt back before being caught and landed on a table. The first sheep, Ron, Nick supposed, was slowly getting back up. He'd have to quickly dispatch Don before going back to him.

"You say that you're at home when you phone me
And how much you really care
Though you keep telling me that you're lonely
I'll know if someone is there"

Don charged him, Nick was waiting for it and had already taken out his telescopic baton in his free hand. Just before he could be hit by the horns, he leapt to his side and landed a heavy blow on sheep's shoulder, who let escape a bleat of pain. He tried to punch the fox with his other hoof but Nick stopped it with a punch of his own, still armed with the knuckle. A loud crack was heard and Nick's arm flew backward because of the shock. His hand felt suddenly numb, but what had broken was his opponent's hoof. A second, and way louder bleat of pain was heard.

"One of these days you're gonna be cryin'
'cause your game I'm gonna play
And you'll find out without really tryin'
Each time that my kisses stray"
"Don !" Ron's face from worry to anger as he turned to face Nick. "I'm going to skin your pelt off, asshole !"

He charged in turn, but Nick was too fast. He threw his baton in the sheep's leg which made him stumble forward. Nick let himself fall from the table where the prey crashed. He didn't even give the sheep a chance to react, he took one of the bar stool and swung it in his face.

"cause the night has a thousand eyes
And a thousand eyes will see me too
And no matter what I do
I could never disguise all my little white lies
'cause the night has a thousand eyes"

Ron was out cold. Only Don was still standing but he was way too preoccupied by his hoof to continue fighting. Nick breathed slowly. He needed to stop now, or he would do way worse than kick their ass.

"Don !" He called, in an aggressive tone. The sheep turned to him with fear and anger in his eyes.

The fox showed fangs and growled, Don took a step back.

"Don't come near, you fucking monster."

"Then take your boyfriend and get the fuck out."

Nick got out of the way and showed him the door. Don used his more valid arm to lift his brother and limped out.

"So remember when you tell those little white lies
That the night has a thousand eyes"

Nick took the stool he had used to bash the sheep's head. The seat was slightly bent but could still be salvaged. The table however was completely destroyed. The rat was already coming with a broom to clean the mess.

"Sorry about this Joe." Nick said, taking out the table board while the barman was carrying its broken feets.

"Don't worry about it son. Those two assholes deserved the whooping. I guess it was worth a table. And you had already paid for it."

Nick shrugged. He had made a haul working for Vlad, he was happy that the money was put to use helping others.

He went back to his stool and ordered a whisky. Now he needed something stiff.

"Where did you learn to fight like that ?"

Nick smiled. He had used techniques Judy had taught him, she was an expert at fighting predators bigger than herself and was way limber than him. Being bigger and stronger, he had relied a bit more on brute force. He was certain his bunny would have been able to beat them while causing them and the bar less damage.

"A friend taught me."
"I wouldn't want to fight the guy."

"The gal."

"You're kidding."

Nick heard Scarlet's silk voice coming from his right. "Because females can't fight ?"

"You must admit, it's unusual." Answered the rat, apologetically.

The vixen had a warm laugh "I think 'usual' tends to be more and more obsolete these days. We have a bunny ZPD officer, and now a fox knight defending a maiden's honor."

"Maiden ?" asked the rat with an ironical smile.

"Let a girl dream, Joe."

Nick smiled, listening to the discussion. Maybe this evening could be salvaged yet. The vixen sang another couple of song but the bar was too empty to be worth it and she left to change back into her city clothes. She approached and put a paw on Nick's shoulder.

"What do you say about getting out of here and finding a nicer place to share a drink or three."

The fox hesitated, it was obvious where she wanted this to go, but he didn't want to reject her in front of a part of her usual audience.

... A couple of street from Joe's bar, they had found a nice diner and were sharing a late meal. The place, called JJ's diner was serving breakfast food and only breakfast food 24/7. But for whatever reason, they also served stiff drink with it. The mix was unusual, but Nick found it was perfect. He was enjoying a meal composed only of turkey bacon and eggs, while Scarlet was having a massive waffle.

It was the best meal Nick had gotten in awhile.

"Why would anybody ever eat anything besides breakfast food?"

"Mammals are idiots, Frank."

Nick snickered and ate strip of bacon, perfect blend of crisp and grease.

"So do you come here often ?" He asked.

"Only once in awhile. Part of my show is my appearance. I wouldn't get as much money if I looked like a potato."

"So you use your wonderful looks to extort those poor drunkard from their hard earned cash."

"Better that than to do what those two asshat suggested at the bar." She shrugged.

"I'm not criticizing. Mammals like us, we must use all our assets to get by."

She took another bite from her waffle with pensive expression.

"You know, you didn't have to fight those guys, they would have left eventually."
Nick glanced up from his plate. "Maybe I thought those two needed to be put back in their place."

"I hope you didn't do it for me." she smiled "The knight act is charming, but I prefer mammals with a bit more brains."

"I didn't do it for you, well not specifically. I did it because I'm tired of seeing good mammals bullied by others." He ate another strip of bacon. "I mainly did it for myself. It shouldn't, but it felt good to put my fist in those assholes faces."

"I never imagined you were the violent type." He looked at her. She was giving him a chance to give more of an explanation.

"Let's just say my life has taken a bad spin lately, and that I'm having a bad time. Well, more like a bad month."

"Good mammals shouldn't have a bad time."

"Who says I'm good ? I just beat two mammals because I was feeling bad about my life." he shrugged.

She had a small smile. "Somehow, I don't think it makes you bad."

"So you have a brother ?" He asked.

"Yeah, little brother. From my mom's second marriage to a second asshat."

Nick lifted a brow. It was unusual enough for a fox to marry a second time, but to have kids with a second mate was even less usual.

"What does he do ?"

"Bit of this, bit of that. We were never close growing up. I was a bit of a bitch to him, he was a bit of jerk to me." She shrugged. "He fell in with a bad crowd. He calls me sometimes, but he never tells me where he is or what he does."

"But you're still talking right ? That's good." He studied her expression for a bit. "You're really worried for him."

"He's all the family I have left. My father's serving life, the gods know where, my mother OD'd with my step-dad when I was twenty and out of the house. After that, my brother went to foster-home to foster-home. He called me back like three years ago to ask how I was doing."

"Well he's surviving. That has to count for something."

"Surviving until his next dose." She sighed. "Enough about my brother, I want this evening to about something else than my broken family."

They were walking on the street. Nick wasn't too thrilled on the idea of letting a lady walk home alone at night so he had insisted to accompany her. His evening had been saved by their discussion and he was feeling a bit better.

"We're here." she said.
She had stopped in the middle of a circle of street light. Nick almost wanted to take a picture, the image was too perfect.

"Would you come up for a last drink ?" she said, approaching him.

*Of course she asks me that. What was I thinking, insisting on accompanying her home ? Okay, diplomatic way out.*

"I don't think it's such a good idea." He answered. His throat felt a bit dry.

She was really close now. "Are you sure ?"

"Yeah."

"Then, let me at least give you this." She approached her snout, but Nick had perfectly understood what was about to happen. Her lips only met air. She stepped back with a look of incomprehension.

"Scarlet, I'm sorry."

She looked away. "Sorry about what ?"

"I already have someone."

She sighed. "Of course you do." She bumped her forehead with her fist. "The best ones always do." She had an ironical laugh. "Oh gods, I'm so stupid." She took out a handkerchief and dried the small teardrops that were forming. "I really thought you were flirting with me."

It was Nick's turn to feel embarrassed. "I was a little, though I was being the complete opposite of smooth. I hoped you'd get annoyed eventually."

She snorted "I thought it was cute. A nice fox trying to seduce me clumsily."

Nick scratched his head "I fucked up didn't I ?"

"A bit. It's okay, I'm not upset with you." She made a pause. "Well, I am a bit, but that's my problem." She made a few steps toward her building's door before turning around. "So if you insisted to accompany me back, it was really because you were worried for me ?"

"Yeah. I didn't even think about how you could interpret it."

"You're really too nice. She's lucky to have you." She striked a pause, paw on her hips. "Is she a prettier vixen than me ?"

"She's not a prettier vixen, but she's... Cuter."

"Foxes going for cute instead of foxy. The world really is changing." she said in a pensive tone. She approached him again and kissed his cheek. "Well Frank, it's my loss. Thanks for the evening." He watched her go, her tail wagging in a sexy motion while she entered the building.

*Judy, I really must be in love. The old me would've followed her in a heartbeat.*

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_Song : The night has a thousand eyes. Once again, I recommend Jennifer Connelly's version._
They had taken the ZUG and were now at the steps of the building. It was around 5PM. They entered it, taking the elevator ride to the sixth floor, and ending their ascension to the eighth by stairs. The vixen knocked on the door and large panda bear opened. For a second, she thought she had the wrong address.

"You must be Vivienne and Finnick. Please come in."

Both foxes stepped inside and the panda hanged their coats. "My name is Wight Blackfur, please call me Wight."

"It's a pleasure to meet you." greeted Vivienne.

"Nica ta meetcha."

They made their way to the living room where Judy was comfortably sitted in an armchair, a recent addition to the furniture.

"Hey Judy, how are you ?" greeted Vivienne as she got in.

"I'm good. The leg's still aching but it's healing well."

The two foxes sat on the couch and the panda went to the kitchen preparing some tea and coffee.

"How's Nick ?" asked the vixen as soon as she was seated.

"He's good, I think. He doesn't like the undercover work it seems, but he's doing okay. I can't really tell you more."

"I know, I know. It's for his security. I'm sure he has already done more risky things in his life-"

"Ya hav' no idea..." scoffed the fennec fox.

"-but I can't stop top from being worried for him." She sighed "He entered the police and he ends up again in the other side of the law because of it. Am I the only one to see the irony ?"

Blackfur came back with a plate covered in snacks, tea, coffee and juice. "You're not. I'm sure he's the first to see it."

An awkward silence fell on the room. It was supposed to be a friendly visit, but without the presence of Nick, it seemed strange to all be reunited here. Judy didn't really know Vivienne, and though she was friend with Finnick, they weren't that close. Besides, the main topic they wanted to discuss was Nick, and it was something nor Judy, nor Blackfur could really do.

Finnick took out a folded paper from one of his back pockets and gave them to the doe. "I've made a little list on what you asked me."
Judy ran her gaze along the paper. It was a list of car parts classed by what vehicle they corresponded to and the names of the mammals that had bought them and when.

"The names, you can be sure that most of them are false, but maybe it can help."

"What is this about a list?" asked Blackfur with an inquisitive tone.

Judy had completely forgotten the panda wasn't aware of what she had asked the fennec, and that she had given sensitive information to a civilian. Well, if she was going to get scolded, at least it would be far from the precinct.

"I asked Finnick to check around the black market for vans and van parts. Maybe we could cross-reference informations to learn some things. If the same guy has bought several parts for the corresponding van, it could be useful."

"Hm. Can I see this paper?"

Judy gave her and the panda looked at it. "Could work. We have a database with renowned suspects and offenders, and their known aliases. If we run those names, I'm sure we could find something."

"Just don't pay no mind to the 'Foxtons'. It won't help ya." Finnick chimed in. "I included 'dem but it's one dat is used by foxes all 'round town to conduct all sorta illegal activities."

Judy took a look. There were several Foxtons. "On the contrary, I think we should pay especially attention to the Foxtons, they seem like they've been very active. Maybe an all-fox gang? Nick is not going to like this."

"All-fox gangs? Those disappeared years ago. No way foxes would be stupid enough to go back to the old ways."

"How do you know about this?" asked Judy.

"I'm a fox. My husband was a fox and most of our friends were foxes. The last all-fox gang disbanded more than twenty-five years ago. I think being systematically targeted would do that to any gang. The reputation we have is not for nothing. Those goddamn morons made life hard for all of us."

"Maybe the youngs are forming those gangs." said Blackfur "Those who fail to learn from history are doomed to repeat it."

"And 'dose who learn from history are doomed ta watch others repeat it." Shrugged Finnick. "Everyone is screwed either way. Here's hopin' mammals got more understandin' in two decades."

Judy knew the cynical outlook on life Nick had when they met had to come from somewhere.

"Apart from 'dat, I got a call from Nick too." All mammal present gave him a surprised look.

"This dumb fox is going to blow his cover." Commented Judy.

"He didn't tell it was him, called himself Frank, but I recognized him He asked me to find his ol' contacts. I don't have a lot of luck yet, but I expected it."

Judy wondered why Nick didn't run this by agent Savage, but it was obvious he didn't want to draw attention on his contacts.
"Is it something we could help with?" asked Judy.

"I highly doubt any of 'dem would appear on ya files, primarily because I don't know their real names. One of 'dem is the Raving One, the guy we used to run wid."

"The pawmart con-guy?"

"'Dis one, yeah."

"And the others?"

The fennec took a pensive look, before shaking his head. "Sorry, I ain't givin' you 'dis. I like you but you're still ZPD, and I can't say their activities are completely legal."

"You need to come to us if you have any information related to this investigation." Said Blackfur, in a perfectly professional tone.

"Don't worry big girl, if tha' wos the case, Judy'd be the first ta know."

The panda seemed satisfied with the answer. Finnick had a few similarities with Nick. He had way less self-doubt, and for a con-mammal, he was as honest.

The rest of their gathering had been more focused on how they were all doing aside from work. Blackfur and Judy didn't go out a lot after work, and if Judy tried to take her laptop home, the panda always insisted she relaxed after work. It was hard for the bunny, she was growing restless with how slow the investigation was going. Since Nick was usually her main reason to go out, she mainly stayed cloistered in the flat. As it happened, Blackfur was a massive bookworm. All she did beside her work was read everything that fell under her paw. She had recently bought a tablet and discovered the joys of ebooks. To Judy, it explained her encyclopedic knowledge on, well, everything. Anytime Wolford or her would bring up a topic she'd know nothing about, which was less and less usual, she would have learnt about it a week later.

On her side, Vivienne's life hadn't really changed. Finnick had finally moved in with her but tried to spend all his time outside, to not lose his touch as he said. They went out at least once a week, to catch a movie or visit a museum. The doe didn't think Finnick would be the type, but he actually rather enjoyed those educational outings. Maybe it was because he felt he had missed out on his education, but he gave an evasive answer to her inquiry. All and all, the two foxes enjoyed each other's presence. They sometimes got on each other's nerves, but it was fun to see them bicker like an old couple even if they had really been together for less than two months. Their main source of argument was Finnick insisting with using the money he had saved for paying half the rent and Vivienne refusing his money until he'd have a steady income. At least she let him pay for his share of groceries. Most of the time.

The pair of foxes left the apartment around 10PM. They had stayed longer than Judy had expected. Surprisingly she felt good. She thought seeing Nick's best friend and mother would be stressful since there was not much she could tell them, but they had been really understanding.

Blackfur was cleaning the coffee table and Judy took a look at the paper Finnick had given her again. She didn't know what kind of info she could get from it. Maybe she could run the names by Nick or Jack, one of them could know of those alias.
He had left his building with a bounce in his step. Today was a good day. Today he was seeing his psyche-eval, making his report, and more importantly, he was seeing his bunny. His so perfectly cute and clever and cuddly and cute bunny. It was a lot of c-words that wonderfully described her. He had to keep himself to stupidly grin while walking down the street to the taxi that waited for him. It would bring him to the complete opposite of his destination from where he would take the ZUG, a pair of buses just to see if he was followed, and then he'd arrive at his destination.

He was in the car, distractedly browsing the internet with the relatively secure 5G connection of the phone given by Jack. Nothing new in the news, but he couldn't keep himself from thinking something would happen soon. He had enough experience with the city's underbellies to feel its pulse. Something was brewing. But he dismissed it. Right now, he had to exit the taxi and take the ZUG.

As usual at this hour, the ZUG was far from crowded, and maybe it was why he noticed a silhouette wearing a hood that he was sure he had seen earlier. Was he followed ? Easy to figure out.

*He's not too big. Fox, Ocelot, Badger ?*

Whatever he was, his tail was tucked in his clothes to conceal his identity.

He would feign missing the next stop and make the trip the other way for one station. If the guy was still behind him then, he'd be sure of himself.

The ZUG stopped, he 'missed' his station, went out at the next. He was taking his trip the other way when he saw the guy again, trying, and failing at looking inconspicuous to Nick. The fox let nothing show, he casually exited the ZUG, and then ZUG station. His meeting was canceled, and like all those meetings, they weren't rescheduled. With a calm demeanor, he took out his phone and texted 'Bouncer'.

"I'm being followed. Rendez-vous canceled. Update in 30."

He knew that in the next five minutes, his phone would be geolocalized and if he didn't update on his situation, someone would be sent to his rescue. Probably.

He slowly made his way down the street, using reflexions in glass from the shop windows and cars to keep track of his follower. The guy was twenty meters behind him, matching his pace. Nick faked being absorbed by his phone, as if he was completely oblivious to the potential threat.

*Amateur.*

Nick hadn't come here for no reason, he knew the back-alleys like the back of his paw. The one on his left had a couple of nooks and crannies, perfect for an escape. Or an ambush. He took the turn and sped up for a few seconds but slowed down again as he was almost at the next corner. Sure enough, he heard steps behind him. He turned and put his back against the wall, waiting for his follower. He took out his baton with his right hand. He'd need the left to grip the mammal, and worst case scenario, he could let go of his weapon and take out his gun.

He was ready to jump the guy. The mammal wasn't completely stupid, peeking at the corner before venturing forth, but Nick had seen it coming, and as soon as he had seen the first whisker, he had leapt and grabbed him by his collar, pulling him around the corner.

He shoved him against the wall, paw on his throat, baton ready to hit. "Two choices. Tell me why you were following me or breath through a tube for the rest of your life."
The hood had fallen, revealing a reddish-orange fox with blue eyes. "Wow wow, easy, I'm not looking for any trouble." He tried to take of Nick's paw but he tightened his grip, strangling him. Nick always thought being aggressive was hard, but strangely, it came naturally right now. Maybe it was because of the pair of awfully bad weeks he had spent, maybe it was because he was missing a meeting with his bunny which meant two more weeks to wait to see her again, maybe it was because he suspected this guy was partially responsible for her injury. In any case, he already knew he would have no problem hurting the fox facing him.

"What are you looking for then. Talk."

The mammal pointed at his throat. "Could you ?" he said in a strangled voice. Nick loosened his paw, ever so slightly.

"Thanks. My name is Osman." he offered his paw but Nick didn't shake it, mainly because none of his hands were free. He simply rose a brow.

"I suppose you want to know why I was following you ?"

The casual demeanor slightly got to Nick's nerves, already pretty ruffled. Probably because he would have had the same in his interlocutor's shoes. "Alternatively I can break your face. Your call."

The mammal rose his paws "Okay, okay. I know your name is Frank, that you work with Vlad and this Savage guy. Funny name for a little rabbit. And my boss is taking an interest in you."

Nick didn't answer. He waited for more.

"We'd like to offer you some work. Nothing too risky. Moving stuff, handling some delicate substances, a bit of negotiation, that kind of things."

Jackpot.

"What's your boss name ? And how come he took an interest in me ?"

Osman took a pensive expression. "Would you consider letting go of me first ? I'm not really comfortable."

Nick wasn't either, his aggressiveness had significantly lowered as he had learned what the guy wanted, and he felt a bit bad in how he had handled all this. He could have been more diplomatic. And despite what had transpired with the two sheeps, he still didn't like using violence, especially against a fellow fox.

Nick shifted his attitude to more casual and friendly. "So this boss name ?"

"I don't know it. Never saw him either, and I don't know anyone that did. He calls himself Lycus."

Nick kept himself for wincing. This was obviously a coincidence. "That's original."

"I think so too."

"And this interest in me ?"

"Well, he knows you're working with Vlad, and he's trying to recruit a couple of skilled mammals. He also knows that you perfectly handled a negotiation with mister Big's bears. That's some high profile shit." The guy was obviously waiting for some details but Nick crossed his arms, waiting
"And we also learned how you handled a pair of asshole specists couple of days back. One against two, way bigger than you. We could use the muscle."

It was the first time Nick was referred to as muscle. It almost made him laugh. "News travel fast."

"That they do. We're always interested in mammals than defend their own. Lycus isn't very fond of specists."

Nick gave a little smile of sympathy. The thing he was looking for had fallen in his lap it seemed. "He's helping the predator cause?"

If he thinks that's what will win me over, that's even better.

"In his own way, yeah."

The grey fox took a pretense reflective expression. "So we're talking smuggling jobs, maybe a bit of muscle, and all for a boss that cares for his own?"

"Pretty much. You interested?"

"I could be." He put back his telescopic baton in his jacket. "I usually don't work for mammals I don't meet in person though."

The orange fox scratched his head. "I can understand that, but he has never revealed himself to anyone. I never saw him and I'm one of the first he recruited. I think. You could meet the rest of the team though, I'm sure they won't mind."

"Well Osman, why not. When do you suppose we could do that?"

"We could now, but you seemed like you were going somewhere."

Nick shrugged. "It wasn't important. Potential uninteresting job, that was most probably going nowhere." He took out his phone, careful to not show his screen, sending a second text to his bunny. "I'm doing fine. See you in two weeks."

The other fox had taken a few steps and had called someone. Nick could only get part of what was said.

"Potential new recruit... At corner of... In a bit." he came back to the grey fox. "All right, someone's coming to pick us up."

They had left the back alley and gone to a parking lot nearby. Nick feared he'd have to put a sack on his head, but they didn't seem to care if he knew where he was taken. For all he knew, it could be a trap. The driver was another fox named Sean. A dark grey furred fox, taller and fatter than Osman, but he didn't seem stronger. He gave a strange vibe, Nick couldn't define if it was coldness or shyness, but he knew he'd find out soon enough.

"I'll need you to give me your phone."

That was risky. There were sensible stuff on Nick's devices and he didn't want to risk his cover. He did the next big thing and gave the batteries.

"I hope this will be enough. I know you don't trust me yet, but it's mutual." Nick smiled. Osman
smiled back.

"That will do."

They had ridden south, to a place between Sahara Square and Savanna Central. The car pulled over near an old apartment building and they entered it, making their way to the highest floor with the elevator. Nick felt like he had entered a large penthouse. Most of the walls had been taken down. He could see a corner where guns were stored, they had a pair of computers in another corner, a TV and console but a big part of the place was taken by bunk beds and a sealed greenhouse like structure. A pair of fox-sized hazmat suits were hanged on a wall near it.

*Jackpot!*

He was tempted to call for a SWAT team as soon as he got out, but without the head of the gang, it would all be for nothing.

He had also noticed three other foxes. One was relaxing on a bunkbed, but that had gotten up as soon as he had seen the newcomer. A white arctic female fox. She casually approached the group and offered her paw to Nick.

"Skye." She simply said.

"Frank."

The two other fox approached. One of them was working on one of the computers, it was a small glass wearing Bat-eared fox. Large ears and dark fur on his eyes like a mask. The last one put down his controller. Nick recognized the young fox that had sold him the drug a few days prior. He hoped the kid wouldn't do the same. He was a sick looking light brown swift fox, his movements were twitchy. The pair slowly approached, greeting him with a wave.

"I'm Lucas." said the glass-wearing one.

"The name's Michael. People call me Mike."

Nick couldn't define if they were shy or wary. The kid hadn't recognized him, so he didn't care.

Detailing every fox here, it hit him. Almost none of them were above twenty. The oldest had to be Skye, and Nick would be damned if she was over twenty-five.

*Kits, all of them.*

"I take it you're our new recruit." Stated Skye.

"I'm thinking about it."

She observed Nick. "I can't believe you're the guy that kicked those sheep's ass. You seem a bit scrawny to me."

"Not every mammal needs to be a brainless mountain of muscle to be efficient." shrugged the glass-eyed fox. Skye answered with a snort. "I don't know exactly what kind of operation you conduct, but you seem a bit short on staff." There had been eight vans, counting the one that had taken Bellwether. Five foxe was far from enough to drive all of them, and that wasn't counting the mammalpower they'd need to drug all the shooters and haul them in and out of the vehicles.

"We're only one cell, there are-" Mike was shut down by Skye that had lightly smacked him on the
back of the head. Nick would have made the same conclusion anyway.

"So, from what Osman told me and what I understand, you're working for a guy none of you have ever seen named Lycus, sympathetic to the predator cause, whatever this cause could be." The grey fox wanted to poke them a bit. Though Lycus was the boss, he needed to know who was the local leader.

"Whatever this cause could be?" Asked Skye with a raised brow.

Nick put on his most sympathetic mask. He needed to drill for info, but also win them over. One against five, he knew it would be a challenge. "Don't get me wrong, I'm thrilled at the idea of working with fellow foxes. It seems we all fell out of the game those last few years." He shrugged. "With all the distrust we get, it always seemed logical to me that we should stand together." He raised his paws, trying to make a show of good intentions. "But I've never been an activist. I'm used to fend for myself, and even though your whole operation seems more to me than a mere string of con, I don't see myself switching goals and lifestyle overnight." Skye was about to say something but Nick cut her, he had to deal a last blow to maximize the chances for them to trust him, even if only a bit. "I'm not refusing any offer, but I think the best course of action is for you to use me as a freelancer. I don't trust you yet, and I'm sure it's mutual. And if I find that Lycus' motives align with what I believe in, then we can begin to talk about a more permanent partnership."

He had placed himself as an asset. They needed him more than he needed them, but that didn't mean he didn't want to work for them. On the contrary.

Skye had her arms crossed, giving the fox an inquisitive look. "And what do you believe in?"

*I knew you were the leader here Skye. And now you're mine.*

"I believe we, the predators, and most particularly foxes, are treated like shit. Politics are too slow to assess the problem, if they only give a damn about it. I'd find it highly satisfying we could make them understand that we are through getting fucked with."

The white fox was now wearing a large smile. "I'd bid you welcome to the team, but as you said, we do not trust you yet. Do a couple of jobs for us, show that you can be loyal, and I guarantee you, you will make a difference."

Nick couldn't believe he was really thinking this, but beating up two mammals had been his best move yet. Often in his life, good actions had been repaid in dire consequences, it was the first time a bad move resulted in a positive outcome.

But he was now treading on thin ice, if those guys were really the ones that had organized the shooting and kidnapping, one wrong move and he was dead.
Part 2, Chapter 20

Part 2 : Lycus Case

Chapter 20 : Chills Down His Spine

Monday the 18th of February 2019

She had to admit Finnick had done a great job finding all those informations. She didn't know how he got them, but that was not important. It was not possible to use any of it as proof, not with how she had obtained it, but if she could get enough information out of those, they could easily get a warrant, and make a raid on the place the info came from and get it the regular way.

The bunny rubbed her temples. This wasn't regular. It was the opposite of regular. She had been so caught up in the investigation, scrapping for every crumb of information that she had forgotten her principles along the way. It wasn't how officers should proceed, there was a reason why regulations existed.

Then again, the biggest case she had ever closed until now, she had done without following any rules. Allying with a con-mammal, a crime-boss, threatening a weasel... Those weren't the means used by the ZPD.

Nick often said there were too many rules to follow, and sometimes the bunny wondered if some of them weren't made to impede on the police's efficiency. But all this was inconsequential.

She had a very long list of names and van parts to cross-reference, and though it would be a tedious and boring task, she had to do it. The sooner the better.

She opened a spreadsheet and began her work. She would have to be methodical. The first thing to do was classify the info by car parts. That was easy. There had been almost a dozen of vans bought in the two week preceding the shootings and at least half of them had been bought by a 'Foxton'. Chances were, those were different foxes using this same alias, so not a lot to find here. Only it could help here eliminate the duplicate entries.

All that was left was four van and van parts, three of them corresponding to the one being used at the prison. Through cross-referencing, she saw a name that had bought several parts for the same brand in different places. It was the same name used for buying the van and parts for the one last van used for the shooting that had not been bought by a Foxton.

The puzzled fitted. Judy knew it could only be a coincidence, so she put the other names down just in case. But she felt it in her guts, it was this guy. All she had to do now was find a mammal named Leonard with no last name.

Great. This was a little step. Way too little.

She let her face slump on her desk, ears spread on her keyboard.

"You alright Judy ?" came Wolford's voice, putting Judy's usual decaf next to her.

"I just spent the last four hours cross-referencing evidence and all I got was an alias with no link to anything. What you see now is me bouncing with joy." came her voice muffled by the desk.

It wasn't the only reason she wasn't feeling great. She hadn't been able to see her fox that last
weekend, and she'd need to wait another two weeks to have the opportunity again. Usually she'd
head to the gym and spar her frustration away but in her state, she clearly couldn't.

The wolf looked at the screen and saw the highlighted name. "Yeah, it's not much to go on. Maybe
we have some Leonard in the database, but without a full name..."

"Our only suspect gave us almost nothing, the breadcrumbs we find lead us nowhere, and even
when we find a footprint, we end up in front of a wall. Last time I was on a big case, it was so
much easier! What am I doing wrong?"

The wolf chuckled "Last time you were really lucky. All evidence almost fell on your lap. Trust
me, this is a pace you'll have to get used to." The wolf took a few step to sit in front of his own
computer.

Judy straightened up and sipped her decaf. "There must be something we can do." And there was.
They had someone going on the inside. Nick's third text had said he thought he had found the
mammals responsible at least for a part of the shootings. She sent him a text, only three words, but
clear enough "Give me names."

All she could do now was wait and hope he would unearth something. She felt powerless, she was
a field bunny but she could do nothing in her state.

Wrong. There was something she could do. The CCTVs. Regulation had changed after
Bellwether's case. It had come to the ZPD's attention that erasing the feeds every two weeks wasn't
such a great idea. True, it helped save storage space, but as it happened, a lot of what had transpired
during those events could have been properly investigated if they could have seen older records.
The span of the kidnappings had been several weeks, and some footage had been lost.

Now they were kept at least six months before being erased. Judy's head perked up and she
checked the spreadsheet again. There were dates of sale for most of the sales. They could even be
able to identify the 'Foxtons'. It also meant hours and hours of footage that they'd have to watch,
but it was something at last.

"Blackfur, Wolford? I think I have something."

Blackfur approached her desk. "Yes? What is it?"

Judy showed the lines on the spreadsheet. "I have dates for the sale of van parts corresponding to
the ones used in the attacks and the kidnapping. I have the place they were bought from. If we
study the camera feeds from those days, we can find the appearance of our suspects."

"It will take days, if not weeks to study all these." Said the wolf. "Let's bring this to the chief, I'm
sure he will lend us some officers to helps us. Even if you didn't obtain this list very legally, it's the
best way we can get identification on the suspects. This is great!"

"It could also mean we could avoid to get a warrant to search the sellers' sale history for now. It
will keep us from alerting that we're onto them. That's perfect. Good job Judy."

The bunny gratefully accepted the praise. At last her work was getting them somewhere. The next
procedure would be even more slow and tedious than her cross-referencing work, but at least this
time she was almost certain it would get them something solid.

Wolford knocked at the chief's office. He had printed the spreadsheet Judy had produced and
hoped it would suffice to persuade the chief to lend them some mammalpower.
"Enter." Came the Buffalo's stern voice.

The wolf took a few steps inside and saluted the chief.

"At ease Lieutenant. What do you need ?"

"Judy has made a breakthrough in Bellwether's kidnapping and shooting case. She has possibly uncovered places where mammals have bought the vans and parts to repair them."

"And you need a warrant to dig deeper ?"

"We've had another idea. Since we doubt a warrant would get us other leads on who were those mammals, and the records we got contained probably only false names, we thought we could use the street camera footage as a mean of identification. We have the date of sale from the parts, so all we have to do is watch a compare between the dates which mammals shows up and leaves with van and van parts to identify them."

"So what you need is the access to the camera recorded feeds and mammalpower to watch them ?"

"Yeah, that's about right."

The cape buffalo scratched his chin. "And how, may I ask, did Judy get hold of those sales records if she didn't have a warrant ?"

Though Judy shouldn't have shared info on the case with a civilian, the chief would know sooner or later. "She asked one of her contacts to dig around. She had to give him the van's models."

The buffalo sighed. "I'd scold her if this didn't get results. She really needs to be more prudent." He took out his phone and dialed. It rang a few times before a jovial voice answered.

"Hello chief, how are you doing ?"

"Hi Ben. I need you at the precinct in twenty, it's urgent."

*Since when does the chief call Clawhauser by his first name ?*

"Is everything okay ?" His voice had shifted to concerned.

"Perfectly fine, but I need you here nonetheless."

"I'll be here soon." The pudgy cat hung up.

The chief then took the radio and called. "Patrol 1258, are you there ?"

"Yes chief !" Came Snarlov's voice. "What do you need ?"

"I need you to report to my office in twenty. Do you think you can manage ?"

"Of course sir. Anything else ?"

"No. Precinct One out."

He put back the radio in place at his belt. "I can't spare any other officers." He had chosen them because they were the only other officers who knew, beside himself and MacHorn, that Nick wasn't really in a coma. The chief suspected the path of those officers would cross Nick's, and he didn't want to risk an unprepared mammal recognizing the fox and blowing his cover. They didn't
know his real mission, but his officers weren't morons, they had to have guessed he wasn't on vacation.

As the chief had asked, his officers arrived at his office a few minutes later. They were aligned in front of his desk while he was looking at the spreadsheet, trying to estimate how long those officers would stay on this assignment.

"At ease officers. Glad you could all make it in time. If I asked you to come, it's because I want all of you to work with officers Blackfur, Wolford and Hopps. They believe they have found a potential lead, and as much as I don't like using so many officers on a single case, I need you to work with them." The buffalo adjusted his glass on his nose to look at the paper. "What you'll have to do is simple. They believe they have found where the vans and their different parts have been bought. They need your help to study the camera recordings on the corresponding days to see if some of those mammals are the same and identify new suspects. Do you have any question ?"

"Yes, how long with this take ?" asked Snarlov. The white bear wasn't very fond of desk work.

"I'd say at the very least two weeks. Maybe less if you're really lucky."

The bear sighed.

"But chief, that means I won't be able to work at the front desk." Said Clawhauser.

"I know. I'll have another officer fill in for you." The chief brushed off the cheetah's worries. He knew the front desk was his life, but the other team needed as much help as he could give them.

"Anything else ?" His officers shook their head. "Officer Clawhauser, I have already asked for a laptop to be delivered for you at Rhinowitz's and Snarlov's office, you three will work together. You'll all be given access to the camera records. All of you dismissed."

The mammals left the room and Snarlov gave a sympathetic pat on the cheetahs slumped shoulder. "I know front desk is your life, but I promise working with us is not that terrible." He joked. "Well Rhinowitz can be a bit rigid, but it's part of his charm."

It wasn't in the rinho's habit to react to his partner's joke, but this time he humoured him with a snort. As he had expected it gave the cheetah a little smile. Rhinowitz's didn't have an humorous bone in his body, but like everyone in the precinct, the cheetah's upbeat attitude got to him too. And like everyone, seeing him gloomy only made him want to cheer him up.

"You're right, I spend so much time at the front desk than even if I see mammals all day long, I don't really have any occasion to work in a team." Like with all his bouts of melancholy, the cheetah had bounced back instantly. It was true, he rarely worked with a team, and even if as a feline he was really independant, he deeply appreciated the company if others. "It could be fun" He added.

_________________________________________________________________________________________

Third week of February 2019

It was strange. Logically he should have hated them, but he couldn't. In all probabilities, they were partly responsible for the attacks in the city, responsible for people's deaths, responsible for his bunny's wound. But he couldn't hate them. They had gotten through hardship, almost the same he did. Rejection, hate, loss. None of them really talked about themselves since they were still wary of him but he had learnt to read the signs and they were there. He could see his old self in them way too easily. A step to the side at the wrong moment and he would be like them.
But beside the fact that he was a cop, there was another difference between them. They weren't alone. Not that Nick had completely been alone, after all Finnick had always been here for him. But this was different. Though Finnick had been a father figure, he never had a sense of belonging. Deep down, he had always considered them working together as temporary. They looked like they belonged, at least three of them. Skye, Osman and Lucas were the core of this cell. Each time he had the occasion he watched how they interacted, how they worked, that they had formed a deep bond.

Mike and Sean were a different story. The kid was trying to fit in, very hard, too hard, but he wasn't there yet. Osman and Lucas were accepting him but Nick could see Skye was suspicious, just enough that it showed. Nick felt sorry for the little guy. Sean was different. The tall chubby fox was mostly silent, he did what was asked of him, nothing less, nothing more, but never really took part in discussions. And Nick couldn't shake the feeling that something was wrong with him. Call it instinct, but there was something creepy and sleazy about him, even if his attitude was mostly passive.

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Friday the 22nd of February 2019

They had made a few runs together. Mostly 'innocent' stuff. Drug sales, moving suspicious crates. Nick had been a spotter for some kind of operation were they had taken some properties from a warehouse that obviously didn't belong to them. But for now, Nick couldn't find anything that could help him discover who this "Lycus" was. He didn't dare ask Finnick to sniff around. It seemed the only mammals that knew of this name were the members of this gang, and if the fennec was to talk to the wrong people, it could come back to blow Nick's cover, or worse, draw danger toward his friend.

Nick was at his apartment on the bench press lifting dumbbells when he heard his phone rang. The fox was already seeing the changes on his body. His lean figure was slowly becoming more bulky and it found fun how it changed his looks, helping him conceal his identity. He knew that as soon as he would get back to his police job, he would stop it and go back to his former slender self. But for now, the physical exercise was a good way to spend time between jobs.

"Hello ?" He answered.

"Frank ? We have a job. Meet us in the back-alley, in thirty minutes." It was Osman's voice, who quickly hung up. In the week they had worked together, he had found out of the foxes different roles. Osman was the messenger, Skye drew the plans and took the decisions, Lucas worked logistic, computer stuff and coordinated them. Mike and Sean were the added muscle when needed. Nick quickly went out and took the ZUG, and a few minutes later he was at their usual rendezvous point.

In the back alley was an old and worn sedan, big enough to contain mammals larger than a fox. The only things new were the smoked glasses, they got installed on the two of their 'work cars'.

"Hey Frank, on time as always." Said Osman. He was leaning against the car, a phone in his paw.

"Hey Osman. You know me, always predictable. One of my numerous endearing qualities. What do you need me for ?"

The orange fox pointed at the car with his thumb. "I need you to drive this thing, Sean will give you the details on the way."
As if it had been perfectly orchestrated, Sean got out of the building holding a sports bag, made a discreet wave to the two other foxes and got in.

Nick had to admit that he wasn't really fond of the idea of being alone with Sean. Osman gave him the car keys and the fox got in. Though the car was big, it had been outfitted in a way that a small mammal like Nick could easily drive it. Nick started the car and pulled out.

"So Sean where are we going ?"

The fox didn't answer immediately, he simply strapped his phone with Zoogle Maps and their destination to the dashboard. He'd need to go through Downtown, the address was south of Rainforest, at its edge.

"And what are we going to do there ?"

"You're driving. I'm working."

It was truly a challenge to get anything from the dark grey fox. He was always laconic. That didn't make him endearing but in this line of work it was a quality. The less you said, the less you had a chance to slip up.

It merely took them thirty minutes to get to their destination. Upon arrival, Sean changed the address on this phone and showed it to Nick. "Next we're going here. Back in forty. Stay put."

Nick barely had the time to note the address and set it on his own GPS. He looked at Sean crossing the street and entering an apartment building. He was tempted to follow and find out what was happening inside, but nothing said he would find in which apartment the other fox had gone.

He would need to be patient, so instead he chose to take in his surroundings. It was a nice neighborhood, modern and clean buildings. Since it was working hours, only a few mammals were in the streets.

Only a few minutes after he had parked, another car stopped in front of the entrance of the building Sean had gotten in a few seconds ago. A black panther with a scar on his eye and a large lion with an unkept mane and carrying a sport bag. Nick took a bunch of photos with the smartphone Jack. Whatever was happening he had suddenly a hunch it would be ugly, but he couldn't do anything about it. Just like the car had pulled over, it took off.

His hands were gripping the steering wheel. He was anxious. It had been more than thirty minutes since the fox had gotten in and he hadn't come back. Just as Nick was seriously wondering if he should go inside, a police car pulled over right in front of the building. That sucked, he needed to know what they were doing here.

"Yes N-Frank, what is it ?" came a worried voice.

"A police cruiser just pulled over near where I am" He gave her the address. "Can you find out what they are doing here ?"

"Huh, sure give me a minute." She heard her tap on her keyboard. "Crud !"

"What ?"

"They're from rainforest, they came because of a noise complaint. Some mammal was screaming."

The two cops were checking the building numbers, making sure they didn't have the wrong
address. Nick thought fast. He could ask Judy to have them called back, but if she did and that mammals were in danger, it would fall on her. He'd have to find a solution on his own. "Okay, thanks for the info. Talk to you later." He hung up unceremoniously and dialed Sean, he had the numbers from all his foxes colleagues.

*Pick up, pick up, pick up!*

"Yeah ?" Came the unemotional voice.

"Cops at the front door of the building. Whatever you're doing, drop it and get the fuck out !"

"Guys we need to get out. Wrap things up and let's go !"

Sean hung up and Nick started the car, chances were they'd have to do a quick escape. As soon as Sean would be in, he'd step on it. Another thing bothered him, the reason why the cops had shown up. Some civilians had heard screaming, what would that be about ? Had they hurt someone ? Had they killed someone ? Given what had happened to Bellwether it was entirely possible.

*Don't think about this right now. Won't help anything. Get them out of this, maintain your cover.*

The three mammals got out of the building, as if nothing had happened. The panther was slightly limping and rested a paw on the lion's. They had reached the car and had just opened the door when Nick saw the two cops exit the building.

"Hey, you three ! Wait a minute !"

The mammals casually tossed their bags into the car as if they had heard nothing and began entering the car.

"Police ! Stop right there !"

The doors slammed and the two cops ran to their car but Nick had already stepped on it. "Fasten your seatbelt gentlemammals, you're in for a bumpy ride."

He launched his car down the street, skidding at the two firsts corners, his tyres only missing the curb by an inch. He slow down to respect the road regulation. He wasn't sure the other cops would find them, but he didn't want another cop car to start chasing them because of his speeding.

"What are you waiting for Frank !" Said Sean nervously. "Go faster !" It was the most emotion he had ever shown.

"I know what I'm doing." Just as Nick had said those he saw the police car crossing the street they were on from right to left without stopping, through his rear mirror.

Chances they had seen them were minor but he turned right and then left again, just in case they'd back up.

"I thought this was going to be a bumpy ride." Said the panther with humour in their tone.

Despite her looks, it was a female. It could sometimes be hard to differentiate male from female when you weren't from the species, but in her case, any mammal would've had trouble. Before he could answer he sensed a faint smell. A smell of blood. He almost shivered but in all logic, it had to come from the panther, after all, she was limping.

"I thought we were in for a chase, but no. I hoped they didn't clearly see the car clearly, otherwise
we could be found with the traffic cameras."

"Don't worry little fox, where we're going there aren't any."

They knew the city well, they must have spend a large amount of time studying the city layout to
now where the cameras were.

"What are your names by the way ?"

"The less different cells know about the others, the better it is."

"Makes sense, sorry I asked."

He let a bit of time pass before asking Sean. "I thought our boss only employed foxes."

The only answer was a shrug. They gave him nothing, and it was highly frustrating. No matter,
traffic cameras in front of the building had surely caught their faces, it would be enough for Judy to
identify them.

They had passed rainforest and arrived to the meadowlands. It was the most rural place of
Zootopia, and the street cameras were almost non-existent. He pulled over where Sean had asked,
approximately two kilometers from the first bus stop.

Every mammal got out, Sean and the lion took out bottle of lighter fluid and sprayed it on the wheel
and seats as well as door handles, emptying what remained randomly. Then They lit the car on fire.
Nick could peek inside their half-opened bags, and what he saw churned his guts. Bloody metal
instruments.

He turned away and calmed his breath. They were occupied, if he wanted he could take out his gun
and arrest them. It would be so easy. But the arms were of no use if he couldn't get the head.

Nick and Sean had separated from the panther and lion, and were now walking down a road, while
the scenery was less and less rural, more and more housing development.

"Care to share what you did at this building ?" Asked Nick in his most uninterested tone.

The chuckle that answered him sent chills down his spine. "You'll see tonight."

That can't be good.
After Nick's call, Judy had gotten back to her task. The analysis of the video recordings. At first, she thought this would be boring and long but she had been wrong. It was the most dull and tedious thing she ever had to go through. Even in fast-forward, it was too long and too slow.

Come the beginning of the next of the week, she was completely exhausted. Her eyes felt heavy and she could feel the circles under her eyes. Looking at a screen all day long wasn't her idea of a good day. She and Blackfur had made their way back to the flat. The large bear was cooking and Judy was setting the table. More precisely she was putting the plates and cutlery on the coffee table in front of the TV.

Friday the 22nd of February 2019

The panda had made pasta with a tomato sauce, a quick dinner since she too was tired and didn't want to spend too much time on it. As soon as she had sitten on the couch, she took the remote and put the TV on.

"You're really up for more screen watching after the week we just had ?" Asked Judy, half-joking.

"Not really, but I want to watch the news. And if you thought it was bad, remember that it was only the first week staring at screens. Given the amount of video feed we need to check, you better be sure next week won't be the end of it"

"Crud."

Not much was happening right now in comparison with the weeks prior. The shootings were barely mentioned again, Bellwether's kidnapping was vaguely speculated on but that was all. Until they went to their 'hottest topic', the death of two sheeps in their flat in Rainforest district. According to the newsmammals, they had been attacked at their home during the day by at least two unidentified mammals. The Rainforest's precinct hadn't given any more information.

"Judy, didn't Nick call you from Rainforest today about a pair of cops that could blow his cover while he was doing a job in the vicinity ?" Asked Blackfur.

The newsmammal gave the address where the event had transpired and the bunny froze.

"Judy ?"

Nick involved in a murder ? That's impossible, he wouldn't, he would never. It's a coincidence, it's a sad horrible coincidence.

"Judy ?" The panda tugged her arm.
"He was there, in the street where it happened."

Blackfur didn't say anything, she kept staring at the screen.

Nick was sitting on the sofa with the five foxes in their flat, they were sharing dinner, pawsian food they had taken out from a place near. Even though they were criminals, he felt good with them. They were more alike than he thought at first.

"So Lucas, did you spend your day with the face stuck to your computer screen again ?" It was Osman's voice. He liked to tease everyone, but never in a vicious way.

"That's what I'm paid to do. It's called working, not something you would know anything about."

"And what did you 'work' on ?" Asked Osman again, making quotation marks with his fingers.

The little vulpine had a smile and turned on the TV. "Something with D, that should go live in five."

"Five what ?."

"Four."

Nick looked at the screen, the newsmammals were reporting about a murder.

"Three."

Two sheeps, in the same the street he had driven Sean.

"Two."

A cold sweat ran down his spine.

"One."

This was a nightmare.

"Boom."

And he couldn't wake up.

The newscast suddenly stopped. There was a beeping noise while the SMPTE color bars were shown for a few short seconds.

They hacked the newscast ? Did Lucas hack the newscast ?

A black silhouette appeared in front of a dark background. It was a fox but it was impossible to discern any features, his face was completely hidden.

"Rackstein ! What is happening ?"

"I don't know sir ! My computer just fried, and someone is sending images and sound. I can't do
anything right now."

The deer ran to another computer. Behind him, his yak boss was pulling off his hair, seeing on his screen what was broadcasted instead of the news.

"Who's doing that? How can they do that! Rackstein, do something!"

"It's not my field, I'll contact the IT!" He made a short pause, his phone had received a text. "They can't do anything either! They've been locked out of their computers! All they can do is pull the plug." He had begun typing an answer. The silhouette began talking. 

"Good evening citizens of Zootopia. My name is Lycus." The voice was heavily modified. The the intonations were still there, but it was completely impossible to recognize.

"Don't pull the plug. Let it play. And record it!" shouted the yak.

"I'll see what I can do." Answered the deer, rushing to another machine.

"Too long have we predators suffered in the prey's paws and hooves. We have been insulted, spat on, stomped on. Some mammals plotted against us, making us outlet of their hate. Pawns to their conspiracies. And all that was done, was to put the responsible in prison."

The silhouette approached the screen, but still couldn't be recognized.

"A nice little low security prison in the Meadowlands. A calm place, almost a retirement home. As you know, she has been taken, and as you probably guessed, by us."

The image switched from the silhouette to another strapped to a chair. It was a lamb, in ragged clothes, covered in filth and blood. Her head was slumped on her chest, she was probably unconscious. The camera approached and a paw lifted her head, pulling her by the wool. She emitted a painful wail but stayed unconscious.

"Don't worry, she's not dead. We have things in store for the worst of the pred-haters." The image switched again to the dark silhouette. "The images that we are about to show you could hurt the most sensitive mammals among the audience, so I highly suggest to remove them. Before showing this to you, know this, if you are a tolerant mammal going about your business, you have nothing to fear. Act in a specist way toward predators, get in our way, this is what's awaiting you."

He disappeared again and the image showed the face of a fox covered by a balaclava. Some grey fur was showing through the eye holes. It looked like he was setting up the camera. Getting back, the audience could now see the entirety of the room. Two other mammals, large felines judging by their frame, were towering above two tied up, gagged and terrified sheeps. They were wearing blue latex gloves. One of them took a knife. The two sheeps tried to crawl away but they couldn't and their throat were slit. The two other predators took brushes and used the blood to write on the wall while the caprines were squirming on the floor, their terror-filled eyes pointed at the camera as life left them.

'Death to Pred-Haters' read the inscription.

The video had no sound, but the fox could be seen taking out his phone and answering before telling the other to pack up. The video cut again.

"Those two were prey-supremacist. They deserved what happened to them, like any other mammal that suffers our wrath. Do not try to find us, do not try to stop us."
The video feed cut, and the two news anchors were back on screen.

"This is fucking gold." Said the yak under his breath., as he saw the audience number peak.

Judy was still frozen when the pirate broadcast started, she glanced at Blackfur but her eyes were attracted back to the screen. The fox talked, Bellwether was shown, and she sighed. The lamb was still alive. Then it cut back to the silhouette and after that to another fox. With his eyes and colored fur, at first she thought the fox was Nick, but seeing him as he moved off the camera, she knew it wasn't him. Too tall and too fat. Then she saw the sheeps and she had a hard time believing what she was seeing. At her side, the panda had begun growling, baring her teeth.

The moment he had seen the two sheep slumped on the floor, Nick had recognized them. Don and Ron. He knew what was about to happen. Instead he turned his focus to the other foxes in the room. He needed to see who would react and in what way. Skye seemed like she wasn't even fazed, as the leader she knew what was about to happen. But there was something in the stiffness of her expression, the way her claws were out, the way she gritted her teeth. She wasn't enjoying what she was seeing, not even a bit. Sean was just behind her, and Nick could see him smile. Not a big bright smile, but sleazy and sadistic. What surprised Nick was Lucas' reaction, he thought the little fox knew what was about to be showed but it obviously that wasn't the case, he made a gasp when the throats were slit and put a paw on his mouth. He saw his paw tremble and his jaw clench. Osman looked half-disgusted half-satisfied. To Nick, it meant he held only contempt toward the prey-supremacist mammals, but wasn't a fan of watching them being killed. Michael, who was already pale, as always, ran to the toilet and a few seconds later a puking sound was heard.

Nick didn't know how to react or what to do. Once again he had the urge to take out his gun and arrest them but it wasn't the best course of action. Lycus had to go down. Nick would have to play the long game.

All this made him understand something else. Despite the fact that they looked close together, Skye didn't necessarily share everything with them. It was a good thing to know, but it also meant that they weren't probably all as bad as the others. And in his mind, it complicated things.

Michael had come back, wiping his mouth. He looked like he was about to say something but Skye talked before he could. "Are you alright Mike ?"

"Yeah. I- I'm good." He glanced at the screen. "Was it really necessary ?"

"What do you think Mike ? Is ridding the city of two specist a bad thing ?"

Michael hesitated. On one hand, he didn't like the idea of killing, and neither being confronted to it, on the other he desperately wanted to belong. Nick could almost see the cogs moving in the kid's brain. "I'll have to get- get used to it."

Skye turned to Nick, and all attention shifted to him. He leaned back a bit, to make it look like he was perfectly comfortable.

"And you Frank ? What do you think about it ?"

The greyish fox shrug. "It's not the worst thing I've ever seen. Top five though. I simply hope we know what we're doing."

"We're showing that we mean business."
And just like that, Nick was reminded that though Skye was more confident and more intelligent, she was as much of a kid as the other mammals she led. "We just declared a war. What we did wasn't justice, it was retribution."

"Do you have a problem with that?"

"Getting retribution? No. Those two mammals were assholes, and I'd bet they had already made their share of evil. I simply wonder if it's a good idea to provoke the authorities like this."

Skye shrugged. "We're not afraid, and they had to know it. If they want to fuck with us now, it's on them."

Nick had left the building and was on his way home. Just as he had turned at the end of the street, Nick took out his phone. He dialed Judy. She picked up almost immediately.

"N-Frank! What is happening? Are you alright? What-"

"Calm down, I'm alright. Is there someone with you?"

"Blackfur is there."

"Great! Put me on speakers."

The bunny did and Nick continued. "I drove the culprit's car. I know where one of them is, but if I give this info to you and Bogo gets them arrested, my cover's blown."

"Then don't. What can you tell us instead?" Asked Blackfur.

"The fox's name is Sean, fat, dark grey, taller than me. The two other mammals, I don't know their names. There was a lion, no noticeable features, but the panther had a scar on her eye."

Judy gasped. "One of our suspects, Racton, he described us the mammals that have taken Bellwether. One of them was a lion, and the other a panther with a scar. They could be the same. Were there a brown wolf with them?"

"No, just those two and the fox. And I was driving the escape car. If you want to identify them, I'm pretty sure there were traffic cameras where I parked."

"Okay, that's good to know. Anything else?"

"There are four other foxes in my terrorist cell." Nick had called it like that without thinking. He blinked and thought the name fitted. "Skye, Lucas, Osman and Michael. They didn't give me any last name and I didn't pry. See if you can dig anything up with that. I'll give you more detailed description when we'll see each other in a week. I didn't meet this Lycus. I think that's all I have for you right now."

"I've noted everything, thanks Nick." Came the panda's voice. "On our side, we have a suspect named Peter Racton. I don't know if it can be useful to you. If you could get us pictures from everyone in your cell, it would be great, but don't take risks. It's more important that we find out who and where Lycus is."

Nick sighed. He wished he had more to give them, but he didn't. "I'll find him. I promise. Say hi to Wolford and Clawhauser for me."
"Wait!" Said Judy.

"I love you too Carrots."

The bunny chuckled, he had guessed what she wanted to say. "I love you, you silly fox."

"See you soon." And he hung up.

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**Last week of February 2019**

Snarlov and Rhinowitz had to be pulled from Judy's team. The chief couldn't afford to have two mammals behind the desk with the city's uproar. He knew that meant slowing down the search and identification of the mammals that had taken Bellwether, but they needed to make a show of force.

Most officers had seen their shift being stretched to twelve hours and off days were now only once a week. They were constantly patrolling the street. The chief knew there weren't many chances that it would deter the terrorists, but the citizens had to be appeased.

Following the death of the two sheeps, large protests had taken place and the chief’s prophecy was coming to realisation. His city was in shambles. Wary mammals were at each other's throats, the divide between prey and predators that had been slowly closing in the past few months was again like a gaping and festering wound. Riots ensued, shop were destroyed, despite the presence of the police forces in large number throughout the city.

The mayor had made a press conference, but it gave little to no result, it wasn't something that could be resolved by talking. The mood had dipped at the precinct, it was only couple of days and the officers already felt drained. Clawhauser, back at his front desk, couldn't even shine his usual smile. All they could hope now is that think would slowly settle down and that they would find the culprits.

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**Saturday the 2nd of March 2019**

It was the weekend at last and Nick had switched his route to the rendezvous point. He had checked and double checked that he hadn't been followed. On the street, mammals were suspicious of him, it didn't help that he looked more and more like a thug. Despite working on his muscles, his appearance was completely unkept, aside from the hair dying. It didn't help either that his mood was tipping toward murderous. At least, no one approached him, his brooding kept those who could want to cross him at bay. And it was better that way, because right now, he had no idea how he would react toward them.

At last, he arrived at the building. As he entered it and began going up the stairs, he felt himself slow down. The last time, he hadn't been able to stop a hyena being murdered. This time, he had actively participated to the murder of a pair of sheep and help terrorists disturbing the peace of the city. He tried to convince himself that it was only him trying to work his way toward the organization head, but the sting of guilt pricked at the back of his mind.

Finally he was in front of the door. He knocked and a few second later it opened. Nick expected to see Blackfur, but it was Judy, standing, a paw resting on one of her crutches.
Without even thinking, he had swept her up, burying his nose in her neck.

After the week's event, Judy was more than happy to see her fox. Opening the door for him was a little thing, but it did a lot. She was about to say hello, but he had jumped at her and swept her up, giving her the most deep hug he had ever given.

"Ha ha, if I knew you'd hug me like this, I'd have asked to have the meeting space like this from the beginning." she joked.

She felt a slight tension before Nick chuckled, a bit too late. He backed up a bit still holding up Judy and slammed the door with a a hand he took the crutches, still holding his bunny against him and made his way toward the living room. He stopped just before entering to kiss her.

"I could walk you know." She said as they entered the room.

"Not good for you."

"The doctor said I could use the crutches a few hours a day. If I went easy."

"I've never seen yourself go easy."

He entered the living room and sat her on the couch placing himself at her side. Only now he realised Blackfur wasn't alone there, Savage was sitting in another armchair.

_Great._

"Hi guys. Sorry for the wait."

"Hi Nick." Said the panda.

"Hello." Said the striped bunny.

"So, what do we start with ?" Asked Nick.

"Why don't you start by telling us about the last weeks."

Nick repressed a wince. He had four weeks worth of events to tell, and the first two had been pretty calm, until he had fought the two specist sheeps. The thing was, two weeks prior, he wouldn't even have brought it up, but it was directly linked to why had been able to infiltrate the terrorist cell, and he was part of the reason why they were killed.

And so he began talking. First, the bit about the uninteresting jobs with Vlad, and then how he had lost it at the bar. Nick left aside what had happened with Scarlet. It was of no consequence, and had nothing to do with the case. And if he could avoid an awkward conversation with Judy later, it was for the best. He had pretty vivid memories of the fight, and had to keep himself for giving every little details. While he was talking, he paid attention to the reaction of his audience. Blackfur was relatively unfazed but had a frown when it came to the fight. Savage didn't seem to care. Judy looked at him with worry, and he was sure he also a hint of aversion. Or maybe his tired mind was playing tricks on him. He put it aside for now, he had the rest to tell.

Then he came to how he had been approached by Osman, how the fox had followed him and how he had handled it. He talked about the team he was now part of, the driving and crate carrying. And then he came to the part where he had to drive them to the sheeps'. And how he knew they were the same that he beat up. He didn't say it, but to him, they wouldn't have died if not for him, if he didn't bring attention to them. But truth was, a deep and hidden part of him was satisfied the two
mammals wouldn't be a nuisance anymore. They didn't deserve to die, but the world would be a better place without them.

He gave a detailed description of the panther and lion, and at Judy's reaction, it was obvious it completely fitted Racton's description of them.

He also talked about the reactions of every fox that were there while the broadcast played. He didn't know if it could be useful, but at this point, every detail could be important.

"Good job Wilde." Said agent Savage. "I didn't know when you'd snap, but seeing how it played out, it was a good thing. You had a lot of luck though, you need to be more careful. You did good with the foxes too, a lot of agents would've whipped out their gun and arrested them. You made the right decision."

Nick had made the same conclusion, and having the confirmed by another mammal, though by one he didn't like, relieved a bit of his tension. Around him, Judy and Blackfur were silent.

"For my part" continued the bunny. "I've dug a few leads. I can't approach this close to Lycus, but I know he works with a few other minor criminals. Mostly informants. I won't give a list right now, but if I find anything that could be useful to you, I'll make sure to bring you up to speed. Once we have the head, all we will have to do is scoop them out and put them behind bars. From what I could gather, big things will happen in the next few months. I don't know what yet, but I doubt avenging the predators is Lycus' endgame."

Judy sighed. "Are all the operations involving the ZIA that complex?"

"Though complex, this one is pretty straightforward. Get the head, stop him. When you have to nudge a balance of power, it can be way more long and slow." Shrugged the agent.

Not wanting this to turn into a long conversation, though she was pretty certain it would be highly interesting, Blackfur chimed in. "On our end, we haven't finished analysing the street camera footage near the places where the vans were bought, and with what happened, our workforce has been cut in half. It will take longer than we had planned. There is another bad news. There indeed were street cameras where you parked, Nick, but absolutely no images of the culprits. I'm pretty sure the forty minutes you spent there were tampered with and replaced with a loop."

"What? It's impossible."

"First the prison, then the TV channel and now this. They have a hacker, and he's very good."

Declared Savage.

"Lucas. The bat-eared fox, he said it was him that had done the thing with the TV. Now, I'm pretty sure he is also responsible for the prison. I could try to bug his computer, but it's in a pretty open space. Anyone could see me put my paws on it."

"Bad idea then. But if you give me his address, I could have their internet connection watched. Anything that goes through, my people would be able to see it. All we'd have to do is decrypt it."

Nick gave him the address. "Whatever you do, do not alert them. I'm pretty sure they're starting to warm up to me."

The bunny agent hopped down from his armchair. "I'm a professional. Good bye everyone." He left and silence fell on the room.

The panda was looking at her notes, and Nick could see Judy was reflecting on something. She had
a slight frown and her arms were crossed.

"So, psych-eval time ?" Asked Nick overly cheerily. "What should we talk about ?"

The panda glanced at him. She looked a bit worried. "Is there any particular topic you wish to discuss ?"

The fox shrugged. "Nope, I don't have anything. Maybe you should just ask me questions, doc."

Judy and Blackfur exchanged a glance, and the bunny hot down from the sofa. "I'll be in the bedroom."

"You don't need to go Carrots."

As an answer she gave him a look of disbelief and trudged to the door.

Nick was tapping on his thighs, waiting for Blackfur to talk but she simply installed herself more comfortably in her armchair and stared at him.

"I'm fine, really."

"You look fine, sure."

"Cause I am."

"So there is not anything weighing on your mind."

"Nope."

She scribbled something.

"We can pull you out if you need it."

"Why would I want that ?"

It was going nowhere. The panda needed a new angle. Good thing Judy gave her one.

"Do you know why Judy left the room ?"

"No idea, maybe she's a bit tired."

It was the panda's turn to give him a look of disbelief. "Maybe she thinks you have trouble opening up when she's here."

Nick didn't answer that. He had trouble opening up, period. And even if he had trouble showing his emotions, he mostly could tell her what he thought. So he simply shrugged.

"Do you think there isn't anything you'd like to get off your chest that she can't hear."

The thing about pandas, was that they always looked half-asleep, even when perfectly alert. At this moment, Nick could see that it wasn't always true. For instance, the panda's inquisitive stare made him thoroughly uncomfortable.

"I hate it when you see through me."

"A lucky guess." She said, which wasn't entirely false. "I know the only thing you like less than opening up is opening up to someone you don't completely trust so I won't press you. But whatever
this is, you need to get it off your chest.” She closed her notepad. "It doesn't have to be to her."

Nick smiled. Who else he could tell it ? Fin ? Sure, the little vulpine would understand, but he was more laid back than most mammal realised. They would always be there for each other, but it wasn't the mammal he would go to, to vent. Their relationship was more... practical. They had each other's back.

The panda had an ironical laugh.

"What's funny ?"

"Judy left so you could say what you needed without feeling judged. What's funny is you're one of the few mammals that would never confide into people removed from the problem. Like a psychologist. The thing is, I'm pretty sure you'll say more to her than to me. You don't want to talk about what's weighing on you to her, but you'd rather say it to her than to anyone else."

Nick laughed silently. "Yeah, that's funny. Not that I'm trying to be rude, but what's your purpose here in that case ? I mean, beside helping Judy."

"Though you don't talk, you communicate. I can read attitude and body language. Of course, I could be wrong but for now, you seem okay enough. Some mammals in your place wouldn't be doing that good."

"That's good to know."

The panda stood up. "That doesn't mean you're perfectly fine. You need to give yourself a break and not fall into the trap of taking in all the guilt on what your 'comrades' do. I don't have anything more to say. I'll be back tomorrow afternoon to pick her up. Have a nice day."

"You too."

And with that, she left the flat.

It was obvious Nick had a lot on his mind. But she didn't want him to feel pressured to talk, and she understood that it could be difficult for him express himself in front of several mammals. That was the reason she had chosen to leave the room. She sat on the bed and let herself slump back with a sigh.

Saying she was worried was an understatement. She remembered the panda's words on how the undercover job could affect Nick. It could change him, even break him and all this scared her.

All she wanted now was to chase those thoughts and for her fox to quickly get to her. It was a bit selfish but she missed him and four weeks without seeing him were way too much.

When someone opened the door, she had dozed off. She felt something warm and fluffy silently wrapping itself around her. Something in her mind told her to open her eyes, but she didn't want to. The warmth around her chased away the dark thoughts and she wanted nothing more than to lose herself in it.

"Judy ?" Whispered a voice in her ear. "Is my little bunny here ?"

"Yeah. I'm here." She finally opened her eyes and saw Nick's face in front of hers.

"I thought you were sleeping."
"I thought too, I was having a strange dream with a perfect fox cuddling me."

He booped her nose. "Too bad you're stuck with me."

"I'll have to make due"

Both of them were hiding their thoughts with their humour. Not that they felt down, but none of them were really comfortable.

Judy knew that all her fox did weighed on him, and even though he had to participate in things that she found horrifying, she didn't hold any negative feeling toward him. It was all to help the city. What she feared was for him to spiral back to his old bad habits, and that it changed him enough that he couldn't come back. She was aware that she didn't know everything about his past, but she was fairly certain he had never participated in another mammal's death. She held him tighter and the fox curled his tail, completely covering her in a fox cocoon.

"Were you able to talk with Blackfur?" came her muffled voice.

The fox hesitated for a split-second. "Yeah, I did."

_Liar._

The thing was, he knew she didn't need for his problems to weigh on her. As an officer, she had to deal with the angry citizens, though indirectly. And he knew his bunny enough to get that the investigation wasn't going as fast as she'd like. And where a regular officer would blame the system and regulation for slowing them down, she would only blame herself. She had to push herself, always. She had this compulsion to rise up to any and every challenge, to prove her worth, because she was a bunny, and despite the fact that she had largely earned her place at the ZPD, there were still times when she wondered if she truly belonged here. "I only have a bit of thinking to do, don't worry about it."
"So, the leg's better ?" He asked, not so subtly changing topic.

"Yes. I had new x-rays, and the doctor was very satisfied. It seems everything that should reattach has done so."

"Great !"

"It's still very fragile, even if I can use the crutches, I should do so less than fifteen minutes at a time. If my healing continues to go that way, I will be able to switch from a cast to an articulated brace. I'll still have to wear a removable cast at night because of the involuntary movements, but it means I'll be able to walk longer."

Nick hugged her. She felt some of his tension being relieved. Obviously, her healing was one of the numerous things that weighed on his mind. According to the doctor, even if it would heal as good as one could hope, the leg would always ache a bit, and even if high physical activity would be perfectly safe and feasible, her leg could get sorer quicker. It also meant that in her later years, it would end up being less mobile. But right now she didn't care about that. She was healing and she would stay a cop.

"You're beefier than I remember"

The fox smiled. "I've been doing a bit of exercise. Lots of free time, no one to talk to. I understand the stereotype on the muscular type. It's like meditation, no brain activity, only the exercise." He straightened up and got rid of his t-shirt. "Feast your eyes, I'll probably lose a bit of it when I'll stop being undercover."

Though the fox had gained a bit of muscular mass at the academy and took care of himself for the job, his lean figure had turned slightly more athletic.

"Maybe you're more muscualr than before, but like all foxes, you still look like a chopstick." Judy snickered. Nick joined her laugh. MacHorn leaded the sparring sessions, and it was how he called Judy, Clawfith and especially Nick when he got a bit too facetious. The fox went back to his bunny, and slowly crawled toward her. "Ever been hunted by a chopstick ?"

"I suddenly feel like a pawsian noodle box."

Nick approached more and wiggled his eyebrows.

"I swear to the gods, if you do a hot-sauce related joke..."

He suddenly pounced and landed on top of her, careful to not touch her leg, his paws caressing her.

"I think my order of bunny noodles has arrived."

"Do you always fondle your noodle boxes like this ? I think I'm getting jealous." She said in
scolding tone. She would usually pull him by the collar to kiss him, but he was bare-chest, and she knew how much pulling on one mammal's fur could be painful. He moved his head up while his paws headed down and gave her the kiss she wanted.

"I'm only looking for the opening."

"That's my tail."

"Maybe if I tug on it..."

"...you'll get a bruised snout?" She proposed with a large smile. His paw moved slightly and found itself on her rump. "You're taking an awfully long time to find an opening." She said, batting her eyes.

"I don't see you helping." His paw squeezed, and somehow it felt a bit different than usual. "Oh, found it!" His paws had made their way to the buttons of her shirt, taking them off, one after the other. As soon as her belly was exposed, his snout was on it, sniffing and nuzzling, fingers tickling her sides.

"Don't play with your food!" she protested in a fit of laughter, trying to get him off of her.

"Who's making bad jokes now..." He stopped talking a looked at her with a strange expression.

"What is it?"

He put a finger on her belly. "Are you getting cuter?" The mischievous smile was firmly in place.

Her face shot red at once, she tried to hide herself with her open shirt. "Nope. Nothing to see. No cute bunny here."

The fox had leaned back and put his paws on his thigh, looking at her with a curious look. She was buttoning her shirt back up.

"From what I had understood, you had said being a bit plumpy was considered beautiful by bunny standard."

Her paws slowed down a bit. "Yeah it is."

"I hope you're not afraid of how I see you. You're still beautiful to me."

She let go of the second last button. "It's silly." she shrugged.

"Usually, I'm the silly one."

Sitting on the bed like she was, her fur showing through the open shirt, he truly thought she was magnificent. But this compliment right now wasn't what she needed.

"Don't laugh alright?"

"I'd never laugh at you." He smiled.

The look of annoyed disbelief she answered with was enough to make him understand it wasn't a good time for jokes. Maybe he'd dial it back a bit.

"I let myself go a little. With work, the leg, the absence of physical activity, I haven't changed my food habits. And so..." She opened her arms, as to show herself.
Truth was, she seemed a bit plumpier, but only slightly. He had only noticed because of the
physical contact.

"I get that you don't like the fact that you have gained a bit of weight, but the way you talked about
it last time, I didn't think you were so self-conscious." Nick was puzzled.

"It's not about my physical appearance. It's- How to say this... I don't let myself go. I just don't. I'm
always focused, always working. I got where I am today, only because I worked hard. I had to be
stronger, faster, more clever. Letting this happen, even though I like what I see in the mirror, it's
just not me."

The fox lifted a paw. "Wait, wait, wait. What you are saying is, you've built your body and your
mind to be the most efficient at what you love doing, at the price of 'looking good'?" He made a
slight pause "I mean, you do look good. Maybe unconventionally to bunnies, but no mammal
would say the opposite. And especially not me. But that means all you'd have to do to be more
'physically perfect' would be to let yourself go?"

"Basically, yes."

"You know most mammals have the completely opposite problem?"

"I told you it was silly."

Nick gave a chuckle. "I don't think it is. I thought you were embarrassed of your appearance, but
that's not it, isn't it?"

She nodded.

"What is it then?" He had an idea of the answer, but he thought formulating it would do her good.
In essence the complete opposite of his attitude.

"I've gained weight, and the thing is, when I look in a mirror, despite the cast, and the scar on my
leg, it's the first time I see myself as really... Attractive as opposite to simply 'okay'. It was never
something I was looking for, all the time I spent at the gym, studying, training to get into the police
academy, and the into the ZPD, I didn't care." She shrugged. "Well I did, but it's the first time I let
myself go enough to get to that point. I think all of my previous boyfriends said to me that if I
dialed back on the physical training, I'd be really beautiful." She chuckled.

"Way to be a gentlemammal."

"Some of them were more subtle than others. So no, I'm not embarrassed because of my
appearance, I'm embarrassed because it's the proof of me not being at one hundred percent in my
job. The citizens of zootopia deserve better."

Silence had fallen on the room. Nick was staring at Judy who was playing with her thumbs.

"You dumb bunny," He said breaking the silence. "You really need to learn how to cut yourself
some slack." She was about to protest but he cut her. "Let me summarized, alright? You were
valedictorian at the academy, you were the first bunny cop, you've solved one of the biggest of this
city with no support of any sort, you're currently with what looks to be the second - or third
depending on how we look at the Nighthowler thing - biggest case, you've been injured in the line
of duty, and you're going to pull through and get back to work against all odds. Tell me again how
any mammal could have any doubt about your dedication?"

Judy shook her head. "It's not about the other mammals. It's about me."
"Did you think you were excluded from the 'any'? So what if you are not one hundred percent? You shouldn't even be working. You should be resting at home, I should be there with you, answering your every need, even though you'd hate it. You're dealing with a lot. So if you can't do it for yourself, please do it for me. Cut yourself some slack." He had approached and was now holding her paws. She went to him and snuggled in his arms, sitting back to him in his folded legs.

"Indulge yourself in a little self-appreciation. You could never really look like you wanted to, now it's the perfect occasion. We're both taking vacation away from our usual appearance. I'm greyer and beefier, you're cuter and chubbier. We'll get back to our usual selves together alright?"

"You're okay with me having a bit more fluff?"

"You're okay with me having a bit more muscle?"

They shared a laugh, before kissing again. His paws on her tummy made a little squeeze. "Besides, I'd never complain about you being fluffy, fluff-butt."

"Hey!" She playfully protested, elbowing him gently. "Paws off, chopstick."

"Make me, noodle box."

She crawled out of his paws and put herself on her back. He advanced toward her while speaking like a documentary commentator. "The wild chopsticks is on the trail of the noodle box." She scrambled backward, in a pretense panic.

"Oh no, a chopstick, I'm doomed."

He leaned over her and opened the few buttons she had put back. "And the lid is open. Will the chopstick-"

She catched his snout, hushing him. "I know where you're going with the chopstick/noodle box metaphor and you better stop now or you'll be playing alone with your own noodle."

"Duly noted." Came his muffled voice.

... They were snuggled on the bed, a paw resting on her belly, giving playful squeezes once in awhile. "I could get used to the extra fluff though."

"I could get used to the extra muscles. Let's not wish for things we can't have." She jokingly answered.

"Speaking of things we can't have, all this has put me on the mood for pawsian food. A big box of fried noodles with shrimps."

"Box." She snickered.

"What?"

"I just thought of what could be called bunnies and foxes hybrids. Boxes."

Nick burst out into laughter "Not easy to give birth to a box."

"We bunnies have litters. It would be a whole lot of boxes."
"My flat would be too small to store all those boxes. How would that work, bunny at the top and fox at the bottom?"

"Exactly, and the foxes at the top, bunnies at the bottom would be called funnies." It was Judy's turn to fall into a fit of laughter.

"Boxes and funnies. I can't stop from imagining a hopping cardboard box with bunny ears. Haha ow, my sides."

Their laughter died slowly. Nick stomach gurgled. With a smile he got out of bed and took his bunny with him to the kitchen.

He had put on his boxer and an apron, and was whipping something up. Judy was on the counter, wrapped in a sheet. They had wanted to order pawsian food but it was risky for any of them to show their faces as long as they were there. So pawsian fried noodles were off the table. So instead, the fox was improvising something with pasta, canned vegetables and oil. He didn't know how he would turn out but hoped for the best. Usually his improvisations turned out well, he wasn't a chef by any means, but he had a good nose and could tell what would do and what wouldn't. Soon, their meal was ready.

While they were eating, Judy asked. "About those boxes and funnies?"

Nick lifted his eyes from his own plate. "What about them?"

"Well, do you want some?"

"Tough I'm not against the trying part, I doubt it will bear any form of result. You know, genetics. I know some species that are close could achieve something like that, I know a liger and a mule, but the-"

"Nick, I'm talking about kids."

The fox marked a pause. "We're not even two months into our relationship. I know bunnies have a tendency to rush, and I'm not the patient type either. But even then, don't you think it's a bit early to get into that territory?"

"If the topic makes you uncomfortable, we can just drop it." She said with a reassuring smile.

Nick took another bite. With what he had under his hand to cook, he was happy from the result. "I've simply never had to really ask myself the question. A year ago I was a con-mammal without any idea of what the future held. You would have asked me if I wanted kids a that time, the answer would've been no. Now, I don't know." He shrugged."Like I said, we're only two months into our relationship, most of which we've spent apart. By fox' standard, I've been completely irresponsible, mating with you this soon. So having kids... It's a huge responsibility, and not one I'd really like to think about right now."

"Alright." She resumed her eating under Nick's puzzled gaze.

"Alright?"

"What?"

"You drop this bombshell, and all I get for my approximate but long answer is an 'alright'? Hello, I think my bunny's busted, can I have the assistance on the line?"
"What would you have me say ?"

"Do you want kids ?"

She put her fork down. "Well, yes, I do want kids. Not as much as my parents though, especially not in the city. I'm from the first litter, I have thirteen brothers and sister in total, so you see how good we are at multiplying."

"Is it a little or a lot ?"

"It's... standard. Most bunny couples have between ten and twenty kids." Nick froze. "You can breathe, I do want kids, but way less than that."

"Okay, good."

"And as you said, we're really not there yet. Two months together it's a bit soon to think about it. I just wanted to know if you'd be okay, or at least not opposed to the idea."

They finished their plates in silence. Judy was expecting the answer she had gotten. Of course, two months in, she knew it was too soon to even think about having kids, but she had to know Nick's position on the matter if this was going to be a long lasting thing. Nick had been a bit flustered by the question. He was worried about their relationship and the fact that they mostly spent their time apart. For her to drop this like that, though it reassured him about her implication in their couple, it was a bit scary. But the fact that she wanted kids hadn't surprised him.

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**Sunday the 3rd of March 2019**

Like last time, he had left first, using the building's back door. They had spent most of the remaining time together mostly cuddling and sleeping. It felt like taking shelter in the eye of the storm, in the middle of the chaos. Parting had been difficult like last time, almost tearful. As he walked in the street toward the ZUG, he took in the morning fresh air. All he wanted now was push weight to exhaustion like a mindless drone.

Judy had clothed herself and was dozing out on the couch. She heard the door being unlocked and Blackfur entered the living room.

"Ready to go Judy ?"

The bunny sat herself on the wheelchair. Now that she could walk a bit, using it was even more of a chore, but she had to be patient.

"Yeah, let's go."

The apartment door slammed behind them, and soon they were in the elevator.

"How is Nick doing ?" Asked the bunny out of the blue.

"You know that technically I can't give you any details about that."

"I'm not asking for details. I think he's keeping too much inside. I and I'm pretty sure he didn't tell you anything, I simply want your impression."

The bear hesitated but chose to give her the truth. "He's not doing perfect. But considering what he
had to do and see until now, I'd say he's doing quite good. He's not slipping, I doubt he will really snap, but we should stay vigilant. I think four weeks without seeing you were a bit much. I wouldn't be surprise if you were an anchor in reality to him."

Judy's ears had slumped down. She knew wasn't doing okay, but she had been a bit too optimistic. "An anchor in reality ? What do you mean ?"

"He's getting more aggressive, bold. You know the expression 'fake it until you make it' ? He's the embodiment of it. I'm sure he picked up in cynicism with someone and used it as a shell until he truly became as cynical as he is. Now he's playing a hardass, but I don't know how long he will just be playing with all the pressure. I think you defuse it each time he sees you."

"Sweet cheese and crackers."

"As I said, he's doing good considering everything. You'll see each other in two weeks and he'll be better from it. Don't worry too much alright ?" But Blackfur knew her words were lost on her. The bunny would worry. She was a big ball of nerves and frustration because of her injury, and the panda had just added a spoonful of problems to the mix. She could only hope that the bunny wouldn't do anything stupid in the weeks to come.

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Friday the 8th of march 2019

To say Bogo was feeling powerless was an understatement. He had just gone out from a group call with the chiefs of the other city precincts and all had come to the same conclusion. Though they had done everything to make a show of force and sent all their available officers in the street, nothing seemed to calm the population. Riots emerged everywhere, manifestation against predators, manifestation against pred-haters, manifestation to have an united front. Stores were destroyed, mammals were persecuted and though the presence of the police had to help a little, there were nothing they could really do beside waiting for it to die down.

The chief took out his bottle of whisky and looked at it for a few seconds. It wasn't a good idea. Drinking alone after a too long reunion that had birthed no solution was the worst idea right now. He had still a bit of work to do but was in no state to do it now. He needed to air his brain a bit so he stood up and went for a stroll in his precinct. It was something he did sometimes. It was his place, his home, more so than the flat he rented a few street from here. He still remembered vividly that voice from his past, saying the job took too much space in his life and he gave a grim chuckle.

Taking the Stroll was habit he had taken when he had become the Precinct One's chief. At the time, pred/preys relations were way worse, more rooted in the city's heart. The politics openly use the antagonism to gain mammal's approval. The chief liked how things had evolved, even though he had never seen his city in such a bad state. He felt he was a bit overdramatic. The months the city had spent under Bellwether's rule had technically been worse, but without reaching this level of chaos. Specism used as a mean to control. Horrible thing.

The chief was now in the main hall, a few days from the front desk. He stopped silently near it and glanced at FitzAntlers who was working on some file while listening to music. Usually he would scold an officer in the front desk for having earbuds, but it was past 9PM and there wasn't anyone here to see her.

"Hello chief." said the female officer with her usual warm but professional voice. "Can I help you ?"
"No, just taking a stroll, seeing how's the precinct doing. Keep up the good work, officer."

He directed himself to a hallway, whistling under his breath. The stroll really did him good. His head felt cleared now. He'd really have to start turning on the light in his office. The dark helped him focus, but the light was the best at relieving his stress. He didn't know why, and it really didn't make sense. Maybe a deep instinct still ingrained in the mammal's mind. The necessity to be wary of predators at night maybe. In any case, even dimly lighted, the hallway were still clearer than his office.

There was a light behind one of the doors. Maybe an officer was finishing a late report. It happened. Except it was Blackfur and Wolford's desk, and he knew for a fact that they had gone home, the panda with Judy in tow. The buffalo had taken his hooves to his belt, a force of habit when confronted to an odd situation. He dialed back on the paranoia a bit and didn't take out his tranq gun. It could very well be one of them that had gone back for whatever reason.

He opened the door without knocking, ready for anything. What he saw on the other side was a pudgy cat, slumped back on a chair, snoring while the screen in front of him played security camera footage.

The buffalo snorted. It was only Clawhauser. He could guess what had happened, the cat had come to watch more camera footage in order to identify new suspects, and since FitzAntlers was occupying the computer he usually used at the front desk, there was no better place than here to do so.

But the cat had no business being here. Not here in this office, the buffalo didn't really care that the feline used his colleagues computer to work, he had no business being here at the precinct at this hour. He silently approached the plumpy silhouette, which was nonsensical since he intended to wake him up, and gently poked his shoulder.

"Clawhauser. Wake up."

Beside a louder snoring, it resulted in no reaction.

"Clawhauser, wake up, it's time to go to bed."

The stereotype about cat instinct proved to be wrong, he clearly wasn't sleeping with an eye open. It almost made the buffalo snort again. Instead, he silently cleared his throat to regain composure.

Even though he hated to make the feline uncomfortable, it was the most sure way to wake him up without shaking him. It was well known that touching a cat's belly automatically triggered them into full defensive mode. And the chief was curious to see what full defensive mode would look like on Clawhauser. He had to be really tired too because it was one of his stupidest idea yet.

He poked the cat's belly. At the moment the chief did so, he understood how stupid it was to poke a sleeping cat. In his half-sleep, there was no way Clawhauser would refrain from taking out his claws. And so that was exactly what he did. In a split seconds, his claws were out and reaching for the poking object. The buffalo had no time to react as paws were wrapped around his muscular arm, the only thing he could do was to steel himself from the pain that was sure to ensue.

Nothing. Well not nothing, the chief had been yanked down by a surprisingly strong strength. There was now a pudgy cat thoroughly wrapped around his arm, claws strapped to the sleeve of his uniform.

"Mmmgn... Don't play with the cat's belly, big guy. Gnnff... 'know what it does to me." Coowed the
cat in a half-asleep voice as he slowly came to.

The chief couldn't keep himself from asking, fighting the urge to laugh. "What does it do to you?" Because of the position he was in, his face was only a few inches away from the cat's.

The feline slowly opened his eyes, answering in a half-asleep, half-naughty voice. "Do it again if you want to find ouaaaAAAAH" As soon as he was out of slumber, Clawhauser had recognized who he was talking to. He had immediately let go of the arm and shot back. More precisely, he had shot sideways and was now falling from the chair, paws flailing in attempt to grab onto something. It found the reaching arm of the chief, latching onto it without thinking, all claws still out. He was yanked from his falling motion and sent forward. The chair made a weird spin and went to crash against a desk. The cat, still not completely awaken though way more than a few seconds ago had now his face flat on something very nice, warm, and firm. The chief abs. He slowly backed up, face now completely red, and let go of the arm he was still holding. Under the chief’s eyes, it seemed like he was trying to make his face disappear in his fat neck. The buffalo felt a sting in his left forearm, obviously the feline officer hadn't controlled this claws and he was now bleeding. He discreetly hid his arm in his back before leaning toward his subordinate.

"Are you okay Ben?"

"Y-yes." He was definitely avoiding the chief's gaze.

"Nothing broken?"

The pudgy cat waved a paw. "No, don't worr- What?" He had noticed the blood on it. "Chief, did I-?"

"It's only a graze. You shouldn't be here this late. As I said before, you should take time to rest."

But the cat wasn't listening. "Show me."

"What?"

"Your arm."

At the cat serious expression, the chief already knew he wouldn't let it go. Most predators, and Ben included, the chief supposed, were really serious about not using their claws against others. He took out his arm, there were four large bleeding gashes where the cat had gripped the chief on his forearm, the sleeve was completely torn. It was less painful than the seriousness of the injury let appear.

"Alright I'm going to the infirmary. You go home."

"But chief-"

The buffalo closed his eyes and slowly breathed. He wasn't mad at all. He had done something stupid, which resulted in a chain of event that got him hurt. He didn't want the cat to beat himself up about it. "Go home and take some rest, I'll be okay."

The cat didn't listen, he had already taken out his upper uniform and was using it to make a makeshift bandage.

"The doctor isn't here at this hour. I have the first aid formation. You can't do the stitches yourself."
The chief expected the cat to be completely disarmed before this situation, but he was acting rationally, and even a tad assertively, which was completely out of character. And then the chief remembered the pudgy officer had followed the same training and formation than any other officer and that he was supposed to be able to handle any critical situations.

He followed the cat and they ended up in the basement, in the infirmary. The cat seemed to perfectly know this way around and in a few seconds, he had gathered everything he could need to tend to the buffalo's wound. It was how the cheetah had earned and kept his place at precinct one. Every skill he could learn that wasn't directly linked to his physical fitness, he made a point to learn.

The level of professionalism he was showing right now was impressive and would make pale any other officer. The chief didn't need to do anything. "This is going to sting a bit."

In a few seconds his wound had been cleaned and the cheetah had taken out an electric hair clipper. Shaving hair was standard procedure for stitches. He didn't even ask the chief and shaved in a few smooth motion.

Next he took out the thread and needle. "You may want to hold onto something. Exhale each time I prick. Ready?" the chief nodded, it wasn't the first time he was stitched. Despite his slightly large paw, due to his pudgy constitution, the cat perfectly handled the needle. The chief himself didn't flinch, it wasn't something he was used to, but the claws must have severed a few sensitive nerves. A few minutes later, the chief was fully stitched and bandaged up. Only now did her notice that since the cat wasn't wearing his upper uniform, he had a pale pink Gazelle tank top.

"Alright, you're good to go. Try not to do heavy lifting with that arm if you want the stitches to hold. And maybe you should have it checked by a doctor later."

The chief moved his hoof, opening and closing it a few times. He had to admit, the feline knew what he was doing. He handed his shirt to the cat. "I think I ruined your uniform."

Clawhauser took it and shrugged. He'd have to throw it away. "It's okay, I ruined yours. Sorry about your arm, sir."

"I should know better than poking a cat's belly." He said in a joking tone, taking his arm up. "Painful lesson."

"And sorry about the whole-" he made a few motion with his paws, miming the whole arm hugging and stumbling thing, and looked at the floor with an embarrassed expression. The event was playing in a loop in his mind, and the longer it went, the redder his face went.

The buffalo cleared his throat, and if the feline didn't know better, he could have sworn the chief looked slightly embarrassed too. "It's in the past. I did something stupid, there were consequences, none of which I'm blaming on you."

"But-"

The chief leaned forward and put his valid hoof on the cat's shoulder. "None. Now do me a favor, go home and get some sleep. Okay?"

"Okay."

The cat put the bloodstained uniform on his shoulder. "Good night sir."

"Good night Ben." The feline left the room in his usual waddling step.
The buffalo sighed with a half-smile, looking at his bandaged forearm.

*Well, that's been mind clearing alright. Let's get back to work.*
Part 2, Chapter 23

Part 2 : Lycus Case

Chapter 23 : To Destroy This Image

Sunday the 10th of march 2019

It had been a week since his last meeting with Judy. He had latched onto the memory almost desperately, the simple idea of going back to work with the five foxes was enough to make him angry. Each time he saw one of them, all he wanted to do was slap them across the face and explain to them how moronic their actions were. But he couldn't, they didn't trust him enough yet for him to openly criticize them. It technically wasn't his job to try and change their mind, but as much as they would deserve their punishment, he thought he had to try and reform them. They were still young, way younger than him when he had changed his ways. Sure, what they had done was way worse, but young minds were easily influenced, prone to anger and to seek quick results.

He was lost in thoughts, pushing the weights when his phone rang. He didn't recognize the number, which made him wary.

"Yes ? Frank Greyfox speaking ?"

"Frank ? It's Scarlet, Joe gave me your number."

Of course, he had given it to the rat when he had asked for some work a few weeks earlier.

"Scarlet ? How are you ?"

"I'm... It's hard to explain. Could we meet ? It's kind of important."

She really sounded distressed. Immediately all alarms rang in Nick's mind. He had gotten up and was already changing clothes.

"Scarlet, Are you safe ?"

"What ? Yes, of course. It's just hard to talk about that on the phone. Do you remember where I live ?"

"I can be here in fifteen minutes."

"Great. It's the number 304, see you soon." And she hung up.

In only a few seconds, the fox had put on the bulletproof vest, put his gun in its holster, and all kinds of concealable weapons inside his clothes and gotten out. He quickly made his way toward the vixen's building, careful of his surroundings. The conversation had woken up the paranoid part of his brain and he had to check in case he was followed. But he wasn't.

As soon as he was in the building, his paw reached for his gun and stayed on its grip until he was facing the vixen's door. He knocked and soon after the door opened, showing Scarlet's face. "Hi !" She said a bit embarrassed. Obviously there was no call for Nick's paranoia and he let go of his weapon.

"Hi."
She opened the door and he came in. The place was tiny, a single room, a bed, a mini-kitchen, but nicely kept. Without thinking, he let her take off his jacket, showing the gun holster. She stopped dead in her track.

"Are you a cop?"

Nick lifted the most sarcastic brow he could muster. "You see a fox with a gun and the first thing you think is that he is a cop?"

She stayed silent and put away the jacket on the bed.

"I'm a paranoid fox walking around with a loaded gun, and let's leave it at that, alright?"

Somehow, it seemed to ease her up a bit. She sat on a chair, looking like she was searching for her words.

"What's happening Scarlet?"

"I think I fucked up."

"What did you do?"

She went back up and started pacing back and forth. "Remember the two mountain sheeps you beat up?"

"Hard to forget, they were all over the news a few days ago. Still are in fact."

She made a slight pause before blurting. "I think they died because of me."

Nick barely contained a snort. "Yeah, I highly doubt that."

She turned to him. "Do you remember when I talked to you about my brother a few weeks ago?"

"Yeah I do. What about him?"

"He called me a few days after what happened at the bar. It seemed he already knew about it, which isn't that strange, word goes around in those parts. And I know he keeps tabs on me, even if it should be the other way around. Anyway, I talked to him about you, about the sheeps, and he asked me to describe them."

Nick shrugged. "That's not much to go on. He could have found them any other way by asking around. What was your brother's name again?" She hadn't told him before, but he bet it was Osman. The fox sure was young enough.

"His name is Michael. He was scrawny when he was younger, I don't know now, I have not seen him in a while."

Nick hid his surprised expression into a scoff. "So, you think those two sheeps died because you talked to your brother about them?"

She nodded.

"With what kind of crowd do you think your brother fell in? I mean, if you talking to him is linked to those two mammals' deaths, they clearly aren't drug dealers. Maybe you should go to the police."

Of course, Nick already knew most of what there was to know, but maybe the kid had given more
informations, things that he hadn't discovered. And he wasn't about about to reveal that he was implicated in those sheeps deaths, or with her brother on any way.

"Frank, stop playing dumb, I know you work with them. Mike told me."

Now that sucked. Of course, the moment he had learnt her brother was working with Skye's group, he had assumed she could know. But 'could' and 'did' were two different things entirely.

And for how long did she knew that ? Since before or after she tried to make a move on him ?

But then, something else bothered him. He supposed he knew what she wanted of him and why she called him. It was obvious she trusted him enough to talk to him even though he was working with this kind of mammals. But if he made a show of how willing he was to help her with whatever she was about to ask, it could come back to the ears of the foxes and totally screw him over. Depending on what that 'thing' was, of course. And he couldn't have that. He had a job to do, and he couldn't afford to have this kind of liability either in his way or in his back.

She now knew what type of foxes he was working with, so he could use that. Fear could work as much as trust.

He put on his most blank and menacing mask.

"You know that technically, the first thing I should do now is take you at gunpoint and bring you to them ? Or kill you so you won't talk. It would be the safest course of action."

He made a step forward.

"It would also spare you the risk of being questioned on what you know of them. All in all, a good bargain for everyone involved."

Even though he could see she was scared, she didn't move an inch.

"You can't do that Frank. You won't hurt me."

She was either brave or stupid, not that it mattered at this point. He had to significantly push himself for what he did next. Of course, he could never kill her, let alone hurt her. But he had to scare her, either enough so she wouldn't talk about this, or enough so she would really say what she wanted. He swiftly put a paw to her throat and held her against the wall.

"Why wouldn't I ?"

"You're a good mammal !"

"Am I ? I beat up two mammals and for all you know, I participated in their deaths. You knew all this before I came here, you faked asking if I was a cop, you tested me to see if I knew your brother. You better tell me right now what you're after if you don't want to end up on the news like them tomorrow." He had growl that last part, squeezing her neck slightly more. Perfect acting, he couldn't wait to get his Academy Award. Her paws had reached for his arm but she couldn't get him to let loose.

"I need your help !" Tears had started showing at the corner of her eyes.

He unsqueezed but still held her. "What for ?"

"Michael ! I need you to help Michael."
While he was getting the act rolling, his brain was still fired up analysing the position he was in. This sucked. This was beyond liability. She could denounce him to the police and they could arrest the whole cell because of it, blowing all the infiltrating he had done until now. He knew exactly what Savage would have done in his shoes, but the simple idea was nauseating.

"And why the fuck would I do that ?"

"He's the only family I have left. He's young and stupid but he can still turn his life around !"

"What's in it for me ?" He had already taken the decision a while ago. Hell, he wanted to get each and everyone of those foxes out of this mess before it blew up in their faces. But he had to sell it.

"I don't- I don't know."

She was slumping and he let her go.

"There is nothing in it for you. Oh gods, I'm so stupid." She was crying now and Nick had to turn around. He could put on any mask, but tears, they always cracked it. "I thought you were one of the good guys, I thought we were friends, but you're just an asshole like any other."

He went to the window and looked at the street. "I can help your brother but not for free."

"I have nothing. I have no money, no possessions." She retorted.

"I'll keep an eye on him, keep him out of trouble. It's all I can do. In return, you will owe me one favor." He turned to her and squat down to level with her gaze. "Talk to anyone about this, or about me and you won't be the one to paying for it. Am I making myself clear ?"

"You're a monster." Her expression, her stare, it teared him, but nothing showed.

He extended a paw. "Yes. Do we have a deal ?"

She reluctantly shook it. "We have a deal."

He had put back on his jacket and left her building. Walking on the street, he felt like shit. She had perfectly understood him, and it was rare for someone like him to meet someone that trusted him, well that believed he wasn't one of the conniving and scheming foxes. And he had had to destroy this image because it was the safest course of action. It was the safest course of action that didn't involve leaving a corpse behind. This was a small victory, the cell was safe, she would keep her mouth shut and he would still be able to do his job. But to do so, he had destroyed a friendship, a thing that was hard to come by in the situation he was in. He decided to redirect his anger toward his goal. Lycus. He would find him and make him pay. This was getting more and more personal the longer he worked this case. He didn't know how all this would end, but he doubted it would be in a good way.

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Tuesday the 12th of march 2019

To say this task was tedious was an understatement. It was straight up boring. And what's more, she was performing it alone that morning because Blackfur had disappeared in the middle of the night and Wolford had gone to look for her around 10 AM. He had said he would come back at the end of his lunch break and stay in late to make up for it.
This morning when she had woken up, all she had found in her roommate stead was a note saying she was sorry but wouldn't be able to accompany her that morning and that she would have to call Wolford.

Indeed, she did and Wolford didn't seem so surprised by the fact that Blackfur had called in sick. He looked worried when he picked her up however and the bunny wasn't able to make him spill the beans on the panda's whereabouts, even if it was obvious he knew something.

Judy was pushing herself toward the front desk. Usually, she would eat at the cafeteria, but this time around, she didn't feel like mingling with the other officers, and for the last week, there had been no-one here anyway. Her and her two partners were the only ones that had the luxury to spend their meal in good conditions. Aside from Clawhauser who was almost continuously working the front desk.

So instead, she went to the chubb cat who had opened his lunchbox and had turned his head when he had heard her come.

"Hey Judy, what are you doing here ?"

"Well, since my partners are nowhere to be found, I suppose I could spend my lunch break with you here, if you don't mind."

The cheetah rolled his chair aside to leave her some space. "Of course."

Just as he had done so, they heard the chief's quick and heavy pace coming from behind them, from the staircase. They turned around to see a buffalo, head deep inside a file while making his way toward the exit.

"Chief." Saluted the bunny, quickly imitated by the cat. The chief answered it by a salute of his own. "That's strange." She said, once he was out.

"What's strange ?"

"Maybe you didn't see it, but he winced when saluting, and there was some cloth protruding from his sleeve."

"Huh ?"

"I think the chief has injured himself. I'd be curious to know how this could happen, seeing how careful he always is."

She turned to the pudgy feline who seemed to be highly focused on his meal, but hadn't dug in yet. "Would you happen to know something about this ?"

If his face had heated up before, it was now bright red under his fur. He forked a large portion of the pasta with salmon he had prepared for lunch and almost choked on it while trying to regain composure. As much as he could be professional, the cat couldn't summon a poker face to save his life.

"You know something, Ben."

He shook his head with absolutely no conviction whatsoever.

"Tell me." She poked his shoulder. "Tell me." She poked again and his head seemed to plunged into the depth of his neck. "Come ooooon. I'm bored out of my mind. Gimme some of those
precinct's gossip."

He mumbled something she couldn't make out.

"What ?"

"It's embarrassing."

"That's what gossip are! Unless... Unless you are involved!" She bounced on her sit and took a forkful of her salad. "Obviously you didn't hurt the chief, but you know how he did because you witnessed it first hand..." She glanced at him, and if he tried to go redder, she was certain he would explode. "Tell meee." She poked him again.

"Alright, alright, but don't tell it to anyone. I think I'd die of embarrassment."

She nodded frantically. This was going to be good.

"A few days ago, I stayed after my shift to watch a bit more of this camera footage in your office. Well I fell asleep."

The bunny forked another bite of her salad in her mouth.

"While I was asleep, something poked my belly and... I won't go into details with the what and why, but the dream I was making was most pleasant, and I thought I was still in it when I hugged what was poking me."

Judy had completely stopped chewing.

"So yeah, I hugged the chief's arm." His gaze was fixated on the floor.

He hugged the chief arm? Wait, the chief poked his belly? What was going on in this precinct? First the city had gone crazy, now this?

"Is it how- ?"

"No. When I got awake I saw it was him and I almost fell from the chair. I grabbed his arm to not fall and-" He got he claws out to mime the scene. "Next thing I knew, I was flat on his abs. Let me tell you, he is ripped." Just as he had said that, he hid his face in his paws. "Oh gods, I said that. I said that. Don't tell him I said that."

Judy was torn between the fact that he had hurt the chief and the thing he had just said. She chose to stay on topic to spare the cheetah. "So his arm? You grabbed it all claws out?"

"Yep. I stitched him up afterwards, I hope he's not upset with me."

"Stitches? It was that bad?"

"Those are cheetah's claws, Judy. It could have been way worse, I checked but I didn't cut any ligament."

She finished her meal in silence. A lot of stuff seemed to happen out of her working hours. This morning, Blackfur disappearing, a few days ago the chief was hurt. The city was walking on its head, and seemed to be affecting everything and everyone.

"Blackfur texted me that she was sick this morning. Do you know what's happened to her? She didn't give me any explanation."
Judy didn't know what to answer, but in all likelihood, whatever was happening, he would come to know about it.

"I really don't. She had disappeared from the flat when I woke up this morning."

"Really ?"

"Wolford didn't seem so surprised. Worried, but not surprised. They're really good friends, so he must have an idea of what's happening. I just hope she doesn't get in trouble with the chief."

The cheetah looked around to see if no mammal was here to hear about this. "I don't think she will. When she was transferred here, the chief told me to accept each of her sick leave as she was giving them and not ask for justification. That's strange, but either it's something really confidential, or really personal."

Judy didn't know what to answer. She always felt like a certain level of mystery cloaked the panda. Despite her good and kind nature, she always seemed guarded. It was only a feeling until now, but this new bit of information reinforced this impression.

In any case, she didn't want to speculate, whatever was happening, she wouldn't know about it until it was resolved, or at least until the panda came back that evening. Her lunch break was nearly over anyway so she left her friend at his desk and went back to the tedious, boring, long and mind-drowsing task of watching camera records.

... 

The moment Judy had called him and asked him to come pick her up, the wolf knew something was either really wrong, or really right. And even though he was optimistic to a fault, this time, the feeling that things weren't right wouldn't part with him. He had driven the bunny to the precinct in complete silence, avoiding her mostly rhetorical questions. His head wasn't in his work either afterwards. Maybe it was because he was nosy, maybe it was because she was his friend, but something pulled at him, telling there was nowhere else he should be but at her side right now.

Call it instinct, call it paranoia, call it whatever you like, but this feeling pushed him to discreetly leave the precinct at 10 AM to rush to the hospital. He should have asked to his superior, but forgiveness was easier to come by than authorisation. He too could be a bit sly when putting his mind to it. And then he ran, because he knew that the hospital was close enough that taking a taxi would make no difference except for his credit card. And because he couldn't shake off that grim feeling that something was wrong, and it was the only way his brain had found to get rid of it at the time.

And so, it was a panting wolf that had gotten through the doors of the hospital, not even taking time to say hello to the front desk and going right to the elevator. The ride up gave him time to take a breather and he was back to his normal self as he approached the door of Lauren's room.

He closed his eyes and took a last inspiration, gave a slight knock and opened the door. The first thing that his him was the complete silence. No machine sound, no beeping, no nothing. On the large bed was lying the skinny panda with no breathing mask, eyes closed, peace on her face. Next to her, sitting on a chair, the slumped silhouette of Blackfur, face closed, her face dripping with tears.

Realisation hit like a truck and the wolf stayed frozen at the door. He had guessed what he was about to face the moment he had put the paw on the door handle, the picture had unfolded even before he had looked. But the picture and the truck had collided and now he wished to go back in
time and cancel everything.

The panda looked up at him, her expression blank of everything but pain. Never before had the wolf felt so powerless. But he moved anyway making his way to her and putting a paw on a shoulder that was low enough for him to reach. There was nothing to say. Nothing to ease the pain, no joke could do at that moment.

He had lost track of time, he couldn't say if a few minutes or an hour had passed, but he was giving her all that he could offer. He slightly moved his legs that were beginning to get sore when he heard her mumble something. He didn't dare ask her to repeat and didn't need to because she did so anyway.

"I knew this was coming." Her head that had slumped down when he had put his paw on her shoulder slowly rose up and fixated its gaze on the corpse. "There was no other outcome wasn't there ?" The wolf didn't answer, she wasn't talking to him anyway. "So that's it ? It's over ? I waited all those year for this ? I lost my brother for this ? What a bloody joke."

She stood up and went to the window, repeating that last sentence over and over. "What a bloody joke." Her paw resting on the window frame. "WHAT A BLOODY JOKE !" Her fist met the wall and dented it, bits of concrete falling down. She punched it again with less force, her shoulders shuddering with the sobbing.

"I lost my brother for this. She should have woken up, we should have been a family again. This isn't fair." She turned to the wolf. "This isn't fair, is it ?" She made a step toward him, uselessly wiping her face that was still dripping with tears. "Is it ?"

He opened his arm and made a gesture for her to come to him. She slumped forward in his arms and he had to muster all his strength not to fall back under her weight.

"It's not fair."

"No it's not." He whispered, while trying to console her.

"Why couldn't it be fair ?"

"I don't know."

She was slowly sliding to the floor and the wolf felt now beyond powerless.

"She should have woken up."

"I know."

"It's not fair."

"I know."

"Why did she have to d-."

"You don't have to say it." He said, giving her a squeeze.

"-did she have to die ?"

The wolf answered nothing.

"My daughter's dead." She was now completely slumped on the floor, her head in the wolf's lap
who had absolutely no idea what he could do for her beside being here.

"I'm so sorry Wight."

She gave a sobbing sigh. "Hope is such a fucked up thing. They called me this morning at like 4AM. Told me this was urgent. The machine were beeping like crazy and that's all they told me. At the time they weren't certain what it was. Her organs were failing hard. She had been deteriorating for the past months, this was the last dive." As she was explaining all this, her tears were slowly drying up, as if getting into this explanation was pulling the last strings of emotions that were inside her. "You know, until the end I hoped she would wake up. Just for a split-second, so I could say her I loved her, so I could say goodbye. She just went like she lived for the last nineteen years. In her sleep."

Once again he lost track of time, staying like this while the panda stared into empty space. When she straightened up, he couldn't feel his legs, and she actually had to help him get up.

"Sorry about this Wolford."

"Don't be sorry. I think you needed a friend."

She didn't let the awkward silence grow. She took out her phone and looked at the time. "It's almost 1PM, you should get back to work."

"Are you sure you don't need me to stay?"

"I need a lot of things, and none of them correlate with what I have to do right now. I'll be okay, mostly, but you should get back to work."

"If you need anything..."

"You will be the first to know. Don't worry, I will probably be unbearably depressed in the next weeks, you will have all the leisure to try and cheer me up then." She gave him a little sad smile, and more than the last three hours, seeing her trying to put and a brave front was the most depressing thing the wolf had seen.

The lupine finally left the premises and went back to the precinct. His mind went back to blank, it couldn't process how all this happened, and even less how the panda could stand up after it. He stopped on the way to buy a hot-dog. When he arrived to the precinct, he simply waved to Judy and went back to the mind-numbing chore.
Part 2, Chapter 24

Part 2 : Lycus Case

Chapter 24 : Closure On This

The first weeks of march 2019

He had spent the entirety of the last weeks working with the foxes, taking crates from point A to point B, buying and selling all sort of products that he'd rather not talk about and was now even more aware of how the cell was finding its funding.

Drugs, and lots of them. It seemed they were working as independent resellers, making the bridge between the different parts of town. And the different mob-bosses that were working its underbellies. It was a good and lucrative but dangerous position to be in. It meant making quite a bit of money, but it also meant that a single wrong move could send the operation spinning out of control, and land them into a world of trouble. They were in the perfect place to betray and sell a whole lot of people to the authority, and a single doubt from those individuals would mean they'd be hunted down.

Also in his mind was his meeting with Scarlet. He felt guilty about it, and no amount of self convincing would get rid of the bitter feeling.

But what bothered him the most right now was the atmosphere among the members of the group. Something was wrong, seriously wrong. There were suspicions, talking among them, he could see it in the edge of his vision, the talking between Skye, Osman and Lucas. Were they talking of him? He had to push away the paranoia induced thought and let nothing show. Frank was a cool-headed grey fox who had seen a lot in his criminal life and was way past the fear of being wrongly accused.

And what's more, now that he kept a closer eye on Michael, he could see how bad the little fox was having it. It was obvious his drug habits were getting worse. Runny nose, constricted pupils, an air of lethargy. He was constantly twitchy. The kid was keeping a good front for his sister, but he was on the brink of breaking and Nick could see it. He could see the moment coming when he would do something stupid and the grey fox was in no position to help him right now.

Aside from that, morale had dipped a bit. A cell had been dismantled, some of its members had been arrested for drug selling charges but it seemed they hadn't betrayed the movement. The authority didn't even seem to suspect they were part of it. He had learnt it via Osman. The ZPD's constant presence in the streets was clearly making things more difficult for the foxes and if they wanted to conduct their operations, they would have to wait for everything to blow over. All in all, it was a slow-period which was putting everymammal on edge.

Tuesday the 12th of march 2019

Wolford had come back and barely said a word to his colleague. It was obvious to the bunny that there was no way he'd say anything about Blackfur and her whereabouts. All she could pull from him was that she was 'doing okay', whatever it could mean.
It was almost the end of the shift and Judy was tired, so tired that she at first didn't believe what she saw on the newsfeed she was consulting on her phone.

She did a double take, followed by a triple take, before turning to Wolford which was bearing a mix of boredom and unease on his face.

"Wolford ?"

"Yeah ?"

"Tell me you're not reading what I think I'm reading." She said, almost shoving her phone in his face.

His expression grew from boredom to puzzled.

"Holy crap !"

"Read it."

"Doug Ramses is about to be freed on parole."

"Good, I'm not going crazy, it's the world that did."

Doug Ramses, Bellwether's accomplice. He had sold everything and everyone to get the minimal amount of time. Everything that he had done, that they had done, when and how. It was obvious he had kept a journal of all the events for this specific purpose. He didn't believe in Bellwether's cause, he was merely on the ride for the money. And so he, or more precisely his lawyer, had negotiated one of the best deals of the century. Less than a year behind bars followed by a release on probation the next month, of which the bunny had totally forgotten about until now.

He'd have to be put on the witness protection program immediately, otherwise he was sure to be the next casualty on Lycus vendetta.

*Or he could be used as bait.*

The bunny mentally fustigated herself for having this thought. They couldn't use a mammal as bait to bring out the mastermind.

"The city is going to go crazy."

"What ?"

"We're releasing one of the main culprit in the Nighthowler's case. You can be sure that one way or another, this will end into some action by this Lycus guy. And whatever this is going to be, the city will go crazy."

The bunny stared at her friend in disbelief. Whatever had happened today, it had put a significant dampener on the wolf's optimistic nature. Of course, she had come to the same conclusion than him, but what she was expecting of him was more along the line of a lighthearted joke or an alleviating remark.

The world truly had gone crazy.

... 

Blackfur had come to the precinct, and accompanied Judy home without a word, and was now
sitting on the armchair. She looked like she had something to say to Judy, but the bunny was reluctant to press her. It was obvious that the day had been hard to her, and so she armed herself with patience, a virtue she didn't possess much of, and waited for the ursine to spill the beans.

"I owe you an explanation." She began. "And I'll probably be all over the place for the next few days, so sorry for that too... Okay here goes."

The panda told the bunny of her daughter, of her brother, how he tried to save her and partly did so. She didn't linger on the details, simply telling her flatly how things unfolded until that day. Judy, who wasn't especially emotional for a bunny, but clearly was compared to the common mammal was already in tears before the end of the story. But though she couldn't dodge the last blow, she at least had been able to steel herself for it. She had gotten up from her wheelchair and used the crutches to approach the bear as she had unfolded her story. She had now a paw on Blackfur's who seemed like she had no tears left to cry.

"So, sorry about me disappearing this morning."

"You don't have to apologize." Sniffled the bunny. "You really don't have any reason to do so. Maybe you should take some leave from work for all this?"

The panda shook her head. "I don't know if it would help. If I end up being a burden for you and Wolford, I'll take some time off, but I really don't feel like being alone right now." She gave a sad chuckle. "Funny how I'm supposed to take care of you and now I feel the role are about to be reversed."

"If I can do anything to help, you let me know alright? I mean it."

The panda let the silence linger a bit before speaking again.

"I've set up the burial to take place next friday, don't take it the wrong way but I'm only inviting Wolford. Beside him there will only be my, well her, family."

Though she wasn't upset about not being invited, the bunny wondered why she would invite Wolford. She hadn't been able to hide her inquisitive expression in time because the panda expanded on her answer. "He knew of her for a few months now. He might need closure on this too. And it's only fair."

How it was only fair, she couldn't really explain but Judy nodded, she seemed to get it.

Friday the 15th of March 2019

He had put on the nicest suit he could find and was now walking in circles in the flat he shared with the two other officers. Wherever he was going, he felt he would intrude. However, she had asked him to come because for whatever reason, she felt his presence was needed.

He looked at the time and saw that it was almost time to go. It was good because the wait was putting him on edge and slowly denting his general optimistic outlook on life. Not that he would be able to use it for the next few hours. He sighed and went to the door. He really didn't need to get down right now, Blackfur had promised she would text him when she would come to get him, but he needed some fresh air, a commodity he couldn't find between four walls.

And so, he left the building, taking in the only slightly polluted air of the street. He hadn't spent all
his life in Zootopia, having arrived here with his family a few years before entering the academy. What he remembered from the city he came from, were grey block of buildings and fits of coughs. Zootopia was more clean that its inhabitants seemed to think.

Anyway, the time for strange reminiscences had come to pass. A black car had made a stop and he recognized Blackfur waving at the window. He made his way to the vehicle and took the only seat available in the large car, the front one.

On the rear sit were two pandas. The first he recognized, but not the second. He extended a paw to introduce himself.

"Augustyn Wolford."

The panda shook it.

"Oscar Blackfur Egeren."

Nick gave an interrogative glance to Wight and she nodded. The wolf took it as a confirmation that it was her husband. After those brief introductions, the mammals fell silent. The driver was taking them to the same cemetery and soon they found themselves behind a hearse. The timing was morbidly impeccable. Behind them were two other black cars. The procession stopped in the little parking lot in front of the cemetery and everyone got out of their cars.

Wolford looked at the few mammals that had come, beside him, all were ursine. He recognized the waiter – Jake, was it? - from the restaurant where he had gone with Wight, as well as major Friedkin. He wondered what she was doing here until it hit him. Wight's brother was named Darren Friedkin Blackfur. He nodded to the instructor and she nodded back, having recognized him. After all, she was the one that had taught him what he had to know in order to become a cop. Salutations and introductions were swapped, and from what the wolf understood, the mammals he did not know were grand-parents. There were so few people, but he understood that Wight wanted all this to remain intimate. The back doors of the hearse were opened. Wight, Oscar, Major Friedkin – the wolf never learnt her first name, that information seemed of the sacred kind - , and Jake went and carried the coffin.

They had chosen the plot next to Wight's brother and put the coffin on planks over the hole. A light breeze blew on the mammal that were gathered around the black wood box. The sun was there, bright, almost burning, no clouds in the sky. It almost made the wolf chuckle how the movies romanticized burials. There was no rain, no sad music, no panning camera. Only a bunch of depressed mammals, a small coffin containing the corpse of an old child who didn't get the opportunity to live, and a deafening silence.

He saw Wight take a few steps and place herself behind the tombstone, taking a paper from her pocket. Even from where he stood, he could see the water stains on it. Obviously writing the eulogy hadn't been a joyful experience.

"Thank you all for coming. I know Lauren would have loved to see us all reunited again, just for her. She was always so joyful, she loved life, and I'm sure she would have become a great panda.

She battled nineteen years to come back to us, but she lost.

But I refuse to focus on that.

Instead, I'd like to remember the wonderful times she brought us.

She was always so energetic and outgoing. She was never one to stay in place. Always running
around, always pestering us to go to the park.

I think it's what I will miss the most, how she always pushed us so she could try new things. She had a hunger for life that so few possess.

I only wish, like I'm sure we all do, that she could have spent more time with us.

Nobody should have to say goodbye to their daughter. No family should bury one of its children.

If there is a place after, I only wish that in the end we all get to be reunited there, and to make up for lost time."

Wolford discreetly wiped the tears from his eyes and saw Friedkin do the same. The grand-parents were openly crying. Wight's husband eyes were overflowing too, but like her, he maintained his composure. The four ursines that had carried the casket lowered it in the ground with ropes. There were easier and more automated ways to do that, but they believed it was something they should do themselves.

As they finished their task, the wolf approached his friend and put a paw on her forearm, looking up at her face. Despite the tears, she had little sad smile, an expression of relief. She glanced at her husband and they both nodded, approaching from the grave.

He saw them reach in their pockets and each of them took a out a simple ring, slowly letting them fall into the hole. The two tinkling that were heard sounded like the knell of a bell. Wight paw reached around the shoulders of her now ex-husband and they hugged right where they stood, while each of the other members of the family threw a handful of dirt on the coffin. The wolf did so in turn. Some of them also placed food offering near the tombstone.

The silence that followed was less uncomfortable than he anticipated. Each mammal was trying to take in the grief that was trying to overtake them.

Finally, the sad mood started receding, and the pandas started mingling. Wight took a few steps toward her friend and led him to the side.

"Thanks for coming."

"You're welcome. Are you- I mean of course you're not, but-"

"I'm okay. Or I will be in a few days."

"Good."

And awkward silence installed itself, and the wolf decided to break it.

"So Oscar is your... Ex-husband ?"

"He is about to be yes."

"Sorry if it's a sensitive topic."

The panda sighed, looking at the grave. "It's not, not really. We had promised that if she ever woke up, we would be there to help her adjust back into society. The ring thing, it was our way to come to term with that."

"I thought you'd be more down than that." He remarked.
"I thought too, but don't worry, I'll probably miserable again in a few minutes." She looked at the tomb. "You know, deep down, I think I'm relieved to finally being able to put all this behind. It's a horrible thing to say, but after nineteen years, it's like being able to breath again."

The wolf patted her arm empathically. "I could never imagine what you're going through, but for whatever it's worth, I don't think it makes you an horrible mammal."

"It's worth a lot coming from my partner. Let's go back to the others, I want to introduce you more properly."

