Pack Street
by TGWeaver

Summary

Wannabite: Noun. *slang.* (Also “wanna bite”) Pejorative for an individual belonging to a prey species who demonstrates predatory characteristics, or who desires to be a predator. Contrast predator analogs: *grassbiter, grinder.*

The story of Remmy Cormo, the only sheep on Pack Street, a predominantly predator-inhabited slum neighborhood.
Remmy Cormo, a rather peculiar sheep, attempts to keep his unusual dietary habits a secret in his unwelcoming new neighborhood.

Sheep don't eat meat.
The smell of greasy, fried food hangs in the air like a delicious fog. It's both familiar and not if that's even possible -- like home cooking, if home was an alien planet. My 'kind' doesn't come to the Bug Burga often -- not that we're not welcome, it's just that we're not exactly the target audience.

Well, more like most guys like me aren't the target audience. Me personally, I'm *real* interested in what these folks are selling.

Licking my lips hungrily, I eye the menu board overhead. Gotta finalize my order in my head as I wait my turn in the line. This cheetah in front of me is ordering food like he hasn't eaten in weeks, but you know what? It doesn't bother me one bit. He's giving me time to work my nerves up to place my order, and more importantly he's running interference for me. I've gotten plenty of funny looks just in the time I've been standing in line.

Don't let my enthusiasm for a good burga fool you. Like I said before, it's not common for a guy like me to be seen in a place like this. I'm used to the stares and I'm pretty thick-skinned, but thick skin doesn't change the fact that sheep just don't eat meat.

Even if it's bug meat. Sweet, juicy bug meat.

"Next in line, please?"

Cheetah guy waddles out the door with six bags of food. Finally, it's my turn.

The cashier's a badger -- short, wiry little guy. Wouldn't say he's more than three feet tall. He's propped up on a milk crate just to see over the counter. (Hey, I'm not judging -- I'm short for my species too.) He looks like he hasn't slept in three days or bathed in a week, if the slouch in his gait and the oil in his fur are anything to go by. His name tag says "Rex", his cherry tomato eyeballs say "gimme a 'teenth".

Delightful. Exactly the guy I want preparing and serving me my food.

"Hi, welcome to Bug Burga. Home of the Roach Deluxe Burga," Rex drawls. "Would you like to try our new and improved Cricket Dippers for only $2.49?"

Ah, geez. I've seen snails that are more energetic than this dude. "They sound pretty good, but nah," I reply. "Double roach deluxe to go. Please. And, uh, firefly sauce."

Rex gives me a sleepy grin as he slowly keys my order into the computer. "Three eighty-five. Oh, and you don't have to lie, man."

I cock an eyebrow at him as he takes my money. "What?"

"About the cricket dippers 'sounding good'. Girlfriend send you in here? Lose a bet?"


"Serious?"

I'm fully expecting him to bust out laughing, maybe call some of his co-workers over to grill me (no pun intended). Instead his face splits into a lazy grin as he leans against the counter to hand me my change.

"Hey, man, good for you. Not a lotta prey come in here. When they do, they're usually buyin' for someone else, or it's a prank, hazing, y'know. Like eating meat's a big joke, right?" I'm too stunned
to reply. "If anything, I say eating grass is a joke. Not sure why we even keep hay fries on the menu."

I laugh uncomfortably.

Catching himself quickly, Rex pauses. "Uh, no offense. It's just, last time a sheep was in here was to protest." He stands up straight, gesturing like he's waving a picket sign. "'Bug Meat is Murder!' You know the type."

"Loonies," I mutter, shaking my head sympathetically.

"I know, right?" he smiles as he idly scratches his chin with a flat spatula from the counter. No telling how many health codes he's violating. "Anyway, thanks for being all cool about it. It's awesome to see prey givin' something like this a shot."

"Uh, yeah. Well, hey, thank you too. Most folks aren't as open-minded about it so I like to keep it to myself."

He points at the black shopping bag hanging from my belt that I brought to conceal my dinner. "Ah. Explains that then." I blink a few times, impressed and also alarmed he noticed. If a guy who acts like he was raised by sloths could notice it, I might be in trouble.

"Uh, the bag said it was scent-resistant on the wrapper," I reply, squirming a little.

Rex shrugs, tearing my receipt off the register. "Hey man, all the power to you. Your order number's 44. Next in line, please?"

I grab a chair at one of the empty tables in the dining room, brushing aside some straw wrappers and leftover hay fries from the last customer. Looks like most of this store's business is focused on the drive-thru. It's an interesting change from the Bug Burga that was near my hometown -- ours didn't have a drive-thru at all, so everyone typically just ate inside.

Not that it really makes much difference to me since I always took my order to go there, too.

As I sit at the table waiting for my double to finish cooking, a tall and very well-built tigress swings a little too close as she walks past me to dump her tray in the trash, her right hip brushing against my thick wool.

"Oh, sorry!" she exclaims as if she didn't notice. The dining room's more than half-empty so she really has no excuse for invading my personal space. Then again, she's a tigress and I'm a sheep so I'm not about to argue the fact.

"It's fine," I insist, tapping my hooves against the table impatiently. It's one sandwich -- what's the hold-up? "Don't worry about it."

She leans down, grinning widely. Way, way too many teeth for comfort. "I just gotta say, it's real brave of you to stop in here. Who's the lucky lady?" I frown just enough that she obviously notices it, causing her to change her tune swiftly. "Uhhh, or guy? Guy's fine too, there's nothing wrong with--"

"It's for me."

She stifles a smirk, clearly not buying it. "Riiight. Lost a bet, did you?"

"Order 44?" Rex calls out, setting a plastic tray with my burga box down. I don't even bother
saying goodbye. I just squeeze past her in a hurry, through the gap between her hips and the table. I can hear her snickering. I need to get out of here. Overstay my welcome and questions pile up. They never stay "friendly" for very long. I learned that one a long time ago.

Recently, circumstances I'd rather not go into detail about right now forced me to find a new place. The good news is, after a solid week of digging through internet listings and browsing newspaper classifieds, I found an apartment that fits my budget. The bad news is that it's on Pack Street.

Why's that bad news? Two reasons: first, Pack Street's a lower-income part of town. That doesn't mean everything looks like shit and that we're throwing molotov cocktails at each other while fighting tooth-and-claw over the ghetto's only bag of bread -- it just means that buildings are older, roads are a little rougher. Older model coupes with dented fenders instead of top-of-the-line sportscars. It's not a slum, it's just not where all of the "pretty" people live.

Uh, but that doesn't mean there aren't some lookers here. (Not that I'd know anything about that.)

Anyway, the second reason is that Pack Street, if you haven't gathered from the name, has a real heavy predator population. Mostly canids. Dogs, wolves, foxes, maybe the odd coyote or two. Probably other species I've never even heard of.

I heard once that predators only make up 10% of Zootopia's population. Other 90% is prey. Well, here on Pack Street, it's pretty much the opposite. Maybe even moreso. I haven't met many of my new neighbors yet, but so far, not one sheep among them. Hell, not even one other prey, now that I think about it. I think I saw an otter yesterday. Are otters predators? I thought they ate kelp or something.

Or, wait, kelp is in the ocean. Are there ocean otters? I'm pretty sure they eat fish. Anyway, it's sharp-toothed smiles as far as the eye can see.

Let's be clear: I'm no racist. What I am is the type of guy that locks his doors at night whether it's a two-story home in a nice suburb or a dingy apartment in the rough part of town. It doesn't bother me that I'm living in a building teeming with meat-eaters. I mean, I'm one, too, technically. But with this whole thing going on in the news right now? Predators going savage and attacking prey? Let's just say my timing couldn't have been worse on moving in.

After all, not only do sheep not eat meat, there's another thing you should know: we don't move into predator neighborhoods, either.

So I guess it's no surprise I haven't been feeling too welcome since I go there. There's this tension in the air, like a spark of static electricity in my coat, and I'm not sure about it yet. The atmosphere of the whole city sure isn't helping me here. There's protests downtown almost every day now. As bad as it might be walking into a wolf den normally it's way worse now, with all this shit going down. So I don't make waves, I try not to stand out. I've been learning to keep my head down for a while now.

But living here makes it hard, especially since I don't have a car. No car means I have to hoof it everywhere. Hoofing it in a neighborhood like this means I stand out. And for a guy like me, in my situation, in this environment? You can see why that's not a great idea.

Lucky for me it's not far now, maybe half a block to the apartment building. I'm in the home stretch and I can smell this double roach calling my name. Today was a good day -- I'm golden as soon as I get to the lobby.
"Hey there, yarn ball."

Shit.

I look around for the source of the voice, not slowing as I do. There's a black wolf girl sitting on the edge of a set of cement stairs that lead to the building next door to my apartment tower, just up ahead. She's got a smoke hanging from her muzzle and she's staring at me with squinted eyes and a hard expression. I don't give her a response. I know better than to even try. Just keep walking. I keep my head down and my eyes on the sidewalk.

"Nice sweater!" she calls out as I pass in front of her. "You knit that yourself?"

I keep walking. A little faster now.

"Yeah, run!" I don't see it, but I can hear her snap her jaws at me, and I jump instinctively.

I can hear her laughing while I hustle up the steps, yanking the building's front door open and hurriedly ducking into the lobby.

Once I'm in, I let out the breath I've been holding. I'm relieved to be back home, but it turns out to be short-lived when I catch sight of Al on the couch in the downstairs sitting area. While I haven't met many of my neighbors yet, I have become familiar with Al. You're familiar with him too, if you ever went to high school.

Al's an alpha wolf, and by alpha wolf what I really mean is Al's every jackoff jock that made the school football team look good but wasn't quite ZFL material. Most of his muscle's turned to fat and he's traded in his uniform for a band tee and give-up-on-life pants, but he's clearly the same shithead today that he was when he was the homecoming king. Al seems to be under the delusion this is still senior year and he's the big dog on campus (rather than an unemployed idiot lounging around an apartment all day). I'm not joking when I say if there was a locker nearby, he's actually the type that might try to stuff me in it.

One thing I've noticed about Al is that he doesn't go anywhere without a flunky. Today's no exception; there's a stoat I don't know sitting on top of the couch next to him. They're glued to some game on the shaky little TV someone's set up down here, so I use my opportunity to make my way upstairs. Head down, keep moving, no problems.

I'm five steps up when Al shuts the TV off. I freeze on the stairs, suck air through my teeth, and tense my shoulders. Because now I have a problem.

"Where you goin' in such a hurry, grasseater?"

I sigh, but hold it back enough not to seem disrespectful. "C'mon, man," I offer as inoffensively as possible, "I'm just going up to my room. That's all."

Al doesn't even get up, still seated with his enormous arms confidently spread over the back of the couch. "Don't go sneakin' around behind my back. That's disrespecting a man in his own territory."

I don't like the edge to that tone, and maybe what he deserves isn't respect, but if I can get this over with and eat my dinner in peace I'll do what he asks. Wrapping the bag a little tighter around my wrist, I walk back down the stairs, circling in front of the bench he's treating like a throne, but still keeping my distance.

"Look, I wasn't trying to disrespect you or anything. It's just been a long day and I'm just trying to get home."
He stares at me for a second with the only expression I've ever seen him wear: a steely glare and a tight-lipped frown that seems like it could turn to a snarl real fast.

Finally, he nods. "Arright. But you keep acting suspicious, you're gonna leave a pretty bad impression on some people."

The stoat laughs, and while I fight a scowl, I suddenly notice Al's nose twitching, sniffing the air.

I turn back to the stairs, hoping it's not too late.

"Hold it."

I didn't make it one step.

"What's in the bag, sheep?"

"Heh, uh, yeah -- what is that?" the stoat echoes, shimmying down the back of the couch and snaking over to to me, uncomfortably close. "Smells like, like, uh --"

Al snaps his fingers in a "shut up, I'm thinking" kind of way, cutting the stoat off mid-thought. He sticks his paw out towards me.

"Smells like dinner. Let me see that bag." The look on his face says he's not joking.

"What, are you mugging me?" I blurt out, instantly regretting it.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa!" He laughs, a deep, practiced, insincere laugh. I can see the stoat's eyes kind of gleam as Al leans forward, a huge hand braced on his knee. It's hard not to notice the claws. "Mugging? Calm down, grazer. This ain't no mugging," he fires back, muzzle twitching. "Now c'mon, I just wanna see it. Don't make me ask you again."

I glance at the stoat, whose face is fighting to hide a shit-eating grin. As if he's defying me to screw this up. I know if I pass it over it's as good as gone, and I'm stuck eating whatever I can scrape together from my mini-fridge while I watch him eat my burga. On the other hand, if I don't pass it over, I'll still be watching him eat my burga, but probably through a black eye.

It pisses me off, but I make the smart decision. Better to endure shame than pain. I reluctantly hand the stoat the black shopping bag, and he obediently darts to couch, handing it to Al. The wolf pokes his muzzle inside, taking a deep whiff of its contents, and looks up with an expression of genuine surprise.

"Bug Burga? Who the fuck had you pick this up?" Al asks, completing the fuckin' hat trick.

I'm starting to develop a migraine from holding back this scowl. "Look, man, I paid for that. You aren't seriously going to eat it, are you?"

"Well, hey, since you're offering," Al snorts, elbowing the stoat with a toothy smile. "Hear that, Marty? Nice of him to pick up dinner, right?"

His name's Marty. Of course it is. I knew a Marty in High School and he was a toadie, too.

"Yeah, real nice, Al," Marty replies. "Real neighborly of him."

Poking his snout to the box, Al takes another sniff. He pauses, frozen, with his broad nose stuffed in past the plastic, for a long moment. Now I don't know what to think.

"Firefly sauce. The fuck?"
"Made with fresh-ground serrano peppers and real firefly extract. Lights up your tongue," Marty chimes in with a wave of his tiny paw, mimicking the new ad. Yeah, I saw the commercial too, asshole. Why do you think I ordered it?

Closing the box, Al squints at me. "I'm gonna ask you again: Who'd you get this for? And don't you fuckin' lie to me."

I bite my bottom lip, bracing for his reaction. "...It's for me. I got it for me."

"You got this," he deadpans, glancing into the bag, then back to me. "I don't -- you got this."

I twist uncomfortably, a pit forming in my stomach. "Yes."

Al sets the bag down and Marty reaches into it, taking out the paper box and flipping the lid open to examine the burga in disbelief. It's bigger than his head -- he'd probably fill up on half a slider, so I know there's no way he could finish it off. Al on the other hand could eat it in two bites.

"Holy shit," Marty mumbles to himself.

"You're gonna eat a roach burga," Al continues. "With firefly sauce."

"Double Roach Deluxe," I clarify.

Al just sits there for a long time, staring at me. He's back to that same expression again. I can see why he wears it now. I'm starting to sweat under my coat, when suddenly Al glances down and notice Marty starting to peel back the bun on my Double Roach Deluxe. He smacks Marty's shoulder with a noise that echoes through the lobby, and Marty almost drops my dinner on the ground.

"Give it back to him," Al nods.

"What?" Marty asks, jaw agape. "Give him -- give it back? You serious?"

"You heard me," Al says, flatly. "Give the carnivore his burga back."

Marty wastes no time in obeying, clapping the box shut around it, wrapping the box back in the bag, and passing it back to me. I look down at it, not entirely sure what just happened, but thankful for the pass. The two of them watch me ascend the steps all the way to my room, and I waste no time in getting inside.

This sauce better be worth it.
The weather's pretty nice today. Cloudy but not overcast; not too hot, not too cold. Just how I like it. As a sheep, I never could handle extreme weather, but I do better in the cold than in the heat. With all this wool, summers are like going for a ride in the microwave. I'm not a fan of rain either - never can shake the feeling I'm going to mildew no matter how much I towel off at home after a downpour. I kinda wish I did a better job of keeping it all trimmed down, but shearing's a pain in the ass, both figuratively and literally.

Learned my lesson from the last set of clippers: cheapest is not always best. Next time I'm springing for a real, brand-name electric trimmer with one of those plastic blade guard things instead of buying whatever's in the bargain bin.

Pack Street's really hopping today; makes sense, it's lunchtime. Speaking of both lunchtime and lessons learned, I decided to forego my usual trip to Bug Burga this afternoon after yesterday's interrogation by Al and his ermine crony. I really could have gone for something greasy, but I'm not looking for another confrontation like that. Besides, on my budget fast food is more of a treat
than a staple, so time to act like a responsible adult and stock up on groceries.

I peer inside the paper bag full of produce in my arms just to make sure I didn't drop anything on my way home. My new local grocery store seems to cater predominately to pred tastes, and boy, does it show. I'm talking stuff I've never seen -- they had real cheese, if you can even believe that. Made with real milk, not the soy stuff you usually see. Guy behind the counter offered me a sample of it on a cracker with a pimento olive -- just a simple little bite, nothing fancy.

I always wanted to try cheese. Who wouldn't be curious? If you think about it, in some ways it's even more taboo than meat. We get meat from bugs, but milk comes from us. So of course, I said yes. Once I got over the initial shock of thinking about eating something made with another mammal's milk, I thought I'd died and gone to heaven. The difference is unreal compared to what I've been eating all my life. I used to point and laugh anytime I'd see a TV commercial use words like "decadent" or "indulgent" or "sinful" to define food, but now I'm starting to see the mentality behind it.

Telling you right now, most prey have no idea what they're missing out on. This stuff's divine and worth every penny of the ten dollars I paid for a half pound. I plan to slice it extra thin -- I bet it'll taste out of this world on a burga.

I'm so busy rooting through my bag I almost don't see the jackal and coyote walking shoulder-to-shoulder up the sidewalk in front of me. Both of them are dressed in work uniforms, obviously on a lunch break. Even though they're moving against the natural flow of foot traffic, they give me a curious look as if I'm the one who's out of place. It's a look I’ve grown very familiar with in a very short time. I respond in turn by giving them a wide enough berth to not seem passive-aggressive while still getting out of their way. They don't even say so much as an "excuse me", but I'm fine with it. The less I'm noticed, the more I'm--

"Well, well. It's the yarn ball again. Where you running to in such a hurry?"

Right on fucking time, it's the black-furred wolf girl from yesterday. She's been out here a few times since I moved in. Always has to say something when I walk by. I speed up and stick to my usual tactic of keeping my head down and ignoring her jeering. She seems calm enough, but I know from past experience that wolves are easily provoked. Last thing I need is another Al breathing down my neck. I'm only a few seconds from the front door now.

"You got wool in your ears, yarn ball? Better answer when a wolf asks you a question."

Great. I turn on my heel with a sigh and face the front steps of the shabby, half-barred building next door. Can't wait to properly greet my new neighbor who's currently glaring at me with her dark, baggy eyes.

As I walk up the path I give her a once-over. Until now I've made a point of keeping my eyes to myself, but I can see her sizing me up, so I figure it's only fair if I learn as much as I can about her while I approach and we ogle each other like dipshits. Her wet nose twitches and I'm suddenly super aware of how I smell. It's something predators seem to do a lot. Do I do it? They don't seem to notice, maybe I don't either. Anyway, she's huge -- almost twice my height huge. Hell, she might be as tall as Al. Her legs are certainly longer than his.

"Of course I have wool in my ears," I reply with a wary grin, hoping a little humor will disarm the situation. "I thought that was obvious."

"Well lookie here, it can talk," the wolf replies without so much as a smile, taking a drag off her cigarette. "In a hurry to get back to your pad and hide from the scary preds?"
So much for that plan. I shift my groceries around in my hooves; even though it's not blisteringly hot out here I do have some freezer pops and I'd prefer it if they made it to my kitchen intact.

"Little bit on the hurry, not so much on the hide," I admit. "What, are you and Al like, the local customs agents or something? Need to paw through my lettuce and tomatoes to see if I'm smuggling any unapproved contraband?"

"I don't give a shit what's in your snack bag," the wolf says bluntly. "I just want to know what you think you're doing here."

I take a step back while keeping my eyes on her this time. Waving my hoof towards my own apartment building, I give her what I hope is a friendly nod that she won't take the wrong way. "My name's Remmy. I just moved in next door."

She snaps her jaws at me again, and to my credit I don't jump nearly as high this time. Apparently that's enough shaming at my expense to satisfy her, so she goes back to her smoking with a dirty grin.

Cordial types here.

Once I'm inside, I give the lobby a quick scan as I head for the staircase. The room's empty which is a good sign. Empty room, no Al. I've already met my obnoxious wolf quota for the day. Bolting up the stairs, I waste no time heading for my room. I can already feel condensation forming on the bottom of my grocery bag, so I'd better get this stuff on ice.

Pulling my house key from the deadbolt, I breathe a sigh of relief as I step inside my apartment. Home free at last.

"Hnnnnh. Wolter, you didn't tell me the fresh meat was a sheep."

I freeze as something warm brushes against my wool.

"Shiiiiit," a scratchy voice purrs uncomfortably close to my ear. "You gotta feel this fluff. Kid feels like shag carpeting."

"Ooh, don't say that," a second voice coos. "I could go for a shag on the carpet right about now."

"Hah. What else is new?"

I turn around slowly to greet whoever's violating my personal space. "Uh, you two need something?" I ask pointedly.

Aardwolves. Two of them, almost completely identical. Bronze fur, tired eyes. Or maybe bedroom eyes. Both just a bit shorter than me, though the fact they're both slouched like they've got a hangover doesn't help. The one fondling my wool sounds slightly more like a girl, and the one in the back propped against the upstairs railing seems to be a guy. At least, Wolter's a guy's name, right? Gotta be. Hell, I knew a Woolter back in high school. Real piece of work.

"Heard there was a new tenant, but man, prey woulda been my last guess," 'Wolter' says with a lazy yawn as he shuffles towards me. I can't tell whether he's replying to me or his companion.

"Yeah, can't say I've ever seen a sheep up close," the female aardwolf chimes in, working her paws deeper and deeper into my wool until suddenly her claws graze against my belly. She giggles when
I reflexively jump at the sensation, obviously amused. I narrow my eyes at her, and place a firm hoof on her shoulder.

"I'd like it if you didn't do that," I insist. "Sheep thing. You understand."

She shrugs halfheartedly and takes a step back. But as soon as she removes her paws from my wool, the other one grabs a fistful and he's much rougher than she is. I yelp out in alarm.

"You aren't kidding," Wolter mumbles to his cohort, his face splitting into a grin. "Dude, you must go through a tub of shampoo every day. This is like... groping a cloud."

"Ahaha, okay, that's enough," I snap a little more forcefully, pulling away and stepping inside my apartment. "Look, I've got frozens I need to put up so if you guys will excuse me?"

"Oh, we don't mind," the girl says blithely as they start to follow me in. I drop my bag and keys on the counter in a hurry before stepping back outside into the hall. Better out here with them than in there with them. In my haste, I nearly catch her tail in the door as I slam it shut.

"My apartment's a mess. Just moved in recently, you know? Still unpacking," I explain, wiping my brow. "Sorry, what'd you say your names were again?"

Neither of them seem the least bit fazed, which I guess is a good sign. "Wolter," the male says, pointing to himself. "This is my twin sister Anneke. You're Remmy, right?"

"Yeah. Remmy Cormo," I reply. "Sorry, how'd you, uh, know--"

"Charlie mentioned you." Wolter scratches one of his ears idly. "Just didn't mention you were a sheep."

"Mmmm. Props to Charlie for not seeing race. Sheep would have been the first thing I'd mention," Anneke adds with a grin to match her brother's. "So I gotta ask, what's up with the whole 'prey moves into a pred apartment' thing? You like some kind of predo, Remmy Cormo?"

"No judging, I've done plenty of both," Wolter follows up immediately as if that'll put me at ease. "Pred, prey, doesn't make a difference to me."

"Same here." Anneke runs her tongue around the edge of her muzzle.

Classy. Tell a complete stranger all about your sexual conquests. These two are the definition of trashy, but the kind of trashy that gives me the heebie-jeebies. I don't know whether to roll my eyes or look for an escape route. Either way I feel like I'm gonna need a deep scrub after this conversation.

"Well, it's nice meeting you, but I gotta get this stuff in the fridge, so..." Without waiting for a reply, I grip the doorknob, smile, and then slam my entire body against the door because it fucking locked itself when I closed it just a second ago. "Oh, you've got to be kidding me."

"Locked out? Oh, that's tough," Wolter chuckles. I think he's trying to be sympathetic but it just comes off sounding like some slasher movie psycho taunting a cornered victim. "Maintenance isn't supposed to be here till Thursday. Hope you have a spare key, otherwise you're boned."

Anneke laughs. "Well, he's not boned yet. I'll at least buy him dinner first, since his is probably gonna melt before he gets to it."

The two of them exchange the biggest shit-eating grins as Wolter slaps me on the back. Damn it,
the cheese I bought is wrapped in paper and if those popsicles melt and ruin it because I was dealing with these two, I'm gonna be furious.

"Well, why not come down to the lobby and chill with us for a bit? I mean, it's not like you're getting into your apartment, right?" Wolter suggests.

Yeah man, that's a great idea! I can't wait to go socialize with a room full of fucking predators -- maybe my new best friend Al can come by and shake me down for any unauthorized dairy products! If a simple burga set his alarms off, I can't imagine what the hell he's gonna think if he smells cheese on me. I'm surprised these two haven't noticed, to be honest.

The worst part is, he's right. I don't really have other options here. With a sigh I follow Wolter down the stairs to the lobby to "chill for a bit". Anneke deliberately hangs back, and I can tell she's got her laser-beam gaze locked onto my ass. I'm pretty sure I feel her not-so-subtly plucking at the back of my shirt, too, until I've got more midsection wool poking out the back.

I make a mental note to never accept anything to drink from either of these two.

It hasn't even been five minutes and already I'm climbing the walls wanting to leave. Anneke's looking me up and down hungrily; I've seen the same face before on preds right before they sink their teeth into a bug meat patty. It's that thing that's going on in the news, gotta be. Something to do with their biology.

I can only imagine what of mine she's fantasizing about biting down on.

Wolter's also fascinated by me, but it seems to be less skeevy (slightly) and more the kind of interest you see in a child's eyes when he sees something new for the first time. He looks like he's seconds away from grabbing my wool again.

"You look tense, Remmy," Anneke drags as she rolls, stretching, onto her brother's lap. The two of them are collapsed against each other on the couch; Wolter scratching at his side idly while his sister is lazily attempting to engage me in conversation.

"Yeah, well," I huff. "It's not like I've got anywhere to be or anything."

"Oh good," she says obliviously. "Then maybe you can fill us in on why you're here, fluff-puff." I bite down on my tongue. Memo to self -- sarcasm's a no-go with this one; don't joke about anything I can't take back later.

The front door swings open before I have to give her a reply. I'm relieved for the distraction, but it's short-lived; the black wolf from the next building over comes striding in, blatantly ignoring the "no smoking" sign hanging in the hallway. She tromps into the middle of the lobby and wastes no time in voicing her demands.

"Where's Al?"

Anneke and Wolter exchange glances, and I can't help but notice a sudden change in them. They're sitting up straighter, their ears are tucked back, and the fur on their necks is standing up into a strange, stripey mohawk. I gotta admit, it's nice to see someone else looking intimidated for a change.

"Heyyyy, Betty," Wolt nervously drawls.
"Didn't him and Marty have a thing they were going to?" Anneke murmurs.

"Hell if I know. I've only talked to Charlie today."

Both of them shrug in response. The wolf turns to me, folding her arms. "Well?"

The smug smile I didn't even realize I was wearing is gone in a second. I glance around the lobby, and I can barely get out a shrug. "He's not here."

"No shit," the wolf says. "I want to know where he is, not where he isn't."

"What're you asking me for?" I return testily. "I'm not his keeper."

"I got that much, yarn ball. But he is your keeper," she says as she takes another heavy pull on her cigarette and blows smoke directly into my face. "So be a good little lamb and go find your sheepdog for me. I got business with him."

I'm frustrated and uncomfortable enough as it is, and my temper gets the better of me in the heat of this one moment. I've got food that's probably gonna ruin and I don't have the scratch to go back and replace it. "Find him yourself," I growl, standing up on the oversized cushion of my chair. "I'm not your errand boy."

She blinks at me without the slightest change in expression. "Y'know, it's hard to take a talking pillow seriously when he gets mouthy," the wolf says, unfazed. "Especially a talking pillow with no horns."

Snorting, I fold my arms. It's not my fault I don't have horns. Lots of rams don't have horns. "Oh, and what, I guess your mom jeans are supposed to scream 'tough chick'?"

Shit.

That was a mistake.

The wolf bites her cigarette and flashes her teeth for just a second in what looks almost like a grin, but it's an unsettling smile even the aardwolves couldn't match. Her nose wrinkles and I realize I'm sweating buckets.

"Mom jeans!!" Anneke snorts, eyes wide.

Wolter joins in her laughter a split-second afterwards. "Oh, shit! Did he really say 'mom jeans'?! Yarn ball's got yarn balls, man!"

"Don't call me that," I squeak. The twins laughs even harder at the crack in my voice.

The big bad wolf stares down at me with a withering glare. She opens her mouth and her words cut through the laughter. "Get out."

She doesn't need to tell me twice. I'm about to make a hasty exit when I hear the twins scampering off and I realize with a deep sinking feeling she was talking to them, not me.

I hear a door slam somewhere and suddenly it's just us in the lobby. I struggle to swallow the growing lump in my throat, but the black wolf casually shifts her weight to her other foot and cracks her broad neck.

"These aren't mom jeans," she responds, her tone as flat and matter-of-fact as before, tossing her
cigarette butt onto the floor and looking down at her pants. "They're boot cut. Completely different."

I know when to back down. "Right. Sorry. My mistake," I nod, shrinking back slightly. "Look, I don't know where Al is and even if I did have some way of getting a hold of him, I've got my own problems right now. I've just been locked out of my apartment."

"No shit?" she replies. "Point me to your room."

I snort, refusing to budge from my spot on the carpet. "What, are you a locksmith?"

She glances back down to me with an arched brow, then all of a sudden her hand slams out, and clawed fingers are clutching, then lifting, and my feet leave the ground as she holds me up by a heaping fistful of my chest wool.

"I said **point me to your room.**" Her narrow eyes haven't changed, but she's showing more teeth in her speech now.

Okay. Obviously I crossed the line. That one was on me. I nod quickly, and she drops me back to the ground, shaking a few woolly fibers off her hand.

I slowly walk up the stairs. She lopes up them two at a time, making it to the top of the staircase well before I do.

I walk down the upper level hall past the other rooms until we make it to my apartment. Stopping in front of my door, I motion to it with a hoof. "There you go. Just like all the others."

"Shut up a second," she mumbles. She flicks her fist open like a folding knife, then presses the tip of one claw to the locking mechanism. I watch in sick fascination as she jiggles her paws a few times, bumping them gently in a rhythm. It takes maybe fifteen seconds before the door lock clicks and she opens the door to my room. My jaw drops as she walks inside my apartment without a word, waving to my groceries. Thankfully there isn't a puddle under the bag. I'm hoping everything's still intact, but I'll sort through it later. I shove the entire bag into the freezer to get it cooling.

"H-how'd you--?" I sputter, making sure to re-pocket my key.

"Not bad for a tough chick in a pair of mom jeans," she smirks toothily, eyebrow raised. "You see Al, you send him my way, yarn ball."

I nod dumbly as she walks outside without another word. I'd lock the door, but at this point I guess it's meaningless -- she'd get in if she wants to.

Actually, on second thought, I lock the door anyway.
Woolly Bully

Chapter Summary

An exhausted Remmy is kept awake by a rowdy block party.

It's two in the morning and I can't sleep.

Not because I'm restless or anything. I'm actually piss tired, and I've still got work in the morning. "Well-rested" went out the window about four hours ago, now I'm settling for "functional". I roll over onto my side and tug my pillow over my head, trying to drown out some of the noise. I can't tell what the hell they've got going on out there, but it sure ain't quiet. Sounds like a block party, maybe someone's birthday, or even a wedding or something.

In addition to being the only prey living on Pack Street, I'm starting to think I may be one of the only diurnal guys as well. (Fancy word for "sleeps at night". You know, like normal people.)

Sounds like they're really revving up. I just heard a bass drop that rattled the windows in my
apartment. Enough's enough, I'm gonna go see what all the commotion's about. I know this is a really dumb plan, but I'm going to go see if I can get them to quiet down. They'll probably bite my head off for daring to ask. Not literally, I hope.

I crawl out of bed, slip my clothes on, and head for the door, making sure to get the key to the extra deadbolt I installed this morning. After seeing Betty's lock trick in action, twelve dollars at the hardware store was cheap piece of mind. Hopefully now I'll have a running start if she decides to pay me a surprise visit.

Normally I'd be quiet when tromping down the staircase, but I'm too tired to be polite. Plus, it's obvious half the neighborhood's up and having a grand old time outside. I'm not sure anyone'll hear my footsteps over the ghetto blaster assault.

"Holy shit," I breathe as I open the door to see the chaos.

Forget my original guesstimate of half the neighborhood, I think I may have been the only mammal on the whole street who was missing out on this party. Damn near everybody's here. I've never seen so many carnivores in one place. Preds of all species and sizes are gathered around, sipping brews from ice chests or dancing in the streets to the music. While most of them are strangers, I recognize a few faces -- Al and Marty are hanging out near a barbecue pit grilling sliders, carrying on a conversation with a tiger and two wolves. Betty's perched on her stoop as usual, excitedly waving around a cigarette as she talks to a scruffy ferret in a sleeveless denim jacket.

As unnerving as her glare is, it's even scarier to see her smiling.

I make sure to keep a safe distance from her as I stride towards the center of the crowd to at least see if I can get them to turn down their music. I can deal with the rest of the racket; yelling, carousing, that shit doesn't bother me as long as I don't feel like the roof is going to collapse on my head every time a new song starts.

They've got both ends of the street cordoned off with a few traffic cones. I can already imagine the local police giving them shit about thru traffic, but then again at two in the morning I can't imagine many Zootopians actually needing to get through Pack Street. Besides, with my luck they'll have everything packed up by the time I need to head to work.

As soon as I'm off the front steps of our apartment, I quickly put my stern face on. Pred or prey, these guys have to show some respect for their neighbors if we're all gonna get along. Weaving through the crowd, I can already feel the stares and second looks.

"Oh my god, is that a sheep?!" a muscular half-breed wolf says. I can't for the life of me tell what the other half is, but I don't really care.

"I think they prefer to be called rams, dude."

"Yeah, yeah, sheep among preds," I grumble just low enough that they can't possibly hear me. Ain't I a real fuckin' novelty. I'm so tired I don't even bother protesting as a pair of too-young coyote teens surround me for selfies.

"Say cheese, sheep," slurs a girl who's too young to drive let alone drink, a bottle in one paw and her phone in the other. She pulls me in tight for a hug before blinding me with several shots of her camera's flash.

"Uh, like, don't they want you to call 'em ewes?" one of the other jailbait coyotes asks as she sniffs at my wool with her muzzle. I'm not even a canine and I can smell the liquor pouring off of these
two. Giving her a dirty look, I pull away.

"I'm a guy."

"Right. Sorry, Mr. Ewe," she says with a sympathetic smile, completely missing my point. For all the good Lionheart's policies did with diversity during his term, I sure as shit wish he'd had the police assign some rams down here. I feel like if preds just saw us more often, we'd lose a lot of that new car smell.

"Listen, kid," I yawn as politely as I can. "How about you tell me where the guy is running the party, and I don't tell anyone you two are hammered?"

They exchange glances with each other before backing up. "Uhhh, you mean Ozzy?" the younger of the two asks.

I fold my arms, wordlessly waiting for an answer. I have no idea who the hell "Ozzy" is, but if they're namedropping him, either he's in charge or knows someone who is. They point further down the street where a few pickup trucks are gathered, and I nod, heading off in that direction. Sadly I'm too damn short to be able to see much, but at least I've got something to go off of now.

The closer I get to "Ozzy", the louder the music and revelry gets. Good sign; I'm headed in the right direction. If I'd been thinking more clearly, I would have looked out my bedroom window for the height advantage before coming outside. It takes me a good five minutes just to slowly push my way through the crowd. By the time I make it to the center of the party, I realize I only ended up moving maybe twenty or thirty yards.

Seated on the tailgate of one of the trucks is a muscular, dopey-eyed hyena strumming a guitar. Even though it's an acoustic, he's somehow got it jury-rigged to a beat-up amp. A tape deck's nearby to provide backing instruments and vocals, though I wonder if it's really just to keep him in tune based on his singing. Seated on another truck across from him is Anneke, one of the aardwolf twins that lives on my floor, bobbing her head up and down in time to the music while her brother Wolter bumps and grinds with pred girls in the crowd.

I wait patiently for the hyena to finish his song, yawning as I tap my foot on the pavement. As soon as he finishes a particularly off-key guitar solo, he flashes me a toothy grin.

"Wah-hey, a newcomer!" he booms into his mic, drawing all eyes in the area to me. "Whatcha want, cotton swab?"

"You Ozzy?" I ask warily.

He nods, grinning as he sizes me up. I brush some of the dust off my shirt.

"Hey, dude, could you maybe dial the music down just a bit? Trying to get some sleep upstairs."

"Tough shit, grazer," a low voice sneers from behind me. Turning in place, I look up into the piercing eyes of a tall, slender, chestnut-furred jackal. "Put some of that fuckin' wool in your ears if it bothers you so much."

"Hey, look, you guys can have your fun, I'm just saying some of us got work in a couple hours," I repeat, hooves raised submissively. I learned from Betty that you can't challenge these guys head-on. Gotta use your smarts.

"Then you shouldn't have moved to Pack Street," the jackal retorts. "Besides, we don't need your permission to have fun, do we, guys? Play him off, Ozzy!"
Ozzy grins and slams a paw against the tailgate to establish a beat. "You got it! This one's for our fluffy friend here! Wooly Bully, everybody! Uno, dos, one two TRES QUAAATROOOO!!"

I narrow my eyes in both embarrassment and exhaustion, cheeks flushed as the hyena and his friends break out into jeering laughs and another ear-splitting song. I make a point of standing my ground for a solid minute or so before it becomes obvious they're not going to stop any time soon. If anything, they've gotten even louder and more rambunctious.

With a sigh, I trudge away from the trucks. My feet are heavy but I can barely feel the ground under me. My head's foggy and aching sharp at the same time. The music's thumping all around me, like I'm underwater. I'd give anything for a good night's rest right about now, but this already feels like a dream.

Might as well kill some time until I have to go to work because I'm clearly not gonna get any sleep.

After another round of unwanted photo ops with drunk teenagers and no fewer than three different species of canine wanting to feel my wool (and one girl who got a little too frisky with her paws), I find a nice quiet curb to land on.

During the day, there are enough folks up moving around that I've never realized just how nocturnal this place actually is. I always see people running around during the afternoons, so I imagined that everyone else was on a typical 9-to-5 working mammal's schedule like me. How wrong I was. The lunchtime bustle I saw the other day makes Pack Street look like a ghost town compared to how packed it is tonight.

There's a line for food from Al's grill that's at least a dozen preds long. He's laughing and carrying on with a big old smile on his face, handing out paper plates with food. Marty collects money from each customer, stuffing it into one of those zippered pouches. There's a cardboard sign propped next to a cooler with prices written in magic marker. They're clearly not out to make money unless they stole their ingredients -- a buck fifty for a slider, a bag of chips and a can of soda's not exactly highway robbery. Something about proceeds going to help local musicians is written at the bottom of the sign.

It's hard to believe these are the same two thugs that shook me down for a bug burga the other day.

That's actually something I'm noticing. Everywhere I look, people seem to be having a good time. I mean, yeah, that's what you do at parties. I get it. It's just kind of bizarre to see these specific predators having a good time. I still can't get over seeing Al and Betty with any expression other than "there's a stick rammed straight up my ass".

The hair on the back of my neck bristles. Before I can turn around, I hear a scratchy voice purr into my ear. "Man, sheep, I've been lookin' everywhere for your fuzzy tush."

"Anneke," I reply as she plops next to me on the curb.

"Oh, you do remember my name," she says with a saucy grin. "You didn't say anything when you came over to visit just now."

Squeezing my eyes shut, I try to stave off the building headache. "Wasn't exactly a visit," I grumble.

"What was it, then?"
I glare at the clueless aardwolf. She licks her muzzle, craning her neck at me curiously.

"Exactly what it looked like," I reply with a frown.

"So I was right, then. You're a square outta your element and lookin' for a good time." Anneke's already wrapped one of her arms around me, and I can feel her breath on my shoulder.

Looking around for anything resembling a distraction so I can leave, I notice Al's queue has almost emptied out. Getting up from the ground, I head towards him. "You know what? I think I'm gonna go grab a soft drink." I'm not really in the mood for anything since I had a big dinner, but it beats sitting here and being molested.

"Sounds good. Make mine a Dr. Bristle," she calls out. "Oooh! And extra pickles on my slider!" I pretend not to hear her.

By the time I get across the street to the grill, there's only one mammal ahead of me. Al's just handed him a bag of chips when he notices me show up.

The partygoer in front of me rips the bag open and spins around to return to the party, nearly bumping into me. Glancing up, I realize it's Ozzy -- the music man himself. He's not quite as towering as I first thought he was now that he's down off of the truck's tailgate and walking around. His face lights up with a crooked, toothy grin, like a hungry kid seeing the waiter approaching with his food. "Hey hey, it's the woolly bully again!"

"Aw, what the fuck is this," Al grumbles, unloading another volley of grasshopper patties onto the grill. "You smell meat cooking and come running, is that it, sheep?"

"Hold up, a meat-eating sheep?" To Ozzy's credit, he doesn't sound repulsed, just surprised. "Oh, wait, man! Did Anneke over there send you on a fetch quest?"

Al and Marty bust out laughing. "Anneke and Remmy Cormo? Fuck me, that'll be the day," Al chortles. In spite of myself I smirk a little; it sounds just as ridiculous to my ears too.

"Nah, no shit, Ozzy, it ain't for Annie. This one's a carnivore, I swear to God. Didn't believe it myself," Marty chips in as he sorts through the coins in the box. "Still don't, actually, but he came in the other day with a Bug Burga."

Ozzy licks some potato chip salt off of one of his paws, grinning behind black lips. "Unreal. Charlie'd flip out to see this. Our crazy world, right?"

"Where anyone can be anything," Marty comments, sounding slightly bitter.

"All right, prey, c'mon. What d'ya want?" Al asks, folding his arms. I shrug, making a show of examining the "menu" -- anything to burn some time until Anneke loses interest and wanders off to fondle someone else.

"Whole bit. Slider, chips, drink." I reach into my pocket, breathing a sigh of relief for having forgotten to take my wallet out of my pants before going to bed. I'd have been humiliated if I'd shown up with no cash on hand; I doubt Al would extend me the credit. The alpha wolf shakes his head, clearly still in disbelief. He begins flipping the patties over while I hand Marty two dollars.

I gotta admit, the grill smells good. Even if it is a little marred by the smell of cigarettes. Someone must be smoking pretty close, or--

Uh-oh.
"I'll have what he's having," Betty says from behind me, blowing a lungful of cancer plumes out over my head. "The yarn ball here's paying for both of us."

Chuckling, Marty reaches out as I fish another dollar out of my wallet without hesitation. "Man, for such a fatass you get all the ladies don't ya, mutton--" The words die in his throat and his smile vanishes as Betty leans down to his eye level, her teeth gleaming dangerously.

"You want to shut the fuck up now, rat," she says. Not a request, but an order. The stoat nods submissively as she stands up, folding her arms.

"Does this make us even for your, uh, locksmithing?" I ask Betty as casually as I can manage. Al hands me a plate which she intercepts.

"It doesn't even make us even for that crack about my jeans," she shoots back, heading off with the food. Glad to see I'm still living rent-free in her head over that one.

"Jeans, huh?" Ozzy asks, crumpling up his soda can. "I bet there's a good story behind that one."

"I might've implied her pants were mom jeans," I yawn as Al presses my own plate into my hooves. He nearly drops it, eyes and mouth widening in shock.

"You're kidding me," Marty gasps. "You got a fuckin' death wish, Cormo?"

"Mom jeans!" Al booms with laughter, then stops in an instant. His eyes go wide and wary, and he looks up from the grill to glance about like a meerkat, but a moment later his smile quickly returns. Ozzy's growing mirth has transformed into wild, unrestrained cackling. The hyena's laughter echoes out over all the other ambient noise. His face is absolutely hysterical. I jump a little at first - - it's so over the top I almost wonder if something's wrong with him, but nobody else seems to be concerned. Business as usual, I guess.

"Mom jeans," Al chuckles again, shaking his head. "Oh, I wish I'd fuckin' heard that one before she came by to bust my chops the other day!"

Taking a bite of the slider, I'm surprised. I'd never tell Al this, but the guy can grill; I'm not even that hungry and I could easily eat this one and probably three more right here on the spot. Then again, I don't think I've ever even had homecooked meat. There never was anyone around to share the taste, after all. "What was that about, anyway? She seemed like she was in a hurry to get to you."

His face turns suddenly serious. "All right, you've got your food. Scram."

I can take a hint. Al's cheery mood's gone again and I'm not about to poke the wolf, especially after he was letting me off so easy. I hurriedly back off as Ozzy begins to slowly regain control of his funny bone, wiping tears from his eyes. "Sheep eatin' meat! Mom jeans! Oh, you're missing a hell of a show, Charlie!" he snickers as I retreat.

A little over an hour's passed, and unlike me, these guys show no signs of slowing down. I'm struggling to keep my eyes open as I wander the crowd. Much as it chaps my ass to admit, I may have to ride the party out and call in sick. Not a good impression to make at a job I only just started recently, but passing out during a shift isn't a better option. I'm so bleary-eyed I don't even notice the towering black bear I bump into, sloshing his beer. It's not even that much -- few sips at best.
He snarls like a savage animal, baring teeth. "Watch it, asshole!"

"Ah man, I'm sorry," I respond immediately, stepping back.

Clearly that's not enough to satisfy him, and he's in my face before I realize it, grabbing me by the wool on my chest. "I should use your fuckin' ass to wipe this mess up, you shithead grazer!"

"Hey, look, I said I'm sorry," I reply, now fully awake. "C'mon, lemme buy you another beer."

"Ohh, we're past that now," he growls, throwing me back. I land on my ass in the most graceless fashion, my lower back smacking against the curb. Son of a bitch, I'm gonna feel that one for a week. He pours the rest of his brew out and tosses the bottle out into the street where it shatters. He raises an open, clawed hand, a few bystanders cry out in alarm, and all I can do is sort of raise my arms to shield myself from the blow that never comes.

Wincing, I look up, only to see Ozzy's standing between us. "The fuck is wrong with you, man?!" he bristles back at my attacker, his shaggy mane standing up like a striped mohawk. "You don't fucking fight at my party!"

"He spilled my beer!" the bear whines, looking suddenly cowed by the much smaller hyena.

"What, the one you just poured on the ground?" Ozzy's not having any of it. He gestures broadly, holding his arms up, and the crowd reacts like he's conducting, collectively descending on the bear and pushing him out to the middle of the street. "You don't fucking come here to fight, you asshole! Get him out of here! Get him out!"

The crowd cheers in support, and a few larger predators start muscling the bear out from the crowd. Realizing he's beat, and that the tide's turned against him, he quickly scurries away on all fours about as fast as he can go. Seeing him retreat, the partygoers cheer all the louder.

"I'm sorry about that," Ozzy shouts out, clearly still pumped up. "You guys come here to have a good time. So c'mon! Let's have a good time!"

The party's recovered almost instantly and amid cheers I think I can make out some folks chanting Ozzy's name. But the music surges again, and with the danger passed, everyone returns to their celebrations.

"Geez, man," Ozzy reaches out, helping me to my feet. "You all right?"

"I'll live," I groan, rubbing my back.

"It's Remmy, right?" he cocks his head, scratching his broad, shaggy neck. I notice his mohawk's started to settle back down.

"Yeah, that's me."

"Then you're up in West 001, huh? You're right above me." Great. Then I can look forward to more midnight guitar practice sessions even when there's no party going on. Lucky me. "Used to be Kenny's room, before he got nabbed by the fuzz patrol. Wonder if his stash is still there."

"I'll let you know if I find it," I mumble, shaking my head.

"Ha! Right on," he grins, looking pretty pleased at my response. "I wasn't gonna ask, but if you're offering, that'd be cool." Apparently he's not joking. "So, how you likin' Pack Street, anyway? You ready to go home yet?"
"This is home," I respond without even thinking. It actually stops me a second later. That's not wrong. I got nowhere else to go now. I'm stuck here. It'd be funny as hell, if it wasn't so fucking sad. Once I get the scratch to leave I'm putting this place in my rear view mirror where it belongs. Too bad I can't make money if I don't get to work on time.

I look up from that depressing line of thought just in time to see Ozzy snap forward at me. I flinch, but it's not an attack -- the hyena's thrown his arm around my shoulder, squeezing me in until my face is jammed against his dirty, stretched-out band shirt. "Damn right it is!" he howls, laughing in a pitch that hurts my ears even when he's not this close. "Pack Street's the only home I need!"

And here I thought I was done having close encounters for the night. I lightly push away the personal space invader. "You guys do seem to be pretty settled in here," is about all the optimism I can manage.

"Gotta say, Remmy, I can't remember the last time I had a prey show up to party. I mean at first, I thought you were just here to try and shut us down, but seeing you stickin' around, talkin' to Annie, even Al... I dunno. It's like..." For a long moment he kind of stares off, either thinking hard or just spacing out. His eyes look a little watery, so it's possible he's halfway through some trip.

I take a breath, still coming down from the rush that Ozzy's grab just reminded me of. That huge fucking bear. For a second, I really did think I was going to be the next mauling victim on the news.

"Well, anyway, thanks for the save."

"Nah, man. I don't care who you are, nobody gets that shit here. Anyway, it's my fault. I sorta know him," Ozzy replies. "He's actually from the row houses a few blocks down. He's started shit before, but his brother's cool so I looked the other way. Shit, I try to invite everyone, but maybe some folks just shouldn't be here."

"Like those coyote girls?" I add, just in case he's not aware of them.

"Coyote girls? Aw man," his smile fades as he gestures at an imagined height. "About this tall?"

"Yeah," I answer, plucking a crumpled soda can out of my wool with a frown. "There are a couple of young girls floating around out here -- can't be any older than fifteen, sixteen maybe. They're drinking, so..."

"Shit," Ozzy huffs, his already slumped shoulders sagging further. "Thanks for telling me. I gotta take care of that real quick. Those are Ritts's sisters, they're really not supposed to be here." Before I can say anything else, he jogs off into the crowd in the direction of Al's grill stand. Seconds later I see the big white wolf stomping down the street with Ozzy in tow, both scanning the crowd.

Hoo boy. Time to bail.

Speak of the devil. As I step into the dark, cool refuge of the apartment lobby, I notice Wolter and one of the selfie coyotes from earlier trotting up the stairs together. His hands are all over her ass and she's giggling like mad. Doesn't take a genius to see how this movie ends.

"Underage," I cough. He stops dead in his tracks, muzzle flaring.

"You better not be trying to cockblock me, grazer!" Turning to the coyote, he squints at her. "Let me see that ID again."
"Well, my birthday's a little over a year from now," she slurs, fumbling a plastic card. "It's totally cool, though. My--"

Cutting her off mid-sentence, Wolter's marching her down the stairs and towards the door. "Nope. Nope, not happening." The two of them are out the door and into the din, with the coyote complaining all the way.

Shaking my head, I collapse on one of the threadbare couches in the downstairs lobby, taking a second to catch my breath. Fortunately my thick wool cushioned most of the blow, but my tailbone's still stinging from the fall.

"Real big of you to tattle, grasseater," a low, smooth, vaguely familiar voice comments.

I blink, looking around. It's dark in here to begin with, but with the stairwell casting a heavy shadow over the nearby recliner I didn't even notice someone else was in the room with me. Squinting into the blackness I can barely make out the same jackal that was giving me shit earlier by the trucks, taking a smoke break.

"I'm not a snitch," I mutter. "I just didn't want to see that get ugly."

"Believe it or not, I'm being sincere. Wolter's been in trouble with the law before. He doesn't need some jailbait showing up to make it worse." A subtle grin, exposing glinting rows of mirror-polished teeth. "Nice of you to take one for the greater good."

Story of my life. "You know this is a no smoking area, right?" I reply testily.

"Oh what, you still sore because we weren't willing to drop everything so you could catch a few Z's?"

Yes, but I'm not about to admit it out loud. "Look, pal, I'm really not in the mood."

"Then get in the mood," the jackal responds, standing up and slipping out of the shadows. "Most of Pack Street's nocturnal. Not our problem that you aren't. If you want to survive here, evolve. Adapt. We've been doing it for millions of years, no reason to stop now."

I'm just passing through; I don't plan on staying here a moment longer than I have to. "Thanks for more unsolicited advice. You gonna put that thing out?"

"Man, you really are a stick in the mud." Casually, the jackal reaches a claw up and pops the stick from her mouth, revealing the 'cigarette' to actually be the stick of a lollipop. "Like our friend Wolter just learned, not everything's what it appears to be."

Sighing, I slump back in my chair. I suppose there's some truth to that. After all, I got a good taste of it firsthand tonight -- these guys at the very least know how to have a good time. Maybe I really am the one being a stick in the mud. Probably wouldn't kill me to lighten up a little bit, or the very least see if I can't get my boss to switch me to the graveyard shift.

As I ponder this, the jackal struts across the room, ruffling my wool with one paw.

"Hey, I've ha-- mmmph!" A mouthful of cherry candy surprises me.

"You know, I meant what I said about the wool earlier," she grins, heading for the exit. "Have a good night."

Reaching up to my mouth, I pull the candy out by its stick, staring at it intently. In the reflection of
the streetlights from outside, I can see the little pockmarks in the surface of the lollipop from her razor-sharp teeth.

I think I've had enough partying for one night. Slowly, I ascend the steps to my apartment. As I fumble with my lock, I hear the too-familiar sound of hurried feet running up the stairs, then a slamming door from the room across from mine. Scratchy, playful giggles fill the air, and with a frown I lower my head. Damn paper-thin walls.

Don't get involved, Remmy. Don't get involved.

I rap twice on the door and call out without waiting for an answer. "Annie, I hope he's eighteen!" I cringe, knowing full well what the repercussions are gonna be if I'm wrong.

There's hushed conversation followed an angry shriek, and the unmistakable noise of a pair of shoes rebounding off of the door. I duck inside my apartment right as a teenage wolf stumbles out of her room in plaid boxers, pants at his ankles as he dodges the rest of his articles of clothing being angrily hurled at his head. Like brother, like sister.

"And you still owe me a slider, Cormo!" Anneke screeches before slamming her door.

After calling my boss and sorting things out, I toss the now-consumed lollipop stick into the trash by my nightstand. Reaching into my dresser drawer and wincing in advance, I pull my unreliable pair of shears out. I'll have to head to the store for a better set tomorrow to trim the rest of it down, but what the hell. It's worth a shot.

stuffing two balls of bundled-up wool in my ears, I collapse on my bed and close my eyes.

I can't hear a thing.
Remmy notices signs of a break-in at the apartment next door to his own.

Another day, another shift over with. Scraping my hooves at the front porch mat, I let myself into my apartment building.

It's unusually quiet today. I imagine everyone's still recovering after the recent block party. Even for so many nocturnal mammals up and down Pack Street, there's always at least some activity outside during all times of the day. The few folks I did see were dragging their feet, shambling along like zombies. Can't say I don't know the feeling.
I know I should lay off the fried food, but there was a special offer on the cricket dippers over at Bug Burga today, and after spending six hours loading refrigerated trucks I felt like getting something hot and greasy. Something that'd really stick to my ribs, you know? Besides, I really want to put that cheese in my fridge to use. By the time I got to the restaurant I was so hungry I ended up ordering with my eyes. Blew nearly half a day's pay on fast food.

To avoid any more unwanted interrogations, I recently bought an insulated cooler bag. Unlike that stupid plastic "scent-proof" bag that immediately got me busted, this one's got multiple zippered enclosures. I could probably pour a gallon of gasoline into this thing and nobody would be able to smell it. Only downside I can see is that I've gotta be careful not to catch my wool in the zippers. Otherwise, I'm golden.

Lobby's empty today, which is a good sign. I almost wonder if I brought the cooler bag for nothing, but I know better. If I hadn't, sure as shit every damn pred in the house would have caught a whiff and beelined it to my grub. Taking one last look around the room, I begin the climb upstairs to my apartment.

As I walk along the creaky floorboards, I run through my mental map of where everyone lives in this building. I know Anneke and Wolter are right across the hall from me, and Marty lives next door. I'm pretty sure Al is somewhere on the top floor. I'm not sure if Ozzy lives here or not yet -- did he mention? I can't remember, but I haven't run into him outside of the party. That just leaves the lollipop jackal whose name I still don't know. If she even lives here, that is.

The reason I'm trying to keep tabs on who lives where is simple: I don't want to get mauled. Predators are getting worse by the day. That bear at the party was drunk off his ass, but for all I know he could have snapped and killed half the crowd. "Savage" predator attacks are in the news constantly; you can't turn the TV on without hearing about another mauling. At least the new mayor's a sheep, and at the risk of sounding like a speciest, I'd trust a prey to be more on top of things than a predator. Common sense -- she doesn't want to get her head smashed open, so she's extra motivated. Besides, Lionheart seemed like a nice guy and all, but he's a typical politician.

As far as survival goes, I've learned a lot in my short stay here on Pack Street. Maybe the most important thing I've learned is that you've gotta avoid looking suspicious. Just like that old trick of grabbing a clipboard and walking with purpose through an office building, I've found I'm less likely to get cornered if I keep my head down and go about my business. And in a pred-heavy area with racial tensions at an all-time high, I just don't need the pressure. My plan's not foolproof, but if you look shifty or out-of-place, you're just begging for attention.

Of course, there's a catch to that thinking: looking out-of-place and looking like you belong are two different things. Just because I have a "place" here -- my apartment -- doesn't mean I "belong" here. This is a layover, not the destination.

Speaking of out-of-place, my hooves crunch against something on the carpet. There are splinters of wood underneath my feet. Looking up, I realize the door to Marty's apartment is half open and the locking mechanism is missing entirely.

That's not good.

I quickly offload my dinner in my own apartment before heading back out to investigate the obvious break-in. Let's be clear: I don't like Marty and I don't owe him shit, but even so, I'm not gonna turn a blind eye if someone's looting his place right now. If I was being robbed, I'd want someone to step in for me, too. Besides, I know what the consequences are if I choose not to get involved and they find out later I knew about it.
I grit my teeth and press a hoof to his door, pressing just enough to see if there's anyone inside. I'd knock, but the last thing I want to do is alert a burglar to my presence. Unlike my door which hasn't been oiled, Marty's swings open freely under my push, slamming against the doorstop with a loud "boing".

So much for stealth.

"Marty?" I hiss, poking my head inside. "Marty, you all right in here?"

No response. After a moment of waiting out in the hallway, I take a deep breath and step across the bits of splintered wood on the floor into his house. Great, now I'm breaking and entering too.

Marty's apartment is surprisingly well-kept. Bookshelves line every wall in his living room, all of which are filled to near-bursting with books of all kinds. Even though his furniture looks old and dated, it's all clean and in good condition. Shelves and cupboards are neatly arranged in the kitchen, the floors and counters polished to an almost mirror shine. His bedroom's just off the common area, and from what I can see through the cracked door everything inside's just as neat and manicured as the rest of his apartment.

"Marty!" I call again, a little louder this time. If he's been robbed, whoever it was must have come for something extremely specific and knew exactly where it was kept. There's no reason for his stuff to be in such neat order otherwise. A sudden, dark realization causes chills to run down my spine as I venture deeper into the household.

Maybe whoever broke in wasn't here to rob him.

Marty's an asshole, and this is a rough part of town. It's an unfortunate possibility. God, I hope I don't find a body. I really, really hope I don't find a body. I immediately begin looking for anything that can be used as a weapon in case I need to defend myself.

Swallowing, I call one last time as authoritatively as I can. "Marty!"

A thump from the other side of the living room draws my attention and I whirl on the spot. I'm glad for the wool between my legs because otherwise my knees would probably be knocking. Steeling myself, I grab a nearby broom for defense. It's either that or an umbrella from the rack by the front entrance.

A door on the opposite end of the living room across from Marty's bedroom slowly creaks open, and steam begins to pour out into the common area.

"Remmy Cormo," he mumbles nonchalantly, barely audible from across the room. "You know, I knew something was missing. You seen Marty?"

"Who the hell are you?" I ask. "What are you doing in Marty's apartment?"

"Our apartment," the fox corrects, dropping the towel to, uh -- ohhh.
"He" is a "she" -- the fox is a vixen, and the vixen isn't wearing anything under the towel. Of course the vixen's not wearing anything under the towel, she just got out of the shower. Get a grip, Remmy.

I redirect my gaze as much as I can, but she doesn't seem the least bit bothered. In fairness it's not like there's really much to stare at -- she's built like the broom handle beside me, and her modesty's at least partway helped by the fact she's on the shaggy side. Or maybe fluffy. Soaking wet, it's hard to tell. Still, not nearly the kind of sheep-tier covering that you'd be able walk outside with. She's obviously not much of one to worry about her appearance, though I guess I'm nobody to judge.

After toweling off, she shakes for good measure, her bushy tail suddenly fluffing out into a ridiculous puff as she flecks water all over the living room. "Maybe you're hard of hearing. I'm looking for Marty. Short, ornery. Supposed to be back thirty minutes ago."

"You're naked," I stammer, grasping for words as I turn away. She cocks her head at me, tossing the towel over a nearby chair.

"I'm a fox," she replies quizzically, shuffling across the room towards me.

"Wh-what?" Yes, I know she's a fox! That -- that doesn't answer anything! Does she think I can't see that she's a fox?

I step back instinctively -- even though I'm a few inches taller I still feel alarmed by her presence. Instinct thing, I guess. You know, foxes and sheep. Also the fact that I've gotten an eyeful of her mosquito bites. Actually probably just that.

"Charlie," she mutters, pointing to me. "You mind?"

This is the "Charlie" I've been hearing about?

"Oh, sure," I answer, stepping aside so that she can move past me to get to the other room. Instead of walking in, though, she simply grabs a letter opener from a cup in the kitchen and in one deft move slices off a chunk of my wool from my arm, way too close to the skin. Yelping, I stumble back in shock as she rolls it into a tight ball, using it to clean some excess water out of her ears.

"Out of swabs. Thank you."

"Warn me next time before you do something like that," I sputter as she tosses the used wool on the floor.

"Y'know I'm not convinced it's a regional dialect, but where I come from 'oh, sure' is generally accepted as a consenting response. More to the point, you still haven't answered my first question. Where's Marty?"

Enough of my scattered thoughts return to me, and I turn around to point at the door that's wide open. I startle, seeing that Wolter's lingering just outside, casually waving to Charlie with a broad smile.

"Hey, Charlie. Yo, Cormo," he winks, grinning. Charlie nods back dismissively, heedless of the fact that she's in the nude and anyone walking by can see her. Either that or she simply doesn't care.

"Your door," I manage, realizing I sound like a loon. I'm still a little in shock here. "It was -- the lock was broken on your door. I came in to see if everything was okay."

Charlie pads over to the door, kneeling to study the wood splinters on the ground and the lock as if
deep in thought. "Twofold problem," she replies. "The lock wasn't passable nor passable, one problem resolving the other."

"What?" I ask, confused. "Can you -- can you say that again?"

"Marty locked me out," she answers matter-of-factly. "So in the process of regaining entrance I've created the need for a replacement."

I look out to Wolter to see if he understands what she's trying to say, but he's already gone, evidently having had his fill of the free show. I quickly step outside; I don't want to be around when Marty or someone else walks in, since I already feel like word's about to spread that I broke into his apartment to be with a naked fox girl. It's bad enough people know I'm a carnivore, I don't want to be labeled a predophile too.

A rough, damp paw stops me on my way out the door. "Cormo. Since it's become apparent Marty's not coming back and you haven't heard from him I'm going to have to get lunch from another source," Charlie says.

"Okay?" I answer warily.

"Your bag had, let me see -- two burgas, cricket dippers..." She sniffs at the air. "Hay fries? No good. Just the burga's fine. Oh, and a slice of the cheese from your refrigerator too, if you don't mind."

My heart feels like it's going to stop. I slowly turn to look her directly in the eye. "How the hell did you know I had all that?" I croak, legitimately alarmed.

"A mammal who knows is a valuable kind," she drawls, scratching the damp scruff of her neck as if we were talking about the weather. "I choose to make myself useful, and there's a clear use in knowing my surroundings. For instance I know that you are Remmy Cormo, a hornless ram of recent local occupancy. Diurnal, naturally. You bear an affinity for pred-rock music, you're slightly nearsighted -- not enough to need glasses of course -- you dropped out of college, you're an organ donor, you're an Aries, which I'd normally find amusing, and you've looked between my legs six times since I stepped out of the bathroom."

There are no words. I think my jaw's hanging open.

"I keep tabs on everything, but it pays to know where to look," Charlie continues with squinted eyes and the faintest hint of a grin, flashing her hand up to reveal my receipt from the Bug Burga. Wait a second -- that was in my wallet from earlier.

"How?" I ask, patting my pockets as she hands me the receipt along with my house keys. "How did you -- did you pick my pocket?"

"And, mm, firefly sauce," she adds, twirling my wallet around in one of her paws. "Oh, and it's nice to meet you face to face, Cormo."

"Are you seriously holding my wallet hostage for a -- a damn burga?" I groan as she takes a seat in the living room, kicking her legs up on the spotless coffee table.

"No, I'm holding your wallet hostage for a Double Roach Deluxe. With firefly sauce. Completely different but I can arguably see why you might get confused. I notice her rummaging through my wallet with interest. "Oh, you really shouldn't leave your social security card in here. That should be kept in a safe place."
I'm out the door to my apartment as fast as my hooves can carry me.

It takes me a few minutes to get a hold of myself once I'm back in my apartment. How on earth she was able to figure all of that out makes me legitimately unnerved. I'm going to be checking my apartment for wiretaps and hidden cameras for months. I wouldn't be surprised if she ran a background check on me or talked to the leasing office or something. After all, this isn't the best part of town; half of these guys are probably con artists or hustlers.

With a sigh I unzip my bag to get Charlie her bribe. Food inside's still warm. I'd be more impressed with its insulating capabilities if I wasn't about to go nuts from paranoia. I pull out a burga and a couple packets of firefly sauce before turning to my fridge with a bad feeling in the pit of my stomach.

I really wanted to kind of savor this cheese myself. Just from the bite I had in the store, it's good enough you could almost just eat it straight, as weird as that sounds. I bet it'd be great with some wine or something. Now the magic's ruined. Angrily, I jerk it from the shelf and hastily saw off a chunk with my pocket knife, not even bothering to make sure it's a nice even piece. I'm not about to bust my ass for the little chiseler when all I was trying to do was the right thing.

Stomping outside, I walk into Marty's apartment without even bothering to knock, storming up to Charlie on the couch. She's still not dressed; must not be much of a priority for her. The contents of my wallet are in complete disarray on the table in front of her; my credit card, my driver's license, my photo ID, my condoms, the coins I keep in one of the billfold pockets... I don't consider myself an angry guy, but she is way over the line here. She's the one that's naked, and yet I'm the one feeling violated.

"Here's your graft," I growl, thrusting the burga box into her chest and snatching back my wallet and its contents.

Charlie runs her tongue around the lips of her muzzle, grinning fiendishly as she pops the box open. "Excellent. Pleasure doing business with you, Cormo."

"Business," I scoff, rolling my eyes. "If y--"

My impending rant's cut short when I notice my wallet hasn't been entirely gutted. My cash is still there, so I quickly count it to make sure this shifty fox hasn't helped herself. To my surprise, there's nothing missing. In fact, I find myself clutching a crumpled up ten bucks that wasn't there before.

"Like I said, Cormo -- business," Charlie murmurs between bites. "I'm sure you didn't think I was just going to extort you for your lunch because you happened to stumble in here looking for imaginary burglars."

I'm not sure I really have a response to that.

As I begin hastily collecting the rest of my things from the table, light crunching noises from the front of the apartment draw my attention.

"What the hell is this?!" Marty snaps as he storms inside. "The fuck happened to our front doooooohhh, of course YOU'RE here!"

Throwing his keys and a stack of books down on the floor, Marty furiously scampers over to me. It's only as he rounds the corner into full view of myself and Charlie that I realize exactly how this
situation looks: his apartment's been broken into, his roommate's naked and eating food -- food he's already associated with me -- and I'm standing here in front of her with condoms and a crumpled wad of cash in my hooves.

"Hey, whoa," I respond, raising a hoof to stop him. A hoof that just happens to be holding a rubber. "Calm down. This -- this isn't what it looks like."

"When in the history of Zootopia has that line EVER worked?!" Marty retorts, incredulous. "Man, I knew you were a fuckin' deviant but this -- this is -- FUCK! Oh, you sick fuckin' grazer, this on an entirely new level! And with CHARLIE?! With CHARLIE!"

"Your door was open when I got here," I try to reason.

The stoat's tiny jaw drops as he stabs an equally tiny paw at the wreckage of his entrance. "Like shit it was, sheep! I locked it before leaving! What'd you do, knock it down with your fuckin' raging stiffy?!"

"I was trying to help you out, you asshole!" I fire back.

"HOW is this possibly helpful?!" Marty screams. I thought he was already at max volume, but apparently he still had a few decibels left in him.

"I thought you'd been robbed! Charlie said she broke the door down because you locked her out! Charlie, back me up here!" I spin to the fox, desperate.

Licking firefly sauce from the tip of one of her claws, Charlie shrugs as she chews through her secondhand meal. "Cormo's right. You locked me out and I had to create a new entrance for myself. The ram's intentions were lascivious, not criminal. He heard I was in the shower and came in to beg me for sexual acts, not least of which included erotic shearing." She nods casually to the spent wad of wool on the ground. "When I said no he resorted to bribery, starting with the burger, then the cash."

The cabin pressure in my head explodes.

"What?!" I'm reeling. I should've known she'd set me up. Fucking foxes. "That's not why I came in at all! She's lying!"

"No shit she's lying, you think I'm a fucking idiot?" Marty spits, like I'd just said the dumbest thing he's ever heard.

I gawk clumsily for a moment. "...wait, what?"

"It's pretty obvious what you're here for," Marty snorts, eyeing my hooves. "But your big fucking mistake was coming into my home for it."

"Look, what's obvious is that this whole thing's been a mistake," I mutter, stuffing my belongings into my pockets before starting towards the door. "Man, leave no good deed unpunished."

Standing up to his full height, Marty deliberately moves to cut me off. I've never seen someone so small so mad, but I'd swear he's actually turning red. "Fuck you! You're not going anywhere!"

"This is an ill-advised conflict," Charlie warns with a mouthful of burga. I don't know which of us she's talking to.

I pause in my tracks, a smile playing at my muzzle in spite of my anger. "You're going to stop me?
"You don't know much about stoats, do you, grasseater?!" Marty snaps, and as fast as I can blink he's suddenly bolted off the ground and in my face. He clutches the stretched-out collar of my shirt and chomps his teeth in my face like he's actually going to bite me. I'm so taken by surprise I stumble back, but after a second I realize how pathetic the size difference really makes this.

I pluck him by the back of his shirt and pull him off me, but this only makes him angrier. He starts coiling around my arm like a boneless little tube, clawing at my wrist. Out of surprise I drop him; he hits the ground with the hem of my shirt in his hands and starts trying uselessly to drag me to the door.

"We're taking this outside!" he swears.

This is so fucking surreal. How did my life end up like this? I glance at Charlie, who I've already forgotten is buck-naked, and she gives me a wordless shrug before going back to her burga. My burga.

Fuck it. I humor the little runt and step to the door with him "leading" me. We reach the hall and he spins on his heels, thrusting an outstretched finger at me in accusation. "What's your fucking damage, grazer?!!"

"ME?!!" If I get any more incredulous today, something in my fucking head's going to break. "What's your problem? I told you I was only trying to help!"

"You're my fucking problem," he spits back, teeth bared. "You! You fucking nosy, self-aggrandizing, arrogant, flat-toothed little domestic! You come into this fucking neighborhood like your shit doesn't stink and you start walking all over places you got no business being!"

"Of course I have no business being here! You fuckin' preds have made that abundantly clear," I answer, shifting my weight forward as I tower over him. "You think I don't know that? You think I don't fucking want to put this dump behind me? I'm not here because I want to be, I'm here because I don't fucking have a choice!"

Something in his face shifts, and to my surprise his shoulders slump just a little. It's not much -- guy his size, the change is barely visible. But it's there, and everything about his demeanor just kind of cycles over into something entirely different.

"That's what it is," he says, voice low. His hotheaded fury has vanished -- now it's more of a tranquil anger. "Oh my god. I just realized it, but there it is -- that's what I can't fuckin' stand about you."

I exhale deeply, tightening my hooves as I look down at him. I'm not stupid enough to throw the first punch, but if he tries anything idiotic, god help me -- I'm putting his ass through a fucking wall.

"What, that I'm a prey?" I reply coolly. "That I'm--"

"Shut the fuck up a second," Marty says, running a paw through his headfur as he tries to collect his thoughts. "Just -- you know, you fuckin' sheep are all the same. Mindless, aimless. Nice neighborhoods, great families, educations and pedigrees. Look at our new fuckin' mayor -- groomed for success."

I shake my head. "Our mayor wasn't elected, she inherited the job because the pred that had it
before her fucked up and went to prison."

He squints at me. "You should fuckin' work for ZNN, you've got the shit rhetoric and one-liners down to an art. You have any idea how hard it was to get a pred elected mayor in this fuckin' city? We had to turn out in droves -- you assholes outnumber us by a factor of almost ten. Lionheart wasn't perfect but he was the best fuckin' thing that happened to us."

The temptation to keep snarking back at him is strong, but I hold my tongue for now. It's better to let him vent and fuck off than it is to engage him. I've got no doubt in my mind I can take Marty (and probably Charlie as well if it comes to it), but it'll get more than hairy if any of the others step in on his behalf.

"Look, I get it, Cormo. You ain't from around here. This is just a stopping off point as you get back on your feet. Hooves. Whatever." He waves his paws around, talking with his gestures as much as his mouth. "Pack Street's some fuckin' shitheap to you. You see the cracked paint and the-- the busted tiles, faded roofs. You see the five-and-dime and the weird grocery stores with pred foods instead of the big-box stores downtown like you're used to. The pawn shops, the burglar bars."

I fold my arms as he paces back and forth in a little circle on the carpet in front of me.

"I get it. I get it, man, you want to roll through here with your fuckin' windows up and doors locked. Avoid eye contact so you can get back to good old suburbia. Keep your wool clean and your hooves unstained with the rest of us filth until you can get outta this nightmare and back to normalcy, but you know what, Cormo?"

He takes a shaky breath, and I realize for the first time that there's more to his voice than anger. There's another emotion swirling around, something else there. Something deep-seated.

"This is home. To us, this IS our normal."

I feel a sudden pang in my chest. Stepping back, I size him up. There's conviction in his voice. He really, genuinely means what he's saying; this isn't some ploy to get me to admit defeat.

"I live here too!" I argue, sounding more surprised than I'd imagined I would.

He laughs at me, eyes wide like I've told an off-color joke. "Yeah, and you hate it. It's gotta be the worst fucking punishment you can imagine: to be down here with the rest of us. I bet you stay up every night wondering what you possibly could have done to deserve this."

I don't want to admit it, but now it's too close to home. Truth is, I have asked myself that very question more than once. How he knows that, I can't say -- but considering Charlie's got a handle on everything up to and including my underwear size, I guess I'm more of an open book than I let on.

Books. Glancing back into Marty's apartment, I realize he's got a real reading fetish. He even came in toting a stack of them with his keys, all of which are strewn across his entrance next to the wreckage of the door. This isn't a guy who's used to pushing people around to get what he wants. Truth is he's probably at least a little unnerved by me. Not intimidated, mind you. But it's obvious I don't sit well with him.

Fear of the unknown, maybe. I know I can relate to that much, at least.

"You're right," I say simply.

"That's what I--" Marty cuts himself off mid-sentence, clearly having been winding up to let me
have it with another verbal assault. "What? That's it?"

"You're absolutely right," I repeat, waving a hoof around. "I hate it here. Like I said, I'm not here by choice. And yeah, I'm very uncomfortable. You guys sure haven't gone out of your way to make me feel welcome."

Frowning, he looks up at me as if trying to read my expression. "Yeah? You mean like that awesome party we threw, and let you wander right into even though all you wanted to do was shut us up? Al grilled you a fuckin' burger, Cormo! **AL!**"

"A burger I paid for!" I reason.

Marty blinks at me, then cocks his head to the side, still trying to figure something out. "Man, you don't get it! You really don't know what Al cookin' for people means, do you? What it represents!"

"It represents... food?" I sound like a fucking idiot.

He gets this weird look on his face and all of a sudden he starts cracking up. At first it seems insulting, but as he runs his tiny paw over his head I can see him start to relax, shaking his head, dropping his shoulders again. I guess at this point he's said what he needed to say, so he just waves me off and sighs.

"Look, cotton swab. You think we're not being very friendly, is that it? Well what about you? You carry yourself like you're a fuckin' untouchable here. You'll come down from your little tower once in a while but only if you can pretend we don't exist. You want unfriendly, look in a mirror. Like we're not even worth a 'hello' when you pass us on the street."

I can only muster up so much of a response, feeling as tired of all this as Marty looks. "C'mon man, I'm just trying not to make trouble. I stick my nose out just once and look where it gets me," I say with a gesture to... all of this.

"That's different," the stoat sighs.

"Is it? I've known plenty of preds," I answer. "I think there's more to it than that. My first impression of you was you rooting through my bag. And now here you are, outraged because I was in your apartment, trying to help."

"Yo, don't fuckin' turn this around on me, sheep," Marty scoffs. "I'm not the bad guy here."

"You know what, Marty?" I take a deep breath and exhale before reaching into my pocket. He instinctively takes a step back, and I can tell by the tension in his legs he's ready to bolt.

"I don't think you're the bad guy either," I answer, fishing out the crumpled tenner from Charlie and tossing it to him. He fumbles it trying to catch it in his arms.

"What the hell is **this**? You think I'm some charity case? Man I didn't expect much from you, but solving your problems with handouts is--"

"It's not for you. It's for Charlie," I correct as I walk past. "Tell her lunch was on me."

As I head back to my apartment, I hear heavy thumping down the staircase leading to the top floor, and a moment later Al's standing arms akimbo at the landing, glaring at us both.

"The fuck was all that screaming about just now?" he rumbles, sizing the situation up. "What happened to your door, Marty?"
Marty looks up to me, then at Al, and then finally back down to the money in his hands.

"It's fine, Al," he says dismissively. "Sorry to bother you."

Al glares at me, clearly unconvinced. "That true, carnivore? Everything 'fine' here?"

I give him a tired nod, turning the key in my lock and walking into my apartment. "Yeah, Al. Everything's fine."
Among Wolves

Chapter Summary

Remmy has a very strange day after buying a bag of lollipops.

So I've got to admit, this is a weird feeling: it's nine AM and I'm exhausted, but not tired.

My boss asked me if I'd be willing to work nights for the rest of the week so that I can fill in for one of the night shift guys who's on paternity leave. That means I had to double back last night for another shift after coming off of one yesterday. So while my arms and legs feel like stretched-out rubber bands (the exhausted part), I'm not actually tired yet. At least mentally, anyway. My noodle's still working overtime even if I can barely move my hooves, but I figure I'll give into sleep soon enough.

For the first time I can really empathize with the other preds I'm seeing walking around, dragging their feet. Must suck to be naturally nocturnal, having to miss out on what the other 90% of the world experiences. Stores picked over if they haven't already closed shop for the night. Restaurants serving old or leftover food instead of fresh-made stuff. Most services operate on a nine-to-five schedule. No wonder every pred you see at the DMV or jury duty always looks like they're hungover or angry -- they're in there on three hours of sleep dealing with the same pencil-pushing bullshit the rest of us are.
Of course, it's not all bad. I guess one plus to being nocturnal is that traffic's usually smooth sailing at night. Good thing too; I don't want to see what a wolf is like with road rage.

While I sit here and force my brain to get in sync with the rest of my body, I try to enjoy the morning quiet. Pack Street's calm today, and I couldn't be happier about it. Apart from a couple of preds coming and going across the road, it's oddly serene. Loudest noise I hear seems to be the broken shutters flapping in the breeze at the dentist's office on the corner.

Speaking of dentists, as much as I hate to admit it, that jackal awakened a long-buried sweet tooth in me. I just had to stop by the drug store on the way home and pick up a package of lollipops, and right now I'm chewing on a cherry one. Never have had the patience to suck on 'em the way you're supposed to, I usually just crunch the things up. Guess I should have gotten a bag of hard candies instead, but the ones on the sticks taste better.

"Hi."

A tiny, quiet voice jolts me from my thoughts. I look around, trying to figure out where it came from -- there doesn't seem to be anyone nearby.

"Hello?" I carefully call out, tensing up to run.

Timid, soft footfalls alert me to the location of the newcomer, and I relax as I realize it's just a young wolf pup. He pads across the sidewalk over to the porch I'm sitting at to stand in front of me. Kid's little, can't be much older than three, maybe four years old. His fur's as black as the night sky except for a streak of white across his muzzle and left eye. It's an interesting natural growth pattern, kind of like a pencil drawing that someone accidentally dragged an eraser over. In his paws he's clutching a toy truck that appears to be missing a wheel.

"Hi," he says again, shyly hiding most of his face behind his truck. "C'n I have one?"

I blink for a minute, trying to figure out what he's talking about before I realize he wants a lollipop. D'oh. I see someone hasn't had the conversation about candy and strangers yet.

"Sure," I chuckle, extending the package towards him. "Your, uh, your mom or dad okay with you having one?"

He shrugs as he dips his paw in the bag, and I wince inwardly, hoping I'm not going to have some helicopter parent wolf come kick my shit in for passing sweets out. It's not exactly like I can blend in if they ask who he got one from. Where'd you get that, junior? Oh, I got it from a nice sheep, daddy!

Next thing I know, I'm on ZNN's eight o'clock news as the latest victim of a savage predator lynching.

Picking a lemon sucker out of the bag, he unwraps it and pops it in his mouth, still staring at me. I set the bag down and offer him a smile, and his eyes widen.

"What's wrong wiff your teef?" he asks, struggling to talk with the lollipop stuck to his tongue.

"My teeth?" As far as I know, my teeth are fine. I'm not missing any, none of them are chipped and I try to keep them brushed at least once a day so they don't -- oh. He wants to know why they're not sharp like a predator's teeth. "They're, uh -- well, they're sheep teeth. Sheep teeth are different from wolf teeth, I guess."

"Why?"
I snort. Oh boy, got me a curious one here.

"Well, sheep mostly eat things like grass, so they're grass-eating teeth. If we ate like bug meat and stuff, they'd be sharp because you need sharp teeth for that." Yes, the irony of this conversation isn't lost on me.

"Ohhh," he says, seemingly satisfied with the answer. "Sheep don't like bugs?"

"Most don't." That's the honest truth, anyway.

He nods, tilting his head curiously like a pup tends to do when one sees something interesting. Bashfully, he shifts his truck to one paw and reaches out, pointing his paw to my wool.

"Why's your fur all like that?"

"Well, I don't really have fur. Sheep have wool. It's like... it's basically like fur, but it's curly and soft. Like, um, kind of like what's inside a pillow, or a teddy bear." I gently extend an arm to let him feel it, and he steps back instinctively. Makes me wonder if he's ever even seen prey up close before. "It's fine, you can touch it if you want."

He sniffs at it with his muzzle, and I wonder if he can even smell anything with a mouth full of sugar and citric acid, but he reluctantly pokes me in the arm with a paw, feeling the texture.

"Soft," he breathes, his eyes lighting up as he touches it.

"Yeah. It's useful, too," I add, twirling a little bit of it around my hoof. "They can make coats and sweaters and stuff out of wool."

His eyes light up. "Wooowww."

Another child calls out to him from across the street, and he turns to run after them, but not before waving to me as he goes. I smile to myself as I stand up, brushing a little dirt off of my pants. At last, a pleasant and friendly encounter with a predator on Pack Street, and I only had to befriend a toddler to have one. Clearly I've been going about this the wrong way.

I pull the front door to the lobby open. Finally, I'm starting to feel ready for some sleep. My warm blanket and pillow are practically calling my name as I saunter into the lobby. Hell, I might even manage a full eight hours for once considering how quiet it is.

"You fucking bitch, what did you just say to me?" Al roars, slamming his fist against the check-in desk right as I walk inside.

Or not.

Al and Betty are at war with each other and for the life of me I have no idea what's caused it.

They're standing near the front desk -- well, maybe not "standing". Pacing, growling, circling each other -- any of those are more accurate. They're sizing each other up with gritted teeth and rage in their eyes, and I'm standing here with a sucker in my mouth feeling like a kid watching mommy and daddy about to fight. Hell, I probably look like the little guy that I just finished talking to.

"I said you're a worn-out, has-been piece of shit, Al, and if you think I'm gonna take that back because you're barking at me, you're dumber than you look," Betty snaps back as she flicks her
cigarette butt onto the floor and lights up a new one in one fluid motion. "It's obvious in the way you run your show here from the fuckin' -- just **look** at the place. Paint peeling, cracks in the tile. The company you let in. You're slipping."

"You're complaining about the fucking paint? What do you think I am, the fucking **landlord**?"

Folding his arms, Al leans in to look her in the eye. "What, you run out of things to say so you're just looking around and snapping at whatever you see, or did you just wake up on the stupid side of bed this morning? You can't just come in here and piss all over my den and expect me to stand here and take it!"

"Oh, you better get **damn** used to taking it," Betty says, whipping her head forward and snapping her muzzle at Al. To his credit he doesn't even so much as flinch as her teeth clench shut inches away from his nose.

"**Fuck you,**" Al snarls, shoving her back with a rough paw.

Shit. Oh, **shit.** That's it. Physical contact. I think this officially counts as a fight now. She stumbles back but quickly recovers, springing to her feet.

"You'd like that, wouldn't you!" she laughs.

Snorting, Al shows his own teeth, leaning in close to her face. "Keep flaunting your ass around me and see what happens. I can bag any muff I want this side of Tundratown. So don't act like you're above my level."

"And yet you never could bag **me,**" Betty retorts, her cheeks burning. "Tell me, could it be that the **weasel** you use as an errand boy's more suited to your size?"

A snicker from off to the side of the staircase causes both of them to whirl. I recognize the lollipop-sucking jackal from Ozzy's block party. She's got her arms folded, squinting at both of them through narrowed eyes.

"I knew there was something weird about you and that stoat, Al," the jackal sneers to Betty's amusement.

Al, on the other hand, doesn't seem the least bit entertained. He plucks the cigarette from Betty's mouth so quickly she doesn't even have a chance to draw back, and takes a deep drag from it before blowing the smoke directly in the jackal's face.

"This doesn't concern an **omega.** Another crack out of you and we'll be having more than just words, so **sit your ass down,** Avo," Al says, the edge in his tone making it clear he's in no humor.

Against my expectations, the jackal ("Avo", I guess) raises her paws in submission, choosing not to follow it up with a zinger. I'm surprised at her restraint; she's got a hell of a forked tongue from what I remember of the other night.

I lower myself behind the television in the sitting area, desperately wishing I'd sheared recently so I could hide better until this whole thing blows over. That's what I get for not staying on top of my grooming -- I'm not sure how they didn't hear me walk in, but nobody seems to have noticed me yet and I'd like it to stay that way.

Turning his focus fully back to Betty, Al slams the counter with his palm as he leans down to look at her condescendingly. The gesture falls a little flat, since he's not much taller than she is, but he's definitely bigger around. They both look like giants to me, anyway.
Betty deliberately avoids eye contact as he roughly grabs her throat with his paw. It may be the weakest I've ever seen her look, and 'weak' isn't a word I associate with wolves.

"You don't realize just how wrong you are about me being a 'worn-out has-been',' he growls. "So don't you fucking test me. I'm still at the top of my game, and I sure as shit don't have to prove it to you."

"Don't have to? Or can't?" she suddenly barks, slapping his paw away hard enough that her claws leave visible streaks of red in his snow-white fur. Instead of reeling, he cuffs her upside her muzzle and instantly she's at his throat, plunging her jaws into his neck.

Oh, shit. Oh, shit, oh shit -- this is it, this is what I knew was going to happen. I'm watching a predator turn savage in front of my very eyes! If they're vicious enough to attack each other they sure as hell don't plan on sparing me. I'm fucked. I'm worse than fucked -- I'd literally settle for being molested over being mauled right now! Of course for all I know they'll do both, seeing how weirdly sexually charged this whole thing felt even before it got really ugly.

My hooves are moving before my brain can catch up and instantly I'm sprinting across the lobby, running up the stairs.

"Hey!" Avo shouts, suddenly bolting up directly in my path. I stop cold and freeze, like a deer in headlights. "Interloper's been watching the entire time!"

"Well get him out of here!" Al bellows, his strained voice suggesting he's mid-struggle.

"Go on, you little freak," Avo hisses, grabbing me by my wool and thrusting me towards the staircase. "This ain't no peep show!"

Don't have to tell me twice. I may not look it, but I'm a hell of a runner when I'm motivated.

Al's voice is furious, but thankfully growing fainter as I make my escape. "You want to get rough with me, bitch? All right, let's get rough!"

I hear a feminine, primal yelp followed by what sounds like a body slamming into the floor, but I'm already gone.

If Betty nearly put me through the wall the other day, Al's probably going to kill her, and I don't want to be around when that happens.

Oh, shit.

Al's probably going to kill her.

I stop halfway through unlocking my door, turning around slowly as a sickening thought hits me.

Material witness.
Court case.
Aiding and abetting.
Savage pred.

And a corpse. A corpse that was nice enough to let me into my room the other day.
No. I can't -- I can't stand Betty or Al or any of these assholes, but I'm not going to just sit down and watch as he kills an innocent girl over something stupid. My hooves are shaking as I lower my hoof from my doorknob, leaving the key still in the lock.

The fuck are you doing, Remmy? Get a grip. You don't begin to stand a chance.

Slowly, I watch in detached horror as my legs seem to move of their own free will, marching the rational but helpless part of me back to the staircase one step at a time. Marching me toward certain death. For the second time today, however, my mind syncs back up with my body as I realize what I have to do. God, I wish I had a set of horns. I'd kill for a set of horns. I'd do anything for a set of horns, but no, I had to be a stupid hornless ram. Fucking genetics, I might as well be a fucking ewe.

I determinedly move down the steps, stopping at the landing. Al and Betty are locked in it right now. There's a lull in the fight but it's clear they've been tearing into each other. I'm surprised to see there's not a speck of red on Al's neck, since the last thing I saw was teeth around it. His shirt is gouged and torn half to shreds, and Betty's has been ripped down the middle. They've both got blood around their noses. The damage is mutual, but it's obvious he's got the upper hand judging by the way he's got his claws to her jaw. Her head's forced back to bare her neck and he looks like he's going to go for a jugular bite at any second.

"Hey," I croak, my voice cracking in two. They don't even seem to hear me.

It didn't take. Maybe I can still walk away. Pretend this never happened.

"You're a bitch," the white wolf taunts just loud enough for me to hear as Betty strains against the wall. "You're my bitch."

Never mind.

Mustering up all of my bravado, I try again. "Hey," I call out, eyes narrowed.

Grunting, Al doesn't even turn around to look at me. Avo spares me a pitying glance. "Back already? Are you kidding me? Get your rocks off somewhere else," she sneers.

Ignoring her, I move toward the center of the lobby, pushing myself to my full height as I ball my hooves into fists. Sucking in a lungful of air, I try my best to roar at the top of my lungs, but it ends up coming out more like a constipated bleat.

Al and Betty instantly stop mid-confrontation and turn to me, their expressions unreadable.

"Let her go, Al," I warn, snorting just for added effect even as my legs are wobbling underneath my frame. "She's -- this isn't worth it, man. Whatever you two have going on--"

Both of them let loose in uproarious laughter, and even Avo's slumped to the ground, cackling hysterically.

"Oh my god! He's for real!" Betty all but shrieks, slapping her thigh as I stare in confusion. There's blood dripping off of one of her cheeks and her clothes are ripped, and yet she's standing here having a fucking hee-haw like she's Ozzy on uppers. I've never seen her eyes so wide.

"You got some kind of fuckin' death wish, Cormo? The cojones on this kid, man!" Avo adds, wiping tears from her eyes.

Al's thrown his head back, half-laughing, half-howling. Eventually his laughter turns to a full-on, straight-up howl, and to my shock Betty and Avo quickly join in. I've never heard a howl -- a real
howl -- in my whole life. I mean I've seen them on TV, in movies, sometimes, but never like this. It's unreal, the way they all fall into it. It's almost like a gag, but I can tell they mean it. The three of them just... sorta screaming at the ceiling as loud as they can, and after just a few seconds I hear howling from all over Pack Street -- upstairs, down the hall, and even from buildings outside. Looking out the front window, I even see the little pup from earlier with his own head pointed up, howling from all the way across the street next to his confused-looking friend.

I feel like I've just stepped into some kind of terrifying alternate dimension. The howl lasts for a couple of minutes solid before everyone finally settles down, and by now I'm pretty sure I'm standing in a puddle of my own sweat.

"You really might be the **stupidest** prey I've ever seen," Al chortles as Betty brushes herself off, pulling a fresh smoke from her pack like nothing's happened.

"Yeah, probably. Dumbass locked himself out the other day when I came by here to pay you the fifteen bucks I owed you, Al," she replies, extending the cigarettes to Al who takes one with a grateful nod. "Smoke, Avo? You look like you could use one."

"Nah, I'm... good," Avo mutters, collecting herself as she stands up, slinking over to me. "I'll make do with something else."

Reaching down, she eases my lollipop package loose from my shaking hoof, sifting through it. I didn't even realize I was still holding this damn thing. No wonder I didn't look intimidating. "All the cherry ones are gone, huh. Guess I'll settle for orange."

"O-orange," I rasp, still trying to come to grips with what I just witnessed. "Fi-fifteen bucks?"


"S-so you're not going to kill each other then," I clarify, falling backwards onto my butt. I don't even care that I look like a total clod right now, I just stopped a couple of preds from going savage. I think.

"Oh wow," Avo says, peeling the wrapper off her candy. "He really doesn't know."

"No shit he doesn't know. He's a sheep, not a wolf," Betty says in an almost pitying tone. Like I'm some kind of mental deficient.

"Well, it's uh, hmm. How do I put this that a sheep would understand?" Avo ponders, nibbling at her sucker with her sharp teeth, turning the stick systematically in her claws every few seconds. "It's a seasonal thing, I guess. Every once in a while--"

"**Heat,**" I confirm quickly, sparing her the embarrassment of having to go into detail. I remember enough about biology class. "No, I know -- I know what going into heat is. Wolves go into heat, right? Not judging, just, uh, it seemed kind of r-- uh, there were some kinda non-consensual overtones--"

"**HEAT!** Bahahaha! **This fuckin' guy!**" Al booms.

He's laughing so hard he might actually crack a smile. His eyes are open so wide I think they might pop out of his skull. I'm legit terrified -- I don't like it when he smiles, too many teeth. His grumpy, haven't-had-enough-coffee scowl suits him better for my taste. I'm backing up as he slaps his belly, gasping for air as he laughs. Hell, if they start another howl I'm booking it out of here.

"Ugh, hah. **No.** We're not in heat, you little pervert," Betty snorts. "You don't know the first thing
about wolf hierarchy."