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**Saturday the 16th of March 2019**

The week-end had come quicker than Judy had realised. Despite the boring job and the painful reeducation, the announcement of Doug's release had acted like a whip lash on her slowing motivation. That, and she had found a few pictures in the camera footage that showed mammals corresponding to Racton's description. She had sent some of them to Nick and Jack through the secured mail system the ZIA had put up for them and exchanged informations on the evolution of the cases.

Since Judy, Blackfur, Wolford and Clawhauser were working on the case, they were kept up to speed on Doug's whereabouts in his protection program. They had to be able to communicate with the officers responsible for his protection. Clawhauser had been appointed by the chief as the coordinator between them and those officers.

It was funny to see how a mammal that could be so airheaded at first glance, and who never seemed to take his job too seriously, could be so efficient and organized.

The most bizarre thing was that even when he was working his ass off, he never appeared to break a sweat. As long as the job wasn't physical, of course. Always giggling, humming, bouncing, the cheetah did his job with a perpetual happy streak.

It wasn't a good thing to wish for, but those events would surely trigger some kind of reaction from Lycus, and it was the best opportunity to learn more about him, about the other cells and to finally put him behind bars.

Nick had had nothing much to do beside his usual work. Hired muscle and driver. He had come to the conclusion that the work he had done for Vlad had been a waste of time since he had gotten in contact with the foxes by other means. Having spent more time with them, he had now a pretty good idea of where things stood. Aside for Skye and Lucas, his deduction was that the other foxes were kept in the dark on the big picture, even though he doubted these two knew what his endgame was.

For now, they were keeping the 'activism' down and focusing on the operations that made them money. Meaning drug selling.

Speaking of which, Judy had had the sample Nick had given her analysed. The other two main ingredients were cocaïne and heroin. Strange considering that they had found scopolamine and GHB in the shooter's system. What Nick had bought wasn't the same thing that had been used on the drugged mammals.

Speaking of scopolamine and GHB, the conclusion on why they were added to the Nighthowler was to make the user receptive to hypnotic suggestion, which would explain why they could do a
bit more than being savage mammals. These drugs, like all the ones that could affect one's behavior had other uses. As Jack had informed them, scopolamine could be used in high dosage to strip a mammal from its free will, but was also an ingredient in medication against Pawkinson's disease and gastrointestinal disorders. Obviously, the buck had done his homework.

Nick had observed what kind of drugs were and weren't sold by his fellow vulpines. Heroin, crack and cocaïne, but not the nighthowler stuff, and so he still wondered why Michael had sold him some. Nick knew they distilled some of the plants at the flat, but was pretty certain the final product wasn't made there, since he had delivered some of the half-finished stuff at dead drops scattered all around the city. Those were now discreetly watched by the authorities.

Jack supposed that the foxes were Vlad's resellers in neutral territory, from what he had pieced together. According to him, the mob-bosses were on edge. The high police presence in the street was making their business harder. According to him still, Vlad was about to make a move but the TV execution event had forced him to postpone it, and now he was pissed at Lycus.

Judy had also shared the pictures of the brown wolf and panther, and Nick had recognised the pair of felines as those he had seen. Those that had killed Don and Ron. Jack also had the feeling he had seen them before and said he would give them what he could find in the ZIA's database, if he really did find something.

She had also pictures of the other van buyers. Foxes that she suspected had a hand in the shootings from two months prior. Nick recognised Skye and Osman on a few of them. This was nothing but coincidental evidence, but it was still better than nothing. Coincidence correlating coincidence could end up being a true evidence.

There was one thing that Judy hadn't share with them. Not with anyone in fact. A hunch, something amiss. Bellwether's kidnapping had been almost flawless in its execution. No one had been caught, no one could be identified. At the time, the mammal that had perpetrated the crimes were ghosts, but afterwards things had gotten sloppy, the fact that Nick had been able to enter one of the terrorist's' cell that easily was a proof to her. And the execution of Ron and Don was another.

Making noise, almost getting caught by the cops, it seemed strange for a group that had taken someone from a prison without any suspicions. Then again, the citizens were on edge after the shooting, so it was logical someone could get paranoid and call the cops at the slightest suspicious thing. Claiming the execution was another thing. Why didn't they claim Bellwether's kidnapping before, was that because they wanted it to have a higher impact later?

She couldn't put her finger on it yet, but she was sure things weren't what they seemed.
Part 2, Chapter 25

Part 2 : Lycus Case

Chapter 25 : Letting the Tension Build Up

Saturday the 16th of March 2019

There was something fishy going on. He had started to suspect it the moment received Osman's call. He had given him an address in the outskirt of Sahara Square, near the docks. He had asked for the fox to come as soon as possible for some sort of business that only him could resolve.

An isolated place, far from their base, a mysterious message for a mysterious task. That had woken all the alarms. He scheduled an email with all the info he had been able to gather until now to be sent one hour after the time of the rendez-vous to Judy. If anything happened to him, she should be one of the first ones to now. As he was doing so, he had another inspiration.

"Hello. Jack talking."

"Hello, it's Frank. I think I need some help. The guys have called me to come somewhere for some kind of task, and I'm smelling danger."

"Do you think you've been compromised?"

"I don't know. I think it's possible. And highly probable it will be the case if I don't go."

"Obviously. Give me the address."

Nick sent him a text and heard the sound of a keyboard from the other end of the phone call.

"A warehouse on the outskirt of town. Yeah, that sounds like trouble. Whatever they want you to do, or want to do to you, they don't want to be disturbed. Doesn't seem like a trap to me though."

"Why?"

"If they wanted to trap you and get you to talk, or even do anything to you, it would be more easy to have you coming at the usual place and bring you there themselves. And it would be way more inconspicuous. When are you supposed to be there?"

"In two hours."

"Alright, I'm coming to your flat, I had stuff to give you anyway." And just like that, he hung up.

Half an hour later the bunny knocked on his door and Nick opened the door. He was carrying a case that he opened on the coffee table. Inside of it were four black boxes of different size, he opened the second smaller one. "This is a wire. It could be risky but I think it would be great if you wore it from now on. You can have it sending the data directly to the ZIA or the device of your choice. There is the software on an USB key to set that up. Don't worry, it's child play." Nick was far from a computer illiterate, but not really on the tech side either. "You can have it set on 'record only'. It also works as a Talkie Walkie with this earpiece. I have the same one adjusted to the same frequency." He slid the box toward Nick and opened another. "Two micro-cameras. Expensive
stuff, 52 hours autonomy. It can be used the same as the wire. It would be great if you could set one up in the cell's den."

"There is always someone there with me, they don't trust me enough yet."

"Well, keep one with you. If you ever have the opportunity please do so." He opened the smaller box yet and took out what looked like a small USB stick. "This is a bug. Plug it on any computer with an internet connexion and our tech team will be able to copy every bit of data from said machine. You have two of them but they can be used as often as you want. Of course the operation takes time so depending on how much data there is, it could take up to several hours." He put back the thing in its box and opened the largest one of them.

"Those are GPS trackers. They can last up to a week once they're on." He showed a strip of plastic on it. "Pull that and you can glue it on almost any surface." He closed the box back. "With the Don and Ron thing, they struck a big blow, but I think the next will be even more violent. Doug will be released soon, and I'm sure it's going to be their next target. We can't let that happen. If you have to choose between stopping them from getting Doug or protect your cover, consider that your cover isn't priority. But don't be reckless either. Got it?"

"Got it."

Then the two mammals got out of the building and headed their separate way. Nick had put on the wire, earpiece and put a GPS beacons and a camera in his pocket just in case. He went straight to the cell's den. If he could see them and milk them for information before going it would be great. When he arrived he knocked several times but no one answered and the door was locked. This was unusual, there always was someone there. He had thoroughly searched the place before. Well as thoroughly as he could considering that he was never alone in there. So there were no one in, but it didn't mean they had no way of knowing if people went in and out. He was torn between taking the gamble of picking the lock or getting out. In the end, he decided his cover wasn't worth the risk for now.

Jack had gone to the rendezvous point's vicinity to do a bit of recon. The dock's area had a lot of warehouses, some of them, like the one they had chosen, were abandoned. Next to it, he saw an old car parked and noted the licence plate number. The buck drove around and found a parking lot a mile away where his car wouldn't be too conspicuous. As he made his way back, he received a call from Nick.

"Frank?"

"They're not at the den. They must be at the warehouse."

"I've seen a car parked near it." He described it to the fox.

"That's one of theirs. Have you seen another one?"

"No, but they could have parked anywhere in this area. If they have a lookout, there is no way I can approach the building without getting seen. I'll get back to my car, send you the address of where I parked it and wait for you there."

Nick received the message. With mass transit, he would be on time.

Nick liked to observe the other mammals during those long ZUG rides. There a family of mice were seated in the rodent level, under the seats of the large mammals. He could hear their squeaky chattering, the parents trying to contain the overenthusiasm of their multiple children. To his left, a
couple of kids, one deer, one panther, were playing games on their phones. A buffalo almost bumped into the fox but avoided him at the last second with a polite smile. On the surface, everything seemed normal, but every last mammal was looking around, giving nervous glance to every one that got in and out of the ZUG car.

He had dozed off and almost missed his stop. He easily found the parking lot and knocked on Jack's car window. The bunny unlocked it and Nick got in.

"I've looked around. It's the only car there, so chances are there won't be anyone else."

"Great. Anything else?"

"I won't be far behind, If things get heated I'll pull you out."

"Thanks, I feel safer already." His joke went unanswered and Jack drove him near his destination, parking the car between two warehouses.

"If I talk to you through the earpiece, try to keep a straight face, you don't want to give yourself away."

"Alright. Oh, and keep this for now. I'm sure I won't need them." He gave him the beacon and camera and got out of the car.

Making his way to the warehouse, he felt his heart pounding in his chest. He was going right into the wolf's den.

Well more precisely, fox's den.

But even his inner jokes did nothing to dial down his stress. He was wearing the bulletproof vest, the gun was in its holster under his left arm, the telescopic baton was in another inner pocket. The knuckle duster was in the right pocket of his vest. And finally he had bought a hunting knife, hidden under his trousers left sleeve. It was the first time wearing weapons came as a reassuring thought.

"Jack. It's Frank, do you copy?" He said under his breath as he was a few meters away from the empty car parked near the warehouse.

"I hear you. Do you need something?"

"Nope, just checking if you can hear properly."

"Understood. Now forget you're wearing a wire and focus."

Nick took out his phone and called Osman as it had been planned.

"Hello, Osman Speaking?"

"It's Frank. I'm near the car."

"Don't move, I'm coming to get you." And he hung up.

Nick's stress was reaching its maximum. The orange furred fox appeared at the corner of the building and waved him to come. The usually upbeat fox was trying to hide his sad mood but Nick feigned noticing it.

"Frank, I'm going to approach the building when you'll be inside. Cough if you think the coast is
clear outside." Came jack's voice.

"Hi Os', how are you ?" Asked Nick to his comrade.

"Fine. You ?"

"Great. A paranoid mammal would be less so, being called here in the middle of nowhere for some mysterious task."

The orange-brownish fox shrugged and smiled. "A paranoid mammal would have nothing to worry about."

"A paranoid mammal wouldn't be reassured by that." Said Nick with a joking smile.

Osman answered with a chuckle and opened the door for him. The grey fox got in and coughed. "You could have found a dustier place."

"Copy that. I'm getting closer." Said the voice in Nick's earpiece.

"Sorry. Next time, I'll be sure to pick one with the right amount of mould and humidity."

"So thoughtful of you. So what's this mysterious task that only I can accomplish ?"

"Better show you than tell you." The smile was on Osman's face, but not in his voice. As matter of fact, since he had seen the fox, Nick had felt something was wrong.

His smile was wrong, he was stiff, he had bags under his eyes, and looked on edge. If anything, Nick guessed he wasn't happy about what was happening here.

*Good thing I'm already totally on edge. No risk to flip out.*

They got to a set of stairs leading underground, dimly lit by emergency light. At the end was a door that Osman opened. He let Nick go in front and the grey fox casually put his paw in his pocket, closing it on the knuckle-duster.

As he saw the scene in front of his eyes, it revealed itself to be even worse than anticipated. In the center of the large circle of light shed by a ceiling lamp was a chair. Slumped on the chair was the silhouette of a young fox.

*Don't be dead.*

Nick was walking through thick water, his movement slowed down by the liquid. He didn't notice the three other silhouette outside of the circle of light right away. He was entirely focused on the unconscious light brown fox.

*Don't be dead.*

He was now facing Michael and examined him. The kid had taken a beating but nothing seemed broken. Two claws of his left paw had been torn and blood was still dripping from it. He was breathing slowly, silently whimpering.

*Great. Not dead.*

He casually turned to the other foxes, put on the professional mask and gave a more detailed look to the room. So, in the center was Michael strapped to a chair, Skye was here too, arms crossed, and like the other two, she hadn't moved when Nick had entered. Next to her was Sean, wiping
blood from a pair of plyers with a satisfied expression. Behind them to their left was Lucas, looking really pale, who really didn't seem okay with the situation. Right in front of the chair, outside the circle of light was a camera. It wasn't recording.

"Guys, what the fuck ?" He casually asked.

Skye sighed and took a step forward into the light. Nick new it was coincidental but it gave a dramatic taste to the scene. As she was looking for her words, he observed her. She was sporting the same bag than Osman had under his eyes, and if he had to guess he'd say she had cried. But he also knew her enough to know that she'd never had done so in public. She was holding it together pretty well considering how protective she was of the members of her cell.

"This idiot thought it would be clever to steal some nighthowler, cut it with random stuff and sell it on the street as a new drug to pay for more heroin."

Nick lifted a brow and shrugged. "Junkies will be junkies." If he could play it down, maybe he could prevent this to go where he suspected it would go.

"Junky or not, our rules are the same. You get in our way, you pay the price." She took out a balaclava from her pocket and gave it to Nick who took it. Then Osman took the revolver he was keeping in his belt.

"Get in our way ? He did something stupid one time. How is it so bad ?"

"One time ? He's been doing that for at least a month. It's a miracle the ZPD didn't get wind of it."

"No harm done then."

He could see his tries at playing things down were slowly getting on the arctic fox's nerves. "It's not about harm, it's about principle. We don't betray our own. Now put on the balaclava".

Nick did so, his brain was fired up and looking for a way out of this. He had to find something, and quick. He didn't know if he would be able to shoot a kid in cold blood, and to be honest he really didn't want to find out. He then took the gun and checked it. Only one bullet. If he did try to free the kid and make a run for it, he'd have to take out his own.

"And the camera is there because ?"

"Lycus wants it recorded to be sure it was done. And also because it could be used in another segment on TV to show our resolve."

On this note, the white fox pushed the button and the camera started to record. Nick pointed at the kid's bloody paw. "Was the torture really necessary ?"

"Quicker to get answer that way." Answered Sean. Nick was sure he had heard a touch of satisfaction under his usual monocord tone. Given the glare Skye gave to the larger fox, Nick could guess she didn't condone Sean's overzealous attitude.

Nick looked him dead in the eyes while cocking back the revolver's hammer. With a satisfaction of the same kind, he saw the dark grey fox slightly twitch at the unformulated threat. If anyone else noticed it, they didn't say anything.

Nick took a few steps, placing himself at the side of the young tied up fox. "So this is for the good of our fellow predators ?"
"As I said, it's about principles. Now shoot him and be done with it." Skye said in a tone that she tried to make resolute.

Nick looked at each fox in turn. Sean was hiding his enjoyment, Lucas was trying to look elsewhere, and it was obvious he didn't like what was going on, like Osman who was wearing a pained look.

"And I'm the one doing it because ?"

"Someone has to do it. And I need to know if you really have the guts. If you really are on our side."

*I'm doing this because beside Sean the nutcase, none of you want to do it, and you refuse to give him the satisfaction.*

"You know I didn't come to work for you to be an executioner. But if it's about principles then..." He said, while putting the barrel on the kid's head. As he did so, he observed Skye's reaction. The arctic fox tensed up, her stern expression twitched, her eyes slightly widened and Nick was sure he was detecting a very light tremble.

He let a few seconds pass, deliberately letting the tension build up.

"Shoot him Frank ! Your cover is more important than this junky." Came Jack's voice in his earpiece.

*Shut the fuck up, you lunatic rabbit.*

"Tell me Skye, what is all this operation about ?" Asked Nick, discreetly locking in the hammer block to avoid any accident.

"It's you shoot ing a-"

"Not us here. We all. What we're doing. Us. The other cells. Lycus. What is it all about ?"

The white fox's expression twitched again. "We're showing that we predators won't be stepped on anymore. That we deserve more than what we get."

"So what we're doing is to make the situation better, for all of us. Am I getting it right ?"

"Yes. Now-" Nick took off the gun from Michael's head, as well as his balaclava from his head, storing it in his back pocket. "A better situation, yeah. You know how much life sucks for us foxes. Tell me Skye, how many times did you wish people wouldn't judge you for being a fox ?"

Nick didn't get an answer so he continued. "I'm about ten years older than you are, and I've stopped counting how many times I wasn't even given a single chance to prove myself." He threw the gun back to its owner who barely caught it. "So, Sean, Lucas, Skye, Osman, Lycus, you know what ? I'm going to do something that even you, that claim to be on the predator's corner, won't do. I'm going to give this kid a second chance."

*Try and counter that.*

No one was moving. Sean seemed to be pissed but Nick could see the hint of relief on Osman's, an Lucas' faces.
"You can't do that! Lycus won't-" Protested Skye, who half-heartedly tried to take back control of the situation.

"Then stop me." He was facing them defiantly but none of them moved, though Sean really seemed to want to. He turned to face the camera. "Lycus, you want revenge on the pred-haters. I get that, and I'm with you on this. But protecting our own is more important. As Skye said 'we don't betray our own'. Next time you want me to execute someone, you better ask it yourself and have a good reason for it."

Nick took out his knife and began cutting the ziplocks holding Michael to the chair. "So you want to know if I'm on your side? Yes I am. I'm on the side of every predator including Michael."

He gave little slaps to Michael to wake him up. The kid groaned, opened his eyes and gave frightened glances around him, slowly remembering how he had ended up here.

"You're okay now. No need to talk, I'm getting you out of here." He helped him up, putting an arm under his shoulder. The movement made him whimper.

"I get that you think he's a liability. So from now on, you can consider him under my responsibility. If he fucks up, consider it me fucking up. It's the best I can offer."

Skye nodded in agreement, not knowing what else to do. She was glad Frank had found a way to save Mike. She couldn't show flexibility, but the newcomer could, as he wasn't completely part of the group yet. Nick and the kid made their way back up and out of the building. The grey fox half-expect to be shot in the back.

"Do not do that again." Came a voice in his earpiece.

_Bite me, jackass._

"Now to get a Zuber." Said the grey fox, while faking using the app on his phone, turning it in a way that the kid couldn't see the screen. But he was too busy trying to walk without stumbling. "Great, there is one two minutes away. Let's go to the corner of the block to wait for it."

"Copy that. Your stuff will be in the door compartment, in the back of the car. Try to get it back discreetly. Else, I'll put it in your letterbox tomorrow." Said Jack's voice.

"Thanks." Came Michael's weak voice.

"For saving your life? Don't mention it."

"No really. Thanks."

Nick sighed. "We're not out of the woods yet. They could change their mind and decide we're both liabilities. We're going to have to let dust settle for a bit. In the meantime, you will crash at mine."

A couple of minutes later, Nick and Michael were in the back of the car. Jack was wearing a cap completed with a mask of worry. "Ya shure, ya don't want me to getcha to a hospital." The thick accent was near perfect.

"Nope, to the address I gave you. He's going to be fine."

"If ya say so."

Nick helped the kid walking up the stairs, opened the door of the flat and sat him on the couch. He
then went to the bathroom and got his first aid kit. He also opened the tub's tap.

"Do you think you have anything broken ?"

"I don't think so. Skye punched me a couple of times but most of it is Sean's work."

Nick sighed. "This guy is a sadist. Give me your paw, I need to disinfect. This is going to sting a lot." Nick sprayed some disinfectant on the injury. The kid winced. "If you think you're hurting a lot now, wait until tomorrow." Nick bandaged the paw and put back the things in the bag. "Get up and get naked."

"What ?"

Nick helped him up and almost had to drag him to the bathroom. "We need to reduce hematoma. I don't think I have enough ice packs for your whole body so get naked and get in the tub." The kids hesitated. Nick lifted a brow. "I'll give you some privacy, but if you aren't in the water when I'm back, you're going in with your clothes on." In the meantime, the grey fox went to the kitchen and took all the ice trays in the freezer. He heard the sound of a body getting in the water.

"C-cold." He heard, while making his way back.

"Well, you haven't felt anything yet." He answered while coming in without knocking. He unceremoniously emptied the tray into the tub.

"What the-" Said a Michael in his brief, as he tried to get out of it.

"Stay in." Interject the larger fox while pushing him back in with a paw on his chest.

"It's too cold !" The kid was trying to get rid of Nick's paw.

"Mike, if you don't stop, I'll drown your ass until you stop moving. Stay in." Nick said with a tone of authority he had borrowed to chief Bogo. The kid immediately stopped struggling.

I'm going to use this more often.

"You're my responsibility now. That means you better do what I say. That also means I won't do anything to deliberately hurt you."

"I'm f-freezing."

"Ten minutes. Try to relax." Nick stopped pushing on the kid's chest but left his paw there. The younger fox leaned back, resting his head on the edge of the tub with a whimper. Nick took the opportunity to observe his face. No black eye, but one of his cheek was slightly swollen. He would need an ice pack for that too, but it was less urgent than his body. Like, he had suspected, Nick could see the lumps and blue skin under the fur. Sean had taken his time, and it certainly wasn't pretty to look at.

"It hurts."

"It will hurt more if you get out. five minutes left. Don't move, I'll fetch a towel."

Nick had wrapped the shivering fox in a towel and had almost carried him to the couch. "W-was this r-really necessary ?" He asked while teeth-chattering.

"Cold helps vasoconstriction, limits the inner bleeding and helps clotting."
The kid gave him a puzzled glance. "You're a nurse of something?"

"Nah, I learned that the exact same way you did. Maybe I had the taste to not need being rescued first."

"Sorry." He said, slumping his head.

Nick blinked. "No, I'm sorry. Not a good time to make a joke."

The kid leaned back on the couch. Time past and Nick went to the kitchen to get an ice pack.

"Fuck." Came the small fox's voice in a whisper. Nick that was about to give the ice pack to the other fox put it on the coffee table. "Fuck" Tears had become rolling on the kid's face. Nick sat next to him and put a paw on his shoulder that had begun trembling.

"Okay, c'mere." He said, giving the kid an awkward hug. "You're okay." If he had to be honest, Nick had expected that sooner. The kid had been in a lot of pressure but now that it had gone, the emotion had to flow out. The fear, the guilt, the feeling of rejection, all came crashing on him like a wave. Nick knew he'd need a long time to get over it.

When the young fox stopped sobbing, the ice pack had completely unfrozen and Nick had to get another. He put it on the kid's face and he fell asleep with it on.

Nick had a dark chuckle. It was like seeing a reflection. A young fox trying so hard to belong, getting rejected by those he believed were his friends. Well, Nick hadn't stolen anything from them, but he hadn't been threatened to be killed either, so maybe their situations were a bit different.

He took out his phone and wondered what he could do now.

He wanted to call the kid's sister, but he didn't really know on what terms they were. Maybe he needed a bit of time to find himself before being confronted to her. So, no big sister for now. That meant he would have to take care of the kid for a few days, and he wasn't very keen on letting him alone for long in the flat. During a few seconds, he considered calling Finnick and ask him a favor, but Finnick was a link to Nick Wilde, not a great idea to maintain his cover.

Nick groaned. He had no choice. He went to and dialed the number.

"Hello?"

"Hi Judy." He said as low as he could. "I won't be able to make it this afternoon."

"Really? What's happening?"

"This is a long story."

"Well, I'm not very busy right now."

Nick opened his room door and looked at the couch. He couldn't see the kid, but if he got up, there was no way he wouldn't notice. He went to the other side of the room, as far as he could from the couch but in a way that he could still perfectly see it in the gap between the door and the doorframe. If he spoke low enough, the kid wouldn't hear him.

"You know the foxes in my cell? One of them is a kid, caught up on drugs, that kind of things. Stole stuff to sell it to buy more heroin. Since our little company isn't really big on forgiveness, they wanted to eliminate him, and guess who got short straw?"
"N- Did you-"

"Carrots, it's me we're talking about. I talked our way out of it."

"That's my fox."

"He's at my flat right now. I don't think it's going to be a good idea to leave him alone in the next few days."

"Doesn't he have any family you could send him to?"

"Based on my own experience, I'm not sure he's ready to come back to his family, if he even got one."

"So we're not seeing each other tomorrow."

"Sorry."

"Don't be sorry, you're doing what's right. I'm proud of you."

"Thanks. Is there anything new on your end?"

She made a slight pause. "I don't want to keep you. If he's at yours he could hear you."

"Nah. He's sleeping, and even if he wasn't, I'm talking low enough so he wouldn't hear me."

Judy took an inspiration, thinking about what had happened during those two weeks that they hadn't discussed via e-mail yet.

"Okay, let's begin by the crappy stuff. I don't know if you knew, I didn't, but Blackfur had a daughter."

"Had?"

"Yeah. She fell into a coma years ago, and she died this week. The burial was yesterday."

"Oh fu- crap. That sucks."

"Yeah, it does."

"Can you give her my condolences?"

"I'll do that."

A bit of silence passed, before Judy spoke again. "In other news, stuff happened with Clawhauser."

"What did he do? Beat his record on the number of donuts eaten in less than a minute?"

"No, not this week." She laughed. "He was staying late at the precinct, watching video footage when he fell asleep on the desk."

"And?"

"Well, chief Bogo saw him and since I suppose he was really tired too, he woke him up-"

"That's not so bad."
"By poking his belly."

"The chief did that? Oh my gods. You don't poke a cat's belly by surprise, it's the shortest way to painland."

"Yeah he did. Woke Ben right up, so fast he fell from the chair. But the chief caught him mid fall."

"Wait wait wait. Let me picture that. Ben falling in slow motion while the chief dives to catch him, reaching him at the last moment. An arm under his shoulder, the other around his hip. Rose petals start to fall slowly around them while their faces slowly approach each other..."

"Please don't put those pictures in my head."

"You're no fun carrots."

"I get that a lot." She smiled.

"Do you think he at least got a taste of the Buffalo Butt afterwards?"

"Oh gods, Nick! No! Bad fox!" She snickered. She slowly breathed, ridding herself of the bout of giggles that was rising. "Okay, alright. No, no romantic last second fall breaking. The chief caught him by the arm."

"Less fun."

"Way less fun. Ben was startled so his claws were out."

"Ben hurt the chief?"

"Yep."

"And he wasn't suspended?"

"Nope. He stitched the chief himself and that was it."

"Knowing our feline friend, he's not going to forgive himself that easily. He knows how to stitch a wound?"

"I suspect he knows how to do each and every thing a cop could that doesn't involve physical fitness."

"So, he knows how to stitch a wound, he's the best shot in the precinct-"

"He reorganized record in the few weeks he spent there."

"-Our ultimate cop is a fat cat that can't run. How ironical is that?"

"I'm sure he can run. He's a cheetah so he would be more of a natural sprinter-

"-very dangerous over short distances?"

"You have to get it out of your system, don't you?"

"I don't have a lot of occasions to joke. Besides, you know you love it."

"Yes, I do."
Nick heard a bit of movement coming from the other room. The kid hadn't moved from the couch, but he had to be waking up. Or he was moving in his sleep. In any case, Nick didn't want to risk it.

"I'm going to hang up now. I love you."

"Love you too."

Nick had made some coffee and was now sitting next to the small vulpine on the couch.

"What do I do now?"

Nick chuckled "Are you asking me or asking yourself?"

"Both I guess."

"You have several choices I believe. You could leave our little group, but I think it would mean flee the city, or put yourself under the protection of the police." The kid shook his head. "Yeah, I wouldn't advise it either. If you have any relatives, you could go to them." The kid shook his head again. "No relatives?" The kid looked away.

"It's complicated, isn't it?"

"Yeah."

"How?"

"You wouldn't understand."

Nick smirked. "Do you believe that? Well let's compare then. I quit my home when I was twelve over something really stupid. I spent twenty years leaving on the streets, hustling any mammal I came across for their money worth. My father died of cancer seven years ago and it was the last time I saw my mother. Not that I talked to her that day." He had delivered that in a totally casual tone. He sipped some coffee while observing the small vulpine over the border of the mug. "So, do you think I could understand?"

The kid's shoulders had slumped. "I guess you could."

"You don't have to talk about yourself if you don't want to. But I'm interested into knowing how someone like you ended up in the situation you're in."

The kid sighed and sipped his coffee. By that point, Nick knew he was going to talk. He was desperate for someone to confide in.

"If you want the story since the beginning, it's not that complicated. My mom was a crackhead, Dad was a dealer. The only decent fox in the family was my sister. Well, half-sister from another mother. I don't know what happened to her mom, and I don't think she knows either. Either way, dad was a dealer. He sold pot, but he always tried to keep us away from the stuff. Well he did repeat that we shouldn't touch it, so I guess it counts." He shrugged. "Mom died when I was eleven, but she was never really there, even when she was home, neither was dad, if you see what I mean."

"I guess I do."

"Dad had pretty much given up on us, so it was basically Scarlet and I. We fought a lot, but she tried to keep me on the right path. By that point, I was already doing terrible in school. The five
last year I spent there were more about selling stuff that studying. Fun thing is, it's not why I got
expelled. I fought a guy who had insulted my sister, said she was a whore. Lost that fight by the
way. So I began selling drugs full time. Dad had begun slipping completely, he left one day and we
never saw him again. Then I worked for a lot of people, Scarlet and me drifted apart. She wanted
me to come live with her but I was making enough to get by on my own. Then four months ago, I
met Osman. He talked to me about this group that did all sort of stuff, fought for fox's and pred's
rights. You pretty much know the rest."

"Yeah. Your life sucked kiddo, but I don't really see why I wouldn't have understood. You can't go
back to your sister because you feel like you have to know how to care of yourself."

"Yeah."

"It's not that complicated. You do drugs because of your circumstances."

"Well, I was in rehab once because of my- um- problem. All I got was comments like 'it's no
excuse to do drugs' or 'The law is the law'. The teachers, the counsellors, they were no better. I
mean, I know I shouldn't do drugs, I know it's stupid and wrong. But I just-"

"It's not easy to stop, is it?"

The kid shook his head.

They had spent the night at Nick's. He had let the kid use his bedroom while he slept on the couch.
The main reason why, was because he didn't want the kid to slip away. During the night, an idea
came. A really sly one, but there were chances it would work. And it was for a good cause. He'd
have a couple of phone calls to make to arrange things.

When he finally got to sleep, he was in a better mood. Everything would not go smoothly, but it
would work, he knew it.
"So what do we do today?" It was past noon when the kid had gone out of Nick's room. The older fox had had the time to do most of the preparations for his plan. He had been afraid the kid would wake up before he would be back, but it hadn't been the case. The last thing to do now was to try to not have to put it into play.

"We're chilling here."

"Huh, really?"

"I got some vacation from skye. She gave us the next two weeks."

"Seriously?" The kid's mouth hung slightly open.

"You need a bit of time to process all this. I think she also wants all of us to use this time to think. I think Osman and Lucas were a bit shaken by what happened."

"That's great, I had some stuff to do outside, maybe I could do that real quick and come back later." Yeah, stuff to do. Sure. I'm not stupid kid.

"Why not, but you need to take a second ice bath. I know, it's not fun, but your bruises need it. I'll prepare the tub, can you get me the ice trays?"

"Of course."

A few minutes later, the kid was in the tub, trying to relax while slowly turning into an ice stick.

"So what's this business you need to attend to? Can I help?"

"I d-don't want to bother you. It's like half an hour away. I d-do my thing, I come back."

"It's personal?"

"Yeah."

"Family stuff?"

"Kind of."

"If you need some morale support, I can tag along, it's no bother really."

The kid started to look a bit uncomfortable, aside from the fact that he was naked and freezing his ass in cold water.

"Nah, it's okay, really."

Nick gave him an enigmatic smile before speaking again. "You know, if it's to get to one of you
caches of heroin, I don't think it's a good idea."

The casual front the kid had put up instantly disappeared. "It's not-

Nick lifted a brow. "-Drugs ? How stupid do you think I am ?"

"Yeah. Okay, it's for that. But I need them."

"No one needs drugs. Apart for mammals in hospitals and stuff, but you know what I mean."

The kid stayed silent. "Maybe it's the perfect occasion to try and stop ?"

"It's not that easy you know ? I tried, but I can't."

"I could help you."

"How ? Even if you could, I'm not ready."

"So that's a no ?"

The kid deliberately avoided the question. "Help me out of the tub."

"Two more minutes, kid." Said Nick, pushing him back. A second after he did that, he caught the kids foot.

*Click-clack.*

He rushed to a carton the kid hadn't noticed when he had come into the bathroom. When he saw what Nick was doing he tried to get out of the tub and stop him, but the cold had numbed his body and he wasn't quick enough.

*Click-clack.*

The kid's ankle was now shackled to the cast-iron radiator with a long chain.

"What are you doing ?!"

"I'm getting you off the heroin."

"What ?"

"I'm not letting you leave this flat until you're totally sober."

"What ? You can't do that !"

"I just did, kid."

"Give me the keys !"

"No."

"GIVE ME THE KEYS !"

"Scream all you want, the place is perfectly soundproof." Nick had to keep himself from smirking. This wasn't the time and place, but he couldn't keep from thinking about a lot of jokes and sarcastic remarks he could make right now. Angry mammals had that effect on him.
The kid lunged at him, trying to punch him. Nick simply dodged to the side. "Alright, I'll let you cool down for a bit." He got out of the bathroom and slammed the door shut, taking the chair he had conveniently placed near it and using it to keep it shut. "I'll let you out in an hour, have fun."

Nick put on his headphones and went to his bench press.

... 

He opened the door. The kid was sitting on the tiles, covered in Nick's bathrobe.

"Better ?"

"Fuck you."

"No thanks. Hungry ? I made pasta."

Nick trudged back in the living room. A few seconds later he heard a grumbling kid following him. He served him a large pasta bowl, with tomato sauce and cheese.

None of them had eaten since yesterday and the young vulpine dug in.

"Do you know why real cheese is that expensive ?"

Michael lifted his gaze from his food without stopping eating.

"Most mammal don't think twice about what cheese is made of. Or from where the milk does come from." The older fox continued.

"Huh ?"

Nick snickered. "Cows and goats sell their milk. I find it fun how we don't eat eachother anymore, but have no problem eating stuff that come from each other's body. Well mostly from preys."

"Dude, no."

"Do you think if there was a way to get prey mammal meat without hurting them we'd eat it too ?"

"Are you trying to disgust me from my meal ? Because you won't."

"I'm just asking." He said with a smile in the corner of his mouth.

Monday the 18th of March 2019

"So what's your play here, old fox ?"

"What do you mean, 'what's my play '"

"You here, making me get rid of the stuff, getting me sober. What do you get out of it ?"

"Would you believe me if I said I was doing that for the sake of doing a good deed ?"

"No."

"You're my responsibility. If you screw up again I go down with you. I'm getting you sober for my own sake. The alternative was me putting a bullet in your head. Not a fan of that outcome."

"Me neither."
Nick's phone rang and Nick quit the living room to get to the bedroom.


**Tuesday the 19th of March 2019**

The kid was feverish, his body was shaking heavily under the blankets. Nick had installed him in his own bed, having taken the couch. The chain was long enough for the kid to go anywhere in the flat, but short enough so that he couldn't reach the door. In any case, he was currently in no shape to go out.

"How many times a week did you take this shit."

"Once."

Nick lifted a brow.

"Twice, Sometimes more."

"That's more like it."

He had regular spasms in his whole body, but it were only the first symptoms, and they stayed light for now.

"I tell you where's my stash, you just give me half a dose. We can do this slowly."

Proposed Michael.

"Nope."

"Smiled Nick."

"Fuck you."

"Not doing that either."

"Said the grey fox. "Stop complaining, it's only the first day. Tomorrow will be worse."

"The dark humor was rising, Nick didn't like to see the youngling in this state."

"You're an asshole."

"I get that a lot. I'll fill you a warm bath, it'll help. I hope it won't impede with your hematomas’ healing process."

The shiver faded away slowly as the kid got in the tub. He gave a whimper as his eyes closed, slowly relaxing.


**Wednesday the 20th of March 2019**

"You need to eat."

"I-I'm not hun-hungry."

"You'll need strength for this."

"N-not hungry!"

Nick sat in front of the sick looking fox. He hadn't slept at all that night, and Nick himself had had trouble doing so. He had heard him walk back a forth, talking to himself through the bedroom door.
"Eat !"

"Fuck you ! You're not my dad !"

"If I was your dad, you wouldn't be in this situation to begin with."

"You can talk, you're both criminals, you're no better than he was."

Nick's phone ran. "Eat." He said while leaving the room, phone in hand.

---

Thursday the 21th of March 2019

"Please ! Just a dose. I'll do anything ! Please !"

Nick was holding him as he was trembling. The kid was trying to punch him with no effect. The withdrawal had taken away all his strength. Nick felt really tired too, the kid had spent his night weeping and screaming.

"No."

"Why are you doing this !"

"I'm saving your life."

"You're killing me !"

"Well you were already killing yourself before, What's the difference ?" Nick had screamed. Watching the kid in this state was torture for him, but there was no other solution than waiting for it to end.

The good news was the kid had retreated in a state of half-mutism, only protesting sporadically.

"I'm sorry." Said Nick.

"Fuck you."

"I'm sorry for screaming. I'm sorry that's it's so hard."

The kid didn't answer. He was still shivering, trying to keep his legs from moving. He had puked twice that morning and he felt like it wouldn't be the last time. He couldn't eat anything but Nick made him drink a lot.

"Hey wanna know how I got the idea with the chain."

The kid glared at him.

"Comes from a movie 'Black Snake Moan.' with Samuel Lee Pawson. Great movie. I was going to cuff you directly to the radiator but I wanted you to be able to sleep in a real bed."

"I don't care. Leave me alone."

---

Friday the 22th of March 2019

"Just do it."
"What ?"
"The o-ther solution."

Nick had to think to understand what the kid meant. "You want me to shoot you ?"
"Yes p-lease. It's of no u-use anyway."
"No."
"I'll g-get back to it as s-soon as I'll be out of here !"
"No."

The kid was weeping. "Shoot me. It's t-too hard !"
"I know."
"No you d-don't ! You don't know what you're doing to me ! It's going to k-kill me, I feel it ! Save us both the t-time and kill me already !"

"No."
"You're a sadist like S-Sean !" Shouted the kid, brandishing the paws that where his claws had been ripped out. It was healing alright, but Nick had bandaged it again. "You like l-looking at mammal suffer !"

Nick smacked him across the face, and regretted it instantly. "Sorry." He left the kid alone and went to the bathroom to splash some water on his face.

It was hard on Nick but it was even harder on the kid. He had to keep his cool, but seeing him go through that was making him go mad. Like the young vulpine, he had barely eaten in three days. He cooked some rice and ate it bland, preparing a plate for his guest too.

Saturday the 23th of March 2019

"You d-don't know."

The kid had nothing but bile to puke by now. He was sleeping on and off fifteen minutes at a time and the fever still ran through his body.

"What ?" Said Nick, sitting across the bed facing the kid.

"You don't know how it feels !"

"Withdrawal syndrome ?"

"Yeah."

Nick chuckled. "I have something to show you." He approached the kid and showed him the inside of his left elbow. "Look."

"What am I s-supposed to see ?"

"Here between the hair. You can barely see them."
The kid saw the old needle scars.
"F-fuck you."
"I know exactly what you're going through."
"F-fuck you !"
"You're not the only one whose life sucks. I spent twenty years in the street. Do you believe I didn't do a bunch of really stupid mistakes ?"
"H-how did you get off ?"
Nick gave a dark chuckle. "The same way you did. Less chains and more punches in the snout in the process. Fun times."
The kid didn't answer. He was trying to make the information go through his hazy mind.
"You're doing okay. You're in the peak now. Tomorrow will be easier." He patted the kid's shoulder and went to his room. The kid could hear his voice having a conversation on the phone, but he couldn't make out what was said.

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**Sunday the 24th of March 2019**

"I can't do it."
"You can do it. Any mammal can do it."
"Please ! J-juste one dose."
"You're half-way there. I'm not spoiling that."
The kid was still feverish. He had already taken a bath that day and he was so weak Nick had to carry him from the bedroom to the bathroom.

Nick's phone rang and he got out of the room for a few minutes. The kid could hear his voice but couldn't make out what was said. After he hung up, he got back in the room.

"I have to go deal with stuff outside. Don't move from here, I'll be back in a bit."
"C-could you-"
"I'm not getting your dope."

---

**Monday the 25tf of March 2019**

"I'm such a fuck up."
"No you're not."
"I'm a f-fucking junky and I couldn't even s-stop if my life was on the line. Hell, that's exactly w-what happened."
"And then what ? It's okay to need help."
"You shouldn't waste your t-time with me."
Nick sighed. "What do you do when you can't run?"
"Huh?"
"When you can't run? What do you do?"
"What are y-you talking about?"
"When you can't run, you walk, and when you can't walk, you crawl. And when you can't do that... You find someone to carry you."
"What d-do you mean?"
"I'm carrying you. You needed the help and I thought you deserved it. Now stop spilling nonsense and get sober."

Tuesday the 26th of March 2019
"You're looking better."
"I-I feel a bit better."
"Great. You see, that wasn't so hard."
"F-fuck you." Nick heard a chuckle in the insult.
"Still not doing that."
"You're s-still not funny."
"My humour is too subtle for your junky brain."
The kid chuckled again.
"If this evening you're doing good, maybe we can get rid of the chain."
The kid smiled and looked at his leg.
"No, not a good idea."
"What?"
"I think I'll need it a bit longer."
Nick smiled. He felt like he could unshackle the kid right away.

Wednesday the 27th of March 2019
"I'm going to buy some groceries. Do you want something specific?"
"Could we have chicken burgers?"
The kid was doing a lot better that day.
"I can get that."

"And pizzas?"

"We can't have both."

"For later?"

"I suppose I can buy burgers and some frozen pizza for later."

Nick left the flat. When he came back, the kid had moved from the couch and done a raid on the fridge. The leftover pastas had disappeared.

"Okay, you were really hungry."

"I still have space enough for burgers."

"Teenagers..." Snickered the elder fox.

"Fuck you."

"You should breathe between bites, you know."

"You no' mah' da'. I don' ha' o li'en o you."

"I've heard that one before."

The kid still look tired, and the fever wasn't completely gone but overall he was doing really good.

"But I doubt you would listen to me more if I was your father."

"Tha's true."

"Click-clack"

"Huh?"

"You're clean."

"Are you sure?"

"Okay, you're mostly clean. But I think you can handle it."

The kid looked at his free leg for a few seconds. "Can I go out?"

"As you said, I'm not your dad. You can do what you want."

"Didn't seem like it during those last two weeks."

"Yeah, well, chain or no chain, you weren't free either way."

The kid marked a pause.
"I have something to do outside."

"Then, go do it."

"You're not going to stop me?"

"Let me be clear. If you're going to plug a needle in your vein, don't bother coming back. If you truly have important business outside, just go. If you need me to come with you, just ask."

"I think I need to do that alone."

The kid left a few moments later waving to Nick. The older fox was nervous. He hoped the kid wouldn't immediately fall back into his bad habits. Maybe he should have kept him in a bit longer, just so that the drug would be completely eliminated. He shrugged. If the kid was going to do something stupid, then he would. There weren't really anything he could do about it now. He couldn't keep him chained in his flat for the rest of his life.

... 

"I'm back."

"Great. How was business?"

The younger fox shrugged dismissively. "I need your help. Do you happen to have some lighter fluid?"

"Sure." Nick went to the kitchen and came back with the plastic bottle. "Here you go."

Michael seemed hesitant.

"Alright, let me grab my coat." Smiled Nick.

A few minutes later, they were in a vacant lot. The place had just been demolished and was scheduled to be a construction site soon. The kid had dug a hole and hid it under some weed and branches. There was a bag inside. He kneeled down and opened it, emptying its content. There was a bit of drug, like one dose in a tube. The rest were clean needles and some other medical stuff repurposed for drug use. Nick whistled.

"It's my personal stuff. It was stashed around the city but I don't think I will need it anymore." Explained Mike.

He took the lighter fluid and sprayed it on the stuff. Then lighted a match and threw it on top.

"Sheesh kid. You're not fooling around."

"I don't need it anymore." He said scratching the inside of his left elbow.

Nick put a paw on his shoulder.

"You can be proud of yourself."

---

*Thursday the 28th of March 2019*

"Shit." Nick was looking at his phone.
"What ?" Michael was lying on the couch watching TV with a large bowl of popcorn. A side-effect of getting off the drug was a constant hunger. Nick hoped it would be temporary but it wasn't unusual to ditch an addiction to another.

"Nothing. Just a phone call to make."

Nick went to his room phone in hand. He came out a few minutes later with a vest, his holster and most of the arsenal he wore when working with the gang.

"Is everything alright ?" Asked the kid.

"Fine, don't worry. I just have something to do tonight."

"Do you need help ?"

"Nah. Just someone to see."

"You're always packing all this stuff when you just 'talk' with someone ?"

Nick secured his gun under his shoulder. "What this ? I'm always wearing that when I go out. Even when I'm out with the gang."

"You're a bit paranoid aren't you ?"

"Well, I'm still alive, aren't I ? The keys are on the counter, don't wait for me."

Nick left the building at a quick pace. He was working up the plan for what he was about to do, but he knew he'd have to improvise most of it.
Thursday the 28th of March 2019

He was a few minutes from his destination when he finally notices that he was followed. He made a few turns in random streets but the silhouette behind him was still there. And in the shadows of the evening he couldn't make out who it was. The area where he was in the north of Tundratown was mostly made of large streets and warehouses but fortunately there weren't many people out at this hour.

He used the same tactic than with Osman. He turned at a street corner and waited for his follower to show himself. He heard the quick pace. The guy was an amateur.

To follow someone discreetly one had to approach corners slowly and casually, not in a hurry.

The moment the snout appeared, Nick caught the mammal by the collar and shoved him against the wall, knife under the chin.

"Wow wow wow. Frank it's me."

"Mike ? What the hell are you doing here ?"

"Well you seemed very worried and I thought you could need help so I followed you."

Nick pinched the bridge of his snout. "Right, okay. Of course. Listen kid, I appreciate your concern but I don't want to put you at risk."

The smaller vulpine lifted a brow. "So you ARE doing something dangerous ?"

"Yes. That's what I do for a living. Now please leave."

"But I want to help you !"

"I don't need help for this. Really."

The young fox gave him a look of disbelief. "Really ?"

"Yeah, really."

"So it must not be THAT dangerous, I can come then." The kid had a little smirk.

Foxes. We're all the same, aren't we ?

"No !"

"Frank, I know you made a few phone calls this week while you thought I was too busy being in withdrawal. I don't know to whom, but each time you sounded increasingly worried. Today you storm out, you rush somewhere. Whatever you're going to do, I don't think it's going to be easy. Please let me help you, it's the least I can do."
"I'm not rushing."

"Is it an adult thing to refuse help? Because both Skye my sister do that a lot."

It was Nick's turn to smirk. "You're worried about me?"

"Yeah." That answer wiped Nick's smirk off his snout.

"You're not letting that go, are you?"

"No."

Nick sighed. "Should've let you shackled... Alright. You can help, but you must do exactly as I say alright?"

"Yes sir." The kid saluted.

"Seriously. Lives are at play."

"It's that serious?"

Nick shrugged as an answer.

"What are we doing?"

The older fox began walking again. "I'll tell you what I can. I'd appreciate if you kept your mouth shut about this."

"I'll be as mute as a tomb."

"Interesting choice of words. About ten days ago, someone called me about a problem he had. I've had to call a few of my contact to find what's needed to take care of his problem. We're going to break someone out."

"Out of jail?"

"Nah, worse. Of the paws of some crime-boss' henchmen. Be quiet now, we're there."

From where they were, they could see a medium-sized warehouse. There were two wolves guarding it. Nick whispered. "I'm going to go around to see if there are other guards. You stay here. Don't get seen and don't make a sound." Before the little fox could answer, the grey one had disappeared.

Mike looked at the two wolves. There was a black and a white one. The white on the left was reading a magazine, the other was sleeping standing against the wall.

He squinted his eyes. He had seen them somewhere before. He jumped when Nick reappeared at his side.

"Frank, I almost had a heart attack."

"Would be a shame for someone as young as you. Well... drugs, will do that to you."

"Not funny. I know those guys."

"Oh? From where?" Nick gritted his teeth. He didn't want the kid to know what exactly was going
"I can't remember right now."

"Maybe it will come back later." But Nick really hope he wouldn't. He took out the balaclava he hadn't given back to skye and gave it to the kid while putting on his own.

"Put that on and follow me. From now on you call me Mark and I call you Joe. Do not, in any circumstance call me by my real name. There is a door locked from the inside on the other side of the building and also an open window I can't reach on my own."

They avoided the guards and ended in the back of the building. Nick pointed to the open window and the kid nodded. Nick put himself in position and gave a boost to the shortest vulpine. He sent him high enough that he could reach the windows edge. He heard him left himself on the other side. A few second later, the door was open.

"It was barred from the inside" He whispered. "The lock was opened though."

"Yeah, I know about the lock." Nick winked.

"Figures."

The warehouse was silent. The dust on the floor and shelves were the proof that few mammals got in and out.

"What are-"

"Shush!"

Nick had found tracks in the dust. They went from the front door to a wall. Nick observed it. "Secret passage?" He put his ear against it and listened. No sound. He gave two knocks. It sounded like there was passage on the other side. "So cliché. Look around for some sort of mechanism."

"Got it."

But Nick feared this would only opened with some sort of wireless signal of from the inside. He poked around a bit but couldn't find anything.

"There is something strange here." Came the kid's voice.

Nick approached the place where Michael was standing. On a shelf was an old radio. On some of its keys, the dust had not settled and there were clearly fingerprints. He lifted a brow, three keys had no dust, there had to be some sort of code. Left to right didn't work, neither did right to left. Center, left, right.

Click

The wall rotated with a light woosh. Seems the mechanism was perfectly oiled. It hid a set of stairs going down under the warehouse. They slowly made their way down.

"Frank?"

"Shush."

"Frank, I know where I saw those guys before."
Shit.

"They're Vlad's folks."

"..."

"What are we doing here?"

"We're freeing some mammal."

"But who?"

"Shush. You're free to go if you don't like this."

"I'm staying."

The path took a turn after the stairs and Nick risked an eye. There was a little room with no door. A wolf was sleeping with a few empty beer bottles on the table where his face rested. On the other side of the room was a doorless frame leading to a dimly lit hallway. They'd have to get around the table and the sleeping guard to get through. At that moment, Nick regretted to not have any non-lethal options to take out the guard, instead he chose the riskier one, crossing the room without waking him up. A paw on his gun, he took a few steps in the room. The wolf snorted but didn't wake up. Very slowly and carefully, he reached the second door.

Glancing behind him, he saw the kid following. He arrived at Nick's side not having made a sound. Nick exhaled in relief and continued his way in the hallway he had reached. The walls were a series of heavy metal doors. More than half of them were opened but a few were latched close. In the end of the hallway was another turn to the left. Once again, Nick risked an eye. He saw a guard making his round in a slow step. If Nick could see his face, he would have recognized the typical expression of boredness and tiredness worn by all guards in late night shifts. For now, he had his back turned to him, but the moment he would reach the end of the hallway, he would surely come back. The grey fox thought about waiting to ambush him there but the noise he would do risked waking the other guard up. He looked again, to see if there was something that could help him take him out silently. Nothing, beside a stool next to the wall at the other end of the hallway. That's when Nick had an idea.

He could use the open cells as hiding spots to advance to the end of the hallway in order to ambush the wolf at the end.

"Follow me and don't make a sound." He repeated.

The kid nodded and they launched themselves as silently as they could. Trying to limitate the risk, the older fox hauled them in an open cell at a third of their course, hiding behind each side of the door frame. Suddenly Nick had a strange flashback. He quickly took out both his phones from his pocket and set them in airplane mode. Seeing him, the kid did the same. He silently exhaled again.

The wolf got past their hiding spot. Nick heard him scoff. "Damn dust." The canid said and continued his round in the hallway behind the corner they came from. Nick got out of the cell, followed by the young vulpine, and went to hide himself in an open cell near the wall at the end of the hallway. He took out his telescopic baton.

"You don't move from here until I say so, got it?"
The young fox nodded.

Less than a minute later the wolf was back. Nick could hear his footsteps closing in. After they had stopped and started again, the armed fox got out and silently approached the canid. The moment Nick tried to hit was the same the wolf chose to sneeze. The baton brushed his ears. "What ?" Taken aback, Nick almost stumbled but pulled himself together, swinging the weapon again. Sadly he missed his opposant chin, hitting the brow instead. The canid yipped and fell on his face after a spin, trying to take his gun out of its holster. But it was too late, Nick had jumped on his back and had begun choking him. He could have beaten him unconscious but he didn't want to risk killing the wolf. Choking was still dangerous but he could stop right after his opponent was out of commission.

Finally, the wolf stopped struggling and went limp, immediately Nick lied him on his side and checked his pulse and breath.

"Is he-

"Alive. He's al-

"Darby ?" Came a tireful voice from the corner of the hallway. "I heard noise, are you okay ?"

They wouldn't have time to pull the wolf in a cell. Nick would have to take him out. He reluctantly pulled out his gun and start walking toward the corner.

"Darby ?"

The wolf appeared and his eyes shot wide open. A quarter of second later, Nick saw the telescopic baton he had let go to choke the other wolf fly past his head and hit the newcomer right in the snout. He gave a yelp while putting his paws to his face. Nick immediately sprinted toward the wolf and embedded his fist in his solar plexus, resulting in a really satisfying sound of hurt and exhalation. He stumbled backwards, holding his guts and Nick simply dragged the out of breath canid by the leg. At this moment he was really pleased to have spent so much of his free time on the bench press. He hauled the two wolves in an empty cell and disarmed them.

"Make only one sound and I come back to shoot you both." He then closed the door and latched it. "Nice aim kid."

"Thanks."

Nick looked around. "Do you know how to drive ?"

"No, but it must not be that complicated."

Nick bit his lip. That wasn't going to do. He unlatched one of the closed door and looked inside. A young female deer.

"Who are we looking for ?"

"An otter." He took out his smartphone and took picture, he then gave it to the kid. "I open doors you take photos. Try not to have me in the frame."

"Why ?"

"Evidence."
The next twenty minutes were spent in high stress while Nick opened one cell after the other, comforting its occupant and helping them out.

"Found her." Came the kid's voice.

The female otter was looking tired and underfed but otherwise in good health.

"Are you Diana Otterton ?"

"Yes, who are-"

"Later. We're getting you out."

Quickly, everymammal was in the hallway.

"Alright guys. I'm taking you out of here. I want you keep your mouths closed until we’re out of here. Those that can't walk, you get someone to help you. When I say stop you stop, when I say follow you come. No time for questions. Stay here, I'm going to see if the path is clear."

He quickly headed up and checked, but it seemed the way was still clear.

"Come."

They got up the stairs and he stopped them in the warehouse, making them hide behind crates. He then closed the secret passage.

"Kid, do you have my phone number ?"

"Yeah."

"I'm going to find us a vehicle. Call me immediately if things go south. Here, take my gun, do you know how to use it ?"

"Skye taught me."

"Great. If you're discovered you have to get them out of here and protect them. Can you do that ?"

"I-I'll try."

"Perfect. See you in a bit."

The next few minutes in the warehouse were gut wrenching. Michael was now seeing how risky all this operation was. With Frank around, he felt relatively safe, but being there was completely insane. Though he had never witnessed it, he knew how ended up mammals that crossed Vlad. He had a hard time keeping at bay the shivers in his spine. But he had to look tough. Mammals depended on him and Frank had entrusted him with their safety.

The thirty minutes felt more like hours. He heard Nick coming behind him and gave him back the gun.

"Did you find something ?"

"An old truck. I parked it behind the fences." He got and whispered slightly louder. "Everyone wake up, we're heading out. Do not make a sound."

The silent procession made its way out and the two masked vulpine held up the fence so the
mammals could get under. Nick then opened the truck's back doors and signaled them to get in. Most of them went straight in but some hesitated.

"If you want to leave on your own, you're free, but this will be faster." It finished convincing the ones that were hesitating. He then closed the doors behind them and took the wheel after wiring up the truck. He took out his phone, looked at the kid and shrugged. On high speaker or not, he would hear everything.

"Hello Koslov. I have truckfull of food to deliver."

"Frank ? What is this about food and trucks ?"

"The special delivery your boss asked me about ? I'm doing it now."

"Oh. That delivery. This was a vegan pizza right ?"

"Yeah, well I got mixed up so it will be a dozen pizza with all kinds of toppings."

After a few seconds of silence, Koslov's voice was heard again. "Alright, but I don't know what I will do with all those extra pizzas."

"We'll figure it out."

Nick hung up. He saw the kid giving him a peculiar look. "What's this about pizzas ?"

"I wasn't about to tell I had a truck full of mammals on a phone. It's unprofessional."

"And where are we going ?"

"You'll see for yourself soon enough. Oops almost forgot that." He took out the balaclava and the kid did the same.

... 

As they got past the Big's estate's gates, Nick glanced at the kid. He had recognised the place that everyone in Zootopia knew.

"Frank ? Are you sure about this ?"

"Come on kid. Have a little faith."

He could see the young vulpine was pale. "Did we just take a bunch of Vlad's prisoner to give them to Mr Big ?"

"I'm not giving him anything. I'm trying to not fuck up the subtle balance of power in this city."

"What does that mean ?"

Nick smiled and didn't answer the question. Instead, he spoke under his breath. "Now comes the fun part."

He got out of the truck parked between two expensive cars and the kid followed him. They were now facing Koslov and four other polar bears he didn't know. "Hey Koslov. How is it going ?"

The polar bear looked at his watch. "Considering you had the courtesy to disturb us after dinner, it's going fine."
"Great. You will find miss Otterton among the other mammals. I think they all had a rough time so if you could be kind enough to provide some warmth and food for them, I'm sure they would be grateful."

The polar bear sighed with an annoyed look. "You'll have a great deal of explaining to do." He pointed at the kid. "Package deal?"

"I'll vouch for him."

"Good enough for me."

While the four other ursines helped the now ex-prisoners out, he leaded them in the house.

"You can vouch for people to meet Mr Big?"

Nick frowned. He had forgotten the kid wasn't supposed to know those kinds of things. He really was tired.

"Seems I can. Maybe forget about it?"

They entered a luxurious salon with red curtain and rich wood furnitures. "Please take a seat. Mr Big will be there shortly." And the bear left the room.

Nick slumped back on the couch and felt his eyes slowly closing. "I'm on my last leg." He chuckled.

"Are you seriously going to fall asleep here?"

"It's tempting, but no."

A few seconds later, as Nick was yawning, Koslov came back carrying the mob-boss and put him on a high stool. Nick got up and kissed his hand, imitated but Michael.

"Hello Mr Big, sorry to bother you this late. This is Michael."

"Nice to meet you Michael." Answered the shrew with his usual thick accent.

"Likewise sir."

"So Frank, I heard you've taken care of my little problem?"

"Yes I did."

Koslov cleared his throat. "He'll be here in ten minutes sir."

"Oh? Please be so kind as to bring his wife here."

"As you wish sir."

Koslov left the room and the kid was surprised that the bodyguard would leave alone his boss with two guests.

"While we're alone Frank, I'd like you to tell me what I'm supposed to do with the dozen of ex-prisoners you brought here. May I remind you my organization is not into mammal trafficking?"

"I know that. I simply thought it would be best to let you have the opportunity to choose whether
they'd talk to the police or not. I mean, if they did, it would put Vlad in deep trouble, but I know the mob politics tends to be a tad complicated. I thought that maybe you'd like to keep all this under wrap. What to do with them... Well you could give them back to their families, get a reward, that kind of stuff. I have also a bunch of photos that I'll send you. I'm sure you'll find them interesting"

Nick glanced at Michael. He was puzzled, wondering how this grey fox, newcomer in this city, could talk to this boss like their were acquaintances.

"We'll figure something out."

A few minutes later, Mrs Otterton entered the salon. She was still wearing a tired look, but looked better than a few minutes ago.

"Hello Mr Big."

"Hello my dear. Please have a seat. Your husband will be there shortly." She did and soon after snacks and drinks were served.

"Please help yourselves to the plate."

The female otter looked at the two foxes with a look of interest. "You were the ones that got us out, weren't you?"

"Yep, that's us. Saviors of the weak, protector of widows and orphans." Said Nick with a smirk before sipping his coffee.

"Thank you."

Nick shrugged, dismissing the praise. Though he had done it because it was the right thing to do, Frank had done so because it was business.

Only a minute later, the doors opened again and an otter, escorted by two polar bears went in. He glanced at the shrew who nodded and Mr Otterton ran to his wife and hugged her. Nick almost wanted to imitate Clawhauser's trademark 'DAAAAAWWWW'. It was funny how things had mirrored themselves those past two weeks.

"Honey, are you alright? I was so worried!"

Mr Big cleared his throat and the two interlocked otters slowly moved apart, still holding their paws.

"Mr Otterton, I would like you to explain to me why you didn't tell me your wife had been taken."

Nor Nick, nor Michael missed the threatening undertone in the crime-boss' voice. The mammal present could hear the otter swallow before he began speaking.

"First they told me they'd kill her if I asked for any sort of help. The price they asked for her release was a bagful of Nighthowler bulbs. So I gave it to them."

"And then?"

"They didn't give her back. And they had the proof I had done business with them, so they threatened to tell you if I didn't give them more."

The otter seemed really nervous and Nick couldn't blame him, but despite his shaking paws, he didn't stutter and kept an even tone.
"And at that moment, you didn't think it was a good idea to warn me?"

The otter's shoulder slumped. "I was afraid for her."

Nick heard the kid whisper. "This guy was on the news, one of the missing mammals of a while back. He's just a gardener, why does Mr Big make all this sound like a big deal."

"It's a gardener working for a crime boss. A guy who knows his plants. Do I need to draw a picture of what his real job is?" Whispered back Nick with humor.

"Oh. Got it."

The otter continued. "I'm sorry for what I did, but talking about it to you could have put my wife at risk."

Silence fell on the room. Tension rose and Nick could see the cogs turn in the small shrew's head.

"Your put me in a difficult position Emmitt. On one paw, I should punish you for betraying the family, but on the other, I can't blame you for trying to protect your own."

Nick wanted to add that not many people knew about it and it could stay hidden, but it wasn't about reputation. I was about principles, the things that replaced ethics in that line of work. Nick decided to do what he did best, play around with the rules. It worked with the law, and it worked with the unspoken rules of the underworld.

"Mr Big, if I may?" Asked Nick.

"Yes?"

"You won't like what I will say, but I think in this case, Mr Otterton technically didn't betray you." The shrew gave him an interested look, encouraging him to go on.

"He's under your protection is he not?" The crime boss nodded. "If his wife did get kidnapped, does that not mean you failed to hold your part of the bargain?". 

Nick looked at all mammals present. All of them, apart from Mr Big were looking at him with wide eyes, most of them thinking he was about to be iced. The shrew had a slight ominous grin.

"In that case, there is no betrayal. You broke the contract first, he could act as he pleased."

Michael tried to scoot discreetly away from the older fox, as if he feared thunder would strike him down and he didn't want to be caught in the blast. The two otters looked alternatively to Nick and to the shrew.

Mr Big leaned his head back and laughed. "Frank, my boy. You're as devious as always. You're proposing to put the blame on me to save this otter?"

Nick nodded.

"That's good. That's very good." He turned to the couple. "Do you find this acceptable?"

They looked at each other with a puzzled look. "Yes sir, of course."

"Would you accept my protection and partnership again?"

"Maybe we could revise the condition of our partnership?" Asked Mrs Otterton with all the
diplomacy she could.

"Honey!" Protested the male otter.

"Dear, I'm the one that does the accounting. I think we deserve a little more than we get." She turned back to the shrew with a little hopeful smile.

"Ha! Your wife knows how to conduct business, Emmitt. I think we can manage something. Koslov, have them escorted home, we'll talk business later. I will have you called next week." And with that he let the otters go.

There was now only Koslov, Mr Big, Nick and Michael in the room. The little vulpine was still wondering what game Frank was playing and how he could talk to the crime-boss like that.

"So Frank, I'd like to know. How did you do it? How did you discover where was his wife? And how did you get her and the other prisoners out?"

Nick gave the kid a glance. There were parts of that story he couldn't talk about in front of him. "Well, right after you called me last week, I knew that Otterton wouldn't betray you for money. He does the job he does, but he's an honest mammal. It's written all over his face. Let's just say I have some... Contacts that could tip me off on some other crime-boss' activities in this city." Of course, Nick was talking about Jack. It was the bunny who had given him the tip on the kidnapped otter. And that was him that had later given Nick the place where she was held prisoner. "After that, all I had to do was go where my contact had directed me, and get her out. Along with the other prisoners."

"You make it sound like it was easy."

"Because it was a bit easy. And I had backup." He said pointing his thumb to the kid. The young fox felt a bit proud at this but tried to hide it and play it cool.

The shrew scratched his chin. "I think I can consider what you owe me paid. You helped a lot today. You too kid, I won't forget it."

"By the way, I thought that you could question, gently, the mammals I brought you. Maybe they saw things that you could use at the hands of their captors. Consider it a little bonus."

The shrew smiled. All in all, Nick had resolved his problem, and given him a lot of ammo against Vlad. For too long had the wolf given him trouble, stepping out of his territory, trying to take control of his, little by little. But not yet. He knew that Nick and the ZPD had stuff to resolve with Lycus before making his move. And having this threat taken care of was necessary too. But contrary to the ZPD, he knew how to do his business discreetly. If he played his cards right, aside from the underworld, no one would learn of it before a long time.

"Do you need Manchas to get you home?"

"Yes please. I can barely stand."

... 

Manchas had driven them home and acted as he didn't recognize Nick. Maybe he really didn't, but it made no difference. The two foxes were now in Nick’s living room and the older fox had such a yawn that his jaw almost dislocated.

"Frank?"
"Yeah ?"

"I was wondering. Since this Otterton guy was providing Nighthowler to Vlad, and since Vlad is one of our main source of plants, did we just... Uhm, how to say that..."

"Did we just screw ourselves over ?"

"Yeah."

Nick scratched his head. "I know that this whole Otterton situation began less than two months ago. And since the first attack happened since longer than that, I suppose Vlad has other means to acquire those plants. But yes, technically, we just screwed ourselves over a bit."

The kid slumped on the couch. "We're fucked."

Nick shrugged. "Not if our friends never learn of our implication. If you're scared you could sell me to them. You'd secure your place in our little group and be sure to not suffer from the consequences." He said with his signature smirk.

"Don't even joke about this. I can't do that."

"Then let's forget about it. Nothing we can do. Now if you don't mind, I'm going to sleep for a million year."
Friday the 29th of march 2019

Nick slowly rose from his slumber with only one goal. A warm large mug of coffee. He half-crawled to the kitchen and noticed that all the mugs were dirty. With a groan, he rinsed one of them and glanced to the kid slumped on the couch. Full of consideration for his temporary flatmate, he rinsed a second one, turned on the coffee machine and left to take a shower while the kitchen appliance was making its thing. Five minutes later, he was back in the kitchen pouring himself a mug. The kid had found its way to the kitchen's counter and his head was resting on it.

"Morning."

Nick looked at his phone. "Afternoon. Coffee?"

"Yes please."

Three mugs later, they were operational enough to walk. It was a good thing because Nick had some plans for the day.

"Kid, we're going out."

"Where?"

"Out."

"Couldn't you be more precise?"

"I could." The trademark grin was in place.

The kid gave him an annoyed glare. Younger mammal were so easy to annoy.

A few minutes later, they were out of the ZUG and Nick led them in a mall. "You're taking me shopping?"

"Yup."

"I'm not your girlfriend, you sick old fox."

Nick chuckled. "You've spent two weeks in those clothes, and even though you took a couple of showers, you need new ones. I know you kept stuff at the 'den' but I don't you feel like getting them right now. And neither do you, am I wrong?"

The kid stared at the floor, embarrassed.

"Then I think you'll need some stuff. Clothes, and a toothbrush, mainly."

"Frank, I don't have any money."

"Consider it a loan. Long term, zero interest."
The first he bought was sport bag. Then a few t-shirts, a couple of trousers and a jacket. Regular stuff. Nick tested the water with the hawaiian shirts but the kid didn't seem fond of them. Teenagers had no taste. They stopped to eat at a diner and Nick was impressed to see the younger fox could eat half his weight in burgers and still walk afterwards. The only two other mammals he knew that could accomplish this feat were Finnick and Clawhauser. In the cheetah's case it was particularly impressive. And disturbing.

"Where are we going now ?"

"See a friend I want you to meet."

The kid gave him a puzzled look.

"I'm sure you'll get along well."

A few minute later Nick, was standing in front of a door and knocked. He heard the rustling on the other side and it opened wide, showing Scarlet with a pissed expression.

"What do you want ?"

He simply answered with his trademark grin, showing the kid with a thumb.

There were a few seconds of fleeting silence while the two foxes were taking in what was happening.

"Mike !" Before the smaller vulpine could move she had pulled him in a hug. "It's been so long, you've grown up so much."

Nick had casually leaned against the wall, grin still perfectly in place. She ended letting her brother go. She turned to Nick. "You- You brought him back, you-"

He stopped her. "Maybe we should get out of the hallway ?" He proposed.

She made them come in and soon they were all sitting in the small apartment, the two sibling on the bed and Nick backward on a chair, elbows resting on the chair back.

"Oh, I can't believe you're back Mike. You're back right ? You're staying ?"

"I-I don't know... I- I didn't even know Frank was bringing me here before I saw you." He turned to Nick. "You're an ass."

"You forgot the suffix, kid." He smirked.

"Frank, I need to know, how did you get him out ?"

Nick scratched his chin. "He's not out." The female fox was a bit taken aback.

"What do you mean by out ?" Asked the young fox.

"This is a bit of a story." Said Nick, before telling how Scarlet had called him to ask him to help the kid and to get him out of the cell. He left out the part where he had threatened the both of them. "So yeah. She wanted me to get you out, but ultimately this is your choice. Besides, I don't think they would let you."
"I don't want to be out." At that, Scarlet frowned. "I'm serious! We're trying to get the foxes' voice heard. The predators' voice heard! It's important! I want to help!"

She stared at him for a few seconds, trying to gauge him. "I'd tell you that it's dangerous, but I wouldn't listen to me, would you?" The younger fox shook his head. "I can't say I like the idea of you having this life, I can't see it ending well, but I agree with Lycus' ideas, if not with his methods. Just... Would you try to lay off the drugs? You're going to kill yourself with those."

The kid chuckled. "Actually, second good news, I'm sober. I got off the dope."

"Seriously? How?"

The kid glanced at Nick who shrugged as an answer. "Frank chained me to a cast-iron radiator in his flat for ten days."

Scarlet stood up, bewildered. "He did WHAT!?!" The kid tried to calm her by putting a paw on her arm.

"He took good care of me, I promise. He was right to do that, I would have escaped otherwise."

She scowled at Nick. "I don't like the idea of someone keeping my brother prisoner."

Nick lifted his paw apologetically. "I promise I went easy on the molestations."

At that, she scoffed and the young vulpine snickered.

Okay, that one was pretty dark, even for me.

The female fox looked alternatively at her brother and Nick. "So you got my brother back to me, and you got him off of the drugs? Is there anything else I should know?"

"Well, Frank didn't just get me off the dope. He kind of saved my life."

"Kind of?" She asked, lifting a brow. The young vulpine recounted how he had sold some stuff he wasn't supposed to, leaving out the fact that it was part Nighthowler, and how the group had learned of it and asked Nick to off him. He explained how Nick had talked both their way out of this.

"Wait, hold on. Those guys wanted you dead and you still want to work for them?"

"I betrayed them, they giving me a second chance."

"They tried to kill you! You have to quit this, go to the cops if they won't let you! They could try again!" She had grabbed her brother by the shoulders and was now shaking him.

"Woh, calm down sis! I know it looks bad, but it's not that horrible!"

"Not that horrible? How can you say that! What if you go back and they change their mind! We need to go to the ZPD and find you protection."

Nick sighed. "I can't let you do that Scarlet." She turned to face Frank.

"And why? What if they- They..."

Nick came and put a paw on her shoulder. "They won't. He's my responsibility now. It means that if he screws up, I'll go down with him, so believe me, I won't let him screw up. But it also means
that I won't let anything happen to him that he doesn't deserve."

"That he doesn't deserve? And what makes you think they'll respect that?"

"I got him back to you didn't I? It's more than my part of the deal. Have a little faith."

"Sis, I think you can trust him. I mean, He didn't have to but he saved my life, he got me off the heroine... I trust him."

She looked back and forth again between them, trying to hold back the tears. "You better keep him out of trouble!"

Nick answered with a smile. "Oh, by the way, this brings us to the bad news. He's staying with you."

"I'm what?" Asked the vulpine.

"I don't like the idea of some fourteen years old sleeping in a squat or on my couch. And as you said yourself, I'm not your dad. So I'm leaving you with your sister."

"I'm seventeen! And I don't need to-"

"Mike?" She interrupted. "Could you stay here, please? I mean- I'd feel better if you lived here. For a few months at least."

"You- you want me to live here?" He asked, swallowing hard.

"I've not seen you for two years, all I wanted was for us to be a family. Of course, I want you to be here. I know it's small, and I'll have to buy a duvet and stuff, but if you want to stay here-"

The kid had to hide his tears and hugged his sister. Nick himself held one back, looking away.

... 

"All this had been very moving but I have to go. Stuff to see, people to do. I'm sure you have a lot of things to talk about." He gave a glance to the kid. "And hopefully not about me." The kid nodded, he seemed to have understood not to talk about Mr Big's stuff. He gave them a wave and began to make his way to the door.

"Frank wait!" Said Scarlet as she went after him. He turned around. "Thanks for what you did for us. I still hate the idea of him continuing to work with those guys but still, I owe you." And before he could react she gave him a deep kiss that made him blink few time. "You're not as bad as you want people to believe."

Still in a state of shock, the grey fox left the room and the building, making his way back to his own place.

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**Saturday the 30th of March 2019**

And it was done. They had reviewed all the video footage, taken all the pictures they could of the mammals they suspected to be linked to Lycus. The file was massive. At least twenty-five mammals, almost all foxes aside from the panther, lion and wolf. Mostly young ones too, they had noticed.
Almost none of them were in their database, which meant they hadn't committed any crimes before, or not registered ones at least. The older ones though, she had found a few things.

They had brought it to chief Bogo, but they knew they couldn't send out an APB yet. They had to be sure they could lead them directly to their chief. And if they tried to arrest some of them, it had to look inconspicuous or logical enough so that it would not alarm him and send him into hiding.

Now they had to wait for Nick to dig his way undercover. But for now, Nick gave no news. Technically, they had a meeting scheduled that week-end so they would see each other and debrief him.

It had been four weeks since she had seen him and she was on edge. Having so little news was unusual and she missed him. At first, she was afraid the time they spent apart would put a strain on their feelings but it wasn't the case, at least not on her side.

Now, she was at the new meeting hideout that had been chosen a few weeks prior and was anxiously waiting for him. If not having seen him for that long was so hard for her, she wondered how he was doing, with the pull of the bond. What's more, Blackfur had accompanied her here but hadn't stayed. In her own words, she wasn't in the right state to provide any psychological support or council. It was understandable, the panda was still going through the grieving process, and though it didn't show in her work, she was still emotionally withdrawn.

And so, Judy was waiting alone, pacing back and forth on her crutches. She heard a knock on the door and went to open it after having checked who it was.

"You look gorgeous." Was the first thing he said to her. She looked down on her outfit, she was wearing her eternal jean and pink shirt. Well, the jean was new, she had to buy something a size up.

"Huh, thanks ?" She blushed. He swept her off her feet while entering the flat and closed the door with his foot.

"You're beautiful. You're my cutesy wuvely rabbit !"

Judy giggled as his snout buried itself in her neck. "Nick ! Stop it ! Are you drunk ?"

"Am I not allowed to nuzzle my mate ?" He answered in a mischievous tone. "Or maybe I should wait after the debriefing ?"

"Well, agent Savage isn't here, and neither is Blackfur."

He put his bunny back on the floor and help her pick up her crutches.

"Great !"

"What, you don't like Blackfur ?"

"No, she's nice, but I don't like what her presence entails." He answered as they made their way to the living room. It seemed that place was smaller than the previous one. The couch was a convertible and the only other rooms were the small kitchen and the bathroom. "Oh, and I got the dinner." He said, producing a bag from the gods knew where. Pawsian noodles.

"Are you serious ?"

"I'm wounded Carrots, you know I'm always serious."
"It's not dinner time yet." She said, sitting on the couch.

The fox wiggled his eyebrows. "Maybe we could find something to pass time."

"Good idea, tell me about your month."

"Killjoy. So what did I do those past few days... Oh yes, you know the kid in my group? The one named Michael?"

"You mentioned him."

Nick wondered if he should also mention his sister. He chose to do so, keeping secret was a habit that always came back to bite him in the ass. "Alright, this is going to be a long story." He told her how he had met Scarlet a few weeks prior and how they had become friend and how she had made a move on him.

"Did you take her up on her offer?"

Nick lifted a brow but kept himself from making a snarky remark. "No, I didn't. You're the only female in my life and I like it that way." He gave her a peck on the nose. "Is my cute little bunny jealous?"

She caught him by the collar.

Oh oh, pissed bunny is pissed.

"Yes, I am. You disappear for four weeks and I hear some skank made a move on my fox, I have the right to be jealous." She gave him an angry kiss that left him wanting for more. "You are MY fox."

"Okey dokey." He straightened his clothes, seemed the weeks had been long for her too and the absence of action was making her restless. "But she's not a skank, I mean, she went for me, you must admit she has great taste..."

"Nick." The tone was threatening.

"She's a nice mammal, alright? And she didn't know I was taken."

"She does now?"

"Yes."

"Good."

He hugged her. "Look at you, getting all territorial. I might make a fox out of you."

"Hey, don't mock me, what would you do if this Savage guy made a move on me?"

"I'd call an ambulance for him." He smiled. "But seriously, if some kind of mammal tried to seduce you... Well, yeah, I'd get jealous, but I trust that you'd reject them."

"I'm a little disappointed. The week after we mated, you'd have mauled any mammals that looked at me for too long." She taunted.

"I promise to leave any insistent suitor in a pool of his own blood." He said while showing his fangs in a joking manner.
"Here's my bloodthirsty predator. So about this Skanklet?"

"You're cute when you're jealous." He chuckled, which earned him an elbow to the ribs. He explained that Michael was her brother and that she asked him to protect the kid. He kept for himself how he had handled it. Then he recounted how he had to save him, the basement episode and the kid getting off the drugs.

"You had a lot of patience with him. Why not simply bring him to a rehab center?"

"Those aren't really free. The good ones at least. And my way is quicker if a bit brutal."

"You did that before?"

"Kind of. So while I was keeping the kid at my flat, I received a call from Mr Big and... Judy, are you okay?"

"There is something you're not telling me."

"Huh?"

"That 'Kind of' was terribly evasive."

You know me too well Carrots.

The fox had a deep sigh. "Okay, I'll have to tell you one day or another. You keep that to yourself alright? And especially from my mom." He showed the needle scars he had showed the kid a few days prior.

"Holy cheese and crackers. You did drugs?"

"I spent twenty years in the street Carrots. Of course I did drugs."

"How did you get off?"

"A lot of swearing and punches in the snout from Finnick. He kept me locked up in his Van for two weeks. At least the kid had access to toilets. I think the worst part was cleaning the vehicle afterwards."

"Oh gods."

"Yeah, so the ZPD has an ex-con, ex-junky in its ranks. I'm not proud of that."

She gave him a peck on the cheek. "You really had it rough. You seemed to not have a care in the world when I met you."

He shrugged. "Not showing the world that it gets to you. I like your philosophy better, even if it's inspired by a cheesy song."

"My philosophy is 'make the world a better place', not 'try everything', which could be a very bad advice when you think of it."

"If I sold drugs, I'd use it as my slogan." He said, using his paws to mime a screen.

"Stop joking and continue your story. You were talking about Mr Big?"

"Yep, so Mr Big called me..." He told her about the mammals he saved with Mike's help and how
he had brought them to the crime boss.

"Mr Otterton gave Nighthowler bulbs to this Vlad guy ? I thought there were heavy regulations on the stuff since the Nighthowler case !"

"There are, but may I remind you that our good Emmitt Otterton works with the biggest crime boss in the city ? I wouldn't be surprised if he had some sort of underground greenhouse where he grows all sort of stuff."

Judy wondered if every mammal in this city was corrupted one way or another for a few seconds, but decided that she didn't really want to think about that. "And those mammals, why didn't you take them to the police ?"

"If they go to the police, Vlad has great chances to go down, or at least to get into trouble. If that happens, and someone in the group learns it's my fault, I'm screwed, cover or no cover. Whatever he'll do, I trust Mr Big will be discreet, and I think he's capable to give back those mammals to their families and help those who don't have one. He doesn't deal in mammal trafficking, so worst case scenario, he'll simply set them free. I know it wasn't the perfect solution, but it was the only one I had at the time."

"Hey, I'm not blaming you. It's just... I wish you weren't undercover, I know you'd find better solutions for everyone if you didn't have to hide your identity." She had taken his paws. "So what else ?"

"After that, I brought back the kid to his sister. I couldn't keep him at my place. So basically she said thank you and I left."

"Why does she do those eyes. I can't keep a straight face when she looks at me like that."

"She said 'thank you' and that's it ?"

"Yeah ?"

The bunny was frowning and slowly approaching him. "Are you asking or telling me."

"Telling ?"

"What did she do ?"

"Alright, she kind of... Kissed me."

The frown deepened. "Did you kiss her back ?"

"Wha- No ! Of course not !"

"Did you enjoy it ?"

"I-"

"Did you ?"

"I- I was too shaken to really think about it..."

"Nick ?"

"Okay, it was kind of nice but she's got nothing on you."
Her paws were shaking and she was still approaching him. He wondered if he should scoot away from her, but it probably wasn’t a good idea. Suddenly he was pulled by the collar again.

*Is she going to punch me this time?*

This time, the kiss wasn't just angry, it was passionate. He felt her free paw crawling under his shirt and felt the heat run through his body. "You are MINE! Next time you see this ska-Scarlet, you better remind her you're taken or I'll find her and do it myself."

"Dully noted. Uhm do you mind—"

She pulled away. "Ooops, sorry for that. I guess I do get a little territorial."

"I was going to say, do you mind doing that again later? That was hot."

"Me getting aggressive is hot?" She asked, lifting a brow.

"Very."

"I'll see what I can do." She winked.

"If you need a bit of motivation I can go kiss some female." He joked, which earned him yet another elbowing. "So that's it for my week. What about yours?"

She recounted what she had done, which meant mostly watching camera footage. She described all the mammals that were suspected of participating in the shootings and gave him the corresponding photos in case he would meet them. The rest, they had already discussed on the telephone two weeks prior.

"With that you'll be able to identify the mammals that work for lycus if you see them."

"Yes. I don't know if I'll meet them though. Do you have something more than their pictures? Names, addresses, phone numbers, stuff like that?"

"Not for all of them. We ran those through the database, but almost none of them have ever committed a crime. They're really young too, so that would explain a lot."

"Yeah, I know the ZPD and courts are ordered to be lenient on minors. Once you have a criminal record, you're pretty much screwed, especially if you're a predator and even more if you're a fox. Don't look at me like that, you know it's true. I see some of the older ones have records though. Skye, what did she do... Public disorder and refusal to comply? I'm not really surprised. Was there any details on those charges?"

"No. Not much."

He looked at the files she had compiled. "Of course she would be on Lycus side. See there, she was condemned when Bellwether was mayor. I think it would be interesting to see which judge declared her and the other guilty."

"Wow, wait, what are you getting at?"

"I'm well placed to know there is a certain number of unfairness going on in this city. I wouldn't be surprised if some judge went a bit 'above and beyond' with his job."

"Nick, I know some mammals are unfairly condemned, it happens. But it would be a hell of a coincidence of all those that are working with Lycus and have a record were victims of unfair
"I hear you. Just bear with me for five minutes okay? I spoke with the foxes in my group. I know what happened to those two sheep was horrible, and the shooting thing was... Well, I can't forgive them for what happened to you. But I think they're not bad mammals, they're not unredeemable. Those are mammals that have been trampled, stepped on and that believe the only way they'll get justice is through violence. I'm not saying that all the foxes that have ever been convicted were so unfairly, but I'm wondering if some of them could have been. And I'm sure all of them have been victims of specism at one point, and I'm not talking like the occasional insult, but more like bullying and beatings."

"You know, you almost sound like you are on their side."

"I AM on their side. They're citizens! I know I'm a cop and that they are criminals, but more than jail, they need help. They need a chance to do something else with their lives. I mean, why would I deserve better and not them?"

"They've done worse things than you."

"You don't know everything about my past. For all you know, I've killed some mammal before meeting you." She gave him a look of sarcastic disbelief. "Okay, I didn't, but I'm older than them, I know better. Trust me, if I was their age right now, I would probably be working with Lycus too. Hell, I used to dream that someone would avenge us when I was their age." He made a pause, looking for his words. "What I'm saying is, we shouldn't treat them like terrorists. They screwed up, and big. I used to think they should reap what they sow, but I think, this time the city should do more than just punish criminals."

"It's not our place to say how mammals should be judged. We catch culprits, and the justice system does the rest."

"Force answers force, war breeds war, and death only brings death. To break this vicious circle one must do more than act without any thought or doubt."

"Huh?"

"I read that somewhere. They rebel because the world is against them, because they are criminals, because the world is against them, because... You see where I'm going with this? I'm not saying they should be forgiven, but when we get them, I think we should try and give them a chance to atone in another way than by sending them to rot in prison."

"I don't disagree with you but it's politics. I'm a cop. Last time I meddled with that stuff, I made things worse for everyone."

"I'm not saying you should do-" Nick felt himself heat up. The matter had a tendency to set him off. He raised a finger and put it back down. "Okay, stop. Time out. I think we shouldn't have this discussion right now."

"It's a big debate that involves more than just us."

"Yeah."

"But it's a debate the authorities and politics of this city will have to have, and probably soon. I know I can't really understand what you and the other fox went through, but I agree with you that you're treated like crap and it needs to change."
"You see, you're on our side too." He smiled.

"What mate would I be if I wasn't on your side?" She joked.

"You don't have to be on my side for the sake of it."

"Well, this time, you're right."

"This time? I'll have you know I'm right most of the time."

The bunny gave a light elbowing in her fox's ribs. "Don't get so full of yourself."

"Would YOU rather get full of myself?"

"Oh, by the gods, you're horrible!"

"That wasn't a no..." He sang while nuzzling her neck, slowly getting up to her face. She reached his collar and pulled him back.

"Do you think I've forgotten your little stunt with this vixen?" She said with a scowl. "You'll have to work harder than that if you want a kiss."

"My little stunt? She assaulted my face with her tongue! If you're going to play hard to get, I might as well get my physical affection from her."

"You are MY fox." She pulled him with force toward her. "Mine!" She gave him a burning kiss. "Don't you dare look at someone else."

That was a predatory bunny. Nick could feel a chill running down his spine but he couldn't define if it was fear or arousal.

Ow, tight pants. Both, definitely both.

His paws were running on his mate's body, caressing and squeezing while he nibbled her ears, a thing he had discovered she liked. No, 'like' wasn't the right way to put it. But she certainly did not seem to not like it. "I see you developed cuteness in all the right places..." he said as a clawed paw clasped on her rump.

"I dream about a day when we will have sex and you'll keep this mouth shut."

"But I thought you loved it when I used fangs?" He then whispered. "And I know you love it when I tell you how cute and beautiful you are." His paw slid slowly down from where they were placed.

"All your compliments have ulterior motives." She cooed.

"You know you love those ulterior motives."

"Do I love them? Yes, yes I loo-oh sweet cheese and-"

"You love what sweetheart?" His paw had now completely changed position.

"I l-love you."

He approached his mouth from her ear, whispering. "I knew you couldn't keep the predatory bunny act."
Oh, it's on Slick. It's so on.

She gripped his forearm and pushed away his paw. She then made them roll and land on the floor, bunny on top.

Rrrriip

"Hey my shir-"

A paw clamped his mouth shut. "I think my dream is about to come true." She said while getting rid of her own top. "No talking now." She said while slowly approaching her face from his. "Or I'll show you who the real predator is."

Nick nodded enthusiastically while barely containing a wide grin.

Nick wasn't winded, he was exhausted. But he was also wearing a stupid happy grin. One made out for the other. His bunny was buried in his chest fur and had pulled a blanket over them.

"What the hell was that ?"

"That was me far from my full recovery and wearing a leg brace." She grinned while caressing his fur. Nick didn't know bunnies could purr.

"I picture it : 'Here lies Nick, died of multiple pelvic fractures, made the mistake of believing bunnies were preys.'"

"If that's the price to pay for you to shut up." She said while crawling up to give him a kiss.

"You'd miss me too much."

"I'm sure I'd find another fox with more stamina."

He suddenly grabbed and they rolled again. She was now lying on the floor on her belly, he was above her, snout in her neck, claws running slowly down in her back.

"You're my bunny."

"But am I, though ?" She asked tauntingly, while trying to keep herself from moaning.

The clawed paw went lower.

"Mine."

"You'll have to make me yours." She whispered as the paws were getting more daring.

"Oh ? Should I ?" He whispered before putting his fangs around her neck and continuing his paw's movement. Her body started shivering under her mate's daring caresses.

"Y-yes. Oh, p-please Nick, make me yours."

The spooning was one of Judy's favorite thing in her couple. On a physical affection point of view. Coming second after sex. It was like being sheltered in a loving fur cocoon. She could hear the
purr coming from her sleeping fox's chest. But right now, she had to go to the bathroom. She had to get rid of the paws that clutched her when she tried to move and crawl a bit to get her crutches. When she came back, the fox was comically clapping his jaw to chase the slumber away.

"Hungry ?"

"I could eat a whole bunny."

"You just did that. I was thinking of something more consistent."

"I found you consistant enough." He said, while making his way to her and pinching her waist. It earned him an elbowing.

"Paws away, red devil." She giggled. "You're not having dessert before the main course."

They had huddled themselves in the blanket in front of the TV. One could whatever they wanted about the hideout's comfort, but if it had pawflix, it was as good as any place for them. They were eating their reheated noodles in front of a movie called "Spots Pilgrim VS the World.", that none of them had seen before, and had absolutely no idea of what was happening. Well they did, the story was rather easy to follow, but the pop-culture-reference-filled universe was so whack that they knew they'd need a second viewing to grasp it all.

"This is based on a comic-book." said Judy, phone in hand after the film had ended. "The author is a guy name Brian Lee O'Malley. Look, here is his photo."

"A cat. Explains the whacky stuff, those guys have a really strange imagination."

"That's a bit specist."

"Only if it's wrong. Well, I'm completely getting those. This movie was crazy, though the ending was a bit..."

"Rushed ?"

"Yeah." He kissed his bunny between the ears. "Have I ever told you that you smell good ?"

"Oh, have you ever ?"

"I might eat you."

"You might ?"

"I mean, I was promised dessert."

She put a finger on his nose. "First of all, I didn't promise anything. And seconds, I can't believe you're up for a third round after those two amazing first rounds."

"Only amazing ? I must be getting old."

"Well, I hope this old engine still has a few miles left in it."
Part 2, Chapter 29

Part 2: Lycus Case

Chapter 29: It Could Be a Trap

Friday the 31th of March 2019

It's with a fleeting head that Nick went back to his flat that Sunday. He felt sore, he felt bruised, but most of all, he felt happy. He had to try and hide his grin on the ZUG, because he knew he wouldn't be able to hide his fangs. It was ironically funny, those week ends were supposed to relieve his stress and rest him, it had achieved none of that. Well, at least it had been good stress. Now he needed a shower and good day and night sleep. And food. Something to replace the calories he had spent in the last twenty-four hours.

Monday the 1st of April 2019

"You seem awfully merry." The kid was taking the ZUG with him to a meet-up point Skye had given them that morning.

"Am I? I guess I am." The fleeting-head sensation had followed the vulpine through his sleep, and he was determined to hold on to it as long as he could.

"Interesting week-end?"

"Yes but you're waaaaay too young to hear about that stuff." Answered the grey fox with a smirk. "How about you, how is it to stay with your sister?"

"Cramped, a bit. But we didn't spend a lot of time there. She took me outside, we went to a restaurant and to the park. I don't think she spends a lot of time at her flat."

Nick gave him an interested look so the kid kept talking. "She talked me more about her life. She's a waitress in a bar and she sings there. I think it's cool, she always wanted to be a singer. I think she actually likes what she does, I thought she would want more than just..."

"Just singing in a bar for drunkard's ears?"

"Yeah. Anyway, she told me about her crush on you, even though it was pretty much obvious from the..."

Nick was a bit embarrassed but he didn't let it show. He knew they had flirted and was partly at fault for having responded to her flirt, but aside from the kiss, it wasn't something he thought about much.

"She told me you were taken and I must say, until today and your stupid face, I didn't think it was true."

Nick shrugged, there was really nothing he could do about Scarlet and her crush on him. The most he could do was leave her some space until she got over it.

They finally arrived to the place in the far north-east of Tundratown at the edge of the city. Though it was still technically Tundratown, it wasn't that cold, they were beyond the 'frost-factories', the
places that created the wind and snow for the whole district. Nick wasn't really well versed on how it worked but he knew it had something to do with the hot winds coming up from Sahara square traveling north and keeping the cold wind down under. The whole thing was a scientific marvel and Nick sometimes wondered if the city's money wouldn't be of better use elsewhere. But then again, it was a show of what mammals could achieve when they stood together.

Another text from Skye directed them to a warehouse. Osman greeted them.

"Frank, Mike how are- erm." The fox seemed he couldn't maintain eye contact with any of them. Nick patted his shoulder.

"Seems you two need to talk a bit. I'm going in." And with that, Nick went through the front door.

Osman and Michael were left alone outside, an awkward silence growing. The older fox took an inspiration and closed his eyes before speaking.

"I'm sorry Mike. We've acted like assholes to you."

"Well, I stole and sold stuff. And I kind of put us all in danger, so..."

"Yeah, but you're a kid ! I mean, you're younger, and young foxes do stupid stuff. I mean I would know, I was one."

"I think that to Frank, we all are." Smiled the younger fox.

"Stupid or young ?"

"Both."

To be honest he had few memories from what happened, he remembered that he had been beaten up and restrained by Sean, and that he had answered questions, but that was all. He knew that they were supposed to execute him, but he didn't remember much of them discussing it or of Nick’s arrival.

"Yeah, well, from what it's worth, I'm sorry. I should have stood up for you, I've been an asshole. I'm glad you're back."

Michael had to look away, having people apologize to him and make him feel wanted was a new feeling, and he still had trouble with it. "It's all right. And it got Frank to get me off the dope, so it's more like a win than a lose."

"You're off the- That's great ! How's the paw ?"

Michael looked at the paw where his claws had been torn out. "It's healing, it's not really painful anymore."

"Good. That's good. You should go see Skye, I think she wants to apologize too, she thinks it's all her fault. And to be honest I think it partly is. I mean it's our fault. But she's the boss... And we were all... I can't even understand why we were going to do this. At least Frank stopped us... Lucas is not here but he's sorry too. Steer clear from Sean though. He was really pissed when Frank left with you."

The conversation ended there and they entered, taking him to the same view Nick had faced a few minutes prior.
Nick entered the warehouse, looking around. The inside had been repurposed as a mechanic garage. A half-dozen vans in different states were being repaired, assembled and painted. Mammals, all foxes it seemed, were going around with car parts, trying to figure out what was going where. It was a chaotic mess. He looked around and found Skye and two other foxes he didn't know arguing about something. As he approached he could get bits of the conversation.

"-and she just left, we just can't work like this!"

"It's a good thing she left us her plans and notes but none of us are real mechanics. And we're completely disorganised, we have too much on our plate and our people are just running around not knowing what they're doing!"

"Okay, I get that, I really do. We must set up a meeting and get this show running more properly."

Nick casually approached the mammals with a polite mask on.

"Seems like one of your guys are here. We'll talk about this later, Skye." Said one of them. The other nodded and they both left.

Skye turned around to face Nick. It seemed she had trouble maintaining her composure, probably a side effect of the event from a couple of weeks prior.

"Hi, how are you doing Frank?"

"Great, I'm doing great. How are you?"

"I'm-I... I think I owe you an apology."

Nick lifted a brow, waiting for her to say more.

"I put you in a shitty position and I ask-no, ordered you to do something that was wrong even though that's what our boss had ordered."

Nick scratched his ear.

"Did he personally order it or..?"

The arctic fox sighed. "Kind of. Through mails. I was told that any form of betrayal was to be punished like that. And also to set an example, to record the thing. Oh gods, it's so fucked up, I should have kept this under wraps and talked with Mike myself. I kind of dumped that on you because, well..."

"Because I'm older and therefore more likely to have performed this kind of task before?" Nick showed the corner of a grin.

"Yeah..."

"You would be right." He added a bit of teeth in his grin to add some weight to his lie. The imperceptible shudder she gave showed the punch had landed. "But I'm not doing that anymore. I accept your apology. I take it you're not really used to lead mammals?"

"Not yet."

The grey fox scratched his chin. "Say, Skye, can I ask you a bit of a personal question?"
"I can't promise to give an answer."

"Fair enough. Why do you follow Lycus?"

"Same as the other I suppose. Lycus is the only one to seem to give a damn about us. I'm not talking about predators but us foxes. Even the other predators look down on us. Whatever I tried to do, studies, career... Wherever I went, I was always looked down upon, even when I was the best."

"The best at what?"

"I studied to become a social worker. Well I tried, the merit-based grants always went under my snout even with the best grades. It doesn't take a PhD to understand why." She said, opening her arms, showing herself. "Fox."

"Yeah, we can't very well prove ourselves if no one gives us the chance to do so."

"Exactly. So now, it's going to blow up in their faces."

Nick chuckled. "It's going to be so much fun. Going back to the apology, I think you owe it more to Michael."

"Yeah, I do. Do you think he's going to accept it?"

*He'd be willing to jump off a bridge just for a sense of belonging. Of course he will.*

"Only one way to find out." Nick answered turning around as, right on cue, Michael and Osman entered the premises.

Skye was really nervous and if she was doing a really good job keeping a front up, Nick could see that she was on the verge of cracking. Realizing how big a mistake they made tended to do that to mammals. Osman had gone up to Nick.

"Hey Frank. I want to say I'm sor-"

"Don't apologize to me. It wasn't your choice nor your order. None of you wanted that to happen. Well apart for Sean."

"Yeah. This guy is a complete psycho." Osman whispered.

"On another matter, what's happening here? And how are things going?"

"We're preparing another raid. Skye will want to brief you and Mike later about what it is. And on how things are going... Not that well. Our chief mechanic just quit on us, or more like disappeared."

"No shit? He left?"

"She. A melanistic ocelot. I'm usually not fond of felines but let me tell you this one..." He gave as silent whistle. "Anyway, I know she wasn't very implicated in our project, so I wouldn't be surprised if she just left."

Nick had been able to hide his surprised expression. "How did she call herself?"

"Selina, but everyone called her Sel."
Nick scoffed. This was her. It was one of the three mammals he had asked Finnick to find for him weeks ago. To be honest, Nick had completely forgotten about it, but he knew that if Fin hadn't contacted him about that, it was simply because he had found nothing. If only he could have contacted Selina before, maybe she could have helped him dig around.

"So we can't fix the vans?"

"Well, we can, she left her notes and stuff, but she was also coordinating everything, and since the other leaders can be a bit... Hard to work with, we're having trouble getting back on track. Plus the fact that none of them agree on how to use the notes she left."

"And when are we supposed to finish all this?"

"The end of the week."

"Are you fucking serious? Okay, I'm going to need to talk with Skye." He left Osman in place and went straight to the arctic fox.

She had finished talking with Michael a few seconds ago and had gone back to reviewing notes on a workbench. "Skye?"

"Sorry Frank, I don't really have time right now. This is all falling apart."

"Skye, who leads this thing?"

"Well it mostly leads itself..." She said, while continuing trudging in the piles of paper. "Shit, why isn't any of this labeled?"

"Skye, put this down and breathe for five seconds."

"I can't, I don't have time right now. We've lost our only real mechanic and I have to find a way to do without her. Unless you know someone who can replace her."

Nick's brows furrowed. There was no way he could implicate Finnick in this, but himself could improvise reparations. He had learned countless of things with the fennec, including how to fix a van with nothing more than tape and a bit of ingenuity. Truth was, he could simply do nothing and let this operation sabotage itself, but the beginning of a plan was forming and the best course of action was actually that all this happened. He simply had to check where it was going first.

"All this is an operation to capture this 'Doug' guy, right?"

"You're perceptive."

Jackpot.

"Well, I've missed a lot of things that happened in the city those last few years, so I've tried to do my homework. You know, I think the first thing you should do is to coordinate everyone. Those foxes running around are not doing anything good."

"Well, I'd try, but I'm not a mechanic, and you could think it's not important, but it's the main reason why there is no main leader right now. Every time someone tries to step up, they get shot down on account of not really knowing what they're doing. Which has been true every time."

Nick lifted a brow. "You want a professional mechanic?" The mischievous grin appeared. "I'll give you one."
The fox quickly went away to look around the place. Skye shrugged, she had to find a way to organize this and had no time to lose to run after this old fox.

A few minutes later she heard a voice at her side.

"Hey lil' lady. I' heard ya needed a chief mechanic."

"What ? Yeah, I do but who are- Wait, Frank ? Is that you ?"

"Yup, it's me Frank, chief mechanic a yo'service." The fox had found a green overall and adorned it with black oil stains and a few tools.

"What are you doing ?"

"Well, the others don't know me I suppose, so I'm going to be your head mechanic and do a bit of management."

"Do you have any background as a mechanic ?"

"Maybe I picked up a few things along the way. And I'm older than they are, so there is the 'respect for the elder' factoring in."

"Are you going to use this stupid fake accent as well ?"

"You hurt me Skye, my accent was perfect. But no, I wouldn't be able to keep it up at all time." The fox took a few steps to face the workbench and looked at the pile of paper. Selina had done some good work. It was even more fun when you took into account that what the feline knew of the job was what she too had picked up from Finnick. Her true passion lied elsewhere, but it was no time to reminisce, he had to prove himself. All he had to do was find something he was sure was in this repurposed warehouse. There it was, plans for an old Cervy van from the seventies. One Finnick would have called a shag-mobile. Very similar to the fennec's too.

"That'll do nicely. Skye, tell me this one's engine still need fixing."

"They all do."

"Great. Let's go impress some foxes then."

Skye followed him. "Do you really think you can fix it ? Most of them had to be totally disassembled to clean them up, and had parts that needed changing."

"Don't worry, I know what I'm doing." He lied with a perfect mask of confidence while making his way to the van he had chosen. A large brown fox was trying to fit different pieces on an engine hanged to a pair of chains above the hood, where Nick was sure they weren't supposed to fit.

"Hey champ', what's your name ?"

"William, but they call me Bill." The large fox detailed Nick from head to toe. "You a mechanic ?"

"I like to think so. Can I take a look ?"

"Shure, I been stuck on this engine for two hours naw. I'd 'preciate the help."

Nick looked at the engine and compared it to the mental notes he had from the diagram.

"Ooookay, two things champ. One, your engine is upside down, so you'll have a fun time lowering
it in place. Two, this isn't even the right engine for this van. The one you want is two vans away, over there." He said, pointing to his right.

"You shure ?"

"As sure as my name is Frank. I'll get a few more paws to-"

"Harumph !" the large brown fox had lifted the heavy engine on his shoulder and carried it, switched it with the right engine and came back to hang it on the chains.

"-Or that works too. Give me the wrench over there will you ."

"Shure boss."

Nick went to work on the engine. Good thing most parts had already been cleaned up, since it wasn't the fun part of the job. "So this goes there – this fits... No – What sort of moron cleans a part like that ? - Oh shit, this valve has been put back in by a blind fox..." Grumbling and mumbling, Nick worked the hours away on the engine. He felt a bit like Finnick, cursing like he did when working on his own machine. When he stopped, not only it was in a relative working state, but a small crowd had gathered to look at him work. He casually turned to them while wiping the grease off his paws. "Oh, I didn't know I had an audience !" He said, which was a complete lie. He had been careful to work as loud as he could to attract attention.

One of the foxes that seemed to be a leader stepped in front of the crowd. "I didn't know we had a new mechanic."

"Well, I'm simply part of Skye's team. I never thought my studies in this field would come in handy. I had the understanding that those vans should be repaired by the end of the week ?"

"Yeah, that's the plan."

Nick scratched his chin. "I must say that it's not something I'd be able to do on my own, but if everyone lends a paw, I'm sure we could do it. I mean, from what've counted, we have at least twenty-five pairs of paws, I think it's doable."

"Well, we would all appreciate it if you could explain to us how to fix all this and help us coordinate our efforts."

"I'm not a leader, nor a very good teacher, but I think with the help of my boss," He said by pointing at Skye. "we could put some kind of plan in place."

"If you truly know what you are doing, it's fine by me. I'm Oswald, by the way." He presented himself, extending a paw.

"Frank. My paws are dirty."

"Don't worry, so are mine." The leader answered, shaking Nick's paw.

A few minutes later Nick and Skye were exchanging ideas on the best way to organize the mammals present. Skye interrupted it. "You know, the more I see you talk in public, or work, the more I'm wondering why I'm your chief and not the other way around."

Nick's head shot up, he lifted a brow. "You think I'd be a better leader than you are ?"

"Yeah. I pretty much screwed up with Mike, and was going to have him killed instead of helped.
That wasn't how a leader should act."

"You're young, you have time to learn."

"I shouldn't be learning, I should be leading." She sighed. Obviously, she felt guilty about what happened. It was a good thing, it showed that she cared. Nick put away the pen he was using to write and put his paws on his thighs to straighten up his back.

"Well, you fucked up. It happens. It could have had dire consequences but it didn't. I won't say that you're being too hard on yourself because you aren't. It's a quality in your position. But if you're proposing to step down in my favor, I won't accept."

"I'm not stepping down Frank. I'm simply a bit lost."

"Tell me, when you discovered Mike's deed, when you decided to do what you had to do, what was your first thought ?"

Skye put on a reflective expression. "I... I thought it was wrong, but it was the directive I was given..."

Nick leaned forward. "But your guts told you it wasn't the right solution."

"They did, yes."

"So there you have it. You have good gut-feelings. Essentials to be a good leader." He smiled.

"Don't make fun of me."

"I'm not. You have instinct. Listen to them. Instincts are nothing more than your subconscious trying to tell you how to not fuck up."

Soon, they had given birth to a new pile of papers. Schedules, list of names and chores in priority order. Skye had a knack for organization, more than Nick did in any case.

"I think, we're done here. You really didn't need my help on this, do you do that a lot ?"

Skye looked at the pile of papers. She was making a few adjustment here and there. "I studied management, but I never found any work in the field, being a fox and all. This, I had to do it a bit with our group but not on this scale. But it's really easy, it works like a big logical puzzle."

Nick sat back on his chair. It was kind of depressing to see all those young foxes having completely given up on a normal life because of the specism. But he was past the point where he would consider it an excuse. An explanation sure, but just because one had a bad life, it didn't give them the right to make it rough for others. Rough being an understatement, after all, mammals had died. Still, he couldn't help but feel for all those predators.

Judy was facing her computer, like any other day. Until that point, everything had been usual enough. Waking up, changing from the rigid cast to the articulate one, taking her breakfast, going to the precinct with Blackfur, greeting Clawhauser and Wolford, drinking another decaf and checking her e-mails. Talking with them, she had heard Clawhauser was also the one Bogo had put in charge of supervising the Doug's witness protection program.

And then, she had heard the notification sound on her phone and looked at the text she had just received. A text that read 'Frank is Nick. Meet me at 86 Delta Street in Sahara Square tomorrow at
10PM. No cops.'

She had barely kept herself from gasping and had slowly put down the phone like she was handling an explosive. Now she was staring at her computer screen, her brain fired up at full speed.

She had to go. She simply had to. Whoever knew of Nick's identity could blow up his cover in a heartbeat. She looked at her phone again. Masked number, and if the one that had sent the text was anything else than half a moron, the phone they used was already at the bottom of canal district.

Now she had to seriously consider the fact that it could be a trap. Hell, it was most likely a trap. But Nick's cover, no, Nick's life was at stake, and in her place he would've gone. Not that she needed this kind of motivation to risk her life for her fox.

So she was going, no sense arguing with herself.

Should she warn Nick? No. If she did, he would find her and follow her to the rendezvous point, and he was still a cop. But of course, Judy couldn't go alone, she needed back up. Someone reliable and strong... She could ask Mr Big to send her a couple of goons, but she didn't really want to owe him anything, and even if he wouldn't consider it a favor, she didn't like the idea of implicating the mafia.

So what else did she have? Well, there were only two mammals she knew that cared about Nick as much as she did, and she knew that only one of them could handle himself in a tussle, or so Nick had told her. She'd have to ask Finnick's help.

And so, one of the slowest day of her life began. Since they had finished analyzing the video records, what she had to do now was to compile every picture they had in one file and class them. Wolford and Blackfur were called as back up for some intervention, a group of pred-haters attacking a peace manifestation in the center of the city. Since the murder of the two sheeps, those kinds of manifestations had multiplied, and having officers there to supervise them was a challenge. Even more so when some weren't officially planned with the mayor's office.

So on top of being a slow day she didn't really have anyone to talk too in the meantime. Not that it was a bad thing, Blackfur would have notice how stressed Judy was, and the bunny would have slipped up in the end.

At least, at the end of the day, the file was almost complete. She had been able to forget about the text for most of the day. Well, not forget, but she had been able to stop it from impeding on her work.

And then her phone rang.

The bunny almost jumped from her seat, looking at the device. Contrary to what she had feared, it wasn't from an unknown caller but from Nick, which was almost worst in this specific situation.

"Judy speaking." She answered.

"Hey, my preferred bunny, how was your day?"

"It was great? How was yours? I suppose this isn't a courtesy call?"

"I'm good. It's true, it isn't. I've spent my day working on vehicles. Vans. A half-dozen of them. The goal is to kidnap Doug."

"Oh crap. We have to stop them!"
"We have to, yes. But I have a better plan than barging in and arresting everyone. We'll have to set up something with the chief and agent Savage. If we play it the right way, we could end up getting to Lycus, but I'll need a bit of time to prepare."

"How-er- What do you need to prepare?"

"A really solid plan for starters. I just wanted you to know that I think things are about to move really fast. Can you please tell that to the chief too? We'll need to find a way to coordinate everyone, I think." The bunny didn't respond for a few seconds. "Hello? Still there? Is everything alright?"

Judy was wondering if she should tell Nick that some mammal knew of his cover, but had decided against before Nick could derail her train of thought. "Huh? Yeah, I'm alright. Simply a bit worried about all this. I don't know how they'll kidnap Doug though. He'll be transferred to a secured location at a random date, to avoid him getting harmed during his trip. And the secured location is even more secret so..."

"Yeah, I thought about that too. The whole principle of witness protection is hiding the concerned mammal. In any case, be sure that as soon as I'll learn more, you'll hear about it."

"Great! Thanks for calling."

"You're welcome. I love you Carrots."

"I love you."

And he hung up. So first, someone had learnt of his cover and now Doug was in danger. Well, in relative danger, there was no way Lycus knew when he'd get out or where to he'd be taken. Was it?
Part 2, Chapter 30

Part 2 : Lycus Case

Chapter 30 : The Old Crew

Tuesday the 2nd of April 2019

She was sitting on a van's seat. The fennec next to her was silent. First she thought he was nervous, but nothing in his attitude gave it away. Finnick simply wasn't the chatty type. They parked near the rendezvous point and the fennec looked outside his left window.

"So let me summarize dis one last time. We're goin' to meet someone who knows Nick's cover ID, alone, without any police officers-"

"I'm a police officer."

"Without any non-disabled police officer, and no one knows where we are ?"

"I've scheduled at mail to be sent to Nick, Blackfur and the chief in one hour just in case. I'm not that stupid."

"At least tell me yo' armed."

She opened her vest and showed a concealed tranq-gun.

"Oh, great. Tranq gun. Ah' feel safer now." He hopped in the back of his van and came back with his baseball bat. "We're set 'den. Le's go."

He helped her get out of the van and they made their way to the abandoned warehouse. The inside was dark and dusty. Finnick took out his phone and used it as a flashlight, not that he really needed it but he knew Judy didn't possess night vision. But with the light in hand, he had now trouble to see anything in the dark.

"H'Ilo. Anybody 'dere ?"

Their steps echoed in the large empty building, and dust moved and flew as they went forth.

A voice came from the shadow in front of them. "Hello officer, hello little fox." It was a female voice, it was like silk, half-seducing, half-threatening.

Instinctively, the fennec put himself in front of Judy, letting go of the back and taking out a gun way too big for his body size. "Show yo'self."

"You seem nervous Fin. Are you scared ?" How did she know his name ? The voice came from the left now, and he turned in its direction. Judy wasn't sure she was comfortable having a civilian carrying a gun. Then again, if it was a trap, she liked the idea of him being able to defend himself.

"I ain't scared. I ain't the one hiding in the dark."

"Still the provocative one I see. You've not changed much."

"Who are you ?" Judy asked. "How do you know him ?"
"Maybe he knows me too ?" The voice had moved to their right, the fennec turned in its direction.

A short silence followed, broken by another female voice, but way more deep. "Stop toying with them. Are they alone ?" It came from the other end of the warehouse.

"Yes, they are."

A loud clanking noise was heard, as well as a low electric buzzing. The warehouse's lights turned on one after the other. The fennec had turned to where the new voice had come from, his vision slowly adapting to the bright light.

A mammal larger than Judy slowly approached them from the front. It had a black fur on most of its body except for the top of its head which was white. Judy recognized her as a honey badger.

"Hi Fin."

"Honey ? That you ?"

"It's me. I see officer Hopps has found some back up."

The fennec put back the gun in its hiding place. "Yeah, she did. Judy, meet Honey Badger. Honey, meet Judy Hopps."

"I already knew her name, but it's nice to meet you in person Judy." The bunny extended a paw but the badger didn't shake it.

"Don't formalize yo'self Judy, She ain't much into physical contact."

"Oh. Okay. Wait, your name is Honey Badger ? And you are a honey badger." The only answer she got from the mustelid was a little smile.

"It ain't her real name, Judy." Judy glanced at the fennec. "Don't look at me like 'dat. I don't know her real name either."

The silky purring voice was back, coming right from behind Judy which almost made her jump. "Aren't you going to introduce me too ?" The fennec looked behind his shoulder and recognized the black feline who was slowly walking around them to place herself next to the badger. Now that Judy could see her, she recognized her as an ocelot, but entirely black. Fur and eyes.

"Judy, meet Selina. Selina, meet Judy."

Judy finally closed her mouth that hung slightly open before opening it again to ask : "You know those mammals ?"

"Do I know them ? We worked togethah wid' Nick years ago. Our partnerships lasted what ? Five, six years ? Until we went to a less illegal business."

"It's strange that Nick never talked to me about them." Frowned the bunny.

"Not really." intervened the Badger. "We've not seen him, or more precisely he hasn't seen us for more than five years. Let's just say we're working way deeper in illegal territories now than before."

"I know how you didn't really approve of the way we earned our money, but we were saints compared to what those two did for a living." Added the small vulpine.
It seemed the ocelot couldn't speak without this strange purr. Judy thought she was almost flirty. "It's not a really nice way to put it. We just do work that no other mammal can."

"Anyway, we've not come here to reminisce. We're here because we have something you may find interesting." The badger had spoken and given a tablet computer to the ocelot who approached Judy and Finnick to show it to them. She pressed play on a video.

First it was black, then slowly appeared what Judy recognized as Lycus' silhouette. "Hello citizen of Zootopia. I have two announcements to make. First, we have captured Doug Ramses, Bellwether's accomplice, the one that refined the Nighthowler drug for her. He had been liberated on parole and put under witness protection. The reason why he got freed this soon, is because of all the information he gave to the ZPD in the Nighthowler case... It seems the ZPD and city's official can easily forgive the actions of a criminal. But we don't. He committed a sin toward us predators, and he must pay for it. If the authorities won't give us justice we will take it ourselves."

The camera panned left and showed a sheep tied to a chair. His face was swelling and his fur caked in blood. Judy had a hard time recognizing Doug under all his wounds. But it was logical, since it couldn't be Doug. He was still safe in his own cell in Zootopia's prison. What was happening ?

"I think it's also time that I revealed my true identity." The silhouette stepped into the light. It was a red fox, and the bunny had to blink and rub her eyes. He was Nick's exact copy. "My name is Alexander Carius Wilde, son of John Lycus Wilde and half brother of Nicholas Piberius Wilde. My father worked himself to death because this city wouldn't give him a chance, and my brother was hurt trying to stop me from bringing the pred-haters to justice. And today, in the name of all those of us who have been stepped on, our true crusade is beginning." The fox pulled out a gun from his vest and unceremoniously shot the sheep in the head twice. His head jerked to the side, a splatter of blood and bone spraying the floor and wall. And then, the video ended.

Judy's face was a mix of surprise and disbelief. "What the hell ?"

"So that where he was." Said Finnick. Judy turned to him.

"Where was who ?"

"Nick asked me to find the old crew. Honey and Sel, but I couldn't find them. And this guy, I talked to you about him, the Raving One."

"His real name is Alexander Vulpes by the way. I found his birth certificate, and a bunch of other paper." She gave them a briefcase that Judy opened. It was choke-full of official papers.

"How- Why do you have those ? Wait no. This is completely incomprehensible. Why are you giving us these informations ? What do you want from us ? What the hell is all this ?"

The badger sighed. "It's a bit of a long story so I'll try to keep it short. I'm a hacker, tech expert and whatever else you want me to be as long as I'm paid well and the job is computer related. Sel is... Can I tell her ?"

"I'll do it myself." Answered the feline. "I'm a thief. And a merc. And sometimes a hired blade. Like Honey, I'm whatever you want me to be as long as it includes stealth. And I dabble in mechanic too. Something Finnick taught me. Among other things." She winked, which made the small fennec glad it was dark enough so that his blush wasn't showing. She opened her arms in an ironical dramatic pose. "We are the bad guys."