"No, I don't." I reply.

"Oh my god, you weren't kidding." Avo's going full throttle chomping at that lollipop; it looks like a golf ball it's got so many indentations into it. "He really is a fucking moron."

"Well, this moron is glad he was able to give you all a good laugh," I remark half-bitterly.

"Okay, lighten up on him," Betty's slumped back against the desk, examining the damage on her shirt.

While the bigger wolves are distracted, Avo leans in, her pointed snout all but shoved in to my ear, and I can feel her breath as she offers a passing explanation. "All bark, minimal bite," she whispers, "they're just making a big show to keep the line steady between 'em, that's all."

I have to pull away just so I can turn my head without smacking my muzzle into hers. "And what about you? Why weren't you scratching and growling and threatening some kind of weird-- sex... dominance... thing?"

She shrugs, plucking the chewed-up lollipop from her mouth to inspect it. "I don't mind being the loner. Besides, someone's gotta be last."

Sighing, I collect myself, forcing my blood pressure to lower as I pull myself to my hooves. "Well, if you'll all excuse me, I'd like to get some sleep. I just worked two shifts back-to-back and I'm exhausted."

As I tuck the candy bag under my arm and start towards the stairs, I hear Al clear his throat. Turning around, I notice both he and Betty have their paws out, looking expectantly at me.

"What, you guys want one too?" I ask.

"You're living on our turf now, sheep. You pay your respects to the alpha like everyone else," Avo comments as she rises from her seated position and crosses me up the stairs.

Sizing both Betty and Al up, I snort. "Which one's the alpha?" I ask as I hoof the bag towards them. They exchange a very brief glance with each other before Al takes three and Betty takes two. Guess that answers that question.

"Consider this an idiot tax," Betty retorts with the faintest hint of a smile still at her muzzle. "Besides, what're you fuckin' doing buying sweets? This shit'll rot your teeth. And you could stand to lose some weight anyway, fatass."

Fatass? Looking down at my thick wool, I glance back up to Betty with a thoughtful expression. "You really don't know the first thing about about sheep physiology."

"No, I don't," she echoes, turning away from me with her prizes. "Don't particularly give a shit, either."

Nodding, I can't help but chuckle as I consider her answer -- maybe the absurdity of the situation's gotten to my exhausted, nerve-wracked brain.

"Well. Fair enough."

She crosses in front of Al, who makes a casual but imposing show of leaning over into her path. At
first I think he's just being a jerk, but when his lips curl back into another growl, I suddenly wonder if this isn't over yet. Betty, in turn, reacts quickly. She cranes her head towards the ceiling like she's gearing up for another howl, but it never comes. She just kind of freezes like that, craned up to look at the ceiling. He noses in towards the scruff of her throat, and for a second I'm worried he's going to bite her neck, but it looks like he's just sniffing at her. Something about this makes me really uncomfortable, but it only lasts for a second before he pulls back and gives a decisive nod, like he just said something profound. And then--

Then she kisses him.

It's a weird kind of kiss, like I've never seen before. He's snarling, teeth out like he's ready to bite at any second, and she gives a few quick pecks at his mouth. She's practically kissing his teeth. I'm too tired for another outburst, but I realize I'm clutching the candy bag in a tight fist. Wolf tradition or not, I don't like seeing her pushed into this kind of thing.

Thankfully enough, it's over quickly, and Betty finally slips past him. Just as she does, she whirls, making a snap at his tail, before turning back to the door.

"Hey!" Al barks, caught off guard, "Don't let's start that again."

"Aye-aye," she grins, disappearing out the door.

I've seen about enough for one lifetime. Definitely for one morning. With the danger passed and the lobby clearing out, I decide it's time to really try for sleep.

"Hey."

"What now? I only have one left!" I gripe, turning around to face the confirmed alpha. Even though I'm standing higher than Al, we end up at eye level.

He's smiling. Not like before, though. Not that toothy, intimidating smile from before. More like the smile he had at the party the other night. It's strangely unguarded for him. I'm almost put at ease, when he suddenly jabs a clawed finger out. I'd have flinched, but I think my body spent the last of its energy breaking up that "fight".

He pokes my chest a few times, nodding. "Jumpin' in like that between two wolves. That was stupid. But you got some fuckin' stones, grazer," he asserts.

It almost sounds like a compliment.

I can't really think of a reply, but he doesn't seem to want one. The enormous white wolf turns and heads out of the building, leaving me alone in the lobby, only a few steps up the stairs.

Okay, now I really gotta get some sleep.
Chapter Summary

Remmy’s neighbors drag him to Bug Burga for a late night meal.

Like everything in life, the night shift's got its ups and downs, and one of those downs is that my body's struggling to acclimate to it. Even though I just woke up, I still feel like I could go right back to bed. By nature I'm kind of a morning person, so it's weird seeing my new "sunrise" is a handful of stars scattered across the blackened Downtown Zootopia skyline. I'm sure that's not helping my internal clock any.

It takes me at least twenty minutes just to dry off from my shower and that's with heavy use of my hairdryer. Much as I hate to admit it, I'm gonna have to shear, and soon. I keep snagging on table corners, door handles, coat hooks, and so on. I thought Charlie's impromptu butchering was bad the other day, until I ended up slamming my wool in the door coming home this morning. That cost me a hefty chunk. I think it would've hurt less if I'd ripped it off with a strip of duct tape.
I'm just glad I was inside when it happened. I can't imagine what my neighbors would've thought if I'd locked myself out while caught in the door. A horrifying vision runs through my mind of Annie having to chew me free.

Anyway, now that I'm cleaned up and dressed, I've got a couple hours before I have to be to work, so I figure it's time to go grab something to eat. I'm grabbing my keys and wallet when I start to wonder -- is it still breakfast, even though you're eating it this late? I guess it doesn't matter. All I know is that I'm fucking starving and ready to get some food in my gut.

As I descend the staircase I can hear voices coming from the downstairs lobby. Annie and Wol and some other guy that sounds kinda familiar. Rounding the wall on my way down, I match the third voice with the face: the guest is Ozzy, that loudmouth from the party. Based on the way they're babbling away, all three of them seem especially chipper tonight. With a hyena, it's to be expected, but it's pretty weird to see the twins this perky and alert (except maybe when they're plotting to lube someone up). Then again, I guess haven't had much interaction with them on their nocturnal schedule.

I guess if everyone only saw me when I was supposed to be asleep, they'd think I was a pretty low-energy mammal, too.

"Swear to god, it was *this* big," Anneke excitedly boasts, holding her hands about a ruler's length apart. "Felt like right then I'd died and gone to heaven."

I grimace. This girl has absolutely no decorum. I shouldn't expect much from preds in a slum, but still -- at least pretend like you've got some standards, Annie.

"No shit!" Ozzy returns excitedly as he adjusts the strings on his beat-up guitar. "You got the full foot long treatment huh? I'm pretty happy just to get half that."

"Yeah, and she wasn't in a sharing mood, either," Wolter kicks in. "I watched her down the whole thing like it was nothing."

I feel my cheeks flush as I step onto the landing. Are all predators total degenerates?! I just got out of the tub and I feel like I need to turn around and head right back in. Now that I think about it, though, this is actually my first time seeing Ozzy since the party. Even though I don't want to interrupt, uh, all *this*, I should probably stop and thank the guy for saving me from getting mauled. Like Marty said, I might as well do my best to be civil with these mammals.

"Hey, it's the woolly bully!" Ozzy spots me instantly, slapping his knee and waving me over. "Man, perfect timing. We're sitting here talking about the new sandwich over at Bug Burga, and here comes the resident freak-a'-nature."

Well. All right, so I read that wrong -- but who'd blame me?

"Freak of nature, huh," I mutter, trying to muster up a smile. He probably didn't mean anything by it. "Hey, I wanted to--"

"Oh sure, mutton chops," Ozzy snickers with a shit-eating grin, cutting me off. "We all know what you want -- you got some kind of meat radar underneath that mad layer of fat and fuzz, right? Feels like whenever the subject comes up, there you are, fork in paw. Hoof. Whatever."

The twins giggle in unison.

Aaaaand the moment's gone. I stop cold on the tile, and the words are out of my mouth before I can stop myself. "Have I done something to fuckin' piss you off, man?"
Annie and Wolter exchange nervous grins, and to my surprise Ozzy cocks his head, his own smile growing wider as I step into the lobby.

"Whoa there, bully, don't pop your top," he says in complete stride, giving his string a test pluck with a claw. "It's cool."

Oh, good. I was almost insulted, but then he told me it was cool.

"Yeah, don't worry about it, fluffin' stuff," Wolter chuckles, rolling out onto his back and stretching over the arm of the sofa, "You're not the only one in the room who loves big meat."

Ozzy gives an obnoxious, wheezing laugh between his teeth as response. "Yeah, Annie would do anything for meat!"

"Ozzy's really more about meat than me, though," Anneke stage-whispers with an odd smile, kicking her feet up on the back of the sofa, now sitting upside-down with her head towards the floor.

The hyena strums a harsh chord, then jerks his thumb at me. "'Course, I doubt anyone's as crazy for meat as this carnivore."

Somehow, I'm not laughing. My shoulders feel tense. "You guys are a fuckin' riot."

Ozzy smirks up at me, even wider than before. Talk about a punchable face. "Ey, c'mon. I's just playin' with you, man."

"Yeah, sure," I grumble. "You just make a habit of insulting all the new tenants, is that it?"

"Hey now," Wolter jumps in. "Relax, Rammy. Ozzy didn't mean anything by it -- that's just his sense of humor."

Setting his guitar aside, Ozzy stands to his feet and looks me over, and I can tell something's shifted in his eye and stance even though the smile hasn't left his face. I take the opportunity to notice how much bigger he is than I realized. Without the chronic slouch, he's almost Avo's height, and way stockier.

"Don't sweat, Wolt. Me an' the woolly bully here are good, right?" he says, making eye contact with me as he extends his paw for a shake. I'm not really in the mood to try being the bigger man here especially when I've just been fucking slighted just for walking into the room. And here I was about to reach out to this guy.

Nevertheless, I reluctantly extend my hoof, shaking his paw firmly. Guess I've got one more asshole here to avoid.

"Whoa, got quite the grip," he comments idly. "Love it. Look, Rammy, I--"

"Remmy," I interrupt, emphasizing my name. "Remmy Cormo."

"Remmy!" he cackles, rolling it around on his tongue like he's trying to decide whether he likes the taste or not. "Oh, man, that's a way better name for a ram than 'Rammy'! Shit, I was like, 'what the fuck were this guy's parents smoking, man?!' I mean, actually, it's still kinda weird. But nah, nah, big step up. For real. I'm diggin' it."

He's the gift that keeps on giving. And to think I thought this guy was all right. Now it's like he's just trying to bust my balls.
The hyena catches his breath, evidently done laughing at his own jokes for the moment. "Anyway. Remmy. Look, I can see you an' me, we're off on the wrong foot here, man," Ozzy says, making a transparent attempt for the high ground. "Let me make it up to you. How about one of those burgas you seem to like so much, carnivore? My treat."

"I'm not hungry, thank--" I start to say before my stomach growls like it's over a fucking loudspeaker, completely betraying me. The twins and especially Ozzy bust out laughing, and I clutch at my reddening cheeks with a hoof in disgust and embarrassment. Great. Awesome. Laugh it up. This is just where I dreamed my life would be right now: playing comedic relief to a bunch of fucking preds.

"Yeah, you're a terrible liar, sheep," Ozzy gasps between laughs as he slaps me on my back. "C'mon, buddy. Let's go fill that sour puss of yours with something tasty! Hey! You two comin'?"

"Shit yes I'm coming," Anneke throws in as she and Wolter slide off the couch like slinkies. "He still owes me a slider and I plan on collecting."

Yes, this is exactly how I wanted to spend my morning. Evening. Whatever. Heading to a pred restaurant with a bunch of my pred neighbors and eating pred food while they point and laugh at me. I sigh, following the three of them out of the lobby and down the street as Ozzy leads us in an impromptu conga line. I try not to worry about what he might actually be up to -- everyone I've met here so far is a taker, not a giver. He might be all smiles, but no pred's that friendly.

Oh well. At least the Bug Burga's on my way to work.

"Holy shit, this place is packed," I gasp as we walk up to the restaurant. The cars in the drive-thru lane have wrapped around the building twice, overflowing into next parking lot over. That's to say nothing of the building itself which is full of predators of all shapes and sizes, and with the seats full I can see there's a lot of folks standing around the tables or even just leaning against the interior walls while they eat. A large group pours out of the building with bags in hand, chatting loudly as they pass into the night.

"Really?" Looking around the parking lot, Wolter scratches his head as his sister sniffs at the air. "I mean, I guess? It's usually busy around this time of night."

I look at him, mouth agape. "I was in here the other day and I thought this place was like, dead."

"Obviously not," Anneke snorts. "You gotta come in here when everything's fresh. That's when it's at its best."

Ozzy slaps me on the back hard enough for me to really feel it through my padding. "Welcome to the night crew!" he howls, grinning.

Our hyena pushes the door open, using his height advantage to clear the way for the rest of us to make our way inside. Once we're in, the noise of the restaurant's almost deafening. There's gotta be a good dozen or so employees frantically working the counter trying to serve customers, and they're still stuffed to overflowing with folks.


I am a sheep surrounded by carnivores.
If one turned on me, would anyone stop it? Would they even report it afterwards? How much of the straining civilized facade would be left? Visions of my own corpse on the floor. Wool red with my blood. Teeth everywhere. Bug burgas discarded in favor of animal meat. I don't want to die.

I won't be devoured.

I'm jolted back to reality with a shock. Anneke snaps her fingers in front of my face and I jump so hard I leave the fucking ground. To her credit, she doesn't laugh. She actually startles in return, and gives me this weird, almost worried look. The other two don't notice, thankfully.

"Hey, what's up? You okay?" she peers up at me, cocking her head to one side. I try to focus on breathing and hope my sweating's not noticeable.

"Yeah," I lie, "Just... the smell in here is kind of overwhelming."

"Yeah, it's something, huh?" she twists, tilting her head the other way, "It smells great in here. Like a slice of fried heaven."

Well, agree to disagree. I glance around the room, wondering how many stares I've elicited, but most everyone seems to be too engaged in their own conversations to notice me, at least for the moment. Most of the mammals in here are canids, but I spot a couple bears looming over the crowd, and a trio of otters sitting in a corner booth. Stoats at the counter. Or maybe weasels. They spin to face me and make some gesture and I nearly fall back into my own cold sweat before I realize they're just waving to someone behind me. They're all girls, high schoolers by the look of them, wearing pink and pastels and giggling at their phones. Yeah. A real threat, Remmy. They're definitely about to rip your throat out.

This is ridiculous. Predators don't eat prey. Not anymore. I gotta get a hold of myself. I'm not in any real danger. Hell, last time I actually was, Ozzy stepped in and stopped it.

...Now I'm just feeling like an asshole.

"Annie, you and Wolt go see if you can hunt down a table for us," Ozzy directs with the same practiced ease I saw him use at the party. "Otherwise we're street eatin'." They nod, scurrying into the crowd in tandem to go battle it out for an eating surface.

Shaking my head and trying to stay in the present, I follow Ozzy up to the shortest of the six lines while trying to avoid being trampled by a trio of lion cubs jockeying to hold their place at the register against a pushy middle-aged cougar. You could convince me half of Zootopia's in here. If you told me there was some kind of special event like a rally going on here I'd believe it, but apparently these people are just really enthusiastic about burgas.

Can't say I blame 'em. Restaurants catering to prey tastes usually have two choices on the menu this time of night: take it or leave it. And that's if they're still open.

Fortunately the griddles must be at full power in the kitchen right now because the turnover rate is pretty fast. It's not long before we make it up to the front, where a bright-eyed tigress is operating the cash register.

"Hi! Welcome to Bug Burga!" she chirps. "Would you like to try our new Cicada Parmesan sub?"

I raise an eyebrow. Thick, battered-and-fried cicada meat covered in tomato sauce and cheese? Hell, even if the cheese isn't the real stuff my mouth's still watering.

"Seven bucks for the sandwich alone?" Ozzy lets out a low whistle as he leans against the counter.
"Hope you didn't have your heart set on it, woolly bully, 'cuz I ain't feeling that sorry."

I don't want to laugh but I can't help doing so. "I'll let you off light. Number two with a root beer," I chuckle. It's the cheapest combo on the menu -- single roach patty with fries. Cheaper as a combo than my usual double roach deluxe is as a standalone, anyway.

"Alright," the tigress says, ringing us up. To her credit she doesn't even flinch as I place my order. I guess this time of night she sees all kinds. "What else can I get for you?"

Ozzy taps the counter with both paws. "I'll have what he's having. And, uh -- aw, shit, I forgot to ask what Wolt and Annie wanted!" He turns around, standing up on the tips of his toes trying to see past the cheetah behind us. "Hey, I don't see 'em anywhere!"

"Don't worry, I got theirs covered," I interrupt, pointing to the menu. Anneke wanted a slider, I'm happy to oblige. "Two of those, please."

I watch as Ozzy turns around, draws line of sight with what my hoof is aimed at, and proceeds to nearly bust a gut laughing. He's laughing loud enough we're getting weird looks as he nearly doubles over.

"That's perfect!" he grins, wiping a tear from his eye as the tigress rings up our order with an unflinching smile.

"Eleven eighty-two. Cash or credit?"

We're technically splitting this ticket three ways -- Ozzy's buying mine and his own, I'm buying Anneke's. I guess Wolter should be paying for himself though I don't expect him to be keen to reach into his pocket when he sees what he's getting. I pull my wallet and plunk down the money for the twins' dinner -- breakfast, whatever -- while Ozzy fishes around for his share of the bill.

"Hang on a sec," he mutters, pulling out loose change from his pockets. "Uh, let's see. There's twenty, thirty... a buck, buck ten... wait, ah, heh. That's a button, not a dime."

"You wanna speed it up, buddy?" the cheetah behind us groans. "I've got work in ten minutes!"

"Yeah, asshole!"

Ozzy chuckles nervously, but it's clear he's coming up short for the food. "Is -- is it all right if I, uh, change that second combo to just like some fries?" he asks plaintively.

Fuck's sake. I toss a few more dollar bills on the counter to make up the difference. "Ignore him, keep the change, and no, I don't need a receipt."

"Hey, whoa whoa whoa, I said I'd buy you dinner. I got this, man. I ain't some charity case."

"Already got that song and dance from Marty this week," I grumble as I cut him off with a tired wave of my hoof. "Really not in the mood for an encore."

Ozzy gives me a weird look as the cashier hands me a placard with our number on it.

"Your order'll be right out, sir."

"Thanks." I head into the dining room as Ozzy follows me, tucking the scattered coins and crumpled bills back into his pockets. I pretend not to notice. "Look, you'll get your food, okay? Let's just find the others."


Sure enough, they did find us seats. Annie's hanging off of the back of one of the chairs while Wolt's splayed out over the top of the table itself. As we approach, a teenage otter attempts to make a grab for one of the chairs only to be hissed away by both of them.

"Back off. This one's claimed," Anneke snaps.

"You have four chairs and you only need two!" the otter whines as he slinks away. "You'd better be glad my dad's not here right now!"

Wolter snorts as the boy runs off into the crowd to find somewhere else to sit. "Fuckin' kids, man. I hate 'em."

"Hey, kids get a bad rap," I remark as I slide into one of the seats next to Ozzy. As far as actual predators go, I've met exactly one I like since I moved in and he was a kid.

"Lots of folks get a bad rap," Wolt replies as he lazily pours himself into the chair next to his sister. "Get used to it. You'll be seeing it a lot on Pack Street."

"Ain't that the livin' truth," Ozzy adds quietly. His smile hasn't disappeared, but it does look like it's waning. At least he's stopped staring at me and has his eyes on his table. I should probably say something, but I just don't feel like it at the moment. I'm beyond starving and ready to eat so I can ditch these guys and get on with my day. Night.

Whatever.

"So you plannin' on shavin' anytime soon, Cormo?" Anneke asks as she slouches along the table, batting at the napkin dispenser. "I prefer my boys at least a little trimmed."

"Stubble," Wolter pipes up. "Little bit of stubble on my girls usually does it for me. Got that borderline slovenly look to it, but they're still wild enough to bring out the buzzer and bare some skin. Yeeeow." What a coincidence. Both "borderline" and "slovenly" are words I could use to describe everyone at this table that isn't a ram.

"Thank you for sharing," I reply automatically. "And yeah, I'll probably shear soon. It's kind of a pain though."

Anneke buffs her claws on her sleeve. "I have no problem helpin' you with that."

"I dunno, Annie," Ozzy says, looking off into the crowd, "You might find this one to be too prickly."

"Me? Nah, I'm a lot softer than I look," I counter as I tug at my wool for emphasis.

Side-eyeing me, I almost see a flash of Avo's wit. "Wasn't what I meant, woolly bully."

Before I can retort, a sleepy-looking badger shuffles over to the table with a tray full of food. "Number sixty-nine, here's your order," he drawls before looking up and seeing me. "Hey, this guy again!"

"Hi, Rex," I reply with a smile, glad to see a genuinely friendly face that isn't scheming for a free dinner. "Nice seeing you again."

"You too, man. Ozzy! You're friends with this guy?"

"Aw, you know Ozzy, he's friends with everybody," Wolter snorts.
The hyena in question brushes his shirt off innocently as I turn to look at him. Oh, I see how it is. He's the town nice guy and I'm the grouch.

"Well, who ordered the number two combo?" Rex asks as he starts offloading the food onto our table.

I motion to myself and Ozzy. "We both did."

"And I, uh -- wait a second," Anneke's voice grows unsteady as she slowly realizes what's going on. "What the hell are those?"

Rex looks down at the tray, and I can practically see the wheels in his head spinning away before it clicks.

"Looks like... your dinner," Rex remarks with a silly grin as he drops two brightly-colored boxes in front of each twin. "Two Junior Baby-Bug Buglet Mealies. With juice boxes."

"Juice boxes," Anneke echoes in a deadpan voice as she pops open her kiddie meal box. "What the fuck is this. CORMO. WHAT THE FUCK IS THIS."

Wolter reaches into his, and pulls out what appears to be a microscopic version of the burga Ozzy and I have. "Is this the fucking toy that comes with the meal?"

"Nope, that is the meal," Rex snorts. "The toy's bigger. Oh, I almost forgot."

The badger sets the tray on the ground and reaches into his apron, pulling out two elongated pieces of die-cut cardboard. Folding them over with impressively dexterous speed, he presents a pair of completely ridiculous-looking paper hats with bug antennae.

"Free with every Buglet Mealie," Rex snickers as he plops them on top of the siblings' heads. They're just a bit oversized -- one of those "one size fits most" type affairs, so Anneke's slides down her head and ends up as a collar while Wolter's just kind of covers an eye like a bizarre eyepatch.

"The shit am I supposed to eat this with?" Annie hisses, turning to glare at me. "A pair of fucking tweezers?"

"You said I owed you a slider," I comment innocently as Ozzy loses control and almost falls out of his chair with howling laughter. For once, I'm actually with him on this.

"Kids, man." Wolter looks down at his own kiddie meal box with a shake of his head, succeeding only in covering his other eye. "Fuckin' hate kids so much."

"Well, as much fun as this whole thing has been, I've gotta get to work," I announce, standing up from the table and brushing the crumbs off of my shirt onto the floor.

"Still can't believe I just watched a sheep eat bugs," Ozzy replies, finishing off the last of his fries. "What a show."

"Yeah, nice having dinner with you, Cormo. Now if you'll excuse me I'm gonna go have dinner," Anneke grumbles.

Wolter gives me a two-fingered salute as he follows his sister. "See ya, grazer."
The twins head back up front to the line for more food with annoyed expressions. In fairness, though, they ate every last bite of the children's meals and they're still wearing the hats. At least they were pretty good sports -- probably better than I'd have been in the same position, now that I think about it.

As I head outside, Ozzy chases after me. "Hey, wait up, man."

I turn to look at him, fighting the urge to sigh in his face. I'd almost expect a 'gotcha' taunt by now, after I paid for his dinner, but even his comedic timing can't be this bad. "Make it quick. I need to get going."

"Don't worry, mutton-on-a-stick. I ain't gonna take up too much of your valuable time," Ozzy responds.

"Mutton on... what's a stick got to do with it?" I ask, folding my arms.

He jabs a claw in my direction, smiling. "Oh, I's referrin' to the one straight up yer ass. Hey, that must be why they call it a ramrod!"

"Look, Ozzy, I don't -- pfffft!" My brain catches up to his awful pun and I start laughing even though I don't want to. I'm really trying, here. Not gonna lie, this chucklefuck's starting to get contagious. "Seriously, Ozzy, what do you want?"

"I wanted to say I'm sorry."

"Sorry?" I blink, caught off guard.

The hyena runs a bashful paw through his scruffy headfur. "Sure, man. I made a fool outta myself in front of the whole place, and you had to step in. So yeah, I'm real sorry for that. Especially after I was supposed to be treatin' you."

I can't say I expected a pred, let alone a hyena, to apologize to me. I can't even bring myself to quip or make a joke at his expense for once, I'm too fucking dumbfounded. I feel like I'm waiting for a punchline.

He takes my stunned silence as a stonewall and continues. "Look, I'll make it right. I just thought I had more cash on me than I did, you know?"

"Counting your change in front of everyone was a nice touch," I mumble. It sounds meaner than I intended when I hear it out loud.

He scratches the back of his neck and glances at the ground, chuckling. "...Yeah. Yeah, I looked pretty pathetic out there, I know."

He's got that same look from back in the restaurant, that kinda distant look. Despite the smile I can tell I don't need to rub his nose in this one. I figure we've given each other enough grief for one night.

Ordinarily I'd just shrug it off and eat the price of the meal, taking it as a lesson learned. No different than the lollipop shakedown or the double roach I ended up giving to Charlie. But I get the feeling there's something way more sincere here. Hell, come to think of it, even Charlie did pay me back. This time, I think maybe the best thing to do isn't to just be passive-aggressively generous.

"All right," I reply simply. "No hard feelings, then."
His tensed shoulders drop and he breaks into an easy grin, and I feel like a spring that I didn't realize was tight just loosened somewhere inside me. "Man. That's really good to hear."

"Yeah, I just..." I sigh, "I guess I just figured something was up, that's all. You made a big deal about all this and it kinda ended up feeling like it was just a night out for you three."

The broad-chested hyena's smile wrinkles and he looks at me with a furrowed brow. "What, you think I talked up a big game and then dragged y'out here just to stick ya with the bill? Man, I'm a lot of things, but I ain't that, woolly bully."

"I gotta know why you keep calling me that," I groan, dragging a hoof down my face out of exasperation. "Is it because of the song? I hate that song!"

"Nah, man, it suits you. Look, you're a sheep -- so there's the woolly, right? I really hope that part was obvious. And you're like -- you're this stiff, uptight, grumpy-assed kinda... well, you get it. You always got this look like you're about to punch someone's face in." All of a sudden he throws his arm around me in what I'm assuming is some kind of gesture of friendliness, pulling me uncomfortably close. "You can't keep walkin' around with this chip on your shoulder shit. It ain't healthy."

"Chip on my shoulder," I repeat, wrenching out of his grasp. "Dude, I know you probably think I'm like, the fun police here, but I just want to be left alone, you know what I'm saying?"

"Whoa, nah! Nah, man! That's an even WORSE attitude to have -- fuckin' boarding up and hiding out like you're makin' a last stand? That ain't no way to live, Remmy. Like, it's cool if you're angry, I don't know your life, but you can't keep holding onto that. Get out in the world, and you'll find your own rhythm in time." He pokes my belly with a grin. "You've got some thick cotton here, but what you need is thick skin. Ain't everyone tryin' to slight you, sheep."

"Do you really think I'm just some spiteful prick?"

Ozzy laughs. "Nah. But until you show some other side of you, nobody won't know WHAT to think. You're like those stiff-ass ram-cops down at city hall, man. Always lookin' to piss on someone's parade. Now, I know you ain't as rotten as that. You're givin' me a chance. Least we could do is give you one, yeah?"

I open my mouth to chew him out, but I catch myself before I say anything. I feel like I'm the one who's been victimized by everyone on Pack Street. The thought never occurred to me that they're seeing me at my worst.

"All right," I reply. "Point taken. I'll try to be more, uh..."

He laughs, saving me the effort of having to come up with some kind of positive spin.

"Hey, I knew you had it in you. Thanks for bailing me out, man. I owe ya. Serious."

I nod reluctantly. "Well, it's the least I could do after you saved me from being mauled by a fucking drunk-ass bear at a party I didn't even want to be at."

Laughing, Ozzy shrugs. "Ah, well, in that case, maybe you owe me then."

Thinking back to his earlier words inside the restaurant, I figure I might as well go for it. "Hey, I'm not feeling that sorry," I joke, waving to him as I walk off.

I swear I can still hear him cackling into the night all the way over from Hill Street.
Ordinarily, I try not to let myself get irrationally happy over small pleasures, but considering that I'm down enough on my luck to move into an apartment on Pack Street of all places, I think they may be all I've got left. Today's small pleasure: enough clean laundry and linens to last me an entire week. I'd slacked off enough on it that I was almost to the dreaded point of having to wear my boxers inside out, and that just wasn't gonna fly. One trip to the laundromat and about six bucks in quarters later, I'm back in business again.

A warm bed couldn't come at a better time, too; the forecast mentioned a huge cold front was going to blow through tonight due to some generator malfunction in Tundratown or something. I can sure as hell feel it; the temperature has to have dropped thirty or forty degrees.
Now that I've got clean duds and a belly full of grasshopper salad, I'm curled up in the sack. You ever just been happy to go to bed early? That's where I'm at. I might as well be on cloud nine -- no, scratch that. With all this wool, I think I am cloud nine. Clacking my lamp off, I tug my blanket over my head and bury my face in my pillow. Right now, as I let slumber begin to claim me, I think to myself that for once, it's good to be Remmy Cormo.

Something jars me awake. I smack my mouth a few times; I'm abnormally warm, and my tongue's dry as a powder keg. That's not gonna work. Fumbling around, I reach for the glass of water I left on my nightstand only to find that it's empty.

Weird.

Getting out of bed, I stumble in the darkness and carry my glass into the kitchen, rinsing it out in the sink. I forgot I'd done the dishes, too. I smile. Damn, I'm on top of things. Might as well get some milk since I'm up this late (early?) anyway. I reach into the fridge and pull out the container of almond milk, pouring it into my glass. (Cheese is one thing, but I'm not quite ready for real milk yet.) After gulping it down, I wipe my muzzle off and set the glass in the sink before returning to bed.

I slide back in under the covers. There's a slight moan next to me and something warm buries itself in my wool.

"G'night," I mutter.

My bedmate mumbles in reply, wrapping a bushy tail around my thighs. Yes sir, I think to myself as I return to dreamland, it's good to be Remmy Cor--

The fuck.

I bolt upright in bed, my heart thumping a thousand beats per second. There's someone in my room, in my fucking BED with me! I feel totally violated as I stumble to my hooves, yanking the blanket up in a frenzy.

"What the hell?!" I bleat out, smashing away in the dark at my nightstand for my lamp's switch. After three or four tries I finally manage to turn it on.

Charlie rolls over in bed, opening her muzzle with a wide, casual yawn. She's in one of my newly laundered shirts. Squinting up at me through her shifty fox eyes, she frowns.

"Cormo," she murmurs.

"Charlie?!!"

I gesture helplessly, waiting for a reply. She doesn't move, but after a moment, finally mumbles back. "I may have miscalculated this."

"What are you fucking doing here?! How'd you get in?!"

Her frown deepens. "It's in our nature to seek sources of warmth. And given your overgrown coat, it's become clear you have insulation to spare. Flimsy, third-rate locks aside, I don't particularly think it's very neighborly to be stingy with it."

I'm livid right now, and for once I know just about everyone on Pack Street would agree with me --
this is going way too far. A predator in my own home, in my most personal and intimate space. Wearing my clothes, sleeping in my bed! No. Not happening. Curbing my rage as much as I can, I angrily snag her by the scruff of her neck to drag her outside. Surprised, she yelps and snaps her jaw at me. Unfortunately for her, I'm used to Betty's trick by now -- I deal with it every day on my way home, after all -- so Charlie's attempt looks like a sad imitation. It also helps that I'm both taller and heavier than she is. Realizing she's sunk, Charlie hangs her head in defeat and goes limp as I carry her to my doorstep.

"And I want my shirt back in the morning," I snap as I deposit her outside in the hall before slamming the door in her face. The fucking nerve. I'm talking to Al first thing in the morning -- I don't know if foxes fit into the wolf pack-alpha whatever, but I'm sure he'll put the fear of god in her. This has got to be some kind of breach or violation of their rules.

Locking the door, I turn around and head back to my bed. I'm not even under the blanket before I hear the door quickly open and close again. I don't know what the hell I was thinking -- the locks didn't keep her out the first time. I should have jammed something under the doorknob like a chair. Or my couch.

I slide out of my bed and onto my hooves, pushing my bedroom door open. I'm not about to put up with this shit. Ordinarily I'd know better than to go against a pred, but right now I've got enough righteous indignation in me that I fear her only marginally more than I fear Marty (which is "not at all").

"Charlie, you really don't want to push me right now," I growl warningly. She sees me coming and instantly scampers up the side of my refrigerator, peering down at me from the top of it.

"Cormo, wait. You're overreacting!" Charlie pleads, paws raised as I approach her with balled-up hooves. I jump up, smacking against the door as I lunge for her. She sails over my head like a flying squirrel, clambering onto the ceiling fan in the living room. "Consider this just -- a temporary trespass. I'll be gone in the morning!"

I reach for her tail and manage to grab it; she yelps and flops down on my head, smothering me to the floor. Dazed, I stumble to my feet as she skitters under my kitchen table.

"Don't make me go get Al," I snarl. "I'll do it! I'll march up to his room right now! You want to get him involved?"

She wrinkles her nose, her tail swishing back and forth from the other side of the table. "If you'll just give me a chance to explain, I assure you my reasoning is sound!"

"You're in my home -- my bed, Charlie! My damn SHIRT! There's no 'sound reasoning' for that!"

I've got her cornered now. I squat like a soccer goalie, ready to intercept her. Defying expectations, she realizes she's trapped and decides to surrender.

"All right, granted, I clearly introduced myself in a bad way, but -- the sudden inclement weather's caught me without my winter coat, and I don't handle the cold well. I can't just stay at home," she says, slowly climbing out from underneath the table. "I'd be grateful if you'd host me. On your couch, if you must -- but I'd strongly prefer not to go back tonight."

"And you can't sleep at Anneke and Wolter's because...?" I ask, folding my arms.

She lowers her head, closing her eyes. "It would be more comfortable for me to rest here." While I can't fault her -- I wouldn't sleep at their place either -- I can tell she's full of shit. There's some
reason she wants to be here, but for the life of me I don't know what it is.

"And Marty?"

"Out of town on personal business," she replies evasively. "He won't be back until Monday."

I know I'm being snowed, and I don't mean by the weather. Charlie's not telling me everything, but I'm so damn tired I decide I'm not going to stand here and argue about it.

"Fine. Just for tonight, you can sleep on my --"

Her narrow eyes twinkle. "Appreciate it," she interrupts with a sly grin. Before I can stop her, Charlie rockets towards my bed and dives under my covers. I drag my hoof down my face, willing my blood pressure to even out. With a sigh, I crawl into bed next to her, tugging the blanket over myself. Within just a few minutes, she's buried her face and paws in my thick coat again, and I swear she's purring.

I'm too warm again. Tired as hell, but something keeps me lying there awake, staring at the ceiling. I'm too uncomfortable. Or maybe I'm too comfortable. I gave in pretty quick, and now I've got some vixen I basically just met squeezing on me under my covers.

I've seen her naked. This is too weird. I've never shared a bed with a girl who I wasn't... being intimate with. If I didn't know better I'd say she was trying to get something going. But judging from her snoring, she was telling the truth: all she wants is sleep. I crane my head and look down at her without jostling. She's warm and almost weightless against me. Was she even wearing anything under the shirt? God, it's been a while for me, too. I hate to admit it. But would a cute little ewe be asking for so much? Why is this happening to me? Is this just some fox thing, or is she passing all this off like it is so she can get in here? Is Charlie a preyophile? Is this her foot in the door? I know I'm a rare commodity around here, but -- well, then again, she was awfully comfortable the other day, when she was out of the shower.

I've seen her naked. I try not to think about it.

Sighing, I turn the lights off. It's just for one night, Remmy.

Morning comes; it's still cold outside, but true to her word, Charlie's gone. The television in my room is muted, tuned to the local news. I notice the almond milk carton and a cereal box both left open on the counter while my cupboard door hangs open. At least she had the decency to shut the fridge so that the rest of my food didn't spoil while I dozed.

Stretching, I make a quick breakfast out of the last bit of my leftover cheese and some whole wheat crackers. It's the weekend, and for once I don't have to go into work. I've got plenty of food and clean clothes -- I see no reason to have to leave my apartment at all right now. Maybe I'll lounge around on the couch and watch some movies or something.

I'm an hour into some action flick and it's just getting to the good part when there's a rough pounding noise at my door. Startled, I hop off the couch and pad over to my front door, peering through the eyehole.

An eyeful of black fur tells me everything I need to know. Panicking, I press flat against the door. If I pretend I'm not here, maybe Betty will go away. Maybe I won't have to deal with her.

The literal wolf at the door pounds twice more.
"Open up, yarn ball. I can smell you through the door."

I hold my breath, weighing my options out. Of course she smells me; it's my house. My scent's probably on everything in here. That's not enough for her to go off of. On the other hand, I know she can break in anytime she wants (since apparently everyone in this fucking town's a locksmith but me). I might as well see what she wants.

Opening the door just a crack, I poke my nose through.

"Heyyyyyy! Betty. Good morning," I smile uncomfortably with only the front of my muzzle visible. Hopefully she can't smell me sweating.

"Got a minute?"

"Now's not really a good time, Betty," I begin politely. "Could you come back later?"

She appears to be considering it. "Sure I could," she responds with equal pleasantness in her tone. "I won't, though. Open up."

Oh, for fuck's sake. I might as well get one of those revolving door things they've got in those fancy high-rise hotel buildings. It's not like mine is keeping anyone out. With an audibly frustrated sigh, I open it wide to allow her entry. She trots in with a duffle bag slung over her shoulder and one of the lollipops I "gave" her as tribute in her mouth. At least it's not a cigarette; I don't need my place smelling like a smokestack.

"You've been putting this off long enough, wool boy," she says, shutting my TV off and dragging one of my chairs over to the middle of my kitchen floor. "It's obvious it's been too long since your last time." She points to the chair, eyeing me closely.

"My... last time?" I look down at myself awkwardly. How powerful is that nose??

She narrows her eyes, groaning. "That's not what I meant. Sit."

I feel compelled to obey, but I've still got enough defiance left in me after last night that I'm going to at least try making a stand.

"Betty..."

She narrows her eyes. "SIT."

"I'm sitting! I'm sitting!" So much for Cormo's last stand. I rush over to the chair and plop down on the seat, shivering uncontrollably. She tosses the duffle bag on my table before unzipping it and rummaging around inside.

"Good boy," Betty smiles condescendingly. "Now, you got a trash bag or anything like that?"

"There's a box with some wastebin liners under my sink," I mumble.

"Great. Let's get started, then."

"Started with--?"

There's a clicking noise uncomfortably close to my ear followed by a low electric hum. I scrabble to my feet in a panic -- I'd recognize that noise anywhere. She's got a pair of electric barber shears
in her paw, a real professional heavy-duty set. Probably for trimming fur on mammals twice my size.

"You're going to shear me?!" I squeak. "Come on, you don't think I can do that myself?!!"

"Obviously not. Look at you. No mirrors in your apartment?" She pulls the depleted lollipop stick from her maw, tossing it in my trash can. "Now, did I say that you could get up?"

"What is it with you all violating my personal space on a regular basis?!" I'm half-tempted to play the AI card again, but I get the feeling that'd have less pull with her than Charlie and the last thing I need is for the two of them to have it out in my living room. I like my apartment just the way it is -- intact.

Unlike Charlie, Betty's not the slightest bit interested in reasoning with me. I find myself being grabbed by the wool on the back of my neck and roughly yanked back into my chair. What goes around comes around.

"You get up again while I'm doing this, I'm not responsible for what happens next," she warns. "Now sit your ass still and let me trim you, cud-chewer. Look at it as I'm doing you a favor."

"Do you even know how to shear a sheep?" I ask, trying not to bleat. It's an instinctive thing. Sheep bleat when they're nervous, or when they're angry. Or scared. Or horny.

Or all of the above.

"I've got a pretty good idea," she mumbles, clicking the clippers on and off as if to test them. I feel like I'm being teased, toyed with.

"A pretty good idea'?!"

Betty scoffs. "How hard can it be?" She buries the razor to the hilt against the back of my neck, pinching my skin. I bleat out in pain, flailing my arms -- for a second I thought I'd just been stabbed.

"Oh, shit," she says, sounding genuinely surprised. "Didn't expect it to go so deep. You got any bandages?"

"Am I bleeding?" My eyes are watering. That really fucking stung! She grabs a paper towel from the counter, folding it up and jamming it into what feels like an open wound.

"Sucks, doesn't it. Listen, you're fine. Just barely grazed you."

Turning my head as much as I can, I glare at her.

"So then you don't know what you're dooooiisii--!!" I cut off mid-sentence as the clippers buzz against the back of my head, causing my teeth to vibrate. I barely avoid biting my tongue from the sudden jolt. "Wait wait wait, not the head, too!"

"Too late for that," she shrugs. "Unless you want a mohawk."

"Oh, god... fine, just take it all off, why don't you," I whine.

"Eh, suit yourself."

Seems she's getting the hang of it as she slowly begins working them up and down my head and back. Clumps of thick white wool flutter off of me and to the ground, landing in messy little piles.
It looks like it's snowing in here.

I lose track of how long Betty spends as the electric razor buzzes away at me, erasing my wool one thick stripe at a time. I'm too nervous to make conversation, but then, I can barely even talk to real barbers. I'm sure in her mind it's no big deal, but I'm on pins and needles here. Wool's more than just body hair for a sheep. It's a protective layer. Nature's way of insulating us against the undesirable elements.

A protective shell.

More of my wool flutters to the ground, exposing me. At some point she slid my shirt off so she could work unencumbered; I didn't even notice. Betty comes around the front and slides a paw gently under my chin, lifting my muzzle up. I avoid her eye contact as she continues shearing my neck, then chest, then belly. It's all coming off. Clump after clump after clump of my shell being peeled away like I'm a fuzzy white onion. Pretty soon most of me will be on the ground.

"Hell, Cormo. I thought for sure you were a fatass. There's more wool under here than there is sheep."

She's right. I'm not a big ram -- I'm actually pretty scrawny. I know what big rams look like, and I'm not one of them. Charlie might have a figure like a mop handle, but I'm not much better. With my wool gone, I feel like the skinny kid in gym class all over again.

I tremble, grumbling. "What do you want me to say about it?" She gives me an odd look, dusting off my bare shoulders with her claws, and again I find myself struggling to meet her gaze.

"Just pointing out that you're a fuckin' twig, yarn ball. Hell, it's no wonder you chomp bugs -- you need some meat on these bones."

I'm shivering and sweating all at the same time. Between being half-naked plus the residual effects of the coldfront, I'm still chilly and yet sweat's pouring off of me in buckets. I begin to fidget in my seat, instinctively wanting to run. This is not a pleasant experience. I've never been shorn by any other mammal but sheep for as long as I can remember. My mom stopped shearing me when I was twelve because I felt uncomfortable having someone else touch me.

Apparently I'm squirming too much. Betty grabs me by my shoulder to hold me still as she works the clippers around the sensitive skin of my underarms.

"You always this nervous when you get a haircut?" she quips, leaning in close to make sure she gets every last bit of wool on my arms. With nothing to protect me, I can feel her breath on my skin. It's probably thirty degrees outside and I still feel like I'm going to need to take an ice cold shower after this.

She begins to turn me in the chair so she can work on my other arm and side. Her rough pawpads and sharp claws grip my flesh as she spins me around, my back to her again -- and yet, as roughly as I'm being handled, she's not hurting me. Steeling myself, I convince myself I can do this. She's almost done -- she's got to be. She can't go much farther without it crossing over from being a friendly gesture -- if you can call this friendly -- to straight-up molestation. I should be fine as long as everything stays above the waistline.

She spins my chair again and I'm face to face with the enormous black wolf. She leans in uncomfortably close, her wet nose almost touching me. I can't tell if she's looking for something she missed.
Then she bites down on my neckline. Not hard -- she doesn't sink her teeth into me, but they're teasing my skin. Her mouth around my throat. I feel my heart stop as she looks up at me, looks me dead in the eye.

She speaks clumsily, her mouth full, and her hot breath washes over me. "I've tagging id."

"Wh-wh-wh-wh-" My tongue's gone numb. I can't seem to form words either.

Pulling her teeth away and sliding into my lap, she straddles me. I should be bleating in panic and yet every part of me's paralyzed like I've just been tased.

"Give it to me," she whispers warmth into my ear. "Give me all of it."

"G-give...?" I sputter, trying to focus on her. She snakes her arm around me, around my back, pressing me forward as the clippers begin to work their way down towards the seat of my pants. There's a vibrating sensation in my tail as she eases me against her body.

"Your wool. Give me all of your wool to carry out of here," Betty says flippantly, shutting the clippers off. "You don't want this shit all over your floor, right?"

I snap back to a reality I didn't even realize I'd left, and crane to look over my shoulder. The daydream fades, and Betty's still standing behind me. My entire body's quaking like the ground underneath my hooves is giving out.

"N-no. I don't."

Nodding, she stows the razor in the duffle bag before brushing herself off nonchalantly. Walking over to the kitchen, she opens the cabinet underneath my sink and pulls a couple of bin liners out of the box. Relief washes over me in waves as I pull myself to standing.

"Oh, and I left your little tail alone after all," she remarks, flapping the bag open. "I'm pretty sure I don't want to see what it looks like without the fluff."

"We done here?" I ask carefully.

"Yeah," she replies, eyes gravitating towards my waistline. I'm sure I look like a sight -- scrawny on top, thick on bottom. Like I've been cut in half and glued onto someone else's legs. "I'll let you take care of the rest, Cormo. I'm sure you have plenty of experience with that."

I gather my wits as she begins scooping the leftover wool into the bag.

"What," I manage, running a hoof along the baby-fine hair left on my skin. First time I've seen it in months. "What, you -- you some kind of nature-girl or something?"

"Huh?" she asks suspiciously, tying off the first of her bags full of wool.

"You said I have plenty of experience. What, you don't have any, then -- trimming below the belt?"

She pauses, a bundle of my wool in her hands as her smirk gives way to a grin. It's a toothy grin, but not immediately menacing. It could probably turn scary in a second, but she just shakes her head, amused.

"You're sick, grazer."

"Must be something in the air," I chuckle, walking over to my window.
"--experts have yet to determine the exact cause of the malfunction, but will continue with scheduled repairs. Nevertheless, residents of Downtown Zootopia should be advised that inclement weather will continue throughout the weekend."

I evened my trim out after Betty left and now my clothes are too baggy. Sighing, I shift uncomfortably beneath my blanket. When I had all the wool on, it felt great -- now it's itchy against my skin. I sip at my hot chocolate. I still don't think I've fully calmed down, but liberal applications of marshmallows and cinnamon are helping the process.

The latches at my door rattle, and instantly my mellow is harshed. I set my mug down and turn towards the door, having a sneaking suspicion I know who's coming through.

A caramel colored snout pokes through the door, sniffing the room, before the vixen wanders in. Charlie looks up at me as she crosses the threshold, sees my folded arms, and instantly I can see her mind whirling. All at once she reverses movements, like a video on rewind, backing out the door the exact way she came. I watch as she fumbles with the locks for a few seconds before giving up and knocking.

I stand up and walk over to the door, opening it. She's on the other side, still dressed in my shirt from last night. Underneath her arm is a giant white quilt, and in her free hand is a pizza box.

"I was going to erase the evidence of my transgression and attempt re-entry via more socially acceptable means," Charlie says. "Unfortunately I'm only really proficient at getting locks and latches open. Resealing them is still a touch beyond my capabilities."

"Of course," I chuckle in spite of myself. "So what, you back for another sleepover?"

She looks down at her quilt, then my shirt, then finally the box in her hands.

"I brought pizza," she states obviously as if that somehow answers everything. I have to admit, it does smell good -- I haven't eaten anything since this morning and even then I only had a little snack, not a full breakfast. "I wanted to return the favor since I've borrowed two of your meals now."

I lift the lid, half-expecting there to only be one or two slices left but to my surprise it's a piping hot and fresh pizza with the works -- onions, mushrooms, peppers, dragonflies. A pizza with premium toppings this big? Had to have cost upwards of eighteen bucks. I sniff -- the cheese smells real, too.

"Wow. All right," I answer. "Come on in."

"I knew you'd see reason."

She trots into the living room, setting the pizza box on the counter before foisting her quilt onto the couch next to my blanket. "I'll have you know that your hospitality doesn't go unappreciated. It's still unbearably cold in our apartment. In fact, last night I briefly considered burning some of Marty's book collection for warmth."

"But you realized that would piss him off?"

"No, I just couldn't find my thermite," she replies casually, reaching for a plate from my cabinet. Thermite? My eyes widen -- well, if I ever need to breach a fucking tank I know who to go to.

Shaking my head, I reach into the fridge and pull out a two-liter of orange soda, topping up a pair
of glasses. "So, you want to watch a movie or som--"

As I turn around, I see she's already behind my television adjusting some wires.

"You, uh, you okay there?"

"Just giving your cable box an upgrade," she replies absently. "I noticed this morning that you've only got the basic channel package, and that's hardly sufficient."

"You're stealing someone else's cable?" I choke. She replaces the cover on the box before scampering onto the couch, flipping over to a movie channel.

"No, Anneke and Wolter are stealing someone else's cable. I'm simply tethering our wagon to their cart, as it were. Now then -- how do you feel about horror?"

I look down at myself as I carry our plates over to the couch. I've already been terrified plenty ever since I moved in here -- nothing on the small screen would faze me at this point. She accepts her plate with a nod as I take my seat at the other end of the couch.

"I guess I'm down for whatever," I comment, raising a piece of pizza to my mouth. She sips at her soda contemplatively, holding the too-big cup with both paws.

"You're smaller than I expected," she murmurs. "But it's a nice look for you."

"Um, thanks. So, you didn't answer me. You staying over, or are you all set with this thing?" I ask, giving her quilt a tentative prod with my hoof as she flips through the digital menus.

"I won't be staying the night, no. As you can see I've managed to acquire adequate heating. I only stopped by to make sure my debts were paid."

I glance away from the screen, sizing up the quilt. It's immaculate white, and on the small size, but just right for someone Charlie's size. It's also ridiculously overstuffed, practically half-pillow.

"Yeah, it looks nice," I shrug. For some reason I'm not as excited about the prospect of an empty bed as I thought I was.

"I commissioned an acquaintance to procure it for me," she replies. "It's very comfortable. One hundred percent wool."

I look down at the pizza, then over to Charlie. Suddenly, my day makes perfect sense.

"You don't say," I mutter.
Feeling a bit too cooped up in his apartment, Remmy decides he needs some exercise.

It's been a few days since Betty's shear job and my impromptu sleepover with Charlie. The weather's finally warmed back up, and fortunately for me, my head wool's just about finished growing back in. I'm glad it comes back quicker than the rest, 'cause I looked damn weird without my usual coif. My first night to work after shearing, my boss (a beaver, hell of a nice guy but knows fuck-all about sheep) asked if I was undergoing chemo. Can't say I blame him for thinking so considering how frail I look right now, but at least we had a laugh about it afterwards.

I'm not laughing right now, though.

I'm staring at the ram in the mirror, and it chaps my ass to admit Betty's right, but I really am pretty
scrawny without all my wool. Here I was thinking I needed to lay off the fried food, and now I'm wondering if I shouldn't start doubling down on it. Even a little fat's better than the alternative of just skin-and-bones.

Truth is, I gotta get some exercise. Build some muscle. Yeah, sure, I might load trucks all night, but the forklift does almost all of the work. I'm not even on my hooves that much, and that's a bad thing since I don't want my muscles to atrophy or whatever. I really need to be in decent physical shape if I have to outrun a pred for whenever someone here inevitably snaps.

Then again, I have to wonder -- if any of my neighbors were to turn, what would it be like? Al or Betty would kill me in a second -- wolves, sheep, that's a given -- but what about the others? For instance, what would a savage Ozzy do? Laugh me to death? I know I could take Marty, and if I had enough forewarning I could probably fend off Charlie too. Plus, if there's any truth to this whole "primal nature" thing, I can't imagine Annie's and Wolt's basest instinct would be violence.

They'd probably be a little more, uh, carnal.

I shake the horrifying mental image free that I just gave myself. I've got more pressing concerns. My stomach's growling, so I hastily tug on my clothes before rummaging around in my kitchen for something to eat. In the back of my snack drawer I find a granola bar from one of my last trips to the grocery store. I make short work of it in just three bites. Not much of a breakfast, but it'll tide me over for now. Besides, last thing I want to do is eat heavy before I go for a run.

Speaking of going for a run, it dawns on me that going running on the street is probably a death wish with so many predators around. They've got that chaser instinct thing. I remember reading somewhere online that even non-savage preds are more likely to assault prey if they're fleeing. Something in their biology that kicks in when they see an animal running away from them, they just get this urge to chase. So I really need to find a place that's prey-friendly to burn off some steam. Trouble is, I have no idea where the fuck any nearby parks are. I guess I'm gonna have to try Zoogle Maps to see where that gets me.

The cell phone I have is about three years old. Actually, it's probably closer to six or seven years old -- it was three years old when I bought it. So basically in technology terms, that means it's ready for an oxygen tank and a walker. It's not like I can get rid of it, though, since it's one of the few luxuries I was able to keep before having to move into this neighborhood. There's no way in hell I could afford a new one if mine breaks.

Because my phone's so fucking old, I'm pretty sure they stopped doing updates for it a year or so ago. And also because it's so fucking old, most of the apps I've got installed run like shit, and that's even assuming they run at all. Zoogle's mapping app is the only vaguely reliable one I've got, and right now it's throwing errors at me and asking me if I meant "Park Street" instead. I don't even think there is a "Park Street" in Zootopia. I try searching directions to nearby fitness centers and a big red circle pops up around my neighborhood that just says "DRIVE AROUND". After five solid minutes of standing in my kitchen and arguing with my phone like a moron, I decide I've had enough of this shit. I shove it back in my pocket and step outside. Nothing for it, I'm gonna have to do a little legwork to get any useful info.

"Ho-leeeeee shit, what happened to your, uh, everything?" Wolter gasps. A fountain drink hangs forgotten in his paw as he gawks at me.

"Oh, uh, hey Wolt," I return, giving my doorknob a twist just to make sure it locked. Not that it matters for fucking anything, though. "Uh, I had to shear. Wool was getting way too thick. What, you never seen a shorn sheep before?"
He scratches the side of his head, seemingly pondering the question for a few seconds longer than is comfortable. "I mean, not outside of magazines, I guess," he finally responds. Magazines? "You're like -- wow, you're way more, uh, narrow than I had you pegged for."

I grin awkwardly, pinching a bit of my skin between my hooves for emphasis. "Yeah, that's just the wool, not fat. I'm actually kind of on the skinny side."

"Yeah, I can see that." He nods appreciatively, looking at me in the same way I saw some of the preds at the market admiring a cut of cheese. "Well, there's still hope for you yet if you tone your glutes. You'll fill out a pair of jeans pretty nice. Guys aren't my bag, but Anna, though? She'll probably flip when she sees you like this."

I pause mid-step, staring at him like he's lost his mind. I'm fairly certain Wolter just complimented my ass.

"Hey Wolt, d-do you, uh-- do you know where a nearby park is?" I stammer, trying to regain control of the conversation.

"Park?" Wolter leans forward way too close, squinting at me like he's never heard the term. "Like a carpark, or a parking lot, or...?"

"Nnnooooo... like a park. With grass and stuff. For exercising. Obviously I really need to go tone my 'glutes'."

Snorting, the aardwolf gives me a sleepy grin. "Huh. Well, I have no idea where a park is. I'm pretty sure they're all gonna be uptown, you know. Pack Street's not really the type to have that kinda thing. You try Zoogling it?"

"Yeah," I grumble. "Phone couldn't figure it out, though, so I'm kind of boned."

"Oh, hey! Try asking Avo," Wolter says as he raises his soda cup to his muzzle, chewing at the straw. "She's more of a fitness buff than I am. Or really any of us are, I guess."

"Avo, huh?" I wrack my brain -- now that I think on it, I don't actually know where Avo lives in the building. Or if she's even in this building at all -- for all I know she's next door over with Betty. "Where is she, anyway?"

Wolter jerks a thumb towards the ceiling. "Apartment directly above mine and Anna's."

Nodding, I set off for the staircase at the end of the hall, waving to Wolter as I go. I suppose that was about as pleasant of an encounter as I'm going to get with one of those two freaks.

The last thing I really want to do is go upstairs and ask Avo for anything, but Ozzy's words from our late-night rendezvous at the Bug Burga play back in my mind, and he's right: I can't make an island of myself here and expect to survive. Out of sheer self-preservation, I've got to get on better terms with my neighbors. If nothing else so I can have someone to hide behind in case of another mauling episode.

Sure enough, the floor above is exactly like the one below. I'm not sure what I was expecting -- this is an apartment building after all. The carpet's so thin and threadbare that I can hear my hooves clicking on the floor underneath as I make my way down the hall. Approaching Avo's apartment, I steady my nerves and rap lightly at her door three times. I convince myself I'm only shivering because of the residual cold weather combined with the loss of my wool. That's all. Definitely not because I'm nervous or anything.
After just a few moments of waiting, I almost lose my nerve and turn around when the door swings open. Avo makes a show of looking around in bewilderment before gasping theatrically and lowering her head to my eye level.

"Oh, hello, little boy!" she swoons with mock concern plastered all over her smug face. "Are you lost? Do you need me to help you find your mommy?"

"Yeah," I respond, pressing my hooves to my own muzzle, mimicking her tone. "Have you seen her? Tall egyptian jackal, beady eyes, typically has one stick in her mouth and another up her ass?"

She stands upright and her face twists into some strange look of amusement, squinting her narrowed eyes as if to read me. "Ooh," she hisses, "So you were adopted by some sassy bitch instead of raised in a proper home? That sure explains why you turned out to be such a grumpy malcontent, cotton swab."

"You got me. As much as I'd love to sit here and exchange jabs with you, I get the feeling you can out-smartass me, so I'll go ahead and concede defeat now," I reply.

"Wise of you. So, what brings you to the wolf's den, little lamb?" Avo asks as she steps aside, clearly inviting me into her apartment but making no effort to voice it. I hesitate only briefly before pulling my phone out of my pocket, waving it around with a shrug as I step inside.

"This stupid thing can't find a park nearby. Is there not a gym around here?"

"Trying to impress the girls, predophile?" she snorts, toothy smile widening.

I stop dead halfway into her apartment. I can feel my cheeks beginning to burn -- she actually just called me a predophile! Joke or not, that's a serious fucking accusation, and I'm not about to let it go any further. As I open my mouth to defend myself, a sudden wild thought sends a chill straight down my spine.

Did she find out about Charlie sleeping over with me?

No. No, there's no way. Even for all her faults, Charlie doesn't strike me as the type to tattle.

Then again, she obviously had some kind of deal in place with Betty since she ended up with my extra wool, and Betty could have let it slip to Avo. And even if she didn't, the fuckin' twins would probably sing it from the rooftops. It doesn't matter if Charlie and I didn't do anything, the walls are thin, we still probably kicked up a ton of noise when I had to chase her all over my apartment, and I know I wasn't being quiet when I ejected her.

None of that matters. If there's been a misunderstanding, the best thing to do is get out ahead of it. It's already bad enough my neighbors know I eat meat. Now they're making up rumors about my supposed sexual preferences, too? Living here is punishment enough, I don't want everyone believing I wanted to move here because I'm some sicko looking for a fix. I sure as shit don't need the stigma on top of everything else. This ends here.

I spin on my heels, jabbing my hoof towards the jackal's face. "All right, LOOK. I put up with a lot of shit, but I'm not some kind of fuckin' deviant, I won't stand here while you call me--"

She folds her arms and fires off a deadpan interruption. "I will go down on you right now if you admit you're a predophile."

"I'm not a predophile!" I nearly scream. I'm sure half the block probably heard me.
"All right, all right, bug boy. Suit yourself," she patronizingly responds, ruffling my headwool. "Anyway, look, it's good that you're coming out of your pen for a little exercise, you can obviously use it."

I bleat out a frustrated huff, still trying to come down from my righteous indignation and purposefully refusing to bite her bait. This is what I get for trying to reach out -- more slights at my expense. No different than the deal with Ozzy.

She sighs, rolling her eyes. "To answer your question, yes, there is a gym just a few blocks over from here. I was thinking of heading out anyway, so why don't you come have a seat while I pack my bag? We can go on over together."

She turns around and heads into the living room of her apartment, and after a second I gather my wits and reluctantly follow her. The layout's a two-bedroom, similar to Marty's and Charlie's place. In fact, I'm sure it's the same floor plan.

Interesting. Why does she need two bedrooms? Does she live with someone else, a roommate I haven't met? If she doesn't, and she's well-off enough to afford the higher rent payment for the extra bedroom, wouldn't she want to put the money towards a nicer part of town instead? Something off here, but I can't put my hoof on it.

As I step around into her living room, I take a look around. Her apartment's decorated with all sorts of eclectic art and knick-knacks -- carved wooden masks with painted tribal markings hang from the ceiling, while bizarre, obelisk-like sculptures line shelf after shelf of the bookcase in her living room. The predominate color scheme of the room seems to be gold and black. Most of the furnishings she has seem pretty fancy-looking at first glance, but when I take a closer look I realize it's all stuff that could be found in thrift shops or at yard sales. There's a big ripped-open bulk sack of lollipops on the table, which doesn't surprise me.

"I was wondering why you'd been holed up for the last few days," Avo casually remarks as she pulls a gym bag off of her kitchen pantry's doorknob. "Now I can see why. You were probably freezing your ass off."

"Yeah, it wasn't great," I agree, still cautious. I'm not going to give her any ammo to use against me. "So, uh, tell me about this gym. Do they at least have like, a weight room or exercise equipment? I prefer using an elliptical, but I'll settle for a treadmill if it's all they got."

"Ah, so that's the kind of gym you had in mind." After filling a water bottle from her sink and tossing it in her bag, she slings it over her shoulder and walks into her bedroom. "No, city boy. Think less 'gym membership' and more 'gymnasium'. P.E., not personal trainers."

I self-consciously prod at my loose skin with a hoof, watching as the light glints off of the baby-fine white hairs of wool just starting to grow back in. "Beggars can't be choosers," I mutter. "I'll take anything at this point. I just gotta stretch my legs."

"Oh, you'll get a workout. Maybe a no-frills one, but a workout nonetheless," Avo says. I hear her rustling around in her closet, and a minute or so later she comes out with her bag suitably packed. "I'm bringing a couple of towels and a clean change of clothes. Do you need a water bottle? I got a spare."

"That'd -- yeah, that'd be nice," I reply, almost expecting another snide comment to be paired off with it. "Thanks."

Nodding, she grabs and fills a second bottle before screwing the cap shut and handing it to me. I
accept it with a nod, tucking it underneath my arm.

"Alright, let's get going," she says. "It's a bit of a walk, but I don't get the feeling you mind. And don't worry, I'll go slow so your stubby little legs can keep up."

"Real 'big' of you," I fire back good-naturedly as we step out into the hall.

"Oh, god," she groans, rolling her eyes at the awful pun, "is that what passes for a quip to you?"

As we make our way down the staircase and into the lobby, I notice Wolter has since moved from his apartment door to being sprawled out across the couch downstairs with Anneke by his side. Some mindless daytime talk show's blaring away on the television, but neither of them seem particularly focused on it.

Annie lets out a whistle as I pass by, snapping her tiny muzzle at me as she rolls off of her brother's chest and onto the armrest. Unlike Betty's intimidation (or Charlie's sad attempt at the same), Annie's jaw snaps seem to be more flirtatious than anything else. Maybe it's some kind of aardwolf mating thing.

"Heeeeeeey, Cormo. You get the fuzz cut just for me? Mm, I appreciate you trying to--" Something in her eyes shifts as she sees Avo behind me, and she instantly sits up, having lost her train of thought. "Whoa, whoa. Where you two headin'? You guys going out on a date or something?"

A wicked look crosses Avo's face as she flashes her own gleaming sharp teeth at Anneke. "As a matter of fact, we are. Come along, prey." Avo slaps a possessive paw down on my shoulder, pushing me forward while holding eye contact with Anneke. I feel like I've just made some kind of deal with the devil.

Standing up at her full height, Annie scrabbles off of the couch and darts in front of the door, blocking our exit. There's an odd, almost crazy look in her eyes. I take back what I said -- she can be intimidating when she wants to be. I find myself backpedaling instinctively only to clunk into Avo's waistline. Fortunately for my pride, neither of them seem to notice my alarm.

"Hnnnnhh...! Fuckin'-- Cormo! First you dog me out of that slider, and now you're taking off outta nowhere with this ice queen?" She's alternating between growling like a wolf and hissing like a feline as she spits her words at me. Oh my god, she's actually jealous! Are these two going to get into a fuckin' fight over me?!

"Watch your mouth," Avo warns, but she's grinning in spite of herself.

"Told you she'd flip," Wolt offers lazily. Somehow I don't think that's what you had in mind, dude.

"Relax, Annie," I offer in a placating voice, both hooves up like I'm being held at gunpoint. "I'm just going for some exercise and Avo's taking me to the gym since I'm new in town. I'm feeling cooped up, is all."

Anneke's leaned into my face, squinting at me in a perfect (but way more aggressive) imitation of her brother's earlier behavior.

"You better not be dickin' with me, sheep," she grumbles menacingly. "I can totally smell if you're lying." I've never seen this side of her before, and I don't know whether to bust out laughing or cower in fear.

"Hey, speaking of smell, I have a great idea." Avo claps both of her paws together, leaning down to look Anneke in the eye. "Why don't you two munchkins change into some clothes that don't reek of
Sugarglide and silicone, and instead go work up an honest sweat with us at the gym?"

"Exercise?" Wolt mumbles from the couch. "Babe, I get enough of that rutting your mom every night."

"Oh, I know," Avo returns easily. "But the funeral home said they're getting new locks."

Anneke makes a horrified sound next to me, and Wolt bolts upright, muzzle crinkled in disgust as he arrives at the punchline. "Holy shit, Avo."

"My mom's not really dead," the jackal whispers to me.

"That's beyond fucked up anyway," I murmur, breathlessly.

She ignores me, clapping her hands once, sharply. "So! You two coming or not?"

"Hey, here's a fun question: why the hell would we want to do that?" Wolt retorts.

Avo buffs her claws on the fluffy fur poking out of her neckline. "Oh, I just thought maybe you'd like an excuse to meet the cute new instructors."

"Color me interested," he says, ears pricking. "What kind of instructors we talkin' about here?"

"A pair of snow leopard siblings from Tundratown who wanted a taste of the warm weather," Avo replies, producing her cell phone -- a much newer model than my own, surprisingly enough. Thumbing through her photos, Avo flashes Wolt a selfie of herself and the aforementioned leopards -- a brother and a sister with big-toothed smiles. "They're probably way out of whatever league you two are in, though."

"Oh, no, fuck that noise," Wolt returns. He's practically panting as Annie clambers up onto his shoulders for a look at the phone. "We're in! Uhhhh, what should we bring besides the usual stuff?"

"Change of clothes and something to drink. You don't want to get dehydrated."

"Oh, I'm sure we'll be getting plenty wet," Anneke throws over her shoulder as she and Wolter bolt up the stairs toward their room.

"They've got a one-track mind, huh?" I think aloud after a long silence.

Avo shrugs noncommittally. "You know what they say about glass houses, Remmy."

"What's that supposed to mean?" I ask.

"Ah, nothin'," she leans against the wall, waiting, "I just don't like talking shit about people behind their backs."

"You talk shit literally all the time," I counter, "it's basically the only thing you do."

"True," she grins, shamelessly, "but I do it to your face."

"And that's better."

"Sure. I get to see the look on it when I roast you," her smile splits so wide I briefly wonder if jackals and hyenas are related. I'm definitely seeing some Ozzy in that grin.
After just a few minutes the terrible twins come shuffling back down, dressed up in a pair of ugly lime green polo shirts and matching khaki shorts. Anneke's sporting a visor while Wolter's got a pair of cheap fake aviator sunglasses on the bridge of his snout, a price tag dangling loose from one of the earpieces.

"All set," Anneke boasts. "Let's go get our workout on."

Holy shit. Avo wasn't kidding when she said this place was no-frills. At the very end of Pack Street, nestled in between a defunct grocery store and a parking garage is a dilapidated, run-down building that clearly was once a high school gym. Despite the fact that the weather's warmed back up, I shiver as we walk up the steps to the front door. I'm half-expecting a gang of street thugs to hop out from behind the bushes and mug us, and now I'm really wishing I hadn't brought my phone.

A battered wooden sign hangs over the doorway to the gym, held up by two rusty chains. Across its surface are faded blue stencil letters, spelling out the name of the establishment along with its street number.

"Packer's Gym?" I ask as Wolter tugs the front door open.

"Sure, after the town's founder, Ruff Packer," Avo replies. "He was the first wolf to settle out here, back in the late 1800s. Street's named after him."

I step inside the lobby after Anneke. "Huh. I just assumed it was like, because of wolf packs," I reply, feeling kind of dumb for not knowing some incredibly obscure factoid, and I wave my hands sarcastically in the air, bracing for the snark. "Haha, point and laugh at the dumbass sheep, right?"

"Nahhhh, that's -- that's actually a pretty good guess." She seems genuinely surprised, like the thought hasn't crossed her mind. "I can sort of see why you'd think that. I mean, there are a bunch of canines that live around here."

No shit. I think Marty and I are the only ones in our building who aren't canines.

"C'mon," she continues, looking excited, patting me on the back and encouraging me further into the gym with her, "I'll give you the tour, get you set up."

Geez. This day keeps getting weirder and weirder. Avo, actually being tolerable to be around? Anneke doing the jealous high school girlfriend routine? I feel a headache coming on and we haven't even gotten started exercising yet.

The inside of the gym is in slightly better shape than the outside, but that's not saying much. My guess was correct: this is totally a former school gym. Makes me wonder where the school went. It looks like it's in the process of being renovated, but a fresh coat of paint and new flooring will only go so far in hiding age and fatigue. Most of the building's interior is dedicated to a basketball court, but the new owners have cleverly repurposed the areas where the bleachers were to squeeze some extra space out for exercise equipment. Granted, their assortment's nothing special -- a few stationary bikes, several rows of weights, couple of other miscellaneous pieces of machinery -- no treadmills, but it's more than my apartment's got, and for that reason alone I ain't gonna complain.

According to a sign on the lobby wall by the front desk, Packer's seems to be a community project, owned and run by the residents of Pack Street itself. No wonder it's in such pitiful shape. The gym and its equipment are free to use for the general public, but donations are welcomed. I fish my
wallet out of my shorts and drop a five spot in the metal lockbox. I figure it's the least I can do. I feel a hand on my shoulder and look up to see Avo giving me a subtle smile, but she says nothing.

"So where are these tennis instructors you promised us?" Anneke asks as the four of us wander into the gym proper. There's only a few other patrons inside -- a few canines, a couple of felines, but all predators. They seem to be pretty fit, so I'm going to take a shot in the dark and guess that they're regulars. I shrink into my wool self-conscious only to remember that it's not there, so I'm mostly just tucking my neck in like a dipshit.

"Out back at the tennis court, right behind the building," Avo responds. "Go through the set of double doors past the bikes and you'll be right there."

"Right on." Wolt snaps off a lazy salute as he and his sister scurry across the court, not even caring for the game they're interrupting to get to their targets. I feel sorry for whatever poor bastards are going to have to deal with those two horndogs.

"At least it's pretty quiet in here," I say while Avo leads me over to the weights where a Bengal tiger is busy spotting a lion in the process of benching.

"Yeah, this is pretty much dead," she replies, checking her watch. "You really don't want to come down here during peak hours; I made that mistake my first visit. Hey, Cliff."

"Hi, Avo," the tiger responds. "Who's your friend?"

"This grumpy little ball of buzzed-down fluff, my dear Clifford, is Remmy Cormo. He's our newest neighbor, if you can even fuckin' believe it."

"No foolin'. Well, nice to see some fresh meat in here," Cliff smirks, and I find myself dipping my head again out of nervousness.

Avo gives me a none-too-gentle shove towards the weight racks as she drops her bag on one of the nearby benches. "I suggest you start with the five-pounders, cotton swab," she grins, goading me. And there's the Avo I know and despise. It's like she cranks up her obnoxious factor whenever she's in a group.

Sighing, I set my water down and turn towards the weights, feeling like I'm being judged every step of the way. I know if I go for something heavy and then fumble it, I'll be more of a laughing stock than I already am. I grab something light, and I'll look like a pussy. Not to mention the fact that I've got hooves, and these weights don't come with the grips designed for a guy like me. I'd prefer an exercise bike, but my legs aren't long enough to reach the pedals without having to awkwardly reconfigure them, and the basketball court's not open. I'm pretty much stuck here.

"Hey, sheep," a voice interjects as I reach an indecisive hoof out towards the rack. "I gotta ask, how do you do it?"

"Do what?" I ask as I turn around, anxiously waiting for the incoming barb. The lion sits up, having finished his set. Dabbing at his mane with a towel, he points his free paw in my direction.

"How do you hide those enormous balls of yours?" he chuckles, extending his paw to me in a fist.

"Wh-- the--?" I stand there like an idiot for a second before realizing what he wants, and I fistbump him clumsily.

"Seriously, you got any idea how fuckin' rare it is to see prey in here? Surrounded by tigers, lions, and bears? Shit, most of them wouldn't set foot through the front door. Don't let Avo give you any
shit for it."

I glance up at Avo, who folds her arms indignantly -- though I'm pretty sure I see a tiny smile teasing her lips.

He continues, throwing the towel around his shoulders. "Half the prey I talk to wouldn't step into a room with a bunch of ripped meat-eaters. Too scared of us 'going savage' these days, or whatever."

"Well... thanks," I reply with a self-conscious smile, "I appreciate you guys letting me come cramp your style, uh..."

"Neil," the lion chuckles, sliding off the bench and onto his feet. "And nah, it's no big. C'mon, Cliff, let's give 'em some space."

As they head off for the locker room, I look back up at Avo who's leaning against the weight rack with an amused look.

"So, you still think I can handle the five-pounders, or should I start with something lighter, like cotton swabs?" I smirk back.

Two hours later we're on our way home from the gym and my muscles are burning. It's the good kind of burn, though -- that feeling of accomplishment that usually goes hand-in-hand with a hard day's work. It's what I came all the way over here for, so I'm not disappointed.

While it is true that I was hoping for something like a fitness center or a big open park to enjoy a brisk run, I think I ended up finding out about one of Pack Street's hidden gems. Sure, I got some weird looks. Yeah, Avo gave me shit and yes, I nearly dropped a barbell on my ankle. But for the most part, everyone I dealt with was indifferent, at worst. Cliff seemed all right, Neil was pretty chill. I learned they're both court regulars, so next time I come down here, I'm gonna relive my high school days and play me some b-ball. They might have me on size, but I wasn't the Stormclouds' best power forward for nothing.

"Oh my gawd, can we please stop and get something to eat?" Anneke pants as she and Wolter limp along after Avo. Both of them are clutching at their backs or sides, nearly doubled over in pain.

"Awww, did those snow leopards give you two a run for your money?" I ask, popping the cap off of my water bottle and downing the last of its contents.

"Uuuuuggh. No, dude, they weren't even there." Wolter rubs his stomach with a sour expression. "No, we had some fuckin' militant bear psycho, like some -- shit, this guy was like some drill sergeant asshole. He hit me with a serve and it felt like I'd been fucking shot."

Avo makes a show of snapping her fingers as if she's just now remembering something, and it's all I can do to hold back a laugh. "Ohhh! You know, I completely forgot! They're not there on Mondays and Tuesdays. Wow, of all the rotten luck. Well, guess you'll have to come along another time," she sing-songs. "I hope you two had fun tagging along anyway. A little bit of activity never hurts."

"Like hell it doesn't. I think I have internal bleeding," Anneke deadpans as the four of us pass a bakery. She turns and stares longingly through the window at the doughnuts and desserts, only for Avo to up the pace out of sheer spite.
Something in Annie's face just now reminds me of her earlier almost-tantrum when we were leaving the apartment building. I thought about it at the time but ended up putting it out of my mind, but for someone so blatantly promiscuous, she seemed damn protective of me when she thought Avo was horning in. Not to mention Avo running with it, though. I mean, I get the vibe that Avo's the type of girl to mess with people for her own amusement, but still. Between Anneke acting jealous and Avo being uncharacteristically nice (well, civil) to me?

I almost have to wonder if they're, y'know, into me. I can't blame them, I am kind of a novelty around here. I know Annie would go for a roll in the proverbial clover if I just asked her to (she's definitely made that clear by now), but I didn't expect that from Avo. It makes sense, though. The best way to direct attention away from yourself is to accuse someone else, and Avo sure was quick to label me a predophile today even if she was joking. And then there was that other comment she made. Was that just a joke, too? Maybe she's got a thing for sheep.

Maybe they both do.

As we round the last corner and the apartments come into view, I can see Ozzy relaxing out front on the stoop with his guitar in his lap. He catches sight of us and strikes an off-key chord, waving to our group.

"Hey, hey, if it isn't..." Trailing off, he looks me up and down like there's something wrong with -- oh, that's right. He's probably never seen a shorn sheep either. He starts giggling almost immediately, but I can tell he's trying to hold it back.

"Yeah, a little less 'woolly' and a little more 'bully' this week," I joke as we approach him. "It was getting a little too thick."

I just barely hear Wolt snickering under his breath. "Never such a thing as TOO thick."

Ozzy makes a strained sort of cough and clamps a hand to his mouth, fighting to contain himself. He bites his black lip and looks away from me, apparently unable to handle the sight. I'm riding too many endorphins to be mad, and honestly, it's just kind of amusing seeing a hyena try this hard not to laugh.

"Hey, uh, so, listen, Remmy. Today's take was solid, man," he struggles in a high-pitched tone, holding up a small roll of bills for emphasis. "If you -- snkkkk -- feel up to a little more walkin', uh, how-- how about you let me make good on that deal of ours and us go hit up the big Bug? Hell, the rest of you guys can come with if you want."

"Greasy food? Pass, I like my arteries the way they are," Avo says, waving him off. "Besides, I've got work anyway."

The twins exchange looks with each other before reluctantly following her inside. "I'm too beat after the Packer's Gym Massacre," Anneke adds as she limps up the stairs behind Avo. "Another time for sure, Ozzy."

Truthfully, I don't really feel like walking anywhere else, but our neighborhood busker seems a little downcast as they disappear inside. The laugh he was fighting to hold back seems to have left. I get the feeling that Ozzy's the opposite of Avo -- he's more chipper and pleasant the more people are around. Seems about right, after seeing him in action at the party.

"Yeah, I'm in, music man," I respond. "It's pretty nice outside today. How about you run upstairs with me and see if Charlie and Marty want to tag along while I go change?"
His easy grin returns, his face splitting wide. "Totally, man. I'll go get 'em while you do your thing." Standing up, he opens the door for me, and as I pass by to head up the stairs he gives me a playful jab in the gut. "Oh, and -- good to see that ramrod workin' itself loose."

"A little moving around will do that," I call back after him.
Chapter Summary

A peculiar visit, and a deal under the table.

A cold beer, a bag of chips, and a basin full of hot water and epsom salt for soaking the hooves. Sometimes the little things go a long way towards soothing a tired sheep.

It's right at about eight in the morning and my shift's wrapped up for another night. One of our forklifts broke down and since I have the least seniority at work, I had to haul boxes the old-fashioned way. Between the workout I got at the gym and the one I got today, my muscles were burning even long before I had to hobble home. For once, my neighbors aren't being loud or obnoxious, so I'm glad for the opportunity to rest today, because I sure as hell need it.

Or at least I should need the rest, but despite my body being tired, my mind's not. I'm questioning
my decision to move towards a more nocturnal schedule, but this only really happens every once in
a blue moon, where I find I'm not really sure what to do with myself. I wonder if everyone else
around here suffers from the same dilemma, because I notice the others are constantly hanging out
in the downstairs lobby, or drifting up and down the halls of the building. I can't say I blame 'em --
nobody here's really loaded with cash, and fun activities out and about usually come with a
pricetag. It's a sacrifice to eat anywhere nicer than a fast food restaurant. Something like a vacation
would be totally out of the question.

Apparently whoever Anneke and Wolter were skimming cable off of has since grown wise, and
now I'm back down to just the bare basics. Every TV channel is covering the latest savage predator
attack nonstop and even I can only take so much fearmongering. Prey pundits are acting like it's the
end of the world, while pred anchors would rather blame shift or pretend the problem doesn't exist.
The new mayor's judgment is constantly being questioned because she's a sheep (something I
especially take offense to), with commentators suggesting she doesn't have the right character to
lead, just because she's a ewe. Yeah, let's ignore the fact they just locked up the previous mayor.
He was obviously doing a much better job!

I fear being mauled as much as the next guy but the propaganda on both sides is just ridiculous. If
there's one thing that pisses me off, it's people who can't realize how blatantly specist they are.

I shut my TV off out of disgust and not two seconds later a series of shrill whistles from outside my
window draws my attention. My ankles are beginning to prune anyway, so I slide the now-
lukewarm basin aside and stand up to see what the commotion is. It's not long before I spot the
source of the ruckus and suddenly I'm as awake as can be.

I'd never believe this if I wasn't seeing it with my own eyes. A tall, slender deer doe is walking
down Pack Street right in front of me. Holy shit, how does she not know where she is right now?
There are a handful of working preds ogling her as she hustles along, completely oblivious. I mean,
I don't think they'd do anything too bad in broad daylight, but then again they treat me like a chew
toy, and I'm a local.

Getting a look at this girl, she seems like some kind of nurse or pediatrician or something. She's
dressed in one of those plain, unassuming uniforms that doesn't quite look like a set of scrubs but
might as well be. An ID badge hangs from her front pocket and she's got a manila folder stashed
under one arm. Interestingly, she's got a budding little set of horns on the top of her head. I didn't
know does could grow horns, but I guess you learn something new every day. I'm tempted to ask
her what her secret is.

She stops in front of our building to flip through her folder, and as she does I notice Betty strolling
over from next door. Uh oh. I hope for the doe's sake Betty's not coming for another insane wolf
duel with Al. There's no way a petite girl like her would survive being slapped around if she got
cought in the crossfire. I shake the water from my hooves before stumbling over to the door. I know
better than to go get involved, but I still have a really weird feeling about all of this right now and it
won't hurt to at least watch from the lobby.

As I head downstairs, I overhear laughter coming from below. The two of them are walking inside
together as I descend the last few steps. The doe's smiling, Betty's smiling -- well, okay, it's more
like an amused half-smirk -- and to my shock, she's holding the door open for the deer as they walk
into the sitting area. Betty sure doesn't look like she came over for a dominance display. Still, her
being this nice to a prey girl? I'm not even sure what to make of all this, but at least it doesn't seem
like there's a problem. Besides, she's safer in here than she is out there.

The doe in question trots into the sitting area, her cloven-hoofed feet clicking across the poured
cement floor, and takes a seat on the couch with her folder in her lap. Betty simply leans against the wall, folding her arms. I realize I'm super obvious standing on the last step of the staircase and I can't really turn around and go back to my room without drawing attention to myself, so I just nonchalantly step into the lobby and make my way towards the ratty old magazine rack.

"Didn't expect you yet," Betty remarks. Her tone's pleasant enough, not accusatory. Good. They know each other, crisis resolved. I grab a random magazine and flip it open without even reading the cover, leaning against the front desk as I eavesdrop. I only plan on sticking around a minute or two before heading back upstairs.

"I had business in the neighborhood today, and I thought I'd come by while I had the opportunity. How are you?" The doe's voice is soft and polished, affirming my initial suspicion -- she's gotta be a doctor or some kind of professional. She speaks with that practiced style -- bedside manner, I think it's called.

"Same as ever," Betty shrugs.

The doe looks around the front of the room, but doesn't seem to notice me. "Is Al around today?"

"He's at work right now, I think," Betty mumbles, shifting her weight from one foot to the other.

"Ah, okay," the doe responds quietly.

Betty stretches, walking to the door and cracking it to peer out at the street as she talks. "So, what brings you in today?"

Smiling, the deer taps her hooves to her folder. "Ozzy brings me here, of course," she laughs. "Our monthly visit's not supposed to be for another week or so but I had some free time today, so I figured I'd drop by early and get him to sign off on some paperwork."

Ozzy? Our resident hyena needs a monthly visit? So this is a regular thing? Well, I suppose there's no reason it couldn't be. I haven't been here too long...

"Oh yeah, of course." Betty brushes some dust off her shirt, nonplussed. "You want me to let him know you're here?"

Our guest nods again. "If it's not too much trouble, Betty."

"No trouble at all," Betty responds before turning directly to me. "Hey, yarnball. Put that makeup catalog down and make yourself useful. Go tell Ozzy he's got company coming by in a minute."

I look down at the magazine in my hands only to realize it really IS a makeup catalog. And I'm holding it upside down. With a nervous chuckle, I tuck it into the magazine stand as Betty gives me a "you aren't fooling fucking anybody" glare.

It's not hard to find Ozzy's room. I managed to remember what he'd told me at the party: he's right under me. Kind of weird I've never heard much noise from him. I expected guitar practice all day, but he must keep to the streets for his playing. Suits me fine. I'm sure he's a decent musician and all, but I'd rather not have to cram wool in my ears at all hours.

I knock three times.

There's a long silence. I knock again.

Finally, just as I'm about to turn away, there's a response from behind the door. "Yeah!"
"Ozzy?" I confirm.

"Yep!" He's awfully short on words for a guy who's usually so chatty.

"Hey, it's Remmy." This is made a little more awkward by not knowing the particulars, or even the girl's name, so I just tell him what I know. "Uh, so, I'm letting you know you've got company. There's a deer in the lobby who said she's coming to see you in a minute."

There's another uncomfortable silence.

"Ozzy?"

I can hear a drawn-out sigh from the other side of the door slowly grow into a groan. "Can you, like... ugh, tell her I'm not here?"

I don't like this being put on me, so it's lucky I don't have to make the call on this one. "Sorry man, Betty seems to know you're here already."

Another pause, then another sigh. "Crap. All right, man."

"I'll uh, let 'em know you'll be here."

"Thanks, Remmy," he replies dejectedly, confirming what I'm already suspecting: something's up. He almost always calls me by that obnoxious nickname, so the absence of "woolly bully" is a clear indicator that all's not well. Unfortunately, there's nothing I can do for him -- it looks like he's on his own for this one.

Speaking of being on their own, it looks like Betty's taken off for the moment, leaving our guest by herself in the lobby.

"Hi," I venture as I cautiously head into the lobby, waving my hoof to get her attention. "Ozzy's in his room and ready to see you whenever."

She looks up from the paperwork in her lap, absently chewing at the cap on one of her ink pens. "Oh, thank you," she replies with a smile. "You must be, uh -- Remmy? The new sheep tenant, right?"

I nod, not particularly surprised. Betty probably told her who I was. "Yeah, that's me," I reply nervously, extending my hoof to hers for a shake. "Remmy Cormo. I live in the apartment right above Ozzy's. I just moved in, haven't been here too long."

"My name's Velvet Roe." she says, pressing her hoof against mine and shaking it. I notice she doesn't grasp my hoof tips, but rather taps hers against my own in a very dignified, prey-friendly manner. It's one of those little things most predators with hands and paws don't pick up on, but it's more socially acceptable to press against a hoof rather than grip it. "It's nice to meet you, Remmy."

"Yeah," I smile earnestly, taking a seat next to her. I already feel like I'm talking to someone on equal footing for a change. "It's nice to meet you, too. Can I ask what this is all about?"

"I'm with the city; I do a lot of work with people like Ozzy," She flips her folder back open discreetly, and resumes writing something. I'm not perfectly sure of what she means by that, but I've got a couple of ideas and none of them are pretty. "Ozzy mentioned you the other day in one of
his messages to me."

I laugh. "Only good things, I hope."

She doesn't glance up, flipping to a new page. "He said you humiliated him in front of an entire restaurant."

My jaw drops. I sit there trying to find the words, but for a minute all I can do is raise my brows to varying degrees of surprise while she peruses her folder.

"It wasn't like that," I finally manage. "He's got it backwards. See, he was trying to-- He didn't have the money to pay for food and--"

She laughs lightly in response -- but it's gentle, calming, not cutting. She looks up and offers me a smile, warm and genuine, and puts her hoof on my arm. "Ah, Remmy, I'm sorry, I didn't mean to accuse you. Please, it's all right. I'm sure you only did what seemed right at the time. I only mention it because sometimes... not everyone realizes when some people need a little more consideration."

A little more? I don't get ANY consideration around here. I sit there for a second, scratching my head, before she continues.

"Besides, he said you two worked it out, in the end."

"We did," I agree quickly.

"Well, good! I'm very glad to hear you're fitting in all right," Velvet claps her folder shut, giving me her full attention. "And speaking of which, I've got to ask -- what on earth brings a ram to Pack Street of all places?"

"Finances mostly," I respond, which is almost all of the truth. "I'm between houses right now and this was the only place within my, uh, budget."

Velvet nods, tapping her pen idly against her folder. "Mm. I know what that's like. Hard times can take us places we don't expect. Keep your chin up, it gets better!"

"Haha, thanks. That's what I wanna hear," I chuckle. "Does your work bring you down here frequently, or just every once in a while?"

"She's practically a regular in our neighborhood. I almost find it surprising that your paths haven't crossed before now, considering the frequency of her visitations," Charlie comments from beside me. Startled, I jump just a little, not having heard her arrive. "Good afternoon, Ms. Roe. I see you've already become acquainted with our resident oddball."

"You're the last person I want to hear call me an oddball," I grumble. Charlie raises an eyebrow, while Velvet giggles, getting up from her seat.

"Good to see you again, Charlie. I'm actually on my way to go visit with Ozzy right now."

"Of course," Charlie responds knowingly. "Please, give him our regards. Cormo?"

I nod politely as she heads off to go do her job.

"Nice meeting you, Velvet," I add as the doe moves past us.

"Likewise, Remmy! It was nice talking with you. See you guys later!"
Wow, a legitimately pleasant discussion. Even if it was brief, it was a nice breath of fresh air to have someone talk to me like I'm a normal mammal. Interaction with someone who isn't poking at my wool, or insulting my taste in food, or breaking and entering into my apartment. Just a nice, reasonable conversation. I'd almost forgotten what those were like.

As Velvet trots towards Ozzy's room, Charlie turns to me with a smirk. Her hands clasped behind herself, she rocks forward and back on her feet. "Say, Cormo. I have it on decidedly good authority that Bug Burga is in the process of phasing their firefly sauce out in favor of new, seasonal flavors."

"What.

"Didn't they just get it in? That stuff's amazing -- why the hell would they drop it?!!" Screw that noise. That's complete bunk -- the firefly sauce is one of the best things about Bug Burga, hands down. If it can make even their cricket dippers taste amazing, you could probably spread it on the heel of an old boot and it'd be delicious.

"No doubt another neurological misfiring of some typically-overpaid corporate executive. It's not without socioeconomic consequences either -- there's already a growing panic. Packets of the sauce are going fast on Camelslist for a dollar each."

I practically flinch, shaking my head in shock. A dollar a packet? For fast food sauce? I mean, it's good, but geez...

"You're kidding! I mean, I guess I can see why -- where else would someone get it from? Still, though, a buck each?" I suppose I can kiss it goodbye, at least for the time being. That's a damn shame -- it's so zingy and zesty, and you can really taste the fireflies, too.

"I spoke to my man at our local establishment, an individual you may know by the moniker of 'T. Rex'," Charlie continues. "Apparently, for a moderate greasing of his presumably already-greasy paws, he's willing to, let's say, relax the limits on how many packets one can receive with their meal."

Rex is in on this? No wonder. "How relaxed are we talking about? Usually there's a limit of just like one or maybe two with an entree, right?"

"Mm. He's talking about 'relaxing' it to the tune of smuggling half a box of firefly sauce packets entirely to our person. And it just so happens I'm in contact with a buyer right now who's willing to pay seventy-five cents on the dollar for any packets we bring him, which he himself will resell for a profit. All I need is someone to help with the initial capital... and who can haul a bit of freight. I have reason to believe you're no stranger to that."

Aaaaand there's the angle. I knew Charlie had some kind of game to run, and now I see what she's thinking. Reaching into my pants pocket, I check the contents of my wallet. Good thing today was payday, I can see I have an investment to make in Bug Burga futures.

"So... you want to go grab a burga then?" I ask with a smirk of my own.

"I was thinking perhaps a few dozen. After all, it'd only be neighborly for us to share our good fortune, right?"

Nine AM, and Bug Burga might actually be MORE packed than it was the last time we were here. And that was supposedly prime time!
Unlike Ozzy and the twins, Charlie has no remorse when it comes to manipulating people. The line's well out the door, and yet we only end up having to wait about three minutes to get served because she somehow manages to sneak us all the way towards the front of the line without anyone noticing. How she did it, I have no idea -- must be a fox thing. I know I ain't complaining.

"Next in line please," Rex drawls from behind the counter. As we start to step forward, I freeze in place.

A sheep is in line in front of us. A ewe, to be specific. Sharp glasses, a beautifully-trimmed coat with a puffy flourish around her cheeks, and light, pretty makeup. I can feel my heart catching in my throat -- an actual sheep. A prey species, real prey -- not even a big tough rhino or an elephant but a real, serious, bona fide prey species like me? Buying a burga? I knew I wasn't the only one.

"Look, Charlie, look!" I whisper urgently, elbowing her in the side. "See? Look at that -- what do you see right there?"

"Yeaaaah, lemme get a number, uh, let's go with a four?" the ewe says, snapping a piece of bubble gum. "And some of that, uh, firefly sauce. If you have it."

Rex starts to say something but stops upon seeing Charlie and myself in line. "Sorry ma'am, we're all out of firefly sauce," he chuckles slowly, winking at us. "But we've got honey cicada mustard right now."

"Sure, whatever."

I'm riding fucking high right now. This is awesome -- I'm right here with one of my own neighbors in front of proof positive that I'm not some sicko with a weird fetish. 'Uncommon' doesn't mean 'nonexistent'. Charlie watches passively through her squinty eyes, and it's all I can do to keep from breaking out into a dance. I'm half-tempted to ask for this girl's phone number.

"Five thirty-eight," Rex says as he takes her money, counting her change out. "Please wait at the next counter over and your order will be right out."

I hand Charlie my half of the cash for our order (and Rex's bribe). "Order for us, I'll be right back," I whisper to the vixen. She looks up at me skeptically but nods, moving forward in line as I excuse myself to jog over to the pickup queue.

I smile, hooves raised, as I approach the girl. "Hey, whoa! Sorry, I just -- I had to ask, if you wanted some firefly sauce, I--" I clear my throat, trying to get a hold of myself. I'm running my mouth and I'm more excited than I realized. "Ha, sorry, it's... it's so weird to see another prey in here, right?"

The ewe looks up at me from her cell phone with a neutral expression, still smacking and popping her gum. "Yeaaah, like, we're always expected to be 'understanding' of such a disgusting habit, you know?"

"Haha, sorry, what?"

"The fucking bugs. Can't stand the smell. I've got to walk in here with a wad of gum in my mouth like I was chewing cud, just so I don't taste it in the air. Shit's just disgusting." She waves a hoof around, clearly put-out by the restaurant and the customers. " Fucking had to work for a boss with a taste for greasy dead bugs. But hey, could've been worse. I could've ended up with a dog like you did."
Blinking, I step back a little. "S-she's a fox, actually," I reply as a broad hyena leans over from behind the counter, folds up her bag, and hands it off to her. "And she's not my--"

"Whatever. You see one dog, you've seen them all." Taking her sack of food, the ewe roughly brushes past me, muttering as she heads outside to her car. "Fucking predos."

Oh.

Okay. So it's like that, huh.

Slumping as I turn on my heel, I look around at the crowd of hungry, impatient predators for Charlie. A painted wolf glares openly at the ewe as she leaves. "Hey, fuck you, specist," she spits.

"Yeah, yeah. Bite this, chomper," the sheep rudely gestures back, before ducking out the door with her head held high.

After a moment I spot Charlie quietly standing by the counter with our order number in her paws, an unreadable look in her eyes. I get the feeling she just watched the whole thing transpire, and I'm at a complete loss as to how to respond.

"Next in line, please?" Rex calls out.

"You weren't kidding when you said a few dozen," I comment with a weak laugh as I tote the box full to overflowing with our spoils. 24 burgas and Rex decided we needed a box to carry them all. No one seemed to notice that it had been crammed with firefly sauce packets. I'm glad Bug Burga isn't too far from where we live. I've had enough of hauling stuff for one day.

Charlie glances up at me, pulling her turtleneck collar up tight to her fuzzy chin. "It was a worthwhile investment. Just doing the mental math, if I'm right -- which I am -- we'll come out about eighty dollars to the green after I drop the sauce off with my client. We'll split the take evenly, of course."

"Along with a ton of burgas for everyone in our building. Not a bad haul for one day," I comment. "Maybe Anneke will finally climb down out of my wool about that slider now."

Opening the front door for me, Charlie motions into the lobby and I spot Velvet on the sofa. I didn't expect our guest would still be here -- Ozzy, on the other hand, is nowhere to be seen. To my surprise, she's sitting with Al, having a conversation. If Velvet can get along with even Al, she really must be a regular. The big white wolf's dressed up way nice, wearing a dark blue button-up shirt and a pair of pressed slacks. Even his headfur's combed nicely.

"Looking sharp as ever, boss," Charlie quips.

"Hey, Charlie. Cormo," he greets almost benevolently. "Whatcha guys got there?"

"Two dozen fresh, hot bug burgas -- and one salad for Ms. Roe," Charlie answers, popping open the box as I drop it on the coffee table. "Dinner -- or I suppose a very early lunch in your case, Velvet -- is on Cormo and myself today. And I must apologize in advance, Al, as they were out of firefly sauce."

"Uh huh," he responds with a dubious expression, looking at the paper bags wedged inside, visibly overflowing with sauce packets. "And these are for everyone?"
"Let's just say we had a windfall," I respond, fishing the bags of sauce out one by one while Charlie produces a burga box and a napkin for Al. Gotta show respect to the alpha or whatever, I guess.

"Hey, cool. Thanks, guys," he says, flipping the lid open and pressing his muzzle to the bun to inhale the scent as Velvet accepts her salad from Charlie with a smile.

"I really would love to stick around and eat with you all but I'm afraid I have to get back to it if I'm going to make Flock Street for my next appointment. I'm totally taking this salad though, since I ran out of the house without breakfast," Velvet says, laughing. "Thanks, both of you. You're lifesavers."

"No big deal," I offer.

Charlie carefully takes the bags of firefly sauce from my arms, heading upstairs to her room. "Safe travels, Ms. Roe."

"Take care, V," Al says, setting his food aside to open the door for her.

As Velvet leaves, I turn to look at my neighbors. Al collapses heavily onto the sofa and rests his head back over the top, yawning. And right on time, here come Annie and Wolt practically tumbling down the stairs in excitement -- I guess Charlie must have notified them, or their mooch radar must have gone off. Either's equally likely. Marty and Charlie soon follow right behind the twins.

"Do I even want to know what my roommate's been up to?" Marty groans as Annie knocks her brother over to scamper towards the table loaded with burga boxes.

Charlie looks down at him with a deadpan expression. "DO you?"

"Don't look a gift dinner in the mouth, Marty," Anneke chastises as Wolt picks himself up off the floor. "Al, you wanna turn the game on?"

"There's a game on?" he grunts, glancing sideways with some effort. "News to me."

"Fuck if I know if there's a game on, I just don't want to watch whatever the hell boring -- is that the fucking weather channel?! Get that shit outta here! Get me some hunky quarterbacks in their tight-ass little running pants!" She flops next to me on the couch with her food while Wolt and Marty peel off a couple of boxes of their own from our enormous pile.

"Actually, while you do that, I'll be right back," I remark, standing up from my seat.

"Right back? Is he eating with us?" Wolt murmurs in a not-quite-whisper, looking up from his free meal.

"He paid for it, he can eat where he wants," Al mutters into the air. That seems a good enough answer for the lot, and Wolt shrugs and goes back to his burga.

I grab a couple of boxes and head off. I've got one more thing to do before I can dig in.

I arrive at Ozzy's door. Knocking twice, I wait patiently for him; after half a minute the latch slides over and he pokes his head out, looking decidedly shaken.

"Velvet, I thought we were--"

"Nope, sorry -- just me this time," I respond, shoving a burga box into his paws. He looks down at
it with some surprise. "Long story, but we've got a ton of these things. Come help us eat 'em before
they go bad. Please."

Holding the box in his hands, Ozzy nods, a smile snapping onto his muzzle like a switch just got
flicked. "You have -- you mean to tell me you guys got TOO MUCH food for once? This I gotta
see."

"You don't believe me, huh?" I snort, motioning behind me.

Ozzy follows me out to the lobby, and when he sees Burga Mountain, his smile grows so big I
almost worry it might go all the way around and lop off the top of his head.

The twins giggle in stereo, seeing Ozzy's silent, awestruck reaction. He whistles appreciatively,
licks his chops cartoonishly, and slaps one hand down on my shoulder.

"So!" I look up to see him grinning down at me. "We got any sauce?"
A bored Remmy visits Pack Street’s public library and begins a strange adventure.

"Pack Street has a public library?"

"Don't act so surprised, Cormo," Anneke says, helping herself to one of my honey mustard pretzels. "You've got this shocked look on your face like you just learned preds can read."

"Hey now. I'm not that big of an asshole," I mutter as I forcefully pull my pretzel bag out of her claws. "I've just never seen it, is all. I'm not a big reader or anything, but it'd be nice to know about in case I ever need a book on something. So where is this library at?"

"Oh, it's right at the end of the street before you turn off onto Trip." She licks honey mustard powder from the ends of her paws, tail twitching. "Marty works there, actually."

While I didn't know that either, it comes as no surprise at all. The guy's apartment practically is a library with all the bookshelves, so I guess it makes sense that he'd work someplace he would be surrounded by more books.
"Books are kind of like, an obsolete medium when you think about it," Wolt pipes up, tossing a pretzel in his mouth like a mirror image of his sister. I look down at my hoof and realize my bag's gone south again. Damn, these two are good. I instinctively feel around for my wallet to make sure that hasn't been clipped by the aardwolf twins, too.

"Yeah," Annie says, sticking her entire muzzle in the pretzel bag, thus eliminating any desire for me to reclaim it. "If there's anything you really need to know, Zoogle that shit. Books are nice and all if like, you forget to pay your light bill, but I'd rather watch a movie than read a novel."

Wolt scoffs, rolling his eyes exaggeratedly. "If your lights are out, how the hell are you gonna read, genius?"

"Oh my god. You know what I mean, Wolt," Annie groans, "He can use a candle or something."

"He can't!" Wolt insists, gesturing to me incredulously. "Look at that coat! Do you want him to fucking burn alive?"

"Oh my GOD, you are soooo fucking specist!" Anneke returns, raking her claws down her face in frustration before turning to me. "He's wearing wool, not fucking gunpowder!"

"Pssshhhh."

Wolt pulls the bag away from her, dumping a handful of pretzels into his lap before holding out the almost depleted bag in my direction as if to offer me one.

"Pass. That's really useful to know, though. I want to be aware of all of the, uh, services Pack Street has to offer."

"Heh. I bet I can think of a few 'services' that you could use," Annie cracks, predictably. "You're obviously... tense."

"Yeah. Tense," Wolt echoes, eyebrow raised.

"Cute," I growl.

I can't really think of any situation in which I'd truly need to go to the library -- like Annie said, if there's anything you desperately need to know, the internet's faster and more reliable. Then again, I don't own a computer and if anything happened to my cell, I'd be up a creek. Might not be bad to familiarize myself with its location. Swilling down the last of my root beer, I pitch my empty bottle in the trash.

It's about six in the morning on my day off. I've been killing time lounging in the downstairs lobby, trying to figure out what I want to do with the rest of my morning. I don't really feel like heading to the gym, but I'm also kind of cooped up. Until I get my share of Charlie's firefly sauce deal tomorrow, funds are a little thin so my options are limited right now.

Fuck it, might as well go see what this library's all about.

I change into a fresh shirt and grab my personal effects from my room before turning around and heading back downstairs. "You said it was at the end of the street by Trip, right?"

"That's right," Wolt replies. "You gonna go check it out? Tell Marty I said hey."

"Will do."
I close the lobby door behind myself and step out into the early morning warmth. Pack Street's lively as ever, most of the nocturnal predators around having just gotten off of their work shifts for the day while the diurnal ones are starting fresh. I'm surprised at how many of them seem like they're in good moods -- I'm seeing a more smiles and getting fewer stares than usual. If I didn't know better, you could convince me this was actually Zootopia.

"Yarn ball," Betty drawls out to me lazily from her porch. She's stretched out on her back, basking in the sunlight. "Where the fuck are you off to?"

"Hi mom," I call back with a fake smile. "Is it okay if I go to the library? I promise I'll be back before curfew!"

She rolls her eyes, raising a cigarette to her muzzle with a smirk. "Get the hell outta here before I beat your stupid ass."

Snickering under my breath, I hurry along on the off chance she actually feels like making good on that promise.

A dull, tarnished plaque bearing the name "Pack Street Public Library" along with an establishment date beneath that's just a bit too faded to read hangs next to the door. While the building's notably old, it's in well-kept condition. I can tell that whoever's responsible for actually maintaining the place is devoted to their job. The gutters are clean, the porch is swept and the windows are polished.

Opening the door, I step inside and the musty smells of paper and lemon furniture polish instantly fill my nostrils. It's a weirdly familiar scent, one that dates all the way back to elementary school age. I can't say I really mind it, even if I do feel like I should be cramming for a test, or eating one of those little store-bought plastic lunch trays with crackers, apple slices, and peanut butter.

Adorning the walls are off-beat posters with cutesy, fun slogans, clearly to get children interested in reading books. The way kids today are more interested in their phones or computers than anything else, I doubt their effectiveness, but it's still nice to see someone putting in the effort. Upon closer inspection, it seems that almost every single poster in here is handmade. The art quality's not professional grade, but it's better than almost anything a child could make. Interesting.

The library itself isn't particularly huge -- I can see clear from one end to the other, but the bookshelves that are here are packed floor-to-ceiling, overflowing into carts and bins and shelves. Obviously they're not hurting for books -- if anything, space is the more valuable commodity.

As I walk into the lobby proper, I overhear bits and pieces of two male voices arguing. I recognize Marty's voice instantly -- he's infuriated as ever -- but whoever he's talking with sounds almost as pissed-off as he is.

"I'm just saying you're not paying attention to the characters!" an otter leaned against the counter snaps, pushing the glasses at the end of his nose up further onto his face. "I can't believe you -- it's a great story!"

"Oh my god," Marty shouts back from the counter, leaned against the librarian's computer. "Listen to yourself, you sound like a fucking idiot. I'm not even sure JK Growling would shill that fucking hard for her books. She knew it was shit when she wrote it. Fucking series never should have lasted more than one, two books tops."
"It's got a great -- a really good, great storyline!" the otter shrieks, yanking at the collar of his polo in exaggerated desperation. Patrons all over the library are hissing at both of them to be quiet, but Marty clearly doesn't give a shit -- which is a great attitude for the librarian to have, if the plaque on his desk informs me correctly.

"So you're a repetitive dipshit then too. Do you even understand what the word 'storyline' actually means?" Marty's beside himself, quivering. "You know there's more to writing than just the plot, right? Any fuckin' five-year-old can come up with an awesome plot but only legitimately talented writers can realize them, you colossal doorknob."

Holy shit. It's a nerd fight, and Marty's clearly winning because whoever his sparring partner is doesn't seem to be that well-read. Even I'm familiar with Hairy Porker; they made us read the first one for a class assignment. Never really was my thing, even though all the other kids seemed to love 'em. I remember the lines wrapped around the block whenever a new book would come out.

"Look, Filburt, I always appreciate our, uh, 'chats'," the stoat grunts dismissively. "But I got shit to do today. Come back when you got a real book to report on, like How Should a Mammal Be? or something. Oh, and you're two weeks behind on your last batch so you'd better fuckin' bring those back tomorrow or I'm fining your ass."

"Nnnngh. Fine, Marty. See you next week then." Filburt scoops his books into his bag before brushing past me, agitated.

"Tomorrow, Filburt," Marty gripes as the otter hastily waddles out the front door. "I mean it! Two bucks a week for every book you don't bring back! Fuckin' amateur."

Eyebrows raised, I wait to approach until Marty's flopped down on his pillow by the computer, taking a sip from his miniature thermos.

"So, uh, this where I sign up for a library card?" I ask, leaning against the counter. He nearly chokes on his coffee, whirling to look at me.

"You've got to be pulling my leg." Marty drags his tiny paw down his equally tiny face in exasperation. "Like I don't have enough of your shit on a weekly basis that I also need you invading my private sanctum.

I lower my brows at him, leaning in slightly. "You mean your 'public' sanctum. Besides, you were the one who wouldn't get off my ass about locking myself up in an ivory tower or whatever. I'm just doing what you told me to and putting in a showing. Being friendly."
He walks across the counter to glare at me defiantly, taking a sip from his mug. I can tell he's trying to look menacing, but his cup's the size of like, a thimble. It's like being menaced by one of those googly-eyed sock puppets little kids make in sewing class.

"Not with some pretentious gesture. Comin' in here pretending like you read anything outside of comic books and Play-- uh, what're they called? Play-Doe."

"Female sheep are called ewes," I correct. "Also, the title is for the people reading it, not the content, so it'd be 'Play-Ram'."

The stoat groans in annoyance. "Man, I don't care what you're into, I'm just makin' a point."

"Play-Ram doesn't exist, by the way. I'd know."

Frustrated, he waves his mug around, angrily sloshing droplets of coffee all over the counter. "Shit, Cormo, it's like you exist for the sole purpose of pissing me off."

Honestly, I have no idea what the fuck he wants from me. It's like he's going to pitch a fit no matter what I tell him. "Are you going to give me a card or not?"

"Fine, you win. Here, fill this out and I'll get you a temporary card," he sighs, pulling a sheet of paper out of a folder on the desk. It's an old-fashioned application for a library card -- I figured for sure he'd use the computer next to him for it, but I guess this branch isn't that up-to-date with the modern world.

"You really can't fuckin' stand me, can you," I mutter, grabbing one of the pens chained to the counter to fill the form out.

"I just can't stand your attitude in general," Marty retorts as he grabs a tissue from a box to mop up the spilled coffee. "You come struttin' around like your shit don't stink and lookin' down your nose at everyone while still crying they're being big mean bullies to you. You can't have it both ways!"

What's he even talking about at this point? "Is this really about me, or is this some prey thing in general?"

"Oh my god, you wanna turn this into a 'not all sheep' thing? Cripes, what's it gonna take to get you out of my face?"

I glance up with a forced smile. "Well you could try the magic word."

He rolls his eyes exaggeratedly and throws his arms to the side, then marches up to the edge of the counter until he's standing on my application and gets right in my face. "You want the fuckin' magic word?" he snarks in a mocking tone. "*BAA-RAM-EWE, SHEEP BE TRUE, get the fuck out of my library!*"

**Baa-ram-ewe?** I haven't heard that in a long time. Memories of old schoolyard games come to mind. I didn't think anyone else played stuff like that, I'd always assumed it was just a game for sheep. For anyone else to know about--

I stop mid-scrawl, looking up at Marty as a wicked idea quickly forms in my head. So it's some deep-seated thing with sheep in general, huh? Shoving the pen and paper aside, I suddenly grab him around his shirt's collar, dragging him close.

"What the hell did you just say?" I whisper.
He growls, and his fur bristles from crown to tail as he struggles against my hooves. "I said get the fuck out of--"

"Not that! The password! Where'd you hear it from?! Who gave you the fucking password?!"

"What, 'baa-ram--'"

Pressing a hoof to his face, I glance around the library in a panic. "You can't just say that out loud in public, man!" I hiss, releasing him but keeping my voice low while still trying to sound panicky. "That's not-- that's not for your people! That's a sheep-only code! Tell me where you fuckin' heard it! What the fuck could you have done to earn it?"

Marty stares blankly at me for a brief second or two before his pupils shrink. Stumbling backwards, he lowers his voice to match mine.

"...It's real?" he murmurs, blinks, then suddenly brings his paws to his mouth. "Holy shit, it's real."

"Yes, it's real! And the fact that you know it -- that a predator species knows our secret password -- means you must have done some serious shit for us! I never would have expected a jerk like you to be gifted the password. But if you have it, I guess I was wrong about you from the start." My tone switches from awed to accusatory. "Unless some stupid asshole blabbed it. Then they're in some serious shit. Who gave you the password?"

He stammers, his eyes darting all around the library as he searches for an answer, but after a long pause, he straightens up and shakes his head. "I can't tell you that. I promised I'd keep confidentiality."

I make a show of slowly relaxing, then nodding in response. "Good. Good thinking. Because if someone leaked the password to someone who didn't earn it, and they ever got found out, they had better pray that the Grand Mutton is in a good mood and only exiles them."

"E-exile?" Marty asks, eyes wide. "You guys actually exile people?!

I give him a look like he's the one putting me on, and inwardly it's all I can do to keep a straight face. "The really loyal ones who fuck up get exiled from Zootopia."

"From Zoot-- are you for serious?! You run them out of town?!

"The ones who aren't so loyal, well..." I drag the tip of my hoof across my throat. "There's a reason he's called the Grand Mutton."

Marty collapses on the counter, jaw agape. "You're -- no, you're fucking with me."

I sigh, straightening my shirt, and collect myself. "If you want to invoke the sacred password just to get me outta here, that's fine, but hey, it seems like kind of a waste of your earned favor."

"No, no, hold on. You don't have to go. Do I only get one use of it, or how does this work?" He's practically running around on the counter, looking for something to write with. Finding a pad of paper, he scratches out a note to himself. "No, I was just joking around, I'm not using the password for that."

"The Society's not something to joke about, Marty," I respond in a low, even whisper. "Sheep control so much of Zootopia, you know. Dude, even you could be in trouble right now."

He scrabbles to his feet, backing away from me with a glare. "Remmy, you wouldn't snitch on me!
I know we had our differences, but c'mon, man, I don't deserve-- I mean, not for just-- look, we can work this out!"

I reel in exaggerated horror, looking at him like he's just said something repulsive. "Marty, whatever else you think of me, I'm not a snitch."

"A-all right," Marty says, running his paws shakily through his messy headfur. "Sorry. I'm sorry, that wasn't -- that wasn't called for. I shouldn't -- wow. I'm still just kind of flipping the fuck out here. So it's real -- the Secret She--"

"Don't say it out loud!" I jerk my head over my shoulder at a leopard seated in one of the corner chairs at the end of the room, a reference book in his paws. Marty follows my gaze, nodding shakily. "We just -- we refer to it as 'the Society'. Plausible deniability, you get me?"

I can see the wheels spinning in his head. It's getting harder and harder to keep from busting a gut laughing. I can tell he wants to doubt -- the skeptic in him, the rational side wants to call BS and tell me I'm full of it. But on the other hand, his natural curiosity and total ignorance of what sheep are actually like is winning out. We don't meet in any fucking secret society, and I'm pretty sure sheep aren't trying to orchestrate the downfall of Zootopia right now. But he's buying it, hook, line, and sinker.

"So like, where do you guys meet?" he asks, finally collecting his thoughts. "I mean, if you're a real organization, you have to have a local chapter or something, right? Even the fuckin' Furmasons have places they hole up at."

Shit. I haven't thought that far into this joke -- I've been mostly winging it up until now, just kind of running with a wild idea. Uh, think, Remmy...

"Wh-where do we meet? Why, you trying to infiltrate the order or something?" I retort, raising a brow.

"Hey, you said yourself, I'm trusted enough to know the password," he smirks back. "I want to know where they meet."

I fold my arms, turning it back on him. "Use your head. Where do YOU think a bunch of sheep bent on controlling the city would meet at?"

"Flock Street," he responds instantly. "I mean, think about it -- it's one street over from Pack, but still on the nicer part of town. It's far enough from downtown it escapes scrutiny, but they wouldn't want to mix in with the riff-raff like us -- because god knows they can't get their fuckin' precious wool dirty slumming it. Just look at you, for fuck's sake. Flock's right on the border. Makes perfect sense. Nobody would look twice."

I'm flabbergasted at how much thought he's put into this. Sure as shit more than I have. Still, that gives me an idea on how to keep the gag going a little longer. I'll ignore the slight for now and work with what he's given me.

"Now you're starting to scare me," I mutter, backing away from him.

"I'm right? I'm right, aren't I!" He runs towards the edge of the counter, snagging me by my shirt collar. "Admit it! I was right about Flock Street! I've always fucking wondered and I was right the entire time! I knew it! I fuckin' knew it!"

I suppress a smile. "You want to see for yourself?"
"Hell yes! I'm blowing this wide open!" he jumps up.

"No!" I slam my hooves on the counter. Marty freezes in terror, realizing he's crossed a line. "This is for you only. I need your word, your solemn vow, that what happens stays between us."

He nods slowly, a serious expression on his face, and he hops up into a sort of standing salute, whispering. "Baa-ram-ewe, sheep be true! To your breed, your fleece, your clan be true!"

A giggle escapes my mouth but fortunately he doesn't catch it. I try to spin it into a relieved smile.

"Good. I'm not taking a traitor."

"Taking -- wait, wait, taking where?" he again scrambles to the edge of the counter, looking around to see if anyone's listening in.

"Do you have anyone who can watch the place for an hour or so?" I whisper, getting hold of myself. "Like an assistant or something?"

"Yeah, I can get someone," Marty says, eyes lighting up. "Oh fuck, are we going to go to a Society meeting?"

I sigh. "Obviously I can't walk you in the front door right as you are, but I can get you close. Be ready to leave in about five minutes." I brush away from him and quickly head out the exit, and all the repressed laughter comes bubbling out of me as soon as the door clicks shut. Oh my god, I can't believe he's taken the bait this fucking hard. It feels damn good to not be the one on the receiving end for a change.

"So the first thing you're going to need is a disguise," I explain once we're both out of the library. I point to a corner store a couple of doors down, motioning for him to follow me, which he does, his little feet working overtime beneath him. "Contrary to whatever you think, sheep aren't complete fucking idiots. I sheared, so I don't have any spare wool otherwise I'd lend you some of mine."

"Lend?" he chokes as he follows me inside.

"Yeah, it's detachable. Everyone knows that." At this point I can't resist throwing in more tidbits like this; it's too damn much fun. "But anyway, I've got just the idea."

Walking down the cosmetics aisle, I scan the shelves for a minute or two before I eventually find what I'm looking for next to the bottles of acne treatment and facial astringent. Pulling a bag of extra-large jumbo cotton balls from the shelf, I hold them out to him. "Perfect temporary wool replacement. Sheep have been using these to hide bald spots for years."

"Cotton balls?" Marty's face is incredulous, and it's right here that I realize the jig's probably up. "How the hell would a disguise that bad work?"

"Sheep have, uh--" I falter for a second, trying to think before spotting a rack full of cheap reading glasses. "...bad eyesight?"

He slaps the side of his head. "Of course. The pupils. That explains the pupils."

I glance at one of the makeup mirrors mounted on the rack overhead. What about the pupils? My pupils are fine. His pupils are weird. They're like, huge and round. Like someone jammed a glassy marble in his eye socket. My pupils aren't weird.
"...Anyway, we'll need some double-sided tape, white glue, and some rubber bands. Go grab them and let's get going or else we might miss our window of opportu--"

Marty's off like a shot, scampering towards the school supplies before I can even finish. I'd almost feel guilty if this wasn't so fucking funny.

After checking out with our selection, we quickly set to work on Marty's wool "coat" in the store's bathroom. I do my best trying to assemble a little vest with tape so he can strap it on, but that's when I notice he evidently has no problem just straight gluing cotton balls to his own fur. Okay, I feel a little bad here. I'd feel more bad, but come on, it's Marty. Still, maybe this is going a little too far. I mean, is that going to come out okay? It wouldn't come out of wool very easy, but I don't know much about caring for fur. Actually, come to think of it, I've never even really had much experience with it at all, outside of the time me and Muriel Pilkington played Seven Minutes in Heaven back in high school. I wonder how she's doing.

The end result is lumpy and lopsided -- hooves aren't exactly made for arts and crafts -- but I assure him it's good enough to "fool at a glance" and he seems to buy off on it. We finish it off by affixing my tape-bound mat of "wool" to him with a pair of rubber bands, and then as an afterthought I strap one cotton ball to his head like a crash helmet for good measure. It looks fucking ridiculous.

"Good idea," he nods. "Looks just like yours."

"Wait, what?"

"How do I look?" he asks, completely straight-faced as he peers into the mirror over the sink. "Like if you were just walking down the street, I'd look like a small sheep, right? Like a kid?"

"I mean, it's not going to hold up under intense scrutiny, but I think you're good," I respond, tapping my chin in thought. "You'll get a few funny looks, but it's nothing I don't get on a regular basis, so don't think too much about it."

He nods vigorously. "Yeah, sure. All right, we'd better hurry -- I can't leave the library unattended too long. Jeanine's too much of an airhead."

"Okay. We'll take the back route then."

"This is so fucking surreal," Marty whispers in awe as we observe a pair of elderly rams playing a game of chess in the Flock Street public park. Both of them have walkers and one of them's on an oxygen tank. And as far as Marty knows, they own the city. We're three or four tables down from them, near a sidewalk snack vendor. "You never would have convinced me that this is where it all goes down -- that we'd be staking out a SSS meeting in broad daylight."

"Eh, that's how consolidated our power is. We hide in plain sight." I toss a hoofful of kettle corn into my mouth. "You have no idea how many lives have been bought and sold by a pair of old rams playing a board game on a sunny afternoon."

"I'd fuckin' believe it." He eyes my kettle corn nervously, and I extend the bag towards him. "Thanks. My sister loves this stuff."

"Oh yeah? Don't worry about it." I'm probably going to owe him a hell of a lot more than a few pieces of kettle corn once he realizes he's been had. Especially if that glue doesn't come out. "You know it's true what they say, Marty. A handful of rams control ninety-five percent of Zootopia. You see that one right there? They call him Little Big Horn."
He chokes on his popcorn, turning to me with a horrified expression. "THAT'S 'Little Big Horn'?!"

I pause mid-bite, staring at him. I slowly respond with my mouth full. "...yes?"

"Oh my god, she was right -- that crazy fuckin' badger was right! She rants about that guy all the time, and how he's controlling the minds of everyone with his horns -- cripes, I bet the walker's just for fucking show!" He nervously clutches his head as a further realization dawns on him. "Ah, shit, and we've got a ewe for a mayor right now! Real talk here, Remmy -- how completely fucked are we?!"

"Eh, no more or less fucked than we usually are whenever a bipartisan politician takes over the city," I respond cynically. "I mean, if you're worried Bellwether's gonna run the city into the ground, I wouldn't be. She's probably not part of their cabal."

"She's not? How can you tell?"

I shrug. "Her eyes. She's got like, not-sheep eyes. It's how you can tell she's actually a half-breed. Can't be a full-bred sheep. And you gotta be full-bred if you want into the Society."

"Ohhhhh shit, you're right!" He breathes a sigh of relief, reaching for another pawful from my bag. At this point I'm going to be known as Remmy the Snack Guy. "Man, that's a fuckin' load off my mind."

At this point it's just getting sad -- I feel like I've got to end this sooner or later. Before I can say anything, though, Marty turns to look at me.

"What do you think they're talking about right now?"

"Grandkids? Pawn to E4? The end of modern civilization as we know it? Couldn't really tell you." I set the bag on the table, brushing crumbs off of my shirt and onto the ground.

For a long time, we just stand there watching, and suddenly I hear Marty sniffle. I look down to see him staring intently at the chess-players, wiping his nose on his sleeve. "It's just a matter of time till they bulldoze the block."

"What?"

"Pack Street. I get it now. They're cramming us all in one place so it'll be easier to get rid of us." He nods, stoically.

"...'us' who?"

He doesn't look up. "Us preds. I can see it. They hate us. Hell, you hate us, and you're willing to show me all this. God only knows what Little Big Horn over there would do."

"Man, it's not quite like--"

"You don't have to sugarcoat it, Remmy. Just know that when the time comes, we're not going down without a fight."

I don't really know how to respond, but the stoat's tone is so serious, even dire, that I feel I should step in. "Look, Marty, this isn't some... some genocide thing. Just because we don't--"

He looks up, his jaw set and his brows furrowed. "The password. I know what I want to use it on."

"What?" I blink.
"You said I get one thing for it. I wanna get protection. I'm cashing in the password for protection when the sheep machine comes down on us."

"Marty, listen, I promise you I'm not going to hurt you."

He sighs, rolling his eyes again, and for a second I think he's pulling my leg. Then he opens his mouth. "Not me, you idiot. It's for Ozzy."

I'm as confused as before. "Ozzy?"

He nods, firmly, and starts listing on his fingers. "Charlie's sharp, the twins are quick, I know Al can handle himself. But you gotta promise to leave Ozzy out of it. Whatever you're planning."

I kneel down, putting my hands on his shoulders. "Marty. Listen very carefully. I promise you, nobody on Pack Street is going to get hurt from the schemes of a sheep."

He looks up into my eyes, trying to read my expression, which is as serious as I think it's been since I said word one to him. Finally, his expression softens. "You mean it?"

"On my fucking life."

He squints. "Okay. Sheep-swear."

I raise my brows, smirking, but play along. "Baa-ram-ewe. Sheep be true."

He sighs in relief, dropping his shoulders. "God. That's a fuckin' load off. I-... yeah. Thanks."

I can't help but smile myself, standing up and dusting myself off.

...but seeing him smiling like that gives me an idea for one last push. "Yeah, no one's getting hurt. We're just gonna replace the meat market with salads is all."

He startles so suddenly he almost faceplants onto the ground. "Say WHAT?!

I smile in spite of myself, hopping he doesn't read into it. "Yeah, I mean, I'll miss it myself, but you know me, I'm a real weirdo. Meat just gives predators too much energy. Gotta keep them dull and sleepy, so we're phasing meat off the free market. Give it five years and every Bug Burga in town will be a Grazing Garden."

"Fuck! No! I can't eat grass! I won't!"

"It's not up to me. But I mean, you could go ask them."

"What?! No way! The disguise is good but it's not that good," Marty croaks. "You don't think they'd see right fuckin' through me?"

"They're what, eighty? It's a miracle they can even see the chessboard in front of themselves."

I back off long enough to let him make the sale himself. I can tell by the look in his eyes that he's obviously considering it. A cool breeze blows through, ruffling the baby-fine wool on my arms and knocking a few stray pieces of popcorn loose from the bag on the table.

"Fine," he says excitedly. "You talked me into it. I'm gonna go listen in. Oh man, oh fuck, this is too real!"

"Just try to think of the burgas," I smirk.
Climbing down off his seat, he brushes himself off, adjusts his cotton ball suit, and teeters across the sidewalk towards them.

I watch with bated breath as he clumsily makes his way right up to their table. He's there a solid five, six minutes -- long enough for me to finish off this bag of kettle corn and go back for a pair of cornbugs before one of the elderly rams finally takes notice of him. Marty nearly jumps out of his disguise and blurts out the "password" right away in a panic, paws raised in surrender. I can't overhear his whole speech, but I can see some really dramatic physical emoting and a whole lot of pleading gestures, and I make out the words "burga" and "grass" coming up an awful lot. He finishes, panting in exhaustion, with his hands held plaintively at his sides.

"What a cute little costume," one of the 'conspirators' smiles, patting Marty on the head like he's some little kid. "You look just like a little sheep!"

"Adorable," the other adds. "What a cute kid."

"This is for you," the first one responds, reaching into his jacket pocket and pulling out a plastic-wrapped peppermint before handing it to the dumbfounded stoat.

"What about -- what about the grass?" he stammers in confusion.

"Looks nice today, must've just been trimmed. Thought I saw the groundskeeper earlier, in fact," one of them nods, sagely. "King me."

"This is chess, you old fool!" the other groans.

The rams return, with some bickering, to their game, leaving a mystified Marty to stare blankly. He turns around very slowly, craning his head over his shoulder, and his eyes are wide with sudden, dawning realization as he spots me with a cornbug in my hoof and a shit-eating grin on my face.

"Oh, you woolly bastard," he mouths.

Back at the apartments, with a washcloth in one hand and a bottle of rubbing alcohol in the other, I'm still finding it hard to stop laughing.

Marty, to his credit (and my surprise), is chuckling a bit, himself. He's sitting on the back of his couch while I stand behind it, because it turns out taking this stuff off is a lot harder than putting it on.

"I gotta admit, you got me good," he grumbles, scrubbing the wet washcloth under his arms, loosing a few more of the glued-on cotton balls. "That fucking part about Little Big Horn. Cripes."

"Well," I grin, "you sort of walked right into it. With the 'password' bit."

"Yeah, yeah. Well I'm gonna get you back for this shit, Cormo. When you least expect it I'm gonna--"

I pour a bit of rubbing alcohol down his back and he jumps. "GOD! Warn a guy!"

"Sorry," I smirk, helping him get some of the leftover cotton scraps off his back. "In fairness, gluing it straight to your fur was your idea."

He mutters something inaudible and rips off more of the disguise from his arms.
I straighten up a little, putting more isopropyl on the cloth. "Hey."

"What?"

I pause, reflecting on the day's events. "That thing about using your one chance to save someone else, that was -- I mean, I dunno. That was pretty badass. I dunno if I'd be so selfless, in a life or death situation."

"I know you wouldn't."

"Awright," I grumble in mock irritation, reaching over the sofa to rub his face with the gross towel. "See how much of a smartass you are when you're--"

A sudden silence falls over us simultaneously, both frozen in an awkward gesture across the back of the couch. Marty, still half-sheep in his deteriorating cotton disguise, and me, holding the alcohol-soaked rag against him.

And in his apartment's unlocked doorway, there stands a familiar jackal.

"Holy shit," Avo whispers, a huge grin growing across her face.

Fuck.
A sudden heatwave hits Pack Street and leaves the residents struggling to cope, in a variety of ways.

In the span of just a few weeks we've had both a coldfront and now a heatwave. If I wanted to sweat myself to death I'd have moved my ass out to Sahara Square. At least in the cold I can operate well with my thick wool, but even shaved down to the skin, I'm still melting in this blistering heat. And unlike the Tundratown malfunction not too long ago, there's no machine that they can fix this time. This is just a straight-up nasty, unseasonal heatwave, and that's all there is to it.

If I could turn on the AC, I would, but I'm shit outta luck there. Our apartment building's so old that none of us have central. Guess you get what you pay for. Charlie, Anneke, and Avo at least have AC window units; nothing like that in my place. What I wouldn't give to be in one of their
bedrooms right now. For the air conditioning, I mean. Not like I've been in there before, I just overheard them bragging about it to Ozzy on my way back from dinner the other night is all.

With the sun brutally pummeling the concrete jungle that is Pack Street, a cold shower sounds good, but I'm stymied by the second big problem: brownouts. I don't know if it's bad wiring or just everyone trying to run fans and AC, but the power's been up and down all day, and I can't shower in the dark.

Plus side: it's good fortune for me that I've permanently shifted over to a nocturnal schedule, because if I was having to walk to work in the middle of the day right now I'd probably pass out from heat stroke. Instead, I can go to work when it's cool and get home before the real heat of the day kicks in. Down side: my free time when I'm off the clock is less pleasant, but what're you gonna do? It's that or risk cooking in my own juices on my way to work.

And speaking of cooking in my own juices, the heat's got me more than hot and bothered today. Too bad for me a pair of hooves isn't the best when it comes to scratching *some* itches. And I'm starting to wonder if it's got everyone else around here worked up too, because there's been this vaguely familiar scent in the air lately. I can't quite place it, but I've got a few guesses.

In an attempt to cool down, I'm laying on the couch in front of an electric fan, stripped down to just my boxers. Even after having lost several pounds in wool recently I STILL feel overdressed for the occasion. I'd go even lighter to let the boys breathe a bit, but knowing my luck, soon as I do, Charlie'll throw my door open and see *le mouton au naturel* on full display. God only knows where that'd lead. Of course, it'd only be fair if she did, seeing as how I broke into *her* place and saw everything foxes have to offer...

You know, I could really use that cold shower right about now.

And god, I've never felt so thirsty.

I decide a cold soda sounds divine. Unfortunately I'm fresh out in my fridge, but assuming that it hasn't been raided, the lobby vending machine should have something cold to drink, if I can catch it while the power's up. As I peel myself off the sofa, I pull my clothes on and drag myself to the door only for my hoof to catch on something. Tripping, I twist my ankle and splat face-first onto the floor like a fuckin' dumbass.

"Oof!"

Hauling myself to a sitting position, I check my leg -- fortunately the only thing I hurt in the fall was my pride. I stand up and put hesitant weight on both hooves just to make sure before sighing in relief. Then I look down and realize what I tripped over, and my relief turns to annoyance: it was my cell phone wall charger, and I just snapped the cable in half.

That's not good. Because my phone's an older model it doesn't hold a battery charge as well as it used to, so now I'm up a creek -- it'll last maybe two hours before I have to plug it in again, and that's the only charger cable I own for my phone. I'm going to need to get a replacement and fast, just in case of an emergency. I suppose I could use a land line in the meanwhile, but since I don't have a computer I'm effectively down internet access, maps, and probably other stuff that a healthy red-blooded ram like me needs every now and then.

Well, shit. Nothing for it, I'm gonna have to go into town and get a cable. I *could* wait and get one tonight, but the shops might not be open. Plus, and I just realized -- my phone's old. Like, several years old. Whatever store I go to might not *have* a cable that works for it, and I have no idea where the nearest Best Bison's at.
Fuck. Well, at least my phone's charged for now. I fire up Zoogle Maps, and after half an eternity of waiting for it to load, I punch in electronics stores nearby. Hmm -- looks like there's one right on Pack Street, actually, and it's only about five or six blocks from here. Nice.

After a quick call to the electronics store (some little mom and pop Radio Shark knockoff called "Bites 'n' Bytes") and a brief explanation what kind of power cord I'm looking for, the guy on the phone tells me they've got a generic that'll work for me and it's only five bucks. I ask him to hold it behind the counter for me, thank him profusely, and grab my keys and wallet before setting out. Before I leave, I cram the bulky charger in my pocket. Might as well have it on-hand to compare, so I can be sure the one they've got will work before I put money down.

The second I throw the front door open, my senses go into overload -- between the heat and the smell, it feels like there's a fucking fog outside my room, like the halls are being fumigated. I take a deep breath, inhaling the powerful cocktail of scents before it dawns on me just what I'm smelling. It's like that night at Bug Burga, packed into a small enclosed space with predators.

Including Charlie. ...and Anneke. ...and Avo.

Oh no.

Sweat. Perfume, fur powder, patchouli oil. Sweat, shampoo, conditioner, skin. Body spray, laundry soap, hand soap, hand lotion, and did I mention sweat?! And there's something else in there too, something that gets my skin prickling. I'm twitching. My nose, I mean. God, I'm not even to the stairs yet and already it feels like the entire fucking building is being hotboxed.

I can't breathe. My mind is swimming in a primal soup as I falter and flail down the steps. I want to breathe through my mouth but I can't quite stop breathing through my nose. It's like a trainwreck, you know? Where you can't look away but you can't look at it? But like, the scent version. The heat makes it worse. I'm wading through a palpable wall.

All I can say is my door must be some kind of space-age airlock seal because I feel like I need a rebreather just to make it to the lobby exit. And yet the damn thing still fails at its one job of keeping people out of my apartment.

Charlie's relaxing on the lobby sofa in a sleeveless tee and shorts -- an unusual contrast from her typical turtleneck and baggy slacks. She's splayed out in the heat, one bare leg draped behind the couch. She looks to be watching the news while having a snack; she's got a bowl of half-melted ice cream resting against her forehead.

"Who's that? Cormo?" she sounds slightly out of breath, and it's not like her not to be left unsure of who's about.

"Hey, Charlie."

She cranes her head up to look at me and I notice her eyelids widening just enough that I can see a faint hint of her beady eyes. "...you seem uncharacteristically pleased to see me. Is it nearly ram season, too?"

I flinch, instinctively looking at my pants. I didn't think all the scents hanging in the air would get--oh. She's seeing the charger cable box. I pull it from my pocket, holding it up. "Actually, my cell phone cable broke just a few minutes ago, and--"

"It was a joke, Cormo," she sighs, collapsing back into the sofa. I had no idea Charlie was really capable of humor. "I don't know much about sheep, but I'm pretty sure you don't have rectangular
genitals. Though if I'm mistaken, you may want to see a doctor."

Chuckling awkwardly, I head to the soda machine in the corner by the door. "Good advice."

It's empty. Of course.

"Long gone," Charlie murmurs, evidently sussing out my plot. "In this weather those cans go faster than Musk Mask."

I glance up, tapping my hooves on the vending machine's glass. "What's Musk Mask?"

She twists on the couch, and I watch idly as she flaps the hem of her shirt to air it out, giving me a brief glimpse of her belly and midriff. "It's like toilet paper. You only notice it when it's gone."

I stand there staring for a few more seconds. Because I don't understand her metaphor. Finally I just shake my head. Maybe I'll grab a drink on the way there, find a mini-mart or something.

I hear laughter and music coming from outside. As I step out onto the front stoop, it looks like a little bit of a shindig's going on outside of our apartment building. Not quite a party, just a bunch of mammals trying to beat the heat. Ozzy's sitting at the edge of the sidewalk under the shade with his guitar and a cooler full of beer, while the aardwolf twins are splashing around like a pair of idiots in a fucking kiddie pool they've scrounged up from somewhere. It's one of those really shallow, like, foot-tall plastic pools you can get from Wallaby-Mart for twelve bucks, but that's not stopping them from having what looks like the time of their lives as they splash the hell out of each other. Wolt's in a pair of trunks, but I can't help but notice Annie's in a skimpy, two-piece spaghetti-strap swimsuit that's clinging to her fur pretty suggestively. Her wet hair hanging over her face is quite a look for her. And watching her bend over in the water's sheen, her lips wrapped around a snorkel--

"You admirin' the view, woolly bully?" Ozzy grins from beside me. I tear my gaze away from Annie to look over at the hyena, slack-jawed.

"Uhh, what?" I sputter, shaking my head. "View? What're you talking about? It's too damn sunny out here. Wish I'd remembered some sunglasses, I can't see shit."

"Sure it is," he replies with an easy grin, reaching into the ice chest on the ground next to his folding chair. I can't shake this thirst, and I find myself stealing further glances, this time at the cooler. Beer's probably a bad idea right now, though. I have to get walking before it gets even hotter.

Ozzy sits up, slapping my arm. "Hey, where you goin', Remmy? You just got here!"

"Oh, I'm not sticking around," I reply. "Broke my phone's charger cable and gotta run get a replacement, since I need it for work."

He scratches the back of his head, nodding. "Bummer, man. Well hey, take a couple sodas for the road. On the house."

"Soda?" I look back at the cooler. Sure enough, bright purple cans of soda, not beer.

"Ice cold, man -- hope you like grape, though, because that's all Marty bought."

"You're not gonna let the grape thing go, are you," Marty calls out from somewhere unseen. I peer behind Ozzy's cooler and realize there's a smaller kiddie pool occupied solely by Marty, just a little stoat floating on a little raft rough-cut from packing styrofoam, a pair of sunglasses on his face and a book in his lap. The pool's actually much more suited to his size, compared to the twins in their
"I told you, they had a sale on grape soda."

"You bought six fucking cases of grape soda though, man!" Ozzy laughs, wiping a tear from his eye. "Dude, at least get some orange or some cola or something else! Variety, man! Six fucking cases, this guy!"

"It was on sale!"

I gratefully accept a can from Ozzy's paw, cracking it open and downing half the contents in a few gulps. Grape or not, I don't care -- it really is ice cold and that's all that matters. It's so cold, in fact, that it's a little bit slushy inside; the soda's just barely at that freezing point. Not much of a surprise -- Ozzy's got dry ice inside his styrofoam cooler. I'd recognize it anywhere, seeing as how I load refrigerated trucks for a living. Where the hell he got dry ice from is a good question (I wouldn't put it past Charlie to be involved, somehow), but hey, I'm not gonna complain.

I'm peering over the lip of the can and watching my neighbors trying to beat the heat. Down the street, I can see two kids running through a sprinkler while a curvy badger lady in a sundress watches them from nearby. Across the street, a jackal and a coyote are napping in the shade, in cheap lawn chairs. I watch a very fit tigress round the corner, jogging down the street. She must be crazy, working out in this heat. Tight jogging shorts, tight sports bra, both soaked. She's soaked. Sweat drips down her toned, bare midriff, punctuated by each footfall against the hot asphalt. She passes me as I finish the can.

Still thirsty.

Ozzy's gone back to his guitar. I immediately recognize the song he's playing -- *Scent of a Woman*.

He notices me watching and grins. "This song's for you," he winks.

I laugh uncomfortably and glance around. "Ha ha ha ... w-What?"

"Well, with all those band shirts you wear, I just figured you were a fan of Sheep Trick."

A sigh escapes my throat in a way that sounds like a dying cough. "Oh! Yeah. Yeah, they're great."

I crumple the empty can and grab another from the chest before fishing into my wallet to drop a few bucks in Ozzy's guitar case. Even though it's "on the house" I figure it's only polite since I don't imagine he'll pull in much busking in this kind of weather.

"Thanks for the soda. I'll be back later, try not to fucking roast out here."

"Man, I feel ya," Ozzy chuckles, squinting at the sun. "See ya, woolly B."

Even sticking to the shade as much as I can, the bottoms of my hooves are hot enough I could probably use them to fry an egg. This is torture, plain and simple. I wish I'd gone with a sleeveless shirt (or no shirt at all) because my tee's soaked with sweat and I'm still a block or two away from the store. My second grape soda's half-gone and all warm by now -- boy, that didn't last long. I swill the rest of it down just to stay hydrated before tossing the can in a nearby garbage bin.

I finally arrive at Bites 'n' Bytes only to see that a sign in the window says the owner's out to lunch and will be back in almost an hour. I feel like putting my hoof through the door. What an asshole! What, you couldn't have told me that on the phone?
Sighing, I turn around -- I've gotta find some AC, and fast. I won't be able to wait out here in the heat for him. Looking around, most of the shops are closed for the day. This is the downside to living in a nocturnal district and being past "business hours". Across the pothole-scarred street, I spot a place that's still open. The windows are tinted black and a sign overhead promises "books", "movies", and "toys". Sweet, a bookstore -- those are usually both dead at this time and well-ventilated to keep the books in good condition because of humidity. I gleefully hoof around to the front door with a huge smile plastered all over my face, only to discover that it is in fact a bookstore -- an adult bookstore, to be specific.

"Pandora's Box". Cute.

Blushing, I look around furtively to see if anyone noticed my blunder. The street's empty. Everyone's probably at home asleep or trying to find a way to stay cool. No reason for them to be milling about the stores here. Hell, I shouldn't even be here.

I'm really tempted to walk in anyway. I'm burning up out here, and besides, I've never been in a sex shop before. The closest I've ever come to browsing smut in public is peeking through the girly mags in the blinder racks at gas stations. I imagine there'll probably be a lot of "marital aids" and a bunch of overpriced, risque pornos -- but hey, it'd be good for a laugh. What've I got to lose? It's not like I'm going to buy anything in here.

The heat helps me make my decision. I swallow nervously and hook my hoof around the door handle, throwing it open and instantly basking in the blast of precious cold air. Relief washes over me.

Sure enough, the store itself is full of aisles of movies, magazines, and other common smut. There isn't even any attempt to hide it -- I guess they figure the dark windows prohibits the average passerby from being accidentally exposed. Life-size cardboard cutouts of porn stars stand at the end of each aisle, including a few I'm embarrassed to admit I recognize as regular actresses from RedHoof (Lacy Bune as "Officer Broody Hipps", and then of course there's the chick from the "Jizzelle" parody videos).

In a stroke of good luck, the place is dead as a doornail. I guess it's not too surprising, considering the time of day. There's nobody behind the counter, and not a single customer to be found up and down the aisles. I'm not really interested in anything this place has, but since I've got another forty or so minutes to kill before I can go get my power cord, I might as well make the most of it. Have a laugh, you know.

Most of the magazines on sale are, as I assumed, overpriced collections of pictures that could be easily found online in better quality, each sorted by which species or body part it fetishizes. I can only wonder what drives some people to lust for "Long, Lewd Necks", or "Dirty, Dainty Hooves". The movie aisles are jam-packed with shelf after shelf full of naughty DVDs and surprisingly enough, VHS tapes -- who the hell still uses VHS? Is this a hipster smut shop or are they just trying to move old stock they can't get rid of?

The entire left-side wall is dedicated to an obscenely large collection of, well, obscene toys, mostly marketed towards females. (Which I find surprising as I can't really imagine a girl wanting to walk in here in the first place, but then again Anneke exists, so...) Lewd models of the male anatomy made out of silicone, rubber, and plastic line the racks in every size, shape, and color. Speaking of size, I'm pretty sure some of these have to be joke gifts. There's one near the end that I'm pretty sure is just a pool noodle.

There's more "discreet" models, too. "Hides in plain sight!" claims a box on the nearby shelf. What about this black and gold one? Looks like some kind of ancient monolith, but with a suggestive

Looks like this store's catering largely to predator tastes -- which again makes sense considering where I am -- though I notice there are more than a few prey-themed toys as well. I try not to laugh too loudly at "Randy the Ram". It's got a spiral horn motif and a tuft of fake wool at the base for "texture". Give me a break.

Honestly, I can't help but laugh at how ridiculous so much of this stuff is. I'm no saint for sure, but I still have some shame and I'd like to imagine even most preds do as well. And even ignoring that, in an age when you can get literally anything you want shipped to your door thanks to the internet, I can't imagine how a brick-and-mortar sex shop is pulling in enough cash to stay in business. Especially in an area that's as financially challenged as Pack Street.

I turn the corner and walk down the next aisle over. This one claims to be stocked with toys "for men". Not an area I'm too familiar with, but the idea of some desperate loner sneaking in here to find an inanimate friend to keep him company has me snickering to myself. Most of the product offerings are those hideous inflatable blow-up dolls that fail at looking like the mammal they're supposed to be (let alone the porn star they're based off of), but there's a subsection of what looks like flashlights at the end that catches my eye.

Rows and rows of predator and prey themed plastic tubes, designed for the male interest. Most of them are designed to look like the real thing (with varying degrees of success) but more than a few just resemble modern art projects. I'm giggling like mad at the idea of dipping my wick in one like some sad bastard. What's this? Antelope. I'm pretty sure they're not fluorescent orange. Look at this little one here. What model is this supposed to be?

"Veronica Vixen"?

Before I know it I'm poking the "feel me" pad of display material. It's not like I thought these were hard plastic or anything, but I didn't realize how soft this silicone actually was. Feels kind of real, even. I mean, fuzzless, sure, but I've heard some girls shave down to the skin, so who knows. This one looks -- "Wanda Wolfess". Jeez, there's a lot of attention on the, uh, artistic details on this one. Some of these might not even feel that bad. There's some specialty ones at the end of the aisle that have their own unique shape. The "Boob 'Em and Tube 'Em" promises six unique vibration modes, while the Tengu Flap offers simple practicality and ease of use. There's a nonfunctional display model of the last one -- a cutaway piece that would be impossible for anyone to use but the most dedicated public fapper.

I wipe the sweat from my brow and look around to make sure nobody sees me before gently tapping my hoof against the edge of the gel structure -- holy shit, what a texture. There are little ridges and nodes and bumps and all kinds of things that I imagine would actually feel amazing. Probably nowhere near as good as the real thing, but close enough. Damn better than a hoof, anyway.

As I bend down to examine one of the fancier compacts, I consider the price -- yeah, it's pretty expensive for an import toy, but it's got some impressive features. "Special ungulate grip" reads some very promising ad copy on the side. I guess sometimes you don't realize a problem is widespread enough that someone's already addressed it.

Sixty bucks, huh. And it even comes with extras. I purse my lips, turning the box over in my hands. Comes with three bottles of lube. Variable suction settings. Flips open, easy access. Easy grip. Testimonials. Still, sixty bucks. I heft the small box and turn back around down the aisle -- I wonder how this one compares to the Vixen, or the Wolf--
"Are you finding everything all right today, fluff?"

I involuntarily jump in panic as I recognize the voice in front of me and suddenly I'm not hot anymore, since fucking icy chills just ran straight down my spine. I fumble the package, nearly dropping it on the floor as I reel to look up at the dark-furred jackal towering over me, cell phone in hand and grinning like the cat that just devoured the entire flock of canaries. Her eyes are wider than I've ever seen them and her grin is six notches past "shit-eating".

"Avo!" I bleat.

"Wow, look at you! I see you've already picked one out for yourself. Going for something deluxe, huh? That's one of our better sellers." She returns her phone to her pocket before pulling her lollipop out of her mouth, pointing it towards the box in my arms.

With dawning horror I notice the name tag hanging off of her shirt --

Fucking hell, she WORKS here. This can't be happening. This is a bad dream.

"'Course, I would have figured you'd go for something more... conducive to your size."

"I'm not actually s-serious," I croak unconvincingly, dropping the toy I picked out. "I just came in for a laugh and to cool down because of the, uh... you know, the heat."

"Oh, Remmy," she says in a sing-song tone. Using my name for once. That's a great sign. "There's no need to be ashamed. Plenty of lonely, ineligible bachelors come in here all the time, looking for love in all the tight places..." She slaps her hand on my shoulder. "'C'mon, why don't I give you a tour and we'll get your needs taken care of together?"

She half-shoves, half-drags me down the aisle with one hand, while using her lollipop like a baton with the other. "So over here, we've got our selection of bondage gear. Gimp suits, masks, straps, harnesses... ooh, and of course our selection of collars and leashes for pred-play. Which I'm assuming, of course, is why you're here."

"I'm not into any of that," I grumble, feeling my face burning. "That's not -- no. That's -- I'm not a predophile. We've been over this."

Raising an eyebrow, she shrugs, steering me away from the racks of sadistic crap. "Fair enough. Boy, did I have you pegged wrong." A wicked grin crosses her lips as she holds up a bright pink strap-on toy. "Hey, speaking of pegged, if that's more your bag, this one's a real crowd favorite. Guaranteed to make you bleat."

"Stop."

"Yeesh. Tough audience," Avo remarks, tossing it back in the bargain bin by the front counter. "Well, I'm assuming, of course, you already saw our lingerie racks?"

"I-I'm not a crossdresser either!" My jaw hangs slack as I watch her suggestively flicking her tongue back and forth across the head of her lollipop.

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She runs the back of her paw down one a slinky black teddie.
"This one's just the right amount of sheer. Shows off the goods just enough to get tails wagging, but still leaves them wanting more."

"Avo--"

She whirs, not bothering to disguise her sadistic glee at my uncomfortable predicament. "Or if you're into a little roleplay, we have a full selection of costumes." She plucks a corny nurse outfit out. It's pretty small for her, which I think is the point, but I can only imagine it'd fit better on, say, Charlie. Or Anneke. I could see her in something like that, too. Buttons undone, white stockings riding up her legs--

I can't handle this.

She notices my eyes darting around and pulls a lacy nightie off the wall. "This one's a bit more traditional. Doesn't it just scream 'I'm a good girl'?" She drapes it across herself, over her work uniform, for demonstration, leaving me to imagine what it would look like without the layer in between. I don't need a mirror to know how red I am right now.

"And of course, we have a video arcade in the back. You'll have to come back during peak hours if you want to partake in that kind of thing with others, though." She grins, roughly jamming her lollipop against her cheek from inside. Yes, Avo, I get the picture. And now it's going to be in my head. Great. Thanks.

"Look, I was just leaving anyway," I huff, heading towards the door.

Before I can make it past the checkout counter, the door swings open and my already awkward situation proceeds from bad to apocalyptic.

"No."

There's an awful feeling in my stomach. The world's on fire. It's all I can say: "No."

Betty's standing in front of me dressed in a work uniform herself -- a polo and her usual "boot cut" jeans. This is a nightmare. Just a bad dream.

"Oh my god, you weren't kidding," she mutters to Avo. Of course. I've been set up -- there's no way she just happened to walk in here in the middle of broad daylight. Not now. "Who would have guessed our little yarn ball was such a deviant."

"Well you know, I had a sneaking suspicion," Avo replies as she discards her depleted lollipop stick and produces a new one from her pocket in one smooth motion. "Glad you showed up here, though. Cormo seems to be having a hard time picking something out."

"Well you know, I had a sneaking suspicion," Avo replies as she discards her depleted lollipop stick and produces a new one from her pocket in one smooth motion. "Glad you showed up here, though. Cormo seems to be having a hard time picking something out."

"K-kiddie aisle?!" I bleat, cold sweat running down my back in beads. To think I was ever worried about the heat. "What the ffff-fuff-fluck is the kiddie ai-aisle? Why would you have a kiddie aisle in a s-sex shop?!!"

"Oh, that's just my name for where we keep all of our smaller toys," Avo says as she and Betty flank me like bodyguards, effectively boxing me in as they herd me through the store. "You know, for guys like you."
"And it's pretty fuckin' tasteless, even for you," Betty grumbles past her cig.

Avo just rolls her eyes. "Oh, don't be so serious."

We come up to a rack full of shoebox-sized plastic bins full of what look like pencil toppers. Avo pulls one out of a box, pinching it between her thumb and forefinger as she presents it to me. "Here you go. Most of our customers from Little Rodentia seem to like this one. I hear it's a bit of a loose fit, though."

My cheeks feel like they're on fire as Betty fights to suppress laughter, nearly biting her cigarette in half.

"Hey, maybe butt stuff's more his thing," Betty recommends, helpful as can be.

Avo shakes her head condescendingly as they continue pushing me forward. "Nah, I tried offering him the Pink Piston earlier and he shut that down immediately. I think he wants to feel like the man, you know?"

"Makes sense. Did he take a look at the AlphaGirl?"

"I was going to try suggesting that one to him but he seemed real keen on the Tengu earlier," Avo responds. "He claims he's not into predo tastes himself, but... well, y'know."

"Yeah, I've seen the way he looks at Annie." The way I look at Ann-- don't you mean the way she ogles ME?! "You don't know the half of it."

Betty nods quietly, considering. "Maybe start him out with something more his speed, Avo. I remember Sammy Woolworth was in denial right up until the day he locked lips with Rachel Howlins back in our senior year. It takes them a while to come around, but I imagine he'll find his sheepdog eventually." What the hell does that mean?

Avo grins, the lollipop clacking on her teeth audibly. "Oh, try not to sound so hopeful, Betty."

The looming black wolf taps her chin, as if she's now genuinely trying to figure out the right product for me. "What about the lingerie?"

Avo sighs dramatically, shaking her head. "I tried, but I think he's going to need more of a solo focus. He doesn't exactly have a lot of visitors." They're talking about me like I'm not even here. Yet as bad as it is, it's somehow easier to take than them trying to talk to me directly. "Shame, too. I was going to say you should model some for him, make sure he knows what he's getting."

Heat or no I wish I had a wool coat to disappear into right about now. Betty just nods back. "I think you'd be better suited to that anyway."

"We could both model for him," Avo grins, angling her hips to one side. "It'd go twice as fast."

These two are vicious. I've fallen right into a trap and there's no getting out of it -- this humiliation's going to continue for hours unless I figure out some way to put an end to it.

"Well then, why don't we take you on over here and get you your first pick, sweetie?" Avo says as she pats my head. "I still think the Tengu's just a tad bit big for a little fella like you, but hey, size isn't everything."
"You know what," I growl, finally digging my hooves into the ground before she can push me any further. I look up at both of them and they're struggling to keep a straight face as they exchange glances. "Really, it isn't. So I may not be predator-sized, but from my experience, technique's way more important."

"His 'experience'," Betty grins. "Watch out, Avo, he's a regular pornstar."

"Yeah, well, I guess you two have the bar set so low, you wouldn't know any better," I retort hotly.

Avo's face shifts a little but as always she's quick with the comeback. "I've heard the 'size isn't everything' argument plenty, sure. Of course, it's always coming out of the mouth from the wannabe Catsanova who buys a toy too big and then ends up sucking wind when we can't take it back due to hygiene laws."

"So wait," Betty hums, "is he saying it's our fault his dick's tiny?"

"I'm saying shallow underachievers are always going to end up disappointed," I respond, folding my arms all the while side-eyeing the front door. I must be crazy. But I need to get out. "Sure, I've probably got nothing on a horse or a bull, and I can't speak for your own 'conquests', but me? I've never had any complaints. With the right moves, nine and a half inches has always been enough to satisfy."

Betty's lips suddenly purse around her cigarette, while a sound like gravel crunching signals that Avo's suddenly due for another fresh lollipop.

"Nine and a half," she murmurs.

"You're full'a shit, sheep," Betty says, but her cheeks are beginning to redden as well -- impressive considering her oil-black fur.

"I don't fuckin'--"

"He's just talking, Avo--"

"Nine and a fuckin' half my--"

Betty plucks her cigarette from her mouth and looks down at me. "You plan to prove that?"

"Wait," Avo interrupts, glancing at the wall behind her, "Where does that even fall on the scale?"

Betty turns around as well, looking over the wall of toys. "Did you check bodysize ratio, or--"

With both their backs turned I'm out the door before she even finishes that sentence.

Stepping back inside, I lock my door and collapse on my couch, panting. I don't know how I'm ever going to face those two again. Or anyone else. I try not to think about it. Best case scenario, maybe I'll die from heatstroke and not have to worry about it.

Something uncomfortable's jabbing me in the leg as I roll over onto my side. Sitting up, I reach into my pocket and pull my broken charger cable out. I look down at it in confusion for a few seconds before it dawns on me.

Not only did I leave Pandora's Box empty-handed, but I ran off without getting what I went out for in the first fucking place. Hurling the broken charger across the room, I bury my head in my
hooves only to accidentally jab myself in the eye.

"Ow! Ffff-- mmmnnnghhhh! Damn hooves!!" I scream in rage at my ceiling.

It's so goddamn hot. My fan sitting silent means the power's out again.

And I'm still thirsty.
It's about half past nine and I have my whole day ahead of me. I admit, waking up at night is something I'm starting to get used to.

Since it's still hot as hell during the day, I'm all set to take advantage of the damn pleasant seventy-five outside. Most days, I've got trouble figuring out what to do with my free time around here, but not tonight. I've had my shower, and it's been a week since my last trip to Bug Burga. I'm thinking a nice walk and a double roach deluxe sounds pretty good right about now.

As I go to open my front door, I find it's already unlocked. Panic ensues, followed by pain as it swings open and pops me in the muzzle.
"Oww!"

Charlie pokes her pointy schnozzo through the door, squinting at me with her usual shifty eyes. "Mmm. You know, that's probably not a safe place to stand, Cormo."

If I was an asshole, I'd close the door on her and see how she likes it, but I'll exercise some self-restraint. Rubbing my sore teeth with a hoof, I check my mouth for blood before stepping back and looking down at her.

"Can't you just knock like a normal person?" I ask, exasperated.

Charlie tilts her head in befuddlement, squinting at me like I've just sprouted a second head. It's obvious that's a completely foreign thought to her -- she literally appears to be having difficulty grasping the concept.

"Never mind," I groan as she finishes letting herself into my apartment. "What do you want, Charlie? I was just headed out."

"Of course you were, but your usual Saturday night bug-meat ritual might have to wait." Usual? Ritual? Have I become that predictable? "I received an urgent call and require your services for the evening."

"So, what, your crisis is now my problem?" Folding my arms across my chest, I look down at her in annoyance, making another mental reminder to figure out a better door lock.

"No, my client's crisis is our opportunity to profit," she responds evenly with a thin smile, reaching into her pants pocket and producing a hand-drawn map. "I've been asked to transport some imported product for a friend, but it's a large shipment and I won't be able to move it all myself. I need all hands, paws, and hooves on deck tonight."

She hands the map off to me and I skim it -- there's the destination, marked out all the way to the edge of Tundratown. I recognize the place. It's where most of our parent company's refrigerated trucks originate from. I've offloaded probably thousands of crates of produce from the surrounding area. Folding the paper up, I hoof it back to her.

"So this is another 'business opportunity' kind of like the firefly sauce thing?" I ask. Not that I really mind if it is. That wasn't a bad gig, certainly the easiest forty dollars I've ever made. Plus it was under the table, too. Considering my boss has been scaling my hours back lately, I can always figure out something to do with extra cash.

"In a sense," Charlie replies evasively. "Your compensation will be far more generous than last time for not much more effort. Assuming you don't mind helping load a cargo van, I'll be taking care of all other arrangements. The hardest part for you, I imagine, will be operating a hand truck."

"So... basically what I do every day, then. Yeah, I think I can manage that." A thought strikes me halfway through -- before I actually offer any verbal agreement, I'd better make sure this is on the up-and-up. "Just to be clear, we're not stealing anything, are we?"

I know how these 'hood deals work. I don't want to get busted for doing something highly illegal that could have been avoided by just asking a few simple questions in advance, and I know any of these guys would throw me to the cops in a heartbeat rather than taking the rap themselves.

"I assure you we're not stealing." Charlie responds. "This is product my client has paid for and has fair rights to. And, if it aids in the decision-making process, I'll even treat everyone to a burga so that you don't have to pass on your carnivorous habit. After all, it'll be on our employer's dime;
operating expenses and all, you understand."

"Nice." I clap my hooves together, and her smile widens. "Arright, count me in, Charlie. Who else is coming along on this?"

She gestures across the hallway to the twins' apartment. "A little extra muscle never hurts."

"Those two? If it's muscle you want, why not Al? Dude's what, three hundred, eight hundred pounds of pure alpha wolf?" I ask, skeptical. Wolt and Annie don't exactly strike me as the kind that've ever done an honest day's work in their lives. Come to think of it, I don't even know what the hell they do for a living -- though I guess I'd believe they were in the world's oldest profession.

"You're not wrong. Al would be ideal, but he's unavailable. Working. Also seems to have a distaste for my odd jobs. I suspect he feels they are beneath him." I suppose that explains why I haven't seen him around much lately now that I've moved to the night shift.

"Okay, why not Betty then?" I rub my still-bare skin self-consciously, thinking back to my recent unsolicited haircut. Charlie certainly didn't have any problem commissioning the big bad wolfess to strongarm someone last time. Namely, me.

"She's unavailable as well," Charlie says dismissively. That's something of a relief, anyway. Can't say I'm looking forward to seeing her again after how our last meeting at Pandora's Box ended.

"Ozzy?"

She turns to look at me, narrowing her already-squinty eyes, and I get the impression that was a dumb question.

"Twins it is, then," I shrug.

As we walk across the hall to the aardwolves' apartment, Charlie raises a paw to the deadbolt to begin picking it, but I interrupt by simply knocking twice. She gives me another weird look, and after a few seconds Wolter comes to the door in his underwear with a yawn.

"Heyyy," he slurs sleepily, scratching his ass. Classy as ever. "What're you two doing here, you run outta rubbers or something? I mean, I'm flattered that you'd think of me first, Cormo, but I'm not sure mine'll, uh... be a good fit for you."

I cringe as I side-eye Charlie, but she either doesn't seem to have noticed his comment or just doesn't care. "Where's Anneke? Is she here?" I ask.

"She's out clubbing. Just me tonight," he shrugs.


That perks him up considerably, and his eyebrows arch high. "What, for like... a threesome?" He glances at me. "Uh, with... him, or...?"

"Yes, the three of us will be sufficient," Charlie replies as she rocks back on her heels, hands clasped behind her back. Wolt nods, obviously not deterred. Oh, for fuck's sake.

"For a job," I quickly interject, nipping this 'hilarious' misunderstanding in the bud before Wolt decides to get any more naked than he is. "Charlie needs us to go downtown and help her pick up some stuff for a client. It's not a sex thing."
"Oh," Wolter mutters before closing his door and disappearing into his apartment.

For a moment I just stand there, staring at the door. Charlie doesn't seem to have moved, either.

I whisper to her. "So was that a 'no', or...?"

"Hold on," she nods to the door.

After another few minutes, Wolt comes back in a pair of cargo shorts and a v-necked shirt, his mane slicked back with water. "So what're we goin' to go get, exactly?"

"I'm not 100% positive. Dora wasn't particularly forthcoming on all the details of the shipment," Charlie responds. "We're going to central Zootopia for the pickup, though."

"And you said this wasn't a sex thing," Wolter grins at me, closing the door behind himself. What? "Hey, can we stop for a bite on the way?"

"It'll have to be after," Charlie replies as the three of us head for the stairs. "Time is a concern for this errand. We need to obtain the shipment and have it delivered before midnight, and I still need to procure the cargo van we'll be using to haul it."

Once we're in the lobby, I stop abruptly. "Wait a sec. If we're heading to Tundratown, should we bring coats or anything? I mean, I know we won't need them here, but..."

"No, we're not entering Tundratown proper, just the outskirts," Charlie responds dismissively. "I've already checked the weather. Even with the residual cold it shouldn't be lower than sixty degrees. You're dressed appropriately."

"All right," I respond dubiously as I follow Wolt out the lobby door. When I had my wool, the cold wasn't a problem. Still, she seems confident enough so I guess I've got no choice but to trust her judgment on this one.

"Sweeeeeeet pussy wagon," Wolt enthuses as we circle our freshly-rented cargo van. I gag, rubbing my eyes -- it's a fucking junker of a vehicle with a hideous custom paint application on the sides, some kind of death metal album cover looking shit, I'm not even sure. The driver's side door has been stripped to the primer -- probably salvaged off of a similar vehicle. If Charlie's plan is to blend in, then she might need glasses, because we're going to stand out in any crowd we're in like a clown on fire.

"You, uh, you sure about this?" I ask Charlie, kicking one of the tires with hoof only to jump back when it hisses at me like a snake.

"Of course," she responds, reaching under the car and pulling out a magnetic key box. "The ad on Camelslist was very specific. Have it back here with the fuel tank refilled by midnight and we won't have problems."

"Hey, works for me. So, can I drive?" Wolter asks, dancing in place like a little kid in front of a coin-op ride.

"No," Charlie says flatly. "Cormo, you're the tallest of us. You're the one best suited to driving. I'll navigate."

Wolter groans, dragging a paw down his face. "Fine, but I call shotgun then."
The van reeks of sweat and cigarette smoke. It's a complete mess inside -- books and cassettes are all over the floorboards and a layer of animal hair covers the stained seats. There's a patch of sticky, peeling duct tape on the upholstery directly underneath one of my legs. I'm damn glad I'm sheared right now, otherwise I'd be leaving behind some hair of my own.

I settle in behind the wheel. At least it's an automatic, which is good because it's been a while since I last drove. Even before I was forced into the glamorous low-rent district that is Pack Street, I never really could afford a car. Gas and upkeep costs would be prohibitive, so I stuck to trains and buses. I guess I'm lucky the city's got such a good public transport system.

My accomplices squeeze in on the bucket seat, Wolt at the far side and Charlie between us. She taps her wrist. "Time is money. Let's get going."

"I hear ya," I respond gruffly. I start the engine, and it explodes into action (literally, if the backfiring noise is anything to go by). I can't say I imagined this was how I'd be spending my night off, but the way I see it, it's just a little bit of overtime.

The streets are busy as usual, with the nocturnal crowd out in full force on the weekend. I'm not very used to driving in traffic at night, and Charlie's directions tend to come about half a second too late. I've missed two turns already because of her -- why we're not using GPS or Zoogle Maps or something is beyond me, but I guess she wants to do this one old-school.

I can see why we're not stopping for a bite -- as we pass by the Bug Burga, it's packed as hell with the cars wound around the building twice over. We'd be waiting for eons in the drive-thru, and right now we're pressed for time. It's already after ten and we're still probably forty, forty-five minutes from where need to go -- and that's assuming traffic's forgiving. We'll definitely be cutting this one close.

"So Chuck," Wolter hums, wrapping an arm around Charlie's shoulder. "Chuuuuck. It's about fox season, right?"

Charlie looks up from her paper. "'Chuck'?" she asks.


She blinks. "Nobody has ever called me 'Chuck' in my life. Certainly not you."

He shrugs, not the least bit rebuffed. "Anyway, Charlie, I'm just saying. It's tough here in the summer, you know? And with the heat and all, like... don't you ever get an itch you just can't scratch?"

Sweat trickles down my back. Damn it, Wolter, I hear ya, man. Really, I do, but I'm trying to drive here. Could you please not mack on my navigator right now? Or maybe ever?

"Turn right onto Hill," Charlie instructs me, seemingly oblivious to Wolt's blatant flirting. I swerve suddenly, cutting across three lanes of traffic to make my turn. In the process, I send Charlie and Wolt sprawling into me -- she ends up with her face practically against mine, and her cold nose against my neck sends a shiver through me.

"S-sorry," I gasp. "Give me a little more advance notice next time, Charlie. Everyone okay?"

"Couldn't be better," Wolter responds, half-muffled from under Charlie's tail, making no move to get up. She pushes him away, regaining her seat.

"Seat belts might be advisable," she remarks. "Shame this vehicle doesn't appear to be equipped
with them. Let me know if you're going to attempt any more stunt driving, Cormo."

"Your late directions are the cause of my stunt driving, Charlie." I retort, matching her tone.

"Y'know, you could ride in my lap, if you want," Wolter grins. "Plenty of room over here."

The vixen shakes her head in response. "Cormo's lap would make more sense. More immediacy to the driver."

"No, bad idea," I quickly respond.

"Yeah, bad idea," Wolt repeats, making a gesture over his lap like he's a gameshow hostess showing off a new prize. "Besides, this is prime real estate over here."

This is going to be a long drive.

A little over a half an hour of Wolter unsuccessfully flirting at Charlie later, we finally arrive at our destination: a nondescript storage compound north of the Fruit Market, right at the edge of Tundratown's southwest border. The place is fenced in and most of the lights are out, and notably, there's a guard post at the front gate. From where we're sitting, though, the gate's open, and nobody appears to be around.

"What the hell's the point of having security if they're not actually here to secure the place?" I mutter, driving across the speedbumps and into the compound. "Is it okay for us to be here, Charlie?"

"Why wouldn't it be?" she returns with an arched eyebrow and a pup-like, almost cloyingly innocent tilt of her head. I've never seen that look on her before. "It's public property."

"With a guard and a gate?"

"I don't see a guard," Wolt smirks.

"And the gate was open," Charlie adds.

Well, shit. They got me there.

Driving around the lot to the building designated in Charlie's collection of notes, I back the van up a ramp to the loading dock. There's a sudden lurching sensation as the van bumps against the wall, apparently having gone too far. Shit. I don't have much in the way of night vision so I was mostly eyeballing it.

"We're here," I offer lamely as Wolt picks himself up off the floorboard.

"Fuckin' hell, grazer, I oughta put-- oh, shit!" He suddenly interrupts himself with a yelp, reaching under the seat from his new vantage point and producing a stack of several magazines. The one on top is labeled **BIG BUTT BEAUTIES** and on its cover is an enormous elephant wearing only a towel that doesn't even begin to cover her ass.

Charlie slaps the porno mags out of his hands as she climbs past him. "You can look at those later. We have a job to do."

Wolt sighs, reluctantly leaving them where they lay on the floor of the van.
Sure enough, the weather's cool but not unpleasantly cold as I swing my door open. Glad I didn't bring a jacket after all, it'd have just been one more thing to haul in the already cramped cab. Hopping out, I go to investigate the damage to the van. There's a sizable dent in the bumper from where I clobbered one of those concrete pillar things -- fuck, what're those called -- but there's so many dents already I doubt the owner will care, let alone notice.

"Yeesh." Wolt scratches the back of his head as Charlie sizes up the metal shutter leading into the storage building. "So we got a key to this place, or is this an electric lock deal or what?"

"Looks like all they have is just an old-fashioned padlock," Charlie casually responds right before reaching into her pocket and pulling out a motherfucking set of lockpicks I KNEW this was too good to be true!

"Oh, hey, good thinkin'," Wolt drawls. What? No, don't encourage her, you fucking moron!

"Dammit, Charlie!" I hiss, looking around for any security cameras as she begins swiftly picking the locks. "I thought you said this was legal!"

"That's not what you asked me," she responds, tossing the padlock aside in seconds like it's the bow on a birthday present. "You asked if we were stealing the product here. We're not. Technically, it was already stolen by another party. Besides, our client has paid for it."

"Paid who? You?"

"Don't be unreasonable," she says as Wolt opens the metal shutter. Fucking hell. "Besides, this is public property. We have as much right to be here as anyone."

"What?! No! This is literally the exact opposite of public property! You are LITERALLY breaking and entering right now!" I press both of my hooves to my head, tugging at my headwool as they saunter inside like they own the place. I can already see my mugshot on the ZNN nightly news.

She doesn't even glance over her shoulder at me, just walks right inside. "Come on, Cormo. We're on a strict schedule here."

"Maaaan, I hate it when people misuse the word 'literally'," Wolt grumbles, following Charlie.

Resisting the urge to scream, I walk around the side of the van, making sure to keep low and out of sight. Going inside is a bad idea, but if some security guard finds me out here I'm on my own, and I don't have the head for this my cohorts do. At least it's dark outside, so I've got that going for me. The warehouse in question that we're totally not breaking into is jammed full of shrink-wrapped pallets and crates. Charlie didn't seem to imply whatever it was we're getting is particularly heavy, and I'm assuming it'll all be able to fit in the van. All I can hope is that we're not here too long.

A pair of hand trucks are attached to the inside walls of the building by a set of thick industrial nylon straps. Wolt and I each grab one as we follow Charlie through the warehouse, who's busy consulting her notes to find our payload. After several minutes of hunting around in the dark, we eventually arrive at what she informs is our haul.

"Here it is. Six crates."

Most of the label is in a language I can't read. But what I can make out isn't comforting. "Tiger Oil? Medical grade?!" I mutter, squinting at what I can understand from the label printed on the side of one of the boxes. What the hell's 'Tiger Oil'? Why would it be 'medical grade'? I can only hope this is one of those really new street drugs that's only semi-legal instead of just plain illegal.
Oh, god. I was mostly joking to myself earlier but now I really can see myself getting arrested for hauling this shit. I won't last a second in a prison around here.

"Dude, nice," Wolt says. "Tiger Oil's the real McCoon. I hear a teaspoon's enough to keep you surging for hours. Charlie, think Dora'll give us any free samples? I know Anna's way into this stuff. I mean, I'd be willing to take some in lieu of cash, y'know..."

This is it, I'm actually running drugs. Remmy Fucking Cormo, drug dealer. My eyes widen -- I suddenly remember Ozzy's comment about the stash in my apartment or whatever. Oh shit. I really hope that was just a joke.

"Let's just get all this in the van and get out of here. You can negotiate for a hit or something later," I growl, grabbing one of the crates. Thankfully they're not that heavy even if they are kind of big -- I can't imagine any of these boxes weighing more than forty, fifty pounds tops. Working together, Wolt and I get all of them loaded onto the hand trucks and wheeled out to the van, where Charlie helps us position them in the cargo hold.

We've got the van loaded by a little after eleven. The cool night air should be refreshing against all this sweat, but I just feel wet and uncomfortable. The aardwolf working beside me doesn't seem to be doing much better, and by the time we get back in the van, we're all a little ripe. Charlie nestles in between Wolt and I, and I don't waste any time in getting out of here.

"Slow down, Cormo," Charlie says as I rocket over several sets of speed bumps. "We're in a hurry, but not that much of a hurry. The speed limit should surely be fine."

"Yeah, I'm trying to read here," Wolt grumbles, thumbing through a nudie mag. "Be careful."

As we pull around to the front of the compound, my heart sinks -- all the lights have since turned on and the gate's locked up tighter than a drum. We're trapped in here.

"Aw, FUCK," I moan, slamming my hooves against the sides of the wheel. "We're busted!"

"Kill the lights," Charlie responds automatically. I make the van go dark. "They must have seen us already!"

"Calm down," she instructs, but it's obvious from her face she has no plan any more than I do. "I told you I have all the other arrangements covered. Just give me a second to assess the situation."

Wolter sighs, chewing at one of his clawtips. He's trying not to let it show, but he's clearly flipping the fuck out too.

"Drive forward a little so that we can see the guard shack. Quiet-like. And be careful," Charlie finally says after a minute or two of looking around. "Let's see if the security guard's on-site. If so, I'll negotiate with him."

"Her," Wolt corrects as I reluctantly creep the car forward. Craning his neck out the window, his squinting eyes widen as he spots the guard -- a young wolf girl snapping bubble gum and bouncing up and down in her seat to the radio. He slouches over and groans. "Fuck me. I know her."

Charlie and I exchange glances before she turns back to Wolt. "I fail to see how this is bad news," Charlie says. "Go work your magic."

"That -- I -- maaaan, no," he hisses, clicking his tongue in frustration. "She and I hooked up at a party about a month ago, and she's super fuckin' clingy!"
"Wolt!" Charlie hisses. "Not up for negotiation -- we're already running late!"

"Man, no, why can't Cormo do it?! Charlie, work with me here!" he pleads.

Charlie slams her fist against the dash, and both Wolt and I jump. She shoves him towards the door. "That's absolutely out of the question," she insists.

I nod, folding my arms. Hell if I'm gonna get stuck dealing with some flighty partygirl. "Thanks, Charlie."

"Besides, it's clearly been too long since he last had a mate. You can smell it all over him," Charlie argues, jabbing a finger at me. "Which means the guard would too. He'd be too nervous, she's a wolf -- there's no way it'll work. Like it or not, you're up, Wolter."

"THANKS, Charlie," I grumble, blushing and slipping down in my seat as Wolter hops out.

With a passive-aggressive sigh loud enough to be audible through the closed van doors, he walks up to the guard booth, sneaks under the lighted window, dips under the fence, and disappears from sight. A moment later he pops back up on the street side of the gate, then walks up and knocks twice. The little sliding window immediately opens and the guard girl reaches out and embraces him, licking the side of his muzzle in a cringy public display of affection. Wolt slowly turns to glare at us as she slobbers all over his face, and the burning fury in his eyes says it all.

Even Charlie's smirking.

"Everything okay, Wolt?" I ask, biting the bottom of my lip to stifle a laugh as we burn rubber cruising down Hill Street.

"Fine." He runs his paws through his hair as he tries and fails to get his mane to go back the way he had it before giving up in disgust.

"So uh, how exactly did you get the gate open?" I tease.

"Don't worry about it," he seethes.

Charlie scratches her nose idly. "Did she see the van on the way out?"

"Trust me, I'm 100% positive she didn't. Now can we please shut up about it? I'm fucking starving, anyway."

"And we'll get food soon. You've got my word on that -- but Bug Burga would take longer than we have right now and we need to see the job through. Left turn, Cormo."

I nod, speeding through a yellow light right as it turns, earning myself a few honks.

"Are we taking this stuff to Dora's apartment or to the shop, Charlie?" Wolter asks.

"The latter," Charlie says.

Wolt seems happy with that answer. "Arright. Bout time anyway, I've been needing to restock on some stuff."

"You can browse if you make it quick," Charlie murmurs, tapping away on an old flip phone. It's one of those super cheap models that doesn't even have like a color screen -- could be any phone
from the nineties for all I know. Reminds me of one I used to have. "I just sent her a message, letting her know to meet us there."

"Nice phone," I crack, craning forward to read the nearest street sign.

"Not anymore," she responds, nonchalantly chucking the phone out the open passenger window. I can hear it shatter to bits on the asphalt, pieces of plastic disappearing in the rear view mirror.

Eventually we turn off of Hill and onto Pack Street, and Charlie begins giving me directions to the drop-off. It's twenty till midnight -- we made excellent time on the return trip, managing to cruise through almost every single traffic light at just the right time.

We drive past Packer's Gym, which reminds me I want to head back soon. Now that I know what it's all about, maybe I can get Cliff and Neil to go for some B-ball. Normally I'd even ask Avo to come with me, but I'm not relishing the idea of having to look her in the eyes after my last encounter with her and Betty.

"Turn right over here," Charlie says once we're through another two or three intersections. "Dora wants us to go around back and offload everything into the storage room since the shop's full of customers right now." Suits me, I don't exactly want to be noticed carrying whatever the hell we've been sent for.

"Figures Dora's the type to prefer rear deliveries," Wolt cracks.

"Wolter, is everything innuendo with you?" I ask, cheeks flushing. He looks at me with an incredulous smile, eyes wide.

"What?! It felt like an appropriate joke, fluff!" he grins. "No need to be such a -- tightass...!" He snickers to himself while I grit my teeth. I'm too frustrated to even roll my eyes at his shit right now.

"We're here, Cormo," Charlie says, pointing to the nondescript back of a building.

I park the van and we all quickly disembark. Loud electronic music is pumping through the walls from inside wherever we're at. Must be some kind of club or something. I feel like I should recognize where I'm at, but it's dark and I'm a little turned around right now. I know I'm back on Pack Street, but I'm not used to driving around the city.

Charlie scampers across the asphalt, knocking at a large delivery-bay door labeled "Employees Only" while Wolter and I carefully head around to the cargo hold. I'm more than a little paranoid right now, considering a fucking deal is about to go down and these two are acting super casual about it.

The door opens and Charlie heads inside before coming back with a flatbed cart to load our crates onto. Wolt and I begin setting them off, though he doesn't seem to be in nearly as much of a hurry as I am.

"Gentle, Cormo," the vixen chides as I shove the crates onto the cart, looking around nervously. "Wouldn't do us any good to get the cargo here only for it to be damaged."

"Yeah, yeah," I respond quickly, grabbing the fully loaded cart by the handle and muscling it over the door's threshold. "Let's just get whatever the hell this stuff is inside."

"Just set it off right there," an unfamiliar female voice says from the other side of a large metal rack full of cardboard boxes. It's pretty fucking dark in here, but I'm not going to complain. I start
lowering the crates to the floor while Wolter keeps the cart steady. "Sorry about the mess back here. Let me get the lights for you."

The storage room's flooded with blinding fluorescent light. My eyes are still adjusting when nearby footsteps get my attention. A sudden pang of fear shoots through me -- I should have waited outside. I don't want this 'Dora' knowing who I am. You can't really undo getting known like this.

Shit. Too late now.

A very tall, muscular tigress steps out from around the storage to greet us. "Foxtrot, so nice to see you."

"Likewise, Dora," Charlie responds with a bow of her head.

I'm awkwardly hanging out by the door and trying not to let her see my face when a sudden call dashes my hopes and freezes my blood. "Hey, I know you!"

I spin on my heels to face the tigress, who stands facing me with her hands on her hips and a huge toothy smile on her face. I'm trying to place it, but my head's spinning. She's huge. Intimidatingly built. A skintight top and what look like yoga pants or tights or--

"Yeah!" She paces over to me and I find myself too scared to even flee. "Yeah, you're that fluffy little meat-eating marshmallow. We actually talked at Bug Burga, a while back. You probably don't remember me. You seemed like you were in a hurry."

I'm suddenly incredibly aware of how sweaty I look. And probably smell. "Ah, uh-- I, uh, yeah. Sorry. I'm--"

She shoves her oversized paw out to shake my hoof. "Name's Dora! Pleasure to properly meet you, li'l lamb. Thanks for helping out tonight."

I shrink, a stupid smile plastered uncomfortably on my face. I'm too nervous to shake so I just offer up this awkward little wave, like I'm eight years old. "Remmy. And don't mention it." Really. Please don't.

She turns to the crates, takes a deep breath, then huffs with a nod, seemingly satisfied at our delivery. "What a shipment. You all did well. Foxtrot, please wait in my office, and I'll be in shortly to see to your payment."

Charlie nods, bowing again before shuffling to a door at the far end of the loading bay. She opens it, and the loud dance music floods in briefly. After a pause, Dora turns back to me, and to Wolt, who seems to be sniffing around the crates we just dropped off.

"As for you boys, if you like, why not come in while you wait, browse around? I'll give you each an owner's discount for the night!"

"Oh, sweet. Thank you, Dora," Wolt nods politely.

"And let me know if there's anything special I can do for you." Oh boy. She literally just said that to Wolter. I roll my eyes pre-emptively -- here it comes.

"No, that's all right, thank you." He bows, heading for the door. Seriously? Nothing, Wolt?

"Actually," he starts, turning around by the wall. There it is, I knew it. "Actually, could I get a hit of that Tiger Oil?"
Dora smirks back, shifting her broad hips to one side. "I'll talk to Charlie about it for you, all right?"

"Great! Thanks again." He ducks out, into the thumping music scene beyond. Huh. All right then.

"That just leaves you," Dora muses, turning very slowly to look over her shoulder. "Do you want a 'hit' too, or would you rather just go browsing?"

I've had about my fill here. "Look -- look, no offense, no judgment or anything, I'm not trying to start something, but I'm trying to stay clean, and whatever's going on back there, it's none of my business. I'm just going to get my share of the payment from Charlie, and--"

A surprisingly girly laugh coming from the tigress cuts me off, and I glance up to see her covering her mouth. "Oh my," she titters, waving a paw in the air. "Tiger Oil isn't a drug, li'l lamb!"

"Oh." That's all I can say. Like a fucking idiot. 'Oh.'

She smiles, circling the crates and taking a seat on one. "It's not even illegal. It's just... hard to acquire."

I run a hoof uncomfortably through my coif. "If you don't mind me asking, what is it, then?"

"Just what it says on the tin, marshmallow!"

"...it literally comes from tigers?"

"Male ones, anyway. It's a -- kind of pheromone extract. Drives most felines wild. Canines too. And ungulates, come to think of it. Just about anyone, really," she grins, tapping the crate with a long black claw for emphasis.

I cock my head to the side, no doubt looking as confused as I feel. She stands and moves toward the back door, and I follow. "I don't get it. You had us lift pheromones? What kind of club is this?"

She stops, glancing back with an even broader smile. "Oh, you're adorable!" she beams. "It's not a club."

The tigress pushes the door open and after a second my confusion gives way to stunned silence. Beyond the door, where the loud music blares, I can see rows of magazines, a wall covered in lingerie, and a very excited aardwolf darting between other customers.

"Dora," I murmur to myself breathlessly as realization kicks in. I knew I should have recognized this area. "I don't suppose that's short for Pandora."

"Mm, so you've heard of me after all."

I glance around through the open door, watching as Wolt runs past the front register, manned by a tall black jackal in--

Oh no.

Avo glances up at Wolt with a look of mild annoyance. As she tracks his movement past her, she spots the open door.

She looks straight into my eyes.

No. No. Not again.
Her eyes gleam and a thin, growing smile stretches slowly across her face.

Just as she starts to sit up, the door closes and Pandora snaps her fingers, getting my attention. I look up to find her wearing a grin of her own, albeit not charged with Avo's sense of malice. "So, Remmy, did you want to do a little shopping while you wait?"

I nervously smile back, blushing. "Uh, maybe another time."
Power Forward

Chapter Summary

Remmy hits up Packer’s Gym for a day of exercise, and gets to know his neighbors.

Packer’s Gym.

It's only my second visit, but it's already starting to feel familiar. Honestly, I wouldn't mind becoming a regular, and I intend to get a lot of use out of it as long as I'm living here. It's one of the few places I can go for exercise that isn't work, and at least the preds that hang out here were friendly to me my first day.

I learned from experience this place doesn't provide much, so I brought my own towel and a water bottle this time. I don't actually own a real gym bag anymore -- haven't needed one since I graduated -- so I just repurposed that stupid "scent-proof" tote bag I paid a king's ransom for that does fuck-all to conceal my burgas. Might as well get some use out of the worthless piece of shit.

Once I'm inside the lobby, I can see the gym's pretty busy today. Strange -- this shouldn't really be "peak hours". I mean, I'm in here the same time of day I came with Avo and the twins, and yet the
crowd's much larger and even a little more diverse than before. If the weather was still as hot now as it was last week, I'd assume they were trying to beat the heat, but you don't exactly go to a gym to cool down.

"Excuse me, sir!" a frilly, high-pitched voice pipes up.

Against the near wall, by the door, there's a folding table with an assortment of healthy-looking snacks and supplements designed to appeal to the average gym-goer. Two big plastic barrels full of sports drinks and ice are at either end of the table along with stacks of cups. A hand-written price list hangs from the front of the table by a piece of masking tape -- looks like it might be a fundraiser for some local organization, possibly the gym itself.

Stationed at the table is a stoat girl, sitting on a stack of books piled up on the seat of a folding chair. She's a tiny thing, right at about Marty's size. Her fur pattern's pretty similar to his as well; roughly the same color as walnut wood with darker circular markings underneath her beady eyes. The stoat (stoatess?) has a messy mop of uncombed, frizzy brown hair atop her head. She's wearing a cute ankle-length one-piece dress that starts out pink and fades to crimson by the time it reaches the hem. Her expression is bright, dainty, and cheerful, but when I turn to her, she seems a little taken aback. I'm used to the reaction by now, though. Still a sheep among wolves.

"Oh, uh, hi there," I respond, walking over to her table. A cash box that's bigger than she is rests next to one of the drink barrels. I'm a little surprised she feels safe running this operation considering what kind of neighborhood we're in. I can't possibly imagine someone her size being able to stand up to a thief helping himself to the cash.

"U-um, hello r-- sir!" She seems a little nervous, blushing and wringing her paws as she talks to me. "I- um, uh, I'm raising money on behalf of the Pack Street local library! W-would you like a snack or a drink? All proceeds go towards operation costs!"

I'm not really hungry, but sure, I'll help the girl out. No telling how long she's been at this. "Sure. What's good?" I ask, eyeing some granola bars in a tupperware case. They appear to be homemade.

"W-well, I make these myself. It's my mom's dark chocolate and marshmallow granola bar recipe. It's a real good pick-me-up after exercising, and they're only 150 calories each."

Yeah, somehow I doubt a four-inch thick granola and cereal brick drizzled in dark chocolate and held together with marshmallows is "only" 150 calories, but I'm sure that's just part of her sales pitch.

"Well, I'm not really counting calories so much, since I actually could stand to gain a little weight," I joke, eyeing the glorified hunk of candy. "Looks good, though, so I'll take one of those. Can you wrap it up for me?"

"S-sure! That'll be a dollar fifty."