"We are the ones the bad guys hire, to do what they can't do themselves. Anyway, two months
back, I was hired to hack into a prison camera system, among other things. I will not tell you how I did that, but I was successful."

"You're the reason why we couldn't identify the culprits!"

"Yep. But I never got the lost footage, it was physically destroyed, otherwise I'd give it to you too. Anyway, I was partially responsible for the ZNN hacking and a bunch of other stuff related to Lycus. I worked with Sel to clean our prints... And I'm not going to give you more details on that, all you need for your investigation is in the tablet and briefcase. So to get back on topic: we're helping you because it helps us. When we began working for them, there was no name, no face and no Lycus. Sel helped them put the first raid and prison kidnapping into motion."

"The vans and shootings weren't my idea though, a bit too noisy for me. I only supervised the vehicles' preparation." Intervened the female ocelot.

"And I did a large part of the hacking and 'tech stuff'. Now, there is a Lycus, and they had 'goal'. Get even with the pred-haters. They're going to wreck all the progress toward peace between predators and preys that has been made in the last months and send it back fifty years. And I think all this runs deeper than this Lycus. He's not the brain, he's just a face. I know Alexander, he's not smart enough for all this. So if you're wondering why I'm giving you this, it's because I need you to do everything you can to stop it. The lives of all predators of Zootopia rely on you stopping them from accomplishing whatever their plan is. On my side, I'll do everything I can to keep this video from reaching the public."

Judy's brow furrowed. This was beyond bad. This was a disaster waiting to happen. If they let Lycus capture Doug, it could blow up in their faces, but if it let Nick approach him, it could put an end to this.

"You need to come with us and testify."

"Are you serious?" The badger chuckled. "You are serious. I'm not coming to testify. There is a reason why neither of my friends know my name."

"She's paranoid." Cut Selina with a smile.

"Yeah that too. But I'm not in the system. I do no exist, and I intend to keep it that way. If you wonder why, just ask your good friend Jack why I'm into hiding, and why I'm going right back as soon as I'm out of there. Oh, you won't get an answer, but you'll get a frown and maybe a growl."

Judy had to keep her jaw to fall again. Finnick stared at the badger waiting for more but she shook her head. The fennec shrugged, he was used to her keeping secrets.

"We're going now. Please don't try to follow us." The badger and ocelot waved and left. A loud clanking noise was heard again and the lights went out.

"Okay, that was unexpected." Chuckled the fennec.

They made their way back to the fennec's van in silence. Given the size of the briefcase, she'd need at least two days going through all the paper. And she was sure the tablet contained at least as much data. But this would be nothing next to what she'd have to endure in the morning. She'd have to explain to chief Bogo where the new elements came from, and tell him she went to a secret rendez-vous with someone who knew of Nick cover, without back up and with a civilian.

She didn't look forward to that at all.
Judy had waited all day for the meeting she had set up with Nick and the chief. She could have gone and talked to the buffalo about her evening sooner but she didn't want to have to repeat everything to Nick a second time. And having him at the other end of the line, she hoped it would keep the chief from shouting at her. Or at least deter him just a bit. In any case, she was making her way to the chief's office while Blackfur was carrying the stuff she had to show him.

The panda knocked on the door and the chief let them in. They sat on the chairs near his desk and he set up the connection with Nick.

His face appeared on the chief's computer screen.

"Hi guys, how are you all doing ?"

"Hi Nick, we're fine, how are you ?"

"I'm great ! So, what was it that was so important ?"

"Well, I think it's better to show you." She took out the tablet and set it up in such a way that Nick could see through the chief's webcam. "Do you see the screen ?"

"Yes. Go ahead."

As the video played, Judy could see the change in the audience expression. The chief constant stern expression got slightly sterner, Nick's face closed and Blackfur eyes widened. When it ended, the chief was the first to talk.

"I didn't know you had a brother officer Wilde." His tone seemed serious and matter of fact, but the corner of sarcastic grin showed on his face.

"I don't. This is the guy I talked about that looks exactly like me. We called him the Raving One when we worked together. Never knew his real name though. I'm not even sure he knew it himself."

"According to this document." The bunny said while showing the birth certificate. "His real name is Alexander Vulpes."

The chief looked at the paper. "This is the original ! Where did you get this ? Where did you get all this officer Hopps ?"

The bunny sighed. "Last evening, I said to officer Blackfur that I was going to a dinner with a friend, with Finnick. Well, I truly was with him, but we went to meet mammals that knew of Nick's cover."

"What ?" The chief had let his large fist collide with his desk and made everyone jump. "Even if I had the whole week, I couldn't begin to list all the reasons why it was a stupid idea ! Why didn't you tell me ? Why didn't you bring officer Blackfur with you instead of involving a civilian ?"

"They had said no cops."

The chief pinched the bridge of his nose, slowly exhaling. "One day, your luck will run out. For now, you're lucky to not be fit for parking duty."

"I'm sorry chief."
Nick cut in. "The Ravi- Alexander is trying to pose as my brother for whatever reason, I'll just ask him why when I'll meet him. But why kill a fake Doug ? It doesn't make sense."

"I've thought about it. It does if they want to make him work on a new nighthowler serum. If their goal is to punish the pred-haters, maybe they want to use it against them. Or tailor it only for prey."

"Yeah, well knowing Alexander, he's not bright enough for this kind of scheme. There is someone above him pulling his strings."

"That's what the one that gave me all this data thought."

The chief gave her an interested look. "And who was it that gave you all this by the way ?"

"She calls herself Honey Badger. And yes she's a honey badger. And no, it's not her real name."

Nick lifted a brow. "Did she seem allergic to physical contact ?"

"Do you know her ?" asked the chief.

"We worked together." The fox simply answered.

"She was accompanied by an ocelot named Selina."

"So that's where she is. She's the one I'm replacing as a mechanic." The chief gave him an interrogative look. "Long story. I'll tell you later. Judy, you said that Finnick knows of all this ?"

"He saw the video."

The vulpine scratched his chin. "Alright. Chief, can I ask you a favor ? If this thing comes out, could you send a couple of officers to protect my mother ? She's not mentioned in the video so I suppose they're going to play the 'second hidden family' card, but I don't want any danger coming her way."

"Of course officer Wilde. But how do you know this fox and you aren't related ?" As always, the chief didn't use gloves. But every mammal present knew there was no malice under the question. It was a legitimate one and the fox didn't take any offense. The fox chuckled.

"I asked myself a couple of time. We ended actually doing blood tests and if we're related we're really distant cousins. At best."

"You're taking this rather well." Remarked the bunny.

The fox shrugged. "I'm a little pissed off that they're trying to involve my family, but if anything, I'm curious to know what they expect to gain from this."

The chief turned to Judy. "Officer Hopps, you and your partners are in charge of going through those files. If you need help computer wise, make it go through me before contacting the forensic, is that clear ?"

"Yes sir."

"Perfect, if you could have done that by the end of the week, that would be great."

Nick cut in. "By the way, since I've got you all here, I'd like to talk to you about Lycus' group next action. Since we're going to kidnap Doug Ramses, I've put together a plan but I'll need help to make it work."
The chief sighed. The last time Nick had planned something big, it had brought down a mayor. Now it was to bring down a terrorist organization. Even before knowing what the vulpine's idea was, he knew he wouldn't like what he was about to hear.
Monday the 8th of April 2019

Dwane Rhinowitz was nervous. It didn't happen really often, but when it did, it was because of something big. And oh yeah, it was big. He was driving the car containing Doug Ramses, the sheep that was about to be kidnapped. And Rhinowitz mission was to let it happen, but in a convincing way. But the rhino officer wasn't an actor. He was an officer. Oh sure, he had done a bit of theater in college, he had enjoyed it even, but he knew he wasn't good with facial expressions.

And so, this rhino was driving a car, waiting for it to be stopped by two vans and guns to be pulled on him.

Rudin Snarlov was nervous. But he preferred thinking he was focused. In the back of Blackfur and Wolford's unmarked car, sitting next to officer Hopps, he was looking at the car in front of them. It was a few dozen meters ahead, going slowly on its way to its goal. He was focused, because in a few minutes, the car ahead would be attacked and one of its occupants kidnapped. And he felt he wasn't close enough to have his partner's back.

Wight Blackfur was nervous. It was a good thing she supposed, because it pulled her from the thoughts of her daughter's funerals. She knew she wouldn't get over it soon enough, but it really wasn't the time to think about it. At the very least, Wolford was the one driving. He was a better driver than she was, even thought the car was a bit big for him, and he needed to install a kit to have access to the pedals and steering wheel at the same time.

Augustyn Wolford was nervous. He was always nervous when mammals lives were at play. And right now, a whole lot of lives were at play. Not only his, or his colleagues, but a lot throughout the city. He knew that everywhere, vans loaded with drugged and armed mammals would appear. And he really hoped everyone would be okay.

But he was also nervous for his partner. She hadn't been herself those past few weeks. And even if he knew why, and that it was perfectly understandable, he wondered if she shouldn't just sit this one out.

Judith Laverne Hopps was nervous. She had convinced the chief to be in the car and he had accepted because the plan dictated that it would be parked a hundred meters away from the place where the vans would corner Rhinowitz's car. But she knew that she wouldn't be able to help, and in case of a fight near the car, she would be a liability. But she simply couldn't bear the thought to stay away from the action and to know her colleagues would risk their lives while she stayed safe. She would stay in the car and be on lookout in case the plan would go south. And she was certain it would, plans never survived contact with the enemy.

Doug Ramses wasn't nervous. He knew that he would soon be out of the city and away from his problems. He had never been a fan of Bellwether, and even if she payed well, he knew that mammals with ideals were lousy employers. They expected you to take part only because you believed in the cause. But Doug only believed in money and he hated to have to negotiate for his pay.
And now, he was leaving this cursed city thanks to a witness protection program. He had bought his freedom by selling the lamb and her allies. Best bargain ever. His ex-employer would soon be dead at the hands of those predators and he couldn't care less. If only this rhino could drive faster, the sooner he'd be away from the place, the better.

Adrian Bogo was nervous. Why on earth had he accepted for this foolish plan to be put into motion? If anyone ever learnt about it, his career was over. To be honest, he knew why. It was Judy and Nick's plan. And the last time they had come up with a plan, a last minute one at that, they had saved the city. This time, they had back up, they had a half-dozen officers and they had experience. It could go smoothly. Or it could backfire and have him and all those involved lose their job, or worse, their lives. But it wasn't the worst thing. He didn't want to think about the worst thing.

Benjamin Clawhauser was nervous. From where he was, he could see the street where the car would be attacked. He was comfortably lying down on a sheet, the rifle was ready, all he had to do now was wait. And when the waiting would be over, all he'd have to do was shoot his targets. An engine and a couple of tires. Easy enough. The hard part would be to cover his colleagues during the firefight that would surely ensue. He had practiced shooting on moving targets before, he was good at it even. No, he wasn't good at it. He was one of the best and he knew it. And the chief knew it too, otherwise, he would never have accepted for him to be on the field.

Herold MacHorn was nervous. One could tell because there was a slight wrinkle on his forehead. He was coordinating the team through the street cameras from his office. It wasn't the first time he commanded a team, but never in those condition, in the heart of the city. All this screamed disaster. Civilians could be harmed or killed, Doug could be hit by a stray bullet. He had warned the chief, but the buffalo had decided to go with it anyway. It was a bold and imprudent move, one that the rhino wouldn't have done in the chief's stead. But he wasn't the chief, he was his second in command. And if the chief wouldn't listen to his advice, he would make damn sure everything would go smoothly.

Jack Savage wasn't nervous. He was used to be in the eye of the storm. Nick had prepared everything perfectly, and he could see every GPS trackers going around on his screen. And if he did, it meant every ZPD precinct in the city could too. So no, he wasn't nervous, if anything, he was a little annoyed. He wouldn't be able to partake in the festivities, but only follow them from the sidelines. And when Nick and his team would've gotten ahold of Doug, he would follow them. This was a good plan. Bold, risky, and probably crazy enough to work. So it was good. The fox was better at this than the buck had suspected at first.

Nicholas Piberius Wilde was nervous. He was scared. He was nearing panic. This plan was crazy.

He had had the chief call Judy, Blackfur, Wolford, Rhinowitz, Snarlov, Clawhauser and MacHorn into a conference room. They had set up a call with him and Jack. He had his plan ready and explained it to them.

Why all those mammals had been invited, was simple, they were the only ones that knew that Nick was undercover, and so they'd be the only one the they could really count on for Nick's plan to be a success.

It couldn't work. His colleagues would be hurt. Doug would be killed, and everything would be his- A paw patted his shoulder and on his left, he saw the kid. It seemed the little vulpine had noticed his state. If only he really knew why he was nervous. It almost made him chuckle. But no. It was going to go smoothly. With the position he had earned as the chief mechanic, he had been able to place the GPS beacons in every single van, and as soon as they would stop, ZPD officer would spring on them and arrest every member of Lycus group. The only one that wouldn't be arrested
were Skye's cell. They would take Doug and bring him to Lycus. And they would be the one to do so because the team that was supposed to do it in the first place wouldn't be able to.

He was armed and ready.

The party could begin.

The car was coming down the street at a deliberately slow pace. The driver didn't want to risk crashing in the van that would block his path. When it happened, he uselessly stomped the brake, to make it appear as he was surprised. He didn't take a hoof to his gun, but simply looked around the car to see what was happening.

Behind him, a van stopped too, placing itself in a way that the car and van were back to back. He saw two masked foxes getting out of the van in front of him and two felines, a panther and a lion, getting out of the one in the back.

Behind him, the sheep bleated in fear.

"Take out your gun and throw it on the ground" came the voice of a fox, which the driver recognized as being Nick's. He executed the order as one of the felines opened the door near the sheep, which tried to flee through the one on the other side. Just as the Lion caught him, a loud gunshot was heard. Immediately, the attacker crouched on the ground. A second gunshot, and then a third was heard. Through his rear window, the rhino could see the van was now slightly lower, and that a black smoke was escaping from the hood. The engine was literally toast.

The Feline had perfectly aimed and shot three times. He had to keep himself from giggling in relief and remain focus. The risky part had now begun and his colleagues were about to face the enemy fire. From where he was, he could see everything perfectly.

Wolford and Blackfur were approaching on the right side of the street, crouching behind the parked car. On the left, Snarlov was making his way, tranq-gun in hand. In perfect coordination, they sprung out and as the third sniper bullet had landed, shouted "ZPD, put down your gun." As they all expected, the masked predator didn't comply, started aiming at them and unloading their bullets at them.

Alone on his side, Snarlov was pinned down. He looked under the car he was hiding behind and saw a fox take the sheep by the arm and shove him to the van in front of the car. Everything was going according to plan. He saw the lion approach his hiding spot and shot him in the leg. The tranquilizer wouldn't take effect immediately, so he took out his nine millimeter too, just in case. But as the feline was stepping on the curb, he staggered and fell flat on the ground.

Bullets were flying above and around Blackfur and Wolford's head. The wolf crept away from their hiding spot to flank the attackers. He gave a glance to the panda, she looked focused and ready to take out any mammal that would come around the car. What she didn't expect however, was for the panther to jump on the car. With horror, the wolf saw the feline take aim. A few meters away, he only had time to leap toward his colleague and shove her out of the panther's line of fire. The submachine gun screamed and a flail of bullet caught the canid in the chest. He was sent backward, unable to breath. His weapon had left his paw,. Though Blackfur had been pushed out of danger, she hadn't seen the wolf coming and she too had let her weapon escape her grasp . She could see the panther aim again at her colleague as she tried to get her gun out of its holster but she wouldn't have the time.

Just as the panther's finger was about to press the trigger, her head jerked to the side, a rain of blood, bones and gray matter splashed the panda who could only try and protect herself with her
arms. In slow motion, the panther lifted a paw to the missing half of her face, made a step forward and stumbled from the car roof, hitting the pavement with a wet noise.

Blackfur ran to the wolf to check on his wounds.

"I'm – hhhh – alright – hhhh - " She looked at him and it was true, all bullets that had hit him had done so in his bulletproof vest. Chances were he had a couple of cracked ribs, but otherwise, he'd be okay. It was a good thing the panther was using a light caliber. She helped him crawl and sit his back against a nearby car and then looked around. It was chaos, the foxes had taken the sheep and were hauling him in their van at gunpoint while shooting randomly to keep their attacker from catching up to them.

Clawhauser had trouble breathing. He didn't want to think about what he had just done. Worse than pulling the trigger, the consequence of it was nauseating. He turned the scope away from the panther and back to the driver of the van. He wasn't here anymore. The door was open. Where was he?

Judy saw the van's driver door open. The masked wolf was running away from the scene. It seemed he had come to the conclusion that it was a set up, and was set on not being caught. For a few seconds, she pondered what she could do. Just as the wolf got past her car door, she kicked it to make it fly open. She had lost some muscle mass, but was still strong enough that the canid yelped, fell and let go of his weapon. She got out of the car, tranq-gun in one hand, crutch supporting her in the other.

"Lie down on the ground and put your paws behind your head."

Of course, he didn't comply. After all, she was a little bunny on a crutch with a tranq-gun. He lunged at her with bared claws and she let herself fall on her side, shooting two darts at him. The canid went crashing on the cruiser while the bunny recovered and stood back up. The two darts were embedded in the bullet-proof vest he was wearing. He lunged again, and instead of shooting him, she chose to use the crutch as a baton, rotating it to hit him. It caught his snout and though he fell again, so did the bunny because she didn't have support anymore. In her fall, she had time to unholster her more lethal option.

"Lie down on the ground !" She shouted, lying on her belly, elbows to the ground for a more stable aim.

The wolf hesitated. She shot a warning shot just above his right ear. Immediately, he complied. She wouldn't be able to cuff him, but holding a mammal at gunpoint wasn't a task that required too much strength. She only hoped her colleagues were okay.

Nick had to fight himself to not go help his colleague when the shooting began. He opened the door and caught the sheep by the leg. Doug tried to kick him but the fox pulled him hard. Osman came to help him and they held the sheep, which ended up complying when he saw the gun barrels pointed at his snout.

"Plan B" said Nick's teammate and they brought him back to their van, shoving him inside, quickly restraining and blindfolding him. Plan B meant the other team was on its own and that they would bring the sheep to Lycus themselves. Everything was going according to plan. Now all he had to do was wait for Skye to drive them to the rendezvous point since she was the only one to know the location. She had kept for herself all knowledge of where they would have to bring the sheep.

He recognized the road they were taking, it was leading to the northern parts of canal district. Finally they arrived to a point where there were more vegetation than buildings. The arctic fox
parked the car in front of an abandoned building site and ordered them to bring the prisoner. Nick and Osman were holding him by an arm each, and they brought him inside the half-build construction, sitting him on the floor.

"What are we doing now ?" Asked Nick.

"We're waiting for some other mammals to come and pick him up." Her phone rang and she looked at it. "Holy shit !" she silently exclaimed. Being the only one close enough to hear her, Nick asked.

"What's happening ?"

"A text from Lucas. All the other teams, and I mean all of those on the field today, have been arrested. Lucas just sent me a text." She looked around nervously, like the ZPD could appear any moment.

Nick gritted his teeth. He had a decision to take. Either he could let them go and have them spend around a decade in jail, or he could help them get out of the city. It was true that they were responsible for some deaths, but they were young. And as he had thought before, in their place he would have done the exact same mistakes.

"While we're waiting, I'd like to ask you something. Did this team participate in the attacks on the city, when Bellwether was kidnapped ?"

"Yeah." The vixen looked at her feet. As the adrenaline from the kidnapping was wearing off and she realized what was happening to the other group, a pang of guilt had begun to creep at the back of her mind.s

"Honestly, what do you think of letting loose armed and drugged mammals in the city simply to create a diversion ?"

The arctic fox thought about it for a second before answering. "I think it was effective, but I think when all of this is over, and when we will have gotten rid the city of the pred-haters, we will have to pay for it."

"And do you think it's fair ?"

"Yes. Two bad don't make a good. It was a necessary evil, but if we get caught, I don't think what will happen to us will be completely undeserved."

"Then why did you partake in this ?"

"If that's the price to pay for our fellow predators to have a better life, I think may be worth it."

Nick reached into his shirt and discreetly shut off his wire, moving in a way that she would believe he was only scratching himself. She seemed to buy it. He then took out his phone a dialed a number.

"Lucas ? No time to explain, get out of the building, go to Mr Big and ask for his protection. Say Frank sent you. No questions, you do that right now." He hung up and turned back to Skye who was looking at him with a surprised expression. "Can I talk to you in private for five minutes ?" He took her by the shoulder and led her away enough from the others so that they couldn't hear them talk.

"What is it Frank ? What is happening ?"
Nick took an inspiration and took the dive. "I think this organization isn't what we believe it to be."

"What ?"

"Think about it for five minutes, You're working for a guy you've never seen the face of, going around and provoking chaos and suffering. You think you're fighting the pred-haters but you're only creating more of them ! I mean, right now, is the specism better or worse ? Do you have any family or other pred friends ? How are they faring ?" He saw the shock in her eyes and so he kept going. "Listen, I have contacts everywhere, and sometimes I can get my paws on stuff that I shouldn't. Look at this." He took out his smartphone and showed her the video. First he saw surprise and then worry in her eyes.

"What does it mean ? Nicholas Wilde has a brother ? And this sheep isn't Doug. What is Lycus doing ?"

"I think he wants to use Doug to work on the Nighthowler serum. Maybe tailor it in a different way, I don't know. What I know is this whether Lycus is or not Nick's brother, what do you think would happen if the public believed his brother was the reason of all this chaos and deaths ?"

She glanced at the phone and the grey fox that was holding it. "He would... He would lose all credibility as an officer. If there was an uproar, the mayor's office could cave in, and he could even lose his job as an officer."

"And it would be another proof that foxes can't be trusted. This guy on the video, Alexander, I know him. I met him around ten years ago, it was before I left the city. The guy was a drug addict, and I'm sure he doesn't have the brain to put in place such an operation. There is someone behind him, I'm sure of it. And the more I think about it, the less I'm convince they want what's best for the predators."

Skye froze with her mouth open for a few seconds. She blinked for a few time and punched herself on the forehead.

"Fuck ! Fuck ! That's so obvious. Why didn't I see that sooner ?"

"Because you are young and angry at this unfair society. You saw something that you believed could change things and you followed it."

She made a few steps away, like she was lost. For a few second, Nick feared she wouldn't accept the bundle of truth and lies he had just served her.

"Fuck, we were so stupid. We need to get Doug and-

"No. Take the others and get away. Were you supposed to get the van ?"

"No we were going to destroy it, why do you ask ?"

"Leave it. I'll need it. I'm going to let the people that want to take Doug take him and follow them wherever they're taking him."

"We could come with you. You could need help."

"Skye, listen to me. What you need to do right now is get the others somewhere safe. You're their leader, you're not supposed to put them at risk uselessly. I'll go do some recon and come back to you with intel, I promise. But if you all come, the risk to be spotted will be higher."
"But Frank-
He took her paws and played his last card. "As of now, I'm not even sure of my theory about Lycus. I need to confirm it. And if we're to take him down, we'll need to be prepared, no to rush in like this, without a plan and without back up. I'll do recon, and I'll come back. I promise."

The mask was in place. He hated to lie, and especially to make fake promises. It was a low he had never reached when he was a con-mammal. It was strange to go to a place he never wanted to just to do the right thing.

"Okay, you're right." She took a deep breath. "You're right. Be careful… Wait how are you going to follow them ? You'll be easy to spot with the van."

Nick shook his phone. "I put a GPS tracker on the sheep. Crazy how cheap this kind of tech got those last few years."

She lifted a brow.

"I've had those suspicions for a while now, but I needed to be sure, or at least fairly sure, before talking to you about them. I like to be prepared for anything."

He wasn't sure she would swallow the pill, but she did. It seemed her will to protect the others had gotten stronger than the one to follow her convictions. That, and one of Nick best skills was to look very convincing. They came back to the others and said nothing. She wanted for Doug to be away while she would explain the change of plan to her teammates. Soon a pair of masked foxes arrived in a brown car. They didn't say a thing but simply took away the sheep. He tried to resist but a punch to the snout and a gun in his back instantly calmed him. When they were gone, they went back to the van. As they were going to empty bottles of light fluid on the vehicle, Skye stopped them.

"We're leaving the van here. There is a change of plan, all the other teams were arrested by the ZPD. We're going to ask Mr Big for protection."

"What ?" Osman was the one that had talked. "Why ? Wouldn't we be safer at Vlad's ? He's the one we've worked with the most."

Nick glanced at Skye. The logic was sound, but Vlad was far from the safest option. And Nick wouldn't be able to keep an eye on them at Vlad's.

"Frank's name carries weight with Mr Big, or so he says, and I believe him. I can't force you to come, but I think it would be better for us all if we didn't separate. Now let's stop wasting time."

She began walking away.

"And what about Frank ?" Asked Michael.

"He has another mission. Now move." She ordered with more conviction, while she kept walking, soon followed by the others. Nick climbed in the driving seat and took out his phone, quickly dialing a number.

"Big's manor, Koslov speaking."

"Hey Koslov, it's Frank."

"Hello Frank, do you need something ?"
"Yep, I sent a bunch of foxes your way. They're going to say I sent them, which is true. Could you please hold on to them until I get back to you?"

"You mean detain them. It will cost you a favor, you know that."

"I think they might have intel that could interest your boss. I can't do better right now, but I'll let your boss estimate how much it's worth. No violent interrogation. Are those acceptable terms?"

"They are. Anything else?"

"Yes. The large one is named Sean, he's a psycho and not to be trusted. I wouldn't mind if he ended up becoming a Popsicle."

"Noted."

"Great, have a nice day." And the fox hung up. He turned back on his wire and then launched the app that he could use to track the GPS beacon he had placed on the sheep while they were restraining him.

Just as he was about to start the car, the passenger door opened and closed. Nick turned while putting his paw to his gun, but it was only Michael.

"What the hell are you doing here?"

"I'm not letting you go alone."

"What?"

"Whatever you're going to do, it's going to be dangerous. You're not going alone."

The little vulpine put on the safety belt and crossed his arms. Nick sighed, he didn't have time to convince Michael to go away, but he didn't want to use violence either. If only he had a tranq-gun... He knew the kid could be discreet and keep a cool head in a dangerous situation. It wasn't ideal, but he could actually use the backup.

And among all the foxes in the group, Mike was the only one he really trusted.

"Alright. But you do exactly as I say. Don't take useless risk and you stay behind me."

"Okay. So what are we doing?"

Nick sighed. He didn't want to feed the kid lies, but telling him the truth could have him risk turning on him. So he chose to tell what he could. "Like I said to Skye, I don't think Lycus wants what's best for us foxes. Look at this." He gave him the phone with the video. Nick had checked the general direction the tracker had taken, and when the shocked kid gave the phone back, they hadn't gone off course.

"What the hell?"

"Yeah. I obtained that a few days ago."

"It doesn't make sense."

"No it doesn't, and I'm going to go and find out exactly what's what. There is too much incoherence in Lycus' actions and I intend to see and ask him exactly what he's doing. If he truly is the head of our organization. I know the guy on the video, and trust me, he's not bright enough to organize all
The kid frowned. "You mean, we may have been manipulated from the beginning?"

"Yes, that's what I mean. You can get off if you want, I can do this alone."

"No, I want to know too. And I think you'll need all the help you can get."
Monday the 8th of April 2018

The tracker was pretty easy to follow. The car in which Doug was, was only a few kilometers ahead of them. It had gone east, and remained in the Meadowlands. Only a dozen minutes later, it had stopped near what looked like an abandoned site. Nick parked a couple hundreds meters away, behind bushes, hoping the van couldn't be seen from where they were going. Him and the kid made their way, wary of their surroundings and looking everywhere. The place was surrounded by barbed-wired fences, but they could probably be lifted. It was an old predator themed amusement park. Nick was sure he had seen photographs of it before but he couldn't remember when or where.

Before entering, the older fox looked at the sign above the closed gate. Some letter had fallen, the only ones remaining spelled 'W...de ...imes'. He had no time to think about it. He raised the wire-fence and helped the kid get through and followed him. Crouching while trotting toward the building, Nick looked at the place. It was full of old and dilapidated attractions. There was a little road that went from the gates to the main building and one could see multiple recent tire tracks.

There was no security camera or mammal on lookout. To be honest the place looked pretty inconspicuous, and it was better to not advertise presence than to have to protect a place.

Both of the foxes arrived near the building. The tire tracks were going around and they followed them, they stopped in front of a large garage door. The paws and hooves print made it clear that the sheep had been taken out of the car and pushed inside. It seemed the car had then left. Nick looked at his phone screen. The GPS tracker was near, but it wasn't precise enough for the fox to define where Doug was exactly. Near the garage door was a service door. Nick approached it and tried to open it as silently as he could, but it was locked. He made a sign to the kid to be on lookout. Using his lock-picking kit, he began working and a few seconds later the door was open. Nick entered and closed the door behind the kid. It was an old storage place. Contrary to what Nick was expecting, it was clean. There was dust, but not enough to make him believe the place wasn't used. There were multiple crates and also a car, but not the same the two foxes that had brought Doug had used. Nick approached the car and took out his knife piercing three tires. The kid glanced at him. "Whoever is here, I don't want them escaping." whispered the fox. The younger fox nodded.

They were about to go when they hear the sound of an engine. They only had time to dive behind crates when the door he had unlocked before opened and a silhouette entered. He couldn't see their faces but what got out made Nick frown. The newcomer was wearing a ZPD uniform and had their gun in hand. The officer made a few steps and flicked a switch Nick hadn't seen when coming him, immediately, the lights went on. At last Nick recognized the newcomer. It was FitzAntlers. She was looking around suspiciously. Was it back up ? It didn't make any sense, Nick wondered why she was alone. Relieved that the newcomer was an ally, he holstered his gun. "Stay behind me." He whispered to the kid while leaving his hiding place.

"Hey Fitz, I didn't think they'd send you." Nick glanced at the kid who was looking at him with surprise, but he followed the older fox, gun still in hand.

The deer had jump at the voice and turned to Nick, her gun pointed at him. She squinted and the open her eyes with surprise. "Nick ? Is that you ?"
I guess, my cover doesn't matter anymore.

"Yeah that's me. Would you mind aiming elsewhere and help me search this place?"

The deer seemed to hesitate. She squinted her eyes again and that was at that moment that Nick finally put a finger on something that had been stuck at the back of his mind. Lycus had a knowledge of the witness protection car itinerary. In the plan's preparation, no one had asked from where Lycus had gotten the information. Clawhauser was the officer in the ZPD supervising the witness protection program on behalf of the chief, and who else had access to that computer when the feline was off-duty? Of course, there was a password to access his data on the server, but installing a physical keylogger on a computer was child's play.

He saw the resolve in the doe's eyes before she pulled the trigger. His paw went to his holster and he felt himself being pushed to the side. Four detonations echoed in the garage, dust flew around, disturbed by the vibration. Nick hit the floor hard, a burning pain in his left arm, but had gotten the time to unholster his weapon in his fall. FitzAntlers had fallen on one knee, a hoof on the floor, the other still holding her gun, trying to aim again. It seemed the kid had had the time to put a bullet in her bulletproof vest.

"Drop the gun." Nick shouted with no effect. Out of breath, the doe was trying to aim again. He raised his gun and shot two times. Red beads flew as his opponent fell backwards, letting go of her gun. He heard gurgling noise as he stood back up. She had put her hooves to her throat, from which blood flowed out.

She's toast.

Nick lowered his gun and glanced at his left arm. Blood was dripping from it and it was painful, but it wasn't a life threatening wound.

"Thanks kid. You saved my skin." He turned to see a slumped silhouette on the floor. "Kid?" Immediately, he let himself fall near the wounded young fox.

"We're – we're even now."

"Shut up. Let me see your wounds." Nick took the kid's arms with his valid paw and put them away. There were three bullet holes in his torso. Nick felt the blood leave his face. This was bad, Michael was already coughing blood. At least one lung had been hit.

"You're N-Nick Wilde." The kid had a fit of cough, which made him spit blood on Nick's shirt.

"I am. I'm here. Now don't move, I need to-"

The kid's paw reached for Nick's sleeve and grabbed it. "Hey F-Nick. C-can you do me a-"

"I'll do anything you want. Please don't move I'll try to make a bandage." But Nick could see it was completely useless. Even if he could use both his paws, there was nothing he could do patch up the kid in time. He wouldn't be able to stop the blood that was spilling from his friend. The lung wound on itself would kill him too fast for any help to come in time, and it wasn't the only one Mike's body had sustained.

"Tell m-my- Tell her she was th-the best... Tell- I'm glad she was my s-sister."

Nick took the kid in his arms. It was all he could do now, to try and reassure him before he passed. A strange feeling of deja-vu washed over-him.
"I'll tell her. I'm sure she's glad to be your sister too. Anyone would be proud to have you as a brother."

"Th-thanks." The kid coughed blood again and Nick felt a tear rolling down his cheek. He choked down the sob that was growing in his chest. "Hey N-Nick. I-I'm cold."

"Sorry. I'm sorry."

"I'm sca-scared."

"Yeah me too." Half-joked Nick. The kid gave a chuckle that turned into another fit of bloody cough.

"Y-you won't be able to c-carry me this time." He smiled darkly, the blood running out of his mouth.

He tightened his grip on the kid's shoulder. "Why didn't you stay behind me ?"

"I t-told you before, you're not my d-dad." He swallowed hard, trying to take the words out. "B-but you w-would have been a-a hell of a big broth-" His paw let go of Nick's sleeve and his body went limp. This time the grey fox couldn't keep in the sob. Jaws clenched, he kept the scream inside and turned it into a growl. He wanted to cry, he wanted to let go.

He had a job to finish.

He put the kid on the floor and closed his eyes. He then put his vest on Mike's face. The kid's gun was at his side and he took it, putting it inside his belt, in his back. He went back to Fitz-Antlers who was still holding her hooves to her throat. Her blood was flowing more slowly than the kid's. He looked down at her face and he saw her eyes filled with fear and tears. For a few seconds he considered leaving her in that state, in the last moments of her agony. Instead he aimed at her face as she lifted a pleading hoof, blood flowing a little quicker.

"Goddam traitor."

A last detonation was heard in the large room.

The wounded fox tore his sleeve at the shoulder with his knife and pulled the dead cop's belt. He used it with the piece of cloth to make a makeshift arm sling.

He took the doe's gun and stored in his empty holster.

Leaving the garage, he found a long dark hallway and advanced slowly, gun in one paw, ready to shoot at anything that could jump out of the shadows. He arrived at another large room filled with science equipment. Basically everything that could be useful to handle chemicals and create drugs. Nick looked up, there were railings above the room, anyone could see him from here, but if he could get there, he'd have a significant tactical advantage. He'd have to be careful. By now, with the sound of the firefight, he was sure everyone in the building knew someone was there.

Looking for a way to get up, he found another closed door. He put his ear against it and heard a faint voice. If someone was on the other side, maybe he could surprise them by bursting in, but with his arm like it was, there was no way he could manage it. He took a deep breath and opened it slowly. The chatter was still indiscernible, but a bit louder. He entered a sort of long storing unit which seemed to have been repurposed as a bunch of holding cell. The first ones were empty but he
finally found one that was occupied. He risked an eye and saw something that looked more like an
office than a holding cell. The occupant was a red fox, babbling alone in a worn and unkept suit.
Nick recognized Alexander. The fox seemed to be talking with someone that wasn't there, writing
stuff in a notebook.

If Alexander was a prisoner, it confirmed his suspicions, someone else was pulling the strings and
he had to find them first. Nick discreetly pushed farther, but he was the only one occupying a cell.
Doug wasn't a prisoner, or if he was, he was locked in elsewhere.

The hallway didn't seem to go anywhere and Nick didn't want to risk the fox to alert whoever else
was here from his location. He slowly made his way back to the room he came from.

Just as he set a foot in, the lights were turned on.

"Throw down your weapon, fox." The light had slightly blinded him but he could see the
silhouettes of the mammals that were threatening him. Two in front of him and two on the railway
on his left and his right. "Throw down your gun! Last warning."

Every cell in his brain screamed against the order. He wanted to shoot at the silhouette, empty his
gun at them. Kill them. Michael was dead because of them, he deserved justice.

He took a deep breath.

And threw down his gun.

If I attack now, I'll get killed. I need to stay alive to find the real Lycus, and to make him pay. Let's
play it smart.

"The one in the holster too."

He gritted his teeth but did what he was asked and threw the second gun.

"Turn around."

He executed the order.

"Throw down this gun too."

Really slowly, he took the last gun between two fingers threw it too.

Nick heard a loud clank and saw a ladder slide down from the railing. A little silhouette was going
down. Now that his vision had adapted to the brightness, Nick could see the ones that were
threatening him. There were two sheeps and two deers. The last small silhouette that had now
reached ground level was a lamb, wearing a pink tailor suit.


Nick decided to play dumb. "You're Bellwether? Wha- I don't understand!"

The little lamb giggled happily.

"Of course you don't. Well it was only a matter of time before one of you found this place. Glad we
caught you, we won't have to relocate." She looked at him curiously and squinted her eyes. "It's
you!"

The fox's mouth felt dry. He was screwed.
"Oh, it's too good! You were the one that refused to shoot that kid... Mark? Mike? It's unimportant." Nick stopped the growl that was coming from his throat. Antagonizing her wasn't the right thing to do at the moment. "You're that Frank guy! You need to know this: you were hilarious. Acting all noble, giving a second chance to a fox... By the gods, I had to watch it again to believe it!" Her smile turned into a scowl. "You pelts don't deserve a second chance. You only deserve what's coming to you."

Nick had to keep himself from chuckling. She hadn't recognized him.

"I hope you appreciate the irony of all this. You know where we are I presume."

"Not really."

The lamb giggled. "You don't?"

Nick shook his head.

"Do you know who Nicholas Wilde is? Of course, you do. He's probably some sort of hero to you, you nosy little vulpine. Well, this place belonged to his great-great-uncle. Wilde Times, it was called. No one remembers it, because it wasn't really something important to begin with. Do you know what kind of place it was?"

Nick knew of the amusement park. It was a story his mother had told him when he was young. The great-uncle Wilde was a strange fox that liked to invent and build things. The park had been his lifelong work, but it had never been popular enough to remain open.

She was walking back and forth slowly with a little smile, a hoof running on the science table.

"An amusement park?"

"Bingo! Aimed at predators." It was faint, but in her mouth, the word sounded like an insult. "So they could express all their instincts. Hunting, clawing, biting, howling..." A scowl had appeared on her face but it quickly went back to its joyful expression. "So, yes it's ironic, or fitting, depending on how you look at it, that I'm using it to do what I do."

"You do...? But aren't you..." Nick put on a mask of incomprehension.

"You're nosy, but you're not very bright, are you? You only wanted to meet Lycus, I bet."

"Well, huh, yeah."

The lamb gave a wide smile, it looked maternal but Nick could see it was full of condescending pity.

"Well, I suppose I can educate you a bit. After all, it's not like you were going to get out anyway."

Nick glanced at the gun wielding preys. Two of them raised their gaze to the ceiling with an annoyed and bored expression.

And you so love to hear yourself talk.

"I am Lycus."

Nick gasped in fake surprise. The lamb giggled again and took a bouncy step to face Nick.

"You- Bellwether is Lycus? It doesn't make any sense!"
And the academy award for best actor goes to...

"Or does it ? You saw the fox in the cell, he's the one that played the role in the video. He's drugged out of his mind, even if I doubt he really needed the drugs to believe the lies we fed him to begin with. Oh if you could see your face, I'm so glad at least one of you made it here. This is too good ! You even killed my ZPD mole, they'll make a hero out of her, and another nail in the foxes' coffin."

"Mole ? What ? She wasn't here to arrest Lycus ?"

"This officer... what was her name again ?" She asked to one of her henchmammal.

"FitzAntlers."

"Yes. That's it. It's sad that she's dead, she helped us a lot. At least, she gets to keep helping us. Anyway, I'm Lycus, and I hired a bunch of foxes to create chaos in the city, and do you know why ?"

Nick shook his head. He had trouble to keep himself from grinning. She was giving him everything again. Guess one would do the same mistake twice. She had going for her that Nick's disguise was good, and that, after all, he was a great actor.

"Simple. Create chaos, blame the foxes, and get them all arrested or cast out from the city, or even better, keep them and shun them. Young mammals are so easy to manipulate, you know ? They're idealistic, rebellious... Give them a cause and they'll do anything for you. Rinse and repeat with other predator species and we'll be rid of this city's cancer."

At that Nick frowned and growled.

"Here's my savage predator. But none of that if you don't want to end up ridden with holes. After all, I don't have to kill you, I need experiment subjects for my new formula."

Nick's eyes widened. "New formula ?"

"Of course. The Nighthowler was good, but we can do better. Something undetectable to target only predators. Maybe even in gas form. I even captured back my chemist, now it's only a matter of time before... But I'm digressing, and you'll see for yourself later. I want to talk more about Nicholas Wilde."

At first Nick had feared he'd need to think to buy time for backup to arrive, but not only was she giving away all of her plan, but she was losing the time she didn't know she lacked. Just as he had this thought, he saw Jack appear on the railway behind one the henchmen. He took aim to the mammals head and silently formulated a sentence. "Whenever you're ready."

"What does he have to do with this ?" Asked Nick with true interest in his voice.

"What does he- Everything you stupid fox ! He tricked me last time and this is the icing on the cake. I'm going to destroy his name. I'm going to make it so he'll have to leave the ZPD. And he's stuck in a coma, he won't even be able to defend himself. And when I'll be finished with him, it will be Judy's turn. She betrayed us prey, and she will pay for it."

The lamb had closed her fists and her hooves were shaking but she calmed herself, turning back to the fox.

"I'll have a TV brought to your cell, so you'll be able to see my surprise go live tonight. I can't wait
to see your face. This is going to be so perfect!"

"What are you going to do? Make the predators go savage?"

The lamb was about to answer but she heard the muffled gunfire of Jack's silenced gun, and the sound of a body hit the metal railing. Immediately, every mammal turned to the location of the bunny who jumped aside and above the railing, while shooting several bullets in the direction of his attackers. Nick leaped to his gun and rolled, his broken arm hit the floor, sending spikes of pain in his brain, but he caught his weapon and got up, ready to fire. He shot the other mammal on the railway who fell from his perch with a scream, cut short by a crack as he hit the floor. Bullets were flying around and Nick saw the lamb take shelter under a table.

Jack leaped from the table where he had landed and kicked a sheep in the face. As his enemy was falling backwards, he put two bullets in his forehead. Unfazed by the blood that splattered his paw, he rolled on the floor and skidded between the leg off the last attacker. He emptied the remaining bullet in his back while standing back up in a smooth motion, reloading his weapon.

The lamb had retrieved one of the gun Nick had thrown away and was aiming alternatively at the two of them.

"Bellwether, put the gun down." Ordered the buck.

"What? Who are you?" She asked in a shaking voice.

"Put the gun down and I guarantee your safety."

"What?"

He took out a plaque from under his vest. "I'm ZIA. Put down the gun."

"Her safety?" Asked Nick with a growl in his voice.

The lamb made a step back and aimed at the fox.

"You guarantee her safety? I'm not letting her leave this room." The vulpine's voice was way too calm in Jack's opinion.

"She needs to live. We need to interrogate her."

The lamb turned and aimed at the bunny, taking a second step back.

"No. She wounded Judy, mammals died because of her." Nick frowned and slowly exhaled. "Mike died because of her."

"Nick, stand down. This is ZIA business. We need her alive."

"Nick? You're Nick Wilde?" The gun shook in the lamb's hooves, she turned it back to the fox.

"Yes I am." He smiled. "I got you." He stepped toward her. "Twice." The lamb took another frightened step back. "And there won't be a third time."

"Don't come any closer."

"Nick, stand down or-"

Nick glanced at the bunny, which was now aiming at him. "Or what? you'll shoot me just so you
can interrogate her? And then what? You'll let her escape again?"

"We're the ZIA, she'll never see the light of day again. Trust me Nick, we need her alive."

"I don't care! She's too dangerous. She put the city at risk two times. I'm ending this now." His voice was resolute, and the bunny understood that he wouldn't wait another second.

"Nick, Stand down!"

"I'm not letting you lock me in again!" Hysterically shouted the lamb in a fit of panic.

"No, Don't-"

Multiple gunshots came from every direction.

A big bright light filled his field of vision.

And the world went dark.

The End

Of Part Two
He blinked a few times before finding his consciousness. The light was bright, way too bright and it sent spikes of pain in his brain. The light stopped shining but the pain didn't get away. The fox heard a strange voice talking.

"He's waking up ! Get the doctor !"

The light started to spin and the fox fell back into torpor.

The fox blinked again and looked around him. He was lying down in what seemed to be a hospital bed. Around him were a few faces that he didn't recognize. There was a raccoon wearing a blouse, which seemed to be around fifty, a female fox that looked slightly around the same age, maybe a bit older, a little fox, that had to be her son, or maybe grandson. And to his right, the most magnificent creature he ever had the chance to lay his eyes upon. It was a grey bunny who was standing up thanks to a pair of crutches.

Something was wrong.

She was a bunny. He found her cute, pretty even, but how could he a fox find a bunny beautiful ? It defied all logic.

His eyes lingered back to the crutches. The fox wanted to ask her to sit, fearing that she could impair the healing of her leg.

"Hello sir, can you hear me ?"

"Yeah." The sound of his own voice sent spikes of pain into his brain. He felt like it was echoing in his bones.

"Can you follow the pen please ?" The doctor moved the pen up and down, right and left. The fox followed it easily. "Good, do you know what day it is ?" The fox concentrated. What day was it ? He knew that, it was easy.

"The 18th of January ? A Tuesday I think ?"

He saw the doctor lift a brow. "What year ?"

The fox blinked a few times. "No idea."

"It's not the 18th of January. It's Saturday the 13th of April 2019, don't worry, memory loss often happens after cranial trauma. My name is doctor Procyon, we met before."

"Cranial... What happened to me ?"

"You were shot in the head. Luckily it was shot at an angle that caused it to bounce off. So while it
cracked the skull, we could find no direct sign of brain damage. But with this kind of wound, you can never be sure."

The fox made an effort to lift his paw and touched the place where the pain was the most present. It was bandaged and he didn't dare explore further. "How long was I out?"

"Six days. You should remember how you lost consciousness, or at least the event leading to it. We'll keep you in observation for a few days, in the meantime, please rest mister Wilde."

The fox lifted a brow. "Who ?"

"Mister Wilde. That's your name. You don't remember that ?"

"I don't remember... I don't remember anything. I don't remember my name. I mean... I'm sorry, I don't even know who those mammals are." He said, gesturing at the other people present.

He heard the bunny and female fox gasp, the little fox sighed.

"I'm Vivienne, I'm your mother."

"Are you sure ?" Asked bedridden fox. She answered with an expression of annoyed disbelief.

"You've dyed your fur grey, but I believe I could recognize my own fucking kit."

The fox lifted his paw "Alright, alright."

"I'm Finnick."

The little fox's deep voice surprised the grey fox but he didn't let it show.

"He's been your best friend for last twenty years." Explained the female fox who claimed to be his mother. "And we're dating. I don't want that to be a surprise."

The grey fox smiled. "Uhm, well I'm happy for you I guess. I mean you're happy together right ?"

The fennec fox smiled. "Very."

"Good. That's good. And you are ?" He asked the bunny. He didn't dare look at her in the eyes, and for two reasons. He knew he wouldn't be able to keep himself from blushing, bunnies shouldn't have the right to be that gorgeous. And the other reason was because she seemed so sad. He wasn't sure if he could keep himself together if he found himself meeting her gaze again.

He heard her take a deep breath.

... 

When the fox had woken up, she wanted nothing more than to hug him, but the doctor had to examine him first. Nick seemed to be okay, though he didn't remember the right date, but as the doctor had explained, temporary memory loss were common with concussions.

What she hadn't expected however was that he wouldn't remember his own name, that he wouldn't remember his family, or that he wouldn't remember her.

He had forgotten her. She was a stranger to him. For some reason he was avoiding her gaze. She could still see the perfect loving fox she knew, but the simple fact that he had forgotten her, that he may have forgotten his feelings for her, was unbearable. She had to fight with all her strength to not crumble.
And suddenly, he had asked her who she was.

She took a deep breath and choked down the tears that threatened to spill.

"I'm Judy. I'm your- I'm." She slowly exhaled and felt Vivienne's encouraging paw on her shoulder. "I'm your mate." She saw Nick's jaw fall in surprise. In other circumstances, it would have been funny, but she felt her tears rising again.

"I'm sorry miss... Judy, was it ? I don't remember." He wanted to say that he didn't see how a fox and a bunny could be mates, but kept it to himself. He didn't want to seem rude, and something inside him hated the idea of hurting her.

Judy glanced at the bedridden fox and at the other in the room. "I'm sorry. I have to- I just-" She wanted to run away. At first, she had feared he wouldn't wake up, even though the doctor was very optimistic. But now that he had, he couldn't remember her. It was almost worse. She made a few steps and left the room, outside she rested her back on the wall, letting her tears flow out. It was too much.

The sound of a step on her right made her turn her head. It was Blackfur and Wolford. The wolf was in a civilian clothes. He was off-duty for the week because of the fire he had sustained but otherwise seemed perfectly fine. His cracked ribs were healing slowly. Seeing Judy cry, his smile fell.

"Judy, is everything alright ?"

The bunny didn't know what to answer. Physically her fox was fine but- But she was being stupid. The doctor had warned her before he woke up that he could suffer memory loss. She swallowed back the tears before answering.

"Yeah. A bit overwhelmed that's all." She answered just as doctor Procyon appeared from Nick's room. He glanced at the two newcomers and greeted them with a little nod before turning back to the bunny.

"You were really reckless. I looked at your X-rays and everything seems still fine, but I can't guarantee it really is. The only way to know for sure is to wait for the healing to be complete. I had warned you to not overdo it."

"I'm sorry doctor."

"Don't apologize. I trust there was a good reason why you used that leg. I need to go now. Nick needs calm, but I also think your presence will be beneficial. And knowing you he can only get one of the two." The doctor gave her an encouraging smile and a pat on the shoulder before leaving to meet other patients.

As the two newcomers entered his room, the fox was slightly startled. One of them was wearing a ZPD uniform and something in his mind said that it could mean trouble for him. But the panda wearing it was calm and kind, she didn't appear to be here to arrest him. The wolf in civilian clothes was nice too, and also a police officer. According to them, the fox was one too. Nick couldn't help but laugh at that, a fox officer, it didn't make any sense, but they were serious. The bunny was his partner on the force too, and he gave her a surprised glance.

First he had learnt she was his mate, and then that they were both police officers. He didn't know what kind of world he lived in but one thing was for sure, it didn't make any sense.
Tuesday the 9th of April 2019

This was a bad day for the chief. And he was sure of one thing, it would almost certainly turn into a bad week. It was now one day since Lycus group had been arrested and they had found Bellwether's corpse along with a bunch of others in an old amusement park on the outskirt of the city. One of the corpses was officer FitzAntler's and until earlier that morning, he had no idea what the hell she was doing there.

The other mammals they had found there, were Doug Ramses and the fox named Alexander Vulpes. The sheep was cooperative, but he unfortunately knew nothing, the kidnapping was a total surprise for him. The fox seemed to know more, and could have provided some intel, if most of what he said hadn't been gibberish. They had found him in a cell, but he was convinced to be the one running the operations. Medical analyses had determined the poor guy was under a large variety of drugs and a dig in the files given by the two mammals Judy had met revealed a medical record indicating heavy psychological troubles. So that witness was most likely useless too.

The other fox that could shed light on this business had been in a coma for two days and the ZIA had cut off communications, and had gone back to their old habits. The chief had talked to the mayor about the necessity of a more cooperative relationship between the two organizations. Maybe even a possible restructuring. But he had little hope it would bring any change. And so, he was condemned to make sense of all this on his own. Well, with the help of his officers, but still, it was a big twisted bundle of knots.

Earlier that morning he had received an unmarked package, and given the state of the precinct, he hadn't found the time to take care of it before noon. Slumping on his seat with a sigh, he opened it. Inside it, was an usb stick and a pink notebook. He had put the stick on the side and opened the notebook. What he read almost made him spit his coffee. He knew the lamb liked to hear herself talk, but he didn't know she liked to write her life down. This was a goldmine. Good thing he had put gloves on to touch it because if her hooves prints were found on it, this was the proof to end all proofs.

He had read it quickly, leaving aside the parts where she detailed how the predators were disgusting creatures that weren't even worth the lead in the bullets she wanted to use to shoot them all. The journal detailed every part of her plan. She had left notes for her accomplice in the Nighthowler case on how to pull her out of prison. It seemed she had anticipated roughly where and when she would be put behind bars. At least she was lucid enough to see that her first plan could fall apart. There was details on the amount of money she had paid upfront to different crime bosses, and mainly Vladimir Zimovitch, to pull off her escape. She had been lucky that the wolf didn't give a shit about her goals and that he didn't leave her rot in her cell. He had even lent her three of his best mammals, a lion, a panther and a wolf.

At that, the buffalo had gritted his teeth, he knew the guys had no principles, but helping someone like Bellwether was a new low.

The notebook also mentioned a hacker and an ocelot mechanic, but like all predators that worked for her, she didn't trust them. He also found one of the few things he suspected. Her plan was to use mainly predators and have them conduct terrorist actions in the name of predators to instill hate toward them. Later in her notebook, was the mention of how they found Alexander. As one of the three mammals that Vlad had lent were conducting the recruitment, they had stumbled upon him in a squat. They had found fun how much he looked like Nicholas Wilde and that was why they had brought him to the lamb. The chief looked at the date. 3rd of February 2019. It seemed the idea of using him came after the
first attack, but she was already set on focusing her effort on the fox population. It also explained why no video was released for the first attacks.

The rest of the notebook was pretty straightforward. Details of her plans, evil gloating on how the authorities were so stupid, details of the other future plans to seize back power, more evil gloating about how she would make mayor Swinton pay for her leniency toward predators.

Her plan was crazy, convoluted, and the worst part was that without Nick, chances were, it would have succeeded.

The chief put the notebook in a sealed plastic bag and put it on the side. He then plugged the USB stick to his computer. The standard procedure should have been to send it to the forensic to have it analyzed, a peripheral coming from an unknown source could be dangerous. But the chief knew by now that it came from the ZIA, and bet that they wouldn't put a virus on an USB stick to fuck with his computer for shit and giggles.

The thing contained two audio files, one short and one long. The buffalo put on his headphones and listened to the longer one first. It was the entirety of Nick's wire feed on the day of Bellwether's death. There was enough proof to send the foxes that were with him during Doug's kidnapping in jail for a long time. At one point, the audio was abruptly cut, it was just after they had reached the place where Doug was to be taken by another team. He rewinded the feed and listened again. He was sure of it, there was a cut there, but he couldn't define if it was because Nick had closed the microphone or because the ZIA had cut the record. In any case, what followed was Nick in a van with a younger fox going to find out who or what was Lycus. The chief guessed the younger fox was the one they had found dead at the amusement park.

When he heard the gunfight with FitzAntlers, all blood left his face. Reading about his officer's betrayal was one thing, but witnessing it and hearing what she had cause was another. And then, there was the long discussion between Nick who played dumb and the lamb revealing all her plan. It explained how Lycus' group had discovered the witness protection car itinerary. He hadn't shared his concern for this earlier, it could have warned the mole that he was onto them. Well, now the mole was dead, good riddance. A new firefight ensued. In the end he put together the three way standoff. The hate he heard coming from Nick surprised him, but it was understandable. After the final gunfight, the audio continued rolling for a bit.

"You dumb fox. Why did you have to do that ?" A few light step noises. "Just as scratch. Gotta search this place and call for the paramedic. Let me just-" The was a strange scratching sound and the audio feed ended.

The puzzle fell back in place. The lamb hadn't been killed in the same firefight her henchmen had fallen. Nick had shot her in cold blood. Well maybe not cold, since she was armed, but he would have shot her anyway. It only shed a new light on the report from ballistic.

The chief launched the second audio record. It was only the discussion between Nick and the lamb, but cut short just after the first firefight.

The chief sighed. This was problematic. Though the lamb was armed, Nick hadn't shot her to defend himself. Then again, the buffalo preferred to know Bellwether would not be a threat anymore that being at the paws of the ZIA. Maybe it was even a better fate for her to be dead. Sure she still could have agents around, but without the head, the snake couldn't do much harm. The good news was that after the proof would be released to the public, every predator that supported Lycus were sure to do their best to be forgotten. No one wanted to be the fall guy.

But releasing the evidence would put Nick in a tight spot. The chief couldn't really say he had done the right thing, shooting a mammal, albeit one that didn't really deserve any pity. And he couldn't
be sure he wouldn't be blamed for his decision by the public. The shorter feed made no mention of Nick being Frank. It was just one nosy fox being there by coincidence, and being lucky enough to gun down five armed mammals on his own. And both records mentioned FitzAntlers' betrayal. Technically, Nick was still under the protection of the 'licence to kill' when he had shot the lamb.

The chief gave a dark chuckle and made a decision he never thought he would ever do.

He clicked on the longer audio recording and pushed the 'delete' key.

Only the short version would see the light of day.

Sometimes, the right thing to do was wrong on all sorts of levels.

But he didn't care.

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_Thursday the 11th of April 2019_

What the chief did care about however was the well-being of his officers and the city's state. There had been wounded mammals during the multiple arrests, but no casualties among the ZPD. A few officers had needed a trip to the hospital, including Wolford, but it was a light wound. Only cracked ribs, and though still in sick leave, he was already out. There were two mammals that worried him though.

The first was Nicholas Wilde. He was still unconscious after having been shot in the head. Said like that, it sounded ominous, but the bullet had bounced off the side of the skull, only resulting in a concussion and a small crack. He had been unconscious for five days now, but the doctors were confident that he would wake back up.

The other one he was worried about was Benjamin Clawhauser. The feline had done his job perfectly, shooting the van he was supposed to immobilize, but during the shootout, he had had to take down one of the attacker which was about to open fire on his colleagues. It had resulted in a deadly headshot.

Sadly, the pudgy cat wasn't build for the field, the chief had been worried when he had accepted to deploy him as a sniper, and his fears had played out. He had ordered the feline to stay home until he got better, putting him on sick leave for as long as he needed.

Usually, the chief wouldn't be worried, Clawhauser had a tendency to quickly bounce back from his bouts of morosity. But this was way more serious than a missed concert or a bad break up. He had actually shot dead another mammal. And though it was his duty to protect his colleagues and stop criminals, the chief knew enough about the cat that he would spend at least a few days down the gutter.

_A few days, right._ The chief gave another dark chuckle. The cat was a deeply kind mammal and practically a pacifist. Would he be able to come back from that? At least, since Wolford spent most of his time at home, there was someone there with the cat to keep him company, and report on his condition in case it got worse.

But still, he could help being worried. Looking down as his hoof, he saw it was trembling slightly. He frowned and closed his fist, pushing back those dark feelings.

Those were personal matters more than professionals, and the chief had other things to think about. For instance, he had already made public the cut audio footage and most mammals in the city were already wondering how a fox could have stumbled upon Bellwether's schemes and dispatched the attackers. Some speculated that he hadn't been alone and words had begun to spread about how
things had played out.

The official version was that a fox of unknown identity had been suspicious of the activity of his employer, namely Lycus, and intending to find out what exactly was going on, had uncovered that the foxes were used by Bellwether that had been falsely kidnapped. The authorities had revealed that Alexander Vulpes was in fact the drugged victim of things he couldn't even understand, and the foxes that had been captured and questioned were, for most of them, going to spend time in jail. The chief thought that it would result in a bit of unrest, but for once, the citizen of the city had impressed him. In an overall positive reaction, group support were created for the victims, and even some rallying for leniency toward some of the manipulated criminals.

Mayor Swinton didn't hesitate to use it, unveiling ahead of schedule her plans to put in place a better rehabilitation programs for ex-convicts, and several education reforms give a better access to education to the poorest citizens of the city.

He couldn't decide if it was only a political move or a genuine one. Good politicians could conciliate both and the swine had proven to be a formidable one.

In any case, the future was looking brighter than he could have imagined only a week prior. He only hoped that his officers would recover soon, and not only for the good of the city.
Part 3, Chapter 2

Part 3 : Hold Forever

Chapter 2 : Pink Robes, Black Thoughts.

Monday the 16th of April 2019

The situation had slowly turned from bad to worse. Wolford had hoped Ben's state would evolve in a week, and it had, but it had come from 'slightly down' to 'at the bottom of the pit'. At first, he had thought that it would be better for the pudgy cat to stay at home but now, maybe he should have gone back to work and let the daily routine sweep away the feline's dark thought.

The wolf made a quick recollection of the event that had led to this situation.

He had seen the panther get shot and killed, and soon after, another police patrol had arrived as backup. Then the paramedic had picked him up. He had spent most of the day at the hospital, and though he didn't feel too bad, aside from the lingering pain in his ribs, Blackfur had stayed with him, even though he could have managed on his own. When she had left in the evening, Clawhauser had come to check on him. He already looked down but was still putting on a brave front. They had talked a bit and then he had left to visit Judy and Nick.

The next day, the wolf had spent mostly alone, the doctors had no objection for him to get home, as long as someone would be here with him just in case and he stayed in a calm environment.

But once he had gotten back to his flat, instead of having his friend take care of him, the opposite happened. To be honest, the wolf had seen it coming. He had had to shoot a perp once before, and even though the shot had not been lethal, he had hated it. But if it had been, he knew he could have handled it. Clawhauser however didn't seem he could get past it. His mental state deteriorated day after day. He barely ate, spent his day in his bathrobe and slippers and didn't listen to music at all, which to the wolf was the biggest sign that he wasn't doing good.

Wolford was at loss on how to help his friend. He couldn't make him talk about what ate at him, he couldn't force him to see a psychologist. All he could do was look at him slowly dig his way down the pit.

But he still had a last card to play. He didn't really like to set foot in the private life of other mammals, though he usually did so by accident, but what had to be done, had to be done.

He dialed the number and hoped for the best.

... 

The pudgy cat rolled out of his bed, not really knowing why. It was already past ten, way later than when he had to wake up to got to work. Part of him wanted to put on his uniform and actually go to work, but the simple idea of calling himself a cop made him want to crawl back under the blanket and never come out again.

He put on the pink gazelle bathrobe and the pink slippers and made his way to the kitchen. He opened the fridge looked inside, sighed and closed it back. Near it was a box of donuts MacHorn had bought the day prior. He opened it, looked at the glazed bakeries, sighed and closed back the box. A glass of water would do.
He slumped on the large couch, staring at the TV. For a few seconds, he thought about extending the arm to reach the remote. His mind was blank, and he intended to keep it that way. Each time his mind fixated on something, by some sort of convoluted way, it went back to the panther, the pull of the trigger, the bullet killing a mammal. He was a cop, he was supposed to help people, not kill them.

It was usually at this hour that Wolford got up when he was off-duty. For the last four days, he came out of his room to find the cheetah on the couch to say the exact same thing. 'You know, it works better when you actually turn it on.' He would then sit near the cat and propose to cook him something, or to talk about what he was thinking about. The cat wouldn't answer and instead tried to make his face disappear in the fold of his neck. But the wolf wasn't deterred and would talk alone, making the question and the answers, trying without pause to cheer up the cat. Maybe he'd get a half-smile or some sort of movement.

But that day, the wolf didn't come out of his room. That was okay, the cat didn't really need the company. He was alright. He simply needed to not think about anything. As long as he watched the black TV screen, everything would be fine. Nothing to worry about.

Suddenly, the bell rang. It was strange, because mammals needed to use the intercom to get inside the building. Well, Wolford would surely go get the door. The bell rang again. Clawhauser lifted a brow. Didn't Wolford hear the bell ? Well, he was being a bit unfair. They both lived here, and it wasn't the wolf's prerogative to answer the door.

The cat grumbled while hobbling to the door, wondering where the wolf could be. Maybe he had gone out ? Or he was sleeping so deeply that he had heard anything. Well it made no difference. Clawhauser went to the door and opened it.

"Heyyyy big brother !"

The cat was surprised by the slender silhouette that had leapt in his arms, not that his arms where open to hug her, he had recoiled in surprise before recognizing his sister.

"Hey little sis !" He tried to greet with the same cheerfulness. "Long time no see."

She took a step back to observe him. He saw her lift a brow but before she could say anything he motioned her to get into the apartment.

"So, how are you doing ? Anything new ?" He asked, before she could.

"Oh, I'm good. I've been selected for the pawlympics training program."

"No kidding ? That's neat !"

"Isn't it ?"

"How fast can you go now ? Have you crossed the one hundred kilometres-per-hour wall ?"

"Pulverized it two weeks ago. Top speed at one hundred and seven. But I'm sure I can do better."

"I'm sure you will."

The female cheetah looked at her brother detailing his looks again. "How are you doing ?"

"Oh, I'm fine. I'm taking a bit of a vacation." He looked away. He felt a bit ashamed of himself, following the end of Lycus' case, the precinct was completely understaffed with all the work that
had to be done. But he didn't want to admit to his sister that he was afraid to get back in uniform.

"Are you ? That's great, you work too much. I saw the police operation on TV, I'm glad you have a desk work otherwise I would have been so scared for you."

"Huh. Yeah, I'm lucky I guess. Let's not stay in the corridor. Do you want something to drink ?"

"A glass of water will do."

He went to the kitchen and brought the glass back to her. He sat next to her on the couch and played with his thumbs.

"How are you doing really ?"

"Good. I'm good."

She lifted a brow in disbelief. "Really ?"

"Really."

She leaned toward him and took his paw into hers. "Do you know why I'm here Ben ?"

"You were in the neighborhood and wanted to surprise your favorite big brother ?"

"Almost but not quite. Your friend Wolford called me. Said you needed help, that you were a bit depressed."

The fat cat looked at his paws. He knew he was depressed, but he didn't know what to do about it. Usually he bounced back easily but this time, the thing didn't leave. It was in his head when he woke up, when was awake, when he got to sleep. He even dreamed about it.

"Maybe I'm a bit depressed. Don't worry about it, I'll be okay."

"Did you eat breakfast ?"

"No."

"Did you have dinner yesterday evening ?"

"… No."

"And you say you're okay. Ben, your colleague wouldn't have called me over nothing. Please, explain to me what is happening."

"It's police business. I can't really talk about it."

"Ben, when did that ever stop you from telling me anything ?"

It did a lot of time actually. Oh sure he had sometimes spilled her things that were supposed to be kept under wrap, but the big stuff, he had never talked about. But this wasn't the big stuff. It wasn't even a secret. He simply didn't want to explain to her that he had killed someone.

"I don't want to talk about it."

"Now you're really worrying me, Ben. What happened to you ?"

The cat officer shook his head and looked away.
"Is it something you did?"

The cat froze.

"Whatever you did, I'm sure it can't be that bad." She put a paw on his shoulder and felt he was shaking. "Ben, what happened?" She asked as gently as she could.

The male cheetah closed his eyes. He didn't her to now, but she had asked, and he didn't want secrets between them. "I killed someone."

He heard a slow gasp coming from his sister. "Wha- who-"

"S-some panther in the street." He didn't want to give details, it would be like trying to find an excuse. But there was none, in the heat of the moment he had deliberately aimed his shot to be lethal.

"How? Why?"

He heard himself speak from afar, like he had left his own body. "You know the big swipe a few days ago, I was on the field. On a roof with a rifle. There was this panther that had two of my colleagues pinned down. I aimed, I shot, and I just killed her. Just like that." He swallowed down the rising tears. "It- It shouldn't be that easy."

She cupped his chin with her paw and lifted her head up to look him in the eyes. "You saved your colleagues lives, you shot a criminal, there is nothing to feel guilty about. You had no other choice."

"You don't get it!" He almost shouted with anger. "I had a choice. I saw the culprit jump on the car, I had time to aim! I was scared and angry. He was going to shoot my friends! At that moment I- I wanted-"

His sister had recoiled a bit. She had never seen him in that state. She had seen the sadness yes, but Ben never got angry.

"Sorry. I'm scaring you. I'm sorry." The cat slumped back on the couch. "I could have aimed for the arm or the legs. I chose the head." He looked into middle-space, lifting his arm and pointing a finger. "Like pointing and clicking." The arm slumped down and he choked as sob.

The younger cheetah grabbed her brother by the shoulder and pulled, making him roll and putting his head on her thighs. "It's not your fault."

"Yes it is. I don't deserve this uniform." Th sobbing continues, the cat's body shaking from the bawling.

"Don't say things like that."

"I shouldn't be a cop."

"Nonsense. You're a great cop."

"Am I? The only time I go into the field and I- I..."

"Shh, you're okay. Let go. Just let go alright? I'm not moving from here. No one's blaming you."

"I'm a monster."

"No you're not. You're my brother. You're my perfect big brother."
She stroke his head that she had placed on her crossed leg, slowly repeating "My perfect big brother" in a soothing tone.
The slow caress was like a slow lull, the sleep that had fled him suddenly crashed like a tidal wave.
For the first time in a week, the cat slept without dreaming about the mammal he had killed.

By his standard, the nap wasn't that long but when he woke up, he saw his sister looking at him, trying to hide a wince. "Sis ? What are you- Oh." The event slowly came back to his mind. He straightened himself up and heard her exhale slowly. "Heavy head?"

"Yeah, I miscalculated this." She smiled.
"Sorry."
"No problem. Are you hungry ? It's noon and I'm kind of famished."
The pudgy cat blinked a few times and noticed that he was in fact hungry. "I think I could eat."
"Great !" She made her way to the kitchen, followed by the slow steps of his brother. She glanced at him to check how he was doing after his nap. He wasn't out of the wood yet, far from it, really. But opening up and talking about what was bothering him had done him a bit of good.

She checked the fridge and took a bit of everything, hoping she wasn't taking too much of his flatmates's stuff.
"What are you making ?"
"What are we making ? A total improvisation."
"Pasta'n'stuff ?"
"Yep."

There was eggs, cream, tomatoes, chicken, eggplants, and all sorts of other stuff that the chubby feline didn't have the time to identify. He lifted a brow, wondering what kind of meal she hoped to make with that.

Quickly, the water was set to boil, with a pinch of salt to make it quicker. He peeled and sliced the eggplant and glanced at his sister as she was cutting the chicken breast in uneven bits. The younger cheetah had a lot of qualities but she was a walking nightmare in the kitchen. She was about to cut another bit of chicken when he caught her paw.

"What ?"
"Your fingers."
"Oh."
"Always keep them folded, knuckles against the blade to guide the knife or the thing you're cutting. I'll do that go do- um-" He glanced around to find her something less dangerous to do. "Stir the water."

He took her place and she gave him a smiling side-glance. The assertive behaviour in the kitchen was a good start, it showed a bit of confidence. Stirring the water though, was he serious ? The pasta weren't even in the pot yet. Well, the water was boiling, so she might as well put them in. She
measured how much were needed for two mammals and put them in. It didn't seem enough, so she added a pawful. If there was too much, there would be food for later.

Suddenly the intercom rang.

"Jenny, could you get it? It's probably Wolford coming back."

The male cheetah was busy trying to make some sort of sauce with the cream and a bunch of different aromatic herbs while the chicken had begun cooking in a pan. She bounced to the door and looked at intercom's screen. It wasn't Wolford. The guy was wearing a uniform and holding a bouquet of flower. He was tall and muscular. She recognized the unexpected visitor. This was going to be good. She opened the door and came back to kitchen, giving her brother a sly look.

"I didn't know you had a new boyfriend."

"A what? What do you mean?"

"A big guy wearing a uniform, muscular just like you like them, with a bouquet." She was still smiling.

A guy with a uniform? Muscular? If she thought it could be his boyfriend, it was probably a feline, so Fangmeyer? They were friends, but boyfriend, it was a bit of a leap. Maybe the tiger was worried and had come to check on him.

"Don't be silly sis, it's probably just Fangmeyer taking time to check on me. It's nice of him. Maybe you could find a pitcher for the bouquet? I don't have any vase."

At that moment the doorbell rang. His sister went to open the door and went back ahead with the same sly smile. "You're sure he's not your boyfriend? Because I really think you'd look cute together."

The cheetah chuckled, hearing the scoff coming from the corner of the wall. Seemed Fangmeyer hadn't seen the joke coming. "Don't tease him, he's more shy than he wants others to b-"

But it wasn't Fangmeyer. The cheetah's eyes widened and he let the spoon fall on the ground.

"Chief?" His voice had instantly turned to meek and he uselessly hoped the chief hadn't heard what he had said. One of his brows was slightly raised, and there was something that looked like the corner of a smile on his mouth. Or a scowl. One of the two, the cat really couldn't tell.

The cat started to speak as fast as he could to clear the misunderstanding.

"My sisters said that my new boyfriend was at the door and I thought it was Fangmeyer because you know he was feline too and it could be why she sup... ether but I'm not seeing anyone at the moment and I'm not interested in Fangmeyer either and you know I wouldn't make this kind of joke about you...

The cape buffalo scoffed again and the feline stopped talking. He really hoped his fur was thick enough to hide how red his face was by now. He tried to glance at his sister for support but she had disappeared from the kitchen.

The chief lifted a hoof. "What you say or do in your downtime is your business, I'm not here to judge." The cat was about to try to explain himself again but the chief stopped him by giving him the bouquet of flower. "Wolford told me how bad you were. Well he told it to those who asked. I hope flowers are a good enough get-well gift."

Clawhauser was suddenly acutely aware that he was wearing a pink Gazelle bathrobe in front of the chief. Though he was wearing underwear he still felt a lot more naked than he should.

The cat nodded his head with an embarrassed smile and took the flower. He smelled them. He
didn't know the first thing about flowers but they smelled good. He looked back at chief Bogo who was scratching the back of his head and seem to try and look away. "Weren't you cooking ?"

"Oh ! Yes I was." He looked back at the multiple pans and pots that were still on the stove, he glanced back at the flower. He didn't know if he should give them back to the chief or get back to cooking. That was the moment Jenny chose to come back with a bucket half-full of water.

"Sorry, didn't find a pitcher." She said, way to happily. She took the bouquet and carefully put it the bucket, she then turned to the chief. "You're chief Bogo right ?" She said extending a paw.

"Adrian Bogo, yes. You must be Jennifer Clawhauser." He shook the paw.

"So my brother does talk about me."

For an answer, she got a light scowl-smile.

"Well, I'll let you two talk. I'm sure Ben can handle talking and cooking at the same time. I'll set up the table. Are you staying Mr Bogo ?"

"I'm afraid I can't. I still got a lot of work to do and not much time to spend here."

"What a shame." She gave a playful glance at her brother. "A shame indeed." And went away.

Clawhauser watched her get away and turned back to the stove to hide his blushing face. "It's nice of you to come check on me sir."

He heard the chief approach from behind and had to fight himself to not freeze. He wondered if he was pissed at the joke or not.

The cape buffalo dipped the tip of a hoof in the sauce the cat was making. "Tastes nice."

"I should add bayleaf. Maybe some thyme. It will have to sit a bit more... But I suppose you've not come here to talk about cooking. Did Wolford advise you to come today ?"

"No, it was a kind of spur of the moment. I came because of your absence."

The cat's shoulder slumped a bit. "Sorry."

"I don't mean it like that. I know you're taking what happened a bit hard. I wanted to be sure you didn't take it... Too hard."

The cat put lids on the pot where was the sauce and turned down the fire under the chicken. He purposely avoided the chief's look and the buffalo noticed it.

"How are you doing, Ben ?"

"I'm good."

"If you were, I'd have already requested your presence back at the precinct. You know I expect honesty from my subordinates." The cat's shoulder fell a bit more and the chief guessed that maybe he was being too pushy. "Sorry. I didn't mean to say you were dishonest with me. I know this is a difficult situation. I'm not very good with the social side of my job. That's usually why I have MacHorn."

Was that a joke ? The cat lifted his gaze to look at the chief's expression. This time, he was sure there was a smile there. The cat smiled in turn and began cleaning the work surface. He needed the few seconds it required to collect his thoughts.
"I'm not good. The shooting. Me kill-" He took a deep breath. "-killing the panther, it just plays in my head in a loop."

"You know it's not your fault."

"Do you think so ? You know how I can aim. I purposely shot where I did. I wasn't trying to stop her, I was trying to-"

The chief leaned forward and put his hoof on the cat's shaking shoulder, stopping him in his tracks. "Most of the time, when we take a split-second decision, it's true there is a thought-process behind it, but do you honestly believe you killed the panther on purpose ?"

"I do."

"Let me ask this another way. If you did have more than a split-second to make that decision, do you think you would have done things a different way ?"

The cheetah looked at the floor while playing with his paws.

"The truth is, you can't know with certainty, and neither can I, though I have my own theory. Here is what I came to tell you : Do not second guess yourself. Do not fall into the trap of the 'what ifs'. You took a decision, and given that it saved two of your colleagues lives, it was the right one. I know it will take time to come to term with what happened, so take all the time you need. If you think you need psychological support, the ZPD can arrange to cover part of the costs."

The medical and psychological expense was one of the new mayor Swinton's rulings. After Lycus' case, it seemed the city had noticed its officers weren't efficiently protected and helped.

"Thanks chief."

The cat turned away and emptied the pasta pot in a skimmer, giving an excuse to hide his face again and regain his composure.

"You're welcome." The chief took out his phone and looked at the time. "I need to leave. Ben, one last thing."

"Yes ?"

"All your colleagues, me included are looking forward to have you back."

"Tell them I look forward to being back. I'm just not ready yet."

"Take all the time you need. How you feel is important." The chief took a step back. "I need to get back to work. Have a good day."

"Thanks sir. Have a nice day too."

As the chief left the flat, Jenny came back to the kitchen. "The table is set up. Too bad he didn't stay." Her brother didn't answer. "Are you alright ?"

"Why did you say my 'boyfriend' was at the door ? It was so embarrassing !"

"I simply made a logical assumption. Hunk plus bouquet equals boyfriend in my book."

"You did it on purpose. You perfectly knew who he was and that he wasn't my boyfriend."

"What ? Couldn't he be ?"
"No! Of course not!"

She approached to smell the food that was cooking and gave him a side glance. "Is it because he's not a feline?"

"You know I don't care about that. He's the chief! Chief Bogo? Main chief of the ZPD? My boss? Does that ring a bell?" He turned back at the stove. The meal was almost done. He took the plates his sister had brought and filled them while grumbling incoherently.

"And that's what's stopping you? The whole ZPD chief thing?"

"Of course it is."

"The only thing stopping you?"

The cat almost dropped the plates. "Wha-"

"I said is it-"

"I perfectly heard you. I am not having this conversation."

"I'm not hearing a no."

Red coming up to his cheeks, he put her plate right under her nose. She couldn't not smell it. It smelled heavenly.

"If you want what is on this plate, you will drop the matter right now." He smiled

Really assertive brother. It seemed the chief's visit had done him good too. She pondered if skipping that meal was worth the teasing but it really wasn't, the food was mouth-watering.

"To be continued, then?" She proposed.

"Nope. Show cancelled."
Several mammals had come to visit the fox during his time at the hospital. He couldn't remember all their names, but there was a tiger named Anand Fangmeyer, two rhinos, one MacHorn, and one Rhinowitz, both of them as stern as the other, an elephant, Francine Somethington… All of those were officers. Some of them seemed really surprised that his arm was broken, wondering how it could have happened. He didn't answer, since he didn't know either. He also received the visit of a shrew who called himself Mr Big, which he found hilarious but he kept himself from laughing. He had come along with a female shrew, Fru-Fru, which was his daughter and had a shrilling voice. A large stern polar bear was carrying them, which only highlighted their little size. It didn't take him long to put together that the shrew was some sort of criminal, but Judy, the one that was supposed to be his mate, and a ZPD officer, didn't seem to mind. If anything, they seemed to be good friend.

Judy had talked to him a lot about everyone. For instance, him and Fangmeyer were mainly the ones that put the wagers in place at the precinct. Him and Wolford had a similar sense of humour. He was also the godfather of one of Fru-Fru's children.

She told him about how they met and how she had coerced him into helping her. It made him frown but he didn't get angry. She spared him no detail and he had come to the conclusion that he had acted as a bit of an ass toward her, but in the end they had stopped the lamb named Bellwether. The name ringed a bell, pun intended, but he couldn't place it.

Next she told him on how he had gone to the academy and gotten his badge. They had been partners for a while and gotten together when he had come to declare at Bunny Burrows. She was smiling when telling the story, and the fox thought that she should always be smiling. She was so much cuter and it made him happy to see her like that.

The story went downhill after she moved in with him. They had been shot during an altercation and it was the reason why her leg wasn't working properly for now. She showed him the scar on his own body, where the bullet had cracked his ribs.

Then she explained that the reason why he was grey, was because he had gone undercover. She didn't remember all the details after that, because she wasn't with him, so she promised that she would bring him hers and Blackfur's reports, to jog his memory.

He had seen on TV about how Bellwether had been killed a few days prior by some fox, and he had figured out that he was probably the one to have done so. But he didn't feel any guilt or satisfaction about it. He didn't feel like he had done it at all.

Finally it was the day he was authorized to leave the hospital. The doctor gave him a few recommendations, he'd have to avoid physical activities, especially those involving moving his head and neck too much. He'd also have to come back to have his broken arm checked up, but it seemed the cracked bone was healing properly. Apart from that, he was pretty much free to do whatever he wanted. He was glad because he didn't like the place, but as he set the first foot outside, next to the bunny, he asked her.
"This is all very good, but where are we going ?"
The bunny seemed way more tired than when they had first met, when he had woken up. Something told him that she had cried a lot, and he hoped that it wasn't his fault.

"Our flat is a few minutes away. Finnick should come pick us up."
The fox glanced at the bunny who was looking away, nervously playing with one of her ears. He wanted to say to her that he was sorry he didn't remember her. She seemed so sad each time she looked at him that sometimes he wanted to pretend he had his memory back, but he knew that it would only make it worse.
The fennec arrived and they sat on the two passenger seat on front.

"Hi guys, how are you doing ?"
"Fine." Answered Nick.

"How's the..." Asked the small vulpine, pointing at his head.

"Still nothing."

"Don't worry, it'll come back." It seemed he was talking to the fox as much a he was talking to the bunny.

The trip was done in silence, the fox could feel the growing sadness inside the bunny. They arrived and took the elevator up, arriving to the sixth level. The bunny went to the stairs and carefully climbed the first step.

"Doesn't the elevator go higher ?"

"Nope. The last two floors must be climbed on foot."

"You're going to hurt yourself."

The bunny glanced back and tried to climb the next step. "I'll be okay." In fact, the doctor deemed a good thing that she had to climb stairs. As long as she did it slowly, it would help give strength back to her leg muscles in preparation for the heavy reeducation she would undertake later.
The fox sighed, went to her and lifted her up with his valid arm. She was surprisingly light. "Wha-"

He avoided her gaze while going up, feeling his face heat up. "If I'm your mate, I suppose you're okay with me helping you. Hold on to your crutches."
Judy couldn't keep herself from smiling. She knew his memories hadn't come back but she felt good in his arms. She breathed his musk, a thing that she hadn't done for way too long. For the few seconds the climb took, everything felt right. To her surprise, he didn't put her down at the end of the stairs, but carried her to the door.

She took the keys from her pocket and opened it. He entered and like he had done that before, slammed the door with a foot.

He looked at the place and didn't recognize it. It was an ordinary flat, there was a couch and a TV in front of it. The kitchen, like the rest was clean. He sat the bunny on the couch and scratched his chin.

"You didn't have to carry me there."

"You seemed tired. And sad. And well..." He looked at her and she was looking at him with
curiosity. "You seemed like you could use the physical affection." He casually walked to a window and opened it. The truth was, he was trying to hide his blush. The complete truth was, he wanted to be close to her too, but as long as he didn't have his memory back, it seemed dishonest. He wasn't the fox she loved, he was basically no one. A fox with a blank memory, in a life that didn't seem to be his.

He contemplated the city, its landscape, and didn't recognize it either. "It's strange you know? I know how to talk, to count, to do math. I know what a car is, I think I even know how to drive one. But this city, the people, I don't know them." He turned to her and saw that tears had come to her eyes. "I'm sorry."

"About what?" Smiled the doe. "It's not your fault you got shot in the head."

"I'm sorry that I don't remember you. I see it makes you sad, but I think I don't want you to be sad."

"That's okay, it'll come back."

The fox slumped near her on the couch, mumbling something.

"What?"

"What if it doesn't come back?"

"It will." She didn't want to think about what would happen if it didn't. It was too hard, she didn't want him to be a stranger. He was her fox. She was his bunny.

"But what if it doesn't? I can't just impose my presence in your life. If my memory doesn't come back, I'm no one. I wouldn't really be your mate."

"Memory or not, I want your presence in my life. And if you don't remember me, I'll make you fall for me again, even if it takes years." She had turned to him and put a paw on his. "I know I'm no one to you right now. I know it's hard, and it's not your thing to trust strangers, or at least it wasn't before you lost your memory, but please trust me. I'll do everything I can to help you."

The fox swallowed hard and hugged her before realizing what he was doing. When he did, he pulled away. She let him, but he could see she didn't want to break the contact. "Sorry. I just- It felt like the thing to do."

The tear she had held back until they had arrived began flowing out.

"Please don't cry." The fox took the tissue box that was on the coffee table.

"I'm s-sorry. I just- I can't." The bunny was overwhelmed by conflicting emotions, most of which she couldn't even name. The fox tried to wipe her tears, but there clearly wasn't enough tissue in the box. She looked up at him and saw that him too was on the verge of tears.

"I'm sorry I'm making you sad."

The bunny shook her head. "That's okay, you know us bunny, always emotional." She tried to put on a brave face, but it was ruined by the tears that kept running from her eyes.

"I can't bear to see you like this." The fox bit his lips, and hugged her again, it was the only thing he thought about that he could comfort her. He felt the tears wet his shirt and his chest through it. They pulled apart, their faces ending up a few inches from each other.

"I know you. I know that I know you." He sobbed. "I want to remember. Why can't I remember? I
feel like you're the best thing in my life."

"I know you're the best in mine. I love you."

"I love you too." He knew it was true, but his memories remained locked away.

She leaned slowly toward him, fearing that he would pull away. But he didn't. Their lips met. He felt the love in her kiss and duplicated it. It felt so natural, so right. Suddenly the pain in his head was back, unbearable, but he didn't want to break the contact. He never wanted to. It was the happiest he had been in a long time. The pain slowly receded and the kiss broke while she pulled away.

"That would have been really awkward if my memory hadn't come back, hey Carrots?" The fox chuckled. She looked at him and giggled too.

"You remember?"

"I think I need another couple of kisses just to be sure."

She leaped forward and the fox stumbled back under a passionate kiss. It was a good thing his the cast around his arm protected it. When she was done and while he took his breath back she said "That's what you get for worrying me so much." And unceremoniously, she buried her face in his chest.

"I'm fine with that." He answered, while stroking her ears. "Do you think it's usual for the prince to get his memory back after the princess' kiss?"

"You remember what the doc said, violent emotions can sometimes trigger the memories' return." Came her voice, muffled by his fur.

"It begs the question: what did you intend to do if a kiss wasn't enough."

She looked up with a naughty grin. "Wouldn't you like to know?"

The fox innocently played with one of her ears. "I think my memory is still a bit hazy."

She crawled up and kissed his snout while unbuttoning his shirt. "For medical purpose then."

"Clever bunny."

"Sly fox."

His sister had proposed him to go out but he didn't want to go outside. He was perfectly fine inside and didn't feel ready to face the world yet. They spent their day looking at musicals which usually could cheer him up. His mood had slightly fallen during the afternoon but he could at last start to believe he could actually get back from what he had done.

It was around seven when Jenny prepared to leave.

"You know, you could stay sleep here. The couch is big enough for you to sleep on it. Or we could even share the bed." Proposed the pudgy feline.

"Aren't you a bit old to have a sleepover?" She asked tauntingly.
"No, I'm not. So?"

"Well, no I can't really stay to sleep here. I already skipped class today, if I stay here, I know I won't wake up and I'll miss class tomorrow too."

"Wait, you skipped school?"

"It's Monday, of course I skipped. Don't worry, I'll catch up on what I missed. It was an emergency, I'm glad I came. And it had been too long since we had seen each other."

The male cheetah hugged his sister. "I'm glad you came too. It really helped me. You take care, and be good in school."

"I won't make foolish promises. I love you big brother, don't hesitate to call if you need someone to talk to."

He had accompanied her to ground level and went back up. He entered his room and opened the closet. He pulled his uniform and looked at it. It was strange to see it a week later, but he didn't feel ready yet. But he'd get there.

The next week passed quickly enough, and soon Wolford was back to work. Without anyone else in the flat, the feline found himself seeking company, so he went out. He visited clothes and records stores but he didn't feel in the mood to buy anything. He just window shopped. He passed a poster and went back a few steps. There was going to be a new Gazelle concert in a few months, and it was already advertised. It would be nice to go, maybe he could convince Judy to go with him, she would get Nick to come too. The more they would be to go the more fun it would be. He smiled, imagining himself ask the chief to go. He knew the buffalo was a closet fan, it was maybe the only side of him that wasn't so focused and serious. The pudgy cat had to repress a chuckle imagining the chief trying to dance, it was something that simply wasn't possible.

Monday the 23rd of April 2019

That morning, the cat woke up with a newfound resolution. He knew it wasn't that strong, so he had to act before having the chance to change his mind. He quickly showered and dried himself, took a quick breakfast and went back to his room. The uniform was still there. The feline took an inspiration and dressed up, stopping when it came to put on the belt with his service weapon. He unholstered it and felt his paw shaking. Quickly he put it back in place and put on the belt, feeling the weight of the weapon at his side. He went to look at himself in his mirror and noticed he actually had missed putting on the uniform. It only strengthened his resolution and he left the flat. He knew that he should have informed Precinct One he had decided to come but he hadn't for several reasons. One, he wasn't sure he could actually be back yet, this was actually at test flight. Two, if he had, they have given him some sort of schedule or rendez-vous and he wanted this to happen in his time. Three, he had something to try, and preferred to be relatively alone to do it.

He turned at the corner of the last street before arriving to ZPD building. When he found himself in front of it, he took a step back, wondering if it was a good idea to come back right now. He didn't know if he was ready. He didn't feel ready. But then again, he knew that there were few chances that he would ever feel ready without forcing himself a bit.

Slowly exhaling, he closed the few dozen meters separating him from the door and entered, trying to be as discreet as the large hallway permitted. Looking around, he saw Clawfith at the front desk. The wolverine looked at him with surprise and the cat quickly came to greet him before he could shout his name across the hallway.
"Hey Clawfith, how are you doing?"

"Good, how are you? Better?"

"I don't know yet. This is kind of a test run, I'm not sure if I'm ready yet, so..."

"Okay, I'll keep you being here quiet. I'll have to inform the chief though."

The cat didn't really want the chief to know he was in the precinct, but he couldn't ask the wolverine to hide his presence, it would at least earn him a stern lecture.

The gods knew chief Bogo's stern lectures were terrifying.

And with what he was about to try, maybe he would get one.

"Alright. I'm just going for a stroll in the hallway for now."

"Okay. Call if you need anything."

Luckily the cat didn't cross anyone's path, making his way to his destination.

Facing the door he was looking for, he took a long deep breath. This was going to be hard, but the violent treatment was often the most effective. He hoped. He opened the door and the scent of powder and fire went to his nose. From where he was, behind the padded soundproof walls, he could already hear the gunfire. Other officers were here. He knew he wasn't going to be alone.

A few seconds later, he was wearing the shooting-range's noise-canceling earphones and had gone to a box. He crossed Snarlov's path that looked at him incredulously. The cat waved and the white bear waved in turn.

At his box, the cat put the gun on the little table, put a target in place and slowly inhaled. He wasn't nervous. He was terrified. He wasn't even touching his gun and his heart was already pounding way too fast. He had to rest his paw on the table to calm down and in a swift motion he took the gun, put in a magazine and armed it. The familiar weight in his hand did nothing to calm him down.

He tried to lift up the gun but it felt like it weighed a ton. He looked around, feeling like he was observed and he was. Snarlov and Fangmeyer were looking at him from behind. He blocked them out and went back to his concentration.

The goal was to shoot the target. At least his paws weren't shaking. Well, not too much. Yet.

This time, he could lift up the gun to aim at the target. He noticed an overprint on the target. Squinting his eyes he recognized it was the silhouette of a panther. The cat officer noticed his paws were shaking hard. With short breaths he brought the gun down, white noise invading his brain. For a few seconds he wondered if he wasn't going to pass out.

When the white noise disappeared, there weren't any gunshot noises anymore. He looked behind himself fearing all the officers had gathered to look at him shoot. But there was only one mammal. The chief was here, leaning against the door, arms crossed with a neutral expression. All other officers had cleared the room.

Clawhauser turned quickly back to his target. He was going to be lectured, he just knew it. At least, he should shoot at the target to save face. He aimed again and felt his paw shake. No matter, even in this state, he knew that he could acquire his target. The shot would be scattered and imprecise
but it was doable. Maybe. He felt tears rising up but kept them at bay. The fear was still there, more present than ever, and the chief's presence didn't really help either.

He put a finger on the trigger and felt dizzy. It wasn't good. A first tear rolled down. He insisted and tried to pull but his finger wouldn't move. Gritting his teeth he tried to put all his might in his shaking paw. It wasn't working. It wasn't going to work. The gun went down and he let his head slump forward, defeated. It was the only physical part of his job that he could do, and now he couldn't do it anymore. He wanted to be a cop, he wanted to come back, but he wouldn't be able to. A hoof went to rest on his shoulder. The cat pulled the headphones from his ears. If the chief was going to lecture him, the sooner the better.

"You don't have to push yourself that hard." The chief's voice was gentle, more than the cat was used to. "You can try again later."

"I don't know if I'll have the courage later."

The chief didn't respond.

"If I can't shoot anymore, I will have to stop being a cop. It's the only thing that was keeping me in the force with my physical performances. And now it's gone." The tears were pouring again. "I don't want to stop being a cop, sir. I need to be able to shoot. I'll spend the week here if I have to but I'll pull that trigger." The cat brought the gun up. It started shaking. He put the finger on the trigger and the shaking doubled.

"Clawhauser, stop."

"I have to do this."

"Stop, please. You'll hurt yourself."

"No!" Shouted the cat. "I need to do this. I need to be able to do this."

"Alright."

The chief hoof left his subordinate's shoulder. The cat heard the steps move away and suddenly felt incredibly lonely. When the chief reached the door and it slammed, he thought he was alone, and was surprised when he heard it lock. He turned and the chief approached with and expression of focused determination. Clawhauser almost took a step back.

"Take aim."

The feline nodded, put back the headset on and lifted his weapon toward the target. His paws shook again, and even before putting his finger on the trigger, he knew it wasn't going to work. A feeling of defeat overwhelmed him. He was going to put the gun back down when he felt the chief’s presence way closer. A large arm went around his left and put itself under his left arm, supporting it and keeping it in place. The chief had leaned and the feline could feel his chest against his back. He had to try real hard and stay focused on the target. His paws were still shaking but more faintly. He tried to put the finger but his vision started to blur and so he pulled it back. Slowly, the chiefs right arm came and took his. Through the soundproof earphone, he heard the chief say. "Shake your head if you need to stop."

The cat nodded in agreement.

Ever so gently, the chief's hoof put the cat's finger on the trigger. The shaking was now a bit
stronger but it was manageable. For a few seconds, the panther overprint appeared again and Clawhauser almost shook his head. He clenched his teeth and the image disappeared. He understood that the chief wouldn't make him pull the trigger. It was his task. He adjusted his aim as much as he could and pulled the trigger. The gun fired and the cat almost dropped it. The ghost panther fell. He felt his guts turn, like an urge to throw up. Focusing all his might, he lifted the gun, helped by the buffalo, took aim and fired a second time. The ghost panther's brain exploded in a splash of grey and red. The horrible sensation came again, and he almost fell, staying up only because of the chief's support. For the third time he took aim and shot a third and final round. The ghost panther stumbled, before slumping down from the car. On the edge of fainting, he knew he wouldn't be able to do it again.

He disarmed his gun, took out the magazine and put them both on the bench. He had to lean against the chief to not fall over afterwards. He felt a hoof take away the headphones and he let himself get sit against the wall of his box. The chief kneeled near him.

"That was reckless, officer Clawhauser."

The cat heard the electrical noise of the target sliding on its rail.

"I'm sorry, chief."

"Don't be. Sometimes reckless is good."

From where he was, the feline couldn't see the target. "Did I do good?"

"I'd say there is room for improvement."

Of the three bullets the cat officer had shot, two had punched holes in the black silhouette, and only one was aimed acceptably. Surprisingly, the cat chuckled. "At least, I'm still not the worst shot at the precinct."

The chief scoffed. It was true. Francine had a hard time aiming with her large hooves. Against all regulations, the chief had accepted that she'd use her trunk to use guns on the field. It was more like a 'willful ignorance', but during exams she had to use her hooves and the results were usually horrifying.

"Chief, may I ask a favor."

"You may ask."

"I'd like to get back on duty. Not on the field obviously, but I just can't spend my time at home anymore. I feel I need to be back to properly... get back from this."

"Will you accept to get professional help?"

"If you believe it's necessary."

"It's not what I, but what you believe that is important. I can put you back on duty as a test run for the next few weeks without it, but you know I can't keep an officer who can't use his service weapon on the payroll."

"I'd like to try the test run, if that's okay with you."

"Of course."
The chief offered his hoof to help the feline officer up, who took it.

"I'm glad you're back Ben."

"Me too chief."

The chief nodded and left the room, unlocking the door on his way out. Clawhauser took back his gun, put the magazine in and slid it in his holster. He still didn't like having it on him, but the weight felt more bearable now.
Part 3, Chapter 4

Part 3 : Hold Forever

Chapter 4 : Consequences of Necessity

End of April 2019

Quickly after Nick had recovered his memory, they had gone to meet Finnick and Vivienne to announce the news, which earned Nick a new slap and hug from his mother, and a nod from the fennec. It seemed that though they had been worried for him, none of them doubted he'd get his memory back.

Naked and lying in bed, the two lovers had spent most of the last days inside, simply happy do spend time together.

On his back, Nick was looking at the ceiling, a frown on his face, while his bunny was cuddlingly lying on his belly and chest.

"What is it Nick ? You look strange, are parts of your memories still missing ?"

"I don't know." The fox grinned.

"Not funny Nick."

"A bit funny. But yeah, I actually miss some stuff. I mean apart for the first and a half year after I was born... And three months in 2004. But those don't count."

"What is it ? I mean, what happened before or after it that you can actually remember ?"

The vulpine scratched his head. "I had just arrived at the place where I found Bellwether. I remember the firefight that happened after I tricked her into divulging all her plans. Again." His face showed a sly mean grin. "But I don't remember her death. Maybe in the confusion I was shot in the head and Jack killed her, or maybe I did.

The truth is, I have absolutely no idea how it ended."

"Does it make a difference ?"

"Well, those are my memories. I'd like to have them back."

"The doctor warned us than the last moments before you were shot had a chance to never come back. What was the term he used ? Retrograde amnesia, I think. It's not uncommon."

The fox sighed. "I could still ask Jack, if I ever see him again. I bet I'm not considered an agent anymore, so I guess I can't really count on it. Too bad the audio of the recording that the media got was cut at the end of the firefight. I just feel I miss something. If I was shot during that fight, I guess it would all have been erased. I know I shot at least one of them after having plunged to get my gun back, but after that, blank wall. Nothing."

"Do you really want to know ?"
The fox gritted his teeth. "Yeah. But to explain why, I should rewind the event a bit. Do you know a bit about what happened?"

"The chief brought me the forensic report, ballistic and all. From what I remember, it was a complete mess." The truth was, she actually knew it was Nick that had shot the lamb, and there was no way it wasn't during that firefight. From what she knew, there had been no reason for it to stop at a certain point. And the evidence pointed toward that theory too.

"I know they found the young fox, Mike, in the garage."

"Yeah. They identified him, his full name was Michael Artorius Wicce. His sister got the body back and I think it already got incinerated."

Nick had winced at that. He had actually promised Scarlet he would keep an eye on the kid to finally get him killed. He'd have to visit her later, and that wasn't something he looked forward to.

"It was the one I helped get off the drugs remember?" He felt his throat tighten, talking about the kid was painful. At the time, he didn't think he had gotten so attached but he had become his friend after all.

The bunny nodded.

"Well, I didn't take his death too well. I really don't know how I kept my cool when I was in front of Bellwether at the end, even with her henchmen on the way, because all I wanted to do was put a bullet in her face. And a couple more just to be sure." He scratched his eyes. "Sorry about that."

She put a paw up and caressed his cheek. "It's okay."

"Not really. I hope you won't see me differently, but I really wanted her dead." He glanced down, fearing her reaction at that last sentence.

"I get it. I mean, not really, but I won't blame you for that."

"So to be completely honest, I kind of want to know because of that. Part of me wants to be the one that killed her. Part of me hope it's not the case. It would only have been for revenge and I'm not sure it's something good... By that point, I didn't really care about the case anymore." Nick sighed. "So there you have it. Your fox is a bloodthirsty revenge-seeker."

"Not funny, and not true." The fox glanced down at that. "Nick, those weren't normal circumstances. You had spent months undercover, you had serious reasons to be upset. And you were under crazy pressure. And besides, you don't even know if you have killed her."

"But you do. You've read the forensic report, did you not?"

"Yes. Do you really want to know?"

"Yes, I really do."

"I'll tell you on one condition, you mustn't blame yourself for her death either way."

The truth was he wouldn't if he had killed her. It was the thing he was scared to admit. He felt guilty about his reasons, but he had considered it, and if he was the one that had killed her, he would only feel glad. And he would feel guilty about feeling glad.

"I won't."
The bunny took an inspiration. "Forensic haven't uncovered everything, but they were pretty sure someone else helped you. Agent Savage, I guess. Three of the four henchmen were killed by bullets from a gun that wasn't found on the crime scene. And those bullets were shot from an angle that didn't correspond to where your tracks were. The bullets that killed one of the sheep were yours. And it was the same kind that killed Bellwether."

The 'great' he was about to say stayed in his throat. "Okay." He scratched his chin. "Still don't remember, but I'm fine with that."

"Good. By the way, the bullet that cracked your skull was hers."

The fox chuckled. There was really nothing to answer to that.

"So to me, it was self-defense anyway." She added.

Maybe it could be considered self-defense, but it made no difference to the fox. She was a dead body stored in a morgue. Good riddance.

"Shit."

"You're cursing now ?" asked the bunny with a smile.

"I cursed before. I have a phonecall to make. At least one week overdue, if not three."

"To whom ?"

"Mr Big. You are not going to like it. Could you give me my phone ? Or simply get off me so I can get to it ?"

She rolled to the nightstand and grabbed the device.

"What is it about ?"

"Work. Hard to explain."

She gave him the phone and Nick dialed the number. It rang a few times before a deep voice answered. Nick put the phone on speaker. "Big's residence, Koslov speaking."

"Koslov, it's Nick, how are doing big guy ?"

"You have some unfinished business with the boss Nick."

"Frank does, not me. But let's not waste time with technicalities, can I talk with your boss ?"

"Patching you through."

Classical music played and a few seconds later the shrew's squeaky voice was heard. "Hello Nick, how are you doing ?"

"I'm fine sir. I'm calling about your guests."

"Which ones ? May I remind you that you sent a lot of folks toward me ?"

Nick glanced at Judy who gave him an inquisitive look.

"Let's begin by the ones I rescued from Vlad's holding cells."
"I offered them rooms for the night and most of them left to get back with their loved ones in the morning. They were really cooperative with the questioning."

"Questioning ?" Intervened the bunny.

"Oh, Judith dearest, you're hear too ? How are you doing ?"

"I'm fine, You ?"

"I'm doing perfectly well. What was your question ?"

"You were talking about questioning mammals." She said with an alarmed tone.

"We simply asked question. Well, Koslov did, but it's the same, he knows how to be nice. There was no violence involved whatsoever, do not be worried."

"Oh. Good"

"And the ones I sent afterwards ?"

"Sean, Lucas, Skye and Osman ? We are still detaining them. Except for Sean, he had to be hospitalized."

"Hospitalized ?" Intervened the bunny again.

"Not our doing, Judy. There was a disagreement with his leader, Skye and she roughed him up a bit. A lot. I wouldn't know what it was about though."

"Alright. But you said you were detaining them ?"

Nick winced, she hadn't forgotten that part.

"They're more like guests, they were very cooperative after it was revealed that Bellwether was behind everything yet again. They gave us a lot of good intel on Vlad too."

The bunny sighed. She knew that there would be some action taken from Big's family toward Vlad's, and she didn't like knowing about it. Gang wars always put mammals at risk, and knowing it would eventually happen was hard on her, especially because she could do nothing about it. It was the price to pay for Big's friendship. On one paw she knew that as long as she would be part of the family, he would take her into account in his actions, and especially because he would never hear the end of it from Fru-Fru if he upset the bunny. On the other it meant sometimes knowing stuff that kept her up at night.

"Can I talk to their leader please ?"

"Of course. I'll have them called here. Please wait for a bit."

The classical music played again.

"Nick, you know that it's not to be revealed that you were Frank, even now. ZIA's orders. And the chief agrees with that."

"I know. If the public came to learn my part on this, it could reflect badly on the ZPD. I know it's better that my part in all this stays buried. You know, it was strange when I didn't have all my memories, some of the guys said they were glad I had finally came out of coma after three months, and the others said that I had only spent a week under. It was really confusing."
"I can imagine."

"The most fun thing was that some of them were asking why I was grey. What did you say to them again?"

"Lack of vitamins and sunlight can lead to hair discoloration." She recited.

"That was a nicely written pile of bullshit." he chuckled.

"You know, it's not entirely false, but it would take around a year for you to look that way naturally. I'm glad you're back to your real color though."

He looked at his fur. It wasn't his really real color, he'd actually have to dye his fur red for the next few months. But he felt like his old self, and it made him happy. The music stopped suddenly.

"Hello? Mr Big said someone wanted to talk with me."

"Hey, Skye, it's Frank. How are you?"

"Frank? What the hell? You disappear for a week and you just call like this."

"I promise, I'll send a postcard too."

"A post- Where are you?"

"Oh Skye, you know I won't reveal my location over the phone. I'm away, far away from the city." Judy recognized his tone. It was the same he had when they first met. The mix of smugness and dismissiveness.

"And you didn't come to get us?"

"I didn't have that possibility, sorry. And I fear I won't have it for a long time."

"Great. That's just fucking great." There was a shot pause before the vixen talked again. "You were the one that offed Bellwether were you?"

"Yep. That's me."

"The news said you were one against five and came out on top. I wish I could have been here to see it." He didn't answer to that, he could have made a joke, but he didn't feel like it was the right moment. "They also talked about Mike. Is it true he was killed by a crooked cop?"

"I didn't know she was before Bellwether told me. I just shot her out of habit." That joke was of really poor taste. Judy was listening, but she let it pass. "No, to be honest, I knew it the moment she shot us without warning. But yeah, he was killed by that cop."

He heard Skye sigh at the other end. "That sucks, he really didn't deserve that. We were so unfair to him, and... I never apologized properly. I know you were close. I'm sorry."

"Thanks. But I wasn't calling for this. I was wondering what you were going to do now."

"We don't know, we could leave the city, but it could mean spend a lot of time on the run. I can't make the decision for everyone. Do you have a suggestion?"

"It depends, do you want to get back to Zootopia in the next ten years?"
"I wish I didn't have to leave to begin with. Part of me want to atone… To help rebuild… But I'll just ge thrown in jail if I get recognized by the authorities." She sighed.

"Then, there you have it. Run away. Maybe arrange for something with Mr Big and take with you whoever wants to come. They could risk it and stay in the city, though wanted, they're technically not actively seeked by the ZPD, I've kpet an eye on things. But that could still be risky. There is also the option to surrender and strike a deal with the ZPD but it's a bit of a gamble."

"Surrender to the ZPD, right." She chuckled. "I'm not that desperate. I'll talk to the boys. Thanks for calling."

"You're welcome. Good bye and good luck."

They heard the vixen give back the phone to Mr Big.

"She's gone Nick. Anything else you needed?"

"If you could give them the mean to leave the city..."

"I'll see what I can do. Anything else?"

"Nope. I'm good."

"Then I have to hang up, I have some work to do, and things to arrange."

"Ok, good bye sir."

"Good bye Nick."

"Good bye mister Big." Said the bunny.

"Good bye Judy."  

The shrew hung up, silence falling on the room. It lingered a bit before the bunny broke it.

"Did you just advise a wanted criminal to flee from justice?"

"Yeah. Sorry about that. I just can't really see them as criminal. Blackfur was right, the relations were based on lies, but they resulted in real emotion and attachments.

Are you upset with me?"

She brushed his chest fur with a paw. "No. If they were really dangerous, I trust you would let them get captured. And besides, we're both on sick leave. You do want you want in your off duty time."

"As long as it's legal, remember?"

"Yeah, well, I think we both earned a bit of leniency."

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*End of April 2019*

"You know Nick, Clawhauser invited us over at noon and it's not even 10AM, no need to prepare for this soon."

"There is somewhere I want to go before, and I know you well enough to believe that you'll
discover where I'm going sooner or later. And then you'd wish you would have come with me. So yes, we need to prepare this soon. Do you need my help to put your clothes on ?"

"No, I'll be okay. This is all very mysterious. Is it a surprise ?"

"No. Or a bad one. We're going to see Scarlet. I got her brother killed, I owe her the truth."

The bunny froze. "The one that kissed you ?"

"Really ? That kiss is the first thing you worry about ?" The tone he had used showed more irritation that he wanted. He was nervous, after all "I'm sorry."

The bunny's ears slumped "I'm sorry too. It's not something I can get past easily."

"It's okay. I'm not upset. Well I am, but not about that. This whole situation sucks."

Judy finished putting on her trousers and straddled to her fox. She pulled him gently down by the tie and gave him a kiss. "Better ?"

"A bit."

"Can you help me find my crutches ?"

"They stayed in the hallway last evening, I'll bring them here."

They were in the midst of spring now, and it was sunny enough so that the two lovers wouldn't need coats. They were enjoying simply walking together in the streets, even though the goal of their walk was far from a happy one.

They entered the part of the city where Scarlet lived and Judy couldn't help but think that it was a gloomy place. Buildings were old, and worn, the streets were dirty, and hobos were sleeping under most porches. It was one of the places where the cops made the fewest rounds. They knew that few things happened, apart from the drug trafficking. They also knew that cops here for too long were bound to draw attention and possibly trouble.

"That's not a really nice neighborhood." She remarked.

"Behold the kind of place where most of us grow up." He answered with a cynical smile. That part of his personality would probably never die.

To be honest, the bunny liked the dark humour her mate could show. In small dose of course, but his dark humour had a way to lit up the darkest situations, even though sometimes, she'd prefer for him to not say anything. But this wasn't one of those time, she was really nervous to meet this Scarlet, and Nick's cynical outlook was a good way to divert her thoughts from it.

Nick helped the bunny climb the stairs to Scarlet's apartment and knocked at the door. A vixen with eyes swollen by tears she had quickly wiped opened the door and ended up face to face with a grey bunny in crutches and red fox with a slinged arm. She frowned.

"That's not a really nice neighborhood." She remarked.

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"What is this ? Some kind of charity ?"

"Hi Scarlet."

Her eyes widened. "You." Nick gave her a sad smile. "It's You !" She quickly stepped ahead slapped him as hard she could.

The fox had seen it coming, and though his head rang and turned, he didn't move. He heard his
bunny gasped but lifted a paw before she could react. Even in crutches, he knew the vixen wouldn't stand a chance.

"Yes, it's me."

She grabbed his collar and held him against the wall behind him. "What the hell are you doing here? Having my brother killed wasn't enough?"

Nick's head slumped a bit, he said nothing.

"You were supposed to protect him you bastard! He's dead because of you!"

She felt a paw place itself on her arm. "Miss, please calm down."

The vixen turned her head angrily. The bunny had a sad but resolute expression. "Or what?"

The doe sighed and flashed the badge she always carried with her. "Please."

The vixen slowly let go of the collar. "You're Judy Hopps." She stated. The bunny nodded. The vixen turned back to Nick with wide eyes.

"I owe you an explanation." Said Nick.

"Like hell you do."

"Can we come in?"

She moved away from the doorframe and motioned them to come in, slamming the door behind them.

"You can sit on the bed."

They did so and the vixen installed herself on a chair. The flat had changed since he had come for the first time, only for one thing, an urn on the table. She stared at Nick for a few seconds and he began talking.

"So, as you have probably figured out, I'm Nick Wilde."

"Yeah, I did." She turned to the bunny. "I'm Scarlet by the way."

"I know, Nick told me about you."

"I guessed as much." She turned back to the fox. "You were undercover, weren't you?"

"Yes."

"You should have arrested them, the little band my brother worked with. Maybe he'd be alive instead. In jail, but alive."

"I had to get to Lycus."

"I bet you did. What else did you need to do that was so important?" The anger didn't seem to depart the vixen and so Nick told the story from the beginning to the end. The first shootings, getting undercover, who and how they met, what had happened with Vlad, and everything he had uncovered on Lycus until he finally found his hiding place. He left out Jack and Mr Big though, those were sensitive topics. He recounted how they had found Wilde Times, and how Scarlet's brother had saved his life and that he had ended up killing Bellwether in the firefight. She had
guessed it was him, it was the only possibility.

"Don't expect me to thank you for your honesty."

There was short silence during which Nick seemed to collect his thoughts. "Scarl et, I know it won't bring you any comfort, but your brother was a hero. He died saving my life. If I could make it to be the other way around, I would. I'm sorry. If there is anything I can do for you, you just have to ask."

Her gaze was hard on him. "There is nothing I want from you. Is there anything else you need to say?"

"There is something else. Your brother told me to tell you something."

The vixen slightly lifted her brows "What is it?"

Nick took an inspiration. Recalling the kid's last moments was painful, but he owed it to Scarlet. He felt Judy's encouraging paw place itself on his arm. "He wanted you to know that you were the best. He was glad to have you as a sister."

The vixen instantly bursted into tears. It seemed the anger was the only thing that had kept her from breaking down during the last few minutes, but now, sadness overwhelmed her. Her shoulders were shaking and she clutched her arms around herself. "Get out."

"Scarl et, I-"

"Get the fuck out of my home!" The cry was filled with more sadness than anger.

The fox and bunny got up from the bed and Nick took out one of his visit cards. He put it on the bed. "If you ever need anything." As an answer she gave him an angry tearful glare. They left the flat and the building in silence.
Part 3, Chapter 5

Part 3 : Hold Forever

Chapter 5 : Bland Coffee, Good Pizza

End of April 2019

The fox and bunny got up from the bed and Nick took out one of his visit cards. He put it on the bed. "If you ever need anything." As an answer she gave him an angry tearful glare. They left the flat and the building in silence.

"I'd be up for a coffee." Said the fox out of the blue. His natural expression was back and Judy couldn't see through it. It didn't mean the fox was okay though. They left that sad part of town and found a Stagbuck. Nick had always considered that those places sold a poor excuse for coffee, but this time he didn't really care. They took their orders and sat at table in the back of the room.

The bunny still couldn't decipher the fox's expression so simply asked. "You're not okay are you ?"

Nick gave a light scoff. "I gave it away did I ?"

She put a paw on his. "No, but no one could be okay after this. You want to talk about it ?"

"Is there actually anything to talk about ? You saw everything that happened."

"I want to know how you feel, silly."

"Blackfur, is that you ?" He asked in a joking tone.

"You don't have to say anything if you don't want to." She said soothingly, having perfectly understood the purpose of his quip.

The fox sipped on his coffee, before speaking again. "I feel like shit, that's what I feel like. I knew it wouldn't be a fun experience, but it was a bit worse than I thought it would be. I mean, she was angry, and she was right to be. If I had refused for the kid to come with me, he'd be alive."

"And you'd be dead." She remarked with a serious expression.

"His life for mine, what a bargain." He answered sarcastically.

"You know I don't believe a life is worth more than another."

I'm with you on this, except for a few exceptions, grimly thought the fox.

"-but selfishly, yes, I think it's a good bargain. And if he hadn't saved your life, you wouldn't have stopped Bellwether in the end."

"Jack would have."

"You can't be sure of that." She caressed the fox's paw. "You know what was one of the first thing the chief told me ? I mean, after the end of the Nighthowler case, when I came back."

"So definitely not one of the first things." He still was a bit taunting, but less, as he was trying to not vent his feeling of guilt on her.
She gave him an annoyed glance, but kept going. "Do not second guess yourself. Do not fall into the trap of the 'what ifs'. You did things a certain way, and they turned out partly crappy, but mostly okay. You have to forgive yourself."

Nick sipped his coffee again. "You know, it was easier to not let the world know that it got to me before I met you... Or maybe it was because I didn't give a damn back then. Easier to not look like you don't give damn when you really don't."

"You know, it's progress."

"Progress feels like shit."

The bunny scooted around in the booth they were sharing and sat next to him, resting her head on his shoulder. She had come to his left, so he could wrap her in his valid arm. She glanced around to see that some mammals in the coffee shop gave them weird glances.

"You think they guessed we're together?"

"Maybe they're looking at us funny because a fox with a broken arm is hugging a bunny with a broken leg."

"Maybe."

"I could kiss you, to dissipate the doubt."

"I don't think it's a good idea yet."

The fox gave a small sigh "Yeah, you're right." He gave her a discreet peck between the ears which made them instantly stand up.

"Nick!"

"That was a purely friendly kiss." He smirked.

"Sly fox." She smiled, giving him a light punch in the shoulder.

... The climb to the cheetahs apartment had been way easier than the one to Scarlet's thanks to the elevator. Clawhauler opened the door a few seconds after Nick and Judy had rung at the door.

"Heyyy guys, how are you doing? Nick, I heard you got your memories back."

"Yep. I'm me again. How are you big guy?"

"I'm good. And you Judy, how's the leg?"

"It's healing. The doctor was a bit worried because of my stunt during the big arrest, but it seems to hold together."

They entered the apartment and were immediately hit by the smell of the cooking.

"Are we having pizza?" Asked the vulpine.

"Yeah, I'm trying new stuff since I have actually time to cook."

The cat went back to the kitchen accompanied by his two guests when they heard a door open to
their left. A half-awake wolf got out of his room only wearing boxers.

"Hi guys." He greeted in a sleepy voice, fist bumping Nick and then Judy. He got across the hallway and entered the bathroom.

"Sheesh, he's even less of a morning mammal than me." Remarked the fox.

"The ZPD's short-staffed, he's pulling eleven hour shifts and it's his only day off. Even though we sustained no casualties, a lot of officers were wounded." Remarked the cheetah.

"What ? The chief said nothing to me about that !" Remarked the bunny, surprised.

The cheetah was checking the pizzas in the oven. They were already half-cooked, he pulled them out and added some ingredients, and then put them back in. "Since Nick isn't undercover anymore, I think he doesn't want you to be working. After all, you were supposed to be on sick-leave to begin with."

"Maybe we could alleviate our colleagues from the paperwork." Proposed the fox. "I hate it as much as you do fluff, but apart for the occasional headache, I feel perfectly capable of using a computer."

"With only one paw ?"

"Beats doing nothing. Besides, if you arrested a mammal with your leg in this state, I can't avoid work in good conscience. Let's go talk to the chief tomorrow."

A few seconds later a way more fresh Wolford came out of the bathroom, he went back to his room to put on his clothes and went back again to the guests. "Good morning... Well, good noon. Hope you're doing fine."

"We are. We heard you were completely swamped at work."

"Yup. It will only be for a few weeks though, the colleagues are slowly coming back to work."

"Wolford, hadn't you been shot a couple of weeks ago ? You're already back in active duty ?"

"The bulletproof vest caught everything, and I suffered only bruises. And a cracked rib. Lucky me. What are we having Ben ?"

The pudgy glanced at the oven. "Classic pepperoni pizza and a, arugula,and asparagus pesto pizza as a vegan option for Judy. I had enough spare ingredients to make a third one in case two pizzas aren't enough. It's sort of a mix of the two. I don't know if it will be as good."

They set up the table and soon, the pizzas were ready. As always when Ben cooked, the food was succulent.

While they ate, and at everyone's demand, Clawhauser recounted the last week. They knew he had been pretty depressed after having to shoot one of the suspects, and wanted to know if he really was okay. He told how Wolford had called his sister to the rescue and how the chief had come on the same day to check on him, with flowers. It made Nick slightly raise a taunting brow but he said nothing since the cat seemed already pretty embarrassed. He understood why when he told them about the little joke his sister had pulled on him and told them the chief's words. Once again, the fox raised an interested brow but kept his thoughts for himself.

However, the cheetah kept for himself the shooting-range's events. Those were way too private to talk about, and he didn't want to risk embarrassing the chief.
"I can't believe you only eat donuts at work. If I could cook like that, I'd prepare all my meals myself." Remarked Judy.

The cheetah took a third pizza slice. "Well there are several reasons why I don't prepare my meals to go for work. First, there are only a few things that taste as good once reheated in a microwave. Seconds, cooking only for myself is no fun. Third, I love donuts."

"You know Carrots, there is something really satisfying in eating unhealthy, greasy and overly sugary food. The only reason I don't binge on junk-food is because I need to keep my body fit."

"Healthy food is a prey thing." Said Wolford. "They mainly eat vegetable, so I don't think they can really get the appeal of fat on meat."

"I'm sure some preys can." Said the fox while giving a side glance at Clawhauser that no one caught. "But there are a few things I can't explain. How can the chief be so big and so buff while only eating grass."

"Nick!" Protested the cheetah. "The chief doesn't only eat grass."

"There were rumors that he ate the noncomplying suspects for a time." Flatly said Wolford. The three other mammals turned to him. "Not pulling your leg here, he actually used this rumor to make the suspects talk during interrogations. I was a rookie at the time, and it was just before he got the chief position."

"No way."

"Yes way. I asked other older colleagues at the time, he was really pissed at first. But when he saw how effective it could be, he simply did as he didn't know mammals believed it. Got that from MacHorn, the guy is pretty chatty when he's drunk." He looked around to see the surprised faces of his friends. "Of course, you didn't get that last part from me."

They all nodded while Clawhauser went to the kitchen to bring dessert, a chocolate brownie. Nick lifted a brow. "Is it the same kind of brownie that we ate a few months back."

"No, I made that one myself." Answered the cheetah.

"Oh. Too bad, it made for an interesting evening."

"What are you talking about?" Asked the wolf.

"Well, a few months back, during a movie afternoon, we may have finished a brownie that belonged to you. It had an interesting taste."

The wolf's eyes widened. "So you were the ones that finished my space brownie." His expression turned to embarrassment. "Well, a friend gave it to me, and I couldn't really refuse..."

"Wolford, friends don't just 'give' this kind of stuff." Remarked Judy. "We're not going to tell on you, as long as it doesn't turn into a problem."

The wolf nodded.

"Oh, and I've made a blueberry cake too. I had forgotten Vulpines and Canids could have trouble digesting chocolate."
"In large quantities. I know it could be deadly for our ancestors, but thanks to evolution we can now eat it too. Still makes the digestion tricky, though." said Nick. "But I'm not big on chocolate anyway."

As the meal before, the dessert was really good. They helped the cat clean the table and the four friends installed themselves on the couch and armchairs.

"Wolford, could you help me get something in my room?"

"Sure."

They both left, leaving Nick and Judy alone in the living room. "He seems to be okay." She said. "I was a bit worried, I can't imagine how bad he could feel after having shot someone."

"He's the most sensitive mammal I know. Even more than you." Joked the vulpine, which earned him an elbow to the ribs. "I don't know how he was able to take the decision to shoot, but since he saved Wolford and Blackfur, it's a good thing. I just hope he will be able to get past it."

The cat and wolf came back with a large frame covered in kraft paper, around one meter by two.

"What is it?" Asked Judy.

"Came in yesterday. I haven't seen it yet, I wanted us to discover it together." He quickly but carefully tore away the paper, revealing a painted picture. Judy had to hold back a squeal, but the cheetah couldn't be bothered and squealed away.

"AAAAAAAAAWWWW!"

Nick and Wolford chuckled at his reaction while detailing the picture. It was a painting of gazelle wearing a Valkyrie bikini armor, complete with the wings on the helmet, and brandishing her microphone like a sword. One could have commented on the sexism of the picture if there wasn't her back dancers wearing the same type of revealing armor, each holding a different weapon like her personal medieval guard. The background was some kind of medieval landscape, made with flashy colors.

"Wow, Ben, it looks realllly..." Began Judy.

"Gay?" Proposed Nick.

"I know right!" Said the cheetah in an overexcited tone.

"I was going to say colorful." Completed the bunny.

"I can't believe you made Finnick paint something like that. What did he say about it?"

The cheetah chuckled. "To use his own words, he said it was 'more gay 'dan getting' fucked in the ass' but he also said he really liked it."

"Wait, Finnick can paint?" Asked Judy. "I mean, he can paint this good?"

"Don't you remember he made the paintjob on his car himself? Yeah he's good, it's just something he never thought he could use to make a living."

"He's changed his mind about it." Said the cheetah. "He knew you'd see this before he actually could but he kind of wanted to surprise you with his new job. He's making a dozen paintings for an
"Even Finnick's going legit. What a time to be alive!"

"Is it okay if I hang it in the living room?" Said the cheetah as he turned to Wolford with eyes full of hope.

"Between us and MacHorn, I'd say you're the only one with some kind of decorative taste. Or interest. Of course, you can hang it here. But don't you want it framed first?"

"Yeah, I'm just so happy to have it. It's beautiful. I need to call Finnick to thank him and ask him how much I owe him."

"Wait, you didn't talk about the price before?" asked the fox, surprised.

"No. I just said him I wanted some Gazelle painting and told him it could be anything as long as she was in the center."

Nick stared at the cat incredulously. It wasn't in the habit of the fennec to not set a price for his work.

"Why don't you call him now?" Proposed Judy. "So we can all compliment him on his work."

"Good idea." Acquiesced Wolford. "Could you muzzle time him? I'd be curious to see what this guy looks like."

"Why not. Just so you know, he's a fennec fox. And don't call him adorable."

"There is a little story behind this, isn't it?"

Clawhauser's face heated a bit. "I don't know what you're talking about. Calling now."

He hit the green button on his phone screen. A fennec fox quickly appeared on the screen. He was wearing a paint stains covered sleeveless jumpsuit.

"Ya, wot is it?"

"Heeyyyy Fin, I just opened your painting. It's really great."

"Oh, hey chubs. The paintin' ? Oh tha'wos nuthing. Glad you like tho."

The other mammals came into frame. "Hey Fin, how are you big guy?" asked Nick.

"Yo' there too ? Nice to see you. And who's the wolf behind ya'll?"

"The name's Wolford, nice to meet you. I like your painting."

"Ya do, do ya' ? I'm making othah's since Ben found somemammal that could be interested in exposin' my work. They'll be for sale if yo' interested."

"By the way." Interrupted the cheetah. "I called you to ask how much I owed you."

The fennec lifted a brow. "You don't owe me nuthin' chubs. You introduced me to yo' friend. The paintin' was payment for yo' service."

The cat gave him an embarassed smile.
"Wot is it?"

"I think Ben is uncomfortable not paying for this painting." Explained Nick. "It's really awesome you know."

The fennec sighed. "If ya really wanna give me something as payment, bring me a case'o beer. Yo mom finally got me to install my workshop in her livin' room yesterday, Nick. If I make enough money, we'll rent sumthin' better. In the meantime, the beer can be brought here. Don't bother buying the cheap elephant's piss. I prefer no beer to bad beer."

"I thought the rule was 'your favorite brand is free, and your second favorite brand is fresh' ?" Taunted Nick.

"Rules are made to be broken, kid. Ya know it better than me."

The call ended quickly after that and the discussion topic shifted to the life at the precinct while Nick was absent.

... 

"... And wouldn't you know it, there was actually a betting pool on when you'd wake up." Said the wolf.

"Figures. Fangmeyer?"

"Who else."

"Did you know Judy placed a bet too?" Asked the cheetah.

The fox turned to the bunny whose face heated up a bit. "Did she, now?"

"Yeah, she bet that you'd be up sooner than anyone had bet."

The fox squinted his eyes with a smile. "That's pretty sly, Carrots, even for me."

"Maybe, but I can't really ask for my prize now. With your cover story." She explained.

"How high did the pool go?"

"I think around two thousand. In the end it was kind of a 'wishing well' fund." Answered the wolf. "Some officers bet several times as the moment they had bet on passed. In the end, we gave it to the charity that financially helps the spouses of fallen officers."

... 

All sitting comfortably in Ben's living room, and the digestion kicking in, they began feeling drowsy.

"By the way, what are you going to say about the bandage you had on your head and your broken arm to our colleagues ? I mean, the ones that didn't know you were undercover." Asked Wolford.

"Simple." Yawned Nick. "I'll say that according to the doctors, I tried to get up just after waking up, got my feet tangled in the sheets and fell on my arm on the floor. And hit my head too."

"Clever. And what about the fact that you're significantly more bulky than before?"
It was true that despite his two weeks of inactivity, the fox had kept most of the muscle mass he had gained.

"I'll have to wear larger clothes until it melts away. With the job and the injury, it won't last anyway. I'll come back to my leaner, sexier self in no time." He glanced at Judy but she already had dosed off, her head on his lap. He turned to the others and saw that Ben had done the same on his arm chair.

"Hot spring this year. It makes me sleepy too. And I have hours of sleep to catch up on."

Remarked the wolf. "Have fun on the couch, I'm going back to bed."

Wolford left the room and Nick chuckled. She had fallen asleep so quickly. It wasn't that strange, they really had eaten a lot, and he himself felt like taking a nap. He moved his legs from under the bunny and wrapped his body and tail around her, careful to not harm his broken arm.

... Judy woke up slowly, enveloped in warmth but something felt odd. Nick's muscles were tense. She raised her head and looked up to his face and saw his expression. He was obviously sleeping but he had his teeth bared and claws out. Her first thought was to try and wake him up, but she scooted out of his arms first. She didn't want him to involuntarily hurt her, more because he wouldn't be able to forgive himself if that happened, than because she was afraid it could happen.

Sitting at his side, she put a paw on his shoulder and gently shook him while stroking his face. The teeth and fangs slowly disappeared and he blinked a few times.

"Good afternoon."

The vulpine clapped his jaw a few times and looked at his bunny.

"'fternoon"

He looked around him like he was wondering where he was, his gaze coming back to Judy.

"You were tense, are you alright?"

"Yeah..." The fox closed his eyes with strength. "Yeah. I dreamed of... I can't remember."

"You didn't seem to like it."

"I know it was violent." He looked down at his closed fist, feeling his claws coming out again, digging in his palm. The bunny crawled to him and put her arms around him. The fox gave her back the hug. Instantly, all the stress he was under vanished, she felt it too and it made her smile.

"I needed that more than I thought." He remarked, stroking the bunny's ears.

"You did, yeah."

The couple said goodbye to the pudgy cat and left his apartment to get back to theirs. Tomorrow, they'd go to the precinct and ask the chief to reintegrate them to the force.
Last Day of April 2019

The moment he had woken up that morning, he knew that it would be a good day. It was strange to him to feel optimistic. He wasn't a pessimist, he knew that much, but he tended to stay pragmatic. He had learnt by now that having set expectations, good or bad, wasn't a good thing. Not in the sense that those expectations could be dashed, even though it was never a good sensation, but in the sense that expectations twisted judgement and altered objectivity. But still, despite the shortage in mammalpower, and the activity that the end of Lycus' case had brought, he felt optimistic.

It was a mood he hadn't felt in a long time. Oh, there were a few times he had felt it in the past years, but the one that came to his mind was old, more than twenty years old.

How old was he at the time, twenty-four, twenty-five? Less than thirty, he knew as much. The time wasn't important though, it never really was. The important thing was that it had happened.

It was like yesterday, it felt like the right time. He had just been promoted to captain, he'd finally get the wage boost. On one knee in the small kitchen of the flat they were renting, he had taken out the ring he had bought for her with part of the money he had saved. He had chosen one that reminded him of her, simple, sturdy and beautiful. She had immediately loved it and in the year to come, they were married. She was younger than him, still attending engineering school, so it was too soon to have a child. It was when she got her job that he began pursuing the Precinct's One chief position. They set back their plans to have a child. More and more he gave more time to his job, with in his mind the idea that when he'd finally get the job he was aiming for, they could finally get what they both wanted.

What he hadn't foreseen however, was that they'd grew apart. The realisation hit him before the first signs of a potential break up. Once again, it reminded him how alike they were, too sucked in their careers to care about each other. He remembered getting home one evening, late, and contrary to the usual, she wasn't already asleep. The discussion that followed was painful, but necessary, and it ended in the most clean outcome. They were done.

He remembered that she cried a bit at what they had lost, and that he was here for her to help her move out.

The memory was bitter, but despite it, he didn't conceive any ill feeling toward her, only the one that he had missed one of the numerous opportunities life had offered him.

But the chief never wallowed in 'what ifs'. He did what he had to do because it had to be done. And today, he felt optimistic. Things were good, and he believed that they would stay so for long. For long enough at least.

He didn't even have to go to roll call, all his officers had already their assignments set, he simply stayed in his office, working on his paperwork and a dossier he had begun working with the mayor. The goal was to reform the ZIA. The report he had asked Nick when he had learnt of the return of his memory had been enlightening. Though the Agency was effective on how it approached and resolved problems, they were too free of responsibilities. The simple fact that a rogue agent
roamed free at Mr Big's service was proof of it. He wanted at true cooperation between the ZPD and ZIA instead of the destructive rivalry that was their relation until now. He didn't want to completely shackle them, but in his mind, it needed more damage control.

In any case, his reflexions were cut short when he heard a knock at the door.

"Come in." He answered, while his gaze was still turned on the paper on his desk.

He saw two of his officers come in. "Corporal Wilde, Lieutenant Hopps, aren't you both supposed to be on sick leave ?"

They sat on the large chair facing the chief's desk. "It's precisely why we're here chief." Began the fox. "We'd like to reintegrate the force."

"If you have found a way to instantly heal your arm and your partner's leg, I'd instead suggest you to go and collect your Nobel prize."

"Chief, you must have seen in my file that I stopped studying magic when I was thirteen." The fox answered in the same matter of fact tone the chief had used. He felt an elbow in his ribs, meaning he should get back on the topic of their presence. "We know we can't get back on the field, but we can both work behind a desk. We know our colleagues are overworked, if we could alleviate them a bit, we'd like to."

The chief put down his glasses and stared at the two officers. It was true having them as office workers could cut back a bit on the work their colleagues had to do.

And after all why not, having them at the precinct could only boost the troop's morale, and if the public was to learn of it, he knew those two were honest and convincing enough to tell they had proposed to come back themselves.

"Alright, I'll see to give you assignments adapted to the both of you." He reflected on it for a few seconds. He didn't like to admit it, but Nick could prove to be a fine diplomat. The recording he had heard, showed that he was at least a fine actor. "Since officer Wilde can't really use both his hands, I think I'll put him on the front desk, that will give Clawfith a chance to spend more time on the field." He scratched his chin while looking at the bunny. "Officer Hopps, I'll probably send you to give a paw in the different team's paperwork. I know you don't like it, but you were efficient at handling Blackfur's and Wolford's when they went on the field without you." He saw her shoulders slump a bit. First he thought it was the idea of having to handle the paperwork, but he quickly understood the true reason behind it.

"Yes, it means you won't be working together."

"Think you can handle not being stuck to me for a few hours a day, fluff ?" Said the fox, scratching the tip of one of his mate's ears that had slumped back.

"I'll live."

"You can still withdraw your offer to come back to work, I don't want to force you to work when none of you have properly recovered yet."

The offer was kind of tempting, but they knew they couldn't take it without guilt. Putting themselves before their colleagues wasn't really something they could do.

"No sir. We want to get back to work. We can work separately." said Judy, as Nick nodded to confirm what she said.
"I won't push it and give you different hours." Said the buffalo, making the two lovers realise that he could indeed have not made them this favor. "But I have another thing to say to you. I had intended to have this discussion when you'd both be able to get back to active duty." He made a little pause to gather his thoughts before continuing. "There are a few rules about fraternization between agents. Of course being friends, even close friends, is okay. For instance, Wolford, Clawhauser and MacHorn are flatmates and it poses no problem whatsoever. But couples are a different matter. To begin, I'll say that officers with different rank being together is not forbidden, but only if one isn't the direct superior of the other. Which is your case, technically, you work under Judy. Two partners on the force being an item... Well, that is also forbidden."

The two mammals' faces fell.

"In case that were to happen, and it has, there are several solutions. If those two had hidden their relation, like you did, it could end up in sanctions, ranging from temporary dismissal to termination."

The faces fell even more. Judy lifted a finger but the buffalo raised a hoof before she could talk.

"Since nothing bad came out of it, I'm letting it slide. It's been more than two months, there would be no point in punishing you now." And considering the conditions during which I learned about it, I wouldn't have done it anyway. "The next solution is generally to split the partnership and assign those officers other partners. Which would be difficult since you both are the only small mammals at the precinct. For several reasons, a few of them being: car size, image and assignable workload, I can't assign you another partner at this precinct. So another solution would be to send one or the both of you to another precinct where another small mammal officer would be available." There again, he made a pause to gauge the effect of his speech. They were trying to keep straight faces but he could see they dreaded for him to choose this solution. "I simply won't accept to lose two of my best officers to another precinct, so this solution can't be chosen either. I could ask for an officer to be transferred from another precinct to this one, but there is no new recruits that I deem fit to be transferred here for now. So this leave me with only one solution. I know of your professionalism and your implication in this job, but I'll be honest with you, I do not like it. You will remain partners once back to active duty."

Nick and Judy Sighed in relief.

"You are not out of the woods yet. As a matter of fact, what it entails will make your life harder. I can tolerate show of affection in the precinct, it's understandable, as long as it's little, and away from the civilians' eyes. I can't give you any order on how the both of you should act off duty, but if the public learns of your relationship it could mean hell, for you as well as for me, because in doing this, I am covering you. Plus, if you're on the street, during an intervention, or basically anywhere out of the precinct, and in your uniforms, I won't tolerate any misplaced behaviour. And lastly, even though I know it could be one of the hardest thing to ask of you, your work will have to come first when on duty."

The two mammals glanced at each other, unsure of what to say after the speech the chief had delivered. Finally Nick raiser a paw.

"Chief, I know it's not what you want to hear, or what I should say as an officer, but I-" 

The cape buffalo raised a hoof again stopping the fox. He then put it back on his desk and scratched his forehead. Maybe not such a good day after all.

"I know one can never be sure that an officer will put his duty first, and to be honest I expect any mammal under my order to find a compromise between their partner's well-being and their duty,
and to do the best decision in any given situation. You have nothing to answer to what I just said, simply do your best while on duty. I've seen what it was until now, and you didn't really give me anything major to complain about. Simply keep it up." He waved them away. "Now I have a pile of paperwork to do. I'll have MacHorn work on your affectations, starting next Monday. Don't be late. Dismissed."

While the two mammals left the room, the buffalo stared at his papers, waiting for them to be out to pinch the bridge of his nose. It could have been way worse. For instance, he could have let Nick finish his last sentence, and he could predict what it would have been. 'Chief, I know it's not what you want to hear, or what I should say as an officer, but I simply can't give any guarantee on that'. But if he had let the fox finish that sentence and let things remain as they were, it would have been him, giving an officer his benediction to not give his one hundred percents. He needed to let this sword dangle above them, they couldn't afford to be complacent as long as they remained partners. In truth, he couldn't afford to have any of his officers to be complacent, but, and he hated to admit it, they were a special case. He'd have to keep an eye on them, even if only to keep them from harming themselves.

Was it something he wanted? No. But he had to be honest with himself. As partners, they had the perfect synergy. Nick could prove to be a loose canon, and Judy knew how to keep him in check. Judy could be too focused on her duty and Nick knew how to help her loosen up. And with their difference in point of view and their way different upbringing, they could come up with a large set of solutions in different situations. Even without being a couple and partners, their performance would go down if he was to separate them. But if things got too intense, if there was another Lycus case, he'd have no hesitation to assign them to different teams.

The chief also felt a bit guilty. His disposition toward those two mammals was an exception. He would never have acted like this toward any other mammal in the precinct and he knew it. Was it because they were the only small mammals in the precinct? Was it because they were ready to take insane risk to complete their missions and succeed against all odds? For a few seconds he wondered if he had been a bit unfair by telling them they'd have to put their duty before their companion. After all that was exactly what they had done during the last few months.

Or maybe he cut them some slack because after all, they were the first small mammals at Precinct One. Or maybe even worse: he liked them and was making a bit of favoritism. He hit his desk with his forehead and gave a sigh of defeat. The whole situation was new, they were chaos magnets. Maybe it was what the ZPD needed though. New blood, new outlook on the police duty, new ways of doing things. The chief knew himself to be an immovable oak, set in his ways, which was one of the reasons why he hadn't been able to accept Judy as an officer at first. He gave a new sigh.

Where had this beautiful day gone?

A stroll. He needed to take a stroll. See if his officers were doing good, if they could need anything.

And worse case scenario, if he was truly making some mistake by letting them be a team, he knew that MacHorn would have no qualm calling him on it.
So a stroll. A nice mind clearing stroll. Right this second. First stop, front desk.

...  

"Well, that was a nice conversation." The fox glanced down at his mate and to the concerned expression she had. "Hey Carrots? Are you okay?"

"Can we go home?" She asked in a meek voice.
"Oh boy.

"Of course we can."

The walk from the precinct was silent. Observing his mate, Nick saw that she had a lot on her mind, thinking hard on what the chief had said. They finally arrived and she went straight for the couch, sitting in a reflective state. He joined her, simply wrapping her in his tail.

"You okay, Fluff ?" She nodded, lost in her thought and the fox sighed. Not okay. "Need time to think ?" She gave half-shrug. The fox scooted closer, grabbing the blanket that always sat on the couch. He then proceeded to wrap them in it while at the same time wrapping himself around her. "You need a hug." It wasn't a question but she nodded again. "I'm not moving from here, so if you need to talk about this, I'm here, alright ?" As an answered, she buried her back in his chest. She didn't move for several minutes as the fox lovingly stroke her ears. What the chief had said was on his mind to, and he was trying to untangle it. It wasn't that complicated, but it had implications. Implications that the two mates needed to talk about. And so he waited for her to open up, which was strange considering how their roles were reversed on this.

"Nick ?"

"Yeah, Fluff ?"

"Can we talk about this ?"

"Depends, does it mean we have to break the hug ?"

"I'm afraid we must."

The fox gave an over-dramatic sigh and the bunny scooted away to face him. The blanket fell down.

"I don't see a solution to this." She declared.

"There is no solution to find. We remain partners, we do our work like we did before."

"The rules are there for a reason. I know I wouldn't act toward you as I would if we weren't a couple."

"The only difference in us being a couple, is that we won't conceive any frustration in our dating life. My feelings would still be there if we weren't dating."

"Don't you think it's wrong that we are mates and partners on the force ? Maybe we should ask the chief and have a transfer for one of us."

"You're right, I'll ask him to send me to Sahara Square. Always loved the heat." He said, deadpan.

"I'm serious."

The fox scooted toward Judy to be a little closer and took her paws. "Why don't you tell me why you're so bothered by this ?"

"The rules-"

"Forget the rules for five minutes alright. You know what I think about rules."

The bunny sighed, letting her ears slump down. "I'm afraid that despite the chief's warning, I'll
never be able to put aside the fact that I love you while on the job."

"And you think it's bad?"

"Of course it is! I'm a cop. I have a duty toward the city and its citizens! I know that if we ever find ourselves in danger, my first reflex will be to help you before helping the civilian."

The fox chuckled. "You're not giving yourself enough credit, Judy."

"It's not funny."

"Yes it is. But not for the reason you think. You get emotional, it's true, and it's an important part of you, hell, it's one of the innumerable reason why I love you. But I know that you don't let your judgement be clouded by emotions. I trust you to be the one to push us to always do the right thing."

"I'm not that strong."

"Yes you are, you dumb bunny." He said booping her nose. "But there is another solution to this problem."

"No."

"You don't even know what I'm going to say."

"You're going to say that you could resign."

"Okay, you're right. But it's still a solution."

"How is it different to you being transferred elsewhere or given another partner?"

"Well, I would spend way less time in the face of danger. One of the reason why I don't like the idea of use being partnered up to another mammal, is because I wouldn't be there to protect you."

"Yeah, same here. But you can't stop being a cop. I know you became one for the wrong reasons, but you like it. Right?" She asked a bit worried.

"At first I didn't, not that I hated it but, it was just a job... But it grew on me. I love the face some mammals do when they see a fox show his badge. Always priceless. I'm kind of a symbol too, first fox officer, I can't really quit anymore. And I get to help people, which is... Well, it's something I really do like. I can make a difference."

"Yeah, it's a nice feeling isn't it. The bunny's head slumped again. " But we're back to square one. Not solution to our current problem"

"You worry too much Judy."

"I don't."

"Judy, you're a cop to the bone, I don't see how us being partners change anything. Well I see, but I don't think it's bad. And would you want anyone else as your partner?"

"It's not about what I want."

"Alright, let me rephrase it: Do you believe that we could be as good with anyone else as partners?"
"I don't know, I don't think so. And it's currently not a possibility anyway."

"So there you have it, the best for this city is for us keep working together. Case closed."

She let herself fall, spinning to get on her back, head in his lap. "It's not that simple. There are lots of things that could happen. And if the public learns of it..."

"Judy, they will end up knowing about it. The best we can hope is that it's a long way from now and that nothing bad happens in between. And if something does happen, we'll have other things to worry than what other think about us."

"I don't want to spend my life hiding our relationship. I want for us to get married-"

"Hey ! I was supposed to propose you !"

"It wasn't a proposal, it was a statement. And I want to maybe have kids. It's not something we can do if we have to hide the fact that we're together. I can accept it as a temporary solution and nothing else."

The fox's eyes widened, he wanted to reassure her but in doing so, he had lost sight of those two things. Marriage and kids.

"Temporary solution it is. And we're a bit early in our relationship to think about those anyway." She nodded. "Selfishly, I'd like to work as your partner a bit more, I feel like I didn't get enough of you those last few months, and the desk job will not provide enough of that."

"To be continued then ?"

"To be continued." He nuzzled her ear. "Could we get back to cuddling ?"

"Do you even have to ask ?" She said, grabbing the blanket and wrapping it back around them.
He was so excited, well, that wasn't all that surprising, considering his love for hosting an event like this. He had sent multiple invitations, and knew that enough of his colleagues would come and the few that wouldn't would see the pictures and videos later. He went through the list of guests he knew would be there. Wolford, Blackfur, Fangmeyer, Delgado, Snarlov, Rhinowitz and of course Nick and Judy. He had invited officers from other precincts of course, but since few knew of the reason he had organized the festivities, he couldn't really be sure they all would come. According to his calculations, there would be between ten and twenty guests. Far from the biggest party he had ever put in place at his place.

He had spent most of the afternoon preparing the festivities. Punch bowls, salad, snack… basically a whole lot of options in drinks and food.

He had put his expensive record player and record collection in his room, knowing that sometimes, drunk mammals could be clumsy.

Wolford was silently humming a tune, happy that his work day would soon be over. He was one of the few to know why this party had been organized and was looking forward to the revelation. He'd have to make it quickly to his flat to change into his party clothes and help Clawhauser to finish the preparations.

He glanced at Blackfur, she too knew about it. He could see it at how she was smiling. In the past few months their friendship had evolved into something special. He sometimes got teased by his colleagues, especially Nick and Fangmeyer, on how close they were. The wolf didn't mind, knowing exactly where he stood with the panda. They were friends. Really close friends. Nothing more, of that he was certain.

By his own nature, as an omega, he always had trouble forming real and deep bonds with others, not that he had ever felt lonely. This close friendship was simply something new.

She felt strange going to second party in less than a year. Despite her ability to understand and see through most mammals, the panda wasn't an overly social mammal. Not in the sense that she fled social interaction, she simply wasn't a party mammal, and didn't really like large gatherings. But this party didn't feel like a chore, she would be going with friends.

Since the end of the case, and the moment she had left Judy's apartment she had felt a bit lonely. Her new place was way better than the one she had rented before, but it felt empty since she was the only presence in it. Maybe she'd find another larger place and a flatmate. She'd ask Wolford but she knew how cheap his place was thanks to Clawhauser.

Still, he was the only one she knew she could imagine as a potential flatmate. The wolf was beyond nice, and though she knew of the teasing he got from the others about it, he, in only a few months, had become her best friend.

He was a happy mammal today. Usually, his wife could be a bit pushy about him staying home after work, but this time she had not complained a bit. She knew how important the gatherings with his colleagues were. With the current pressure schedule and pressure from work, they didn't always have time to really get together, and the parties were a nice respite. Plus he bonding that resulted was important for morale.
When they were younger, Fangmeyer and his wife had been quite the party mammals, but now he preferred more quiet, and relaxing evenings. And aside from the surprise that was announced, he knew what he was getting into. A rather wild party. And he if he played his cards right, he'd be able to start a drinking contest. Sure there would be a chance to make or lose a few bucks. But he was confident that they'd all get a good laugh out of it.

Delgato felt a bit guilty. It was unusual for him to have a free evening and when he did, he liked to spend it with his family. It was his wife that had pushed him to go. She had even helped him dress up, choosing clothes that were 'nice but not too classy'. The perks of having a mate working at a clothing store. To be honest, part of him wanted to stay at home, there was nothing more that he wanted after a long day of work than to be at home and have a nap. But he had to go. His colleagues would be here and Fangmeyer, his partner, would never let him hear the end of it if he missed whatever the 'announcement' was, even if he had a faint idea of what it was going to be. And with a bit of luck, he'd be able to bait Fangmeyer into a drinking contest. Despite his big mouth, the tiger never could handle his liquor.

Snarlov was a bear, and as such, he was not an especially social mammal. Despite this, he always looked forward to ZPD parties. It was nice to be among colleagues while off duty. Not that he'd socialize much, he usually stayed on the sidelines, looking at mammals mingle. Usually there was someone that would come to him and ask if he was bored but he really wasn't. It was his way to spend time around others, alone but not lonely. And knowing the crowd, Fangmeyer would try to put up some kind of wager, a drinking contest maybe. And no one could drink like bears. Not even elephants, even if Pennington and Trunkaby liked to pretend the opposite.

Rhinowitz was rather solitary and enjoyed the tranquility it offered. But when there was a ZPD party, he would try to attend and make the best of it. He wasn't big on gossiping or even talking for that matter. But if the food was good and the booze fresh, he wouldn't have any reason to complain. And after all, he had nothing against the mammals that would be present.

Hey, he already knew how the evening would end for him. In a corner, side by side with MacHorn, a beer in hand, without swapping a word. Yes, he would make the most of this party. Nick felt that Judy was especially bouncy, not that he could blame her. Last week she had gone back to the hospital a last time and had finally got the news she wanted: she was fit for duty. Well, at least her knee was, because she had a lot of training to do to get back to full strength.

Considering how hard those last months had been hard for her and how she thoroughly hated her desk job, He was glad to see her in that mood. And to top it all of, they would soon be celebrating her return to work with their close friends from work. But still, he liked her in her bouncy mood. He knew she would be the one to push the most reluctant mammals onto the dancefloor, helped by Clawhauser of course. There would be a few that would absolutely not join in on this activity, like MacHorn or Rhinowitz for instance, which was a good thing considering their weight.

Judy could see the fleeting little smile the fox had kept the whole day. She knew it was partly his reaction at her mood, but also at the perspective of the party. He'd never say it to them, but he really loved to spend time with all his colleagues, even the less chatty ones. He often had one way conversation with Rhinowitz, doing the questions and the answers, which seemed to annoy the rhino, but not as much as he wanted others to believe.
She liked how the fox had easily adapted to the ZPD life. Or maybe he had adapted the ZPD life to himself. Probably a bit of both.

She was happy to be finally cleared for duty, but she had a lot of training to catch up on, and even if the chief had given her his go at getting back on the street, she didn't feel physically ready. But it wouldn't stop her anyway, she'd simply have to get back into shape fast enough. No more cute Judy, back to lean and fit Judy.

What she felt a bit less happy about, was that Nick had been able to back on the field a month ago and had refused. She knew that he didn't like the paperwork, but he knew the wait would be even worse for her if he was back on the street without her. And for him, it wouldn't have been the same.

Unsurprisingly, the first one to arrive had been Wolford, quickly followed by Blackfur. The last of the preparations were done and they hung out around the large table full of food the cheetah had put up. Unlike Blackfur, the two males had a hard time keeping themselves from digging in, so it was a relief when the first wave of guests arrived.

In no time at all, the room filled with at least twenty more guests who all quickly began to mingle. Overall more mammals than the cat had anticipated, though it was a pleasant surprise. Some of them were looking at Finnick's art with an interested eye.

It was fun to hear about the stories from the different precincts, and to see that most officers were working as hard as them. Those parties were also occasions to learn about the other precinct's work. For instance, recently there had been a drug bust in canal district. They had been tipped off by a white bear, and had stumbled upon a large shipment belonging to a certain Vladimir Zimovitch. As per usual in Sahara Square, the trade of hallucinogenic cactus was fluctuating. There had been a recent fox disappearance in Savannah central, the officers were confident in their lead to find him, and a suspect in a Lycus related case had disappeared from a hospital in Tundratown.

Like most party the Clawhauser held, the atmosphere was lively yet low-key. Yet like most parties, you never could be certain what it would eventually devolve into. He could fondly remember, years ago, how a drunken Fangmeyer had gotten a hold of a microphone and twisted it into a very drunken karaoke. His only regret was that he hadn't gotten the chief to pick up the mike.

Looking at his phone, he saw that it was almost time for the surprise. He went and fetched Judy and Nick. The fox had put back on his arm brace as a symbol, to accompany his mate onto the improvised scene with their ploy, which was nothing more than a table with a chair as a footstool.

The two small mammals climbed up and onto the table, while the cat turned off the music. Everyone turned to them and the bunny tapped the microphone.

"Hello? Can everyone hear me?"

"Yeah!" "Yes." "We can" Came a chorus from all over the room.

"Good, good. Nick and I have an announcement to make." She gave the microphone to the fox and began unstrapping her leg cast while he did the same with his arm cast, letting the objects fall to the floor. He then gave her back the microphone.

"We're returning to the field." She announced.

It was the felines' idea, to try and improve morale. Despite things improving as of late off the ZPD, and underlying tension was still present. Knowing that the heroes of Zootopia were back on active duty could only have a positive impact. And the gods knew that after the whole Lycus debacle,
every mammal needed a little pick-me-up. With a bit of luck, those who had recorded the scene would upload it on Zootube, where it would be seized by the public as a good omen.

A collective roar of celebration, even from those that had never worked with them, filled the room. The cheetah winced, feeling that his neighbors wouldn't be too happy about it. The enthusiasm died down slowly, and when finally a relative calm came back they could hear a taunting voice.

"Talk about a dud. I thought they'd finally announce they were together."

The room suddenly fell silence, and all head turned slowly to the one that had said it. Delgato seemed to try and slowly scoot away from Fangmeyer who was coolly downing his drink, giving the stage an innocent side glance.

"I wouldn't want to make you jealous, kitty cat." Immediately shot back the fox. He couldn't leave this remark hanging, otherwise, it would be like an admission. And it was too soon to go public. The remark earned a few laughs.

"You wish, Wilde."

"Oh no, I don't. I wouldn't dream of becoming an obstacle between you and Delgato." And second wave of laughter shook the room, and the two lovers used the distraction to sneak away from the stage.

"Catastrophe averted, well played." Remarked Judy. "Not very subtle though."

"Yeah, well, I was a bit shaken by that. I'll do better next time."

"Let's hope there won't be a next time."

Nick made a quick double sidestep and reappeared with a couple of glasses. "Let's drink to that."

And they did. The party continued, a notch crazier than it had started. At one point, Fangmeyer jumped on a table, brandishing a bunch of banknotes. "Who think they can drink me under the table?" Already a bit tipsy, Clawhauser didn't protest and the contestants gathered themselves around the table. It was a good thing most guest had brought a bit of food and alcohol, because otherwise, there wouldn't have been enough of it.

"Not participating Nick?" Asked the tiger.

"I'm smaller than your leg. And it's a contest against your whole body."

"You can play as a tandem with Judy if you want." He proposed.

"Pass." Said the bunny with a smile.

"You two are no fun."

Judy was surprised to see Rhinowitz staying on the sidelines. Despite his discreet nature, he usually didn't stay away from a contest he could win. She was however very surprised to see Blackfur and Wolford around the table.

Nick and Judy installed themselves a bit away, on the table that had been a stage, to observe the contest. Around the table were Fangmeyer, Delgato, Blackfur, Wolford, Snarlov and a couple of others from other precincts. A moose, a buffalo, and a very large badger.

"A shame the chief isn't here. He would drink them all under the table." Remarked Nick.
"I'm not so sure." Chimed in Clawhauser, who had silently installed himself near them. "He's not a big drinker." The cheetah looked at those who had started to drink more seriously. "I'm going to get some buckets."

Nick and Judy went to help him and found that he had quite the stack of them.

"That's quite the collection. It take it this has happened here before." Nick questioned.

The cheetah giggled

"Far from it."

"They must have made quite a mess if you bought so many in advance."

"The first time, I had to have the room recarpeted." Simply stated the feline.

"Oh my gosh!" Judy grimaced in disgust. "And you're letting them do it again?"

"Well, that was the first time, and I don't want to spoil the fun."

"But who had to clean it up, let alone pay for it?" Judy asked in shock.

"Oh they all did, on both counts," the cheetah chuckled before freezing, "Wait, if Snarlov is participating, maybe we should tarp the floor too."

"What, he's a messy puker?" Asked the fox with a smile mixed with disgust.

"No, but the mammals that try to follow him tend to be." Smiled the feline.

The participants were kind enough to pause the game while buckets were distributed and the tarps were installed. And they agreed that any expenses incurred from the game would come from half of the winner's gain. Once everything was set up, it could really begin.

Slowly but surely, the mood around the table changed. At first, it was rather cheery. Wolford's smile was goofier than ever. Without any warning, the badger fell from his chair. "I'm the biggest drinker in my family but those guys are craz-" he had to stop talking and put his head in the bucket, one of the guest was kind enough to escort him to the bathroom.

"First blood!" Shouted Nick, which made Judy giggle.

The next to fall was Fangmeyer. Well not exactly fall. He looked at his beer with disgust before declaring with a smile. "Delgado, sometimes I really have shitty ideas."

"Then why do you always follow through with them?" The two feline bumped fist as the Lion downed his seventh drink. "Piss break soon!" He announced.

Two of the participants nodded and abandoned at the same time, extending paws and shaking them. It was Wolford and the moose. "We may be defeated, but we're still standing!"

"What an achievement..." Taunted Snarlov who didn't look tipsy at all.

"Do whatever you like, my big friend, but I'd actually prefer to walk home, rather than crawl." Smiled Wolford.

"Don't you live here?"
"I do. But like me, my point still stands." Answered the wolf with a wide smile, going to place himself behind Blackfur to cheer for her.

"Piss break!" announced Delgato standing up. He must have done it a bit too quickly because he leapt to his bucket and emptied his stomach in it. "Carrots." They heard him mumble. "Why is there always carrots?"

After they all came and emptied their bladder it was time to resume this little championship. It was actually fun to look at each participant and look at how they handled their booze. Snarlov looked fairly okay but he blinked a bit more than usual, the buffalo looked like he was trying to chase an nonexistent bee flying around his head, and Blackfur's eyes were smaller than usual, and had the beginning of a drunken smile.

The buffalo finally caved in, falling forward and hitting his head against the table. "I'm still there! Still the- Oh gods!" He fell on his knees just above his bucket and puked all he had eaten and drunk during that evening.

"Piss break!" Announced Snarlov, getting up. Wolford helped Blackfur get up and walk.

"Are you sure you don't want to give up." He asked. Still smiling she shook her head.

The two ursine were now facing each other, drunken gaze locked.

"What do you say we move up to something a bit more fun?" Proposed Snarlov.

"Why not. The sooner you roll under the table the better." The panda shrugged.

"Haha! Perfect!" He turned to Clawhauser. "I brought some bottles that I put in your freezer. Can you bring them please?"

The cheetah nodded, left and came back with three bottles. They didn't wear any label.

"Everyone take a shot to bring us luck!" Said the polar bear while opening the first bottle. Most mammals were curious and brave enough to try it.

It wasn't a stiff drink. It was frozen hell.

"How much alcohol is there in this?" Asked the moose that had accepted to try the beverage, while a tear slowly ran down his cheek.

"I don't know, I'd say around fifty percent. Try it warm if you want to truly feel the burn." He answered with a toothy grin.

Three shooters later and the two ursine still hadn't given up. The panda actually looked better than she did a few drinks ago.

"I thought pandas couldn't hold their drinks." Taunted Snarlov.

"I thought polar bears could." She answered in the same tone.

"Ooooooooh snap!" Came Fangmeyer's voice. The rest of the room was shaken by laughter and one could even hear a howl or two.

"It's going to be like that, Wight?"

"Better believe it, Rudin."
Wolford's eyes widened in surprise.

"Nick, I think Blackfur is completely drunk." Judy said, turning to her mate with worry.

"And I'm so not missing this!" He replied, phone in paws, filming the whole scene.

"Nick!" She elbowed him.

They were facing each other, fists tightly closed.

"Alright. Time to get serious." And the polar bear got rid of his shirt. "It's getting too hot in here."

They downed another shot. Judy had only sipped in Nick's glass and she wondered how they could actually keep drinking that. The fox himself hadn't finished his glass.

Fifth shot and the panda blinked a few times. "You're right Rudin."

"What, This panda can't handle her alcohol?"

"No. It's getting too hot in here." And she got rid of her own shirt, which triggered another round of laughs, accompanied with whistling and howling. Wolford clapped his paws on his face and rubbed it. Guess he was sleeping on the couch and her in his room that night.

Judy went from slightly rosy to red in less than a second.

"This is gold. And I'm not saying gold-plated, but actual twenty-four karats gold!"

"Nick stop filming!" She said, trying to take the phone from his paw.

"Oh no fluff. It's for posterity. I won't make it public, but maybe she'll have a new wallpaper on her computer soon."

The first bottle was empty, and they had attacked the second. Snarlov didn't seem so sure about winning now, he looked like he was just about to pass out. Or puke. Or both. But the panda didn't seem far behind him. She extended her arm in what seemed like the biggest effort of her life, grabbing the bottle and filling both their glasses. She raised her drink and downed it. The polar bear looked at his own glass unsure, but the cocky smile she gave him made him down it too. Bad decision. His face turned red, blue, green and he filled his own puke bucket.

A last roar of applause exploded, Wolford raising the panda's arm. From the other she took her bucket and vomited in turn.

"It's not gold. It's platinum!"

"Nick!"

"Think Finnick could make a painting out of that?"

"Nick!"

"What? Paintings make nicer gifts than computer wallpaper."

"Where is your empathy?"

"You're right, I need to think of my fellow officers. Sharing is caring." He replied with a sly grin.
"Don't you dare!"

"Aaaand... Sent. Hopefully our colleagues won't be too mad they missed that first paw."

The bunny pinched the bridge of her eyes. "I can't believe you."

The fox gave her a peck between the ear which earned him a punch in the shoulder.

Wolford helped a drunken and giggly Blackfur up, a state no one here had ever seen her in before. She stumbled a bit and fell on her paws with a snort. The wolf put his head under her shoulder and helped her up again, glad he hadn't drunken that much and was in possession of most of his strength.

There wasn't a lot of cleaning to do afterwards. The people that were sober enough helped clean up. As he had foreseen, Wolford gave his bed to a completely drunk Blackfur.

It was around 2 when most mammals had left, Judy and Nick saying goodbye to the cheetah before leaving too.

... 

The air was fresh but not very cold. Walking on the street side by side, they leaned against each other. They wouldn't have a lot of occasions to safely express their affection outside of their own home.

"Why don't we have a stroll, I always liked being out at night." Said the fox.

"You're a nocturnal predator, the night is kind of your thing. But I'm not tired yet, so why not." She said with a smile, happy to be out and without her brace. It was a thing on which the doctor Procyon had heavily insisted, despite the fact that her knee had technically healed for two months, he didn't want her to take any risk, and had restricted her physical training to specific exercises, and had forbidden her to not wear the articulated brace outside of those moments.

"You're taking us somewhere aren't you?"

"What makes you think that?"

"It's not your strolling pace."

"You know me way too well Carrots." He said before stopping. "But not well enough. we're already there."

She looked around her and didn't recognize the place until she looked up and saw the sign dimly lighted by a nearby streetlamp. "Jumbeaux's Café." She turned back to him with an interrogative gaze. She saw him, a knee on the floor.

"Oh gods."

"The first time I saw you, I knew I wouldn't be able to get rid of you." The bunny felt her throat tighten and tears coming up. "I didn't know at the time, that it was because I'd never want to let you go." More tears, she felt her paws shake. "So I hope you'll never let me go either."

"Never." She gasped silently, the first tears welling.

He took out a little box and opened it. "Judith Laverne Hopps, would you be willing to marry this sly fox?" He opened the box. Inside was a flat open ring. She could see two little gems embedded
at each side of the open part.

"Yes. Yes I do." She answered with a big bright smile.

The fox slid the ring on her finger and it fit perfectly. Turning her gaze from the ring she buried her now tear streaked face into his shirt. The fox hugged her in turn, stroking her ear. When she was able to finally stop crying tears of joy, she turned her head on the side to look at her ring. The two gems were amethyst and emerald.

"Only you could turn a puking contest into a marriage proposal."

"Thanks." He said, kissing her head.

"How did you get my finger size right ?"

"Natural fox slyness. I took a picture of you hand next to a ruler while you were sleeping. It took a few attempts. Do you like it ?"
"I love it. It's steel, isn't it ?"

"Yeah, I know you're not really into jewellery so I chose something sturdy. According to the jeweller, you could punch a rhino in the horn with it."

"Nice. You know how many rhinos I punch in a week."

"And you can turn it to have the gem on the inside to make it more discreet."

She turned her face up. "That's perfect."

"I didn't think you'd settle for less."

She put herself on the tip of her toes and kissed him. "I never did."
Middle of July 2019

Like every roll call, the officers were horsing around before the chief came in. Nick was taking part, throwing back the paper balls he had received a few seconds ago, when the chief entered.

"Atten-hut!" Came MacHorn's deep voice. Immediately the room calmed down.

"Assignments. Wolford, Blackfur, You're south of Downtown, there are rumors about a disappearing fox. I want you in civilian clothes trying to find names and faces."

The two partners took the file and left. "Pennington, Higgins, you'll complement the security staff at Dry River Park's on the circus parking lot. Your Colleagues at Sahara Square will tell you more. Hopps, Wilde, you're at the Downtown market. Reports on pickpockets have risen those past few weeks. I want it to stop."

"Aye aye sir."

"And I want to see you in my officer at 5PM at the end of your shift. Dismissed."

As the two mammals left the room they came across Clawhauser that seemed to go in the chief's office direction.

"You're going to see the chief?"

"Yes. He told he needed to talk to me."

"Alright then. Have fun." Said the fox. None of the bunny or cheetah missed the joke, being called in the chief's office was rarely fun.

... 

The two partners were strolling down the street, keeping an eye on the civilians in the street market. Judy liked Downtown market, it reminded her of the sundays at the burrows, where all the farmers sold and showed off their products. It was a bit different there since most of the sellers were in fact resellers, but she could see they knew and loved the products spread on their stalls.

The whole situation sent a thought in her mind. It wandered from the market to the burrows and to her family.

"Nick!"

She whispered, loud enough so that he'd be the only one to hear him.

"Yes?" He asked in the same town.

"I have bad news."
"What ?"

"You'll have to ask my father for my paw."

The fox grinned. "I don't see how it's bad news."

"My parents seem to have adjusted to the idea, but I don't know if they truly are."

"Strangely, I think the main obstacle will be your mother."

The doe sighed. "Whatever this obstacle will be, please put on your best behavior."

"Oh, fluff, you know I'm always on my best behavior."

"484."

The fox blinked and looked where she was pointing. "484 Indeed. Pursuit ?"

The bunny didn't even answer to him, instead she went and tapped the side of the raccoon that had just made disappear a wallet that didn't belong to him in his pocket. "Sir please give back this wallet to its owner and follow us-"

He immediately turned and made a swipe at her. She jumped back, easily avoiding the attack ready to evade from another, but the mammal had already started running. The fox passed her running too. "Theft, attack on an officer of the law and refusal to comply. He's going to get it." He sang under his breath.

He heard a light tap behind him and the bunny bolted before him. "Tell me about it."

The raccoon only had slight head start, but he made up for it by passing under stalls. The two officers separated around them, not wanting to disturb them more. After the first stunt Judy had pulled on her first day on the force, she tried to avoid public destruction.

They lost track of him a couple of times but he mostly went in a straight line, getting out of the market and in alley ways.

"In the name of the law, stop." Shouted Judy on his heels and almost out of breath. 

*Not in top shape yet.*

The next street took a sharp turn in had a dirt ground. He went to a stop which made the bunny skid and get ahead of him. She turned and received a handful of dirt in the eyes, rendering her blind. Next thing she knew, a paw yanked her by the ears and rose her just enough so that only her toes touched the flour.

"Not another step or the bunny gets it !"

Nick stopped to see the raccoon in front of him holding his partner by the ears and a switchblade to her neck.

"Dude, really ?" Said the fox in a sarcastic tone, while unholstering his tranq-gun.

"I'm not kidding, let me go or I'm gonna do it."

The fox lifted a brow. "Put the knife down, get on your knees and paws behind your head."
"I'm gonna do it! Look, she's shakin' and cryin', she believes it. And you should too."

Nick looked at Judy. She was indeed shaking and crying. Shaking with rage, which was never a good thing for the mammal who was the target of that particular feeling, and crying to get rid of the dirt in her eyes.

"Take it easy, please." Said the fox while holstersing back his tranq-gun.

"I'll do what I wa-

"Not talking to you."

"Wha-"

The bunny spun her hips which brought her face to face with the raccoon. In a smooth motion, she took her baton out and knocked the blade from her attacker's paw. The pain made him let go of her ears. She landed perfectly and while the raccoon was cursing in pain, she launched herself feet first in his jaw. The criminal took off and landed on his back.

"She never listens to me." Jokingly lamented the fox while taking out the ziplocks he carried instead of cuffs and checking the unconscious mammal. He wasn't completely out, but knocked enough so that the fox had no trouble cuffing him. Nick snorted. If his mate had been in top shape, the poor guy's jaw would've been dislocated.

"Still blind here." Said the bunny, trying to rub away the dirt in her eyes.

"Coming." Said the fox, dragging the raccoon with him. He took out a handkerchief. "Try not to blink." He held her eyelid open and gently helped her.

"Did you call in for the package?"

"Nah, I thought we could bring him ourselves. You okay?"

"Apart from the dirt in the eyes, yes. A bit insulted that he thought I was shaking with fear, though."

"Better to be underestimated by criminals. You really hate being yanked by the ears do you?"

She blinked a few times, her vision had come back. She gave him a hip bump. "Depends by whom."

"No flirting on the job, officer." Joked the fox. "Could you please bring the cruiser here while I hold on to this lowlife criminal?"

"Sure thing officer Slick." She took the wallet from the raccoon's pocket. "I'll give back the content of the wallet to the owner and ask them to come make a deposition. Be back in a bit."

She was taking her sweet time. The raccoon had tried to escape twice. Once when a civilian had proposed a nice warm cup of coffee to the fox while he was waiting, which he accepted, and second when he had taken out his phone to trump the boredom.

"You've just been beaten by a blind bunny. I'm a fox in possession of all his senses. You should really calm down." He had said after the second time. The cuffed mammal thought about it and followed the advice. What Nick didn't say was that he genuinely believed that a blind Judy was more proficient in paw to paw combat than a seeing Nick.
Finally he took out his radio.

"Wilde to Hopps. I'm growing roots here. It's been half an hour already, did you decide to taste all the carrots in the market?"

Just as he finished his sentence, the cruiser stopped near him. "At last. Up you go buddy, time to enter the cruiser. And it seems you're going to have a seat mate." He pushed the raccoon inside, careful to keep him from hitting his head. He then took the front passenger seat.

"You arrested someone without me?" He asked while putting his seatbelt.

"Yep."

"A capybara? What did he do, walk too slowly? Felony of being too chill?" He joked.

"Ooooh, speciesism coming from you? No, he was eating food from the stalls without paying."

Nick turned around to look at the mammal. "Is that true buddy?" He looked at the large rodent. The guy wasn't looking like a hobo, but wasn't dressed too nicely. He looked very tired though.

"I was hungry." He said in a slow voice.

"Did he give you trouble?"

"No, I asked him to come with me and he just did. I'm not sure he even understands what's happening."

"Completely stoned." Remarked the fox. "If eating food is the worst crime stoned mammals can do, it's a wonder how weed is still illegal."

The bunny gave him a glare. "Could you refrain from saying this kind of stuff in front of suspects? Or civilians for that matter."

"Sorry Carrots." He said. Her tone had been a bit too dry, but he guessed she was still angry about the ear-yanking.

... 

The afternoon was paperwork and deposition taking. The deer that had his wallet stolen pressed charge against the raccoon, but the merchants didn't against the capybara. It was only a few vegetables, and they didn't see the point for only a loss of a handful of bucks.

"Sorry if I was a little cold in the car."

"No problem, I shouldn't have said that in front of civilians anyway."

She nodded getting down from her seat.

"You know what the chief wanted to talk to us about?"

"Nope, he just asked us to be in his office at 5PM."

The bunny glanced at her phone. "Time to go then." She said while getting down from her seat.

"Are you not forgetting something?"
"Am I ?"

The fox went toward her and leaned to give her a kiss. "You were."

She kissed him back. "Silly me."

They quit their office and went to the stairs. To do so they had to pass near the front desk. Behind it, they found a gloomy cheetah.

"Hey, Clawhauser, what's happening to you ?"

"Oh ? Nothing. I'm fine. Everything's fine." He said in a sad voice, his gaze fixed on the desk.

"Ben ?"

"Hm ?"

"Why are you so sad ?"

"I'm not sad. I'm okay. Don't you have a meeting with the chief ? You shouldn't make him wait."

Nick and Judy looked at each other. He was right, they had to go.

"See him afterwards ?" Asked the fox as they went away.

"Of course." She answered.

A few seconds later they were in front of the chief's office, knocking at the door.

"Come in."

They did and found the chief behind his desk, but he wasn't alone. Mayor Swinton was there too. She stood up from her chair and greeted the two newcomer.

"Hello ! It's so nice to see you again officer Hopps."

"Likewise mayor Swinton."

"And officer Wilde. I just read the reports on what you did for our city."

The fox lifted a brow.

"Lycus case. You being undercover."

"Oh, I thought you knew."

"One would believe I would." There was bit of irritation in her voice, but it wasn't targeted to the fox. "But after what happened with Bellwether, I can understand why I was left in the dark."

She motioned them to sit and they did so.

They were waiting for one of them to start speaking but they didn't, the chief simply glancing at his watch.

"Are we waiting for someone else, sir ?"

"Yes, they should arrive in about a minute."
Nick had bad feeling of déjà vu. At the same time the door opened, showing a striped bunny.

"Shit." Let the fox escape.

"Hello to you to officer Wilde." Answered the bunny. He looked at everyone in the room and sidestepped. Another mammal entered the room. A large grey wolf. He looked old and strong at the same time. The part of his body that weren't covered by his suit were so by scars. He missed an eye, which was covered by an eyepatch.

"Bogo. Mayor. Officers." He nodded.

"Barklin." Answered the buffalo, nodding too. He saw that his two officers gave him interrogative looks. "This is Jonathan Sears Barklin, director of the ZIA." The wolf went and shook each hoof and paw.

"Chief, you know I'm not one to got against order, but if it's about another undercover operation, you might as well take back my badge this instant."

They heard a laugh that sounded more like a growl coming from the wolf. "No. Don't worry it's not about that. Besides, I don't see why you wouldn't want another assignment from us. According to Savage's report you did an excellent job."

The fox glanced at the male bunny that gave him an imperceptible nod.

"If everyone could sit, I will explain what this is all about." They did so and the chief started his explanation. "After Lycus case and his experience as an undercover agent, me and the mayor came to a conclusion: the ZIA has a little too much liberty on how it handles the cases it takes on. To put it simply, it's been at least a decade since they showed account of their actions, and though they claim what they do is for the good of the city, we don't have any proofs or even official records. Basically they say what they take on and all I get is a 'stay out of our way'. Which can be a bit tricky when I put in place my own covert operations. Me and the mayor came to the conclusion that it had to change."

The chief had slightly leaned over his desk to stare at the wolf who looked like he was having a perfectly pleasant conversation. "And I, for one, agree with you, mister Bogo."

The answer made the buffalo lift a brow. "Really?"

"Wait, you do?" Asked the mayor.

"Yes, I do. The ZIA has actually changed a lot between the beginning of the year and now. It's mostly due to a change in management."

"As I recall, you were only the vice-director at the time. What was your predecessor's name again? Adamska something. He kept it secret." Stated the buffalo.

"Adamska Pardalis. Yes he loved his secrecy, believing that only by being totally detached from the mayor's office and ZPD we could do our job properly, and without the influence of politics. I must admit I'm not completely against those ideas, but the ZIA simply can't stay unaccountable. Immunity leads to drifting. And we don't want something like the ZIA to drift away from its intended purpose."

"Why did you replace director Pardalis?" Asked the mayor, curious.

"His multiple bouts of undercover operation had made him unstable. When he was named director,
we knew it was only a matter of time before his mind crumbled under the PTSD and paranoia, but the ocelot was one of the best director we ever had. To make an metaphor, some mammals can think a few moves ahead. He could think a hundred move ahead, on multiple chessboards. Problem was, half of them were imaginary."

"All this is really neat, but why are we here ?" Asked Nick. "I mean, me and officer Hopps."

"Because we need to ease the ZIA into its new place. And since the ZPD will technically have authority over us from then on, we need someone that is ZPD but that also knows how we, the ZIA, proceed in our work."

"Not to seem disrespectful, but despite having worked for the ZIA, I know very little of its inner workings."

"Congratulations, it's more than most of our field agents." Said the wolf with a wide joking smile.

The fox didn't know what to answer. He simply looked at each mammal present in turn to see if they were in the same reality than him. "Okay, let's slow down a bit, I can add two and two together, you want me for that job. What would I be supposed to do ? What is... How could I even be useful in this situation ?"

"I must admit, I'm asking myself the same question." Said the mayor.

"Same here." Added the doe. "And I don't even know why I'm here to be honest."

"You're here because you're Mr Wilde's mate, my dear." Said the wolf. "Oh, don't make this face, of course I know about it. I also know that you don't keep secrets from one another, and if you are to know about this, I'd prefer that you don't have any wrong ideas about your mate's work."

"I knew it !" Said the mayor. "I knew you were together ! Congratulations !"

"Thanks." She said with her surprised expression still in place looking alternatively to the pig and wolf.

"You're welcome." They said at the same time. The wolf continued speaking. "And to get back on how you'll be useful, Mr Wilde : We want you as some sort of...

Connection between the ZPD and the ZIA. We want you to learn the true inner working of the ZIA and find where they could meet the ZPD's. You'd be a sort of ambassador between two nations. You would see what works and what doesn't, what to change so we could operate behind... Acceptable boundaries. You would teach our agents the ZPD ethics, and what protecting the city entails for a ZPD officer. You see, most of our field agents are mammals that were recruited after they failed the ZPD academy, or left an army from a nearby country, some even came from criminal population. If the ZIA is to change its ways, our agents too must change theirs."

He left the mammals present a bit of time for it to sink in.

"I personally think it's a good idea." Said the mayor. "Change the individuals to make the system evolve. One of the pillar of my politics."

"And how would I be supposed to do that ?" Asked the fox. "I mean, will I have a team ? Who would I answer to ? How will it even be organized ?"

Chief Bogo chimed in. "Director Barklin has agreed to lend you any help you need, and meet any demands you could have, provided they're in his power."
"As for a team..." Continued the wolf. "You won't really have one. You'll be able to ask any free agent for help though. And have complete access to our documents and archives. Basically, consider this an internship. You can proceed however you like, and you'll work directly under me, Mr Bogo and Mayor Swinton."

"Okay... Yes... No... I mean, do you even have a plan on how this all thing will work? Or how long it will take?"

"Officer Wilde, this isn't an assignment, it's a change in position." Stated the chief.

"What?"

"It's a job offer. You would still be considered and officer, but it wouldn't be a temporary assignment. You would become the ZPD-ZIA liaison. The first, by the way."

"What?" Came his voice and the bunny's at the same time.

"It's a position that will ask for field knowledge, social skill, and a willingness to work with, around, and above the law while keeping a steady moral compass. Basically, every best thing in your skillset. Apart from organization, but everything can be learned." The wolf smiled.

The fox looked around. The ZIA director was smiling, the mayor was smiling and the chief had a corner of his mouth up.

"And you want me for this job?"

"Yes we do."

The fox looked at his bunny and back the three other mammals. "I can't... I mean... Judy's my partner, I can't simply leave her behind."

"Well, the good side would be that we could finally come out and get married." The doe remarked with a little smile.

"Judy, can you please be a bit more worried about all this? They're asking me to help reorganize a whole institution and bring it closer to the ZPD's standards. And to be a liaison between the two."

The bunny put a paw on his. "I think you can do it. But you don't need to if you don't feel up to the task. Whatever your choice is, you know I'll support you."

"Thanks Carrots."

"If I may." Since the beginning of the discussion, it was the first time Jack actively participated. The ZIA director nodded. "I've seen you work, I know how resourceful you are. This job would not only bring the ZIA and ZPD together, but also change how our agents perceive their missions. Meaning, less of 'the end justify the means'."

"I wouldn't have thought it would be something you'd get behind." Nick's tone was half-taunting.

"I don't. I don't like to have restraints when on a mission. But if this is going to happen anyway, I'd prefer the task to create those restraints given to a competent mammal. And to one that will actually know what our work usually entails."

Nick scratched his chin. It was a lot to process. "And what about Judy? What will she do while I'm on this job? Did you request a transfer from another precinct?" He asked the chief.
"No, I found another solution. First, you won't be at the ZIA full time, your time will be divided between here and there in half. As for officer Hopps, I know she will need another partner, but none of the mammal in other precincts are good enough for Precinct One, or to follow her rhythm. She will be at ZPD academy to give special training to the small mammals." The fox lifted a brow, the buffalo continued. "According to the inclusion act, there was not to be any favoritism toward small mammals, but it seems the one that get into the academy don't take the training seriously enough. Simply put, they underestimate what will be asked of them on the field. Having officer Hopps as a part-time teacher, and being confronted to her knowledge of the field, will help them get in line. And it will give her the opportunity to choose among the new recruits which ones would be fit to enter Precinct One, and get a new partner."

"You've thought of everything." Stated the bunny.

"It's what I'm paid for." Declared the chief before turning back to the fox. "This job is too important to be done unwillingly. If you're not up for it you will simply go at ZPD academy with Officer Hopps, officer Wilde."

The fox looked around the room again and sighed. "Chief, you're being unfair. You know I can't refuse that kind of assignment…" He gave a glance to the wolf "I have a question though, pure curiosity. The document I signed, the 'licence to kill', you said that we were only two active agents to have signed one. What about the other field agents, how do they accomplished their mission until now ?"

The wolf gave another growl-chuckle. "You have a very dark vision of our work Mr Wilde, but it's not far from the truth. Let's just say 'accidents' happen more when they are involved."

"A license to kill ?" Asked the mayor shocked.

"It's more complicated than that." Explained the wolf. "There are actually a lot of regulations around that, but it's basically what it is. I'll send you the documents about it."

"Yes please, I'd be very interested to know which mayor accepted that to be put in place, and how it holds against a court of law."

The wolf gave her a polite smile. "Of course."

The fox stared at him. "I'm definitely accepting this job. There are work ethics problems I can't turn a blind eye upon. And yes I just said that. Do I have something to sign ? Contract in blood ? Soul of my firstborn ?"

The wolf glanced at the chief. "My agents will love him. No, Mr Wilde, there is nothing to sign. This won't start before at least two weeks anyway." He looked at his phone. "Time for us to go. Bogo, Mayor, we'll have through the details via e-mail."

"Have a nice day Director." Said the female pig.

"Good bye Barklin."

The two ZIA mammals nodded and left the room.

"He's nice." Said the mayor. "I mean, nicer than one could expect."

"Oh yes, he is. As long as you are on his side." Answered the chief. "Are you sure you're up for it Wilde ?"
"I feel even less ready than for Lycus case. But yeah, I'm up for it. It needs to be done anyway."
The mayor stood up in turn. "I've got to go too. Don't hesitate to contact me on this chief Bogo."
"I will, don't worry."
She said goodbye to the three remaining mammals and left in turn.
"That was a bit surrealistic." Remarked the fox.
"Just a bit." Said the bunny.
"I don't need your sass right now," Declared the chief. "It will be a simple job to you, but do you know how much paperwork it will mean for me? Anyway, I'll have the contract brought to you as soon as I get it, Wilde. As for you Hopps, you'll soon receive a schedule of the classes you'll participate in."
"Do you know which ones they will be?"
The buffalo looked at a few sheets of papers. "Firearm handling. They learn to shoot with 9mm and some of them have trouble handling them. Health and fitness, I think it's directly linked. First-aid and CPR, but to be honest, I don't know any young officer that takes them seriously, driving-"
"Not sure Carrots can really help with that one."
"Hey, I'm getting better. Driving in the country and driving in the city are really different things."
The chief glared at them and kept going like he hadn't been interrupted. "Patrol procedures. They technically are good enough, but there are a few things that I know you handle differently given your size. Use of non-lethal weapons. You wouldn't believe how many of them say they should rely more on lethal force."
"Comes with the small size." Explained the bunny. "We tend to be more aggressive to compensate."
"And of course, self-defense and boxing. They all struggle with that one."
"The rope-thing is too well-known now. They'll have to find something better." Half-joked the fox. "But self-defense is a real pain against larger mammals. There are no standard moves adapted to our size. It's always improvisation."
"Maybe you'll have a few insights major Friedkin will find useful." Added the buffalo. "The thing is, and by that, I don't mean to be disrespectful, a small mammal has a size advantage in only a few situations. The rest of the time, they better be damn good at their job to compare to larger officer. From what I've seen until now, you're the only two that showed they could exceed expectations. In any case, we simply can't accept mammals that won't put in the effort to do their job."
"It's logical. The ZPD has standards, they don't meet them, they don't get in." Said Judy. "Was there anything else you needed to tell us?"
"No, you're dismissed."
The two officers saluted their superior and left the room.
"This is happening faster than I thought." Declared the fox.
"What ?"

"Well, you know, us being partners isn't very regular. The mayor didn't seem to mind, or maybe she doesn't know the ZPD's rules in depth. In any case, the solution to this problem is coming faster than I thought it would. And I didn't think I'd work with the ZIA again."

"You know, you don't have to if you don't want to."

The fox scratched one of his ears. "I don't really want to, but I know how I acted during the time I was undercover, and I was trying to stay as close as the ZPD's standards as I could. If their agents don't, I can't imagine the level of damage they can cause, and how much has been covered up by the ZIA over the years. And don't get me started on their mental state. I can't really let that stand. And you know me, I'll find a way to make it enjoyable."

"Yes, I know you." She glanced at the empty hallway and jumped to steal a kiss. "We're going to get married !"

The fox was a bit taken aback by the surprise kiss. He leaned gave her one. "Yes we are. And it's going to be fantastic."

"My parents will want a traditional bunny event."

"My mom won't give a crap. But let's not discuss it until we really decide to organize it, alright ? We'll have enough on our plate in the next few months."

"True. Shall we go see Clawhauser ?" Asked the bunny, pulling her fox by the paw.

"We shall." He let himself get directed by his mate.

The cheetah was still wearing his moping expression, shoulders and ear slumped. It was heartrending to see him like this, and it was bound to bring the whole precinct's mood down.

"Ben, what's eating at you ?" Asked Judy, putting a paw on his arm.

"Nothing."

"Want a donut ?" Proposed the fox who made a box appear out of his back.

"No thanks."

The two mates glanced at eachother with a conniving look of disbelief.

"So basically, you're wearing a moping expression..."

"...refusing donuts..."

"...And you're perfectly fine ?"

"Yeah."

"Ben, I really don't want to press you if you don't want to talk about it, but I personally know that talking about your problems helps at least get past a portion of the emotional burden." Said the fox while putting the donut box on his desk.

The cheetah glanced at the glazed treats and took one between to fingers.
"It's silly."

"If it puts you that down, it can't be that silly."

The pudgy cat sighed. "Well, you know there is a Gazelle concert Friday night?"

The fox didn't, but Judy immediately shot back "Yes."

"I had bought tickets, but the chief said he had an important assignment for me that evening. So I can't go. I even got front row tickets."

"Oh, Ben." Said the bunny tapping the cheetah's arm. He took a bite of the donut.

"And the tickets were not refundable."

"Now that really sucks." Said the fox with a little smile.

"Nick!"

"Sorry Ben."

"No, that's okay." The cheetah said with a sad smile. "It actually really does suck. I had one for me and one for my sister. She's not really into music or crowded places, but I know she would have enjoyed it if we have gone together." He trudged in his pocket. "If you want them you can have them."

The bunny looked at the tickets. "Can't take them Ben. We're working that same evening. Security details in front of the stadium."

"Kind of ironic actually." Added the fox. "Maybe you could give them to Wolford and Blackfur, maybe they'd at last stop being so stuck up and actually declare to each other."

"Nick, there is nothing between them." Said the bunny, giving him an annoyed but amused glance.

"You mean, they wish there were nothing between them. No rank, no clothes..." The bunny elbowed him hard. "Ow. But yeah, I actually think you could propose to give it to them, seems like a thing they could enjoy."

The cat looked at the tickets sadly. "At least they'll be useful to some-mammal."

The bunny and fox glanced at each other, there was really nothing they could do to help the cheetah cheer up. They could stay with him until the end of his shift they knew him enough to know that it would embarrass him more than it would help him. They each gave him a light encouraging tap on the shoulder and left. He'd get over it after the concert.

"I know he probably has reasons, but I'm kind of angry at the chief." Said the bunny with a frowning face.

"Want to head back up and tell him he's an ass?" Proposed the fox while directing himself to the stairs. She caught him by the arm.

"No, not today. Let's head home. I want to celebrate you getting a new job."

The fox jogged at her side. "Oh, can I pick the food?"

"Depends, what do you want to eat?"
"That." He said, nibbling her ear.

"Not in the precinct!" She said, sidestepping to get away.

"There is no one in the hallway." He said, following her.

She picked up her pace. "Someone could come at any moment."

"You'd hear them coming." He matched her pace and nuzzled her neck.

"Stop it!" She giggled turning at the end of the hallway and beginning to run. He ran after her.

"Or what?"

She suddenly stopped, caught the arm that was reaching for her and made the fox fly over her, breaking his fall with an arm. "Or I'll use violence." The fox in her arms, she gave him a deep and passionate kiss that left him panting.

He lifted a finger. "I don't mind."

"Alright." And she unceremoniously let him fall flat on his back.

"Ow."

She helped him back up. "We'll finish this later." The bunny took a few steps, deliberately wiggling her tail. "Are you coming or what?"

The fox followed eagerly.
The cheetah glanced at his phone. It was around 7PM. He wished he was in front of Zootopia's stadium, tickets in hand, in the queue. Instead he had to go to the chief's office to get his special assignment. It was really unusual for him to feel any resentment toward the chief. Or any resentment toward anyone for that matter. He knew that it was to be expected in the life of a cop to have the job interfere with personal life, but it usually went a bit more his way. He tried to put it into perspective. Missing a Gazelle concert wasn't that bad compared to what he had been through.

He wasn't over the shooting yet, and it sometimes woke him up in the middle of the night. But he could feel the horrible experience slowly fading away. He could now empty two gun mags before needing a short mental rest.

Turning at the corner of the hallway he saw the chief's office door. Sighing and putting on a polite smile, he knocked.

"Come in."

The cheetah did so and installed himself on the chair in front of the desk.

"Hello officer Clawhauser."

"Hello chief." He tried to greet cheerily. But the line fell flat. He thought he could see the chief's brow move slightly. The buffalo was holding two envelopes. He slid the smallest toward the cheetah.

"Here's to cover the cost of the tickets."

The cheetah pushed it back. "I gave them to Blackfur and Wolford. They insisted to pay me back." Truth was, even if that hadn't been the case, he felt he couldn't accept that money. The precinct shouldn't refund his personal expenses.

The chief took back the envelope, took out the check and tore it in several pieces, put back the pieces in the envelope and stored it in one of his desk's drawer. He then slid the larger envelope toward the cheetah.

"Here's your assignment."

Repressing a sigh, the cheetah took it and opened it, reading its content.

"What ?" He let escape, while his eyes widened in surprise.

Elbows resting on the desk, the chief had rested his snout on his crossed fingers, mouth hidden by his hooves.

The cheetah's gaze rose up to meet the chief's.
"What ?" He repeated. Putting back the sheet of paper on the desk in fear of letting it fall.

"Do you think you will have trouble with your assignment, officer ?" The chubby cat's mouth had fallen agape. "If so, I'll have an officer assigned to you as a partner for the duration of your mission." He extended a hoof and took the paper, scribbling a line, signing, and adding his stamp for good measure. "Here, all done."
The cheetah's voice was finally audible again. "You're putting me on security detail ?"

The buffalo's hooves were back on his former place, mouth hidden behind them. "Yes."

"At Gazelle's concert ?"

"Yes."

"Backstage ?"

"Yes."

"Tonight ?"

"Yes."

The cheetah took the piece of paper to check who his partner would be. "You're coming too ?"

"Yes."

Clawhauser mouth slowly turned into the brightest smile ever and the chief quickly brought his hooves to his ears and plugged them. He was glad to have done so given the eardrum-piercing squeal that followed.

... 

When they had entered the cruiser, the chief had wondered how the cheetah would manage to put on his seat-belt given how bouncy he had become. But as soon as the cruiser started he calmed down.

"Sir ?" He was staring at the road, a bright smile still plastered on his face.

"Yes Ben ?"

"I'm very touched by what you did, but uhm... Why ?"

The chief had a light scoff. "Because I could."

"Okay, but I mean... I'm technically on payroll here, it's not very fair."

"If it bothers you I can turn the cruiser back."

The cheetah turned to him, a startled expression replacing the smile. "Please don't do that."

"Besides, we're not doing much harm. I've been off duty for fifteen minutes now. You're the only one wasting taxpayer money."

"Chief !"

There was something strange in the chief's behavior. For one, he had made two jokes in a row, and
he also seemed slightly tense.

"Are you alright chief?"

Despite his usual stern expression, the feline could actually see his superior's face fall slightly. "I'm good. Why do you ask?"

"It's just... Don't take it the wrong way, but you're acting strange. A bit like you did that evening, at the beginning of the Lycus case."

"Let's just say I have a lot on my mind. Things I wanted to do that I have postponed..." The feline could see the chief was deliberately evasive. He was curious, but he also know not to pry on the buffalo's business. "We're here."

The security guards opened the back gates when the chief showed them his ID, not that they needed it to recognize him, and they parked the car in the service parking lot.

The two officers got out of the car and the feline took a few steps before he felt the chief tug at his collar. "Remember, it's an assignment. We're not here to have fun."

The cheetah froze. "Kidding." Gleefully, the feline continued to make his way in a bouncy pace, followed by the buffalo.

The scene was a circle in the center of the stadium with an elevated path coming from the edge of the stadium that would allow the singer and dancers to make their way from backstage to the stage. From where they were on the rim side of the stadium, it was clear Clawhauser and the chief wouldn't have the best view. Realizing that, the feline's face fell a bit.

"Ben, this way." The cheetah turned to see the chief show a metal staircase. He followed his superior and they ended up in a narrow pathway, between the screens that would project images of the concert and the stadium walls. A short walk later and they were on the mobile railings that had been lowered to less than a dozen meters above ground. They basically had the best view of the scene. "The only downside is that you won't be able to move a lot here."

"It's perfect!"

"Not yet, but it can be. Don't move from here." The chief went away leaving the cheetah to wait, while the crowd slowly poured into the stadium. The cheetah tried to spot his colleagues but the crowd was too dense at the moment. He looked at the scene. The technicians were still putting things in place and checking that everything was okay. For a few seconds, the feline felt a bit guilty toward Wolford and Blackfur. They had bought him the tickets and he would still get to see the concert for free. Maybe he had lied on the ticket price and made them pay only half their worth. But still.

The chief came back with a large plastic bag a few minutes later while the crowd had packed itself against the barriers.

"What's this?"

The chief emptied the bags of part of its content. A pair of harness. "You should put this on. Standard security procedures."

The cheetah almost protested that he wasn't clumsy enough to fall from the railing, but if he had to be honest, he wasn't so sure about that. And he knew that he would not be able to keep himself
from dancing. The chief helped put it on and adjusted the belt, before hooking it to the handrail. "You have two meters on the main rope and three meter on the security rope. Should be enough to move around."

"Thanks sir."

The chief nodded and put on his own harness. "Ben, could you reach for the belt behind my back and pull it?" Because of his large back, one of the adjusting belt was not reachable for the buffalo. He leaned back and the cheetah obliged. "Thanks."

"You're welcome sir."

The chief hooked his own harness and reached for the bag, taking out what was still within. A pair of soda can and a box of for donuts. The buffalo sat, legs dangling from the railway, elbows on the handrail. He scooted at bit on the side to let the cheetah sit at his side without the column in his way and put the donut box between them, even though he would probably not touch them.

"You think it's going to start soon?"

The chief pointed at the technicians. "See those guys in the corner? They're about to switch the system to computer control. The mammal controlling them will be working from this booth right here. I'd say we'll have to wait five minutes tops."

"You know a lot about this."

"I know the place's blueprint and procedures, I had to study them to help devise the security plans."

As he finished his sentence, the lights turned off.

A cheer came from the crowd as a few lights turned on toward the stage. The cat opened the donut box, took one and gave one to the chief. He took it and stared at it for a second. Those treats were too sweet for his taste.

But he didn't care.

Lights began blinking in a visual ballet around the scene and the cheetah stood up, leaning down to look.

"Oh oh oh oh ooooooh
Oh oh oh oh ooooooh"

The feline squealed in anticipation, bouncing and humming with the singer.

"Oh oh oh oh ooooooh
Oh oh oh oh ooooooh"

He realised it was actually completely necessary that he wore a harness.

"I messed up tonight, I lost another fight.
I still mess up but I'll just start again.
I keep falling down, I keep on hitting the ground,
I always get up to see what's next."

One of his fears was that the sound wouldn't be great there, but free from most of the crowd's cheering and with the shape of the stadium it was actually quite good.
"Birds don't just fly, they fall down and get up
Nobody learns without getting it wrong"

He began dancing, following the rhythm, careful to not move too much on the railing.

"I won't give up, no I won't give in
'Til I reach the end and then I'll start again
No, I won't leave, I wanna try everything
I wanna try even though I could fail"

He glanced at the chief, who was standing too, hooves tapping rhythmically on the railing.

"I won't give up, no I won't give in
'Til I reach the end and then I'll start again
No, I won't leave, I wanna try everything
I wanna try even though I could fail"

Losing himself in the moment, he danced to the choreography of the feline dancers, which he knew perfectly.

"Oh, oh, oh, oh, oh
Try everything
Oh, oh, oh, oh, oh
Try everything
Oh, oh, oh, oh, oh
Try everything
Oh, oh, oh, oh, oh"

He liked the concert mood, and being up there was different than being in the crowd, but since it was the only concert he had 'missed' so far, he enjoyed the change of pace.

"Look how far you've come, you filled your heart with love
Baby, you've done enough, take a deep breath
Don't beat yourself up, don't need to run so fast
Sometimes we come last, but we did our best."

He heard the chief's voice at his side but it was low. He had to focus on it to understand what he was saying.

"I won't give up, no I won't give in
'Til I reach the end and then I'll start again
No, I won't leave, I wanna try everything
I wanna try even though I could fail."

The chief was singing the song. He was actually singing a Gazelle song. True, he didn't sing loud, but that meant he knew the lyrics.

"I won't give up, no I won't give in
'Til I reach the end and then I'll start again
No, I won't leave, I wanna try everything
I wanna try even though I could fail."

Still dancing in his spot, he continued giving the chief side glances. Wait, was it a dance move? He continued his observation trying to not lose himself too much in the music.
"I'll keep on making those new mistakes
I'll keep on making them every day
Those new mistakes."

They were actually slight dance moves. It made the cheetah giggle. The chiefs discreet moves matched perfectly those of the tigers, if one was to extrapolate. His voice had also risen, and he was singing at the usual level of his voice.

"Oh, oh, oh, oh, oh
Try everything
Oh, oh, oh, oh, oh
Try everything
Oh, oh, oh, oh, oh
Try everything
Oh, oh, oh, oh, oh"

The cheetah and buffalo were side to side, one truly dancing, lost in the song, the other still composed, but clearly singing it with heart.

"Try everything "

The cheetah looked at the chief who was smiling. Not the light corner smile he usual showed but a genuine smile. The buffalo reached down and grabbed the soda cans, while the next song began and proposed one to the cheetah who nodded.

The chief was happy to always be wearing the short sleeved uniform. He hadn't planned that the stadium's body heat would go up and hit them like it did. Teh fact it was still summer didn't help either. He was sure that it was worse in the crowd, and he was quite happy to be a cape buffalo, adapted to high temperatures. The concert had ended and they were getting down from the railway. Clawhauser was feeling the usual post-concert gloom rise. It would dissipate in a few minutes. They got rid of the harness, giving them back to the technicians and the cheetah began walking to the exit, turning his head toward the scene to catch a last glance of his favourite singer.

"Where are you going ?" Asked the chief.

"Well the concert is over..."

The buffalo chuckled and put a hoof on the cheetah's shoulder. "We're not going yet."

"What ?"

The chief directed them across the back of the empty scene, to a door with a sign saying 'private', in front of which was a bear bodyguard. The ursine sidestepped to let them pass.

"You're sure we can..."

As an answer the chief knocked on the door. "Yes, come in." Came a female voice.

"No, no, no, no-" Tried to protest the cheetah, while the chief pushed him through the door he had just opened. When the door shut, he glanced back, fearing that the chief had left him alone. He hadn't.

He was frozen in place, face to face with a gazelle. Face to face with Gazelle.

"Hello ?" She greeted. "Is everything okay, officers ?" She seemed a bit worried. After all, two
police officers had entered the private room.

The chief poked the cheetah's back to put him out of his state.

"I- uh- erm-" Clawhauser scoffed to take back his composure. "No, everything is okay. I'm simply just a fan. Backstage. In the private room." The gazelle lifted a brow and gave him the corner of a smile. "Well... Erm, since everything seems okay here, maybe we should go chief ?"

The buffalo, still smiling rolled his eyes. Gazelle giggled in her hoof. "You don't want an autograph before leaving ?"

"Can I ?"

"Of course. Anything for my fans !" She turned to one of her dancer. "Heinkel ? Do we have a photo for our fan ?"

"I'm sure I can find one."

"And a t-shirt too ! A large one."

"On it !"

The gazelle gave the chief a look. "Are you a fan too ?"

"Yes." If he was embarrassed, the buffalo didn't show it.

"Heinkel ? Two photos and two t-shirt, please ?" She then turned back again toward the intruders. "You're the chief of police, are you ? Chief Bogo ?"

"Yes. Adrian Bogo." He extended a hoof that she shook.

"Gazelle Ripoll. And you are ?" She asked the feline.

"Benjamin Clawhauser."

"Nice to meet you Ben ! Can I call you Ben ?"

"Of- of course." He said, his blush going up a level.

"Wait, I know you ! Two years back, I signed a copy of 'Magia' for you."

"First Pawlumbian edition. Yes. I still have it."

"I knew I had seen this face before."

The cheetah couldn't believe his star had remembered him. The chief was less surprised. The chubby feline wasn't easy to forget.

The tiger came back with the t-shirts and photos. She quickly signed them. "Wanna make a selfie ?"

"Yes, please." Immediately shot back the cheetah, taking out his phone. Suddenly he had an idea. "Oh, I must absolutely show you something." He quickly went into his picture folder to look for a very specific one. Quickly he found it and put it on fullscreen. It was a picture of Finnick's painting.
"Oh that is so lovely! Guys, you must come and see this!"

The four backup dancer approached too, to look at the screen.

"Yes, I got the axe!" Came a voice. "We need props like that on scene."

"I love the armors. Well, the bits of metal."

"Don't know if it would be easy to dance with, though."

"That's awesome, who painted it?" Asked the gazelle.

"A friend of mine. He's trying to do it professionally."

The singer immediately took out a business card. "Can you give him this? It's my agent's card. I need to have something from him."

"I will." He put the card in his wallet, and turned ton his phone camera. "About that selfie?"

"Of course!"

"Chief Bogo, get in the frame!" Called one of the dancer. They had to be pressed one against the other to actually fit all in, and the buffalo ended up taking the picture since he was the one with the longer arms.

...

The chief was driving the feline home. In the cruiser, the feline was mute, staring at the road ahead.

"Anything on your mind, Ben?"

"I... I think it was the best night of my life. Thanks chief."

"Technically, you've been off-duty for ten minutes. You can call me by my first name."

The cheetah stared at him for a few seconds, stunned. It was unthinkable to him, and he would think the chief was joking. But the chief was rarely joking, and when he said or asked something, it was rarely, if never, a figure of speech. He said what he meant. And The feline kind of wanted to try it.

"T-Thanks Adrian." His cheek immediately started burning and hid his face with his paws. He had dared call the chief by his first name. And it didn't feel that wrong. Well it did a bit. But it had felt right too.

"You're welcome, Ben."

The cruiser pulled over in front of the feline's building. He took the door handle and started opening the door. He stopped midway and turned to the buffalo. "But really, it was a wonderful evening. Thanks a lot. Good Night Si- Adrian." Yep. Burning cheeks. He quickly turned away and as he stepped outside the car, he was happy that the darkness hid his face.

"Good night Ben." The chief looked at him go around the cruiser and sighed scratching his forehead. Taking an inspiration, and as the feline had almost reached the building's door, he quickly got out of the vehicle, stopping in his tracks after a couple of steps.
Having heard the cruiser door open, the cheetah glanced back and saw the chief standing on the sidewalk, head slightly bowed, in such a way that the shades from his horn hid his features.

"Chief ?" He asked, taking a hesitant step toward the buffalo. "Is everything okay chief ?" He saw a slight movement in the buffalo's body. He was slowly and deeply breathing.

"Chief ? A-Adrian ?"

He seemed to struggle to take a step forward, like he was hesitant, which was absolutely out of character for the chief. It troubled the cheetah, who took another few steps. Only a couple of meters separated them now. The feline could actually hear the buffalo mumble something but didn't dare ask what it was. Since he didn't know what to do or say, the feline chose to wait for a bit.

The chief slightly lifted his head, but his face was still hidden. "Ben, I'm sorry if this question is strange or unexpected, but what is your opinion of me ?"

The feline was a bit taken aback. "Well, um... I think you're a great officer, and you really know how to do your job. I think you try to always be fair with the officers under your command."

The buffalo lifted a hoof. "I... meant on a personal level."

It was unusual for the chief to hesitate, and even more to get on a personal level with one of his officers. Then again, he had just asked to be called by his first name. The cat chose to put aside his interrogations and answered honestly. "I... I think you are as solid as you show, and that it's not actually only a shell like some mammals could believe. I think you're nice, even if you don't really show it. I don't know if that's because you don't know how to show it, or because you prefer to do than to show." The feline stared at the buffalo that hadn't moved an inch. He didn't know if he should but he kept going. "I believe it's a bit of both... I also believe that you genuinely care. You're very selfless, and not just acting the way you do because it's your duty." The cat gave an embarrassed chuckle. "You just don't care about the futile stuff. And you're also a bit scary." He smiled.

The buffalo had gruff chuckle and took a step forward and slightly leaned down toward the feline. He was actually even more impressive under the street lamp light.

"Am I scaring you now ?"

Any mammal in the cheetah's situation would feel threatened but he didn't. He had a complete trust in the buffalo. "You've been weird all evening, I'd say I'm worried about you."

The buffalo scratched his neck and looked in empty space for a couple of seconds.

"Would you care to know what I think about you ?"

Clawhauser's mouth suddenly felt really dry.

"Yes. I think I would."

The buffalo cleared his throat. "I think you're more capable than mammals believe, or even than you believe. You're selfless and caring. Mammals are drawn to you. It's actually part of the reason why I asked for you to stay at Precinct One after your temporary transfer and to have you on the front desk." He gave a strange chuckle. "Not the only reason though. I've only realised it a few months ago.."

The cheetah lifted a brow, not understanding what the buffalo meant.
"I'm not that selfless, Ben. For instance, the reasons why I pushed you to stay and work your ass off as an officer in my precinct are in part very selfish." The chief took another step forward and the light finally lit his face which showed a somewhat concerned smile.

"I'm not sure I get what you mean, sir." Said the cheetah, while a few dozen theories, all more crazy than the next, popped in his mind.

"I only noticed, or accepted to notice it a few months ago, but the reason why I wanted you at my precinct, was because I wanted you to stay close."

"Close ?" Asked the cheetah in a meek voice.

The buffalo made another step and put a knee to the ground, putting his head on the same level of the cheetah's. "Close to me." He approached a hesitant hoof, but stopped it midway. The cheetah's mouth opened slightly with the hitting realisation, his eyes widening in turn. He made a little step forward and tried to control his breath. The hoof ran on his face's fur and the buffalo's mouth approached his slowly. He brushed the cheetah's lips gently, and the feline answered with the same movement. The lips slowly locked in a soft and interrogative kiss. They slowly broke it, each trying to find the answer they sought in each others gaze. In a mutual understanding, they reached again for eachother's lips, ever so gently. The cheetah still felt the hoof caressing his fur. He, in turn, reached with his paw. It found its way to the chief's cheek, ran up, and found its place, his thumb between the ear and the horn.

When the kiss broke again, they both blinked a few times. The feline had to recover his breath. They were both smiling, in a mix of awkwardness and happiness.

"I... You..." Began the cheetah, looking for his words and not finding them.

"I ?" Proposed the buffalo.

"Us… Well…"

They both chuckled, the awkwardness was still present.

"I need to..." Began Clawhauser.

"You're working tomorrow." Stated the buffalo.

"Yeah."

"See you... tomorrow ?"

"Of course !" Had he answered a bit too enthusiastically ? The feline took a little step back.

"Tomorrow."

"Tomorrow."

Totally confused, his head full of interrogations, and on the verge of losing it, the feline made his way to the door, feeling, or imagining, the chief’s gaze on him. He passed the door and gave a little wave as he disappeared inside.

The buffalo, noticing that he hadn't moved while the cat was leaving, stood up, turned and went back inside the cruiser in a really slow pace.

In the elevator, Clawhauser leaned, and knocked his head back against the wall. He was only now noticing the wide smile that had crept on his face. "Oh ! Em ! Goodness !"
In the cruiser, Bogo had put his hooves on the wheel and was breathing really slowly. "Try everything, heh?" Fighting the urge to let escape a scream of joy that he was sure would wake up the entire neighborhood. Biting his lips, he started the car and drove away into the night.
Middle of July 2019

The bunny and fox were a bit early to work. Judy usually woke up sooner that the fox for her morning run. It was a habit she had fallen out of, after what she called her 'leg injury', and what Nick referred to as 'the reason he wasn't feeling guilty about shooting this damned lamb dead' in his mind. That morning, like sometimes, he had woken up at the same time and accompanied her. He usually ran in the evening. Having nocturnal tendencies, the morning exercise was kind of a torture. But sometimes, he went with her, simply to enjoy her company, and because he knew she enjoyed it too.

When they arrived at the ZPD, the first they saw was a slightly weary Clawhauser with a dreamy smile on his face.

They exchanged a surprised glance before approaching.

"Hey big guy. Seems you've recovered from yesterday."

"Nick, Judy ! Nice to see you so early !" It seemed he hadn't really registered Nick's sentence.

"Nice to see you too, Ben." The bunny was curious. "I'm really glad that you're feeling better today. But from where does this smile come from ?" She said pointing at his face.

The cat noticed the expression he was wearing and turned it in a more casual smile. "It's my usual smile." They didn't miss the slight nervousness in his tone.

"Is it ?" Asked the fox, with a slightly mischievous grin. The feline's smile faltered a bit.

"Yes. It is. Completely. Nothing strange in my smile." Still, the nervousness was here.

"If you say so..." Said the vulpine. "Anyway, glad you're doing better. See you later."

The bunny waved at the cheetah too and the couple went away.

"He's hiding something." Stated the bunny.

"Noticed it too, huh ? Any idea what ?"

"I don't know. But he'll probably end up telling us anyway. No point in pressing him." She stated. They entered the parking lot and the bunny climbed aboard the cruiser, on the driver side. "Ready to roll ?"

"Hit it."

...
"It's not going away." She remarked.

"What ?"

"The streak of white hair." She said pointing at the place the bullet had caught him, a five centimeter line of white hair, beginning from the middle of his right brow and pointing to the back of his skull. "The doc said the hairs' roots could heal. They aren't."

"Doesn't matter. It makes me look cool." He said with his trademark smug grin.

She had to admit that it made him look cool. But she wouldn't tell him, he was smug enough as it was. "Yeah, and girls dig scars."

"They do."

"Too bad most of them are bears." She said tauntingly.

"I could go for a bear." He answered in a conversational tone.

The bunny gave him a glare that he pretended he didn't see.

The morning had been pretty uneventful, and when lunchtime came they were kind of bored. They decided to take it on a terrace with the cruiser parked near, in case of emergency. He had chosen a bug-burger. The bunny couldn't understand how he could stand to eat bugs, even cooked and in steak form. She chose a simple tomato and mozzarella salad. She didn't eat a lot of dairy products, since as a herbivore she couldn't digest them very well, but she liked them a lot.

"So any theories on why Ben had that strange smile on his face ?" She asked between two bites.

Her partner was distractedly browsing the internet on his phone, his burger in his other paw. "No idea. I've already seen this kind of smile on his face though, but I can't put my finger on what occasion."

"You remember when ?"

He put the phone down to reflect on it. "Before the beginning of Lycus case. I'm sure of it." He took the phone back up. "Hey, want to see pictures of the concert ?

There are also clips, but the ones uploaded by users are always crappy."

"Sure." She scooted aside and leaned against him. His tail unconsciously went to wrap itself around her. He picked one and swiped left. Most of them were taken toward the scene, showing Gazelle and her backup dancer at different place. Sometimes they were carrying her, there was even a picture where she seemed to be flying, the tigers ready to catch her.

"I want to go to one of her concerts one day. Would you come with- wait, back up, back up ! What's this ?"

The fox swiped right a few times.

"This, here, near the spotlight." She exclaimed

"Seems like a loose cable, Fluff."
"Zoom in."

The fox shrugged and did it. It didn't really look like a loose cable.

"That, Nick, isn't a loose cable. It's a cheetah's tail. Notice the spots here? They're hard to see because of the light but they're there."

"Thinks it's Ben? The picture is over-exposed, there is no way to be sure."

"Do you want to bet on it?"

The fox gave her a side-glance. "Nope, I'm pretty sure you'd win that one."

In the car, the bunny was back behind the wheel. The afternoon announced itself as boring as the afternoon.

"Say fluff, were you going to ask me to come to a Gazelle concert with you?"

"Well, yes. I know you're not too fond of pop music, but it could be a nice date."

The fox chuckled.

"What? I think it's a good idea."

"I'm not mocking you, Fluff. I was just thinking about the whole date thing."

"What about it?"

"I've proposed to you, and you've accepted, but we never even went on a proper date."

The bunny's brow furrowed. Didn't they? She was pretty sure they had at least once. "Are you sure?"

"Certain. Patrols don't count, and neither does hanging out before we got together. I think we skipped a few steps."

The bunny sighed. "Hope we won't have to wait too long for it."

They had parked the car in the underground parking lot and had come back to ground level. The chief passed them and gave them a nod and then passed the front desk. The chubby feline gave him a little wave with a strange awkward smile. They couldn't see the chief's expression, but he answered with a wave instead of his usual nod.

The fox put an elbow on the desk and brought his phone up, looking for the picture from before while Judy asked. "Did you have a nice day Ben?"

"Slow and a bit boring, but overall, yes."

"And what was that special assignment the chief had for you by the way?" She asked on the same tone.

His expression changed to slightly startled. "It was um... Confidential."
"How confidential?" Asked the fox with a mischievous smile, while sliding the phone on the desk toward him. The startled expression turned to mild panic. Nick pointed at the tail. "Concert security?"

"Yes?"

"Absolutely not a ploy to give you backstage access?" Asked the bunny. It made sense though. She knew the cheetah was still struggling with the memories of the shooting. Maybe the chief had wanted to surprise him. It was awfully nice of him. And completely out of place. Not that she minded.

"Maybe a little. I actually got a signed photo, and selfie with her." He said in a giggly tone. "Please don't tell anyone. I know this wasn't really regular and I don't want the chief to have any problems." It was true, but it was not the only reason.

It explained the strange smile, thought the bunny. But to Nick, it was something else. He couldn't put the finger on it yet but he would find out. "Was the chief with you? I remember you telling me he liked gazelle."

"Yes, he does." The strange smile was there again, slightly hidden. Nick scoffed with surprise, and the grin was back on his face. Dreamy smile, small wave from the chief. Somehow it made sense.

"What is it Nick?" Asked the bunny while the cheetah's eyes slightly widen in fear that the fox had made some sort of unseemly deduction.

The vulpine leaned on the desk, his smile widening and showing teeth. Whispering so that the three mammals were the only one that could hear him he asked. "Say, Ben, what happened aside from the concert?" There was a tinge of naughtiness in his teasing tone.

Ben's jaw opened slightly and then clapped shut. Judy gave a glance to the two predators before her eyes widened. "What?" She asked in a strangled voice. "Nick, I see what you're implying, but that can't be..." She looked at the cheetah's expression switching from startled to dreamy and back to startled again. "Oh my gosh, it is." She was so stunned, there was nothing she could add.

"Guys, please, not a word to anyone! It just... We just kissed. Tha-"

"You and the chief kissed!?" The bunny had place her paws on her mouth.

"Did he kiss you or did you kiss him?" Asked the fox.

"It kind of was a mutual thing." Answered the cheetah, his face completely red under his fur.

The bunny barely muffled the squealed that came out of her mouth.

The cat waved his paws. "Guys, we haven't talked about it yet. I don't even know what 'it' is. Please keep it to yourselves."

The fox put a paw on his forearm. "Ben, you kept your mouth shut about Judy and me. I'm not going to say anything about you and him to anyone, you can rest easy. But you'll have to tell us about it later."

The cheetah nodded and turned to the bunny. "Ben, you know me. I won't say anything." She reassured.

"Thanks guys." He sighed in relief. "I don't know what I would've done. I promise to tell you
They both smiled. "Don't worry, your secret is safe with us." Said the bunny before giving him a little wave. "Time for us to head home. Have a nice evening."

"You too."

"How did you know about the whole kiss thing?" Asked Judy as they left the precinct.

"I didn't know. His smile was just the same than the one he had when he went out with that tiger a few months back." He smiled. "And I've seen him after a Gazelle concert before. His attitude didn't match."

"So, it was guess?"

"An educated guess, but yeah pretty much. Why do you think Fangmeyer stopped inviting me to the poker nights? I'm very good at educated guesses."

... 

The cheetah had had the whole night and day to think about the situation between him and the chief. Thinking about it, he could put aside a few things. First, it wasn't a spur of the moment coming from the buffalo. He didn't do spur of the moment. Even the 'surprise' assignment, had been carefully planned. And knowing him, he must have weighed his decision a long time before taking it.

The chief was his superior, he was the chief of Precinct One, and even if the cheetah technically didn't work directly under him, it could lead to all sort of problems, and mainly for the buffalo. Oh, as the chief, he could easily put the blame on the cheetah if any problem arose, but he believed the buffalo wouldn't make him take the fall. But that hadn't been the main thing in his mind.

He wondered if anything could really happen between them. If was to be honest with himself, he'd have to admit he had a crush on the chief for a really long time, maybe since he had met him. But having a crush was not a guarantee that anything good would come out of a relationship. Then again, there was no guarantee in any relationships.

There was another thing that weighed on his mind, like a big ball of strange anxiety. He saw the chief as something big, not in the physical sense, like some sort of hero, or idol. And he knew it was not a good thing to see his potential partner like that. He'd have to take the chief down from this pedestal, and he didn't know if he would be able to.

It was in that state of mind that he left his desk at the end of the date and directed himself toward the chief's office.

The feeling was strange. His feet weighed tons, and his stomach was filled with butterflies.

"Come in!" Came the voice just after the cheetah had knocked on the door. He stepped in the office, and found himself facing the chief who was consulting a file. He pulled his glass down to look at the newcomer and greeted him with smile. A genuine smile, which sent the cheetah's heart in a looping. "I brought the day's report, chief." He said, putting it in the bin on the desk. "I thought that maybe, we could... Um, talk. A bit. If that's okay with you chief."

The buffalo looked at his watch. "As of twenty seconds ago, we both are off duty."

"If that's okay with you, A-Adrian."
"I'm okay with it. I too think we should talk." They both awkwardly stared at each other for a bit, not really knowing where to begin. "Maybe you have questions?"
How the chief could maintain his composure, the cheetah didn't know but he found it quite impressive. "Yeah, I do... Sorry if this is a bit blunt, but what is it? Us... We... I don't really know what is happening... I'm a bit lost. I mean, what do you want?"

The chief took down his glasses and put them back in their box. "I don't know what this is, yet. This is new to me. Or really old, depends how you see things." The chief took an inspiration. He knew talking about past relationship could be like walking on eggs, but it was important to make his point. And he had faith that Clawhauser would be comprehensive. "Did you know that I had been married before? To a female buffalo if this is of any importance."

"I think I heard about it." Answered the feline, wondering where the chief was going with this.

"So you probably guessed that it ended. It didn't end good, or bad. It just did. I thought I had everything figured out. I had a plan, I had expectations, and it just didn't work out." The chief scratched the bridge between his eyes. He got up from his desk and went to the cheetah who stood up in turn. "What I want to say is, I don't know what this is. And I don't know where this is going. I had no other plan than to declare and hope for the best." The cheetah had to fight to not let his mouth fall agape. The chief always tried to plan ahead, to prepare for the worst. This was so... Unusual. "So, for what I want. I want to try to have something with you. Something genuine." Even in this, the buffalo was direct and blunt. Most guys the cat had dated were direct too, but Bogo was on a whole different level.

The feline noticed he had been holding his breath for the whole duration of the chief's speech and gasped for air.

"What about you Ben?"

"I... I'm not much of a planner in my private life... You have to know, I've had a crush on you for a long time." He couldn't hold the chief's gaze while saying those words, but he struggled and looked back for the nexts. "I want to try something too. Not just some one-time thing." He finished with a hopeful smile which the buffalo mirrored. "And I kind of want you to kiss me no-"

He didn't have the time to finish the sentence, the buffalo's right hoof running on his cheek and his left arm coming and supporting his back while the cheetah bended back. Their lips collided in a soft kiss. The cheetah rose his paws and gripped the chief's collar with one while brushing his neck with the other. Heaven smelled and tasted like buffalo musc.

The paw on the collar had slightly slid down on the chief's chest and when the kiss broke the feline bit his lips and put the paw away. "Sorry." He said in a meek voice as he was only half-sorry.

"That's okay." Answered the buffalo with a kind smile. The cheetah put his paw back with a wide smile and chief chuckled. He helped the cheetah straighten up and scratched his neck with annoyed look.

"Chi- Adrian, is everything okay?"

"I was going to ask you to have dinner somewhere with me but... It wouldn't be really prudent or wise to do that. If people began to have the right idea..."

The cheetah sighed. "I'm beginning to understand how NIc and Judy feel. Well at least they live together." The cat noticed what he had just said. "Not that I want to live with... Or that I don't... I mean, it's a bit soon, and..." He decided to shut his mouth, not wanting to embarrass himself further.
The chief gave a chuckle. "I understood what you meant... We could go have dinner somewhere, but we can't really look like a couple."

"We could do that but, it wouldn't really be... How to explain."

"It wouldn't really be as nice as a date." Stated the buffalo.

"Yeah. I'd invite you home and cook, but with Wolford and MacHorn, it's not really an option either."

The buffalo scratched his chin reflectively. "I'd invite you at mine, but I don't know how to cook. I mean, aside from the simple stuff."

It put a slight dent in the perfect bachelor image the pudgy feline had of the chief but also made him smile. "I could cook for you. I mean if you want to."

"I don't want to make you work."

"Cooking isn't working. Is your kitchen furnished?"

The chief looked slightly embarrassed… Well one of his brows rose slightly. "What exactly do you mean by that?"

As an answer the cat giggled. "I'll bring stuff then! If you give me your address I'll arrive around 6:30." The chief did and cheetah wrote it in his phone. It was a place south of Downtown, in a nice neighborhood. The cat left in a bouncy step while the chief wondered if a monster had just awaken. Shrugging, he put his stuff in order and left the precinct in turn.

... 

The good thing about spending so little time at his place was that it was always tidy. The place wasn't big, not for a buffalo anyway, but it was enough. The chief didn't live an ascetic life, but he didn't need much to go by. At least, the little he owned, he made it a point to be resilient and of good quality. For instance, though he rarely used his kitchen, the stove and oven were the best one could find, his large TV that he had bought a decade earlier, and maybe turned on two times, was still on par with the current technology standards, and the convertible sofa that was in front of it, which was also his bed, was one of the most comfortable thing one could find to sit or sleep on.

He took a bit of time to sweep the place clean, since he didn't always think about dusting, and sat on the sofa. He usually would stay at the precinct until around eight or nine, checking on everything his subordinates did. The half-hour of respite he had before the feline arrived were unusual.

Everything seemed unusual.

While he was in his bedroom, he chose an outfit, staying uniform wouldn't do. He noticed that aside from his workout clothes, he really didn't have much to put on. He chose a simple pair of trouser with a plain shirt, hoping it would be enough.

For a few seconds he wondered what he was doing. The whole thing looked like a terrible idea. An invite to chaos. Then again, Hopps and Wilde were chaos magnets, and they were parts of the best things that city had. Maybe chaos was good from time to time. Until that point, his life had been a well arranged straight line, and this time, he had taken an impulsive decision. A well and long thought decision that had taken a fair amount of self-convincing, but impulsive nonetheless. It didn't make any sense and fitted nowhere in the square scheme that was his life, but it was the first time in a very long time he had wanted something as much and with such selfishness.
The buffalo didn't consider himself selfless, or good. He mostly didn't give himself much hoped that jolt of selfishness wouldn't send him astray. One would argue he had the right to have someone, to not be alone, but the chief simply didn't think like that. Was it a mistake ? Was it a fling ? Was he doing something stupid ? He didn't know yet, and wouldn't figure it out tonight, since the doorbell rang and he went to open the door.

"Hello chie- Adrian. Sorry, I can't say it spontaneously yet." Greeted the cat. He was holding a large sportsbag, which the chief took. The thing was slightly more heavy than it looked.

The feline was wearing a pair of blue long shorts with a white shirt which fitted him well.

"You'll get there." Reassured the buffalo. "Come, I'll give you a tour." First he showed him the kitchen. It wasn't big, but the necessary was there. The only complain the cat could make was that the stove worked on electricity and not gaz. Next, a large bedroom which doubled as a living room. Aside from the couch, TV and a desk with his laptop on it, it contained a benchpress and that was it. The last thing to see was the bathroom which had one of the largest bathtub the cat had ever seen. It was logical since the whole place was buffalo-sized.

They went back to the kitchen and the cheetah began unpacking what he had brought. There were mostly vegetables, and a lot of cooking herbs the chief couldn't identify. "I've taken the liberty to bring my own utensils, since I didn't know if you had anything." The buffalo opened a cupboard. The only thing that was worth using there was the cutting board which the cat took and set on the table, taking one of his cooking knife from his bag. He began dicing an onion while the chief leaned back on the table and watched him work.

"Can I do anything ?"

The cat stopped mid-move and glanced at the chief. He wasn't used to let people help when he was cooking, aside from his sister, which was walking disaster with a knife in her paw, despite her eagerness to help. "You could put the pan on the stove, low heat. Do you have some butter ?" The chief did what the feline had asked and took the butter out of the fridge. "Could you put some oil in the pan with a bit of butter ? Just a bit more. Perfect." He then threw the onion in and began cutting other things.

The chief leaned over the cat shoulder which slightly shivered at how close he was. "What are we having ?"

"Don't know yet. I'm mostly winging it. Is there anything you don't like ?"

"Not big on tomatoes and potatoes. And cumin. Can't stand it. Else, I eat anything, aside from meat of course. Tried it, not that bad, but I can't digest it." The buffalo left the feline's back and went to his room, leaving Clawhauser to his work who could suddenly breathe a little easier. He was beginning to have some ideas and stirred the onions while they were taking form. A few seconds later, Gazelle started playing in the other room and the chief reappeared with a smile. The cheetah giggled and the buffalo went to place himself near him. He had to admire the dexterity which he was showing while working the knife. He didn't know much about cooking, but the smooth movement seemed almost perfect. There was something in how the feline was moving in the kitchen, it wasn't just joy or happiness, there was something else. The chief approached from behind and leaned, careful to not do it while Clawhauser was using the knife, and brushed his neck with his lips. The cat instantly froze with a purr and slightly turned his head left. The chief reiterated his action and the cat leaned back, putting his back against the chief's pectoral muscles with a satisfied huff.

"I hope I'm not bothering you in your cooking."
"Not at all." A bit reluctantly, the feline unstuck himself from the warm and firm chest of the chief and went back to his vegetables. Half-dancing to the beat of the music, the cat took a zucchini and grated them in long stripes. He had sauteed a bunch of other stuff after the onions had finished cooking, and he added the stripes to the mix.

"It's going to be a bit of an experimentation. Hope you like Parmesan." He added the cheese with a touch of cream to make it all more liquid. A few minute later it was ready. "You may want to add pesto."

"I don't have any."

"But I do." He said, taking it from the bag.

The two mammals set themselves on the couch in front of the TV. The music was from a concert recording that they watched while eating.

"So you don't have any plan for anything?"

"No. I'm winging it." Smiled the buffalo. "Let's hope it will end up being as good as your cooking."

The plates had been put aside on the headstand and the cat leaned against the buffalo, his head ending on his lap, while he was lying on his back.

"Let's hope yeah. Sorry if it's a sensible topic, but, um..."

"Go ahead, I understand that you can have questions."

The cat took an inspiration. "Have you chosen to do all this thing that way because of how your marriage ended? You know, with no plan or no idea what was coming..."

The bovine gave a grim chuckle. "No, at least I don't think so. Even if I wanted to plan ahead, and I did try, I'm afraid I've absolutely no idea how this will go. I just don't want to screw it up or put you in a bad situation."

"Me neither. Since we're on sensible topics, can I ask another question."

The chief's hoof had begun stroking the cat's head. "Sure."

"Your ex wife is, well... A female, and I'm a male. So..."

"So you want to know about my sexual orientation?"

"Yeah."

The chief kept stroking, lingering on the base of the cat's ears, which made him twitch with bliss. "I don't know. You're actually the second mammal I've ever been attracted to. The first one was my ex wife. So I can't really answer, I'm attracted to whom I'm attracted to. I hope it's enough of an answer."

"Yeah." Answered the cat who could barely focus on what the buffalo was saying with the stroking. It put a smile on the chief's face. He extended an arm that he brought under the cat's shoulder pulling him up, as he leaned. They ended up lying down face to face, the cheetah slightly over his partner, all according to the buffalo's plan. He had chosen that position because he couldn't really lie on his side with his horns in the way. The right arm went around the cheetah's back, pushing him up and against the buffalo's large chest. It seemed the chief had pulled Clawhauser
into a hug, which the feline had trouble realizing. A hoof crept up and resumed the stroking, which made the cheetah go completely limp and put on an expression of complete bliss. After a few seconds, he inadvertently started purring and immediately tensed up, looking up at the chief with embarrassment. He answered with a kiss, not stopping his movement. The blissful expression came back and he could relax again.

The buffalo had to admit, he was perfectly serene. He had feared the physical interaction wouldn't feel natural. Even with the amount of research he had done, something that he would never talk about. Simply having the feline against him and hearing him purr was enough to make him smile. With digestion and the stroking, the purr slowly turned into a light snoring and the chief put an arm under his head to get comfortable. Though he could have woken the feline, he was in no hurry to see him go, and he felt especially good. At this instant, seeing him sleep with this contempt expression, he was certain he had made the right choice.

... 

The cat blinked a few times, awaking to a gentle face. "I fell asleep." The face nodded, and he crawled up to kiss it. The slumber slowly left him, and his mind cleared in the kiss. "Is it late?"

"Around 11PM." It actually was late.

The feline's face heated up in embarrassment. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have fallen asleep. But with the digestion... And you were so comfortable."

"You were, too."

Clawhauser felt his face heat up even more and a few thoughts came to mind, some of which were exciting, but also too embarrassing to share, at least that soon. "I should go, I shouldn't spend the night here... I mean, not yet..." He noticed that he was way more awkward with the chief than with any of the mammals he had dated before. He mostly knew why, and hoped he would get past those barriers.

"It's a bit soon for that, yes. I'll drive you home."

"Oh you really don't have to." He said, waving his paws.

"I want to." And the chief did. It meant spending a bit more time with the cheetah, which he had come to realise he couldn't really get enough of.
End of July 2019

It was his day off and like every time he could sleep late, he did. Being nocturnal meant he could sleep most of the morning without so much as opening an eye. Well it did mean that until the bunny had come to live with him, not that he complained. More time awake, meant more time with her, something that always brought him joy. That morning however he wasn't awoken by her pulling closer for a hug before getting up and making some coffee. His arm reached to her side and grabbed nothing. He reluctantly opened an eye, and then another, and then grabbed his phone to look at the time. It was almost 11PM. She had actually let him sleep. That was nice of her, but his sleeping schedule could so easily reverse to night time that he felt a bit annoyed. The smell of coffee was present however and his ears perked up. He put on a pair of boxers and left the bedroom, to find a fully clothed bunny. "Were you going somewhere ?"

She was preparing a basket with food and bottles of water and juice while humming distractedly.

"I actually came back from somewhere." She gave him a deliberately mysterious smile. He decided not to pry, if she had a surprise for him, he'd hate to spoil it. "Coffee ?"

"Yes please."

She poured it and put the stove on with a pan on it.

"I can do the pancakes fluff." She went around the table and gave him a peck on the cheek.

"Can't I spoil my fox ?"

He gave him a suspicious glance. "Do you have some sort of bad news to announce ?"

"I'm pregnant." She deadpanned.

"It's Clawhauser's, isn't it ?" He answered in a falsely scandalsed tone.

"Yes."

"What are we going to do with it ?"

"Give it to him and the chief, obviously."

"Obviously." He smiled and sipped his coffee.

She poured some pancake mix on the pan and made a couple of them, knowing that the vulpine didn't eat a lot in the morning.

"Thanks fluff."

"You're welcome sweetheart. By the way, I have something to show you outside, could you dress up before noon ?"
"Of course."

He then took a quick shower before putting some clothes on. She led him down the stairs and in front of the building.

"So what was it you wanted to show me?" He heard a loud beep coming from the car parked right in front of the apartment building. She was holding a set of key. It was a nice cop blue Mustang convertible. The paint was partly worn, but it overall looked in good shape. Even though it was certainly second-hand, those models were actually pricey.

"Holy crap, Carrots, you bought this?"

"Yup."

"What for?"

"Well, I remember you saying that a car was very handy. And to be honest, I thought that we should have one."

"How much did it cost?"

She put herself on her toes and pecked his cheek again. "That, slick, is my business. Yours is to take me on a date." She climbed in the passenger seat and opened the roof by pressing a button. He took the driver seat and adjusted it to his size. "I thought we should keep our dating low-key?"

"Then you'll have to find somewhere discreet. You know the city do you?"

"So that what the food-basket was for. A picnic."

"Precisely."

The fox scratched his chin reflectively before starting the engine. It roared nicely, a nice sound to his ears. "I may know a place." He pulled off and started driving.

"Where are we going?"

"You had a surprise for me, I know have one for you." He chuckled. She answered with a giggle as he took a large avenue. "I must ask though, how did you come up with the money for this?"

"I'm a bunny. The family business may be running well, but it has to feed 275 stomachs. We learn to save money soon. And since I'm living with you, it cuts my expanse a lot. So I had enough for this. And I still have some savings."

"Sheesh Carrots, and I thought I was smart with my money."