I reach into my wallet and pull out a five dollar bill as she wraps a granola bar up in a piece of wax paper. "Here you go. You can keep the change."

"O-oh wow, thank you, sir," she breathes, tucking the bill into her cash box. I sneak a glance at it as she does -- surprisingly, her take's not as meager as I'd have expected, but that's a good thing. Call me a soft touch, but I have an appreciation for someone who'll put the time and effort into busting hump for a cause they believe in. Maybe Charlie roping me into her various odd jobs has rubbed off on me a little.
I accept the treat from her and slip it into the pocket of my tote bag. "I'm Remmy, by the way. Nice to meet you, miss...?"

"Ah, Mart-- Martina," she responds, extending her tiny paw for a shake. "Forgive my saying this, but... you're kind of a rare sight to see here at Packer's, Mr. Remmy!"

"Just Remmy's fine. I'm new to the neighborhood. And yeah, I bet not many rams come here, right?" Wow, nice to have someone not calling me a slur or some weird pet name for once.

"Not really," Martina chuckles, clasping her paws together with an enthusiastic smile. "But it's always great to see new faces! Enjoy your workout! Come see me if you get thirsty!"

I sling my bag over my shoulder and head into the gym proper. "Will do."

Most of the weight sets are occupied today so I have to make do with ones that are small even by my standards. The gym's even expanded its inventory a little, too. To my surprise I see a few "new" pieces of exercise equipment that either I didn't notice or weren't here last time, including two treadmills. They're not in brand-new condition, of course -- that'd probably be asking too much of a place that squeaks by on donations and volunteer work -- but hey, more stuff's never a bad thing. When it's less busy maybe I'll even get a shot at using one.

"Hey, Remmy! Good to see you back."

Glancing over my shoulder, I spot a familiar-looking Bengal tiger in a nearby crowd of predators.

"Hey, Cliff," I greet, setting my barbell aside to shake his paw. "Thanks, I had a couple hours and thought I'd swing on by. How you doing?"

"Miserable," Cliff laughs. "Dude, I've been wanting to ball since I got here two hours ago but those sloth kids have the court on lockdown."

Looking at the partitioned-off basketball court at the far end of the gym, I spot a pair of statues enjoying a slow-motion game of basketball while a group of mostly canine predators look on in a mix of amusement and thinly-veiled agitation. Prey species are a rare sight around here, but these wouldn't be the first I've run into since moving in. A certain ewe comes to mind and I find myself frowning unconsciously, only snapped back to reality when one of the kids goes for a dribble and ends up just sort of dropping the ball. It's come to a stop before he even manages to scoop it back up.

"I really shouldn't laugh," I chuckle, watching as one of the sloth boys begins the motions to attempt a steal. He might even be done with it by the time I leave. "I take it they're out-of-towners?"

"That's the vibe I got," Cliff sighs. "Really sweet kids -- well raised. Very polite. Asked if they could use the court, oldest can't be more than fourteen. Their folks probably dropped them off while they tend to whatever business they have in the area."

"And of course nobody else can simply play around them," I add. "Because they're, y'know..."

"Yeah, exactly." Cliff rakes his claws gently across the top of his head, massaging his scalp. "Damn nice kids, though. Like I said. They just don't know any better."

"Right, sure."
Cliff sticks around for a little while longer making small talk before Neil comes up with a friendly greeting -- apparently he's Cliff's ride. The two wave goodbye, so I scoot over to the set of weights Cliff had been using, trading up to something more within my comfort zone.

I'm no bodybuilder, but I know my way around a set of weights, at least. I wish I had a music player or something, but lacking a distraction, I just sort of zone out during workout instead. My thoughts drift to some of the uncharacteristically friendly faces I've seen today. Martina, Cliff, Neil... in spite of myself, I can't help wondering if there'll be another block party soon. Maybe I'll have the opportunity to get to know some of these folks a bit better now that I can appreciate nocturnal life more.

A pleasant image of myself with a beer and a bbq burga as "Mr. Life of the Party" is interrupted when I feel the heat of breath on my neck, causing the wool on my back to bristle. With a start, I turn around to see Avo towering over me, arms folded and her usual shark-like sneer in place.

*Oh, fuck.*

I've been kind of trying to avoid her and Betty since the whole Pandora's Box debacle. Running into her twice at the sex shop wasn't part of my plan, either. If I'd gotten more intel from Charlie on what our client was actually about, I'd have let Wolter spearhead offloading the boxes while I waited in the van.

"Hello, fluff," the sleek jackal coos as she backs me up against a wooden bench, rolling her lollipop around her mouth. "Trying to put some lamb on those chops again? Or are there maybe some frustrations you're working off?"

Sighing, I lower my weights and brush myself off, looking up at her. "All right. Go ahead, get it out of your system," I groan. "Let's hear the full run of sheep dick jokes. I'm sure you've heard them all by now from everyone."

"Hey, I didn't tell a soul, Cormo." She seems almost offended.

I cock my head to the side, not quite believing her. "Oh no? Why not?"

"Oh, get over yourself," she cracks a thin smile, "Like you're the biggest weirdo I've ever seen at work. Customers are customers, after all. I can't scare them *all* off. Bad for business. We've got to have some kind of confidentiality."

I sigh, leaning back to rest. "Sure. I can see you're itching to get some quips out. Go ahead. It's all right, I can take it."

She rolls her eyes exaggeratedly, slumping her shoulders for effect. "Oh, take all of the joy out of it, why don't you? Besides, I had my fun at the shop already. I figure you've been run through the wringer enough by now."

"So what, you're just gonna let it go then?" I scoff.

Tapping the tip of her muzzle, she smirks. "Well, I reserve the right to hold onto it for a rainy day. But, ahh, tell you what: any time you want to swing on by and pick up that toy you left behind -- I think I remember the one, in fact -- I'll give you my employee discount. You know, so that there are no... hard feelings."

I sit up, blushing slightly and draping my hooves over my knees. "You done?"

"Yeah, yeah. Now I am." Avo leans down and condescendingly pats my coif, albeit with a genuine
smile. "You can't blame me for wanting to rib you, fluff. You're kind of cute when you're flustered."

"Only when I'm flustered?" I return, folding my arms with a smirk of my own.

She scrunches up her face in surprise at my comeback, a grin at her muzzle. "Ooh, careful Remmy. Someone might think you're trying to flirt."

I shrug, fishing in my bag for my water bottle. When I look back up, I see Avo's gesturing for me to follow her.

"All right, mutton, time for a little advice from me to you. If you're gonna work on building up some muscle you might as well know how to use it." Gesturing to the punching bags hanging in the back corner of the gym, Avo spits her stick out before reloading her lollipop with a fresh one from her pocket. "You at least know how to throw a punch, right?"

"Hooves," I respond bluntly, arms up in mock surrender. "They're not really designed for punches. There's a reason we're called 'prey species'. I can kick pretty all right, though."

"Hey, you use what you've got," she nods. "I mean, look, we've all seen the news. I don't see much point in pretending it's not happening. If someone -- god forbid -- goes savage around here, we all gotta be prepared."

I stretch, loosening up my shoulders. "Ooh, careful, Avo. Someone might think you're worried about me."

She laughs so suddenly it sounds like a cough, and she waves a hand in front of herself, wafting away my comment like a bad smell. "Please. I'm just saying, last thing Pack Street needs is a sheep getting mauled, or worse. It'd just give the donut patrol more of a reason to climb up our asses."

Reasoning aside, I can't disagree with her suggestion. I never was one of those passive-to-a-fault types like the "naturalist" crowd who thinks a mammal doesn't have a right to at least defend himself from an attack, but I've never owned a weapon of any variety before. Unless you count, like, kitchen knives or something. Point is, I've never really had much of a need for self-defense, but the game changed when I moved into a rough neighborhood in the middle of an unheard-of epidemic.

After returning the last of the weights to the rack for the next guy, I grab my bag and follow Avo to the far end of the room. There's hardly anyone nearby, so I hopefully don't have to worry as much about a bunch of preds gawking as I make a fool of myself. And as far as Avo goes, well, if she wanted to humiliate me I'm sure she's already got all the necessary ammo for it after the other day.

"All right lambchop," Avo croons as she sidles behind one of the predator-sized punching bags, wrapping her paws around it like she's giving it a hug. The thing's at least twice my size. Maybe more. "Give me your best hit."

"My best hit, huh?" I crack my neck, arms folded. "You sure about that?"

"Yeah, really try to reach in and tap your inner pillow fighter," she smirks. "I need to get an idea of what we're working with here."

Taking a deep breath, I begin backing up. She cocks her head at me funny once I'm a few yards back. "What, you running away? I get that's your natural instinct, but you know this thing can't hit back, right? It's just practice," she calls out to me.
I decide I've got enough of a running start. I hunker down and charge the bag. Avo's grin is firmly locked in place right up until the moment my headbutt impacts the punching bag. It jolts hard backwards, taking Avo with it, and she stumbles a good few steps just to keep standing. I hear her sharply inhale as she slumps to the floor, eyes wide.

I rub my head and neck, immediately sore after the impact. I haven't headbutted in years, I don't think. Lacking horns makes it a lot harder, but I think everyone around here would agree I've got a thick skull.

I circle around the bag to check on Avo. Chunks of sugary candy dribble out of her mouth in a trail of saliva. "Holy... shit," she gasps, clutching at her stomach. "Were you -- kafffh! You trying to, gguuuhhh -- show off or something...?"

"You okay?" I ask, warily glancing around to make sure nobody saw what just happened. "Sorry. You said to give it my best hit."

"F-fuck, Cormo." She sucks in a lungful of air -- apparently I knocked the wind out of her and good, so she keeps pausing to gasp. "Feels like... I got run over by a truck. You're not as... lightweight as I thought."

"Where do you think the phrase 'battering ram' came from?" I reach into my bag and pull out my water bottle, popping the cap loose and handing it to her. She nods to me, slowly sipping at it as she wipes the shards of lollipop from her chin.

"I'm lucky I didn't bite my damn tongue in half," Avo finally manages after collecting herself. "I think you might need to teach me that move."

After parting ways with Avo, I've gotta admit, I'm feeling pretty damn good. If the gym hadn't been so crowded I could have easily stuck around a while longer. The endorphin rush has been great. I don't know if it's just the atmosphere of the place or what, but it seems like everyone was in a good mood. Even Avo seemed agreeable for a change, and spent more time smiling and working with me than figuring out new insults.

It also helps that I'm feeling pretty flush right now, too. My cut from Charlie's heist made the Bug Burga sauce packet hustle look sad. I'm almost wondering if it isn't too early to consider looking at apartments over on Flock Street, or maybe closer to Downtown Zootopia. Hell, I wonder if I couldn't get a couple roommates to go in with me on a townhouse in Savannah Central right now. Might be time to post myself a Camelslist ad.

Still, I guess I can stick around here a little longer and build my resources up before making the commitment. Even with the bump I got from boosting -- sorry, "transporting" those cases of Tiger Oil for Dora, I want to make sure my move's comfortable. Plus, my current place is paid up for the month. Might as well get my money's worth before I bail. Somehow, getting out of this neighborhood doesn't seem quite as urgent as it did a couple weeks ago.

Again I find myself snapped from a daydream by a familiar voice. "Heeey, woolly bully! Man, what're you doin' gallivantin' around out here?"

Turning to look across the street, I see Ozzy loping along across the pedestrian crossing with a sling bag over his shoulder. "Hey, it's the music man! What's up Ozzy?"

"Aww, felt like takin' a walk! Weather's cooled down enough after that fuckin' -- felt like a volcano
eruption the other day, man." He grins easily, sticking his paw out for a bump. I tap the end of my hoof against it as we step over to the side to make way for the sidewalk foot traffic. "I see you're all in your gym duds, Remmy. You headin' to Packer's?"

"Just came from there actually," I answer. "Avo and I hung out for a while before she had to go to work."

"Hey, nice. You guys get a chance to play any ball?"

I make a show of hanging my head. "Nah. Shame, too. Couple of sloth kids had the court tied up and so we ended up just lifting weights and doing some kickboxing kind of stuff." I neglect to mention that I nearly broke her ribs. "They were still playing when I left."

Ozzy lets out a raspy, low chuckle. "Sloths, man, gotta love 'em." Reaching into his sling, he pulls out a basketball, tossing it to me. "If you've still got the energy to go shoot some hoops, I know a great alley court just like, a block from here."

"Fuck yeah I've got the energy!" I reply, catching the ball in my hooves with ease. There's a reason I played back in high school. Bowling, hockey, tennis, most other sports and activities work better with hands or paws, but even hooves can grip a basketball with minimal effort. Hell, I even learned to palm. "I'll follow you."

"Hey, right on! You're gonna love this place -- it's nice and shaded and everything. Little smaller than, you know, regulation size, but still. Best fuckin' deli next door, too."

A month ago I might be alarmed at how readily I'm following a hyena into a back alley. But Ozzy's a lot of things, and malicious sure doesn't seem to be one of them. I mean, the guy did basically save my life and all, so I figure he's not going to shiv me. Either way, it's not long before I confirm he's absolutely telling the truth -- there's a nice little alley court tucked behind a building about a block away. The broken, pock-marked sidewalk gives way to nice clean pavement and a backboard in good shape, and honestly, there's nothing more you can ask for.

"Do I know how to pick 'em or what?" Ozzy chuckles as we set our bags down on top of a nearby trash can lid. "Can't tell you how many afternoons I spent here growin' up."

"No kidding?" I scratch the back of my head while he stretches. "Man, you were right. Nice little spot here."

"Tell me about it! Packer's is great too, y'know, for the cushy indoor thing." Cushy? I mean, Packer's is all right, but I wouldn't call it 'cushy'. "But there's just something about an alley court that, like, it feels real. I know more than a few scholarships ended up goin' to mammals who cut their teeth sinkin' baskets here."

Licking his lips, he picks up the ball and lobs a practice shot at the hoop, swishing it with ease.

"Aww yeah. That's what I'm talkin' about. Hey, Cormo, you wanna make it interesting?"

"Maybe. Whatcha got in mind? Loser buys lunch?"

Chuckling, he tosses me the ball. "You know I won't say no to a free meal, man."

"I warn you, I'm on a lucky streak today," I return, lining up my shot. "Best two outta three, then?"

"Works for me, woolly B."
It's pretty close in the end, but Ozzy just barely manages to edge me out in sudden death. I haven't had anyone give me nearly this much of a run for my money since our senior year matchup against the Rainforest High Raiders.

"That was a damn good game," I pant, taking a seat on a discarded milk crate and wiping sweat from my brow. I'm hot and achy but damn, even having lost, I'm really fucking riding high. A real game. It's been way too long. I make a mental note of the court, because I sure as hell plan on coming back.

Ozzy's leaning on the wall, catching his breath. "I ain't never seen a puff-ball move like that," he laughs, in his usual way. "Shit, Remmy."

"It's my game, I guess. Well, I mean, I still lost, but you get what I mean."

He flops down on the ground next to me with a yawn, craning his neck over to eyeball my watch. "I got time for one more if you want a rematch."

"You sure?" I ask warily. "You don't have to like, gimme a sympathy do-over. I don't mind picking up lunch, I lost fair and square."

"Oh, don't worry, you're still buying lunch."

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"You sure?" I ask warily. "You don't have to like, gimme a sympathy do-over. I don't mind picking up lunch, I lost fair and square."

I mull it over for a few seconds. "Yeah, why the fuck not? I only have a four-hour shift tonight, boss cut my hours for the week. I can sleep in."

"Fuckin' A. Let's do it," Ozzy declares, scooping the ball up and flipping it stylishly over his shoulder towards the hoop. He misses by a fucking mile -- it doesn't even hit the backboard.

I clap my hooves together with a wry grin as I stand up. "Very nice. Ten out of ten shot."

"Gonna be honest: I saw that working out so much cooler in my head," he chuckles as it rolls to a stop near his foot.

Ozzy's in better shape than I am, but this time around fatigue's getting the best of both of us. My experience is just enough to give me the edge, and I end up beating him 3-2. By the time we're done with our second impromptu match, we're both on the brink of collapsing where we stand. Still, I'm happy just having redeemed myself after that close first loss.

"You ready for that lunch break yet?" I ask as we limp out of the alley. "I heard there's a great deli next door."

"Haha, yeah. Just a little mom an' pop place, nothing fancy. Pretty much a literal roach-coach," Ozzy wheezes, one paw outstretched towards a family deli at the front of the alley. "Oof. I could go for something cold to drink, too. If you're feelin' generous."

"That makes two of us. My water bottle ran dry back at the gym."

The day's special is a hot sandwich, chips and a fountain drink for three bucks. Ozzy's right -- the building isn't really much to speak of and there isn't even sitting room inside, so we're street-eating,
as he put it, out on the court. Some old stacked crates make for useful enough seats, and with a breeze blowing down the alley and the shade from the buildings on either side, it's actually pretty pleasant. To top it off, the cicada sandwich is one of the best I've ever had even if the cheese isn't the real deal. After burning so much energy I devour my plate in just a few minutes, but Ozzy takes his time eating. Chewing thoroughly, small bites, small sips. After a few seconds he realizes I'm staring and blushes, obviously self-conscious.

"I ain't holdin' you up or anything, am I?" he asks, almost apologetically.

"Nah, don't worry about it," I reply, relaxing in my chair. "You take your time, man."

Ozzy bobs his head rhythmically. "Coo'. Hey, speaking of time -- when's all this goin' down, Cormo?" I turn my wrist so that he can eyeball my watch. "Oh, wow. Guess I'll hurry it along then so we can get goin'."

He polishes off the last of his sandwich and chips before chucking the paper plate in the trash.

"Thanks again, man. I had fun today," Ozzy offers, slinging his bag over his shoulder.

"Yeah, me too," I reply as we begin making our way home. "Start to finish, actually."

He laughs, slapping me on the back. "Hey, there you go! Didn't I say if you just got out in the world, you'd find your groove?"

"Let's do this again sometime."

In an interesting switch-up from the norm, Betty's out smoking on our apartment's porch rather than her own. As soon as she catches sight of us, she reaches behind herself and swings the lobby door open, leaning inside our apartment building for just a few seconds before ducking back out again.

"Wonder what that was about," I mutter to Ozzy as Betty descends the steps, keeping an eye on us the entire time as she walks back to her usual stoop.

"Couldn't say," Ozzy mutters, his perma-grin replaced with an uncharacteristic frown. I don't really blame him. She kinda has that effect on me, too.

I make eye contact with Betty as we pass, waiting for her inevitable jeer or call out to me. She's stone silent today, though, and something about that makes it worse. I've got an uneasy feeling as I reach the front door.

Al's standing dead center in the lobby, arms folded across his chest. He's dressed immaculately, in a dark black suit I've never seen before. His entire body language screams hostile, and I instantly find myself wanting to retreat into my wool casing only to lament once again that it's not there.

Avo's leaning against the far wall, staring daggers in my direction, lollipop clamped between her sharp teeth. Seated near Al on one of the couches is Velvet, that deer who came to visit the other week. Her clipboard's in her hooves and a very stern expression's on her face. Now, I've only met this lady once before, but she seemed like a pretty optimistic, professional type back then. I wonder what's got her in such a foul mood today.

With little choice, I slowly head in, glancing around and trying to figure out what's going on. Ozzy lingers at the door, but with an audible sigh and a hangdog look, he plods in after me.
"I'm disappointed in you, Ozzy," Velvet reprimands, standing from the couch as we step inside. "And I'm especially disappointed with you as well, Mr. Cormo."

Uh oh.
Fall Back

Chapter Summary

After a pleasant day out, Remmy returns home to a tense situation.

If looks could kill, I've just been brought before a firing squad.

Man, what is it about Pack Street, huh? No, scratch that. What is it about this specific apartment building? For the most part, I've met predators everywhere around here that are nothing but friendly to me -- Martina was precious, Dora seemed charming if not a little quirky, and both Cliff and Neil are really easy to get along with. Not here though, buddy. Everyone in this building's a total asshole.

Al playing the big disgruntled piece of shit "alpha" wolf and Avo being her insufferable self is just par for the course around here. Actually, with Avo, it's a little jarring seeing the jackal staring me down after I just spent what felt like a good day at the gym with her. But what's most shocking is that even Velvet's irritated. She seemed like the calm, professional type, so this really comes straight out of left field. We're both prey species -- she's even a deer, which makes her an ungulate like me -- so you'd think she'd at least be willing to give me the benefit of the doubt here. After all,
we're on the same team, aren't we?

So I've got no fucking clue what Ozzy and I did to piss everyone off, but whatever it is must be huge. As for Ozzy himself, he's standing (hiding) behind me. The happy-go-lucky musicman who chased off a drunk, enraged bear at a rowdy block party is nowhere to be seen right now. Instead it feels more like I'm looking at that wolf pup I gave the lollipop to -- wide-eyed and timid. I'm surprised he hasn't turned tail and run yet, but then again he probably knows better than I do what a profoundly stupid idea that'd be. A street full of canines? He'd have no place to hide.

I grit my teeth and turn my eyes forward again, trying to be diplomatic. "You maybe want to explain what you mean, Ms. Roe?"

"Maybe you thought you were doing the right thing, but enabling someone isn't love, Mr. Cormo," Velvet replies tersely. "It's self-serving, and worse, it's damaging. I had only hoped that as Ozzy's friend you'd know better, but as I've seen today, clearly that's not the case."

"Enabling." My disbelief's obvious as I echo her words. "I'm enabling him -- and self-serving? Damaging? Lady, what the hell are you talking about?"

"Watch your tone," Al gruffly warns.

"Ozzy's standing appointment with me is at the same time every two weeks, rain or shine -- it's also mandatory, by the way. You didn't think I'd just get bored and leave, did you?" Velvet taps her clipboard with a frown. "This is a very serious matter. I've been waiting here for an hour and a half for him to show up, and I've already had to cancel two meetings with other mammals around Zootopia today because of your irresponsible behavior."

I'm not sure whether she's referring to Ozzy's irresponsible behavior or mine, but the way she's looking at us I can't help but feel like she means us both.

"I take my eyes off of you for one fuckin' second, grazer," Avo mutters, still boring holes into me with her eyes. The wool on the back of my neck bristles, and I can feel my cheeks starting to burn.

Okay. So that's how this is going to be.

Tossing my makeshift gym bag on the floor, I start to open my mouth to fire back at her, but Ozzy's voice fills the silence instead.

"Oh wow, man -- look, Miss Velvet-- I was goin' to come to my appointment, honest to god I was. I was bookin' it, man." He's stepped around me just barely, wringing his paws with a hat-in-hand, droopy-eyed look on his face. "But on my way over here, well, I ran into Remmy and he just begged me for a game -- and you know how much I love basketball, and I -- well, I wanted to say no, but, I thought it'd be good for me. What with everythin' that you and I've talked about?"

"On your way over here? What the fuck, Ozzy!" I bleat, hooves clenched. "No, you were totally going in the OPPOSITE direction!" Besides, I begged him? That sure as hell ain't how I remember it.

Ozzy blatantly ignores me, though, raising his volume to drown me out. "And so, I figured one game wouldn't hurt all that much, and we went over to the court and shot some hoops, y'know. Little one-on-one. And he was just so excited, really wanted to play, and I thought -- well, you know I'm a real social type, Miss Velvet, so I just couldn't refuse a friend. Scout's honor."

"The ZJRS is a respectable organization," Velvet dryly returns. "But as I recall, you said in our very first meeting that you weren't a member as a boy and had no desire to be."
"Aheh. Figure of speech. Honestly, though, this whole thing's a real victimless affair. Remmy was just bein' friendly, and I lost track a' time. I tried tellin' him I had to get going, but then he wanted a rematch, and then we had lunch, and... we just got carried away, you know? Man, you know I got trouble sayin' no. I wasn't trying to blow it off, we just got caught up in it, y'know?"

I'm wondering what afternoon Ozzy's remembering when he turns to me, and I catch a glint of understanding in the hyena's eye. The corner of his mouth twitches up in just enough of a smirk that it's suddenly obvious what he's trying to do. I'm fucking livid -- *he's throwing me under the bus*. He's throwing me under the bus and selling them this line of shit like it was my fucking idea for us to go and screw off. And who do you think they're gonna side with? Him, of course -- one of their own. Not the outsider.

What really fucking blisters my ass is the fact that Velvet's going to gobble this load of crap up like it's cherry pie. She already bought off on Ozzy's spin of me "humiliating him in front of an entire restaurant" -- when that was *also* his fault and not mine. The deck's been stacked against me from the get-go.

"I can't fuckin' believe this," I mutter, shaking my head. "You're just going to stand there and listen to him feed you this *obviously* bogus story and not even question him on it?"

Al unfolds his arms, stepping forward. "I said watch your tone, Cormo. You're out of line."

"Ah, shit, I sure am sorry Al," I toss back as insincerely as I can. "Far be it from me to upset the apple cart."

He glares at me, but he doesn't say anything.

"The one whose judgment I'm questioning right now is you, Remmy." Velvet tucks her clipboard and folders underneath her arm, walking across the room and leaning down to make eye contact with me in the most demeaning way possible. "This is already a problematic environment for someone with Ozzy's background, and I'm sure you thought that you were being supportive of him. But this is a team effort. He needs friends who will help keep him on track, not ones that will let him keep running away from his responsibilities."

"And what *are* his 'responsibilities', exactly?" I return, muscling forward to gaze back at her defiantly. "I didn't get any kind of fucking notification when I moved in that we had some kind of addict or convict living here, or -- what's his problem, anyway?"

Ozzy gives me a sharp look and a nudge, shaking his head, but at this point I don't really fucking care. I'm not about to do him any more favors after he just played me like a fucking fiddle for the *second* time.

"And for that matter, what are *you*, his physical therapist? Warden? Shrink? Lady, you make it sound like he and I were fucking out running drugs. We played basketball for like an hour and *he* invited *me.*" I'm practically panting as I look up at her, and her eyes are wide as dinner plates. Good, that's what you get for pointing the hoof without having all the facts. "Oh, I'm sorry, we ate lunch, too. You need a synopsis of what I had on my sandwich just in case my mustard was 'enabling' him, too?"

Velvet puts a hoof to her chest. "*Mr. Cormo!* You're--"

Al steps up, gesturing with his hands in the air, palms forward. "Hey, all right, calm down. Look, he's right. He doesn't know, arright? He doesn't know shit."
I bite my tongue. That's rich, coming from him. I know a lot more than your ass, Al. You've probably got more teeth in your head than brain cells.

Looking across the room at the staircase leading up, I catch a glimpse of a reddish snout peeking out from around the corner and two scruffy piles of dark brown fur poking over the banister. Great, now our fucking commotion's drawn spectators.

Velvet turns to Al, her brow knitting, her expression suddenly incredulous. "You actually didn't tell him? Al, this is completely on you, then! Why didn't you say something? It's your duty as landlord to keep your tenants informed about my business here. You told me that I could count on you to keep the group together. And now you're saying that you just didn't mention it?"

I scoff, trying not to laugh. "Sorry, 'landlord'? Lady you're even more confused than you think. Maybe get your facts straight next time before you jump on me."

"Fucking hell, grazer!" Avo pushes off the wall, and all at once she's crossing the room towards me in about the most serious I've ever seen her look. Al catches her halfway to me with an outstretched arm, freezing her in place.

"Cut the shit, both of you," he booms, teeth bared. Avo instantly backs off in surrender, stepping behind him with her muzzle toward the ceiling in another display of wolf deference or whatever. "Avo, you know better. Cormo, you obviously fucking don't, so show some respect when you're talking to a lady."

"Oh, you're one to lecture me on respecting ladies," I mutter, my tone low and even.

Al stops cold. "The fuck did you just say to me?"

"Oh, come off it, Al! You know damn well what I'm talking about with your make-believe 'king of the castle' alpha male shit! How about that fucking trainwreck that was watching you and Betty doing your stupid mating dance, huh?"

Velvet turns her attention from me. "Al...?"

The alpha slowly raises an extended finger, thrusting his claw at me. "You don't know what you're talking about."

From over his shoulder, I can see Avo wearing an intense look, slowly and deliberately shaking her head at me. Every muscle in her muzzle's tight as she silently mouths "no" at me. Does she expect me to just lie down and take this?

"Oh, I don't? After all the things I've seen with my own eyes? You threatening her, making her kiss you? Strong-arming god knows what else? Oh, yeah, you're a real big man," Seething, I lean forward, practically spitting. "You know, I'm half-expecting to walk in here one day and see you two rutting like dogs, mounting your bitch like a..."

The words are out of my mouth faster than I can stop them, and already I want to rewind this tape to the beginning. Oh, fuck. That was a damn stupid thing to say. Someone gasps and the room goes dead silent.

Al's fists are balled tight, his mouth twitching. I'm suddenly acutely aware of every gleaming tooth in his mouth, as all of them look like they're pointed straight at me.

Ozzy suddenly claps his hands and stumbles hurriedly into the middle of the room, grabbing a flabbergasted Velvet by the hoof. His eyes are watering but his dumbass grin is still plastered
across his face and he's giggling like a moron.

"You know what? Ha, ha ha! You know, Miss Velvet, I'm sorry. I am **SO** sorry I almost missed our appointment. But hey, we're here now so, uh, you know, let's just have it now! Okay? Yeah I mean -- yeah, let's -- yeah! Okay!" He turns to the stairs, his giggles getting more high pitched with every passing second. "Yeah, so yeah, let's go! We'll go now. Sorry, guys! We're just gonna go now!"

As he practically yanks Velvet along by her sleeve back to his room, Al turns his full focus on me. His tone is barely controlled.

"**Get out.**"

I'm frozen with fear. I can't even lift my legs -- my mind's whirling, racing. God I've fucked up bad.

"**I said...**" Drawing a deep breath, Al takes a single step towards me.

All of a sudden my survival instincts take over for me. I bodyslam the front door in a mad dash to escape his wrath, and I'm out on the street.

I'm not even hungry after eating at the sandwich shop earlier, but here I am in front of the Bug Burga anyway. I guess in my panic to leave, my brain took a vacation leaving my legs in charge. I suppose that's only fair. Prey species; it's in our DNA to run.

It's late afternoon -- dead hours at Bug Burga, in other words. The only customers in sight are a quiet leopard couple in here eating lunch, probably after work. Reminds me of my first few trips here before I joined the night shift.

Rex is standing atop the counter with a rag underneath his feet, scooting it along the surface to wipe it down. Upon seeing me walk in, he kicks the rag off to the side and hops down onto a stack of crates with what looks like practiced ease. Guessing this is a normal routine for him.

"Hey, it's you again," he drawls with a tired smile. "Double roach deluxe as usual?"

I sigh, walking up to the register and eyeing the menu. My hooves are still shaking, my head's pounding, and my vision's blurry. I can't even focus enough to read the entries. It's all just a smear. "Nah, I don't -- I don't think so today, Rex." Trying to steady my hooves on the counter, I resolve to at least order something. Even if it's dead, I don't want to look like I just wandered in here looking for a handout or something. "Gimme a fried apple pie off the value menu and a small fountain drink, I guess."

"Sorry, we're out of apple," the sleepy-looking badger remarks. "Got plenty of cherry pies, though."

Grimacing, I shake my head. "Just the drink, then."

"**Arrighty. Dollar ten.**"

I fish into my pockets and pull out a couple of bucks, passing them over the counter to Rex in exchange for a waxy paper cup and a meaningless receipt. Hoofing over to the soda fountain, I push the cup against a tap picked at random, not even bothering with ice or a lid. Collapsing in one of the seats by the window, I sit there for a while. Not sure how long. Just staring ahead. There's black spots at the edge of my vision, like when you stand up too fast. My tongue's dry as sand.
I raise my cup to my mouth only to gag as I take a sip -- lemon cola with a nasty artificial sweetener aftertaste, probably diet. Yuck. Serves me right for not paying attention.

But then, not paying attention's what got me into this situation in the first place.

Slumping against the table, I cover my muzzle with my forearm in disgust, exhaling through the gap between the table's surface and my skin. Fucking hell, I can't believe I just shot my mouth off in front of everyone like that. Avo and Ozzy would've been bad enough, but both of them have given me plenty enough reason to want to snap back at them. Avo zings me every fucking chance she gets, and she and Betty have made a hobby out of watching me squirm. And while Ozzy's not that bad, he's a master at getting under my skin.

But more than anything else, the one I really can't believe I went off on was Al. I don't doubt in my mind that while the aardwolves and Marty aren't much of a threat to me -- and I could probably fend Charlie off through my size advantage alone -- everyone else in the apartment complex could snap me in half like I'm a fucking twig, and Al puts them all to shame.

Looking at my face in the polished reflection of the table, I don't even really recognize the ram staring back at me. How did this happen to me? How did I end up here, like this? Yeah, I wasn't on the honor roll, but I never did much worse than a B in my classes. I don't come from a rich, sheltered family, but my folks never really fell on hard times. We always had money for clothes and the occasional treats, and while my birthdays weren't as lavish as some of the upper-crust kids' that went to my school, I'd always get whatever I asked for whether it was a new bike or that year's popular video game.

Now that I've been dropped into this environment, I can't help but feel I've lost a part of myself. Anger management has never been a problem for me, and yet ever since I moved into Pack Street I feel mad at the world.

What's this place done to me? What have these people made me into?

I blew up. I'm not acting like myself. I'm acting like them.

Am I really? Am I as bad as them? Did they just grind me down until this was all that was left? Does that mean this was inside me all along?

Even Avo's backed off in the past. Even Ozzy knew when to shut his mouth that first time I was here with him. Hell, even Betty calling me all those colorful names doesn't seem like it's just out of hate, more ignorance. But me, did I have to say that? And for what? Because I can't handle a few slurs being thrown my way by mammals who obviously weren't raised any better?

If I thought I could ever show my face in there again, I'd go back to Pandora's and buy that toy I wanted and probably four others like it in a heartbeat. Obviously, I need to blow some steam off somehow, and screaming at my neighbors isn't the way to do it.

The sound of the chair in front of me being pulled out catches my attention. Looking up, Rex has flopped into the chair across from me, his head on the table and one of his arms over his muzzle. He's perfectly matched my pose, looking up at me with a dopey grin and tired, red eyes. In spite of the day I've had, I can't help but smile.

"What're you doing, Rex?"

"Tryin' to see the world through your eyes. But I'll be honest with you, man. This isn't as comfortable as it looks."
Snorting, I shift to a more normal sitting position, and he does the same. "You must be having a rough day," he says, rather astutely. "Came all this way but no double roach, man? Girl troubles?"

"Just troubles in general," I respond, sighing. "I've let a lot of stupid shit get to me lately. How do you manage to be so chill, Rex?"

"I'm sure I'm not that chill," he chuckles.

"Pfft. More than me. By a mile. I used to be more of a mellow guy and I just -- lately I find myself snapping off over trivial crap that really doesn't matter. You work in fast food with cranky, stupid customers, I'm sure. Hell, I saw one in here not too long ago, shooting her mouth off. What's your secret, man?"

"That's a good question." Rex reaches up to the top of his head, swatting off the sweaty bug hat that's part of his uniform. Fur and dandruff shakes out onto the table; good to see he's still as mindful of the health codes as ever. "I used to be the kind of guy who got worked up over all the little details. Flies in the ointment and all that, you know."

I can't believe it. Rex is so calm that half the time I wonder if he remembers to breathe. "What changed?"

"Knew a nice, older lady that used to work here a couple years ago as the manager. Sweet as could be for the most part, but she had a fiery temper sometimes. Never heard the phrase 'the customer's always right', you know?" Rex places a paw on his hat and rolls it back and forth across the table out of boredom. "One day she didn't come back to work. Figured she'd quit."

He trails off abruptly, and I wait for a couple of minutes for him to continue. It's obvious he's not remembering something pleasant.

"Heart failure. She went in her sleep." Sighing, Rex props his cheek on his palm. "To be honest, a lot of the way I do, well, everything... it's because of my health. Not just physical. Mental, spiritual, emotional, you know. Life's all about makin' investments, but not all of them have to do with cash. I mean, rich or poor, you're the one thing you gotta protect. Who you are, you guard that with your life. 'Cause it is your life, you know what I'm saying?"

Nodding glumly, I look down at myself. I'm stringy as ever with pathetic muscle mass. I have a pretty cushy sit-down job that doesn't require much physical labor. Heck, I don't even really have to interact with people at work. I drive a pallet jack around loading and unloading trucks in the dark, and I usually just listen to music on my phone. I'm constantly cramming fatty food into my gullet. And I let just about every predator I know push my buttons like I'm a fucking calculator, and instead of just reasoning with them I blow my top.

Shit. I'm a ticking time-bomb, aren't I. I don't want to be dead before thirty, sprawled out on my kitchen floor surrounded by the greasy food and no one to care.

"Yeah, nobody thinks much about the young burga fool manning a cash register," Rex continues. "But you know, most of these folks can be mellowed with something as simple as a voucher for something off the dollar menu, and the ones that are really bad? I just sit it out, 'cause I know after they walk out that door? I won't ever see 'em again. It's like they're gone from my reality, you know? Poof. They cease to be. It's like it never happened."

"I wish it were that simple for me. I have to live with some of these irate assholes," I reply.

"Then you just learn to look at the positive side, man. Not everything's as bad as it seems. Like
with the rude customers, I figure I ain't the guy they're really mad at. They're upset over somethin' else, whether it's their kid failing their classes or getting passed over for a promotion." He settles into that familiar, sleepy smile that I'm so used to seeing on him. "They take it out on me 'cause they know they won't see me again after they leave. And I think that's funny because in a way, they're thinking the same thing I am. Might be two different sides of a coin, but everyone's the same."

Glancing at the clock, Rex slides out of his chair, grabbing his hat off the table. "I gotta get back to work, but I'd say whatever you're dealin' with, the same goes. Whoever you're havin' trouble with, they're just like you, man, and I bet they're havin' trouble of their own. So do the right thing, and put it behind you. You'll both live longer."

"Maybe," I respond, perking up a little bit. "Thanks, Rex."

"Anytime, dude."

I finish about half of my disgusting soda before tipping the rest of it down the drain and chucking the cup in the trash. I suppose I've killed enough time here feeling sorry for myself. I'm sure everyone's probably settled down by now after the misunderstanding with me and Ozzy, and I imagine Velvet's probably worked the truth out of him.

Time to head back home and patch things up with the alpha.

Wrapping my hoof around the handle, I swing the front door open and reluctantly step inside. The lobby's dark and calm, the only light coming from the muted television in the corner, the only noise a gentle hum from the vending machine by the front desk. Looks like everyone's gone to their rooms. I guess I should be grateful. After what happened earlier, we could all use a night off. Things'll be easier to smooth over in the morning after everyone's had a chance to sleep it off.

I make my way across the lobby for the staircase, gripping the banister with a hoof and beginning my ascent. I'm five steps up when the TV shuts off.

I didn't even see him sitting there. I freeze on the stairs, suck air through my teeth, and tense my shoulders.

Somehow, this all feels familiar.

This time, though, Al doesn't say anything as he stands up from the couch, walking across the room to the banister. His dress shirt's unbuttoned, coat hanging over one of the armrests. In the dark of the lobby, his face is obscured. I'm only able to make out his eyes and teeth, flickering under the emergency lighting by the exits.

Too scared to move, I hold his gaze. Even though it's only been less than a minute, you could convince me this standoff's gone on for hours. I feel like I'm in one of those horror movies where the monster can't move as long as the victim's making eye contact with it. If I turn my head, I'm toast.

I open my mouth to voice some kind of acknowledgement, something, anything -- and yet the back of my throat feels like I've swallowed a mouthful of sawdust. All I can manage is a raspy squeak. Not my best look.

Al's tone is intense, measured. Like it's taking all of his energy to hold it back. "I warned you," he thrums low in the darkness. "I warned you about disrespecting a man in his territory."
Raising a hoof, I try to stem him off. Let him know I really didn't mean what I said. "Al, listen -- about what happened earlier--"

His foot slams against the floorboards of the lobby loud enough that it sounds like a Ramington 12-gauge just fired next to my skull. I jump, slipping on one of the stairs and landing on my ass, hooves pressed to the sides of my head. My knees are knocking as Al lowers his head down to look at me, and based on the rage in his eyes I'm certain that if he hasn't gone savage yet it's going to happen any second now. There isn't a word in our language vulgar enough to describe exactly how *fucked* I am right now.

"Get up."

"Al--" I bleat.

He growls. "I said *get up.*"

Wrapping his paw around my collar, he clutches a fistful of fabric and wool and hauls me to my feet with such force I leave the ground for a second. His claws have my shirt in a deathgrip. I'm physically shaking in his grasp. He's not choking me, but I can't breathe. I can't fucking breathe. The mauling's coming any second now, and absolutely nobody's going to come to my rescue. No last-minute saves.

Snarling, he leans in close -- real close. I can feel the heat of his breath on my neck as my hooves kick uselessly underneath his iron grip. I take back everything I ever said about Al -- his isn't the body of a couch potato who's given up on life. He's got the physique of someone who fucking wrestles bears on the mountaintops for the hell of it.

"You an' me," he rumbles, tightening his grip. "We got a problem now."

All at once, he lets me loose and I drop onto the bottom step, stumbling and catching myself against the banister. Some part of me struggles to turn back up the stairs, but my legs are like jelly. They give out under me and I fumble gracelessly, nearly falling on my ass a second time.

With a sniff, Al pulls something out of his pocket and shoves it against my chest, letting it fall into my hooves. I stare down at the tattered tangle of black fabric, lifting it into the air to get a better look at it. The dim light comes through long, ragged tears and claw-marks that shred through the mess.

Al turns, grabs his coat from off the couch, and pointedly walks past me up the stairs.

"You forgot your bag, mutton."
I'm on "vacation" this week. Well, to be more specific, my hours were cut again. Considerably. My boss pitched it to me like it was some kind of reward for a job well done. Thanks, man, but if I wanted time off I could just quit. I work because I need the money.

Despite having the week off, I don't feel like going anywhere. I haven't left my apartment once in four days. What a coincidence; feels like something really big happened four days ago. If only I could recall what it was... oh, that's right, I remember now.
I lost my fucking shit and alienated half of my neighbors in one fell swoop.

What a perfect time for a vacation. Without any place to go, I'm stuck lurking here at home. I haven't dared to even poke my head outside my room since the fallout. I've been too worried that Al's going to split my skull like a watermelon if I do. Any delusion I had in my mind that things would blow over with time and distance is gone. I've been eating out of the fridge every meal. Delivery's been tempting, but now that I'm officially working part-time (which is describing the amount of work I'm getting rather generously) I have to make what little cash I still have last. The boon I got from the tiger oil hustle went from being move-out money to survival scratch.

Too bad, too, because I've never wanted to move out as much as I do right now. So much for a townhouse in Savannah Central; I've got more pressing concerns, like keeping my stomach filled and my lights on. And speaking of filling my stomach, I'm starving. I roll off of the couch and onto my hooves, but as soon as I stand up I feel lightheaded. My vision's blurry and the room's starting to spin. Before I know it, I'm doubled over on the floor, coughing as something nasty dribbles down my mouth and onto my shirt.

Lovely.

I reach for my bottle of water and uncap it to take a swig. Room temperature, but still better than nothing. My throat's burning, probably because of how parched I am. Despite downing almost the entire bottle, it does little to alleviate the soreness.

Sighing, I force myself into the kitchen to grab some paper towels to clean myself up.

What the fuck am I doing? I live in fear -- constant, endless fear that everyone's out to get me. I worry night and day about getting jumped or mauled. Yeah, the savage epidemic is terrible, and yes, mammals are getting hurt. But now I'm starting to wonder if I'm part of the problem. There's still no clue as to what the trigger is. The cops can't be everywhere, and Mayor Bellwether's trying but she clearly can't get a handle on it either.

Provoking a wolf built like a fucking tank during a period of unprecedented civil unrest may very well top the list of stupidest things I've ever done in my life. I'm not saying it's entirely my fault, but I'm legit surprised that Al didn't punch me into next month or worse. Not just Al, but the others as well. He had to physically restrain Avo, and even Ozzy's more than a match for me. And I kicked him while he was down, too.

Yeah, don't get me wrong, I'm not ready to go kiss Ozzy's ass. The giggling fucker threw me under the bus for his screw-up, which I now realize is a pattern with him. If the going gets rough, he's going to be watching out for himself every single time. And in that regard, well, I can't say I blame him. I'd do the same thing. Still, I said all that to say at least now I've got a reason for why he acts the way he does.

And he still did save my life. In hindsight, I probably owe him more than lunch and a handshake. I certainly owe him more than humiliating him in front of a bunch of people. Twice, if his accounting of what happened at Bug Burga was him being honest.

As I dab at the stain on my shirt, I can't help but feel like the worst part of the shitshow I took part in is the spread effect that my words had. Not only did everyone in the room get an eyeful of the ugliness I've been bottling up, but I'm sure Betty's gotten wind of it by now. Clearly I caused problems for Al, but I didn't even consider the effect it had on Betty, especially with what I'd said about her. What I'd called her. I've never used the b-word like that in my life. I don't think, anyway. Beta or no beta, I almost fear her wrath more than his.
Truth is, I don't actually know for sure if Al's tapping her on the side or not. I'm sure he wouldn't pass up a ride like her if he was given the choice (what man would?), but implying that he was forcing sex out of her was a stupid assumption to make. Especially out loud. And even more especially because I'm starting to think he might have some kind of thing going on with Velvet, who's yet another victim of the Wrath of Cormo that I'm going to have to apologize to. Tossing the last of the paper towels aside, I collapse back on my couch only to remember I'm still hungry.

I lay here for a while, staring at the ceiling and ignoring the gurgling noises my stomach's making and the blistering pain in the back of my throat. I'm not really sure of what went wrong, but I'm going to have to start putting things right. If for no other reason than my safety's sake, anyway. I can't keep living on Pack Street, constantly at war with everyone around me. Like Rex said, it's not good for my health -- physical or mental. I'm surrounded on all sides by potential maulers and I've got to get some of these folks in my corner.

With a sigh, I close my eyes to rest until I'm feeling well enough to get back up, then it's onto dinner. Just for a few minutes, though. Just until the dizziness passes.

A sudden, jarring pounding noise at my front door startles me awake. Looking around in a panic, I catch sight of my clock -- shit, I was out for over four hours. The banging at the door continues in another short, loud burst. I try to quiet my raspy breathing. I plan on making amends with everyone I lambasted, I really do... but not right now. Right now, I just want to hide from the world for a little longer. I'm not feeling up to it just yet. Whoever it is can wait until I--

"Your little disappearing act didn't work last time, yarn ball, I don't know what makes you think it will now," Betty calls out from the other side of the door. "Knock off the shit and open up."

Oh, perfect. It's only the grim reaper, come to collect. Who am I to keep death waiting?

I slide off the couch and onto my hooves, but they feel like jelly underneath me. I must still be tired. I stagger over to the front door and unhook the totally non-functional, decorative latches. They're starting to swim before my eyes; it takes me two tries just to get the last one unlocked, and another three tries to locate the real doorknob. Bracing myself for impact, I slowly open the door.

Betty's standing in the hall, cigarette in her maw and fire in her eyes. In her arms is a small laundry basket covered with a blanket. I look up at her, and for the second time in so many days I'm completely at a loss for words in front of a wolf. She shifts her bundle around in her arms, glaring down at me.

"You look like shit."

I swallow again, grimacing at the itching sensation in my throat. "I st-- Betty, I-look, I just..."

"Shut up and let me in. I've been standing here holding this thing for ten fucking minutes."

I quickly step aside as she makes her way into my apartment. It's only once she's out of my doorway that I can see Marty and the aardwolf twins standing out in the hallway, all three wearing wide-eyed expressions. Betty sets the basket down on my kitchen counter, tosses a look over her shoulder, and the peanut gallery scatters in seconds, Anneke practically tripping over her brother to get inside their apartment first.

Closing the door, I meekly toddle over to the couch, pressing my hooves together. Even though it's taking all my energy to stay standing, I don't dare sit down while she's here. Betty turns to look at
me, arms folded in disgust.

"You have no idea what kind of hornet's nest you've just stirred up, do you," she says, her tone like ice.

"Actually, I, I -- ahhh, aaaa-aaahsschhooooo!!" Without warning I abruptly, violently sneeze into my hoof mid-sentence, leaving a disgusting trail of mucus and snot dangling from my muzzle. The back of my throat's on fire and my eyes are watering. I waddle over to the counter, grabbing another paper towel from the roll and wiping my face clean. Betty sighs, shaking her head as she watches me.

"You're a fucking mess."

"I think there's something in the air," I groan. She tosses the blanket over the back of my couch and begins digging through her basket, pulling out a countertop pressure cooker and a brown grocery bag.

"Yeah, the stench of a sick fucking sheep. Now quit hovering and sit down. I don't want to catch whatever you've got while I'm here."

"I'm not sick," I retort, scrunching my face up to stifle another sneeze. "Just a little tired and run-down, s'all."

She pulls a thermometer out of her bag, walks over to me, and leans down, wagging it in my face. "Say 'ahh'."

I scrunch my eyes closed and shake my head. "What? No. Betty, you don't--"

She rolls the thermometer between her fingers, still leaning down. "I wasn't asking."

I know better than to argue with her when she insists. If it didn't work during the shearing, it sure won't work now. I open wide and she roughly shoves it into my mouth with one paw while she presses the other to my forehead. I bleat out in panic as she shifts the thermometer around in my mouth, scraping the plastic handle against my teeth and positioning the reader end under my tongue.

"Be glad I had the mercy to put it in this end, lambchop," she quips. What the hell is it with Betty wanting to stick things in my ass?

I sit there for a long, quiet moment, trying not to make eye contact, but I can feel her looming over me. I'd give anything to break this awkward silence.

"So I'm a bitch, huh."

I gulp uncomfortably and nearly swallow the thermometer.

"Beddy. I shwea, I wazh--"

"Shaddup." She yanks the thermometer out of my mouth before returning to the kitchen. "Yeah, that's a fever if I've ever seen one. I'm surprised you don't have the chills."

"Why are you here?" I ask warily as she sets the thermometer in the sink and begins unpacking the rest of the grocery bag. "If it's to chew me out or whatever for what I called you, then fine, I understand. I deserve it. But why all this? Surely you didn't come over here just to take care of a sick asshole everyone hates."
"Betty. Not Shirley." She continues scrounging, not even looking up from the bag. "And what, you think everyone hates you? God, you've either got a really fuckin' high or a really fuckin' low opinion of yourself. I ain't sure which."

"Wh-what do you mean?" I croak.

"I mean that the world doesn't go revolving around you. Yes, you shot your fuckin' mouth off the other day. Good job, you confirmed what everyone already knows: you're a fuckin' dumbass." She pulls out a couple of cans from her bag, setting them on the counter with a frown. "But life doesn't stop because some upstart grazer makes a fool of himself on Pack Street. You got this picture in your brain that you're like, some kind of rare treat for us to 'ooh' and 'aah' over. Like we've never seen prey before."

I lower my head, saying nothing. Whatever she's going to lecture me about, I've probably got coming.

"Al was right about one thing. You really don't know shit about how things work around here."

"That's because nobody tells me shit," I mutter bitterly. "I'm just expected to know everything."

To my surprise, however, she nods. "Yup. And for once, you're right. So let me clue you in on some things. Consider this a, hmm -- a crash course. Pack 101." Sighing, she dumps the last of the paper bag's contents onto the counter -- a few more cans and a few loose vegetables -- before crumpling it up and tossing it aside.

"S-sure. Uh, you need a can opener for all those?" I interject. Betty rolls her eyes and picks up a can of peas, pressing it against her jaw. With a single bite, she punctures the metal and begins unscrewing the top using just one of her sizeable claws, half-wrenching the tin lid off. "Okay then. N-nevermind."

"First and foremost, you need to get somethin' through your head now." Betty pauses, turning to glare at me. "I'm nobody's bitch. You understand me?"

I hastily nod, wiping my nose against the back of my sleeve. "Y-yes, right. It was inappropriate. I'm sorry."

"Inappropriate's for using the wrong fork at some fancy dinner. What you did starts fights. You're lucky I wasn't there at the time."

I swallow painfully, staring at her, and nod.

"That ain't your word to use. You got that?"

"I'm really sorry," I repeat, emphasizing it. "Won't happen again."

She tilts her head at me for a few seconds, holding my gaze before reluctantly turning back to the pressure cooker. "And me and Al, we weren't 'kissing', just so you understand. I was licking his teeth. It's a wolf thing, a check-in. Shows submission and respect for authority."

She sits up, wincing visibly. "Licking his teeth? Really? Isn't that kinda... gross?"

She snickers in return, shaking her head.

"I -- this'll probably sound ignorant, but you guys don't exactly strike me as the whole... respecting authority types." I try to point in the vague direction of Al's apartment but only gesture weakly at
my own door. "So I kind of assumed... something was going on there."

Betty snorts as she resumes opening cans using the same method as before. "Yeah, well, assuming is what started that mess the other day."

"So there's nothing going on between--" I start, and she glances up at me with a suspicious look that makes me want to rewind this sentence. Instead, I just bumble through it. "Uh, I mean, if you've got some kind of... romantic thing, uh, with Al -- or, well, with anyone? Just so I know for the future."

She props herself against the counter with one paw, side-eyeing me. "Are you asking if I'm single?"

A sudden sneeze buys me a much-needed pause to clarify my words. "I'm just trying to make sure I have the situation straight."

"Al's a sweet guy, but no, we're not like that." Sweet?! Are we talking about the same Al here?
"And anyway, we have plenty of respect for authority. Place like this would devolve into anarchy if we didn't."

"So is Al like your leader, or king, or what? I mean, what's it mean to be the 'alpha' and 'beta' and all that sh-- stuff?" I ask.

"Honestly, it's not that complicated," She shrugs. "A lot of it's formalities, tradition. Business. Al's the alpha, but that doesn't extend to like, everything. So like, he has a territory, but there's limits to it."

"Wait, seriously?" I lean against the armrest of the couch, pressing a hoof to my throbbing head as I look at her. "Like an actual -- like what, a gang thing? Like the mob? I thought he was just joking when he said he had a territory."

She gives me an incredulous look, laughing as she begins dumping the contents of the cans into the pressure cooker. "Ahah! Haha, wow, no. No, he's -- he's not joking. His influence is a pretty fuckin' big net, fluff. At least for around here."

Placing the lid on the pot, she wipes her hands on a kitchen towel and walks over to the couch.

"Look, we ain't all angels who walk the straight and narrow, but this isn't a gang. That's prey stuff, it came from herds. I know some folks watch 'Clem and the Trashbangers' on the big screen and think that's what it's like in a place like this, but packs are for looking out and staking lines, not starting wars. And they're sure not organized crime. That shit stays over in Tundratown."

"O-okay." Never had any idea Tundratown was the crime capital of Zootopia. That puts it in a completely different perspective.

She scratches her neck, thinking. "A pack's more like a family. Hell, in the old days that's what it actually was. The 'alphas' were just the parents. Now, though, it works a little differently. Mammals don't live around blood so much."

"Yeah," I nod quietly, "living with your folks isn't for everyone."

"Now take some of this shit and lay your ass down while your dinner cooks," Betty says, thrusting a packet of cold medication into my hooves. "It'll be about thirty minutes."

"Wh-what are you making? It smells good."
"No it doesn't, you liar. It doesn't smell like anything yet," she says as I tear the packet open and toss two of the pills into my mouth. "It's chicken soup."

I cough at the sudden shock, gagging on the pills. "Ggkk! Wh-where the fffuck did you get--"

"Relax, I'm just joking." Betty snorts a little as I struggle to clear my throat. "Vegetable soup. If I actually had chicken, there's no way I'd have been able to smuggle it over here without everyone on Pack Street knowing about it. And I sure wouldn't waste it on your ass."

Swallowing, I head over to my bed and collapse on top of it, pulling my comforter over myself. My apartment's pretty wide open; I've got a clear view of the kitchen even piled up in bed. Betty unfolds the blanket she brought, draping it over me. I'm not really sure why, but maybe she feels like I need the extra layer. I didn't really realize how cold I was, but now that I'm under the blankets I'm beginning to shiver despite the fact that it's warm outside.

I guess I really am sick.

"Thanks," I manage.

Sitting at the edge of the bed, Betty pulls her cigarette butt out of her muzzle, crushing it out against a coaster on my nightstand. "Anyway, the alpha's the leader of the pack and the beta's the second-in-command," she says, holding one paw up and another paw slightly lower like some kind of a visual aid, as if I don't understand how ranks work. "It's not like a king or a mayor where he gives orders and everyone else follows. The Alpha fights for what he's got. Gotta struggle and show he's strong enough to keep it. That's what that little 'fight' you saw was about."

That makes sense. They explained it sparingly at the time, but I think I understand it better now. So he wasn't keeping her down, just flexing his muscles a little. And I guess in a way, she was encouraging it. I quietly nod to let her know I'm following along. Or trying to, anyway. My sinuses feel like I've been snorting lines of gravel.

"So Al's got power, respect. When he talks, we listen," Betty continues. "But he earns it. Stands for something. He's gotta be the kinda wolf that deserves it. He watches everyone's backs, makes sure needs are taken care of."

"Needs?" I reach a hoof up to my throat to massage it. "Like, like what kind of... needs?"

"Like the kind that life kicks you in the ass with. If the law comes knocking, the Alpha's the one who tries to settle things while they can still be salvaged, but he also does his best to keep his pack in line. Someone's kid getting shit at school and the faculty won't get their paws dirty? The alpha puts a stop to that. Some mama wolf in the pack whose deadbeat husband fucked off doesn't have money for formula or diapers for her pup? Alpha makes it work." She fumbles around in her pocket for another cigarette, but stops just short of lighting it after looking at my face. "He can't be everywhere at once, and obviously he's not everyone's provider, but when he's really needed, Al finds a way."

I'm having a hard time imagining much of anything right now, least of all Al being some selfless saint. Further investigation's needed when I don't feel like I'm at death's door.

"So it's a two-way street. The Alpha works hard to help, but he needs his pack to follow him. Needs respect to keep order. That includes breaking up fights, keeping his pack from fighting amongst itself." She wags a claw at me, accusingly. "That's where you really fucked up. You start a fight in a pack, you answer to the Alpha. You start a fight with the Alpha, you're in deep shit."
"I kinda gathered as much, yeah," I sigh.

"That's why even Avo wanted to punch your face in. It wasn't even that she was pissed at you. Not only, anyway. She wanted to defend Al, the way he defends us. So if you learn one thing from this chat, learn this: you don't disrespect the Alpha. Not over petty shit. Not in front of the whole pack. And **definitely** not in front of outsiders."

We sit in silence for a while, and even through my haze I digest the advice. Respect's something anyone understands, but here, it's like a way of life.

"Him and Velvet, then...?" I venture quietly as she gets up from the bed, heading back into my kitchen. "They some... some kind of...?"

"That ain't my business to say shit about," Betty replies, rattling around in my kitchen drawers until she finds a plastic grocery bag. Reaching into my freezer, she pulls out a scoop of ice cubes from the tray inside, pouring them into the bag before tying its handles off in a knot. "And it ain't yours to ask about, either. If either of 'em want to volunteer that info, I'm sure they'll let you know."

"Okaay. Sss... sorrrry," I mumble. My head's beginning to pound, so I close my eyes for just a few seconds. I can feel her as she lays the makeshift ice bag onto my forehead before clicking my nightstand light off. "...the beta?"

"Pretty much the kind of shit I'm doing right now. Assessing the needs of the pack. Now sit there and count yourself for a little while," she snorts, her voice fading off into the living room. "I'll let you know when it's dinnertime."

She's taking care of me. "Assessing the needs of the pack" -- does that mean I'm part of the pack? No, can't be. I'm a sheep. Sheep aren't wolves. Not me.

It's dark out, and cold. I feel like we should be in Tundratown, but I can't see any buildings nearby. There's snow crunching beneath my paws, but I don't mind. My thick fur keeps me warm.

The sky's clear and open tonight. No clouds. No city lights to drown out the natural stars. They say on a clear night you can see forever. Turns out 'forever' is damn beautiful. In the center of the stars is the moon, tucked into the swirl like an egg in a nest. Smooth and round and perfect. I don't feel like I've got the words to explain it, but looking at it, I want to be there. I want to reach out and touch it and pull it close and run with it like a ball tucked under my arms. I've never loved something the way I love the moon in this very moment, but I need it. I want it.

Most importantly, I want to share this feeling with the world, but there's nobody around to tell. I slide down off of my snow-covered rock onto all fours, looking around for someone to tell. Anyone to communicate with. I have to get it out.

But no matter where I look, I'm alone.

I have nobody to share this wonderful feeling with. I have nobody to share anything I have with. I've been on my own for a while. I like being alone, but for the first time realize I don't like being lonely. My heart hurts. In my chest, my heart hurts. I hurt. I collapse in the snow, body shivering. My eyes close. I roll onto my side, raising my paws to the sides of my head.

I'm singled out in this corner of Zootopia. Isolated. By myself, in an endless stretch of white. White everywhere, far as the eye can see. Like an endless sea of wool, but it hurts to the touch. It's so cold it's burning me.
They say the lone wolf dies. I wonder if that counts for me too. I throw my head back and let loose a cry, a scream at the moon. A desperate plea of anguish and misery. A lonely cry from the pit of my belly that lasts and lasts, crescendoing. Someone, anyone. Send help. I feel like there should be a word for this feeling, this noise I'm trying to make, this essence I'm pouring out.

And yet the moon doesn't answer me back. I'm going to die out here.

This is what I get for straying too far from the pack.

Something nudges me awake. My eyes feel like they're weighted down, almost like my eyelids have been clamped shut. Betty presses her paw against me as I carefully try to shift to a sitting position.

"No. You're fine like you are," she says gruffly. "All right, lambchop -- open up."

"Yhhhhmn," I groan, trying to blink the cobwebs away. I feel like I'm underwater. "You're not spoon-feeding me."

She taps the spoon against the bowl, idly. "It kinda looks like I am. Now c'mon, open up. You need this."

I can't even focus enough to remember why I protested, so I let my muzzle kind of fall open. She dips a spoon into the bowl in her paws, poking a warm serving of broth and soft vegetables into my mouth.

It's delicious.

I gulp down spoonful after spoonful of the liquid as she serves it to me. At one point Betty stops to chide me, insisting that it's not a race and that I should take my time. I nod deliriously, my fever-fried brain working overtime just to keep the rest of my body functional. All I know is food's good, I'm starving, and someone's here with me. That's enough for now.

Once I've finished the soup, she sets the empty bowl aside before picking up a water bottle with a straw poking out of the top. "Fluids will help with the fever, and you don't want to get dehydrated."

"Why are you -- mff -- helping me?" I moan as she pokes the straw into my mouth. "Helping an outsider?"

She tilts her head at me with a weird look on her face. It's not really a frown but far from a smile. "Oh, you're not an outsider."

I suck down half the bottle in just a few slurps. So thirsty. "So like, what, I'm one of the pack then?"

Letting loose a short bark of a laugh, Betty sets the bottle aside. "Don't flatter yourself."

Groaning, I lay my head back against the pillow. "Betty, about Al... what -- what should I do to, y'know..."

"Apologize?"

"Not get my ass kicked," I mumble as she readjusts the ice bag on top of my pompadour.

Betty gathers up the empty dish and spoon to dump off in the kitchen sink. "Al hates stupidity and
he probably wants to make an example out of your dumb ass for disrespecting him, but he'll be patient with anyone willing to learn our customs and pay the right respects. Show him you're willing to play ball, and it'll go a long way."

"Any tips on how to, uh..."

She looks up at the ceiling, then taps her neck, emphasizing that she's exposing her throat to the open air. "This is always a good one."

Every instinct in me screams not to bare my neck like that, especially to an angry wolf. But I'm too tired to disagree. At least it'll be easy to remember. Worst case scenario, at least I'll be dead quick, right?

"I'm going to take care of some laundry to kill time," Betty remarks flippantly, carrying her empty laundry basket to my front door. "You're going to rest. I'll be back to check on you before the end of the night."

"Yes'm," I call out weakly before nestling myself in and leaning back on my pillow.

"Looks like your fever's broken. Took it long enough," Betty says as she looks over the digital readout on the thermometer. Walking to the kitchen, she rinses it off under the tap.

Yawning, I slide out of bed with a tired nod. "Did you get your, uh... laundry done already?"

"Yesterday, actually. You were out the entire night."

Testing my weight on my feet, at least my legs don't feel like gelatin anymore. I'm able to hobble to the bathroom door to relieve myself before stepping back outside into the living room. As Betty gathers up her pressure cooker and the extra blanket, I prop myself against the wall, fumbling for something to say.

"The, um... the soup you made was delicious."

"Good, because you've got about six more bowls of it in the fridge. I also had that little mongoose go get you a couple bottles of Superade and a box of popsicles. Hope you like grape."

"What is it with Marty and fuckin' grape," I chuckle tiredly, extending a hoof to her for a shake. "Really though, thanks for everything."

"Yeah... I ain't shakin' your hoof, fluff," she remarks bluntly. Flinching, I lower my arm to my side. Guess I can't really blame her after everything that happened. "Some of us still got work, last thing I need is to be laid up a fuckin' week."

"Oh... right," I reply, feeling more than a little stupid.

"Well, at this point, you can fend for yourself." Betty trots toward the door, clicking it open. "And... you're welcome."

She steps out, closing the door behind her.

I don't bother to lock it.
Now on the mend, Remmy begins to seek out his neighbors and get a hold of his life.

As I open the door to the apartment building's lobby, all I can think is how it's good to finally be back to work. Keeping myself shut in at home was a miserable, stressful experience, and being sick sure didn't help. As soon as I was feeling better and my boss gave me the green light to come in, I hauled ass down to my job with a smile. I've never been so pleased in my life to drive a forklift around a cold warehouse in the dark for minimum wage.

I've been aching for a good burga, but until I get paid again money's tight. I'm not about to splurge on fast food when it could mean letting the electricity run out. So it looks like I'll be microwaving another bowl of Betty's soup for dinner, and hey, I'm not gonna complain.
She said six bowls or so. Well, maybe that's true for a wolf, but it turns out a bowl for Betty is not the same as a bowl for Remmy. I've been going at the leftovers for the better part of a week and I still ended up freezing the rest so it wouldn't go bad before I could get to it. Sure, it'd be better if there was some bug meat in it, but it's pretty good. Filling, too. Besides, it'd be rude to waste it after she went through all the trouble for me, and I'm not the type to spit in someone's face.

Okay, that's not true. I'm not the type to spit in someone's face when they're doing something nice for me.

...usually.

Speaking of which, I still don't know what possessed her to come to my apartment and take care of me. After calling her a "bitch" behind her back and telling everyone Al was using her for sex, I'd be more inclined to believe she came over here to kick my ass, if not for the basket full of food and medicine and stuff she brought with her. She said she knew I was sick before I got here. Her sense of smell is way better than mine, but I'm not sure I believe it's good enough she could smell me an entire building away. Someone had to have tipped her off about me.

I make a mental note to thank Charlie later.

The lobby's empty again. Actually, it's been empty every time I've been in and out lately. I guess that's good for me -- the less I have to deal with everyone around here, the better -- but at the same time, I've been dragging my hooves, and not bumping into anyone's just been making it easier to avoid the problem. Truth is, I don't really want to deal with anyone, even though I know the longer I let it simmer, the worse it's going to get. Grudges are like wounds, they fester if left alone. I gotta bury the hatchet before it gets buried in me.

Running through a quick list in my head of neighbors I need to grovel to, I figure Al's the one I really need to go make amends with, but I owe something to Ozzy as well. Fortunately for what's left of my ego, I don't think anyone else is going to be too upset with me. Either way, I'll find out soon enough.

As I start to climb the stairs, I notice that I'm not the only recent arrival. Avo's down the hallway ahead of me, dark brown tail flicking as the jackal taps on her cell phone with a shopping bag hanging from her forearm. I slow my pace down to wait her out.

Then again, I should probably clear the air with her, too. She was there, after all. Almost stepped between me and Al. Wanted to, at least. I wonder what would've happened if Al had let her. Would I have gone off on her instead? I guess Betty had me figured out better than I even realized. Avo wanted to protect her Alpha, but he stopped her from catching the ram-shaped bullet. Probably would've been easier for everyone if I'd blown up on the Omega instead.

Screw it. She probably already smells me and knows I'm behind her. I can't exactly pretend I'm not here. I decide to nut up and get this over with. Maybe she'll put in a good word for me with the others if I play ball.

"Hey Avo," I call out, my voice cracking as I say her name. Smooth, Remmy, real smooth. Off to a flyin' fuckin' start already.

I hear her sigh as she continues walking towards the second flight of stairs, shifting her bag around as I hurry to catch up with her.

"Now's not really a good time, Cormo," Avo grunts dismissively.
"I promise I'll make it quick then," I plead, trotting up after her. She stops midway up the stairs, disgust apparent in her eyes as she turns to look down at me over her shoulder.

"What makes you think I even want to hear what you have to say?" she asks, fur bristling.

"Look, I'll cut to the chase. I'm sorry about everything that happened the other day." I reach a hoof up to my headwool, brushing some of it aside as I look up at her. "It was inaprop-- no, it was really fucking petty and I just, I-- well, there's no excuse for it. I was an ass, and I'm sorry."

"Ain't that just big of you," she sighs, scratching her muzzle in irritation. "You think just a simple 'I'm sorry' is gonna cut it for -- all that back there? That shit you threw in the Alpha's face? Al's not the type to get mad, but you really brought it out of him this time."

He isn't 'the type to get mad'? Seriously? Mad and grouchy are the only two moods he has.

"No. I'm not asking you to forgive me on Al's behalf. I'm gonna talk to him, and he can forgive me or not. But right now, I'm apologizing to you. I've already apologized to Betty, and I'm trying to make things right with everyone. I only just recently got over being sick and work's had me busy, otherwise I'd have done it sooner." A convenient half-truth, but Avo doesn't have to know the real reason is I've been too scared to approach anyone just yet.

"You're apologizing to me," she repeats in deadpan.

I nod. I'm sweating already. But I'm determined to get this over with. "Yeah. I am. You got dragged into all that and I -- I fucked things up with everyone there. Not just Al."

Avo lowers her shopping bag onto one of the steps and turns around to face me head-on. As she does, I catch sight of the brand name on the side of the bag -- Pandora's Box. Written underneath the logo is the slogan "It's a Business Doing Pleasure With You" in an exotic font. Whatever's inside the bag is buried under a few layers of tissue paper.

"Well shit. If you've already talked it over with Betty, then -- I guess I've got no choice but to let it go," she mutters, looking me over as if she's inspecting me for flaws. "You're on some seriously thin ice, though."

"The thinnest," I hastily agree, jerking my head up from where I've been staring at the bag. "I really don't know what the fuck crawled up your ass, but I hope it worked itself loose." Avo folds her arms, tilting her head to the side. "Are you really that fuckin' miserable here? Do you really think we're all out to get you? Is that why you fuckin' shot your mouth off at Al? You just got a lot of shit in you and you need to smear it around on everyone else?"

I start to open my mouth to reply, but she presses a paw abruptly to my muzzle, shutting me up. "On second thought, I'm not sure I want the answer to that question," she says. "You obviously don't understand any of the ramifications of what happened. I'm not sure anyone who's only used to herd dynamics could. Maybe we're the idiots for expecting you to be on the same page as everyone else."

My shoulders slump as she looks at me with disdain. I've gotten this 'you just don't understand' speech a lot lately. I'm not a fan of being looked at that way, but if this is what I've got to go through to keep the peace, I guess I'm going to have to grin and bear it.

"What I do understand is that you were just looking out for Al, protecting your Alpha," I murmur quietly. "I get that much. Betty explained it to me. When you were... gesturing or whatever to shut
me up, back during the argument. It pissed me off at the time -- like you weren't gonna let me defend myself -- but now I understand what you were trying to do."

To my surprise, she lets out a sharp, barking laugh, shaking her head with an incredulous expression.

"Actually, fluff, you don't. I wasn't just doing that because you were on the warpath, and I wasn't trying to defend Al. He doesn't need me to be his knight in shining armor, you know." She leans down to look at me, and for a fraction of a second I catch something in her face other than condescension. Something almost sympathetic -- pity, maybe? "I was trying to get you to shut the fuck up to protect you, you dumbass."

I hadn't even considered that, but it's like a light in my head just turned on.

"How'd you--?"

"You think I've never said something stupid in a fit of rage that I regret? You had all the early warning signs. Hell, Cormo, you were charging into a minefield and I was trying to stop you from blowing us all up."

She leans down to pick up her bag from the ground while I process what she's just told me.

I run a hoof over my pompadour, staring at the ground. "Well... I appreciate it, even if I didn't take the hint at the time. I should have listened to you."

"Yeah, if I had a nickel..." she grumbles, heading up to her floor.

"Avo," I venture as I follow after her. "There's something else I wanna ask you."

"Make it snappy. I've got an important appointment I need to keep and you're gonna make me miss it."

"Do you have any advice for Al? Anything I could do to, you know... pay respect to the alpha?" I tilt my head up to the ceiling, showing my neck off to her. "Like, I've got -- I know, uh -- Betty showed me this one. Any other customs, or tips, or... anything else I could do to plead my case?"

I'm half-expecting her to break out laughing again, but instead she folds her arms, sizing me up. "You're serious."

"I mean, yeah." I hold my hooves out in a shrug. "Everyone keeps saying I don't know how this works, and they're right, so I figure I should at least try."

She leans against the wall for a minute, thinking. "Well... shit. I dunno if I'd put in that much effort to learn sheep habits."

I chuckle in spite of myself. "You might, if you lived in a sheep neighborhood."

"If you really want to appeal to a canine species, you need to show them complete deference," she says.

"Deference. Right," I respond, wishing I had a notepad. "Like any kind of specific gesture, or something? I don't want to do something too like, presumptuous, since I'm not actually part of the pack."

"Yeah," Avo snickers, unwrapping a fresh lollipop and poking it into her muzzle. "Wouldn't want
that. But if you're going to do anything, how about the secret pawshake?"

"Secret pawsha-- oh, right," I respond. Of course there's a secret pawshake. We're in the 'hood. That's practically a given -- even if gangs are supposedly a "herd construct" there's got to be some truth to the lie otherwise nobody'd believe the rumors. "Can I do it with hooves?"

"Yeah, it's real easy." Avo nods, extending her paw toward me, her palm pointed upwards towards the ceiling. "There's two steps. First you initiate it by holding your paw -- or in this case, your hoof, up just like this."

I mimic her exactly, outstretching my hoof as she looks it over. "Next you ask if they want to 'shake'. It's very rude to do this to someone higher up in the pack without prefacing it with a polite request, because then it looks like you're just expecting one. Or asking for a handout, or something. But if you say it out loud, that's you showing respect, you get me? Always ask. That's important."

"Got it. Palm up, ask for a 'shake'. I don't want him to think I'm ordering him around."

"Right, there you go. Then he just takes his paw like this." She places her palm on my hoof, and slowly pumps it up and down three times like she's pumping water from a well. "It's that easy."

"Shit, that is easy," I marvel. It even feels canine -- probably some evolutionary holdover or something. Still, I can dig it. She makes me initiate it a couple of times just to make sure I've got the hang of it before finally deciding I'm ready.

"That's about the best I can do for you. Just expose your neck and then ask him for a shake and I'm sure you can put all this nasty business behind you in no time," Avo says, picking her bag up. "Now look, I really gotta go now. Can you take it from there?"

"Absolutely," I insist with a genuine smile. "Thanks again, Avo. And again, I'm sorry for all the trouble."

"You're forgiven. Just try to stay out of trouble and we'll be fine," she says, waving me off as she finishes climbing the stairs.

Nodding to myself, I head back to my apartment. Might as well get some dinner and hit the hay early -- if what Velvet said about her bi-weekly appointments with Ozzy is true, then I've got a busy day ahead of me.

"Is there life before death?" Are you serious right now? What the fuck kind of -- get outta here with that shit. Pretentious quasi-intellectual garbage."

"It's an honest philosophical question," Wolt protests, although it comes off as more of a whine. "You don't have to get your fuckin' panties in a bunch, Marty!"

"No, it's pointless pseudophilosophical double-think you pulled off of some bottle cap, and you're too stubborn to admit you're just trying to look smart!"

"Gum wrapper, actually," Anneke helpfully adds as her brother socks her in the arm. "Oh, I fuckin' knew it," Marty groans. "Coltaire would be rolling in his grave if he could hear this shit right now."
As I head down the staircase, it's obvious the three of them -- or at least Wolter and Marty -- are engaged in some kind of deep ongoing discussion. Marty's sitting on top of a milk crate stuffed with books, half a donut in his paws while the twins lazily rummage through the rest of the pink box it presumably came from.

"Hey, fluffin'-stuff," Annie calls out as I step onto the landing. "Was beginnin' to think you were never gonna show your face around here. Like you'd gone into hibernation or something."

"Pretty sure sheep don't hibernate," Marty says.

"Meh," the aardwolf remarks, licking the frosting clean off of her donut before tossing it to Wolter.

"He was hiding because he knows Al's gonna rip his guts out," Wolt snickers, chomping on the now-plain pastry.

"It's not that. I've just been a little under the weather lately, Annie," I return.

"Oh, is that what you'd call it." Marty finishes off the last of his donut before brushing crumbs off his shirt. "I'd have used the term 'suicidal' myself."

I nod as he looks up at me, arms folded. "Yeah, that won't happen again. In fact, I was hoping one of you guys could tell me where Ozzy is, so I could go straighten things out with him before Velvet gets here. I tried knocking at his door earlier, but I didn't get a response."

Annie picks a few sprinkles out of the fur in her paws before tossing them into her mouth. "Wow, big shocker there."

"Yeah, you know what? You really got some fuckin' nerve, grasseater," Marty interjects, standing up on his crate and turning to me.

Wolt kicks the crate lightly with the tip of his foot, making it wobble beneath the stoat. "What are you so mad about? You weren't even there."

"Doesn't matter if I was," he retorts indignantly, raising himself up to his full height, "what he did was way outta line. A black eye to the whole pack."

I scratch my head. "You're not even a wolf, Marty."

With a scoff, he hops off his crate and storms up to me. "You really don't get how this works, do you?!

For once, I don't feel like meeting his anger with more of my own. It's just not in me right now, so all I can do is shrug. "No. I honestly don't. But I want to, and I'm trying to learn. Which is why I'm looking for Ozzy."

His posture deflates almost instantly, and he opens his mouth to go off on me, but nothing comes out. Finally he just leans back a little, shoving his hands into his low pockets. "...all right, then."

"Shut you up," Anneke giggles.

"Well-- look, grazer," Marty continues, pointedly ignoring her. "If you really want to find him he's probably out somewhere on his own."

One of Annie's paws skyrockets as an idea suddenly hits her. "Oooh. Think he's at Pandora's? We could go scope for him there."
"We're going over Ozzy's hangouts, not yours," Marty groans, dragging a paw down his face.

"Well... maybe we should go to Pandora's anyway," she muses.

Wolter scratches his stomach, shrugging. "Yeah, I'm down. Later though."

Leaning back onto one of the pillows, Annie wipes her paws on the legs of her jeans. "Well, he might be over at Packer's, then."

"Nnnnaah, I don't think so," Wolter lethargically drawls. "If he's gonna go ball, he prefers the alley court. Says he gets better games there, anyway."

"Ahh. Maybe. Couldn't really tell you for sure, cotton swab, but I doubt he's gone too far." Annie closes her eyes, snuggling into her pillow. "After Velvet read him the riot act last time, he's sure as shit not gonna miss his appointment today. You might be able to find him with a little legwork."

Rubbing my nose in frustration, I nod. "Figured as much. Thanks anyway, guys," I sigh, pushing out the door and onto the street.

Going over all the possible places Ozzy could be, I decide to try the alley court first. Even though it's only mid-afternoon, it's an awkward hour for anyone on a nocturnal schedule -- like me and just about everyone on our block. I figure Ozzy's probably killing time before his session, so it seems like the most likely solution.

The hidden alley court is just how I remember it, but the hard afternoon shadows seem to paint it in an unfamiliar darkness. Speaking of painting, I find my eyes drawn to this huge mural running along the length of the court on one side. I didn't pay much attention to it before, but all the fluid, blended figures that dot the colorful abstract swirl seem to be lacking their energy, too. It makes a lively painting look somber. They're just sitting motionless, frozen and silent in the shade.

And so is a certain hyena, staring at a faded basketball resting on his knees.

I steady myself before approaching him, knowing now just what kind of mammal Ozzy can be. I hobbled his little trick last time, and he knows the jig is up. I doubt he'll try lying his way through another encounter with me, but I wonder if he's above lashing out.

"Y'know, I was told I'd find you here," I venture.

Ozzy jerks his head up abruptly, looking around for the source of the voice before spotting me at the end of the alley. His face shifts a little as I step into view, and I realize that this is the first time we've even seen each other in two weeks.

As I walk his way, I'm bracing for some kind of outburst. He's probably going to be pissed, and yeah, it's fair for him to be a little upset -- but I definitely don't deserve **all** of the blame. And even if I did go off on him, he still needs to fess up and admit that throwing me under the bus in front of everyone was a dick move. I'm willing to bring the olive branch, but I know my boundaries too. This isn't going to be a one-sided conversation where I let him take out all of his pent-up issues and shit on me. Velvet might take that from him, but I won't.

"Hey, man," he warily says, a shaky smile on his lips. "Can't say I expected to see you today."

"Yeah," I respond, equally wary as I walk up to the assortment of crates he's staked out at. "Say, this cardboard box taken?"
He lets out a light, wheezy snort of a laugh, motioning to one with the wave of his paw. I settle onto it, testing my weight on the cardboard before fully seating myself. Placing both of my hooves on my knees, I lean forward. No reason to put this off any longer.

"Ozzy, look, about what happened a couple weeks ago," I begin carefully, gauging his face. "I want--"

"Yeah, man, I know," Ozzy says, interrupting me. "Dude, I was... I was real outta line. And I'm -- I'm so fuckin' sorry about doing you like that, in front of Velvet and the others, man. I didn't mean to set you up as some kinda like sacrificial -- uh, shit... you know what I mean."

I blink, taken aback. He glances at my wordless face once and immediately puts his eyes back on his ball.

"You got every right to hate me after I set you up like that. Man, I was -- I dunno if you could even tell, but I was just trying to think of some way where both of us could get off easy, you know? I figured if I said you did it, they couldn't get mad at you, because you didn't know any better. But even if they knew that, which -- which I mean, I guess they didn't -- I shoulda just copped to it and taken the blame," Ozzy frantically gushes, waving his paws around. "I didn't know that it was gonna go down like that but I swear to God, I didn't mean to use you, dude, I feel like shit, man. Y'know? It sure as shit wasn't like -- it wasn't my plan to fuck you over, man. It's been eating at me for weeks, and I -- I mean, I don't know what else to say."

I can tell by looking at him, by the sweat dripping off of his fur and the panic in his eyes that he's not joking. I can practically feel his heart thumping overtime in his chest -- this really has been eating at him.

He reaches up, wiping sweat off of his brow with the back of his arm. "And I just -- like, you haven't been around in days, man. I kept meaning to go up to your room and try to hash things out with you but I figured I was the last fuckin' person you wanted to see, and then -- I knew you were in deep shit with Al," he stammers, wringing his paws. "And I's like, y'know, I didn't wanna get in the way of that. God, all that with Al is 'cause of me, too. And I feel like an asshole 'cause all this shit, this whole fuckin' thing's my fault and I used you to get outta havin' to deal with Ms. Velvet, and--"

"Hey, no, look -- it's not that bad," I interrupt, raising a hoof to try to calm him down. "I get what you were trying to do. Not at the time, but now I do, anyway. And hey, I'm sorry, too. If I'd known going in we were headed for a fight, there's a lot I would have done differently. Like keeping my fucking mouth shut."

"Remmy, man, it wasn't on you to--"

"No, no I was wrong too," I interrupt. "I'm sorry I unloaded on you. I said some shit that was really hateful, and I ended up just exploding and -- and I kind of hit everyone. It's no secret I'm having a hard time kind of getting used to living here, but I'm trying, man. I am now. I really am. Can we just put all this behind us and start over?"

He nods slowly, and I figure now's the perfect time to practice the secret pawshake. I extend my hoof and before I can say anything else, he grabs it with both paws, pumping it up and down. This guy's so manic it's like flipping a switch -- he doesn't seem to have a setting between "low" and "max".

"Ah man, yeah! Yeah, absolutely," Ozzy says. "If you're willin' to put it all aside I know I am. For sure. I don't even want to THINK about what happened. I'm just glad we're on good terms, because
dude, I've been so fuckin' worried. You don't even know, man. It's like I swallowed poison and it was just burnin' a hole in my gut. It was awful."

"Really, Ozzy, it's fine," I insist as he yanks my arm like it's a slot machine handle. I'm half-worried he's going to dislocate my shoulder. "I'm -- really, we're all good. We're totally good."

"All right. Yeah, man, all right," he says, finally releasing me with a dumb smile and a hoarse chuckle. "Cool. No, that's -- that's cool."

Our conversation trails off, and the two of us end up just sitting here together in silence for a while, staring at the painting opposite us. I feel a lot better about all this already. I don't think of me and Ozzy as 'friends', not really, but whatever we are, it's better than what we were a few minutes ago.

I lean back and find myself thinking out loud. "Sometimes things aren't as bad as they look from outside."

"Whaddya mean?" Ozzy cocks his head to the side, palming his basketball.

I pause, struggling to find the right words. "I don't know how to put it. But I was a lot more worried about talking to you before I actually did it."

The big, scruffy hyena tosses the ball against the opposite wall, catching it idly as it bounces back to him. "Yeah, same here."

"I kinda feel like that about this whole neighborhood, you know? When I realized where I was, it felt like a warzone. But I haven't been mugged yet," I smirk, "and there's no graffiti, Betty says no gangs, and other than that one block party, there--"

Ozzy's chuckling derails my train of thought, and I look back to him, curiously. He grins a toothy smile at me. "There's graffiti everywhere, dude. What street are you livin' on?"

"What, does it just get covered up?"

"Man, look in front of you!"

I glance back up, taking in the wall-width painting in front of me. The shifting sun casts thin beams of light across the urban canvas, breathing life into the once-still figures that flow across the spirals of color like water. "You mean the mural?"

"That ain't no mural!" Ozzy guffaws, rebounding the ball against it again. "That's graffiti, man!"

I can't imagine the face I'm making right now as I look back and forth between him and the painted wall. "No way, man, that's art!"

"Sure it is," he hums, giving me his full attention, "but it can be both. And that's graffiti. You shoulda seen how it looked a few months ago, before the city painted over it."

I jump to my hooves. "They did what?!"

"Yeah, man, used to be a big thing with three howlin' wolves and a full moon. City painted brown all over it, covered it up."

All I can do is stare at the work of art in front of me, more enthralling than any public piece I'd ever seen downtown. "That's fucked."
Ozzy chuckles, but doesn't say anything. He tosses me the ball and I tuck it under my arm.

"So hey, the 'graffiti' here's beautiful and all, but that's not what I came here for," I finally offer, tearing my eyes away from the art to turn back to him. "What time's your meeting with Velvet?"

"I got about an hour," he says, glancing at my watch. "Well, more like an hour and a half, but I want to be back in case she shows up early. You don't know how them straight-laced types are around guys like me, man. Doesn't matter if you say you're gonna meet someone at two, if you're the last to show up at half past noon, you're runnin' late. Just how it is."

"Yeah. It's always someone else's fault," I mutter, feeling a pang of guilt. "Well, I came all this way to see you, and we've worked our differences out -- so before we leave, you wanna go a quick best of three and grab a bite on the way back? My treat."

"Man, yeah! I'd fuckin' love that, but I'm not gonna let you pick up the check," he says, standing up and hefting his basketball. "At least lemme pay for mine."

Stretching, I settle into my stance. "Yeah, sure. If you win."

7 PM, and a text message from my boss lets me know I'm off for tonight. And most of the rest of the week. I sort of expected it, and given that my internal clock's still off from being sick, it might be for the best. At least now I know what my schedule for the rest of the week is -- if you can even call getting two more half-days a "schedule", anyway. Turns out that even being "back to work" isn't really being back to work -- at least, not with my hours still cut. Part-time would be putting what I'm doing right now generously.

To be honest, I can't really say I understand my life. Feels like every time the Remmy Cormo balloon begins to inflate, something's gotta come along to pop it.

I luck into a deal of Charlie's which turns out to be so lucrative I could considering moving out of this hellhole... but then I'm sidelined by my hours getting cut.

I spend weeks trying to make headway with my neighbors to the point we're even starting to be "friendly"... but then it all goes to shit in one bad confrontation.

I get a mandatory "vacation" in the form of unpaid leave... but I can't even enjoy the time off because I end up spending almost all of it sick and in bed.

I finally get some more work so I can start getting my life back in order... but it's barely even enough to keep me fed, let alone able to flee Pack Street.

Fucking aces. No matter what I do, I can't catch a fuckin' break. And to add insult to injury, I can't sleep, either.

With a sigh, I climb out of bed, slip my clothes on, and wander downstairs. I'm not sure where my hooves are taking me. I drift past the blaring television, past the napping aardwolves sprawled out across the lobby floor right in the walkway, past the noisy thrum of the vending machine. I walk, paying no mind to where my hooves are taking me. I don't know if it's that my body's rebelling against the nocturnal schedule or if I'm just restless. Maybe it's neither. Maybe it's both.

I find myself at the stoop of our apartment building, staring out into the evening sky. God, I can't remember the last time I watched a sunset. Seen plenty of sunrises lately, not so many sunsets.

It's only just now that I realize how much I've missed them.
Shuffling over to the curb, I take a seat off to the side, away from the entrance, so that I'm out of the way of anyone coming or going. I just want to watch the sun sink into the sky for a while. A little fresh air doesn't hurt either, even if we're in the middle of the inner city. It's still nice. It still feels damn loads better on my lungs than my stagnant, musty atmosphere of my apartment. I need an AC, or at least a bigger fan.

I shift my weight onto my back, looking up at the fading orange sky for the longest. I breathe in and out deeply, basking in the cool of the evening. Feels like just yesterday I'd have been scared to death to be out here this close to dark. Now I'm to the point where I almost relish the night.

My eyelids are finally beginning to grow heavy. I feel like I'm about to fall asleep right on the sidewalk like some transient when light hoofsteps click-clacking against the pavement nearby prick my ears. I jolt suddenly, realizing exactly how rare hoofsteps are to actually hear around this place. Sitting up, I spot a familiar deer walking this way. Velvet Roe is out of her uniform and instead dressed up in casual clothing, a light sleeveless blouse with a cutoff jacket and a calf-length denim skirt.

I hadn't really given it much thought, maybe because she's not a resident, but there's another wrong I gotta make right.

"Good evening, Mr. Cormo," she greets with a thin smile as I wipe some drool from my mouth onto the back of my sleeve.

"Oh! Um, hey, Ms. Roe," I stammer, hauling myself to my hooves, struggling for something to say. "Isn't your, uh, appointment with Ozzy in the afternoons? What're you doing here so late?"

"It is indeed." She tucks her purse underneath her arm so that she can extend it to me, clicking her hoof politely against my own. "But I'm not here on business. This is a personal call."

"Ah, I gotcha. I -- actually, uh, I was hoping to get a chance to talk to you about something this afternoon but I didn't want to interrupt you and Ozzy." So far I'm three for three on my apology circuit. "I wanted to apologize for my behavior the last time you were here. I was out of line. I said some real ugly things, in front of everyone, and I'm sorry you had to see all that. I regretted it right away."

She nods, pulling her hoof away from the door handle to turn her full attention to me.

"It's very mature of you to say so, but it's all right. I'll more than accept your apology. We all say and do things we wish we could take back, sometimes. I just assumed you were having a bad day."

I start to respond only to pause before the words can leave my mouth. Actually, I was having a really good day.

All I manage is a sigh. "Well, I'm also sorry if I... caused any trouble between you and Al. I didn't know what I was talking about back there. So I hope you didn't put too much stock in any of the stupid things I said about -- about him and Betty."

She smiles awkwardly, dipping her head to me. "I appreciate you saying so, but don't worry. Al and I had a talk about it later, and we cleared everything up. I think you'll find that's all it takes to solve most problems."

It's not always that easy, of course.

Or maybe it's even easier.
Velvet takes my hesitation as a cue to continue talking. "I should apologize, as well. For jumping to conclusions about you and Ozzy. I'll admit, I misread the situation. But I meant what I said: Ozzy needs friends who will help keep him on the right track. And I hope, if not now, then someday soon he can count on you for that, too, Mr. Cormo."

"Please, just call me Remmy," I insist, recovering quickly. "And no, it's fine. Ozzy and me -- we're good now. At least I think we are. I should've been better about keeping my feelings in check. I guess I'd really been bottling some stuff up."

"He seemed to be in much better spirits today," she nods, reaching a hoof up to her muzzle in thought. "I understand adapting must be pretty difficult for you, Remmy. Plus I imagine you've got be pretty lonely, living on your own in an unfamiliar part of town?"

"...Not as much as I thought I'd be. Not as much as I was, anyway," I reply. That much, at least, is the truth. "I guess everyone here keeps me pretty busy."

Velvet giggles, seemingly remembering something amusing. "Yeah. They're definitely an energetic bunch. Ozzy tells me the block parties here are a sight to behold. I know for a fact Al gets like a little pup over them, always excited about a chance to cut loose and hang out with his friends."

There it is again. It's a little tough to imagine a stick-in-the-mud like Al getting tail-wagging excited over much of anything.

"Hopefully I'll able to enjoy the next one now that I'm on a nocturnal shift. Y'know, Ozzy actually bailed me out of a tough spot at my first party -- but, uh, I'm sure he mentioned that to you already."

To my surprise, though, Velvet tilts her head with a mixed expression. "No. What happened?"

"Uh, well, I was milling around, and it was the middle of the night -- and I guess I pissed off a big guy, bear I think. He'd had a couple too many, and he got in my face and I was sure he was going to let me have it." I point towards the building in the general direction of Ozzy's room to emphasize my point. "Ozzy just went off on this guy and chased him out. It was really something. Truthfully, he probably saved my life -- or at the very least, saved me a trip to the hospital."

"...really. Ozzy did that for you."

I shrug, arms at my sides. "I might not be having this conversation with you if he hadn't."

She turns to look at the building, smiling absentley. "I had no idea. Thank you for sharing that with me, though."

"Yeah, no problem. Oh, and as long as I'm sharing stuff with you, I guess I should apologize for something else too. I-- ...I'm sorry you had to find out from me about Al not being, you know..." I gesture to the building, rubbing my hooftips together.

Velvet laughs, her manner effortless. "Oh, I've known since day one that he's not really the landlord."

"...You did?"

"I think I know my fiancé better than that," she declares with a mischievous smirk. "Believe me, I've known him since he was five, and that wolf's horrible at keeping secrets from me, but I go along with it because I'm sure he's got his reasons."

I nearly trip over my jaw as she beams proudly at me. 'Fiancé'? Al's engaged to a doe? Mr. Big-
Pred-On-Campus? That prey-hating lummox? Since he was FIVE?! Holy shit. I've suddenly got a mental image of a white-furred version of the little pup I gave the lollipop to wandering around with a tiny fawn at his side.

"Ah sh-- man, I'm sorry," I blurt, quickly wrapping my hoof around the door handle to open it for her. "W-well, I'm probably keeping you guys from something important then."

"Haha, no, that's fine," she says. "We were just going to go get breakfast -- well, breakfast for him, a late dinner for me -- before he has to head to work. Call it a date night." She winks, and I can't help but smile back.