While he was driving he glanced at what kind of equipment the car came with. The car radio wasn't really new, it took CDs but it didn't have an USB port, which was really rare in this day and age. He'd have to switch for newer one. No A/C either, but on a convertible, was it really useful? The interior was tidy. The car had either hadn't been used a lot, or had been renovated. He looked at the mileage counter, it showed less than thirty thousand kilometers. Whoever had owned it before hadn't used it a lot and probably had kept it sitting around before selling it.

He had been driving north for quite sometimes and they had passed the Rainforest district and were now in the Meadowlands. It was a suburban area, and she knew it had some forests up north. It was actually where he led them. He took a little road and found a place he could park the car.
"Do you know this place?" She asked.

"Yes and no. There are a lot of woods in those parts. I know some of them. I hope I'll find somewhere nice."

"I'm sure you will." She took the basket from the trunk and gave the fox a folded blanket.

They walked through the wood for a bit as the bunny led the way, careful to remember some landmarks to find their way back. A large tree there, a strange looking rock there. "Aren't you afraid of getting lost?" He asked tauntingly.

"I'm a country bunny, I know how to find my way in the woods."

He slowly crept up behind her. "But the woods can be dangerous. Full of hungry predators."

"I have a basket full of food, and a slow running fox just in case." She quipped, which owed her to have a pair of claw run on her sides. "Eeek, stop it!"

"What if the predator is the slow running fox?"

She let go of the basket to try and defend herself but he had anticipated it and blocked her arms against herself, letting himself stumble on her and rolling to break the fall and not crush her.

"Nick!" She tried to protest, but was shut down when a mouth captured hers and paws ran up her back in a slow caress. The kiss broke, and he teased her with his lips. She felt the claws come out and slowly run from her back to her ribs and belly. "Nick, we're in the middle of the forest!" She articulated, out of breath.

"You're right, we shouldn't act like animals." The claws didn't come off, however and started slowly crawling up, sending shiver in the bunny's spine. "I could set up the food, I'm dying to eat some bunny..."

"Then, you should unfold the blanket..." She grabbed his collar and kissed him passionately. "...And eat your bunny before it cools off."

"Yes ma'am."

... The blanket was set up and so was the food. Two mostly naked and satisfied mammals were lying next to each other and enjoying their meal.

"I noticed." Said the fox, biting in his sandwich.

"Noticed what?"

"You mostly let me initiate sex."

The bunny was chewing on a carrot stick. "Is that a question?" She asked with a discreet smile.

"I'm wondering why. Not that I'm complaining or anything, it's just a reflexion."

She took another carrot stick and played with it a bit nervously. "Well, you see, I'm a bunny. You already know that our promiscuousness isn't a complete legend."

"Way to understate it." He taunted.
"Shut up. Anyway, since I know I have a higher sex drive than you, but that yours is still quite high on its own, I prefer to let you initiate."

"Aren't you afraid I could initiate while you're not in the mood."

"Sweetheart, I'm always in the mood. And not like you males say 'always in the mood'. Since we've started being in a relationship, no, since I started having feelings for you, it's like a constant. With the occasional spike."

The fox's eyes had widened. "And the suppressants do nothing to help you."

"Oh, believe me they do. You were lucky I was in a cast and under painkillers the couple of night I didn't have them at the hospital. If I stopped taking them now, you would feel it." She ended her sentence with a chuckle and sipped at the orange juice bottle.

"How different is it? If it's not too personal." Nick inquired, a bit embarrassed.

"Well it's very personal, but you're involved, so I think it's better that you know. Just in case. The impulse kicks in when we hit puberty. It's overall higher for males, but we females can spike way higher on our 'horny scale'. I won't explain to you when those pikes happen, I'm sure you can guess."

"I think I do."

"Perfect. When I'm under suppressants, it's just a desire. I see you or I think of you, and I just want to be against you. Without the suppressant, it becomes an urge."

"You mean you're constantly going against your desire? It must be hard."

"Knowing that I can fulfill it helps to dampen it. It was a lot harder to deal with when we weren't together. And especially when I hadn't realized I was in love with you yet. I sometimes felt like my suppressants weren't working straight." The fox suddenly felt the urge to hug his bunny. He had felt like he had a hard time dealing with his emotions prior to his declaration, but it seemed to be nothing compared to what she had endured. "Hey, I'm okay."

"You deserve a hug. I wouldn't be able to deal with half of this."

"Foxes... So emotional."

He nuzzled her between the ears. "That's why you love me." Judy slid in a more comfortable position before resuming her explanation.

"So, the suppressant are really necessary for us to function. Few mammals know it, but mice and rats actually need them too. It's less advertised but it's true. You know, I'm kind of glad that you're a fox, I mean, aside from the fact that you wouldn't be you if you weren't one... You see what I mean?"

"Because I'm not constantly after your butt?" He said, playing with her tail.

"That too. But no. It means I don't need the pill. No risk of getting pregnant. It's another reason of our reputation of being highly emotional. Pill plus suppressant, perfect mix to throw the hormones off balance. As a result we get highly emotional."

Nick lifted a surprised brow. "Really?"
"It's true we're highly emotional to begin with, but with this added bonus, we can set records... I'm rambling a bit, I'm not boring you, I hope?"

"No, I'm actually interested. If we're to spend our lives together, I want to know as much as I can."

The bunny sighed in relief. "You're kind of the only one I can't vent that to. Bunnies, live with it and don't complain about it to each other, and I don't see myself talking about it with mammal of other species."

"I think every species has shit to deal with. The fact that we all have our problems doesn't mean that they cancel each other." Said Nick supportively, which the bunny appreciated.

"Fun fact: bunnies in couple sometimes purposely drop the suppressants for a couple of days. It's called a marathon."

The fox gave her an interested and slightly horny look. "Could we try that sometime?"

"I don't know, I think I could kill you." Taunted the bunny.

"I know of worse ways to die."

"True." She laughed. "It's a method that is also used to have babies."

"Really?"

"I know my parents did it." She said with a provocative smile.

"I don't even want to know how you know."

"Thin walls."

"I said I didn't want to know." He chuckled. "Now I'm imagining it. Oh gods." That sent them in a short fit of laugh.

The meal finished, they put the remains back in the basket. Nick, standing on the blanket stretched, showing off what remained of the muscles he had put on during the investigation. He had lost a bit, but not that much, and the back muscle hadn't moved, and given his life rhythm, it probably was here to stay. He felt the bunny's paw run from his shoulder to the middle of his back and slowly down to his tail, turning around his waist, the other arm getting on the other side. She buried her face in his red fur.

"Hope I'm not bothering you." Came the muffled voice.

"Not at all." He said, stretching again, and bending his muscles for good measure. The paws slightly moved. "And now?"

"Gah."

"Weren't you going to put your clothes back on?" The bunny asked tauntingly, paws moving slowly and sensually.

"Not anymore." He said, turning and lifting her up to kiss her. She wrapped her legs around his waist.

"Good."
"You know, for cops, we're breaking the rules quite a lot." Said Nick.

The bunny was driving with a smile. "Public indecency, fraternization with a direct subordinate..." The thought was strange. Some time ago she never would have believed she could go against rules without even thinking about it.

Suddenly, Nick's phone beeped and he took it out. It seemed his mother had left a message on his phone. The place they were on the meadowlands had was too far off to let him have any network connection. He decided to listen to it.

"Hey Nick ? It's your mother. We've not seen each other since your time in the hospital. What about we have dinner together ? At my place, maybe this evening ? Call me as soon as you get this message. And give a kiss to Judy from me and Fin. Love you."

The vulpine looked at the time. With the meal and the physical activity, they had napped almost all afternoon and it was already 5:30PM. He hoped it wasn't too late to confirm. "Mom is inviting us to dinner."

"This evening ? Why not."

He gave her a peck on the cheek. "And this is from her and Fin. I'm going to call her back to confirm." He dialed his mother number. It barely rang before she picked it up.

"Hello son. You got my message ?"

"Hi mom. Yeah, I got your message, it's okay for us tonight. Sorry if that's a bit late to confirm."

"That's okay. Are you still good for 7PM ?"

"Sure."

"See you soon then."

"See you soon." He put back the phone in his pocket. "So dinner at my mom's tonight, 7PM."

"I'm going to have to change clothes when we get home. And maybe we should go and buy something. Think she'd like a bottle of wine ?"

"Of course. And flowers. Moms everywhere deserves flowers."

"That, they do."

Coming back to their place and changing took them almost an hour, the fox had really drove them far off in the meadowlands, not that it had bothered Judy, after all, they wanted to be alone. They quickly went out afterwards to find a nice bottle of wine and a bouquet of flowers. They went to Nick's mother's through the ZUG, finding a parking spot could prove tricky in the city. They rang and entered the building, and climbed up. Vivienne was waiting for them at the door.

"Nick, Judy ! It's so nice to see you !" She gave each of them a tight hug and invited them in. "Fin, put down the paint, the guest are here !" She called through the flat.

"Comin' Vi." Came the fennec's deep voice. They heard the sound of water running and rustling of clothes sound. And a fennec dressed in his usual shirt and cargo pants arrived in the hallway. "Hey y'all, how ya doin' ?" He greeted them in turn.
"Hi Fin." They answered. "Still in your paintings?"

"Neck deep."

"It shows." Said Nick pointing at a splash of paint under his chin.

"Crap, missed a spot. Be right back." And he disappeared again. Vivienne had found a vase and had filled it with water to put the bouquet in. She looked at the bottle.

Red wine. She placed it on the counter for later. "So, how is it to be back on active duty."

"It's so good!" Declared the bunny. "I actually feel like I'm getting some work done."

"You know you get as much work done doing paperwork." Said Nick with a little smile.

"Not the same."

"True. Filling a file is not as rewarding as tackling a pickpocket. And certainly not as fun."

The bunny was about to contradict him, but she had to admit it was true. She didn't do that job for the fun of it, but she preferred the physical part of her duty.

The older vixen smiled and patted their shoulders. "Since you're here I have a surprise for you. Well a couple of surprises actually." She led them to the living room. They were hit by the scent of paint and terebenthine. They had pulled a sheet as a makeshift curtain, cutting the room in two. She pulled it to show what was behind as the fennec reappeared. "Makin' dem visit my workshop?"

"If that's okay with you."

"Still is yo' place, Vi." She didn't really consider it only her place anymore since he payed half the rent. They took a look inside and saw a few blank canvas and a few half-painted ones. "Tha's where I'm working. But the surprise is 'dere he said pointing in his back. At the other end of the room, on the wall their back was previously facing were four vertical paintings. They had been done one wood instead of canvas and were no more than forty centimeters high. Each of them represented Vivienne, Nic, Finnick, and on the far left, a male fox that the bunny didn't recognize.

"Holy crap." Nick had to put a paw in his mouth. "You painted dad!" A flow of contradicting emotions filled his mind as he approached the painting to look at it in more details. He noticed he had too few vivid memory of him, the only image left was him on his hospital bed. There was a big ball on his throat that he had a hard time to swallow. He felt two paws, one on his shoulder from his mother, and when taking his paws from Judy. He turned to face the fennec who looked slightly uncomfortable.

"It's a good painting." And single tear rolled down his cheek. "A really good painting."

"Glad yo' like it. I wanted to paint the Wilde family, yo' mom insisted that I put one of myself on the wall. Hope 'dat's okay with you."

Nick turned to look at the painting of Finnick. "I think it's its place, but maybe you should put it next to mom's."

The fennec had a strange scoff. "Yeah, she said the same thing. Anyway, I have another thing to show you." He went back to the unfinished painting and took one of them. It was an unfinished one of Judy, in the same format.

The bunny gasped. "You can't! I mean, I'm not part of-"
"You are to me." Cut the vixen.

"To me too." Added Nick. "And that ring isn't only for show. He said, taking her paw."

Vivienne and Finnick's mouth slightly opened in surprise. The vixen finally articulated. "You proposed !"

"Yup !"

"Not too soon, kid !"

Nick turned to the fennec with a joking smile. "Why, did you already propose to my mom ?"

"Actually..." She said, raising her own left paw, which had a ring on it. It was a nice simple silver ring, with a pair of small topaz and emerald embedded in it.

"Holy shit !" Muttered the fox. "That's fantastic !" He said, suddenly hugging both his mother and soon-to-be father-in-law. "Have you decided on a date ?"

"Well, no, but soon. We don't want something big, or anything. Just the two of you and us."

Explained the vixen. "By the way, Judy, I'd like you to be my maid of honor."

"What ?" She asked surprised. "I'm honored, but don't you have someone closer, or... I mean, I'd be glad to do it."

"Judy, I don't know if you've noticed but I don't have a lot of acquaintances. I spent most of the years before Nick came back into my life retired from the world. Apart for my work. I'm not saying that asking you as my maid of honor is the default choice either, I really want you to be it."

"In that case I'd be glad to do it." She said, hugging the vixen.

Finnick casually turned to Nick. "Oh, by the way, you're my best mammal."

"Sure." And they simply fistbumped on it. The females glanced at them in disbelief and the male simply shrugged at them.

"Males."

"Males. Oh, and of course we'd also like you both as our witnesses." Added the vixen.

Nick and Judy nodded "Of course !"

At the same time the discussion ended, the stove rang, signaling it was time to set up the table. Nick and Judy did it while Finnick and Vivienne prepared the plates. The vixen had prepared a roasted mushroom pie. She usually put chicken in it too, but since the bunny was here, she had chosen to go for a vegan option. Sometimes, the bunny wondered if it was bothering her predator friends to always be careful to avoid using meat when preparing a meal when she was invited. Nick had explained that it probably didn't. It was an usual problem in predators and prey relations, with which the predators had learned to live with.

When the dessert came, ice cream with whipped cream, Finnick and Vivienne looked a bit awkward, something Nick was quick to notice.

"Do you have another surprise for me ?"

"There is actually another reason why we want to marry..." Seeing his mother being a bit shy about
something wasn't very usual to Nick, and even less coming from Finnick. It kind of put him on edge.

"Yes ?"

The vixen took an inspiration and spilled it. "We'd like to adopt."

"Huh ?"

"I can't really have kids anymore, or not without risk. And me and Fin... We'd like to have a kid. Not that I want to replace you, but I wanted to talk about it with you before we went through the administrative process."

The fox was a bit dumbfounded. He had absolutely not seen that coming. Judy looked at him with apprehension in the growing awkward silence.

"Okay ?" He said. "I mean, I don't really have a say in that. I don't have anything against it. I mean are you asking for my permission ? Because it's not really something you need."

"We just don't want it to be awkward."

"Good job with that." He taunted, lifting a thumb. "But I think it's a good idea. I mean, the two of you separately managed to make a half-decent fox out of me. I think together, you can't really screw that up."

The vixen gave a deep sigh. "I was a bit nervous about announcing that to you." Nick went to hug his mother.

"I understand why. But I'm really okay with it."

"Hey kid, you're going to be a big brother !"

Nick tensed up slightly, that last comment reviving the memories of Mike in his mind. "Yeah, that's nice. I guess. Judy, how is it to have brothers and sisters ?"

The bunny that had been surprised as much as Nick and that had stayed out of the conversation made a smile. "It's like living with hellspawns you're not allowed to send back to their realm."

"Good thing I'm not around here a lot then."

Nick was truly perfectly okay with his mother and Nick having a kid. He felt like the reason why they had waited so long to get together was him. Maybe if he had found the courage to get home, they would have declared to each other sooner too. And they would already have had a kid together. In any case, he had no doubt they were both qualified enough to handle the task.

The two mates had gone back to their flat, sitting on the couch to relax for a bit, when an idea came to Nick's mind.

"Speaking of marriage, I know Fin and my mother want something really small, but what do you want ? I mean, I'm pretty open to anything on this, I never had a lot of expectation about my love life before meeting you."

"Well, I know my parents won't ever let me live it down if I don't have a proper bunny marriage." She said pensively.
"And what kind of marriage are those?"

Judy had a little apologetic smile. "The complete opposite of small. We send invites to the extended family. Traditional bunny marriages can go from two hundreds to one thousand guests."

Nick's mouth fell slightly.

"We usually use the local stadium or party hall if it's big enough. Else, it takes place in a field."

The fox was trying to figure out the logistic of such an event. "Wait, how are we supposed to pay for such a marriage?"

"I knew you'd get stuck here. Bunny marriage aren't like the others. First, everyone brings something. There is usually enough to feed an army. And most bunny weddings are in fact multiple weddings. With extended families it's usually simpler to get everyone gathered once a year. I once saw seven couples get married at once. Plus, there is rarely any need to hire any helping paws. We just do everything ourselves. However the amount of organization it needs is completely crazy."

"And you want a marriage like that?" Asked the fox, aghast.

Judy scoffed. "Absolutely not, but I can't really avoid it. Marrying a fox, I think I can at least put on this effort for my parents. I'll let them handle the logistics though. There are limits to my abnegation."

"So basically, we'll just go there, get married, and get back in the city?"

The bunny elbowed him lightly. "We'll at least have to spend a few days there. You can't just come and go, and pass off as some sort of sly fox getting away with the bride. We wouldn't want that."

She leaned against him, suddenly feeling a bit tired. She gave a big and adorable yawn.

"No we wouldn't." He pushed her toward the bedroom door. "Let's go sleepyhead."
"So how went that first week ?" The fox's face had appeared on the bunny's phone. She was staying in a room at the ZPD's academy for duration of the two weeks she would spend helping and teaching there.

"Those small mammals are a catastrophe waiting to happen, but you don't know the worst."

"What ?"

"Friedkin told me I was like them in the beginning !" She said with a scandalized expression.

"You mean, unfocused ?"

"No. I wasn't taking it all seriously enough ! I think I'm beginning to get why she was so hard on me."

"Heh. She was hard on my case too, pushed me harder than the others. At least I was only aiming for corporal. Short six months formation. You were aiming for the lieutenant rank, so it was two years, right ?" The bunny nodded. "Do any of the recruits aim for it too ?"

The bunny sighed and slumped her head. "No they're all aiming for the lower position. Most of them think they can go up the rank easily once in the field."

"Oh, lazy and complacent. What a nice combination."

"Isn't it ?" She asked in a muffled infuriated tone, face in the pillow.

"Isn't there any of them that are worth anything ?"

The bunny lifted her head back up. "Two of them actually. They're not really good, but at least they look like they are really driven."

The fox installed himself comfortably. Knowing the bunny, she had more to say. "I arrived monday and I was mostly getting installed. First two days, I only watched.

They were a mess in fitness, but some of them could actually handle the guns."

"And those you seem to have a slight hope for ? How did they fare ?"

"There is a rat named Louis Buster. He has a really dark sense of humor, and I'm pretty sure he has a criminal background. He didn't have any criminal records though, and he's really respectful of the rules. Maybe he's a bit too by the books. The other, get ready, is a Capybara."

"No way !" The fox was really surprised.

"He's named Arthur Cavid. He's small for his species, maybe an inch taller than you are. I've never seen him look anything but calm, even when Friedkin gives him a ribbing. Anyway, I've seen them shoot, and they're not past the point where they're afraid of their gun."
"Those things pack a punch. I had a hard time getting used to them."

"Yeah. As for physical training, they had to get to the obstacle course. None of them could complete the whole thing. The capybara got stuck on the ice wall. The rat fell in the mud, missed a ladder bar."

Nick saw having flashback of his time in the academy. It had been hard, but overall it was a good memory.

"Anyway, I got to give them a few pointers during self-defense and boxing. One of them, a rabbit, I don't remember his name, had the guts to tell that without the rope trick, I couldn't put a rhino to the ground."

Nick winced. "Let me guess, you had to actually prove him wrong."

"There was no rhino available. I had to make due with a buffalo. He never saw my foot coming. Those guys really have a thick skull you know?" She was smiling a bit guiltily.

"Was it enough to make him swallow back his remark?"

"Maybe I had to put his face in the ground too." The fox lifted a brow, it was unusual for the bunny to get physical without good reason. "He made a pass at me." She explained.

"You broke his nose, didn't you?"

"Yeah." She said with the same guilty tone. "Anyway, I had to explain and show that since we don't have enough strength to easily take down large mammals, we had to tire them. So, the most important thing they had to physically develop was their cardio. I think that when I explained that I spent all of my free time working out, some of them were really considering quitting."

"A dose of realism can do a lot of good. I didn't have it as hard as you, but again, I didn't aim for lieutenant."

"True. And you, how was your week?"

Nick winced for a second time. "It was a bit of a mess. Believe it or not, the ZIA is very bad at communication. You know those spy flicks where you get an address and password to give to a guy and he lets you enter a secret facility under an old and worn building?"

"Yeah?"

"Well they're full of crap. Not the old and worn front though. Except that once you get inside, you feel everyone's eyes on you until you've presented yourself to the old sheep behind the desk. She was surprised to see I was actually clear to enter. Anyway, she gave me the location of my desk, a badge, and that's it. No one came to help me get started, so I basically went down to the archives and asked to enter, badge in hand. I think the ram almost called security on the spot. He ran my badge for the hell of it, and would you believe it, I was actually clear to enter that too."

"Found anything interesting?"

"A lot. But nothing I'm really authorized to say. Just so you know, I think a fifth of those road accidents of these last ten years weren't actual accidents. And you really, really, don't want to take a swim in the canal district."

"Oh gods." She said putting a paw to her mouth.
The fox seemed to actually have had fun at least. "Oh, and I also got to put an eye in the active file. There is so much stuff happening in this city that the ZPD has no idea about. Drug rings, mammal trafficking in places you wouldn't expect. There make links between new cases and some so cold they could come from the depths of Tundratown. There are some conspiracy theories going around in that place... I'll see if I can have some of those things get relayed to the ZPD, it could help us a lot. Anyway, I got to talk to a few agents. Most of them seem to not actually give a crap about the law. I didn't mention why I was there, and I don't think any of them knew at the time, until Director Barklin called for an exceptional global meeting. There were all those guys in the cafeteria, all were carrying a piece, and I think not half of them had an actual clearance to do so. The director told them why I was there and that there was going to be a whole bunch of new regulations on the way they handle their work. Let me tell you, there was more groaning than when the chief put half of the precinct on mandatory security detail for the new year festival. I think some of them were already putting in place a plan to get rid of me."

"Get rid of you how?" She asked worriedly.

"I clearly heard the words, 'cement', 'chains' and 'canal'. No worries though, he threatened them to let Jack loose on their ass if they didn't comply with my directives, or if anything happened to me. Instant magical dead silence."

"This isn't an institution, it's a mob in disguise."

"It is. I got to speak to the guys. Most of them are nice. Very cynical though, but I suppose it comes with the job. They really are doing what they think is right for the city, and they don't give two shits about the consequences on their lives. Probably because they don't actually have lives. Some of them told me their stories from before they got in the ZIA. If you thought I had it bad, it was pretty much paradise compared to some of them. I think I got a few of them on my side when I explained that the goal was that the city would need them less, and that part of the chaos was due to the fact that the ZIA didn't have any restraint. Some of them stayed very skeptical though."

"Figures. And even for those willing to change, I'm sure it won't come easy."

The fox gave a resigned sigh. "Probably. Won't keep me from trying anyway. Oh, and I got a bit more info on our favorite psycho bunny. Jack is kind of a legend. I heard the craziest stuff about him. If even half of it is true, I think I will really try and not cross him. Most of them think he will end up replacing Barklin. Another reason to try and make friend."

"Do you think you will manage?"

"As long as he ends up believing what I do will be good for the city, I'm pretty sure he'll be on my side."

Beginning of August 2019

It had been a bit longer than two weeks since Clawhauser and Bogo had started dating. To the cheetah, the fact that they had to hide their relationship felt slightly exciting, and it was the same for the buffalo, but they both feared that the fact that they couldn't really have a date outdoors would slowly put a monotonous spin on their relationship.

The chief had spent a bit of time to peel the regulations layers on officer fraternization. Since he technically wasn't the direct superior to the cheetah, a thing that he had to double check, hierarchy could sometimes get a bit fuzzy, they weren't doing anything wrong.
But none of them were blind enough to believe that outing themselves would be a good at the moment. The city was still suffering from the cumulative stigmatas of the Nighthowler's, Bellwether's and Lycus' case. And the buffalo was the chief of Precinct One, a figure of authority, he couldn't take the risk of undermining his authority with his subordinates and tarnish his image at the moment. Four months after the last big crisis was too soon.

Given the mayor's reaction to hearing that Nick and Judy were an item, he supposed his career wouldn't suffer, but he wasn't really afraid for it. He was more concerned by the repercussions it could have on the peace of the city.

In any case, he still had a fleeting happiness feeling as he was tidying up his place while waiting for the cheetah to arrive. They had spent three evenings together, and the cheetah had accepted to be his spotter on the benchpress during his day off. The buffalo didn't really need one, but : A. He still needed to keep his body in top shape, and it meant he couldn't skip training, B. He didn't want for the cat to have nothing to do and get bored while he was lifting. C. Seeing the feline struggle to keep his paws to himself and not oggle him while he was lifting bare chested was pretty enjoyable. In any case, he had decided to change his schedule a bit, accepted to delegate parts of his task to MacHorn, a thing that he technically had to do in the first place, to have a bit more time to spend with his lover.

Thinking about the cheetah that way extended his grin and he had to fight back a bit. He always felt like he looked like a moron when smiling too widely, a trait that he found that most stern mammals shared.

The doorbell rang and he went to open it, showing a bubbly cheetah that he leaned to embrace. The feline hung his arms to his neck, and the buffalo lifted him up, making his lover give an amused squeal.

The couple went through the chief's place like this, and slumped on the couch.

"What's the afternoon's program ?" Asked the cat.

"I thought we could watch a few series and then order some food."

"Lazy afternoon ?"

"Pretty much." The simple idea of using an afternoon to do nothing would have been unthinkable a few weeks back, but doing that with Clawhauser felt like the opposite of a waste of time.

The cat stood up and went to the laptop hooked to the TV. "Is there anything particular you'd like to watch ?" The chief shrugged, he was more interested by the perspective of spending time with the cheetah than to look at the screen. "You have absolutely no idea what series are good or bad, do you ?"

"I never watch TV. Aside from the news. And even then, I mostly know of them before they come out."

The feline stopped in his tracks. "Have you ever used your free time unproductively ? To relax for instance."

"No." Most mammals would've had an uncomfortable glance to the floor, but not the chief. He wasn't a buffalo that happened to be the chief of police, he was the chief of police that happened to be a buffalo.

"I'm not taking up the time you could use in a better way, am I ?" Asked the cheetah a bit
The buffalo had to get up and put his hooves on feline's shoulder to answer that question. "I have absolutely no idea how I could use my time in a better way."

Clawhauser's face instantly heated. In any other mammal's mouth, it would have been the cheesiest line ever uttered out loud. But he had delivered it with such seriousness and certainty that it just made the chubby cat melt inside. Which is why he had to fight himself to not turn into a puddle of satisfied flesh when arms wrapped around him and kissed him deeply.

A bit out of breath after the kissed had stopped he said. "So we were going to choose a series ? Was that it ?"

"You were."

"Okay right. Choose something to watch. I can do that. Maybe." He went to look at the selection of series on pawflick. Something new or something old ? If the chief had no series culture, better to try for something old but easy to watch. Why not something that left a big print on pop culture. Doctor Moo ? No, the old episodes could be a bit dull, and it was overall too weird for first-timers. Something aimed at a wider audience maybe ? Oh yes ! That was going to be good. He made his selection, set it to play and went back to the couch, leaning in the chief's arms.

"What are we going to watch ?" He asked, as his question was answered by the title that appeared on the screen. 'Wallaby the Vampire Slayer'. The title made on of his eyebrow slightly raise up and the theme song wasn't totally unfamiliar. The series was about a female Wallaby that fought and slayed all sorts of vampires and demons. At first the chief had trouble getting the appeal. Though the series was old, the effects were still bad for its time, but it seemed to have been done on purpose. All the characters seemed cliché but a few episodes later he was hooked. The show was really fun and it seemed there was way more under the surface than it showed at first.

They made a pause to stretch a bit and the cheetah left to go to the bathroom for a bit. When he came back, he lied down on the couch without putting the show back on. "You don't want to keep watching ?" Asked the chief.

"Well, last time, you had to train around this hour. I thought maybe we could make a pause and..."

The buffalo smiled. "I actually did that this morning so we'd have the whole afternoon for ourselves."

"Oh. Okay." The cheetah bit his lip, confirming the chief's suspicions.

"But if you want me to get rid of my t-shirt that much, you can simply ask." He said, approaching his face and nipping the feline's neck.

A shiver ran through his body. Could he really dare to ask that ? "I wouldn't mind." He heard himself utter. The realisation of what he had just said sank in when the buffalo actually got rid of the piece of clothe. Noticing that the cat had completely frozen with a half-smile, he leaned forth, pushing his shoulder and kissing him deeply. The cat slumped back on the couch, accompanied by the buffalo.

Not able to keep his paws to himself, he ran them on the bovine's short fur, detailing the design of his muscles. The chief felt the strange sensation of the purr in his mouth, rumbling from the feline's chest. He pulled back a bit to take back his breath.

"Sorry."
"I don't mind, it's nice." And it was. Getting that direct a feedback from his partner was really endearing. "Can I?" He had opened the cat's shirt's first button.

"Of course!"

Lips locking again, the buffalo helped the feline get rid of his shirt and turned the couch back into a bed. Soon, they were fur against fur, paws on eachother's body, each of them feeling and longing for the other. Though the cat was more on the chubby side, the buffalo went and placed himself on his back. With his larger frame and stronger weight, he was afraid he could crush him. And it also gave his partner a bigger liberty of movement. He had to admit, intimacy with a female was pretty straightforward, but he was a bit at loss about what to do now. The feline recoiled a bit.

"You seem a bit hesitant." He said.

The chief gave him an apologetic smile. "I'm not really experienced with this."

"You mean, with males?"

"Yeah."

The cat crawled back up with a purr, which only heightened the chief's excitation. "Want me to take the lead?"

"Yes."

Clawhauser had feared the chief would back down, but he seemed really into what was happening. If he had to be honest, the buffalo's apprehension was adorable. But maybe it wasn't the right moment to point it out.

Brushing the chief's lips, he took the claws slightly out. Feline's claws were very sharp so he was very careful, and he felt the chief's heart thumped quicker when he ran them on his chest and abs. The way his hooves went to caress his back, he understood that he actually had no problem with that. He folded back the claws and slid the paw downward, unbuckling the buffalo's pants. A hoof went and clenched on his thigh, the other placed itself on his neck, pulling him back up in a burning kiss. His paw, still exploring found a reminder that the chief was in fact a buffalo, which made him let escape a giggle. The exploration resumed.

"Easy on the claws, there." Articulated the bovine between two short breaths.

The cat nipped the corner of chief's large jaw, while throwing away his own pants. "I'll be careful."

If the last kiss had been burning fire, this one amounted to a supernova. The chubby took out his claws again, and slowly crawled down the chief body. He heard a groaned which he assumed was of excitation, and saw the buffalo's hoof clenched on the sheets. The groan turned into a deep moan when he ran his tongue from the bottom of his abs to the tip of his target.

... 

The feline was lying sideways, his face resting on the chief's chest, face turned toward his. He was wearing a satisfied smile, really similar to the buffalo's.

"Fast learner." Commented the cat crawling up to kiss his lover.

"Good teacher." Answered the buffalo before their lips met. A loud growl was heard, and the chief caressed the cheetah's belly. "Maybe we should order food."
"Yes please."

"And take a shower." He glanced around. "And change the sheets."

As he was about to move, the feline wrapped his arms around his chest and buried his face in his pectoral with a sigh of satisfaction. Pulling the cheetah up, he lifted him and stood up. Despite the cat's weight, it didn't seem to be an effort to him. He ordered the food online before directing himself to the bathroom. "I'm not too heavy?" asked a voice from under his chin.

He reached down and grabbed a butt cheek. "Nope, perfect weight."

A giggle came as an answer.

In the large tub, he was half tempted to set the water to cold, the way he usually took his shower, but he already had a set of scars on the forearm and didn't need a new one. He sat down in the tub and fired up the shower.

He had set it to mild but he felt the cat feline shiver against him. "You want me to set it hotter?"

"I usually take them almost burning hot." He pushed himself a bit more against the buffalo. "I think I'll manage."

The shower took a bit longer than it could have, not that any of them minded. A few minutes after they had gotten out and dried themselves, the food arrived.

Slumped on the bed, in front of the TV, the two mammals enjoyed another episode of the TV show while eating their pizzas. "Do you like it?" Asked the cheetah.

"Yes. It's nice. Clichés turned on their head, the 'princess' beats up the monsters and protects the world." The feline had a loud yawn, and pressed himself more against the buffalo. "Do you want to sleep here tonight?" A purr was his answer. "I'll change the sheets tomorrow then."

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Beginning of August 2019

It was the second self-defense course she participated in, having only watched during the first one. She had to admit, small-mammals were at a large disadvantage. Large mammals could use their weight and muscles, but the small ones had to rely on swiftness and tools to take down the larger suspects. And the thing was, although she knew how to use her body and surrounding to take out almost any mammals, few mammals had her leg strength.

What they could use was the element of surprise. Unusual tactics. The fact that as small mammals they'd be underestimated. But even then, without weapons, this would inevitably stay their greatest challenge.

But on the field she had discovered a few things. First, every mammal had weak points. Eyes, throat, solar plexus. An elephant trunk could be quite sensible. And the usual swift kick to the balls was perfect to calm any mammal. And since small mammals were lighter and their hit were weaker, using those weak points bore less risk to provoke a lethal injury.

Her goal was to teach the trainees to reach them from any angle, and to show them how to selection the right tool to eliminate the danger. For example, she rarely had the bear handcuffs at hand. They were way too big and heavy to carry around and usually stayed in the cruiser. Instead, she carried a pawful of ziplocks. Light, easy to conceal, quick to use. But they all had to master the traditional equipment and tactics, even though they couldn't really use them. It's something the bunny took notice of. The ZPD training program simply wasn't adapted to small mammals.
"You need to keep your fist aligned with your arm Buster." She was holding the punching pad for the rat. "Quicker, the suspect won't stand right in front of you waiting for your punches."

From what she could see, the rat knew a bit about fighting, but he was extremely defensive, keeping his arms near his face. She sidestepped and gave him a light kick in the thigh.

"I want to see you lighter on your feets. You're not a rhino, you're a rat. I want to see speed in your fists and in your legs."

"Yes ma'am."

"Now punch!"

And he did. The rat had a quick understanding of what was expected of him. He stopped putting all his body in his punches, and only used his arms muscles. Those attacks would never provoke a KO, but could distract and opponent to get in for the finishing blow.

"Up high!" He launched an uppercut.

"Down low!" Elbow blow.

She could see him anticipate the pad placement. He wasn't looking at it but at her arms and joint. Sometimes, his punch were even thrown before the pad actually stopped moving.

"Stop." She said, putting down the pads and approaching him. "Where did you learn to fight?"

"The street." He shrugged with a smile. "Bad neighborhood, money to make. Fun times."

"Keep what you learned in mind, but try to take in what I'm teaching you, alright?"

"Yes ma'am." He nodded.

"Cavid you're up. Put on the protections."

The Capybara winced. He had fought the bunny a couple of times and each one of them had ended in a bloody nose or mouth.

The bunny jumped in place a few times, watching the rodent take place on the ring. No punching pad for him. He knew how to avoid attacks, but was a bit too pacific for her taste. He had to get that frame of mind that allowed him to let himself harm another mammal. It was something that had taken time for her to get too, and no amount of punching the pads would help.

"Ready?" He nodded and they fist bumped. At first glance, the large rodent could seem really static, but she had learnt that it wasn't the case. With his compact frame and short limbs, and despite his training, cardio wasn't his forte. He was actively choosing to save his movements. She tried a simple series of punch that he avoided, with his own series of short and almost slow sidesteps, paws up to give her less of a punching surface.

She deliberately gave him an opening by throwing a poorly aimed kick, but he didn't take up the opportunity. "You can't win a fight if you don't attack Arthur." Sent in a rotation, she launched a high hook under which he dodged. He closed in and threw a couple of punch. The first one connected and made her back down a bit, but didn't hurt. The bunny frowned. She was sure of it now.

Stepping forward, she entered his attack zone with a barrage of easily avoidable fists. "Why do you
pull your punches Arthur?" A backhand punch caught his jaw, but he absorbed it by turning his head. "Is it because I'm a female?" She swiped one of his leg putting him off balance and launched her shoulder in his stomach, making him stumble. He rolled back on his feet. "Or because I'm a meek cute bunny."

A bit out of breath, the capybara put up his defense. "I just don't want to harm you." He muttered with an apologetic expression.

She launched a kick powerful enough to open his guard, and a second that only caught his shoulder. Before he could recover his step, he received two lip opening jabs, and tasted blood. She gave him an aggressive glare "Then I'll make you bleed until you do." She hoped her little bout of acting would wake him up, and gave him a third punch for good measure.

"Alright." She heard him say under a loud breath. "Alright." Was there anger in his tone? If it was what it took to instill in him a bit of combativeveness, so be it. His posture changed slightly. His shoulders and back straightened up. He was waiting for her.

She jumped and threw a downward kick that only found the air. She had seen it coming though, and rolled under his fist, trying to swipe his foot again. He moved it the quarter of an inch and launched his knee toward her face. She blocked it with both her paws and rolled back. By his posture, it looked like he hadn't moved. If he was Buster, she would exhort him to be lighter on his feet, but the Capybara's body wasn't adapted to such a combat style. He suddenly launched himself forward, two jabs toward her face and two toward her guts. She received all of them with her open paws, ejected his paws to the side with her forearms and landed a hard kick on his chest. There was a light huff, but she had kicked him lighter than she thought she would. His slight recoiling move had absorbed most of the impact. She only had the time to lift up her guard when a surprise kick came from the side. This one would have knocked her out cold. "That's good Cavid. Very good!" She launched two swift kicks and he caught her left leg on the second. She suddenly felt a cold chill. Despite the knee strap she wore while sparring, she was afraid her knee could get hurt. She twisted her hips and threw a kick powered by her fear with her free leg that only brushed his snout. It was a good thing, because she would have fractured it. She felt him let go of her leg and got in for an attack. Instead of rolling forward to recover, she let herself fall flat on the ground and rolled sideways, using her right leg to jump high enough so he couldn't attack her. She saw him place himself where she was about to land, ready to attack. His punch caught her in the cheek and her kick caught him in the ear.

His inner ear shocked, the capybara stumbled a bit, trying to find back his balance. The bunny felt the thumping in her jaw and the taste of blood. This had been a good punch. For the third time, she launched a leg swipe, and he fell flat on his back, his guard immediately coming up to cover his face.

"Well played Cavid. You're getting the hang of it." She said, offering a paw.

"Thanks Lieutenant." He said gruffly, straightening up.

There was hope yet for those two. She was sad to admit than there was absolutely none for the others however. Most of them performed the exercise she gave only half-heartedly, and she had heard a few of them talking about giving up. Well, it was true, most mammals weren't cut out for police work, too bad they had to realize it that way. But better like that than on the street.

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_Nick wasn't authorized to disclose much about what he was learning at the ZIA but he could see it was different than what it looked like in the first place._
The organization was very tight, and analysts worked around the clock with the intel the field agents fed them. From what info he had gathered, there were little more than fifty people working there, which made the results they got even more impressive.

Director Barklin hadn't completely lied when he had said than he knew as much as the other agent about how the ZIA worked. Each branch was divided, and very few knew of the other's actions. Field agents were the less informed on the other's behavior, and he had only seen a couple of them in the premises. He had asked about it and it happened that it was very unusual to get back to HQ. They mostly used dead drops and secured connexions to communicate.

They all got a bit of formation on the skills they lacked, dispensed by senior agents. Which meant Savage and two others, tops. All those had training in psychology to help monitor the other agents and also doubled as liaison between field agents and the ZIA when it was needed.

Aside from the data analyst, were also the tech mammals divided in two branches : the computer mammals and the engineers. The former were in charge of hacking, conceiving or modifying software, and the latter built special equipment the agents could need.

He now understood why their operations could stay a secret, with so few agents, they really were hard to find. But the thing was, if he was to change the way the agents acted in the field, he needed to see them and talk to them. To watch how they operated, to understand which limitations he could impose and which he couldn't.

And they had to find a way for the ZPD to know about the ZIA operations without risking for those operations to be discovered, and given that the ZPD had been infiltrated a few months ago, it wasn't going to be an easy task to convince the agency.

Maybe he would end up being the only one having the inside knowledge of the ZIA, since he couldn't really know who in the ZPD could or could not be corrupted. At that thought, he felt a bit paranoid. Most of his coworkers could be trusted. Could they ? Worst case scenario, he would have to supervise both ZIA and ZPD operations to keep them from colliding.

All those thoughts were swirling in his head while he was waiting on the sofa while browsing the web on his phone. He heard the door open and close and a raccoon stepped in the living room. Instantly, as he saw the fox, he took out his gun and aimed. "Paws up ! Who the hell are... Wait. Are you Nick Wilde ?"

The fox had casually lifted his paws. "Hello Domino. Yes, I am. Could you please take down your weapon ?"

The raccoon's eyes squinted. At second glance he seemed completely exhausted. "Where is Chester ?"

Nick's mindcogs started turning. The raccoon was referring to his ZIA liaison. "I'm replacing him this time." The procyonid slowly put away the gun and approached in small steps. "What is the great Nick Wilde doing here ?"

"I'm here as a sort of liaison between the ZIA and the ZPD." He took out the document that proved it but the raccoon only glanced at it. "I'd like to ask you a few questions, about this operation and the way you work in general."

The raccoon emitted a sound between a sigh and a snort while making his way to the nearest
"Do you have what I ordered?" Nick slid a bag toward the other mammal. He had looked inside, it contained surveillance material, and a whole bunch of medication, most of which could only be acquired with a prescription. Nick was pretty sure the agent could have found this stuff on his own, but he understood how he could want to spare himself the hassle. The raccoon took one of the bottle out and popped a couple of pills. From what Nick had read on the box, those were antidepressant. He added a mental note that field agents probably needed more psyche monitoring and support. "Ask away, fox."

Nick put his chin on his paws. "First, could you talk to me a bit about what you're currently doing." Truth was, he had given the agent's file a look, part of it had worried him. For instance, there were some evasive parts. And he had contact with the agency only once every six months. Sometimes even less. Nick needed to know how the raccoon was approaching the assignment.

"I'm working under Vlad. Unearthing a whole lot of intel. Since a bunch of his mammal cargo was released a couple of months ago, he went almost ballistic. Shoots his henchmen for no reason, sees traitors everywhere. The few that stay are new and probably a bit nuts. He's about to try something on Mr Big's turf, and though he's really secretive about it, I can already tell it's going to blow up in his face." The fox almost had a devious smile at Vlad's impending doom. "I've already transferred my report through a secure channel. What else do you need to know?"

"What kind of task do you accomplish and how do you perform them?"

"I sell and buy dope. I beat up the problematic mammals who won't pay me or ask too much for it. Standard stuff." Nick could feel the answer was deliberately evasive.

"And how many of those problematic mammals have had accidents?" The truth was, Nick had read the brief reports the raccoon provided, and nowhere was any mentions of those altercations.

"What is to you?" From evasive, the raccoon had gone to defensive. It was logical after all. That field agent didn't possess the 'licence to kill', and as Nick had come to understand, it was to deter the agents to make systematic use of violence. The ZIA would try and cover them, hide the evidence, but any agent caught by the ZPD as a criminal would immediately be abandoned and disavowed by the agency.

Nick sighed, obviously the raccoon had no idea what was happening between the ZIA and ZPD at the moment. "Listen, about me being the ZIA and ZPD liaison, I'm not here to arrest you or stop you from doing your job. I'm here to help." The raccoon lifted a brow. "The thing is, the ZIA has been acting on its own for too long. The director, the chief of police and the mayor think it should be held accountable for its actions."

"Yeah, because risking sanction for doing my job is going to help me." Said the black and grey mammal sarcastically.

"There is going to be a transition. We won't just put behind bars the agents that have blood on their paws, it would be counterproductive. And also probably put a big dent in the workforce. My goal here is to help the ZIA and the agents to change their ways a bit. Find a way for them to have limits on what they can and cannot do."

The raccoon chuckled. "And this will help me how?"

"How many of those 'accidents' could have been avoided if you had a direct line to the ZPD? If you had a way to have them taken out of your way without bloodshed?"

Agent Domino scratched his chin. "Maybe a few..."
"If you had a way to have some big guns to rely on, and not only your wits and the handful of other field agents, how easier would your job be?"

"Depends on what you mean by 'Big guns.' And how quick they could act."

"I'm talking SWAT teams. So of course, time is needed for preparation. But you could have a direct line to the ZPD and get officers nearby in a whim. And that would also mean zero risk of being arrested along with the targets."

Domino crossed his arms and looked at the fox suspiciously. "And you say it's what Director Pardalis want? I really can't imagine that."

Nick scoffed. The ZIA really was secretive, even toward its own agents. "Adamska Pardalis is retired. The new director is Jonath-"

"Jonathan Barklin?" For the first time since had entered the room, the raccoon had a genuine smile. "Jonathan Sears Fucking Barklin?"

"Yeah...?"


"You're a fan?" Chuckled Nick.

The raccoon leaned back on his seat. "This guy is a legend. I don't know if you know agent Savage, but most of us agent wish we were him. Savage wishes he were Barklin."

Nick wanted to say he had been a temporary agent and there was no way in hell he'd ever want to be like the buck, but he kept it to himself. "Mind explaining why?"

"Let's just say I read dossiers I wasn't supposed to." Said the raccoon with a sly smile.

Nick frowned. There was obviously surveillance material in the hideout, wasn't he putting himself at risk by divulging how much he knew.

"Don't make this face. They know that I know. Those are really old and cold cases now. To give you an idea, there are a few stories about an agent that would have defected to work under Mr Big, and that was one of the things that propelled the Big's family at the top of the underground food chain."

"Let's say I've heard of it."

The raccoon leaned forward with a really secretive expression. "Believe it or not, this was Barklin's plan. He was the one that pushed that agent on that case, and he knew he would defect. And Barklin was manipulating another crimelord in the shadow to make him an enemy of Big and put him on the path to self-destruction. And he did all this without the support from Pardalis. Total field improvisation. It's all in his reports. And it checks out."

"You make him sound like a perfect manipulator." remarked the fox.

"He's the kind of mammal that can make you eat the bait, the hook, the cane and make you believe it tasted good." The fox put that info at the back of his mind. It was good to know.

"Okay, so you see, this is another thing we wish to change. There isn't enough communication with
field agents. Some of you, the ones that undertake extended undercover tasks are left on your own. And you have absolutely no idea what is happening at the agency."

"Maybe, but it means we have nothing to say in case of interrogation."

The fox lifted a brow. "Being left in the dark with absolutely no back up can be a bit hard on the nerves don't you think?"

"We get used to it."

"Or take antidepressants. Whatever works."

The raccoon fell mute for a few seconds. "Okay, I wouldn't be against a bit more communication."

Nick smiled. "Well, I'll see what we can do. Change is on its way. In the meantime, please try to take it easy, especially on the collateral damage."

The raccoon smirked. "We do what we have to."

"Speaking of which, I'd like to get back on topic. Your work. With details this time."
Middle of August 2019

Being together on the job again had felt like a vacation day. Judy had come back from the academy as a big ball of tangled nerves, that the fox had spent an entire evening untying.

A day on the beat was nothing in term of stress compared to their new assignments. Judy had vented her frustrations about the recruits and the fox had simply listened to her. He could have given advice but he hadn't for two reasons. First, he believed she was qualified enough to handle all that on her own. Seconds, she needed an ear, not advice anyway.

The fox had talked a bit about the couple of field agents he had met and the bunny was happy to know that they weren't against the ZIA's restructuration. Strangely, she would have thought there would be more resistance from the field agents than from the desk ones.

In any case, it was the end of the day, and aside from a bit of public disturbance from a couple of drunk elephants, and public indecency from a tiger that was fleeing from his lover's husband, the day had been pretty uneventful. They almost had to arrest the husband too but were able to calm him down before it got out of paw.

Paperwork sorted out, they had stopped near the front desk to catch their favorite cheetah and offered him donuts in a corner of the cafeteria to smooth his mood.

"So Ben." Began the fox as the feline was biting in a glazed bakery. "How is the chief ?"

"I knew those donuts wouldn't be free." He sighed with a smile. He took another bite, letting them stew a bit.

The bunny was bouncing in place. "So ? So ?"

The cat gave her a side glance, with an impish smile. "Well, he's... Very big." He took another bite, waiting for that first answer to sink in.

"Ben, I know he's big, he's a buff- Oh sweet cheese and crackers ! Ben, it's not what I meant !"

At her side, the fox was chuckling. "Donut-stretching big ?"

Judy turned to him, scandalized. "Nick ! It's not something you can as-"

"You get used to it." Cut the cheetah, with an innocent smile.

The bunny hid her red face in her paws. "Guys ! No ! I don't want this image stuck in my head !"

"Prude country rabbit. But anyway, Ben, really, how are things going between the two of you. It's been about a month now, is it ?"

"Yeah, about a month. I don't really know how to explain how the chief is when we're together..."

"Is he nice ?" Asked the bunny.
"He is. He really is. Like... He's full of little attentions. For example, since we can't really date outside, he buys meat and fish to cook when I come to his flat. He's bought a load of my favorite music to put on while we're together..."

"The chief cooks ?" Asked the bunny.

"He helps when I do."

"Does he talk more when you're alone ? Does he get mushy ? I really can't imagine the chief all lovey-dovey, but I kind of wish he was." Said the fox with an amused smile.

The feline gave a little giggle. "He's not a talker, he's very direct. Maybe a bit less blunt with me when we're alone. And he's not the mushy type. But I didn't think he was much into physical affection when we started dating."

"Ben, I really hope you're not getting back to what I think you're getting back to." Said the bunny with a sigh.

"No, No. He just like being near me. If I pass close, he'll brush me with his tail, or he'll..." He had a dreamy smile for few seconds before taking back his composure.

"Anyway, yeah, he's nice. Too bad we can't really date outside yet. What do you do as inside dates ? I don't want for him to get bored."

"Well, you could set up something to make him meet your family." Proposed the bunny.

The cheetah snorted. "Pass. My family, or at least my parents, didn't take it really well when I came out, so dating outside of my species... The reveal won't be fun. I don't know about his, though. I could ask."

She patted his shoulder. "Family can be harsh. When we came out to mine, it was a bit of a scandal. At least it didn't get out of the burrows."

"Or you could go on a date in the woods in the Meadowlands." Said the fox to change topic. "There are a few nice clearings... It's perfect to eat out." He felt the discreet elbow in his ribs, but his expression didn't betray anything.

The feline's face brightened up. "It's actually a really nice idea." He said standing up. "I'll ask about it next week." He glanced at his phone. "It's getting late, I'm sorry to cut this short but I have to go."

"No worries, we were about to head home too. Have a nice evening."

"You too." He said, going away with the box of donuts.

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Middle of August 2019

Nick had spent so much time in front of the mirror that he was beginning to fear they would end up being late. Then again, he had begun getting ready sooner than he should have. It was an important event. Maybe even more important than when he got into the ZPD. His mother was getting married for a second time, and it made him so happy. It felt like she was finally getting all the happiness she deserved, and he really, really didn't want to screw that up.

He had thrown a bachelor party for Finnick, or at least a makeshift one. They had mostly hung out
int the spots where they used to hustle, reminiscing of the past, and sharing a pack of beer. It hadn't been the most crazy of days, not even a party for that matter, but it had been nice to spend time with the fennec. Between the job and his mate, Nick felt like he was neglecting him. Finnick wasn't upset about it though, he knew that he had spent a lot of time undercover, and had barely seen his mate during that time. They had used that time to catch up, promised each other to spend more time together.

Judy had chosen her dress and put it on. She had bought it reluctantly a few days prior. She had never liked this kind of garment, feeling they impaired her movements.

She didn't have much experience in parties, but had tried to make something nice for the vixen. She had proposed her to go clubbing, and had sighed in relief when Vivienne had shut the idea down. Instead, they spent a day at a park near her flat. The vixen told the bunny how she had spent a lot of time with Nick here when he was a kid. Judy wasn't really surprised to learn that Nick had been an outgoing kid, playing and having fun with anyone that would come to him. Judy found out that Vivienne was a bit anxious about what Nick really thought of her second marriage and the fact that she wanted a new kid, but Judy reassured her, explaining that he really had no problem with it.

The time approached and Nick still didn't feel ready. The bunny slid behind him.

"You look perfect, Nick."

"Do I ? I think the bow tie isn't straight." She made him turn and pulled on it a bit.

"It is. It's not your wedding Nick, no need to be so stressed out."

"I just want it to be nice for her."

She took his paws and noticed he was shaking a bit. "Nick, are you alright ?" He shook his head. "Come. You need to sit down." He did and put his head in his paws.

"What is it ?"

The fox exhaled slowly. "I just thought I had put all this behind me. The getting away, the years outside. The pain I put her and dad through."

The bunny bit her lips. She hadn't thought this wedding would stir up those painful memories. She patted his shoulder. "This kind of thing takes time."

"It's been almost a year." He felt an arm go around his shoulder, and felt Judy's body press against his.

"It can't say can understand what you're going through, but I think it's pretty normal to have it come back sometimes." She kissed his forehead soothingly.

"It's just... I feel like I screwed up her life twenty years ago. I'm afraid I'll do it again. I don't know how, or why. I just feel like it's going to happen again. I know I'm not making any sense." He lifted his face from his paws to look up to his bunny. "It won't happen, right ?"

"Of course it won't." She said, taking his face between her own paws and kissing his snout. "I promise it won't. I'm not letting it happen."

His feeling of dread slowly receded. He knew it was nonsensical, and that there was no way he'd
do the same mistake twice. He really hoped the kid they would adopt wouldn't either.

"Now get up. We really have to go. You need to go pick up Fin while I help your mom get
dressed." The fox smiled. The wedding's organization had been a bit messy.

First he'd have to get Fin, and find something to do or someplace to hang out before the time of the
wedding, bring him to the venue go back to his mother's place and pick up the two females to bring
them there and walk his mother up the aisle. Him and Judy had insisted on organizing the wedding
themselves, and had gone a bit off budget, but not too much, and had paid for the difference.

"Okay, let's go." He had an instant of hesitation before getting through the flat's door, but Judy
gently pushed him forward.

"You're fine."

... 

They arrived at Vivienne's flat and entered the building. She had given them the code and keys.
Tapping at the door, a costume wearing fennec opened it. "Hi guys."

"Fin, you look handsome in this." Remarked Judy

The fennec stretched his shoulders. "I hope, 'cause it itches like hell."

Nick held back chuckle, the fennec was pretty stressed out. "Has mom begun to get ready ?"

"Yeah, she locked herself in the room. Won't let me in. Not that I tried." He danced from one feet
to the other. "So, we goin' or what ?"

"Of course, let's go." He moved aside to let the fennec pass. "Hope my mom won't give you too
much trouble. Kiss her for me, will you ?"

"See you soon". She answered.

The two vulpines went back to the car, and the fennec casually took the driving seat.

"Fin, you don't even know where we're going."

"You'll guide me. I need ta' drive. Calm my nerves."

Nick shrugged and took the passenger seat. "Alright." While sitting and putting on the safety belt,
he observed the small vulpine. He looked very stiff, and as he was starting the car, Nick noticed he
was very nervous. "Take the third left. Nervous, much ?"

"Nah." Finnick lied. "The costume's just a bit tight." He felt Nick stare and his calm expression
faltered. "Alright, I'm fuckin' terrified."

"Afraid you're making a mistake ?"

"What ? No. It's the best decision I've ever taken. Not even a decision to be honest. I'm just afraid
I'll make mistakes."

"Turn right at the next crossroad. Don't worry, you'll make mistakes. But I know you, you can't
really screw that up."

The fennec snorted. "Way to reassure me... But ya' know, I'm kind of afraid I ain't good enough.
"I'm shure she could do bet-"

"Fin, there is no other mammal on this planet I could imagine being right for my mom. You've
taken care of her for years, even before you started dating her, I have no reason to believe you'll act
different now. Next right and we're there."

The fennec shut his mouth, staring at the road.

"Ya really believe 'dat ?"

"What I just said ? Yes."

"Thanks kid. Means a lot." They arrived near the docks north of Downtown. "Don't tell me you
rented a boat."

"A barge actually. Do you have your boat driving license on you ?"

"In mah wallet, as always." The fennec turned to his friend. "How much did 'dis whole little party
cost."

"Pretty much your whole wedding gift."

"Asshat."

Nick chuckled "It's rented for two days, so if you want to go on a little trip down the canal, you
can."

"You didn't spare any expense." Said the fennec, getting off of the car after having pulled over.

Nick brought him to the barge. It had been discreetly decorated with flowers and white ribbons.
There was a red carpet and a floral arch under which he would exchange vow with Vivienne.
Behind was a white curtain that hid the front of the boat.

"No peeking behind the curtain while I'm gone."

"How will ya' stop me while you're gone ?" Smirked the fennec.

Nick got a pair of cuffs out of his pocket. "Do you really want to play that game ?"


Judy had entered the room where the vixen was getting ready after Nick had unlocked it. She was
sitting on the bed looking at a wedding gown on a hanger with a look the bunny couldn't decipher.

She stood at the door silently waiting for the vixen to get out of her trance. She finally blinked and
put on a little smile.

"Hey Judy. How are you ?"

"I'm fine. You ?"

The vixen turned back to the gown. "I don't know. I should feel great but I feel strange."

The bunny sat near the female fox. "Strange ?"
She answered with a nod and pointed at the dress. "This gown, it's the one I wore at my first wedding... It reminded me of John." She made a little sigh. "I know how it sounds, but I don't actually feel like I'm betraying him by wearing it again... It's just..." She felt the bunny's paw on her shoulder. "I fucked up a relation before. I almost lost a kit because of my stubbornness, because of my stupidity. I pushed John away," She took her ace in her paws. "What if I fuck up again. What if I do the same mistakes with Fin, with this child we want to adopt. I can barely live with it as it is, I just can't... I-

The bunny had stood up and pulled the vixen in an embrace. "Hey, don't think like that."

"Fin deserves to be happy, with all he did for me, what if I can't... What..."

Judy's paw slowly ran on the fox fur. "You're okay. Everything's going to be fine. I don't know if I can understand how you feel, but... Nick actually had the same fears for you both."

"Really ?"

"Yes. I think he's a lot like you, and even if I don't know you that much, I know him. He has learnt from his mistakes, and I'm sure you did too. You will probably make mistakes, but if you or Fin are half the mammals I think you are, you won't let it break you apart. You want to be with him, and he wants to be with you. Hang on those feelings, and you'll be okay."

Vivienne pressed Judy against herself. "I'm so glad Nick found a mammal like you." The doe was left mute by the compliment, she could only smile and help the vixen stand up. "So, how about you help me put on a that gown ?"

"Sure."

It took only a short time to slip it on. The dress was very simple, and had laced long sleeves. Judy was bit at loss with the make up, since she was using the bare minimum but Vivienne could tend to that herself. She put on the veil and was now ready.

"I'm back." Came Nick's voice from the other side of the door.

The bunny went to the door. "Let's surprise your son." The vixen took the bouquet and placed herself in front of her door, nodding to the bunny, who opened it. Nick's heart skipped at beat when he saw his mother get out of her room. She lifted her veil to see him more clearly. Two thought went through his mind. First, it was the most beautiful his mother had ever been, even now, with the weight of the years. Two, he couldn't wait to see his bunny in a gown.

"You look splendid."

"Thanks son." She went and hugged him lightly, to not risk wrinkling her dress. "Now how about we put this fucking show on the road." And she unceremoniously went to the door, waving her to follow her.

Nick followed her, whispering to Judy. "She's terrified, is she ?"

"Yup."

"Fin is too. He loved the boat by the way."

"He told you ?"

"Nah, but it was written all over his face."
The trip to the barge was very short, and the vixen had little smile when she saw what they had prepared. The sun would set in a few minutes, and if they timed it right, they would be able to take the perfect cheesy and romantic pictures they wanted. Judy got out of the car first and approached Finnick.

A tiger officiant had arrived while Nick had gone pick up his mother and mate, and was waiting behind a small altar in the middle of the boat. Nick and Judy had chosen to have as little official presence and interaction as possible.

"Are you ready ?" She asked the fennec.

"Nope." He answered with a worried smile.

"You'll do fine." She trudged behind the curtain and the music started. The fennec repressed a chuckle. Nick had surely chosen the music. It was a song by the Ink Snouts, I Don't Want to Set the World on Fire. He considered it fitting for the occasion.

Judy held up a thumb and placed herself at her spot. Nick opened the door and helped his mother's out of the car. As he saw her, the fennec's heart skipped a beat. She slowly made her way to the arch and faced the fennec who couldn't stop himself from gawking at her. He blinked a few times and shut his mouth as Nick tapped his shoulder while placing himself behind him.

On cue, the music switched to some generic background music and Finnick took out a paper from his pocket. He looked at it for a couple of seconds before throwing it away. "Screw it. I ain't needin' any paper to tell ya how I feel." He reached up and took her free paw in his. "Vi, we've known eachothah for a long time. I spent way too long wondering if ya felt the same way I did, or if I wos the right fennec for ya. But all this waitin' led us to today, so, ya know what ? I think it was all worth it in the end. I know I'm a bit short tempered and a bit pig-headed, but I swear, I'll do anythin' to make you happy, if you'll have me as yo' husband. 'Cause I think you deserve it."

The vixen had to swallow hard to keep the tears inside. Judy, didn't have that much self control and tears had started rolling. Nick was barely keeping it together, having to look away, discreetly wiping the corner of his eyes.

The vixen pulled away her paw and took the paper she had kept the only place she could and threw it away too. "Never liked reading fucking speeches anyway." She took a deep breath, looking for her words. "Fin, like you said, we've known eachother for a long time. I put you through so fucking much, I can't understand how you can still want me in your life. But you do. And you are one of the most honest and brave mammal I know. If you'll have me as your wife, you'll make me the most happy mammal on the planet."

Judy had to wipe her eyes several times to get rid of the tears. On Nick's side, the waterworks had really started and he stopped trying to shut them down. Despite them, he kept a straight smiling face.

Judy and Nick stepped forward next to the couple with the ring. The officiant spoke. "Vivienne Octavia Wilde, will you take Ryan Vulpo as your rightful husband, share your life with him, be truthful to him and stay with him both through hardship and happiness ?"

"Fuck yeah !"

"Ryan Vulpo, will you take Vivienne Octavia Wilde as your rightful wife, share your life with her,
be truthful to her and stay with her both through hardship and happiness?"

"Hell yeah!"

Each took the ring their witnesses had been holding onto for them and slid it on the other's finger.

"Vivienne, Finnick, you can know ki—" They didn't wait for the authorization and acted right away. Judy and Nick quickly backed down, and the officiant slipped aside with a smile. Quickest wedding he had ever officiated in.

Nick took a couple of photos with a camera he had bought for the occasion. The sun aligned perfectly, and his shots looked like postcards. The husband and wives turned to the other couple. Judy was smiling and Nick took up the camera again. They held the pose, letting him take a few more photos. Vivienne suddenly threw the bouquet and the bunny caught it as a reflex. She gave the fox a glance, whose smile got even wider. Vivienne and Finnick kissed again and Nick took the opportunity to dry his tears.

The officiant politely took his leave, but not before Finnick and Vivienne signed the marriage license he had brought.

"What now?" Asked the vixen.

"Well, now there is that." She pulled a cord and the curtain fell, revealing a four places table which was more of a cold buffet.

The four mammals spent the evening together, but Nick and Judy decided to not stay too long. They were working the next day and didn't want to impose. Nick knew the fennec would want to take the vixen somewhere nice on the river and this evening was for them after all.

Middle of August 2019

As she was heading to the place the event took place with Nick at her side, Judy had a strange feeling. The four months during which she helped at the academy replayed in her head for a bit. Buster and Cavid had made a great amount of progress and were now getting a deserved recognition for her efforts. She felt a bit frustrated, despite her and theirs best effort, only the rat had gotten good enough to enter Precinct One.

It was still a form of victory, even if it tasted bittersweet. It meant that her and Nick would stop being partners and she would have the rat as a new partner. She could see her mate didn't look forward to work full time between the ZPD and ZIA, but it still meant they could make their relationship official and, at last, get married. This time, the ZPD ceremony would be nothing special. No speech, no cameras, only the chief giving their badges to each of the new recruits. It would go fairly fast.

They were neatly aligned on the stage, each waiting for their turn to come. Most of them were beaming with pride, and the few of them that weren't, wore professional expressions.

"So, fluff, this is one of the guys you selected at the academy?" Asked Nick, pointing to the rat.

"Yes. The other, Arthur Cavid, will be transferred to Savanah Central. He was really close to get into Precinct One. If he works hard enough, I'm sure he'll get there."

"Do you think he'd like to?"

"I think he would, him and Buster got really close during their formation."
"Too bad he didn't get in, would have been fun to have a rodent team."

"And give you guys bad jokes fodders? I think we mostly dodged a bullet here."

"You're no fun Carrots."

The dozen new recruits were now wearing their badges and getting down from the stage, the two rodent directing themselves to the couple since Judy was the only one they really knew here.

"So what's the program now?" Asked Buster.

Nick pointed with his the commossion that was happening a few paces away. "See the chubby cheetah there? Party at his house tonight. He's distributing invitations as we speak." He extended his paw to present himself. "Nicholas Wilde by the way. Call me Nick."

"Nice to meet you Nick. Louis Buster. I prefer Buster."

"Got it Buster."

"Arthur Cavid. People call me Art or Cavid."

"Art it is then."

The rat turned his head toward the cheetah that was approaching in a bouncy pace. "Ooooh, our two new small mammals recruits. You look so nice in those tiny uniform."

Judy rose a brow as the two rodent's expressions turned to surprised. "At least you didn't use the 'C' word this time." Remarked Nick.

"C word?" Asked Buster.

"Cute." Said the Capybara. "Not something you want to use in the presence, and especially not with, a bunny. I grew up in a rabbit neighborhood." He explained.

"Oh." He gave a glance to Judy who confirmed with a nod.

The cheetah gave the invitation, the rodent accepted them but Judy and Nick didn't. "Can't come Ben. Tonight is our last shift together, and we want to make the most of it." Said Judy. Nick caught her by the waist and pulled her a bit closer.

"I knew it." Said the rat. "I knew you were together."

"I suspected it too. To be honest, I think most people do." Added the capybara.

Judy was happy to see that despite their fears, most mammals that learned about their relationships didn't see anything bad in it. Maybe it was because they were in the city, or maybe it was because of the event of those last months, that had helped open a lot of eyes. In any case, it gave her hope that the future would be bright.

"Well, we're making it official tomorrow, so if you could keep your mouth shut about it, it would be nice." Said the bunny.

"Lips sealed." Smiled the rat. "Now, if there is a party tonight, I'm going to have to go and choose an outfit. An uniform won't do."
"So, you're going to spend time with this Buster ?"

Nick was resting his feet on the dashboard while sipping on a coffee.

"Yes. He's going to be my new partner." She bit in a donut while looking around for potential trouble in the street lit by the twilight sun.

"Hm..."

"What? Are you jealous?"

"Should I be?" He said in a joking suspicious tone. "After all, you're both rodent, I have the right to have my suspicions."

"Bunnys are lagomorphs. And if you're going to play the jealous type, I might as well-" His mouth capture her lips before she could finish her sentence. "Nick! Not on patrol."

"You know you love me."

"Do I know that? Yes. Yes I do." She heard a sigh coming from her right. Nick had gone back to staring through the windshield. "Something's on your mind."

"It's going to sound a bit selfish, but I'm kind of disappointed that we won't be together as much as we are now. I mean, my whole reason to be a cop to begin with, was because I'd be close to you."

"Is it still the only reason?"

"No. I like that I actually got to make a difference. It just won't be the same without you." He took another sip of his coffee. "And I don't really like that ZPD-ZIA job. It's necessary, and I'm the most qualified to do it at the moment, but the first occasion I get to leave it, I must say, I will."

"You know you could leave it now? Chief Bogo and Director Barklin said that you could get back to be a simple cop whenever you wanted."

Nick snorted. "Yeah, of course. You realise that was a false authorisation. I simply can't stop until the job is done. I couldn't let things remain as they were. And I think they knew it. Or at least, the wolf did anyway. And besides, if I stop, it means I'll probably be back to be your partner. And that means no officialisation, no marriage, no kids. No nothing."

"We could find another solution." She proposed.

"Nah. I'm good. I'll work my ass off for the next three or four years, get this resolved, train some mammal to take my place, and that'll be that. And if three years of a shitty job means I get to marry and get kids with you, I think it's a great deal. Twenty years wasted got me to meet you, and that made them well spent after all."

"Could you get more cheesey?"

"I could, fluff, but you wouldn't be able to handle it."

She nuzzled his neck and gave him a kiss. "Maybe, maybe not."

"I thought we were in patrol?"

"Yeah." She sighed, pulling herself away. "We are."
Middle of August 2019

Despite how late they had gone to bed because of their shift, the couple wasn't surprised be among the most well rested. Clawhauser had deep bags under his eyes, but a happy smile. He waved at them while dipping a donut in a large coffee mug.

They were the firsts to enter the bullpen, it slowly filled with a bunch of other tired mammals. The chatter was almost non-existent, despite the number of mammals present. Buster sat near them silently. The rat was completely hungover. The chatter was way more silent than usual and MacHorn's 'Atten-hut' lacked its usual strength, which didn't stop the rat to put his paws around his painful skull as a reaction.

The buffalo faced his officers and took out the files. "I'll ask you to remain in the room after you received your assignation. First, I should present to you our new recruits... But I don't care. Wolford, Blackfur, Fangmeyer, Delgato, there is a bunch of mammals that are taking my streets for their personal race tracks. Bring them in. Snarlov, Rhinowitz, there's been a fox disappearance in canal district. I want you to go there and get statements. Hopps, Buster there are rising reports of drug dealers in Downtown south. I want you to go there and find out anything you can." A bit of chatter rose in the bullpen. Nick and Judy not working as a team was a first. "Grizzoly, Pennington, you're on street patrol. Clawfith, parking duty. Now, before you all go, I believe some of your colleagues have things to announce." He stepped aside, and left the stage to Judy and Nick.

"Well, guys... I know there are a lot of rumors around me and Nick, and we've decided to put them to rest."

Nick stepped forward. "Yes, we think the joke has run its course. There is absolutely no way that we..." As he began his sentence, he actually saw a few faces fall. "... wouldn't be dating."

The applause was way a lot more silent that he thought it would be. Then again, half of the bullpen was hungover. Nick caught his bunny by the waist and leaned, giving her a deep kiss. Judy didn't really like to be the center of attention, but she decided to indulge. Not having to hide themselves anymore felt too good.

This time there was a satisfactory loud roar of congratulations. "Yes !" Came Fangmeyer's voice. "I won !"

"We won, you mean." Said Delgato. "We made the same wager."

Nick unstuck himself from Judy, which gave her the occasion to ask. "So you bet on us being together ?"

"Nah. That bet died long ago. It was about when you'd make it official."

"Oh, for carrot's sake. You're all impossible."

The chief cleared his throat. "You can all go now. Except for Hopps, Wilde and Buster. I'd like a few words with you three."

The officers left the room, and only those that had been asked to, remained.

"So, corporal Buster, lieutenant Hopps will be in charge of you. I want to make it very clear that you barely had high enough grades to get into my precinct. You will have to follow her rhythm, and learn from her. Disappointing her expectations will be disappointing mine. Is that clear ?"

"Yes sir."
"Good. Corporal Wilde, as of today you are now Sergeant Wilde. You know the drill, act your rank and keep on doing good work. Is that clear?"

"Yes sir."

"Outstanding. Lieutenant Hopps, I know that you're used to work with Sergeant Wilde, but you'll have to learn to work with another officer from now on. He'll have to adapt to you, but it also means you'll have to adapt to him. Keep that in mind. Oh, and by the way, you're one step away from becoming a captain. So don't screw up, I don't like to have to change my mind. Is that clear."

"Yes sir."

"Perfect. You're dismissed."

They left the bullpen, and while in the hallway, the rat asked. "Is he always that blunt?"

"Only if you can take it. He knows how to be understanding. Just, don't ever try to hide your mistakes, you'll be sanctioned anyway, but it will be way worse." Explained Nick.

"Okay. By the way, what are you going to do? He didn't assign you a new partner or mission."

"Top secret." The fox smiled.

The rat lifted a disbelieving brow.

"He's not kidding, Buster." Smiled Judy.

"Oh. Okay."

"I really got to go. See you later." Nick gave quick kiss to his bunny and went away, leaving the bunny and rat alone.

Judy took a few steps in the hallways and turned to the rat. "What are you waiting for? Let's go." She threw him the car keys. "And you're driving."
"You seem awfully cheery today."

His face resting on the buffalo's chest, Clawhauser was looking up at the slightly smiling expression the chief wore. He had learned by now to read his lover's almost undecipherable expressions.

"Do you mind sharing the subject of you're almost ecstatic attitude?" He like to tease the buffalo about his constantly contained demeanor.

The buffalo turned and rested his head on his hoof, making the cheetah slide from his place and end up slightly lower than the chief. "Well..." He ran his other hoof on the feline soft fur. "For starters, there is fluffy naked cat in my bed." Clawhauser pushed himself closer, stealing a kiss. "Then, It's our day off." A second kiss was stolen. The buffalo placed a gentle paw on the cheetah's cheek. "And I realized one thing." He leaned down and took his third kiss. It was longer and deeper. The feline felt himself melt in the embrace. "I'm in love with you."

The cat stay stunned for a couple of second before he suddenly pushed the chief who fell flat on his back. The quarter of a second later, the cat was sitting on his stomach, lips locked on his, his paws running along the muscles of his neck and his torso. "Really?"

"Yes."
"Really, really?"

"I'm in love with you, Ben." He pressed the soft body of the feline against his own. "Really, really."

"I'm in love with you too."

Even after the long sessions of cuddling and sex, the cheetah still managed to find knots in the chief's back. "Do you ever relax?"

The chief turned his head upward, off of the pillow so he'd be able to talk. "Sometimes."

The cheetah was using his elbows, the chief's back muscles were so resistant that it was necessary for the most persistent knots. There was groan, but the chief didn't move, the feline knew what he was doing. "You need to do it more often."

"As a matter of fact for the last few months, my life has been especially relaxing."

"I can't imagine in what state your back was before. This one is going to hurt." The groan was louder than the previous one. "Sorry." A hoof brushed his leg.

"It's okay. It hurts good." He caressed the arm, seeing the scars he had made a few months prior. "Do they still hurt?"

"The nerve endings are dead, so no."
The feline wanted to apologize but he knew the chief wouldn't consider it necessary. The massage turned more soft, punctuated with kisses. "I never thanked you properly for what you did for me at the shooting range."

The buffalo fell silent for a few seconds, shifted a bit to the side to look at the side of his face, but the buffalo turned it. He was blushing. Clawhauser could feel it.

"I... partly did it for myself." Bogo was glad the feline couldn't see his face right now. His composure was all over the place.

"Really?"

"Yeah. I wanted to declare to you when the case ended, but I couldn't with the state you were in. It wasn't what you needed. You needed support. I could have helped you differently. That way meant I could get close to you. As your superior officer, it wasn't something I should have done. I apolo--"

He felt a finger poke his neck and the body of the feline press against his.

"Adrian, don't be sorry for that. It was the best thing you could do at the time. Even when you're selfish, you do the right thing." He got down from the buffalo's back and lifted the chief's arm to get under it. "The food is going to arrive soon."

"And I'll have to go get it?"

The cat pushed himself in the chief's chest a bit more, wrapping the muscular arm around him. "Well, you're the one on top."

"As usual." The feline froze and slowly glanced up. There was the slight hint of a grin on the chief's face.

... 

The cheetah picked up a piece of sashimi and ate it. "Judy seems to be doing fine with her new partner. I read the reports, she's really taking charge."

The chief nodded while struggling to use the chopsticks. Hooves weren't adapted to their use.

"He's really working hard, he doesn't show it much, but he really admires her."

"Hopps is an excellent officer. Most of her colleagues could actually learn from her."

The feline gulped a second piece of sashimi. "She still has a lot to learn though. Are you sure it's a good idea to give her the captain rank yet?"

The chief lifted a brow. "You don't approve?"

"You don't need my approbation, chief- I mean, Adrian."

"I want your opinion." He had finally gotten the hang of the chopsticks and caught a rice ball.

The cat felt a bit of unease. He felt it wasn't something he should give his opinion about. He was a bit afraid of not having the same opinion of the chief, but he knew the buffalo wouldn't get mad if they didn't agree. "She's very young, and has spent little time on the force yet. There are officers that have been there longer that are still waiting on their promotions. But aside from the jealousy, don't you think a promotion so quickly could get to her head?"

The buffalo ate two more rice balls before answering. Those were concerns he actually had, but he
hadn't deemed them big enough. "I agree with your concern. Do you think Hopps is less deserving of this promotion than her colleagues?"

"She works hard, but she lacks experience, and especially in leadership and... And that's why you sent her to teach classes at the academy and gave her an unexperienced partner." Realised the cat.

"Not only. But yes."

"And you don't believe the promotion will get to her head."

"Before Lycus case it could have. But now, no. I don't."

What the buffalo didn't say, was the reason why he wanted her to have that promotion, or the other reasons why he had pushed for her to be in charge of a recruit that quick. It was a calculated risk, but he thought she could handle it. He wanted her to be free to come out as a couple with Nick. He knew the public eye would get on her because of it, but it would have sooner or later. If the hero of Zootopia was in a cross-species relationship, it would help ease the people's mind about those types of relationship. And if him, as the chief, wanted the opportunity to officially be with his cheetah, he needed the opinion on it to be positive. He needed to keep the trust of the citizen, otherwise, his work would get way harder, and it would mean a less safe city. "She still has things to learn before becoming a captain."

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September 2019

Nick walked into the Director's office with his weekly report. For now, they were only in the early stages of the project, and though actions had been taken, their final course hadn't been decided yet. He knocked at the door and entered when the wolf answered.

"Hello Director."

"Hello Wilde. Please take a seat."

The fox slid the file on the desk, waiting for the wolf to take it and sit on one of the chairs. He did and put it aside. "So, I've received a few reports from my agents, that you've talked to pretty much every one of them."

"Aside for the field agents. I've seen three or four of them, not that we could pull them out just for me to have an interview with them."

"That's true. Most of them seem to have changed their minds about our rapprochement with the ZPD." He took out the project file and looked at the list of idea the fox had gathered until now. "I haven't really had much time to go through it all yet, but a few things pulled my attention, and I'd like to go through them now."

"Sure."

"First, I'd like to ask about what you call the 'exchange program'. You want to send some of our agents to work at the ZPD?"

"I think it would actually be a good idea for them to experience the job of an officer. Get to directly help others, work with rules."

"You want them to be in a ZPD's agent shoes. That's not a bad idea, but a sudden arrival of exchange officers would raise suspicions. And a clever mammal could easily connect the dots. One
of the ZIA’s strength is that no one knows who exactly are our agents, including the ZPD. You’ve seen it yourself, if one of the officer got corrupted, it could end up in disaster."

Being reminded of FitzAntler's betrayal, the fox sighed. But he had actually thought about that problem. "Well, Zootopia was actually a form of social experimentation when it was funded. There are more and more large cities that are trying themselves at predators and prey mixity on a large scale. I know the mayor actually wants to put officer exchange in place, so that officers from those other cities could learn how to deal with interspecies problems. The ZIA agents could be grafted to this program. After all, are you not experts at distributing false identities?"

The wolf scratched his chin. "That is a good idea, but one we won't be able to put to test until the mayor actually puts in place the exchange program. I see that you'd also like ZPD agents to do internships at the ZIA."

"I know that there is a risk for the ZIA agents, but with a good selection and sufficient background checks, it could be doable. If the ZPD could really see how the ZIA works, it could learn from it, and maybe the officers could get a little less frustrated to be ordered not to act in certain situations."

That was true. One of the main problem the ZIA had met until now was that since they didn't know where were their agent or what they did, it happened that sometimes the ZPD would take on related cases and give a hard time to the ZIA agents. With the rapprochement, they would stop impeding on eachother's work, but it would also mean that sometimes, the ZPD would have to back down from situation where they would usually act.

"I understand that this will be harder to put in place, but in my opinion, it will be a crucial point of this project."

"Of course. I see there that you want every action that would usually be illegal to be documented. Surveillance, accidents, extortion... You've made quite a long list. What is the reason?"

"One of the things that shocked me while I was undercover was that I could basically do what I wanted without the fear of retribution. I don't know how your agents work, but that level of freedom is an invitation to abuse in my opinion."

"You understand that one of the reason of our efficiency is that we act partly around the law?"

"The goal isn't to punish your agents when they do something that they technically shouldn't, but I want them to have limits. It's easy to slip when what you do is for the 'greater good'. And writing down what they do may make them reflect upon their action, and maybe sometimes help them find other solutions."

"A tool of self-imposed control. It's sort of devious. I like it. You also want the ZPD to have access to our archives?"

"Yes. I'm fairly certain that there are a lot of cold cases that could be resolved if our inspectors could take a look at it."

The wolf chuckled. "You're right, it's probably true. But you must understand, for the safety of my agents, I may have to redact some of the content."

"I am aware of that. The other reason why I want the ZPD to have access to the archives, is that we need to understand the importance of your work. I know most officers frown upon your activity, if their worries could be put to rest, I think the cooperation between you and us would be facilitated."
"I'll think about it. It's all I had to talk about."

"Then I'll be going. Have a nice evening Director."

"You too Wilde."

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End of December 2019

"You should relax, Vi. It's going to be okay."

The vixen was twisting her fingers while her tail was wagging nervously. Sitting in the waiting room, she was wondering how the fennec could stay that calm in those circumstances. The truth was, he wasn't, but he was her husband. And as old fashioned as it could be, to him, it meant he had to be an anchor to which she could always hang on to. He took her paw and stroke it slowly.

"We went through the background check process, our file is solid. We even got a few letters of testimony to back it all up. There is really no wall in front of us now."

The female vulpine closed her eyes and exhaled slowly, opening the file for hundredth time and looking at the picture. A girl fennec fox, sporting a bunch of band aids on her knees, elbows and face was looking defiantly at the camera. The photo made her smile each time. It was like being groomed and wearing nice clothes was one of the worst thing that could happen to her. On the half dozen of child in the foster care system that had been presented to them, it had been the one that had really caught their eye. They had met a few times already. Well, they simply had seen her in the common room of the foster establishment. Most children had been looking at them from the corner of their eyes, some of them with hope, some of them with fear. In a corner of the room, reading a half-torn book, she had simply lifted her head given them a long stare that really looked like a 'I dare you' glare and gone back to her reading.

"Mister Vulpo and Miss Wilde ?" Called a female voice. The fennec winced, being called by his real name was a strange thing. Casting aside his eternal paranoia had been hard but necessary in that case. They entered the office and the female grizzly director waved them to sit. "Hello."

"Hello miss Andersine."

She opened their file and quickly went through it. She didn't really need to since she knew it well. It wasn't especially usual nor unusual for a couple of their age to try and adopt, but she had to admit she rather liked them. They had shared their personal history and when she had learnt about Nick's story she had become wary of the couple, but as she had come to know them, she saw that they mostly had fallen victims to bad circumstances.

And the letters of support she had gotten from both the vixen's son and his mate had helped a lot to build her opinion of them. And the fact that the mammals having written those support letters were the heroes of Zootopia didn't hurt.

"You're nervous." She stated to Vivienne.

"Just a bit."

"Don't worry about it, most adopting mammals are. The first meeting is always a bit awkward... Oh, and I know I've mentioned it before, but she has a bit of... Character. She'll need time to warm up to you, and I'm pretty sure you'll need time too. Ready ?"

"Yup."

"Yeah."
She brought them in an adjacent room. It was painted with pastel colors and contained a bunch of toys, large pillows to sit on, everything to make any mammal comfortable. She pushed a key on a phone hanged to the wall. "You can bring her in." She said. A few seconds later, the nine years old fennec kid was accompanied inside by a worker who then left. She looked at the two sitting vulpines, giving them a bit of a berth, and went to stand near a large pillow. She still had the worn book and was still sporting a few band aids.

"Hollie, meet Vivienne Wilde and Ryan Vulpo. Vivienne, Ryan, meet Hollie Halopy."

Finnick noticed the slight teeth gritting when her last name was said out loud. The foster service didn't reveal the children's past unless they deemed it necessary. In Hollie's case, they knew next to nothing.

She didn't look frightened, but her expression was clear, she didn't trust anyone in the room.

"Hi." Said the vixen with a smile.

"Hi." Her little shy voice was almost interrogative.

"Hello." Said Finnick, unsure. It seemed he could keep a cool head before the event, but now that he was in front of the kid, he felt completely at loss.

Silence fell on the room.

"I'm going to let you get acquainted. If anyone needs anything, I'll be in the next room." Finnick found it strange to leave a child alone with two mammals, even with the background check the grizzly had run on them, but with a glance up, he found the camera he was looking for.

The silence grew a bit before the vixen broke it. "So, um, you like to read ?"

"Yeah."

"What do you read ?"

The fennec kid made a imperceptible move backward, clutching the book a bit harder.

"It's okay if you don't want to tell me."

"Robots."

"Huh ?"

She brought the book up to show them. Robots, by Isaac Mousimov. The two adult's raised their brow, it wasn't really a kid's book, not that it was inappropriate either.

"Is it nice ?"

The kid shrugged.

Vivienne and Finnick felt a bit distraught. The kid was completely guarded.

"Yo' name is Hollie Halopy, right ?" Asked Finnick.

There was teeth gritting again. She nodded.

"Don't like yo' name ?"
The kid didn't answer, but at her expression, he knew he had put his finger on it.

"Is it Hollie ?" No reaction. "Or Halopy ?" New gritting, followed with a nod. "As it happens, I don' really like my name either. Mos' people call me Finnick. Or Fin for shorts."

"Why ?"

" 'Cause I ask 'em to. Dontchu wanna sit ?"

She looked at the large cushion behind her and sat on the edge.

The kid shook her head. "Why do you want to adopt me ?"

The question took them aback. Finnick was looking for an answer, but Vivienne was quicker.

"We thought you seemed like a nice kid."

The little vulpine scratched one of the band aid on her snout. "The other kids don't think that."

"Fu- I don't care what others think." Shrugged the vixen. "Do you fight a lot ?"

"Not a lot."

"Why do you fight ?"

"They say mean things." They saw that she tried to say it as she didn't care, but her expression, and the fact that she fought because of it hinted that it wasn't the case.

"Like ?"

"Say stuff about mom and dad."

"Do you win often ?" Asked the fennec ?

"Fin !"

"Wot ? Dat's a gud question."

"Sometimes." She scratched the band aid again.

Her guarded attitude didn't deter them, but they had thought she would be a bit more enthusiastic.

"So, what do you like to do ? Aside from reading ?" Asked Vivienne, eager to get away from the topic of fighting as soon as possible.

"I repair stuff."

"Like what ?"

"Stuff." She shrugged. Putting a paw in one of her pockets, taking out what looked like an old MP3 player. Finnick extended a paw.

"Can I ?"

She gave it to him. He turned it to look at it from all sides. It wasn't one MP3 player, it was several parts of different players held together with tape. There was a single earbud plugged to it. One of the side was slightly disjointed, in a way that he could look inside. Most cables had been repaired
with tape too, some even looked like they had been welded. He turned it on and brought the earbud to his ear. The thing did work.

"Impressive." He fiddled in his own pocket to take out his own earplugs and gave them along with the player. "Ya can give 'em back next time."

She lifted a brow and simply bundle it all and put it back in her pocket. "You're weird."

"Weird ?" He asked.

"Yeah. Not like the others."

"What d'ya mean ?"

She played nervously with the corner of her old book. "You didn't ask me if I had friends or what game I like to play."

Vivienne and Finnick felt a bit embarrassed. The couple of times they had seen her, she was mostly staying alone. The fact that she fought a lot was a hint that she didn't have a lot of friends. And oddly, she didn't seem like the kind of kid that played a lot.

"Do you want to talk about that ?" Asked the vixen.

"No." She answered almost immediately.

An awkward silence fell on the room.

"When ya said 'the others' who didja mean ?" Came Finnick's voice.

"Adults. Other people that wanted to adopt me."

"Why didn't ya go wid' dem ?" They saw her jaw clench and tremble a bit. Maybe that question had been a bit too insensitive. "Ya don't hafta talk about if ya don't wanna."

"Mom got better. Then she didn't. Then she d-did again." She took a deep breath, and they both could see that she was swallowing back tears. They wanted to ask where was her mother but they feared they wouldn't like the answer, and they certainly didn't want to pull back that kind of memory.

... 

Vivienne and Finnick settled back in Andersine's office. The bear politely waited for them to get seated.

"So, how did that first meeting go ?"

"Good, I guess." Said the vixen. "She's really guarded."

"She is, yes."

"She said that she fought a lot with the other kids." The ursine lifted a brow but let Vivienne continue speaking. "Isn't there anything you can do about that ?"

Andersine had a little smile. "I'm surprised she talked to you about it. And there isn't much we can do. We try to talk with the kids, tried to keep an eye on her, but we can't really keep someone near at all time."
"What was it about her mom getting better and worse again?" Bluntly asked the fennec. The bear had avoided that topic in their early interview, but it seemed to him that knowledge was important.

"I didn't really want to tell you before you met her. I didn't want you to have preconceived ideas. She went into a couple of foster home before yours. It went fine, but each time, her mother got better and got custody back for several months. She did that a couple of times, and each time another kid was matched with the foster families in the mean time. And her mother... Well, she was a drug addict, and that was not her biggest problem. She tried to quit a few times, but it didn't work out.

She's actually dead now." The bear's expression switched to sadness. "Hollie was actually the one that found the body."

Vivienne put a paw to her mouth. "By the gods! That's horrible!"

"Yes. I hoped that she would accept to talk about it to our psychologist, but she won't. In my experience, it's better for a child that they start to work that out before being adopted, but I don't think it will be the case this time. The next best thing for her would be to find people she could actually open up to."

"You think it's the best thing for her?"

The fact that the vixen had actually asked that question was only raising the ursine's confidence in the matter. "I see it that way: It's better for a troubled kid to be raised by half-descent parents, not that I mean that you're only half-descent, than to spend their whole childhood in a foster institution."

"And what about her father?"

The grizzly scratched her forehead. "Even the mother didn't know who he was."

Silence lingered after that last sentence. Finnick ended up breaking it.

"So, wha's happenin' now? What do we need to do?" Asked the male vulpine.

"You don't need to do much. Prepare a room for her while I complete the paperwork and in two weeks you come and pick her up."

"Just like that? I mean, we're both okay with that..." She turned to her husband.

"Right we are."

"But isn't it a bit..."

Oh, they were going to be perfect. "Fast? It's the kind of situation where you can't actually be sure without a field test. You two look like you really want to do a good job. Leave her some time to adjust and it should be fine. And remember, this isn't an adoption yet. You're just providing a foster home for an undetermined time. If her time with you proves to be the right thing for her, then we'll be able to start speaking about a real adoption."

It was a bit of a mood dampener, but said that way, it slightly lowered their stress.

They left the office a bit dumbfounded. Despite all the trouble they had been through, completing the background check, finding a larger place to live with a decent rent, convincing each and every social worker they had met that they were actually ready to adopt, they thought the hardest part
would be to find the kid.
Sitting in the van, still parked in the lot, they were both contemplating the event that had unfolded a few minutes prior.

"We're going to have a kid." Whispered the vixen.

"I'm going to be a dad."

"Kind of for a second time."

"I ain't taking no responsibility for the nutcase you call your son." He joked, pressing her paw in his.

"What if I screw up again ?" She asked suddenly.

"Again ? I don't remember tha' ya screwed to begin wid'."

"What if-"

The fennec stood up and caressed her cheek. "Ya won't."

"You don't know that." She said avoiding his gaze.

"Girl, look at me." He put a finger under her chin. "Ya won't. I'm here. I won't let ya. You do something stoopid, I'll stop ya. And ya better do the same for me."

"What if we both screw up ?"

"Tha's called marriage sweetheart. Ya know it better than I." He pulled her into a kiss. She ended up breaking it.

"We still have a problem."

"Yes ?"

"The room isn't ready. It needs fresh coat of paint, furniture..."

"Then let's change dat."
Judy woke up in a great mood, it was her day off, and Nick's too. The form near her was immobile and she decided to let it rest. She went to the bathroom and then to the kitchen to fix herself and her mate a nice breakfast, when something on the table caught her attention. A pink letter, closed with a heart-shaped sticker with 'open me' written on it. With a smile, the bunny opened it to find a simple piece of paper. 'Where it began' was written on it. Judy lifted a brow, and went back to the bedroom to inquire what it meant, even if she had a faint idea. She approached the form of her fox but when she ran her paw on, it felt too cold and too soft to be him.

She turned the lights on and it appeared to be a pillow of Nick's length.

The cogs in her mind began to turn slowly.

"Where it all began ? Alright, that's easy enough." She took a simple decaf and headed out. Nick hadn't taken the car, she opened the door and found another envelope on the driver seat. This time the paper in it read 'Don't drive too fast fluff-butt, you have the whole day.'

It was so on.

She drove to the cafe and stopped in front, looking around. Nick was nowhere to be found, and she didn't see anything that resembled a clue. She entered the cafe and approached to counter.

"Excuse me sir ?" She asked to the elephant behind the counter.

"Miss, there is a line." Remarked a client somewhat annoyedly.

The bunny sighed. She couldn't use the 'police business' excuse, though she was highly tempted, so she prepared to head back behind the line of mammals when a voice stopped her.

"Miss, wait. You're Judy Hopps right ?" The elephant was leaning on his counter to see her.

"Yes. It's me."

"Then I have something for you." He handed her an envelope and a little box containing two carrot's flavoured bakeries. "It's already been paid for, have a nice day."

"Thanks, you too." She said, almost bouncing outside and reading the paper in the envelope. 'You skipped breakfast, didn't you ? Please eat before dashing to your next destination.' The bunny lifted a brow and turned the paper over. Had Nick forgotten to add in the clue ? No that wasn't it. She read the paper again and sighed.

"I really hope you didn't do what I think you did." The bunny quickly ate the bakeries and hopped in the car in direction of Department of Mammal Vehicles. She parked in front of the building and looked through the glass doors. The line was long and the sloths were as slow as usual. Judy put her head against the glass and sighed.
The fox was sly enough to have given the clue to Flash.

Suddenly she heard a commotion behind her and turned. A silhouette had grabbed a honey badger lady's handbag and was running away.

"Thief! Someone stole my bag! Someone, call the police!"

The bunny instantly turned away and ran behind the thief. From the way he ran, she recognized a feline. It was fairly small, so maybe a small lynx, a serval, or an ocelot. The thief ran out of the parking lot and in the streets. The bunny slowly gained on him and the hooded figure suddenly turned in an alleyway. Suddenly wary, Judy slowed down a bit, taking out the pepper spray she always carried for safety reasons. Even with her paw to paw combat training, it could always come in handy. The alleyway was in fact a dead end and the feline seemed like he was looking for a way out.

"Police. Put down the bag and come quietly." Judy rose the little spray can. The thief didn't move. "Turn and put your paws against the wall." She took another step, ready to spray the suspect which still didn't move. "Paws against the wall. Last warning." Suddenly, with an impressive speed, the feline leapt forward and kicked the can from Judy's paw. Unimpressed, the bunny sidestepped to block his way. "I've taken down larger mammals than you."

"I know." came a female voice. Surprised, Judy backstepped. If the feline knew of her, the situation could be more dangerous than she had anticipated. Suddenly, the cat closed the distance between them and threw a series of testing jabs with her free paw. Judy caught her wrist and tried an armlock, but the feline jumped above her, sending one of her feet in her shoulder. The bunny turned and evaded the attack, but lost her grip on the wrist. She went to the offense with a flying kick. The feline fell for it, ready to absorb the shock. Instead, the legs locked around her neck, and with a waist twist, the bunny brought her to the ground. The feline rolled and went back on her feet. "Oh, you really are good!" The voice was happily excited more than it was angry. Judy had a sudden doubt.

"Did Nick put you up to this?" As an answer the feline threw her the bag which was surprisingly light.

"He said to only make you run, but I couldn't resist having a round with you." The feline took down the hood, revealing her face.

"Selina?"

"Yup." She picked up the pepper spray and gave it back to the bunny. "Let's do that again sometimes." And in a few leaps she went from the ground to the rooftops. Judy sighed. Nick had asked two of his outlaws friends to help him for this scavenger hunt. Of course the badger was Honey. What else did he prepare? She opened the bag, which contained only a pink letter 'The place where we found the naked truth.'

"Really?" Giggle the bunny. "That one wasn't even hard."

She went back to her car and drove to the Mystic Spring Oasis. Yax was still his usual naked self behind the front desk when she approached it. "Hey Yax. How are you doing?"

"I'm fine Judy. How are you?"

"Good, good. Say, did Nick come and leave you an envelope for me?"

"Oh? No, I don't think I remember that. I know he left a message for Nangi to give to you."
Judy frowned. If Nick had given a letter to the elephant, the Yack probably didn't know its content. She took the direction of the large door.

"Woh woh, where are you going ?"

"To ask Nangi for the message."

"But you can't enter like this Judy. This is a naturalist club."

"But last time, I went in with my uniform !"

"I don't really remember well, but last time was police business, wasn't it ?"

Judy froze. It was true. "Yes ?"

"I'm sorry but you can't enter with your clothes on for a personal matter."

The bunny gritted her teeth. She'd get Nick later for that, he knew how uncomfortable she was with public nudity. "The things I must do to get a stupid envelope."

"Envelope ?"

"Yes, what Nick gave to Nangi."

"I don't remember no envelope..." said Yax with a frown under his locks.

"What was it then ?"

"He told me to tell Nangi the message. Since she's an elephant, he knew she would remember it."

Judy leaned forward with a little smile. "And what did he tell you to tell Nangi ?"

"You'll cross that bridge when you come to it."

"Huh ?"

"That's what Nick told me to told her ' You'll cross that bridge when you come to it!'"

Judy beamed. "Thanks, I have to go." She said, taking a few steps toward the exit.

"Wait, won't you ask Nangi what the message is ?"

"Don't need to, thanks Yax."

"Bunnies... Always in a rush."

...

Judy went back to her car again and stepped on the gas pedal. The bridge, the place where she apologized for what she had said. The memory had a bittersweet taste. She thought she had lost his friendship but he actually came back to her.

The place was empty, no long chair. But Nick was there, back turned, at the other side of the bridge, in the same position than when he was holding the carrot pen, but instead, he held an envelope.

"Alright, you've made me run enough." She said approaching. The fox didn't move. She took
another few steps and realized she had talked to a cardboard cutout.

"Really ?" She jumped and caught the envelope. 'Gottcha ! But I'm still far, you're actually freezing.'

The bunny giggled and went back to her car. Nick had outdid himself with the scavenger hunt. The next step was to go to Big's house. She first thought she would disturb them but then deduced that Nick had probably informed them of what was happening. She arrived at the gate and didn't even have to call at the intercom. She entered the courtyard and then the manor as a tall white bear opened the door for her. "This way miss Hopps." He led her through the manor and to a little salon where Fru Fru, her husband and Mr Big were having tea. "Judy !" Wave the female shrew. Judy greeted each of the mammals.

"Let me guess, you have a clue for me."

The shrew giggled. "No, I actually have a gift from Nick. Would like some tea before I give it to you ?"

"Of course." She sat on the chair that had be brought for her next to her friend. "So, how are Judith, Nicholas and Vito ?"

"They're so big already. Kids really are growing up fast. How are you Judy ? It's been a long time since we haven't seen each other."

"Well... After Lycus case, and since my leg is repaired, life has been really good. Nick proposed me."

"That's so great !" The shrew squealed. "When will you marry ? Can I organize it ?"

"We haven't decided on a date yet. As for organizing it, I know I can't take that away from my family. Bunny traditions, you know how it is..."

"Traditions are important." Intervene Mr Big. "It's what keeps us together." He took a sip of his tea. "And sometimes, tears us apart."

Judy thought about her family reaction when she announced her decision to go to the ZPD academy, and when she inadvertently came out to them with Nick. "That can be true, sometimes. By the way, I want you to be my maid of honor. If I can't have you organize my marriage, I can at least have that."

"I'd be glad to be your maid of honor !"

The bunny turned to the other shrews. "And you're all invited of course. After all, we are family."

"That, we are." Confirmed Mr Big. "By the way, Fru, didn't you have a gift for Judy ?"

The female shrew slapped her forehead. "I almost forgot !" She waved to a bear that approached and took her up. Judy recognize Koslov who offered her a paw. Judy hesitated to get on.

"Don't be embarrassed, it will be hard to talk if you're walking beside Koslov."

The Judy sighed and sat on the paw. He brought her up easily and started walking. "Where are we going ?"

"You'll see."
"Hi Renato. How are you doing ?"
"Good, you ?"
"Perfect."
"To Downtown miss Fru Fru ?"
"Yes. Thanks Manchas."
"At your service." He closed the window and started the car.

Judy looked at the landscape that unfolded in front of her eyes. "What are we doing in the center of the city ?"
"We're going shopping." Judy had a little wince. She wasn't really fond of shopping, and especially not of spending too much money on clothes. "Don't worry, you're not paying for anything."
"Fru, I can't make you pay for my clothes."
"Who says I am ?" She asked with a little smile.
"Don't tell me Nick gave you a budget for this."
The shrew kept smiling without saying anything.
"Of course Nick would go overboard. Sweet Cheese and Crackers." She sighed. It was Nick's idea of a date. Unusual, unique, and completely surprising.
"You found quite the catch, you've no idea what he has planned for later." Giggled the shrew.
"What, you know what he has planned ?"
"Manchas wouldn't be able to drive you there otherwise."
Judy had a sudden realisation. "My car is still at the manor, I'll have to go get it back."
"Not really. Nick has a key double for it, remember ?"
"Nick was at the manor ?" The shrew had a little apologetic smile, but didn't answer. The bunny pinched the bridge of her nose. "How can he be so infuriating and sweet at the same time."

... 

They arrived at the center of the city. Koslov got out first and extended his paws. Judy felt a bit self-conscious being carried around, but didn't complain. They entered a store Judy wouldn't have even looked at while shopping. In her opinion, most prices had at least one, if not two numbers too many.

They were greeted by a male antelope who asked them if they needed anything but the shrew politely dismissed him.

"Choose something you like !"
"I'd like less numbers on these price tags." Muttered the bunny before jumping down from the bear's paw, before he could put her down himself.

"Don't be like that. It's your day. If there is something you've never had, it's a really nice and elegant dress."

Judy winced again. It was true, aside from the dress she had bought for Vivienne and Fin's marriage. And that one was nice but nothing special. All the dress she saw here were magnificent, but there was no way she could were something like it. And it was definitely too expensive. "Fru, let's go somewhere less expensive. I'll let you choose my wedding gown. Deal?"

"No deal sweety." She squeaked. "Nick was very specific. And you were going to let me choose your wedding gown anyway."

"I'm starting to reconsider."

The shrew crossed her arms and gave her an amused look of disbelief.

"Okay, I'm not. Can I have at least a few demands?"

"Anything."

The bunny went around to look at the dress, though they were beautiful, she feared even those in her size range wouldn't fit her. When she informed the shrew of her worries, she simply said that the shop could make adjustment in less than an hour.

"Alright, if I can have anything, I want a dress in a sturdy material that does not hinder my movements." She said with a smile. The antelope reappeared at their side.

"In that case, I may have a few model that may correspond to your needs." The mammal had been very silent, and led them to a few dresses. "Those models were conceived for the James Prongs movies. Those are, I must admit, subpar models, the ones from the movies were technically fire-proof. The silk is so tightly woven that it should be able to withstand knives slashes, if so was your wish."

The bunny bit her lips. The purple split dress looked really lovely, but its price tag was really insane. Well, maybe no more than the other things in the shop. "Can I try it on?"

"Of course."

The antelope delicately took the dress from the dummy and accompanied her to a dressing booth.

"It may need adjustments, those are included in the price."

The bunny quickly slipped out of her clothes and in the dress. She had to struggle a bit, not used to this kind of garment. The dress was slightly too large but not by much. She got out of the booth.

"Judy! You look so lovely!"

"True, the dress perfectly brings out the color of your eyes." Added the antelope.

The dress was long enough to cover most of her legs. She tried a couple of sidesteps, to see if she risked to step on it by mistake. She didn't.

"Could you step away a bit? Koslov, could you...?" She extended a paw and the bear understood what she meant and put himself in posture. The bunny took a few bounces, bringing her paws in a
fighting posture. She suddenly launched herself in the air, a flying kick hit in the bear's paw. The antelope and shrew gasped in surprise. The dress wasn't making things more difficult than her uniform.

"If you intend to use this garment in dangerous situations, may I suggest insuring it?" Asked the antelope.

"I just don't like to be impaired in my movements."

"Of course, I understand perfectly." The antelope took a few steps around her while observing her. "The dress is a little loose on the waist and chest. We could adjust it, when would you need it done?"

The bunny glanced at Fru Fru. "Noon, please." The shrew answered. The antelope frowned. "It's manageable. I'll take your measurements and our seamstress will get to work right away."

... They got out of the shop and Judy gave a long sigh. "Are you okay Judy?"

"This was more than a thousand bucks. How can a dress be that expensive?"

"It's a really nice dress."

"For this price, it should have been fire-proof."

The shrew giggled. "You took it anyway. Let's go to the next store."

"Next store?" The bear took them to a jewellery store. "No. No way. I am not buying jewelleries."

"You're technically not buying anything." Remarked the shrew while looking at the window display.

"I am not letting Nick buying me that type of stuff. Those are just overpriced rocks."

"Shiny overpriced rocks." Corrected the shrew. "And it's not Nick's gift, it's mine and dad's"

"Fru, I'm touched, really, but I can't let you pay give me something like this."

The shrew made a little wave and Koslov stuck his paws against each other. Fru Fru reached for Judy's paws. "Alright Judy, listen to me. I know you don't like to buy expensive stuff, I know you like to live with the bare necessity, but I like to make gifts. Don't you think you deserve it?"

"Why would I deserve things like those?"

"Judy, I'm the daughter of a mob boss. I live off criminal activities. You live off risking your life to make the world a better place. Between you and me, who do you think, deserves this stuff more?"

"Fru, you know I don't think that way."

"Well, I do. So I'm buying you a bunch of expensive shiny rocks."

The bunny caved in. "Alright. Let's go buy rocks." and they entered the store. The place was classy, and the bunny didn't feel like she belonged at all. The clerk rose her head and saw Koslov. He made a slight nod and went back to his occupations. Obviously, he was used to see the bear in his shop.
There was a little footway for smaller mammals around the different showcases. At least, since she was part of that size category, the bunny knew the jewellery wouldn't be that expensive. "Don't they have anything in steel." Muttered the bunny.

"Judy, what kind of friend would I be if-"

Before she could finish her sentence, the bunny showed her the ring she was wearing. "I can punch rhinos with this."

"I always forget your standards are on the practical side."

"I'm not asking for a necklace that could double as cuffs. I just don't want it to break easily."

The shrew took a few steps to look at the exposed chains. "You need something simple anyway. It will suit you better. Why not that one?" She showed a chain that had discreet iridescent reflections. The chain was made of an alloy of laminated steel and silver.

"Too... I don't know..."

"You're right. It's not your style. No we need something to highlight your eyes and goes nicely with the dress. Maybe... Yes. I think I got it." She jumped on the bears paw and showed him where she wanted him to drop her. The bunny followed.

"What do you think about this one?"

"Finally." Sighed the bunny as they exited the store. A giggle came from the shrew. "This giggle can't be good news."

"You need a purse."

"I have a purse." Said the bunny, showing the small denim bag strapped to her shoulder.

"If you can make it work with the dress and the pendant, I'd be really impressed. I promise, it's the last thing on the shopping list."

"Fru, we've already blown the equivalent of two month and half of my salary."

"We'll choose something discreet that can go with everything, alright? Not expensive but elegant."

"Okay." Sighed the bunny. "The date better be amazing, or I'm punching him in the face."

"Oh, it will be, don't worry."

They were back in the limo and Judy felt a little annoyed. Nick knew she wasn't especially fond of expensive clothes, so what would he push for her to go and buy this kind of stuff? She didn't know. She felt in a slightly bad mood, but maybe it was because she had spent the better part of the morning running around, shopping and overall not seeing her fox. If she had to be honest, she felt a bit tired. And she knew she could get cranky when tired.

"Nick said you could need a little nap after all this." The shrew looked at her phone. "Once we're home, I think you could have around one hour of respite."
"I have to admit, I'd like to rest my eyes a bit. Maybe I'll sleep a little."

The shrew showed her a guest room and Judy took some shut-eye, waking just moments before Fru Fru went back to wake her up. "You had your beauty sleep?"

"Yeah. I'm feeling better. I suppose it's time to dress up?"

"Yup. I'll have Manchas bring your clothes to your home in the evening. Do you need help applying make up?"

"If there is something I won't do, it's go heavy on the make up. That has never worked on me and it never will."

"Okey-dokey. The dress is on the hanger, come down whenever you're ready." And just like that, the shrew was gone.

The bunny got up from the bed and went to the dress. She undressed and put it on. She then applied her make up, only a light touch. No lipstick, no blush, only crayon. And lastly, she put on the amethyst necklace Fru Fru had bought her. It was simple rough stone, mounted on a discreet silver chain. She took the content of her denim handbag at put part of it in her purse, leaving aside the pepper spray and badge.

... She got out of the room and found her way downstair. The Big's family and a couple of bears were waiting for her down the stairs and she looked for the fox, but he was nowhere to be seen.

"Judith, my dear, you look stunning." Said Mr Big.

"Thanks."

"You look troubled too."

"I just thought Nick would be here." She sighed.

"Manchas will drive you to him."

Koslov accompanied her outside and opened the limo door for her. The panther looked at her through the rear view mirror. "Nick is a lucky fox." He commented.

"I didn't know panthers had a thing for bunny."

"Pretty like you are, you're bound to awake a few hunter's instinct." He joked, firing up the engine and driving away.

The ride was fairly short. The car stopped in front of the Palmtree Hotel. The place had a restaurant, one of the best and most expensive in the city. "Nick. For Carrot's sake." She sighed. The car door opened as Manchas opened the door for her and gave her his arm to step down.

"Thanks Renato."

"My pleasure."

... She looked up and saw a red fox in a white tuxedo take a couple of steps down the stairs leading to
the hotel before stopping. Nick's jaw fell slightly as he beamed at her. Seeing him so handsome and
dashing in his costume, she half forgave him for putting her through a shopping session. He got
down the few steps that remain between them and kissed her paw. She blushed like a highschooler.
"Nick, people are looking." She whispered.

"Can you blame them ?" He smiled while giving her his arm. "I don't think I could put into words
how beautiful you are."

The blush intensified.

"You're not so bad yourself." She answered, struggling to not hide herself behind her ears.

"Thanks."

He led her up the stairs while she felt the weight of the eyes upon them. "I thought I asked you not
to go overboard."

"That part seem to have slipped out of my mind."

"That, or you purposely forgot about it."

"What would I be, if I ever did such a thing ?"

"A sly fox."

They entered the hotel and went to the restaurant. The place was extraordinary. A marble fountain
in the center of the room created a complicated ballet of water. The crystal chandeliers looked like
cascades falling from the ceiling which, in itself, could have occupied her eyes for hours. They sat
at a table and the waiter brought them the menus.

"The waiting time for this place can be months long, how did you achieve that ?"

"Cashed in a favor. I know everyone remember ?"
The bunny opened the menu. There were few items, but by the place's reputation, it would be of
the greatest quality. She noticed that her menu didn't have prices on it. She looked up at the fox
that had the corner of a sly grin on his face. "Nick, can I see your menu ?"

"Nope."

The bunny sighed. "Nick, I know that you're doing all this because you want to make me happy,
but having you spending this much on me... It's kind of embarrassing." The fox put down his menu
and stared at her without a hint of embarrassment. "I know how much you earn, I know how long
it takes you to save so much money. It touches me that you're ready to do this for me, really, but I
don't want you to do that. Just being with you is enough to make me happy"

Judy thought the fox would at least show some sort of apologetic expression but he smiled instead,
taking her paw across the table. "When I fell in love with you, I just fell. Hard. It was stupid, it was
nonsensical, illogical. Then I learned what kind of mammal you were. I fell a second time. It's
because you see things that way, because of how simple and genuinely good you are, because you
would never ask for those things, that I believe you deserve them. You deserve everything that I
could give you." Nick sighed, looking for his word as Judy was left mute, fighting back the tears
that were threatening to pour. "You talked about the time it took me to save that much money. I
think every second of my life spent on you is an investment well made. If you want to see the
prices on the menu, I can show them to you, but I'd like you to let me treat you anyway. I'm not
doing it only for you, but also for myself. Getting you those things makes me happy too."
It's a good thing I didn't put on too much make up.

The tears were welling down the corners of Judy's eyes. "I- I have to go to the bathroom." She said, getting down from her chair and quickly getting away. Nick fought the urge to get after her.

He played with his napkin, wondering if he had overdone it a bit too much. He knew she wasn't fond of that kind of things, but he sometimes struggled to show her his appreciation.

... 

He tore his attention from the napkin and looked for his bunny. She was coming back with a smile and fresh make up. She was so beautiful, he had trouble detaching his eyes from her. The way she walked in that purple dress, the way she smiled at him, he tried to burn that memory down in his mind. Where he'd keep it forever. "If you want to go somewhere else, we can." He proposed.

She took the menu she had left one the table and opened it again. "No, you've gone through so much trouble to organize today, I don't want to ruin it. I'll just have to relax a bit and learn to enjoy it."

The meal was beyond pleasant. It was perfect. The course were simple, focusing on a couple of tastes, but the dishes were so refined, that they could hardly focus on anything else than the food.

"This is a trap. How can we go back to regular food afterwards."

"I don't know. It's going to be hard. And have you tasted the wine? I didn't I could actually like red wine."

They were still hesitating on the dessert when they heard a commotion coming from the door of the restaurant.

"Nobody moves, cooperate and everything will be fine!" Screamed a masked boar as him and a half dozen other mammals entered, guns in hand. Judy turned to Nick, wondering for a second if he also had organized it, but the way he made a steak knife disappear in his sleeve and how his posture instantly changed told her that it wasn't the case.

The bandits spread out in the restaurant.

The boar jumped on a table.

"Every female, take down your jewellery, and give it to my colleagues as they get near your table. Watches, rings, bracelets, wallets, I want everything in the bags."

As one of the armed mammal went to a table, a zebra tried to protest, as an answer he got a teeth-breaking rifle butt to the snout.

"They're too spread out." Whispered the bunny. "It could be dangerous for the civilians."

"Do you have your pepper spray?"

"I left it at Big's manor."

"Crap. Smartphone?"

"Yup."

"Alright. I have a plan, do you want to do this or do we sit this one out?"
The bunny had little sly smile. "I want to do this."

"After I'm gone, wait thirty seconds, and call my number."

The bandits were still away from their table. Waiting for an opening in their vigilance, the fox lept under a nearby table. Using the tablecloths as hiding spots, he went from table to table, going around the fountain and through the room. Slowly counting in her head the bunny lost sight of him. Thirty.

More worried for his safety than for hers, she dialed his number. Suddenly, the muffled scream of a police siren was heard from the dining room doors. The outlaws all turned toward the noise. Not losing that opportunity, the bunny launched herself toward the one, a wolf, that had gone the further toward the back of the room, and away from his allies. Luckily, the other criminals weren't looking in his direction and so she lept and kicked him in the face. Out cold, he let go of his gun. She caught it as she rolled down but put it away, it was too big for her.

At the other side of the room, Nick noticed a mammal near the fountain. He was hidden from his allies eyes. He launched himself and got under the buffalo who was carrying a shotgun and in a swift motion, cut a tendon. The horned mammal fell to the ground before he could actually feel the pain. The fox didn't leave him time to react and elbowed him in the throat. The shotgun was too big for him to use, and Nick rolled under a table, toward another smaller gun carrying mammal.

The attackers hadn't noticed that two of their allies had fallen yet, but as their chief looked around, he noticed that something was amiss.

As she went from a table to another, a weasel holding a submachine gun saw her. "Miss, get back to your seat, no one is leaving." The bunny stopped dead in her track. Her phone was still in her hand and she purposely let it fall to the ground. She faked getting down to take it back, to hide the fact that her right foot had recoiled, ready to kick. "I said get back to you place you stupid bi-"

*THWACK*

The smartphone flew at an almost sonic speed. Judy's hope that it could survive the kick shattered when the device exploded in the weasel's face. The battery had probably been breached by the kick. She didn't take time to analyse what had happened and rushed to the weasel, taking the gun from his paws. This one had the right size. She rolled and took position on a knee, ready to aim at the next attacker.

Knife still in hand, Nick made his way to a second criminal. They were now on alert, looking right and left at what was taking their allies down. Though he was discreet and careful to not be noticed by them, he could see the fearful glance the patrons gave him as he passed between them. The ram he was aiming for was a few meters away, but he started turning toward him. Nick realised he wouldn't reach him in time. Skidding, he threw the knife, hoping the hours spent training at the dartboard wouldn't be for nothing. The knife connected with its target, but sadly, only by its handle.

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"You stupid fuck !" Came a deep voice. One of the attacker, a black bear was aiming at him. Nick was tempted to take shelter behind a table but it would mean putting a civilian between him and the gun. Before he could react, a detonation was heard and blood flew. The bear looked at his bloody shoulder with surprise and let go of his weapon. The fox didn't wait for him to understand.
what was happening. He lunged to the rams rifle and aimed at the bear. "Lie on the ground, paws behind your head." A bit lost, he did half of what he had been ordered and fell to his knees, staring at the paw he had used to wiped his shoulder. Obviously, the bear was in shock. It seemed he wasn't used to see his own blood. Nick carefully turned his attention to the rest of the room, keeping the bear in his field of vision.

Judy saw the bear aim and interject at what she believed was her fox. She instinctively shot his shoulder to make him let go of his weapon. She only had the time to shoot two times, one miss and one hit, before she saw the boar charge her from the corner of her eyes. Why he had chosen to charge instead of shooting, she didn't know, but it gave her the time to evade his attack. He only caught her with his shoulder and she was sent flying toward a table while he stumbled into another, entangling himself in the tablecloth. Bracing for impact, she rolled herself in a ball, but a tiger patron caught her and broke her fall, putting her back on her feet.

"Thanks sir."

"G-Go get them miss Hopps."

She didn't need to hear it twice and ran to the gun that she had let go off, when she saw the seventh and last attacker, a giraffe, take aim at her. She was about to leap away from his line of fire when a grizzly waiter jumped him, hanged himself at his neck and pummeled him to the ground. She didn't wait to see exactly what was happening, the sound of the punches being enough to guess that the giraffe wasn't having a great day. She picked up the gun and aimed at the boar that had just finished untangling himself from the tablecloth.

"Lie down on the floor, hooves behind your head." The boar searched the room for his allies but he saw he was alone. "Lie down on the floor."

"Or what cute bunny ? Are you going to shoot me ?" He said mockingly, taking a step toward her.

She took a warning shot, the bullet hitting a spot an inch away from his right foot. "I am Judith Laverne Hopps, officer of the ZPD and you are ruining my date. Lie down on the floor, hooves behind your head, or get shot." She ostensibly took aim at his forehead. "Last. Warning."

The boar finally complied and the bunny heard steps behind her. She instantly turned to aim at the grizzly waiter's belly who was dragging a beat up giraffe on the carpeted floor. "Wot do I do of dis one miss Hopps ? I mean, Officer Hopps ?"

"Huh ? Leave him there where I can see him." Not taking time to look up, she pointed at the rest of the room. "Could you please go and make sure no one touches anything or approach the-"

A thunder of applause erupted from the room as everyone realised what had happened. Smartphone were taken out and most mammals were already taking photos and selfies. Nick suddenly reappeared and quickly took out his own phone, taking a picture of her. "Sorry sweetheart. You looked so cool, I couldn't resist."

"Nick, we need to calm them down and find a way to restrain the criminals. Did you take care of the three others ?"

"They shouldn't wake up for the next few minutes, except for the black bear who is still in shock." He pointed to him between the table, he was still holding his shoulder with and wearing a haggard expression. "All we need now is-"
The doors suddenly opened and a SWAT team entered the room. They covered all the corners before getting in and cuffing the criminals. One of them took their helmet out.

"Blackfur ! How are you doing ?" Asked Judy with a smile.

The panda gave her a little professional smile. "I'm good. We only had the time to get to the security room to plan our entry when we saw the boar surrender."

"You were still quick." Said Judy, giving the gun to an officer who put it in a large plastic bague.

"We were tipped off." She admitted in a low voice.

Suddenly, the sound of siren was heard again. "Incoming call. Be right back." The fox ran to the other side of the room, near the door and got back with a puzzled look.

"It's the chief."

"Well, pick up, what are you waiting for." Said the bunny.

"Blackfur, does he know what happened here ?" Asked the fox with a concerned expression.

"I gave him a short radio report just before entering the restaurant."

Nick winced and tapped the little green icon. "What the hell were you thinking ! And why isn't officer Hopps picking up !" Despite the fact that Nick hadn't put the call on speaker, he was pretty sure most mammals in the dining room were hearing the chief's shout.

"I broke my phone sir." Explained the bunny.

"And did you break your common sense as well ? Acting that way in the middle of civilians, unarmed and with no back up ? You better hope none of them got harmed !"

"Actually sir, none of them were." Intervened the panda.

It was true, they had acted impulsively and with complete disregard for anymammal's safety. Judy suddenly felt mortified. "I'm sorry sir. I acted impulsively and-"

"Impulsive is a weak word in that context. I expected better from two of my top officers !" They heard a long angry sigh coming from the chief's side. "I don't need to explain to you how lucky you were that no civilian was hurt. If anything had gone wrong, it could have meant the end of your careers. I want to see you both first thing tomorrow in the morning." And before they could even answer, he hung up.

They stayed stun for a couple of seconds before Judy could talk again. "And there goes my promotion." She sighed. Nick lifted a brow, it was unusual for her to act so dismissively. "Do you need to take our statement ?" She asked the panda.

Blackfur looked around as officers were taking notes of all the present mammal's identity. "Not right now. Your report will suffice, unless the chief wants it done completely by the books."

"Who tipped you off ?" Asked Nick in a low tone.

"We don't know. We received an anonymous call around a dozen minutes before the criminals arrived here. We didn't even know you were here before we saw the images on camera." She looked around to find that her colleagues had finished their tasks and most of the other mammals had been evacuated from the premises.
"Well, since all is good, we're going to go, but you should leave the crimescene too."

They followed the panda out in the hotel main hallway. She left and the couple looked around. There were a couple of paramedics, but they didn't have much to do, aside from psychological support. It seemed that despite those events, the hotel wouldn't close for the day.

"Wait, isn't that..." Whispered Judy, staring at the grizzly that had fought the giraffe earlier. "No way!" She exclaimed, bouncing toward him. Nick followed her with a puzzled expression. "Herbert? Is that you?"

The grizzly was discussing with another waiter, a moose, when he turned to her. He was wearing an eyepatch but aside from that, his face had completely recovered.

"Miss Hopps, it's me. Ah' thought yo had recognized me earlier." The other waiter had a little cough. "Sorry sir." Apologized the bear, speaking more slowly. "I'll be more careful." The bunny lifted a brow. "I must be careful with the way I talk to maintain the hotel's image." He explained.

"Oh of course."

"Miss Hopps, Mister Wilde. It's an honor to meet you, but I sadly must return to my work." Bowed the other waiter. "Herbert, do what I asked you to and then you can take the rest of your day off." And he left.

"Thanks sir." He turned back to the couple. "It's so nice to see you. I didn't know you had come to eat here. It's a nice coincidence."

"Yeah. Oh, Herbert, this is Nicholas. Nick, meet Herbert."

"Nice meeting you Herbert, please call me Nick." Greeted the fox.

"Nice meetin' ya- Nice to meet you too, Nick." The bear and fox shook paws.

"Where did you two meet?" Asked Nick.

Judy and Herbet glanced at eachother and the grizzly suddenly looked really embarrassed. "You technically already met eachother." Began the rabbit. Nick's puzzled look remained for a few shorts seconds before the realization hit. "Holy crap! It's you! You were the... I mean, yeah we kind of met already."

The grizzly scratched his neck. "I'm sorry I shot at you."

"I'm sorry for your eye." Nick answered uncomfortably. It was one of the few times Judy saw him really taken aback.

"That's okay. I'm managing without it."

"By the way," cut the bunny to change topic. "You really look like you took your life around! How are things going?

"Well, after I left the hospital, I went to the free detox center your colleague gave me a card of. After what I did, I didn't want to have anything to do with drugs. I kicked the habit more quickly than I thought I would, and I found a job as a waiter in a little restaurant. Then I got a bit lucky, and after a bit of a misunderstanding, I landed a job here."

"A bit of a misunderstanding?" Asked the fox.
"I had put in an application for a job here. The guy that called me had confused my application for another, but since it was his mistake, he accepted to try me for a week. I've been working here for three months now."

"That's very nice of him, most other would simply have refused you the job." Observed the bunny.

"True. Oh, by the way, your meal is payed for by the hotel, as a gift for what you just did. My boss asked me to tell that to you. And since no mammal will pay for their meal tonight, and the hotel want to make you a real gift, I'll give you a coupon for a three days stay, with all services included. Please follow me."

He led them near the front desk where he talked to the receptionist. A couple of minute later, they had an official sheet of paper with the establishment's stamp on it.

"Even if you lose it, it's in the system anyway. It simply will be easier to set you up if you come with it." Judy took it and folded it to store it in her wallet. "Well, I won't keep you any longer. I'll change back to my street clothes and get off." He waved and left. The bunny and fox were near the hotel's exit.

"Did you have anything else planned?"

Nick was a bit taken aback. He turned to his bunny with a surprised expression. "I thought with the attack thing and chief's Buffalo Butt's speech, you wouldn't really be in the date mood anymore."

She played with his collar, pulling it a bit to make him lean and give him a kiss. "You've put so much effort in it, I'd hate it to end that way."

"Okay. Just give me a second." He took his phone and sent a text. A few seconds later it gave a short ring. "Manchas is on his way. He'll be here in a minute." He pulled her against him. "Are you enjoying yourself so far?"

"Very. It was nice, the riddle thing. But don't ever make me go shopping again. Or at least, not on this price range." They got out of the hotel, going through the police cordon to end up in front of a bunch of press mammals.

"Crud." Sighed the bunny. A half-dozen cops were keeping the journalist at bay, but it was obvious that the couple wouldn't be able to go through that easily.

"Miss Hopps! Mister Wilde, is it true that you are dating?" Came a voice. Judy and Nick glanced at each other, it was as good as time as any.

"Yes. Yes we are." Answered the bunny. "But if you really need us to answer questions, let's do it away from the police cordon, to let them do their work."

The police-mammals gave them worried look but Judy waved at them to signal they were okay with the press question. And if it could get them out of the way of the police, it was good thing too.

"How long have you two been together?"

"Since before Nick's coma." Answered the bunny without really thinking.

"Isn't it against regulation for partners to be dating?" Came another voice.

"This is why we're not partners anymore." Explained Nick.

"Is it true you took on seven criminals by yourself while unarmed?"
"Yes, but we were very lucky. They weren't expecting us." Since they didn't want to make things harder for the chief, Nick added. "This is not a point we wish to discuss further."

"What would you answer if a mammal said that you, as a fox, had manipulated miss Hopps into dating you?" At that question, the other journalists calmed a bit. It was obvious what the question entailed, and it was asked in a way twisted enough so that the one that had asked it wouldn't completely look like a bigoted specist.

"Nick didn't 'manipulate me' into dating him. The simple fact that some mammal could believe it is offensive!" Judy responded a bit aggressively. Nick put a paw on her shoulder. She looked like she was about to go and find the one that had asked the question to punch him in the face.

"Judy wouldn't let herself be manipulated by the conniving fox that I am. I dare believe that she fell in love with me as much as I fell in love with her. If anymammal could believe that me, the 'predator', would have trapped her, the 'meek prey'." He said, making quotation signs with his fingers. "Let me answer this: There is absolutely nothing meek about this bunny."

"But isn't it unnatural?"

Those question were slowly getting on the bunny's nerve. Nick, as a fox was on the other paw used to be questioned and doubted. "What exactly do you mean by natural? We wear clothes made of synthetic fibers, we were glasses, hearing aids, we use phones, computers, cameras, microphone. We cook our food, we use electricity, nuclear power, gas. What is natural in our way of life? Is our relationship questioned because we can't have kids in natural ways? What about those using fertility medications? Adoptions? I don't think the 'natural' argument has ever been a valid one."

Behind the journalist, they saw Manchas' limo stop in front of the stairs. "Now if you could please make way, we'd like to go." As they went through the small crowd, they were bombarded with unintelligible questions. One came through as they approached the limo's door.

"Miss Hopps, I see a ring on your finger. Has mister Wilde Proposed yet?"

"Yes." She smiled. "Yes he did."

_Might as well give them a nice picture._

She pulled Nick's collar again and grabbed his bowtie making him lean, trapping his lips in a long kiss. A hail of flashes caught them. They then entered the car and installed themselves in the backseat.

...  

"I heard that something happened at the hotel. Is everyone alright?" Asked Manchas in the driver seat.

"No one was hurt."

"Good. Do I get you to the- to your next destination?"

"Yes please." Answered Nick. The panther closed the glass and took off. "I must be honest with your Carrots, with the shopping and restaurant, I knew what I was doing. But this, I don't know if you will like."

"As long as the limo isn't taking us to the Mystic Spring Oasis..."
"No it's not. Don't worry."

The bunny leaned against her mate and kissed him before putting her head on his shoulder. "Well, whatever it is, I'm sure it will be nice." His arm came around her shoulder and he kissed her forehead.

The bunny suddenly gave a long sigh. Nick lifted an inquisitive brow. "I'm impulsive, aren't I?"

"You mean, about the thing in the restaurant?"

"Yeah. We could have waited, see how it evolved. And chances were, no one would have been injured. I mean, badly. You were there, you seemed to have a plan... I wanted you to have a plan. I just wanted to act so badly."

"Heh. Don't blame yourself too much. Or blame us together. I was so happy to see some action, and especially while with you..."

"Being on patrol without you is just not the same. Buster is good but... Not the same. Taking those guys down... It was just like working together again."

Nick chuckled. "And it's been only a month... What I wouldn't give just to be on parking duty with you..."

"We'll get used to it. I know we will!"

He leaned down and kissed her. "We still have the time off work to see each other. We still live together."

The limo stopped and a few second later the door opened. Nick got off first and offered his arm to the bunny. She came out off the car and looked where they were.

"Nick. Are you really taking me to the opera?"

"I guess I am. It seemed to be the right thing after the dress, the restaurant and everything." He shrugged. "The tickets are still refundable if you're not up to it."

"I've never been to an opera. What are we watching?"

The fox took the tickets from his pocket. "Rheingold, by Richard Walrus. First part of a four part opera. I think it's more listening than watching. No idea what this is about though."

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The music was one of the most powerful thing Nick had ever heard. He had nor the words nor the experience to describe it, but the way he had lived the experience was nothing compared to how Judy had reacted. The moment the music had started, he had felt her grip tighten on his paw, and she hadn't let go for the whole duration of the piece. He saw her perked ears twitch at every subtle change in the music. He knew bunny hear was better than most mammals, but he didn't think she'd be that into it. Her eyes were gleaming with amazement and when it ended she turned to him with an expression that he could only read as 'I want more.'

"So, I take it you enjoyed it?" He asked casually while leading her back to the car.

"It was fantastic!" As a kid, she hadn't been exposed to that kind of music. Her father had jazz and blues disc that he listened to sometimes, but she never cared much for it. "We must go and see the
"I know they're playing the second part next week and so on if you want."

"Yes ! Yes I do."

They went back to the limo and the panther took off with them. Nick was browsing the web on his phone while the bunny took his free arm and put it around her shoulders. "So, any other surprise for today ?"

Nick looked away from his phone to hug her properly. "I'm afraid it's the end of our date. Hope you're not too disappointed."

The bunny kissed his neck just under his chin. "It's been wonderful. You really thought about everything." She gave a little sigh. "Getting back to normal life will be hard. The simple idea of preparing food this evening feels horrible in comparison to the rest of the day."

"Good thing I just ordered our dinner online then." He said, putting back the phone in his pocket.

"Did I ever say to you that I love you."

"I remember it occurring a couple of times."

"I love you."

"I love you too."
Clawhauser was, as per usual, bringing the files of the day to chief's office. He knocked to the door.

"Come in." Came a half muffled and tired voice. The cheetah entered to see the large frame of the buffalo slightly slumped on his desk, his face resting on one hoof while he was writing with the other. The chief's scowl was sterner than usual. When he glanced up to the cheetah, his expression softened. Straightening up, he took the file the cheetah was giving him.

Usually the cheetah would say something nice or come near him but this time he simply stared silently at chief with and expectant and curious expression.

"Yes Ben ?"

The feline glanced at the clock on the desk before asking. "Are you okay Adrian ?"

The chief took out his phone and browsed a bit before giving it to the feline. It showed a video uploaded to pawtube showing the events of the restaurant from different angles. It seemed that despite their fear, some mammals had taken out their phone and filmed what was a happening. The different segments could be found individually on the website, but somemammal had already taken the time to create a complete video.

The feline watched it from beginning to end, it was shorter than the report and witness statements suggested. The points of views flew from the bunny to the fox back and forth to show the events that played simultaneously. The fox was seen going from table to table and throwing his phone which slid near the exit door. Clawhauser winced when he saw Nick immediately use his knife to bring the first opponent down. The footage was pretty brutal and felt slightly unreal. He was amazed, and a bit frightened by how proficient the both of them were in paw to paw combat. When the bear was shot, he gulped, the memory of the shooting from a few months prior coming back to his mind but he didn't let himself get overwhelmed. After the video was finished, he gave the phone back to his superior. "They were impressive."

"They were impulsive. They were reckless. They... I need a drink." He took out the half-finished whisky bottle and put it on the desk. "Want some ?"

The feline still didn't like it but he didn't have the heart to let the buffalo drink alone. "Why not."

The buffalo filled two glasses and slid one to the cheetah. He lifted his glass and downed half of it, the feline did the same with a wince.

"Impulsive, lucky, stupid... You were right, she's way too young for a promotion." Sighed the chief. The cheetah sipped again, waiting to see where the chief's train of thought was going. "It's that gut feeling. She's a promising officer, and I can feel it. Most of the time she acts like it, but sometimes... She does things like this." The buffalo stood up to go and face the windows, looking at the setting sun. "Are all the young officer so eager ?"

He felt a paw reach for his hoof and gently brush his palm. "What do you think ?"
"They are, just not as much as she is." The buffalo finished his glass and put it back on his desk. "Let's not talk about this. I'll deal with it tomorrow. In another matter..." He took the empty glass in the cheetah's paw, before leaning and kissing him. While doing so, he felt a light tug on his tie. "Are you free this evening?"

"I may be able to clear my schedule." Answered the cat before pulling the tie and bringing the buffalo back in the kiss.

The bunny and fox felt like the time had slow down as they had made their way from their home to the ZPD and to the chief's office. They were facing the dreaded door and about to knock when it suddenly opened showing the cheetah's round and surprised face. "Oh guys, you're already here? I was just uhm... Greeting the chief. That's it. Just 'have a nice day' thing." There was a light scoff coming from behind the chief's. The feline stepped aside to let them in and then left the room. The two mammals couldn't keep themselves from having a discreet smile, despite the fact that they were probably about to get chewed out. The chief's scowl slowly brought them back to reality.

"Reports." He simply said, extending a paw. They give to him and he quickly went through them. He didn't need it really, since he had seen the camera footage from the restaurant, but having the insights of officers sometimes brought up things that cameras couldn't. Putting away the files, he asked. "Now what exactly went through your head to make you act the way you did?"

"Well I-" Began Judy.

"It's just-" Started the fox.

"You go fir-"

"After you-"

They stopped talking at the same time under the chief's annoyed glare. He pointed at the bunny.

"We were at the restaurant and those guys entered, and I just thought that I needed to arrest them."

"Don't blame yourself. I wanted to get them at least as much as you."

"Yeah, but I'm the superior officer."

"I'm not working under you anymore, so..."

The buffalo scoffed again. The two mammals went mute. He pointed to the fox.

"I... When those guys came in, I was just pissed. I had planned this date so well, and they were about to ruin it. I just wanted to stop them. And it felt like the right thing to do."

The chief turned back to the bunny.

"They were criminals, I am a cop. I had to arrest them. I didn't even think about it. Nick had-"

"That's it, exactly." Cut the chief's cold voice. "You. Didn't. Think. You just acted." Silence fell on the room, while the two mammals took in the first blow. "Do you know why I consider you both to be good officers?"

They both had a few ideas, but they knew it wasn't the time to answer riddles, so they simply shook their head.

"You have good instinct. When you have to act without having to think, when you rely on your
instinct, you act the right way." Small smile slowly brightened the two small mammal's faces. He lifted a hoof and stopped them dead in their tracks. "But, having good instincts is not an excuse to not think. Your instincts can be great. But you have to be driven by something else than your impulses." He stopped, putting his ideas back in order. "Even though I don't have anything to say about how you spend your time while off duty, I expect my officers to protect civilians. But I also expect them to follow regulation. You attacked without warning, and that's not something I can condone, even though I know things would have gone a different way if you had." The chief sighed. "So, to put it simply, you both screwed up. Big time. And if I had to take a guess, you stepped into action because you were together, and really, really wanted to work together again."

They both silently nodded.

"I'm disappointed, but it's partly my fault. I have really high expectations for the both of you, but I sometimes forget how little experience you both have. Officer Hopps,

I shouldn't have talked to you about that promotion, and so, I'm sorry to say that you'll have to wait for it a little longer. It's not a sanction, you're simply not ready yet." He leaned forward a bit. "Two weeks parking duty, that is your sanction."

"To which partner will Corporal Buster be reassigned to while-"

"He's going with you. He's young, I'd have sent him do a bit of it at some point anyway. Helps put the new recruits' or anymammal's heads back on their shoulders."

The bunny understood the underlying statement and gave a little sigh but didn't protest. "That will be all, officer Hopps. You're dismissed."

"Have a nice day sir." She said, getting to the door. Before leaving, she turned back. "I'm happy for you both, sir." He gave her the slightest of nods and she left the room, leaving the fox and buffalo alone.

"Officer Wilde, I'd like to ask you about this." He turned his computer screen to show parts of the fox's fight. The knife cut and kick to the ram's groin. "They were armed, so you were not really playing with the 'excessive use of force' line..." The chief didn't say more, waiting for the fox's reaction. He gritted his teeth. Now that he saw how he had acted from the outside, Nick could see how cold-blooded he had been. He hadn't only tried to take them down, each of his blow had been thrown with full force, even when unnecessary. He hadn't thought about it at the moment, and neither had he afterwards.

"I'd like to know what you think about how you acted."

Nick hesitated, but he knew honesty was always the best course of action with the chief.

"I wish I could say I feel bad about it, about how ruthless I acted. But I really don't. In that kind of situation, any hesitation can lead to dire consequences. I needed to take him down and it was the quickest and surest way."

The chief stared at Nick, keeping and indecipherable expression.

"I do feel bad about not feeling bad. If that makes sense."

The chief had seen it happen to some officer. Some of those that saw the worst things the city had to offer came out changed. Some broke and resigned. Some hardened, and gained more resolve. Some got angry. "It makes sense. But keep in mind that as an officer of the ZPD you took an oath to protect and serve. It also means avoiding unnecessary harm or casualties, including in the
Nick sighed and looked at his feet. "I know chief. I'm sorry. I'll be more careful."

"I know you will. You're dismissed."

The fox was slightly taken aback. "No sanction?"

"Given the nature of your current assignment, I don't think it would be wise to waste your time. Unless you really want one?"

"No thanks." The fox took a few steps back, before a grin started appearing on his face. "I think you're a good match for each-"

"Do not push your luck, Wilde."

"Okey-dokey, have a nice day." And the vulpine disappeared through the door.

The buffalo hadn't talked about the segment that had run on TV the evening prior. Their answers to the question that had been asked were good. They had taken a risk by revealing for how long they had been together, but the news hadn't focused on that. Instead, the part that had been broadcasted the most was Nick's speech on what was natural.

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Beginning of January 2020

"So, is everything ready?" Asked the ursine. It was almost a rhetorical question, she had participated in the visit of the apartment, to be sure that the child would have everything she needed to settle in. The last documents had been signed.

"Yup. Everything is set." Answered the vixen.

"You're still nervous." Smiled Andersine.

"Well, the first and last time we really met, she was a bit guarded, so I don't really know if she wants to-"

The bear gave a chuckle. "Don't worry about that. I think she's actually looking forward to it."

"Did she say something?"

"It's more of a general impression."

They were led to the room where they had first met. The kit was waiting there next to a sport bag that looked a tad big, earbud in her ears. When the newcomer entered, she took out the earbuds from her ears. "Hi." She greeted in her shy voice.

"Hello." Greeted Finnick.

"Hi." Said the vixen.

"Ready to go Hollie?" Asked the bear. As an answer, the kit nodded, putting the large bag on her shoulder.

"Do ya need help wid' dat?" Asked the male fennec. She shook her head. The little group made its way to the parking lot where Finnick's van was waiting. He had made some modification in it, and there was now one more seatbelt for the large passenger front seat. He slid open the back door.
"You can put your bag here."

After having stored her bag, she turned around. The bear had leaned on one knee to be a bit more at eye level. "I guess this is good bye Hollie."

"Bye miss Andersine."

"Be nice with them, alright ?" The fennec kid nodded and Vivienne invited her to climb in.

Finnick and Vivienne shook the ursine's paw and climbed in.

The ride was completely silent. The two adults felt a bit awkward with this kid they knew so little about sitting between them. They took the elevator and entered the flat. The place had two room, one for the kid and one for Finnick and Vivienne. There was also a smaller room that the fennec had transformed into his art room. The kitchen and living room were only separated by a workplan and low cupboards.

The kid took a few steps in, looking around with a shy curiosity.

"Wanna see yo' room ?" Proposed the fennec. She nodded and they leaded her to it.

"Sorry if it's a bit bare, we don't know what you like." There truly wasn't much in the room. They had found some second hand construction toys and had filled a few shelves with books, since they supposed she liked to read. There also was a wardrobe to store her clothes and belongings.

"I could paint a wall for ya if ya want. I nice big mural with whatevah you like."

The kit let the bag slump from her shoulder. "This is my room ?" Came a little voice.

"Yeah, it's not really much. Sorry about that."

Her shoulders had started shaking. "It's o-okay."

"Oh sweetheart." Vivienne rushed to the kid and pulled in an embrace. The change had to be a lot to take in. Finnick approached and joined in on the hug.

"Ya alright kit."

The hug didn't last long, it seemed the kit was used to pull herself together quickly. When she back down, they saw that she was actually smiling. Shyly, but still, it was a smile.

"Do you want to see the other rooms ?"

The kid nodded and followed them. They showed her their room. It wasn't much larger than hers, not really decorated either, aside from the red curtains Vivienne had brought from her old place. "Don't hesitate to come and ask if you need anything, even at night, alright ?"

"Just, think ta knock before comin' in." Added the fennec. The vixen gave him a discreet glare to which he answered with an innocent look.

Next was the little vulpine atelier. "Dis is where I work. I'd prefer for you to not touch anyt'in without asking me first."

The little vulpine nodded. They took her to the living room where she saw the five paintings. She looked at them with curiosity. She instantly recognized Vivienne and Finnick, but got stuck on the other. The bunny particularly surprised her. "Who are they ?" She asked.
"It's my family. Mine and Fin's." She had been tempted to say 'our family' but she didn't to push the kit to accept them as her family yet. She wanted let her get there at her own pace. "I'm sure you recognized Fin and me here." She said pointing at the two picture. "This is John, my previous husband. He's... Um..." Knowing of the kit's past, she didn't want to bring back that kind of memory.

"He's dead, isn't he ?" Despite the blunt question, the kid had asked it softly, taking the vixen's paw in hers.

"Yeah. He is." It still stinged, that was the kind of pain that never really went away. "This is Nicholas, Nick, my son." The vixen saw the cogs starting to turn in the kids mind, her face brightened when she recognized the bunny. "Is this Judy Hopps ?"

"Yep, they're engaged. We consider her part of the family."

The kid didn't really know what to say or feel. She felt a bit lost, not knowing if she should be happy to be here or not. The three last times a family had been found for her, her mother had been better and able to take her back. Each time, she had been torn away from people she had come to know and like. Now that her mother was gone, her feelings were all mixed up.

She had frozen in front of the pictures, but felt a paw on her shoulder. "You okay sweetheart ?"

The kid nodded. She wasn't really much of a talker, but Vivienne and Finnick believed she was slowly warming up to them.

The couple felt a bit at loss on how to act now that the kid was at their home. They didn't want her to think they weren't ready to care for her, but on the other hand, they didn't want to pressure her by staying constantly at her side.

"What d'ya wanna do ?" Finnick's inquiry was met with a shrug. "Well, there are games in yo' room. And books too..."

They accompanied her to her room and she took a book at random on the shelf. The Golden Compass, by Philip Woolman. Since they weren't into book, they had asked a clerk at a thrift book shop what kind of things a kid would like. He had showed them the kid's section and given them a relatively large number of recommendations.

As a result they had bought everything that he had named, and more by the same authors if they could find it. It was a gamble, she had a book that they knew she read, but maybe it was more of a heirloom and she had no real interest in books.

"Can I read on the sofa."

"Sure." Answered the vixen. They sat next to each other and she pulled the knitting she had started from one of the coffee table's drawer. She was trying herself at new hobby. Sewing definitely wasn't her thing, and it reminded her too much of previous husband, and she didn't really like it anyway. Finnick had tried to teach her painting, but he himself was mostly self-taught, and he made for a lousy teacher. And contrary to him, she was really reluctant to get paint in her fur. Knitting was a good choice, it occupied her hands and let her mind wander. Nick had teased her a bit about her turning into a grandma. Her answer that she was still waiting to have grandchildren had shut him up.

Finnick had gone back to his atelier, she could hear the music playing on his radio since he had left the door open. Some mammal had ordered him a painting and he was already a bit behind on his
work.

Vivienne glanced at Hollie. She was sitting sideways on the couch, the book she was reading in hand, and the old book she carried everywhere on her laps, her rear on the armrest. She was tempted to ask her to sit straight, but Finnick always sat on the armrest next to her so that he could put an arm around her shoulder. Or at least around her back. The kid was giving the occasional glance every two pages or so toward the ateliers open door. Vivienne discreetly turned and saw that the way she was placed, the kit could perfectly see inside Finnick's atelier.

To Finnick, until he had met Nick, all kids were nothing but loud balls of problems. His experience with the fox had changed his mind on the loud part, and later on the problem part. He wasn't expecting Hollie to be even more guarded and quiet than Nick was when they first met. Her upbringing had been worst than Nick's, it was hard to not take pity on her. But as Andersine had said to them, the kit didn't need saviors, she needed parents. And hell if he wouldn't be able to be a decent parent.

As far as education was concerned, they needed to find her a school, but it wasn't the biggest priority. She first needed to acclimate herself to her new environment and form strong bond with her foster parents. Sending her in a new environment right out of the foster-center wasn't the thing to do. It was a good thing that Finnick could work from home, otherwise, having that kid could have been quite the challenge.

Dinner was uneventful and mostly silent, the awkwardness was still palpable. It was followed by a movie on the TV they had bought. Vivienne still refused to have it connected to the network, and Finnick didn't really care about it either, but having something to watch movie on was always nice. They would usually watch something, either with Finnick sitting on the armrest and her against him, or him with his head on her laps. But it appeared that the habit would have to change for the time being, the kit in her pajamas having placed herself in the middle of the sofa. They had chosen for an animated movie, something she could watch with them.

But she didn't watch for long, ending up dosing off against the vixen's side. It seemed the emotion filled day had used all her energy. Anyway, it was the conclusion to which the couple came to. Vivienne took the kit in her arms and carried her to her room, no point on letting her sleep on the sofa.

She laid her in the bed sitting on the edge of bed to pull up the sheets. The action stirred up memories. Memories of Nick, of when she did the same for him. She caressed the kit's cheek. The gut feeling was here, the instinct, she knew they had made the right choice. She was about to get up when she felt a tug on her dress, the kit's paws clutching her dress. Her eyes were half-closed, but she wasn't completely asleep. The vixen decided to stay until she completely fell into slumber. Finnick had stayed in front of the TV at first, but when his wife didn't come back he wondered if something had happened. In got down from the sofa and went to the kid's room. He saw Vivienne sitting on the bed's edge, gazing at the sleeping kit. He was going to paint that scene. He just had to. It was the kind of instant he wished he could witness forever. He rubbed his eyes, that felt a bit itchy, and went back to the living room.

In the morning, the vixen had woken up the first, since she was working that day at hotel. Finnick was still sleeping, it seemed the little vulpine would never be an early riser, not that she minded. She was preparing her breakfast when she heard some noise coming from Hollie's room. The door was open so all she had to do was lean to look inside. She saw the little vulpine get out of the room in her pajamas, rubbing the slumber away from her eyes. The vixen looked at her phone, she still
had a bit of time before having to go to work.

"Good morning sweety, did you sleep well ?"

"Morning." She took a few hesitant steps toward the table.

"Hungry ?" asked the vixen, taking out a cereal box. "I can also make toasts." She proposed.

"Cereals, please." Said the kid, sitting on a chair. The vixen prepared a bowl and gave it to her, completed with a glass of orange juice. They both ate in silence, the kit seemed a bit too tired to have a conversation anyway.

"I'm going to have to go to work now. I'll wake Fin up, if you need anything, don't hesitate to ask him okay ?"

"Okay." She answered in a sleepy voice. The vixen finished to dress herself and put on her coat, and as she approached the door, she heard the light steps behind her.

She felt a tug on her dress and leaned down to get at the same eye level as the kit.

"I'm coming back this evening, alright ? I promise." She gave the kid a hug, and saw a half asleep Finnick making his way to the kitchen.

"'Mornin' " He muttered, taking the coffee pot.

She knew that he wouldn't really notice her in that state, and she was about to be running late. "Stay with Fin, it's going to be okay."
The kid nodded and let her go. Vivenne closed the door behind her and left.

Finnick didn't really know what to make of the kit. Nick had been a hard case, but he was some sort of outgoing, despite what had happened to him. He always found some kind of twisted way to laugh about everything. It was probably just a shell he was using to not let any mammal get close, but it was still feedback.

Hollie was close to mute, and especially since Vivienne wasn't there.

She had done nothing but read since the beginning of the day. He was tempted to take her for a stroll, maybe in a park, but Mrs Andersine had been clear that she needed to take her marks in her new home before being taken to a new environment.

He had gone back to painting, not putting the music too loud, so that he could easily hear her in case she needed anything. The meal at noon had been fairly silent, he had tried to engage conversation a couple of time, but without success. Maybe he was more boring than he thought, maybe she didn't like him... He needed to find a new approach.

"Hey kid, have you ever painted ?"

He had put his head through the door frame and was looking at Hollie, which had lifted her gaze from her book.

"Yeah."

"But have you ever painted wid' dis ?" He took out a spray can. She shook her head, and he was sure he had caught a gleam of interest in her eyes. "Wanna try ?" She nodded. "Then come here." She put down her book and went to the fennec's atelier. He found a blouse he had bought a while
ago but never used. He preferred to put on his 'painting clothes' to work. A comfortable paint
stained sweater completed with equally adorned pair of sweatpants. He took out a pair of scissors
and quickly shortened the blouse to the kid's size. The sleeves didn't have an equal size, but it
really didn't matter. He put the scraps of cloth away. "New rags. Okay kid, put this on." He helped
her a buttoned up the blouse. He then put away the painting he was working on and replaced it with
a large flat cardboard. "Help me put on the undercoat ?" She gave him an interrogative glance and
in answer he gave her a white paint spray can. "Depending on what you want to paint, you may
want your background to be of a different color." He took his own spray can and pressed the cap,
putting the first white stroke on the brown cardboard.

"Try it." She took the can and spray the cardboard. "Now you see, if you're farther, the ring will be
larger but the edge will be less precise. If you're closer, you'll make a smaller circle with precise
edges. But the paint will probably drip."

The kid nodded and started from the far right while Finnick did his side.

... 

"I'm home!" Came Vivienne's voice from the living room.

"Hey love! We're in my atelier!"

The vixen lifted a brow while putting down her coat. She made the distance that separated her from
the room and entered. There was a massive painting, made of several cardboard taped together. In
front of it was a pair of fennec covered in paint, both wearing proud smiles.

The artpiece was completely indescribable. At first glance it looked like the city, seen from above,
but there were also mammals that she didn't recognize, something that looked like a room. All in
all, with the vibrant colors made it look like some sort of trip on acid, and for a few seconds, she
wondered if the paint fumes hadn't gone to their heads.

"So, what d'ya think? She did it all herself." He felt a tug on her arm and the kit shook her head
with a smile. "Awright, maybe I helped choosing the colors and worked out a few details."

The vixen leaned down to kiss Hollie's forehead in a spot that hadn't been splattered with paint.

"It's fantastic! Too bad there isn't any place in the living room for it."

"Hey kid, waddya say, we hang this in your room? Not to day, but next the day Vi is isn't working
?" The kit nodded enthusiastically. "We'll have to buy a stapler."

The vixen chuckled, looking around the fennec's atelier. He had tarped the floor, but even with that
safety measure, there was paint stains on most walls and parts of the floor. "We're not getting back
the f- The deposit, are we ?"

"Probably not."

She took down her blouse and lifted up the kit, wondering for as second if she wasn't a bit too
forward. But the kit grabbed her shirt with a smile. She headed for the bathroom. "Let's get you
cleaned up."

"I'll prepare the dinner in the meantime" Said the fennec, going to clean himself in the kitchen
sink.

Finnick was glad for the time he had spent with Hollie. She was still not talking much, but she had
been way more lively, and the dinner the three vulpine had together was too. Sure, there still were
those awkward moment when she would simply shrug as an answer, but they more and more rare.

It seemed the day had been long for the young vulpine and it wasn't long after dinner when
Vivienne brought her to her room. Finnick was finishing to clean his atelier when he stumbled
upon something that didn't have anything to do here. Wrapped in a cloth to protect from the paint
was Hollie's ragged book. He carefully lifted it but something fell off. He hoped it wasn't one of
the pages and took it up.

It wasn't a page, but a photograph. He looked at it, and saw a female fennec, wearing a pink dress,
holding a baby in her arms. She looked a bit tired, but had wide smile, the kind that only true
happiness could bring out. For a few moments, he wondered what thing could have happened to
her, how that happiness could have gone away. Having spent a life full of hardship himself, he
didn't have a hard time doing so, but decided to ditch the dark thoughts and bring back the book to
its owner.

He waited for his wife to leave the girl's bedroom, to give it back without Vivienne being here. Not
that he wanted to hide things from her, but chances were the kid would prefer to keep her private
stuff... Private.

"Hollie, you awake ?" He asked, stepping in the room.

"Yeah." She whispered with a voice filled with sleepyness.

He put the book on the headstand. "You forgot that in my atelier." She gave him a strange look,
mix of thankfulness and apprehension. "I saw the picture inside."

The kit winced and took the book quickly, pulling it against herself, and checked if the picture was
still there.

"Hey, hey. I ain't gonna take it away, okay ?"

She glanced up, he could still see a bit of fear in her eyes.

"It's yo' stuff. I wos just giving it back." He smiled, taking a few steps toward the door before and
idea hit him. "Tell you wot. Someday, if ya want, I'll make a nice paintin' of her. Like the one's in
the livin' room. Okay ?"

The kit nodded shyly. He approached her again. "C'mere," She put the book away, and though he
conceived no ill feelings about it, he could see that she was pushing it away from him. He wrapped
her in his arms, hoping she wouldn't pull away. Instead, she pushed herself closer. "Yo' stuff is yo'
stuff. I ain't never gonna take it away." He gave her a kiss on the forehead. "He put her back in her
bed a pulled up the blanket. "Now you gotta sleep kiddo. Have a good night."
Beginning of January 2020

It was one of those rare days, during which Nick had nothing much to do. Judy was on duty until late in the night, and it was his resting day. He felt a bit bored. He would have prepared something nice for her return, but he was working the next day and he knew her enough to know that she'd want nothing more after work than a shower and a good night sleep. And maybe a bit of cuddling. Cuddling was always nice.

He went to the fridge to fix himself a late breakfast while thinking about what to do with his day. He would have gone to see his mother and Finnick, but they had explained to him that the kid needed to first find her footings with the new place and people. Too bad, he was eager to meet his hopefully soon-to-be sister.

His head in the fridge, he noticed they were getting low on provision. Well, he could still go shopping for food, it would be one less thing to do later. He quickly prepared some eggs and bacon, gulping them and headed out. The walk would clear his head, maybe he'd get an idea of what to do with his time while outside.

Running that errands proved to be fruitful, aside from his bag's content. He had indeed found an idea, or more precisely he was going to do something that he had postponed for too long. Well, they both had. He always felt awkward when Judy's parent called and she purposely avoided the matter. It didn't hurt him that she didn't dare tell her, he knew she was only avoiding confrontation.

He emptied his shopping bag quickly and took out his phone, settling himself on the sofa and launching muzzletime. It was a bit of a gamble, maybe they weren't connected at the moment.

But they were, and he clicked their icon.

"Hello ? Nick ? How are you doing ?" Stu's jovial dirt stained face had appeared on the screen.

"Hey Stu. I'm good, and you ?"

"I'm good. It's been a long time, when are you two coming back to the burrows."

Nick chuckled. "About that, could you please call your wife ?"

"Sure. Bonnie ?"

"Yes dear ?" Came a muffled voice from near him.

"It's Nick ! He wants to talk to us !"

The female bunny quickly appeared at her husband's side. There was few black stains on her face and arms, and she was holding a wrench. "Oh Nick, how are you ?"

"I'm good, hope you are too."

"Of course. What is it you wanted to talk about ?"
Nick cleared his throat. "Well, I know you country lot can be a bit set your ways..." He gave them his most obvious sly grin. Bonnie's brow furrowed, and Stu's smile faltered a bit. The fox hoped Judy wouldn't be too mad he did that without her. "...So I can't really get around that. I've already proposed to her, but I'd also like to formally ask you for your daughter's paw in marriage."

Bonnie's paw immediately shot up to her mouth and Stu's smile widened again. "Did she say yes?" He asked. His wife gave him an annoyed side glance.

"Yes, she did."

"That's fantastic!" exclaimed the male bunny, while tears started to appear at the corner of his eyes. Suddenly the image shift and Nick could only see cloth. Stu was hugging his wife while Nick could hear him sob. "My little girl is getting married!"

"I take it you're okay with it..." Deduced the fox. The two bunnies' faces reappeared on screen. Bonnie seemed a bit more reserved.

"Honey, is there something wrong?" Asked Stu.

It was the doe's turn to clear her throat. "I want to be clear, I'm not saying this because you're a fox. You've opened both our eyes on fox's worth. And you're one of the most honest and nice mammal I know."

"Well, miss Hopps, it's quite the-"

"However." She cut him. "I would say that to any male marrying one of my daughters. Do not hurt her." She threateningly hit her paw with the wrench she was still holding. "Understood?"

He had about a hundred quips ready to answer this, but it deemed it more appropriate to keep them to himself. "Yes ma'am."

"Good." She kissed her husband on the cheek. "Our daughter is getting married."

"Yes, yes she is!"

"Oh, and she doesn't know I asked you for her paw. But feel free to tell her."

"Oh we will. There will be a lot of things to organize. We'll call her right away."

Nick almost stopped them, but he knew Judy's days were a bit slow too. He reckoned she could use the distraction. "Then I'll leave you to it. Have a nice day."

"Thanks Nick. You too."

That task done Nick sat back on the sofa. It had been a little more stressful than anticipated, but he had seen Bonnie's bout of protectiveness coming. He looked around the place, still at loss on how to keep himself busy. He chuckled. There was a time when he didn't mind spending a lazy afternoon on a long chair, sipping on a beer. Where had the carefree fox gone? His time with the bunny truly had changed him. He slumped sideways and rolled, setting an arm under his head. Yes. A lazy day, that's what it was going to be. He deserved it after all, with all the work he was doing. And deserving his rest was actually more satisfactory than he thought. He hopped off the sofa and went to the fridge. He hadn't thought about buying beers, but three still remained. He took one and went back to the sofa, pushing the coffee table against it. He opened a window and the beer bottle, before slumping back on the sofa, his head on a pillow. A lazy day. That was going to do nicely. He found that lazy day would lack one bunny, but hey, the world couldn't always be perfect.
The fox was awaken by his phone. More precisely, by a text notification. Had Judy's parent called her already? He took his phone up and looked at the screen. It was already 4PM. Well, no wonder why he was hungry, despite his late breakfast, he still had skipped a meal.

He looked at the text.

"Could we talk? - Scarlet."

His heart skipped a beat. After the last time they had seen each other, he had thought they'd never talk again.

"Phone or in person?" He answered.

"In person. When are you free?"

Nick bit his lips. Something in him felt a bit bad for Judy, not that he would ever do anything with the vixen, but he knew what feelings the vixen once had for him. But he owed his life to her brother, and he would be here to repay the debt.

"Now. Where do you want to meet?"

"My place. When will you be here?"

The fox checked the time again. He'd grab a bite on the way. "4:30. See you soon." And just like that, he left the flat.

He had eaten a hot dog on his way, and arrived a bit earlier than anticipated. He quickly climbed the stairs and ended in front of the vixen's door. Taking slow breaths to calm his nerves, he knocked. The door budged and opened slightly. "Scarlet?" No answer. The fox felt a bit nervous about entering uninvited but did so nonetheless.

"I'm coming in." He announced, pushing the door open and taking a couple of steps inside. The place was silent, had she gone out and forgotten to lock the door? He heard a step behind him. "Scarlet?"

Suddenly, something blurry flew toward his face. He had no time to dodge and bright light invaded his field of view.
And then he fell into darkness.

... 

The first thing he noticed was the pain. A throbbing pound in his head. He did his best to not moan or move, and quickly found out that the latter couldn't be achieved anyway. He was restrained, strapped to an armchair. Probably metallic given the coldness of it.

The second thing he noticed was the smell. Dry blood, rot, mold. And something else, underlying everything else. It smelled like fear. Real fear, the one that comes before despair.

Sound started to come to him. He deduced that he must've had hit very hard, for his sense to only come back one after the other.

"Nick!" It was a female voice. "Nick! Please wake up!" It wasn't Judy. It was another voice he knew. Scarlet. "Nick!"
He painfully opened his eyes and looked up. His eyes needed a bit of time to adapt to the darkness surrounding them. Facing him, strapped on another chair was a vixen, with a swollen eye and a split lip. Blood had dripped from her mouth, staining her torn shirt.

The place was a warehouse he had never seen before. Despite its decrepit look, and the dust he could see gliding around them, there was no hole in the roof. Six large ceiling lamp were attached to the ceiling.

"Scarlet ?" He tested the ropes, but they were tightly tied, already digging in his flesh.

"Oh, by the gods you're okay !" He could see on her face that she had cried. She was still crying. "I'm so sorry. They were asking question. They asked for you. For Frank ! If I didn't talk they said were going to... They were..." She looked down at her torn clothes and Nick barely contained a snarl when he understood. Whoever 'they' were, he was going to make them pay.

"That's okay. You have nothing to apologize for. Who are they ? Who did-"

"Nick !" Came a voice from behind him as the light was turned on, blinding him for a few seconds. "Dearest of all my friends !" He instantly recognized the eastern accent.

Vlad. Oh shit.

"I am so happy to see you. Please take a seat." The grey wolf placed himself on the side of the two vulpine. "I hope you're comfortable. We have a long discussion ahead of us. Oh, and I brought you a guest." He glanced at the vixen. "Well, two in fact." Nick heard the steps behind him and turned his head. There was a third fox. Dark grey, tall, a bit on the chubby side, wearing a smile that couldn't be described in any other way than creepy.

Sean. And Vlad. Why ? Why the hell ?!

The tall fox was sporting a bunch of new scars on his snout and arms, some of them were still fresh. He was pushing a wheeled metallic tray. On it were knives, pliers, pruning shears, and a blowtorch. Nick felt a cold sweat in his back.

"You know Nick, you played me." The wolf's tone was way too joyous. "You fooled me. I never thought, not even suspected that Frank was you. Or that you were Frank." He approached and put a paw on Nick's shoulder. "Well played. I mean it. It's too bad, really, that it has to end like this. Someone of your talent... I really could have used you."

Nick put his confident mask on. "You actually remember me ? The first time we met ?"

"Do I ?" The wolf slapped him. Hard. He felt his lip split and the taste of blood invaded his mouth. "I remember a scrawny kid. I remember giving him roofies to put on female's drinks. I remember this scrawny kid double-crossing me. I remember this scrawny kid freeing half a dozen of my merchandise." He approached his face to Nick's, their noses almost touching. "I actually connected the dots a few hours ago. But yes, oh yes, I do remember you. I remember all those that make me lose money."

"Glad I made a great first impression." He smiled. Second slap. Harder than the first, but he barely felt it.

"I couldn't believe you actually freed some of my merchandise twice. You made me lose a lot of money, freeing this otter. Otterstein ? Ottersky ? Can't remember."
"Otterton."

"Yes. Right. Otterton. You know, this vixen knows a bit about you." The wolf went to hover behind Scarlet, caressing her neck with his claw. "Her brother, you see, told her about Frank quite a lot. Seemed he liked you a lot. Like a father, or a brother..."

Nick kept the wince hidden. He put on a mask of sorrow. "Doesn't really surprise me that she talked." The wolf stared at him, interested. "She hates me." Maybe if he could convince the wolf that she really didn't like him, he could save her life. He'd need a miracle to save himself now, but she didn't need to die. Repaying his debt to Mike was the best he could hope for in this situation.

The wolf leaned toward the vixen. "Really ? You hate him ?" He caught her chin between his thumb and pointer to make her face him.

She glanced at Nick, who nodded with a serious frown.

"Y-yes. This bastard, he got my brother killed." Despite the fear, she sounded convincing enough. Maybe it was true, or maybe not, but at this point Nick didn't care. What any of them felt wasn't a priority, staying alive was.

"Did he, now ?" The wolf turned back to the fox. "That is not nice Nick. Not nice at all. First you make me lose money, then you get this pretty lady's brother killed." He snapped his fingers and Sean took a pair of plyers from the tray, approaching the fox. Vlad at Scarlet's side, holding her head to look at Nick. "Then, I really hope you will enjoy the spectacle."

Sean grabbed one of Nick's claw with the plyers. The restrained fox slowly exhaled, anticipating the pain. Sean began to pull. Slowly. Very slowly. For a few seconds Nick wondered if the time hadn't slowed down. He could feel every millimeter, every second, every bit of the pain that started radiating from his finger, as the claw was torn from it. He barely contained the scream of pain that was growing in his throat.

"Lovely isn't it ?"

Tears in her eyes, the vixen was about to talk but Nick shook his head, teeth clenched. Jaw trembling, she stayed mute.

Sean, a smirk plastered on his face, grabbed the second claw and Nick's expectations were dashed. He thought the second claw would be less painful than the first, but it was actually worse. Way worse. The scream of pain filled the warehouse, and he felt tears slowly rising.

"You see my dear, Sean, isn't very proficient in this. He's a bit clumsy. But I've never seen anyone so eager to learn."

"Please." She said between two sobs. Nick shook his head but she couldn't obey.

"What is it my dear ?"

"Please, stop."

"Why ? Don't you hate him ? Didn't he get your brother killed ?"

The vixen swallowed her tears. "He doesn't deserve this ! Please, stop."

The wolf stood up. "Alright. Sean, put down the plyers please."

"Bu-"
"Sean. Plyers."

The fox did what he was ordered with a disappointed sigh. Vlad took a quick few steps toward Nick. "Do you know what is happening here?"

"You saw that it was all a big misunderstanding and decided to let us go?"

"Hahhaahaha! Nick, my boy, you're so funny!" If it was a fake laugh, it was perfectly executed. "No. You see, this is revenge. This is revenge against you for destroying a well oiled plan to bring down Big's family. Did you know that it was what you were doing by freeing that otter?"

"I must admit, I wasn't."

"I appreciate your honesty."

"Isn't it a bit much though? A bullet to the head would be way more efficient." Remarked Nick. He heard the vixen gasp.

"Haha! Yes, true! Very true! But it's not only a revenge against you. You see, by now, Big has almost taken down all of my organisation. It's my way to come back at him. I know you're part of his extended family. Two birds with one stone." He turned to the vixen. "Three actually. Mike, her brother, also screwed me over by helping you free that otter. He's dead, so... My only way of revenge against him is this lovely lady." He ran a claw under her chin, which owed him a spit to the face. Nick was impressed that despite the situation they were in, the vixen still retained a bit of combativity. As an answer, he slapped her, almost making the chair tip over. "That wasn't really ladylike." Wiping his face with a cloth, he went back to place himself aside, to have both of the foxes in his field of view.

"And him?" Asked Nick, pointing at Sean with his chin. He had to play for time. The more they talked, the more they had a chance to be rescued, not that it was likely.

But all remained now was hope. He stared at the chubby fox, hoping for answer. But as always, Sean was his laconic self. Vlad, however, humoured him.

"Sean is a fox with a vengeance. Did you know he actually kidnapped, and tortured, and killed some foxes to find you? He actually offed one of my mammals. I almost killed him for that. But when I asked, nicely mind you, I am not a barbarian-"

**Explains the fresh scars. But why is he working with that bastard?**

"He told me his story... About Frank, about this 'little traitor' Mike, and his little bout of drug dealing. I connected the dots. Two foxes, a small, a large, my merchandise disappearing. A new fox in town... It was a bit of a leap, but worse case scenario, only two more dead foxes in this city. No offense Sean." The fox shrugged. "I thought it was going to be harder to get you. Of course, my first step was to find and ask Mike's sister. Rumors were that Frank had left the city, but hey, it never hurts to ask. And she knew more than I thought she would. And now, there you are."

Nick turned to Sean. "So this is it? This is for revenge for you too?"

"Yeah."

"Bullshit."

Sean lifted a brow.
"Don't try to hide behind revenge. You're a psycho. You love to inflict pain, you love to torture."

"Shut up."

"You simply needed a justification. You pretended to want to help, with Skye, with the group, but all you wanted was an occasion to torture."

"Shut up !"

"That's why they rejected you. They all will. You need help Sean, or else you're going to end up dead in the canal dis-"

"SHUT UP !" The punch Nick received almost made him lose consciousness. He spat blood, while his spinning world slowly slowed down.

The wolf clapped his paws. "Nick ! You sweet talker, you ! You didn't hope to turn him against me, did you ?"

The fox took a few more breathe. "In a sort of roundabout way, yes."

"Your honesty is still appreciated. It almost makes me want to shoot you on the spot and keep you from what's coming next. Almost. So I'll be generous, and instead, I'll put your worries to rest."

"You're way too nice."

"I am, am I not ? You see, I won't kill your lovely lady here. And neither will Sean." He put a paw on his pocket and pulled something Nick instantly recognized. "You will." A Nighthowler pellet gun. "Or she will kill you. I'll shoot the both of you. Whoever wins gets to live." The wolf gave him a sarcastic grin. "Except if it's you. If you kill her, I'll be kind enough to not let you live with it." He turned back to the vixen. "I'm kidding my dear, no one remembers what they do under the Nighthowler's influence."

"Don't think Mr Big is going to let this slide." Interjected Nick.

"Oh, don't worry, by the time they'll find your body, I will be far, very far from this cursed city." He juggled with the gun, making it rotate around his finger. "But before this second little game, there is a first one. For you see, torture is fun. I can never get enough of it. I don't like to participate, way too messy. But I really like to watch. No wonder me and your friend Sean can see eye to eye."

"I'm not in a playing mood."

"Ooooh, Nick, I didn't know a joker could be such a killjoy. But you'll play anyway." He went back to the vixen putting an arm around her shoulders, rolling a finger on her cheek while staring at Nick. "Here are the rules. Sean is going to torture you. And he'll do so for as long as you want. For you see, as soon as you want it to stop, all you have to do is ask him to do it to her instead." A pair of predatory grins spreaded themselves on Vlad's and Sean's faces. "With a pretty lady like her, I'm sure Sean could be very creative."
Part 3, Chapter 18

Part 3 : Hold Forever

Chapter 18 : Pain And Rage

Beginning of January 2020

Had Nick ever found himself in a similar situation? Maybe, but not as dire. There was no escaping this, no sweet-talking his way out. He almost started weeping. He'd never see Judy again, never meet the fennec that could have become his sister. He'd never get to marry the bunny he loved.

The plyers tore another claw, pulling from his thoughts. Not prepared, he screamed so loud he was pretty sure he hurt his lungs. He felt tears of pain rolling down his cheeks. In front of him, the vixen was begging Vlad to stop this.

He couldn't abandon. He had to hold. As long as he did, he would stay alive.

Fourth claw, and his left paw was a bloody painful mess. He didn't dare look down, for fear that the vision would render him insane.

He had to focus, focus on the now. Now was important. The more he endured, the more he could delay what would happen to Scarlet. The more he had chances that rescue would come. But would it? His bunny wouldn't be back home before late in the night, and he didn't even know what time it was.

Sean approached his right hand and started pulling a first claw. Nick clenched his teeth. He wouldn't give him anything, no scream, no satisfaction. If he couldn't escape, if he couldn't save anyone, he'd at least give his tormentor frustration.

The claw came off and with it, a groan of pain. Each subsequent claw-tear was met with the same level of reaction.

"Nicky, my boy, you're more brave than I thought." Sean had put down the plyers and Nick was glaring at Vlad. "Most mammals-

"Yes Nick. Very. You see, most mammals break before the last claw."

"You organize this kind of event often?" Groaned the fox.

"Pitting two mammals against each other? No, it's only the second time. The first was quite nice though. I'm hoping to reproduce the magic this time too. When I say 'break' I meant 'start talking' but you have no information of interest to me." Nick heard a metallic sound. Sean had taken the blowtorch and shears from the tray. "The moment mammals really start talking is usually the one when my mammal starts to inflicts permanent damage. Like taking body parts. Before that it's just
bits and pieces of information."

Nick gulped. He was pretty certain it would also be the point where he would break. He saw Sean put the shears around his pinky and prepared to exhale to ease the pain. Once again, the psychotic fox took his time and the feeling of the bone cracking between the metal fangs pulled a scream of pain and fear from Nick's throat. The blood was quickly flowing and Sean lighted on the blowtorch and cauterized the stump on the spot. New scream.

"He won't pull out all your finger. Maybe two on each paws. You'll need them to fight later. Maybe he'll take an eye too. You wouldn't believe how many mammals can't bear the thought of turning blind."

Sean approached the plyers again but he was careless, and let his arm at Nick's mouth's reach. His head flew forward and he bit the larger fox as hard a he could. The way they were place, Sean couldn't easily punch him to make him let go and he started screaming in pain. A new taste of blood invaded Nick's mouth, and though the idea of Sean's blood on his tongue was disgusting, the scream that resulted was very satisfactory. Vlad pulled his gun and put it on Nick's forehead.

"Let him go."

A defiant glare was his answer, and Nick bit even harder. Vlad took a few step and placed the gun on Scarlet's head. "Let. Him. Go." He cocked the hammer back. Nick let go. Sean punched him and the chair tipped over. The chubby fox leaped at him, ready to beat him again. "Sean ! No ! Put him back up !" The dark grey fox groaned but did what he was ordered. "You can't very well be mad at him, you're torturing him after all. You should have been more careful." Vlad approached Sean to look at his arm. "That's quite the bite, nice work Nick. Sean, go and have yourself patched up. I think we all need a little recess." The chubby fox's step resonated in the large room as he left.

Vlad was making the gun rotate around his finger. "Still combative. I can't believe this scrawny kid turned into you. You're quite the hero."

Nick smirked, despite the pain that was radiating from his left paw. "You gotta do what you gotta do. Sure you don't want to let us go ? I think I've been punished enough." He was beyond terrified, but refused to let the mask fall, refused to give the wolf any satisfaction.

"No Nick, not nearly enough. And it's not a question of punishing anyway. It's me sending a-"

Nick heard the door open again. Sean had been quick to get himself patched up.

Judy was bored. The day was slow, way too slow. Sitting in the car, they were driving around to look out for any disturbance. Suddenly, her phone rang. She glanced at Buster. "Mind if I take that call ?"

"You're the boss, boss. I won't tell on you." He smiled.

He had taken the habit of calling her boss. It had annoyed her a bit at first, but it was the rat's way to recognize her rank. Every officer had their quirks, this was pretty harmless as far as quirks went.

She looked at her phone, it was her father. "Hello ?" She answered.

"Hello sweetheart." Came her father's jovial voice.

"Hello dear." Her mother's voice was a bit more serious. "You hid things from us." Definitely
"Huh ? Of course not." But the first thing that sprang to mind was the marriage proposal she had hidden from them for a few months. She really, really hoped it wasn't about that. She wasn't ready to have that discussion.

"Nick called, he just asked us for your paw."

Judy's eyes opened wide. "He did what ?"

"He asked us for your paw. He said he already proposed you. You're getting married !" Stu's voice was ecstatic. "We need to decide for a date, and to start organizing things !"

Judy scratched her eyes. She would have preferred to announce that to them in her own time. Hell, she had almost considered having a first secret wedding before coming out to them and have a second all out bunny wedding. Well, the fox had done it. At least now, they knew.

"When were you going to tell it to us ?" Asked Bonnie.

"Well... Soon ?" She lied.

"You still think we wouldn't approve." Her mother stated.

"Yeah. Sorry."

"Don't apologize, we weren't the most supportive parents... At least I wasn't. I'm glad you found someone like him. Now we need to talk about the-"

"Mom, Dad, sorry to cut this short, but I'm on duty." She cut apologetically. The only thing she dreaded more than announcing Nick's proposal, was the wedding preparations.

"Oh. Of course. Sorry dear, we'll call you back in the evening."

"Maybe tomorrow, I'm working until late." She could still have had that conversation with them that evening, but there was a fox that needed to have an earful first.

"Talk to you tomorrow then." Smiled her father.

"Bye."

"Bye girl. Love you." And they hung up.

She heard a snicker coming from next to her. "I thought you were bored."

"You were listening, were you ?"

"Hard not to. I guess that your wedding plan isn't something you look forward to do."

"Absolutely not." She sighed. "I wish I could just be married and get on with it. Bunnies traditions are no fun. Enormous parties, unending number of guests..."

"Rat's weddings are kind of a chore too. Good thing we're not too into it in the city." He said in a conversational tone. Judy lifted a brow.

"How are rat's weddings ?"
"Well... Country rats, or field rats are they were named. They have pretty much the same type of weddings than the bunnies." Judy looked at him surprised. Most mammals didn't know about other mammal groups habits. "I've studied sociology before... Before turning to police work." He had hesitated on his sentence. She knew there had been something between sociology and police work, but she decided not to pry. The rat reminded her a bit of Nick in a way. "Anyway, country rats have large weddings. City rats... Not so much. It's more like a string of parties that link social events to one another. Being weddings, births or funerals. If you were wondering why most rats have the reputation to be lazy, it's probably because we're a bit tired of all the social events we attend."

"That's the first time I hear about it." She admitted.

"It's not really known. And we're a discreet kind."

... The rest of the day too was uneventful. The high point was when Judy had to climb a tree to get ball back for a couple of kids. At least, she got to do something physical, and not something that needed a report.

It was around 6PM when the two officers decided to grab a bite. Sitting on a terrace, they were enjoying their sandwiches when a car stopped in a tire screech near them. It must have gone pretty fast, and so the two officers approached it warily. As Judy was about to take out her badge, the passenger door flew open.

"Hopps, Buster, get in. Now."

"Jack ?"

"Who's J-"

"Nick might be in danger. He's not at your place. He's not answering his phone."

The doe didn't need to hear more and lept inside, followed closely by Buster who took the backseat. Jack launched the car at definitely unauthorised speed down the street.

"What's happening ?"

"Don't know yet. A contact just gave me the intel and location."

"And why not alert the ZPD ?"

"Reasons. Mainly, I'm not sure about this info."

"Where are we going ?"

"Tundratown, the docks. Don't call it in yet."

Only a few minutes separated them from their objectives. "Judy, who's that guy ?"

She glanced at the agents which nodded. "Jack. His name is Jack. He's ZIA."

"What ? And he says Nick's in danger ?"

"He might be."

They arrived at an industrial zone and the male bunny stopped the car behind a large building. He
headed out, followed by the two officers and entered it. It was an old decrepit place, rust was eating at the beams, and mold had settled in most corners. The dust almost made them scoff. Jack took out his gun, imitated by Judy and Buster.

Going up some stairs, they arrived in a large room. One of the wall had collapsed and let them see outside. A large slumped silhouette could be seen. It moved slightly.

"K ?"

"Get down and come here." Came a deep and low voice. The three newcomers followed the order and arrived near the silhouette. It was a polar bear wearing a blue tracksuit holding a pair of binoculars.

"Koslov ? Is that you ?" Asked Judy.

"Yes, that's me. Jack, I did recon. We may not need back up."

"You work with the ZIA ?" she asked, aghast.

"I work for Mr Big. Period." The tone was almost threatening, and for the second time that day, she decided not to pry. The shrew truly seemed to have a lot of connections.

"What do you have K ?" Asked the agent.

"Two mammals, most likely foxes. They've been inside for at least one hour before I came here. This one of Vlad's 'places'. He intends to leave the city soon. From what I've gathered, he's tying up loose ends." He gave the binoculars to Jack. They were so large than both him and Judy could use them at the same time.

"Places ?" She asked.

"The ones he uses to... Interrogate people."

Judy's heart skipped a beat. Whoever was inside, they needed help, and soon.

"Two wolves in front. Anyone in the back ?" Asked Jack.

"No. He's getting sloppy."

"Good. Anything else ?"

"No."

"Then let's go."

The four of them crawled back and went outside. Judy started to head for the other building but was stopped by Jack.

"No. You're both staying there until I give you my go. If they see cops, they'll alert Vlad immediately, and Nick, if it's truly him, will be as good as dead."

The bunny sighed and stayed hidden. Buster placed himself near her, and they watched the bear and bunny casually approach the two guards.

"You know this Koslov ?"
"Somewhat." She said, quizzical. It wasn't anything official, and though she knew the chief had knowledge of her connection to Big's family, her colleagues didn't need to.

"And he's really working for Mr Big ?"

"Yup."

"And do- What are they doing ?"

The bear and bunny had started a conversation with the wolves. At first the guard seemed wary, but they seemed to slowly relax. She saw Jack casually step to their side. A split-second later, his feet connected with one of the guard's snout, and Koslov fist had broken a few fangs from the other. Jack waved at them while the bear dragged the unconscious wolf to the side of the building.

"Well, that's that." Remarked the rat.

The male bunny started explaining his plan "Alright, we're going in. There are two foxes inside, but we couldn't get any names. You two, stay in fron-"

Judy cut Jack.

"No. Me and Buster are going in. Koslov has no official authority. He's staying outside, waiting for the ZPD."

"Hopps, it's no-"

"Jack, I know you think it's for the best, but we can do a job as good as your friend here-"

"We're not friend." Remarked Koslov with a serious tone.

"Whatever. We need to do this by the books."

They stared down for a few seconds before the agent caved in. "Alright. You stay behind me, and you do as I say."

"Got it. Let me just call for reinforcement." She took out her radio. "Precinct one, 19-79 talking, we're investigating a probable 207 in Tundratown, Industrial zone, number..."

Buster had taken out his phone, anticipating that she didn't know the complete address. "98, Ramdock street."

"...98, Ramdock street."

"Copy 19-79." Came Clawhauser's voice. "You're out of your patrolling zone."

"I know. We need back up. Given the size of the place, at least two units."

"Okay. Stand by, Hopps, I'm send-"

"Negative, we're going in. Reinforcement will have to catch up."

"Alright, I'll speed them up."

She put back her radio on her belt and took out her tranq-gun. "Let's do this."

Jack opened the door and started to walk silently through the short hallway, gun in hand, closely
followed by the doe and rat. They didn't know the layout of the place, but usually, the door at the other end would open on the main room. There were two other path on the right and left. As they were closing in on them, a large chubby fox, sporting a bandage on his right arm came out. He saw them from the corner of his eyes and immediately stepped back, starting to run.

"I got this. Find the foxes." Said Jack, bolting after him. Luckily, the fox didn't think to scream to alert his potential allies.

Judy and Buster arrived near the door. No way to take a peek inside. Judy stuck her ear against it.

"...nearly enou... a question... sending a-"

They opened it as silently as they could, but it creaked anyway.

The doe was the first to enter. With the lack of light, she couldn't discern the details, but there were three mammals. One grey wolf, with a gun in his paw, and two others. Two foxes, tied to chairs, facing each other. One of them was showing his back to the newcomers and they couldn't see his face, so Judy only recognized a beaten up Scarlet on the other chair. She could guess who the other was, though.

"ZPD, put your gun down." Said the bunny, while Buster closed the door behind them, to block the noise they risked to make. Just as he finished, they heard a couple of muffled gunfires behind it, it was just enough so that the two officers lost their focus for a split-second, and for the wolf to place himself safely behind, or rather in front of Nick.

Judy and Buster started moving toward the wolf, the doe's heart beating faster and faster as she noticed the state her fox was in.


"Oh, no, no, no." Said the wolf, cocking back the hammer of his revolver. "You're the ones that will put their guns down. Or your friend Nick gets it."

Judy hesitated. The wolf pushed his gun against the fox's head. "Gun's down, please."

"Judy, don't-" He was instantly smacked by Vlad's free paw.

"Last warning miss Hopps."

She put the tranq-gun away and slowly put it down. Buster imitated her. Just as her gun touched the floor, Nick's face flew forward and bit the wolf's paw. He gave a scream of pain and saw a grey lightning bolt head toward his face. He only had the time to sidestep, but because of Nick's fangs, he had to let go of his gun in the process.

Buster took the opportunity to rush to Nick and started to free him. Given that Judy was taking the wolf in paw to paw combat, trying to shoot him would be dangerous for her, and trying to help her would only hinder her.

"Watch this Buster." Came Nick's hoarse voice. "It's going to be fantastic."

Judy had missed her first kick, but not by much. She had grabbed the wolf's paw and made him spin, taking him away from the tied up foxes. She tried a second kick, but he blocked it, though more out of sheer luck than real practice. She had read Vlad's file a couple of times during Nick's undercover mission. He had a fighting experience but only on the street pits, nothing remarkable. She tripped him and he stumbled back but didn't fall, jumping up, she purposely missed a kick.
again. She needed to get him away from his gun to fight him more safely. The wolf tried a clumsy swipe that she dodged by leaping over it. As she was in the air, he tried a second swipe with the left paw, but she had anticipated the attack. She grabbed his paw, spun around it, and broke one of his fingers.

"Argh ! You bitch."

Anger was good. Anger clouded judgment. And she wanted to make him hurt. She landed safely and he tried to kick her. She used his leg as a springboard, propelling her toward his face, her strong legs hitting his snout full force. She felt a couple of fangs crack and his lips split. He fell backward and stopped moving.

Buster had already seen her fight, but never all out and in real conditions. It was nothing short of impressive. Given that he had looked at Judy's performance, he hadn't finished untying Nick.

"Everything okay back there ?" She had turned her head toward her audience while taking out the ziplocks from her pocket.

"Judy, look out !" Both Buster's, Nick's and Scarlet's voice resonated in the warehouse.

The wolf was taking out what looked like a gun. Buster took out his own, and so did the bunny, unloading three bullets each in the wolf's body. But not before he could use the almost silent weapon of his own. He seemed to have missed though, because no mammal other than him fell.

"That was close." Remarked Buster as he put back his weapon in his holster. Judy was about to check the wolf's pulse when she turned toward them, scratching her neck. She took it out and looked at it. Her eyes widened. Blue. Her paw was blue.

Nick was staring at her, and saw it at the same time she did. "Buster. Cut me out."

"Don't worry bud-"

"Buster. Move your fucking ass."

The rat heard a scoffing noise. He saw Judy fall down on her knees, all her body trembling. He was about to go to her when Nick's voice stopped him. "It's Nighthowler ! You need to free me ! Now !"

Without giving a second thought, he did. Judy was trying to crawl away, realizing what was happening. She didn't want to hurt them, but she felt it inside. The rage. The hate. The will to destroy. Her mind went blank. Nick saw it. He saw her bunny leave her own body, replaced by a killing machine. A highly efficient, faster than lightning, killing machine. If they were to stay alive, he'd have to think really fast. Buster and Judy had left they tranq gun behind. The bunny's eyes were going from Nick to Scarlet and to Buster. The first to move would be the first one to face her.

"The both of you, do not move, do not make a sound." Whispered Nick, still sitting on the chair. The bunny's ear instantly shot up, it seemed she had caught the sound of the fox's voice. The safest way would be for Buster to take out his gun while the fox would occupy her, but he refused that possibility. She wouldn't be shot again. Not on his watch.

Nick leaped aside, anticipating the bunny's attack. It came so fast that he had barely the time to dodge. She rolled on the floor and prepared to attack again. The fox recognized the posture. It was a fighting stance. She was savage, but she still retained a bit of her fighting kills. Even with the training she had given him, there was no way in hell he could win paw to paw. She bolted again toward him and he received her with a hook and a sidestep.
Surprisingly, the fist connected, his clawless fingers sending spikes of pain in his arm. She could attack, but she barely defended. He tried an attack, but she dodged it. She attacked him and he punched again. His fist connected to her shoulder and her paw hit his torso. Since his punch had deviated her, it didn't hurt much, but he was still sent backwards. She dodged, but only when she wasn't trying to attack. Her drug filled brain didn't seem able to process every action at the same time. It gave him part of an idea. "Buster, shoot down the lights."

He heard a first shot, a light was taken out and Nick saw the bunny wince. Her heightened senses seemed to hate the loud noise. She immediately turned toward the rat but as she had changed focus, Nick slapped her. He gritted his teeth, and hoped he'd never have to do that again. She turned back to him and tried to bite, but he took away his bloodied paw just in time.

He had to block away the pain in his paws, and execute his plan. He had to be faster than her. Faster than Judy, and her savage mind fired up by the nighthowler. "Judy, snap out of it!" He tried, barely avoiding another attack. But it was a lost cause. There was no power of love, no fighting back. The nighthowler was a chemical, a thing the mind couldn't win against.

He took a few side steps toward his goal. The bunny leapt toward his face and a gunfire was heard, a second light turning off. Twisting in the air, the bunny completely missed her attack. She rolled an leapt again. Third shot, third body twist, third light disappearing. Buster was timing his shot on purpose to hinder the bunny. She tried to bolt at him but Nick's arm appeared in her way. She immediately bit it. He felt the bunny's jaw close on his muscle. The pain was indescribable, almost worse than getting his finger cut out. He made an ample movement that made her fly in the opposite direction, a chunk of his flesh coming off with her. He screamed in pain and heard a fourth shot. There were only two lights left. The tears were pouring, from pain, from exhaustion, from his torn feelings. He had to fight the one mammal he loved the most.

He took another few steps toward his goal, and saw the bunny attack him. She was quicker, but somewhat clumsier. He had to block three leg attacks and a punch. Close to him, he tried to hold her but she put her paws against his torso and kicked. Hard. It sent them both flying backwards.

Nick rolled and fell next to what he was trying to reach. Judy's tranq gun. He took it and aimed. She easily dodged the bolt, like she could see them move. At this point, the fox wouldn't be surprised if she truly could. She was dodging right and left, and Nick had used two darts already. Only two remained. She leapt at him, her little claws out, her teeth bared. Two detonations were heard and the two last lights came out. She twisted. They were now in the dark. Nick missed his third shot as the bunny collided with him. Only one dart remained. He was feeling drowsy, and he knew he wouldn't be able to line the last shot. He couldn't risk to miss. Taking the syringe out of the gun, he grabbed it like a knife. His vision was quickly adapting to the darkness. She was a few steps from him, her ears shooting left and right, trying to catch any sound. He took a slow deep breath. He couldn't make a step toward her, she would hear it and immediately attack. He needed to lure her toward him to be ready to prickle her with the needle. And so he decided to do something stupid, but highly effective. He leaned down, putting his paws in a fighting position.

"I'm here, love."

Her ears turned toward him instantly, quickly followed by her whole body. She pounced at him, and though he was ready, he couldn't anticipate her speed. She hit him on the chest and sank her teeth near her neck with a growl. He put the syringe in her back. It seemed she barely felt it. As her body went limp, he saw her expression relax. He took her in his arms fell on his back. "You're alright sweetheart." He got up slowly and stumbled back to Buster. "You can turn on your
"flashlight now."

The rat did so and untied the vixen. "Can you walk miss?"

"I- I think." She got up and had to hold the chair for a few seconds before her legs stopped trembling. "Are you okay Nick?"

"Never better."

Buster took a few step toward Vlad's body and checked his pulse. "Dead."

"Good." Came the vixen's answer. Nick found himself thinking the same thing.

The rat had gone and retrieved both of Judy's weapon. He put her tranq gun in his holster and swapped her gun to the tranq gun Nick was holding. "We're going out. The both of you, stay behind me."

"Want me to take her?" Asked Scarlet to Nick.

"No." He realized his tone had been a bit harsh. He was only standing by sheer will and adrenaline. "But thanks for asking." He added in a nicer tone. As they headed for the door, led by Buster, Nick realized his legs could barely hold him up. He would be able to make it to the building's exit, probably, but not farther. Just as he was hoping help would arrive soon, the doors flew open and a ZPD team of four erupted from it.

"ZPD, put your guns down!" Every gun were immediately pointed to the gun carrying fox. "Fox, put the bunny down!"

Buster immediately flashed out his badge. "I'm ZPD. Officer Buster. This is officer Wilde and he's carrying officer Hopps. Everyone calm down." The scene froze.

"Officers, stand down." Came a voice from the center of the group. The commanding officer, a ram, gave glances to two of his officers. "We need paramedics here. Cavid, Burrowsky, go and bring them here, on the double. Go! Go! Go!"

Two officers detached from the group and ran away to the building's exit. The two remaining stared at Nick, their mouth slowly falling agape as they realized the state he was in.

"Hey don't worry guys, it's only my blood." Quipped the fox, as he was taking a step forward, and realizing it was a step too much, since the world started collapsing around him.
Beginning of January 2019

Her body ached, like she had used all her muscles far intensely than their were supposed to. She tried to stretch but her arms wouldn't move, and she realized she was strapped to her bed.

"Oh, girl, yo' awake." Came a voice she immediately recognized. She blinked a few times and turned her head to see Finnick, sitting next to her bed, smartphone in hand. He reached for the call button and pressed it.

"Hey Fin- Oww." Instantly, as the sound of her own voice resonated in her head, a pulsing pain appeared in it.

"Head hurtin' ?'

"Yeah."

"The doctor said it could happen."

"Where am I ?"

"Downtown Central hospital. You were transferred less than an hour ago, on demand of doctor... Pro-something." 

"Procyon ?"

"That's the one."

Her eyes suddenly widened. "Nick ! Where is he ?"

"Alright but unconscious. Ya'll get to see him as soon as the doc-"

The door opened and the raccoon doctor appeared. "Miss Hopps. I hoped I'd never have to see you again." He smiled.

"The wish of all doctors." Finnick remarked.

The doctor took out his lamp and quickly observed the bunny's pupils. "You seem to be fine. I'll untie you." He did so and the bunny could finally stretch her aching muscles. "I've taken the liberty to have your leg x-rayed. Mammals under the influence of the Nighthowler tend to over-exert themselves. Your knee is perfectly fine except..."

"Except ?"

"As I feared, in a couple of decades, you will want to avoid Canal and Rainforest district at all costs."

It was one of the things he had warned her about. Damp weather would make her knee ached for sure in the later years.
"Figures... How long was I out?"

"Four hours. The paramedics had to sedate you again, but the serum didn't take too long to take
effect. Good thing it was the original recipe, otherwise it could have had some repercussions. By
the way, you're staying in our care at least 24 hours more, for observation."

He saw that the bunny was slightly bouncy, in a haste to get out of the room. "Your fox is in room
308, three doors down to the left." He helped her get down from the bed. She felt a bit weak and
almost stumbled. "I'll bring a wheelchair."

"I'd rather avoid that." The time she had spent in that awful contraption wasn't the dearest memory.
She'd rather crawl than get back into one. "Fin, can you..."

"Shure girl." He approached and she put a paw on his shoulder, slowly making her way out.

It was a good thing Nick room was near, because she wasn't sure her legs would let her walk
farther. She knocked and pushed the door.

Nick was laying unconscious on the bed, his paws wrapped in bandages. Around the bed were
sitting two vixens, Scarlet and Vivienne. The younger one was sitting to the side. On a chair was
also a little fennec girl, Judy supposed it was Hollie, the foster kid the couple had taken in.

"Hi." Greeted the bunny.

Vivienne turned to the bunny, rushing to her and immediately hugging her. "Oh I'm so glad you're
alright."

"Thanks Vi. How is he?"

"The doctors say he's okay but he hasn't woken up yet. He first had to replenish part of his blood
reserves. They say he needs his rest."

"Vi?"

"I'm crushing you." She loosened her embrace a bit. "Sorry. Oh where are my manners!" She let
go of the bunny and leaded her to Hollie. "Judy, meet Hollie. Hollie, this is Judy."

"Hello Hollie."

"Hi." Greeted the little fennec shyly.

"How are you?"

"Fine." She seemed to hesitate to talk, but Judy nodded supportively. "Is it true you went savage?"

The bunny's mouth fell slightly agape and she glanced at the two vulpines who were sporting
similar expression. "She's taking after you two already... Yes. I did. I'm better now."

"Oh. Good."

A slightly awkward silence fell, which the bunny escaped by going to her fox's side. Looking at
him, he seemed to sleep peacefully. His breaths were slow, and his expression static. Detailing him,
she couldn't do anything but wince. His face was covered with bruises from the beating, and she
noticed he missed a finger on his left paw.

"They couldn't reattach it." Announced the doctor who had placed himself at her side.
"Cauterization destroyed tendons and melted the bone."
"My leg could be reattached though…"

"The cut was relatively clean. And a knee is a very simple thing in comparison to a paw. Replacing a metacarpus is feasible in theory, but with even less chance of success than for your knee. The claws will grow back though. But it will itch. A lot. I'm more concerned about his mental state." The raccoon had taken the file attached to the bed. "What happened to him... No mammal can get out of it unscathed." He looked at his watch. "I have other patients to attend to. Ring a nurse as soon as he wakes up." And he left the room, leaving the mammals alone.

Judy caressed Nick's face, and swallowed back the tears. How many times would her fox get hurt? If only she could have arrived sooner. She glanced at the vixen sitting in a corner and sighed.

"I need some air. Scarlet, could you help me walk?" The vixen was a bit surprised by that demand, but she helped the bunny out of the room. "I'll be back soon. Watch over him in the meantime, will you?"

"Shure girl. We ain't lettin' him leave the room."

"Thanks."

Though Scarlet was helping her walk, Judy was leading. Having spent a bit of time in that hospital for her reeducation, she easily found the inner courtyard and sat on a bench. Scarlet sat at her side, a bit removed.

"You had feeling for him, didn't you?"

The vixen chuckled. Of course, it would be about that.

"Yes. I did."

"You still do?"

"No. Not really, after all that happened, after Mike's..." She swallowed hard, fighting back the tears. "I hated him. He took my brother away, just as I had gotten him back!"

"I'm sorry."

"Don't be. I was unfair. I was angry." She rubbed her eyes. "You know what's funny? While I was on that chair, while Nick was holding for my sake... I finally realised it wasn't his fault. It was Mike's decision to go with him. Nick wasn't responsible for my brother's decision, nor was he for the bullet that killed him. It only took for him be tortured for me to realise it."

"Wait, dial it back. For your sake? Could you explain what happened to you from the beginning?"

The vixen had a sigh. She really didn't want to go back to that place, but the bunny deserved to know. "I can't go in detail. I just... Can't go back there. Your colleague, officer Buster, already took my statement."

"Say what you can. Please?"

"Those guys, Vlad and Sean, they went to my apartment. They hit me, and threatened to…" She put her arms around her shoulder with a shudder. "They wanted to know where Frank was. I tried to convince them I didn't know anything, and I let slip something. I don't remember what, but from that wolf deduced... Well, he knew who Frank was. Next he took my phone and texted him. Then, they drugged me and I woke up facing Nick on his chair." It seemed she had a harder and harder.
time getting the word out. "He posed it as a game. Sean would torture Nick and all he had to do for it to stop was to ask for me to be tortured instead."

"Sweet cheese and crackers!"

"I don't know how he held... I just don't."

The bunny put a supportive paw on the vixen's shoulder, but the vulpine didn't give in to the tears.

"You know, when Nick told me about you, I was a bit mad." Started the bunny to switch topic.

"Really?"

"Yeah. He was spending time away from me a knowing a vixen was... Hovering around him, I got a bit territorial."

"You really had nothing to fear. I think there was absolutely no way he could have cheated on you. He's quite the gentlemammal."

"I know."

"It's a big loss for the vulpine population." She said with a little smile.

"I'm not giving him back." Smiled the bunny.

They were about to head back when she saw Buster arrive in the courtyard. He waved at her and approached. "Glad to see you're up, partner." He gave a side glance to the vixen. "You seem to be doing better too, miss."

"Yes. Thank you." She blinked a few times. "I mean really, thank you, the both of you. You saved us, and I didn't properly thank you for it."

"We were just doing our job, miss." Answered the rat in a professional tone. He could seem really laid back around his colleagues, but as soon as a civilian was involved, he immediately switched to 'officer mode'.

"Well thank you for doing your job." She marked a pause. "You seem to want to speak with Judy more privately, I'll go check on Nick." And she left without waiting for them to say good bye.

"You wanted to talk about something?"

"Those guys, Koslov, Jack, Vlad, what's their deal?"

"What do you mean?" She was surprised he'd put Vlad in the same bunch, though it made sense in a sort of twisted way.

"Well, Jack is ZIA, so I suppose that whatever you know, you can't really tell me." Judy nodded. "But Koslov, he's clearly from the mob. There are rumors around the precinct that you and Nick have a link with Big's family, but I didn't know how much."

"I'm... The godmother of his grandchildren." He lifted a finger but she kept talking before he could utter a word. "He helped me on the Nighthowler case and that's all.

I'll say on the matter."

"Alright. No more questions about him. And Vlad?"
"I don't know him."

"He was torturing you boyfriend and that vixen. They are linked one way or another. You don't have to tell me about it, but I'm curious. And slightly involved. I'd like to make sense of what happened at that warehouse."

Judy sighed. It wasn't a story for her to tell, then again, he had helped save Nick, he was slightly involved. And she believed she could trust him. She looked around to make sure no one was listening. "Whatever I'm about to say, you're not to repeat it to anyone. Not our colleagues, not anyone, ever."

"I promise."

"You remember Lycus case ? That Bellwether was shot down by an unidentified mammal, probably a grey fox named Frank ?"

"Yeah ? What of it ?"

"It was Nick. Undercover. The coma story was made up."

"That... Actually explains a lot. And that vixen's brother was killed in the process ?"

"You talked to her ?"

"Yeah, when I took her statement. But she never told me about Nick's real implication. It was a bit of a bundled mess since she wouldn't tell me in which circumstances her brother died. I knew she was hiding stuff. Don't worry, I preferred to left all that off the record until I spoke to you. And it seems it will remain that way."

The bunny sighed. There was so little the public knew about that case compared to what had remained hidden, and it had to stay that way, both for the citizen's peace of mind and for the implicated mammal's safety. "By the way, did you get a hold of Jack after he chased that fox ?"

"No, and no one did. He's made quite an impressive work, though a bit... Strange."

"What do you mean ?"

"Forensic is still examining the crime scene. It seems there was a firefight between Vlad's henchmammals and that they killed eachother. I'm pretty sure my report will be redacted to fit with their report."

"And Sean ?"

"They found him with his brain blown off. The gun used was the one found in his paw. No traces of agent Savage."

"That's... Disturbing. And what about Koslov ?"

"Did you know that guy had an official weapon carrying permit ? The Tundratown officers let him go after he gave his statement. Nothing out of the ordinary, he saw Vlad's men carry a pair of fox in a warehouse and contacted the ZPD. Well you, specifically. No mention of Jack either." Judy didn't know how that would make sense, but if Jack believed no mention of him needed to be made, it was probably for the best. Very few knew of Koslov's past, and maybe current, implication with the ZIA. Very few also knew that Jack was ZIA, it was necessary for him to be able to work. "Everyone's safe now. I think it's what matters."
"That's true. I'll get back to the precinct, I still have a mountain of paperwork to fill in. See you
soon partner."

"Wait, could you help me get back to Nick's room?"

"Sure."

She could walk better now, but she still felt feeble. He brought her to the door and made a step
back. "Don't want to come in?"

"Not really big on tearful thankings. I'll let you have my share."

"Alright, see you soon."

"Bye." He put his paws in his pockets and went away. Judy knocked on the door and entered. In a
corner of the room, Vivienne and Scarlet were chatting silently. Finnick was showing stuff on his
phone to Hollie. And Nick still remained unconscious. "Hey, yo' back." He said, lifting his gaze
from his phone.

"Yep. Did he move?"

"Nope. He still sleepin' like a log. Understandable. Scarlet told us wot happened."

The bunny smiled and went to sit on her fox's bed. She hesitated to take his paw, not wanting to
risk hurting him more than he already was.

She had gotten to have her room switched and to share Nick's. She knew he'd be happy to have her
near him when he would wake up, and she was feeling more comfortable that way. The sun was
slowly falling on the horizon, Vivienne and Finnick had to leave with Hollie. The bunny promised
she would call them as soon as Nick would wake up. Scarlet ended up going back to her own room
for the night, and Judy was left alone with her fox. Part of her wanted to go and share his bed, but
she doubted it could help in any way, so she went to sleep on her own bed.

She woke up with the sun, rubbing the sleep away from her eyes. She looked at the time, it was
pretty early. It was then that she realized she hadn't called her parents. She hoped the news hadn't
gotten a hold of the story yet, otherwise, she was sure to receive a panicked call. She took out her
phone and went to check some news site. There already was a story about two foxes abducted and
freed by the ZPD, but no names appeared, not hers nor his. She sighed in relief, it bought her a bit
of time. She went and sat next to Nick on his bed, caressing the fur of his arm.

"I wish I had gotten to you sooner." She felt something strange under her paw, like his muscles had
slightly tensed up. "Nick? Can you hear me?" She ran her fingers on his face. "Nick?" His paw
shot up, grabbing her arm and pushing it away. "Nick, it's me."

His eyes were looking around the room, trying to comprehend where he was, when they fell on his
bunny's face. They grew slightly wider. "Judy?"

"Ni-"

He let go of her arm and pulled her in an embrace. She felt him slump slightly and his face went to
place itself against her chest. "It's not a dream."

"No it's not a dream. I'm really here." She felt her hospital gown get damp, and soon she could here
him sob. "I'm here. You're safe."

She stroked his head for a long time before he calmed down. She had never seen him in such a state. "I thought I'd never see you again. And when you went savage, I..."

"I'm sorry. I should have been more careful."

The fox looked up. "Don't apologize." He wiped his eyes. "You saved my life."

She pulled closer and kissed him. "That's what I do."

Nick became suddenly aware of the state of his paws and the pain arose. Judy felt him loosen his arms around her. "Sorry, paws' pain." He took the call button and tried to push it but the slightest pression of the tip of his fingers was unbearable. "Fluff, could you ...?"

"Sure." She pushed the button and they both waited for a nurse to arrive.

A scrubs' wearing yak entered the room. "Oh, I see you're up mister Wilde. I'll have the doctor come and examine you as soon as he arrives. Do you need something in the meantime?"

"Paws hurt like hell. And I'm really hungry."

"Anemy will do that to you. I'll get you a painkiller and bring you some food." The yak left the room, leaving the two mammals alone.

"You thought you were dreaming?" Asked the bunny out of the blue.

"Yeah."

"Want to talk about it?"

He didn't, but he decided to take a page from Blackfur's advice book and do so anyway. "It were more like nightmares. Several of them. The less tough were those where I was tortured again. There was one where you went savage and t-took..." He grabbed his gown with his right paw, suddenly having difficulties to breath.

"Don't push yourself."

"...Took Sean's place, with the p-plyers. Oh gods..."

"Shhh, I'm here. I'd never hurt you."

"I know. It's when I realized I was d-dreaming. It's the one that actually woke me up. It's why I grabbed you like I did. I'm sorry if I hurt you."

"You didn't." She kissed his forehead. "Were they all like this?"

"Pretty much. The worst one was..." He took a deep breath, pressing his eyes shut, bracing against the images he was summoning in his mind. "You were in Scarlet's chair, and I... I broke. I didn't want to, but I did. I broke. I still see him approach you with plyers and the knives, and he..." He suddenly bolted out of the bed, almost stumbling to the ground and rushing to the bathroom. Judy accompanied him and held his gown as he emptied his stomach in the toilet. "I broke." Came his weak voice, muffled by the bowl. She pulled him from his slumped position and wiped his face.

"You didn't."
"I..."

"It was a dream. You didn't."

Sitting on the cold tiling of the bathroom floor, she put his head in her lap.

"I did, I-"

"No. You didn't. You'd never. You held against those mammals for the sake of that vixen, and I
know you well enough to believe that you'd never let anymammal harm me if you could prevent it.
Even if it meant getting tortured to death." She stroked the fur at the base of his neck. "And if we
ever find ourselves in a similar situation, I beg you not to do that. Do not sacrifice yourself for my
sake. Not ever."

The tears were still flowing from the fox eyes who stared at her. "You really think that ?" Despite
the pain he had grabbed her arm almost desperately.

"The part where you'd sacrifice yourself for me, or the part where I don't want you to do that ?"

"Both."

"Both."

"What did I ever do to deserve you ?" He smiled.

They heard the door open. "Miss Hopps, Mister Wilde ?"

"In the bathroom." Answered Judy, helping Nick stand up. She leaded him back to his bed, before
joining him in it.

"Are you feeling sick ? I could get you something for that too." Proposed the yak nurse, while
rolling the wheeled tray near the bed. From the corner of her eyes, she saw her fox wince at the
noise the wheel made.

"Nah, I was just being a bit emotional."

The yak lifted a brow and pushed the pills on the tray. "Take one now and another in four hours if
you need it. And eat, you need to replenish your strength and the rest of your blood stock." He took
a few steps toward the door and stopped. "And try to keep the 'funny business' to a minimum, both
for your and your neighbors' sleep sake. The yak had a coy smile. Judy's face shot red and she was
about to retort something. "Doctor Procyon's orders, not mines." Completed the nurse before
leaving them alone in the room.

Nick quickly gulped the pill and took the fork to dig in the tasteless plate of food. It's when he
noticed the missing finger, the only one that didn't ache when he also grabbed the knife.

"So that part wasn't a dream." He put down the knife and looked at his paw. "Well, at least that
finger doesn't hurt."

"You're taking it well."

"I didn't use that finger much to begin with," He shrugged, but she could see he was less okay with
it than he showed. He stuck his fork in what looked like meat and winced. The painkillers weren't
working yet, and the slightest pressure against his fingers was near excruciating. The bunny took
the for from his paw and the knife from the table, cutting the meat.
"I can do that fluff."

"I know you can. Doesn't mean you have to hurt yourself." The fox face showed a bit of embarrassment. "Nick, let me help you."

"Okay fluff."

She gave him his first bite. "And it trains me for when we'll have kids."

Nick chuckled, almost choking on his food.

...

A knock on the door woke the two lovers from their dozing. Despite the long time they both had spent sleeping during the past 24 hours, being together pretty much brought so much peace to them that they had spent their time cuddling and slumbering. Since the door didn't open after the knock, they guessed it wasn't the hospital staff.

"Come in." Said Judy, extracting herself from under the fox. She got down from the bed, needing to use the bathroom. Scarlet entered the room. "Has he...?" She saw the fox rub his eyes and almost leapt to the bed hugging him tight.

"Woh, woh, easy big girl."

Judy gritted her teeth. Despite the fact that she believed the vixen's feeling toward her fox were pretty much dead, she still didn't like to see her rub herself against her fox.

Scarlet pulled away and wiped her tearful eyes, while the bunny gave them a bit of privacy.

"I'm so sorry !"

"There is nothing to be sorry about."

"I told them. I told them who you were. They got you because of m-"

Nick took her paw and kept the wince inside. "I know you didn't do it willingly. You already told me."

"It's all my fault."

"No. It's not. They did the... The torturing. They did it. No one could expect you to hold your ground in this situation."

"You did."

"I'm a cop. It's what I'm paid for." He put a paw on her shoulder. "Look, I know you think it's your fault, and I honestly don't know if there is anything I can say to convince you otherwise, but you at least need to know that I don't blame you. Not a bit."

Judy had come back from the bathroom. "Truly a loss." Said the vixen, to which Judy answered with a nod and a little smile.

"Huh ? What are you talking about ?" Asked Nick.

"Nothing important." The vixen took an inspiration. "There is something else. I'm sorry."
"About what ?"

"Blaming you. About Mike. He chose to follow you, and he died killed by that crooked cop. It wasn't your fault. I shouldn't have blamed you."

"But if-

"No ifs. I put it on you and it was unfair. I'm sorry for all the things I've said." She sighed. "I think it was the thing I was the more afraid of. To never be able to apologize."

Nick felt a bit awkward at the apology, he hadn't much to answer to the vixen. Thankfully, he was saved from the awkwardness when they heard a knock coming from the door and doctor Procyon entered the room followed by the yak nurse from earlier.

"Good morning mister Wilde. I didn't think you'd wake up that soon. If you could get down from the bed miss Wicce, I'd like to examine him."

The vixen stepped down from the bed and sat in a chair near it.

The doctor looked at the fox pupils and checked his blood pressure. "I suppose your wounds and bruises are still hurting."

"Yeah."

"It's perfectly normal. I'd be more worried if it wasn't the case. I'm sorry we couldn't save your finger."

"Well, I'm alive, so there is still that."

"True. Your claws will grow back. They will itch a lot and be more brittle at first. You must try to refrain from scratching your fingers and using them."

"I think I'll be okay."

"Well, my work here is done. There isn't more I can do. You should be able to leave the hospital in the evening, but no active duty for at least two weeks. And try to not use your paws, or at least the tip of your finger if you can avoid it. The nurse will change the dressing on your wounds. Miss Hopps, miss Wicce, I'll examine you now. Nothing invasive, don't worry."

While he did the same things with them than he did with Nick, Judy observed Nick's bandage being changed. When the yak took out the bandage at the base of his neck, she recognized at biting mark, and another on his arm. The shape was familiar. They were bunny's teeth marks. Judy's heart sank.

"Blood pressure a little high, but otherwise, you seem to be okay miss Hopps. You're leaving us in the evening too, as well as miss Wicce. Mister Wilde, you'll have to get your wound dressing changed at least once a day. Either you'll have to see a doctor or ask someone who knows first aid."

"I know someone." He said, thinking about Clawhauser. He'd buy him donuts for the duration of the healing process.

"Good. Also, given what happened to you, you must prepare yourself for... Problems. Best case scenario a few nightmares, worst case scenario, heavy PTSD." He took out a card and gave it to the fox. "This is a line to psychologist I trust. She mainly deals with civilians but also does great work with officers and veterans. Do not hesitate to use it."
Nick read the car. 'Dr Irma Procyon, Psychologist'. Nick smiled, it seemed the Procyon family treated both body and mind. "Thanks doc. Anything else ?"

"No. I'll be going. Have a nice day, and remember, do not overdo it. And keep this number handy." The raccoon left the room and Nick immediately noticed Judy's state.

Her paws were trembling and she was clearly avoiding his gaze. Scarlet noticed Nick's staring at the bunny.

"I'll leave you alone, I'm sure you have a lot of things to talk about." It was far from subtle, but at least she got to flee from the awkward silence or situation that was sure to follow.

They were now alone in the room and Judy had grabbed her trembling shoulders.

"Fluff, what's happening ?"

"I... Thought I'd never hurt you."

"You'd-"

"But I did."

"What ?" Nick looked at his wound on his arm and rubbed the one near his neck. "This ? This wasn't you."

"I-"

Nick hopped down from the bed. His strength had slightly gotten back so he had no problem getting to her before she had finished turning away. "No. Don't you dare think you hurt me. You didn't."

"I bit you. I hurt you." In all the worse situation she had imagined, all the bad stuff that could happen to them, she had never considered it. She had never considered she could get shot with the nighthowler and go savage.

He pulled her against his chest, blocking her arms when she tried to squirm away. "It was the Nighthowler. Not you. You couldn't fight it, you weren't there. You weren't in control."

"I hurt you." She went limp in his arm. Seeing her in that state was breaking his heart.

"You didn't. You know how the Nighthowler works. It doesn't make mammal regress, it doesn't put them in a fight or flight state. It sets the brain reaction to any stimulus to aggressive. It literally wasn't you. Your brain didn't have the possibility to react in any other way."

"I should have been m-more careful."

He turned her and she buried her face in his chest. She felt safe in his arms, his scent invaded her nose. A part of her felt like she shouldn't have the right to feel like this, not after she had done to him, but she didn't have the strength to push him away.

"I don't care. Maybe you made a mistake, maybe things could have played differently... But what led us to that situation were my mistakes. If I had better covered my tracks, if I hadn't left anything behind me, it wouldn't have happened. I'm the guilty one. Scarlet got hurt because of me, you got shot with the Night-"

Her face shot up. "No. That's not true. Those were those two mammals decisions. Vlad and Sean.
They're the ones to blame. They're the ones that kidnapped you and hurt you, they're the ones that chose that path."

"You really think so?" He asked with an expression between guilt and hope.

"Yes, I do."

"Then don't blame yourself for their decisions and actions either." He said with a smug grin full of love.

"You..."

"I?"

"Did you just..."

"It's called a hustle sweetheart."

She crawled up and kissed him. "I love you so much."

"I love you too." He kissed her again. "Now you need to tell me everything that happened before you got to me."

... 

"Seems like I was indirectly saved by Mr Big."

"Yeah, I'm sure Koslov was spying Vlad to begin with."

"Did Koslov get into trouble?"

"No, not according to Buster. If he's mentioned in the news, chances are it will bring trouble to Big's family though."

"Strangely, I'm sure the ZIA will negotiate with the ZPD to keep both his and their involvement hidden."

The bunny sighed. "I don't like keeping information from the public. Seems dishonest."

"All we can hope is that someday, this city won't need it anymore."

Suddenly, Judy's phone rang. She grabbed it. "Crud. It's my parents."

"Think they already know about all this?"

"I don't know if the story has aired yet. Only one way to find out." She was about to press the green button when the caller ID on the phone changed. It was the chief.

She immediately answered. "Hello chief?"

"Officer Hopps, I heard by doctor Procyon that officer Wilde had awoken. Is that true?"

"Yup. I'm up" Answered the fox.

"Perfect." They heard a sigh from the other end of the line. "I should have come to the hospital, but the ZIA is keeping me a bit too occupied. When will you be released?"
"This evening."

"Then I need you both to be at the precinct tomorrow morning."

"Yes Chief."

"Perfect." There was a short silence. "I'm glad you're both okay."

"Thanks chief."

And the buffalo hang up. "Well, that was strange." Remarked the fox.
"He didn't seem pissed." Added the bunny.

"How unusual. Where were we?"

Judy had to take refocus and put her ideas in order. "My parents were calling me."

"Maybe we should call back."

They were still a bit shaken but the chief quick call, but Judy quickly dialed her parent's number and pressed the green icon.

"Hello honey!" Came her mother's voice. "How are you doing?"

Obviously, they didn't know anything. Otherwise, her mother's tone would have been way different.

"I'm good." She said. There was short silence from the other end of the line.

"What's happening?" Came her father's worried voice.

Judy groaned. She could never keep anything from them. "First of all, I'm fine. Really. Nick is fine too. Everyone is fine."

"You're worrying us, Jude."

"Don't freak out okay? We ended up in a bit of a pickle yesterday and Nick was hurt. I kind of was too in a way, but I'm overall unharmed."

"Overall?" Came her mother's voice.

"Promise me you won't freak out." Silence was her answer. There was really no way around that. "I was shot with the Nighthowler."

"Oh sweet cheese and crackers." Came Stu's voice.

"I'm better. I got a serum shot, no lasting side effect, no nothing."

"That's good... Are you really okay?"

"I am."

"And Nick?" Asked Bonnie.

Nick decided to answer for himself. "Nothing much. Some wolf from my past with some loose ends to tie up. I'm okay now."
They heard Judy's parents sigh loudly. "Why must you both always end up in these kinds of situation."

"Comes with the job Dad. So why did you call ?"

Judy's parents were a bit taken aback by their daughter's sudden switch of topic, but they didn't try to bring back the conversation to the previous one. "We were calling about the wedding. Maybe we should call about that again later ?"

Judy and Nick looked at each other. They were both eager to find something else to think about than the events from the previous day. "No, we're fine." The bunny hopped down from the bed and found her notepad in her stuff stored in the room's closet. "So, what about our wedding ?"

"First of all, we'd like to know if Nick is really okay with us setting it up."

"I know it's a big deal for you. I mean, it's also for me, but there is not much tradition for foxes' weddings. As long as I get to invite whoever I want, you probably won't hear me complain."

"Wonderful. Did Judy talk to you a bit about bunny weddings ?"

"Humongous parties with way too much bunny ears to count ? Several wedding at once ? Yep, she did."

"So, to go a bit more in details." Came Stu's voice. "Each couple gets to exchange their vows individually in front of an official. There are also religious options if you want them."

"Nope. Not religious."

"Okay. Then you'll just have to sign the papers either during the ceremony or after. We usually do it afterwards, but it's really for you to chose."

"What do you prefer Carrots ?"

"I'd prefer after. Things tend to get lost during bunny weddings." Judy answered.

"True. We once lost one of the couples. They were found three days later in the cellar, stripped naked and completely hungover."

"Stu!" Came Bonnie's voice.

"What ? I'm just giving some trivia. And what about the date ? There is an event in about five months. We could easily get you grafted to it."

"What do you think Nick ?"

"I'm fine with that."

"Writing that down. I'll have some papers sent for you to sign up." Continued the male bunny. "Do you have an estimation of the number of guest you'll bring ?"

"Let us think for a minute..." Answered Judy. "I guess pretty much all the tri-burrows will be there ?"

"Yep."

The bunny opened the notepad app on her phone "So, Finnick and your mom, obviously. And
Hollie...

"Clawhauser. Oh, and Wolford and Blackfur."

"Yes, they have to come." She added another name Nick hadn't thought about.

"Bogo ? You want the chief to come at your wedding ? Not afraid he'll trample somebunny ?"

"I wouldn't want Clawhauser to feel lonely there." She smiled.

"You want them to out themselves, do you ? You're getting as mischievous as me."

The bunny didn't answer but smile turned to coy. "Fru Fru, her husband and Mr Big."

"They'll come with their bodyguards, we'll have to ask how many."

"Yep. Can I add Buster ?"

"I got no problem with that. Anyone else in mind ?"

"Nope. So it brings it to around 20 mammals, maybe more." She heard her father mumble something. "What did you say ?"

"I was just wondering how we'd accommodate for size difference. I'll need you to send me their names, species and addresses later."

"Now about the gown." Came her mother's voice.

"Sorry mom, I promised Fru-Fru she'd get to chose it."

"Oh." She sounded a bit disappointed. "Do you have best mammals and witnesses in mind ?"

"I'll ask Fru Fru for both, she'll probably say yes."

"And I'll ask Finnick." Added Nick.

They heard Stu giggle. "No bunny, this is sure to start some gossip."

"You mean, worse than a bunny marrying a fox ?" Asked Judy jokingly.

"Heh, maybe. Pretty much the whole tri-burrows knows about it by now." There was a sudden ringing noise in the background. "They're here soon."

"What is it ?" Asked Judy.

"We're having guests over, but they arriving sooner than we were expecting. I'm sorry to cut this short."

"That's okay dad, we'll talk later."

"Love you." Said her mother.

"Bye mom, bye dad."

"See you soon." Completed Nick. "They put this all in place really fast."

"We tend to be effective with administrative stuff. Handling big numbers..."
"Multiplying, that sort of stuff ?" He asked, nuzzling her ear.

"Exactly."

... 

It was shortly after noon when Judy and Nick heard a knock on the door.

"Come in" Said Nick.

The door literally flew open, and a red blur bolted through the door, leaping to Nick's neck. "Wow, easy there, mom. I'm still hurt."

"Is your work always going to be that dangerous ?" She said, hugging him tight.

"For the record, this wasn't completely job related."

"Ya scared us, kid."

"Oh come on. I've been in worse shapes before."

"Not by much."

Nick looked above his mother's shoulder to see the little fennec girl who was carrying a little bag with her. "Are you going to present me ?" He asked.

"Oh sorry. Yes." She got down from the bed and pushed the small fennec toward Nick which sat on the edge of his bed.

"Nick, meet Hollie."

"Hi Hollie. I'm Nick. Nice to meet you." He extended a paw and she looked at the bandages curiously. She precautionously shook it. "I'm sorry, I'm not really presentable right now." He got a shrug as answer.

"You don't talk much do you ?"

"No."

"Well that's fine. Someone I knew often said that you shouldn't talk if you have nothing to say."

"Not that it ever stopped ya'." Intervened Finnick.

"Well, you all love me for it." Said the fox, pulling Judy, who had approached, against him. "Don't you ?"

"I do. Oh, by the way, me and Nick will get married in five months."

"What ? That soon ?" Asked Finnick.

"Fin, you don't get to comment on how fast I marry my bunny." Quipped Nick. "So yes, that soon. You're my witness and best mammal by the way."

"Shure."

They fist bumped on it, lightly because of Nick's paw. Judy and Vivienne exchanged an annoyed glance. Judy suddenly had an idea. "Vivienne, what about you being my witness ?"
"Are you sure dear?"

"Well, I was yours, and the spot of matron of honor is already taken, so..."

"In that case, of course." She hugged the bunny.

"Ya shure ya don't want another mammal as a witness? The gals going to outnumber us."

"Nah. Maybe I could ask Bogo for the fun of it, but I can't the risk for him agree." Nick smiled. "Wait. What if I get Mr Big as my best mammal and Bogo as my witness?"

"No." Cut Judy. "I know that smile. You're not setting up this as a prank."

"Alright. Alright. No pranking the chief using a crimelord. You're no fun, fluff."

"That's why you love me."

"That, I do."

... Nick still felt a bit weak from the blood loss, but apart from the pulsating pain his paws, he felt alright. Judy at his side, they entered the precinct, stopping at Clawhauser's desk to greet him.

"Hi guys! How are you doing?"

"We're good." Answered the bunny. "You?"

"I'm fine." He leaned forward to talk to them a bit more privately. "I heard about what happened. It seems the ZIA want to cover it up and the chief is pretty pissed about that."

The two mates glanced at each other. "Doesn't surprise me." Remarked the fox.

"Nick I'm sorry for what happened to you, and for your..." He pointed at the fox's left paw.

"Well, on the bright side, I lost a bit of weight. I don't recommend the diet however."

The cheetah had an awkward laugh before turning to the bunny. "And I know about the whole Nighthowler thing too... Are you really okay Judy?"

"Ben, don't worry about me. I don't even remember what happened when I was under its influence."

"Okay. Well I guess you should go see the chief. And if you need anything, just ask, alright?"

"Will do Ben."

"Thanks big guy."

They waved while getting away toward the chief's office.

"Think other officers than him know about this?" Asked the bunny.

"Hope not. I don't want to have to find a joke each time some mammal express concern for my paw."

They arrived in front of the door and the bunny knocked. "Come in." Came the chief's gruff voice.
Both mammals entered and sat on the chair that was in front of the buffalo's desk. "I'm happy that you both look mostly okay. According to your doctor, there won't be any long-lasting sequel." Stated the buffalo.
"Apart from the missing finger, no."

"Good. Officer Hopps, I'm also glad you being shot by the Nighthowler didn't have a more dramatic resolution."

"Thanks sir."

"Now with all this out of the way, let's get down to business. We should have a few minutes before agent Savage arrives. I've read officer Buster's report and according to him, you were shot while you were about to cuff the culprit. Any thoughts about this?"

The bunny gritted her teeth. "I looked away for a second to ask if they were okay. I thought the wolf was unconscious."

"Not an uncommon mistake. At least you weren't harmed. I trust it's not one you'll do again."

"I won't sir."

"Outstanding. Getting back before you entered the premises, why did you choose to leave the bear named Koslov to wait alone for the ZPD?" The chief's expression was neutral.

"Well, I very well couldn't let a civilian come with us. And I couldn't really tell him to go away. I know that an officer should never separate themselves from their partner so I couldn't tell Buster to stay with him."

"And what if someone had tried to escape from the warehouse? Did you consider the civilian's safety?"

"I did consider it, but I believed he knew how to take care of himself considering his past."

The chief scribbled something on the file that was in front of him. "And lastly, what about you decision to not wait for more officers to back you up?"

"In case of kidnapping, every moments count. The less time the victims spend at the paws of their captors, the higher their chances of survival are."

"Would you say you were influenced by the identity of said victims."

Nick gritted his teeth, feeling the question was a bit unfair. Judy winced but answered. "Yes."

The chief scribbled a last thing and rested his chin on his intertwined hooves. "Despite your... Creative interpretation of the usual procedure concerning Koslov, I must say your way of handling that situation was almost perfect. You did make the mistake of assuming the culprit was down, but no officer can handle this kind of situation perfectly. You were under high stress and came out on top. Good job."

The bunny exhaled with relief. "Thanks sir."

There was sudden knock on the door. "I hoped we'd have more time to talk." Remarked the buffalo. "Come in."

Jack Savage entered the office. "Hello officers. Hello chief."
"Hello agent Savage."

"So, let's cut to the chase. We wish for the minimal amount of info to come out on this case."

"I already know that. I simply don't agree with what you refer as 'the minimal amount.' "

The fox lifted a paw. "Can I know exactly what amount we're talking about."

"We wish that neither mine, nor Koslov's name was revealed. No mention of the ZIA's implication, nor of Nick as a victim. For the rest, we don't really care."

"Keeping your involvement a secret won't be hard. The only three mammals that saw you near the warehouse were officer Buster, officer Hopps and the civilian named Koslov. For Koslov however, it complicates things. Officers from Tundratown precincts saw him, and I'm pretty sure his name was mentioned in their reports."

"Revealing Koslov's involvement with either the ZPD or the ZIA could disturb Mr Big's operations."

The chief frowned.

"I know how it sounds like, but we both know that as far as crimeboss go, having Big's family on top rather than another is a good thing."

"True." Reluctantly agreed the chief.

"I may have a suggestion." Intervened the bunny. The three other mammals turned to her. "There are already a few rumors that both me and Nick have personal ties with Big's family, and it's known that they were a help in the resolution of the Nighthowler case. Maybe if we let it heard that they used me to get rid of Vlad, it could be a good thing. And maybe Vlad could have wanted to use Nick to pressure Big's family into... Well anything. And it would explain why Koslov would have given me the info."

"Still doesn't explain how all the henchmen in the warehouse got dispatched."

Jack had a cold smile. "I'm pretty sure ZPD's forensic already have a leading theory, confirmed by the ballistic."

The chief groaned. It was the second time he'd have to hide the truth for a case related to the ZIA. "I won't release a lie. I won't throw in the supposition of my officers' relation with the mob. I'll say they received a tip by a civilian named Koslov and that's it. Your name won't be mentioned. That's the best I can give you."

The striped bunny scratched his chin. "It should be enough. I'm sure we'll manage something on our end." He got down from his seat. "If that's all, I'm going to go. I have work ahead of me."

The ZIA agent having left, the chief sighed loudly. "Nick, I hope you'll be able to get us and the ZIA on the same page. I really don't like the way they handle their cases."

"I'll do my best, sir."

"Good. Now, I'd like to know how you got kidnapped. I'd also like you to go over what happened at the warehouse. I know it's probably not a memory you want to relive this soon, but it's necessary. What you say now will be considered as your statement, so no need to write me a report later."

The chief put a recorder on the desk and crossed his hooves, waiting for the fox to begin his story.

Nick swallowed, steeling himself again the memory he was about to face again. Judy gently took
one of his paws. "Well, all began when I receive that text..."

... 

Nick had finished his story and the chief clicked the stop button on the recorder. "Usually I'd say something about leaving business unfinished. It could have been better and it could have been worse. No mammal can get out of this unscathed, don't hesitate to seek help should you require it."

"I'll keep that in mind."

The fox noticed the slight glint of disbelief in the chief's gaze.

"Was there anything else?"

"No. I think we're done here. I'm giving you both two days off, full pay. Officer Buster will have to make due with parking duty. If you need more, it will be sick leave."

"Before we go sir, we have something to ask." Said the bunny.

"Go ahead."

"Would you come to our wedding?"

The buffalo blinked a few times and the shadow of a few contradictory expressions came and went on his face. "Did you ask Clawhauser yet?"

"No."

The chief pressed a button on his phone. "Officer Clawhauser, could you come to my office please."

"Coming right away sir."

A few seconds later, the cheetah knocked and enter. "What do you need sir."

"You're off duty for the next forty seconds." He then turned to Judy. "Could you please repeat your question Officer Hopps?"

Nick casually put paws on his ears while Judy asked. "Would you two come to our wedding?" As she saw the large smile grow on his face, the bunny imitated her mate and so did the chief.

"AAAAAAWWWWWWWWW ! Oh ! Em ! Goodness ! Yes ! Yes, of course." He grabbed both of the mammals and hugged them.

Nick seemed to suddenly think about something. "And what about being my second groomsmammal?"

With the feline's arms restraining their movements, they could barely reach their ears in time again.

"AAAAAAWWWWWWWWW ! Of course ! Do I get to organize your bachelor party?"

"You'll have to see about that with Finnick."
You're nervous.” Nick was relaxing, his paw behind his head, while Judy was driving. Judy was highly focused on the road and hadn't talked for at least an hour. She looked very stiff, and she was driving a tad slow.

"Yeah."

"You want to turn back?"

"If I did that, Fru-Fru would put a bounty on my head."

"Ooooh, crime related jokes, you really are nervous.” He approached and gave her a peck on the cheek. "Want to make a pause?"

"No. The sooner we arrive the better.” She was keeping her eyes on the straight road.

"You know, the wedding is in two days. Whether we arrive today or tomorrow doesn't make a big difference. We could stop at a hotel. We'd take a long relaxing bath,

I'd give you a massage...” He ran a claw along the bunny's neck and saw her shiver.

"Nope. And no teasing when I'm driving.” She pushed away his paw but not before kissing it. "It's the crowd. The whole thing will be on a stage in one of my families

field. I saw the pictures, it going to be really big." She sighed. "We should have gone for something more intimate."

"Well, if it can reassure you, I'm not really liking this any more than you do."

The bunny felt the urge to bump her head on the wheel but didn't. "Why did I accept for my parents to put this all in place?"

"I think your exact were 'my parents won't ever let me live it down' so basically : pressure."

The bunny sighed loudly. "You're right. I need a pause."

He kissed her neck. "Maybe find a place with bushes. Nature always helps you relax."

"No, we're just switching seats."

"You're no fun, fluff."

Judy was resting her feet on the dashboard. "So, you didn't tell me what you did for your bachelor party."

The fox had a corner smile. "Well, it was originally Finnick's idea... They took me from the apartment, blindfolded me... And I found myself in front of a lot of mostly naked mammals."
"Finnick took you to a strip club ?"

"And if you really want to know, it was one owned by Mr Big."

"Did you see things you liked ?" She smiled to hide her jealous expression.

"Well, there was that really nice and flexible otter... Did a number with a pole and an aquarium. I'll send you the video, just in case you want to try it out."

"You'll tell Finnick he's off the godfather list."

The fox chuckled. "Well, it was originally Finnick's idea, but really, it received a little tweak from Wolford and Clawhauser."

"What kind of tweak ?"

"I never said the otter was a female." Smiled the fox.

"Wait... It was a male stripper club ?"

"Yup."

"Oh sweet cheese and crackers." Guffawed Judy. "A gay club, for your bachelor party. How did Buster take it ?"

"He found the place. He worked there for a while before joining the ZPD."

"He danced ?"

"No, he was a bouncer in the small mammal part of the club."

"I at least hope you had fun !"

"I'd even go as far as to call it a journey of self-discovery." Grinned the fox while glancing at the bunny over his sunglasses.

"I'll tell to Gideon to watch his back around you."

"Destroy all my dreams and hopes, why don't you. Too bad Finnick had to leave half-way through to go keep Hollie, but otherwise my mom wouldn't have been able to join you for your party. How was it by the way ?"

Judy felt her face heat up a bit. "It was nice."

"As in embarrassing ?"


Nick flashed her the corner of a grin. "And who decided what you would do for this nice relaxing and totally not crazy night ?"