"That sounds nice. I hope you two have a good time." Opening the door, I motion her inside. "Watch your step, though. The twins are serious sleepers. Kind of a safety hazard."

"I'll do my best," she grins, daintily dodging around Wolter's twitching tail.

I let the door swing shut, and turn my attention back to the growing twilight. The last orange rays of the sun glimmer from over a highway overpass in the distance. Along the trestle there, a broad mural -- or I guess a graffiti tag, really -- is stretched out, barely visible in the dimming light. A huge swath of green landscape, dotted with figures of different sizes. A twinkling purple-white moon rises above the whole scene. Despite its immense size, I can't really make out the details.

But I stand by my sentiment.

It's art.
Chum

Chapter Summary

Remmy vows to make peace and settle things at last.

While I might be used to the nocturnal lifestyle, I'll never get used to looking up at the stars and thinking "wow, what a beautiful morning". Even so, that doesn't mean I don't still appreciate the simple appeal of a clear night sky. I pull my curtain shut, then shake the last of the water loose from my headwool. Tossing my towel in the laundry hamper, I begin rummaging through my closet for something a little bit nicer to wear than my usual band tee and cargo shorts. I eventually
settle on a clean pair of khakis and a short-sleeved pullover. I might not be on a date or a job interview, but tonight's a very important night -- after the conversation I had with Velvet just recently, I've made up my mind.

Tonight, I make peace with the alpha.

There's really no sense in putting Al off any longer. I can't keep dragging my hooves on this. Especially not now that he's been on a date with his fiancée -- she probably told him everything we talked about. First rule of interacting with couples: never assume anything told to either party will be kept in confidence. Besides, them spending time together gives me an opportunity. It's my best opportunity to strike, get to him while he's in a good mood. At this point, I'm sure everyone's just about ready for us to make amends. Hell, fuckin' Marty seemed worked up about it, and he wasn't even there when I went off on Al.

Thinking on it, that's one thing I've learned during my time here. Small community, everyone knows everyone. News travels fast. People talk. And based what little I could glean from Marty and the twins, the "pack" extends to more than just wolves. I can't afford another slip-up again. No telling what the consequences would be if I mouth off to the wrong person a second time.

It feels weird dressing up just to go talk to another dude, but given his attire when Velvet visits, appearance seems to be big with Al, and I really want to at least make a decent impression here. I start gathering up my stuff to get ready to leave. I'm halfway through loading my personal effects from my table into my pockets, when my ankle brushes against something soft. I nearly jump in surprise before realizing it's just a scrap of tattered cloth. Sighing, I bend down to scoop up one of the last leftover fragments of my gym bag. I guess somehow I missed these when I tossed it. Even the tag's still attached to it, too.

"Stain-resistant, waterproof, with patented scent-locking technology," I mutter, snorting at that last one as I turn it over in my hoof. Yeah, right. That's why it kicked the bucket as a makeshift gym bag instead of what I bought it for. "Ballistics-grade weave guaranteed impossible for even the toughest claws and blades to shred, rip, or tear, or your money back. Safety rated up to... nine hundred pounds of pressure?!

I nearly choke as I look at the tag one more time. There's no way I'm reading that right. The scent-proof thing was clearly bogus, so why should I believe this? I tug at the fabric with my hooves a couple of times to test it, chuckling nervously. Just another example of false advertising. I mean, I can't rip it, but I'm just a ram. Hooves aren't made for that sort of thing. Picking up a pair of scissors from my kitchen drawer, I slide the fabric between the blades and squeeze the handles.

Rather than being sliced in half, the fabric ends up just wrapping itself around the blades and getting wedged between them. I clumsily yank it free and try again, and after three or four attempts, one of the scissors blades snaps off and clatters to the floor uselessly.

My eyes widen as I stare at the fabric. I spend the next minute attempting to cut it with the remaining half of the scissors, then a kitchen knife, with no success. Eventually my hoof slips and I very nearly avoid cutting myself, so I figure I'll quit while I'm ahead. Ballistics-grade -- man, were they serious?! Is this shit what they make flak jackets out of or something? Al was able to shred this thing to ribbons with just his bare claws, and I can't even scratch it with a blade. Tossing the broken scissors and the fabric scrap in my wastebin, I lean against the counter in shock.

On second thought, maybe going for a walk to clear my head before approaching him might be a good idea after all.
Weather's nice tonight. Clear sky, good breeze. Even if there are other places I'd rather be, it's nights like these that make living on Pack Street a little more tolerable. A familiar-looking pup with coal-black fur runs by obliviously with a toy airplane in his paws, tail wagging and tongue hanging out of his mouth as he goes. Looks like he finally upgraded from his truck. I'm a little surprised he's out by himself this late, but then again, I'm told Al's influence extends pretty far. He's probably safer here than he is just about anywhere else in the city. After all, the only creep offering candy to kids around here turned out to be me, so who am I to say anything?

I'm kicking around the idea of indulging myself in a trip to Bug Burga. I can't remember when the last time was that I had one, and my meals have been pretty one-note lately. Not that I'm not grateful to have them, of course. Betty really came through for me while I was down, but ram cannot live on soup alone. Surely a little junk food won't hurt.

Sucking in a gutful of the fresh city air, an unfamiliar scent hits my nose -- and it smells fuckin' amazing. Cilantro, tomatoes, lemon, and -- something else I don't recognize. Whatever it is, it's a strong, overpowering sensation. I notice a line of around a dozen or so predator species gathering up at the end of the street with more hurrying over. I'm not sure what they're lining up for -- another block party, maybe they're getting in line for a barbecue? Looking around, I quickly toss that theory. Not even close to enough people out for one. Last time there were mammals out in full force. You could have convinced me that it was a huge rally or parade or something -- felt like half of Zootopia had shown up. Sure, it's busy out tonight, but nothing remotely like it was before.

Making my way forward, I realize that the mammals are lined up for a food truck. Whatever they're selling must be something popular, because more and more folks are piping over by the second. Shrugging, I make my way forward and take my place in line without even questioning it. If everyone else is this excited, it must be good, right?

Standing in front of me is a tall coyote in a business suit, a briefcase hanging from one of his paws. In front of him is a jackal, equally well-dressed. It takes me a second to realize I've seen these guys before -- in fact, a couple of times now that I think about it. They pause chatting with each other long enough to catch sight of me, and to my surprise they actually turn around to engage me in conversation.

"Hey," the coyote rumbles, extending his paw in a low-key greeting. "You're that new ram that moved in. Corner? Comor?"

"Cormo," I correct politely, offering him my hoof. He squeezes it like most non-hooved species usually do, though to his credit he's gentle about it, like he thinks it's going to break if he isn't careful. "Remmy Cormo. Nice to meet you."

"Dewey," the jackal offers as he moves in and grips my hoof tighter, in a much more powerful display. "This is Don, my partner. I've seen you around the neighborhood a few times, actually, but it's good to finally meet you."

"Same," Don says, shifting his briefcase to his other paw. "You ever had a street taco, Cormo?"

"That what this guy's selling? Can't say I have," I reply, licking my muzzle reflexively as the smell grows stronger. "Closest I've ever had to that kinda cuisine is cornbugs."

"Yeah, not really the same level. This guy's stuff's pretty good, and it's rare that he comes by here. Usually sells out quick. I bet if you ask he'll make one herb-style for you." Don glances over at Dewey, who's pulled his cell from his coat pocket and has it aimed at me. "Dewey? Don't."

"But--"
"Don't," Don echoes, much more firmly. "Imagine if you were over off of Flock eating salad, and someone was doing that to you. Worse, imagine what the boss would say if she found out. We're not freelancers anymore."

Dewey draws a heavy breath through his nose, sighing. "Fine," he grumbles, tucking his phone away. "Not every day you see a ram lined up at a roach coach, though."

I chuckle awkwardly. "That's fair. I'm not your typical ram, though."

"Goes without saying you're different," Dewey says with a thin smile before turning back to Don. "You're living here."

Though his answer is one I've given myself in the past, this time it makes me stop. "So, what, only a 'different' ram would move into this place?"

He smirks over his shoulder at me, toothy, but his eyes are calm. "Nah. You got it backwards. I mean that living here for a while is gonna make you different."

The line moves fairly quickly, and before long I find myself at the counter as Dewey and Don head off with their order to-go. To my surprise, the guy working the truck is Neil, the lion I met at Packer's Gym. Instinctively I find myself looking around to see if Cliff's with him, but it looks like he's a one-man show tonight.

"Hey! Remmy, my man," he grins, brushing some of his loose, unkempt mane out of his eyes. "Didn't expect to see you here! What can I get you?"

"What's good, Neil?" I reply, standing on my hooftips to get a better look at his menu. "I hear you got tacos and, uh -- wait, these are made with... fish?"

"Well, yeah," he replies, almost apologetically. "But I can do an herbivore one for you--"

Shaking my head, I match his grin with one of my own. "Fuck no, I'll take one however it normally comes. I've never gotten a chance to try fish before. Is it anything like bug meat?"

Neil takes a deep breath as he pops open a cooler on a shelf behind him, pulling out a fresh, ripe tomato and a head of lettuce. "Better," he answers as he begins chopping them up. "But really, you sure, man? You -- you eat bug meat?"

"You couldn't keep me away. I'm actually a regular at Bug Burga," I respond with just a hint of pride. "Fish are like bugs of the sea, right?"

"More like bugs wish they were the fish of the land," a wolf behind me interjects with a snarky leer. "Holy shit, what a concept. Lamb eatin' fish. You get separated from the herd, kid?"

I snort, taking his jab in stride. After dealing with my neighbors he doesn't even rank on the scoreboard. Besides, right now I don't really give a shit -- I'm kind of mentally freaking out about getting to try real fish. I'm aware I've gotta look like a tourist to these guys, but in a way, I am. I knew there were fisheries somewhere over in Tundratown, but you don't really tend to hear or think much about that kind of stuff growing up in a prey neighborhood. I mean, I only started eating Bug Burga recently, gimme a break.

Neil pushes a basket into his deep-fryer, pulling out a thick, battered slab of what I'm assuming is the actual fish. It's golden-brown and crackling. He slices it into thin strips and begins layering it into a tortilla before adding tomato, lettuce, a squirt of lemon, and couple dollops of some kind of white sauce to top it off. Nesting it in foil, he passes the taco over to me.
"That'll be three bucks," he says, and I happily fork the money over with a couple extra dollars as a tip. "Hey, thanks, dude."

"No, thank you," I respond, accepting it gratefully, almost reverently. The other bystanders in line look kind of awed themselves, and even when I step aside to let them up, the line doesn't move forward to take my place at the counter. Even Neil looks like he's daring me to take a bite. At this point, it'd be an insult to the chef not to. With a shrug, I sink my flat teeth into it -- and instantly I feel like I've died and gone to heaven. Man alive, and I say this with full conviction: *fuck* bug meat.

Okay, well, I don't actually mean that -- bug meat's like a dietary staple for me -- but holy *shit*, I've gotta look up the nearest fish store (is there even such a thing as a fish store?) and learn how to prepare this at home. The crust is so flaky and buttery, and the fish itself is like... it's soft, almost melts in my mouth, but still there's so much substance to it. That's it: it's substantial. It's *hearty*. Hearty in a way even Betty's thick vegetable soup isn't. And the sauce! The sauce is better than even firefly sauce, and I thought that stuff was amazing. The fresh vegetables serve as like, a palate cleanser, and -- fuckin' listen to me. I sound like those ascot-wearing pretentious assholes foodies on TV who use words like "couscous" and "toothsome" and "deconstructed". Nobody real talks that way, so I'll just say that this thing is amazing. I'm torn between downing it in two gulps and ordering more, or savoring the one I've got and making it last.

"Hey c'mon! You're holdin' up the--" someone about five spots down starts to say, only to be interrupted by literally everyone in front of him *including* Neil.

"Fuck you, this is magical!" To my surprise, the snarky wolf's waving him off. "It's like watching a pup take his first steps."

Another voice chimes in. "Holy shit, is this a sheep going savage?"

"Nah, prey don't go savage," Neil replies, leaning against the counter. "How is it, Remmy? Though I got a feeling I already know."

"Mmmhmm." I inhale the rest of my food before wiping my hooves on my shirt, eyes watering. "Fuckin' *aces*. I'll definitely be back."

"Yeah, you know you will," he chuckles.

It feels good to get out and stretch my legs. I've been a little mopey lately, so getting a change of scenery really has helped lift my mood. I've missed hitting up all my usual haunts, and it's always nice to discover new ones, too. Finding out about little hole-in-the-wall places like Packer's, the deli, or Neil's food truck. Those little high notes that give me something to look forward to rather than dread. Even the alley court Ozzy took me to has really turned out to be a hidden gem. In fact, I've found myself going out of my way to swing by there on my way to and from work -- something about the wall art there really fuckin' does it for me. If I could rip it off that wall and hang it in my living room, you'd damn well better believe I would. And even now, as I wander these streets like some hobo, I keep finding new graffiti that looks like it should be hanging in a museum. If Ozzy hadn't pointed it out, I'd still think they were murals.

I'm admiring a new piece: a solid-white, uncolored cat vandal with rollerblades posed dramatically against a sea of green, yellow, and orange spraypaint cans and tags. And as I'm taking in this street art, it suddenly occurs to me that I don't actually know where I'm going. I'm not going to work, and the gym's probably at peak hours right now based on what Avo told me. Somehow, my legs are moving with purpose but my brain's been asleep at the wheel. I don't actually recognize this area at
all. Shit. I might actually be lost. All I really wanted to just get a little fresh air before I went to make amends with Al, but I guess the truth is I'm just not ready to face him yet.

A loud, abrupt noise like a gunshot ringing out nearby causes me to jump, and instantly I press flat against a nearby wall. A few seconds later it goes off again, then again, then again. Like there's a rhythm to it. After my heart slides out of my throat and back into my chest, I listen closely, realizing I recognize that sound; it is in fact a gun, but one that fires nails, not bullets. Turns out I'm near a construction site.

Stepping around the corner of the building I'm at, I can't believe my eyes.

*Speak of the fucking devil.*

Standing in the thick of a construction site at a lot across the street is the big white wolf himself, wearing a hard hat and an orange vest. Scurrying all along the ground by Al's feet are several smaller mammals -- stoats, ferrets, even a ground squirrel, all in matching construction gear. In his arms is a bundle of rebar piled high all the way up to his chin. He's lumbering along at a steady pace, dumping the load on the ground halfway across the site before going back to get more. As he does, however, a tinny, feedback-filled voice I can't quite make out bursts to life. Al stops midway, ears lowering ever so slightly against his head as he turns around.

The ground squirrel is shouting something at him with a megaphone. Between his high-pitched voice and the poor sound quality, I'm having trouble catching everything he says. But Al nods quietly, and without a word walks back over to the rebar and picks the entire stack up again only to move it a few measly inches over. It's really weird seeing him taking orders from someone else.

I watch from behind a trash can as this continues for several minutes -- the ground squirrel shouts something out, Al nods and complies. He's just standing there fuckin' taking shit off this wry little fuck like I've never seen him do before. You know, the *Alpha* -- the guy that runs the whole show around here. I guess it makes sense. Pack rules may count for a lot at home, but at a paid job, nobody's gonna give a shit what your rank is unless it's in the company. Sweat's pouring off of him in buckets, and his clothes are streaked in mud and concrete powder. He looks tired, but he doesn't stop once to take a break. Doesn't complain. Every so often I even catch him starting to raise his muzzle to the sky, only to quickly lower it again.

Seems the smaller animals have got him hauling their building materials around, while they drive their construction equipment. There's a dinky little backhoe that looks like something you'd see in a toy shop, and an equally pitiful miniature crane at the top of the building they're working on. A weasel in a road roller with a drum about as big as a rolling pin smooths out a pile of dirt, while a mouse drives a bulldozer around that looks more suited to demolishing sandcastles than clearing land. I'm not kidding when I say the lollipup's toy airplane would fit right alongside their machinery. Something appears to be missing from their assortment, though, and I can't put my hooftip on it.

And then it hits me. Like a brick to the teeth.

*Forklift.* That thing I drive every day at work. They don't have one -- *Al's their fucking forklift.*

I feel my cheeks burning as I watch. Sure as shit, that's exactly what he's doing. Picking up stacks and pallets of equipment and transferring it to different places at the construction site, picking stuff off one level and shifting it up or down to another. Like a forklift operator would do. They're using him like he's a fucking appliance and he's not saying a damn word. Just "yes sir", "no sir", "right away sir". I don't know what this feeling is that's hitting me out of nowhere, but my face is hot and my nose is running. Gotta be some leftover sinus issues from my recent sickness. Yeah. That's it.
I grit my teeth, dragging my muzzle down the back of my sleeve as I turn away. I've seen more than enough here.

Hooves in my pockets, I find myself drifting back towards home the same way I came. The charge in the air, the pleasant thrill, is gone. I can't get the image of what I saw back there out of my head. That scene's gonna be with me for a while to come. Right now I'm just trying to focus on retracing my steps. I'm still on Pack, so even if I'm lost, it's not gonna be too hard finding my way home. Worst case scenario, I just ask someone.

A sudden, shrill whistle cuts the silence, causing me to shake loose from my thoughts. Looking up, I spot the source of the noise seated at a nearby sidewalk cafe table -- a tigress dressed in a button-up blouse and a pair of cutoff pants.

"Li'l lamb!" she shouts, a grin on her face. "I thought I recognized you! C'mere!"

Blinking, it takes me a couple of seconds to place her. Ahhh, Dora -- or rather, Pandora. She's eating alone, a glass of wine and a mostly-finished plate laid out in front of her. Wandering over to her table, I give her a polite nod and a nervous smile.

"Hi again, Pandora," I respond, reaching my hoof out for a squeeze. Instead of gripping it like most of the other mammals around here do, she extends her claws and taps them against my hooftips in a sort of gentle pushing motion. It's the closest I've ever seen a pawed animal of any kind get to an ungulate-tap, the kind me and Velvet do. On the other hand, hooved mammals don't have claws, so I'm both impressed and frightened.

"We didn't get much of a chance to talk last time, so I'm glad I ran into you." She breaks into a wide, sharp smile that heavily contrasts her half-lidded bedroom eyes. Taking a sip of her wine, she motions for me to be seated. "Can I get you an apéritif? I wanted to thank you and Foxtrot again for the help in procuring 'that' for me. I may very well be in need of another shipment soon, seeing as how I underestimated how popular of a product it'd be."

"Oh, no, no thanks. And really, no problem," I chuckle nervously, pulling my chair out from the table and sitting down across from her. "It was a lot of fun, but really, don't mention it. Like, to anyone."

"Mr. Marshmallow, I run a chain of stores that offer adult novelties and other items to be purchased on the sly!" she protests, feigning offense. "Discretion is more than just a company policy -- your secret is safe with me. Besides, the cops would be all over me if word got out, and not in the good way. I prefer my handcuffs fuzzy, thank you."

"Uuuggghh. That was terrible," I snort, making a little rimshot noise with my hooves on the table.

"Mm, thank you, thank you. I'll be here till Thursday. Try the fish," she jokes.

"I did, actually," I answer with a grin. "For the first time tonight, in fact -- from a little taco stand a guy I know runs. I've never had fish before, but it was really damn good."

"No kidding! Good for you; I don't know what I'd do without fish," she says, paw pressed to her chest theatrically. "You have to try it from Whiskers' Pub over in the Square. They serve fried cod with sliced, fried potatoes. Put a little malt vinegar on it and have you an ice-cold beer, and you'll forget all your troubles."

"Oh, that sounds incredible." I make a mental note to hit it up if ever on that side of town for
I'll admit it, I could eat my way across Zootopia. I was surprised at how much more -- I dunno, 'pure' fish tasted than bug meat. Like, don't get me wrong, a burga's great and all. But this was like the difference between apples and apple-flavored candy."

"Oh, I agree completely," she nods, returning her attention to the remnants of her meal. "That's because it's not processed, like bug meat is. Bugs don't come in the shape of a patty, you know? So they have to grind them up, add fillers and binders and all that nonsense. 'Pure' is a good way of describing it -- fish is more... whole. What sort of fish was it?"

"Oh, uh, I didn't ask. How many different kinds are there? Are they not mostly the same?"

She laughs good-naturedly and shoots me an excited smile, resting her huge, warm paw on my hoof across the table. "Oh, my sweet, naive little marshmallow, there are many, many kinds and no, they are not mostly the same."

"Well hell, now I wish I'd asked."

She shifts back, nodding. "Mmh. You think you've just found the ultimate food, but you've only just gotten started. You have a world of seafood ahead of you. Ah, what I wouldn't give to try tuna for the first time. Or swordfish. You'll have to come dine with me sometime. The reactions on your cute little face alone would be worth the price of the food."

"Dora, please!" I protest with a laugh, "If a beautiful woman takes me out for fish I might ask her to marry me on the spot."

She covers her mouth, giggling and flicking her ears involuntarily. "Mr. Marshmallow, you flatter me. Please, stay a while. Let me get you a digestif, at least."

She calls over the waiter, who doesn't look like he knows the term 'digestif' any more than I do, and before I know it, Dora and I are laughing over a few empty drinks.

"...well, for confidentiality reasons I'm not going to, you know, comment too much on my clientèle," Pandora continues, "But yes, those two are the best customers a girl like me could ask for. And I don't mean just in spending -- Wolter's nothing but polite whenever I see him, and Annie's a very thoughtful shopper. You'd be surprised at some of the types that come into an adult bookstore at three in the morning."

"All right, all right," I grin, leaning over the table, "Well c'mon, tell me something really juicy. I'm sure you've got some great stories."

"You don't know the half of it," she giggles. "I could keep you here for hours, li'l lamb."

"Well? Go on, dish, I'm not going anywhere just yet," I prod. "C'mon, at least one. I can't be the biggest weirdo to have ever walked through your doors."

"Weirdo? You? A shy young man comes in and can't find the nerve to buy anything? Please, you don't even register." Wiping her lips on her napkin, she begins to drum her clawtips on the wrought-iron table to jog her memory.

I wipe my forehead in a gesture that's only partially for show. "Well, nice to know I won't be going down in history for that, at least."

She sniffs, looking up to the dark sky. "Let me see. A few years ago, the citywide ban on leashes
and collars was lifted. That was from the days of the Byron Manifesto, of course."

I cringe. "Oh, I remember hearing about that when I was younger. Awful stuff."

"Dreadful business, indeed. But when it was overturned, my buying agent comes to me and goes -- 'Dora, leashes and collars are looking hot this season, let's order some.' And I'm like 'ahaha, what? No, no way, nobody's gonna buy those things'."

"Except of course, they did, didn't they?" I grin, already eager to see where this is going.

"Of course!" she agrees, forking her slice of after-dinner cake with gusto. "We put this small ad out online, you know -- we get a lot of web orders because, let's be real, nobody's going to come all the way to Pack Street from Tundratown just to buy a plain old dildo -- and we're advertising that we have collars and leashes for fantasy use. The collars we sell are for show only because of regulations. If you tug too tight, there's a hidden clip on the inside that pops it loose -- like uh, you know, like those clip-on ties the police wear."

"Yeah, you don't want someone choking themselves if they get a little too 'into it' -- last thing you need is a lawsuit."

"Yeah, exactly. I mean, I make pretty good money, but not nearly enough to feed a lawyer," she says with a laugh. "So we've got this ad out and within like, an hour, this guy and his girlfriend show up. Probably in their twenties and forties -- May-December couple, you know? They immediately go straight for the leashes and collars I'd just finished stocking, and they buy one of every color we've got. Because the female wants them to be 'coordinating' with various outfits."

"Wait wait, mammals don't wear those things in public, do they?" I interrupt.

She giggles excitedly, leaning forward right into my face and tracing her claw over my chin. "Oh, you sweet innocent little thing, you really don't know the first thing about true perversion, do you?"

"I'm a hooves-on learner," I shoot back with a grin. My cheeks flush immediately at my own quip. God, how much did I have to drink?

To my surprise, she purrs in response, sitting back. It's not something I've encountered often, but it's pretty clear what it means. She returns to her wine with a sly smirk. "You really are a predator at heart, li'l lamb."

"Excuse me," I murmur with a sheepish smile.

"Mm, but you haven't heard the best part -- right then and there, soon as he's paid up, he wraps the collar around his girl's neck and makes her crawl out on all fours, and it's at this time that I notice she's wearing a very short dress -- and that's it." Pandora flags the waiter over with a wink as my eyebrows rocket up my forehead. "I'm sure a lot of it was them getting off on the public humiliation aspect, you know. But I learned right then and there that I'd be seeing all types in this business."

Sounds like something Annie would do and oh shit I'm suddenly imagining Annie in a collar, being walked on a leash with her tail in the air.

As she begins to settle the check, she looks up at me in surprise. "Can I get you anything else for the night, marshmallow?"

"J-just some water," I reply, coughing. "I just got real thirsty all of a sudden."
My brief hello to Dora turned into a rather long chat, but we've both been enjoying ourselves so much I sort of lost track of the time. After she settles the bill (and refuses to let me chip in), we sit for a while and wrap up our conversation.

"It's been a pleasure getting to know you," she purrs, standing gracefully.

I nod, smiling. "Likewise. I have some things I should probably stop procrastinating over, but it's a small world -- I'm sure I'll see you around soon."

"Before we part ways, at least allow me to indulge in something I've been meaning to do anyway," she says. Pandora motions for me to follow her, so with a shrug I begin trailing her down the sidewalk. Al's probably not home yet anyway, so I have no reason to be anywhere specific at the moment. We walk about half a block before the sounds of a muffled bassline and electronic music begin to fade into my ears, and it suddenly clicks in my head.

Of course I ran into her. Makes sense she'd be eating near where she works.

As we walk up to the front door of Pandora's Box, I find myself getting cold hooves. The toned, towering tigress doesn't notice my hesitation and tosses the door open, heading straight to the back of the shop. A large-screen TV in the lobby is blaring an adult movie with a number of males gathered around watching approvingly -- looks like it's some kind of parody. I don't recognize the actress in it, but a paw-written sign next to the screen reads "Tonight: Amateur Blinkie Hoggs' Video Debut ~ A Pandora's Box Exclusive" in very flowery writing. Gulping, I quickly turn away before I get any more uncomfortable.

Fortunately, Avo isn't working tonight, and there's no Betty in the immediate vicinity. I do, however, know one of the guys crowded around the screen, but Wolt's too busy salivating over Ms. Hoggs' freshly-glazed hamhocks to spare me even a first glance.

"All set, li'l lamb," Pandora beams as she comes walking from behind one of the aisles, a nondescript paper bag with a folded scrap of tissue covering its opening. "Since you weren't able to take me up on my discount offer last time, I wanted you to at least have something as a thanks for everything... and maybe an incentive to come back sometime."

"Chumming the waters?" I laugh nervously, accepting the bag with a dip of my head. "Ah, a fish analogy, too," she grins, leaning against the counter. "Oh, marshmallow. If only you were about twice as tall."

"I don't mind," I return quietly, "the view's lovely at any height."

She suddenly kneels down, kissing me on the snout. "You're a sweetheart. Do keep me posted on your seafood explorations."

"Yeah, sure thing," I chuckle, blushing as I clutch the shopping bag's handles. At least she used a discreet bag instead of one emblazoned with her logo. "Really, though... thank you for the gift, Pandora. I'm sure I'll, uh, appreciate it."

"My pleasure. Tell Avo I said 'hi' if you see her."

"Will do."

What a visit. I never expected to hit it off so well with anyone around here, and definitely not a
hulking tigress-turned-smut-peddler like Pandora. I think I needed that. She's not quite my type, but I can see myself becoming fast friends with her for sure. For someone who owns a store jam-packed with obscure porn and pool noodle dildos, she's surprisingly level-headed, and that's a pretty nice trait to have for a Pack Street resident. I can see why Wolt and Annie are regulars here, and for once, I don't think it's solely for the lewd material.

Tucking my bag under my arm, I decide to hurry on home. It's not too terribly far from here, and the last thing I want is for one of my neighbors to stop me and frisk me for whatever I've got. I'd never hear the end of it.

It's well into the late morning when the lobby door swings open, jarring me awake. I guess I must've dozed off sitting on the couch, waiting for Al to get home. Sleeping off the drinks maybe. Had a few more than I realized. At least I remembered to put the gift bag away in my room first.

I can hear heavy footfalls trudging inside, followed by the sound of paws scraping against the floor mat. Straightening in my seat, I turn my focus to the entrance of the apartment building, hooves clasped over my stomach. Al tiredly shuffles inside. Thick, dark circles hang under his eyes. His usual white fur is smudged with mud and debris from the job site. There's an alarming red stain that's about ankle-height on his jeans, and a visible bandage strip wrapped around his foot.

He takes a moment to close his eyes and breathe slowly as if he's in the middle of meditating, and for the briefest second, his shoulders shudder. He's obviously just trying to calm the fuck down after the night he's had. I don't blame him at all -- sure, my boss isn't a saint, but I've got a hell of a great job compared to what I saw Al going through. How he's able to put up with that and keep his calm is beyond me.

As he throws his coat over the back of the lobby couch, he looks up and notices me for the first time, freezing in place. I figure he'd have smelled me long before walking in, but his nose is caked thick with dirt and dust. His eyes narrow to slits and he stands over me, staring coldly.

"Move."

He doesn't break eye contact, but I sure do. Working up all the nerve I have left, I stand up from my seat, pressing my hooftips together.

"Al," I ask, hesitantly, my voice cracking just a little. "Could I -- I'm s-- can I talk with you for just a second?"

His lips curl, but instead of a toothy growl, all he offers is a tired frown.

"You really want to do this right now, when I just got home," he rumbles. It's not spoken as a question or an inquiry. It's more like a statement. Or maybe a challenge. He's challenging me, daring me to step out of line again. Daring me to say something stupid so he can punch my fucking skull in. I'm all but shaking with fear, but I've got to do this. Walking very slowly with my head lowered in submission, I stop just a foot or so away from him.

I don't look up. I don't dare look up. I can hear his breathing. It's labored, raspy. Like he's winded. Like he's just run a marathon. His arms fold, and I recite the lines I've been rehearsing on and off in my head for most of the night.

"I just -- Al, look, I want. I wanted to, to say that I'm really sorry for my -- for what I've said, and what I've done. It was disrespectful and -- well, it was just shitty on my part. I'm sorry." I swallow
the lump in my throat, trying to force the rest of the words out.

The wolf sighs, folding his arms slowly. "Do you even know what the problem is, or are you just apologizing because you're scared?"

"I mean -- partly because I'm scared, yeah," I admit, "But still. I had no right to say those things to you, especially in your territory. Especially in front of everyone else. I understand now that you were just trying to -- to settle it all quickly, and I should've let you. I could make a million excuses or reasons why I did it, but I did it, and that's on me. I'm sorry, and I also apologize for whatever trouble I caused you and Vel-- uh, Ms. Roe."

He's quiet for a second, then roughly scratches his nose with the claw on his thumb and sniffs. "Comin' to me was good. And I ain't gonna beat the point into you if you're already on it. But words are cheap. You want to settle things, we can't be doin' like this moving forward. Get me?"

I nod instantly. "Yes. And it won't happen again. Ever."

He doesn't say anything else, and at this point I feel like expounding on it would just be stammering to fill the radio silence.

Every instinct in me is screaming in my ears to run, to run and never look back. I shove all of that to the back of my mind, trying not to think about what'll happen if I do run. Fear conquers the greater fear. I clamp my eyes shut, turning my head up to point at the ceiling like I've seen the other wolves do. My knees are knocking as I expose my throat -- my fucking neck -- to the alpha wolf in a bid for his approval. I can just barely bring myself to open my eyes as my heart pounds away in my chest.

He doesn't say anything. It's just silence. It's hard to see from this angle, and I can't quite figure out that look on his face. Surprise? And then I feel his breath on my neck. He's sniffing at me. I wrench my eyes shut at the feeling. One bite and I'm dead. I'm the fish in a street taco at this point. I can't even move. Finally the longest few seconds of my life are over, and with a puff of air from his nose, he straightens up again.

"I'm surprised," Al says, looking at me with an unreadable expression. I don't know what going through his mind -- but based on how calm he looks, it's not anger. "I was right about you, though. You really do have a fuckin' set of stones on you."

"A-are we good...?" I bleat.

He holds my gaze for a while, then folds his arms again, looking around the room slowly. Finally, he nods.

"Yeah." Al looks back at me, making firm eye contact. "Yeah, we're good."

A wave of relief crashes down on me like I've been thrown under a waterfall. I can feel my spine literally decompressing from how tense I've been. Even Al looks like he's taken a load off.

Now's my chance. Thinking quickly, I reach my hoof out for the secret pawshake in the same way that Avo taught me -- something I've been doing on and off in my spare time over the last day or so, practicing it to get it right. I want him to know that I'm going to learn their culture -- it's not fair that they always have to meet me on my terms. If this'll help smooth relations, then I'm going for it.

"Shake?" I ask, making sure my hoof is presented properly. Upright, palm towards the ceiling. And I gotta ask, make sure he wants it. "You wanna shake?"
Al stops, squinting at me with a suddenly incredulous expression. "What the fuck," he practically whispers.

Sweat begins to trickle down my head as he studies me, like I'm trying to trick him. Oh, fuck. I did it wrong. That's gotta be it. Was it palm down? Hoof too high? Too low? I'm shorter than him-- do I need to stand on my hooftips so that he doesn't have to stoop to my height? Is it a sign of disrespect if I don't meet him at his height, or -- is this a, wait, no. No, no! Fuck, shit, FUCK! What did I screw up this time?! I was so close!

Al stares at me with a look of unbridled incredulity and disgust, then tilts head and looks around the room in bewilderment like he's on a hidden camera show. Without warning, his muzzle splits wide, and he starts to laugh his ass off, squeezing his paw into a fist. I'm completely caught off-guard and back up a couple steps, but man, whatever he finds funny about my fuckup has him in stitches. I can't tell if this is a good sign, or if this is the last straw -- him snapping right before he goes postal and guts me.

"Ahahaha! Oh, fuckin' WOW," Al booms, leaning against the lobby desk for support as he belly laughs. I'm fucking terrified right now -- I've really stepped in it. Seeing Al smile like this is always a scary thing. I should've just gone with a normal shake but no, I had to get fuckin' fancy and do some insider thing as a complete outsider.

And then I turn to see the staircase, and like the last puzzle piece snapping into place, it all makes sense.

Avo's standing there, leaned over the railing with wide, dinnerplate eyes and a muzzle split open in the biggest open-mouthed, shit-eating, dicksucking smile I've ever seen. She's got literal fucking tears of joy in her eyes. And wouldn't you fucking know it, perched on her shoulder like a damned parakeet is Marty, who looks just as entertained by all of this.

She set me up.

"You're a fucking monster," I murmur while the three of them roar with laughter, once again trying to bury myself in my non-existent wool to hide my embarrassment. Well, monster's putting it lightly -- there's another word that comes to mind for her, but I don't think I'll be using that one again any time soon.

"All right, gather round. Before we get started with the festivities, y'all need to listen up," Al says with a broad, cheerful smile. I'm not sure I'm liking this horrifying mirror universe Pack Street I've just found myself in. I'm wondering if I preferred it more when we all hated each other. Charlie, the twins, Marty, Ozzy, Avo -- fuckin' everyone's here for whatever announcement he's about to make. Even Betty, who's just coming through the door now. She must've ran over here as soon as she was called. A few large pizzas have just been delivered and laid out on the lobby table, with garlic breadsticks and a couple of two-liters of grape soda (thanks, Marty).

"Big dog's got a big announcement to make," Ozzy wheeze-laughs, unscrewing one of the bottles of soda to begin pouring into party cups. "And Marty fuckin' went for the purple shit again."

"You all seemed to like it last time," Marty retorts, having since shifted from Avo's shoulder to a stack of books on the coffee table. "I wasn't gonna rock the boat, but whatever. There's a vending machine in the corner for you picky pieces of crap."

"I'll make this brief because the game's on in five minutes," Al continues. "Our resident sheep
made his first big steps today."

"What, did he get laid, finally?" Betty quips as she lights up in the lobby.

"Not the case," Charlie replies with a shake of her head. "He still smells like--"

"You were saying, Al?" I interject hotly, glaring at her as a wave of chuckles sweeps the room.

Al nods. "Let's not beat around the bush. You all know what happened a couple weeks ago, no point rehashing it. There was a lot of shit going down that day. I ain't putting it all on Remmy, but he sure did his share."

The crowd chuckles, and though he's smirking too, Al waves his hand to silence them and continues.

"Everyone fucks up. But today, Remmy here finished settling his debts." He claps me on the shoulder roughly enough that I almost faceplant into the table, but he's grinning. "And he even taught me a new secret pawshake."

I facehoof as Avo, Marty, and Al burst into laughter. Ozzy joins in as well, even though he probably doesn't have any clue of what the hell they're talking about.

"But seriously, it takes guts to admit when you've done wrong. Takes character. And Remmy here stuck his neck out -- literally -- just to make peace. So today's a celebration. Cormo, you're now an honorary member of the pack."

Blinking, I look up at Al, as do a few of the others.

"Really?" I quietly ask.

"Wait, you serious?" Wolt drawls with a lazy yawn as he flips one of the pizza boxes open with his foot. "He's not a wolf."

"Neither are you. Marty and Ozzy sure ain't either and here they are. And hell, this woolly bastard eats meat, same as you and me, right? So hell, I say he's as much a carnivore as any of us!" Al nearly roars out. To my surprise, Ozzy and the twins let out a cheer, raising their cups in a toast.

I'm thrilled -- I'm more happy to have all this stuff with Al behind me, and sure, I hoped for a good outcome, but I definitely didn't expect a party. My cheeks are red. All the attention is a little much to handle.

"Guys, please," I wave, magnanimously, "Really, you didn't have to do all this for me."

"We didn't," Al replies immediately. "Like I said, big game tonight."

"...oh."

"Yeah, what, did you think we ordered pizzas just because you said 'sorry for being a dick'?" Avo grins.

"Well I--"

"We didn't," Anneke chimes in.

"Okay."
"We didn't," Avo echoes in affirmation.

I cough, blushing further. "No, I got it. Right."

"We didn't," Wolt agrees.

"We didn't," Anneke says. *Again.*

I offer a fake, aggravated smile. "Guys. No, yeah, I get it. Please."

"So this an official decree then, Al?" Betty asks, arms folded. At first I think she's being sarcastic, but something in her face seems to suggest otherwise.

"Yeah. Yeah, this is for real," he says, nodding the affirmative to her.

"'Bout fuckin' time," she replies. "Let's eat, then. I haven't had anything since last night."

Al reaches into the box to take the first (and biggest) slice of pizza, and after he does Betty goes in second. At that point it's a free-for-all, with Avo waiting patiently until everyone else has loaded their plates.

"By the way, uh, Al -- do I get a position?" I ask as I hoof a piece of pizza onto my plate. "Or like -- a rank or something? I mean, there's the alpha/beta thing -- where do I fit in?"

"Oh, good point," Al says with his mouth full as he flicks the TV on. "Avo, congrats. You're no longer the Omega."

Blinking in surprise, Avo turns and looks at him with -- like, I'm not sure what it is. Glee? Incredulity? She's clearly taken aback. "What, really? You really mean that, Al?"

"Yyyyyep. Cormo, you're the new O. Welcome to the pack." He flops into one of the chairs as the screen crackles to life to begin playing the ZFL pre-game anthem.

Before I can say anything, Avo swipes my pizza off my plate, whipping her cell phone out of her pocket with her free paw. She eagerly heads for the front door, cackling madly to herself, her tail wagging like a spring door-stopper.

"Cliff? Hey, go get Neil and -- well, wake him up, I don't give a *FFFUUUUCK,*" she laughs, kicking the lobby door open with her heel. "Both of you meet me at Pandora's Box in fifteen minutes, I'm buyin'. Mama got herself a *promotion!*"

"So Remmy's the new Omega, huh? I guess that means business as usual?" Annie remarks with a wicked smile as I look down at my empty paper plate.

"I don't suppose now's a good time to talk about what being the omega actually entails," I mutter.
Remmy adjusts to his new position as Omega, and what it means to be part of the pack.

"I don't know what the hell he was thinking," I scoff to the stoat beside me, taking another bite of my cornbug. "Can't fuckin' believe Sahara's putting up this bad of a showing."

"Shit, no kidding," Marty agrees from his spot on the couch's armrest next to me. "Up until tonight, you'da convinced me Sahara had it in the bag. Now I'm wondering if these dipshits forgot how to play ball. Hey, pass the honey mustard, Charlie."

Without even looking up, Charlie plucks the bottle from off of the table and lazily tosses it over her shoulder to him. I barely manage to snatch it out of the air with one hoof, just in time to prevent Marty from wearing its contents. Wide-eyed, he nods appreciatively at me.

"Nice catch," he says, giving the back of vixen's head a crude gesture.

"Not really," she responds absently, completely focused on the game. "More like a fumble."
"Thanks," I smile anyway, hoofing over the bottle, "Guess it's my inner couch-athlete coming out."

Charlie, Marty and I are over with Anneke at her and Wolt's apartment watching the ZBA playoffs on their bigscreen. Come to think of it, I guess this is my first time inside the aard-twins' apartment. Not sure where her brother is. Leaning back on the couch, I finish off the rest of my cornbug and toss the stick in the trash with more accuracy than the athletes we're watching. Not gonna lie, this is kind of nice, even if it is a little outside my comfort zone. I'm not used to really just sitting down and socializing with my neighbors, but I guess now that I'm an "honorary" member of the Pack (as Al phrased it) I might as well try to act like it. Besides, I can think of worse ways to spend my evening, and hey, everyone's actually been kinda pleasant tonight.

Myself included.

"Oh, lookit this -- dumb fuck's gonna choke on the free shot. Calling it now," Annie cackles, jabbing a paw at the screen.

"Nah, no way." Marty waves her off. "Guy's a professional. Who can't land a free shot when they're given one?"

"Anneke's right. Spotter's the worst shooter Sahara Square's team has," Charlie says. "Forty percent isn't a solid track record for free throws."

Sure enough, Spotter whiffs.

"Glad I didn't put any money on that bet," Marty says begrudgingly as Annie pumps her fists in the air, rolling over to face me.

"Hey Cormo, you're the basketball guy among us, right?" the aardwolf asks.

"I played back in high school, yeah," I respond, brushing some crumbs off my shirt. "I wasn't like some prodigy or anything, but I was pretty all right."

"Cool. I've always thought guys in sports uniforms look pretty hot," she says, licking her muzzle seductively. "Especially after they've just worked up a nice sweat."

Charlie clears her throat.

I nonchalantly move a throw pillow over my waistline as I look at Anneke. "Really. You, uh, you think so, huh?"

"Awww, fuck yeah. Plus basketball uniforms look so comfortable, you know?" She arches an eyebrow at me, and suddenly it's a little difficult to swallow. "Those silky kinda shorts and those sleeveless shirts, like. Soft, roomy, breathable... bet they'd be real nice to wear to bed."

Perking up from her spot on the floor in front of us, Charlie turns her squinty gaze from the TV over to Annie.

"Anneke, you know better," she says in a warning tone. Annie raises her paws in wordless defeat, leaning back in her oversized recliner.

"Well hey, hold on," I stammer, glancing down at Charlie. "I'm okay with it, I mean, we're just talking, you know?"

Marty wordlessly shakes his head and offers me an exasperated roll of his eyes, and I suddenly feel I'm missing something.
"Okay, what's -- what do you mean 'know better'? Because I didn't--"

"You're the Omega now," Annie says with a sigh.

"Not sure I follow...?" I look around the room curiously, waiting for someone to fill me in. "Like, what does me being the pack's Omega have to do with anything?"

"Omegas can't mate," Charlie says bluntly, reaching for her drink.

I can practically hear the record screeching to a halt. You're kidding. Omegas can't mate-- the fuck? Since fucking when do these assholes -- or anyone else -- have the authority to determine who gets to fuck and who doesn't?! I'm legit floored right now -- no, nevermind. Calm down. They're just fucking with me, of course. Like they always do. I mean, this has to be a joke. But would Annie really turn down a chance at a romp in the hay with a guy like me just for a practical joke? I mean, no, she's got to be pulling my wool over my eyes, that's all there is to it.

"You, uh, you sure about that, Charlie?" I ask with a nervous laugh. "Because I'd think if I was being promoted to Omega I'd have, y'know, more authority than I already had before. Not less."

That makes sense. I give Marty a 'can you believe this' elbow and he sniffs, avoiding eye contact and rubbing his forehead.

"You weren't really 'promoted' to Omega, since you weren't a member of the Pack before," he grunts, fumbling with the cap on the bottle of honey mustard as means of distraction. "That's like saying you were 'promoted' to fry cook when you didn't work for Bug Burga prior to getting the job."

"But Omegas can fuck, right?" I ask bluntly. "I mean, that's not -- you guys are just putting me on, right?"

Awkward silence ensues.

"You really don't know much about pack dynamics do you," Charlie asks.

"Wow. I'm sorry you had to find out this way, Remmy," Annie says in an uncharacteristically somber display.

"Yeah, you guys are really fuckin' funny. Look, I'll be right back," I announce to nobody in particular, sliding to my hooves and trotting towards the front door. "I left something at my apartment."

Without waiting for a response, I quickly toss the door open and head out into the hallway, making a beeline straight for the upper level. I've gotta ask somebody to clarify this. Anneke's the type to mess with me, and Marty's probably still sore at me after I got him good over on Flock Street, but for Charlie to be backing it up, too? No, there's no way in hell this can be real. If it is, I'm revoking my own Pack membership.

Wait, fuck, can I do that? Is it opt-out? Can I go upstairs and just tell Al "sorry, I changed my mind, Avo's the Omega again" and go back to the way things were before? Shit, I don't want to risk pissing him off after everything that went on between us, but I've gotta know. This'll keep me up all night if I don't address it now. Gotta nip it in the bud before things get worse.

As I hurry up the stairs, I notice Avo coming back down, a paper bag from Pandora's slung over her shoulder. That reminds me -- I still haven't opened the one Pandora sent me home with yet. It may very well end up being a lifeline if what my neighbors were saying just now is true.
"Hey, cotton-butt." The slinky jackal waves as she passes me by on her way down. "Where's the fire?"

"Hey, Avo, perfect timing. I gotta ask you something." Stopping midway up the staircase, I try to look a little more relaxed and a little less like I'm about to pass out. "You're not the Omega anymore, right?"

"That's right," she says proudly, no trace of her usual snarky air as she puffs up her chest. "That'd be you now. I was promoted."

"But you're not the Beta or the Alpha either, right?"

"Right. Just like any other member of the Pack now," she says, smoothing her dress out. "Why, what's with the sudden interest?"

"I was just wondering, uh," I lean against the rusty banister, looking away towards the upper floor and trying to sound as nonchalant as possible, "Is there, like, I dunno... anything I need to know about being the Omega? Anything that stands out from your experience? Anything you weren't too fond of, or... you know, anything like that?"

"Hm. Downsides, huh? Well, the lack of sex was kind of a bummer," Avo admits.

Panic begins to spread through me like the fever I kicked a couple of weeks ago. I turn to face her but she's already on her way down the stairs.

I book it up the stairs as fast as my legs'll take me, peeling down the hallway to Al's apartment.

Maybe it's different for male Omegas, right? It's gotta be -- maybe the Pack keeps the females locked down for breeding in case of emergencies or whatever? That's-- no, look, I don't know! But like, it's different for me! I've got buildup to deal with, okay? Maybe it's a pred/prey divide thing, like predators don't mind it? I don't know their breeding habits! But I'm a sheep. I'm exempt, right? I mean, I should be exempt. Al will understand, he's got to.

Sniffing deeply, I stop in front of the Alpha's apartment. Maybe if I ask him real nice and lay it out honestly, he'll have mercy on me and give me a special dispensation. Raising a hoof to Al's buzzer, I steel my nerves and give it a light push. I hope I'm not waking him up -- I know he's probably exhausted after work.

To my surprise, though, the door swings right open; Al, the towering white wolf (and my new Alpha) stands there with a Sahara Scorchers jersey on and a half-eaten sub sandwich in his paw.

"Cormo?" he asks, raising his sandwich to his maw and taking a bite. He almost seems surprised to see me. "I wasn't expecting-- are you crying?"

"No, nope," I reply, sniffing and wiping my eyes on the back of my sleeve. Dipping my head out of respect, I press my hooves together pensively. "Can I trouble you for a moment? It's, uh, a really personal matter."

"Uh, sure," he shrugs, resting against his doorway. "What's going on?"

I nod a second time to him, politely scraping my hooves at his front doormat and peering inside. The lights are off in his apartment, so I can't make out much, but he's got a small portable TV crackling black and white on his countertop.

When he doesn't move aside, I slowly look up at him. "Uh, can I come in?"
Unexpectedly, he shakes his head. "Sorry. Nothin' against you or anything, but I don't invite just anyone into the den."

"Oh. Well, I mean, I -- that's fine, I just was gonna ask something real quick anyway. It's about the Omega thing, with the Pack? I was told -- well, I was talking to Annie and the others, and she made a joke about -- well, long story, but I guess it was like a pass at me, like, uh... look, Charlie was -- she'd made this comment in response to Annie and she said that, you know, about Omegas, like..."

"Cormo, I have no idea what the fuck you're trying to say," he says, folding his arms. "Slow down."

"Everyone was telling me that Omegas can't mate," I blurt out, hooves shaking. "And I came to ask -- ask your permission and make sure it's okay. If I do? Because I don't know how much longer I can go, man! You understand, right?"

Al blinks a couple of times before his huge paw shoots out at me. For a half-second I think he's gonna clobber me for insubordination but all of a sudden he's got me by the shoulder and laughing so hard I'M shaking.

"Oh my god, I can't believe they fuckin' pulled that one again," he wheezes, slamming his fist on the door frame. "They got you good, Omega!"

I laugh out loud in relief -- probably a little too loud, probably a little too aggressively, but I'm nervous, okay? Al slaps me on the shoulder a few times, wiping tears from his eyes.

"Man, I can't believe you completely bought it! No, no, of course you can have sex!" he asks, still roaring. "I mean, you can, like you're allowed. Doesn't mean you're capable. I mean--"


He chuckles, finally standing straight again. "Like -- holy shit, wow. I remember when they pulled that one over on Kenny."

"So it IS just a joke," I reaffirm, embarrassed. God, I feel like a fuckin' idiot now. I'm really not digging this new trend of me embarrassing myself in front of Al, but at least it's a joke at my expense rather than me having to do damage control again over some fuckup of my own.

"Yeah. Like -- how the fuck would we even enforce that? What were you thinking we'd do, slap a chastity belt on your ass or something?"

Sighing, I half-collapse against the hallway wall, running my hooves through my headwool. I'm surprised to find out that I'm actually drenched in sweat. Holy shit.

"Man, I'm sorry to bother you about it," I reply, pinching the bridge of my muzzle. "Fuck. I feel like a moron."

"Haha, naaaah," he says, waving it off. "They're just having some fun. Fucking with the new guy is kind of a tradition, and you're not the first one to bite. Honestly, the whole thing's actually not that complicated, and you've got even less to worry about because you're not even a wolf."

"So like, what does change for me now that I'm a member of the Pack?" I ask with a hopeful smirk. "Like, am I expected to take part in the, uh, the dominance thing you were doing with Betty, or...? I mean, if you need me to, at least give me time to get a padded suit or something."

"Yeah. No. Probably a good idea if you sit those out," he smirks. Man, when was the last time I saw Al acting this friendly? "Look, basically being part of the Pack just means more than anything
else that you watch out for everyone. If you know someone needs something and it's shit you can help out with, then you do it. Likewise, if you need something, then you put your need out there and hopefully it gets taken care of."

"So like what kind of needs are we talking about, exactly?"

"Day-to-day stuff, making ends meet, that sorta thing. When life fucking kicks you in the jaw and you're trying to figure out how to scrape together the thirty bucks you need to pay your fuckin' light bill, or you need someone to go with you to one of your meetings. That kinda shit. I mean it about the cash, too. You need a loan, you talk to me before you go find some shark." He finishes off the last of his sub, tossing the paper plate in the kitchen trash can behind him. "Just don't take advantage of it. Kenny took the pack for granted, started doin' shit he shouldn't have. We can't look the other way when that happens, and if cops come knocking we can only do so much."

"Right," I respond. "So keep my muzzle clean, obviously."

"Rule #1: don't be a fucking dumbass. That said, long as you're here, you're under the Pack's protection. Anyone comes by to fuck with one of ours, that's where we get involved. You play ball, we won't throw you to the wolves. Figure a'speech."

"I see. Well yeah, that makes sense, I think. We've got a similar kind of thing going on with the herd, too, though it's more of a 'follow the leader' kind of arrangement."

"Yeah, herds are... their own kinda thing," he mutters, his expression shifting. "Anyway, it's a good thing you stopped by when you did. Saves me the hassle of hunting you down."

"Oh?" I ask.

"Yeah, I got somethin' for you. Well, two things, actually. Hang on a sec."

He cracks his neck, then turns and heads off into his apartment. After a minute or two of waiting, he comes thumping back into the kitchen with a shopping bag tucked under his arm.

"First things first. This is for the one I wrecked. I was... frustrated. At the time."

He unceremoniously thrusts a bright red gym bag into my hooves -- a proper, not-improvised one. It even comes with a freebie water bottle inside, too.

"Holy shit, Al," I reply, breaking into a smile. "Man, I -- I don't know what to say. Thank you! This is fuckin' awesome, it's even got like a little pocket for my phone charger and everything. Way better than my old one."

"Don't worry about it. It's the least I could do, considering. And here, this is the other thing I wanted you to have." He reaches into his pocket and pulls out a small vinyl pouch, handing it to me. "As long as you're here, if ever you're in trouble, I want you to have this."

Setting the bag aside, I open up the pouch and reach inside it.

"...A whistle?" I ask curiously, studying the shiny silver gift inside, tied to a thick loop of cord.

"For emergencies only," he instructs sternly. "You get me? Don't you blow it unless you're in a bad way -- not even to test it."

"Emergency use only," I repeat with a nod.
"Good. Now you put that thing on and don't take it off. You're a member of the Pack now, and all of us carry one."

I hastily nod, slipping the cord on over my neck and letting the whistle slide under my shirt.

"Once if you're in trouble," he says. "Twice means 'big trouble'. Three times means 'literally fucking life or death, send everyone'. As long as you're near Pack Street and you sound that whistle, I fuckin' guarantee you someone's gonna come running."

Looking down at my chest, I lay a hoof over the whistle in realization.

This is what it means to be accepted into the fold.

"I understand," I quietly offer. "This is big, Al. I -- I really appreciate it. I promise I'll try to work hard to earn your trust."

Al claps me on the shoulder, nodding. "Good. You just pitch in from time to time, when you can, and we'll be square."

I tuck the whistle into my shirt. "Is there anything I can do now?"

"What, like right this second?" He scratches his chin, his claw playing through the snow-white scruff. "Actually, yeah. I got something you could do, if you're offering."

"Sure, I'm game," I reply, standing up and collecting my new gym bag. "What do you need me to do?"

"Actually, it's Wolter who needs you for something," he says. "He came by a half an hour before you got here, talking about a road trip. It's a long way from here, so it's gonna take up your whole day. You up to tag along?"

I hold my hooves out at my sides, scoffing. "I think I can handle that, yeah. Plus I don't have work tonight. Where are we going?"

"Bunnyburrow?"

"Crazy, right?" Wolt mutters, fumbling around in his pocket for the keys to the car we'll be taking - a clean, late-model two-door sedan, built for a bigger mammal than either of us. Not much in the way of amenities, but it should get the job done. "I've got something I gotta go pick up. It's a ways out and I wasn't really, you know, keen on makin' a big trip like that alone."

"Can't say I blame you. It's like, what, four hours from here? Five, something like that?"

"Yuuup. Toss your stuff in the trunk and hop in." Wolt opens the luggage compartment in the back, and I chuck my gym bag in. "Hey, do you have your phone? GPS would be nice."

"Oh yeah, good idea," I reply, climbing into the passenger's seat and plugging my phone into the dash.

"Hey woolly, check it out," Wolt says, hopping into the driver's seat with a pair of sunglasses slung on over his muzzle. "Whaddya think of my new shades? Pretty nice, huh?"

It's like, two in the morning -- should you really be driving with sunglasses on at night, Wolt? "Oh, real nice. Big step up from the old aviators. Those Elkleys?"
"Friend of mine found a case of them that'd fallen off the back of a truck," he boasts, adjusting the seat up a dozen or so notches so he can see over the steering wheel.

"Not bad. You, uh, you might want to take the price tag off though," I chuckle. He glances at himself in the rearview mirror, blushing a little before plucking the tag loose from the right earpiece.

"I was testing you. Just deciding whether I wanted to keep 'em or not," he insists, starting the car and handing me a scrap of paper with a hastily-written address. "Punch this in so we can get going. I wanna hurry up and get outta here so we can beat the downtown traffic before it gets crazy."

"Sounds like a plan." I fire up Zoogle Maps and type in the address, letting the software give us directions. "Been a while since my last road trip."

"Same here. Anna and I used to go on 'em a lot," Wolt replies as we take off down Pack. "Right after we moved here. Mostly to visit relatives and shit for family gatherings when we were young. Not so much these days. How about you, fluff? Planning on visiting the herd come the holidays?"

My wool bristles a little. I make a show of adjusting my seat.

"Nah."

Conversation kind of stalls for a minute; I think Wolt just naturally expected me to follow that up with some kind of commentary, but I've got no idea where to go from there. To his credit, he doesn't press me on it. Thing about Wolt is he's so laid-back, I'm not really used to his personality. Ozzy's practically hyper by comparison, Marty's hostile, Al's gruff and scary -- but Wolt just sort of is. Seems like his sister or someone else is usually around for him to kind of play off. Hell, even having Charlie here kind of brought out a different side of him, even if it wasn't necessarily his best side.

"So, uh, I'm the Omega now," I remark with a snort, fumbling for something to talk about. "You jealous of my sweet new title?"

Wolt cracks a smile that slowly inches across his face. "Man, I totally am," he says with an approving nod. "Shame you won't be able to shag any babes until we get a new Omega to replace you, though."

"Nice try. I already talked to Al about that one."

"Shit," he chuckles, grinning lazily. "Anna, right? Man, you shoulda seen the look on the face of the last guy we pulled that shit on. He was in fuckin' tears."

I take a deep breath, scratching my nose. "Can't imagine."

"So I gotta say, never thought I'd see Al accept a ram into the fuckin' Pack, but you know what? I dig it," Wolter says. "How you likin' it so far?"

"It's not bad," I admit, pulling my whistle out and flashing it to him. He nods, reaching under his shirt and doing the same -- his whistle's a bit tarnished and the rope necklace has faded with age, but it's still very much the same kind. "Any tips or taboos I should know so I don't have a repeat of, well, you know?"

"Uh, well, I'm sure you've heard Rule #1?"

"Don't be a fucking dumbass' if I remember correctly."
"That's the one," Wolt snickers. "Honestly, man, I think you're probably makin' too big a thing of it in your head. Just showing respect goes so far with Al and the others, man. Like, so much of that 'pack dynamics' stuff is just ancient rotes and shit -- nobody touches that stuff anymore. It basically just boils down to like, play nice together, show some respect, and pitch in. And yeah, don't be a dumbass, of course."

I lean my elbow against the window, watching Wolt talk as he focuses on the road. "And what about the traditions and stuff?"

"There's little things, sure, but like, they're little, you know? Like Al's not gonna bite your head off if you don't do the little wolf-gesundheit-dance every time you sneeze or have a snack past midnight or some weird shit like that. And most of what's left is just reserved for wolves, so they won't expect it outta you any more than they do outta Marty. Hell, it took me and Anna forever to pick up on that, but it feels a lot better once you realize you only really have to focus on the big stuff."

"So what, you guys have to do the full song and dance, but I'll get by with the abridged version?"

He furrows his brow a little as we take a left onto Grass Street. "No no, like I just said, it's really easy. Me and Anna don't have to worry about dominance displays and all that weird stuff."

I scratch my head. The simple lesson is seeming more complex by the second. "No, you just said wolves have to do the whole shebang."

"Right," his brow unfurrows, and his sleepy smile returns.

I pause for a long second, till it becomes clear he won't be continuing that thought without help. "But you guys are wolves."

"Nah, we're aardwolves," he corrects, taking the next turn. "Common mistake. Last stop before the highway, you all right with grabbing Bug Burga on the way so we can keep going?"

"Yeah, that's great," I reply, licking my lips. "But like I was saying, aardwolf, regular wolf -- that's the same thing, isn't it? Wolves are still wolves, right?"

He pushes his shades up onto his head to make eye contact with me. "We're actually, like, hyenas, dude."

"Wait, what?" Blinking, I shake my head. "So wait, you're -- you're a hyena? Like Ozzy?"

"Yeah man," he straightens up with a smile. "Me an' Ozzy are like cousins. Didn't they teach you any of this shit in school?"

"Dude, fuckin' look at me, I'm a ram," I deadpan. "That's why I'm asking. But like, okay, you're all -- you know what I mean. Even if hyenas don't have the pack, you're still canines, right? So like, you and Annie got the whole--"

"Felines," he quietly corrects again, biting his lower lip to keep from laughing.

"Fucking hell," I sputter incredulously, pressing my hooves against my head like I'm trying to hold my exploding brain in. "You guys are called aardwolves, living on Pack Street where all the canines are, and you're FELINES."

"That's about the long and short of it, yeah."
I stare blankly over the dash. "You and Annie are felines. Like, cats."

He sniffs, failing to stifle a grin. "That's sorta what feline means."

I sit there like a dumbass, trying to work through it in my head. "Ozzy, too. You're telling me Ozzy's a fucking cat. Like a tiger."

He pantomimes a clawing gesture. "Me-yow."

"Well I guess there goes that point I was trying to make then," I admit, leaning back in my seat with a dull whump. "So the pack shit's bizarre to you guys too, then?"

"Oh, abso-fuckin'-lutely," Wolter replies immediately, shifting lanes to pull into Bug Burga's drive-thru. "I mean traditionally, we're supposed to be loners. But like I said, you get used to it. Just basically think of it like a company, you know? Where you got the CEO -- that's Al -- and then you've got like, the manager -- that's Betty -- and then all the other guys on bottom, and that's us."

"Right," I nod.

"Except you. You're the unpaid intern," he clarifies with a snicker.

"Fuckin' joke's on you, I got a sweet new gym bag today," I boast. "Al hooked me up."

"No shit. Al's a good guy, man."

I nod, having finally gotten to see what the others have been trying to tell me for weeks. "Yeah, I think he is too."

"That's why he's the CEO."

Pulling in behind a pickup truck full of tired beavers in construction gear, Wolt cranes his neck to look around at the cars, counting them off slowly.

"Six deep... that's not too bad. Probably won't be any faster going in," he muses. "What do you want?"

"They have fish?" I ask.

"Fish?" he says, turning his head to me with eyebrows raised. "Holy shit dude, you eat fuckin' fish now too?"

"Just started recently," I admit proudly. "Neil's taco truck came by and I had a fish taco. Good stuff, isn't it?"

"Wouldn't know. We don't eat fish -- and before you say anything, hey, not all felines are into it," he says. "I dunno, something about it, it's like -- it's off-putting, man. It's too 'alive'. Too close to 'real' meat, which just... makes me queasy."

"But you don't mind bugs?" I query.

"Fuckin' love bugs. I'm an insectivore, man," he says, shifting the car into gear and pulling forward in the queue. "That means I only eat bugs. Which is funny, because that shit they teach you in school about preds having to sorta 'compromise' by eating bug 'meat' doesn't even fuckin' stick to me."

I know he's just talking to talk, but something about that makes me turn it over in my head. "No
shit," I murmur.

"Like, even tens of thousands of years ago, back in the fuckin' wilds, my ancestors were eating ants." He turns, smirking to me with teeth that seem plenty sharp all the same. "Not sheep."

I laugh in disbelief, holding my hooves out. "Thanks? That makes me feel way safer."

"So really," he hums, slouching comfortably in the driver's seat, "If anything, I should be the one lookin' over my shoulder for you."

I'm tempted to fake a predatory lunge, as a joke, but I wisely let the dumb gag die in my head, instead. "I think fish is probably my limit. I'm good with bugs, anyway."

"Mm. I'd eat bug meat every day of the week and not think twice about it. Anna too -- that's why she was so pissy about that slider you owe her."

"Oh god, she's still on that? I thought I'd settled that tab," I grimace. "How many fuckin' sandwiches do I have to buy your sister before she lets me off the hook?"

"So. I gave you a biology lesson -- prolly way more than you wanted to know," he quips, popping a sweet potato fry in his mouth. "Your turn. Gimme the straight dope on wool, man. That shit looks fuckin' involved."

"It's a lot of effort to keep maintained, yeah," I admit, taking a bite of my own burga. "It's coarser than fur. Thick and curly, but warm and soft, too. I like it short because it's easier to deal with, but when it's winter, last thing I want to do is give it up."

"Can I, uh... you mind?" he asks, licking his lips as he gestures to my head.

"Uh, if you really want to," I shrug as we pull up to a stop light. He quickly runs his clean paw through my headwool, eyes lighting up.

"Daaaaamn," the insectivore marvels.

Finally he backs off, and as we pull onto the mostly-deserted highway I stare out the window, watching the city lights start to dip behind us.

"Not as easy as it sounds," I blurt out. My eyes suddenly go wide and I divert all my attention to the scenery, pressing my head against the passenger-side window.

"How d'you mean?"
I cough. "Just -- it's a lot of work to maintain, is all."

"Well -- so this's probably like, super fuckin' offensive, but I gotta ask," Wolt says, stepping on the gas as we shift into the fast lane. "Where're your horns? They just not come in yet, or what?"

"Nah, I just don't have horns." I tap the sides of my head. "Some sheep have 'em, some don't. I was just one of the ones that don't."

"Well. That's a fuckin' bummer," he grunts. "I bet that hadda be awkward growin' up, getting confused for a girl and all."

"Some ewes have horns. It's uncommon, but they do."

It's his turn to look surprised. "Really? Because all the ewes I've seen are hornless."

"But horny, right?" I quip dryly.

"That, my friend, is entirely besides the point," he retorts with a sleazy grin.

"Well, pornstar ewes almost never have horns. It's not considered 'sexy'."

"Shiiiiit," he drawls, gripping the steering wheel for emphasis, "I actually think that might be kinda hot. Like... built-in handlebars, you know? Woof."

I laugh in spite of myself. Wolt's too crass to take seriously. I can already tell this is gonna be a whole-trip thing. "Woof? The fuck happened to 'meow'?"

He wiggles in his seat, scratching his shaggy neck with a free claw. "Hey man, when it comes to the ladies, I'm flexible. I'll make whatever sound they want me to."

"You know, I think our new mayor doesn't have 'em either because I'm pretty sure she's a half-breed or something," I ponder, taking a sip of my drink. "Though I have no idea what her other half is."

"That explains the eyes," Wolt ponders. "None of the sheep girls in the parodies really come close to pulling her 'look' off, they all got those weird-ass eyes."

"Man, what the fuck is weird about sheep eyes?" I retort with a smile.

He doesn't miss a beat. "They look like they belong on a deep-sea monster."

I fucking lose it. I'm laughing so hard I almost spill my drink. All over the -- "Hey, whose car is this anyway?"

"Al's," Wolt nods, patting the dash. "He loans it out for special occasions."

"Wait, then why didn't we take this for that Tiger Oil thing? Why'd we rent a fucking beater van? Probably would've been enough space. Or almost, anyway."

Wolt giggles out his nose in breathy little snorts. "Charlie sorta had her car privileges revoked."

"Ah." Just 'ah'. I don't even need the rest, I can picture it in my head. It makes total sense.

"...Speakin' of weird eyes," I murmur, finishing my burga.

"Oh man," he snickers pre-emptively. "C'mon."
"You ever wonder if Charlie needs glasses and just doesn't know it?"

Wolt bursts out laughing again, slapping the steering wheel and accidentally honking the horn.

I can't believe we're sitting here talking about ewe horns and eyeballs like it's some in-depth discussion. What's worse, I can't believe I'm having a good time doing so -- it's so weird and rare to have someone genuinely interested in sheep. The few times I've even tried to come close to broaching my species with these guys, I've been blown off.

I tuck my trash into the car's cupholder for now, settling into my seat to get comfortable. "Okay, so you're called an 'aardwolf' but you're not actually a wolf, you're feline. But a feline that doesn't eat fish, only insects."

"Right."

"And I'm a hornless ram -- a herbivore that eats bug meat and fish."

"Dude, you can forget 'herbivore' -- you're a carnivore now," Wolt cracks. "Like, big-time. More than me. Hell, you probably are closer to like, Al and Betty."

"Sure, but like, that's what I'm saying. It's what we're classified as, but you ever stop and wonder if whoever it is that comes up with the labels might be wrong?"

"Considering they broke the fuckin' mold when they made you?" he says with an exaggeratedly thoughtful look. "Yeah, yeah, I've thought that many times."

Grinning, I settle back into my seat, adjusting the headrest while Wolt polishes off his burga. It's gonna be a long ride out to Bunnyburrow, but I don't think I'm going to mind the trip at all.

While I've never been here, there's something innately familiar about Bunnyburrow. It's pretty much the textbook definition of "country living". Compared to the neverending onslaught of mammals coming and going in Zootopia, this almost feels like something out of a children's picture book. Miles and miles of farmland, green grass as far as the eye can see. Little fruit stands dot the sides of the road, their vendors selling everything from carrots to berries to homemade pastries, all farm-to-market fresh.

We're arriving "late" by our standards, but early morning by the rest of the world's. Farmers and ranchhands are out bright and early, tending their crops and getting their work done. Bunny families are unreal -- it's amazing to me to look at a random field and see hundreds of rabbits swarming all over it, riding tractors and wielding tools, and realize they're all related. I guess with that many folks helping out, though, farming must be a relatively easy task.

"Gotta tell ya, I dig this place," Wolter says as we turn onto what looks like a main street running through a long row of vintage storefronts. Everything from a dentist's office to a barber shop to even an old-timey general store. Bunnyburrow could almost be something out of a black-and-white movie, if not for the modern gas stations and signs offering free wi-fi. "Seems real fuckin' chill here, you know? And the people are great, too."

"You think so?" I yawn, watching as a tiny rabbit kit hops up and down a sidewalk with an oversized bunny-shaped lollipop in her paws. "They seem pretty normal to me. Kinda plain."

"Plain? Just wait until we get out and start actually dealing with 'em," he replies excitedly. "Like this place is out in the fuckin' sticks, right, so you'd think these guys'd be backwards fundies and
self-righteous hardasses, but nah. Super nice folks. Real upbeat. Give you the shirts off their backs if you asked."

"No kidding."

"Straight-up," Wolt grins. The GPS chimes, letting us know we're within a mile of our destination. "And you know, I like it. They act like they've never seen a pred before, but not in like, a bad way."

"That sounds nice."

We turn off onto a frontage road, weaving through a neighborhood full of old-fashioned brick houses with faded paint and yards full of decaying pickup trucks and playground equipment. I'm even surprised to see a handful of sheep milling around, going about their morning routines. One of them -- a middle-aged ram in overalls -- catches sight of me in the car, offering me a friendly wave. I find myself smiling and waving back to this total stranger I've never even met before. Guess there's something in the air out here.

"So what're we out here to get?" I ask. "I figure it's big enough you needed a car, right? Otherwise we could've just taken the tram."

"Yeah," Wolter grunts, his previous enthusiasm waning a little. "Well. No. We didn't take the tram because I needed to be here, and I'm sorta banned from the tram for a few more months."

I slump, hitting my head on the dash for effect. "You're kidding me."

He coughs. "Nnnnope."

With a sigh, I draw myself back up into a sitting position. "Lemme guess. Public indecency?"

He whistles, not bothering to look at me. "Anyway, Anna actually sent me on a fetching run."

"That why you brought me instead of her? What, something she ordered that you have to pick up?"

"...Not exactly," he replies as the GPS announces that we've arrived at our destination: an unassuming green house at the end of the street with a rotting picket fence and a yard that's more dirt than grass. Shifting the car into park, Wolt glances over at me. "This is the place. You, uh, you mind going with me?"

"Sure thing."

I unbuckle my seat belt and hop out onto the sidewalk. It feels good to get out and stretch my legs after being in the car for so long. Wolt does the same, and for all of his bluster about how nice Bunnyburrow is, I can't help but notice he seems to be dragging his feet as we approach the house. Sighing loudly, Wolt pushes the fence gate open, walking up the dirt path to the front door. He draws a deep breath before irritatedly batting at the doorbell.

"Not looking forward to this part," he grumbles. I start to make a quip about how obvious it is, but I decide to hold my tongue last-second. He doesn't need me busting his chops right now. I'll save it for the ride back.

Compared to the other homes on the block, this place looks pretty run down. The eaves and gutters are full of dead leaves, and the wood by the porch is starting to give way to mildew. A mud daubers' nest hangs over the front door, the wasps inside working tirelessly doing whatever it is they do. I eye them in annoyance -- bug meat's fantastic to eat, but man, the actual insects themselves aren't my bag. Whatever their reasons, whoever lives here clearly isn't taking care of
the place. Renter, maybe?

A few minutes pass before the screen door to the house opens. Standing on the other side is a tall male pig wearing a polo shirt with an upturned collar, jeans, and sandals. He's a buff, tanned piece of work -- looks like he spends more time at the gym than at home judging by the condition of his body versus his house. There's a scar right above his right eye and another smaller one right in the middle of his face. He's shifting a toothpick in his mouth disinterestedly, glaring down at us over the thick Ray-Baas on his fat nose.

Ah. No wonder Wolt brought those shades.

"The fuck you want, you little knife-eared shit?" the pig grunts. "Your bitch of a sister decide inbreeding wasn't the life for her after all?"

"Fuck you too, Rasher," Wolter replies evenly, looking up at him through his own sunglasses. Between the two of them their lenses are so dark I wonder if they can actually see each other. "You know what I'm here for."

"Sure damn don't," Rasher sneers. "You wanna clue me in?"

"Anna left a metal locket here. It wasn't in any of her stuff when she moved out, and I know you took it." Wolt sticks his paw out like he's expecting Rasher to have it on-hoof. "Go get it and I'll get out of your fur. Sound good?"

"Don't have fur and I sure as shit don't have any metal locket, brah." The pig pointedly continues to chew his toothpick, fixing it between his teeth, making no move to, well, move. "So I was thinkin' that maybe instead, you'd fuck off and I'd get about my business. Sound good?"

Wolt starts to open his mouth to retort, but I clap him on the shoulder.

"Hold up, Wolt," I interject calmly, moving forward. I know how prey think, and even a buff, brainless shithead like this pig is no different. They're all talk, but cowards at heart.

Last thing we need is Wolt taking a swing at him, drawing blood by accident, and getting branded a fuckin' savage.

"Look, man, nobody wants any trouble here," I offer, turning to the boar. "I hear what you're saying, but maybe you could just go double-check? Give the place a look, see if it might've fallen behind a cupboard or something?"

"The fuck's your problem, lambchops? Too much wool in your ears?" Rasher snorts, shoving me back with a hoof. "How many times I gotta tell you stupid fucks I don't got no fuckin' pewter locket? The only trophy I kept offa Anneke was a pair of her side-ties after my little piggy made her squeal."

"Arright, grazer, we tried it your way," Wolter snaps, darting around me and drawing himself up to his full height, fangs bared. "Time to show your stupid ass how we do it back home."

"Fuckin' come at me, you little turd," Rasher says, raising his hooves as he towers over the smaller aardwolf.

"Yo, hey, calm the fuck down, both of you," I snap, wedging myself between them. A lightbulb suddenly goes off in my head, and I find myself looking up at the pig, eyebrows raised. "Hey, Rasher, how'd you know?"
"How'd I know what?" he asks, not even taking his eyes off Wolt.

"How'd you know the locket was pewter? Could've just as easily been gold or silver, couldn't it?"

He steps back, glancing at me. "Because when I got it looked at the guy said it was pewter. They got guys who know that shit."

I can't help but let a satisfied smile stretch across my face. "So you know it's pewter."

"Yeah, I just fuckin' said that."

I smugly turn to Wolt, only to see him giving me the same clueless stare as Rasher was. "Remmy, are you gonna help me out or what?"

With a groan and a roll of my eyes strong enough to give myself a headache, I turn back to the obstinate pig. "If you took it in, that means you have it, you fucking meathead."

This time it clicks. He fumbles the toothpick, dropping it from his lips. "But -- no, like -- no, 'cause, like you said, it could be gold or silver, too, right, 'cause--"

Wolt leans back, and we both fold our arms simultaneously.

Rasher grumbles, but it's obvious from the look on his face that he realizes we aren't buying it.

"...fuck. Fine."

With a sigh, the pig deflates, reaching under his polo's collar. Lifting a chain from around his neck and over his head, he reluctantly hoofs it over. Sure enough, a small pewter locket in the shape of a heart dangles from it. Even for being pewter, it's polished to enough of a shine that it could pass for silver at a glance. Obviously he's taken excellent care of it.

Wolt snatches the necklace up without a second's hesitation, pocketing it. Without another word, Rasher storms inside his house, slamming the door in our faces. I scratch my head before glancing over to Wolter, who tosses the closed door a gesture even filthier than the one Marty used on Charlie. It's obvious there's something more to all this, but Wolt didn't press me earlier -- I figure the least I can do is return the favor. The two of us stand on Rasher's doorstep for a moment as Wolter kind of collects himself.

"Man, what an asshole," I finally offer, shaking my head. Wolt glances up at me with an unreadable expression.

"Yeah, fuck that guy," Wolt adds, unlocking the car with the remote starter as we turn back to the street. "We got what we came here for. Let's get outta here. It's a long drive back."

"HEY!" A voice suddenly barks out from behind us.

Rasher stands in his front doorway, sunglasses pushed up on his sweaty forehead. He coughs, leaning uncomfortably against the door frame in a way that reminds me of my exchange with Avo earlier.

"...so like, did she ask about me, or...?"

"Oh fuck OFF, dude!" Wolt shouts back.

"Yeah!" I join in.
"YEAH!" Wolt echoes, grinning.

"Yo, fuck you guys!" Rasher growls, biting his lip. He stoops down and plucks a loose stone from the ground, winging it us. It flies straight at me and hits the wool around my middle, losing all its force and bouncing harmlessly onto the pavement.

Wolt and I stare at in disbelief, and even Rasher seems to realize what he did only a second later.

Without even thinking I indignantly snatch the rock up and fling it back -- with much better aim, I should add. It sails in a perfect arc, and though he flinches, it swishes past him harmlessly.

It does manage to hit the dauber's nest, though. A swarm of angry wasps pours out right above Rasher. It takes him a second to notice I didn't miss.

I elbow Wolt. "Drive."

"WHAT THE FUCK!" Rasher screams.

Wolt doesn't need to be told twice. In a second we're both in the car. He revs the engine and I slam the door. We give the furious swine a final glance as he swats uselessly at the wasps.

"Eat shit!" Wolt calls, cackling. He flips Rasher off as we peel out and I do the same, sticking my hoof out the window.

"YEAH!" I bleat defiantly.

As we pull out back onto the main street, Wolt and I are still clearly riding the adrenaline high.

"Holy shit," he mutters, still trying to wrap his head around it.

I've got on a smile as wide as my head and I can't get rid of it. "Shit, what a rush. Seriously though, fuck that guy."

"He deserved it," Wolt asserts.

"And then some."

"Nice fuckin' throw," he grins back.

I kick back in my seat, sighing happily. "Thanks, I thought so too."

"We got what we came for," he nods to my phone. "Wanna punch in the apartments and we'll head home?"

"You sure you don't wanna look around Bunnyburrow while we're here?" I ask, sitting back up. "Feels like a shame to come all this way just to turn around and leave."

He glances around the slow-moving street, and shoots a hesitant look over his shoulder. "I dunno, man."

"Hey, tell you what, how about we swing by that general store over there and get Avo one of those huge-ass bunny-shaped lollipops?" I ask with a chuckle. "Maybe it'd shut her up for a while. Besides, I wanna see for myself how 'upbeat' a sleepy town full of bunnies could be."
"Ha. Anna loves candy too, might not hurt to pick her up a souvenir." Grinning slowly, Wolter nods. "Yeah, man. You know, I know a guy here has the best blueberry pie. You ever have blueberry pie?"

"Can't say I have, but it sounds fucking delicious," I reply as we head away from the housing row and back into town.

"Oh, well, we gotta fix that," he insists. "Get a scoop of ice cream on it and man, you'll feel like you're flyin'."

"Yeah man, I'm down for that."
Mini Special: Transformation

Chapter Summary

Facing the day isn't always easy.

Chapter Notes

This is a special episode of Pack Street, and is not told from Remmy Cormo's perspective.

Half an hour till sundown. Most of the building is still asleep. What was it Thomas Gekker called it? "That golden chain that ties health and our bodies together".

But me, I slept sparingly. No matter how many times I go through it, it's always fresh. Always exciting. Anticipation kept me awake. Almost giddiness. Today is the day I've been waiting for all
week. *A red letter day.*

Time to get ready. I crawl out of bed, sneak to the door, creep out into the front room. Empty. Good. I haven't been caught doing this yet and I'm not about to start now. Making every effort not to wake my roommate in the other room, I slip across to the bathroom. With the door solidly locked behind me, sealed inside like a chrysalis, it's time for my "morning routine".

*My transformation.*

I stare long into the stained mirror, at a familiar face. Dark bags under the eyes and a grumpy frown, like some weary troll of myth, biding a resentment of the world as deep as the molten stone from which it was hewn. Not a pretty face. Not a delicate face. And one that I'm not so arrogant to think has never worn on my friends and neighbors. A face even I've grown to resent at times.

Well, not today.

The locked cabinet beneath the sink beckons like a secret treasure trove from any one of a number of fantastical tales strewn across the apartment, in tomes of immortal paper and stately pleathers, but its contents are worth more to me than gold and jewels. I know in my heart that its meager lock could never keep out a truly interested party, but peace settles on me, a blanket of calm called trust. The only mammal who would ever have a chance to pry into it is the one I know respects me enough not to look in the first place.

Oh, Charlie. If only I could trust you that blindly.

They say the man who can keep a secret may be wise, but he is not half as wise as the man with no secrets to keep. I say only a dead man has no secrets left, and even then I wouldn't wager.

A quick rummage reveals a bevy of beauty products fit for a queen. I wonder for a moment if our resident Egyptian wouldn't love to get her claws on these, but knowing her sharp tongue, I think she'd prefer to leverage them into taunts against me than employ them for herself. Not that I haven't grown used to her barbs, but on a topic this sensitive, I don't relish the thought of her knowing.

Jar by jar, bottle by bottle, my countertop collection grows to its full glory. I've gotten quite handy at applying eyeshadow -- a light touch. I'm a lady, after all. Not a whore. Mascara blooms my meager lashes into swooping, gorgeous black wings. Lipstick too, but just a whisper. I even it out with a practiced kiss.

A quick spray of *Musk Mask* to the necessary regions is quickly followed by a misleading mist of *Pomegranate Passion*, and at once the old odors are hidden for a new and feminine fragrance. I slip into a stylish tanktop, and I must admit, its smooth comfort is strangely enthralling. I can feel the change building. A peachy skirt the color of a warmly remembered spring fits me well, and though I (rather plainly) don't quite have the hips for it, its loose, airy fit invigorates me and its girly flair is a strangely-welcome change.

At last, I move to the final piece. I need to do my 'hair'.

From beneath the sink I retrieve the crown jewel of my collection: a hairdresser's mannequin-bust with flowing, wavy hair as glossy as the dew. The wig calls to me, eager to take its familiar position, and I am more than happy to oblige. Like whispered breath, the auburn waves fall around my head, and I girlishly bat my locks out of my face.

I close my eyes. A youthful energy spins me, and my skirt flits out, a swirling cloth punctuation mark ending one chapter and beginning another.
When I open my eyes, the old "me" is completely gone. I barely recognize the girl staring back at me.

I can't help but smile. It's a cheerful, unguarded smile. Not like the old "me" at all. Peppy. Fun. Girlish and charming. I giggle, involuntarily. I bat a paw at the mirror with a dismissive chirp.

"Oh, sir!" I whisper in a tone much higher than my throat is used to, "You're going to make me blush!"

"What? Oh, tee-hee! I'm just out here for a fundraiser, that's all!"

"Would you mind walking a delicate girl like myself home?"

A sudden noise in the other room jolts me to reality. I was so caught up in my imagined conversations I didn't realize how loud I was getting. My heart begins to pound. I'm not even out and about yet and I'm already fearing discovery.

Get a grip. Take a breath. Calm down. You've been through worse scrapes. And besides, if anyone were to catch you like this, there's no mammal in the world who'd be more understanding. Your secret might even remain that way.

The bathroom door creaks open under my paws and I peer out into the silent room beyond. I don't move. I don't breathe.

Another sound. From the other bedroom. I've still got time, then.

With lightning quickness and a careful, steady focus that stops well shy of panic, I stash the cosmetics and the bald bust beneath the sink and lock them up. I bolt from the bathroom and I'm out the front door before I can be spotted.

But once out in the hall, I freeze cold. I didn't check for passers-by. A quick glance calms my nerves and confirms I'm alone. But this was careless. Sloppy. Could've caused problems. And I wasn't even accounting for our on-and-off wildcard more commonly known as Remmy Cormo. Fortunately for me, our resident nocturnal herbivore is nowhere to be seen. At this point I'm more or less in the clear. If anyone spots me in the lobby, I can just do what I've planned from the start. What I do every time.

Pretend I'm someone else.

"What? Oh, tee-hee! I'm just out here for a fundraiser, that's all!"

The sharply-dressed mountain of a mountain goat before me laughs politely, scooping an hors d'oeuvre off the platter-display at my table and nibbling it so lightly I wonder if he'll even leave a trace.

"Well," he drawls, slowly placing a twenty into my metal donor box with all the subtlety of a plane crash, "Perhaps after this is all over, you and I can go get a coffee together somewhere."

"Oh," I titter, bringing a paw to my mouth, "That sounds lovely! But I don't really drink coffee."

He winks down at me. "Neither do I."

"Oh, sir! You're going to make me blush!"
He smiles broadly, flashing flat teeth, and with a confident nod, turns back to the party, disappearing into the crowd.

Quite a haul already, and that's not even counting "extra" donations I'm poised to be tallying up in my own personal afterparty, such as it is. At this rate, I'm starting to wonder if I've brought enough snacks. It's going to be a good night.

And that's when he shows up.

I can feel it -- feel the smile on my face slowly fading, the girlish giggling dying on my lips. My eyes track him as he shuffles through the crowd, some pale phantom drifting in and out. A cold omen. A bad dream. The darkest cloud, condensing above my bright and sunny night.

But despite all my silent pleading, the puffy white fluff drifts my way.

"Hey, how are you," he mumbles. He doesn't even say it, so much as excrete the words out the front of his face, leaving them sitting in a fetid pile on my table, in my once-quiet corner. A whole gym-turned-ballroom, a whole party, and he had to come here.

To be perfectly clear, my resentment, my hostility -- they're not symptoms of my personal feelings. How I feel about the sheep before me is not the problem here. But the last thing I need right now is someone who knows me well enough to blow this for me, but not well enough to know they should keep their mouth shut.

"Good evening, sir," I return, through my teeth. My mouth is tight. My fur is nearly bristling. Even when I get angry, my fur never bristles.

His bug-eyed gaze trails over the appetizers I've laid out, sampling them in his mind. His broad, soft, triangular nose twitches like some alien organ. "How much for the bagels with, uh, is that salmon and cream cheese? Oh man, that looks f-- uh, that looks really good." His strange, hooved hand hovers over the table, ready to snatch.

Well, that course suits me fine. I'd just as soon he get his food and move on. Don't give me a reason to regret this.

"It's free," I explain, focusing all my will to keep my delicate tone. "The appetizers are all complimentary, but if you like, I'm accepting charitable donations as part of an ongoing fundraiser. Anything you can give is more than generous enough."

"Seriously?" He looks up at last, meeting my eyes, and my pulse quickens against me. "So I can just help myself, then?"

"That's what complimentary means, sir!" I bite my tongue. Literally. I worry for a moment that came out more harsh than cute, but it seems to have gone over his head. This false tone is getting harder to maintain by the moment.

Looking satisfied, the ram uses a napkin to pick up the half-bagel he was eyeing, taking a deep whiff of the tiny bit of thin-sliced fish atop it. I'm not a cook. I don't know my way around a kitchen. But I worked hard on these. Perhaps it's a weakness in me, but if I'm going to do something, I've learned to do it right. And judging by his reaction, my hors d'oeuvres are more than worth the donations I've been earning.
The look is just an added bonus.

Satisfied with what he's got, he half-turns back to the party, pausing only to fish into his pocket. He pulls out a clumsy, hoofed fistful of change, but as he moves to drop it in my lockbox, the coins slip and come clattering onto the table.

He sets his bagel down quickly and fumbles for the dropped coins. "Oh, shit -- ah, I mean -- sorry. Sorry, here, let me--"

I can feel heads turning. Even that slight din was enough to get attention at this celebration. Wanting this over as quickly as possible, I lean forward over the table and scramble to help collect the change.

"It's all right, sir," I smile as pleasantly as I'm currently able, gathering up the spilled currency and waving a paw towards the rest of the gym. "Please, go enjoy the festivities!"

"No, no, I'm not gonna just leave you to clean up my mess, here, let me--" His hooves repeatedly slip, clicking together audibly, unable to pick up the last few coins off the table.

I try to push past him to get them. "Sir, please--"

"No, I can..." He can't.

"Let me just get--"

My eyes dart past him, over his white, puffy shoulders. People are starting to stare.

"Sir, I've got it! I can do it, you don't have to--"

"It's not a problem, really!"

"Corno!"

He stops, outstretched hoof hovering over the last coin. Slowly he lifts his head, looking up at me with an expression of wide-eyed trepidation. "...How do you know my--"

I've made a mistake.

Half the room is looking this way.

He squints, studying my face. "...Wait a minute, is--"

I lean across the table, grabbing him by the collar of his shirt, and with sudden force I yank him towards me, shoving my lips into his.

His eyes go wide as I lock him into a deep kiss. I can feel the fuzz of his wool against my face. It tickles faintly.

Opening one eye, I see the room has mostly returned to its business, many of my ex-onlookers now bedecked in blushing, sheepish smiles as they politely divert their attention back to the party. I even spot a certain mountain goat looking to the floor, dejected. Guess I can write that one off. Thanks, Cormo.

I pull off just enough to break the kiss. He blinks, stunned, and his mouth moves noiselessly, trying to create words his brain hasn't yet had time to find.
"Fix my wig," I whisper pointedly, in my normal voice.

He reaches up automatically and obliges me, in a smooth and subtle motion disguised as cradling my head. Reluctantly, I'll admit, I have to give him credit there.

I lock eyes with him. "Meet me behind the gymnasium in two minutes."

He understands.

I watch the ram toddle off for a moment, biting my lip. I have no time to dwell on this. I snatch up the rest of my things, toss most of them into the lockbox, and make a quick but subtle getaway from my little corner.

Damn.

So much for the afterparty haul.

Bricks hued in the soft, dreamlike blue of early evening greet me as I round the corner of Packer's Gym and dip into the shadows, hidden from the streetlights that glare down like so many prying eyes. I'm back in my element, such as it is -- and yet I find I'm still wearing my makeup and wig. Maybe it'll make this easier.

I spot the dim ball of wool without trouble. He's mulling about in the center of the alley like a lost child waiting for his mother at the supermarket. I clear my throat to get his attention.

"Oh!" He startles, peering intensely at me.

"There's no need for such a hard look," I sigh.

"What?"

I glance down at myself, gripping the hem of my skirt in the darkness, as if it'll fix this. "The way you're looking at me. I understand what you're feeling, believe me. I know you must think--"

He steps forward suddenly, and in a response unlike myself, I startle -- just a bit.

"No! No no no, no, it's -- no, it's not that. It's not like that. I just -- I was just squinting." He waves his hooves quickly, as though trying to clear the air in the most literal way possible. "Sheep, uh, sheep have poor night vision. I wasn't..."

For a moment, silence overtakes the alley again.

I sigh, looking back down at my feet. "I wasn't here for... what you might think."

He starts to speak, but then stops himself, reconsiders, and slips his hooves into his pants pockets. "It's none of my business why you were here."

That's the best answer I could have hoped for. I look back up at him and almost smile.

"So does that mean...?" I start.

"Don't worry," he shakes his head, blushing lightly. "I won't tell anyone. Your secret's safe with me."
I admit, I hadn't planned for this possibility. I'm not used to being surprised -- at least not like this. I try to respond, to find the words to explain why this matters, but for once, I think he's got the better plan. There's not much further that needs to be said.

I take a step forward, retrieving my lockbox, and spring it open. The ram peers down, curious as I'd expect, as I draw out something wrapped in a napkin.

"You forgot something," my words are colored with the same practiced feminine tint I used inside, and as I offer my blushing neighbor his bagel, I add a showy little curtsey. "I'm afraid some of the cream cheese got smeared off on the napkin, though."

When he leans down to take it, I give him a quick peck on the cheek. He turns redder, laughing in his shy, nervous way.

"Th--thanks. I'll uh," he thumbs dumbly towards the back door. "I'm going back inside."

I nod, fixing my top slightly. "I'm heading home."

"Oh, then, do you need me to walk you home, or--"

I shake my head, stopping him mid-stride. "I'll be fine."

He smiles. "Thanks, Charlie."

"And you might want this, too," I offer, holding up his wallet.

He pats his empty pocket in surprise, then shoots me a look of faux-anger as he swipes it back. "Why you-- thanks."

I turn on my heels, heading for home.

"Enjoy your night, Cormo."

"Yeah. You too."

As I cut through the alleys leading back home, I flip the lockbox open, fishing through the loose bills, change, and billfolds until I find the wallet I'm looking for. Popping the brass clasp open, a photo of a smiling mountain goat greets me.

No credit cards. $7 in cash.

Bust.

With a flick of my wrist, I pop an hors d'oeuvre in my mouth, pull off my wig, and wipe the taste of sheep off my lips.

Well, I suppose the night wasn't a total waste.
Trying to find his place in the pack, Remmy gets an idea of how to reach across the aisle.

Sudden movement from out of the corner of my eye catches my attention right as a heavy paw taps me on the shoulder.

"Hey, Remmy!"

"Oh! Hey, Cliff," I gasp, trying my best to look nonchalant. For a tiger of his size, Cliff sure can be
silent. I never even heard him come up behind me. Must be some kind of evolutionary holdover from when they'd have to sneak around to catch food.

"So hey, what's up with that rubber thing on your barbells?" Cliff asks, taking a heavy pull off of his water bottle as he collapses on the seat next to me. "Kinda reminds me of those clips they have on snowboards to hold 'em onto your ankles. That just a comfort grip, or...?"

Once my heartrate settles back down from the stealth ambush, I lower my weights to the floor.

"Yeah, basically. Hoof grips," I confirm, wiggling the tips of my hooves for emphasis. "Ungulates have a harder time holding onto heavy stuff. Little items like phones and cups are just fine, but last thing I wanna do is drop a dumbbell on myself." Like I almost did a second ago.

"Yeah, I can see it," Neil says from the next bench over, scratching his golden lion's mane. "Didn't even know those were a thing. Lookin' at it now, though, makes sense why you'd want some."

I peer at the grips, hefting the barbell before me. "I guess when you don't have to deal with it, you don't really think about it."