"Well, it was mostly Fru-Fru. But Blackfur decided it was a bachelorette party and should be more..." The bunny stopped talking and took a water bottle from the bag in the backseat.

"Guess I'll have to ask my mom."

Judy choked on her water. When he fit of cough stopped she could finally articulate. "We went
dancing. Just dancing."

"And that's what put you in that state. Now I'll definitely ask my mom."

The bunny sighed. "Of for carrot's sake. We went to the Disco night at Mystic's Spring Oasis."

"Oh."

The bunny noticed a bit of disappointment in Nick's voice. "What ?"

"I kinda wanted to bring you there sometimes. Did you like it ?"

"You wanted to bring me here ? Like as a date ?"

"A surprise date from which you wouldn't have been able to back out from, but basically, yeah. As a date. And you didn't answer my question."

"Yes. You ended up forgetting that you're naked and it's quite nice to dance like that. And freeing too."

"I knew you'd like it.."

"You've already been there ?"

"Couple of times. Well, I guess we could still go on Tantric Tuesday."

The bunny's face instantly shot red. "What ? No ! Never ! It's not some... And you're pulling my leg."

"Yup."

The bunny frowned. "Bad fox. So you have nothing against your mother being naked around a bunch of random mammals and dancing her ass off to the music ?"

Nick smirked. "First of all, I have no problem about it as long as I'm not there to see it. Second, I'm pretty sure Finnick would like it a lot less. Except if he was there. Third, if you bring my mom into it, I'll have to send tickets to your parents to even the field. And one for you to accompany them."

"Alright. Message receiv-"

"On tantric tuesday. OW. Okay, I deserved that one." Said the fox, rubbing his ribs where the bunny had punched him. Nick blinked a few times. "Wait, it was Blackfur's idea ?"

"Mostly yes. Fru-Fru had suggested a stripper club at first, but I think she guessed I wouldn't be into that."

"So our panda is the stripping kind. Hope you got some photos for Wolford."

"You're never dropping that joke, are you ?"

"Never. But with the shirt dropping at Clawhauser's party a few months ago, I'm beginning to wonder if she doesn't have a thing against clothes. Maybe if I get her to drink a lot during the wedding."
"You're not getting her drunk."

"Not sure she'll need much of my help. Hey, only fifteen miles left. We're almost there."

... 

The car screeched on the gravel in front of the Hopp's house. It was quickly surrounded by a whole bunch of bunnies, most of them being kids.

"Judy !"

"Nick !"

"There you are ?"

"How was the trip ?"

"Are you really getting married ?"

"Kids ! Stop annoying our guests, I'm sure they're tired." Came Bonnie's voice as she got out of the house. "Judy, Nick, it's so nice to see you !" She hugged them both.

"Nick ! Jude the Dude ! It's so nice to see you !" Stu left the house in turn and hugged his daughter before shaking Nick's paw. "How was the trip ?"

"Shorter with your daughter keeping me company."

Judy had already opened the car's trunk and taken out the luggage. "Do you need help hon ?" Asked her mother.

"Thanks mom, but we got this." Nick came and took his own suitcase.

They got to Judy's old room, and set their suitcases here. "Well, it's a good thing Fru-Fru reserved a hotel in town, because her bears bodyguard would never have fitted in here." Remarked the fox.

"Yeah. I'm still surprised you mom preferred to sleep in the house however. Fru-Fru would have had no problem paying for her room."

"Mom doesn't really like handouts. And I think she wants to spend more time with your parents, get to know them better."

"She'll probably get to know the whole family. I hope it won't be to overwhelming for them."

"Well, as a fox, I can say that all those fluffy little butts hopping around are more exciting than really stressful."

"Nick !"

The fox felt the sting of Judy's elbow in his ribs. "Just kidding Carrots. But on a more serious note, I'm more worried for Hollie. She opened up a bit more but she still pretty shy. And I'm not sure immersion in the world of the top tier hugging competition contenders would be a good thing."

Judy froze for a couple of seconds. "You prepared that one for a long time, did you not ?"

"Yup. But I'm still worried for her."
"I think she'll do fine. I'll tell my parents to keep an eye open just in case, but she should be okay. Let's get back down, I have to greet the rest of my family."

"The whole ten thousand of them?" Nick quipped.

Judy twitched.

"Okay, come here."

"What?"

"Just come. I'm not going to punch you."

The fox took a few steps toward his mate with his paws in his pockets, still sporting his relaxed demeanor. The bunny caught his tie and pulled on it, but instead of kissing him, she wrapped her arms around his neck and hugged him.

"What's that for."

"Shh." Her paw scratched the base of his neck and she felt him slowly relax. "You're stressed out."

"How did you know?"

"You get insufferable when you're under pressure."

"Silly bunny, I'm always insufferable."

She flicked one of his ears.

"Sorry."

He leaned more into the hug, burying his face in the base of the bunny's neck, breathing in her scent. His heart slowed down a bit.

"Better?"

"Yeah. Thanks fluff." He kissed her. "You always know what to do."

"I know. I'm the best. Let's go greet my ten thousand siblings, now. Otherwise, we won't have time to get married."

As they left the room, they noticed the footsteps noise that went away from them in the hallway.

"We were spied on?" asked the fox.

"Privacy is not something you'll have much of in the burrows."

They reached the large living room in which they found at least two dozens bunny of all sizes. Judy began hugging one bunny after the other, but quickly those greetings turned into a group hug.

"Evan, Lily, how are you? Riley, you've grown again! Ellis, you lost some weight. Kyle you gained some."

"Hey!"

"It suits you. Phoebe, I like your new hair. Isabelle, Oscar, I hope you're both well..."
Each bunny came and shook his paw. It seemed they knew that other species were not as much into physical contact as they were. He had tried to remember each name at first, but given how many mammals he was about to meet in the next days, he quickly gave up.

"Judy, hi." Came a voice from the room entrance. Judy turned to see Jessica. The room felt like it suddenly got colder.

"Hi Jessica." Greeted Judy, slightly less awkwardly but only by a hair.


"Hey guys !" Greeted Gideon, appearing behind her through the door. "Glad ya made it here."

"Okay kids, time to clear the room." Said Bonnie, clapping her paws a few times.

"But moooom !" Came multiple voices.

"Out. You too Stu."

"But Boooon !"

She pushed them all outside to give them some relative privacy and closed the door.

"I-" Began Judy's cousin before stopping. Gideon tapped her shoulder encouragingly. She took a deep breath. "I owe you an apology. I was stupid and I said mean thing, and I was wrong." She bit her lips. "Saying a predator and prey couldn't be together, that their relationship couldn't work... It was... I see it know, it has nothing to do with species or anything. If it's the right mammals it will just work out." She was bending her finger and didn't dare to look up. "I hope you'll forgive me."

Judy lept forward and hugged her cousin. "Of course I do. I'm glad you changed your opinion on this."

"Well, that's not that surprising." Said Nick with a smile.

Judy glanced at them "Why do you say that ?"

"Oh, no reason." Smirked the fox, pointing at Jessica's paw.

Judy looked down and saw the engagement ring. Her mouth fell as she put two and two together.

"Sorry again Judy. I wanted to apologize face to face. And sorry I didn't tell you about that too."

"What- But- How-"

Nick came and put a paw around his bunny's shoulder. "Easy fluff. Use your words."

"You're engaged ?"

"Yup. We're actually gettin' married in two days." Answered the chubby fox.

"Huh ?"

"Yeah. You're actually first on the list. We're the third couple after y'all. We didn't want to steal the spotlight. Wouldda been unfair."

Judy had still difficulty to grasp the whole situation. She took a couple of deep breath. "Wait. How
"Did that happen? And when?"

"Short version, I realised I was stupid and I was hiding from my feelings. And then I confessed to him." Quickly answered Jessica.

"And the long version?" Asked Nick.

"Well, we better sit, 'cuz it ain't gon' be too short." Said Gideon, directing them to the sofa.

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_January of 2020_

"Ya know, ya don't have to come every day. It's pretty calm dese days and ya need some rest too." Came Gideon's voice from the back of the shop.

"Nonsense. You have no one else to help you right now. I'll stop coming once you get a new employee."

The truth was, Gideon was in no hurry to find a new employee. Having Jessica come every day had brightened his life, and he knew that without her, the place would feel way more empty.

Jessica was cleaning up the counter as they were about to close when the door opened.

"Hi guys."

"Hi Travis! What can I do for you?"

"Hi Jessy. I'd like that strawberry pie, right here." Said the weasel taking out his wallet. "You're here often these days. You know, if you spend all that time together, you might as well get married." He joked.

The bunny's face heated up. She took the pie and put it in a box. "You shouldn't joke about that. I have enough of one depraved bunny in my family. I mean, I'm not interested in foxes, and I'm pretty sure Gideon isn't interested in bunnies anyway. Prey and predators together. Hah." She took the banknote Travis was holding. "A fox and a bunny." She snorted. "Can you imagine anything more incompatible. No way in hell I'd date a fox." She looked up, extending a paw to give the weasel his change when she saw his embarrassed gaze at something behind her.

_Please don't be there. Please be in the back of the shop._

She risked a glance back and all blood left her face. She had seen Gideon sad before, when he messed up a batch of bakeries or when some bunny would say something hurtful about foxes, but the blank expression he was wearing now was way worse.

"I gotta... I need ta look for something in da back... Right. In the back. Hi Travis. Sorry. Gotta go... Look for..." The fox turned and left.

She looked back at Travis who was wearing an awkward expression. "You really believe what you just said?"

"What?"

"About predators and prey. Foxes and bunnies being together."

"Of course." She answered after a second of hesitation that Travis didn't miss.
"I don't know... I think that we're more than our own species, but I'm not a highly educated predator. Maybe I'm too dumb to understand that prey and predators shouldn't even be friends to begin with." He gave her a conniving wink.

"Huh ?"

"I'll let you close the store. You may want to go and help him found that 'thing' in the back." Probably the pieces of his broken heart.

The weasel directed himself to the door and turned the little sign to set it to 'close' and waved as he left.

The bunny stayed frozen in place for what seemed to be hours. When she finally found the courage to look for the fox, she found him sitting on a cardboard box, silently weeping, and vainly trying to wipe his eyes.

"Ya should go. I can close da shop by myself." He said between two sobs when he noticed her presence. She was pretty tempted to take him up on his offer but there was no way she could leave him that state.

"I'm sorry. I didn't want to make you sad."

"Tha's okay. I already knew wot ya thought about all that wid' us foxes." He had rested his elbows on his knees, but his head was still slumped, like he was trying to hide his crying face.

"Gid, I didn't mean that foxes were bad or..." She felt a bit lost. She knew she could sometimes be a bit fuzzy in the way she expressed herself, but she didn't think she had been insulting. "I just said that bunnies and fox couldn't work as a..."

"Yeah. Ya said that."

Jessica felt lost. Something in her mind felt stuck. He couldn't take it that bad, they were just friends. They could be friend. She wouldn't abandon him just because...

The bunny had fallen mute. Understanding that Gideon had feelings for her had been a slap in the face, and she was now completely stunned. A string was pulled in her chest, but she quickly dismissed the silly feeling. She closed her eyes and took a couple of breath.

"I'm sorry Gid. If I can do anything, just tell me, alright? We're still friends."

The fox gritted his teeth. It was true, they were friends, but he didn't want to only be her friend. "I'll tell ya." His head slumped down. "Maybe don't come tomorrow, I need a bit of time to think."

Jessica felt something akin to a sharp pain in her chest. "O-okay. See you then."

"See ya."

She left the shop in a state of confusion and mixed feelings, fighting a lost battle against rising tears.

She had barely slept that night, and had been up at the usual hour, even though it was of no use since she didn't have to go and help Gideon open the shop. At least she could use her other work to busy her mind. As each weekday, right after she had finished Gideon set up shop, she went to the post office to prepare to deliver mail. Her shift ended at noon, and she knew she would have a bit of paperwork to do in the afternoon. As she was sitting on a bench on the street, about to enjoy her meal, she received a text.
"I did a bit of thinking. Can you come take a drink with me this evening? I'll close the shop sooner."

"Of course." She immediately replied. Two contradictory feelings emerged following that message. On one side, she did want to see him, and to be here for him, but on the other, she was afraid that whatever they would talk about, she wouldn't really like it.

She arrived at the bar near Gideon's bakery, where they usually shared a drink after work. He was already sitting at a table, and had already downed a beer. He had chosen a booth a bit removed from the others so they'd have privacy.

"Hi Gid."

"Hey Jess."

She sat in front of him and a waitress quickly arrived to take her order. They stared at their drinks for a long time before one of them decided to talk.

"So..." Began Gideon.

"Yeah?"

"I... Oh crap. This is hard." He twisted his finger anxiously. "Alright, here goes. As Ya probably guessed, I have feelings for ya. I just didn't want ya to learn of it like dat."

I wanted to invite you to dinner and catch a movie. Then I'd tell ya I have feelin's for ya. I mean, I knew ya would probably not feel da same way, but I had to try. Ta be honest, I wos happy my old employee left, I got ta see ya more often."

Jessica stayed mute. She didn't know what to say. That string in her heart was pulled again, but she pushed the feeling away.

"So... I mean, I know this is direct, but what do ya... How do ya see me?"

"Well... You're nice, and sweet. And you're a good friend..." She got stuck here. She didn't want to say more, it would make it too definitive, too final. And she felt like if she said more, their relation would never recover from it.

"Ya don't see me like 'dat?"

She didn't move, and kept her stare on her chocolate mug. "I don't-" She suddenly felt her tears rise. "I-" She was short breathed. "-dont have..." sSe felt her paws tremble. "I don't- I..." She felt sick, the deaf pain appeared in her chest again.

"Alright. I get it." He sighed sadly. "I get it."

"Is there anything I can do?"

"Nah. I'll get over you on my own. Those are my feelings, it's up to me to deal wid' dem."

An awkward silence fell, which the fox broke a few seconds later.

"Actually, there's a thing ya could do, or not do. But ya won't like it."
"Tell me. I'll do anything if it can help."

"Could you... Not come to work for a couple of weeks?" He kept staring at the table. "It ain't like I don't want to be your friend, but... I need some alone time to think. You know put stuff in perspective. And Ah know I won't be able to do that if I see ya."

Jessica swallowed back the rising tears. "Are you sure?"

"Yeah. I just... I need 'dat. Please."

"Alright." She got up from her seat. "I'll give you space, if that's what you need. I- I'm sorry."

"It's not your fault. Don't apologise."

She put a bill on the table to pay for the drink she hadn't even touched. "If you need anything, you still have my phone number." She quickly turned away to hide the fact that she was now crying and quickly left the bar.

The bunny jumped on her bike, barely taking the time to put her helmet on and launched the roaring beast down bunny-burrows' main street. She needed the speed.

She needed to put as much distance between her and the bakery. To let the whistling wind take away the pain. It always worked. Each time she felt bad, the speed soothed her pain.

She had left the city and was driving half-aimlessly down the roads, on an indirect path to her home, when she suddenly saw the light of a police cruiser behind her. She sighed and pulled over. The car stopped behind her and the ram officer got out of it. She began to take off her helmet and prepared to receive an earful from the aging officer.

"Miss Springer. You again. It's the second time in three months I catch... Oh."

She lifted an eyebrow as she saw him take something from his pocket. He gave her a tissue. She lifted a brow.

"Are you okay?" He asked

She took the tissue and noticed she was still crying. "I don't know officer Rammington."

The ram felt embarrassed, on one hoof, she was speeding, and not only a bit, but on the other, she really seemed in distress. He couldn't understand where the overly cheery and energetic bunny had disappeared.

"Maybe you shouldn't be driving right now."

"Yeah. I shouldn't."

He could have proposed to take her home, but he couldn't really leave the bike here either, and asking for a tow truck would mean paperwork and having to find an adequate explanation.

"I won't give you a ticket, and I'll stay here until you feel better. And you better not speed again, or that time, be sure you'll have a ticket. And not a small one."

"Okay. Thanks officer."

"Don't mention it." He glanced at his deer partner who had put his feet on the dashboard and his hooves behind his antlers. It seemed the guy had understood they'd stay here for a bit. "Wanna talk about it?"
"Not really. Sorry."

"That's okay. It's your business."

In the end, it took her only fifteen minutes and a complete tissue pack to calm her down. She climbed back on her bike and the cruiser accompanied her home. She went to bed without eating and barely slept that night.

She woke early the next few days, feeling empty and restless. She would usually be at Gideon's bakery, but she couldn't go, and even if she could, she wouldn't be able to face him. The events of that evening played on a loop in her mind as she was delivering mail. She was finishing her early shift that Saturday morning when she came across Travis' home. He was leaning against the mailbox in his bathrobe, a cup of coffee in his paw.

"Hi Jessica." She never knew what to make of Travis. He had a thing for hitting where it hurt the most, but he never seemed like he enjoyed it. Despite the little falling out him and Gideon had had when the weasel had started taking his life in his own paws, he had gone back in the fox's life when Gideon had decided to become an adult. She couldn't say he was the fox's best friend, but he certainly was the one that had known him the longest.

"Hi Travis." She said giving him his mail instead of putting it in the box.

"Talked to Gid recently ?"

The bunny froze. "That's none of your business."

"He's my friend. That makes it kind of my business." He sipped on his coffee, giving the bunny an inquisitive gaze.

She sighed. "No. We haven't really talked since... Well, since what you know. Now sorry to leave you like this, but you're not the only one I have to deliver mail to." She had spoke a bit dryly, but she didn't feel like having this kind of conversation with him.

"Can you do me a favor ?" He asked out of the blue.

"If it means I can get back to work, anything."

"You should go and tell him of your feelings for him."

"I don't-" She had felt a weight on her chest the moment she had started talking, but the weasel didn't let her finish.

"Or of you absence of feelings. Whatever. Guess you weren't that close, but it's understandable since he's a fox and you're a bunny."

She was heating up. She was under the impression that Travis was purposely getting on her nerves. "I don't see what it has to do with anything. We can be friends, whatever our species !"

"Yeah, well I'm not sure you really believe that. I'm not sure I do either. If he was a bunny, I'm pretty sure you would have been together for a long time. Seems ironic that the burrows' most close minded mammal ended up being so open, when everyone around him seems to stay stuck in their ways, huh ?"
"I'm not stuck in my ways !"

The weasel lifted a sarcastic brow. "I won't be the one to try and change your mind about that." He chuckled. "But you're right, what you do with your feelings isn't my business. Forget I said anything." He made a half turn and headed back to his house, mail in hand. "Have a nice day bunny. Try to not think to hard about it, it's probably simpler than you think." He glanced down at the mail. "Bills. Figures."

She watched the weasel disappeared in his house with a scowl.

"What does that rat know about friendship anyway." She muttered, getting back on the post-office bike. "He doesn't know anything. He wasn't there for Gideon when he fell out of school. He abandoned him like the rest."

*Like I did at the shop.*

"He asked me to leave him alone. It had to be because he wanted it."

*And now he's alone. And he hasn't hired anyone yet so he's working twice the amount to keep up.*

"It's not my fault. He knows that if he wants anything, he just has to ask."

*So what about going there and telling him that I don't have any feelings for him ?*

Lost in her thought, she bumped into the curb and almost lost control of the bike. She took back control quickly enough and stopped, to put the mail in a mailbox.

"I don't want to say that to him. I don't want to hurt him."

*Well, I already did. So maybe I should finish what I started.*

"That sucks. I wish this wasn't like that."

*Like what ? Like he didn't have feelings for me ?*

The bunny climbed back on the bike and started driving it again down the street. A couple more streets, and she would have finished delivering mail for the day.

"I wish the world wasn't like it was."

*So I'm saying I want him to have feeling for me.*

"Maybe..."

*That doesn't make sense. Why would I want that ?*

The string on her heart was right there in her figurative paw, daring her to pull it. She yanked once and for all, tearing up the fabric and opening something she had unconsciously sealed away.

"Because, I have feelings for him too."

She had frozen midway, as she was sliding a letter in a mailbox.

"I have feelings for him." She repeated.

The realization was strange. In one way it felt freeing, but she now felt trapped. She had feelings
for him, and she knew he felt things for her too. She couldn't escape it. She almost wanted to take it back, to run from it.

She stepped into a strange blurry world where the letter almost delivered themselves while she struggled against her contradictory feelings. They couldn't be together.

They couldn't. Only bad stuff would come out of it. Chances were he would hurt her, and her him. She didn't want to hurt him.

The last letter had been delivered and she was driving aimlessly.

At eleven in the morning, on a saturday, Gideon's bakery was empty, like the town streets. Bunny-burrows was beyond calm during the week end.

In autopilot, she got down from the bike and ended with her paw on the door handle. The fox wasn't behind the counter. She pushed the door and the little bell over it rang.

"Make yo' choice. I'll be dere soon." Came a voice from the back store.

"I can't tell him that." She muttered. "It can end only badly. I can't do that to him." She muttered under her breath.

"Go then. I can just leave. He hasn't seen me. He won't even know it was me.

"I can't go."

"Why?"

"Because I can't. I need to... I need."

"Sorry for the wait. What can I do ya fo-" The fox had frozen, the moment he had seen her. A mammal on each side of the counter, they were to face. Well, he was staring at her, but she was staring at her shoes. "Hello Jess." He greeted has warmly as he could. She could hear the tinge of sadness in his voice however.

*I can do it. We can do it.*

"I- I should..." She made a step back. "I shouldn't have come. Sorry."

He had made a step toward her but was still behind the counter.

"I sh- should go." She turned around and walked toward the door.

*I don't want to leave. Stay. Please tell him. Please !

"I can't."

Her paw reached for the handle.

"Wait ! Please, wait !" He asked, almost desperately. She heard him skirt around the counter.

*Don't come near me. I don't want you to see me cry. Not today.*

"Ya don't have to go." He said, a couple of steps behind her. "I missed ya."

*I missed you too.*
"I'm sorry for what I asked. I'm sorry I told ya to stay away. I know you're upset with me."

You're not the one I'm upset with.

"I know you can't have feeling for me."

You're so wrong.

"I mean... I ain't the sharpest tool in the shed."

You're so nice.

"I ain't no handsome fox or anytin''

I love your cute smile. I love how you walk. I love how you talk. I love how shy you are around everyone but always friendly all the same.

"And I get that it's unfair to push ya away because you don't return my feelings."

And it was unfair of me to push you away because I returned them.

"But that don't mean we can't be friends, can it?"

She began pushing the door.

Please stop me. You have to stop me. I need you to stop me.

She felt his paw on her shoulder.

"Please Jess, you don't have to go."

"I'm afraid."

"You're my friend. I ain't never gonna hurt you."

"I know. I'm afraid- I." He was so close and she almost could feel his breath on her neck. "The feelings..."

"Ya don't need to do anyt'in' about them. I'll deal wit' them myself."

The ones I have for you.

She pulled back the door and turned the little sign that now had its "closed" side in the outside. She turned around and hugged him close.

"Whoa 'dere Jess." He half-whispered, a bit taken aback.

"I'm sorry."

"Don't be. I'm okay."

"I was being stupid."

She glanced up and he saw she was crying. He caught one of her tears with a claw.

"Hey, hey. Don't be like 'dat. I shouldn't have layed 'dat on you like I did." He put himself on one knee to be at eye level. "Ah' promise I'll-"
"I didn't run because of your feelings. Those aren't the ones I'm afraid about. I-" She bit her lips.

*Do it. Say it. I want to. I promise it's going to be okay. I'm strong enough.*

"I'm in love with you."

She thought he was going to be taken aback. She thought he was going to make that face. The one he made when something happened that he didn't see coming. She loved that face. But instead, he did better.

*Of course, he would taste like blueberry pie.*
June 2020

Judy had a tear in her eyes at the end of the story and had pulled closer to Nick. She would never admit it to anyone but, she had always been a sucker for cute love-stories, and her pawflix history was proof of that.

"Well, Jessica, I'm glad you went over your... Um..."

"Bigotry problem?" She proposed, still holding Gideon's paw.

"Yeah."

"I'm glad I did too."

"Ain't complainin' myself." Added the chubby fox.

"That's good you're finally together. Bottling up feelings... It's not good." Said Nick. "But it's not been more than six months... Why are you getting married that soon?"

"Oh. I'm pregnant." Casually answered the bunny.

Judy's jaw fell. Nick's brows furrowed.

"Wos a nice surprise too... Didn't think bunnies and foxes could... You know..."

Nick's squinting eyes went from one face to another. It wasn't possible. He had checked and double-checked himself. On a biological point of view, there simply was no way it could happen. Something fishy was going on.

Judy took back control of her jaw. "But... I mean it's not possible... I mean, I don't want to imply anything but-"

"Yes?" Asked Jessica with a candid smile.

Nick stared at her.

Ooooh, you cheeky little fuzzball.

"Huh. Well, you see Gideon, biology... Oh sweet cheese and crackers, I really don't want to explain that. Nick a little help."

"Sorry fluff, not my family, yet. You're on your own." He tried to say as seriously as he could.

Judy rubbed her eyes. "Oh crud. This is going to be such a pain."

She heard Nick snicker at her side.

"Nick! This isn't funny! You know what it's means if she's pregnant! There aren't a lot of
Nick leaned toward her. "Well, from where I sit, there are two explanations. Either our little bunny here wasn't completely faithful."

A gasp, that came to him as fake, came from Jessica and Gideon.

"Or they're trying to pull our legs, and succeeding in your case."

"What?" She glanced at the couple and saw that they were barely containing their hilarity. "Oh, by the gods! You two are so immature!"

"Sorry Jude. I had to. For old time sake." Said Jessica between two giggles. "I hope you're not mad."

"No. You just... You always get me. It's been like that since we were little." Judy frowned.

"That's because you're too honest, fluff. Some mammals are just born mischievous. You were born straight as an arrow." He gave her a peck on the cheek. "It's one of you numerous endearing qualities. And they reason why it's so fun and easy to prank you."

She gave him an elbow nudge. "Foxes."

"Hey, I ain't that bad. Well I used to be, but..." Said Gideon.

"No Gid. You're perfect. You're my big cute foxy fox." Smiled Jessica

Nick glanced at his bunny. "All that cheese is bound to make me lactose intolerant." He quipped getting a laugh from the other mammals.

"You can be pretty cheesy yourself." Said Judy with a smile.

"That's true." He gave a look to the window and saw a few pairs of eyes and ears. He knew the house's windows were sound proof, but it made him realise that it was one of the few moments of social respite they would get in the course of the three days. It also made him realise that as soon as they had arrived, they had ended up alone with Jessica and Gideon, and that wasn't a very polite thing to do.

"Maybe we should get back with your family. You know, being polite guests, things like that?" Asked Nick.

"Yes, of course." Agreed Judy.

They opened the door and the Hopps family flooded back into the room.

"Was everything okay?"

"Did you fight?"

"Is Judy upset?"

"What happened to your finger?" Nick felt a tug on his left paw and saw one of the kid pointing at the stump.

Nick gave a glance to his partner which looked beyond embarrassed. "Will, you don't ask things like that to people." She scolded.
Her parents looked a bit uncomfortable too. They knew about what had happened, in broad strokes, but they knew it probably wasn't a matter Nick wanted to broach.

"An accident." Nick lied, poking the little bunny's nose. "Always turn off the lawnmower when cleaning the blades."

"Does it hurt?"

"Not really. But it was my favorite finger to pick my nose."

"Ew."

The bunny was grabbed by Bonnie who gave him a little thanking nod. She preferred that lie to the truth which would have been way more hard to hear for the kid.

"Well played." He heard Judy whisper at his side.

Everyone found a place in the large living room that could have been a warehouse given its size. Everyone was mingling, and both Nick and Judy were amused to see the interest the kids had for Nick had died down more or less quickly. Nick had always thought that the country was more relaxing and silent than the city, but it was obvious he had been wrong.

Refreshment and snacks had been served, bunnies came and went. Suddenly he saw Judy shoot up. "Angela!" She greeted. Nick saw a bunny that was almost Judy's twin, aside from the fact that she was slightly smaller and chubbier. She could have been sisters. Nick huffed. They were sisters, obviously. "How are you sis?"

"Well, tired but good." She was pushing a large stroller.

"Oh my gosh, they are so cute!" Gawked Judy, leaning down to look at the kits in the stroller. Nick came too to greet Angela.

"Careful Nick, she's a-"

Two paws shot forward and pulled Nick in a surprisingly strong hug.

"-Hugger." She completed with a little smile.

"Getting used to bunny hugs. I'm Nick. I don't remember meeting you."

"Angela, nice to meet you." She took a step back. "How was the trip?"

"Good." He noticed the kids were giving him curious glances. He leaned down to look at them. "Hi kids, I'm Nick. I'll soon be your uncle." He turned to Angela. "They're so cute- Um, I mean..."

"That's okay, all kids are cute." She smiled. She took one and gave it to him. "Wanna hold one?"

Nick glanced at Judy unsure but she nodded. She already had one in her arms. He took it like it was the most fragile thing ever. Judy was observing both his and the kit reaction, and was glad to see they were both smiling.

"Who's a big bunny? You're a big bunny." He made him bounce a couple of times in his arms before giving back the child at his mother. "What's his or her name?"

"Oh, they're Andrew, Stanley, Isa, Joan, Miley and Randall." Answered Angela pointing at each of ehr kids.
"And how old are they?"

"Almost one year old."

The fox saw that most of the kits were now extending their paw toward him.

"Let me guess, now that I held one, I'll have to do the same with the others?"

"Yup. It was a trap." She smiled.

"If you were ever wondering, Judy, she's really your sister." Quipped Nick taking another bunny in his arm. They were so tiny he could easily have held three at time, but he decided to give each the same treatment.

"So, who's the father?" Asked Judy. "I didn't even know you were dating."

Angela's face grew red. "I... um. Let's just say they don't have a father."

Nick lifted a brow but didn't pry. Judy however asked the question they both asked themselves. "Do you at least know who he is?" She was rather surprised, her sister wasn't one to sleep around.

"Yeah. I know who he is. An error in judgement." She said darkly before sighing. "They're Chad's."

Judy frowned. "As in 'Chad, my ex'?"

"Yeah. Please don't say anything, I already got an earful from mom and dad."

"Oh. Angie." Judy hugged her sister. "I would never lecture you on how you should or should not sleep with."

"Well, I remember you saying to me I shouldn't approach him."

Judy snorted. "Ten years ago. He could have changed."

"That's what I thought, guess I was wrong."

Nick was still playfully wiggling his paw above the kits who were trying to catch it. "Who's that Chad guy?"

"My ex. He's an ass." Answered Judy

"The kind that thinks females shouldn't have responsibilities, are weak, should obey their husband, stuff like that." Completed Angela.

"Can't imagine you'd ever date someone like that, fluff." Remarked Nick.

"I was young and impressionable, he was handsome and moderately charming." She answered before turning back to Angela. "How did you get with him? And pregnant?"

"Well, I still worked as a waitress and he was a regular. We talked and he seemed nice. He seemed to have changed. We dated, we did... Stuff. And my pill didn't work.

When I noticed two months later and told him, he said he wasn't ready and it would have to be him or the kids."
"He said it like that?" Asked Judy, outraged.

"It was more subtle, but that's what he meant. So, guess who's a mom now." She pointed at herself proudly with her thumbs. "I wanted to have kids sooner or later. Sooner had to do."

"I'm glad you didn't let that get you down."

"I think they'll be better without a father. And I was already living here anyway." She was smiling, watching Nick play with the kits. "Hey Nick, can I ask you something strange?"

"Yeah?"

She suddenly looked a bit awkward. "Are your claws sharp?"

Nick lifted a brow. "Not much why?"

"I don't want my children to be scared of predators. Could you show them to my kid. I already asked Gideon, but he was really not comfortable with it."

Nick shrugged. "Why not." He took them half-out while Judy continued chatting with Angela. It seemed the kid were curious about the movement and he took the claws in and out a couple of time, making them giggle. He approached them, and it seemed they weren't scared. He gently scratched their head, careful to not harm them, but vulpine's claws were dull enough for it to not be too risky. Suddenly, one of them caught one of his claws and tugged on it.

From the corner of her eyes, Judy saw Nick quickly retract his claws and straighten a bit quickly. "I gotta go to... The bathroom." He made his way out in quick steps.

Judy followed him with her gaze. "I'm not sure he knows where the bathroom is. I'd better show him the way."

"Alright. See you later."

Judy got out of the living room and looked around. Nick had already disappeared. She took a few steps in the hallway to the left and saw the tip of a tail disappear behind a corner. She ran toward the next hallway and found her fox sitting on the floor, arms around his knees.

"You okay Nick?"

He was short breathed and she saw he was keeping his fists closed.

"Nick?"

He glanced up and he looked at her like he didn't really recognize her. He scrambled back a bit, with a look of fear.

"It's me, Judy."

She approached and brushed his shoulder. His expression relaxed a bit. "Judy?" He suddenly hugged her, still sitting on the floor, burying his face in her belly.

"What's happening?"

"Flashback." Came a muffled voice. "From the time with Vlad."

"How?"
"One of the kids tugged on one of my claws."

She slowly leaned down and got him to her his head on her thigh.

"It was like being pulled from my own body and put back in the chair. Everything was here. The pain the smell..." He pulled closer and grabbed one of her paw, holding it tightly. "I'm a bit of a mess, aren't I?"

"No you're not." Tried to reassure the bunny.

"I feel like it's always piling up. Each time I think it's actually going to be okay, there is something pulling me back down."

"You're going to be okay."

"It's not me I'm concerned about. It's us! The Nighthowler case, Lycus case, Vlad... we can't get out of that unscathed every time."

"For the record, we didn't get out of unscathed of any of them."

"I'm afraid. I'm afraid to be weak. I'm afraid that the next time the hammer falls, I will break."

Judy flicked one of his ears. "You're not weak. You don't realise how much you went through and got out of. You're one of the strongest mammal I know."

Nick gave a sad snort. "I don't see how I'm strong. A tug on the claw and transform into a jelly puddle."

She stroked the fur of his cheek. "Don't you remember what the doctor said? PTSD was a possible outcome. And don't you dare say you're not strong. You are. No, listen, you really are. You remember when you listed the amount of things I had to deal with when my leg was still healing? Back when you were still undercover?"

"I have a vague memory of it." He weakly smiled.

"Let me make your list, like you did mine, okay? You've been bullied, and it was big enough of a trauma that you left your home at twelve to spend twenty years living on the street. The you developed and rid yourself of an heroin addiction, if I remember clearly. Your parents separated, your father died, and you blamed yourself for it. At the beginning Lycus' case, I got hurt and you blamed yourself for it. You took upon yourself to help the misguided foxes you had infiltrated instead of taking them down. You saved the young fox, Mike, from others and from himself, and took the blame when he died. You got hurt and lost your memory fighting Bellwether. You stayed with and supported me during the remainder of my recovery. You got kidnapped and tortured, both physically and mentally for having performed a good action, and even lost a finger in the process." She kissed him on the forehead. "And I'm not even going into details. Remind me again how a weak mammal could have gotten through all this and gotten out of it like you did?"

"Leaving alone not biting one of my own bullets to make it stop." He grimly joked.

"Don't joke about that. Don't you ever joke about that." She kissed him on the snout.

"Sorry."

"So, yeah, you're troubled. You're not completely okay. But given your circumstances, I think you're still doing good. And I'm here. I'm never letting you go. It's what we're about, we're
supporting each other."

"You're okay with me needing that much support ?"

Judy seemed reflective for few seconds. "I was going to say you did it for me before, but I'm not going to support you to return the favor. You weren't making me a favor, and I'm not making you one either. I'm here for you because I love you, and for no other reason."

"I love you too, Carrots."

She kept stroking his fur.

"Can we stay like this a bit ?" He asked.

"It was your plan all along, you sly fox."

The fox had a weak smile. "You see right through me, clever bunny."

... 

It was the last day before the wedding. There were still a lot of things to do to prepare it and despite the bunny's parents protestations, Judy and Nick had decided to lend a paw.

Judy was helping set up the tents in the field where the weddings would take place. Nick was helping to set up the stage. He had gotten a bit more familiar with the way the weddings were going to go. There would first be a summary of the wedding orders, and of their timing, each of them after the other, with small recesses in between. Then the bands would come to play songs and most mammals would be able to dance. The tents would serve to house tables with foods and beverages. Teams would relay themselves to both serve and be able to participate in the celebration. There were also private tents, reserved to the couples and their closest friends and relative, where they could prepare before the ceremony and then retire afterwards if they needed.

Nick didn't think the organization would be so tight and precise. He had joked that Bonnie was running a tight ship, but as it happened, Stu was the one mostly in charge here.

The fox was impressed to see the bunnies work together. They were well organized and stronger than he gave them credit for. Working in the field was a physical job, so it could explain a lot. But thanks to his physical training, he was still stronger than most of them, had more stamina and was able to carry heavier loads.

The day flew by quickly enough, and at the end of it, preparations were complete. Nick was finishing to screw a spotlight in place and let himself fall from a couple of meter high, easily landing with a roll.

"You know, you could have gotten down with the ladder." Remarked Judy who had come to see if they were finished.

"Yeah, but it would have been way less impressive." He smiled, giving a shoulder roll.

They went back together toward the house when they heard splashing sounds and laughs. Going around, they saw most of the males bunnies shirtless and showering with a hose. Nick smelled himself. "I could use a shower too."

"We could take one together." Said Judy.
"We could yeah, but I kind of want to get rid of the sweat before rubbing myself against you." He whispered in her ears, making her blush. He casually approached the group taking off his t-shirt. "Hey guys, could you spread a bit of that love over therblarghlaraghglgle." Before he could finish his sentence, he was received with a stream of water in the face, while Terry, Jessica's father, which was holding the hose, gave a laugh.

"At your service Nick." He joked.

"Very funny." He joined the line of males and turned around while Terry sprayed them. Most of them were giving glances to Nick. They had seen foxes before, but none like him. For starters, though lean, he was very muscular because of his work, which gave him an impressive frame for his species, and there was quite the collection of scars on his body as well.

Judy had approached and was looking at the females bunnies that were there. "Screw it." Came a voice. "I've worked my ass off outside and I'm sweaty too." And she saw Angela get rid of her shirt, bra showing, to get hosed. Terry and some males gasped, turning away, while some of them ogled instead. Judy knew of bunnies, and as she had expected, it resulted in a crowd movement where all female that had helped set the field up were now shirtless and got sprayed as well. Nick glanced at her and saw that she was hesitating. He made a few steps toward her. "Don't want to get wet ?"

"I'm not really comfortable with... You know, this." She said, pointing at all the half naked bunnies. They had now set up a second hose.

"Not joining ?"

Judy stared at her feet.

"Guess you need a push."

"What kind of... Nick, No ! Don't you-" He picked her up on her shoulder, his wet fur already soaking her shirt. "Nick, let me go ! Nick, I swear-" She saw Terry's gleeful expression while he approached with the hose. "Terry ! No ! I'll knot your ears ! Don't-"

"Worth it !" He laughed as he drenched the two mammals in water.

Nick finally put the soaked bunny down and she got rid of her shirt. "You're paying for that, Nick."

"I know. But admit it, it's kind of nice."

She looked around to see the other bunnies running around. Some had taken out buckets and it was total chaos. Nick had put his paw on his hips, enjoying the sun's warmth. "I don't want to seem alarmist, but I think your sisters are ogling me."

"You wish." She said, but checked anyway. He was right, there were a few blushing bunnies that were clearly having an eyeful of her fox.

She put a possessive paw in his arm and gave them a playful glare.

"So the rumors were true." Came a smug and loud voice from outside of the bunny group. All bunnies turned toward it.

"Chad." Groaned Judy, recognizing him.

"Seems you all have fallen pretty low to accept not one but two foxes in this family." The group
had fallen dead silent.

Nick observed the bunny. It was true that for a bunny he could be considered handsome. He was fairly tall, had a large jaw, and his musculature showed. He had a bit of a gut, but that was more a quality than a flaw by bunny standards.

"I'd rather have those two foxes in my family than even one bunny like you in it." Retorted Judy, crossing her arms.

Nick glanced at her. She had never seen her mate so openly hostile toward anyone before, apart from some suspects. Then again, there was personal history involved.

The muscular bunny snorted while taking a few steps forward. "And who else than Jude the Dude to bring back a fox. You were always the weird one."

Nick would usually have slammed the bunny's trap shut with a well aimed remark, but he wasn't on his turf, and he guessed it wasn't for him to take him down. He still couldn't keep himself to say something. "I'd have used the word 'unusual', it doesn't have the negative undertone. It's one of her numerous endearing qualities."

He gave him a glance full of disdain, before going back to Judy. "So he's eating off your paw? I'm not surprised. You should have found somebunny that could properly handle you, it would have done you good."

Judy was facing one of her hardest challenge yet, not make that bunny eat dirt.

"Chad!" Came an angry female voice from behind them which they recognized being Angela's. "I told you to never come near me again!"

He had a discreet backing reaction that only a few saw. "Don't flatter yourself Angie, I'm not here for you, I'm here to see the disaster. You made the wrong choice, and I don't have anything to say to you anymore."

Terry approached from the side with an angry scowl. "Kid, if you don't want trouble, you should go."

Chad was easily a full head taller than him. "By you?" He snorted, crossing his arms "Stay out of it chu-"

"By me." Came a third angry female voice. Bonnie quickly approached the scene. Her face was composed, but Judy saw the stiffness in her step, evidence that she was furious.

"Hah, and you think you have anything to say? You should know your pla-" He had poked her chest tauntingly and Judy had been about to react but the smacking sound they all heard as an answer was impressive. And just like that, Nick was reminded that female farmers worked as hard as male ones.

Chad stumbled backward with the violence of the slap. He seemed a bit shaken, that slap was one of the numerous ones he deserved and hadn't received until now.

"You- You-"

She grabbed him by the collar and pulled him down, half-strangling him. "Now, you listen to me, you cute-face, good-for-nothing muck brain. You ever come close to my home, one of my children or my family again, I'll tie you by the ears to my truck and tow you back to your farm myself. Am I being clear?"

"Ghark." could he only answer since she was holding the collar too tight. She untightened her grip
"Am. I. Being. CLEAR ?"

"Yes ma'am." He said, trying to get out of her grip. She let go and he almost stumbled down. He took a few steps backwards and seemed like he was about to say something, but he didn't dare under Bonnie's glare, and went away with the little dignity he had left.

Most bunnies were gawking at her, she straightened her shirt, and turned toward them. "Now kids, you clean up this mess."

"Yes ma'am" Came a few mutters.

She turned to her brother and patted his shoulders. "Proud of you for not having put his face in the ground."

"Thanks Bon." Said Terry.

She stepped toward Judy and Angela and hugged them. "Are you okay you both ?"

"Yes mom." They answered.

"I know you could have handled him, but I've wanted to do it for a long time."

"I don't think we will hear of him in a long time."

She then turned to Nick. "I'm glad you didn't react violently. Not that I think fox's would more than others, but given he insulted you and Judy..."

"Got it, Bon." Nick smiled.

She observed him from head to toes before turning her face toward Judy and nodding approvingly with a wink. "Lucky bunny."

Judy's face instantly shot red. "Mooooom !"

Bonnie went away with a giggle and arrived near her husband, they saw him say something to her, and as an answer, she pulled him by the collar and kissed him, before pulling him inside.

Not long after they had cleaned up the water mess, a few vehicles pulled over in front of the farm. There was a big limousine, a van and something that looked a lot like a police cruiser. Except it didn't have either the paint job or the revolving lights.

A large polar bear they didn't know got out of the limo. A shrill voice came out of his paw "Judy ! We're here." Most bunnies had taken a step back when the large predator had appeared, but Judy came and greeted their wedding guests.

"Fru-Fru ! How was the trip ?"

"It was nice !"

Judy waved at her family to approach, while Vivienne, Finnick and Hollie got out of the van.

Behind them, the chief, Clawhauser, Blackfur, Wolford and Buster came out from their cruiser.

"You guys came all together ?" Asked Judy, surprised.
"No, we just kind of saw each other on the road and came as a convoy." Explained Vivienne.

"I hadn't seen Mr Big in a long time. We spent noon together, was kinda a nice to catch up." Added Finnick.

Judy's family was a bit overwhelmed, to see so much different mammals at the same time. Which was strange given they usually were the ones producing that effect on guests. They quickly warmed to the newcomers and began to chat.

Judy was observing everyone's reaction. Most bunnies were impressed at the polar bears sizes. They had never seen one up close before and were surprised to see the shrews they were holding were in fact the actual guests. Clawhauser was biting his fist, trying not to let out of a squeal in front of the numerous cute bouncing bunnies. Bogo at his side was mostly silent, politely returning the greetings when they were addressed to him. Buster, as a small mammal, had quickly found his footing. Wolford and Blackfur were staying together a bit on the side, mingling with a few bunnies at a time.

"Sorry to cut you all in your greetings." Came Terry's voice. "But it's time to prepare dinner."

"Oh." Came Fru-Fru's voice. "Then we'll go get our hotel and leave you to it."

"Nonsense. You're staying for dinner. You just arrived, we must get to know each other more." He said. "And you must meet Judy's parents before the wedding. They're unfortunately... currently busy, but you will be able to chat during dinner."

"We really don't want to impose." Said Mr Big politely.

"You're really not. We'll set up the table in the backyard. I simply hope everyone's okay with vegetables, because we don't have much in term of meat." He apologetically smiled.

... Lying in bed against his bunny, Nick could see she was reflecting on something. She had spent the dinner lost in thoughts and hadn't left that state since.

"What's on your mind Carrots?"

She pushed herself against him. "Nothing."

"That's usually my line." He smiled, kissing her between the ears. "Can't I know what it is?"

"I don't want to stress you out the night before our wedding."

"I'm already stressed out. You might as well add one scoop over it."

"Well..." She hesitated. "The thing with Angela, and her kits... I know you're not really comfortable with the idea, but I'd kind of want to be pregnant."

Nick fell mute. He didn't have anything to answer to that.

"I know we kind of had that conversation before." She continued. "And that you don't really like the idea of me being pregnant from some bunny. I know it has to do with the bond... I did research on that, most foxes are really uncomfortable with the idea of their female being pregnant from another male... And it's not an ultimatum or anything..." She was trailing off, unsure of what Nick's blank expression meant.
"Judy. It's your body, if you want to get pregnant, you can, I'll support you either way... Just as long as you don't do it by, erm, 'conventional' ways." He said, a bit embarrassed.

Judy put her forehead against his chest and sighed. "I know you don't want to 'rob' me from experiences, but I don't want to put you through a difficult experience only for my sake. It's our couple, those would be your kids too. I don't want for you to feel like I... cheated on you. Like I said, I know it's a big deal for foxes."

"Aren't you afraid could put a dampener on your career? I'm not saying that to get you out of the idea but... You know..."

"I considered it, yes. But I want to do it."

"Then okay. Let's do that. Why not."

She stared at him and despite his smile, she saw a glint of something undecipherable in his expression. "What is it?" She asked.

"Okay, now it's getting creepy, I can't hide anything from you anymore."

"As if I ever could. Now the fields are even." Smiled Judy. "But seriously, what is it?"

"There is another reason why I'm not really comfortable with you getting inseminated. Gosh I hate that word. It's not just because of the whole 'possessive bond' thing. I'm afraid I won't... Love them like they were my kids."

"Oh."

"Yeah. Imagine it. You get pregnant, you have kits, and I'm just there, standing like a fool, not feeling a thing for them. I'd be there for you and them, don't get me wrong, but it would be... I don't know... Horrible." He pulled her closer. "To be honest, I'd love for you to be pregnant. I'd love to be here to fulfill the weird pregnant cravings, wipe the puke, help you choose pregnant outfits..."

She gave him an elbow nudge. "I'd love to get the full father experience. But I'm afraid. I guess all mammals go through that."

Judy crawled up and kissed his nose. "Yeah, I think it's perfectly normal. I'm afraid too, you know. There are actually mothers that can't love their children. They see them and feel nothing either...It's usually temporary or can be fixed with therapy, but still. I actually saw it happen."

"Really?"

"It's common. It happens to one female in five."

"Holy crap. How is it not known? I never heard of that."

"Taboo topic. It happened to my mom, on her second litter. It was pretty hard on her."

"I can imagine that, I've seen how invested she's in her family. Did she get over it?"

"Mostly. We understood what it was quickly enough, she went to see a therapist. But I think she still blames herself for it."

Nick pulled his bunny closer. "I know it's strange, but it kind of makes me feel better."

Judy sighed and buried her face in his chest. "I'm glad we talked about it. Are you sure you're okay with it?"
"I think I am. Can we just leave the topic open in case I change my mind?" He asked half-jokingly.

She knew he'd be more comfortable if he had a way out. She wasn't seeking a promise anyway and knew him well enough to know that he was already set on doing it. And she didn't want him to feel forced. "Sure." She pulled back from the hug. "Then there is something else we need to talk about."

"I feel like it's going to be heavy." Remarked Nick.

"Yeah." She took a deep breath. "Okay, there is something, and that's really, really important.."

"If you're trying to worry me, you're actually succeeding fluff."

"Sorry. But it really is important."

"Go ahead, I'm listening."

"If... No when. I think it's more a matter of when we get children."

Nick chuckled. "I'm on board with that."

"When we get children, they'll have to go first." She said, very seriously.

Nick frowned. "Yeah, of course. It's not even a debate."

"No you don't get it. We must consider the possibility we won't make it as a couple. And even in that case, we'll have to keep working together for them to have a good life."

Nick fell mute. He hadn't considered that.

"I'm not saying we're temporary, or that I want us to be. But, you know it is. Mammals, they change. Couples, they break up. And I don't want for us to break up, or to even think about it. But we have to seriously consider it could happen. When we have kid, we won't have the luxury to be selfish anymo-"


"Us, alone as a couple, we're together because we want to. We don't have a reason to. I'm with you because I love you, and you're with me because you love me." He kissed her. "Yes. I do love you."

She smiled before going back to her serious expression. "But the kids, they won't be about us. We'll have to cast ourselves aside for them if we need to. You understand?"

"You've been thinking about that a lot, have you?"

"Yeah, a bit since I know I'll want children, and more seriously since the first time I broached the topic of kids with you."

Nick sighed. "I must admit, I hadn't put as much thoughts into it. Having kids, it was always an abstract concept before... Well before now, to be honest. I don't like the idea of us breaking up. It even hurts to think about it, but I think you're right. I just can't give you some kind of definitive answer on that. I'll do my best if it comes to it. And I really, really hope it won't."

She kissed him. "I didn't need a promise. I just wanted to know where you stood with it. You
know, in the burrows, with the number of families there are, even the number of families that live in our estate... I've seen some ugly stuff going on. Families falling apart. Kids being pushed away. If not for my mom, there would be a lot more miserable kids and parents. She gave me a similar speech when I was a teen and started dating.

"That's... Well I don't know. I guess that's a lesson you don't want to learn by yourself."

"Yeah."

He sighed. "You're fine if we just cuddle tonight? I need to think about all of this."

"I hope I didn't scare you away."

She felt him wrap his tail around her and pull the sheet to cover them both. "You really don't have to worry about that. You know me. Always the anxious fox. Sleep tight Fluff."

"Good night Nick."
June of 2020

Nick was stressing out, but less than he would have thought. He was kind of glad to be the first one to be married. He was putting on the 'traditional outfit', which was pretty much a green sleeveless jumpsuit with a shirt and a bowtie. Despite the cheap price, the thing was of nice quality, and quite sturdy. Judy had said to him he could come in a more usual attire, but he had insisted to wear the same thing as the others. Her parents wanted a bunny wedding, and he wanted it to be the full experience. And he would have felt a bit out of place being the only groom to wear a suit.

"Ya okay in 'dere ?" came Finnick's voice through the door.

"Yeah, I'm coming out." He said, pulling the curtain. "What do I look like ?"

"Ah think yo the only fox tha' can pull that look off."

Finnick was wearing a shirt with a tie and his usual cargo pants. Buster, Wolford and Clawhauser were wearing their shirts with jeans. Stu had instructed them that bunny wedding usually happened outside, and that they weren't very big on classy, and that it was actually better to use clothes they were comfortable dirtying. According to him, he had never gone to a wedding where at least one of the wedded couple didn't ruin their clothes.

"Looking good, guys."

"You do too." They answered.

"How long before the start of the ceremony ?"

"It's 10:50AM, so ten minutes. Got yo vows written down ?"

"Nope. I'm gonna wing it." He said, stretching his arms, as to prepare himself for action.

"Fru, I really don't need help putting on a dress." Said Judy with a smile, while pulling the straps above her shoulders. She looked at herself in the mirror. She had feared Fru-Fru would go overboard with the dress, even if she had been here to pick the design and get measured, but she hadn't. In fact, the attire was pretty simple. It looked like a white summer dress, long enough to cover her knee scars, completed with a white shawl. That last piece of cloths wasn't mandatory, but it came with the dress. And it was good to have something handy to keep warm, just in case.

The only fancy thing on the dress was a silvery squarish pattern coming from the bottom to the waist. "You still haven't told me how much you paid the dress."

"And I'm not telling you now either." she smiled. "Here's your jewellery." She said, opening a box. It was a simple silver pendant. Judy was glad that at least the shrew hadn't gone overboard with the style, even if she knew most of what she was wearing was far from cheap.

"Tell me that this isn't real silver thread." She said pointing at her dress while the shrew closed the pendant on her neck.
"Then I won't tell anything." She answered cheerily.

"Oh, Fru, for Carrot's sake." She went in front of the mirror again. "Do I look good?"

"You look perfect."

They pulled the curtain and went out. "Oh Judy, you look lovely!" Said her mother, putting her paws on her mouth.

"Yes, you really do." Agreed Blackfur. Judy would have loved to also have Vivienne as matron of honor, but she was sitting on her future husband side, as tradition asked. Vivienne hadn't complained though, and she was actually glad. She knew Hollie wouldn't have been comfortable on stage with them at the center of the attention, or sitting alone in the assistance.

"How long until the ceremony?"

"Ten minutes. It's almost 11AM. Are your vows ready?" Asked her mother.

"Oh mom, I'll improvise." She smiled, hopping a few times like she was preparing herself for some sort of sport competition.

The music started playing, it was Nick's pick. Judy didn't know a lot about music, and even if Nick wasn't a complete melomaniac, he had a few songs he really liked that he believed for the occasion.

She recognized Drive You Home, by Garbage, one of the few bands he possessed an album from. The music was slow-paced and she synced her steps to it. Bouquet in paw, she walked along the aisle, or more precisely, the field, between the ranks of bunnies sitting down on the blankets that had been lain on the ground.

A few chatters erupted, some bunnies didn't know the fox on the stage was about to marry a bunny. Some voices were louder than others, but she really couldn't make anything out.

She looked at him, and the fear she had that he would look ridiculous in the bunny wedding attire instantly flew away.

Nick saw his bunny appear, and barely contained his jaw from dropping. The dress she had worn on their date a few months back was nice, but this was something else. The simple white dress, near absence of make up, it was her. It was his bunny.

He had a chuckle when he saw the tears in the corners of her eyes, as he was now in the same state. An arm on her father's, followed by Blackfur and Fru-Fru on a bear's paw, she approached and climbed the stage's stairs, ending up in front of Nick.

She nodded to Finnick, Buster and Wolford on Nick's side.

"You look gorgeous." He whispered.

"You're not so bad yourself." She answered in the same tone.

The older officiant switched on the microphone he was holding and had a light scoff, bringing the attendance to a state of silence.

"Bunnies and mammals of the tri-burrows and elsewhere, we have been invited today to share with Judith Laverne Hopps and Nicholas Piberius Wilde a very important moment in their lives. In the time they have been together, their love, care and understanding of each other has grown, changed
and matured, and they now have decided to live their lives together as husband and wife."

"More than the formal recognition of partners in their union and relationship, marriage is a vow. A vow to love, support, care and carry each other's burden. A vow to share not only the joy and happiness of the partner, but also the pain and hardships."

The officiant took a step back and made a little motion to signal that it was now time for them to say their piece, giving them the microphone. Nick nodded and Judy took it, making a little step forward.

She took a deep breath and started speaking. "The first time I saw Nick, my first reflex was to be suspicious toward him. The first time we had contact, he conned me and put me down. I was pretty horrible to him afterwards." She smiled, pulling a few laughs from the assistance. "And then, he did what so few mammals are strong enough to do. He supported me when no one would, helped me get through my first real challenge in life, and even when I said..." She had to take her breath. "When I acted like the most bigoted and stupid bunny ever, he still forgave me. I think it's at that moment that I fell in love with him. He didn't even know it back then, but he's the most caring, supporting and nice mammal I know. Even if he probably hates that I'm saying that in front of such a large crowd." She saw him chuckle. "Nick, I love you. You've been the best thing that ever happened to me, you've helped me open my eyes on my own shortcomings and to become a better mammal. And that's why I want to be your wife. For as long as you will have me."

She gave a glance around to see her father with his face buried in a tissue, and most bunnies in the assistance doing the same.

Nick took a slight step forward as she gave him the microphone. "The first time I saw Judy, my first reflex was to be wary of her. I'm a fox, and she was wearing a cop uniform after all." A few chuckles came from the assistance. "The first time we had contact, I conned her and put her down. And then she coerced me into helping her resolve a very dangerous case that almost cost us both our lives." There were a few gasps in the assistance, but most bunnies knew of the Nighthowler case. "And I saw, that despite all the things stacked against her, that she'd never quit doing the right thing. And later, when she acted a tad bigoted..." He let the moment pass to listen to the few chuckles in the crowd. "I wasn't hurt because of what was said. I was hurt because it came out of the bunny I already had fallen for. And when she apologized, she didn't even know it, but she proved to me that mammals could change, and better themselves. That's the thing with Judy, she always thrives to be a better bunny, and bring the world up with her. She's wonderful, she's perfect, and she's now blushing that I praised her so much in front of a crowd." He glanced at her, and saw that he was right, but she maintained her tear-filled gaze. "Judy, I love you. You've been the best thing that ever happened to me, you've helped me change and improve myself, and even more than that, you've made me want to become a better mammal. And for that, I'll never be grateful enough. And that's why I want to be your husband. For as long as you will have me."

He looked at the crowd, and seemed his speech had been the last blow for the now bawling audience.
Finnick gave the ring to Nick and Fru-Fru gave hers to Judy.

Nick held the microphone for her.

"I, Judith Laverne Hopps, give you, Nicholas Piberius Wilde, this ring, as a symbol of my love and commitment to you." She said, putting the ring on Nick's finger.
She then took the microphone, holding it for him.

"I, Nicholas Piberius Wilde, give you, Judith Laverne Hopps this ring, as a symbol of my love and commitment to you." He said, putting the ring on Judy's finger.
The officiant recovered the microphone.

"Then, by the power vested in me in the Tri-Burrows and Zootopia, I now pronounce you husband and wife. You may now kiss each other."

Nick took her paws and pulled her toward him, himself making a little step forward, and kissed her once, a short kiss, almost shy. She pulled him by the collar and let herself go backward, he caught her by the waist, his lips brought only at an inch of hers. "You totally improvised that speech." She tauntingly whispered.

"You're one to talk." He answered in the same tone, before kissing her deeply, drawing the cheering of the crowd.

"I present you the newly married couple, Judith Laverne Hopps and Nichols Piberius Wilde." That got a few raised eyebrows from the crowd, the tradition in the Tri-Burrows being that the wife should take her husband's name, but they had decided they both wanted to keep their names. Judy approached the edge of the stage and threw the bouquet. It was caught by a female bunny she didn't know, that immediately jumped to the neck of a male bunny near her, that suddenly felt in a tight spot.

"We'll now take a short recess in wait of the next couple."

..."You sure had perfectly planned those vows. That's was impressive guys." Said Gideon congratulating them both.

"Yes. I don't know if anyone will be able to top that today." Added Jessica. "It's good it's not a competition."

Nick and Judy glanced at each other awkwardly.

"Wot ?"

"They improvised." Explained Bonnie.

Some jaws fell.

"I'm gettin' used to you stealin' my ideas." Quipped Finnick.

"I'd prefer calling it 'improving'." Taunted Nick.

She felt a nudge in his ribs. "Not a competition." Scolded Judy.

"Alright, alright." He said, defensively lifting his paws. "But I'm still totally winning." He whispered.

After having received the congratulations from everyone, they went back to the ceremony.

The two next marriage were not between bunnies Judy knew, and she got bored, skipping the second one. They could, since at each recess, the guest switched seats to have the close friends and relatives on the front row.

When it was finally Jessica and Gideon's turn, she went back and sat in front with her family. Nick pulled her to sit her in his lap with a satisfied smile. She used him as a chair, his snout sitting between her ears, his paws around hers.
Gideon was wearing green overall with his shirt and bowtie. He looked a bit uncomfortable, but it was more due to the attention than the clothes. Behind him were Travis, a bunny she didn't know and his father. The music started, a song she didn't know, and she looked at Jessica, making her way up the aisle, he paw on Terry's arm. She was followed by her mother and Angela. The dress she was wearing was slightly shorter than Judy's and she didn't wear a shawl, nor jewellery. She had opted for a really simple look, and it truly suited her. The smile that appeared on Gideon's face was so large it could have broken his face.

"Bunnies and mammals of the tri-burrows and elsewhere, we have been invited today to share with Jessica Springer and Gideon Abercius Grey a very important moment in their lives. In the time they have been together, their love, care and understanding of each other has grown, changed and matured, and they now have decided to live their lives together as husband and wife."

"He's recycling." Whispered Nick in Judy's ears.

"That's good for the planet." Joked Judy as low.

"More than the formal recognition of partners in their union and relationship, marriage is a vow. A vow to love, support, care and carry each other's burden. It a vow to share not only the joy and happiness of the partner, but also the pain and hardships."

He gave them the microphone and Gideon had a little frightened head shake. Jessica took her future husband's paw to reassure him and grabbed the mic.

"Me and Gideon met in highschool. I barely knew him back then, and like most other bunnies, I was avoiding him. But he changed, he became one of the nicest, reliable and hardworking mammal in Bunny-burrows. It took me a while to realise and accept my feelings for him. But I'm glad I did. And I'm glad I found someone who can support me, and endure my... less endearing qualities." This drew a few chuckles from the mammals who knew of her hyperactivity, and over-energetic personality. "Gideon, I love you. I'm glad to be with you, and you would make me the happiest bunny in the world if you would accept me as your wife."

She gave the microphone to Gideon who approached it from his lips and took a few breath.

"I-" He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. "When I was young, I was not very nice. 'specially not to bunnies. It took me a while to change and see that all mammals were worth da same. And I'm glad I did so, 'cause otherwise, I'd never have met and fell in love wid' someone as wonderful as Jessica." He felt a bit short breathed. Jessica was still holding his paw and gave it a little squeeze. He took a few seconds to regain his composure. "I know I ain't that bright, or attentive, but as long as ya let me, I'll try to make you happy. 'Cause I love you. And that'd make me the happiest fox in the world If ya'd accept me as your husband." He had forgotten his speech halfway through, but was happy that he could have saved it.

Angela gave the ring to Jessica and Travis gave his to Gideon.

Imitating Judy and Nick, he held the microphone for his bride.

"I, Jessica Springer, give you, Gideon Abercius Grey, this ring, as a symbol of my love and commitment to you." She said, putting the ring on Gideon's finger.
She then took the microphone, holding it for him.

"I, Gideon Abercius Grey Wilde, give you, Jessica Leapers this ring, as a symbol of my love and commitment to you." He said, putting the ring on Jessica's finger.
The officiant took back the microphone.
"Then, by the power vested in me int the Tri-Burrows and Zootopia, I now pronounce you husband and wife. You may now kiss eachother."

Jessica immediately leaped to Gideon's neck, wrapping her arms around it. He had not choice than to grab her, and ended up carrying her since she wouldn't let him go.

"I present you the newly married couple, Jessica and Gideon Abercius Grey."

He carried her down the stairs after she threw the bouquet in the crowd.

"I wish I had thought about carrying you down the stairs." Said Nick.

"We can do that after the last marriage if you want." Said the bunny in his lap.

"I do."

"We'll now take a short recess in wait of the last couple." Said the officiant.

It wasn't a reception as much as it was a massive party. There was a main band playing on the stage, but there were also a lot of other bands around. Bunnies were going around, mingling, joking and it was overall chaos. Nick and Judy as well as their friends and families had gathered and were enjoying the sun.

"So that's what a bunny wedding looks like." Remarked Vivienne.

"Yup." Answered Judy, lying on a sheet, her head on Nick's stomach. "According to dad, there is a bit more than two thousand guests. It's actually a new record."

"It kind of make it look like a festival. Do you always plan it at noon ?"

"Usually, yeah, so that those who have to work the next day or live far have an easy way coming and leaving. The party will continue until late. I wouldn't be surprised if at least a quarter of the guest stay until 4AM tomorrow. And there is still a couple days of afterparty afterward."

Suddenly the music coming from the stage was a bit louder. The bunny got up. "Nick. You're taking me dancing."

The band on stage was playing a slow balad. Nick followed her bunny and saw that most guest were also going in the same direction. "I must warn you fluff. I have numerous skills, but dancing isn't one of them."

"I know. You mostly wave your arms around. Just follow my steps."

She took his arm and put it on her hip, taking the other and putting it on her shoulder.

"You know how to dance ?" He asked.

"Most mammals in the Tri-Burrows learn a bit a some point. But it's a bit hazy. Just sway around, don't step on my feet, and avoid bumping into other couples. You should be okay."

Nick struggled a bit to find the rhythm. He was glad, looking around, to see there were other mammals he knew.

Finnick was dancing with Vivienne, or more appropriately, the vixen was swaying while carrying
the little vulpine who was looking a bit embarrassed. Jessica was resting her head against Gideon's shoulder while they moved around. Nick and Judy smiled when they saw Wolford and Blackfur glance at each other, shrug and started dancing together.

"I'm telling you, there is something going on."

"No way in hell, Nick." She smiled, resting her head on his shoulder.

Taken by the slow music, Nick and Judy found themselves in a state of complete bliss. They always knew they were right for each other, but in that moment, it reached a complete clarity. That was the one. The one they saw in movies, the one they read about in books, the one everymammal dreamed about. Whatever the future held, they'd always have each other.

Nick put a finger under Judy's chin. "Judy ?"

"Yes Nick ?"

"Thank you, my clever bunny, for everything."

She smiled to him. "Thank you, my sly fox, for everything."

He reached down and she put herself on the tip of her toes. Their lips met, with love and passion. It was a kiss they wished they could hold forever.

_The End_

_Of Part 3_
The party had come from mild to wild, and most mammals were now dancing their ass off to the songs the band was performing. Nick was trying to not look too ridiculous while Judy bounced around gleefully. Her parents were rock dancing almost like professionals, Vivienne and Finnick were mostly improvising, Wolford was doing exaggerated dance moves from the various movies he knew to Blackfur's hilarity. Fru-Fru and her husband were dancing on the large polar bear bodyguard's paws which looked mostly bored. Buster was nowhere to be seen. The icing on the cake was the chief and Clawhauser dancing together in what looked like Gazelle's song choreographic moves. No mammal's present had any doubt left they were together, as they occasionally kissed. Wolford had barely kept his jaw to touch the floor the first time he had seen them do so, but Blackfur hadn't seemed shocked. Or even surprised. The Tri-Burrows mammals however, didn't really know what to do or say, and were mostly giving them a wide berth.

As the party continued on in the evening, the dancer were fewer and fewer. Since it was time to eat, they went to the buffet that had been set up and ate. It seemed they knew carnivorous mammal would be present since there was meat and fish, as well as bug-based toasts. The respite was good, as they all felt a bit tired from the dancing. Looking around they saw that the bunnies had no qualm laying around in groups to nap before getting back to the partying.

"Where is Hollie ?" Asked Nick to his mother, a bit worried that she'd feel alone without her foster parents.

The vixen pointed a place at the edge of the party and Nick squinted his eyes to see. There was bunch of kids there playing and she was with them, seeming to have fun.

"We're still going to check on her once in a while, just so she doesn't feel abandoned." 

"Good."

Wolford plopped at Nick's side.

"You need something, big guy ?" Asked the fox.

"For since when did you know about Clawhauser and the chief ?"

"Approximately right after it started."

"Yes, but since when ?"

"Approximately two weeks after Lycus case end."

Wolford stared at the two embracing mammals. "I'm so unreceptive."
Nick and Judy felt slightly tired but the upbeat mood and the energy the guests showed had kept them going. Now however, they needed a bit of rest and directed themselves to their tent. When they entered it, they weren't surprised to find Wolford and Blackfur, Jessica and Gideon, Fru-Fru and her husband, as well as Vivienne and Finnick sitting, chatting and laughing around a bunch of full and empty bottles.

"I see everyone's having fun." Remarked the bunny as she sat with them. They widened the circle to give her and Nick space to sit.

"Yup. I knew bunny were overly cheery and energetic, but I also thought you were on the top layer." Said Wolford with a smile.

"Jessica proved you wrong did she ?" asked Nick.

"Yeah."

Judy looked around. "I'm surprised Buster isn't here. I haven't seen him since the beginning of the party." She took out her phone.

"He's a grown rat, Judy. I think he can handle himself." Remarked Blackfur.

"Getting overprotective with your new partner ?" Asked Vivienne with a smile Judy was used to see on Nick's face. "Hope my son has no reason to get jealous."

"No ! Of course not."

"Already married and you already go down that road ? Tsk, Tsk, Tsk." Scolded Jessica.

"Not funny. Guys." She scolded. "Nick you have nothing to worry ab-"

He was giving her a look of hurt and sadness, which broke in the quarter of a second when he saw her shocked expression. "Sorry fluff, it was too tempting."

She lightly punched him in the rib, and he used it as an opportunity to kiss her nose.

"So what were you discussing about ?" Asked the bunny, eager to get away from the jokes they all seemed willing to play on her.

Jessica showed her phone. "Truth or Drink app. Normally, it's one question each, but we're a bit much for that, so everyone answers the questions. Rules are, if you answer you have to give details. If you drink, you don't have to, but everyone will suspect you did or said something you weren't proud of."

"Who's been drinking the most ?" Asked Nick.

Gideon rose his paw. "Adventurous teenage years." He explained.

"Alright, what's the next question ?" Nick asked eagerly.

Judy wasn't so sure she wanted to participate in that game. For one she didn't want to get too personal with so much mammal, and knowing that kind of games, it would go toward their sex lives. And second, Finnick and Vivienne were here, she feared some questions would be too personal for them.

"Have you ever been handcuffed ? By whom and in what circumstances ?"
"Nope." Said Fru-Fru and her husband.

"Yes. Part of the police program." Said Wolford.

"And a couple of times by Fangmeyer as a prank too." Added Blackfur with a smile.

"Hey !"

"Same answer as his, minus the Fangmeyer part." She added.

"Same." Said Judy.


Vivienne drank. Finnick smiled, Nick scoffed, Judy gasped and the whole assistance was surprised.

"Seriously ?" Asked Nick.

"It was only once, and I'm not telling anything more. What about you ?" She asked with taunting smile.

Nick answered with the same type of grin and simply pointed at Judy whose face instantly shot red. "All I'm saying, is that she wasn't arresting me." He said, triggering a round of laughter.

"Well, if it gets me to be laughed at, it's not happening again."

Nick smile dropped, and the laughter kept going.

"I never got cuffed." Said Jessica. "But I wouldn't mind." She said, giving a side glance to her husband who almost strangled himself with his drink.

"Tha' wos my answer by the way." He said, as he took back his breath a showed his drink.

"If you had to play match maker, who of your friends would you match ?"

Most mammal shrugged, having no idea what to answer to that question. Most mammals they knew that would go well together were already a couple.

"You two." Said Nick casually, pointing at Wolford and Blackfur.

As an answer they gave him the same look of uninterested disbelief.

"Bad idea." Said the wolf.

"Ditto." Added the panda.

And they fist bumped on it.

"Oh, that one is a bit dark. Who here could get away with murder ?"

Most mammals turned to Nick. "Seriously guys ? That's not nice."

"On the contrary, shows tha' they think ya clever enough to get away wid it." Said Finnick, who for one, hadn't pointed to Nick.

Nick chuckled. "Yeah, except you all are not taking all the parameters into account." And he
pointed at Fru-Fru who giggled.

Realisation dawned when they understood how it was way more likely.

"When you are trying to impress people, what personality trait do you try and hide ?"

"I can answer 'dat one for Nicky. He knows how to hide how annoying he is." Said Finnick, raising his glass to his friend.

"Ha ha. Very funny. And I don't have any trait to hide, I'm overall perfect." He said, sipping his drink.

"I try to be less energetic." Said Jessica.

"Ya fail at that. And tha's why I love ya." Said Gideon, kissing her between the ears. "I mostly try to not say anytin' stupid."

"I act surprised when mammals tell me stuff I already had guessed." Said Blackfur.

Wolford sipped. "What ? I'm not giving you any ammo."

Fru-Fru shrugged but didn't sip.

"I tone down my humour." Said her husband. "Not that I'm funny, it's quite the opposite."

"I try to not fucking curse so much." Said Vivienne, triggering the general hilarity.

"Ain't nothing I need to hide. You don't like me, y'all can just piss off." Said Finnick with a smile.

Jessica giggled at the next question. "If you had to sleep with one person here, who would it be ?"

Judy groaned. That one was easy, but that also meant there were also be more question of that type. All couples pointed at eachother, and the only ones that didn't point at anymammal were Blackfur and Wolford.

"Don't take it personally. I'm just answering a question." Said Wolford to Gideon before pointing at Jessica. "And the app said 'had to', not 'want to'."

Gideon muted down the growl that was coming up, but couldn't do the same with the frown.

"You have a thing for bunnies, Wolford ?" Taunted Nick ?

"Let's just say meeting Judy woke up the taste." Answered the wolf in the same tone. At that, Nick gave him a thumb up.

Blackfur pointed at Gideon. "Just because you'd be able to survive it." She winked.

For a few seconds, Judy wondered how many drinks the panda had downed. She hoped this time the shirt would stay on.

Just as she had answered, both Bonnie and Stu, and the chief and Clawhauser appeared. "Your boss told us a lot about your work. It seems there is a lot you're not telling us, sweetie." Said Judy's mother, before realizing how many mammals were present. "Am I interrupting something ?"

"No auntie, but if you want to learn secrets about Judy, maybe you should sit with us." Answered Jessica.
The blood left Judy's face. This was nightmare. She tried to get up but Nick's paw was keeping her down. Glancing to him, she saw the corner of a mischievous smile.

"You'll pay for that, Nick". She whispered.

"Worth it."

The cheetah and the buffalo also took place, and it was probably the weirdest situation Judy had ever gotten into. Both her parents and her boss playing truth or drink with her. She'd never be able to get past that.

"Oh, this one is going to be good!" Giggled Jessica. "Have you ever slept with a mammal someone else here slept with."

All mammals looked around, and they saw Nick raise his paw. "Does 'fooling around' count?"

"What do you mean by that?" Said Judy.

"There was no actual...I'm not going to spell it out." He said with a shameful smile.

"Let's say yes." Jessica smiled.

"Then yes."

"Who was it?" Asked Finnick with a scowl. "Better not be-"

"Honey. You weren't together anymore."

Judy's jaw fell. "You, with... Honey, that Honey?"

"That one yeah." Seeing the interrogative expressions from the other he gave her more information. "She's a Honey Badger. Yes, unoriginal name. And no, I won't say more. She wouldn't like that. And neither would Finnick."

"Goddam right."

"Anyone else?" Asked Jessica. Everyone shook their head. "Alright, I slept with Chad."

"WHAT!" Came multiple voices.

"I was young and stupid, and I could believe someone so handsome could be such an asshat, okay? It was right after Judy broke up with him. Well, he tricked me like all the other girls." She shrugged. "And I found way better afterwards." She added, kissing her fox.

"That's it." Said Bonnie. "I'm neutering him."

"Let's just pretend you didn't just say that in front of six officers." Joked Stu with a smile.

"Not my jurisdiction." Stated Bogo, which earned him twelve surprised stares and a giggle coming from Clawhauser.

"Next question." Said Jessica. "Okay, seems like it was already answered. Did you sleep with someone here and how was it?"

"Amazing." Immediately came Clawhauser's voice, as his face heated up.
"Same." Said the chief, stroking his shoulder.

Most mammals gave the same answer, except for Blackfur and Wolford who both downed their drink.

Nick's, Judy's, and Clawhauser's jaw fell.

"No way." Said the bunny.

"Yes way." Said Nick. "Told you. Come on guys ! How was it ?"

"Awful." Said Wolford.


"Shouldn't have done that." Added the wolf.

"Wish I could get it out of my memory." Declared the panda.

"Ditto."

"Okay, what the actual fuck ?" Asked Nick, which surprised the other mammals since he didn't curse much. "I mean, when ? How ?"

"I thought we didn't need to give details if we drank ?" Asked Wolford, but seeing the interrogative looks on most of the other mammals he sighed and caved in.

"I was tipsy, she was tipsy, we were watching a rom-com at hers..."

"... We got caught in the moment. Nothing else to add. Let's move on." Finished the panda.

"Well, that was strange." Stated Jessica. "What's the hardest drug you've done ?"

Nick and Finnick drank and gave around a look that dissuaded others to ask.

Wolford drank.

"Pot... No, hallucinogenic mushrooms." Stated the panda. "It's his fault." She added, pointing at the wolf.

Okay, thought Judy, she's definitely drunk.

"Hey !" The wolf reacted.

The chief gave them a scolding glare and they both seemed suddenly highly interested by their drink.

"Pot." Stated Gideon flatly.

"Same, in a browny." Said both Judy and Clawhauser, staring at Wolford with accusing smile, while the wolf tried to make himself smaller.

"Judy ! That's what you do with your free time in the city ?" Upsetly asked Stu.

"It was an accident." She justified. "I didn't know the cake was trapped."

Her parents gave her suspicious looks but let it slide.
"There is no reason for Judy to be the only one to be embarrassed." Mischievously smiled Jessica. "What's the biggest lie you ever told to a significant other ?"

All mammals stared at them and they suddenly felt particularly uncomfortable. Stu was about to drink but he realised that if he did so, Bonnie would probably reel him down until he talked. "Remember, just after we graduated, when I said someone had stolen your car when you lend it to me ?"

"You mean, my first car ?" Bonnie frowned. "Yeah, what about it ?"

"She's actually at the bottom of the tri-burrows river." He stared at his drink. "I had a bit of an accident." He hid his head in his shoulder.

Bonnie frowned for a few seconds before relaxing. "Explains why you came back with different clothes on. You owe me a car honey." It was a good thing she was already a bit drunk, because otherwise, Judy knew her mother would tear her father a new one. Coming clean at that moment probably the best time to do it.

"The assurance paid for it."

"Not the same."

"And you mom ?" Asked Judy with a wide innocent smile.

Bonnie felt the attention shift to her. That was her turn to feel uncomfortable. "Um..." She stared at her drink. She couldn't sip, Stu hadn't either. "The dress, the really expensive one that you bought me. Do you remember it ?"

"The one that you ripped a week after ? Yes, I do remember."

"I never showed it to you, after it ripped, right ?"

"Yeah." He answered suspiciously. "It's because I brought it back to the store."

Stu gasped. "It was gift."

"Honey, it was both hideous and pricey. I used the money to pay for our kid's clothes for a year. The whole twelve of them."

"Oh." He left his ear slumped with a sad expression

She kissed him on the cheek. "I love you, but there is a reason why I insist to pick your clothes for important events." She hugged him. "I'm sorry."

"That's okay." He turned to the other mammals. "Anyone else has anything to confess ?"

Wolford shrugged "No significant other."

Blackfur sipped. No one pried. Vivienne did the same. "Not about you." She said to Finnick.

"I may have told you a couple time I was too tired to come see you before coming to live at yours, but I was, um... 'Working'."

"It's actually a better reason." She remarked.
"Yeah, well, at that time, I wasn't doin' a job I was proud of."

Jessica kissed Gideon. "I pretended I didn't have feelings for you. Mostly lied to myself though."

"I remember saying to you I'd never want to have anytin' do wid bunnies ever in highschool."

"I think you said that to most bunnies at the time." She smiled. "But I'm not jealous about that."

Clawhauser looked up at the chief. "I never lied to you."

The chief lifted a brow and began to talk with a serious tone. "After Hopps and Wilde came back from their vacation I asked to you what was new at the precinct. You said 'nothing much' and omitted to mention they were a couple, even if you already knew."

"Okay, that's once." Smiled the cheetah. "I hope I didn't upset you."

"You could never." He whispered, kissing.

Seeing the chief all nice, in his stuck up way, around Clawhauser was still a bit unsettling to his officers, which now wore awkward smiles.

"And for my lie." He took a sip of his glass. "You already know. I'll tell you again later."

"Works for me."

They heard Fru-Fru squeaky voice, "I pretended I wasn't my dad's daughter the first time I met him. I didn't want him to run scared."

Her husband was a bit embarrassed. "When I learned she was Mr Big's daughter, I... Well she already knows about that one." And he sipped his glass, while Fru-Fri gave him a drunken and giggly hug.

"I did pretend to be Finnick's father to con Judy out of five bucks." Said Nick.

"I pretended I could set the IRS on his tail when I had nothing but a recording that didn't really prove much. And the IRS had biggest fish to fry anyway." Said Judy

"Okay, one, saying I'm a small fish is hurtful, two, you double-hustled me ?"

"Yup. Hustled you into giving a confession, and bluffed you to make you believe I could use it. Not so bad for a dumb bunny."

"You're the best Carrots."

As the Jessica was finding another question, Judy whispered in Nick ear. "But it wasn't your biggest lie to me."

"What was it then ?"

"I'm Okay." "

"You got me Fluff."

"What's the kinkiest sex toy you've ever used with a partner ?"

Everyone sipped like one mammal. Judy gave glance to her parents. On one paw, she was glad
they hadn't answered, but on the other, that they'd be too embarrassed to say what guaranteed it was really not something she'd like to think about.

"Carrots aren't technically sex toys." Deadpanned Nick, glancing at every bunny, while the other mammals choked on their drinks.

"That's it. No more drinks for you." Said Judy, trying to reach his glass, that he lifted high enough so that she couldn't.

"What's the most illegal thing you've ever done ?"

Nick and Finnick raised their glasses to each other and drank.

"I think I answered that question earlier." Said Wolford.

"Stole a car." Said Gideon. "But I brought it back."

"So that makes it okay." Smiled Jessica. "I stole a garden gnome. That's technically more illegal than speeding." She told to Gideon that had started to grin.

"I let a suspect go, even though I had already caught him." Said Blackfur, giving a discreet smile to Nick.

"Who ?" Asked Bogo, like he didn't really care.

"Not answering that. And I wasn't under your authority at the time" She smiled.

Vivienne and Judy's parents drank too. "I'm not letting you using that against me. Ever." His mother said to Nick with a smirk.

Fru-Fru took a shot and was followed by her husband. They couldn't really risk saying anything in front of officers.

Vivienne suddenly took out her phone. "Oh shit." Finnick took a look at it. "Oh crap."

"What's happening ?" Asked Judy.

"Well, we don't want Hollie to stay up too late, but it's already late, and we're both pretty drunk." The vixen explained.

Finnick got up on wobbly legs, and helped his wife up, which wasn't much more stable.

"You're sure you can take care of her in that state ?" Asked Nick.

"I've done things way more complicated while drunk. But I'm really not sure if we'll find our room in the house."

Bonnie got up, a bit too quick, and started to reel, she was caught by her husband, as he got up in turn. "We'll help you get there. I'm a bit tired myself." Said the female bunny.

Clawhauser stretched his arms. "To be honest I am too. I wouldn't be against getting back to the hotel room." The chief got up, and pulled the pudgy cat by his arms to put him on his feet.

"Thanks, hon."

"You're welcome."
"Which direction is the hotel again?" Asked Wolford after downing his drink. "Cause I don't remember, and I'm pretty sure she doesn't either."

"Ginsky?" Squeaked Fru-fru. "Could you take us up and lead us there?"

The bored bear put back his phone in his pocket and extended his paws to take his boss's daughter in it and led the mammals away.

"Not even a good bye." Remarked Nick, sipping his drink.

"Completely drunk." Added Judy.

"They're going to regret it in the morning." Added Jessica.

"I'm sure I will too. Glad I ain't working."

"Where is Travis by the way?" Asked Judy. "He basically disappeared as soon as your wedding was over."

"He's working. Well, volunteering. He's one of those that clean the place and keep the booze and food flowing. He doesn't like parties."

"If he spends all of them that way, I'm not surprised." Joked Nick, getting up at the same time as his wife.

Gideon shrugged. "I think he doesn't like crowds. And loud noises. I'm pretty sure that if you found him, he'd be wearin' a noise-cancelling headset." He helped Jessica getting up and they directed themselves to the house.

... 

Though the showers were individual in the burrows, the bathroom were still separated between males and females. However, since so few bunnies were present at the moment, it didn't stop Nick from suddenly barging in Judy under the shower.

"Hey! The male showers are on the other side."

"I might have gotten lost." Smiled the fox, while throwing away his boxers and getting in with her. "And I know you always struggle to reach your back."

"Nick, this isn't my back." She scolded.

"Woopsie. I knew it felt nicer." He joked pulling her closer.

She pushed him back an inch. "Nick, I'm not really comfortable doing that here."

He gave her a kiss between the ears. "Sorry, between the wall thinness of our room, and the alcohol, I feel a bit daring." He took the bottle of shampoo and began scratching her shoulder. She gave a little sigh of satisfaction.

"I'm sure with the party and all, most of my siblings will be too drunk to notice anything tonight."

"But it means we'll have to take a shower again." Said the fox in a fake whiny tone.

"Too bad."
The shower was short. It's a habit every bunny took. With that much mammal using the same water, they had to be quick so that every one would get the chance to have hot water.

Judy pulled him out of the bathroom and into their shared room, pushing him on the bed.

"What are you doing ?" He asked, as she took a few steps back. "Don't try to take momentum, cause I'll dodge."

"Close your eyes."

The fox did so and he heard a ruffle of clothes.

"You can open them."

He did and saw her in her wedding dress again. "I'm glad." He said. "I was afraid we'd have to divorce and marry you again so that I'd get to see you in that dress for a second time."

"I'm glad you like it."

"That's because you look so cute in it."

Judy couldn't hide her blush. "So I suppose you wouldn't want to help me get rid of it ?"

"To be honest, I'd feel like I was desecrating it. I mean, look at you..."

"Hm." Said the bunny, scratching her chin.

"Is something wrong ?"

The bunny felt a bit taken aback. "Well, um... That wasn't really the reaction I was expecting."

"Sorry."

"Don't worry." She giggled. "I'm no upset. Just surprised." She pulled one of the strap, and then the other. The dress fell, and he saw that she had gotten rid of her underwear before putting the dress back on. "Is this more your speed ?" She smiled, taking a couple of steps toward him.

All he could do was give her a wide smile.

... 

"So, how was the party ?" Asked Nick to Wolford, while sipping on his coffee at the diner. It was already noon, but the both of them hadn't woken up way sooner. The wolf had been clever enough to restrain himself to one type of alcohol, and so he wasn't sick at all.

"Nice. Don't remember everything though."

"You remember the moment when you and Blackfur kissed, I'm sure." Smiled Judy above her chocolate milk.

The wolf froze. "What ?"


"Oh crap, again."

"Again ?" Asked the bunny.
The wolf closed his mouth.

"It happens often?" Asked Nick, his grin threatening to appear.

"It happened once. And we never did it again. And none of us want to."

"So that's all you did?" Judy was trying to keep her smile from widening.

"Yes."

"I guess that story about having sex in front of a romantic comedy was just a joke." Stated Nick, with a gigantic effort to keep his serious in front of the expression of utter panic the wolf was showing.

"We talked about that?"

"Maybe."

"But only to you right?"

A completely hangover Blackfur appeared behind the wolf, leaning so that only their booth could hear. "Yes, Wolford. Only them, Fru-Fru Big, her husband, Nick's mother, his best friend..." As she was enumerating, the wolf slumped his head on the table.

*bonk*

"Judy's cousin..."

*bonk*

"Her husband..."

*bonk*

"Judy's parents..."

*bonk*

"Clawhauser..."

*bonk*

"And the chief."

Wolford put his paws on his head. "Shiiiiieet."

"Yup. You can consider that the whole precinct will be aware of it by tomorrow."

"I can't believe it was that awful." Said Nick was a smile.

"Well..." Said Blackfur. "It wasn't awful in the moment. I mean, Wolford is very, uhm... Okay, not drunk enough. Let's just say, it was nice. In the moment." It was the first time Judy saw Blackfur really embarrassed. It was beyond weird. She thought nothing could really reach the panda that way.

"Oh yes. It was actually very nice. I mean she's more nimble that..." The wolf instantly shut his mouth. "It was okay. It was afterwards that we realised we shouldn't have done that. Let's just say,
working gets really hard when you spend your time trying to avoid your partner."

"It took us a week to talk about it. I was afraid he could have feelings for me that I didn't return." Explained Blackfur.

"It was like I had slept with my sister... If that sounds really wrong, I guess you know understand how we felt."

Both Nick and Judy had winced at Wolford's last sentence. "I didn't think you were that close." Said the bunny.

"Well, a lot happened during the last year." Explained Wolford. "We've spent a lot of time together, and not only during work. Chances are, we're going to find a place to be flatmate. So yeah, we're close."

Nick was staring alternately at the two mammals sitting in front of him with a puzzled expression.

"You know Nick, females and males can be friends without having the urge to jump on each other. It's actually quite common." Said the panda slightly tauntingly. "On another matter. Has someone seen Buster? He disappeared last evening and he wasn't in his room today." She took a look at her phone. "And it's almost 1PM. We have to meet the chief in front of the hotel and get back to Zootopia today. He better not be late, or the chief will give him parking duty for the rest of the week."

"Wasn't he going to have that task anyway since me and Judy are spending it here together?"

"No, he has asked a temporary transfer from one of the other precinct. A guy named Cavid will replace Judy."

"Oh. Good." reacted Judy. "I know him, he wasn't half bad at the academy."

The wolf and panda got up from their seat and were followed by the fox and bunny. They soon arrived near the chief's cruiser. The buffalo was leaning against his vehicle, wearing a simple pair of jean, a perfectly fitting white buttoned short-sleeved shirt and his reading glasses. He was looking at something on his phone while Clawhauser was looking for something in his luggage. When the newcomers arrived, he greeted them with a nod. "Only thing missing is Corporal Buster, now." He declared, looking around to see if the rat was coming. Clawhauser found the thing he was looking for with a "Aha!". It simply was his phone. He quickly closed the suitcase and the chief casually carried it to the trunk.

"Guys, you're here!" He said, in a tone that lacked the usual energy. It seemed the party had drained him.

The mammals greeted each other a bit tiredly.

"I didn't know the chief could have a sense of fashion." Remarked Nick.

"Well, he likes jeans, but usually wears t-shirts with them." The feline explained.

"So I take it you asked him to wear shirts. How did you manage to convince him?"

"I just told him he'd look good in them." They doubted 'looking good' was in the chief's preoccupation. Looking strong, fierce or intimidating, maybe. But not good. Then again, it showed how dedicated the buffalo was to the thing he had with the cat.
"I must admit, he does." Remarked Judy. Nick gave her a nudge, and a falsely jealous expression.

"And you wouldn't believe the ass those jeans give him." Whispered the feline with naughty smile.

Judy's face heated slightly, but she caught herself trying to catch a glimpse of the buffalo's butt.

Suddenly a car stopped near the cruiser, and Buster got out from it. He got around it and gave a kiss to the female bunny which drove it.

"If you ever find yourself in those parts again, give me a call." She winked.

"Will do."

And just like that, the female bunny rode off.

He took a couple of steps toward the cruiser until he noticed the six mammals staring at him. "What ? I would totally give her a call."

"I can't believe it." Said Judy, slapping her forehead.

"Score !" Sang Wolford and Nick, cheerfully lifting their paws up at the same time.
Blackfur simply gave him a slight smile with a single raised brow.

Clawhauser hid his mouth in his paws, containing his giggle.

The chief shrugged. He didn't care. "Say goodbye and climb in. We have some road ahead of us."

They said their farewell, and cruised rolled off under the afternoon's sun.

"So Buster is that kind of rat." Smiled Nick.

"I highly doubt he has a habit of sleeping with every mammal he meets." Answered Judy near him.

"Maybe he only does that with bunnies. Glad I found you first." Nick chuckled.

"I can't even understand how this is a joke." Remarked the bunny.

"Me neither. My brain is still numb from yesterday's party."

"You know that there is technically an afterparty today."

"Is our presence required ?"

"Technically yes, but I only promised a wedding to my parents. And that isn't that." Reassured Judy with a smile. "I could show you around, last time you were here, you didn't take the time to really visit."

"I wonder what kind of exciting thing a country town could hide." Joked Nick, earning a light elbowing in the ribs.

"Hey, that's my town you're talking about. It's very exciting." She reacted. "But the town isn't the thing I want to show you."

"What is it you want me to discover then ?"

"Well, it's the country. There are woods everywhere." She said, while taking a few steps to get
ahead of him, rocking her hips and waggling her little tail.

"What are we waiting for, then?" Eagerly asked the fox.
Epilogue, Chapter 2

Epilogue : Where Life Leads Us

Chapter 2 : Bunnies in the Fox Den

28th of March 2022, 7:34 PM

He had run from his job, taking shortcut through the alleyways. He was sweating, panting, and almost panicking. He couldn't be late for that, he'd never be late for her. The world felt slow around him. The automated door slid sluggishly along their rail and he bolted through them as soon they gave him enough space to pass his body through. He skidded in front of the reception desk.

"Judith Laverne Hopps, where is she ?"

"Huh ?" The clerk lifted his head from his phone.

"Hopps. The bunny, my wife. Admitted here a few minutes ago. Where is she ?" He almost shouted.

September 2021

In the waiting room, Judy and Nick were waiting anxiously for their turn. They didn't really know what to expect of that first interview with the doctor, or how it all really worked. Sure they had spent a lot of time on the internet gathering information, but looking at it virtually and facing it for real was different.

"Mister Wilde and Miss Hopps." Came a voice after the door opened. The male zebra doctor gave them a weird look as they made their way through the door. "Please sit down. I'm doctor Hippatis." He said presenting himself.

"Nicholas Wilde. Please call me Nick."

"Judith Hopps. Judy for short." 

"What can I do for you ?" He said, getting right to the point.

They glanced at each other to give themselves a bit of courage. The bunny took a deep breath. "We'd like to have children."

"I'm afraid that despite our progress in genetic, there is now way you two could-"

"I didn't mean together. I want to go through the artificial insemination procedure."

The zebra took the file he had on them. "I see you're married."

"Yes."

"Hm." His expression turned to concerned. "Don't take this the wrong way, but in my experience, most cross-species couple are not what I would call stable. And it's even worse for predators and prey couple. What makes you believe you two would go the distance ?"

"We love each other." Simply stated the fox.
The equine had little chuckle. "Believe me, most couples that go through my office do. It doesn't mean they magically hold themselves together. You need to understand, that procedure has little medical risk, but in a sense we feel responsible for the children that get born because of it. It's not my role to define if you're suitable as a couple as well as parents, but I need you to be as sure about it as possible." He took down his glasses and wiped them with a tissue. "I know who you are. Judith Hopps, and Nicholas Wilde, but my sympathy toward you can't affect my judgement on this. So, what more can you tell me about yourselves ?"

They both recounted how they met and what they faced before getting together, they skipped the gruesome details, and ended the story with their wedding. The doctor had taken note throughout their speech.

"You both have a lot in common, and lot of differences. It shows that you have great affection and respect for each other. It's a good thing. I have another question. What does it mean for you to be a parent ?"

"Can I ?" Asked the fox to his wife.

"Go ahead."

"Being a parent would be for me to take care, protect and provide for my child, or children. It would be to thrive to be a good role model. I know it's a big responsibility, but I think it's something I'm ready to face."

"As a bunny from the first litter, I participated in the education of my siblings, and I know how hard it can be. But I know that as a couple, it's something we can do, and that we both want."

The zebra chuckled again. "Textbook answer. I'll start the paperwork right away."

December of 2021

"How many ?" Asked the bunny, laying on the exam table while the technician was running the echography.

"I count two. Let me check there." The lama ran the scanning rod along the bunny's belly, to check from another angle. "Yeah, two. Two heartbeats, two heads, separated bodies. Everything seems in order."

Nick was holding Judy's paw and was grinning from ear to ear. "Two kits." He said. "I thought you'd have more."

"Relieved ?" She smiled.

"Kind of. When you told me litters could go up to six bunnies, I got a bit worried."

"It's unusual to have so few bunnies in a litter, but it's not alarming." Explained the lama. "Do you want to know the sex of the kits ?"

"Yes please." Answered the bunny. At her second pregnancy month, they could at last know of the kit's sex.

The technician turned the screen toward the couple to show the floating black and white shapes. They could barely recognize anything.

"That's a head here, and another here. We can already see the ears. There's a penis, so that one is a
male, and there are the labias, so the other is a female."

Nick's smile couldn't get any larger and Judy's wasn't far behind. "We're going to have to decide ourselves on names."

End of December 2021

"It's really a great place." Stated the bunny. "But I'm not sure it was a good idea to buy it this soon."

"Why ?" The fox was carrying a pair of paint bucket. Most of their furniture was piled up in the middle of the living room, where they would camp for the next few days.

"Well, if we need to move again..."

"Fluff, the place is large. It was conceived for badgers. There is more than enough room for us and our future kits, and it's close to the ZPD. Besides, given how much we spend on a daily basis, and how much we'll need to feed our two kits, I'm pretty sure we'll have finished paying it in less than ten years." The fox smirk "That's the first time I plan things so far ahead."

The bunny took one of the bucket and brought into one of the future bedroom. The floor had been tarped and the plastic cloth had been taped to the toe boards.

"How did you get the loan for it ?"

Nick had insisted that he'd pay for the flat and pay back Judy on all the money she'd put into it. He was usually easy going, but it was one of the few things he refused to back down from.

The fox had a little smile. "First, even if I'm a fox, my name carries a little weight. And I may have name-dropped you to my banker."

The bunny glared at him.

"I know, I know, you don't like me to use your celebrity. And it wasn't enough anyway. I had to drop a bagful of cash on his desk for him to finally accept."

Judy was a bit taken aback. "You accepted the money back from your mother ?"

"Yes and no. I'll just slowly fill a second bank account for her. She could need that money for Hollie, so I'm giving it back."

"Does she know ?"

"Nope."

They had popped a bucket open and to Judy's annoyance, Nick had climbed on the ladder to paint the top of the wall. He wouldn't let her near thing, not taking the risk to see her fall. For the kid's room, they had chosen a pale yellow. Pink or blue were too cliché anyway.

"So..." Came the bunny's voice, as she hopped along the wall to reach a little higher with the painting roll. "Are you going to tell me why you wanted to pay for the place in full ? It's certainly not for legal purpose. We chose separate properties on the marriage act, but my name is on the property deed."

Nick had a snort, while getting down from the ladder, and moving it to reach another space on the wall. "You're going to find that silly."
"I always find you silly."

"That's not nice. Crud." He had put a paint stain on his shirt.

"Told you to use a shirt you didn't like." She mused.

"I like all of my shirts, and I wasn't going to buy new clothes for this." He answered before spreading more paint on the wall.

"And that silly reason ?"

The fox sighed. "It's just... Okay, you know how sometimes I'm a bit old-fashioned ? This is one of those times."

"Like, 'a male should provide for wife and children.' kind of old-fashioned ?"

"Yeah."

The bunny had a little giggle. "It's bit old-fashioned, yes."

The fox had a nervous chuckle. "One of the things I inherited from my dad. He always tried to keep us from being in need. When I entered high-school, mom had to find a full-time job to help support us."

The bunny lifted a brow. "She worked part-time until that point ?"

"Yup."

"How come ?"

"Let's just say looking after me and my dad was close to a full-time job." Smiled the fox.

... 

The room was near finished and Nick approached Judy. "You seem a bit tired, sweetheart."

"I'm fine."

"There's no shame in taking a break." He smiled. "I was going to take one anyway." The fox strolled away in the living room and the bunny some noises. He came back with a couple of sandwiches and a water bottle. He had also cleaned his paws. The bunny quickly went and did the same, and came back to sit against him in the middle of the room.

"It's taking form." She commented.

"Yeah." He unpacked one of the snack and gave it to her. He hungrily bit in his.

"Can I taste yours ?"

The fox lifted a brow. "There are eggs and turkey ham in it."

"I know."

"You don't like turkey ham."

The bunny's ears slightly dropped in embarrassment. "I know." She still extended her paws. "But it smells wonderful."
"One bite." He said. Since the babies in her womb would absorb part of the nutriment, he didn't want risking to poison them.

The bunny took a bite in the sandwich and chewed for a few second;

"How's it ?"

"Meh' " She said, swallowing the bite. "Don't know why I wanted to taste that."

"Pregnancy cravings." He taunted, which earned him an elbow in the ribs as well as a kiss on the snout;

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**End of January 2021**

"Nick, I swear on all that is holy, if you try to pick up something for me again, I'm going to punch you." Three months and a pair of weeks in, she was really showing signs of pregnancy. Round belly, pregnancy sickness. The only upside, was that her fur had never looked that silky and soft.

She was now taking the calls from dispatch, the closest to the action she could be, and the chief had been very evasive concerning her early return to active duty after the birth. As a result, her mood strings were erratic, and she went off for any reason.

"Alright Carrots." Nick lifted his paw and let her bend to grab the fork she had let go off. The operation was slow and fairly hilarious, even though the fox kept himself from laughing. She had to grab hold of the table, and slowly bend her knees to stay as straight as possible while holding her belly. Once her knees were bent, she took the fork, and slowly raised back. Nick extended a paw to help her, but she simply glared at him.

"You don't need to help me pick up a fork."

"Yeah but-"

"You don't need to help me do the chores, or do them for me..."

"I-"

She waved her finger at him, her temper rising."...you don't need to help me clean up when it's not your turn,"

"But-" He tried to chime in, but she raised her tone.

"YOU don't need to do the dishes for me..."

Nick glanced at the little stepladder in front of the sink which he had to fight tooth and claw to keep her away from. It wasn't their first argument in the matter, but they had gotten shorter and shorter, the fox caving in a bit sooner each time.

"... I don't need your help !"

Nick took a step back. He looked like he had been slapped, and the bunny realised it as soon as the last words left her lips.

"Alright Carrots. You don't need my help. Got it." He smiled, putting the mask on.

*He's putting on a mask ! Why does he do that, he knows I can see through it ! This damn... Does he
need a mask with me now? Why does he? Am I... I'm hurting him. I'm pushing him away!

It wasn't the first time she cried during her pregnancy, but it was the first she showed it to him. "I'm sorry Nick." In her moment of sadness she'd usually come right for the hug, but this time she stayed away. She had hurt him, she didn't have the right to do that now. "I just... I can't be weak. I have to do things for myself." She tried to wipe the tears but it was a lost battle. "I can't just let everyone do everything for me."

"You silly bunny." He suddenly hugged her. "You don't think I know that? I know there is nothing more you hate than people thinking you need help."

She nodded in his chest, soaking his shirt with tears.

"You're pregnant fluff. Pregnant. You're growing two lives inside of you." He stroked her ear. "I completely get that all those mammals trying to help you is a call back to the time you were injured."

"Yeah. I hated that."

"But believe me, being pregnant isn't something to take lightly. Hell, there is a reason why prenatal leave exists." He felt the bunny stiffen in his arms. "I'm not saying you should take one. I honestly don't think it would be good for the kits. But you need to stop setting yourself impossible goals. If you could settle for highly improbable, that would be great."

"Okay."

"Oh, and you don't have to hide when you cry." He added.

"I just don't want you to think I don't want this. I do want this. But sometimes it gets overwhelming. And my mood is all over the place."

"A vow to love, support, care and carry each other's burden. A vow to share not only the joy and happiness of the partner, but also the pain and hardships. I think those were the officiant exact words. Don't hide from me."

She gave a light punch to his ribs. "Yeah, well, don't act as if you weren't putting on a mask back there."

"Sorry about that. It's the only way I found for you to listen to me." He smiled.

The bunny groaned. "You did it on purpose."

"Aren't you glad I did?"

"Am I? Yes, yes I am."

February 2021

"I'm taking two points from Clawhauser. He proposed me a piece of his donut because he 'doesn't think I eat enough'."

"I'm taking one thousand points from Jack. Because he's still a jackass." Smiled the fox.

"You're a jackass, and I still married you."
"Yup, but I don't need points on a chart to be the father of my kits."

The bunny couldn't keep herself from smiling each time the fox referred to the life in her womb as his kits. It was one of her biggest fear that he wouldn't recognize them as such, even though she had played it down.

"One points for Blackfur, she let me hold the door for her, and didn't act as if I was made of glass."

"Two points for Wolford. He kept himself from howling last time I played a howling track on my phone speaker."

"And I'm taking two points from the chief, who tried to pull me from duty again this week."

The fox stroke her belly. At this stage, the pregnancy was really showing, and they both knew that despite the fact that she was still technically on active duty, the buffalo was keeping her at the precinct. He knew that being behind a desk would only raise her stress, but as her superior, it was his job to be mindful of her state, and her ability to perform.

"I'm giving three points to my chiropractor. Really unlocked my vertebras last week."

"Could you please take it seriously ?" She smiled.

"Oh come on Carrot. We both know who we're going to choose as godparents. This is only a hobby. And a way to get them to fight over it."

"And who are we choosing ?" She mused.

"Ben and Fru-Fru."

The bunny giggled. "Ben is going to spoil them so much."

"Oh, he's going to, that's for sure." Nick pulled his bunny against him. "Have I told you that you look cute ?"

"I may have heard it a couple of time. But it's hazy."

"You look cute."

The blushing bunny kissed him on the snout. "You don't think I'm too fat to be called cute ?"

"Honey, you're not fat, you're pregnant. There is a difference." Grinned the fox kissing her snout in turn.

"You don't think I'm too pregnant to be called cute ?" She asked jokingly.

"Never."

Early March 2022

"So, kits names." Announced the bunny, slamming a large book name on the coffee table.

The fox gave a groan. Choosing a name was hard. He had proposed bunny 1 and bunny 2, but Judy would have none of it. "Now ? I just came back from work."

"And you're tired, and more open to suggestions." She smiled mischievously.
"Or grumpy and in no mood to cooperate."

She pulled him by the tie. "You sir, are going to cooperate, if you don't want to get cuffed."

"You're going with that threat ?" He asked with a naughty expression.

It was the bunny's turn to groan "You sir, are going to cooperate, if you want to get cuffed."

"Now we're talking. So about those names ?" Asked the fox, suddenly way more motivated.

...  

"Tommy ?"

"Sounds retarded."

"Isaac ?"

"I had a grand-grandpa named Isaac. I think he was a dick."

"Robin ?"

"I don't want him to get bullied."

"Chad ?"

A progressively annoyed Judy was spit-balling name while Nick was happily shutting them down one after the other.

"Now you're doing it on purpose."

"Blaze ?"

"And why not Rush ?"

"Edward ?"

"Ed-ward..."

"Evan ?"

"It... Actually sounds nice."

The bunny lifted a brow. "Sounds nice ?"

"There is no better reason to give a kid a name. Nick Wilde : sounds nice. Judy Hopps : sounds nice."

"Let's go with Evan then." She said, scribbling it on a notepad. "What about a middle name ?"

"Do all bunnies have middle names ?"

Judy had to reflect on it for a second. "Not really. Mine comes from an aunt... But most of my siblings don't have one. Most foxes do have one, though."

"They're not foxes." Remarked the fox.
"They're getting middle names all the same. And I know you want them to."

"Alright. That's true. Any idea?"

"I kind of wanted to call the male Lycus."

"Okay, I'm vetoing that. I don't want my kid to wear that name." He said with a chuckle, but the bunny could see the hurt underneath.

"That's your father's name." She protested.

"And it's also a name that most mammals know as one of this city's biggest criminal. So no." He took out his phone and went on a fox naming site. "Sentius, Carbius, Portus... Doesn't sound nice."

"What about this one?" She said, pointing at the screen.

"Placidius?"

"Yeah, why not?"

"We're basically giving him our benediction to be a lazy ass."

The bunny gave him a smile. "I don't think any of your kids would need any kind of benediction to be lazy asses."

"Kids, you'll have your mother to blame for your names." Smiled the fox while adding the name on the paper. "So the girl now."

The bunny gave him the book. "Your turn."

"You're about to make me pay, are you?"

"Yup."

...  

"Abigail?"

"Stick in the mud."

"Maisy?"

"Too cute."

"There is no such thing. Heidi?"

"No."

"Bethany?"

"Sounds like a shallow tramp."

"Scarlet?"

"I'm going to punch you."

"Sharon?"
"One of my classmates was named Sharon. Couldn't stand her."

"Damn those people ruining names for everyone else. Miley?"

"Sounds like a prostitute."

Nick lifted a brow and the bunny simply nodded. "Courtney?" He proposed.

"A cheaper prostitute."

"Oh my gosh, Carrots!"

"What? I've been neck deep in a mammal trafficking case for two weeks. Those names came back the most."

"Now that's creepy."

"You don't need to tell me."

"Katie."

"Katie Wilde... That sounds nice. Katie Wilde it is."

"I don't have a say in this?"

"Of course you don't, silly fox." She said, rubbing her snout against his.

"Alrighty. Katie it is. Does she need to have a middle name?"

"Yes she does." The bunny took the phone from her husband's paw. "Augustina, Vinicia, Maxima, Viricia... You foxes have strange traditions."

"Yeah, some of us marry bunnies, how strange is that?"

"Pinara... Now that one can't be real."

"I knew a Pinara."

"Varia, Caria... Meh. Hey, Junia, that sounds nice. And I had an aunt named Juniper."

The fox wrote it down. "Katie Junia Wilde. Okay. Written down."

The bunny closed the book and gave back his phone to the fox. "It was shorter than I thought it would be." She remarked.

"Does that mean I get to spend more time cuffed?" Asked the fox with his tail vaguely wagging.

"I guess you do." Smiled the bunny while pulling him toward the bedroom with his tie.

"Yay!"

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28th of March 2022, 7:02PM

"So, you liked the movie?" They were driving away from the cinema in their open-roofed car.

"Yes, it was fun! I can't believe they made another Robin Hood remake!" She smiled. "You like
that character, don't you?"
"I like that he's always presented as fox. I think it's the only piece of media that consistently presented us foxes as the good guys."

"Except for the 2010 movie where he was played by a wolf."

"The 2010 movie doesn't exist." Simply stated the fox with a smirk. "And it wasn't even the true robin... And I'm not going into this right now. So how about we hit the restaurant?"

"That's going to be difficult."

"Why? I'll just park here, it's only one."

"My water just broke." Smiled the bunny.

"Oh shit..."

"I had a few light contractions during the movie, but I didn't- Owh!"

Nick made a quick u-turn and launched the car down the street. "Please don't give birth in the car." He said in a tone he tried to make light.

"If they come out, they come out, hon." She said in the same tone.

He took a sharp turn. The hospital wasn't much farther.

"I'm the only one that gets to be reassuring. You're supposed to be a panicking pregnant bunny."

"You're supposed to be the panicking fox dad." She answered tauntingly, but he could hear the fear underneath. "Okay, I'm scared, but I won't panic."

"Yeah, well, I'm scared too." He pulled over in the hospital parking lot. "You've got the papers on you?"

"Always." She said. "Give me a paw. I don't think I'll be able to walk."

As an answer, he vaulted over her to open the door on her side. "At your service."

"My hero."

She unlocked her belt and the fox carried his bunny toward the emergency ward. The hospital personnel quickly laid her down on a stretcher and were rolling her down a hallway. Nick was running at her side and kept holding her paw.

"Nick, I'm going to need you to go get my stuff."

"I'm not leaving you on your own."

"Nick, I'm pretty sure I'm not giving birth right away. You have time. Please?" They had prepared a stuff with all the necessary for her admission to the hospital, clothes, toiletry bag, everything... And right now, she needed to know that everything was going properly. She needed the structure.

"Okay fluff. I'm going. Don't your dare deliver without me."

"I wouldn't dream about it."
He skidded on the living room's wooden floor. The bag was supposed to be in their room. He bolted through the door and looked everywhere. Not under the bed, not in the closet... Where?

He went back to the living room and checked every inch. Nope. Maybe the kid's room? He entered it and looked around. It smelled of fresh paint, and brand new furniture. No bag.

Where, where?

Bathroom. He opened the door. The back was there. She had needed something inside it that morning. Of course. He took it up just as soon as his phone rang.

"Mister Hopps?"

"Yeah, well no, me and my wife don't have the same name, but yeah, I'm Judy Hopps' husband."

"Zootopia's central hospital. Your wife is on her way to the delivery room."

"That soon?"

"Yes, if you want to be there you might want to-"

"I'm coming!"

He hung up and rushed back out.

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7:34PM

"I'm sorry sir, I can't let you in."

Nick lifted a brow. "I'm her husband."

The stern female moose nurse had barely given him a look and gave him back his ID card. "With no wedding certificate, and the two different names, I can't authorize you to enter the room."

"For f- carrots-sake lady! I'm Nick Wilde, she's Judy Hopps, you know us! On the TV, the thing the tabloid talked about for a week! I'm her husband!" He was losing his temper. He could see the moment when he'd begin snarling, and that wasn't going to help him.

"The rules are the rules. You know what rules are fox." She said in a condescending tone.

Not today. Any day but not today.

"Oh, come on!" He had nothing. Usually he'd have a dozen way to convince her to let him through, but his mind was blank. All there was inside it was his bunny, alone, about to give birth. He was starting to consider getting violent. No matter that he'd probably get arrested as soon as he'd get out of the delivery room.

Kick the knee, get her to bend over, jump-punch her in the eye and grab an antler. As soon as she straightens up from the pain, use the momentum to propel myself up and kick her forehead with my feet on the way down. Seven seconds.
"What's the commotion?" Asked a voice the fox recognized instantly.

"That fox pretends his wife is about to deliver."

"And?"

"She's a bunny." The moose crossed her arms. "I don't know what he's up to but with that kind of-"

The doctor Procyon had taken down his glasses. "I can't pin that on you for being anything else than prudence this time, Joyce, but your attitude toward predators and especially foxes is being a pain for all the hospital staff. You're this close-" He held two fingers really close together."-To get suspended. Now get. Go do something productive with your time. I'm vouching for him." If the moose felt offended she didn't show it, and got away in a quick step. "Sorry about this mister Wilde." He took a look at his watch. "I have a few minutes before my next consultation, I'll help you get prepped.

"Thanks doctor Procyon."

"Don't mention it. I'm pretty sure I was helping the nurse more than I was helping you, at this point." Smiled the raccoon.

"I don't know what you mean." Answered the fox with the same expression.

The raccoon snorted. "While we're on our way, a couple of recommendations. First of all, chances are there will be a couple of harsh words said during the delivery by your wife. 'It's all your fault' is the most common one, even if not really applying in your case. If you feel light-headed, I suggest you sit."

"Light-headed?"

"Fainting husband syndrome. Common enough. You'll fall from lower if you're sitting."

"Logical."

"I know you won't, but I'm still going to say it. Do not, in any way, try to physically participate in the delivery unless asked to by the staff. That won't happen by the way."

"I can hold her paw?" Asked the fox worriedly.

"You better." The doctor scratched his chin. "You can wipe her forehead with a fresh cloth. That always helps. It's more of a comfort thing, but she'll need all the comfort she can get."

"Alright. Anything else?"

"No, that about covers it up."

"...

7:37PM

The fox was wearing a gown and a mask. He entered the delivery room. His bunny was laying on a table, legs on a stirrup, and she seemed exhausted.

"You're late." She smiled.

"Not too late, I hope."
"No, they were waiting for you."

The fox gave a surprised glance to the hospital staff.

"I'm talking about the kids, sill- OWH OWH !" He immediately placed himself to her left but her fists were closed, all he could do was hold her paw during the contraction. When it finally stopped, he took her paw properly.

"Nick, I think I'm going to destroy your paw."

"Okay, let me just..." He let go and placed himself to her right, giving her his left paw. "This one's already busted, might as well finish the job."

As an answer she gave a giggle, punctuated by a groan of pain.

"Is everything okay ?" Worriedly asked the fox to the otter doctor.

"Perfectly fine, though I'd be more comfortable if your wife had accepted the epidural, first delivery and all..."

"She's a bit difficult like that." Smiled the fox.

"Hey !" She said, letting go of his paw and trying to punch him in the ribs.

"Will you accept an IV anaesthetic ?" Asked the fox, after having dodged the small fist.

"Nope. I'm not doing that two times, so I might as well have the full experience. OWH, OWH, OH SWEET CHEESE AND CRACKERS !"

Nick was suddenly very glad that her paws weren't as powerful as her legs. The contraction stayed for a full minute.

"She's fully dilated." Informed the doctor. "It will only be a couple of minutes now." He looked up at the fox, and made a little wave to a nurse. The antelope approached with a water tray and a damp cloth.

"Do you think you can handle that ?"

Nick smiled and took the cloth. "Honey, I think she wants me to waterboard you." He whispered, high enough that everymammal could hear. It pulled a chuckle from the otter doctor.

"The tray's not really handy for that. It works better with a pitcher." Smiled the bunny as Nick wiped her forehead. "That feels good. Thanks."

She felt how worried Nick was. Despite the reassuring smile he wore, he was completely stiff. And his humour had taken a turn for the dark.

"OH CARROTS !" She shouted. "I can do this." She breathed deeply. "I can do this."

"And they're on their way. Don't push yet miss, wait for my go."

The contraction receded. "You're doing great Carrots."

"Once again, I'm doing all the work."

"I thought you'd be used to it by now."
"OWH, OWH!"

"Push, now." Came the doctor's voice.

Nick could see the look of effort on his bunny's face. Jaws clenched, she gave a groan, that almost sounded like a growl.

"You're doing great Judy." Said her husband.

"I see the head!" Came the doctor's voice. He manipulated the kit to guide his face downward, facilitating the delivery. "Push again!"

It wasn't a groan this time, but a scream of effort. Nick had to hold on to her paw not to lose it and forgot for a couple of seconds he was supposed to be the one supporting her.

"I have him. It's the boy." He expertly cut open the birth sack and the umbilical cord, before clamping it. The little bunny immediately started screaming. It was more of a high squeak. He then gave the kit to a nurse for him to get thoroughly checked and washed.

"You okay Carrots?"

"Walk... In... The park." She slowly breathed.

"Good thing, because the second one doesn't seem to want to wait." Said the doctor, leaning again toward her.

"Oh crud."

Nick took the cloth and put it on her forehead. "I love you." He whispered.

"Love you too... Oh crud I feel it com-" She clenched her jaw and gave a loud groan of pain.

"You're doing great."

"You bet I aaaaAAAARgh!"

"Push!"