"No kidding! Why didn't you say something before, Remmy?" Cliff asks. "Packer's is always looking for suggestions on new equipment. Seems like the kind of thing that some folks would want here for accessibility reasons. Uh -- not that hoofers are disabled, I mean."

Cringing, Neil tugs exaggeratedly at his collar. "Jeez, Cliff."

"Yeah, shit, I know," the tiger mutters self-consciously. "Sorry, Remmy."

"For what, 'hoofer'?" I shrug, unscrewing the hoof grips from the barbells and returning them to my bag. "Why would I mind? I mean, that's what I am, right? 'Ungulate' doesn't really roll off the tongue, anyway."

"Still, shitty move on my part, at least," Cliff says. Is that even a slur? I guess it must be if he feels that bad about it. "Won't happen again."

"Nah dude, really, don't beat yourself up for it. I've said way worse, and recently, too." Chuckling, I wipe my face on my towel, shaking some of the sweat loose from my wool. "To answer your question: I guess I hadn't really thought it was a big enough deal to gripe about. The gyms I'm used to cater to sheep. Hoof grips there come standard. Makes sense they wouldn't be as common here, so I figured I'd just buy my own."

"I guess." Looking at his own paws, Cliff flexes his digits, deep in thought. "Feels like it'd be a huge pain having to do stuff like that with hooves."

"Oh, it definitely is. It's a massive fuckin' pain in the ass," I immediately reply, laughing as I finish gathering my stuff up into the new gym bag Al got me. "Nobody here's gonna argue that. But we all gotta work with what we got."

"Ain't that the truth, Neil," Cliff grins, elbowing the lion in the side.

"Look, I dunno what you're talking about," Neil mumbles back with a dopey smile as he slings his own bag over his shoulder. "Anyway, I gotta head to work, guys. Those tacos aren't gonna make themselves!"

"This is so like him," Cliff sighs. "I'll always come second to tacos."
The lion lets out a loud guffaw and shakes his shaggy head. "Hey, be fair. The tacos were here first."

"Hey Neil, you gonna be at the same place you were at last time?" I ask, licking my lips. "If so, save some fish for me. I've been dying for a second helping."

"I'm actually setting up in the old lot just south of the row, near Clippership Styles and Grooming? You know where that is?"

I nod. "'Clips, Dips, & More' right?"

"'Been a good boy? Come treat yourself!' Neil adds, gesturing like he's spelling out their slogan in mid-air, much to the tiger's amusement.

"Yeah!" I clap my hooves. "Yeah, I know where that is."

"That's the one. I gotta go home, get the truck, and stock up on some ingredients, that kinda thing, so I probably won't be wheels-down for an hour or so." Neil reaches into his pocket, pulling his phone out and thumbing through it idly. "But yeah, man, come look me up. We'll do lunch. By which I mean I'll make you lunch, and you'll pay me for it."

"Right on. I gotta shove off myself, but hey, it was great seeing you guys," I reply, following Neil out to the lobby.

Sometime between now and when I first got here, Martina's arrived with her snack stand and cash box, raising money for the library again. Looks like she's got her own paws full, with several eager customers lined up to buy granola bars and sports drinks. I slip a five dollar bill into her donation box on my way out, and even though she's looking a little frazzled with so many hungry patrons swarming her stand, she still takes the time to give me a grateful smile and wave.

As Neil and I part ways, I catch myself practically strutting down the street. The air's cool tonight, and charged with something -- even though I just came from lifting at the gym, I feel like I could go right back inside and ball for hours. I don't know what it is about Packer's, but it seems like I always leave the place full of energy. While I'm not sure what I'm going to do with the rest of my evening, I'll be damned if I let it go to waste. At the very least, I'm hunting Neil down and getting some tacos. Maybe I'll bring one of my neighbors along? I wonder if Ozzy eats fish.

"Hey, little lamb!"

Looking up, I spot Pandora leaving the same bakery that Annie seemed really interested in back during our first group trip to Packer's. She's dressed nicely tonight in professional clothes; a low-cut, airy blouse and a pencil skirt with leggings just transparent enough to show off her natural tiger stripes. For a second, I wonder if it would be specist to ask if she's related to Cliff. Hanging from one of her claws is a ribbon-bound box full of pastries, one of which she's snacking on. She's on her way to work, if I had to guess.

"Well look at you, all dressed up in your track suit," Pandora grins as I jog up to her. "Looking good, marshmallow. Bulking up?"

"Oh, I wish," I chuckle, poking one of my twiggy arms. "More like just trying to blow some steam off."

"Hmmm. I might know of a thing or two that could help you with that." Finishing the last of her treat, she brushes a few stray crumbs from her blouse. "For instance -- did you get a chance to peek in your goodie bag?"
I wince slightly. I did indeed -- her very generous gift to me was a sampler pack consisting of a girly magazine (Preyboy, natch), a packet of tissues, a small four ounce bottle of "intimate lubricant", and most notably an inexpensive (but soft) textured stroker. Barbells aren't the only thing hoofed mammals have trouble gripping, and getting my rocks off without help is not exactly a pleasant premise. The toy she gave me was all set to be an absolute boon for de-stressing.

...keyword was, anyway. Unfortunately I was so set on doing things just right that I got the bright idea from some fucking asshole online to stick it in the microwave so it could "warm up". They insisted a few seconds would make my experience far more "pleasuresome", but apparently, the popcorn button is not a substitute for low power. The twins gave me shit for the rest of the day about the smell of melted plastic or rubber or whatever that was. That's what I get for trusting someone with a username like "QueenODenial".

"I did, yes," I reply, blushing profusely. "It was, um, really nice, Pandora."

"...but?" she asks, eyebrow raised. "Oh, shoot. I didn't give you a pred one by accident, did I?"

Actually, you did, but I'm not picky. "N-no, that's not the problem," I admit reluctantly. "It was real nice, it just, um... I broke it."

"You broke it," she echoes, her other eyebrow elevating to match her first. "You know they're -- reusable, right?"

"What can I say?" I chuckle awkwardly. "Turns out that I'm too hot to handle."

Pandora giggles, shifting her pastry box to her other paw.

"Mr. Marshmallow, if you're packing that kind of heat, I might just see a film career in your future," she jokes, reaching out and giving my coif a playful pat. "Tell you what. Swing by the shop next time you're in my neck of the woods, and we'll fix you up with a new one. Something a little... sturdier."

"I'd like that a lot, actually," I reply. "Sorry for the trouble. Believe me when I say I was brokenhearted about it." That's actually an understatement. I hadn't even gotten to use it!

"Oh, I don't doubt it, you poor thing," she sniffs. "I've dedicated my career to spreading the message of the importance of self-maintenance. You know, if you don't have any evening plans, you're welcome to walk with me over there now."

"I'd love to, but, uh, I don't suppose Avo's working tonight...?"

"Ahh. Yes, she sure is. You two are neighbors, right?" Pandora asks with a sage nod, instantly having taken my meaning. "I can see how that might be just a touch awkward."

I nod sheepishly. "Yeah. Any chance of me getting a raincheck on that offer when I can be a little more, y'know...?"

"Discreet? Mm, absolutely. I ask all of my employees to exercise common sense and not violate customer privacy, but just the same, you might do better to come in during off hours. You know how Avo can be."

"Yeah, I do," I answer, a shiver running down my spine. "Speaking of evening plans, how about you? Anything exciting going on?"

"Oh, nothing too glamorous. I'm giving kind of a little presentation tonight. And before you ask,
no, not that kind," Pandora laughs. Tapping her box of pastries with a clawtip, she gives me a knowing wink. "Hence why I stopped and picked up a few goodies on the way."

"Gotta make a good first impression, huh," I muse. Something I wish I myself had done. "So like, are you doing a seminar, or...?"

"Mmm. Yes, kind of. It's mostly a sales thing; I'm meeting with some clients who own a chain of gentleman's clubs and are looking at my store as a potential distributor. Pasties, costumes, that kind of stuff. If things go well, this could be just the kind of push I've needed to finally expand into the downtown area." She shrugs. "Truth be told, I'm actually a huge fan of public speaking, if you can believe it. I've done talks at colleges and business schools, and it's a lot of fun. College students will turn out in droves to hear a thirty-something 'Porn magnate' talk about sales and marketing."

"I can't say I'd have figured you for the type, but that does sound like a lot of fun. Maybe I should take up public speaking myself," I joke. "Give a seminar on proper pompadour maintenance or something."

She doesn't laugh. Instead, she tilts her head, resting her cheek on her paw in a thoughtful pose. "You joke, li'l lamb, but I think people around here would get a kick out of listening to you speak. You've got a good sense of humor. A little bit of schmoozing, a little knowing how to poke fun at yourself, some free food, and you could probably get anyone to listen to anything you have to say."

"Huh. I mean, you know, I dunno," I chuckle, fluffing the wool on my shoulders. I can't believe I'm even considering the idea. "I wouldn't have the first clue of what to actually give a speech on, though."

"I'm sure you'll think of something," she says, flashing a toothy smile at me. "If all else fails, you've got the pompadour plan to fall back on."

"Hah! That's definitely top of the list."

"Good. Let me know how it goes! In the meanwhile, I better get hustling -- my presentation starts in twenty minutes. It was nice chatting with you, as always."

"Likewise! I'll definitely stop in sometime soon and take you up on that offer," I answer. "I saw a couple things that interested me last time I was in your shop, too."

"I look forward to it. Enjoy the rest of your night, Remmy," Pandora replies, tapping her clawtips to my hooftips before heading off.

As I resume my walk home, I can't help but shake my head at the very thought of me giving a seminar on any topic -- pompadours or otherwise. I mean, where the hell would I even start? Hi, my name's Remmy Cormo and I'm here to talk to you about how cool being a sheep is? Yeah, no. I can't imagine anyone around here seriously wanting to listen to a fuckin' ram spout off about shit like hoof cleaning and wool trimming and life without horns. Besides, I know I'm not the only prey species that's living on Pack Street. I don't really want to piss off the Pack by trying to flaunt myself as some novelty. Betty made it pretty clear she wasn't interested in sheep at all, and I can't imagine Al wanting to go for it either.

...but then again, Wolter was pretty curious about sheep when we drove out to Bunnyburrow, and I did have questions for him about aardwolves, in turn. I bet he's not the only one who's got questions he's just never had a chance to air. Cliff and Neil seemed curious about the hoof grips, which I guess makes sense. I didn't know anything about Pack traditions and rankings and
responsibilities and so on until I finally nutted up and asked about it. And now that I'm 'officially' part of the pack, maybe even Betty would show a little interest. I mean hell, maybe if I tried to put myself out there one more time, it'd help further relations in our community -- if nothing else, at least with a few of my neighbors.

After all, we are in the middle of a national crisis. Reaching across the aisle's not gonna hurt anybody.

I'm starting to get to know my neighbors a bit more, but there's not really a whole lot they know about me. Marty even accused me point-blank of acting "fuckin' untouchable", and now that they've brought me into the fold, I've got to socialize more. As hokey as the idea is, maybe if I presented it all tongue-in-cheek like a seminar -- with free food and so on -- it'd work like an ice breaker. We could have it down in the lobby of the apartment building, since that is kind of our unspoken group gathering place between the burga lunch Charlie and I treated everyone to, and then the pizza party we had the night I was formally accepted into the Pack. Could actually be a chance to get everyone interested, and share a bit of my world with them.

Reaching into my wallet, I check my cash supply. Pandora did say free food and schmoozing goes a long way, and sure enough, Al was a lot more receptive when I bought everyone lunch that day. I could swing by Neil's food truck and get tacos for everyone. Maybe ask him to make some with bug meat for the twins and anyone else who doesn't eat fish. I'm pretty sure the dollar store's open so I could get one of those big foil tins to keep everything nice and warm, too.

I might even stop off at the library first and get a book on sheep, grab a few talking points from it and print up a couple flyers to hoof out... shit, I'll probably need a big easel and a dry-erase board or something. I've never really planned a "meeting" like this, but I can see why Pandora would think it's fun. I'm excited already. Hell, if it goes well enough, I could see this becoming a regular community thing.

That's it. I've made up my mind. The Pack's started educating me in their ways -- least I can do is return the favor. And hit or miss, it's not like I can embarrass myself any worse than I already have in front of Al.

One thing's for sure: I'm definitely going to be busy tonight.

Two hours later, I arrive home to an empty lobby, but since this is the nocturnal equivalent of "late morning/early afternoon" (my visit to Packer's was basically my "morning routine"), I imagine everyone's going to be ready for lunch soon.

Neil ended up giving me a nice discount because I bought the equivalent of a catering order, but I figured it's better to have too much than not enough. I lay the huge tin full of tacos out on the lobby table along with some paper plates and some plastic cups. A couple two-liters of normal, non-grape soda later (sorry Marty, not this time), and the food's all taken care of.

I hastily set the easel up in front of the lobby television, where it'll be front and center. Speaking of Marty, everyone's favorite stoat wasn't at the library tonight, but I name-dropped him and one of the workers was kind enough to loan me an easel along with a laminated piece of posterboard and a few dry-erase markers. In my hooves are a few fact sheets I printed off -- and since this is the digital age, I'm going to see if I can't get a tag trending for later online discussion.

Grinning to myself, I quickly write out the name of my "seminar" and flip the board over so that it's a surprise. Folding my arms, all I need now is an audience -- and living in an apartment building
full of predators, it won't take them long to come running for the smell of fresh food. On scent alone, my money's on the fox.

It's not two minutes before I hear a familiar pitter-patter down the overhead hall. Sure enough.

"Cormo," Charlie's voice murmurs from somewhere overhead long before she even shows her face. "I do believe I smell fish. Cod, if I'm not mistaken."

"That's definitely cod," Ozzy whoops in standard hyena fashion, toting his guitar case over his shoulder as he stumbles in from the hall, passing behind Charlie and her enormous, swishing tail. "Fuckin' wow, woolly B. I'm really hopin' you're in a sharin' mood tonight, because if you brought a mountain of fish tacos home all for yourself... man, that'd be a mean trick to play on everyone."

"Ozzy, come on, it's me," I reply with a smug grin, arms folded. "Am I that big of an ass?"

He laughs excitedly, throwing his shaggy arm around my shoulder and squeezing me into a brief but overpowering hug. "Y'know, I would answer that, but it's not worth missing out on a taco."

Charlie coughs pointedly, but says nothing. Thanks, guys. Message received.

"Tacos? From Neil's?" Anneke sniffs as she rockets down the staircase. "There'd better be some bug ones in there or you're making a second trip."

"I'll have you know I got both kinds," I smugly retort. "I have it on good authority that aardwolves are insectivores."

"And sheep are herbivores, but that ain't stoppin' you," she cracks with a too-sweet smile. "How about you apply your knowledge to getting that slider debt of yours settled up?"

"Are you kidding me?" I ask, eyebrow raised. "I bought everyone lunch! Does that not settle it?!"

Sniffing at the air, Anneke waves me off. "Tacos aren't sliders."

"She's got you there, Cormo," Charlie muses. Oh, come on, Charlie, not you too. You're an enabler, you know that?

Looks like we've already got ourselves a serious little crowd going here. Charlie's obviously racking her brain trying to figure out what I've got planned -- I keep noticing her attempting to sneak a glance at my paper materials tucked under my arm. One-by-one, my neighbors are beginning to pour out of the woodwork. Where there's Annie, there's Wolt, and eventually the Alpha wolf himself makes his way down the stairs to see what the commotion's all about.

"Arright, what's goin' on? You making an announcement?" Al scoffs good-naturedly. "You know Omegas aren't permitted to make announcements, right? You ain't got the security clearance for it."

"Well, good thing I'm not making an announcement, just holding a meeting," I reply casually. "Well, a seminar, really."

As I expected, the entire room bursts out laughing -- I think that they think that I'm super serious about this. Even Charlie's smirking to herself as she passively observes this entire exchange. Joke's on everyone here -- I knew I'd be ridiculed going in, which is why I front-end loaded it. My plan is to get the jeering out of the way early so that I can actually get my point across.

"A fucking seminar," Al says, grin widening as he pulls his phone from his pocket. "Oh, fuck, no. Don't nobody make a move until everyone's here. Betty'd kill me if she knew what she was
"One step ahead of you, boss," Charlie replies as she wiggles one of her burner phones. "This seemed like a rare occasion. I've already put the word out to Betty. And Marty as well."

"Well, hey, the more the merrier," I grin, taking my seat by the easel.

"A seminar! W'shit, man, I knew I shoulda brought my pocket protector," Ozzy giggles uncontrollably as he collapses at the far end of the couch opposite the twins.

"I don't have a pocket protector, but maybe these'll work," Wolt replies, fishing around in his pocket and pulling out a pair of lenseless glasses. "Here y'go, Oz."

"Oh, fucking flawless, man," the hyena cackles, taking them from Wolt and perching them on his nose. A fistful of ink pens from the lobby counter in his shirt pocket completes the transformation. All of a sudden his smile's gone and he's got the most blank, serious expression I've ever seen him wear. "I'm ready for our meetin', sir. Do you need me to get those fourth quarter reports for ya, sir?"

"Have them collated and on my desk by five," I reply gruffly, fighting a smirk. Annie's got her phone out, snapping photos of him. My response is too much and his facade shatters as quickly as it came, leaving him laughing so hard tears are streaming from his eyes as he snaps off a salute.

"Yes sir, Mr. Ramrod!"

Amid all the laughter, the last canines finally come home to the pack. Betty and Avo nearly kick the door down getting into the building, both of them dressed in their mismatched work uniforms -- based on their attempts to not look winded, they probably ran here on their lunch break.

"Where's the fuckin' fire, Charlie?" Betty pants, sniffing at the air. "Wait, that's fish. Is that fish? This is the weirdest fucking surprise party. My birthday's not for another month."

"About time you two showed up!" Al eagerly rumbles, taking a seat and prying the tin open. "Everybody's here except Marty, so let's go ahead and eat."

Every nose in the room begins to twitch as the metallic lid's peeled back. Mine included. It's fascinating watching a room full of predators inhaling the powerful scents of crispy, fried fish and fresh-grilled bug meat.

"Well this is a welcome treat," Avo says, subconsciously licking her lips. "Thanks for lunch, Al."

"Wasn't me. Our woolly pup here sprang for it." He flicks a clawed white finger at me with a smirk.

Avo gives a surprised glance to Betty, then turns back to me with a soft-edged smile. "Well. In that case, thank you for lunch, Remmy."

A mumbled chorus of appreciation follows Avo's, ranging from enthusiastic to reluctant -- all of which I take in stride.

"Ah, no big deal, guys," I reply. Actually it was a pretty big deal on my meager budget, but that doesn't need to be said. "You're welcome."

"I thought you didn't like greasy food, Avo," Annie chides, muscling in next to her, paper plate in paws. "Something about it going to your enormous hips?"
"I'll make an exception for fish, pipsqueak," the jackal fires back. "Besides, I missed Neil's truck last time he was around here."

"Glad we didn't stop to eat along the way," Betty says, lining up behind Al (and more importantly, in front of everyone else) as the Alpha helps himself to a king's share before taking his place in his recliner. I'm just glad I "overspent" on food to make sure I'd have more than enough for everyone - I wasn't expecting this huge of a turnout.

As with the pizza party, as soon as the Alpha and Beta are taken care of, it's a free-for-all on the taco tins. I notice Avo's being way more aggressive than she usually is. By the time everyone's plates are filled, there's only a single bug taco left. I can't help but feel smug -- nice of them to leave one for the Omega, but I was a clever boy. I ate three tacos on the way over here!

...not that they need to know that.

"All right, Cormo. You've definitely more than earned your audience, and you've got my blessing," Al chortles, wiping guacamole from his muzzle with the back of his paw. "So let's have it, what's this little show-and-tell of yours about?"

"Shoulda known there was strings attached," Betty mumbles, glaring at Charlie as she leans against the wall with her plate.

"Oh, did you not see the easel?" Charlie responds cynically. "It's right there. First thing I noticed when I entered the room." Ha ha, no, the first thing you noticed was the fish, you fibber.

"Honest to god, I was trying to ignore it," the wolfess mutters, rolling her eyes. "Okay, cotton swab. What's so important you had to bribe us?"

Seems like everyone's in more or less a good mood and the initial scornful atmosphere's started to die down -- all according to plan -- so now's looking like my opportunity. Grabbing my stack of flyers, I eagerly trot over to the easel. I've only got one shot at making this work. Presentation's everything.

"I'm so glad you asked," I reply jovially, flipping over the posterboard to proudly unveil tonight's topic of discussion. As expected, Ozzy breaks out in another round of shrieky laughter, though this time he's the only one. The others are all wearing expressions of disbelief, most frozen mid-chew.

"#SheepFacts?" Betty finally asks, incredulous. "With a fuckin' hashtag and everything? Oh my god."

"No wonder you wanted us over here in such a hurry," Avo squeals, nearly choking on her food as she shoulder-checks Charlie. "Hot fuck! I'd have paid money to see this show!"

I start passing out my flyers to everyone. "I know it seems stupid--"

"Only 'seems'? Really, yarnball?" Betty grumbles, making no move to accept the flyer. I roll it up and gently poke it in the pocket of her mom jeans with a smile before continuing my sweep around the room.

"...since I'm obviously the newest member of the Pack and all," I continue, patting my whistle with pride. "But you guys have been kind of going over Pack customs with me off and on lately and I wanted to return the favor, so I thought maybe I'd go over a few sheep customs with you guys. Thus, the name."

"This whole thing was an excuse to talk about yourself?" Avo discards her lollipop stick as she
pours herself a cup of soda.

Betty rolls her eyes. "How do you manage to hide your balls in your shorts so well?"

"That's enough." Al waves her off. "At least give him a chance to get his foot in his mouth first."

"Um, thanks, Al. I promise this'll be quick, and hey, you guys might even learn something," I nervously reply. "I mean, you did the other day, right, Wolt?"

"That's right, yeah," Wolter says, wiping his paws on his shirt. "Wait, what?"

"Well, at least we know who to blame for putting the idea in his head," Avo quips.

Before I can actually launch into my diatribe, the front door to the lobby slams open and Marty tumbles in. He's disheveled and dripping sweat, toting a duffel bag that's almost as big as he is.

"Hey. Sorry I'm late," he wheezes, nearly doubling over as he staggers inside. "I had... a ton of fuckin' shit to deal with at the library. And I thought I was never gonna get outta there. I got your text, Charlie, what'd I miss?"

"Nothing yet," Charlie replies, plucking the last bug taco from the tray and gingerly handing it off to Marty as he collapses on the seat next to her. "Want something to drink?"

Marty looks at the bottles of cola and lemon-lime soda on the table in disgust, much to my internal satisfaction.

"Water," he grunts after a few seconds of consideration, glancing around. "...Why the hell are you dressed like a nerd?"

Ozzy holds his arms out proudly. "I'm a wage slave now, man, same as you!"

Marty squints, staring in confusion. "The fuck is all this?"

"Woolly bully's holdin' a seminar on sheep facts," the hyena snickers.

"I'm out," Marty says, standing back up.

"Sit," Al booms. Marty immediately complies, returning to his taco.

"I can't leave you people alone for five fuckin' minutes, can I," he mutters.

Skimming the flyer in his paw, Al motions for everyone to settle down. "Arright, guys. Remmy. Get on with it."

"Okay, so, uh -- welcome! You all know me as a neighbor, but I don't think you know much about me as a sheep. Being a ram, I grew up in a herd. Which is a lot like a pack, I'm finding out! And I thought I'd share a couple of the similarities with you guys." I'm half-expecting them to correct me or argue semantics, but to my surprise, everyone simply continues eating. All eyes are watching -- with mixed expressions, sure, but watching just the same. Shit, I've actually got the floor here! Fuck, I'm running with it. I flip open my notecards.

"Contrary to popular belief, sheep are very intelligent. They're especially good at recognizing and remembering faces, and have excellent memories. Wait." I peer at the card, tilting my head. "What the hell does that mean, 'contrary to popular belief'?"

Marty snickers, and for whatever reason, everyone looks to Avo. Surprisingly, she just shrugs.
"Hey, I didn't say anything."

I push on. "And speaking of herds and packs, did you guys know that herds have their own Alpha, sort of?"

"No shit, really?" Annie asks. "I'm trying to imagine Al as a ram now."

Al's eyes go wide and he stops chewing halfway through. He mutters very quietly to her. "Don't."

"Tooooo late," she grins.

"Yes, it's true. In olden times, there were actually sheep called 'leadersheep'. They were usually the biggest and hardiest sheep in the herd, and they'd lead all the others to safety," I continue, tapping the flyer. "Even though we've evolved past all that, even in modern day Zootopia we still find ourselves, y'know, looking for our own Alpha, basically."

"Leadersheep, huh. Explains a few things," Al muses. "I don't think that means you'll be challenging me any time soon, though."

"No, no. For now, I accept my fate as the Omega," I chuckle. That gets a few laughs. "So another thing -- rams are really competitive. It's a biological thing, you know. It takes different forms today. For instance, me kicking Ozzy's ass at basketball."

"Hey, only because I've been holding back," Ozzy protests good-naturedly. "I could mop the floor with your fuzzy ass, man."

"Well, be that as it may, back in the days of the leadersheep, we weren't gonna follow some weak-ass ram who couldn't prove himself. So we'd have headbutting contests," I reply. "And they got pretty nasty."

"Hey, no lie there," Avo interjects, patting her stomach. "You guys think he's hard-headed, you should've seen him use that thick skull at Packer's. Almost laid me out, and I was behind a punching bag. If he had horns I'd probably have busted a rib."

"Speaking of biological things, sheep actually have very good eyesight. Statistically, less than 5% of sheep need some form of eye correction, one of the lowest numbers of any species. And speaking of natural benefits, sheep wool was once the most widespread fabric and clothing material in the entire world, and is still used in some places today."

"Yes, which reminds me, when your next coat comes in, I'll be needing a pillow as well," Charlie deadpans.

"I'll... keep that under advisement," I cough, flipping through my notes. "Behaviorally, sheep are natural followers, too. For instance, we're really good at following along without asking questions."

I blink, re-reading my notes in the sudden quiet. That... really didn't sound so good -- maybe I shouldn't have printed the first website on sheep behavior I found at the library computer.

"Uhhh... heh. Ah, sheep also form really strong, borderline familial bonds with people if they're removed from their native herd -- according to this, adopted lambs tend to take to their new families better than any other Zootopian mammal on statistical average," I add.

"Awwwww." Annie smooshes her cheeks in with both paws. "Remmy's like our own little adopted lamb!"
"Explains why he called me 'mom' when I was taking care of him," Betty mutters with the faintest smile.

"I didn't," I snap back without hesitation, trying not to turn red. Ozzy's got both paws over his mouth, wheeze-laughing and trying in vain to stay quiet. "No, I didn't. Guys. She's joking, okay. I didn't do that."

Betty sips her drink, a smug look on her face.

"Anyway, yeah, that's why sheep put so much importance on family. Uh. Why family's, um..." I trail off. There's dead air for a moment. My eyes glance over the card and I crumple it up, stuffing it in my pocket.

"And, uh, yeah, anyway, I guess that kind of carries over into modern times with -- well, with leadership!" I continue awkwardly, staring at the rest of my note cards. "Because we're a prey species, you know, and we're constantly looking for someone to protect us from pr-- from threats. And because of that, sheep tend to... to shun anyone around them who shows unusual characteristics or doesn't conform because, uh, in the olden days that's... how the pa-- herd protected itself."

There's a lump forming in the back of my throat. I fumble for a cup off the table, pouring myself some soda. Nobody's saying anything, which somehow's making it worse. I expected another joke or comment by now.

"Turns out that sheep are also really good at hiding pain, since they'll seem less vulnerable to pre--" I cut myself off, flipping through my notes. "Uh. Evolutionary thing. Holdover. Whatever. Hah, uh... did you know we have trouble walking in a straight line? If you look at hoofprints, they're almost never straight. Hope I never get pulled over for drunk driving! I'm in trouble if I gotta get out and walk the... line, outside. The car."

The only sounds in the room are quiet chewing and my own heart pounding in my ears. The cards are shaking in my hooves.

"In social groups, herd animals -- especially sheep -- can have difficulty thinking for themselves, esp-- especially when it, especially when it comes to new --" I stammer, crinkling the cards in my hooves. "And, uh, we have -- you know what, I...

I can't even look up from my notes. At this point, the words aren't even registering. I fold the flyer over a couple of times before shoving it and the remaining cards in my pocket.

"You know, this, this was a, this was a stupid idea, hah. Never mind. This was a really dumb idea," I announce to the floor beneath my feet. "Ha ha, thanks for, uh, for showing up and humoring me, guys. I don't know what I was thinking. Uh, enjoy the tacos and uh, yeah. So. Yeah. Thanks, have a great, have a good day. Okay."

I can hear some quiet murmuring. The sounds of a few of my neighbors slowly rising from their seats. Turning around, I begin shakily dismantling the easel to return to the library. Even though it's a ways from here, there's no reason in not taking it back tonight.

"Yo, wait, that's it? You're just gonna fuckin' bounce without finishing your seminar?" Marty grunts, licking salsa off of his paws. "You didn't even get to any of the good shit."

Wiping my nose on my sleeve, I look over my shoulder at him. "Nah, man, it's fine. I don't--"

"No, no no no, I ditched work to get over here, and you gave us a few social studies bullet points
without even dishing on any of the crazy stuff. Like the fact it says that you guys have a fuckin' 300 degree field of vision," he continues, tapping the flyer. "Says it right here. 300 fucking degrees. I'm calling shenanigans."

I flex and relax my hooves, trying to focus. "Marty--"

"Turn around and tell me how many fingers I'm holdin' up."

I sigh. "Marty--"

"C'mon, grazer, don't be a fuckin' wuss. You a lamb or a leadersheep?" he demands, scurrying to the front of the room to join me before the group, who've resettled into their seats. I set the posterboard down, turning away as instructed with a sniffle. "How many?"

"Four," I reply, my head pointed away from him -- though out of the corner of my eye, I can still see his paw.

"Holy shit," Avo gasps.

"No, that was a fuckin' lucky guess," Marty insists, waving her off. "Fine, how about now?"

"Two. Thumb and index," I add.

"Fuck me, that's awesome!" Ozzy hoots.

"Fuck me, that's creepy," Wolter says, dragging his paws down his face as he leans forward on the couch seat. "I knew those were sea monster eyes."

"One more time," Marty says, holding his paw out towards me.

I smirk openly before I flip him off in return.

"Yo, all right, that's just fucking unreal," he says, scoffing. "What other superpowers are you sitting on?"

"The ability to turn my head slightly away from you and see the tip of your paw in my peripheral vision's a superpower? I take it they don't have many comic books at your library." Folding up the easel, I wipe my nose on the back of my short sleeve. "I dunno. Uh, I can eat fish without throwing up. How's that?"

"I think I've got that one too. That's a good one," Al cracks.

Annie sprawls out on the couch a bit. "C'mon, seriously though, your eyes are really that good?"

"Avo's picking her nose," I sniff.

The whole room suddenly turns to Avo, who's moved to the back corner. She shrinks down on being caught. "I was scratching it," she protests.

"Well, I'm convinced," Charlie brushes crumbs off of her sweater before standing up, circling around me and standing on her tip-toes to get close. Her eyes widen ever so slightly -- to my surprise, her irises are blue. She's usually squinting so much I can't tell. "If I ever need an eye transplant, I know where to get a fresh set."

"Tha-- thanks, I guess?" I respond.
The vixen leans in a bit closer. "It's a joke, Cormo," she says.

"And hold up, what the hell is this?" Anneke abruptly stands up on the edge of the couch, waving around the flyer I gave her. "Sheep have four stomachs?!

"No, no," I smile. "Common misconception. It's more like one stomach with four compartments."

"So what," she pauses, looking back at the paper in her paws, "like, one for each food group or what? Can you get full on veggies but still have room for dessert? Because I told my mom that when I was a kid and it didn't fly."

"Hyenas can eat bones."

Everything in the room stops, and in dead silence, my neighbors and I all simultaneously, slowly turn to face Ozzy -- still in his thick glasses and pocket full of pens -- sitting with his paws on his knees and a dumb smile on his face.

"What?" I ask.

"Hyenas can eat bones," he repeats. "All those deboned fish meals and stuff. They don't throw out the bones. They make 'em into stock and stuff, usually, I think? Most predators don't eat the bones. But hyenas can! We can digest them just fine. We got bonecrunchers for teeth."

"Yikes," I find myself grinning and taking a step back.

"That's creepy," Marty says, giving voice to what we're all thinking.

Ozzy smiles blankly at the stoat. "I could probably even eat your bones and not get a stomachache."

Marty looks around the room, paws held out incredulously. "What the fuck!"

"We can drink salt water too," he whistles, kicking his feet up on the table and rapping his fist against his midsection for emphasis. "Cast iron stomachs, man."

"I guess we've all got some weird biological holdovers," Annie smirks.

Her brother nods in agreement. "I eat ants off the ground sometimes. I'm not gonna pretend I don't."

To my surprise, Charlie chimes in. "Sometimes, when I see people throwing a ball at the park, I get the urge to chase it." She fidgets with the hem of her sweater. "I know better, though."

"Don't hyenas laugh as an evolutionary thing, too?" Avo glances to Ozzy.

"Nope," Marty corrects. "You're thinking of spotted hyenas. Their ancestors were way weirder."

"Aardwolves definitely don't, either way," Wolt drawls, flopping out on the increasingly-abandoned sofa.

Chuckling, Ozzy gives him a friendly shove. "We're talkin' about hyenas, dude."

Wolt sits up, a look of disbelief on his face. "Aardwolves ARE hyenas!"

Ozzy tilts his head, ears lopping to one side. "What, no shit?! Really?"
"YES! What the fuck, Oz? You're a hyena! How do you not know this?!"

Ozzy responds by simply giggling in embarrassment and offering a clueless shrug, which gets the rest of the room laughing, too. Myself included. Good to know I wasn't alone on that one.

"Actually, speaking of outmoded biology, that reminds me," I join in, tapping a spot on my face. "They're long gone, but in the old wild days, sheep ancestors had scent glands, right here, right in front of the eyes. Nobody's even really sure what they were for!"

"You're all freaks as far as I'm concerned," Al chortles. "Thank god all wolves do is howl, instead of some weird shit."

Charlie rocks on her heels, clasping her paws together. "Didn't wolf ancestors used to pee on everything?"

Al takes a long sip from his drink. "Nope."

After everyone's cleared out for the evening to tend to their own devices, I stand alone in the lobby. As I begin humming to myself, cleaning up the mess from lunch, I hear faint footsteps behind me.

"So, was your seminar everything you'd hoped and dreamed?" Annie asks from the other side of the sofa.

"Well, I wouldn't say that," I admit as I gather up the paper plates and trash, loading them into the empty foil tin. "But... yeah. Yeah, I think it went all right."

She folds her arms. "Well hey, I had a good time. I think I learned a lot more about you. About all of us, really."

"Good to hear. That was the plan. More or less."

"Speaking of plans, you know, I was wondering... you got any tomorrow night?" she asks.

I stop, turning to face her with my arms full of garbage. If I didn't know better I'd think she was asking me out.

"No, I don't think so," I admit warily. "Work's got my hours scaled back right now so I've got the night free. Why, you need me for something?"

"My brother's gonna be hanging out with a few of his idiot friends, and he's ditching me all alone on a Friday night. Usually, we go out clubbing together, and I'm not about to fuckin' miss out," Annie says, lolling out over the back of the couch. "I know a pretty good place that just opened up. Since you keep fuckin' up that slider debt, I was thinkin' you and I could, y'know. Hit the town."

My heart's starting to race in my chest. Holy shit. She is asking me out. She actually is. I knew she was into me -- you don't have to have sheep eyes to see that kind of attraction -- but -- holy shit. This is kind of a big deal. Unable to formulate a sentence, I just nod dumbly like a fuckin' idiot.

"...so is that a yes?" she asks coyly.

"Yeah," I reply. Oh my god. This is definitely a date.

"This isn't a date," she quickly warns.
"Definitely not," I scoff, coolly.

"I just need someone to go out with so I don't look desperate, you know. I mean I'm not gonna be ignoring you or anything but if some available stud shows up I reserve the right to leave with 'em. Same for you if some shaved-down ewe or whatever you're into comes your way, of course. Just you know, that's how me and Wolt handle things when we're out. Keep our options open."

"Yeah, absolutely. What, uh, what time should I pick you up tomorrow?"


"Sounds good."

"Cool," she says with a soft smile, nodding her approval. "I'll see you then, fluff."
As tensions rise across the city, Remmy prepares for an evening with one of his neighbors.

"Savages."

That's what they're saying on the radio.

I'm packing up the last of my things in my locker, clocking out on a short shift, with a little radio on a nearby box blasting news. And that word keeps coming up.

They're not saying "victims". They haven't for a long time. They're not saying "predators who have
gone savage" or even "savage predators".

Now they're just calling them "savages".

I slam my locker shut a little too hard and head out for the night. With the warehouse behind me, I've got the rest of the night free. And since I've still got a couple hours before I'm supposed to pick up Anneke for our totally-not-a-date, I'm naturally on my way to Pandora's Box.

I'll admit, I'm nervous about tonight for a number of reasons -- not the least of which being that Annie's one of my closest neighbors, at least in terms of proximity. If the night goes south, shit's gonna be awkward between us. It's not really like I can avoid her when I live across the hall from her and her brother. Plus, whatever club Annie's got planned for us to go to is almost definitely going to cater to pred tastes, and let's face facts -- no prey dude goes to a pred club to pick up prey chicks. It doesn't work that way.

Besides, a night club full of hot, sweaty, musky predators, boozed up and grinding to music? It's going to be a hormone storm the entire time I'm in there. So even though I don't want to admit it, I know myself well enough to know I'll end up looking like the thirstiest tailchaser in town unless I get some relief first. And that's why I'm hitting a sex shop on my way home.

By pure chance yesterday, when I was leaving the gym I ran into the tigress entrepreneur herself. Pandora generously offered me a replacement after I explained I "broke" the freebie she gave me. To be fair, I may have neglected to mention the reason the toy "broke" was because I melted it in my microwave. I figure I might as well buy some condoms from her or something while I'm picking it up -- I mean, even if she does feel indebted to me for helping out on the tiger oil shipment, I'm no freeloader.

Besides, who knows what's going to happen tonight? No reason not to be prepared, just in case.

Running a hoof through the curly wool on my arms, I notice I'm starting to get pretty shaggy again. I wonder if I should trim up before tonight. I mean, I am going out on the town -- least I could do is try to look marketable, right? Based on the comments some of my neighbors have made in the past, I imagine wool might be kind of a turn-off to girls who aren't used to it. Annie herself seemed to like me trimmed down, too, so I may as well play to my audience.

I'm mulling over the idea of making a second detour on the way home to stop by Clippership's for a buzz (like hell I'm letting Betty anywhere near me with shears again), when out of the corner of my eye, I catch a huge pred in a hoodie and jeans running up the street behind me. He's coming this way. Like, directly towards me. I immediately start to panic -- holy shit, who've I pissed off now?! They're really fuckin' hauling ass, too! Shit, shit! Not good!

I try to break to one side, leaning against the wall of some closed storefront. Play it off like I'm checking my watch or something. Are they still coming? Standing still, I keep an eye on them in my peripheral vision, bracing to take off running as soon as they're too close. I'm not sure if I'm supposed to run. Doesn't it encourage them to chase you? Well, like hell I'm just gonna stand here, either. I'm not the greatest sprinter or anything but I can probably make it to a nearby occupied building to call for help. Reaching a hoof under my collar, I grab the string my whistle is hanging on. I don't want to sound it unless I'm really in trouble -- Al made that much damn clear.

Tensing up, I'm just about to bolt when the guy blitzes past me obliviously without even so much as a "fuck you".

What the hell?
"Shit, man, where's the fire?!" Sighing in a mix of relief (and frustration), I make a point of straightening myself out before shakily resuming my trek up the street. "Fuckin' typical. Some people really know how to further the stereo--"

I'm jolted from my grumbling by the shrill, loud sounds of wailing sirens coming from nearby. A squad car roars down the street, followed by another -- and moments later, an ambulance joins them.

...the fuck?

Apparently I'm not the only one that's noticing the commotion -- residents and passersby are pouring out of the nearby buildings in droves, taking off down the street past me. Cars on the street are turning or grabbing quick parking. It's about 10 PM, or pretty much "broad daylight" for Pack Street given how nearly everyone here's nocturnal. I'm not sure why -- chalk it up to herd mentality, I guess -- but I feel compelled to follow them. And besides, I guess I am headed in this general direction, anyway.

By the time we make it over the hill and around the bend, I realize with a sinking feeling just how true that is.

Pandora's Box looks like a fucking warzone.

Shards of glass litter the surrounding asphalt like confetti after a parade. Blinding, spinning red and white beacons burn away in the night. Heavy metal doors opening and slamming as stretchers are loaded into ambulances by mammals in white uniforms. Distorted voices scream orders through megaphones at the crowd that's gathered to spectate. Strips of yellow police tape rope off sections of the block, acting as a flimsy barrier to keep dozens of predators and prey alike from getting too close.

The scene's a fucking haze of noise and insanity. I can just barely make out a couple of excited words murmured from some of the rubberneckers who're spectating from nearby, shaking their heads and commenting on the chaos.

"Hey, what's going on here?" a tall guy beside me excitedly asks, giving voice to the question I myself was just about to ask. Obviously an out-of-towner, considering his dopey smile and fancy clothes. Oh, and the fact that he's a stag.

"Not sure," a wolf replies, looking back at him. She clutches her purse, head tilted curiously like I've seen so many canines do when something catches their attention. "I heard someone saying something about a mauling. Maybe a tiger, not sure."

I can feel my wool standing on end.

"Wait, what? A mauling?" I blurt out. "Are you sure it's a tiger? Like, a tiger was mauled, or --"

"Possible mauling," another, shorter wolf interrupts from beside her, glaring at me. "Emphasis on POSSIBLE. Don't jump to conclusions, dear. Last thing we want is to spook any more of the prey who're stopping to gawk."

Hey. I live here, asshole!

"Holy smokes, a real-life savaging!" the stag says obliviously, his grin widening as he leans in. "Well now I'm glad I'm not missing this! Maybe we'll be able to make the news!" Man, what the fuck's wrong with you?! You shouldn't be this fucking enthusiastic!
My stomach's turning over on itself, and instinctively I find myself chewing on my hooftips as I try to push my way to the front of the onlookers. Tigers aren't common on Pack Street at all, and I know the tiger that runs this store.

"HEY!" A bleating voice goes up, shouting over the din. "HEY, THEY'RE COMIN' OUT! THEY'RE COMIN' OUT!"

Everyone moves forward, and I move with them, closer to the police tape. I desperately push through to the barrier, just in time to catch a horrifying glimpse of a group of first responders filing out of Pandora's Box, pushing a large mammal covered in a white blanket along on a gurney. Whatever's strapped down to it is convulsing violently. It's hard to see from where I'm standing, but I think I can just barely make out a frizzy, orange and black-striped tail flicking from underneath the blanket.

"Oh, fuck," I choke.

My knees buckle and I almost hit the ground without even realizing it. I'm nauseous. I'm looking around in utter confusion. Fuck. This is all happening so fast, I can't even begin to fucking process it.

"Please, god, don't be him," a familiar male voice whimpers from off to my side. I look up in a daze and see a bulky figure in a hoodie trying to fight past mammals in the crowd -- the same guy that almost ran me over just minutes ago. He reaches a shaky, quivering paw up to his hood and pulls it back, revealing a thick lion's mane.

"Neil?" I hoarsely whisper.

"Cliff!!" Neil yells into the crowd, oblivious to me as he shoves past a middle-aged rhino couple, lifting the tape up over himself. "Oh, god, Cliff! Hey, wait! Where are they taking him?"

Oh, shit. Cliff's a tiger too! Fuck, I didn't even think about that!

"Hey, get back, kid," the male rhino grumbles, brushing Neil away with the back of his -- hoof? "Damn upstart lions, think they're the king of the--"

"Move it!" Panic-stricken, Neil shoves him back, his normally sleepy eyes full of worry. "I gotta -- I gotta get in there! Move! I've got -- MOVE, okay?! Could you just, nngh-- get the hell out of my way!!"

"He's losing it!" A shrill voice shrieks from nearby.

"Look out!"

Stumbling backwards into his wife, the rhino cries out in alarm, and I quickly force myself between the two giants to get over to Neil's side just as a heavyset bison in a police uniform hustles over to the police line. He's got a hoof on his taser.

"Neil!" I call, louder this time. "Hey, whoa! Settle down, man!"

The towering lion turns down to look at me, eyes glinting red and blue in the light of the sirens. I find myself taking a step back as I quickly wave my hooves to get his attention.

"Remmy?" he finally manages. "What're you doing here?"
"Same as you!" I motion for him to pull off to the side, away from the cop and the panicky spectators. "I heard noise and came running!"

"Have you seen Cliff?" he chokes. "I can't find him! I heard something about a--"

"Tiger!"

"Oh, shit, another one!"

The whole crowd seems to turn towards the source of the disturbance, parting like a stream. Even from my pitiful height I can see the fuzzy orange and black tips of Cliff's ears bobbing along over the sea of heads and horns. As his face drifts into view, he looks every bit as worried and panicked as Neil does.

"Oh, fuck, he's got his claws out! Is he going savage too?!" a kangaroo off to our right screams, cupping his hands over his muzzle in a panic.

"Two in one night?" the overly-cheerful stag grins, elbowing me. "Oh man, what are the odds, right?"

"Cliff!" Neil cries out, waving his arms. That gets his attention, and the sudden relief on their faces is unreal.

"Neil!" Cliff shouts back as he runs towards us. Mammals are stepping back as he hurries through, giving him a wide berth and panicky glares. The two felines throw their arms around each other even as some of the bystanders stare warily at them.

Neil grips him like he's holding on to a life preserver. "I was so fucking scared."

"I'm here. It's okay."

"Look at that shit," a scraggly goat mutters nearby. "They're celebrating. Mammals got hurt and they're happy."

Meanwhile, I find myself just kind of struggling in disbelief, trying to make sense of all of this. On the one hand, I'm happy that Cliff's okay, but that doesn't change the fact that Pandora isn't.

It's difficult to be happy about someone dodging a bullet when the bullet ends up hitting someone else.

I swallow the lump in my throat, looking at the ambulances as the police motion for the crowd to part so that they can drive away from the scene. They wouldn't send more than half a dozen ambulances if only one person needed medical attention. The guy was right: a lot of mammals had to have gotten hurt here tonight.

Pandora. She was one of the good ones, too. Sweet and perky. Friendly, jovial, good sense of humor. Well-adjusted. Self-made businesswoman. Public speaker, gives lectures at colleges. Just last night she was telling me about some big deal she was going to go close.

And then this happens.

Fucking hell.

Tears in my eyes, I shake my head, stumbling off away from the din and the madness. I'm dimly aware of someone calling my name, but it's not even registering. My legs have taken over, and all I
It's half past eleven. I've been staring dully at the report on the lobby TV for over an hour trying to gather my wits. Looks like the stag got his wish -- I can even see the bastard in the crowd behind the reporter, waving his arms and mugging for the camera. Sighing, I lean back in my chair, dragging a hoof over my bleary eyes. That's her picture, all right. That's Dora. Right up next to the glass-strewn parking lot lit up all red and blue in the night. In the photo, she's smiling. Pleasant. No teeth. I wonder if she does that on purpose.

Words drift in and out. I can't even focus enough to listen. Reaching for the remote, I shut the TV off.

It's never the ones you expect. That's what they say, right?

The guy who serves you your morning coffee at the diner. The girl at the grocery store who gathers shopping carts in the parking lot. That friendly neighbor that always puts a dollar in your kid's lemonade stand jar. Your co-worker, your mailman, the student who mows your lawn.

Any one of them could be a fucking time bomb with a two-second fuse. This is the world we live in now. Our reality, as it stands. How long is it going to be this way? Forever?

The species divide's at an all-time high, tensions through the roof. Any pred around you can turn at any fucking moment, and yet you never think it could happen to someone you know.

Crisis is what happens to other people.

The nightly news is blaring sound bites from Gazelle like they're going out of style. Makes sense. Everyone wants to stick their head in the sand and listen to feel-good noise. Meaningless platitudes are a seller's market. The late shows put on a silly sketch, get some washed-up B-list celebrity actor to dress up like our new mayor and put words in her muzzle because she can't snap her hooves to put an end to an epidemic. As if there's some magic formula. The mayor doesn't fuckin' know. She doesn't know shit, she just got handed a job out of nowhere and she's just trying to run the fucking city. Give her a fuckin' break.

Honest to god I would've bet Betty or Al would snap and lose it long before someone like Pandora.

Never the ones you expect.

The lobby door opens and closes, and the breeze startles me out of my thoughts.

A small, thin fox in an oversized sweater and baggy pants drifts in, kicking a little dust from her feet as she pads over to the downstairs sitting area next to me. Rather than taking a seat, Charlie opts to stand in front of me, restlessly fidgeting with her paws. I can't quite put my hoof on it, but something about her seems off -- which is a feat, considering who we're talking about.

"Cormo," she murmurs.

"Hey, Charlie," I sigh. "What's up?"

She doesn't immediately answer. Reaching up to her head, she bats restlessly at one of her ears. As she does, it clicks for me -- that's what it is; her eyes are wide open. And I mean wide open. Usually she's squinting like she needs glasses, but right now I can see her blue eyes staring back at me.
It's a very unnerving look for her.

"I received some bad news tonight," she says, continuing to stare. "About Pandora."

"You heard too, huh."

Without any warning, she slumps against me, wrapping her frail arms around my shoulders. I'm alarmed for a moment before I realize what it is she's doing -- she's hugging me. Or trying to, anyway.

"I'm not... in a well place right now," she murmurs, voice muffled against me. "This isn't a feeling I much appreciate."

"Fear?" I ask.

"Grief," she responds. "Dora is more than a business partner to me. She's one of the few people I can call a friend."

Frowning, I lower my head and wrap my arms around Charlie as she buries her muzzle in my woolly chest. It's weird to think about, but I feel pretty much exactly the same way about Dora too. Unlike just about all of my neighbors, I've never had any rough run-ins or harsh words exchanged with her. She's been nothing but polite and generous to me -- friendly, even. Shit, Velvet and I've been on more sour terms, and she's a prey species. If anything, you'd think the Alpha's doe girlfriend would be more sympathetic to me than a tigress who's almost twice my age.

She mumbles again, quietly, almost whispering into my wool. "It should have been me."

"What?"

I pull her back gently by the shoulders, but she doesn't return my gaze. "It should have been me, Cormo."

I shake my head. "Hey. Come on."

She refuses to meet my eye. "I'm no good, Cormo. Pandora's legitimate. She has a lot. People depend on her. But me? No one would miss me. I could just vanish. Poof. Like I was never here."

I try to lean in front of her but she tucks down into her oversized collar, exactly like I do into my wool. "Charlie, that's ridiculous. Of course people would miss you."

I finally catch her eye. She doesn't flinch. Instead, a second later, she falls against me again, squeezing me tight.

"Why wasn't it me?"

Charlie doesn't say anything else. I'm sure this looks weird to anyone who might pass by -- she's draped across me like a blanket. Still, I kind of understand where she's coming from right now. After several minutes, though, she still hasn't let go, and it's starting to get kind of awkward. I eye the clock nervously -- I'm going to have to get moving pretty soon if I'm going to pick Annie up.

"I'm sorry," I say after a while, gently helping her to her feet. "I hate doing this to you, but I have to run. I've got plans tonight."

"Right," she comments. "No, of course. Your date with Anneke."

"It's not a date."
"Oh. My mistake then," Charlie replies as she turns and heads for the stairs.

Sighing, I shiver a little. I'm cold. No -- wet? Looking down at myself, I realize my shirt's drenched with sweat. It's not that warm out tonight, but I feel clammy and disgusting. Miserable, in fact. I'm supposed to pick up Anneke soon, and I haven't even had a shower yet. I should at least go upstairs to my apartment and rinse off.

Pushing myself to my hooves, I start to head up the stairs. A short, heavyset wolf I've never seen before is exiting the apartment next to the twins', and he sees me coming. Walking this way, he makes it a point to avoid eye contact. Another member of the Pack? Must be, since he's a wolf. All the wolves I know are part of the Pack. So how've I been here this long and not yet met this guy yet?

"Hey, how's it going."

"Evenin'," he mumbles, barely loud enough to hear.

I extend my hoof for a shake as he approaches. I've gotten off on the wrong start with so many of my neighbors that now more than ever I should be trying to make peace with them.

"I'm Rem--"

"Don't care," he grunts, slinging his laptop bag over his shoulder and continuing on past me.

I stand in the hallway, hoof still outstretched like a fucking clod as he clomps down the stairs. I'm legitimately surprised that I have a neighbor who's not immediately up in my business like just about everyone else around here. A few months ago, I'd have pointed to that guy as some kind of model or ideal -- the standard that all of my other neighbors should hold themselves to. Now, I'm surprised to find that I'm actually kind of offended.

I'm not sure what that says about me at this point.

Opening up my apartment door, I walk inside and head for my shower. After seeing everything go down at Pandora's I'm not sure I'm up to going out tonight. I don't at all feel like getting dressed up for a night on the town, but I'm not gonna blow off Annie after she asked me. Besides, when was the last time I had a date? Even if it's not a date. I mean, couldn't hurt to make some inroads, so to speak. Let's not get ahead of myself here. Turning the water on, I climb inside the tub and try to force myself to focus.

I'm nowhere near the crime scene and yet I can still hear the sirens, the glass crunching underfoot, the gurney clattering as it carts off one of the few people around here I'd call a "friend".

Despite my best efforts, I end up idle in the shower longer than I wanted to. I towel off and try to pick out something to wear that looks semi-decent. I don't want to look like I'm trying too hard with formal clothes, but I don't want to head out my door looking like a slob either. Eventually I tell myself "fuck it" and go for the tried-and-true -- a nice pullover and my khaki slacks. If these were good enough for the alpha, then I'm sure Annie won't mind. Besides, the pullover's thick enough that it'll mask some of the excess wool that's starting to creep out from under my shirt lately. It always seems to come in thickest around my belly, giving the impression that I've got a beer gut or something.

Really wish I'd gotten that trim.

Tucking myself in, I comb the last of the water out of my pomp and grab my phone. Might as well head over to the aardwolves' apartment and get this show on the road.
After a couple of raps at the twins' door, Annie answers looking about as disheveled as I feel. Her fur's oily and she looks like she just got out of bed. She's wearing a sleeveless band shirt that's so faded I can't even tell what band it's for, and threadbare skinny jeans with no knees. Or ankles. I almost wonder if I'm overdressed for the occasion. Propping herself against the doorframe, she cocks her head at me, letting her mouth open with a huge yawn.

"Sorry to keep you waiting," I offer, tapping my hooves together and giving her a shaky smile.

She stares at me, looking pretty unimpressed. I focus my mental efforts on not fidgeting.

"So, uh," I fumble, smiling like an idiot, "You look really cute tonight."

She sniffs, shifting her weight on the frame of the door, but doesn't respond. Uh oh. Too far? I mean I know she's the one who said this wasn't a date but I figured she'd at least like the compliment.

I can't pretend suaveness right now, so I just go with honesty. "Look, I know I look like a tool or whatever, but, uh, I really was looking forward to this. And I hope you're not gonna call it off. Because, uh, I mean, I dunno. I wanted to have a nice night, tonight. With you. So uh, yeah."

That seemed to get a reaction. She arches her brows at me slightly and straightens up, nodding. I sigh, smiling a little. Good sign, right?

Finally she leans back, calling over her shoulder with the wrong voice entirely. "Anna, your cotton candy delivery is here!"

My smile disappears instantly. Ah, fuck. It was bound to happen sooner or later.

"...Wolt."

He turns his attention back to me, his grin slowly widening. "Thanks, by the way. You look cute too. You know, for a dude."

It's uncanny how much they look alike. I guess I've never really noticed. In my defense there're usually more clues, too, like the clothes they're wearing. It's rare to encounter them when they're not chatting away, so I guess I usually go by their voices, too. Even beyond the obvious pitch difference, Annie's is kind of scratchy and breaks every now and then, whereas Wolt's got more of a tired, lazy drawl.

"I'm sorry, Wolt," I groan, dragging my hoof down my face in embarrassment.

"Eh. Not the first time someone's mistaken us for one another," he chuckles. "Probably won't be the last either. I'll go see what's keepin' my sister."

He ducks back into the darkened apartment, and it's not long before Annie comes to the door. This time, I'm confident it's her. Either that or Wolt got a shower, applied makeup, and changed into a one-piece dress all in the span of about a minute.

"Hey cotton-butt," she quips, but I can tell she's not feeling it. Her eyes are a little red and she's looking a lot more subdued than usual. Like she's just seen a ghost.

"Hey yourself," I reply. "...I take it you heard."
"Yeah." She bites her lip, looking down at the ground. "Yeah, I heard."

"If you want to, you know..." Running a hoof through my wool, I shrug. "...do this some other night? That's fine. I understand."

"No, I need to get out of the house. Besides, Wolt's got plans with his pals anyway and he doesn't need me fuckin' bringin' the atmosphere down." She gives me a smile that seems kind of forced. Looks like one of mine, just with sharper teeth. "I don't think I'm up to clubbing, though. Someplace a little more quiet might be nice."

I nod. "You got a place in mind?"

"There's a little sidewalk cafe not far from here." She perks up a little, running a paw through her headfur. "Word is they've got pretty good fish, since I heard you're the kind of deviant that's into that kinda thing."

I smile back, this time a little easier. "What can I say? Fish agrees with me."

"Awww," she grins, and I feel a little better as she leans in, patting my cheek. "There's our little wannabite."

"How about sliders instead?" I joke, shoving my hooves in my pockets. "I gotta get this tab settled up sooner or later."

Annie chuckles, closing the door behind herself and stepping out into the hall with me. "Hoo, you wish you were that lucky."

"Hah! Yeah, 'lucky' and I don't really belong in the same sentence," I reply with a smirk of my own. "Hey, don't be so sure. Y'know, since we're not going clubbing, you're gonna have a lot less competition tonight."

I stop halfway to the landing as she continues on down the stairs. Wait, did she just say what I think she--

"You comin', Remmy?" she asks, glancing up at me from the ground level.

"Yeah, absolutely," I reply, hurrying to catch up with her.

I should've known "little sidewalk cafe" sounded familiar. I ate here once with Pandora, not long ago -- it was right after I tried fish for the first time at Neil's little taco truck, the night I made peace with the Alpha after losing my cool.

That was a better night than this one. That was a way better night.

"Pretty sky tonight," she muses, staring up at the stars overhead.

I know she's struggling to find conversation, especially after we've already veered into talking about today's incident a few times, but she's right. They sure are out tonight.

"Did I ever tell you about my first day here?" I offer, sitting up. This'll be a good one.

She seems to think so, too, because the weariness leaves her face and she gives me a look of genuine attention. "Oh my god, no. Is it good? Because if you're just going to waste my time with a
story about moving boxes and packing tape I'm walkin' out. So it better be good."

I flex my hooves with a grin and she settles in. "Okay. So this is day one, right? I haven't met anyone yet, not even Al. I don't even have a moving truck, 'cause my stuff's--"

A distant siren blares in the night, and we both stiffen up, going silent. I can even see the waiter freeze. Annie and I exchange a quick, hesitant glance, but soon the noise fades.

She sighs, paws to her forehead, and I sink back into my seat.

"God."

"I know," I mutter.

"I just -- fuckin' hell," Annie stammers, laughing nervously. "Like, what would you do? I mean if it happened."

"Prey can't go savage," I reply quietly, looking down at my glass of white wine. I'd never even heard the term "apéritif" before I came here to join Pandora. Now I'm sitting here having one.

"Right, but I mean, if you were."

I think about it for a long moment, but my mind's a blank. Nothing. "...I don't know."

"Like just -- what the fuck even ARE you supposed to do, like..." She dances her fork around her appetizer. Fried crickets. A favorite of mine when I'm hungry, but tonight it looks like neither of us have much in the way of appetite. "Like, do you think you get any warning?"

I trace the edge of my glass with my hooftip. It makes an unsatisfying squeaking sound.

"Do you think there's, fuckin'... a feeling?" she continues. "If there was, I mean -- would you just tell everyone around you 'hey, I'm about to turn, run while you fuckin' can!'?"

"I don't think there's much warning, no," I finally admit at length. "It seems like a... a sudden kinda thing."

"Well that just makes it fuckin' worse. Like would you try to get to somewhere safe? I mean, where would even be safe TO go?" Annie asks. "Like when Wolt and I were kids, there was a tornado warning and we had to hide in the ground one time. In a little cellar in the backyard."

"I don't know. I don't know, like... I don't know if you could hide from a savage predator. I saw the damage done to the shop, it was..." I shake my head. "Someone small like Marty, sure. If Al went savage, well..."

"It's fucking terrifying," she mutters, looking down at herself. "I don't, like... I spend so much time at Pandora's. And now it's -- I don't even know."

"I know."

"Like... why? Why the fuck does it even happen? Pandora isn't violent. She doesn't have any -- any tendencies, like that."

"I know," I agree quickly. "I was just thinking that earlier, myself. She was so polite, so calm. She was one of the good ones."

Annie shrinks down, looking at me with an expression that's almost fearful. "God. You're talking
about her in the past tense. She's not dead."

"No, no no no, I just meant before this. She didn't have any signs or anything. It was -- I mean, no one could have seen it coming."

She glances down at the tablecloth and nods. "...Yeah."

There's a long pause and I'm trying to think of what to say. But all that comes to mind is the image of Pandora thrashing on a gurney.

"That's what makes it so scary, you know?" Annie bites her lip, swirling her drink in one paw.

I was starting to feel pretty okay a few minutes ago, but being here just makes me think about my dinner with Pandora.

She continues, after a silence. "I wonder if, you know, if it happened to me. Would I remember? Would I still know who I was? Or is -- is all that just gone? You know? Would there be anything left of me or just -- god, does it ever come back? Is a cure even possible or is it just...? And how would you know it was even coming? Any night could be your last night as you."

Makes me think of the time I passed her by the pastry shop. That was the last time I saw her, before this. What if it was the last time I'd ever see her, and I didn't even know it?

"I mean -- shit. Shit, Remmy. It comes from inside, like, it's not a shot you get or a, a-a-a contagion. Do you have any idea how fucking -- it grows inside. It could be in me. Right now."

She's a mess right now. Keeps running her paw through her tufted mane, which is more and more standing on end until she's left with a shaky, striped mohawk.

I reach out, putting my hoof on her paw. "I'm really sorry, Annie. That must be terrifying," I agree, gently. "I can't even imagine. You have every reason to be upset."

She breaks eye contact to look down at her food, tapping the plate with her fork again.

"Yeah."

So much for a dinner at a quiet little cafe. Our waiter, some kind of small canine, comes by for the fourth time in the last ten minutes to check up on us again, trying to upsell more booze and desserts. We haven't even ordered our main course yet. Clearly it's a slow night here -- figures, since this place isn't far from the blast radius. Now that the show's over, the rubberneckers have fucked off. This part of Pack Street'll be a ghost town until morning.

There's a badger in an ugly suit wandering around with a little violin, playing music that's probably supposed to be romantic but just comes off as distracting for the few patrons that are here. I can't tell if it's that he doesn't know how to play or I just don't like the violin. Either way, it's grating as fuck.

Anneke straightens up and takes a slow, deep breath, closing her eyes. She's trying to fight the stress. I don't blame her. I don't know how I'd be able to sleep at night if I were a predator.

"I don't -- y'know, I'm sorry, Remmy, uh... I'm really sorry. I don't think it's working tonight."

"No, I think -- I think you're right," I sigh, folding my napkin and motioning our waiter over. "Check, please."

"Before your dinner course?" he asks, brow furrowed.
Is this guy serious? Read the fucking mood, man. I give him an incredulous look and he backs off. "Just bring us two boxes for the appetizers, please."

The waiter scurries off, and Anneke sighs again, staring up at the sky. "I came out because I wanted to get my mind off everything, but I don't think I can shake this right now. I thought I could. It's just too soon, I dunno."

I nod to Annie. "Sorry."

Her mane's settled back down a little. "No, yeah. Me too. Let's, uh -- maybe try this again another night."

"I'd like that."

After settling the tab, she takes her food, and with a halfhearted wave, trudges off toward the direction of the apartment building. I offer to walk her home, but she doesn't even respond. I figure she needs some time to think.

I'm pretty sure I do, too.

For a nocturnal district, there aren't many mammals -- pred or otherwise -- out right now. I suppose that's because everyone heard about what happened and they're giving this entire chunk of town a wide berth. The ones that are milling about look like they're just kind of lost -- like they could be extras in any disaster movie after an earthquake or a zombie attack or something wipes everything out.

There's a familiar-looking coyote in business clothes across the intersection. Don, if I remember right. I don't see his partner anywhere. He's quietly sitting on a bench with his briefcase and his suit jacket in a messy pile next to him, staring off into the distance.

He looks lost, too.

I've noticed when I've got a lot on my mind, I tend to drift. For the second time tonight my legs are just sort of carrying me along -- they do that, I guess. Everyone's saying the savage epidemic might be due to predator biology. Well, then maybe it's in prey biology to wander around when we're troubled. Maybe herds scatter when they don't have someone to follow. I don't have a "leadersheep".

I keep having to remind myself that I'm not part of the herd anymore. I'm in the Pack now, for better or for worse. Al's my Alpha, now -- that still feels weird to say -- but after what I saw, turning to a predator that could rip me in half with his claws alone is little comfort. Still, the whistle hanging around my neck's proof I've got something. Something's better than nothing.

Speaking of the Pack, that standoffish wolf I met earlier makes me wonder -- is that how the others saw me at first? Did I come off to them as some uninterested, calloused stick-in-the-ass? Do I seem that way NOW? Some "can't be fucked enough to care" type? I mean, I like my privacy (and I could do without my apartment being open to anyone who wants to swing on by), but I don't want them to see me as an untouchable who locks himself away in a tower -- to paraphrase Marty.

Eventually, a smooth brick wall cropping up in front of me alerts me to the fact that I've arrived at a dead end.

As I glance around, it occurs to me that I know right where I am -- this is the alley court where
Ozzy and I've shot hoops a few times. I guess my subconscious just wanted to bring me someplace quiet and familiar to think. I might as well indulge. I walk over to an upturned milk crate, brushing it off with the back of my hoof and sitting down.

As I settle in to reflect, I see there's a puddle of red liquid on the ground in front of me. I flinch at first, but a second later I realize that it's not blood -- it's way too bright and... goopy, though I don't know if that's the right word. Relaxing, I follow its trail with my eyes, looking up at the "tag" -- the beautiful graffiti mural that's supposed to be on the wall across from me.

My heart sinks as I see what's been done to it.

The "vandalism" has itself been vandalized. Scrawled all over the gorgeous wall art in bold, ugly red letters is one word.

"SAVAGES".
Chapter Summary

Everything changes.

"Sheep don't eat meat."
The smell of greasy, fried food hangs in the air like a delicious fog. Ordinarily, it would have a calming effect on me. It's a warm, even familiar sensation. Like that feeling you get when you come home to a fresh-cooked meal. A trip to Bug Burga is usually the highlight of my day, the perfect way to end a long morning of tiring but fulfilling work. The light at the end of the tunnel, so to speak. Any other day, carrying a sack full of comfort food back to my apartment to enjoy would be enough to get me dancing.

Any day but today.

"You know that's not... normal, right?"

I can still see the look in my manager's eyes as those words spill out of his stupid face. A mix of confusion and worry as he intentionally stands in front of me with his arms crossed, blocking my way to the loading docks -- while all the other crew members file in past me just fine to start their shifts.

"Wasn't so long ago I was your age, kid. And look, yeah, I get it, we all get into experimenting with weird shit a little when we're young. 'Try anything', or however that song goes."

He says "experimenting" like I'm trying out drugs or some shit. I'm not some fucking deviant. I'm not a junkie or an addict. If I ever find "Kenny's stash", I'm flushing that shit down the toilet. I'm a normal, functional member of society. I'm not some fucking screwup like Ozzy, who needs weekly visits to make sure I don't step out of line.

"Listen, you live, what, a mile from the latest outbreak? Until we can, you know, figure out exactly what's going on with all that, we're -- look, just don't worry about coming in tomorrow, alright?"

For a second I thought it was a kindhearted gesture, on account of grief. An offer to just take the day off so I could try to recover. Get my wits about me after everything that's happened.

Until he told me not to bother coming in the day after tomorrow, either. That's when I put two and two together.

I move forward another spot in line, my fist crumpling the slip of paper in my pocket that might as well be pink.

I can't fucking believe my luck. My boss has cut my hours yet again -- officially, it's "until further notice", but the formal letter I'm holding reads an awful lot like "permanently". He's stalling me out until I quit so that he doesn't have to fire me and pay the severance I'm entitled to. And for fuckin' what? Because I just happen to eat bug meat, and because I just happen to sort-of live near a store where a predator went savage?

If anything, I'm more of a victim here than anyone else! I'm being unfairly discriminated against because of the company I keep. The company I've been forced to keep. I wouldn't even be here if I wasn't down on my luck! That bastard didn't even give me a chance to explain, to plead my case. The security guards standing nearby made it clear I shouldn't stick around and try to argue.

This isn't hard to understand: I'm not like them! Prey species don't go savage -- we're immune, remember? And even if we did, I'm a hornless ram, for fuck's sake! What am I gonna do, bruise someone with my flat, nubby teeth? Just because I live near a bunch of hair-trigger preds that could go savage any moment, doesn't make me one of them!

And now, those same hair-trigger preds have probably cost me my fucking job, just by association.

"Next in line, please."
I step up to the counter, eyeing the menu. I knew what I wanted when I came in. Now I've lost it already. They're doing a promo for a limited time -- real cheese. Cheese like I would've killed for when I first moved in. Now, though, I don't want it. Now it'd just be one step closer to the deviant the rest of the world's already starting to see me as. So hold the cheese.

Hell, I shouldn't even be here. I'm so fucking frustrated I can't even think straight. I feel ready to explode. Everything on the menu looks the exact same -- I'm reading the text over and over again and it's just not sticking. Oblivious to my frustration, a familiar badger with the nametag "Rex" slouches forward in front of me, tapping his register.

"Oh hey," the cashier yawns. "How's my favorite wannabite doin' today. The usual?"

"I'm not a fucking 'wannabite'!" I shout, slamming my hooves on the counter. "Where the fuck do you get off? I'm not some 'wannabe predator' living out some -- some twisted fantasy!!"

Rex looks back at me with raised eyebrows, standing up straight.

"All right," he replies passively. "Sorry, guy. I didn't mean it like--"

"I don't fucking care how you meant it!" I clamp my muzzle shut, exhaling heavily out my nose as I look the menu over, trying to will myself to calm down. "Just -- look, just gimme a double roach deluxe. With real cheese."

"Gotcha." Rex quietly turns to the till and rings my order up. "That'll be three eighty-five."

"No, I said real cheese," I reply impatiently, tapping my hoof. "I'll pay more for it, just--"

"I heard you," he replies, holding up one paw. "Your order will be three eighty-five."

Letting out a heavy sigh, I reach into my wallet and pull out a five spot, pushing it across the counter. My hooves are shaking. I'm suddenly acutely aware of the impatient predators looming behind me. We're always expected to be 'understanding' of their disgusting habits, but they see something they don't know and all they do is gawk. Well they can fucking stare all they want. I'm not here for them.

Rex takes my money, counts my change out, and hands it to me along with a receipt and a paper cup.

"I didn't order a combo," I mutter, looking down at the receipt and the cup in my hooves. "This is more than I paid for."

"I know," Rex says, his expression unchanged. "Next in line, please."

As I take a seat in the mostly-empty dining room, I lower my head, turning the cup in my hooves over as I try to gather my thoughts.

I never wanted to get involved here.

My plan from the get-go was to keep my head down, save up enough, find a better place to live. Somewhere along the way, I lost the plot. I started thinking of Pack Street as something other than what it is: a stopover. A stepping stone on the path to a better life.

Now, that plan's gone belly-up. Yeah, I've got a little money set aside, but it's not nearly enough to
Not only would I have to find a new apartment, I'd also have to find a new job. If I moved someplace nicer like Flock, I wouldn't be able to even make the deposit on what I've got, let alone pay for a month's rent.

Like it or not, I'm pretty much living hoof-to-mouth right now. Trapped on a street full of short-fuse predators, any one of which could pull a Pandora. Last time, I was lucky -- I showed up after it happened. What if I'd been even twenty, thirty minutes earlier? What if it's one of my neighbors this time? Hell, considering how much time Avo, Annie, and Wolt all spent around Pandora, if this thing is contagious, any one of them could be infected and I wouldn't even know. Even Betty and Charlie had regular contact with her. It could be weeks, days, maybe even hours before one of them turns.

And if it happens -- when it inevitably happens, I've got nowhere to run. Forget my livelihood, forget my hopes for socializing, I'm risking my damn life just being here. I've gotta focus on my goals. Gotta remember who I am.

I'm a sheep among wolves, and I don't belong down here.

Eventually, Rex sets my order on a tray, rings the bell, and then returns to work polishing the counter as he waits for the next wave of customers to roll in. Looking up from my seat, I realize that almost everyone's cleared out of the restaurant. If I ignore the run-down buildings outside the windows, I could almost believe this was the Bug Burga from my old neighborhood. And one day, hopefully soon, I'll be sitting in a dead-empty Bug Burga in a better neighborhood again.

And Pack Street will just be a bad memory.

With that thought in mind, I actually feel a little better. I've got my plan set. It won't be easy, but I'll make it work. Back to basics: head down, eyes forward. I gotta be the guy who gets through. I'm not here to rub elbows. So just force a smile, and stay pleasant and agreeable long enough to get out.

Standing up, I walk over to the counter and pick my bag up before turning to the cashier. I can probably start by not being a jerkass to Rex. Even as angry as I was, I definitely knew better than to explode at him like that.

"Hey," I murmur, holding the bag with my burger and hay fries. "About earlier."

He nods. "Don't sweat it."

"No, I was wrong. I'm sorry for going off on you." Running a hoof through my wool, I sigh. "You're not the one I'm mad at. My boss, he..."

"Dude, really, don't worry about it," he says, that same lazy, tired smile coming back around. "We've had a conversation like this before, remember?"

I stare blankly at him for a few seconds before it dawns on me. Yeah. Yeah we did. Right after the last time I unfairly shot my mouth off at someone, as a matter of fact. During the aftermath of my run-in with Al, I remember asking Rex about how he dealt with irate, asshole customers.

Never figured I'd end up being one, myself.

"Still, you don't need someone acting like a prick to you," I argue. "You don't deserve that shit."

"I appreciate that, I really do. But like I said before, dude, I just let it roll off me," he yawns. "Just sit it out, bide my time. 'Cause I know after they walk out that door I won't see 'em again."
I look down at my food, deep in thought.

"Yeah. Yeah, maybe."

The street's tense. Restless, almost. The whole walk home, there's a lingering sense of unease that I can't shake, and I think everyone else is feeling it too. Considering that it's coming on to night in a primarily nocturnal district, it seems like there should be more mammals out and about than there are this time of day.

But then again, part of me's thankful for the empty streets.

I'm no specist, but I don't think it's unreasonable to be rattled right now in light of recent events. I can't stop keep thinking back to the night Dora turned. The looks on everyone's faces said it all -- from the bystanders in the crowd, to Cliff and Neil, to Anneke melting down at our dinner together. Even Charlie seemed bothered, to put it lightly -- and until recently you could've convinced me that nothing could faze her. If they're all this shaken, I feel like I have every right to be too -- maybe even moreso. Right now the odds are against me, which is all the more reason why I need to focus on putting Pack Street firmly in my rearview mirror.

If anything, my setback tonight just strengthened my resolve.

As it stands right now, my plans haven't changed. I'll take a night or two to regroup. Scour the paper and Camelslist for new job prospects, and save up enough to move out. Leave this backwards town of pack customs and pecking order behind me, and move on. Back to normal society. Back to the real world.

"Hey, yarn ball!"

In my peripheral vision, there's a black wolf girl, sitting on the edge of a set of cement stairs. The stairs lead to the building next door to my apartment tower, its face punctuated with dingy curtains behind dirty, faded glass. I don't even stop in front of the dilapidated steps, but I give the wolf a passing glance.

"You need someone to bat you around for a while?" Betty snorts.

"Pass," I reply, forcing a smile. Fuck's sake, not now. You're the last mammal I feel like talking to. "I feel like I've been batted around enough today."

"Aww, poor little lambchop," she grunts, pulling a cigarette out of the pack in her shirt pocket and lighting up. "Another rough shift at the sitting-on-your-ass factory?"

I stop and turn, looking her square in the eye.

"I got laid off today." Well, not formally, but let's be honest -- that's what happened. I don't feel like feeding her all the details and she doesn't give a fuck about my life anyway. She's said as much in the past.

Blinking, Betty's face softens, just a touch. She pulls her cig out of her maw and exhales a plume of thick, pungent black smoke, breaking eye contact and looking instead at the cracked pavement.

"Tough break, Cormo," she says after a minute's silence. "That sucks."

"Yeah," I grimace, putting my hoof on the door to the lobby. "I guess you know the feeling,
though."

"What?"

I hesitate at the entrance, hearing muddled voices coming from inside.

"Pandora's. Didn't you work there?" I ask, looking back at her.

"No. You got me confused with Avo, fluff." She gives me a tilt of her head. "I don't work at that fuckin' smut den. I'm next door, at the locksmith's."

"Ah." I shrug. Could've sworn she was employed there, but in my haste to leave when she and Avo were grilling the shit out of me, I didn't really get a good look at her uniform. Guess that explains a few things. "My mistake, then."

I head inside and Betty returns to her smokes.

"Take care of yourself," she mutters.

I'm barely through the door when, amid the din of voices, someone calls out to me.

"Hey, who ordered mutton?"

Ozzy's wearing his typical dopey grin, glancing to the other preds in the lobby like he expects applause for his hilarious joke. He chuckles, raising his soda can to me in a mock toast as I scrape my hooves on the doormat. Frankly, I'm over it.

More than I have been since my first visit, I'm making a mental note of all the predators around me. In an atmosphere like this, I feel I have to. Ozzy wears a big harmless smile, but he's a hyena, and as he told me himself, those teeth can crunch bone.

The TV in the lobby's blaring. Most of my neighbors seem to have congregated to watch what looks like the highlights from last night's hoofball game. Or maybe they're just shooting the shit, who knows. Al's here, looking tired and irritable, even for him. He's a wolf. One I have to look out for, for sure.

He's leaned against the wall by the stairs listening to Marty, who's lounging on one of the bottom steps like it's a seat. Marty's a stoat. Not much trouble there. Not physically, anyway -- his personality more than makes up for it, though. Lucky me. He's waving his arms frantically as he describes something, though I can't hear him over the sounds of the TV sportscasters.

Charlie and Avo seem to be engrossed in a discussion of their own as I walk past them. Charlie glances over at me, nodding once before turning back to Avo. If you hadn't been here a week ago, you'd never have known this was the same wild-eyed fox that threw herself across my chest. Avo gives me a tired smirk. It's full of teeth. No surprise. She's a jackal. Or wolf? I can't keep it straight. Either way, trouble. I can see in her face she's wishing she had beaten Ozzy to the punch on that zinger.

I've counted them in my head time and time again, but now it seems more important than ever. So that's three wolves, if I'm counting Betty and Avo, a fox, a hyena, and a stoat. The aardwolves aren't here, but they don't seem much threat. Wolt said they only eat bugs.

God, I'm really surrounded, aren't I?
"We was just talking about you," Marty huffs with a mean grin. Somehow I don't fucking doubt it.

Having finished my silent census, I close the lobby door behind myself, giving them a tired nod as I make my way towards the staircase. I'm not gonna stick around with them this time -- I just want to head upstairs, eat, and unwind before going to bed. I'm going to spend my time off tomorrow doing some legwork for a new job. Even if I have to work two part-time gigs, I've got to figure out a way to do more than just make ends meet.

Unfortunately, there's a big hyena blocking my path.

"What's in the bag?" Ozzy asks, gesturing to the plastic sack from Bug Burga. Like it's not fuckin' obvious from the branding on the side. "Gettin' your daily protein, wannabite?"

My hoof knots into a fist around the bag's handles. It's this kind of shit right here that's gotten me steered off course in the first place -- hanging out with you assholes, I've somehow become branded as some kind of pretend pred. I catch myself only seconds away from firing back another scathing rebuttal.

Nah. Not this time.

I'm not gonna go off on Ozzy again -- not after what happened with Rex. Sure as hell not after what happened a while back. I'm not looking to start trouble, but I'm not going to keep playing their game here.

"I'm not a wannabite."

There's no trace of humor in my tone. To my credit it's a lot softer than the way I told off Rex. Short and to the point. I'm putting my hoof down because I'm not going to be stereotyped -- certainly not by this crowd. Not after being lumped in with them.

"Hey, arright, arright," Ozzy chuckles awkwardly, backing off with eyebrows raised as Al leans imposingly over his shoulder. Probably gauging me to see if I'm about to lose my cool again. I guess I can't fault him there. "I'm just messin' with you, Remmy."

Nodding again, I shift my bag to my other hoof and offer a tired smile to show there's no hard feelings. Like I said, gotta keep things smooth until I can leave. Starting today, I'm 'Mr. No Problems'. I'm not making waves.

"It's been a long day. You guys have a good one." I glance down at Marty, who quickly realizes what I mean and stands up, stepping aside so I can make my way to my apartment.

Halfway up the staircase, my ears catch the faint sound of mumbling followed by stifled snickers.

"Hey Remmy!" Marty calls out from behind me.

I turn my head slightly to glance down at him, bracing myself for whatever's headed my way. I'm used to being the frequent target of ribbing since I'm the odd mammal out here, though I usually handle it better most days. In my defense, most days I haven't just been shitcanned for my diet and choice in apartments, though.

"Me an' my sister are having a barbecue this weekend. She said you're invited." He looks up at me from around the corner, paws on his hips. Marty has a sister? News to me, I guess.

"Really?" I ask, slightly dubious. I feel like this is a setup for a gag, but I have no idea what the punchline is.
"Yeah. She didn't know where else to get lambchops around here!" He smirks confidently as Ozzy snickers and Al groans, shaking his head. Ah, there it is. Having me over for dinner, not having me over for dinner. Really hilarious. That one got a lot of play back when I was in grade school, though I guess usually we'd be the ones using it to warn about going to some pred kid's house. Still, even by sheep pun standards, that was pretty fuckin' weak, Marty. Besides, I already heard the lambchop joke once today from Betty.

Something sparks inside me. Turning around, I crack my neck as I look down at him with a widening smirk.

"Hey, if your sister wants meat," I reply, straightening my shirt out, "I'll give her all she can handle."

Marty's expression twists into shock and manic disbelief. Ozzy's face freezes into an open-mouthed grin, eyes gleaming like someone who just found buried treasure. Even Al's staring at me with arched brows, his jaw dropped to form a silent, incredulous "oh" like he can't believe I just went there.

How's that for a fuckin' zinger, shorty?

The silence doesn't last. Ozzy bursts out into insane, feverish laughter, leaning against the banister for support. Tears are beginning to well up in the hyena's eyes as he struggles to stay upright, cackling so loud that I imagine they can hear him all the way over at Packer's. From around the corner, Avo leans in, making no attempt to cover her own snickering as Marty just kind of deflates on the spot, with that weird look still frozen on his face.

"Yo, fuck you, grazer!" Marty croaks, desperate to pretend I didn't just destroy him, though a lot of the weight of his insult kind of falls flat because he's too busy swallowing down a laugh of his own. "Don't make me go savage on your ass!"

The joke-threat's in poor taste, but coming from someone like Marty, I don't even blink. Besides, anyone would be desperate for a comeback after a roasting like that.

Ozzy's still in the middle of hysterically laughing, having slumped back against the wall. His eyes are rolled up as he continues to hee-haw. Cringing, Marty looks at him in disgust, retreating a little into his shirt in a similar way to how I've tried to retreat into my wool in the past. I turn back up the stairs, more amused at the scene than the fact I was able to get Marty back so well. He's kind of had it coming for a while, to be fair.

"Cripes, Ozzy, shut the fuck up," I can faintly hear Marty grumble. "It wasn't that funny."

"Someone found his woolly little balls today," Al snickers, distantly behind me.

"Guess they were in Marty's sister's mouth," Avo replies smoothly, prompting another howling hyena laugh.

I leave the lobby behind and head to my floor. With any luck, by the time I come back out tomorrow, Ozzy will have stopped laughing.

Turning the key to West 001, I push the door open, step inside, and exhale heavily. What a fuckin' day. That comment from Rex, and then Ozzy -- I don't know. I'm trying not to let it eat at me, but honestly, it does. To my core, in fact.
I am not a wannabite.

I think I'm saying that as much for my own benefit as theirs. Like a reminder to myself -- I know if you're told a lie long enough you start to believe it. Just like how I've gotten used to this place, gotten used to their ways.

I feel like I have to reiterate it -- once and for all. I'm not a "wannabite", a "pred pretender", a "predophile", a "toothie", "chomper chaser", or anything even remotely close. I can handle the usual assault of nicknames and insults -- "fluff", "yarn ball", "woolly bully". "Cud-chewer". "Grasseater". Even "carnivore" doesn't faze me. They don't hit me as offensive so much as just hokey. And honestly, I figure for these guys, they're largely terms of endearment. But I do have a name -- it's what normal people in normal society used to call me.

My name is Remmy Cormo. I live in Zootopia. In a crappy little apartment downtown, off Pack Street.

It's been a few months since I moved into this dump. It's all I could find. And afford. I needed an apartment, so I looked in the paper and this was the only place that would return my inquiry. Cheap rent with all the basics I really needed: water, electric, a roof over my head. And with the budget I had at the time, and the circumstances I was coming out of -- well, this place looked like a no-brainer. I made the mistake of just assuming that Pack Street wouldn't be that different from the rest of Zootopia. Maybe a bit more pred-centric -- I wasn't such an idiot that I didn't recognize the name -- but I mean, I just thought there'd be tons of other visible prey walking around too.

It's what I was used to. There were predators where I grew up, yes, but there were a hell of a lot more prey.

It wasn't long before I realized how off my assumption was. I quickly realized I am the only sheep in my apartment building. I am the only *prey species* in my entire apartment building. I figured the population split here *might* be something like half and half, at the absolute most.

Not even close.

I moved into a predator neighborhood without even realizing it.

Thinking back to Marty on the staircase, I sigh. Maybe that was a low blow, given I brought his sister into it. And...

My neighbors. They're not bad people. They just like to joke around.

But they're not *my* people. I gotta remember that. I don't think there's a single mammal on this block I would call a "friend", really. Maybe there was one. But right now she's probably strapped down in a special lab somewhere, feral and mindless. I wonder if she'll ever be herself again, but I can't dwell on it right now. My focus has to stay on the mammals still here.

They're not who I thought they were when I first moved in, true. Not out for my blood. I can survive here until I have to leave, at least. Few weeks ago, I wasn't so sure.

A little strange, but we all have our quirks. Nobody's above it. And the more I see of folks like Ozzy and Al, the more I start to see there's more under the surface.

Hell. I got to see a lot more of Charlie recently than I ever have, and my very first impression of her had her stark nude.

And what about me? What's *my* deal? Well, like I said, I'm not a wannabite. I'm perfectly happy.
being a prey species.

I just have unusual tastes when it comes to some things.

Reaching into my kitchen drawer, I shove the metal whistle aside and pull a few packets of leftover firefly sauce out. Gotta have my sauce. Unwrapping the plastic bag, I'm surprised to find that the burga inside's still fresh and warm. Breathing deep, I embrace the best thing that's happened to me all day, enjoying a little whiff of heaven.

The Double Roach Deluxe. With real cheese. Thing o' beauty.

Tearing open a sauce packet, I lift the top bun and begin to slather the patty in it. Mmmm. I really wish they hadn't discontinued this stuff. Yeah, I'm excited over a fucking bug meat sandwich. That doesn't make me a wannabite. I'm sure I'm not the only sheep who eats at Bug Burga. I just don't see any because there are none in the area, that's all. I mean, my old town was able to keep a Bug Burga in business, and there were plenty of sheep who lived in the area. That's gotta say something, right?

Swinging over by my front door, I begin locking up for the night. I've gotten into the bad habit of not locking my door recently. I guess I kind of convinced myself there was no point to it, but thinking back on it now, that's a pretty stupid idea. I live in a dangerous place, and the locks will do some good in saving my hide if I ever really need it. Not everyone around me is a skilled lockpick, like I initially thought -- just the career criminal who lives next door and the literal locksmith in the next building over.

Speaking of the area, it's not that I'm afraid of my neighbors.

But with all this talk of predators going savage and attacking people on TV -- not to mention what happened with Pandora -- I'm just thinking of my own safety.

Collecting my burga and fries from the counter on a paper plate, I stumble over to my couch and collapse in front of the TV, clicking it on with my remote. I can hear the faint sounds of mammals kicking up a ruckus out in the street. God, I hope they're not about to start another fucking block party. It's too early in the night for this. Some mammals are trying to sleep. I imagine they'll get a lot more "stick in the ass" types besides just myself complaining.

"--anding for our citizens, and of course, for the future of Zootopia!" the idiot box screams in my face. I hurriedly fumble with the volume -- geez, I don't remember setting it this fuckin' loud.

"And if you're just joining us, our top story tonight, once again," the Channel 2 newscaster begins, making a show of straightening his papers out as he attempts to look dignified in front of the camera, but unable to shake the huge grin from his face.

"The nightmare is finally over."

Nightmare?

"Channel 2 Action News is now able to confirm the earlier rumor -- that the violent epidemic plaguing our city appears to have been an elaborate hoax."

I pause, my burga raised halfway to my mouth. There's no conceivable way I heard that right. They
couldn't mean the *savage* thing, right? Is there some other epidemic?

"A police investigation is currently underway, but sources close to the ZPD have confirmed: Mayor Bellwether has been arrested."

Sorry, what?!

The anchor straightens his tie, smiling broadly as a photo of the Mayor lights up the corner of the screen. She's wearing metal cuffs and the angriest look I've ever seen her make, all from behind a mugshot plate.

"Numerous sources have confirmed at this time that over the past several months, Mayor Dawn Bellwether headed a criminal conspiracy designed to poison predators across the city, by means of a yet-unknown biotoxin. By all accounts, this toxin is **solely responsible** for the recent outbreaks of so-called 'savage syndrome'. Earlier theories regarding 'predator biology' being the root cause now appear to be completely erroneous."

I lean forward in my chair, my eyes wide as saucers. At some point my burga ended up in a messy splatter of sauce back on my plate.

"Details are still coming in, but for now, it appears the entire city can rest easy."

You could knock me over with a feather right now. There's no -- there's absolutely no way this is for real! Predators turning *savage* isn't some kind of genetic thing or an infectious disease -- it's because they were **drugged**?! By our fucking **MAYOR**?!

Setting my food on my table, I get up from my seat. Despite being exhausted I can't sit still -- I'm light-headed with anticipation. The room feels like it's starting to spin as I'm watching the gleeful anchor continue reading the news. He's a black wolf -- not unlike Betty, I guess. Guy looks like he's trying his fucking damnedest not to cry, he's so overcome with emotion. Like anyone could possibly **blame** him!

Shit, I don't even know where the hell to begin right now. If it's a hoax -- if this really all is just some crazy conspiracy -- that means I've been living in fear for nothing! Everything I know is wrong. Everything **EVERYONE** knows is wrong. Fucking *all* of Zootopia's been living in fear for nothing! Predators **don't** just "go savage"! That's it, boom! We're safe! I'M safe! Everything's okay now! Holy shit, they weren't kidding -- the nightmare really is over!

That definitely explains all the noise outside.

Wandering over to my window, I peer out as the TV continues to blare behind me -- nightly news panelists all chattering blindly away in the studio about what this means for the future of Zootopia. The streets are packed. It's not a block party after all, but it might as well be. Out under the streetlights, dozens of predators of all shapes and sizes dance, cheer, and shout. I can see groups huddled together, talking excitedly, and others embracing. I can even spot a few prey in the crowd, maybe locals like me, or just mammals passing through that heard the news.

A huge giraffe struts through the crowd like he's on stilts, picking up two small canines and hoisting them triumphantly up to ride on his shoulders. A family of bears, wailing happy tears loud enough to hear even through my window, wrap themselves so tight they seem to merge into a single ball of shaggy brown fur. And as I watch a big cat crying on an old goat's shoulder, sobbing like a burst dam that's been waiting months to release, I can't help but smile as a tidal wave of relief begins to wash over me. I don't know *when* the last time was that I was able to lay my head on my pillow without worry.
The TV downstairs was on when I came in, and it looks like the news spread quick, so I can only imagine how everyone in the building's taking this -- I bet Anneke is fucking over the moon right now. She seemed so worried at dinner the other night -- god, I can't wait to go see her reaction to this! Talk about being able to sleep better at night! She's gotta feel loads better, now that she knows there isn't some -- some fucking biological timebomb inside her, trying to eat away at who she is! And Charlie -- man, Charlie's going to go nuts! It's like a fresh start for all of us.

The only real sour note here is the Mayor. All this -- all my stress, my suffering, my anxiety, my fear. My job -- god damn, my job! That's on her! All the shit I've put up with -- the whole CITY put up with -- over the past few months. All the pain and anger we've all been through -- it's because of her.

It was her all along.

Fuck! I stood up for her, the city rallied behind her, and she spit in our fucking faces. She looked us all in the eye and told us she was working to find an answer. What a fucking betrayal. And after Lionheart?! That's how she got the job, isn't it? Fucking hell, clearly corruption is an occupational hazard for mayors in this city. They were probably in it together! About a thousand angry words for that ewe fill my head, none of which I feel like repeating.

I hope this doesn't end up hurting pred-prey relations, especially in the wake of all this good news. God, I can't believe I defended her!

Marty! God, what about Marty? I bet he's already thinking about all the ways to say "I told you so". A conspiracy of this scale, going to the very top. He'll probably be wearing a tinfoil hat from now on. I don't really blame him. I'm never trusting a politician for the rest of my fucking life.

I glance over my shoulder, back to the TV. The camera's gone back to the main anchor.

"Early forensic reports suggest that the toxin may have been distilled from a known natural source, though citing safety reasons, police have opted not to release specific details to the public at this time. In light of this new information, medical experts say it may well be possible to treat and even reverse the effects in victims exhibiting savage behavior."

And -- shit, I hadn't even thought about Pandora! So she's going to be all right? Can they really cure it? I mean it's poison, so there's got to be an antidote, right? Holy shit, if that's the case, then that means she won't have to spend her whole life in that fucking state! She'll be able to get back to her business! She'll be able to see her friends again! Charlie'll be so excited to see she's okay. And Avo'll probably get her job back, too!

...and I guess that means I'm probably not fired either. At the very least, I'll have a leg to stand on with my boss, right? Now that there's proof beyond a shadow of a doubt that I'm not gonna go savage either? (Not that I was ever worried about it, but that's not the point.) I mean hey, let's not get too ahead of myself here, but in light of everything, I could probably even press for better hours or a promotion. Maybe both. The threat of wrongful termination sure would get my boss motivated, now that he's gotta know there's nothing to justify what he did. I get maybe he was just scared of what he didn't understand, but there's a reasonable limit.

You don't get a free pass to treat people however you want just because you think they're dangerous.

I imagine they'll probably even be able to do drug testing now for this poison thing, too. So many lives are gonna be saved now that they actually know what it is that's causing all this. I'm fidgety and giddy and I keep pacing. I don't normally pace. But I'm marching from my chair to my window
and back, nonstop.

I'm gonna remember this night for the rest of my life. Mammals will be telling their kids about this. Where they were when they heard the news.

Well, guess what? I was eating a burga on Pack Street. That's right: A sheep eating meat. And now, more than ever, I think the world is going to recognize there's nothing wrong with that.

The news breaks for commercial, so I mute the TV for a second and head over to the front door, pressing my ear against it. I can hear what sounds like loud conversation coming from the downstairs lobby, and maybe out in the hall. I'm tempted to go down and get everyone's reaction -- I bet they're all on cloud nine right now. Maybe after dinner; I just remembered I still haven't even eaten yet. Plus, despite the good news, my body's still drained after the shit I've been through. And I'm gonna need a few minutes to get a grip on all this.

What a rollercoaster of a night.

I'm still just kind of awed -- months of worry and fear, poof. All gone. Things might even start looking up around here. A lot of tension's gonna be relieved. Has to be. Hell, maybe I won't have to immediately move after all -- which, I mean, if I'm being honest, is probably for the best. Staying here, at least for a little longer, would probably be better in my financial state. I can't really afford to be making a move right now anyway, and if I can keep my current job, so much the better, right?

Running my hooves through my head wool, I turn the TV's volume back on, taking a seat at the very edge of my couch cushion. I can't even wrap my head around this right now. It's too much at once. I'm gonna be digesting this for days. It's like waking up to an alien world -- I feel like I'm in some kind of fever dream. Some bizarre, anti-Pack Street where everything's wonderful and the sun's shining and we're all gonna be okay. Somebody, pinch me.

A commercial for Bug Burga reminds me for the second time that my own food's getting cold -- but before I can reach for my plate, it's interrupted halfway through as the night news anchor from before comes back on, this time joined by a co-host? Co-anchor? Whatever. A reindeer I think, female, in a high-necked sweater and blazer.

"We're coming back with breaking news," she announces, sounding charged but professional. "The ZPD is now reporting that several co-conspirators have been arrested as well."

Co-conspirators?

No, I guess it stands to reason. No such thing as a conspiracy of one. She couldn't have been making poison, running around administering it to mammals all across Zootopia, and still acting as the Mayor. Not by herself. I hadn't even considered the other bastards involved, so it's good to only think of it when the danger's passed. Don't have to risk an ulcer worrying about some remnants of this disaster still skulking around when they've already got them apprehended. Just one less thing to worry about. Suits me fine.

The male anchor nods in confirmation, and the screen cuts to a photo of cops swarming around three tall, bulky white rams.

"There's no word yet on the rumors circulating about corrupt agents working within the ZPD. However, of those currently in custody, police have confirmed that all the 'savage hoax' conspirators are sheep."
Oh.

The anchors continue to drone about something, but suddenly it's all background noise. Everything at the edges of my vision starts to blur, and all the sounds -- from the street, from the TV -- they might as well not exist. Even my burga might as well not be here.


And for the life of me, I suddenly can't find my appetite.

All I can see is the image of those rams, surrounded by cops.

All the misery. The hate. All this. The last few months. Everything.

Sheep.

*Sheep did this.*

"Oh boy," I whimper.

I stare at those woolly hooves wrapped in handcuffs for what feels like hours. Then the image changes and the anchors are back on and I stumble out of my chair, half-blind. I hear a wet splat. My dinner's on the floor. I don't even care.

I stagger to the door. Locks are on tight. I double check them. Triple check. Five times. Ten. I squeeze the deadbolt so tight my hooves hurt, twisting it as hard into the door frame as I can. I can't control my breathing. I look back at my room, try to get my heart rate under control. I blink repeatedly. The room won't focus. When I look up, I've moved my chair across the room and braced it against the door.

I lurch to the window. Everything's spinning.

The celebrations haven't stopped. Maybe that's a good sign. There's raw energy there tonight. The streets are full of it. Out in the crowd, lit by the yellow haze of the streetlights, a circle's formed. Some kind of spectacle.

There's some kid in the middle, shouting something, holding a pillow over his head. It's got a face drawn on it in red paint. The stuffing's been half-pulled out at the top to make a sort of white coif.

I watch in a daze, my hooves on my head. He chucks it to the crowd, and they start smacking it around like a volleyball, cheering and laughing. A towering lion moves in, snatches the pillow out of the air. He's shouting something into the crowd, and behind that shaggy mane, I recognize him. It's Neil.

He shakes it in his claws -- even bites it. Thick cottony clumps flutter out of it and onto the ground, landing in messy little piles. It looks like it's snowing out there. All at once it hits me what I'm looking at.

I stagger back, tearing my eyes away only to meet another pair looking right up at me.

A black bear standing on the sidewalk stares up at me with a blank look. He taps the nearest predator on the shoulder and points up. Straight at my window.

Next thing I know, I'm lying on the floor, panting. My window blinds are shut tight.
They're wrong. The nightmare's not over. Mine's just starting.
Chapter Summary

In the wake of Bellwether's arrest, Remmy takes stock of a changed city.

With a shaky hoof, I finally set my bargain-bin shears aside before I give myself even worse razor burn.

I'm so tired that I can't see straight, but I'm so wired I can't sleep straight either. I don't know the skinny, haggard ram staring back at me in the reflection of the bathroom mirror. I don't recognize that pale skin, those bloodshot eyes, those jet-black rings hanging just below the sockets. All I know is that he looks like a fucking mess.

As I begin sweeping the wool around me into a dust pan, I try yet again to take stock of my situation. Speaking logically, I haven't got anything to be afraid of. There's no reason I should be singled out or targeted. I mean, I'm guiltless in all of this -- just because all the conspirators were
sheep doesn't mean all sheep were in on it. I may be a ram, but my neighbors can't lump me in like that. They gotta know that. They do know that, right? I mean, I know this looks bad, but if I just keep my head down, this whole fucking crisis should blow over soon. Stands to reason the worst is past us already, isn't it?

If there's one thing I've learned through all this, it's that logic and reason get tossed in the trunk once fear takes the wheel.

I mean, maybe I'm wrong. Maybe this lingering feeling of dread is my ironic punishment, because I was somehow complicit in the Great Sheep Deception. But I feel as much like a victim here as anyone else -- yeah, preds had it rough during the savage epidemic, sure, but it was more of a shared, spread out fear. This is different -- everyone's waking up to a Zootopia where sheep specifically masterminded a conspiracy to send modern society kicking and screaming all the way back to the Stone Age. It doesn't take a fucking behavioral analyst to figure out that both predators and prey are gonna resent us.

So much for "prey solidarity".

Being blunt, there's nobody on the face of the planet that I hate more right now than Dawn Bellwether. I'm not alone, either. Probably half of Zootopia's calling for her head on a pike. Everyone involved in the "crime of the century" was a motherfucking sheep, and here I am, balls-deep in the middle of enemy territory, wearing the wrong team's colors.

Looking around my apartment, I let out an antsy, frustrated bleat. I've dusted and polished every piece of furniture in here, cleaned my kitchen, cleaned my bathroom twice, alphabetized all eight of my DVDs, installed a year's worth of system updates on my phone, and shaved my wool down to stubble. I'm out of shit to distract myself with. I can't fucking hole up in my apartment forever -- it's gonna be super obvious that I'm hiding, and that'll just draw more attention my way. Not to mention, I'll run out of food and resources. No, I've got to at least put in some kind of showing. Test the waters, do some damage assessment.

...of course, I'll also need to be able to step outside my front door without immediately getting lynched by an angry, pitchfork-wielding mob. I don't think my neighbors are gonna go after me -- but then again, I also wouldn't have thought my lion gym buddy would maul a homemade sheep in the middle of the fucking street.

Fuck. I'm never gonna get that image out of my head, am I.

Brushing a few loose curls of feather-soft wool from my prickly, stubbly belly, I stumble over to my dresser and start rifling through my clothes. I need something baggy, something that'll hide my build. Gotta make it a little less obvious that I'm a ram when I go out. A hoodie and sweatpants should work. Emphasis on 'should'.

I've never been happier to be hornless; all I gotta do is run some pomade through my headwool, slick it back, and hide it under the hood. Slipping on a pair of cheap sunglasses to hide my eyes, I stand in front of the mirror again, looking myself over as objectively as I can manage.

It's not perfect, and I'm sure not gonna pass for a predator, but at the very least, I could be any random ungulate. This'll have to do.

Well, one foot in front of the other. Gathering my things into my pockets, I head over to my front door and begin unfastening all of my locks and latches. Prying loose the kitchen chair wedged under my doorknob, I set it aside. With a deep breath I tentatively poke my head out into the upstairs hall.
The building itself's quieted down considerably. Good sign. The walls are lined neatly with trash bags full of discarded takeout containers and empty beer cans. Seems almost everyone finally crashed after staying up all night -- all day, whatever -- celebrating their victory. I thought the block party was loud; the revelry over this was deafening. My ears are still ringing.

And yet, it looks like everyone must've had a good time. Nightly parties aren't normal when most of the tenants are struggling to make ends meet. Even that standoffish wolf looks like he had company over, judging by the pile of pizza boxes outside his apartment. Either that, or the dude's got a hell of an appetite.

Maybe I'm overexaggerating things in my mind. Maybe it's not as bad as I thought. Maybe they're all just happy to have the weight off their shoulders. I know I would be. These last few months have been fucking miserable on all of us. For them, the bad days are behind them at last. Meanwhile, I feel like I've got a target on my back. In a way, I'm envious of everyone here. I would've much rather spent the night celebrating. Instead I spent it hiding under my bed, feverishly hoping that nobody would kick my door in and drag me downstairs for a pummeling.

Pulling my hood a little lower over my head, I slowly make my way toward the staircase, tip-toeing down the steps one at a time. The downstairs TV's buzzing away with talking heads and news chatter, but it looks like the only mammal around is a lone hyena sitting anxiously at the edge of the sofa.

We lock eyes as I alight at the bottom landing, holding each others' gazes for far too long. I start to say something to Ozzy, but he manages to beat me to the punch.

"Woolly B," he rasps. "Been wonderin' when you'd turn up."

Unlike yesterday with my stinging zinger aimed at Marty, I'm not in the frame of mind for clever banter this time. I swallow and nod, sticking my hooves in my pockets. I'm already losing faith in this disguise if someone like Ozzy was able to spot me immediately.

"Take it you saw the news...?" I cautiously venture.

"Figure everyone musta by now. Some real crazy shit," he agrees, staring up at me with a hollow look in his eyes. "Mammals coulda fuckin' died, you know. I'm kinda floored nobody did."

"Yeah." That's all I got. I walk into the room, grasping for something, anything to say as he peers at me. Usually he's got a quip or a joke, something to serve as an icebreaker. Now it's just dead air. "Lucky that they didn't, I guess. Thank god nobody got hurt, right?"

Instead of replying, he pushes his paws against the seat cushions and slowly forces himself onto his feet. At the side of the sofa, there's a dented-up guitar case covered in duct tape; he hefts it by the handle and slings it over his shoulder with an odd reverence.

I figure now's as good a time as any for an olive branch. I need to make sure I'm on good terms with everyone here. I've recently been inducted, formally, as the first sheep member of this little local "Pack". So I figure we've gotta come together and unite as a Pack -- no, as Zootopians.

"Hey, Ozzy," I offer, "I was thinking, you know, with the good news, about maybe heading out, grabbing a bite. You wanna come with? My treat--"

"Man, I's-- yeah, I dunno man," Ozzy interrupts with an almost pained expression, brushing past me to head down the hall to his own apartment. "Lemme just -- I think I got uh, something I really oughta take care of right now..."
"No, it's-- I get you." I don't, actually. I'm shocked to see him turning down free food -- I didn't get the feeling he was well-off enough that he could afford to. "Uh... another time, then?"

"Yeah, maybe," he replies noncommittally, giving me a weird look as he fumbles with his keys in the lock. Even as he pushes through the entryway to his room, he refuses to break eye contact with me until the door clicks shut.

I shove my head into my hooves, exhaling heavily as I try to wrap my brain around what's going on here. Even during the night that I fucking unloaded on Ozzy in front of Al and Velvet, he managed to handle the worst of it with a smile. I've gone off on him personally a couple times, actually -- and he always bounces back like he's made of rubber.

Twirling the drawstrings of my hoodie idly, I look out the lobby window at the street in front of me. Sure, it looks peaceful enough out there during the day, but if a carefree guy like Ozzy is this fucking uncomfortable I'm not liking my odds.

Turning around, I trudge back up the stairs as my sleep-deprived mind hastily tries to scrape together a Plan B.

Ozzy's not the only one who's been rattled to his core by this ordeal.

I find my thoughts drifting back to the night Pandora went savage -- no, let's call it what it is: she didn't "go savage", she was singled out. Attacked. That night, Charlie and I talked together in the wake of the chaos. It was only for a few minutes -- I was so focused on my not-a-date with Anneke that I couldn't spare her much time -- but the whole encounter lodged itself firmly in the back of my brain. She's the kind of fox who normally seems like she has everything comfortably under control. But I remember how she looked, and I've never seen her so... shit, I don't even know if there's a word to describe it. Frail? Timid?...prey-like?

She talked to me about Pandora, and how she was experiencing grief. Despite the nature of their "business", Charlie told me that it felt more like the loss of a friend than a client, made worse by her having very few she even counts as friends to begin with.

In a lot of ways, I can relate. I don't really have "friends" either. I do have acquaintances, sure, I've got gym buddies -- but I don't have friends. Real friends. Friends to go see movies with, to go shopping with, whatever. Real friends hang out, they live their lives together.

Me? My life consists of waking up, eating, working, and sleeping. Rinse and repeat, day in and day out. I've been so fucking focused on getting out of my shitty apartment on Pack Street that I don't have a fucking idea of what it's like to have a social life anymore. I haven't since I moved away from home and into this place.

Sure, thinking back to some of the escapades I've had with my neighbors, it's been almost like hanging out. Like the block party where Ozzy saved me from that drunk asshole of a bear, or that one time I played a prank on Marty and tricked him into gluing cotton balls to himself. Avo and Betty busting my chops at Pandora's, the road trip I went on with Wolter. After it's all said and done, though, we go our separate ways, and I don't feel like I'm friends with any of 'em.

My eyes sweep the hall, looking at the aftermath of the afterparty. Everyone freed up to live their lives, finally. Getting back to normal after all this time. Meanwhile, my new "normal" is a bad
dream I can't wake up from.

Yes, it's true that I don't have any friends -- but I do have the Pack, and if anyone'll understand what's going through my mind, I get the feeling Charlie will. She's smart. Calculated, logical. Not the type to get swept up in emotion. She'll know I'm not to blame for all of this.

I linger outside the door to the apartment next to mine. I heard Marty leave this morning, probably headed to work at the library, so I don't need to worry about facing him just yet. That means Charlie's home alone. With a hesitant nod, I reach up to the knocker and click it a few times.

Before I can pull my hoof away, the latches rattle and the door opens a few inches -- just enough for a thin, pointy snout to peek its way out.

"Cormo," Charlie rasps by way of greeting, eyes narrowed to squints as she sniffs at me. "You seem... different."

"Oh, uh..." I look down at myself, plucking at the fabric of my baggy hoodie. "I sheared."

"...no, that's not it," she says at length, refusing to elaborate further. "I'm glad you stopped by."

That perks me up a little. "You are? Really?"

Her snout wags up and down. "Mm. Saves me the trouble of having to drop this off."

A thin paw comes through the door, pushing something into my hooves. I look down to see I'm holding an old shirt of mine, freshly laundered and folded up neatly.

The shirt she 'borrowed' when she spent the night.

Now, admittedly, it wasn't what it sounds like. A strange move from a strange fox, one I never quite understood, but it ended with movies and pizza, so I never thought that badly of it. God, I'd forgotten she even still had this, but I guess she just never gave it back.

Until now.

"I'm-- why are you giving this to me?" I wring the fabric in my hooves. I've never felt so uncomfortable to get something returned.

She doesn't hesitate to answer. "You told me you wanted it back."

"Why now, though?" I bite my lip hard, already blurting out the question I'm not even sure I want answered.

And yet I'm a little surprised to find she doesn't. After a pause, she taps the doorframe with her claws. "Was there something you wanted?"

"I was hoping I could talk to you." I wait a moment, giving her a chance to respond. Nothing. "Um, about -- well, about a lot of things. This whole savage thing, and, uh..."

I trail off awkwardly as her muzzle dips low, pointed down towards the ground. I can see one of her blue eyes opened wide, peering up at me through the gap between the door and the doorframe.

"How shall I put this," she murmurs, low. "It would not be... socially advantageous for me to be seen with you, right now."

Stiffening, I look down at her.
"What does that mean?" I gawk, motioning around the hallway. "There's nobody around!"

"In my line of work, someone's always watching what you're doing."

I gesture uselessly a moment longer, but my arms fall limply to my sides. "After everything that's going on, though?"

"...I have a prior engagement I need to get to."

A prior engagement? I'm breaking down out here! Can't you call it off for someone in need? "You can't make time for me?"

"It doesn't feel good, does it?"

I feel like I've just been punched in the chest.

"Charlie, c'mon," I quietly plead, voice shaky. "I'm in a rough spot right now. I need someone to just, y'know -- to talk to. Isn't that what the Pack is for?"

She breaks eye contact, staring at the floor for a few seconds, before sighing and closing the door on me.

I can feel my stomach flop. First Ozzy, then Charlie. Everyone's going to shun me at this rate.

...or not. I hear the sudden sound of latches rattling, followed by her apartment door swinging open. Still, she makes no move to step aside or invite me in.

"I'm sparing you a consideration," she says, clasping her paws together in her typical way, "but I ask that you keep it brief."

Ordinarily I'd be pissed off at getting the bum's rush after everything I've done for her, but right now I'm just elated that there's some kind of a dialogue between us, and so I immediately start gushing. Everything just flows out of my head like so many pent-up worries.

"I haven't slept at all. I've been on pins and needles ever since that whole bombshell dropped yesterday." Jerking my head down the hallway, I let out a flustered, uneven sigh. "And I-- I came to see you because I know you're street-smart about this stuff. You've got, uh, connections."

She raises an eyebrow, one paw on the doorknob. "'Connections.'"

"What I mean is, you hear shit nobody else does," I hastily clarify. "Y'know. Word on the street? Be honest with me -- how fucked over am I?"

Relaxing her shoulders slightly, she wraps her huge, puffy tail around her legs, fiddling with some of the fur at the tip.

"If you want me to be honest with you, I think you need to calm down."

"...what?"

"Most everyone -- and I'm referring to not just Pack Street, but the city at large -- is elated right now," she replies, slouching against the doorframe. "Your usage of the word 'bombshell' is interesting to me, because as far as I could discern, yesterday's revelation was good news."

"No, no, right, I get that," I stammer. "I mean -- of course that makes sense."
"The looming question on everyone's mind has been answered, Cormo. You mentioned 'connections' and 'word on the street'? Right now, the general consensus is that life goes on."

I feel myself letting go of a breath I didn't even know I'd been sucking in. Shoving my hooves into the pockets of my hoodie just so I stop fidgeting with them like a moron, I nod, listening to everything she has to say.

"The mother in the building next door who works two jobs doesn't have to worry anymore about 'turning savage'." Charlie tilts her head, her neck popping audibly as she stares at me. "She can sleep easier knowing she won't wake up one day and maul her own pup."

"Right. Because 'turning savage' was never a real thing in the first place."

"Mm. The looming threat that gnawed at this city was nothing but a phantom. The true danger is now behind bars. The fog's lifted. And because it's lifted, you can expect things to return to status quo." She tilts her head, looking at me kind of lopsided. "And to that extent, you also should be able to sleep easier."

"I already feel better just talking to y--" A sudden flicker in her eyes causes my words to choke out. "--talking about it."

She nods slightly, peering down the hall past me. "Just don't make waves. Don't do anything to raise ire for a while, maintain a low profile. You seem capable of going to ground, for a sheep."

"Just hope it blows over," I nod in understanding.

"Was that all you wanted to talk to me about? I was being honest about having a prior engagement, and I really should be going as soon as possible."

"Actually, uh, there was something else," I admit. "Has... anyone said anything about me? Like, the Pack, I mean?"

I watch as she seems to be considering her reply, almost like she's rolling the words around in her mouth to get a taste for them. "Your name has come up a few times, yes," she answers evasively.

"...in what way?" I prompt. You're not gonna dodge the question that easily, Charlie. "Hey. I'm asking because I want to know if I'm a marked mammal. I think that's a fair question."

"Cormo, you'll forgive me if I find it exceedingly difficult to imagine anyone here raising a hand, claw, or paw against the sad-eyed sheep who tried to share his world with everyone over a platter of street tacos."

I'm surprised to find that there's a lump growing in my throat. I'd already forgotten about my stupid little "seminar" from just a few days ago -- well, more like I'd put it out of my mind. I never would've thought it'd have an effect on them after how poorly it went, but I'm genuinely glad to hear I made a good impression.

...for once.

I start to push forward past the threshold to hug her, but before I can make it even half a step she turns and collects a bundle wrapped in paper from the kitchen counter, tucking it under her arm. I stop cold as she brushes past me out into the hallway.

"Cormo, I'm sorry. I really can't stay any longer. I've got plans tonight."
"Wait, Charlie!" I start as she shuts the door behind herself. "Is that it? Isn't there anything else you can help me with?"

She stops halfway to the staircase, her tail swishing.

"In what way?"

Throwing my hooves in the air, I offer a weak plea. "I'm going through hell here, Charlie! C'mon!"

"If you're going through hell," she replies, placing her free paw on the banister as she begins descending the stairs, "keep going."

Somehow, that doesn't fill me with confidence.

A single heavy thump at my front door jolts me out of a half-slumber. Standing up from my couch, I rub my bleary eyes as I make my way across the room to see who it is. Even before I spot the patch of jet-black wolf fur through the peephole, the stench of cigarette smoke wafting in under the door is enough to instantly ID my visitor.

Opening the door for Betty, I offer her the most respectful nod I can muster.

"Remmy," she grunts by way of greeting. Uh-oh. No cutesy term of endearment like "yarn ball" or "fluff".

"...this isn't a social visit, is it."

Rather than replying, she sniffs around my apartment as she walks in, like she's checking to see what's changed since she was last here. I wonder if it's a canine thing, maybe some ages-old territorial instinct.

"Not gonna lie," she says, motioning pointedly for me to take a seat at the table, "you ain't winning any popularity contests for a while."

"I gathered as much, after talking to Charlie." I numbly sit as instructed, even though she herself remains standing. From past experience, I know better than to rock the boat. "She was in a hurry. Didn't seem to want anything to do with me."

"Get used to it," Betty mutters as she raises an unlit cigarette to her muzzle. Lifting her lighter, she starts to flick it before stopping abruptly halfway through the motion.

"I-- I don't mind if you smoke in here," I offer quietly. I do -- alot, actually -- but right now I'll do anything to placate the Beta.

"That fuckin' thing does," she quips, pointing at my new smoke detector fitted onto the ceiling.

"...good point."

Pocketing her lighter but leaving the smoke in her mouth, she turns to me with folded arms and an uncharacteristically somber expression.

"I figured you'd heard the news, so I wanted to give you time to poke your head out on your own, before I came up knocking," she sighs. "Now that you have, I'll get right to it. Consider yourself on notice."
"On notice?"

Running a paw through her headscruff, she nods. "What I mean is things are gonna be uncomfortable for a while, so keep your eyes open. Shit might get ugly, but me'n Al will keep the peace until this all gets worked out."

The image of the big white Alpha wolf flashes into my mind, and I clack my hooves together in an automatic nervous response. "Is Al... mad at me?"

She props herself up against the table with one arm, looking around my apartment. "Did you shear again?"

"Betty."

The big black wolf breathes deeply, idly rolling her cigarette in her prominent teeth. "It was Al's idea to come talk to you in the first place."

"Really? He sent you?"

"He's not happy, which is why I'm here instead of him. But he's lookin' out for his own, which is why he sent anyone to begin with."

I close my mouth, unsure of what to say. She snorts in return, shaking her head at me.

"That's the Alpha for you. Whether any of us likes it or not, you're part of the Pack now. And that means we're responsible for seein' that you don't get your sorry ass beat. I know Al told you already, but if you play ball, we won't throw you to the wolves." She coughs. "...figure of speech."

Her tone alone tells me everything I need to know, so I immediately drop any further line of questioning about Al. "What can I do, then? To make it easier on everyone else?"

"Good. Asking the right questions." Craning her neck, she leans down low at me. "Your best move is getting out ahead of this. Get your face out there, make everyone know you're a part of this community. You hide away and folks'll get suspicious, or just think you don't care. Last thing you need to do right now is put walls up."

So, basically the opposite of what Charlie said? Great, that helps a lot.

"A lot of mammals are mad, but that doesn't mean they're mad at you. If you give a little courtesy, a little patience, they'll work through it in time. So I know this might be a tall order, but try bein' nice for a while."

"Yes ma'am."

"Folks around here will be fine, but just to be safe, you don't step outside without that whistle. World's full of nuts, and we all gotta be ready if one cracks," she adds. "You do still have it on you, right?"


"Good. You fuckin' shower with that thing on if you gotta, as long as it keeps you from forgetting it."

She takes one last glance around my apartment before heading for my front door, apparently satisfied that she's met whatever condition Al laid out for her.
"Hey, Betty," I ask, standing up as she walks out.

"What, Cormo?" she grunts.

"Are we -- are we good? Like, the two of us, I mean?"

To my surprise, she gives me a smirk -- which I think's as close to a smile as I'm gonna get out of her. "Yeah, we're good. You've got a ways to go, but you're tryin' to play ball. I ain't gonna fault you for that."

Before I can reply, she's gone, the door clicking shut behind her.

To be honest, I'm surprised she was so... even about it. I figured Betty would be one of the first ones to jump on my back after everything. Hell, while Charlie and Ozzy were both evasive, things could be a lot worse with them. At least they were civil to me. Nobody tried to get in my face. Right now, I guess I can't ask for anything more.

Getting up from my seat, I stumble across my apartment and over to my bed, collapsing across the top of my mattress without even bothering to undress. My sheets feel damp and gross from sweat. Been a while since I washed 'em, but right now I couldn't care less. I finally feel like I can get some rest now that I know my door isn't getting kicked in any second.

The clock on my phone tells me two things: one, that I'm awake at a decent time, and two, I've missed half a dozen calls and voicemails. All of which are from my boss at the warehouse. Yeah, I'm in a real fucking hurry to get back to you, pal.

My nose is stuffy, I've got a nasty taste in the back of my mouth, and I feel like I'm boiling alive after having slept several hours in bulky clothes, so I strip off and climb into my shower. I crank the cold water to full blast in an effort to cool down and wake up. After just a few minutes, I'm definitely feeling more alert.

There's kind of a racket going on downstairs. I can just make out several voices loudly going at it over the sound of the lobby TV, but it doesn't sound like a fight so much as -- I don't know. Just a really loud, animated discussion? Maybe that's a good sign. I'm pretty sure I just heard Ozzy rip into a bout of laughter. Sounds like he's feeling better, and I'm glad to hear it. Obnoxious hyena-isms and all, I think I prefer him cackling to... whatever he was yesterday. Hurt.

Getting dressed quickly -- and foregoing the stupid disguise idea this time in favor of a tee and cargo shorts -- I gear up and make for the staircase. Between Charlie's advice and Betty's assurance that the Pack isn't going to turn on me, I've got no other way out but forward. Hiding myself away in my apartment until my bank account runs dry and I starve to death doesn't sound like a particularly good plan.

"'Months'? Shiiit, I think even years from now, I'm still not gonna quite believe this shit's actually over," Ozzy laughs as I begin making my way towards the lobby.

"God, I know," I can hear Avo echo in a tone of sincerity I rarely hear from the sarcastic jackal. "What a shitshow Zootopia's political system is. Two fucking criminal mayors in a row."

"Yeah, but at least Lionheart wasn't actively trying to kill us." That flat, scratchy voice can only be Anneke. She sounds more keyed-up tonight than usual. "Anyone mind if we fuckin' turn ZNN off? I can only take so much of the talking heads."
If one half of the aardwolf twins is here, that means her brother is probably here, too.

"Yeah, I'm bored to tears over here." Yep. Sure enough, there's Wolt.

"Fine," I hear Al grunt as the TV abruptly shuts off.

"Well you didn't hafta turn it off entirely," Annie grumbles, "just, y'know, offa the news and shit. I've had enough of fuckin' politics for one day."

"Yeah," Wolt draws, "let's see if we've got some beach volleyball comin' up."

Anneke continues right over him. "Plus all the fucking 'prey victims' are turning my stomach. Cryin' how hard they've had it, while they're still wiping their mouths from months of spitting on us."

I stop halfway down, my hoof tightly gripping the rail. I'm only just now aware that I've been holding my breath. Pressing my back flat against the wall, I crane my neck to listen in. I know they can probably already smell me -- so I can't stay here long. Just long enough to get a feel for the atmosphere of the room.

The sudden twang of a guitar chord jolts me. "At least it's over, right?" Ozzy chuckles.

Anneke huffs, makes a dry, angry sort of scoff. "Yeah, and now that it's over it feels like most mammals are just goin' 'hey, we're not mad at you anymore! Lucky you! Why are you still mad?'. Like we're the ones who need forgiving!"

"Preds got stomped on city-wide and now it's getting swept under the rug," Al murmurs, his low voice barely audible from my position. I'm really having to strain to hear him. "Lotta prey acting like they were the victims in this, but not one of them was targeted. Not once. History repeats itself."

"To me, it's like a fog's lifted," Avo says. "I can't even put it into words. I'm just -- at peace. Finally."

"Yeah, nah. I get you, totally. I've been trying to vent through my music, put what I'm feeling into a song." Stretching, Ozzy leans forward, just barely into my field of view. "But it's like, my head's a jumble right now. I try to write something down and my pen's all over the place. I'm so happy I could scream, you know?"

"Oh, I feel like I could scream too," Annie sighs.

"You, uh... you all right there, Annie?" Avo asks, sounding genuinely concerned. As much as she's capable of, anyway. "You're starting to kinda..."

"...nah, no. I'm fine. I'm okay."

"Okay well--"

"I mean, I guess it's just funny to see all these happy prey smiling and acting buddy-buddy -- like they just want to ignore the last few months," Anneke continues, cutting her off. She coughs, like a short, bitter bark. Almost an angry yap. "Fuck me. And you can't even blame Bellwether for everything. She just rode the fear wave to the top."

"I thought you were done talking about politics," Avo points out. "Any time you wanna stop, we can talk about boys or something."
"Oh, fuck off, Avo," Annie groans. "You know I'm right. It's like Al said, mammals are already trying to act like this never happened."

"Man, Annie, I hear ya. Really, I do," Ozzy chimes in with an off-tune strum of his guitar. "But sooner or later we're all gonna have to move on. 'Less of course you wanna be angry for the rest of your life."

"I'm thinkin' about it," she laughs back. "Live the rest of my life as a total asshole. Can't be that hard."

The room bursts out laughing and even I crack a grin. I decide that's my cue, since now seems like as good a time as any to insert myself into the conversation. Little self-deprecating humor to let them know I'm self-aware. I peel away from the wall, smooth my shirt out, and make my way down the steps into the lobby proper.

"It's harder than you think," I add with a smirk. "I'm an asshole most days, and I can tell you, it's exhausting."

To my surprise, nobody says anything as I enter the room. They all just kind of... stare at me. Immediately I'm looking down at myself, wondering if I spilled something on my shirt or if I butchered my trim job.

Al's seated on the couch with the twins at either side of him, wearing chalk-stained work clothes. Ozzy's sitting backwards in a wooden chair he's way too big for, draped over the backrest, while Avo's leaned against the door.

Anneke glares at me with a tight-lipped expression on her face, and kicking off the table, she deliberately stomps past me and up the stairs. Al murmurs something I can't quite hear to Wolt before standing up and following her out.

"I was beginning to wonder when you'd show up, cotton swab," Avo quips dryly, plucking the lollipop stick from her mouth and tossing it in the trash bin in the corner.

"Woolly B," Ozzy mutters, suddenly looking and sounding as uncomfortable as he did the other day. So much for moving on.

"Hey," I return, lamely.

Nobody answers.

How do you even break the ice in a situation like this? The whole world feels like it's upside down. I can't exactly chat about the weather.


"You can say that again," Wolt grins, stretching across the couch cushions, rolling over onto his back as he sprawls out. "Gray skies are clearin' up. Clouds are gone. Sunshine and clear stars as far as the eye can see. Talk about a brand new day, man."

Ozzy fidgets with his guitar, pretending to tune it, but winces when I look at him. I've been through a lot of shit the last few days, but somehow seeing that big dopey hyena flinch away from me cuts me deeper than the look on my boss's face when he told me to take a hike, or even the sight of those sheep in shackles on the news.
I can't live like this. And more than that, I don't want him to live like this.

I take a seat on the couch, in an empty spot at the end near Ozzy, but distanced enough to give him some space. Avo's probably glaring at me for not taking the hint and fucking off, but right now I don't care.

"Ozzy, man..." I don't really know where I'm going but in my typical way, I can't help but open my mouth. "I know things are weird right now, but I hope you know I wouldn't hurt you. I wouldn't hurt any of you guys."

Wolt sits up next to me. "Why would you hurt anyone?"

"I wouldn't," I insist.

He makes an odd, sour expression and idly scratches himself through his shorts. "No shit. And I wouldn't kick you in the nuts. But I don't go around starting conversations about it."

"He's talking about the news," Avo interjects dryly. "Because Bellwether and her goons were all sheep."

"So what?" Wolt sniffs, fixing his scruffy hair with both paws. "Pretty sure cotton candy over here wasn't one of the guys in the police photos."

"Sharp eye. But it doesn't matter," the jackal returns, shaking her head. "There's gonna be--"

"There's gonna be a lot of hard feelings after all this." I'm surprised to find those words coming out of my own mouth. Even Avo looks at me, a little surprised. "And they're justified. A lot of mammals aren't going to know who to trust. You guys just had the rug pulled out from under you. I know how you feel."

Avo sharply cuts back in with a noise like a growl, unwrapping another lollipop from her pocket. "No, you don't."

The room's dead quiet for a second. My hooves feel weightless as they rest on my knees. Somewhere, way off in the distance, I can swear I hear a howl going up.

"No, you're right," I nod, staring down at myself. "I don't know how you feel. But it probably sucks. And I'm sorry."

"You didn't do anything," Wolter corrects, folding his arms. It sounds like that was directed at Avo, but I don't feel like looking up at her.

"No, I mean, I'm not apologizing, I'm just trying to show some basic sympathy, I guess."

Avo paces up to me, stopping in front of the couch. I feel like all I can do is stare at her feet, but finally I wrench my head up and force myself to meet her eyes. There's none of her usual snark behind her expression. It's dull, somehow. Flat eyes, humorless frown. Like there's no energy at all.

"Basic sympathy's a good first step. So I guess at least you're trying."

I can't really think of anything to say to that -- so for a change, I don't try to. She doesn't seem to want anything else, though, so she nods once and heads up the stairs to her room.

"Catch you around, Omega."

And then there were three.
"And I thought Annie was in a hurry to leave," I mumble.

"Eh. Don't hold it against my sister." Wolt hops off the couch to stretch, arms over his head. "She's really hurting right now. She needs some time to work through this."

I nod dumbly. "I think everyone does, right now."

"Nah, fuck that," the aardwolf wrinkles up his snout, like he's just caught a bad smell. "The whole city just got a new lease on life. No more savage panic, no more fear, no more violence. We've got more to smile about than ever!"

"Easy for you to say," I sigh bitterly. "You've got Annie to lean on. I don't have anyone."

"You got us!" Ozzy suddenly howls, slapping me on the back so hard I stumble off the couch and onto my hooves. He grabs me around the shoulder with his shaggy arms and squeezes me in close, hugging me with an unrestrained and wild energy. "You got the Pack! And starting now, I don't care what anyone says. That's good enough for me!"

"Hell yeah," Wolt hums, slapping my other shoulder. "We're all honorary wolves, aren't we? So we're all in it together. That's like, Pack 101, man."

My face is hot and I can't seem to meet their eyes. All I can do is kinda mutter. "You guys are great."

The hyena gives me a playful shove. "And you're treating us to Bug Burga."

"Yeah, okay. I mean, yeah. I said I would," I manage. "Let's do it. You guys hungry now?"

"Sure," Wolt nods, quickly turning to clamber up the stairs. "Lemme just check on Anna real quick before we head out."

I rub my face with my sleeve, breathing deeply, shakily. I don't know what's wrong with me. My ears are pounding. I guess it's that kind of morning. A lot to take in.

"You oughta go easy with those clippers, Remmy," Ozzy smirks, patting my chest with the back of his paw.

"Huh?" I blink down at myself, then look back up to him. He's got a big, broad smile on his face, that sort of easy grin he always wears when I see him out playing.

"Yeah, for real. You look good in the fluff. I think it suits you better."

My hooves find their way to my pockets. I pat my wallet. What's one more dip for friends?

"Y'know, this all kinda reminds me of something someone told me once," Ozzy muses, scratching his immense, shaggy neck.

"What's that?" I sniff.

"Sometimes things ain't as bad as they look from outside."

He slings his guitar over his shoulder, throwing a wide grin down at me.

"And you're not outside, 'less you wanna be."
Chapter Summary

Remmy finds himself doing community service.

Packer's Gym is gone.

Well, mostly. I mean, the building itself's still here, but all of the gym equipment, the exercise machines, and all the other stuff has completely vanished. So you know, only everything that actually makes it Packer's Gym and not just another run-down warehouse on the older side of Pack. Hell, even the wooden boards that made up the basketball court's floor have been ripped up.

 Fucking hell. Whoever did this was thorough. As I wander around the lobby in confusion, I'm racking my brain trying to figure out why someone would rob a gym. All that comes to mind is this has to be some act of specist retaliation in the wake of Bellwether. I had no idea there were so many tensions still running rampant, but I guess I should have expected it. As I turn from the
doorway, my eyes catch sight of a bizarre square-shaped discoloration at the lobby's entrance, and my stomach drops when I realize that the assholes even swiped the fucking donation box. I trace my hooftips along the screwholes in the faded, cracked plaster where it used to be, shaking my head in disgust.

What a dick move. What a fucking dick move. Packer's barely had anything as it was. A loss of this magnitude'll mean the end of the gym for everyone. One of the few nice things we could all look forward to, and poof -- just like that, it's gone.

"What the hell happened here?" I mutter.

"I know, right?" a tiny voice comments from somewhere behind me. "It's a little exciting, don't you think?"

I nearly choke as I turn to look down at the tiny stoat behind me, whose arms are wrapped around a clipboard that's almost as big as she is. I guess that's Martina for you: even in the wake of this catastrophe she's trying so hard to find some optimistic way of looking at things.

"Do we have any idea of who could've done this?" I ask. "Has anyone thought to call the cops down here?!"

"The... police?" the tiny stoat mumbles confusedly, tilting her head just slightly before quickly reaching up to straighten her headfur. "Over a remodeling?"

"...remodeling," I repeat.

She nods slowly and I suddenly find myself deflating like a woolly balloon.

...oh.

"The gym's been long overdue for one," Martina continues, smothering a giggle. "We recently got Packer's recognized as a Civic Place of Interest, so now it qualifies for city funding. It's not a lot, but at least we can start doing some basic renovations."

"Oh, man, I -- yeah, that's good. Way better than what I was thinking," I breathe, letting out a sigh of relief.

"What did you think?" she returns, an amused yet concerned look on her face. "A bunch of mammals snuck in overnight to steal some old gym gear and pry up the floorboards?"

"What?!" I laugh a little too loudly. "Noooo, ha. No, nah, nothing like that."

She gives me a weird, squiggly smile.


"You're too funny," she snickers good-naturedly. "Nothing quite that exciting, I'm afraid."

Looking around the empty gym anew, I've finally got an idea of just how huge the building really is now that all the equipment's out of here. "All the stuff's gone -- does that mean we're getting new exercise machines, too?"

"Mm, no," Martina says with a sigh. "As nice as that would be, we're going to be relying on donations as usual. The money's just enough to help with upkeep."
"Ah. Bummer."

"The machines are all out back on the court for the time being. Head on out through the rear door, we've got a tarp roof up." Even though I've been here enough to know where the door is, she points helpfully. "Have a nice workout!"

"Thanks, Martina." I take a step towards the back, but hesitate. "Well, actually, before I go, do you have any snacks for sale today?"

"Sorry," she sort of bows in apology, "I'm too busy helping with the renovation, but I do have some drinks if you need hydration. On the house!"

"What sort of drinks?"

Setting her clipboard down, she scampers around behind her familiar snack table, beckoning me over with an excited paw and a swish of her tail. Intrigued, I drop my gym bag onto the floor and step around behind the folding table where I see Martina digging through a large wheeled cooler, right next to a sizable metal box with a sturdy-looking padlock.

"Is that a new donation box?" I chuckle, folding my arms.

"Oh, you noticed! The locksmith's had some surplus inventory they didn't need, and so they dropped it off this morning!"

I cock my head to one side. "Betty?"

"Yes! I forgot you know her!" Martina claps her paws in excitement, then looks a little embarrassed for having done it. "Betty delivered it personally. She really cares about the gym."

"I figure with all the fundraising you do, you probably know better than me, but instead of having it in the lobby where you only see it when you first walk in, why not put it inside the gym itself?" I glance over at the spot where the old donation box used to be, nodding. "That way it'll always be visible while everyone's working out."

"Out of sight, out of mind', hm?" she replies, straightening her skirt. "Hmmm. That's not a bad idea, actually!"

"Well, you don't have to sound quite so surprised."

She bursts out giggling and waves a tiny paw at me. "Oh, I'm sorry, I didn't mean it quite like that! Please, let me get you your drink and you can get on with your day."

I can't help but laugh, myself. I lean against the bare table, glancing around the empty gym. When I got here I couldn't wait to hit the weights, but now it seems a lot less urgent. The cool, quiet atmosphere of the gym is way different from what I came here to find, but I think I'm liking it anyway.

With a scratch of my chin, I turn back to the tiny stoat, who's unpacking a few things from the cooler. "Hey, Martina, what's the renovation cover, anyway?"

"Safety certs, inspections. Mostly reflooring the main room," she replies with a strain as she tries to haul a massive plastic pitcher up to the table. "A couple of-- nhf-- elephants came through looking to play basketball last week, and -- well, you can guess how that went."

"Yeah, that court didn't exactly seem safety-rated for that kind of abuse." I reach down, scooping
the heavy pitcher up onto the table, and Martina scurries up a moment later with paper cups. "Painting too? I see you've got a lot of buckets around the lobby, and it looks like these walls already have painter's tape up."

"Thanks." She carefully tips the enormous pitcher and begins pouring each of us a cup full of what appears to be some kind of sports drink, dark purple in color. "Yep! I figured I could save a little money in the budget by doing the painting myself."

"Yourself? C'mon, that's going to take forever." I can't resist laughing as I take the cup from her; even from here I can smell the distinct scent of artificial grape flavoring.

Because of course it would be.

"What? What's so funny?" she asks with a huff. "You think I don't know how to handle something like painting?"

"Oh no, that's not it at all. You reminded me of someone just now," I explain, taking a sip of it and reeling at the surprisingly strong flavor. Usually sports drinks taste like salt water, but this is almost pure grape syrup. "You're not the first stoat I've met that loves grape."

"You mean Marty, by chance?"

I set the cup down. "You know him?"

"Only all my life! Marty's my older brother."

I blink for a second, studying her expression. "Wait, really? You're Marty's sister? Are you sure?"

Her face scrunches up as she gives me an incredulous smirk. "Am I sure?"

I laugh hard and cover my reddening cheeks with both hooves. Real smooth, Cormo. Now she thinks you're an idiot.

In a sweet tone she laughs, too, capping off the pitcher. "Lives at the Crowns with a vixen named Charlie, right? Unless you know two Martys."

"Uh, yeah, that's him," I mutter from my hiding place of shame, when something clicks in my head. "Wait. The Crowns?"

"The Royal Crown Estates at Aurora Gardens? The old beat-up apartment building towards the end of the street?" she prompts before taking a thirsty sip from her too-large cup. "The one you live in? You're his next-door neighbor, uh, if I remember right -- the ram he's always going on and on about."

"Oh god," I groan, dragging a hoof down my face as Martina sips from her drink. "I'm sure he's had plenty to say about me. He and I don't exactly get along well."

"Mmm. I know my brother can be a little... abrasive, but he's got a really good heart underneath that sour exterior."

"That sour grape exterior?" I joke.

"...what's wrong with grape?" she asks defensively.

I'm not entirely sure what to say to that, so I just shrug, hauling the nearest paint can to the wall.
"He isn't afraid to speak his mind," Martina says, setting her half-finished cup aside to finish unpacking her cooler. "That's the one thing I can say about Marty. You always know what you're getting with him."

I contemplate that for a minute, popping the lid and dipping a roller into the thick white paint. "There's an understatement."

The gym's front door opens with a jingle, and for the first time I notice there's a bell that's been mounted to the top of the door. I'm guessing by the cutesy little "happy-face" ribbon that this is another of Martina's new remodeling touches.

Pushing his way inside is a tall, muscular tiger with a gym bag slung over his shoulder and a pair of sunglasses perched on the bridge of his muzzle. Cliff grins, eyebrows raised as he looks around the empty building. He's dressed way fancier than I think I've ever seen him -- pressed slacks, a button-up dress shirt with a tie, and a blazer folded neatly over his free arm.

My heart begins to pound, and I can feel my hooves shaking. Usually where there's Cliff, there's Neil. In the back of my mind I can still see the tattered fluff from that night's horrible spectacle. I'm half-expecting him to pop out at any moment and rip me to pieces for real.

Surveying the empty gymnasium, the tiger offers a stunned, open-paw gesture. "Did we get robbed or something?"

"Oh, good morning, Cliff!" Martina's eyes light up as he saunters over to her table, the only real point of interest left in the lobby. "Don't worry, the stuff's out back on the tennis court."

The well-trimmed gym cat turns on his heels, gesturing blankly at the empty main room. "And by 'the stuff', you mean 'the entire gym', right?"

I snort. At least I feel a little less like a dumbass now.

"Didn't either of you get the newsletter I sent out via e-mail about the renovations?" the stoat huffs in exasperation, her paws on her hips, wearing a very Marty-esque frown. Oh fuck, now every time I look at her I'm going to start seeing Marty. "Why'd you both act so surprised?"

"Who uses e-mail anymore?" Cliff deflects.

"I don't have a computer," I add. It's a weak excuse, since technically my phone is capable of e-mail, but like he said -- who uses e-mail anymore?

"Hm. Maybe we should switch to some kind of SMS list for announcements then?" she mumbles, scribbling a note down on her clipboard. "I wonder if the library computers could be set up for something like that..."

"So, what... no Neil today, man?" I ask, looking around warily for Cliff's intimidating other half.

I don't like my chances if I've got to run like hell from a lion. They're supposed to be fast, right? Or wait, is that cheetahs? Wait, shit. Is it specist to assume that they're all fast runners? Then again, these guys are in great shape, so they could probably manage a good sprint, whereas I spend most of my free time gobbling fast food...

"He'll be along any minute," Cliff replies. "Bank let everyone off early today, so I just told him to meet me here."
"The bank?"

"Yeah, I'm a teller at Zootopia First Financial." Loosening his tie, Cliff unzips his own gym bag and tosses it inside. "So what's up, big ram? Feels like it's been a while since I saw you last. How you been?"

"I'm hanging in there." I decide that's about as optimistic as I've got in me right now. "Trying to get on with life after everything, I guess."

He pauses halfway through unbuttoning his shirt, tilting his head at me. "Something happen?"

I glance over at Martina, who's staring at Cliff with half-lidded eyes and one of the corners of her mouth upturned. Feels a little heavy to get into right now, and I doubt, as preds, they'd know where I was coming from, so I decide to just keep the peace for now.

"Just a rough couple days, I guess." That much is true. "I'll be okay."

"All right then. Hope you're on the upswing," he shrugs, his paws in his pockets and gym bag forgotten in the corner. "So, what were you two cuties up to before I interrupted?"

"Well, we couldn't afford to hire painters, so I was taping the doors up to start painting, myself," Martina explains bashfully, motioning to a cardboard box full of supplies near her cooler, "I've given art classes at the library, by the way, so I know my way around a brush. But Remmy here offered to help, so..."

I glance down suddenly. Wait, I did? When-- how long have I been painting the gym?

"Uh, yeah, I got this," I mutter, only just now realizing I've already finished most of one of the lobby's walls. "You wanna pitch in, Cliff? It'd go faster with us both on it."

"...wait, are you serious?" he replies incredulously. "This place is huge! You guys are tiny! It'd take you days to paint it all -- of course I don't mind helping out. Heck, we could probably just dip Remmy in the paint and use him as a big ol' brush. Have the place knocked out in minutes."

"Hey. Some things you just don't joke about, man. You get any paint on my pompadour and I'm gonna be pissed," I warn, grinning.

"Oh, no! Both of you, really, there's really no need," Martina hastily insists.

I shake my head. "No trouble."

"You don't need to do all this, Remmy. You give to the gym every time you come in. Please."

"Well, that's different. This place is free to the public, and I've certainly gotten my fair share of use out of it already, so dropping a five here or there's the least I could do." I laugh, feeling a little on-the-spot. "But Packer's also introduced me to a lot of great mammals -- present company included - - and if it looks nicer, maybe other mammals'll visit. And that means more donations down the line. So really, everyone wins. So I mean, unless you actually want me to stop, I might as well keep painting and pay it forward."

"Yeah, Remmy's right! Packer's needs more traffic. We can get it done lots faster if we all work together." Cliff rolls his shoulder a couple of times, his joints popping. "Besides, there's just something magical about a fresh paint job. A nice clean slate, full of possibility."

Martina looks so happy she could cry. I can't blame her, it's a huge job -- especially for such a little
stoat. I hardly expected to spend my night (morning? whatever) painting the gym instead of exercising at it, but I figure it's the least I can do.

"Well, um -- let's finish the lobby then!" Martina says, taking charge.

I nod, getting back to work. "I'm on it. I'm almost done on this wall. You wanna get the left one, Cliff?"

I'm rolling some more paint out, but the response I'm waiting for doesn't come.

"...Cliff?"

I turn to look over my shoulder to see both him and Martina standing at the table, glancing repeatedly between me and a fresh paint roller.

Martina marvels, tapping her chin. "Hmm! The resemblance is uncanny..."

The tiger nods in quiet awe. "I wonder if they're related."

"Yeah, real funny," I groan, fighting a chuckle as I swipe it from them -- only for my laughter to stop as I feel the rolling surface. "Wait, this thing isn't actually made out of wool, is it?"

I'm in the middle of thoroughly applying some more masking tape to the doorframes of the main gym when something heavy and warm taps gently on my shoulder. A paw. A lion's paw.

Oh, fuck.

"N-Neil!" I bleat out.

"Hey, Remmy! How are you?" he greets with a broad, razor-toothed grin. Too many teeth, too sharp. "Sorry I'm just gettin' here -- traffic was a nightmare."

I swallow heavily, letting my pulse slow back down to normal as I size him up. I'm trying to read his face for any of the warning signs -- and yet, he looks as pleasant and agreeable as ever. If anything, he's in a cheerful mood. In other words, a sharp fucking turn from the last time I saw him. Remembering back to the performance mauling I witnessed the night the Bellwether news broke, it's like he's a different mammal altogether.

But then again, everything's different now.

"I'm... good," I reply, fidgeting anxiously with the roll of tape in my hooves. "How about you? Everything... okay?"

"I'm great, yeah! Been kinda beside myself after this whole thing, but who isn't, right?" he jovially replies, lifting one of his broad arms to scratch at the back of his head. "I mean, man, hard to have a bad day compared to that night outside Pandora's, you know?"

"Yeah," Cliff adds, somberly. "We were both really shaken by it."

"Yeah, me an' Cliff spent the rest of the evening trying to put ourselves back together, like, emotionally. We just cuddled up and ate ice cream all night."

The tiger coughs. "You ate ice cream."
"Aw c'mon," Neil objects, chuckling. "You're tattling on me?"

Cliff sets his paint roller down, wiping sweat off his forehead and unintentionally leaving a broad white streak neither Martina nor myself feels like pointing out. "Hey, uh. Speaking of Pandora, anyone heard anything about her?"

"...not yet." I reply quietly. "The city's holding her and some of the other, um... victims. For evaluation."

Everyone sorta looks at their feet for a moment.

"Man."

"Yeah."

Neil throws off his jacket, and Martina watches from her table as he stretches in a purple and yellow tank top that reads *Mane Event* in block letters. "Well, on the bright side, at least she's in good hands and we don't have to worry about it happening to anyone else ever again."

"Yeah. Yeah, absolutely." I pick at a loose lock of wool on my arm, struggling to think of something to say.

"Hey. You okay, Remmy?" Neil asks warily. "You look like you've seen a ghost."

Fuck it. I have to know.

"You, uh. You remember when the news broke about Bellwether?" I mumble, my voice low. "And, uh... everyone was partying outside the apartment-- the Crowns?"

"Yeah," he replies with a wistful smile. "Dude, that was like, the best night of my life. 'Course I remember."

His words are like a sharp slash to the gut -- both stinging and knocking the wind out of me all at once. Best night of his life, huh? I really wish I could say the same.

"Well, uh. I saw you out there, on the street," I continue, nudging the opened paint can across the floor with my heel. I can't even look at him. "And, uh... you guys had like, an effigy. A sheep effigy."

"...a what?"

"Like -- it looked like it was made out of a pillow, I guess... done up to look like me." I drag my hooves across my head, wringing the sweat loose from my skin and wool. "I mean, not me specifically, maybe, but it was... you know, it was sheep. My apartment was right overhead. I heard the noise outside, and, I saw you just -- fuckin' wreck that thing. Ripped it apart with your teeth. And I'm not gonna lie, it really... really fucking shook me, dude."

"Oh. Oh, shit. No, man -- no no no, no." Neil's stammering, his enthusiasm gone in an instant. "Oh my god, man, Remmy -- I am so sorry. That's, that's not -- I promise you, that's not what that was about."

"It wasn't?"

"No, of course not! Never! I didn't even know you lived there! Or -- well, I guess I did, because I know Avo lives there, and I think I knew that she said you guys were in the same building." He's
almost frantic in his apology, both of his huge paws raised plaintively. "But I swear, it wasn't supposed to be 'sheep', it was her. It's like -- you know how it is when you're with the guys, right? Folks start talkin', and -- there was this dude, he ran outside with a pillow and he was like 'hey, look, it's Mayor Bellwether! And we all kinda just... I dunno, man. She'd spent the last -- how many months? -- just fuckin' with us. Ruining our lives. We were all pretty charged and just, you know, happy. And angry. We were just fuckin' around with it."

Blinking, I stare dumbfounded. I can hardly believe it.

"I mean, I didn't even think about how that might look to somebody like you, but we had glasses on it and everything, so-- I mean, we did at the start, they mighta got knocked off. I was pretty drunk. I dunno man, we were all excited just -- just going nuts because of the good news, right? Everyone was shoutin' and laughin' and we were havin' a good time, smackin' it around, and it got to me, and all I could think about was all that shit she kept saying about 'savage' predators, and what happened the other day, and -- and how I felt when I thought Cliff was -- uh, yeah. An' I shouted somethin' about showin' her what a savage predator looks like, and I just... sank my teeth into her. Uh, the pillow 'her', I mean." Running his paws nervously through his thick, unruly mane, Neil's muscles strain at the fabric of his shirt. "I mean, she was the one turning everyone savage. Everyone was excited, and it just... I was all in the moment."

Martina and Cliff stand wordlessly nearby, glancing awkwardly at each other as Neil wraps up his hurried, stumbling explanation.

"Well... when you put it that way, I get it," I murmur, thinking back to my visit to Bunnyburrow with Wolt when we went to deal with that pigheaded asshole, Rasher. "Some people are just so rotten, make you so mad, you gotta do something to blow off that anger."

"Exactly! You totally get me," he says with a growing smile. "I know those guys like the back of my paw and none of them would've done somethin' like that for real. Or even out of like, intimidation or whatever. I promise I wasn't tryin' to make you uncomfortable. Sorry about that, man. I didn't even think of the uh, the... you know how it'd...

"The optics," Martina chimes in, helpfully.

Neil nods enthusiastically, pointing to her. "Yeah."

"No, dude, I... I believe you." And I'm relieved to find I even mean it. I don't know how to explain it, but it's like... I feel like this is the first time in days I've been able to breathe. "When you put it that way, it makes perfect sense. Hell, I wish I'd known. I almost would've laid into that backstabber, myself."

"So we're good then?" he asks.

"We're good," I reply, bumping his fist with my hoof. "And thanks, man. Really, thank you. You have... no idea what kind of a weight off my chest that is."

"Hey, right on. Don't want to scare off one of my newest customers anyway," he laughs. "Hey, speakin' of, tell you what: How about you an' me an' Cliff all hit up my truck after this and we have some tacos -- on the house! I got some fresh beer-battered cod -- you're gonna love it, dude. Mm. Melts in your mouth."

"Hey, that's awesome, I'm totally down! You'll have to make mine bug meat, though."

"Oh, changed your mind about fish after all?"
"Not at all -- I just... kinda promised myself I wouldn't have fish again until Pandora's back." I scratch the back of my head sheepishly. "She was the one who introduced me to it, after all. It... wouldn't feel right."

"Hey, respect, man," Cliff nods from the side. "Showing solidarity."

"Us preds gotta stick together," Neil adds.

"We all do," Cliff corrects, gesturing at me.

"Oh, no, Remmy included!" the lion guffaws. "This ram is an honorary predator, the way he goes at that meat."

I crack my neck, flexing dramatically. "I'll have you know, I'm actually part of a pack."

"No shit," Cliff marvels. "Well, spill, what pack?"

Come to think of it, I'm not sure if ours has a name. "Uh, Al's?"

"Great white Al?" he breathes, looking surprised.

"Hey, cool, same pack as Avo! Guess that makes sense, since you guys live in the same building. Oh, and Marty -- your brother," Neil nods to Martina.

I had no idea the Pack would get this kind of recognition even out here. Al's reputation must be even stronger than I expected for them to sound this impressed.

The tiger scratches his chest, deep in thought. "And uhhh... who else? Foxtrot."

"Ozzy!" Neil nearly shouts, clapping his paws together firmly. "Ozzy's in that pack!"

"Dude, he's gonna be stoked to have the court fixed up," I join in. "That alley court of his is great, but he always seems to do better with other mammals. He'd probably be happy for a chance to get into a bigger game."

"Yeah, good point." Cliff stoops to dip his paintbrush in one of the cans, being careful not to accidentally slosh paint all over the floor. "Maybe he can work on his pickup game."

"Granted his pickups are a little rusty," Neil chuckles.

I stare blankly, evidently not getting the joke. "What, is that why he doesn't have a girlfriend, or...? Everyone loves that guy, so I figured--"

The gym cats both stifle a laugh, and Neil exaggeratedly looks away, whistling.

"Yeahhh," Cliff drawls, looking over his claws, "Let's just say I don't think his mom's holding her breath waiting on him to bring home a nice girl any time soon."

"Cliff!" Neil elbows him in the side. "You're fuckin' terrible."


The two muscle-shirted gym cats tussle playfully for a moment or two before eventually breaking off to get back to work. As I turn back to what I was doing, a tiny tap on my hip draws my attention. I glance over to see Martina standing patiently at my side.
"Remmy, I just want you to know," the little stoat begins quietly, "I think my brother might've been... mistaken about you. A little bit. I'll talk to him for you."

"Oh, uh," I rub my hooves together, shyly. "Well, anything that can help smooth things out would be nice. You really think he'll listen to you?"

She closes her eyes, filling her tiny frame with a deep breath before looking up at me with a confident smile.

"I've got a feeling he will."

"Hey, quick question," Neil interjects, turning away from the wall he and Cliff are working on, clutching a wet paint roller. "Anyone know when I picked this thing up?"

With white streaks on my shirt (no big loss, it's my workout shirt anyway) and a bug meat taco in hoof, I'm finally on my way home.

After we wrapped up work at the gym, Martina tagged along with us over to Neil's truck, and we ended up shooting the breeze together for a little while. While today was a lot of hard work, it's work I can be proud of. Cornerstone of the neighborhood like Packer's, a fresh coat of paint is the least it deserves. I feel like I made a difference for a change, and it'll be worth it just to see the look on everyone's faces when the place is done. We got almost half the gym painted, and we're coming back tomorrow for the rest. For now, I'm ready to get back to my room to finish off this taco and enjoy some peace and quiet.

As I make my way up to the apartment building, sitting on the front street steps of "the Crowns" is the towering Alpha wolf himself. Al takes up nearly the entire stoop, hunched forward with his elbows on his knees and a stormy expression brewing below two stained white brows. He stares off towards the purple-orange skies in the distance, an opened can of beer in one paw, and doesn't even seem to acknowledge me as I approach.

I step past him without a word, but something stops me before I can make it inside. I slowly pull my hoof away from the lobby door's handle and step back to where he's sitting.

Standing next to him, it's amazing how much height he's got on me, even seated. His once-white fur's now gray in large, matted splotches and powdered concrete cakes his muzzle. His slacks are frayed all around the cuffs, crusted black from mud and maybe blood. No bandages this time, but I notice just under his A-shirt, he's got a heat pack on his back the size of my pillow. A few dozen possible conversation starters pop through my brain, but none of them seem right. Finally I just sit down beside him, watching as the sun begins its slow ascent over the distant downtown skyline.

There's something tired in him. More than just a long shift at work. I can't put my hoof on it. The hulking, stone-faced wolf sighs deeply, almost growling, and takes a short swig of his beer. Still, he says nothing to me.

"Long night?" I finally say.

He inhales sharply through his nose, but his expression doesn't falter, and his gaze doesn't move. Well, what the hell. It was free, right? Easy come, easy go. Might as well pay it forward.

"Here," I offer, holding out the leftover taco. "Fresh from the food truck."
"No thanks," he mutters.

"C'mon," I insist, wiggling it at him, like that'll somehow make it more tempting. "Consider it an offering to the Alpha."

"I'm not hungry," he returns sharply. "Go give it to the idiot twins. They'll eat anything."

"Al."

"I said I'm not hungry."

I tap my hooves on my knees. A heavyset badger walks down the street with her kid.

After a moment, I turn to glance at Al with a smile. "Hey, you hear the one about the antelope barber and the sheep?"

"You can go inside," he rumbles.

"How about the bear who married a fox?"

Finally I get his attention, and he turns away from the sunrise. "You're startin' to piss me off, lambchop."

"Well, good," I shrug, making myself comfortable on the stoop. "Just part of being Omega."

The immense Alpha squints at me. "What was that?"

"Just the other day, I did some research," I muse, faking nonchalance. "Way back when, one of the roles of the Omega was to antagonize the rest of the pack."

"Sounds like you," he huffs, humorlessly, as he turns back to the horizon.

"I mean it. The Omega would sorta playfully poke at the others, make them chase him, start fights he knew he'd lose. He'd unite the others by getting them to rally against him, kinda like a willing punching bag."

Heavily, Al rolls his head back, scratching at the scruff of his broad, fluffy white neck. "That how you see yourself? A punching bag for the rest of us?"

"No, not really," I sniff, scratching my own neck in an unintentional mirror of his actions. "But, you know, I do think it helps everyone to vent, now and then. All the way up the chain."

He glances sideways at me, then returns to staring at the skyline. My casual bravado -- maybe just emotional momentum from Packer's -- is quickly wearing thin, and I tap the tips of my hooves together, feeling a little uncomfortable.

"Look, I'm just sayin'. I know you gotta be there for everyone, but you got your own problems too, right?"

He rolls his eyes beneath his heavy brow, shaking his head. "Oh, fuck off."

I don't.

Instead, I just sit there with him for a while. A minute passes, maybe a few. I guess I could go up to my room. I guess I probably should. A few weeks ago I wouldn't be caught dead sitting out on the street with a wolf several times my size, let alone the one who once shook me down for my lunch.
God, I remember that encounter so clearly, and yet somehow the memory doesn't feel real.

Wasn't even that long ago, but it feels like a lifetime.

I can't think of anything else to say, but somehow I don't feel ready to leave yet. There's something in the air, something that's still waiting.

I'm sitting there, wondering about this banged up old car with a family of otters in it that I've just seen circle the block for like, the third time, when Al finally speaks up.

"I was just a boy when I sat down to watch the news on TV. The kind of things I saw--" he pauses for a second, huge claws tensing. "And my old man, he said, 'don't look away, Al. You gotta be strong. You gotta be brave.'"

He breathes slowly, heavily, watching the rising sun, blinking. I squash the part of me that wants to tell him he'll ruin his eyesight.

"I was alive when the city was still debating TAME collars. The Byron Manifesto was released when I was a pup." The Alpha glares over his shoulder down at me, his eyes hard. "I could be wearin' a fuckin' shock collar right now. You have any idea how close we came? Do you even give a shit? Four votes. Four fuckin' votes."

I stare back, at a loss for words, and try to keep the dumbfounded look off my face. "I thought-- I thought it was more than that."

"They had a public council vote after those ex-TUSK whackjobs made the news. The only thing that stopped this city from going over the edge was a look at what was waiting down there. More things change, the more they stay the same. And it'll take more than a fresh coat of paint to cover up all the ugly shit."

He stares down at the scratched aluminum can, and his jaw moves like he's chewing his tongue -- like he's too pissed off to find the words right away. Then he throws his head back and finishes his beer, before crumpling the empty can in his fist, down to a tiny, mangled ball. He watches -- and I watch with him -- as the sun finally peeks out over the graffiti-covered overpass that crosses Pack Street, behind the twisting skyline, and the last bits of purple in the sky begin to make way for the warm, orange hues of morning.

"They used to call this place Happytown."

I glance up at Al, but he's still just watching the horizon. The name doesn't mean anything to me.

"Back when my old man lived here, that's what they called it. Back when preds were still just gettin' over being treated like shit -- that's when they changed the name. Everyone thought it was a bright new future." The great white wolf frowns deeply. "But people in this city got short fuckin' memories."

Finally, and with some effort, he stands. The Alpha dusts himself off and tosses the crumpled can into my lap, then turns for the lobby. I stare at the wrenched aluminum in my hooves, a thin red mark of blood on one of its jagged edges, and I get this weird pain in my stomach. I don't even know why, but something about it is making me really angry.
"Hey, Al."

He stops at the door, but doesn't look back. "What."

I bite my lip, take a breath through my nose. I feel like maybe I don't have the guts to finish this thought, but I sure as hell don't have the guts not to, now that I've said something. "The Pack knows you're here for them. But we're here for you, too. You don't gotta deal with everything by yourself."

The Alpha stands there with his back to me for a few long seconds, then sighs, and I can see him shaking his head. "Don't make me kick your ass, Omega."

And with that he walks off into the lobby, and I'm out here on the step by myself, with a crumpled beer can and a leftover taco.

I wonder if the twins are hungry.
Can a mammal change?

I've been thinking about that a lot lately. Especially after the whole Bellwether fiasco. Our own Mayor turned out to be a criminal conspirator and a bio-terrorist. Was she always like that? Or did something in her turn to evil? Corrupt what was once a good sheep? Can someone like Dawn Bellwether even become 'good'?

I don't know about all that, but it got me thinking about changing, myself. And I don't mean the changes people have made for me, like being a part of the Pack. I mean changing from inside.

See, the other day I decided to make a household budget to see if I could trim fat from my
spending anywhere. After deducting necessities -- food, utilities, and rent -- I found out that my only 'luxury' spending is the money I fritter away on fast food and convenience store snacks. A few bucks here or there doesn't seem like much, but man, it really adds up when you only work part-time. Hell, I spent over eighty bucks at Bug Burga last month alone.

At least part of it is because I don't really cook often. It's not because I don't know how or anything, I just find it to be too much of a hassle. But money's tight, so I should probably stop eating take-out and start making some cheap meals at home instead. Plus, ladies dig guys who can cook, right?

Anyway, there's plenty of other reasons I'd like to start cooking, so that's why I'm elbow-deep in my kitchen cabinets, rummaging through every cupboard in my apartment for a pot and some utensils to cook with. Eventually, tucked away behind a stack of telephone books, I find a skillet (which is basically the same thing as a pot, just a little flatter), a sheet pan, and a spatula. Well, it's not really a spatula so much as like, a wooden spoon with a flat edge, but I figure that's close enough.

A quick skim through the recipe app on my phone gives me the perfect dinner idea: macaroni and cheese! Now we're talkin'! It's tasty, it's filling, and it's so easy even a kid could make it. I mean, it's basically just pasta and melted cheese, right? Start with something idiot-proof. I've already got a box of noodles, and there's a nice brick of real cheddar cheese in my fridge. What more do I need?

With a grin, I toss my skillet on the stove and crank the heat up to begin boiling the macaroni. This is going to be epic.

"Fuck fuck fuck FUCK!"

I stretch on my hooftips, desperately reaching for the smoke detector overhead before it has a chance to alert the entire building. Just as I manage to grab hold of it, a shrill beep rings out.

"Shut up!" I demand, gracelessly ripping it from the ceiling and cutting it off before a second alarm can sound.

Hope no one heard that. I need to get back to it, so I hop off the table and hit the ground with a reverberating whud. Shit. Hope no one heard that. Hopefully Ozzy's out and about and not wondering why his upstairs neighbor's jumping around.

I sprint to the oven, throw the door open, and promptly get hit in the face with a thick plume of black smoke. Fuck! Window -- where's the window?!

Eventually I stumble through the haze over to my window and throw it open. The latches present some resistance, but a moment later I'm sucking fresh air with relief and fanning the remaining smoke out onto the street.

And that's when someone knocks on my door.

"Uh, just a second!" Fuck. Try to sound like you're not in the middle of a panic here, Remmy.

"Open up, lambchop." Avo? That's Avo's voice, a bit quieter than usual. "Quick."
Here comes the firing squad. I rub my soot-covered face off on the front of my shirt, plod over to the door, and with a deep breath, brace myself as I open up.

"Hey, Avo, what brings--"

"Shut up." Sniffing at the air, the slender jackal's expression sours as she takes in the spectacle of my smoldering kitchen. "What a mess. Did-- you didn't even turn off the oven!"

"Sure I-- I thought I did?" I blink as she crosses past me.

Clicking off the oven, her tail swishes and she glances from the window to the smoking appliance and back again. The lollipop in her mouth clacks loudly, rolling around between her teeth. Finally, she turns to me with a snap of her fingers.

"Gimme your shirt, quick."

"What?" I blink, glancing down at the ashy smear across the logo on my band shirt. "I'm not gonna--"

Avo interrupts me with a harsh, frustrated growl, suddenly reaching down and grabbing her pastel yellow sundress by the hem -- before peeling it right off over her head, leaving her in her underwear right in my living room?!

Normally I'm much more composed than this, but watching her wildly flap her outfit around in the air, dressed in just a matching set of black undies?! I gotta admit, I'm gawking. Dark chestnut fur runs the length of her slender frame, toned from untold hours at Packer's Gym. But all down her front, her markings are pale like mocha cream, visible from her belly to the tuft of fur poking over her bra. Something I've come to notice (and appreciate) in other mammals: underbelly colors. They really make her look, uh... nakeder? Like, they really highlight how--

"Hey, feel free to help me out any time here," she snaps. I blink twice to reorient myself to my current situation. "If you're just gonna stand there I'll have to start charging admission."

Oh. The smoke! Right. Of course, yeah, she's fanning the smoke out the window. Obviously.

"Yeah, yeah, okay."

I hustle over to where she's standing and haul off my own top, flapping it into the thinning cloud of black smoke and billowing it toward the window. I actually think it's working. The air in the apartment is getting more breathable, anyway. I can't help but glance at Avo while I'm doing it -- and not to ogle, I mean, because I'm trying to figure out why she came in here. Surely she didn't come downstairs just to help me of all mammals out? Maybe she just smelled something burning and wants to get the room more tolerable before she doles out whatever hilarious zinger she's got saved up in her head.

But a minute or two later, she's still silent (and half-naked) when she rests a paw on the window.

"Right, I think that's most of it."

"So what's with the house call?" I ask, wary. "You looking out f--"

A sudden pounding at my door stops me dead in my tracks. Avo stiffens up, glancing to me, and we stare at each other for a few seconds before she suddenly breaks out of the freeze, hustling to the door while smoothly slipping her dress back on over her head.

She cracks my apartment door open and from the spot where I'm bolted to the ground, I can see
Al's enormous white wolf snout jab through the opening, peering in.

"Avo?" he snorts, tone gruff but surprised. "What's going on in here? Is everything okay?"

She leans casually against the doorway, blocking the Alpha's view of the kitchen. "Right as rain, boss."

"I smell smoke."

"Crumbs in the toaster," Avo answers him. "Won't happen again, don't sweat it."

His gaze traces over to me, and I realize suddenly I still have my shirt off, clutched in my hoof.

I can see his teeth gleam as he growls out another question. "...what are you two doing?"

"Practicing kissing," the jackal responds without missing a beat. "Now, I got everything under control. Don't you worry about a thing. Just enjoy your day off."

I watch the Alpha's keen eyes slowly narrow, but a moment later, he backs out of the doorway and Avo gently clicks it shut after him. Once his footsteps can be heard receding up the stairs, she lets out a long, relieved sigh.

"Now," she smirks, reloading her spent lollipop with a fresh one and tossing the old stick into my trash can, "what exactly were you trying to make? Other than a charcoal briquette, I mean."

A bleat escapes my lips. "What was that?!"

"What was what?"

"That!" I shove my hooves at the door. "Did you just cover for me?"

"Don't flatter yourself," she smirks, passing me with a patronizing pat on my pompadour. "Just trying to keep the peace. Last thing we need right now is even more arguing about a problem that's already settled."

"Well, I appreciate it." I sniff the air. It seems clear enough, so I finally close the window. "I definitely don't need to be in any worse shit with Al than I am already."

She kneels in front of the oven, wafting the air away and staring inside with a look on her face like some snarky quip is just waiting for its chance to bubble up to the surface. Using a washcloth she's grabbed off the dishrack, she carefully eases the smoldering baking sheet out of the oven and sets it on one of the cold stovetop burners.

"So, I'll ask again." She looks over her shoulder at me while pointing to my charred mess of a dinner attempt. "What on earth were you trying to cook? This looks like the world's most unfortunate casserole."

"...mac and cheese," I quietly mumble.

"You -- mac and cheese?" Her jaw hangs slack as her eyes dart almost cartoonishly from me to the skillet and back again. "This is just-- crunchy pasta and burnt cheddar! Why the cookie sheet? And why is it in the oven?"

"Uh, because I didn't have a pan, and I was using the pot to boil the water already?" I reply defensively, arms folded.
"What, you mean the skillet? Do you not own an actual pot?"

I cough in wordless embarrassment as she turns in place, taking in the rest of my apartment with arched eyebrows. Truthfully, I don't own a lot of cookware, or utensils. Or... much of anything else, really.

In fact, my entire apartment's practically barren. I haven't done a lot with the place since I moved in. When it comes to furniture, I have the barest possible minimum -- a bed, a nightstand. A beat-up dresser for my clothes with a couple of drawers that get stuck if you push them all the way in. A kitchen table with wobbly-legged wooden chairs that don't even match, and a threadbare couch in front of a crappy old TV set. No decorations, no books for the shelves, not even a poster for the walls. I mean, I own posters, but I've just never put them up. Maybe I figured I wouldn't be here long enough to bother.

"Come to think of it, I'm pretty sure this is my first time in your apartment, and, uh... yikes," Avo comments, nudging one of my kitchen chairs with her toe and watching it teeter. "It's pretty, uh... *austere* in here, isn't it."

"Yeah. Sorry it's not exactly a penthouse at the Hoofton," I grumble as she struts past me, picking up the smoke alarm off the table and effortlessly returning it to its spot on the ceiling. "I've had other things on my mind besides interior decorating."

She chuckles, tapping a clawed finger on my forehead. "Yeah, mile a minute up here, I'm sure."

I huff back, shoving my hooves in my pockets and attempting to take it in stride -- even though I really don't feel like it.

"Hey, I may be hard-headed, but I guarantee there's at least a little gray matter in there."

Still, she's got a point -- if I'm gonna keep staying here, there's probably no reason I can't start trying to make things a little more comfortable for myself.

With her long tail wagging, Avo swishes her way across my apartment and hoists herself up backwards, sitting on the edge of my kitchen counter and kicking her legs like a little kid. She scans the room, maybe looking for something, and every few seconds there's a loud clack from her lollipop shifting between her teeth. She brushes out a few wrinkles in her outfit. I try not to think about the fact she wasn't wearing that dress just a few moments ago.

Finally her eyes come back to me, and a toothy smirk slowly cuts across her face. Ah boy, here it comes.

"Look, no offense, but I'm really not in the mood, so if you can just stow whatever *hilarious* joke you're about to make at my expense..."

She raises her brows, looking down at me. "Guess you're free for lunch, huh?"

"Look, I said-..."

"Don't worry," she smiles slightly, reaching out and patting my woolly coif with one paw. "This isn't some shtick. Promise. Just assumed you haven't eaten."

I gesture lamely to the smoldering slag on the stove. "No. I haven't."

"Me either, actually. You wanna come upstairs to my place and have dinner?" she asks, jerking her thumb to the door.
"Wait, really?!
I ask, jaw dropping. "You don't mind?"

"Nah. Besides, I don't get to entertain company often, and hell... I can give you a few tips on how
to heat up food without burning your apartment down. You might even get some 'interior
decorating' advice, if you ask nicely."

"Yeah, okay -- I mean, yeah!
I nod quickly as she hops down from the counter, plodding to the
door. "Yeah, I'd like that! Uh, are you sure you don't mind?"

"Well, now you're starting to make me second guess it. C'mon. It'll do you some good to have a
real dinner for once. Maybe put some mutton on those bones."

I hurry along after her, shutting the door behind me as we exit the apartment. "Hey, I'm not about
to pass up a free meal."

She laughs, plucking her lollipop from her mouth. "Who said anything about free?"

"So what what are we having, anyway?"

"I'll be honest, I figured you'd start me out with something a little easier than stir-fry."

"It's healthier, cheaper, and tastier than Bug Burga." Avo chuckles, chopping up vegetables for our
dinner. "That makes it a great place to start. Not as hard as it looks, either."

"So what kind of pan is this?" I peer deeply into the bizarre metal container in front of me. "It's all
round and big and... well, round."

"Excellent description, cotton swab. Ten points," she grins, swishing over to me with her paws full.
"It's called a 'wok'. What, you've never seen one before?"

"I watch more daytime drama than cooking shows," I admit, studying it intently. As long as I'm
here, I might as well try to learn something. "So in your opinion, is this another 'basic essential' I
should have in my kitchen?"

She laughs easily, scraping the onions and thick orange carrots she just chopped up into the wok
before setting her cutting board back down on the kitchen counter.

"No, not really. I got one as a gag gift a couple of years ago and figured I might as well learn how
to use it," she says. "It's perfect for stir fry and stuff like that, but for day-to-day stuff you're way
better off with just normal pots and pans. Now here, give it a dash of this."

"Got it." I nod, splashing a little oil in from the bottle she's handed me before capping it and setting
it aside. "Done. Now what?"

"Good. Now -- you go ahead and start stirring them," Avo instructs, handing me a proper spatula.
"Don't overstir them, but don't let them go too long either or they'll burn."

Taking the tool from her, I notice an immediate difference with its rubber grip. Sure is a lot easier
for me to hold onto with a hoof than that crummy wooden spoon I was using earlier. I could get
used to this.

"I didn't realize something could be 'overstirred'. Why aren't we adding all the vegetables in at the
same time?"
"Firmer veggies go in first, like the onions and the carrots," she explains, opening her refrigerator and pulling out a small plastic grocery bag full of green beans. "You have to give the harder ones time to soften up."

"Kind of like Al," I mutter, stirring as instructed.

Shaking the beans into a bowl, Avo runs them under the cold water tap. It's obvious that she's not a professional chef or anything, but based on her enthusiasm, she clearly seems to enjoy cooking for its own sake.

"I think you're the better example," she says after a moment.

"Me? Hey, I've been doing my part to 'keep the peace' lately, too. But you saw how he came in just looking for a fight." I shake the pan like I've seen on TV and nearly spill a bunch of veggies out.

"Go easy there," she warns.

I swirl the pan, oiled veggies coasting around the rim. Sigh. "I just thought I was getting somewhere with him, you know? And now it's like we're back to square one. I half-expect he's gonna go back to shaking me down for my lunch."

With a sigh to match my own, Avo rolls her shoulders, grabbing a bottle off a shelf. "You don't understand, fluff. You really don't. It's not like that."

"You don't understand, you don't understand," I repeat back in a frustrated tone, angrily stirring the wok. "That's all I ever hear! Ever since I moved in, it's 'Remmy doesn't understand'! I never understand, it's all you guys can say! I'm tired of always being wrong!"

The heat of the kitchen is starting to get to me. I wipe my forehead with the back of my free hoof and splash a little more oil in from the bottle, which Avo then carefully puts back in the cupboard.

"Remmy's always wrong," I grumble, tired. "I'm always the one who gets told off or talked down to. I always have to be the one to apologize."

"You mean like with Neil?"

I stop shaking the stir fry long enough to glance up at Avo, who gently steps in and eases the wok handle out of my hoof, gently swirling it over the burner.

"Yeah, I heard about that," she smiles, just slightly. "Cliff wouldn't miss a chance to gossip if his life depended on it."

"Well, one time isn't much exception," I mutter back, stepping away from the stove and shoving my hooves in pockets.

She swings her hips and flicks her tail to the same rhythm she stirs, too busy watching the meal to face me as she speaks. "Funny. I seem to remember Ozzy being the one to bury the hatchet between you two. And I bet that fancy gym bag you've been toting around came from Al's apology."

"Look, I'm just tired of being shot down." It's a little cooler by the window. There's even a bit of a breeze today. "It feels like it's me against the whole neighborhood sometimes."

"See, that's exactly why you don't understand, fluff. You're not wrong all the time because you're some brain-boiled idiot, or because you got your facts outta some misprinted book. You're wrong
because of how you keep looking at things. It's a pattern." She finally takes the food off the heat, and starts digging through the cabinets. "It's like something in you is trying to always see the worst in people. Always thinking we're out to get you. Like you never heard of giving someone the benefit of the doubt."

I scoot out of her way as she rummages through a drawer for napkins.

"Yeah, well, you guys didn't exactly welcome me with open arms," I huff.

A sudden slam causes me to jump, and I turn to see Avo rolling her eyes with her paw on the drawer. "See, now, that's the kind of thing I'm talking about. You'd be singing a different tune if you knew the truth."

"Oh, what 'truth'?!" I fold my arms over my puffy middle and scoff in a tone that comes off bleating. "Al basically mugged me for my lunch! First impressions count for a lot."

"Yeah, I heard about that too. But let's get one thing straight," she nods, setting a pawful of fancy cloth napkins aside to scratch her nose. "That wasn't your first meeting, now, was it?"

"What?"

"You spent your whole first week here refusing to even look at us. Didn't even say 'hello' back, wouldn't make eye contact, nothing. Not the slightest acknowledgement. You came rolling in here like you couldn't stand to be in the same building with us, let alone the same room. So I figured -- and I'm sure most of the Pack did too -- 'hey, he wants to be an asshole, we'll treat him like one'. What's one more angry loner?"

I drop my hooves to my sides, stammering for a response. I barely even remember my first week here. I knew Al before that meetup, but he seemed intimidating from the get-go. Hell, everyone on the street had me quaking.

She sucks in a lungful of air, looking more ramped up than I think I've seen her in a long time. "And normally I wouldn't get into it -- I really ain't one to tell tales out of school -- but it's funny you mention that time with the sandwich, because later that day, Al came to see each of us."

I laugh bitterly, turning away to the window. "What, to warn you about me?"

"No. He came knocking at my door to give me a heads-up. Y'know what he said?"

She walks around beside me so she can make eye contact, leaning against the wall. "He said, 'we've got a stray'."

I blink.

"What?" I turn to face her. "Me?"

Avo nods quietly.

"He called me a-- what, that same day?"

"Not even Charlie had you figured out that quick."

I rub my hooves through my pompadour, squinting. "I don't understand. What's...? Why did he--"

She begins counting off on her fingers. "Angry little sheep, far away from home, mad at the world,
doesn't want to talk with anyone... and he eats bug meat. Guess he just... put the pieces together."

"The pieces'," I echo blankly. "What-- what 'pieces'?"

"I get it. Can't choose who you're related to. But look, Rem, your shitty family notwithstanding, we made sure--"

"Hey." I stomp my heel on the floor, raising a hoof to cut her off. "You don't know my family."

She holds her paws up, palms facing me, like she's surrendering. "If I overstepped--"

"You did."

"...then I apologize. I didn't mean to assume."

She waits a second or two, watching me, and I lower my hoof with a nod.

"Anyway, very next day, the twins came over just to ask you if you wanted to hang out. Betty pops your lock for you. Annie and Ozzy both took time out at the party to check up on you." She pulls an empty lollipop stick from her mouth, trashing it in the nearby bin without replacing it, for a change. Instead the jackal raises the back of her paw to her head, mock-dramatically. "Even yours truly started going easy on you. Sharing my candy, not to mention my valuable advice!"

She relents with a sigh, clapping her paw to my shoulder and patting me a few times.

"That's my point, fluff. And you're not the first stray we've brought in. We've been a lot more welcoming than you seem to think. Just... you know, in our own way. I mean, yeah, maybe we're a little crass sometimes, and Al can't exactly be too humble--"

"What about you? What do you do when I'm around but chomp candy and snark at me?" I grin, joking. Well, half-joking.

"Oh, like I haven't been the angel on your shoulder from day one!" She laughs, paw to her chest and head tossed back indignantly. "Who pulled you aside when you went rushing into that tiff between Alpha and Beta to fill you in on how dominance displays work? Who took you to Packer's and showed you around? Who tried to stop you the day of that big blowout? I've been in your corner this whole time, and you're insulting me? I'm shocked -- yes! Shocked and hurt, that you would write me off so rudely. Just more proof you've misunderstood our intentions!"

"And Marty?" I raise my brows.

"Oh, no, yeah, Marty just plain hates you," she laughs.

I can't help but smirk, too. Avo's kind of got an infectious smile, and for as overwhelmed as I feel right now, I'll take what I can get.

"...but point is, you gotta meet us halfway. You're a part of the Pack now. That means you're one of us. And we're all in this together, one way or another. You're making steps already, so just -- give it a chance. Maybe you'll see."

I chew my lip, not quite ready to let this go. "It still doesn't feel fair. Like I'm held to a different standard than everyone else."

"How so?"
"Okay, like... I got in a lot of trouble when I called Betty-- when I used the 'B-word'. But you guys call me names every other breath. So what, I'm not allowed to get mad about it?"

She cocks her head to one side. "Are you mad?"

"Huh?"

"Well, look -- Marty would give you some spiel about how it's about power dynamics and social context and all that, but I'll make it even simpler." Avo rests against the wall by her elbows, giving me her full attention. "If you called me a 'B-word' right now, I would be upset. So let me ask you: does it upset you when I call you 'fluff'?"

I sniff, considering. Her tone is strangely earnest. Given who I'm talking to, I'd expect this to be some set-up for a punchline, but there's no hint of snark in her voice -- not this time. It feels like a real question. So I decide to give it a real thought, and a moment later, a real answer.

"...I guess not."

"Okay," she shrugs. "So it is okay if I call you fluff?"

I shrug back. "Yeah."

She nods, smiling a little. "Okay then. How about all those other colorful terms? Is there anything you don't want me calling you?"

I move to speak up and she snaps, pointing a finger at me and cutting me off before I start.

"Besides 'predophile'. Don't worry. I'm filing that one off right now."

"'Grazer'," I mutter almost reflexively. "Everything else is okay, probably? Even 'cotton swab' and 'yarn ball' are kinda funny, I guess. But I don't like 'grazer'."

"Got it," she wags a finger in mid-air like she's making some imaginary check-mark. "Tell you what, fluff, I'll make sure the whole Pack knows not to use the 'G-word'."

I must be smiling, because she tilts her head the other way and slowly smiles back. It's not the same toothy smile I usually see on her. It's kinda nice, actually.

I take a deep breath, hold it a second, and let it go. There is a breeze coming in off the street, I'm sure of it now. Air's usually more stale than this. But it's real clear today.

After nearly burning my apartment down trying to make dinner, being forced to smell this amazing stir-fry the whole time we've been talking has been nothing short of criminal.

Despite hunger so strong I think my stomach's trying to eat itself, I patiently wait, hooves clasped, for Avo to finish the final steps plating the dinner she's made. To distract myself, I decide to take a moment and really drink in her apartment. While I've been here before, it seems like until this moment I've been too tense to really appreciate it. I'm amazed at how much fancier it is than mine - - even though I guess that's not really saying much.

Not gonna lie, Avo's really got a point about that 'interior decorating' thing, and as much as I'm surprised to find myself admitting it, she's got great taste. Everything in her apartment -- from the striped throw rug on the floor, to the statuette on her coffee table, to the tribal masks hanging along
the wall above her sofa -- all looks as if it was expertly-picked. Ever seen one of those shows where a bunch of designers go in and do a complete remodel for some dump? I feel like my apartment's the "before" and hers is the "after".

Her place is *decorated* but not *cluttered*; *eye-catching* but not *gaudy*. Sure, her paintings are probably prints, and the ornate knick-knacks lining her bookcase are probably just cheap trinkets from souvenir shops, but it doesn't matter. While nothing in here is expensive, the way it all comes together seems... oh, how's that saying go?

*More than the sum of its parts?*

...and in a way, I'm starting to think that describes Pack Street pretty well, too.

I'll admit it, Avo was right -- I've been wrong about a lot of things. Not the least of which being my assessment of her. If she of all mammals thinks I'm on my way to fitting in more, then I've got to be. And that alone's enough of a vote of confidence for me to want to try hanging in there a little longer.

"Here you go, fluff," she says, setting a full bowl of stir-fry and a rolled-up napkin on my placemat before doing the same for herself. "Looks good, huh?"

"You aren't kidding. Though at this point I think I'm hungry enough to eat a shoe," I grin, reaching for my fork...

...only to realize there *isn't* one.

Her kitchen table's adorned with classy placemats, a pair of salt and pepper grinders, and even two glass bottles full of what I'm guessing are oil and vinegar -- but there's no fork anywhere. Or spoon, or knife, or anything.

"Uh... I think you forgot something," I mutter, brow furrowed.

"Hmm?" she asks.

"Something to eat with?" I reply, tapping the bowl for emphasis.

"Oh, check your napkin," she answers, unwrapping her own.

I do as instructed, unrolling the cloth beside my bowl before spotting the tips of a pair of polished wooden sticks.

"Chopsticks?"

"Never eat stir-fry without them. I don't know what it is, but they taste better than with a fork."

"I mean -- yeah, they're cool and all, but there's no way I could use 'em," I sigh, wiggling my hoof-tips at her. "I'd be lucky to stab the veggies with them, if I got anything at all."

"You sure? Take a closer look," she replies cryptically.

Frowning, I finish pulling them out of the wrapping -- and my expression flips to a grin in an instant. These chopsticks have rubber grips *and* a spring-loaded connector at the end that holds both sticks together.

"Heeyyy, now we're talking!" I laugh, clicking them in my hoof and watching in fascination as they work like a pair of pinchers. "These kinda rule!"
Reaching into the bowl with my new utensils, I'm amazed at how easy they are to pick things up with. Sure, a fork's probably still easier, but the cool novelty factor alone makes me want to eat the entire dinner with these things. Scooping up a well-seasoned pepper, I take a bite and instantly feel my mouth watering. This is absolutely delicious.

"You like?"

"Hell yeah!" I reply between bites. "I've always wanted to be able to eat with chopsticks -- but... well, hooves, y'know? Did you seriously buy these just in case I came by to eat?"

"Oh, please. I've entertained ungulates before."

"Uh huh. Suure."

Suddenly she slaps the side of her cheek, eyes wide. "Oh gosh, Remmy, you're right! I picked them up just waiting and praying for the day you'd toddle up the stairs and come bursting through my door like the woolly stud I know you are!"

I nod, knowingly. "Called it."

Taking hold of her own chopsticks, she dextrously scoops up a bite of carrot and pops it in her muzzle with a smirk. "Mmm. This turned out even better than I expected."

"You make a good stir-fry," I agree.

"We made this, fluff," she corrects through a cheekful of carrot. "You helped."

I sheepishly stir through the bowl, smiling in spite of myself.

"I guess I did."

One tasty dinner later, I'm finishing up rinsing off the dishes in the sink while Avo puts away the last of the leftover ingredients.

"So, where's your roommate?"

"You can just ask," she replies with an odd smile, closing the refrigerator door.

"What's with the second bedroom?" I bleat out immediately.

She grins toothily, stifling a laugh at my response. "I use it for work."

Oh, okay. That makes sense. Grabbing a small towel from the rack next to the sink, I dry off the bowls and stash them in the cupboard they came from before something clicks in my head.

"Wait, you work retail at Pandora's, right?" Wiping my hooves, I look up at her in confusion. "Are you like, subleasing your extra room to her so she can stash her unsold dildos at your place or something?"

"If you're that curious, I'll just show you, Mr. Nosey," she tuts with a click of her tongue, motioning for me to follow her across the apartment.

Shrugging, I toss the towel on the counter and fall in behind her as we exit the kitchen. Opening the door to her mysterious extra bedroom, Avo walks in ahead of me and turns the lights on before
spreading her arms with a sarcastic flourish.

"There you go," she replies, leaning against the frame. "Knock yourself out."

Cautiously, I make my way around her, stepping inside what appears to be...

...just a second bedroom.

The visual theme is black and gold, not unlike a lot of the furniture in the main room, but other than a few pieces of standing decor, there's not much here at all. Definitely not for storage. A large bed in the center of the room with silky sheets the color of the night sky, topped with a pair of tassled golden pillows resting against the ornate headboard. A nightstand nearby holds a small lamp and a bottle of paw lotion. Across from the bed is a large dresser, upon which sits a laptop computer plugged into a wall charger.

Weirdly, I can't shake the feeling that I've been in here before, somehow.

"Huh," I mutter, tracing the sheets of the bed with a hooftip absently. "Interesting."

"Yeah. Isn't it just?" she replies with a dry smirk.

She watches me as I walk around the bed to the dresser, where, leaned beside it, is the only other object of interest in the otherwise sparse, plain bedroom: a large video camera, resting on top of a tripod.

I don't know much about cameras, but I can tell that this thing's way nicer than the sort of camcorder you'd see around here. It's a high-powered, industrial model with a huge lens and a big on-board microphone. The tripod it's sitting on has wheels and an adjustable arm for the camera -- if anything, I'd assume it belongs in a studio rather than my neighbor's apartment. Connected to the back of the camera is a long cord running all the way to the laptop on the dresser. Is she using this for video conferencing or something? If so, it's... kind of overkill for a webcam, isn't it?

"High quality tripod camera in the bedroom?" I ask with a chuckle, examining it with interest.

"What, don't tell me you make homemade porn in here."

Glancing over my shoulder, I stop, realizing Avo's intently watching me.

"I do," she replies.

I reflexively laugh, but cut myself off when I notice that her expression -- a calm smile and raised eyebrows -- doesn't budge.

I nearly choke on my tongue.

"You're not kidding." The words spill out of my mouth.

"I perform live adult camera shows for a select clientele. It's quite good money."