Nick was a bit afraid for her vocal cords at the long scream she gave.

"I see the head! Push again."

"Just a sec... I need just as second." The bunny was short breathed. She took a long deep breath. "Alright. Let's finish this."

She pushed again, and felt like it was the last time she'd be able to.

"I have her. It's the girl." He cut open the sack and the umbilical cord and clamped it again. This time the baby didn't scream. The doctor turned her and gave a lap on its butt. No major reaction. He took the stethoscope to her chest and his brows furrowed. "There is a heartbeat." He said. He tried a second slap, but the baby didn't cry. Pulling down his mask, he approached the baby to his face, placing his mouth over it and started the mouth-to-mouth.

Nick gritted his teeth while he felt the paw of his bunny grip his harder.

_Ten seconds._
The doctor kept going, but there still was no reaction.

Twenty seconds.

Judy felt her tear rise and heard a sob from her mate.

Thirty seconds.

"Not giving up on you, girl!" Came the doctor's resolute voice.

Fourty second.

There was a sudden muffled squeak and the otter immediately pulled his face back. The cry instantly pierced the bubble of dread.

The doctor gave the kit to the nurse which took it to give a more thorough exam and wash him. Judy fell limp a short second before Nick unstiffened. She was still gripping his paw, but with less force. "Nick can, you hug the doctor for me?"

"Unfortunately, you're still holding my paw." Answered the fox.

"And mines are full." Said the practician as he approached them with the clean kit boy, giving him to his mother. She placed the small form against her chest and observed it. His fur was almost completely white, except for the tips of his ears which were slightly darker. Both her parent were looking at him in amazement. A couple of minutes later, he was joined by his sister. He fur was the same shade as her brother. They'd have trouble telling them apart in their early years.

"So, have you decided on any names?" Asked a nurse with forms in paws.

"Katie Junia Wilde for the girl." Answered the fox.

"And Evan Lycus Wilde for the boy." Answered the bunny. Nick immediately turned his surprised gaze toward his wife. The nurse was wearing the same expression.

"I'm not letting your father's name be remembered like that." She stated.

As an answer, the fox wrapped her in a warm hug. "I love you Carrots." Came a strangled voice in her neck.

"I know you do."

The nurse wrote the names and went away.

"We're going to roll you back to your room." Said the doctor.

"Are there going to be complications for the girl?" Asked Nick, slightly unsticking himself from the bunny.

"No, it's unlikely. Kits sometimes go a full minute before breathing, though it's fairly rare." A nurse came and rolled the bed back to the room, while Nick and the doctor walked at their side. The fox could unlock his eyes from the kits.

"I'm going to keep you under observation for a couple of days. Both for your and your children's health… Small mammals can have a harder time recovering from labor."

The doctor made his recommendations and left the room, Nick and Judy were now alone.
"Can I hold them ?"

"They're your children too." She said, giving him the boy. He gently took the small bunny and cradled him in his arms.

"You're crying." The bunny noticed.

"I know." Sniffled the fox. "I know it's cheesy but... When we kissed for the first time, I thought nothing would ever top that. Then we became mate, same feeling." He chuckled. "We married. And guess what ? Same feeling. And now I'm a father. Nothing can top that." He extended his paw caressed his wife's cheek. "I love you Carrots."

"I love you too." They kissed, and she put the second kit in his paws. "Hold your daughter too. It's even better."

The fox had a strangled laugh and took the kit. "I'm holding both my kits. Boom. Moment topped."

There suddenly was knock on the door and a nurse alpaca appeared. "Hello Mr Wilde and Mrs Hopps." The alpaca turned toward the bunny. "It may be a bit soon, but if you wish to take a shower, I can assist you. We will also change your bed. We're usually more prepared, but your delivery was..."

"I know, I think they were in a rush to get out."

"Yes."

The bunny turned toward her mate. "You think you can handle them while I'm gone ?"

"Sure, fluff." He felt a bit guilty to not be able to help her since he arms were taken, but the nurse did her job perfectly. Another took the bed away a brought another larger one with clean sheets. "It's common for bunny parents to sleep together with their kits at first." He explained.

As the second nurse had left, the kid started crying again. He tried to rock them back to sleep but there was nothing he could do. "Fluff ?" He called through the door.

"Yes ?" Came her voice, muffled by the door and covered by the sound of the running water.

"They're crying and... Well, I don't know what to do."

"Tried rocking them ?"

"Yup. Not working."

"I'm almost done. They're probably hungry." The nurse leaded the bunny back to her room and helped her back in her bed. "To be honest, I'm starving too." She hadn't eaten yet that evening, and her belly growled as to confirm it.

"I'll bring you something right away." Smiled the nurse, leaving the room.

Nick brought her children to Judy and she immediately stuck them to her nipples. "I'm glad they don't have teeth yet." She smiled.

Nick hopped on the bed and installed himself near her. "That happens ?"

"More that we'd like. Angelica had hers early enough. I'm pretty certain mom has a couple of scars on her..." She pointed at her chest.
"Oh. I can see how that can be painful."

Judy nodded, and focused her attention back to her children. "I'm glad that part is over." She sighed. "I can't believe my mom birthed at least four of us each time."

"I was kind of scared for you back there."

"I know, that's why I was holding your paw." She smiled, before slumping back on the pillow. "I'm exhausted. I'm hungry. I feel like my lower body is just one big sore-muscle..."

The fox put an arm around and shoulder and pushed himself closer. "On the plus side, we know have two kids to keep us awake every night for the next two years."

"Kids, your daddy is already making mean jokes about you." She said, caressing their head.

"I'm surprised though."

"About what?"

"There actually are things that can be cuter than you." He put his snout in her neck and nuzzled her, making her giggle, both with his comment, and with his whiskers that were tickling her.

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**June of 2022**

One of the numerous good things about having children was that he knew that when he'd come home, Judy would be here to greet him.

Now, as he came home from his ZIA job, he could find a bunny with two kits happily waiting for him.

"I need to get back to work." Stated the bunny shattering that perfect mental framed picture as the fox hung his coat next to the door.

"What?"

"Work. I need it. I'm going crazy here." The bunny put her face against the fox's chest. "I'm booooorred."

The fox had a chuckle. "I thought the kid's were a pawful."

"I got organized." She smiled. Once again, Judy's thriving for efficiency surprised the fox. "I even had the time to put a schedule in place." She took the fox's paw and pulled him toward the laptop on the coffee table. Their two kids were sleeping in the wheeled crib next to it. The fox leaned above to watch them sleep. In the span of the first two months they truly had grown a lot.

"Don't wake them up." She whispered.

He sat near her and she showed him a spreadsheet. Still whispering she started to explain. "Those are your working days and hours, if we overlap them properly, we can optimize the time we spend together. We'd even have time for ourselves."

"I see you've thought of everything fluff, but why is it a fourty-five hour work week? Shouldn't you take it a bit more easy?"

The bunny had silent giggle. "What would the chief say if I proposed him and thirty-five hours
work week ?"

"Well, first he'd be surprised, and then he's say you should do less." He proposed.

"Exactly. If I had sent him a thirty- five hours work week schedule, he'd simply have told me to wait a bit more before coming back to work. That way I showed him I was motivated, and he accepted when I proposed this." She explained, showing a twenty-hour schedule.

Nick Studied it for few seconds. It held up well, but there were a few times a week when none of them would be home. "There is a slight problem there and there, hon."

"Don't worry, your mom said she could take care of the kits while we both worked."

Nick's brows furrowed. "You put that in place with my mom and the chief ?"

"I... got excited."

Nick lifted a brow while Judy expression switched to contrite.

"Maybe I should have talked to you about it."

"Maybe just warned. But I'm kind of surprised you didn't try to get back on duty sooner."

"I wanted to, but I didn't feel ready yet."

The fox stood up and took the two kits in his arms. They both gave slumbering squeaks, before burying their faces in each other. "Your mom loves her job more than she loves you." He whispered just high enough that the bunny would hear it.

"Hey ! No ! Don't say that to them !" She tried to give him a light punch but he side stepped toward their room.

"I'll teach you to steal cars, that'll get her attention." He said, trotting through the door.

"Nick, not funny." She snickered. "Put them back in their crib. They need to finish their nap."

He installed himself on the bed. "They're going to finish they're nap. With us." He said, pulling Judy toward him with his free paw.

"Mandatory cuddle time ?"

"I don't see what's mandatory about it. You can go sit alone on the sofa while I enjoy the company of my wonderful kits." He smiled, stealing a kiss, before lying on his side.

She installed herself on her side facing her fox and he pulled her closer, both of their body forming a nest for the small white bunnies. "You're trying to be their favorite parent, aren't you ?"

"That would be so very sly of me."

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**Technicalities :**

Pregnancy for rabbits is technically one month long. I added the time for sapiens sapiens brain development, the difference in length between humans' and chimpanzees' pregnancy time. It's very arbitrary, yes. But it's my story with its approximate science. And one month pregnancy seemed a bit short to me. I think five months is an acceptable compromise.

I'm realizing now that Judy technically wears a bra (as stated in Part 1) which would imply she
only had one pair of boobs. It doesn't make sense, since I'm saying that most rabbits in this version of the universe have between 2 and 5 kits by litter. Four nipples should be a minimum. Yes it's different from regular bunnies (which have 5 pairs of nipples on average), but well, they are talking mammals so... Not the most inconsistent thing all around. I may or may not have typed 'bunny nipples' into google. Results in google image were surprisingly safe.

So, hey, maybe they alternate the babies so they can all get fed when litters are larger than two. That's a good explanation...
Vivienne and Finnick were nervously waiting in front of the principal's office. They had been summoned here to talk about Hollie. Their foster-daughter appeared shortly before they were called in. The female pangolin was sitting in front of her large office that could probably receive larger mammals. She was wearing strict clothes, and a pair of glass, in contrast with her welcoming expression.

"Mr and Miss Vulpo, hello and thank you for having taken the time to come. Hello to you too Hollie." She greeted.

"Hi." Shyly greeted the kid.

"That's quite normal Mrs Pholid. Why did you need for us to come ?" Asked Vivienne.

The principal pulled a tablet from her desk and tapped on it a couple of time, while her brow furrowed.

"Is 'dere a problem ?" Asked the male fennec.

"No. Not at all. It's quite the opposite. I just always struggle with... Oh come on, she fixed it this mor- Ah !" She put the tablet on the side. "Alright, here is the thing. I'd usually discuss the matter privately with you, but I think your, um- "

"We've been over this Mrs Pholid. You can call her our daughter. We consider her that way." Smiled Vivienne.

"Thanks. I know some parents can be very specific with it, I don't want to offend anyone. So yes, your daughter. She's clever and mature enough to understand." She took a short breath. "Alright, here is the thing, she's clever. Very clever. If you take a look at her grades..." She showed her a spreadsheet. "We can see huge progress during the two years she spent with us. I have to admit, when you insisted for her get in a class from her age, I was a bit skeptical. Foster kids tend to struggle, and especially when they get in school during an ongoing year."

"I remember she did struggle." Remarked Finnick.

"Yes, but she passed." Completed Vivienne.

The pangolin nodded. "As you can see here, there has been quick progress, especially in math and physics. Were you the ones that insisted for her to get into the introduction to programming class ?"

"Nah, she asked by herself. 'Ah think she can study whatever she likes. It's her life."

"Well she's mostly excelling." The pangolin took the tablet back and tapped a few times. "So the reason why I asked you to come, is because I think she could be suited for a better school."
Finnick and Vivienne looked at each other. "What kind of better school? We're okay now, but we're not that rich."

The principal had a little apologetic smile. "I know. We already discussed that." She showed them different schools on the device. "All those places are great, they can be springboards for brilliant students. Most of them allow scholarship, so if she works hard enough, money shouldn't be a problem. If we begin preparation now, she could get in one at the beginning of the next year."

The parents glanced at each other again and then at their daughter. "Well, I think it's really up to her then." Vivienne leaned toward Hollie. "Would you want to go to one of those schools?"

The fennec had a light shrug.

"They'd probably be good for ya. You could choose the one ya want. Well, the one ya want with a scholarship..."

New shrug.

They had learnt to know the kid. It was the attitude she had when uncomfortable. She had taken a lot from them, but contrary to the two vulpines, she tended to flee confrontation.

"What's on your mind honey?"

She gave her timid gaze, and seeing their encouraging faces she started talking. "I don't wanna go."

"Okay, but why?"

"Well..." She began hesitantly.

"Go on. It's your choice, we just want to know the reason." Said Vivienne, patting her shoulder.

The kid played with her fingers a bit awkwardly. "I made friends here. I don't want to leave."

They had suspicions it was the reason. During the multiple times she had been given to foster care, it was the first she actually had found true stability. It was clear she was afraid of change. And they both knew that being with her friends was really important to her.

"And... Well, they're counting on me..."

Both vulpines lifted their brows and turned to the pangolin.

"She's in a couple of study groups." She explained. "She doesn't need them, but she helps the others. Most student in her class have seen their grades go up because of it." She turned to the female fennec. "I know you want to help them, but you need to put yourself first. I'm glad their grades are going up, but you shouldn't put aside your potential for them."

"I kinda agree wid' dat, even if it sucks for the other kids..."

"I know. But I want to stay."

"Well, as long as your grades keep being what they are, I don't see any problem. Just stay in school. I kinda wish I did." Smiled Finnick.

The pangolin had small chuckle. "About those grades by the way." She showed the tablet again. "She's excelling in all science and mathematics. And in art class too, I think she has you to thank for that, Mr Vulpo." The fennec nodded. "She's quite good in english too, but in history and
geography..." Though the grade were still acceptable, they clearly weren't as good. Nor Finnick nor Vivienne felt they had anything to say in the matter, those were subject they had been particularly good at either.

"But they're boring..." She said.

Finnick had trouble not chuckling while he clearly heard Vivienne snort.

"Maybe. But you still have to work as hard." Stated the pangolin. She had hoped she could have the support of the kid's parents but given their expression, it wasn't really the case. "You'll need to work a bit harder."

"Hey kid. Selling my paintings is the boring part of my job, but I do it anyway. Tha' goes the same for you."

"Yeah but you get money." She retorted.

"And you get an allowance." Vivivenne said, booping her nose. They both knew it wasn't motivation enough though.

The pangolin put back the tablet in a corner of her desk. "I don't have much to add. I just need you to understand your daughter has potential. If she works hard enough, she could be accepted in any school she wants. I needed to let you know she had other options than this school because I want what's best for my students."

"Thank you, Mrs Pholid."

"Thank you for listening." She said standing up and directing them to the door. "Have a nice day."

... 

"So. Ya don't wanna go to those schools ?" Asked the fennec while driving the van.

"No."


"Fin !" Scolded Vivienne with a smile.

"Wot ? I don't like mammals that think they shit gold." He stated which earned him a giggle from Hollie and an amused glare from Vivienne. "Anyway, I had forgotten about the programming class thing. It's going good ?"

"Yeah..."

"I hear a but." Said Vivienne.

"I already know the full program." She explained.

Finnick had a strange smile. "Would ya like to learn more about computer stuff ?"

"Well, yes."

"I may know someone... She doesn't like kids and she's a piece of work, but ya could learn a lot."

"You're talking about Honey." Stated Vivienne.
"Ya know 'bout her?"

"Nick talked to me about her a bit, when he told me what he did growing up. I'm not really sure I want Hollie to learn things from a criminal."

"Vi, I'm a criminal." Grinned the fennec.

"You were. As far as I know she still is."

"You're friend with a criminal?" Hollie asked Finnick.

The fennec had a sigh. "Well... I was a criminal. I did bad stuff, and sometimes other mammals helped me do bad stuff. She was one of them."

"What did you do?" She asked eagerly.

"I'm not telling you what I did. Not today. When you'll be older, I promise I will."

The small fennec fox tugged on Vivienne's sleeve. "Mom, I want to learn more about programming. I won't do anything bad."

"As long as we don't get the ZIA knocking on our door, okay." The vixen smiled. "You can drop me here, hon. I'll do the rest of the trip on foot." She got out of the van after having given a kiss to both the fennecs. "What are you both doing tonight?"

"Horror movie night. Dad picks, I cook."

"Makes sense, raises your chances to have something edible on your plates."

"Hey! I know how to cook!" Protested Finnick at the windows why the vixen left with a playful wag in her tail.

... 

"Kids. Both of them." She smiled.

The coffee table was a mess of snacks and soda bottles. A pair of fennec foxes were snoring against each other, wrapped in a blanket.

The movie was still playing and given the amount of blu-ray boxes near the TV screen, she guessed they had dozed off midway through the third movie.

She gave a glance at the clock which showed 3AM.

"Guess you were trying to wait for me." She scooped Hollie in her arms. The little vulpine kept snoring and gripped the vixen's shirt. "Gotta get you to your bed." She whispered, entering her room before putting her in it and pulling up the blanket.

"Ah' thought I heard sumtin' " Came a voice behind her. Finnick was standing in the doorframe, rubbing his eyes. The vixen took a couple of quick steps and scooped him up. "Wot? Hey, I can walk."

"You don't like being carried, do you?" She said before kissing him.

"I ain't a kit anymore." He scowled, before giving back her kiss.
"Well, this not-kit needs to sleep in a real bed, better for his back." She smiled

"Mah' back's fine, Vi."

She deposited him on their bed. "Not what the doctor said. You know you should be careful." She got rid of her shirt before crawling up to him. "Which means I'll have to do all the work."

"You ain't hearin' me complainin' 'bout that."

Rolled and half entangled in the sheets, the vixen woke up. She laboriously extracted her face from under a couple of pillows for her eyes to meet the sunlight. She immediately buried her face back in the soft cushioning with a groan.

*I'm so glad I don't have to work today. I don't even have to get up.*

With one of her arms, she blindly searched for her husband but he didn't seem to be here.

*Strange. He usually wakes up after me.*

Smells suddenly hit her nose. Pancakes, jam, coffee. Her stomach gurgled. With a second groan, she rolled out of bed and grabbed her bathrobe.

She opened the room door and entered the living room. *Honey I'm hungry.*

"Pancakes coming up Vi." Said the small vulpine on a stepladder in front of a pan. He leaned down to give a plate to Hollie which brought it to the vixen.

"Thanks hon." She helped herself to the coffee pot and refilled her husband's mug. A little while later, the three of them were sitting around the table.

Vivienne was absentmindedly chewing, her still slumb-filled brain trying to find a way to boot-up properly.

"How're the pancakes, love ?" Asked Finnick, while taking a second serving and giving one to his foster daughter.

"They're perfect. Can I have seconds too ?"

"Shure."

The slow week-end days, those were the things she had missed the most when she had lost the two most important fox in her life. She sometimes expected to wake up from her new life and find an empty flat. That didn't happen yet, and she took it as a victory.

Hazily biting in the first pancake of her second serving, she saw Hollie leave the table, and come back a few seconds later with a large envelope. "What's this ?"

"Not telling. It's something to open once you've finished eating."

The vixen was half tempted to rush the meal, but she decided to enjoy it fully. Maybe she'd end up getting used to that kind of morning, but it wasn't the case yet, and she had decided to enjoy things properly.

She slid her plate aside and took the envelope. Both fennec were smiling expectantly.
"Holy shit." She whispered as she read it, and almost let it escape her paws. She put down the adoption certificate on the table and rushed to her daughter hugging her tight.

"It's just Hollie, mom." She joked, reminding that she was taking after Finnick's bad sense of humour. She wrapped her arms around her mother.

"Well, Hollie Wilde Vulpo." Precised Finnick with a smile, before joining on the hug. "Glad to officially be your dad, girl."

"I thought you'd get more emotional than that." Came the vixen's tear-filled voice.

The fennec had an embarrassed smile. "I discovered it last evening, before you arrived yesterday evening. Sorry I didn't tell you then, I wanted Hollie to be awake for it."

"I can't wait to tell Nick."

As on cue the doorbell rang. "About that, here he comes. Don't worry, I didn't tell him, but I invited him and Judy over. Called 'em yesterday night."

The vixen unstuck herself from her family. "I'm not dressed! Shit, Fin, you could have warned me."

"I could have." Grinned the fennec. "Go put something more appropriate while I go open the door." The doorbell rang again. "Coming!"

"Fin! How are you doing?" Asked Nick, fist-bumping the smaller vulpine, while coming through the door. He was wearing baby harness with his children in it.

"I'm fine. How's fatherhood treatin' ya? Ya look older."

"Wiser you mean. You look smaller." Nick stepped aside to let Judy in.

"Hello officer." greeted the small fennec.

"Hiya Fin." She greeted, giving him a short hug.

They entered the living room where Hollie was finishing cleaning the breakfast's remnants.

"Hollie! My favorite sister." Said Nick lifting her up with extended arms. "You've grown, haven't you?" He put her back down next to Finnick. "Almost bigger than Fin."

"Hey, I ain't 'dat small." Protested with a smile. Judy had come and greeted her half-sister too. "So, Nick, Judy, as I said on the phone, we have great news. We're just waitin' for Vi to finish dressing up."

"Mom overslept?" Asked Nick, surprised.

"She didn't know ya were comin'. Came back that night and went straight to bed."

They went to install themselves on the couch and a few seconds later the vixen joined them. "Hello guys. Oh my gosh they're so cute!" She said, approaching the kits.

"They're bigger than last time I saw them." She remarked.

"Grow fast at 'dis age."
"They're nearly bigger than you, big boy." Joked Nick.

"Yeah, well I'm still older, so shut it." He got up from the couch, took the envelope from the table and gave it to Vivienne. "I think it's better if ya make the announcement."

The vixen took it and took the papers from it, feeling the emotions she had felt a few minutes ago appear again. She had to take a deep breath to draw back the tears. "Alright guys. This is..." She turned the papers toward her guests. "The adoption certificate."

"This is awesome!" Jumped the bunny. "Oh my gosh! It's official. I mean, you were pretty much a family, but it's..."

"It's great to have it recognized officially." Finished her husband. "Glad to be your official brother, Hollie."

"Thanks." She smiled.

"Now that we're officially family, mom won't have anything to say when I totally start to spoil you." He grinned.

"Nick, you have children now." Scolded his mother. "You need to act responsibly."

"I should... But where is the fun in that?" He took out his phone. "Speaking of responsible ways to spend my money." He tapped the screen and started the call. "I hope you didn't really plan anything for lunch."

"Nah, why?" Asked Finnick.

"We have to celebrate that properly. I'm cashing in a sort of favor, and I'm inviting you. If that's alright with you Carrots?"

The bunny lifted a brow. "Why wouldn't I be?"

"Palmtree Hotel. You kind of own half of that favor." He smiled.

"I had completely forgotten about this. And yes, it's alright with me."

Finnick and Vivienne's jaw had fell while Nick was talking on the phone. "Hey Herbert? It's Nick, Nick Wilde. Remember? ... Great, thank you. Hope you're doing fine too. Say, wouldn't you happen to have a free table for one, two... Five mammals, fox sized, plus two babies, bunnies? ... Yes for noon... You're the best, see you soon." And he hung up.

Finnick's ear twitched. "Palmtree Hotel? As in 'Palmtree Hotel, you better book a table one month ahead'?"

"Yup."

"As in 'So expensive it's three months' rent just to look at the ceiling'?"

"Pretty much."

"And you just booked a table for us?"

"Yeah, and it's going to be free for me and Judy, but don't worry I'm-"

"We are inviting." Completed the bunny.
"No! No, you can't do that." Protested Vivienne.

"It's done. I can't just cancel it." Smiled the fox.

"That would put Herbert in a difficult position." Added Judy with a grin she had borrowed from him.

"Toldja she'd learn from him. Better find some fancy clothes, we wouldn't want to upset the rich and stuck-ups." The fennec scratched his chin. "But Hollie doesn't have nice dresses."

"I don't like dresses." She informed.

"Explains why ya never were the few ya have. Wot 'bout a shirt and a tie? I should have something that fits ya'."

Vivienne's mouth was gaping, while she tried to get a hold of the situation.

"N-Nick, Fin, wait, they can't just spend-"

Nick approached and hugged his mother. "Breath, mom."

"But Nick-"

"You know all the shit you've put up with, the things you went through, and how every time you thought you deserved a 'fucking medal', or at least a tip of the karma balance?"

"Yeah."

"That's happening now. You got a family again, you got a husband, you got a daughter, and your son's paying you an overpriced lunch in an overrated restaurant. And I don't intend for all this to stop." He pulled away a bit. "I know you. I'm pretty sure you've started to work even harder since Hollie entered the family, and you're trying as hard as you can to not screw anything up. And you're probably worried sick that anything could go wrong."

"Y-yeah."

"Then stop. Breath. Time to live a little, alright?"

"Alright." she said with a strangled voice pulling him back in her arms.
Epilogue, Chapter 4

Epilogue : Where Life Leads Us

Chapter 4 : Old Wounds

Friday the 8th of April 2024

He was in front of the door, trying to decide if he should ring that bell or not. He had driven more than 300 kilometers to do it and he still hesitated.

He heard a sigh coming from behind him and saw an arm activate the doorbell in his stead.

"I didn't know you could be so indecisive." Said a female voice.

Nick repressed a chuckle. "Given that most of what you knew about me was a lie, it's not that surprising, Scarlet." Years later, and with most of his inner demons slain, his dark humour was still intact. "Sorry."

"It's okay Nick."

The bunny at his side squeezed his paw. "I told her to be ready for your bad jokes. Your humour always gets that way when you're stres-"

The door opened, showing white furred vixen which looked at them with a raised eyebrow. Nick recognized her almost immediately.

"Hello ? What can I do for you ?" She asked.

She had left the chain on the door. Though Old Reynard was a relatively safe place, it seemed she was of the prudent kind.

"Sorry to bother you, my name is Nick Wilde and this is Judy Hopps-" As he was making the presentation he saw the arctic vixen squint her eyes. "We're not here on ZPD business, and we'd be out of our jurisdiction anyway. We just want to talk."

"This is not a good time."

"I doubt there ever will be a good time." Chimed in the doe.

The vixen glared at the bunny for a couple of seconds. She was surprised to see a total absence of fear in her eyes. With a groan, she closed the door and they heard the tingling of the chain on the other side. A couple of seconds later, it opened again.

"Come in."

She led them in the living room. Two foxes were sitting on a couch, both of them were holding glasses of wine. In front of them, the coffee table was covered with snack, and different beverage. Mostly alcohol. Nick recognized the two foxes instantly too. Though he was younger than Nick, Osman already a some grey strand in his fur. On his part, Lucas only seemed to have gained some weight. They stared at the newcomers as they came in, and their eyes widened in surprised when they recognized Nick and Judy.

"Relax, we're not here to arrest you." Smiled Nick.
"That's good to know." Answered Osman. It seemed his humour was intact too. "Who are you?" He asked Scarlet.

"My name is Scarlet. I'm-"

"Mike's sister." Cut Lucas. "I would say nice to meet you, but..."

An awkward silence fell on the room.

Nick broke it by clearing his throat. "Since we're already uncomfortable, I might as well say it now." He saw the other mammals gazes turn to him. "We kind of already met... Though my fur was grey at the time."

The two foxes on the couch stared at him, their jaws dropping in slow motion.

The vase which was sitting on a nearby table suddenly flew across the room to crash against a wall. They all turned their head to look at the vixen which had now her back turned to them and was resting her paws on said table.

"I did not expect that." Stated Nick.

They saw her shoulder tremble slightly. "I hope it was fun to you." There was anger but also sadness in her tone.

"I can't say it was."

She suddenly spun around and went straight to the coffee table, pouring herself a large glass of whisky and downing half of it before turning back to the fox. "You played us from the beginning to the end."

"Yeah."

"Was it worth it?"

"It saved the city. I'm sorry for... If there had been a way to do it without manipulating or hurting anyone, I wouldn't have done what I did. But it was the surest and fastest way to get to Lycus. I think it was worth it."

The white furred vixen gave a dark chuckle. "Yeah it was worth it." She downed the rest of her drink while an awkward silence fell again. "Sorry about the outburst. It's just... I'm pissed. I'm pissed at you, though it's unfair because you only did what you had to. I'm pissed at myself because of what I did, and what I made them do." She pointed at Osman and Lucas.

"Skye. You know us, we did what we did only because we wanted to. You didn't make us do anything." Osman was wearing a sad smile. "If anything, I'm sorry for what happened to Mike. I think he was the only one of us that was somewhat innocent."

"He's the one that should have lived." Added Lucas, raising his glass.

The silence that followed that last sentence was deafening.

"We're commemorating Lycus' fall and Mike's death." Explained Skye, while she took glasses out of a cupboard. "You're welcome to join." She poured three glass of wine gave one to each new guest, ending with Scarlet. "I'm sorry for your brother. Really. We all screwed pretty bad with him and even if we tried to apologize-"
Scarlet put a paw on Skye's shoulder. "I know. He told me."

They all sat down around the coffee table, taking chair from dinner table so no one would have to sit on the floor.

"You know, it's funny..." Began Scarlet. "Because, he really told me a lot about you all. I must admit, after the whole 'treason' business, I couldn't understand how he could still want to be around you..." The three foxes were staring a their glasses. "But I think, in a sense, he had found where he could fit in. You know, it was something he could never really do. Even with all that happened, he considered you all his friends. So at least, it wasn't all bad. Wasn't it?"

Lucas had to wipe a tear while Osman dam had completely broken down. He kept staring at his glass though. "You know what the hardest thing was?" He spoke.

"Until the end, I thought we were the good guys. The rebels. The ones that were going to change the world. Until I saw the news about Bellwether at Big's mansion, I thought... I know it sounds childish, but realising we were the bad guys, the ones that needed to be stopped... We fucked up. And we didn't stay to fix things. We just left."

"You're okay, Os." Said Lucas, putting a paw in his shoulder.

"Mammals died because of us! And we got away with it!"

"You were played. It doesn't excuse everything you did, but Bellwether was a great manipulator." Said Judy. "She fooled everyone, twice. I know how it is to be played by her."

"Yeah, but mammals didn't die because of you." Stated Skye. "Guess we'll just have to live with that."

Judy took a sip from her drink. "You know, I never hated any of you. I was pissed, I was angry, but you were kids. Stupid, maybe, but you were actually trying to make a difference. Even if your methods were more than questionable, I mean, I almost lost a leg because of them, at least you were doing something. That's more than most."

"That's a way to see it." There was a bit of irony in Skye's tone, but it was mostly self-aimed.

"I could argue about your motivations. I could ask if you were aiming for revenge or justice... But five years later, to me at least, it doesn't really matter anymore."

"It matters to us." Grimly answered Lucas. "For me it was both."

"Same here." Said Osman.

"There is no point trying to deny it." Stated Skye.

It seemed that meeting would be a string of awkward silence. This time, it was Judy who broke it.

The bunny gave a little huff. "I wanted to know what kind of mammals you were. I met most of the others that worked for Lycus. Almost all of them regretted their actions, but they were all going to jail for at least a couple years, so it was hard to tell if it was because of the punishment or because of their conscience. I know you did some horrible things, but the fact that you truly regret it... It's not meaningless. I can't talk for the citizen of Zootopia, but I forgive you."

The three foxes were looking at her with surprised expressions.
Nick smiled "On my part, I know myself enough to believe I'd have acted the same way you did if I had been your age, so… I can't say I'm putting myself in the same basket, but I get where you all come from."

Scarlet had kept her arms crossed. "I know a thing or two about grudge. I know it's not healthy to keep one. And my brother's death isn't something I can get over easily. But you mattered to him, and it seems he mattered to you. I'll leave for you to decide if you deserve forgiveness or not."

"Might take a couple of decade." Snorted Osman.

The silence that followed was slightly less awkward than the previous ones.

"On an unrelated note, I'd like to know how you got here." Said Nick. "And how things are for you now."

The arctic fox relaxed a bit on the sofa. "Well, when you called Mr Big to let us leave, we didn't really know where we would end up..."

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*End of April 2019*

"Where are they taking us ?" Asked Osman with worry in his voice. The orange-brownish fox was sitting next to Lucas, which was looking through the tinted glass.

"Wherever it is, I'm sure it would have been better to get arrested." Worried the small bat-eared fox.

In front of them, Skye didn't feel more at ease, but she trusted Frank wouldn't have send us to their deaths. "I'm sure we're going to be okay. Frank knows Mr Big."

"That doesn't reassure me. He seemed to know a lot of stuff." Remarked Osman. "You think he knew about Bellwether ?"

The three of them had seen the news about the lamb's death, and her involvement in Lycus' case. Realising they had been manipulated had been a shock to them, and Skye hoped that they would be able to put that behind them.

"I don't think so. I just hope that wherever he is now, he's okay."

"It sucks for Mike." said Lucas. He was still looking through the window, but was now wearing a sad expression. "We've been assholes to him, and he ended up dying like that. We couldn't even properly apologize."

"They were my decisions. Both times. Even the one that got him killed. You have nothing to feel guilty about."

"Well I do." Sighed the small fox. "If I had tried to hack into Lycus files, if I had just been a little more nosy, I could have found out the truth sooner. I could have put an end to this."

The arctic wanted to retort something but it was of no use. Time would heal, there was nothing she could say now that would really help the two other foxes.

The car they were in suddenly stopped and a large polar bear opened the door for them. "Get off." They obeyed, finding themselves in a remote parking lot at the edge of the city. In it was single old and worn red car. The bear threw them a set of keys as well as a little bag. "I don't get why Mr Big
is willing to got to those lengths for you, so you better be grateful. There are a thousand buck and the car papers to your name. Take it all and leave. Farewell." And just like that, the bear got back into the car he had just left and rode away.

Skye quickly opened the bag and found the money. She looked at the car papers. They were under 'Skye Winters'. "Why did they use my real name ? We're going to get caught."

Lucas was already on his phone. "No necessarily." They entered the car and Skye turned the engine on. The vehicle coughed like a cancer patient in terminal phase, but started anyway. "Zootopia is technically a self-contained country, even if very open, and for whatever reason, we're not high-priority wanted mammal. We weren't even mentioned on the news."

"Feels insulting." Remarked Osman.

"Shut it, jackass. What does that mean Lucas ?"

"Means there are a few roads out of the city we can bet won't be monitored. Drive, I'll guide us."

...  

The first week in Old Reynard had been easier for them than anticipated. It was strange to not be singled out for being foxes in a city that was less than four hundred miles from Zootopia. Then again, there was speciesism, it simply wasn't directed toward them.

They had found a motel easily enough, and the clerk had been kind enough to not ask for a deposit. But they had to find jobs, and as newcomers with no network, it wasn't an easy task. At least Lucas had been able to negotiate two rent-free weeks by repairing the computer at the reception desk.

The bad news was, the car had broke down. Their last trip at the grocery store had been a one way trip, and the piece of rusted metal was sitting at the parking lot in waiting. It was something they needed to sort out. The car could draw attention, it could get checked by the authorities, and though they were away from Zootopia, it could still be dangerous. The foxes didn't know where the car papers had been registered. So that day, the arctic fox had been to a garage to get it towed away. It would put a dent in their saving but they didn't have much of a choice.

The arctic fox was waiting near the car when the towing truck arrived.

"H'lo miss. That the car you need taken 'way ?" The truck driver was a dark brown fox with a gut and a smiling face.

"Yes. Thanks for coming this quick."

"No problem. 'Want it repaired or thrown away ?"

The female fox reflected on it a for a few seconds. "I honestly don't have the money to get it repaired."

"Tell you what. I bring it back to my place and I take a look. For free. If it's an easy repair, you just pay me back if or whenever you can. Deal ?"

"It's generous of you." She said shaking his paw.  

They got in the truck and they drove away. "I ain't that generous. I have a thing for old cars, and you obviously have no money. Since you wouldn't get it repaired to begin with, repairing it doesn't lose me any money. And if it doesn't work, I'll disassemble it for spare parts." He shrugged.
"Never seen you before, you new in the city ?"

"It shows that much ?"

"Zootopian accent." He simply answered. "It got heated there a few weeks ago. Know anything about that ?"

"Not more than the news say. But it sucked a bit for us foxes, so it's why we left."

"Yeah, I can get that. You getting by ?"

"We still have some money left, but without a job, it's running thin."

"Hm."

The garage was a short distance from the parking lot. He pulled over and they pushed the old car into the large garage. Three other car sat there, some of them had their engine on chains, others had the only their hood open.

"Any idea what caused the problem ?"

The white fox shrugged. "It's not the purge valve, not the fuel tank. The electric wiring seemed fine, at least the ones that went from the casing. I couldn't take apart the cylinders, but they could be manually be moved smoothly, so I guess it's not that either."

The brown fox lifted a brow. "You know your stuff."

"Just a bit." She had learnt a lot with Nick while they repaired the vans. He gave her an inquisitive look, and motioned her toward a car. "What's wrong with this one ?"

She looked at it and the time she had spent repairing the vans came back to her mind. "Injection pump's busted."

With an appreciative smile he pushed her toward the second car. "That one ?"

The engine was out of the hood, she looked at it for a few seconds. She couldn't really guess like that. "Can I ?"

"Go ahead."

She prodded it a bit, trying to get the cylinders to move. It seemed they were slightly stuck. She tested one after the other. They did move a bit. "That arm's busted.

There is rust stuck here. That's not supposed to be possible, or there would be rust on other parts. I don't know what caused it though."

"Me neither. And that one ?" He said, pointing at the last car. The hood was closed, she could not find any clue on what was wrong. She opened the hood but at first glance there was nothing out of the ordinary.

Well there was. The engine came from another brand of car. "Technical check ?"

"Not far. You ever worked as a mechanic ?"

"More or less."
"You wanna ?"

The arctic fox stared at the brown fox for a couple of seconds. "Is that a job offer ?"

"Yeah. I mean, I think you're not completely qualified, but you don't seem half-stupid. Which is
more than I can ask at the moment. I was employing two brothers, but they had to leave the city a
few days ago. So I'm hiring. Want the job ? I must warn you, I'll be on your back as long as I don't
consider you qualified enough to work unsupervised."

"Consider me on board." They shook their paws again. "I didn't catch your name,"

"Casey Bushtail. Miss Winters, was it ?"

"Just Skye."

From then on, things had gone a lot better. Casey hired another fox. And given Skye's experience
in management, she quickly got that role.

On his end, Lucas found a job in IT in a printing company. It wasn't the most interesting thing he
had ever done, but it paid the bills, and was in his range of skills.

Osman ended up as a waiter in a restaurant. He was used to find easy jobs that didn't require lots of
skill aside from social ones, and he was actually liking it.

They had found a new place, cheap enough, in an old building near the center of the city. At first
they had thought it was a scam, but as it turned out, the renting prices in Zootopia were a lot higher
than in Old Reynard. That, and the internet in that place stuttered, which regularly got Lucas to
rage at his computer screen.

Friday the 8th of April 2024

"And it's been pretty much much of the same for the past five years."

"You got it pretty good." Smiled Nick. "I'm glad it turned out okay for you. But you left something
out. How did you and Sean get separated ?"

Skye had a satisfied smile. "I think he hated being confined. Mr Big had all kinds of cells, ours was
some sort of underground suite, with a bathroom, a TV, and everything. He lost his temper over
something-"

"He thought I was trying to poison him when I brought him his plate." Intervened Lucas.

"Yeah, that. And he just took his knife and tried stabbing him. I punched him and dislocated his
jaw. And broke his arm when he tried again. The bears took him away. I don't know what
happened to him then."

"He tried to find me… Well, Frank. He did, and left with a souvenir." He showed his paw, which
pulled a few gasps from his audience. "Then he… Let's just say the official version was that he
committed suicide. Don't look at me like that, I had nothing to do with it."

"I'm glad he won't be a problem anymore." Said Osman. "He was a complete nutcase."

…

"Do you want to stay for dinner ?" Asked Skye.
"Not really. It already felt like imposing, and it's not like I could take more of the awkward silences. I kind of came to apologize about manipulating you. It was something that was on the back of my mind for way too long. I'm glad you took it well." Smiled Nick.

"It's a hard pill to swallow, but as I said, and as much as I feel dumb for not seeing through you, I think you did what had to be done." Answered Skye. "I have a question though. How did you know where to find us today?"

"I used my old connections." He answered, avoiding to give a more complete answer. The vixen nodded. She understood that there were somethings he had to keep to himself.

He got up and was imitated by everyone else.

"As for me, I simply wanted to be sure we hadn't left dangerous mammals go free. I trust Nick's judgment, but he too can be wrong." She winked at her fox. "But I think he was right to let you all go." Stated Judy.

"That's nice to hear." Smiled Osman.

…

In the car, riding toward Zootopia, Nick turned toward Scarlet which was sitting on the backseat. "You okay? You didn't say much."

"Yeah. It's strange but I feel better. I don't really know why I wanted to come, but I'm glad you gave me the opportunity to meet them."

"I owed you that."

"No, you didn't." She turned to look out the car window. "But I might actually be able to move on, now."
"Are you sure you're going to be okay?" The wolf was helping Nick strap his bulletproof vest.

The fox was trying to calm his mind and to find that place he went to find a plan. "Don't worry Wolford."

"I'd have thought you'd want to take it easy at your return in the force."

"I never left the force. I was just doing a side job. And comparing to what I was doing four years ago, I'd say I'm taking it easy."

Easily foreseeable outcomes, quick thinking, lives on the line... Fo I really think what I'm doing here is easier than restructuring the ZIA?

Nick closed his eyes and chased the thoughts. He had to get back in the moment. "Can we go over the brief one last time? The short version please."

Blackfur took out her phone. "Five mammals tried to rob Savannah central's bank. The silent alarm rang, they shot all the cameras down and possibly a security agent.

And they blocked the back exits as soon as they could. Guess they knew we'd try to get in through them. That's pretty much all we have."

"Great. What about our assets?"

"Two snipers on the roof in front of the building. A TUSK team ready to engage on the second floor, but we don't have eyes on the inside, so it's too risky for now."

"Anything else?"

"Don't get shot. Or killed."

"I can't die. I have three kits now, Judy wouldn't let me." He winked.

Nick straightened up and jumped in place a couple of times. "One last thing to do and I'm ready to go." He took a few steps toward his bunny, ducking near a car and trying to peek inside the bank through goggles.

"Hey Captain Fluff." He smiled.

"Hey Lieutenant Slick. Ready to go?"

"Nearly. I need my good luck kiss." He leaned toward her and their lips met.

"What would you do if I wasn't there?" She smiled.

"I'd kiss Wolford."
She gave him a light punch in the shoulder. "Be careful in there."

"You know me."

"Yes I do. That's why I'm telling you to be careful."

"Good luck Nick." Came Buster's voice from behind the fox.

They fist-bumped. "Thanks, buddy."

He took a couple of steps toward the security cordon. Near it was Blackfur which had moved from her previous place. "Remember your training. Assess, find the high ground, and hold it. And avoid the bad jokes."

"Don't worry big girl." Answered the fox.

"Remember the passcodes?"

"'Waste' for 'playing for time', 'Inevitable' for 'attack is go', 'stupid fuck' for 'tell my family I love them'."

Blackfur had followed the negotiator training years ago, but the event that had stopped her life had kept her from finishing it. She still retained a bit of it though, and had helped the fox get through the training.

"I'll be fine. And tell the snipers if any of them shoot before I either gave my go or have been shot, I'll personally make them eat their rifles. Without mayo."

The panda took out a small radio. "Test, are you hearing me?"

The fox tapped his ear. "The earpiece is on. Are you hearing me?" Came his voice in the panda's radio.

She nodded

He took a megaphone and gave a carefree wave to the other officers, while he made his way toward the bank's large door.

"I'm a negotiator, I'm unarmed. I'm going to enter the bank now so we can find a solution together." Came his enhanced voice.

No answer. He entered the building and was greeted by a pair of guns soon as he passed the door. One normal size, and one oversized.

"Who the fuck are you?" Asked a masked grey fox holding an assault rifle.

"Negotiator. Nicholas Wilde. You can call me Nick." Answered the red fox, with his paws behind his head, and turning around to show that he was truly not armed.

The grey fox lowered his gun and gave Nick suspicious look. The rhino didn't move an inch, but seemed way calmer.

Nick had used his movement to look around the place. The attackers were scattered around the large room. One of them, a tiger, was walking around, keeping an eye on the hostages. In a corner, a ram security agent was holding a hoof to his guts, while a lioness was helping pressing the wound. In front of him were a large rhino and the grey fox. Two of the attackers were missing.
"Listen negotiator. We want a vehicle and for all the police force to leave. Do that, and no civilian will be harmed. You have twenty minutes." Came the rhino's deep voice.

"You're in a rush."

"Yes. Now get out and get what we need."

If there was to be an assault, he needed to know where the two last attackers were. "I can ask that from here." He pointed down to his radio.

"Alright."

Nick took out his radio. "Hello, Wilde speaking. They want a car, and for us to leave. The car should be large enough for rhinos. Oh and we have twenty minutes, they're kind of in a rush."

"Precinct One speaking. That's a negative."

"On the twenty minutes thing or the car thing? Cause that rhino seem like a nice guy, and I wouldn't want to put a dampener on our relationship. Wait before saying no to both, maybe we should know why they need a car that quick. Armed mammals have often reasonable reasons to do what they do." As he said his line, he observed the rhino's expression. There was the hint of smile in his eyes, which were the only things he could see behind the mask. The fox put back the radio in place.

"So, why do you need the car that quick?"

"Don't fuck with us!" Said the grey fox, aiming up at him again. Twitchy was euphemism to describe him.

"Calm down Blonde. One of us got wounded. He needs medical attention. The sooner we're out, the higher are his survival chances."

The rhino had kept his gaze right in Nick's. Obviously he was trying to pull Nick's sympathy, which was partly working, but the red fox wouldn't be swayed that easily.

"Can I see him?"

"Blonde, keep the door." Said the rhino turning around.

"Seriously White? You're going to let that pig in?"

The rhino gave a loud grunt. "Brown is a pig. And don't question my orders." He leaded the fox behind the bank counter. Nick could see a large trace of blood, like a body had been dragged. At the other end of the trace were two mammals. One of them, a zebra, was pressing a chest wound on a pig's chest. It seemed that attacker hadn't been wearing a bulletproof vest. He approached the pair of mammal.

"What the shit, White? What's that cop doing here?" Asked the zebra.

The pig was barely conscious and gave a vague glance to the newcomer.

The rhino shrugged. "He's trying to find us a ride out."

"There won't be one for this guy." Declared the fox. "He doesn't have twenty minutes."

Silence fell. Nick turned to the rhino. "Listen, White, was it?"
"Yeah."

"You obviously care at least a little bit about your guys. If you want this pig to make it, you need to let me call in the paramedics right now."

The rhino frowned. "No paramedics. I want a car. We'll take care of it."

"And find him a hospital out of the city?"

"Yeah. Now get us a car or go get someone that will agree to give us one. If he dies, we start shooting hostages."

Nick had a sigh. "Can I talk real for a minute? Good. Do you have a stretcher? Medical supplies? Or even medical training? And even if you do, that means two of you will have to carry him in the car. Which means only two of you to watch each others back AND carry the money. Let me call the paramedics, only them. If anyone else tries to enter, you can simply shoot me."

The large prey still didn't seem convinced.

"He's losing blood, and a lot of it! You see the flow getting out of his mouth? It's a lung wound. Right now I can't even tell if he's going to die from losing his blood or drowning in it! The decision isn't if he's going to leave with you, but if he's going to die today. You need to let me call in the paramedics. Please!"

The rhino seemed to think intensely, pondering what was the best course of action. "Okay. Alright." He pointed a menacing hoof toward the fox. "Only the paramedics." He took a couple of steps and placed himself near a civilian gazelle, lying on the floor, with her hooves on her head. "Anyone else, and you lose a hostage."

"Thanks." Despite the threat, it was a first breakthrough. And the proof that the leader could be reasonable. Nick took out his radio. "We need paramedics here. Only paramedics, nothing else. There is a wounded mammal here, a pig, shot in the chest, lung wound, lost a lot of blood."

Nick kept looking around, trying to find something he could use. The security ram.

"Can I see the wounded security guy?"

The rhino looked at him suspiciously. "Why?"

"It may not seem like it, but I honestly don't give a shit whether you're arrested or not. I want to save as much mammals as possible." Just as he had said that the doors opened showing three paramedics pushing a stretcher.

"What the hell!" Came the grey fox's voice. "Don't make a move."

"Let them through Blonde, they're here for Brown."

"We're letting them take him? Don't let yourself be manipulated by that guy!" He said, pointing his gun at Nick.

"I'm not. Brown is dying, he needs medical attention right now. And if he comes with us, he will die for sure."

"You're not thinkin-"

The zebra attacker approached the fox. "Blonde, let this go, he's right. You haven't seen how much blood Brown has lost."
"But-"

"Blonde! Let them through!" Resonated the rhino's voice. The fox lowered his gun and the paramedics went through. A few seconds later they left with the heavily wounded pig in tow. Soon, a helicopter was heard from inside the bank.

"So, about that security guy." Said Nick, approaching the Lioness and Zebra. No one stopped him. The masked mammals were talking between themselves, though the rhino was clearly keeping an eye on him.

"You really had to help the pig?" Whispered the lioness as soon as Nick was near enough.

"Yes, I had to. How is this one doing?"

The zebra security guard gave a little wave. "I'm okay. It only stings when I laugh." He had a wheezing respiration. Despite the fact that he looked in better shape than the pig, Nick knew that it didn't mean he couldn't die in the next minute.

"What were you shot with?"

"Shotgun."

That wasn't a good thing. Given the amount of blood, it was probably not something bigger than buckshot. Multiple wounds. "I need to get you out too." The fox straightened back up and went to the rhino. "He needs to be evacuated too."

"He will. As soon as we get our car."

The fox took out his radio again. He perfectly knew there was absolutely no way they get the vehicle or that the ZPD would let them go. But for know he decided to keep playing pretend. "Guys, we really need that vehicle over here."

"Negative, officer Wilde."

"There is another wounded here, security agent, he's in better shape than the pig but not by much. The sooner they get out, the sooner he can get help. There is no time to waste."

"We'll do what we can. Hold on." Nick smirked. That was a lie. 'We'll do what we can' was always a lie. The fox had a sigh. He had bought a bit of time. Now he needed to make them understand they needed to surrender before they understood the car was in fact not coming.

"Thanks. I'll keep you posted." He turned to the rhino. "The car should be here soon." He lied.

"Good."

"But I highly doubt this agent will make it. You should really let me call back the paramedics."

"No."

The fox had a sigh. "Can you follow me please?" He leaded the large mammal toward one of the windows. "Don't put your head out too much but look at the roofs. You see, there and there?"

"Yeah, snipers." Grunted the rhino.
"You need to understand, you won't get out of this. The best thing you can do now, for yourself and the hostages, is to limit collateral damage. You get out of the bank and try to flee, you'll get shot down, or at least two of you. And then, they'll just shoot down your tires. You won't go far."

"We have hostages." Answered the rhino.

Nick looked around. He had spoken low enough so that the others wouldn't hear him. Convincing one guy was easy, but convincing the four of them together would be harder.

"Yeah, sure. And you intend to take them with you in the car?"

"If we need to."

"You know that the moment you leave with hostages, you double the number of reasons why the ZPD will want to catch you? Sure they'll try and avoid harming them, but they certainly won't let you get away."

The rhino frowned. "Why are you telling me all this?"

"If you heard about me, you know I wasn't always a cop."

"Yeah." Nick's upbringing was a relatively well known fact. The media loved an underdog's story, and a reformed criminal was always nice to talk about. Nick had always kept the fine line, only dipping his toes in the crime pool, but it hadn't stopped the media to blow it a bit out of proportion.

"So you can imagine I have sympathy for you guys. I wasn't lying when I said I didn't give a shit if you got arrested or not. However, I want to keep alive as many of you as I can. And if you try to flee, I can't guarantee anything. But ultimately, you're the one holding the gun. You're the one making the decision. You just have to know one last thing." He pointed to the security mammal on the floor. "If this guy dies, the ZPD will be even more determined to track you down, and if you get caught, homicide charges will be added. And trust me when I say you don't want that."

Finally, the large prey seemed troubled. He took a step back and scratched his horn. "I need to talk with the others." He took Nick by the arm and brought him back to the agent. "Give me your radio, and don't move from here." Nick complied.

Then, the masked mammal went back to his allies while Nick approached the ram and lioness again.

"Can I do anything?"

"I wanted to make a bandage to help, but I can't keep the pressure and do that at the same time. They only accepted for me to help him. And my arms are getting tired."

The fox took out his pocketknife and began cutting the ram's shirt. "Is it because you're some kind of nurse?"

"I'm his wife. I was bringing him his lunch."

"Congratulations, I guess." Smiled the fox. "You two have been married for long?"

The zebra had a weak smile. "Six months."

"I'll do everything I can for it to be longer than that."

The zebra was now shirtless, and the fox used the strips as a makeshift bandage. The lioness
moved her paws slightly and Nick took her place as she finished the bandaging process.

"Thanks officer Wilde."

"Just doing my job." He had kept half an ear on the group's discussion and even if he couldn't see what they were talking about, the more it went on, the more it got animated. Suddenly, the grey fox lifted his gun toward the rhino. "Shit, gotta go." He got up and trotted toward the new situation.

"We can't surrender!" Came Blonde's almost panicked voice.

"I'm not saying we should surrender, I'm just enumerating our options." The rhino seemed calm enough, as his voice stayed firm.

"That is not an option. And we're not giving them back a hostage either." Continued the fox.

Nick placed himself a few meters away from the group. "What's up guys?"

"You!" The grey fox turned toward the Nick. "You're the one who's been manipulating Jo-"

"NAME!" Cut the tiger.

"I mean White. You've been manipulating White."

"I merely informed him about what situation you were in. You have hostages, which keeps the ZPD from acting. For now. There are snipers, and even if you asked them to be removed, they'd just place them where you can't see them. And as soon as you'd be out, they'd either shoot you or your car."

"Then we'll-"

"Use hostage, yes. Because the ZPD needs more motivation to-"

"SHUT THE FUCK UP!" The fox planted the barrel of his gun on Nick's chest. "Stop talking. You're just trying to get us to surrender."

Nick gave glance to the rhino. His shoulder had slumped and Nick could see the cogs turning in the large prey's mind.

"That's basically what negotiators are for." Stated the masked zebra. "As for me, if Quentin isn't with us, I don't really have any reason to keep going."

The grey fox glared at him. "Yeah, your little boyfriend count more than the team. Is that it?"

The equine seemed he was about to retort but instead he gave a huff. "Guess the cat's out of the bag, huh? Fuck it." He unloaded his gun, put on the security and started walking toward the door while tossing aside his mask.

The rhino gave a sigh of defeat.

"The fuck you think you're going?" Asked the fox, aiming at him.

"I'm going to surrender. Do whatever the hell you want."

"Don't you dare get out!"

"Or what?" The zebra went back to the grey fox. "Or fucking what Vic?"
"Names..." Groaned the tiger, which seemed on the verge of giving up too.

"Or I'll shoot you !"

There suddenly was a loud thump, and the grey fox flew backwards on a half-dozen of meters before sliding on the ground and hitting the bank counter. The rhino was holding the fox's gun. "Guess that's that." He put both the fox's weapon and his own on the ground. "We're fucked. Let's get arrested."

"You're taking the right decision." Stated Nick as he checked Vic's pulse. He was still alive, but probably had a couple of broken bones. He didn't dare cuff him, but stayed at his side.

"Still feels like shit." Simply answered the tiger.

"Hey, by allowing that civilian to take care of the security guard, you actually won some points. You're going to do time, but no one died, so believe me, it could be worse."

The rhino approached his zebra ally. "I'm sorry for Quentin."

"Me too."

"May I ?" He asked, taking his radio back from the rhino. "Three of the suspects are getting out. They're surrendering. Do not shoot ! I repeat, do not shoot ! There are two other wounded mammals. A zebra security agent who got shot, and a grey fox, one of the perps, who got punched by a rhino. The suspects are unarmed and are being reasonable, so please take it easy."

Nick saw the three mammal get out with their hooves and paws behind their head. They were quickly apprehended by the officers and put in different cars. In the meantime, the paramedics had entered the building and were taking care of the woundeds while the hostages were escorted out.

...  

"Good job Nick." Congratulated the panda. "No casualties for you first time without the training wheels."

"The pig made it ?"

"We don't know yet." SHe pointed at his ear. "You weren't hearing a thing, weren't you ?"

Nick lifted a brow. "About what ?"

"In your earpiece. I was giving you instructions. May I ?" She took the almost invisible earplug from the fox's ear and looked at it. "It's switched on." She put it at her ear and talked in her own mic. "Test, test. The thing's busted. It didn't worry you that you didn't hear me ?"

"To be honest, I had completely forgotten it was there. Were you still receiving sound on your end ?"

"We were. Otherwise, you'd have seen the TUSK team come in."

The fox smiled. "Dodged a bullet there. Quite literally. Did I miss something from not hearing you ?"

"Not much. Just that I tried to have you prioritize the security guard over the criminal. In the end, I think you made the right call."
Nick unstrapped his bulletproof vest before getting back to his bunny.

"Good news fluff, the kids still have father." He smiled.

She hugged him. "Big pressure in here ?"

"Merely a life or death situation." He gave a sigh. "Guess who's going to have to write a big fat boring report now ? Ow ! Why did you punch me."

"Don't joke about dying. You can't die. You have three kits now."
Epilogue, Chapter 6

Epilogue : Where Life Leads Us

Chapter 6 : Upbringing

May 2034

"So what was it about the school principal wanting to see us ?" Asked the fox as he got into their car.

"I don't really know. It was about the kids, I just hope none of them are hurt." Answered the bunny worriedly.

"Fluff, if they were, she'd have told us." Said the fox. "I'd bet on a fight."

"A fight ?" She reacted. "Our kits wouldn't fight !"

The fox snickered. "Sure, because you were the most rule abiding bunny when you were young, and you never fought. I talk to your parent sometimes, fluff. They're kids, and kids fight all the time, with words, with fists... That's what they do."

"They're too young for that !"

The fox lifted a brow. "Judy, the first time I was in a fight, I was six. Evan and Katie are twelve and Lucy's eleven. They're certainly not too, young. If anything, I'm surprised we didn't find ourselves in that situation sooner."

2021

He was handsome, she loved him, and he loved her. They had taken a place together, he was studying sociology and working in a fast food part time, she was pouring all her time in medicine school and was getting by with a substantial student loan and a small scholarship.

The first year they had spent together was probably the best of her life. She had gotten away from her dad's place, with barely more than a bagful of clothes and a worn photograph.

She had felt free, she had felt on the top of the world.

Naked on the bed, adrenaline, phenylethylamine, testosterone and serotonin pumping in her body and brain, she felt half-anxious, half-ready. The lingering feeling of dread was here but she cast it aside, as being the product of her anxiety. She was young, and he was too. She had always been too young. She loved him and he loved her, it was the logical next step.

August 2022

Sitting on the toilet, the plastic stick in her paw, she was staring at the plus sign. Next to her, a pile of plastic sticks with the same sign.

The pill hadn't worked. She was now part of the 1 percent.

It was a nightmare. But they could go through it together. She'd have to break the news carefully, and she was ready to have an abortion if it came to it, but it was really a scenario she didn't want to
think about. She knew how bad most relationships went afterwards. A little than less fifty percents survived that kind of incident.
She wanted to have children, but maybe not yet. She didn't know if he did, but given how he usually avoided the topic, she guessed he didn't feel ready either.
She wouldn't impose a choice. Not when the outcome would affect them both, whether she wanted it or not.

December 2023

How could he !? Why ? This was worse than leaving her after an abortion. He should have told her he wasn't ready. He should have.
She read the letter for the tenth time, tears of anger and pain running on her face.

"Rose.
I'm sorry it came to this, but I can't keep pretending I'm okay. I thought I was. I really believed it. I wish I was more courageous, I wish I wasn't a coward. But I can't have a kid yet, I'm not ready. I know how it will go. You'll scream, I'll shout, you'll cry, and I'll do too. And then, I'll leave. Because I'm simply not strong enough.
We don't need to uselessly suffer through this, so I'll take the decision for us both. I'm leaving. I left a thousand bucks on the kitchen counter, I can't do more right now. Do what you want with your child, I don't think I have the right to call her ours.
There is no way for me to explain how sorry I am, or how bad I feel for leaving you like this, but you need to understand, I can't be the father she needs.
I hope you'll be strong in my stead.

David."

She had a decision to take. It was too late for an abortion now, and she wouldn't be able to raise that kit by herself. Not without sacrificing all she had worked toward.

Since that kid had started to live in her womb, she had read countless of articles on pregnancies, on family, on foster care, on adoption services.

The decision wasn't easy, but it was the most logical one. And the best for the kit. And right now, it was all that mattered.

Friday the 17th of February 2023

She was almost twenty, but she looked more like sixteen. The young red vixen was sitting on her hospital bed, a mix of fear, anger and resignation in her eyes. Next to her, in a crib, was a fox kit. Its fur was more orange than red, but the tip of its ears were already black.

"Are you sure this is the right decision ?" Asked the male fox standing in front of her. He was holding the rabbit's paw. She liked them. In the small timeframe she had gotten to know them, they were probably the sweetest, even if the oddest, couple of mammals she had met.

"You're good mammals, you'll take care of her."

"Rose, I don't want you to take this decision in spite. You'll regret it your whole life. I know a thing or two about rushed harsh stupid decisions." Seemed like he wanted to make a movement toward her, but her gaze stopped him. She didn't want support, she didn't want help. It was an important decision, and it wasn't something she'd let get influenced by stupid things. Like emotions. And the
gods knew she had let her judgement influenced by emotions way too much up to that point.

"Mr Wilde, it's better that way." She took the paper on the headstand and signed them before giving them to the couple. "Really."

The fox was holding the papers. It felt wrong, even if it was right.

"Rose-" Began the bunny. "Are you sure you don't want to think about it a couple weeks more?"

Did she want that? Yes, she did. And if she did, she would get a lot more attached to the kit laying in the crib a foot from her. And she'd break, she'd accept her.

"No. She needs to go with you. I can't have her. I don't have a job, I don't have a family to help take care of her. And hell if I'll let my 'pa less than a mile near her. I can't provide for her. And even if I could, I know myself. I'll be spiteful, I'll spend my life regretting what I couldn't do and I'll blame it all on her."

He could see the mask. The resolution, the cleverness, the certainty that she was making the right decision. And how could he or Judy argue, it was the right decision for the kit. She had more chances to have happy life with them than with her biological mother.

Judy had to wipe her tears. She couldn't imagine the state the young vixen was in, but she knew that she had to separate herself from her kit that way, she'd lose the will to live. "We'll give you updates on her."

"No. I'd prefer that you don't. Please, sign the papers."

"Her name isn't on it." Stated the fox. "It wasn't on the birth certificate either."

"I didn't come up with one. You can choose it."

The fox had a sad smile. "It's the only thing we refuse to take from you."

The vixen looked to the kit. "I don't have any idea how to name her." But of the mammals facing her saw right through that lie.

"Then we'll call her Rose." Stated Judy.

The vixen had a shudder. "No. I'd prefer you don't."

"Then give us a name for her. You should at least give her something. She won't remember you but she'll have something from you."

"I don't know how to name her." Stated the teenager with a hint of anger in her voice.

Judy was looking again through the papers she was about to sign. "What about Lucy?" She proposed.

"How do you know?" The vixen's eyes shot wide hearing her mother's name.

"Both your parent's names are on the papers." Judy explained. "Lucy Caletia Wilde. If that's okay with you."

The vixen discreetly wiped the tear that threatened to drop. "Yes. I think it's nice."

The fox scribbled the names on the papers and signed them, followed by Judy who gave a copy of
the document to the girl.

"Just so you know, if someday you want to meet her, you just have to ask." Said the bunny.

"I don't-"

"Don't say anything. It's not a question, it doesn't require an answer. It's an open invitation. If someday, any day, you want to know how she's doing, call, or come." She smiled.

The female fox didn't answer but simply nodded. She looked at the pair of mammal leave with her child and said nothing. She kept her teeth clenched and waited for them to leave.

She waited several minutes before breaking. She wanted them to be far, she didn't want them to hear her. It seemed the tears would never stop, even if she knew, eventually, they would. She would survive, she would build herself a life, and her daughter would be happy, even if she would remain out of it. It was a small comfort, but it was the only one she found at that moment. She looked at the business card on the headstand and grabbed them. At that moment, she wanted nothing more than to throw them in the bin. Instead, she put two of them back, the ones from Nicholas Piberius Wilde and Judith Lavern Hopps. The third in paw, she grabbed the phone on the headstand and tapped the number on it.

"Hello, you reached the secretariat of Meryl Racton, Doctor in psychology and psychiatry."

"Hello, I-I'd like to schedule a session."

"Of course, I'm going to need you name..."

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May 2034

"Why are you smiling like that ?" Asked the bunny as they arrived near the principal's door.

"Like what ?"

"You have that smile. The one when you're happy about something really specific and silly." She grinned.

The fox snickered. "You know me way too well."

"And so, that smile ?"

"Well... Okay, it's probably a bit stupid, but simply put, it's like a consecration. I'm being called in the principal's office because of something my children did. It's like the system recognizes I'm a dad. I'm being held accountable for my kits actions." He grinned.

"That... Surprisingly makes a lot of sense."

"Doesn't it ? I laughed at Finnick when he told me how Hollie had taken down the whole computer system while trying to take a peek at the question for the next exams... And that he had felt the same."

"No way ! That's why she was grounded for a month ?"

"Yup. I sometimes wonder if Fin had the right idea by having her studying with Honey..."

The bunny smiled. "Well, she got her internship at ZBM when she was fifteen and still works
there, so yeah, I think it was."
Another couple arrived, a pair of pigs, lead by one of the school monitors. The two newcomers
gave discreet glares to the fox and bunny, which feigned not seeing it. The monitor knocked on the
door.

"Come in."

They were invited inside and sat on the chair in front of the principal after having greeted her.

"What's happening miss Pholid ?" Asked the bunny.

"What's happening, is that your sav- your kid beat up mine." Stated the other mom angrily.

They both had heard the insult she had almost uttered but chose to cast it aside for now. If one of
their kid had fought that woman's child, they weren't really in a position to feel offended. For now.

"Please calm down, Mrs Pigstein." Said the pangolin. "Let's keep this civilized." She turned toward
Nick and Judy. "Your children were part of an altercation between several students. It was a bit of a
mess, but no one was really hurt. Sadly, we don't know the complete story yet, and I wanted you all
to be here to hear the kid's out."

"How come they seem to know what's happening when we merely know our children were in a
fight ?" Asked the fox.

"Because despite having told them not to before we could shed light on what happened, Joe
Pigstein called his parents "

To tell his own version, I bet. Thought the fox, but decided to keep it for himself. If his children
were at fault, he didn't need to antagonize the Pigsteins more than that.

"Hornsky, please bring them in." Called the principal in her phone. A couple of seconds later, four
kids entered the room. A pink Pig with a bruised eyes. A white furred bunny girl, with a bandage
on one of her black tipped ear. A completely grey furred bunny boy. And a your red vixen. Both
male bunny and vixen seem unharmed.. The four kids seemed intimidated by the adult audience.

"Since Joe seem to be the victim here, I'd like him to tell his story first. Please go ahead Joe. Tell
the truth." The pig balanced himself on each leg uncomfortably. "Well... Uhm. I was in the yard minding my
own business, and then that fox-"

"Lucy ?" Asked the pangolin in a discreetly scolding tone. She didn't like the slightly demeaning
tone the pig had used while saying the female's species.

"Yeah, Lucy. She just attacked me."

"What did she do ?"

"Well... Um... She punched me and twisted my arm." Nick gritted his teeth. The shifty glance the kid had given the audience hadn't gone unnoticed. At
least not by him.

Oooh, that's a lie right there.

"She just punched you, like that ? Out of the blue ?" Asked Nick with a reassuring smile devoid of
"Well, yeah."

"And what business where you minding, may I ask?"

"Um..." He stared at his feet.

"Mister Wilde, my son is the victim here. Don't try twisting the truth like... Just don't!"

The principal hadn't intervened in the exchange, simply looking at each party.

"I didn't punch him!" Protested Lucy.

"Yes you did!" Answered Joe.

"Are you calling my son a liar, you little-"

"Everyone calm down!" Came the pangolin's voice. "We're animals, but we're civilized animals."
She turned toward the young fox. "You didn't punch Joe?"

"No."

"Then who did?"

The fox stayed mute. Nick knew her enough to guess she wouldn't talk instead he turned his attention to his bunny kids. He saw his bunnies children nod at each other and the female spoke.

"I did." She stated.

"I get you want to protect your sister." Began Mrs Pigstein. "But there is no way-"

"Your coward son would admit getting punched by a little bunny?" She immediately snapped back. Nick had to scoff in his fist to not chuckle.

"Katie!" Scolded Judy.

"What? It's true. He's a coward." She said in an apologizing tone.

"Three against one, and you call him a coward!" Angrily said the female pig between her teeth.

Nick observed Mr Pigstein. As the discussion progressed, he was looking like he was increasingly trying to disappear, but not to hide behind his wife. More like he tried to discreetly separate himself from her.

"Three against one?" Asked Evan, who talked for the first time. "Your son runs around bullying all predator kids in school, with all his followers. The only reason why Lucy hadn't been bothered until now is because the three of us usually hang out together."

"My son would never do that!"

"Must have been a different David Pigstein then." He said innocently which only made Mrs Pigstein's face go redder and Mr Pigstein go smaller.

*You got a mouth on you kid, but you should really learn to know when the power balance isn't in your favor.*
"My son was the victim miss Pholid, are you going to believe those three delinquent?"

"Delinquent?" Asked Judy a bit drily.

"Oh, I'm not blaming you, I'm sure it doesn't come from you." Tried to soothe the pig.

"Meaning it comes from my husband?"

"Well he's a fox..." She looked at her husband and then at the principal for support but received none.

The bunny had a predatory smile. "I could cite you the law article you just broke with that statement." She then turned to the principal. "Could we hear Lucy's version? I'm sure it's going to be enlightening."

She had uttered that last sentence with a polite smile but Nick could see that underneath she was almost at her boiling point.

"Of course. Lucy, could you please tell what happened from your point of view?"

The small female fox felt a bit unsure but began talking. "Well, I was on my own, reading a book and minding my own business." They all could hear the sting of sarcasm in her voice. "When Joe and his friends, Jack and Will, and others I don't remember, came at me and... They called me names, and said things about me, about dad, how he was probably a crooked cop... So I told him..." She embarrassingly looked at her audience. "He could shove his stupid opinion where the sun doesn't shine." Nick bit his lips at the statement. "So he pushed me and tried to punch me."

Mrs Pigstein gasped, Mr Pigstein gritted his teeth, the principal scoffed, Nick barely hid his grin, Judy frowned, the two bunny kids tried to contain their snickering and Joe scowled at her.

"And next?" Asked the pangolin.

"Well, Katie and Evan arrived..." She hesitated.

"And I punched his stupid face." Stated the female bunny.

"Katie!"

"Sorry mom."

"Then..." Said the female fox. "He got up, and pulled on Katie's ear to try and punch her. So I caught his arm and I twisted it to immobilize him. That's when the monitors arrived."

"Ah, so she admits she attacked my son!"

"From where I'm standing, she defended herself, and then immobilized an aggressive mammal in a non life-threatening way." Stated Judy in her cop tone.

"And it seems to me she pretty much saved your kid from a beating. If she had let him really attack Katie, he would've had more than a bruised nose." Added the fox.

"The saving part would be from me, I was trying to hold her back." Said Evan.

The Pangolin looked at each kid separately. "All this is getting complicated. We'll have to take in the other witnesses statements."
"What?" Protested Mrs Pigstein. "They're obviously lying!" The pangolin lifted a brow and glanced at Nick and Judy. The two of them waved their kids to keep their mouth shut. "How can you believe them? That kid is a fox, and they're an interspecy couple, that should tell you enough about the way they live!"

Judy lifted a brow. "The way we live?"

"That, kids, is what we call a bigot." Explained the fox with a wide smile.

"Nick, not helping." Groaned the bunny. "As for lying, there is absolutely no more evidence that our kids are lying, than yours."

"Erm, actually mom." Said Evan, taking out his smartphone. "I do have evidence." He played the video, showing Joe coming up to her, and a couple of slurs could be clearly heard. It then showed the pig trying to punch Lucy, her avoiding his attacks, being pushed, Katie punching the young pig and Lucy restraining him. The video finally turned shaky as Evan tried to keep Lucy from hitting the kid again.

"There, you see, your kid attacked mine!"

"Technically, we're at a stalemate. Your kid pushed and attacked Lucy first. And your kid is clearly using specist slurs. Maybe Katie shouldn't have punched him." Smiled Judy. "Besides..." She took out her carrot pen. "I recorded our whole conversation, and I'm pretty sure you did more than imply foxes were second class citizen."

The pig's face turned redder and then completely white.

"So here's what I propose. You teach your kid better manners and make it so he never comes near mine again, and I'll do the same." She approached her face near the pig's. "Alternatively, I can bring you in front of a court of justice and see what they think about the situation."

"I'd take the offer lady, she's not kidding. Mammals that try to go after her tend to go down in flames." Said Nick with a little smirk. "It usually makes the news."

Mrs Pigstein alternatively looked at the couple and at the principal with an uneasy expression. She finally got up, pulled both her husband and her kid by the arm and led them out. A couple of second later they could hear the pig's shouts through the door, slowly disappearing in the distance.

"Guess that's that." Commented Nick. "What sanctions are you going to put in place?"

The pangolin had a sigh. "I should punish Joe for attacking Lucy, but I should also punish Katie for having attacked Joe. Even if she was defending her sister, she still attacked another student. Now, Evan has some evidences of Joe's actions. There were rumors about that kid's bullying habit, but I suspect he was really discreet about it, because we never caught him in the act. With that dangling over his head, he should calm down."

"So?"

"So I'm not going to do anything. That matter self-resolved thanks to Evan's quick thinking. They'll both receive an official notice, but I won't add anything to it. I'd also like to apologize for both this incident and Mrs Pigstein's attitude, and I'd appreciate it if you didn't follow up on that 'taking them to court' thing."

Bot adults got up from their chairs. "Don't worry, I really don't want to have the kids caught up in that kind of business." Stated the bunny. "We'll just get out of your scales and get home."
"You're grounded." Stated Judy.

"Hey!" Protested Evan.

"Not you, just Katie." Explained Nick. "She's the only one that fought."

"But I was protecting Lucy!"

"Yeah, you totally didn't punch that kid in his stupid face because you were angry." Smiled the fox as his wife was driving.

"As if you wouldn't have punched anyone that'd attack me." Retorted the young vixen.

"I would have make it so that the kid would have attacked me first, and then I'd have punched his stupid face. Always get the law on your side."

"Nick!" Scolded Judy.

"What? I don't want my kids to be in trouble with the law."

The bunny groaned. It wasn't a way of thinking she wished her kids learnt. "Anyway, Katie's grounded. One week of washing the dishes, no dishwasher."

"But mom-"

"Don't you 'but' your mother, young lady. You did something wrong, there are the consequences. Then again, you did it to protect your sister, you all stuck together..."

"So you all deserve some ice cream. No good deed should go unrewarded." Finished Judy.

... They had finished dinner and were cleaning up the table, Katie was directing herself toward the kitchen dragging her feet. With a groan she climbed on the stepladder.

A few seconds later she was joined by her brother and sister.

"Guys, it's my punishment."

"Yeah, well, they said you couldn't use the dishwasher, they never said we couldn't help you." Casually stated Evan.

"And I'd feel guilty for you taking the blame for that anyway. We were in it together." Added Lucy.

Judy and Nick were standing in the doorframe. "Kids, I'm having a suspicion right now..." Began the bunny, squinting her eyes at her children.

"Yes mom?" They answered with a perfect copy of Nick's mask of innocence.

"Would you happen to have baited Joe Pigstein into attacking Lucy, just so you could teach him a lesson?"

They all looked at each other. "What? No never." Answered Lucy.
"I mean, a plan like that? Would have I punched him if that was the case?" Asked Katie.

"It was totally fortuitous turn of event. Who could devise a plan like that?" Added Evan, wiping a dish with a slightly devious smile.

"You know we would never do something that you wouldn't." Added Lucy.

Nick gave his wife a kiss. "Honey, I think our kids think we're stupid."

"Yeah. I think so too."

"We'll have to get them back for it."

"Oh yes, we will have to."

The three kids were now wearing their 'oh shit' expression.

"Five days." Stated the bunny. "Because it was a great plan. Next time, tell us what you have in mind." And they left the kids to their dishwashing.

"These kids are too clever for their own good." Smiled the bunny, slumped on the couch against her fox.

"Got that from their mother."

"I'm sure the sly comes from you."

"Hey, don't blame it all on me. You're pretty sly for a bunny." Chuckled the fox.
September 2037

"Atten-hut!" Came Blackfur's loud voice.

The chief of police appeared and gave an appreciative glance to the officer presents. She approached the rostrum, putting part of her weight on the cane she was using to walk, expertly hiding her slight limping.

"At ease officers. We have several items to go over today. First I'd like to congratulate Higgins who's now officially a grandfather."

"Congrats old fart!" Came Fangmeyer's voice.

"Shut it pussycat!"

There was a bit of a tussle but at the bunny's scoff, the room quickly calmed down.

"Second, I should introduce our new recruits, but I won't. Because I don't care." She stated, imitating the ex-chief, pulling a few giggles from the senior officers and surprised expression from the aforementioned recruits.

"Kidding. Please welcome officer Whiskberg, Sharpfang, Springstein and Digger."

There was a round of applause and shoulder taps rained on the tiger, puma, hare and wombat.

"Now you will all come to take your week assignment. Wolford, Blackfur, Fangmeyer, Delgato, there's a new group of dealer on Chase Avenue. I want you in civilian clothes getting names, intel and if possible, arresting perps. Higgins, Pennington, you're back on patrol. Whiskberg, Sharpfang, Springstein, Digger, parking duty."

She had distributed the files and the officers had all left, some of them grumbling about how they hadn't enrolled to get parking duty. She squinted her eyes at the hare, he seemed to be the one that was the least happy and the most loud about his discontent.

"Hello chief." Saluted the red fox that had appeared in the doorframe.

"At ease, Captain." Smiled the bunny.

"How's the first month going so far?"

"I'm adjusting." She got down from the small stage. "Walk with me?"

"Sure." The limping had accentuated itself those last ten years, and though she was technically still fit enough for active duty, she had decided to cast that part of her job aside. Mainly because she had been named the new chief after Bogo's retirement. "You broke the news to him yet?"

The bunny had a sigh. "It's on my mind."

"You need a second in command, hon. I know you don't want to replace MacHorn that soon, but it's
"Yeah." The bunny sighed again. "You sure you don't want the job?" It was a half-joke, she knew it was a bad idea to be married to her second in command.

"First: no. Seconds: he's more qualified than I am." Smiled the fox.

"Okay, let's go to my office." They made their way in the precinct hallways. "How's the job going?"

"Pretty fine actually. Giving speeches about mammal psychology and crisis negotiation is less boring than it sounds. There also the formations I give for the ZIA agents about ethics and law… Didn't think I'd go back to work with them again."

"I'm glad you finally found a job you really like."

"It will never beat being your partner."

Silence fell between the two mammals for a bit. They both missed working together.

"... Anyway, when I really need action, there is still the CQC training. I've put your name on the consultant trainer list, if you ever want to blow some steam." It's not something he needed to do, since she didn't need an authorization for that, but it was still nice of him for having thought about it.

"You're the best, honey.". They entered the bunny's office. She had kept the buffalo's desk, but it meant she had to use a ladder to get to the seat. Technically. She always got up to it with one hop. And a slight wince because of her bad leg.

"You'll never stop, won't you?"

"Not until my leg falls of." She took the phone on her desk. "Clawhauser, could you come in my office, please?"

"Right away chief."

A few seconds later, the bubbling officer knocked and entered the office. His fur had now a silvery tone, and the gut was slightly less prominent. "What do you need chief Hopps?"

"I'm promoting you. You're now assistant chief."

The cheetah's mouth fell agape.

"Don't worry, you'll keep your front desk job, but I'm taking away the call and dispatch tasks. You'll have more of the administrative workload than MacHorn had instead."

"I... Uh."

"And I'm putting you on a regular schedule. So you'll be able to spend more time with your husband and kid."

"Isn't it some kind of power abuse?" Smirked the fox, leaning against the desk.

"Shut it, Captain Wilde. Just because you're off duty and only a half-time member of my precinct, doesn't mean I'm not your superior. And it's not power abuse if it isn't detrimental to the citizens."

She smiled.
"But I- I..."

"Am going to get a raise?" Proposed the bunny.

"I-"

"Am grateful for this new career opportunity?"

"I-"

"Will keep gaping for the next five minutes?" Grinned the fox.

"I'm not qualified!"

"You are completely qualified. Rhinowitz kind of was, but he's... A stick in the mud and younger than you. And Higgins is getting too old for this. I want someone experienced that I'll get to keep for a long time." Spoke the bunny. "You'll learn on the go, I have faith in you."

The cheetah seemed he had trouble coming to term with his new position. "You know I can't lead mammals. I don't have what it takes."

"Officer Clawhauser, being my assistant isn't something that will need a lot of leading skills. You're best at the paperwork stuff and organisation, and that's mainly why I want you for. And if I'm to be the stern chief this precinct needs, I'll need someone to balance that." She smiled. "Chief Bogo had his way to sail this ship, I'll have my own. Are you in?"

"Yes chief." He saluted.

"Outstanding officer. Dismissed." And the cheetah left

She took the pile of files on her left and put it in front of her. "You're still here?" She asked the fox.

"You didn't dismiss me."

"You're off duty. You can go."

"But I didn't get my kiss."

"I'm on duty."

"You can sign off for five seconds."

The bunny gave him a scowl she had clearly borrowed from the previous chief. "Officer, are you suggesting for me to neglect my work?"

"Pretty much."

The bunny lightened the scowl and raised a brow.

The fox smiled and raised his paw in apology "Oookay, no kiss, got it. Have a nice day."

He made couple of steps toward the door before hearing the couple of light thump he expected and having a cane handle grab the back of his collar and pull him back.

"Gark."
Next thing he knew, a grip was holding his tie and lips were pressed against his. "Did you really think I'd let you leave without a kiss?"

"Not for a second."

He bended down and put an arm around her hips, kissing her more passionately. It left her wanting for more. She pulled his tie again, trying to get another kiss.

"Weren't you on duty, Chief Carrots?"

"I…"

He nibbled one of her ears before straightening her up.

"Off you go. Back to your boring chief job."

That kind of interaction was usually the other way around, but once in a while, the table turned. She took a couple of steps toward her desk while giving him a side glance, and purposely wagged her little puffball of a tail.

"That's low Carrots."

"I could sign off for more than five seconds." She smiled. She used a joking tone, but they both knew what would happened if the fox took her up on that offer.

"That's tempting, but I have work to do too." He went toward the door and passed it before turning and blowing a kiss toward her. "I'm free tonight though."

Judy sat back at her desk and stared at the her computer screen for a few seconds. An e-mail notification appeared and she clicked on it. It contained a picture of Nick taking a selfie while only wearing an apron with a print of the body of a fox only wearing a thong. 'I received that yesterday while you were at work. I may or may not wait for you home only wearing that. I think sharing this picture with you is as good a time as any.'

That's it, I'm not getting any work done today.

October 2037

"Oh, for goodness sake! These aren't martial art, it's close combat. What's that weakass attack about Sharpfang? No mammal attacks with a knife that way!"

"It's what we learned at the academy!" Protested the Puma.

The fox had a snort. "You didn't really pay attention to what old Friedkin was saying then..."

"That hag..." Came an under-breathed comment. Nick didn't have to turn his head to see where it came from. Springstein was more mean spirited than he seemed. There was something in his attitude, something vaguely condescending he didn't like. But the hare wasn't his subordinate, and as long as he didn't impede in the training session, he didn't see the point of putting his snout in the mud. Yet.

"I can't quote her exactly." Continued the fox "But as I remember it, it was pretty much 'only a sixth of what you learn here is applicable, but you'll have to learn it anyway. Even if it's shit.' I personally can't believe the combat training has been updated during all these years, but it is what it is. So, I'm going to show you what a knife attack looks like." He took the fake knife from
Whiskberg's paw and approached Sharpfang. "You can disable me in any way you like. But only as soon as I try to attack you for the first time. Either take me out or take my knife. I stab you four times, you've lost. Got it?"

"Alright." The feline assumed a fighting stance.

Nick approached in a casual pace and as soon as he was at an attack distance, he pulled out the knife.

"One, two." He didn't even try to evade the punch the feline threw. He vaguely cushioned it with his shoulder and stabbed the arm. "Three, four." He was then launched across the ring and rolled a few times before getting back up, scratching his head to shake off the grogginess. "You've lost." He announced

"Yeah, but I pushed you away."

"And you've been stabbed four times in the process. And it's really not like I wasn't in a fighting shape anymore. You see the problem here? A knife attack comes as a surprise, and no one will ever try and stab you only one time in a row. It's always multiple attacks." He threw the knife to the puma. "Your turn. Stab me four times, and you've won."

As soon as the puma launched his first attack, the fox leaped away. The puma tried again, expecting the fox to try and control his arm. Instead, he pushed it away by punching it, using his knuckles and sending a spike of pain in the feline's nerves. The surprise made the puma let go of the weapon. The fox lept, rolled and snatched the knife before the puma could take it. "See what I did there?"

The feline rubbed his hurting forearm. "You disarmed me."

Nick smirked. "Incidentally. I pushed away your attacking arm, and you happened to let go of the knife. I didn't pinch a nerve, I didn't push a shakra point or any of this bullshit. You felt a pain you didn't expect and you let go of your weapon. Simple as that. Alright, we're taking it from the top." He went around the recruits. "Nope, Whiskberg with Digger, and Sharpfang with Springstein. You won't always be confronted by mammals your size."

... 

"What do you think of them?" Asked the bunny while taking a handful of chips from the bag she was holding.

The fox stole a chip. "Well, they're salty, wasabi flavoured, so they're nice."

"I'm talking about the recruits, dumb fox."

"Pretty salty too, at least some of them." He smirked. "You won't give up on the parking duty tradition, I suppose."

"Nope. They need to get a bit humbled before I clear them to really work with civilians."

"The one I'm the most worried about is Springstein. He's good, but I think he's... I don't know, mean, a bully... Something like that."

The bunny frowned. "Yeah, I got the same gut-feeling. I actually asked Clawhauser to keep his ears open about the new recruits' behaviour."
"Ooooh, a spy among the other officers. You sly bunny."

"I'm just trying to have them all doing a good job. I'm not going to be behind their back berating them or correcting their every move, but if one of them makes work difficult for the others, I need to know about it."

November 2037

"And what are you going to do? Report on me to the chief?" The hare's ear were laying back behind his head and he was scowling at his partner.

"No, but we're here to protect the citizens, not acting all condescending and mighty toward them. You failed to give way, he honked, that's a pretty normal reaction."

"Well, his technical inspection was three months overdue, that's not my fault."

The female wombat pinched the bridge of her nose. "I can't believe that you fail to see the problem with your attitude. It's not about law, it's about communication."

"Who gives a shit about communication. I was valedictorian at the academy, I know how to do my job, I don't have to play nice with those who don't respect the rules."

There was a sudden knock on their office door. "Hey guys." Came a voice belonging to a red fox. "Adjusting well?"

The two partners fell mute and quickly saluted the fox.

"At ease. Don't go all protocol on me. I'm not in it for the authority. Besides, I wasn't under the impression you were really about respecting all the rules." He gave and emphasized gaze to the hare while sipping on his coffee.

"You were listening?"

"More like hearing. The walls aren't exactly thick. Just so you know, I agree with Digger. As a rule of thumb you should always be as lenient with yourself as you are with the civilian." He took another sip. "Then again, I'm not your commanding officer, you can do whatever you want."

He waved leaving the office, but not without noticing the scowl the hare gave him.

... 

"So big Ben, what do you think about him?" Said the fox, pointing at Sharpfang.

The cheetah observed the new recruit distractingly while chewing on his donut. "Nice fur, but a bit lean. Something to play with for a night, but the toy would break too quickly."

The fox snickered. "You're a bad kitty, Ben."

"And what do you think of her?" Asked the cheetah, pointing at Digger.

"She's nice, but not my speed."

"I'd thought she'd be the right format."

"I'm not into short ears. No grip." Winked the fox.
The cheetah almost choked on the piece of donut he was swallowing.

"And him, there?" He said pointing at Whiskberg.

"Now we're talking. In my opinion he should just work more on the legs, but that part where they join his back... Rawr."

Though he hadn't heard what they were talking about, the lion caught them staring. He lifted a brow and the cheetah answered with a friendly wave.

"So hunks. Only hunks. Guess there isn't anyone that can compare to Bogo."

"Nope."

"Didn't he lose a bit since he retired?"

"Nah, he's keeping himself in shape. He still consults for the academy, and I don't think he'd like losing all those fine and perfect muscles." He stated with dreamy eyes.

"And him?" Asked the fox, pointing at Springstein.

The cheetah snorted. "I thought all rabbits were nice, but this one is a stuck-up asshat."

"Such strong words in your mouth Ben... I almost can't believe my ears. But what makes you say that?"

"Botched reports, aggressive attitude, and total control freak. Judy's had him in her scope for two months now."

The fox took a few seconds to reflect on it. "As far as I know, he was valedictorian too. Explains how he got here."

"And he likes to remind it when other question him."

"His crappy attitude was in his file?"

"Nick, I don't have access to those. Only the chief does." Smiled the cheetah.

"Yeah, sure. So?"

"They might as well have written 'opportunistic prick' all over his. Thing is, there was a bit of a paperwork mixup when Judy was named chief, and Bogo was the one that went to review the exams. And he accepted him."

"Knowing the ex chief, he probably knew what he was doing. That or he overlooked it."

"Adrian doesn't 'overlook' things." Stated the cheetah.

"Yeah. And what is chief Hopps going to do about the guy?"

"I don't know, but I really hope it's going to be caught on camera."

..."Alright guys, I want you on your best behavior. The chief is going to participate in this training session."
There was a bit of chatter as the female bunny entered the precinct's gym. Her limp seemed slightly worse than usual, but it was probably because she wasn't using her cane. She was wearing her usual sport clothes, completed with a leg brace.

The whole room calmed down and saluted her.

"At ease, officers. I take it you've all finished warming up?"

There was a bit of chatter as an answer.

"I asked you a question officers!"

"Chief, no chief!"

"Then finish it up. You too officer Wilde. Lieutenant Buster, come here please." She had started bouncing in place, air jabbing a couple of time.

"Yes chief Hopps?"

"Help me bandage my paws please."

"Sure chief."

As he was closer she leaned toward him. "How's Springstein doing. Any amelioration in his attitude?"

"Nope, it's actually getting worse."

"Not for much longer." She smiled. The first adjective that came to the rat's mind was 'predatory'.

She tested her wrist flexibility and quickly warmed up.

"Okay, I want to see you two by two, exchanging blows. Cavid, you're with me. Buster, you're with Wilde. The others, with your usual sparring partner."

She exchanged a couple of punches with the larger rodent. He had gained swiftness and seemed more sure of himself. And he didn't seem to hesitate anymore.

"You've really caught the hang of it, Cavid."

"Thank you chief." He tried to catch her arm after a punch, but she backstepped quickly. "And thanks for having me transferred here also."

"It's was on Bogo's advice." She smiled. "But you deserved it." She tried a high kick with her bad leg, but he countered it and grabbed it, trying to punch her in the inner thigh. She twisted and caught his paw between her leg and brought him in an armlock.

"That was sly, officer Cavid."

"You'll have to blame officer Wilde, chief. He taught me a few of your moves" He smiled with a groan, tapping on her leg to surrender. She gave him a paw to help him stand back up.

"I heard Springstein is being a bit of a pain."

"I wouldn't know chief." He said with the corner of a smirk. "I'm not his partner."
"Got it."

The bunny went to climb on the ring and looked at the mammals fighting. Springstein wasn't half bad. "Your attention please."

The officers stopped their training and turned toward their chief. "It has come to my attention that some of the new recruits." She stared directly at the hare. "Maybe causing some trouble for their colleagues and fellow citizens, and disagreeing with my way of leading this precinct." Her gaze switched to the wombat. "Digger, you're up."

Nick tapped the rodent's shoulder. "Don't worry, she'll go easy on you." He heard a snort from behind him. He backstepped to place himself at Springstein's side.

"Something funny, Springstein?" He whispered.

"Go easy on her? I know she had quite the reputation, but with her leg, she can't be much of a fighter anymore."

The fox gave him a smile full of teeth. "Wanna bet on it? Twenty bucks Digger loses."

"You're on."

"By the way, what do you think it was about the chief's comment on officers 'disagreeing with her way of leading'?"

"You're her husband, I'm sure she told you."

The fox scratched his ear. "Nope, there are some things she keeps to herself, and I don't like to pry." That was an complete lie.

The hare shrugged. "I think it has to do with me. If you want to know, and I really don't want to seem offensive, I think there is a lot of dead weight in the precinct, but she made friend with most of them, so... They're staying."

The fox kept looking at the fight. He really didn't like that hare.

"I mean, a female chief... I'm not saying she's unfit to lead because she's a female, but you know, bunnies and their emotions clouding their judgement... I would know what I'm talking about." He smirked. "I can't understand why chief Bogo would give his seat to her."

"I guess we'll have to wait and see." Answered the fox under his breath. Suddenly he saw the wombat flying over the second rope, Whiskberg sprung to catch her before she harmed herself.

"You owe me twenty buck, Earstein."

"Very funny."

"Are you okay Digger?" Asked the Judy, leaping down from the ring.

"Yes chief." Came the short-breathed rodent. "That'll teach me keep my guard up."

"You did great. Springstein, you're up."

The hare lifted a brow. "You don't want to take a breather?"

She gave him a cold glare.
"-Chief." He added quickly.

"Get your butt on the ring, bunny-boy." She scowled.

He gave a glance to the other officers and saw they were all wincing and giving him worried glances, except for Nick which was grinning from ear to ear. "Whatever you do kid, keep your guard up." He advised.

The hare leaped on the ring and jumped a few times on place to warm back up.

"Ready ?" Asked the female bunny.

"Yes chief."

"Attack then." She smiled.

He observed her for a few seconds. She had a pretty open stance, but he knew enough about fighting to know that any move would put him in danger.

Unsure about what to do, he tried a couple of jabs that she avoided by only moving her head. "I hear you've given a lot of tickets, corporal." She casually stated.

"I do my job." He tried a feint, false jab, followed by a knee attack. She simply changed posture to put herself out of range.

"I'm sure you do. Is bullying citizens part of the standard ZPD job description ?" The hare missed his punch which threw slightly off-balance. "Dashcam footage." She side-stepped and gave a had slap on his chest, making him fumble backward to regain his stability.

"Or not admitting your mistakes, not listening to your colleagues advice, botching your reports... I must have missed that course at the academy." She closed the distance and launched a wave of jabs he only barely avoided. "Then again, the academy was almost twenty years ago for me."

She could see the red on his cheeks under his fur, but he didn't retort anything. "I've seen your academy file, Springstein. You're a piece of work."

"Weren't you when you got out of the academy, chief ?" He backstepped and threw a kick toward her chest. She turned to avoid it and he turned the kick into a jump to use his other foot to attack in a spinning motion. She blocked the foot with her forearms and he rolled away from her, after having hit the ground.

"I was respectful of my colleagues and of the civilians. I didn't use them as steps for my personal advancement."

"I don't-"

"You will if you're left unchecked." Leaping forward, she feigned a punch, but used her whole body instead and shoved her shoulder in his chest. The hare took a tumbling, but stood back up only slightly short breathed. "But what I'd like to address, is the way you seem to doubt about my skill as a chief. I can't lead officers who don't trust me as their leader."

"I don't-"

She grabbed him by his chest fur and head butted him. "We're fighting here, Springstein. Get your head in the moment." The hare took a couple of steps back holding his snout in his paws, while the
bunny gave him time to recover.

"Why is it you don't trust me officer? Is it because I'm new at this job? I've been trained by the
best chief of police that ever worked in this city." She began walking sideways, and they started
circling each other, the hare still holding his bleeding nose. "And I intend to outclass him." She
shot forward with an easily predictable jumpkick. She expected the punch he used to send her away
and grabbed it, using her weight to bring him to the floor. "Is it because I'm a female? I know you
don't really see eye to eye with the other female in this precinct." She tried to bring him in an
armlock but he elbowed her side and she had to let go. "You think I'm emotional? You think I can't
judge who can and cannot work at this precinct?"

He gave her a surprised glance.

"Bunny hearing." She smiled. "And I know everything that happens in my precinct." She was
walking away from him taking back her breath, and he could see the limping had gone worse.

"Yeah, well, just because you know, doesn't mean you take the right decisions, chief." In his
mouth, the honorific title sounded like an insult.

The female bunny dropped her guard and lifted her paw, waving him to come to the offense. Arms
loose around her body, she merely avoided his attack by moving around him. "Listen here bunny-
boy. I was a valedictorian, like you. I was a bunny fresh out of the countryside like you. But there
is a major difference between us." He had put her in a habit of dodging and launched a sudden leg
that broke the pattern and caught both of her legs. She fell flat on her back, rolled and in the quarter
of a second, she was already back up with her guard up. But he had taken a step back, with a
condescending smile, to let her get back up.

She assumed an attacking stance. "I know not to underestimate what I'm facing." He never saw the
foot that caught his jaw. One moment she was in front of him and the world was horizontal, the
moment later it was vertical, and then spinning with patches of darkness and circles of light.

"Huh?" He asked, as Wolford was checking his eyes and face.

"Minor concussion." The Wolf announced.

"Good. I was worried I'd have to fill in paperwork." Dismissively stated the bunny. She leaned
toward the hare. "You better learn humility bunny-boy. Otherwise, you'll become another
precinct's problem."

Nick was kneeling near the groggy hare, which was slowly getting better. "At least I gave her a run
for her money."

The fox snorted. "She toyed with you all along. She could have opened with that kick and the fight
would have lasted less than a second. You want to see what a real fight looks like with her?" He
straightened up. "Chief, can I have a turn."

The bunny gave him a look that communicated her exhaustion.

"I'll go easy on you, promise." He smiled.

She scowled at him. "Do that, and I'll put you on parking duty for the next three months. Get up
Wilde."

He could see the limp had worsened. According to the doctor, even if she was in pain, there was no
major risk for her leg. Otherwise, the fox would have never provoked her.
Facing each other, they were waiting to have the hare's full attention. He was looking at the match with interest. Nick assumed an aggressive stance and immediately went to the offense. His fist only met air, and a leg swipe caught his front leg. He fumbled to stay up, but the bunny's strong legs immediately found themselves above his shoulder, locking his neck in a choke. She had used his fumbling and her momentum to place herself behind him. He didn't tap to give up right away and tried to find a way out, but there was none. It was a bit frustrating to be in charge of the CQC training of the precinct, but still be no match for her. Then again, he had never met someone that could go toe to toe with her.

"Enjoying the moment, Captain Wilde ?"

"Maybe." Came his strangled voice as he tapped several time on her leg to make her let go, and signal his defeat.

He was up first though, and helped her straightened up.

"That was her fighting all out kid." Said Wolford to the hare.

The bunny got down from the ring and approached him. "I'll give you one last tip kid, and if you've read anything about me you'll know I'm not kidding. I care as much for my officers than for the civilians. If you decide to keep being a threat to either of them..." She approached her face inches from his and gave him the most threatening smirk she had ever shown. Despite his effort, his face shot slightly back and he lost his composure. "...you'll get eaten alive."
June 2043

The electric car stopped in front of a nice house surrounded by a green lawn and a white wooden fence. The house wasn't new, but it didn't show. A white fresh coat of paint, neatly kept grass, and an horrifically kitch garden gnome in the middle of it saw to it. It was the Zootopian Meadowland's dream cottage for you.

A chubby cheetah, wearing a pair of short and a light white shirt was napping in the sun, lying on a long chair, and slowly got out of his slumber as he heard the vehicle stop by.

He took a few steps towards the newcomer to greet them.

"Wight ! Wolford ! How is it going ?"

They exchanged hugs. "We're good Ben. How is retired life treating you ?"

"I'm not retired, guys, I just moved." Smiled the cheetah.

A large buffalo appeared in the door frame. "Good morning." They exchanged way more formal pawshakes."Please come in. Do you want to drink something ? Juice, beer, whisky ?"

"I'd go for a beer." Said the wolf.

"I'll follow you on the whisky, chief." Said the panda.

"I'm not the chief anymore." Smiled the buffalo, though he was still used to be called by his title.

"I'll take an orange juice, hon."

"Spiked ?"

The cheetah brushed the buffalo with his tail. "You ask such silly questions... Let's go to the back of the house, the pool is finally finished."

"So that's why you told us to take our bathing suits. Neat." Commented Wolford.

... 

The four mammals were sitting around the table under the large parasol near the pool. Clawhauser had pushed himself against Bogo and and the buffalo's arm had come around his shoulder.

"So Wolford, how is the new chief doing ?"

The wolf had a chuckle. "She's been at it for 7 years, I think the 'new chief' got the hang of it. But knowing her, she probably won't retire as soon as you, chief."

The buffalo shared the wolf's laugh. "I did my time. I'm the product of an old generation, it was time for me to let the youngsters take over."
"You're not that old." Cooed the cheetah. "That or you're nicely preserved."

The buffalo inflated his pectoral muscle, where the cheetah's head was resting, which pulled a giggle out of him. "I'm maintaining myself. Still got that part time as an instructor at the academy."

"I've heard rumors that you're more feared than old Friedkin." Said the wolf.

"Oh, not yet. She's not one to give up on the title so easily."

The cheetah got up with his drink. "I think it's time to start the barbecue guys."

"Need help Ben?" Asked the wolf. It was cheetah-size appliance, so he was probably the best one for the job.

"Sure, why not. You can bring me the firewood."

The buffalo had gotten up too, to bring the food they had prepared beforehand.

... 

"Remember that hare that had gotten into Precinct One? What was his name... Springton, Springstein?"

"It was Springstein." Reminded Blackfur to her best friend.

"Yeah that one. It was you that had approved of his position at the precinct."

The buffalo took a bite of his vegan burger. "Yes. It was me."

"Why? He was a complete asshat."

"Judy had to learn to deal with difficult recruits. She did well, didn't she?" He asked with a discreet grin.

The wolf had a howling chuckle. "Oh yes she did. I remember her exact words 'You'll get eaten alive.' I thought he would pee his pants. To be honest, she knows how to get scary. Maybe she was a bit too hard on him, because he asked for a transfer shortly afterwards."

It was Blackfur's turn to chuckle. "She actually stared down Rhinowitz, once. I think the cane and limp give her a bit of a presence."

"A soldier with old wounds." Confirmed Clawhauser.

Wolford picked out the tomatoes in his burger. "She hides it, but it's gotten worse. Nick's always on her back about how she should stop trying to go without the cane. If she keeps that up, she'll have to go back on the chopping block." He glanced at the chief. "I tried to talk to her about it, but she gave me that look. You shouldn't have taught her The Scowl, chief."

"I didn't teach it to her. She just took it." The buffalo had a sigh of relief. "I'm glad she's doing a good job."

The cheetah had a little giggle. "You were worried for her."

"I was worried for the city." He stated evenly.

Clawhauser poked the slight belly the buffalo had developed as a result of the feline's cooking.
"Don't lie to me, I can see your creamy center."

The buffalo answered with a playful scowl.

... 

"You're sure you don't want to come back?" Asked Wolford.

"Sometimes I do." Smiled the cheetah. "I really miss my job as Judy's second in command, even if I was more of a glorified secretary."

"That's not true and you know it." Contradicted Blackfur. "You were in charge of the precinct's whole planning and had a paw in each and every process. You were pretty much essential."

"He always was." Stated the buffalo.

The feline blushed hard. "Yeah, huh, well...I miss being there. But my job at the Meadowland's precinct is closer to home, and I like it here, so... Sorry."

"Heh. That's fine. We miss you though. Front desk's not the same without you."

"Who's replacing me now?"

"Clawfith, and he also handles call and dispatch."

"And who's her second in command now?" Asked the buffalo.

"Buster."

"Hm. Good choice. He was always reliable, even if a bit lenient with the regulations."

Clawhauser turned to Blackfur. "I know she proposed the job to you."

"She did."

"Why did you refuse?"

"I'm not comfortable with having that much responsibility. And she needed someone with a personality similar to yours. Which I don't have. Busters fits nicely, and they know how to work together."

"It's strange to have no large mammal in a place of command. The two of them will have to work on their intimidating presence." Smiled Wolford.

"MacHorn was good second in command. He inspired respect, but when I retired I was afraid she'd use him as a crutch." Stated the buffalo. "I'd have preferred for her to replace him for another reason than..." It was one of the few time the chief showed a bit of hesitation.

The wolf had a sad smile. "To MacHorn." He said raising his glass.

"Heart failure is a b*tch. Should've had that checkup." Stated the panda.

"That dense old fool..." Added the buffalo as he rose his glass in turn.

... 

"So how's the kid?" Wolford was swimming in circles, while the buffalo was floating, and the
cheetah was using him as a floating device.

"Marc's doing great. He's about to finish his first year at the academy."

"Hope his old man is not too hard on his case." Smiled the panda.

"Ben is never hard on anyone." Deadpanned Bogo, which owed him a splash of water in the face. "He's doing great, that's true. I think he got over his 'I'm the ex-chief's son, I can do whatever I want' phase."

"How many laps around the academy did it take?" Asked the wolf.

"One-thousand two-hundred and thirty-eight." The buffalo had a mean smile.

"He's aiming for Precinct-One?" Asked the panda.

Ben answered "He is. I'm pretty sure he'll get in. But if he has anything left of his bad attitude, I'm also pretty sure Judy will rid him of it."

"Speaking of children, I'm surprise none of Nick's and Judy's have tried to get into the police force." Intervened Wolford.

The panda chuckled. "Can you blame them? They'd have to do better than their mother. And then live in her shadow. It's not a challenge I'd undertake. Anyway, I heard Lucy got into the ZFD."

"It's the fox one, yeah? She's a firemammal? Small mammal and female, she's just like her mother, taking on too much at a time." Said the feline.

"Yeah, I heard she's as crazy. The kind to defy orders and enter crumbling building to get the last mammals out." Told the wolf. "So it's mean the dare-devil trait isn't genetic, it's just the bunny's influence."

"That's a bit cold. Remember that she's also been raised by Nick. He has to have added some of his own traits to the mix." Smiled the panda.

Bogo had a fake wince. "I don't see how that's a good thing. Are their other children like that?"

"Nah. Evan's the most calm. He actually left and got back to the burrows. He's an accountant for the Hopps' business." Informed Clawhauser. "He cut me a good deal with their vegetables. It's good to be a godfather."

"Lucy got into martial arts. She even got into the ZFC. She already got a couple of belts and medals." Stated Wolford.

"She was always the trouble-seeking type." Smiled Clawhauser. "I don't know how many times Nick and Judy had to come and get her from school after she started a fight. I wouldn't have let that girl learn to fight, but she got more calm after she got into martial arts."

"I suggested it." Stated the cape buffalo. The three other mammals stared at him with surprise on their faces. "Martial art teach you respect. Or at least when to and not to fight."

"She actually found a bouncer job on the side, to secure some income while she trained. Her parents proposed to support her but she's a Hopps. And a Wilde. So she wanted to do it all by herself." Completed the wolf.

...
"I can't believe Big's family cut half of their operations in the last couple of years." Stated Clawhauser.

"I mostly have trouble believing how they can still stay the biggest crime family while their operation are shutting down one after the other." Chuckled Wolford.

"If I had to guess, which I never do, I'd say their relationship with the ZIA worked both way, and that Mr Big's intentions are to retire Big's name for good after he passes away." Stated the buffalo.

The three other mammals stared at him.

"And if I had to guess, again, I'd say it started after Vlad's fall. But again… I never guess."

"But wouldn't that give the other families space to expand, if Big's family disappears?" Asked Wolford.

"Not if another family named Koslov were to arise from Big's ashes. But it's all very hypothetical." He stared at his drink. "Seems I drank too much."

Blackfur chuckled "Well, if I had to add a non-guess to the chief's no-"

"I'm not the chief anymore."

"-To the chief non-guess, I'd say somebunny's influence is partly to praise for all this."

"You know what it means, right?" Smirked Wolford. "A cop corrupted a crimelord into turning good."

"That bunny is really something else." Smiled the panda.

... 

"I've drank too much." Stated the panda, which earned her a couple of snicker from Clawhauser and Wolford. The both of them knew how much she could drink in an evening.

"You're far from your limit." Smiled the wolf.

"Yeah, well, I still can't drive like this. And neither can you, you're at your fourth whisky."

The feline giggled. "You two really bicker like an old couple…"

"I guess we do." Smiled the wolf.

He gave glance to the panda who sipped at her glass. His family sometimes buggered him on how he should find a mate, have a family, or become part of a pack, settle down. But he didn't want to, he didn't feel the need. Being flatmate with the panda had turned into a sort of longterm relationship. Long evenings falling asleep in front of the TV, meals at fancy restaurants, visiting museum... Pretty much everyone thought they were a couple. But they weren't, at least not in the carnal sense.

They didn't feel that pull, but simply enjoyed each other's presence, in that strange place between friendship and love.

"What's on your mind Wolford?" Asked the panda.

"Heh... hard to explain." He stared at his glass. "The word 'platonic' comes to mind."
"Glad you finally figured it out." She smiled.

The feline was gawking at them. "What... What just happened."

The wolf was feeling embarrassed. "I think we're kind of together." His paw took the panda's, and her thumb went to rub his palm.

"We were for a long time, weren't we ? Simply not in the usual way." Completed the panda which sipped down her glass.

A snort was heard coming from the cape buffalo. "This city brings out the weirdest things, doesn't it ?"

"Don't you mean the best, hon ?"

"After Hopps and Wilde… I don't see the difference anymore."

... 

The sun was setting, and the four mammals were sitting on the edge of the pool, sharing a last bottle of wine. The first stars were appearing and the ex-chief slumped back, his shoulders and head touching the short grass. He emitted a chuckle. "I have a hard time believing it, but she did it, didn't she ?"

"She became the first bunny chief of police." Answered the feline, slumping back in turn and pushing himself against his husband.

Wolford's and Blackfur's paw were still interlocked, and they imitated the two others. "She did something better than that." Stated the panda.

The wolf raised his free paw as to touch the stars.

"She made the world a better place."

The End
Notes and Afterwords

Notes and References

Before parting ways, here is a bit of a gift ; a non-exhaustive list of references and easter-eggs. I may have forgotten a few of them, so don't hesitate to tell me if you find something that isn't there, I'll try to update.

Part 1, Chapter 1 :

Jack Rabbit Slim's : Restaurant where Vincent Vega and Mia Wallace have Dinner in the movie Pulp Fiction.

About the Raving One, Judy asks "You partnered up with a rabbit ?" : It's a reference to the 'Raving Rabbids', also known as 'one of the numerous mistakes committed by Ubisoft'.

In Part 1, Chapter 2 :

The On Clawd shoes name came from the On Cloud (or On-running Cloud) shoe brand/model.

Vito : The name of one of Fru-Fru's children. Reference to Vito Corleone, from the Godfather. Book Written by Mario Puzo and movie directed by Francis Ford Coppola.

Magia : Literally Shakira's first album. From what I could gather, it was only released in Colombia, and has since been removed from the music market. So the fact that Clawhauser has a copy (signed) is kind of a miracle on its own. Yes, I'm overlapping Zootopia with our reality.

David Pawie = David Bowie

Clawing Stones = Rolling Stones

Fang Division = Joy Division

Pink Snoud = Pink Floyd

The Wall, Orange Vinyl Version : A really rare edition of Pink Floyd's The Wall album. If you possess it, you're probably either very lucky, or very rich.

Part 1, Chapter 4 :

The Hakkapaw Nightclub : Reference to the Hakkasan, one of the biggest night-club in Las Vegas.

Fantastic Mister Fox : The first movie Judy, Nick and Ben watched during their Movie night. It a great stop motion movie, directed by Wes Anderson, adapted by the book from Roald Dahl. I highly recommend it.

Hot Fuzz : The second movie Judy, Nick and Ben watched during their Movie night. A movie by Edgar Wright. In my opinion the best one in the Cornetto Trilogy. Go and see it.

Bunraku : The third movie Judy, Nick and Ben watched during their Movie night. A completely crazy action flick directed by Guy Moshe. I can't really describe it. You'll have to see it for yourself.
Part 1, Chapter 8:

The Krispy Krab: Reference to the Krusty Krab in Spongebob Squarepants. The counter mammal is a hyena called Bob. Strangely, it's not a cartoon I've watched much of.

Part 1, Chapter 14:

"To be Continued": I borrowed that line from the series 'My Mad Fat Diary'. It a very good show about a teenage girl growing in the 90's that has a whole lot of personal problems, ranging from physical to psychological. That line was said in a similar context.

Part 1, Chapter 16:

The Sloth Convention: Idea shamelessly stolen from Cimar of Tularis WildHopps in their excellent fanfic "One Hundred Kisses".

Part 2, Chapter 9:

Frank Greyfox, codename Jaeger (Nick's undercover Identity): Reference to the character Frank Jaeger, codename Grayfox, Metal Gear Series.

Part 2, Chapter 10:

Vladimir Zimovitch: That one is a bit of a stretch. In Max Payne and Max Payne 2, there is a character named Vladimir Lem. In the second game, he is secretly dating a detective named Valerie Winterson. Zimovitch is a clumsy traduction of Winterson (Zimo = Winter, Vitch = Son). His name is basically Vladimir Winterson. As I said, that reference was a stretch. Kudos to you if you got it.

Scarlet Wicce: I needed at last name for the character, and I pretty much used the name from which Witch is derived. So yeah, her name is Scarlet Witch.

In hindsight, I should have called her brother Pietro.

Part 2, Chapter 15:

Sway: Song by Anita Kelsey, though I have a preference for Jennifer Connelly's interpretation in 'Dark City'. I discovered that song because of the movie, a masterpiece Directed by Alex Proyas.

Part 2, Chapter 18:

The Night has a Thousand Eyes: Song by Anita Kelsey (again), and I have a preference for Jennifer Connelly's interpretation (again) in 'Dark City' (again). As I said, masterpiece. Go see it.

Part 2, Chapter 26:

"When you can't run, you walk, and when you can't walk, you crawl. And when you can't do that... You find someone to carry you."

Line shamelessly stolen from Firefly, series by Joss Whedon, one of the best cancelled TV series in existence. I also recommend the comics.

Part 2, Chapter 28:

Spots Pilgrim VS the World: Scott Pilgrim VS the World. And excellent movie, directed by Edgar
Wright (yes, I love that director) adapted from a comic book (even better than the movie) created by Brian Lee O'Malley.

The fact that I chose to make Brian Lee O'Malley a cat in the Zootopia universe, is simply because of Thomas O'Malley, from the Aristocat movie.

"Force answers force, war breeds war, and death only brings death. To break this vicious circle one must do more than act without any thought or doubt."

Quote shamelessly stolen from the Metro 2033 game, developed by 4A Games. It's good, play it.

**Part 2, Chapter 29:**

Selina : Reference to Selina Kyle, AKA Catwoman.

"My paws are dirty" "So are mine." : Line stolen from Drive, directed by Nicolas Winding Refn.

It's fun because I intended to give to Frank a personality similar to the Driver's. I also intended to have Nick struggling to go back to his old personality because of a Dissociative Identity Disorder, partially caused by his amnesia. I gave it up because I couldn't do it justice, it was going to get a tad too cliché (and if you've read my work, you know how cliché I can get...)

**Part 3, Chapter 8:**

Jonathan Sears Barklin (Boss of the ZIA) : Reference to the character George Sears AKA Solidus Snake, Metal Gear Series. Yes, he misses and eye just because of that reference.

Adamska Pardalis (Ex-boss of the ZIA) : Reference to the character Adamska, also known as Revolver Ocelot, Metal Gear Series.

The name of the Ocelot in the Binomial Nomenclature is 'Leopardus Pardalis', just so you know it didn't come out of nowhere.

**Part 3, Chapter 22:**

Garbage (band played at Nick and Judy's wedding) : Alternative Rock Band. I highly recommend them. I needed a ballad that could be played at a wedding. 'Drive You Home' did the trick. It's a bit bittersweet song, but hey, I love that band, so...

**Epilogue, Chapter 2:**

"Edward ?"
"Ed-ward..."
A reference to Nina and Alexander and their horrible fate in the manga Fullmetal Alchemist.

**Epilogue, Chapter 5:**

The whole situation is inspired by Reservoir Dogs. All Crayons Criminals code-names come from the movie, as well as who gets hurt and who is psychologically unstable.

**Epilogue, Chapter 7:**

Digger the wombat : Reference to the excellent webcomic Digger, created by Ursula Vernon
**Things about the medical and scientific side of the story**

Most of the technological, psychological and medical babble was as accurate as I could make it to be. There are of course a few guesses and approximation.

All I've said about drugs is near 100% accurate, but only on humans. I didn't do my researches on the effect of drugs on animals (and when I say 'do my researches', I mean intensive googling, I didn't inject anyone with drugs for testing purpose, and you won't find any evidence anyway). As for the Nighthowler, (made researches on it as well) it's half fictional. There are Crocus species with very similar looks. But to get a similar effect, all you need is erythroxylum coca (coca plant) and heat it enough to concentrate the 'juice'. The result is pretty much the Hulk recipe. Basically, it's highly concentrated Cocaine.

The bioceramic replacer for bones is a thing that is actually in development (for bone regeneration and cancer treatment), but there hasn't been a real breakthrough yet. As for reattaching tendons and bones to it, I made a bit of a leap. Then again, it might eventually be possible.

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**Afterwords**

Still there ? Congrats, you've almost pulled through the slog that is me trying to stretch my time writing about this story for as long as possible.

I began to write this fanfiction precisely the 5th of January 2017 at 15:08 (still have the first document), and I consider that the first complete draft was finished the 29th of June 2017.

It had multiple stages. At first, I thought it would only be a few short scenes but by the end of what is now the Prologue, it was obvious that I was going to be longer. Because I needed more. I wanted to write Nick and Judy's love story. And if it had been only that, I'd have been okay with it. But it turned into something else. And, oh boy, it made 6 months of my life disappear in the blink of an eye.

Now, as you read these words, I still can't consider this work over. Not that I'll work on it again, but as I reread the first chapters, and even the lasts, I notice flaws, errors, avoidable blunders. But I think I'm okay with those mistakes.

I'll quote Leonardo Da Vinci on that one : "Art is never finished, only abandoned."

Again thanks for reading this story.

I can't promise you I'll ever publish something else here, but I sure hope so.

So, until that hypothetical day...

**Good Bye**

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!