"You just--" I glance quickly from the camera to the bed, then back to Avo. "Why are you telling me--??"

She shrugs calmly, leaning in the door frame. "You asked. I'm not ashamed of it, if that's what you're implying. And I'm sure everyone in the building knows about it."

"No, no." I stand there kinda dumbly, shaking my head. "No, I mean, love what you do, right? Heh. Uh. I wasn't suggesting you should be ashamed, or anything."
I scratch my head nervously, unable to take my eyes off the lavish bedspread.

"You uh, like, ever do two-person shows, or...?"

"...okay, time to go," she groans, clicking the lights out before I've even left the room.
It's important to look out for your friends.

"That'll be $14.39," the elderly meerkat cashier says, sacking the soda bottles and chips with a cheerful look on his fuzzy, wrinkled face. "Say, I don't think I've seen you around before. You new to the neighborhood?"

"Been living here going on several months now," I reply, hoofing through my wallet for a ten and a five. "Sure doesn't feel like it, though. I guess I just don't really get out much."

Well, if I'm being honest, it's probably more like I haven't wanted to get out much.

For months, most of my nights consisted of getting up and going to either work, Bug Burga, or both, and then coming straight home. That is, right up till the scandal broke. What the stations are
alternately calling the Savage Crisis, the Savage Hoax, the Savage Conspiracy, or the Bellwether Conspiracy, depending on who you're listening to.

A lot changed that night. I've been trying to take Betty's advice about 'getting my face out there', but the truth is I just can't keep to myself anymore. In a way I wonder if I ever really could.

Anyway, that's why I've been spending most days out and about lately. And so far, I can see it's already starting to pay off, even if only in small ways. I'm finding all sorts of places I didn't know about. For instance: who'd have expected this hole-in-the-wall convenience store to have jumbo bags of chips for just a buck and a quarter each? Sure, they may not be name brands like Hay's, but Root Beer, Pickle Party, and Cool Mayo don't sound bad to me. They've got some carnivore-friendly flavors I've never seen like Tangy Gravy and Grasshoppers. Hell, despite the area, they even have a few herbivorous specials like Leaf Medley, Flamin' Hot! Tubers, and Roots & Vinegar -- though I wouldn't trust the expiry dates, given how long they've probably been sitting on those shelves.

"...Son?"

"Sorry, I got distracted by the chips," I confess, sheepishly.

"I was just askin', if you don't mind, where abouts you live?" he inquires with polite interest.

"You know The Crowns?" I jab a hoof in the sort-of direction of home.

"Oh, yeah, that's Al's building! Always a darling little pup, that one. Even if he couldn't resist getting into it with that wee grass-eating goat. Ohh, or was that an antelope...?" Trailing off, he opens the cash drawer of the old-fashioned till, layers my money on top of a neat stack, and begins counting out my change.

"Deer," I blurt out. He must mean Velvet Roe. Guess she and Al really have been together since childhood.

"Always trouble, mixing across lines like that," he mutters absently. "You know, I've been around long enough to remember the Crowns when it was just a slum. They sure made it into a nice place."

A 'nice place'? It wasn't long ago that I would've laughed in his face for even suggesting it isn't a slum. Or isn't still a slum. Now, I don't know. Maybe he's got a point. The apartments are rough at first glance, sure, but like Packer's Gym and this store, there's plenty of good stuff to be found on the inside. You just gotta be willing to look for it.

"So, you stocking up for the big game?"

"Sure am. The whole building's probably going to have a watch party, and everyone usually brings something." I take my change from him and drop the coins in the 'give a penny' dish on the counter. "I can't cook, so I figured, you know, play it safe and bring junk food."

"Can't go wrong with chips and pop," he smiles and nods like it's the wisest thing he's heard all day. "Enjoy the game, and come back anytime."

"I will!" I reply with a smile of my own, hefting both grocery sacks and making my way out onto the street.

What a nice guy.
We've got a couple of hours before the game starts, so I'm on my way back to my apartment to stash the soda bottles in my fridge. Lobby's quiet today, which makes sense. Hoofball's broadcast schedule isn't really convenient for a nocturnal lifestyle.

As I make my way inside, I catch sight of Al resting in his chair. The great white wolf looks like he's been working hard. Thick, weary bags hang heavy under the Alpha's bloodshot eyes, and the bridge of his nose has a bandage wrapped around it. Rather than wearing his usual work clothes, though, he's dressed up nicely. A crimson button-up shirt I haven't seen him wear before, and a pair of black pressed slacks. Velvet must be coming by later. Straightening up as much as I can, I give him a respectful nod as I make my way upstairs, and he lifts a paw halfway off his armrest in what I'm guessing is a tired wave back. I think I even saw him smile a little.

I'd call that progress.

I head upstairs to my apartment, juggling the overstuffed paper sacks in my arms while trying to remember which of my pockets I stashed my keys in. I could get one of those retractable key holder things you hook on your belt loop, but I probably look like a big enough dork in my cargo shorts as it is.

On my way past the apartment next to mine -- the one Charlie and Marty share -- I notice something in my peripheral vision: a little wrapped box sitting at their door. I glance around to make sure nobody's coming before leaning over and giving it a quick skim.

Look, I'm not nosey, it's just really rare to see mail -- especially a parcel -- uncollected around here. I mean, Pack Street's not the best neighborhood. I'm sure mail gets swiped from doorsteps all the time.

I set my bags down on the floor and quickly pick the box up. It's heavily marked with 'fragile' and 'urgent' stamps all over the cardboard, and sealed up tight with bright red 'express mail' tape. The return address doesn't include a name, but it looks like it's addressed to Charlie specifically.

Frowning, I turn the thing over in my hooves, studying it. It's weird to see something like this just left lying here. Makes sense Marty would be gone from home this time of day. The hothead of a stoat's probably still at his library job. For someone like Charlie to miss a parcel, though? She's not the kind of vixen who'd order something important and then miss the delivery. She'd absolutely be here.

I know it's probably none of my business, but some part of me wonders if something isn't wrong.

Well, no sense in not at least being neighborly. If I was expecting an important delivery and I missed it, I wouldn't want it left sitting out to where anyone could steal it. Maybe she was in the shower, or was listening to music or something. Raising my hoof, I knock politely at their door, then wait for a reply.

A full minute later, I'm still waiting.

Okay, that is weird.

The safest thing to do would be to hold onto it for her till I can figure out what's up. Make sure nobody snags it. Unlocking my own apartment door, I drop the snacks off, shoving the sodas into my fridge without even unloading them from the bags. I snatch a marker and a scrap of paper from my junk drawer to scribble out a hasty note.
Charlie - Something arrived for you. I'm holding onto it so it won't get stolen. Come knock when you get this. - Remmy Cormo (West-001)

There. I guess once this is done I'd better jog downstairs and ask Al if he knows of a way to contact her. I'm sure I'll probably catch shit for snooping, but this box could have something important in it, like medication. I'm willing to take that risk.

Heading outside into the hallway with the note in-hoof and the box under my arm, I almost run face-first into Ozzy, who's pacing around outside Charlie's and Marty's door. The hulking hyena looks up at me with a troubled expression, his usual smile nowhere to be found.

"Hey, Rem," he mumbles half-heartedly, paws in his pockets. "You ain't seen Charlie around, have you?"

"No, no, I haven't." I hold up the box, which he looks over with a furrowed brow. "Just found this on their doorstep. Looks like you're not the only one having trouble getting in touch with her."

"...huh," Ozzy finally mumbles once he's finished, scratching the back of his broad, shaggy neck. "This really ain't like her."

"Yeah, my thoughts exactly. Why don't we go ask Al if he knows of a way to get a hold of her? If there's even a chance something's wrong, we better get on it sooner rather than later."

Raising his paws, Ozzy shakes his head, forcing his smile back into place.

"Hey, whoa, I dunno about all that. I never said nothin' about getting the Alpha involved. Look, Charlie's got her own way of doin' things. Her bein' gone a couple days ain't that big a deal. I mean, she's taken off before. She's probably fine, y'know?"

"A couple days?" Now I've got an even worse feeling. "And she didn't tell anyone?"

"...not that I know of, no."

"I get that you know her better than I do, Ozzy, but she seems way too careful to leave when she's got a mail delivery coming in. I figure she'd at least have let someone know she was gonna be gone."

The hyena stares back at me, not immediately responding. He looks like he's torn, trying to decide between going with his own gut feeling and staying out of it. I can't blame him -- I'm not any more thrilled than he is to have to ask Al anything, especially now that it seems we're just starting to get on good terms again. But this is also a Packmate we're talking about here. This is Charlie. I'm not going to just hang her out to dry if she's in danger.

I attach the note to Charlie and Marty's door, then tuck the parcel carefully into my shirt. It's fragile, so at least my wool will keep it well padded. "I'm going to ask him--"

"C'mon, Woolly B. Al's got a big evenin' planned. And so do we, right?" Ozzy interrupts. "I don't wanna cause problems for him an' Ms. Roe, s'all. Let's just stay here, watch the game, y'know? Charlie'll turn up. She always does."

Rubbing my chin, I almost concede -- but I just can't shake the weird feeling gnawing at me. And based on how unconvinced Ozzy sounds, I think it's eating away at him, too.

"At least just let me bring it to Al's attention. Make sure he knows about it." He starts to cut me off, but I raise a hoof. "It's okay, man. You don't have to come if you don't want to. I'd just feel
better if he's at least aware of the situation. Just in case."

He sighs, taps his foot for a moment, and nods, stepping aside as I make my way downstairs. To my surprise, though, I can hear his heavy footsteps trailing me. Guess he didn't want to hang me out to dry either.

Entering the lobby, I can see Al's since migrated from his chair to looking out the window, one paw in his pocket, the other idly twirling a keyring as he watches the cars pass by. He glances over his shoulder as we walk in, a half-smile on his muzzle.

"Evenin'."

"Evenin', boss," Ozzy offers.

"Hey Al, I'm sorry to bother you," I begin, tapping my hooves together to steady my nerves. "Is there any chance you've seen Charlie lately?"

"Not lately," he replies, leaning down a bit and peering at something outside.

"Not even in the last few days? Like... she hasn't called, or anything?"

He stops jingling his keyring, and something in his stance changes.

"...no," he repeats more slowly, but there's a different weight to it.

This all feels too familiar. Ozzy right beside me, Al staring me down in a nice suit. I've been here before and it ended with something foul coming out of my mouth and a whole lot of trouble. I gulp, trying to bury the unpleasant memory. The situation itself was way different then. For one thing, I was definitely in the wrong. And I may be now, but if worrying about the welfare of a fellow Pack member is wrong, then fuck it, I'll be wrong the rest of my days.

I'm kind of fumbling around for verbal footing as I glance over to Ozzy, who, despite everything still gives me an encouraging nod.

"Well, I'll get right to it," I begin plaintively, going for the 'softly softly' tone. Show deference, humility. I'm the Omega, after all. I pull the little box from my natural woolly padding. "We haven't heard from her, she doesn't seem to be at home, and there was a parcel delivered on her doorstep."

He tilts his head to one side. Almost curiously, like the toy truck-wielding pup that lives around here. "You sure it was for her?"

"Yeah. I figure if she's getting something in the mail it means she had to have ordered it, and Charlie w--"

"Yeah," Al interrupts, nodding quickly. "I get it. When's the last time either a'you did hear from her?"

"Been a couple days, at least," Ozzy says quietly. "Maybe longer."

"I haven't seen her in a while either," I add. Now that I think about it, I haven't talked to her at all since she gave me my tee shirt -- along with that cryptic advice.

*If you're going through hell, keep going.*

What if she's going through a hell of her own right now?
Straightening out his collar, Al reaches his free paw toward me for the box, which I immediately hand over. He looks it over, shakes it slightly, gives it a sniff.

"It ain't like Charlie not to at least check in if she's plannin' on being away a while." He passes the box back to me, his brow knotted. "She knows the rules."

"There's a rule for letting the Pack know if you're going on vacation?" I ask with a nervous laugh.

"Yeah, it's called common sense," Ozzy bark-laughs, cocking his head as his ears flop to one side. "Y'know, like if your plants need waterin', or your mail needs collectin'? Like this exact kinda thing, for example. Didn't you just say somethin' like that like, two minutes ago?"

Oh. Well yeah, I guess that makes sense, after all. Here I was thinking it was some kind of violation of ancient wolf code.

"Look, do you have her cell phone number or anything?" I ask.

"I can call her beeper," Al mutters as he breaks out his own cell and punches in a few numbers. "Pager, whatever. She uses burners mostly, but this way she can call me back on whatever she's got. I've told her to get somethin' more reliable in case shit like this ever happens, but she's stubborn."

Al replaces his cell, then picks one claw at the cuffs of his sleeves.

"Right, done. We'll hear from her soon."

Despite Al's assurance, none of the three of us seem particularly relieved. We all just stand there awkwardly for a while.

Maybe a minute passes, before I break the uncomfortable silence. "How fast does she usually get back to you?"

"Fast," the Alpha grumbles.

"That ain't good, man," Ozzy murmurs. "Maybe she can't get to her phone?"

"Like what, lockup or something? Oh fuck, you don't think the cops arrested her, do you?" I bleat.

Both of them give me a weird look, and I nervously clear my throat.

"I, uh -- whatever, I'm just saying, it's a possibility."

"...nah. If she got busted on one of her 'errands' she'd have called here for sure." Despite Al's calm voice, I can tell he's as troubled by it as Ozzy and I are. "Oz is probably right. My guess is she just can't get a call out for some reason. Out of service area somewhere, maybe."

"Any idea of where that 'somewhere' might be?"

He shakes his head. "Remmy, it's Charlie. She could be in any part of the city doing a job. Fuck, she could be in Bunnyburrow right now for all we know. There's no sense in runnin' all over creation looking for her."

"Maybe, but we can at least look around Pack." I gesture out the window, not quite sure what exactly I'm pointing at. "Someone has to have seen her, right? I know I'm just the Omega, and I probably haven't earned car privileges yet, but--"
"No," the white wolf returns immediately. "Absolutely not. Me and V are going out tonight. I'm treating her to a nice dinner."

"Al, if Charlie--"

"Remmy, you're putting me in a real bad spot here," he warns gruffly. "We made plans."

"Boss, c'mon, Remmy's right," Ozzy nods enthusiastically, slapping me on the shoulder with a firm paw. "An' you know he wouldn't be askin' if it weren't important. I'm sure he ain't here for shits and giggles. Besides, you an' Ms. Roe can stay here, catch the game with everyone! Hey, that sounds like a great time, right Rem?"

Despite the Alpha's glare, I find myself pointing at Ozzy in agreement, like he's just struck some great idea. "Oh yeah, yeah. Sounds like a blast."

Al lets out a heavy sigh through his nostrils, seemingly weighing it out in his mind -- but only for a moment.

"If you can't find her, let me know before leaving the area and I'll put some calls in. Let's not make this a bigger deal than it has to be just yet." With a reluctant nod, he extends his keys to Ozzy.

The hyena shakes his head apologetically at the gesture, paws raised. "You know I can't drive, Al."

"...oh, right. Sorry," Al shakes his head, instead turning and half-dropping, half-tossing them at me. "Don't fuck this up, and don't fuck up my car, Omega."

I barely manage to catch the keychain before it hits the floor. Straightening up, I nod to him. "You got my word, Al. I won't fuck this up."

Climbing into the driver's side of Al's sedan, I'm immediately struck by how small I feel in comparison to the rest of the car. The only time I've ever even been in here was when I was a passenger. No wonder Wolt had to ratchet the driver's seat all the way up on our trip to Bunnyburrow; I'm taller than he is, and I still feel like I'm sitting on the floor!

"You okay with drivin', Rem?" Ozzy asks with a worried smile.

"I'd better be," I quip, familiarizing myself with the placement of the controls. "Thank god it's an automatic, at least. I never learned how to drive stick."

He stares back. "That ain't really reassuring!"

"Sorry. No, yeah, I got this."

As I merge onto the street, I can see my passenger fretting and staring out the window, even shifting in his seat. I'm not sure the last time I've seen Ozzy so uncomfortable. I guess I didn't realize he and Charlie were this close. Then again, seems like Ozzy's close with just about everyone.

"So, places she could be," I offer to keep him focused, motioning for a tiny fox on a dinky moped to pass as I pull up to a red light. "Could she be at the library? Marty is her roommate, after all."

"Nah. If Marty'd seen her, he would'a texted me something back."
"Right, scratch that off the list then." Though I realize it'd probably help if we had a list to begin with. Scratching my head, I try to think of other locations our resident troublemaker of a vixen could be. "Maybe Bug Burga?"

"We lookin' for Charlie or pickin' up your dinner?" He punctuates his joke with a chuckle, and I roll my eyes, snickering in spite of myself. "You got me. Chalk it up to wishful thinking," I reply as the light turns green and we take off again. "How about you, any thoughts?"

"Man, if I knew I'd have run over there myself," he admits, fidgeting with his seat belt. "Sometimes there's no tellin' with her."

For now, I just nod and focus on driving and keeping an eye out for places Charlie might be. I'm not exactly scared behind the wheel, even if Ozzy seems nervous. After all, I operate a forklift for a living. That said, driving around Downtown Zootopia is different from driving a slow-moving forklift through a warehouse. Pedestrians, cyclists, nighttime traffic, keeping an eye out for small rodent-sized vehicles... it's a lot more than I'm used to. At least we're not trying to drive through the Rainforest district. All those twisty back roads are fucking brutal, even for an experienced driver. There's always some story or another about an overturned semi or some other kind of accident down there.

"Y'know, I know she can take care of herself," I grumble. "It's just that in a bad neighborhood, my mind always goes to the worst case scenario."

Ozzy turns to look at me, head cocked so hard to one side it's almost horizontal. "'Bad neighborhood?' Man, Pack ain't a bad neighborhood!"

I scoff. "What? You kiddin' me?"

"Dude, what?! You gotta be pullin' my tail here!" He laughs, but it's incredulous, dry. "You can't just call every place with bars on the windows a 'bad neighborhood'! Everybody knows everybody, folks here is nice as hell. You don't get jumped for walkin' down the street, you can go out any time of day or night, we got low crime..."

"Dude," I fire back, "Some guy got killed like a block from us just last weekend!"

"People get killed all over the city, man!" Ozzy sits back hard, rattling the seat. "Besides, guy was a dealer. It's not like random folks are gettin' got on the street."

I shake my head. "Marty thinks Pack's a bad neighborhood."

"Yeah well, Marty's got his head up his butt sometimes," Ozzy grins. "Plus, little dude likes being dramatic."

"That's for sure," I grin back, eager to change the subject.

It seems to work. For a while we just cruise wordlessly, Ozzy watching the windows as I try to plot a course.

"Packer's?" I ask after a while, breaking the silence.

"Charlie ain't really the workout type."

"Not really," I agree. "But maybe one of the guys there's seen her?"
"Worth a shot," Ozzy sighs, running a shaky paw through his headfur.

I suppose it's as good a lead to go on as anything else we've got, and conveniently, the Gym's only a block or two from where we're at. Besides, the regulars there are pretty chatty types, and as tight-knit as Pack Street is, maybe someone knows something.

And speaking of Packer's, it's overflowing tonight. The parking lot's packed -- uh, it's full. They must've finished the renovations and had some big reopening since I was here last. It dawns on me that they must have something set up inside for the game, because under the front lights I can see Martina's got a table set up outside, the tiny stoat all but floating in a pool of light in the middle of the nighttime darkness. Seems to be paying off for her, since her table's surrounded by a mix of predators and even a couple prey species as well.

"There's Marty's sister," Ozzy observes, pointing to her stand. "I think that's Neil at the table with her too?"

"Looks like it," I chuckle, spotting the back of the friendly lion's messy, frizzy mane poking out above the rest of the crowd. "I'll keep the car running if you wanna hop out and ask 'em if they've heard anything?"

"On it."

Since there's nowhere else to stop, I pull up to front of the building and let Ozzy quickly disembark. He jogs over to the stand, ducking and weaving past a few of the patrons to get Martina's attention. While he's busy chatting away, I shift into park and drum my hoof-tips on the wheel, scanning the mammals coming and going for anyone else I recognize. After a minute, I notice a familiar jackal standing next to an equally-familiar aardwolf just outside the entrance.

Rolling the driver's side window down, I wave to them. Avo catches sight of me first and waves back. Following her gaze, Anneke glances over, sees me waving, and she makes a face like she's just tasted curdled milk. Without missing a beat, she storms off into the building. My heart sinks a little as I lower my hoof.

Guess she's still mad at me.

Watching the aardwolf leave, Avo throws me an apologetic shrug before disappearing into the gym after her.

I'm still staring after them when Ozzy throws open the passenger side door and climbs in, bringing me back to the situation at hand.

"Anything?" I ask hopefully, shoving the unpleasant encounter from my mind for now.

"Neil said he definitely saw her pass by his truck just last night," Ozzy says excitedly. "Couldn't tell me where she was headed when he did, but still -- that's a good sign, right?"

"Yeah, I mean... it's not much to go on, but it's better than if he hadn't seen her at all," I reply. I already feel my own worry lifting. Ozzy's energy is contagious. "Where was Neil at the time?"

"At the lot down by the barber shop, where he's been setting up lately. You know it, right?"

"Clipperships, right? South of the row? Yeah, I know it," I reply, flashing him a thumbs-up as I pull out of the parking lot. "It's a start."
"...Don't cross the double yellow line," Ozzy murmurs quietly as we pass in the blackness between streetlights.

"I wasn't planning to," I return, glancing sideways at him.

He laughs, shaking his head. "Sorry. Song lyric. I sing when I'm nervous."

"You sing all the time," I smile.

He stretches a little in his seat, chuckling as he rolls his window up. "What can I say, I got music in my heart."

We keep on driving, down towards Clipperships, and he starts humming to himself, but only for a minute. In the silence that follows, he lets out a forlorn sigh, running his paws through the shaggy, sweaty fur on his head.

"This... ain't really helpful, though, is it?" Even though he's still smiling, I can tell he's beginning to fret. "I mean Clipperships is on the edge of the commercial row. There's so much down that way."

Ozzy's not wrong. I work in a warehouse, myself, so I'm plenty familiar with that area. If you've ever heard someone say 'it fell off the back of a truck', it was probably one bound for Pack Street. There are tons of distributors, storage facilities, importers, distribution centers, and so on. Even if we just skinned the row, it'd still take us hours. Hours we may not have.

Enough of this needle-in-the-haystack shit. Where would I be if I were her? Why would I be there?

Ozzy scratches his broad shoulder with a quiet canine (or is it feline?) whine. "An' if she went down that way, she coulda been headed anywhere. Might not even be in Pack. Maybe Grass Street. Hell, she coulda kept on going straight out past Muddy for all we know."

"On foot?" I cut off his line of thought, shaking my head. "Nah, I think if she was headed that far she would've gotten wheels."

"Unless she was meeting someone, and taking a ride from there," he points out.

Fuck. I hadn't considered that. I don't know all of Charlie's 'business contacts', so she could be with anyone. Hell, the only one I do know, I met because--

Suddenly all the lights on the street come into a kind of sharp clarity, and everything goes real quiet in my ears. I can feel my wool tingling like it's electric.

"I know where she is," I blurt out.

Whirling his entire body to face me, Ozzy stares at me in startled confusion. "What? Where?!"

Without replying, I shift into gear and stomp on the gas pedal, roaring down the darkened strip.

Pandora's Box looms before us, imposing and quiet.

The awning and gutters are covered in leaves. The side of the building's covered in graffiti. After what happened to the alley court's mural, I don't bother reading it. Though the sirens and light bars are no more, the rubberneckers have long gone, and the once-shattered shop windows have since been replaced, all I can see is the scene from that night -- the night Pandora was attacked, and the
last I saw of the nicest tigress on Pack was her being wheeled off, thrashing and strapped to a stretcher.

Something about the dusky storefront still clings to the feeling of that night. There's still that lingering air of dread. Of sadness.

I guess that's a pretty dramatic way to talk about an adult bookstore.

"You think she's here?" Ozzy asks curiously as we make our way up to the tinted windows at the front of the building.

Charlie once told me Pandora was one of the few people she thinks of as a friend. I can still hear the trembling fox's words in my ear from the night Pandora 'went savage'. "Call it a hunch, but... I get the feeling that she might be here to help out a friend. Just like us."

I look around inside the building, wondering if my hunch was correct. It has to be. But between the darkness inside and out, and the tinted glass, I can't see much.

"Oz, hyenas have good night vision, right? Can you...?" I jerk my hoof toward the murky shop windows, smudged with pawprints and grime from not being cleaned.

Without waiting, Ozzy smushes his face up to the window, mashing his broad snout in, before deciding to angle his head down for a more efficient way of pressing his face to the glass. All I can do now is wait and hope.

Fortunately, I don't have to wait long.

Ozzy jumps up in place, his shaggy little tail wagging suddenly. "There! Right there! Hey! Right there, right next to the cardboard bunny!"

I peer in again, straining against the dim light to focus on the spot Ozzy's indicating. And sure enough, there in the middle of the store, surrounded by empty drink bottles and a pile of discarded papers, is an orange-furred, sweater-clad vixen. Ozzy pounds excitedly on the glass and Charlie's ears prick. She looks up, squinting at us for a moment, then quickly hops to her feet, hurrying toward the window. In her paws is a half-eaten bag of crackers which are shaped like--

...well, it is a sex shop.

"Ah, I see my estimate was correct. Perfect timing," she calls through the glass, wiping crumbs off onto her sweater. Her already low and mumbly voice is hard to make out with the barrier separating us, but at least she sounds okay. "I trust I didn't put you through too much trouble."

"We've been looking everywhere for you! How long have you been here?" I ask. "Are you hurt?"

"Since last night, and no -- in that order."

As relieved as I am to see she's okay, Ozzy's beside himself. He's practically running up and down outside the building. You can tell he wants to grab her up in a big hug, but he's held back by the glass.

"I'm so glad to see you're okay!" he cheers.

"Yes, I'm quite well, apart from being locked in as you can surely discern."

Ozzy excitedly pounds his paws and face to the window like a little kid looking into an aquarium.
"We've been worried sick about you!"

Charlie tilts her head slightly, the corners of her mouth turning up in (what is for her, anyway) quite the smile. "Just be careful of that glass. The alarms are still live on a separate system so mammals don't just cut the power before breaking in. Otherwise I would've cracked a window out hours ago."

I smile, wiping the sweat from my forehead. "Yeah, don't worry, I wasn't exactly planning on smashing up the storefront."

"How did you know I was here?"

"Oh man, Charlie, that's the best part! You hadda see it! We's lookin' all over town for you, and then Remmy just -- outta nowhere! He said to me, he says, 'Ozzy, I know exactly where she is'. And then he just punched it and drove straight here!"

"You make me sound like Sherlock Hound or something," I chuckle. "But yeah, that's more or less what happened. I just... had a hunch."

"Well, however you came to the conclusion, your 'hunch' was obviously the right one," she says, eyebrow raised. "I got your page, but my phone broke when I fell through the skylight, so I wasn't able to respond. The internal power and phone lines have been disconnected as well."

"If you're locked in, why didn't you just pick the lock and get out, then? I know these door locks wouldn't stand up to you."

"My skills with improvised picks aren't quite on par with Betty's yet," Charlie confesses, like she's admitting to something embarrassing. "But even if I had brought my tools, opening the door would have sounded the aforementioned alarm. That's why I came in through the roof. Unfortunately, after a mishap involving the wall-brackets, a shelf of erotic candy samples, and an unfortunately unpredictable skylight cover, I wasn't able to exit the way I entered."

"What're you doi'n' here anyway, Charlie?" Ozzy asks, stepping back and looking around the perimeter of the building. "Place's been quiet for a while."

There's a glint in her eyes as she opens them ever so slightly.

"Let's just say I'm tending to some sensitive inventory the owner can't see to personally, in her current state," she answers evasively, glancing at me out of the corner of her eye. Having personally delivered some 'sensitive inventory' here, I get where she's coming from. I nod once to let her know I understand.

Apparently her explanation's good enough for Ozzy too. "Oh, okay," he says, and leaves it at that.

"Mmm. I'll admit I'm relieved at your timing. I've almost run out of these barbecue-flavored phalluses," Charlie quips, shaking the foil package in our general direction, "and I wasn't eagerly anticipating making a meal of Gooey Gummies and Cool Mayo chips."

"Hey!" I interrupt. "What's wrong with Cool Mayo?"

She ignores me, finishing the last of the crackers. "These aren't terrible. I recommend pairing them with the Wet Dream Cream Soda."

Ozzy can't take it anymore, and promptly doubles over into a wheezing giggle-fit. If my own
choice of chip flavors wasn't being so rudely insulted, I'd probably be doing the same.

"All right, well, let's see if we can't get you out of there," I propose, looking around for anything that might help us. "You said you went in through the roof, right? Maybe we can get you out the same way?"

"...hey, how'd you get up to the roof in the first place?" Ozzy asks. "I'm the tallest of all us and I don't think I could get up that high without somethin'."

"That was the simple part: I climbed up the fire escape of the neighboring building and jumped across."

I glance at Ozzy, jaw agape, but the hyena doesn't seem fazed by her answer, so I turn back to Charlie.

"You just -- you parkoured your way inside?" I choke.

"It's not as difficult as it sounds," she replies, clasping her paws behind herself.

Eyeing the gap between Pandora's and the surrounding buildings, I'm not sure a flying squirrel would feel comfortable trying to make it across. Talk about a literal leap of faith -- what'd she do, slingshot herself? And what if she'd missed the jump? Fuck, I don't even want to think about it. All I can say is she must really consider Pandora to be a good friend.

Then again, I guess after what she and I both went through to get that Tiger Oil for her, it's not that surprising.

"Say, is that Al's car?" Charlie asks, pointing to the sedan behind us.

I'm still kind of stunned, so I just nod dumbly.

"Hmm. That gives me an idea." She sprints over to gather her papers off the ground from the little 'nest' she was sitting in earlier, before returning with them and a marker from her pocket. "If you back the car up and around the alley, then -- based on your combined heights -- you should be able to climb up onto the roof of the building if you stand on the hood."

She flattens the paper to the window for us to see: a sketch of the building that she mapped herself -- complete with labels for all the product aisles like 'Tool World' and 'Pussy Paradise'. Over the back storeroom is the small skylight -- easily large enough for a mammal Charlie's size to breach through.

"I know Al keeps a coil of cable in his trunk, for something work-related. Find something sturdy to anchor it to, lower one end down to me through the opening in the roof, and I can climb up and leave through the way I came without tripping the alarm."

I study the map, figuring out mentally where I'll have to park for the easiest way up onto the roof, while Ozzy runs back to the car.

"Hey, Charlie," I cough, taking advantage of the moment of privacy.

She clasps her hands. "Cormo."

I fumble with my hooves, but we may not have much time so I settle for just blurring it out. "Look, I-- I hope you're not still mad at me."
She blinks in response. "For what?"

I just look down at the ground.

"...ah," she softly returns. "Yes, that's right. Our last encounter was not... particularly pleasant. For that, I apologize."

I glance up suddenly, and this time I find I'm cocking my head to the side. "You apologize?"

"I'll maintain you were being a bit unreasonable, and I did try to offer some assistance, but I..." Charlie takes a breath. "Well, I was emotional at the time. A lot had been happening. I was unnecessarily cruel with some of the things I'd said."

"I-- no, I don't-- I accept your apology, of course, I just didn't expect--" I'm falling over my words here. "But, 'emotional'? Since when are you emotional?"

Her fuzzy orange brow scrunches up and she peers curiously through the glass at me. From behind me, I can hear Ozzy cursing idly at the trunk of Al's car.

"I may not always express it in more typical modes," Charlie sniffs, matter-of-factly, "but I assure you, I have emotions the same as anyone else. I'm not some machine."

I sigh, stroking my pompadour with a hoof as a relieved smile creeps over my face. "No, no I wasn't trying to say you were. Sorry. I'm just-- I'm glad to hear things are okay between us. I thought, I mean-- I thought maybe you didn't want to see me."

"Well as of this moment, you can take my word for it that I'm quite pleased to see the both of you. Now, are we ready?"

With near perfect timing, a triumphant-looking Ozzy returns with the heavy metal cable.

"Al's not gonna like us jumping up and down on his car, but I don't think we have much choice," I finally admit. "All right, Ozzy. You ready?"

"Absolutely, Woolly B. Let's do this! A good old-fashioned breakout! I'm like, an action star!" he grins, heaving the cable with both paws to strike a dramatic pose.

...unfortunately, the gesture throws the metal-weighted lead at the end of the cable directly into the front display window. The three of us tense up and freeze in place as the sound of shattering glass fills the stillness of the night, followed by the loud, shrill wail of an alarm going off.

Looking over my shoulder, I see Charlie and Ozzy staring in wide-eyed disbelief at the destroyed barrier between them. The two of them glance for a moment at each other, then me, before suddenly springing into action and bolting for the car. Ozzy dives in through the back door, hauling in the cable, while Charlie vaults over the shattered glass window with her notes, hastily taking the passenger's seat and not even bothering to buckle in as she slams the door.

"Well, that's one way of making an escape," Ozzy groans a muffled groan, his face buried in shame in the seat cushions. "I'm such a fuckin' idiot!"

"Hey, it was an accident, man," I assure him over my shoulder. I've been in his shoes, and frankly,
I'm just relieved it wasn't me this time. "Don't beat yourself up. At least we got Charlie--"

"I can't be seen here!" Slinking down in her seat like she's trying to hide, Charlie grabs my sleeve and shakes me by it. "Drive, Cormo!"

"Right. Don't have to tell me twice," I respond, shifting into drive and flooring it.

As we peel off down the street headed for the safety of The Crowns, one of Ozzy's burly paws reaches shakily forward, clutching a wrapped parcel -- the same wrapped parcel that started us off on this rescue mission.

"You dropped this," he murmurs sheepishly.

"Oh, hey, yeah. I almost forgot," I grin in spite of myself, taking it with my free hoof and quickly passing it over to the vixen. "Parcel came for you, Charlie. Here you go -- special delivery."

"Man, that's twice now so I gotta ask -- what the hell is a parcel?" Ozzy laughs.

"What do you call it?"

"It's a package, man! Parcel... lookit Mr. Fancy Pants over here!" The clouds seem to have passed quickly, and Ozzy's back to his usual giggling self. Guess having Charlie back makes it hard to dwell on the botched escape plan.

"Thank you, Cormo," she nods, accepting it gently.

"You mind me asking what it is? If you do, I ain't gonna pry," I cough, focusing on driving even while stealing glances at the 'package'. "It's just that's what kicked off this whole search, so I'm kinda curious."

Charlie rests the little box in her lap. She offers me a gentle, knowing smile. "It's something for our mutual friend."

Ah.

We drive in silence for a moment, heading for home.

"I'm sure she'll appreciate it," I finally return.

The lobby's full of light and sound, but as we step in, I realize there's only two people actually watching the game: Al and Velvet. A wolf and a deer leaning together in the empty lobby, watching a tiny TV from an old, worn sofa. Guess everyone's out watching somewhere else.

I hate to interrupt the moment, but...

"Hey Al," I greet. "Car's back where you left it. Even topped off the gas."

They turn in unison to see us, and Al's face lights up with visible relief on seeing Charlie is with us -- only to immediately shift when he spots what we're carrying. Charlie with a freshly opened bag of A Chip Off The Ol' Cock kettle chips, me with two hooffuls of Bunny-Buns Marshmallow Gummies, and Ozzy picking tiny bits of broken glass out of his scruff.

His glare hardens, and he looks like he's about to growl something at us when all of a sudden Ms. Roe breaks out laughing hard enough to match Ozzy's howls, slapping her leg with a polished hoof.
The great white wolf turns a little red and smiles in spite of himself.

I cough. "So uh, we--"

"Don't tell me," he interrupts, turning back to the game. "The less I know, the better. Long as the car's in one piece."

Charlie plods over to the couch, peering at the TV. "Mind if we join you, Chief? We've got snacks."

He turns back again to glare, and Velvet -- who was calming down a little and wiping a tear from her eye -- breaks out laughing anew.

"I've got like, *actual* chips upstairs," I offer quickly. "And soda. We can make a watch party of it?"

"Fine," he grumbles at last, relenting. "Just no weird deviant snacks, all right? And none of that *Cool Mayo* shit."

I can't believe this.

"It's hard being the only one with good taste around here," I sigh, popping a peach-flavored gummy shaped like a butt into my mouth.
Walking into the Pack Street Public Library always feels like stepping through a time warp.

Though to be fair, I guess that comes with the territory. Libraries are pretty much the same wherever you go. They're one of those stubborn relics from the past like newspapers or pay phones, refusing to disappear even as technology gets better. Which is a damn good thing right now, because I really need to look something up and I exceeded my cell phone's monthly data cap on the first of the month.

...And today is only the second.

Look, I didn't have a choice. Nobody willingly downgrades to the ultra-cheap 4GB-a-month data
plan, but I'm kind of between jobs. Gotta tighten my belt. If making my rent payment on time means no bingeing ZooTube videos on my phone, that's a small price to pay. Besides, the library's within walking distance from home, and it's free for everyone to use. It's not gonna kill me to get out of my apartment for a little while.

And I mean, it's actually sorta cool here, in a 'nostalgic-for-junior-high' way. Case in point, I'm pretty sure I see one of the Wilbur Worm books on the shelf full of 'staff picks'. God, that takes me back. I remember writing a book report on that series when I was in third grade!

I'm soaking up the atmosphere when I glance up, and for the first time, I notice there's a bunch of banners strung along the walls, and even between bookshelves. They all have cutesy sayings like 'BOOKS ARE FUN!' and 'Read! Know! Grow!'. They're obviously homemade, using materials like you'd see out of a classroom -- construction paper, markers, glitter and paste -- but the art and lettering are so much better than what the average kid's capable of. You can tell that whoever made these put a lot of work into them.

Now I'm grinning at the thought of Martina running laps around an oversized sheet of construction paper, drawing a border with crayons and markers. Come to think of it, I wonder if the little stoat works here along with her brother. I know she's always doing fundraisers for the library down at Packer's, but I don't think I've ever thought to ask if she's actually employed here? Eh, something to bring up next time I see her, I guess.

As I approach the front desk, I spot a familiar, orange-furred, bush-tailed vixen standing at the checkout station. Her pointy snout's resting flat on the smooth surface of the counter, her arms dangling loosely at her sides as she carries on a conversation with the librarian himself.

"...haven't heard anything yet," Charlie mumbles, ears laying flat against the top of her head. "Though I'm confessedly not as... patient in this particular matter as I'd prefer to be."

"I'm tellin' you, don't sweat it. You read that article I left out for you this morning?" Marty replies as he finishes stamping a hardback book nearly as big as he is. "They said a hundred fuckin' percent, Charlie. A hundred percent! Good as already done."

She huffs frustratedly through her nose, sending a few scraps of paper fluttering across the polished wood. I'm half-expecting him to gripe her out for it, but he just gathers them all up without even flinching.

"Always a margin for error."

"Hey. C'mon," the stoat grunts back, muscling the hardback off the table and onto a cart full of other books. "Y'know it's okay to believe in good things, Charlie. You'll see."

The fox furrows her brow, studying him as he works for several long moments before finally nodding -- which is actually pretty cute to watch with her chin tapping on the smooth countertop.

"Mm." She finally pushes back and straightens her too-heavy sweater off with both paws. "Maybe you're right. Perhaps a little optimism isn't unwarranted."

"That's the spirit," Marty says approvingly before turning on his heel and coming face-to-face with me. "Ah. Great. Speaking of unwarranted..."

"Nice to see you too, Marty," I reply, extending my hoof to him for a shake. "Hi, Charlie."

She clasps her paws behind herself and dips her head in polite greeting.
"Cormo," she hums pleasantly as she saunters toward the door, her tailtip brushing slowly and deliberately around the backs of my bare legs as she passes by.

Meanwhile, Marty's looking at my outstretched hoof like I've just tried to offer him a scoop of fresh manure.

"What're you doing here, g-- Cormo?" he groans, pinching the bridge of his muzzle. "I know it ain't to renew your library card. That ain't due for another eight and a half months."

I let my hoof drop to my side, quietly choosing to ignore the fact he apparently has that information memorized.

"I'm... here for a book?" I ask warily, glancing at Charlie out of the corner of my eye, watching as her tail swishes from side to side with each silent step. "That's okay, right?"

"Uh, I guess?" he replies, mocking my fake, confused tone. "I assume you don't need me to hold your hand, so just try not to make a mess. I'm way too busy to be dealing with your shit today."

"Great." I force a smile. "Appreciate it, Marty."

Rolling his eyes, he climbs down from the counter and ducks into a back room marked 'Staff Only'. I run a hoof through my wool as I watch him leave. So much for being a 'civil' servant, am I right? ...Wait, that one was actually pretty clever.

I pull a small notepad from the pocket of my shorts, withdrawing the pen from its coiled wire binding.

Civil... servant.

Nice.

Okay, this is getting old fast.

I've spent the last half-hour looking for even a single book on interior design, and I can't find anything. And no, it's not that the books I'm pulling back are too dated or too high-brow. I mean I literally can't find anything at all in these stupid note cards. No matter how many times they showed us how to use it while I was in school, I never did get the whole Ewey Decimal thing. Shit's complicated as hell, and besides, computers automate everything anyway. This is one relic I wish they would get rid of.

I've exhausted every keyword I can think of: apartment, furniture, decorating... hell, I even looked for books on feng shui. Zip, nada, fuck all.

Unfortunately, I realize what this means. I'd really hoped I could avoid having to ask Marty for help. While he isn't in the worst mood I've ever seen him in, the less contact I have with him the better. Y'know, for keeping the peace and all. Still, unless I want this to be a wasted trip, there's no avoiding him.

"Fuckin' fantastic," I mutter as I shove the bundle of index cards back into their drawer. I mean, neatly shove them. I did say I wasn't going to make a mess.

Making my way back up to the librarian's desk, I see Marty's emerged from his staff room cocoon
while I was busy trying and failing at card divination. He's slowly shoving an oversized cart full of books across the library. I'm surprised he can even move it, seeing as how it's sized for a mammal bigger than he is. He can barely see over the top of the thing, but that's not stopping him. Gotta admire his persistence, I guess.

I approach the cart, waving to get his attention.

"Hey, Marty?" I cautiously prod, knowing he's been trying to avoid me.

"Yeah," he grunts, stopping to wipe the sweat off his brow.

"You busy?"

"What do you think?" he gestures to the cart without missing a beat, in his typical grouchy tone. Though, there's a bit of something else in it, too. Even as prickly as he usually is, I can hear it. "I gotta ton of shit to do today, so unless there's something you really need--"

"Well, if you're that busy," I interject, "is there anything I can help you with?"

That gets his attention. And to be honest, mine too. I'm just as surprised to hear myself extending the offer as he apparently is to be hearing it. He looks up at me, his eyes kind of bugging out, jaw hanging slack. He's making this weird sort of face that's equal parts confused and in pain. Like he's just stubbed his toe while trying to remember where he left his car keys.

"Nah. I'm fine," he replies dismissively.

"Yeah? You sure?" I persist. "You seem kinda... overwhelmed today. And you said you were super busy, so..."

He scoffs, clearly annoyed. "What, you think I can't do my job? Listen, muttonhead--"

"Hey, I might be a muttonhead, but that doesn't mean I can't read," I interrupt.

"Fuck's that got to do with--"

Without saying a word, I jab a hoof at the sign hanging off the counter behind him; 'VOLUNTEERS NEEDED'. Marty turns, sees what I'm pointing at, and rolls his eyes so hard his whole body moves with the gesture.

"Look, I don't have anywhere I gotta be right now," I continue, downplaying his frustration while trying not to sound patronizing. "And that cart's gotta weigh a ton. At least lemme help you push it to where it needs to go."

There's this weird feeling of clarity in my head right now. I originally just meant to call his bluff, like I figured he was just blowing me off? But as I'm doubling down, seeing all the shit he's got on his plate, I think I actually mean it? Like I said, it's not like I got anywhere else to be.

"Yeah, all right, fine." Conceding, Marty steps back and throws his paws in the air. "Knock yourself out. They're reference books, so they go in the reference section. Just wheel 'em over and I'll come shelve them myself in a minute."

I nod, gripping the cart's handles and giving it a test push. Even though it's fairly heavy, the cart rolls easily enough. "Okay, and where's the reference section?"

Smirking, he points over my shoulder to the center of the library, where a huge sign reading
"REFERENCE" dangles from the ceiling, flapping in the air-conditioner breeze.

"...Right, got it," I sigh as I begin wrangling the book trolley.

"Where do you keep the light bulbs in a library?"

Marty glances up from his clipboard, eyebrows knitted.

"...I don't know, Cormo," he groans. "Where do you keep the light bulbs in a library?"

"No, I mean -- I'm not making a joke. One of the floor lamps over there burned out. That lady saw me pushing the cart and asked me if I worked here," I explain, pointing to the sitting area where an older canine has her nose pressed tight against the pages of her book.

In spite of clearly being stressed, Marty smirks. "You working here?" he laughs. "That'll be the fuckin' day!"

"Yeah, it's a fuckin' laugh riot. Can you quit busting my balls and just tell me where they are?"

"Yeah, allright. There's some in the closet behind the counter. I need to finish taking inventory here and then I'll go get one."

"Nah, I already promised her I'd do something about it," I reply, heading over to the front desk and pushing the little half-door thing aside to let myself behind the counter. "This closet over here, right?"

"Hey, that area's for staff only!" Marty gawps as I throw open the first door I see. Whoops, looks like it's full of filing cabinets. This must not be it then. "You're not supposed to be back there!

"It's fine, I'm a volunteer," I smug at him, shutting the door and moving onto the next one. "Let's see what's behind door number two-- ah, here we go."

You can tell a control freak like Marty's in charge here because even the most mundane of places -- the fucking supply closet -- is meticulously organized and impeccably sorted. Every single thing on the shelves is clearly labeled and stacked in neat piles and orderly rows. In no time at all, I've found the light bulbs. I pluck one from the box and shut the door before turning around to see a smiling, heavyset brown bear in business clothes waiting patiently at the counter.

"Hi, excuse me? I was wondering if you could direct me to the reference section?" he asks.

"Sure thing." I point helpfully to the same section Marty showed me not fifteen minutes ago. "Right over there, just underneath that sign."

See, I'm learning!

He turns and looks over his shoulder, then lets out a barking laugh. "Well I'll be! How the heck'd I miss that?"

"Don't worry, it's not just you," I smile, glancing over at Marty. He's shaking his head at me in disgust. "Same thing happened to me on my first day too."

"Oh, well, that makes me feel better then. Thanks, son!"

"No problem."
As soon as the bear walks off, I calmly step around the counter with the light bulb in my hoof, waving to the canine lady still struggling to read in the dim corner of the open room. She smiles and waves back as Marty and I head her way. At this point I can't tell whether I'm supposed to be following him or he's following me.

"So what was that you were saying about 'that'll be the fuckin' day'?” I whisper to him with a shit-eating grin.

"You don't work here."

"Right, I'm just volunteering." I reply with all the pomp I can muster, unscrewing the bad bulb from the lamp. "I can--"

"Oh, dear!"

Unfortunately, just as I get it most of the way undone, it shatters in my stiff hooves and I find myself staring down at the broken glass on the carpet with a dumb look on my face, like I'm eight years old all over again and I've just knocked over mom's favorite vase.

Marty though, he doesn't miss a beat.

Without a word, he plucks the bulb from my other hoof, clambers up the side table, finishes unscrewing the broken bulb, and pops the fresh one in. It clicks on, lighting up the dark section of the reading area.

"How's that, ma'am? Any better?"

Nestling into her chair with a nod, the lady resumes reading her book.

"Much, dear. Thank you, you've both been very helpful."

Turning back to Marty, I tap my hooves together.

"...I'll get the dustpan."

"Forget it, I got this," he mumbles, hopping back to the floor with enough care to avoid the shards of glass. "If you really want to help, I got something a little more your speed, anyway."

"The 'Storytime Book Cub'?" I squint at the dry-erase board outlining all of the upcoming activities at the library, just to make sure I'm reading it right. "Shouldn't that say 'Book Club'?"

"Ain't you ever heard of a play on words?" Marty frowns.

...Isn't a play on words supposed to be clever?

"Sure, okay. So what do you need me to do here?"

His face softens a little as he runs a paw along the edges of the bookcase full of kids' titles. Picture books, short stories, and even some beat-up comics line the well-worn oak shelves. There really aren't as many kids' books here as there were at the library I went to when I was young, but given the neighborhood, I'm surprised they've got any at all.

"Morning or night, rain or shine, you always make room for storytime,” he says in an odd, almost sing-song kind of way. "That's our motto. Unfortunately, my assistant's out on maternity leave, and
I'm having to take care of her share of the work."

"Does she usually do the whole storytime thing?" I ask.

"Nope. I do."

Wait, is he... smiling?

"...I see," I reply, not really sure of what else to say. It's rare to see Marty acting so, I dunno... I don't want to say nice. More like non-hostile? Anyway, I don't want to ruin it.

"Since she usually handles tutoring the high schoolers, today that's my job. And since I obviously can't be in two places at once, that means I'm gonna miss storytime."

"What subject do you have to tutor? Anything I can help with?"

"Advanced calculus."

"Y'know, I always loved storytime," I cough.

"Well, it's simple enough," Marty says, tone immediately switching back to stern. "I'll let you pick something to read. It lasts for an hour, and remember, these are little kids, so try to pick something appropriate. No fantasy wish fulfillment harem strongman shit."

"Who reads that? Are you saying I read that?"

The shrimpy stoat shoots me a smirk and a sarcastic shrug. "Look, can you handle it or not?"

"Yeah. Yeah, I got this," I reply confidently, whacking my chest with my fist. My hoof makes a soft plomf noise as it hits my thick wool.

He rolls his eyes again as he turns to leave, but this time it's more amused than disgusted. I watch as he plods off in the direction of the supply closet, leaving me alone in the kids' section.

Well then, I guess we should see what I have to work with.

I grab a book off the shelf at random, take one look at the cover, and immediately return it. I don't know how young these kids are, but I figure they aren't Happy Hoppy Learns the Alphabet young. Slippy Snail's Sad Day also gets a hard pass, since the last thing I want is a bunch of crying kids. I dig a little deeper and find a book about a young rhino who wants to be a sorcerer, which actually looks pretty interesting until I realize it's over six hundred pages long.

The choose-your-own adventure books don't make the cut for similar reasons; I need something that we can get through in one sitting. On the other end of the length spectrum, comic books aren't even an option. I can't imagine trying to read one to a group. And don't even get me started on this kids' joke book. I don't think I'd enjoy being a stand-up comic cracking off terrible joke after terrible joke for an hour straight. I got enough laughs for one lifetime during my sheep lecture thing.

Maybe I'm overthinking it. I mean, I realize I'm only reading a story to some kids, but I really don't want to screw this up. Last thing I want is to reinforce the idea in Marty's mind that I'm a total fuckup. Maybe I should just go with something like a picture book? After all, Marty did say these are little kids...

Reshelving everything I've pulled out so far, I turn my attention to the row of picture books. These
are already showing more promise -- for one, there's a bunch to choose from, and for two, they all
look pretty easy to read. I pick up one with a brightly-colored cover and skim the blurb on the
back, only to laugh out loud when I see it's about a fox who's a master thief.

I guess art really does imitate life.

Making a mental note to check that one out before I leave, I get back to picking through the stack.
A cute story about an elephant trying to eat the world's biggest sandwich, but it's only a few pages
long. I don't think I could stretch it over an hour. Same for this book about a tiger riding a bicycle. I
have to choose wisely here. I want to make a good impression, after all, and I'm trying to help out a
friend.

Well, help out Marty, anyway.

And at last, right there, beneath a book about a wolf mail carrier trying to deliver a letter, I find
what may just be the perfect answer.

*The Sheep Who Wouldn't Sleep.*

I quickly flip through it, nodding to myself. The main character's a sheep who tries everything but
still can't fall asleep, so he eventually ends up counting himself. Cute. Length looks solid -- not too
short, not too long. The writing seems easy enough for kids to follow. Good quality illustrations,
and the book's *size* is big, so I can hold it up for them to see. And hell, since I'm a sheep too, I
could act out the scenes for them. They'd like that, right?

Like I said, I gotta choose carefully.

This'll be perfect.

Oh wow. I don't know how many kids I was expecting, but it sure wasn't *several dozen.*

The conference room's absolutely *packed* with kids of all species and sizes gathered round. Pups,
cubs, kits, you name it. Not all predators, either. There are actually a few prey kids as well, even if
they're far from the majority. In fact, there are *so many* kids here we ran out of seats and a few of
them are seated cross-legged on the floor. Meanwhile, here I am with a book in my hooves, sitting
on a little wooden stool at the front of everything, all eyes on me, as I pretend to be a wolf.

Compared to right now, the stupid seminar I gave for my neighbors seems like no big deal.

"So -- *achem* -- the horrible winds blew, and blew, and *blew.*" I pause halfway through reading to
make a whooshing noise with my mouth, flapping the pages of the book. "...But the Mailwolf
wouldn't turn back."

Immediately a paw shoots up.

"That's a tornado, right?" a pudgy bear boy in a set of overalls and a baseball cap says. "I saw one
before, a real one!"

"Um! Um, my mom told us, if there's ever a tornado, we have to go into this special room under
our house," a bespectacled hyena girl says through a mouthful of braces. "So he could go in... in
something like that...?"

"The Mailwolf can't *hide,*" a wolf pup beside her interrupts. "That's stupid! If he did, he'd get
"Fired!"

"Nuh uh! He'd get hurt really bad! My mom said!"

"Hmm. Well, I think there's more to it than that," I offer before an argument can break out. "I think the Mailwolf's got another reason besides not wanting to be fired."

He huffs, clearly not having any of it. Sorry, Mailwolf. I tried to vouch for you, but I guess this unbeliever's just gonna have to find out for himself. Turning the page, I show off the illustration of the Mailwolf standing in front of a tornado, letters trailing out of his bag.

"Knew it," the bear cub says, smug.

"He's losing his mail!" a pup at my feet cries out. That unbridled enthusiasm, reacting to the story as if the characters were physically in the room with you? It's contagious. I smile broadly, soaking up their enthralled reactions.

"Yeah, he is!"

"He's losing 'em!"

The hyena girl's eyes go wide, amplified by her oversized bottle-glass lenses. "That looks... um! That's bad! He's gonna get in trouble!"

"The Mailwolf was in trouble. He knew that there was no way he'd be able to get past the tornado by himself," I continue.

"I told you!" the hyena girl pipes up again, as if explaining to the rest of the room. "That'd be -- that's... that's -- um! Um! Nobody should ever go near a tornado! You should just hide and wait for an adult to tell you it's gone away!"

I stifle a laugh. That last bit sounds like it was drilled into her.

"Now, everyone, the Mailwolf is a trained professional," I insist, drawing a few chuckles, mostly from the parents. "I'm sure he's got a plan. Anyone want to guess what his plan is?"

"He puts the tornado out with water!" a wolf girl excitedly yips, her tail wagging so hard it thumps the floor.

"...I think that's what you do with fire, sweetie," her mom replies, scrunching up her fair, reddish-brown face as she stands against the wall in the back of the room. "How do you put out a tornado, anyway...?"

"Pretty sure you can't," I chuckle. "Any other guesses?"

"He runs really fast and jumps over it," a rabbit boy suggests, planting his paws to his chest bravely. "I could jump over it, easy!"

"What! That tornado's as big as a building!" his friend laughs, causing a wave of giggling to sweep the room. "You can't jump over a building!"

I patiently flip to and reveal the next picture, which takes up both pages of the book, showing the Mailwolf hitching a ride in an old-fashioned biplane being piloted by another wolf.

"The brave Mailwolf called his friend, the Airwolf, for help. And using the Airwolf's plane, they flew so high up they were able to go over the tornado." I clear my throat and affect the deepest
I can manage (which isn't much). "Thanks for the help, Airwolf!"

There's a chorus of 'oohs' and 'whoas' as I present the art showing the two high-flying wolves. I feel like I should probably put some kind of disclaimer out there right now about how trying to fly around a tornado is incredibly stupid and dangerous, but I don't want to ruin the moment. I just hope this doesn't inspire any of these kids to grow up to be pilots.

The talkative hyena girl straightens her glasses, putting herself out there once more. Clearly the kind of kid who feels the need to comment on everything. "The plane is really cool! Planes go really high up in the air."

"I still could'a jumped it," the rabbit sulks.

Scoffing, the bear cub leans back in his chair. "Pfft. Whatever."

"It wath really thmart to askth his friend for help," a ferret girl observes through her bulky retainer.

"Yep. These wolves are really smart," I reply. "They know it's better to work together, as a team. Does anyone here know what a team of wolves is called?"

The response around the room is immediate, and enthusiastic. "A PACK!!"

Man, that feels good. It's easy to feel smart in a room full of children.

"That's right," I grin, turning the page and readying my 'wolf voice' again. "Once they had flown to safety, the Mailwolf said--"

The sound of the door in the back of the room quietly opening draws my attention, and I instinctively look up to see a familiar silhouette lingering in the entryway. A tall, well-built black-furred wolf walks inside with a tiny pup at her hip, who bears a single white-patterned streak on his dark coat. Betty nods wordlessly to me as she lets the pup down, who wastes no time in hurrying up to sit up front by me, lollipop in mouth and toy car in paw.

"Said what? What did he say?" the hyena girl urges.

"Yeah, Mr. Remmy! What did he say?" the bear cub asks.

"Finish the story!"

"Yeah, finish!!"

I find myself faltering. "I, uh..."

Nervously, I look up at Betty, who gives me a silent, approving nod as she leans against the back wall, arms folded.

Well. Here goes nothing, I guess.

"No tornado is terrible enough to stop the Mighty Mailwolf, because I made a promise! And I'm a wolf of my word!!" I growl in my absolute best attempt at sounding like Al. Which ends up kind of sounding more like a confused, angry bleat. But what do you know -- the kids eat it up anyway, cheering me on. I glance back at Betty, who I'm expecting to be doubled over in laughter, but instead she just kind of watches, a half-smile at her lips.

The black pup bounces excitedly, instantly invested, even though he missed the entire first half of
the story. "Keep going!"

Chuckling, I flip slowly to the next page. "Well, the tornado was gone, but you'll never believe what happened next..."

In the end, we wound up going well over the hour-long mark for storytime. Note to self: never, ever underestimate the willingness of kids to chime in. I could've probably gotten away with an even shorter book. Though I'm pretty sure, based on the energy in the room, that the one I picked was a winner. Hell, even the grown-ups seemed to enjoy the story, and that's saying something.

Speaking of grown-ups, almost everyone's filed out of the conference room except for me and Betty. She stands beside the low snack table nearby, nursing a cup of leftover lemonade, watching protectively as her pup plays by the front of the room with a few of the other kids still waiting to be picked up. Meanwhile, I'm in the process of gathering up the folding chairs to return to their place in the corner. I'm just about finished moving them when Marty walks into the room with a stack of papers in his arms.

"How'd it go?" he asks, making his way over to me and Betty.

"Actually, I'd say it was a hit," I reply. "They really seemed into the story."

He visibly relaxes, dropping his stack of papers in a loose pile by his feet. "Good. That's good. What'd you pick?"

"The Wolf of His Word. You know it?"

"Yeah, Kat Looptail. Her books are classics. I grew up on a few of 'em myself." He looks me up and down, head cocked to one side like he's studying me. "I'm actually surprised. I figured for sure you'd have tried to read them some dumb fuckin' shit like Hairy Porker."

I mimic his showy eye-roll from earlier as I shove past both of them with my payload. "Geez. Thanks for the vote of no confidence."

"Tone it down, weasel," Betty yawns as I pass by her with the last couple of chairs. "I'd say he did all right by those kids. You looked like you were enjoying yourself out there, yarnball."

"Beats my last attempt at public speaking," I shrug, depositing the chairs in the pile with a pair of clanks. "As you may recall, that one didn't go so hot."

"I thought it was a fuckin' riot," Betty chuckles, pouring the last of the lemonade from the pitcher into a foam cup and passing it down to Marty. "Sorry, no grape-ade."

"EH HEH HEH HEH, Marty loves grape, eh heh heh so funny," he spits a sneering, fake laugh as he reluctantly takes the cup from her with both paws. "You can't blame me for thinking he could fuck up a children's book."

I'm restacking the books when I hear Betty's hushed voice again, over my shoulder.

"Fluff did you a favor. You need to reel it in a little. This hate-on or whatever you got for him. Keep it in check or we're gonna talk again." Her tone is low and steady, all business.

"He's not much of a civil servant after all, I guess," I quip smoothly.
"Are you kidding?" Marty blurts back in an exasperated whisper. "I have been! I have been on my best behavior today!"

She points, claw extended from her plastic cup. "That what this is?"

I turn to them, coughing into my fist to indicate my presence and let them know I can hear them.

"Guess he's not much of a civil servant," I quip extra smoothly.

"Oh for fuck's sake." Marty growls back at her, not even acknowledging me. "You're always giving me shit, Beta, and let's not pretend I don't know why. So if this about you an' me, fine, but don't make it about him. You'll excuse me if I got little patience for specists."

"He's not a specist," Betty fires back instantly.

"Thank you!" I sigh, relief and incredulity washing over me together.

"I mean, okay, he is," she takes a quick sip from her lemonade. "But that's not his main problem."

Oh for-- "Guys, I'm right here!"

"I think being specist is sure as fuck his main problem," the stoat argues, face puckering as he takes a swig from his lemonade.

Betty just shakes her head. "Nah. He's just self-centered. A fluffy little world all in his head. Specism's just a side effect of thinkin' it's all about him."

"I'm not either!" I stamp my hoof, then catch myself and lower my voice. "How am I self-centered?!"

Finally acknowledging me, the big black Beta wolf leans sideways a bit, nodding. "Arright, chew on this: Remember when you thought that pillow-sheep everyone was ripping on in the street was you, personally, instead of the ex-Mayor who was on the news and everyone hated?"

"Wh-"

A broad, easy grin splits across her face.

I can't even find the words. "You know Cliff."

"'Course I do," she smirks. "I used to babysit that chatty catty. Now, are you two gonna settle this or what?"

Finally, Marty sighs, turning back to me.

"Look, I got a lot of shit I was gonna say to you. But... I heard about what you did at the gym. My sister had a lot to say about you. So I'll cut it short." He pauses, tosses back the last of his lemonade like he's finishing a shot, and takes a deep breath. "I was wrong about you. I still think you got your head wrong about a lot of things, and I still don't really like you, but... well shit, I been saying from the start that actions speak louder than words, y'know? And how you gotta act the part. Well, I guess I'm not too proud to finally say it: you have been doin' that. So all that shit I was gonna say, I'm just gonna leave it."

"That almost sounds like a compliment," I mutter with an awed tone that's only partially sarcastic. Marty's actually saying something nice about me. I wish I was recording this.
"It was an apology, at least," Betty nods. "Now I think you were about to thank him, too."

Marty grits his teeth, but nods in agreement all the same. "Yeah. Well. Anyway. Nice work today, I guess, Cormo."

I roll my eyes at the 'I guess'. Figure that's as grateful as he gets, so I just grunt in reply and begin breaking down the folding table now that it's no longer needed.

Turning his back to me, Marty looks up at our Beta.

"But seriously, I'm not gonna get any complaints from angry parents in the morning, am I?" he asks of her, voice low enough not to be overheard by the kids at the front of the room.

"Hey," I grumble.

"Fuck, Marty, seriously. Climb off him," Betty frustratedly growls back at the same low volume, her thick black tail swooshing lazily behind her. "Turns out he's good with kids."

The stoat hums, playing with his empty plastic cup. "Guess it makes sense. Not that far off from being one himself."

"He's young, but he's not that young," Betty argues quietly.

"Look at him, he's practically a pup! Sheepling. Whatever they're called. You can still see the baby fat around his face!"

I stop what I'm doing to turn around and glare at both of them. They're talking about me like I'm not even here. I glance over my shoulder to make sure I'm not swearing in front of the children. "Are you two fuckin' serious right now?"

"His wool's already turned white," Betty remarks, thumbing a claw at me. "Turns white with age. I think that was in the presentation, anyway."

"It wasn't," I huff.

"Hey, Cormo," Marty pipes up, as if I haven't heard everything already. "How old are you?"

"I'm almost twenty," I reply indignantly.

Both of their jaws drop as they stare at me, wide-eyed. Marty's the first to recover, tossing his cup in the nearby trash. "You're nineteen."

"Yeah. I am."

"That explains so damn much," Betty finally manages. "Fuck."

"No shit. Charlie mentioned you dropped out of college, I didn't realize that was last fuckin' week," Marty breathes, eyebrows arched. "I had you figured for mid-twenties, at least. He really is just a dumb kid."

Betty's phone is out of her pocket and in her paws as she begins typing. "Shit. I don't think even Al had any idea."
Groaning, I throw my hooves in the air in exasperation.

"Yeah, okay, I'm young! Are you two gonna make a huge fuckin' deal about this?"

Next thing I know, I feel a vibrating buzz coming from my left hip pocket. I fish out my phone and see that there's a new text message, addressed to the Pack's 'important messages only' ZMS group.

(Betty) Twenty bucks says you can't guess how old [sheep emoji] is.

"Seriously?" I scoff, squinting at my screen. "...You'd better cut me in for half when you win."

"Keep dreaming," she laughs out loud, stowing her phone and sauntering over to the kids at front of the room. "Hey, ready to go, bucko? You did real good today."

"Yeah!" the little black pup cheers excitedly, reaching both paws up at Betty. "An' I made a new friend!"

She swoops down, nosing around his face and neck with playful 'bites' and exaggerated "arrh arr" noises that get him giggling. Finally she kisses him on the snout and hefts him up, holding him against her hip as she strolls to the door.

"Hey, I did good today too," I brag with a very self-aware laugh.

"You sure did," Betty coos back in her patronizing child-friendly tone, and without warning she suddenly shoves her face down at me, burying her snout in the puffy wool around my shoulders and nipping at my neck with play-bites.

Ah.

"Okay, bye bye," she says, encouraging her pup to wave as she ducks out of the room. "Play nice, you two."

I'm still standing there, bolted to the floor and blinking to reorient myself with reality when she walks out the door.

"Well, maybe I oughta have you come in to read next week, too" Marty relents, re-gathering his papers and sorting them onto the table.

"Yeah," I agree quickly. "Maybe you oughta."
The sun's coming up and my day's mostly over, but I'm still so keyed-up I could sprint all the way from my apartment to Packer's Gym and back without getting winded. My muscles are tensed, my hooves are clicking, and static electricity runs through my wool. I'm sweaty as all hell even though it's only sixty degrees outside.

I guess all this is my body's way of trying to come down from the high of officially quitting my job.

I've been dodging calls for weeks, but my pain-in-the-ass ex-boss finally got a hold of me this
morning by calling the front desk of The Crowns directly. I damn near came unglued on him over
the phone, but he was adamant that I come into work to take care of some "pressing matters"
regarding my employment.

You know those scenes in a movie where you realize the hero's walking into an ambush? That's
what this looked like. My boss was flanked by two company lawyers and a couple of higher-up
suits, but the second they started talking I realized they were more afraid of me than I was of them.
Sure, he didn't come right out and say it, but I think the cowardly bastard thought I'd try to sue the
company over how he all-but-sacked me during the "Savage Crisis" because he knew I was eating
meat and living with a bunch of predators. And I gotta say, having that sort of leverage on the
dirtbag felt really fucking good. I'd be lying if I said it wasn't the cherry on top, watching him
squirm in his seat while everyone gathered breathed down his neck.

I ended up signing a bunch of legal-ese shit, but I walked out with a pretty nice "parting bonus" as
well as a personal apology from my ex-boss. It wasn't exactly the huge settlement check that TV
lawyers advertise, but I've got some breathing room for the next couple months, at least, to find a
new job.

And yet, as I start the long walk home, I'm still so wound that I feel like punching a brick wall.

"Hey, Cormo. C'mere."

The familiar, rumbling voice calling out to me over the traffic shakes me from my thoughts. I look
up to see Al standing at a sidewalk food stand just down the street. Guess the great white wolf
must've just gotten off work, since he's dressed in a grimy long-sleeved tee and jeans, with a foil-
wrapped foot-long hot-bug in one of his cement-caked paws and a fountain drink in the other.

"Al," I reply, nodding my head up at him. "What's up?"

A rough smile crosses his face. "You don't gotta show your neck, Remmy. We're good. This is a
friendly visit."

I stop for a second, looking down at myself. I didn't even mean to. "So what are you doing out
here? A long way from your job site, isn't it?"

"Yeah. I heard you were gonna be dealin' with your boss." He nods, taking a slow sip from his
drink. "If you want, I could go in, exchange some words with him."

"What, seriously?" I'm left speechless at the thought of the Alpha throwing his weight in for me,
but I wave him off. "Nah, that's -- I mean, I appreciate it, but I think I've got it handled."

He accepts my response without prying. "Arright. Well, since I'm here anyway, lemme give you a
ride home."

"Yeah, thanks." Another bus wouldn't be by for a while, and I really didn't want to have to make
that walk all the way back. "Charlie knew I'd be here, huh? Always keeping tabs."

"She said you told her you were comin' out."

"Oh. Right." Yeah. I guess I did.

He scratches the side of his neck awkwardly with the bottom of his cardboard drink cup. He seems
serious as ever tonight. Looks like he's deep in thought.

"Right. Well, why don't you grab a bite and join me. Leo, this is the carnivore. Hook him up with
"Hey, you got it, chief," the vendor -- a tall, slender, sleepy-eyed feline replies pleasantly.

I hadn't even thought about eating, but a hot-bug does sound good right about now, and this guy seems to be a friend of Al's. I try to pass a five to the vendor but he assures me it's been paid for, and less than a minute later I find myself holding a huge, fully-loaded hot-bug and a large cup full of ice-cold root beer.

Al motions for me to follow to his car, so I guess this one's to-go.

Last time I was in this car, I was driving. Ozzy was with me, and we were scanning the city for Charlie. Then there was the time where I went off with Wolt to Bunnyburrow. You know, now that I think about it, this is my first time actually sitting in Al's car with Al himself. Huh.


"He's a good guy, yeah," Al replies, peeling the foil wrapper back on his food, which I take as a cue to do the same. "Used to be part of the Pack. Long time ago."

We chew our hot-bugs in silence for a couple of minutes, and then he decides that's enough time for the icebreaker.

"Look, I don't know what this shit is going on between you'n Anneke, but you need to settle it."

"Yeah, that makes two of us!" I mutter, taking a pull off my root beer and wincing a little at the carbonation.

"Remmy."

I turn my gaze to look up at him, but despite the sincerity -- severity? -- in his tone, he doesn't look angry. Instead, it's more like... concern. He seems troubled.

"I mean it." He exhales heavily through his nose, his breath fogging up the windshield of the car. "I'm askin' you to sort this shit out."

I start to interrupt him, but quickly catch myself once I realize he has more he wants to say.

"Betty told me that whatever this is, is causin' problems for the twins at home. And those two ain't the type to fight over personal disagreements." He flicks the straw of his drink cup idly with his thumb. "This bad blood between you an' Annie's poison. An' poison spreads."

Sighing, I turn my focus to look out the window, watching the passersby making their way up and down the sidewalk.

"Mmgh. Look, I know she's pissed off, but whatever this is about, it's on her, not me," I answer. "So tell her that."

He furrows his brow and sighs. "I did. And she told me to tell you, and so here we are."

I shrug. "Maybe she just needs some more time to cool off. It's been bugging me too. I can't even hang around some places when she's there."

"I don't want to lose a member of the Pack over this. Sort it out. Please."
Losing a member-- he thinks it's *that* serious? That I'd just up and *bolt*? I mean, I know she's still pissed over the whole thing with Bellwether, and that's kind of to be expected. The conspirators were sheep, I'm a sheep, so I at least understand the guilt by association. I figured she just needs time to work through it all and then we'll be back to normal, but it's been over a week.

"You're the Alpha," I finally manage. "Why don't you just, you know, do the Pack leader thing, if it's such a big deal?"

"I can't just *tell* you two how to feel about each other. This is one'a those things I can't do anythin' about myself. I wish it was, but it ain't."

Drumming my hooftips on the dash, I nod.

"Fine. I'll talk to her and see what's up," I offer. "Go clear the air, I guess."

"Mm. Then unless you got other business here, let's get back to the Crowns." Al turns the key in the ignition, and the old car roars to life. "I hope I can count on you, Cormo."

I pinch my muzzle and set my half-empty cup in the console's holder.

"I'll get it taken care of."

"Good."

"Hey, speakin' of," I tap on the window with my knuckle.

As he stops the car in front of the Crowns, he glances out the driver's side window at where I'm pointing. Betty's seated on the stoop of the apartment next to ours, the towering black wolfess puffing a lit smoke hanging from her muzzle. Not an unusual sight -- but the small aardwolf chatting away next to her with a matching cigarette sure is.

"I didn't know Anneke smoked," I mumble, scratching the side of my head.

To my surprise, Al seems just as confused. "Me neither."

As Al pulls up to the front of the Crowns, I motion for him to let me out before he goes to park.

He glances over, an unusually patient look on his face. "You okay to handle this right now?"

"Better rip the bandage off now," I shrug.

Reluctantly, I climb out, brush myself off, and slowly make my way up to the neighboring steps. The sooner I clear this misunderstanding up, the better. Not just for Al, but for me and Anneke, too. Besides, after dealing with my former boss earlier, I'm pretty much prepared for anything right now.

Betty's the first to notice me approach. She stubs out her cigarette and stands up abruptly, nodding to me. Anneke pauses mid-sentence, turns, sees me, and instantly her entire body language flips from giddy to *fuming* like the flick of a switch.

"Hey hey hey, no, Betty." She flags down her departing friend. "C'mon, you don't have to go."

It doesn't work. "Uh-uh. Sorry, Annie. We'll catch up later," Betty replies.
The aardwolf growls in frustration as the door closes. She stands, fur bristling, and I'm half-expecting her to just storm right past me.

I raise my hooves in surrender, keeping a respectful distance.

"Hey, Annie," I begin, glancing sideways to Betty -- who nods back to me before opening the apartment door and stepping inside to give the two of us some space. "Can we, uh... can we talk for a sec?"

She scowls, and rather than replying, takes a heavy pull off the cigarette in her mouth, exhaling as I walk up the steps. Her eyes are red, and she looks like she's fighting the urge to cough. I guess she didn't know she smoked either.

"Listen. I get that, y'know, that you're frustrated..."

"That's a fuckin' understatement," she interrupts, her voice almost like a hiss.

I just kind of nod. I want to come across sympathetic here. It's important to me that she knows I'm not here to lecture her, that I'm on her side. I've always been on her side. I politely wait a few seconds to see if she wants to say anything else, but she just kind of glares back incredulously and makes a weird half-waving gesture at me. Which I take as an invitation -- well, it's more like a demand -- to continue.

"But I know that all this -- that you're not angry at me personally, that this is really about--"

Annie's eyes go wide and her muzzle opens up, and my words die on my tongue. For the briefest moment I'm half expecting her to just kind of scream in my face. It's the sort of face you'd make if you stepped on a fishhook or something and were halfway through realizing you were in pain. She bursts out into laughter -- but it's not humorous, not an amused laugh. It's angry and vicious, mean-spirited, like she's trying to pack as much animosity into it as she can.

"Are you fucking me right now?" she yaps, tossing the cigarette on the concrete and bounding down the steps two at a time until she's right in my face. "You think I'm not pissed at you?! You're the entire fucking problem, you tone-deaf fuck!"

I don't know what I was expecting, but it sure wasn't this. I want to open my mouth but she's got all the forward momentum right now.

"You're ground fucking zero -- right here! Of course it's you! It's always you!"

"How-- what did I do?" I finally manage to croak out.

"Fucking exactly!!" Her breaths are coming heavy and ragged, her fists clenched and shaking at her sides. "You unaware little prick! Open your fucking eyes and maybe you'll see what you are!"

"Wh-- Are you seriously blaming me for what Bellwether did?!" I can't believe I'm hearing this. She thinks I was fucking complicit?! "You think because I'm a sheep, that I'm just okay with what happened?! That I had something to do with her?"

"No, you idiot! This isn't about Bellwether! This is about what specist little fucks like you did the second she gave you carte blanche!"

I blink, feeling like I'm caught in headlights. "...what?"

"This city's fucking sick, and mammals like you? You're the fucking disease!" She growls, the fur
of her whole body fluffed up in agitation, and she paces around the sidewalk in front of me. "All those anti-pred demonstrations? The protests? The new laws they tried to pass? Talk of re-segregating the line? Hell, I heard a fucking talk show host bring up 'Happytown'! In my fucking lifetime?"

She twirls, storming up to me, and gets right in my face. I almost think she's gonna throttle me, but it's all I can do to stare. I sure can't find the words.

"Y'know there's this bunny -- older guy, I used to live down the street from him, when I was a little kid? I saw him on TV not even a month ago, holding a big sign for the camera that said 'Better Dead than Pred'. Same fucking guy. I trick-or-treated at his fucking house!"

"Annie--"

"How are mammals supposed to look their friends, neighbors, their-- their fucking teachers, leaders in the eye ever again when they spent months calling us monsters? Abominations, freaks, savages?" Tears swell in her eyes, and her teeth chatter in rage. "Everyone wants to-- t-to pretend we can all just go back to normal? Well I've seen Zootopia's true face. And now we're supposed to act like it never happened, just because they put the mask back on?"

I answer quietly, searching for an appeal to common sense. "Bellwether had everyone convinced there was a threat."

But she won't have it. "No. No, Remmy, this much hate doesn't just crop up overnight, from outta nowhere. It was always there -- just under the surface. Waiting for the first excuse to come out. These mammals played their hand. They let us know exactly what they are."

She reaches for something -- her cigarette, I think -- only to realize with an angry huff that she's already discarded it. Instead, she turns back to me, and I see the fire in her eyes has been replaced with something else. It's a deep, tearful sadness. She's crying in rivers, and something wrenches my heart.

"Ozzy," she sniffs. "Ozzy got jumped."

I don't think I heard her right. "...What?"

"About a month before you moved in." She keeps raising her paw to gesture, but dropping it partway, like she doesn't have the energy to follow it through. "He was out playing and I guess one of those protests was happening nearby, and a bunch of prey fucks came by and just -- kicked the shit out of him. Ozzy never did nothing to nobody."

"What was he singing?"

Her jaw goes slack, even as tears continue to pour from her eyes.

"Fuck does it matter what he was singing?" she snaps, furious and incredulous all at once. "Could'a been singing 'fuck all your mothers', doesn't give 'em the fucking right!"

I put my hooves up in defense. "No, I-- Anneke, you know me, I didn't mean anything like that, I was just curious!"

She turns away, silent, and I find the time to finally take a breath and steady myself.

"Anneke," I shake my head. "That's-- I mean, even if everything you said is true, and that's terrible, I had nothing to do with any of that. You can't take all that out on me."
"You're the perfect example. The face of this shit. You bought that fucking narrative real fast, didn't you," she mutters darkly, her back still to me.

"Folks were scared. I was scared!"

"I know you were!" She barks back, immediately, and all her pissed-off energy returns as she spins to face me. "Everything you fuckin' did showed how scared you were of us! You fucking flinched every time someone got near you! I saw how you'd stare at our teeth, cover your neck, hurry away. Treated us like timebombs! Oh, Remmy was scared! Well guess what? I was scared too! Everyone was fucking scared!"

I feel like I'm being backed into a corner here. "You can't blame me for buying into the fear! You guys believed it, too! What was I supposed to do?"

"You could've stood with us! Even if it was real, and some -- what, how many people in the city? 0.01% of mammals going savage? -- you could've had some empathy. When your friend's sick, do you try to help them? Take care of them, even if it means you could get sick too? Or do you just keep your distance and hope they go away?"

"That's--" I choke, waving my hooves. "That's not a fair analogy, Anneke, and you know it!"

"Yeah? How about our 'date', huh? How about that fuckin' shitshow?! I felt like I was losing my fucking mind, and I'm pouring my heart out to you and all you could do is wonder whether or not you could take one of us if we turned?!" She paces up and down the steps, never once taking her eyes off of me as she moves from side-to-side. "While we were all suffering, the only thing you could think of was you! 'How does this affect Remmy Cormo'?"

I'm fucking stunned. It's like she's yanked the carpet out from under my feet, and then rolled it up and clubbed me with it. Forget the whole deal with my boss, this was the real ambush. Swallowing, I grip the concrete outcrop of the stoop for balance, tracking her frantic form with my eyes.

"Fuck's sake, you called Pandora 'one of the good ones'," she breathes to herself in disbelief, her paw to her forehead.

"Why didn't you say something before, if this is how you felt?"

"What fuckin' good would it have done, huh? Like you said, you bastards had us believing it! Every time we got slapped in the face we got told 'you deserved this'. And 'don't make waves'."

My hoof tightens on the stoop and the words flow out of my mouth faster than I can really even think.

"I'm sorry."

She stops cold, her head swiveling to lock onto my face.

"You what."

"I'm sorry," I repeat quietly. "Annie, I didn't know. I had no idea that this is what you were going through. I'm so sorry."

"Yes you did," she comments, quivering lips twisting into a trembling, insincere smile. "You knew because I fucking told you."
"Look," I steady my breathing, and try for the little window I have. It's not so much a defense, more an explanation. "A lot happened. These were special circumstances. The whole city was lied to. I know that you're angry, but do you really think I'm that kind of mammal?"

Her paw's on the door to Betty's building, already heading inside, but she pauses to look at me first.

"I don't care what Al says," she sniffs, soberly. "Remmy Cormo, I don't ever want to see you again."

My ears are ringing. I have this weird, hard-to-describe feeling in the pit of my stomach. It's one I haven't felt in a while; not since the night I unloaded on everyone in the middle of the lobby. My hooves are cramping -- I look down and realize they're balled up so tight that my hoof-tips are digging into my palms. It takes me several seconds just to unclutch them.

I try to breathe deeply to calm myself down, but it sounds more like a crazed snort than anything else. I'm grinding my teeth and my heart feels like it's gonna beat right outta my chest. I think I better go lay down before I headbutt something -- or someone -- right into next fuckin' week.

Shoving through the entrance into the lobby, I see that while it's quiet tonight, it's not empty. Al's sitting on the couch with a magazine in his paws, and Ozzy's tuning his guitar in the corner of the room. The hyena looks up at me, pauses mid-strum, and quickly slips off in the direction of his room. I don't really blame him -- I wouldn't want to be around me right now either.

I storm towards the stairs, but this time I don't even make it to the staircase before I hear Al.

"Remmy," he murmurs low, folding his magazine and standing up from the couch. "Hold on a sec."

"...This is getting to be a thing between us, isn't it." I meant it as a joke, but it comes off way harder than I meant. I can't win for losing tonight.

Al sighs, walking over to me.

"How'd it go?" he asks plainly.

"How do you think--"

I cut myself off from saying something too harsh, but Al doesn't look insulted. Just... sad. Quiet. He lowers his head, nodding, and thumbs his claw over his nose.

"Not good," he finishes for me.

"Yeah," I return more gently, but no less upset. "Pretty sure she wants to kick my ass."

He nods patiently, and there's something in him that seems sympathetic. He puts his paw on my shoulder, squeezing it gently. I just sort of stand here while he does, trembling. I'm a fucking whirlwind right now. I can't decide whether I want to cry, or scream my head off, or just pick the coffee table up and throw it so hard against the ceiling that it gets embedded in Avo's floorboards.

After a minute, I finally gather enough of my wits to look him in the eye.

"...There's something else?" I sniff, rubbing my nose.

"It can wait," Al says dismissively. "Get some rest."
"No, you got somethin' to say," I return through clenched teeth. "You don't gotta play games, Al. I've already gotten it today from Anneke, so you might as well--"

He shakes his head calmly. "An' I'm tellin' you now, never you mind. It'll wait."

"Why?!"

"Because you ain't in a place to hear it, Remmy," he returns, a little more sternly. "Not now, not yet. You're itchin' for a fight and you're mad as hell."

My gut instinct is to tell him off, but that'd just be proving him right. So biting my lip, I just kind of nod dumbly, and he lets me go. I slowly make my way past him and up the creaky staircase on my way to my apartment.

I'm stomping circles around my room. Haven't even tried lying down. Even though it's probably what I need more than anything, there's no way in hell I'm going to sleep right now. Not after Anneke.

I can't remember the last time I felt this torn up. I don't know if I'm mad because she's wrong or mad because she's right. Well, no, it sure isn't just one or the other. A whole goddamn lot got said, and my brain's doing cartwheels trying to sort out what made me mad, what made me hurt, and what made me confused. She had some points. But so did I. I wasn't totally wrong.

But I didn't even think about what it must be like, being told to go back to normal and knowing the people around you hate your guts just for being you. Fuck, I saw that shit in my boss's own face today. The Savage Hoax might've made it worse, but like she said, that shit was already inside him somewhere. I'd be mad too. But it's not like I started this, right?

But maybe that's me just thinking about Remmy Cormo again.

I can't fuckin' untangle this. It's too much to think about.

Some part of me wonders if I'd have done better to stay in and comfort Charlie after Pandora's incident, instead of taking Anneke out for our date. Maybe Annie would have understood, hell, maybe she'd have thought better of me if I had. Maybe I should've taken them both out for the night. Even if it was just to someplace like Bug Burga. There's no way things could've gone any worse than they did.

I mean, Annie's burning herself to cinders right now and as far as she's concerned, I am the problem! I don't even know if she'll ever give me the time of day again, and I gotta live with that awkwardness, with her being right outside my apartment. I get to fuckin' own that now.

It's scary that Neil going ballistic on that fuckin' pillow doesn't seem so unreasonable anymore. Now, I think I'd be right there with him! I mean, if Bellwether or her goons were anywhere near me, I'd put their asses in the fuckin' ground!!

I pull the whistle Al gave me from its strap around my neck in anger and slam it down on my TV stand a little too hard. The screen wobbles, but while I stoop down to check for damage, the whistle rolls off and across the floor. Shit, the whole apartment is probably off-level. I walk after it and it keeps rolling. Just one more fucking thing to get under my skin tonight.

It keeps rolling straight into the bathroom, where it finally comes to a stop by hitting one of the baseboard tiles hard enough to knock it loose. Fantastic. I get down on my hooves and knees,
checking the popped tile. It opens right into the wall, looks like.

...There's something in there.

I reach into the rectangular recess without thinking, and a second later, pull out a strange little box.

Caked in a thin layer of dust and grime is a small, worn case with a handle -- kind of like a toolbox, but smaller, narrower, and a little more flat. Upon closer look, it could be the case for a musical instrument, like for a trumpet or... oh, what do they call those really fancy flutes? A recorder, I think? I can't think of much else that would fit in here. Even a violin would be way too big.

All my frustration takes a quick backseat to my growing curiosity, and I carefully carry the mystery box over to my kitchen table. I grab a couple paper towels and wipe the grit off of it as best as I can so that I don't make more of a mess, and on the lid, there's a painted-on mark. It just says "K".

And all of a sudden I realize what this is.

This is Kenny's stash.

I've heard about him on and off. I know he used to live in this apartment, before me. I think he went to jail? And I remember at the block party -- god, that must've been over a month ago, now -- Ozzy asked me to bring him Kenny's "stash" if I ever found it.

Well, looks like I just did. Fuck, I didn't think he was being serious! I didn't think it was real!

I don't need this. Not now, of all times. I really don't need to fuck with drugs right now, I can't have the cops coming at me on top of everything. If I bring these to Ozzy, does that make me an accomplice or something? No. No way, man. No no no. I'm flushing this. Or burying it. Or throwing it out in the dumpster at least. Where can I put this?

My eyes trace the edge, where a little combination lock on the front is set to straight zeroes. On a whim, I press the button on the lock, and it immediately pops loose.

Shit.

I shouldn't. I really can't. The less I know about this, the better. Plausible deniability, and all that.

But on the other hand, what's one quick peek going to do? Not like anybody's gonna know. And at least I'll know what I'm dealing with.

With trembling hooves I reach out and slowly flip back the lid.

Whatever the case was originally designed to hold, it's now packed to near-bursting with... actually, I'm not sure what all this stuff is.

On the top of the pile is a deck of well-used playing cards, held together with a dried-out rubber band. The faces of each card feature a picture of a different pinup girl along with the rank and suit, while the cardbacks all share the Pandora's Box store logo.

Loosely tucked between the pages of a (long-overdue) paperback novel is a bright, folded-up piece of orange paper. I pull it loose and give it a quick skim; looks like it's for the grand opening of Clippership's Grooming, with the words 'now hiring friendly faces' circled in pencil.
And-- shit, I knew it. There's drugs after all. Under the book is a plastic zipper-seal sandwich baggie full of... rocks? No, they're literally just rocks. Really smooth, like ones you'd find in a river maybe? Written in faded marker on the front of the bag is the message "Don't give up! We'll make a skipper out of you yet!"

Little by little I'm sorting out the contents, clearing out the box and placing all the weird objects on the table in neat piles. I can't quite piece them together, and my curiosity's only drawing me deeper. Nothing else exists right now except me and this box.

In a side compartment are several guitar picks in varying condition -- most seem okay, but a couple appear to have bite marks in the plastic...? Predator teeth for sure. Wonder if Kenny played with Ozzy? The picks are laying on top of a refillable metal cigarette lighter. Seems brand new, unlike most of this stuff, including the beat-up portable video game player underneath it.

This thing looks like it's been attacked by a bear. The screen's scratched, the case is cracked, and the batteries are so corroded that they look like they exploded. The game cartridge (which is just about the only intact part of it) looks like it's called Nightmare Raid. Never heard of it. Based on the shadowy figures on the label's art, I'm guessing it's some sort of stealth game, maybe? Wonder if it still works.

Wedged into the loose fabric of the box's lining is a paper crown, one of the novelty kiddie meal prizes from Bug Burga. Looks just like the kind I got for Annie and Wolt. A stray strand of black fur hangs from it, and someone wrote "Queen Bitch" on the front flap with a crayon. Hoo boy. I bet there's a story there.

...Of course, now that think about it, there's gotta be a story attached to a lot of this stuff. It's not like a junk drawer where you stash tape or push pins or tools or whatever. I mean, none of these items have much practical use. Which I would guess makes these mostly personal mementos. I guess the right thing to do would be to leave them to Kenny's own privacy, but I'm kidding myself if I think I can stop now.

Fascinated, I dig deeper at what remains. A couple of packets of spicy 'Bug-B-Q' sauce from Bug Burga... man, didn't they discontinue that shit years ago? A pair of black sunglasses -- obviously a knockoff of a name brand. A pair of broken chopsticks with something rubbery stuck to them. A few creased business cards for a local dentist -- who, worryingly, also claims to 'dabble in doctor work on the side'? And here's a crappy keychain made out of red plastic and shaped like a... I guess it's a bunny? Looks like you can wear it on your finger. Reminds me of those cheap prizes you get at arcades and school fairs.

There's a few other odds and ends in here, and I dutifully pile them out onto the table in turn -- some old coins, an ink pen from a hotel, a makeup brush, and a... okay, I guess a lipstick-smeread cigarette butt stands out a little. Still, it's looking like the box is just about empty, and the last item lining its bottom is a small manila envelope tied shut with string.

I raise an eyebrow as I pull it out and turn it over in my hooves. The extra layer kinda looks like it may have been something the previous owner wanted to keep private. Or maybe I'm just reading too much into it. For a moment, I hesitate -- considering just packing everything back up and reporting it to the building's lost and found.

Buuuuuuut fuck that. I've come this far, and it's too damn interesting to stop now!

I slowly unwind the twine, then open the envelope and shake its contents loose onto the table next to everything else.
Holy shit. Holy SHIT. It's a stack of photos taken with an instant camera -- and the very first picture is of a very, very familiar black-furred wolffess at the beach -- and she's wearing almost nothing but said black fur. I nearly choke on my own spit as I hold the racy photo of Betty up to the light, staring bug-eyed at it.

Holy SHIT.

She's barely dressed -- just a thin two-piece bathing suit, in a kinda garish red. And damn if she isn't in an incredibly suggestive pose. She's sprawled across a towel on the sand. Her top's visibly untied, head's turned ever so slightly away from the camera, her eyes are half-lidded, and she's got a weird smile I've never seen her wear, like she's a mix of shy and playful. Everything from her pose to her expression is provocative, and that look in her eyes is so piercing it feels like she can see me through the photo. Goddamn, this is a loaded image.

My mouth is watering, and my cheeks -- no, scratch that, my whole face is burning. Suddenly it's obvious why this was hidden away.

After several long minutes of scrutinizing every square inch of it, I finally -- gently -- place the photo aside and begin slowly looking through the other ones. Don't tell me there's more. I wonder if there's any of the others, too?

To my surprise, there are -- but nothing quite like that first one. I recognize just about everybody in these pictures. There's one of Martina with a little smock and a paintbrush in her paws, decorating what looks like one of the posters at the library. And here's one with Annie and Wolt at what looks like a block party, each of them grinning and holding a plate of chips and burga sliders, just like the one Al grilled for me. I notice a handful of prey in this one, but to my displeasure, I soon recognize the familiar pig with the facial scar in the background. That'd be Rasher, Anneke's ex. Guess this might've been taken when they were still together.

Photo after photo in this box, and it's almost all of my neighbors and friends. Ozzy busking and singing a duet with Charlie. A nighttime shot of Al at work, a stack of rebar slung over his shoulders as prey species work around him. Different work uniform, though. Could be a different gig. There's Velvet and Betty in tacky holiday sweaters sipping mugs of hot chocolate. That one brings a smile to my face. There's even a photo of Rex in casual clothes, seated in a barber chair with a big old grin.

And then there's a picture of a large group, gathered on the steps out front of the Crowns, right outside this very building. Seems it wasn't taken too long ago.

Charlie took this one, I think, given she's closest to the camera and is taking up much of the right side of the picture. The whole pack is here, from Al acting tough and Anneke flashing a peace sign to Marty and Avo both looking like they're too cool to care about the photo.

But right there in the middle, next to where Betty's got Wolt in a headlock, and with Ozzy's arm around his shoulder, is someone I've never seen before.


I turn the picture over in my hoof-tips, my head tilted, trying to figure out who the hell this guy even is. He seems weirdly familiar, and yet I've never seen him around here anywhere. Or heard any of the Pack talk about him. I mean, I think I'd remember if they'd mentioned a llama.
Rubbing my muzzle, I reach back over to the rest of the stuff from the stash on the table--

And bump into the sunglasses.

The same sunglasses as in the photo.

I stare at the llama in the shot for a long moment, and my jaw just kinda hangs slack.

"Fuck me," I quietly curse under my breath as realization hits me like a sledgehammer. "You're Kenny?"

My head's spinning and I collapse back in my chair, staring at the ceiling. Ever since I first heard Kenny mentioned, I figured he was -- fuck, I don't know what I figured. Another wolf, I guess? I don't know. Just that he was some druggie who had some dope pigeonholed away in my apartment. I knew he was an ex-Packmate, I just sure as fuck never thought he was a prey species!

God damn. My mind's racing, trying to piece this in with everything I knew. Thought I knew.

My hooves move on their own, and I begin flipping through the stack of pictures anew, this time looking to see if there are any more of Kenny in them. Sure enough, in one of the previous photos, I spot a hoof that looks just like his, holding the posterboard that Martina's painting on. His reflection's also visible in the mirror behind Rex at the barber shop, and I can see he's wearing a Clippership's uniform. There's even one I missed, stuck to the back of the picture of Al. Looks like a New Year's party, and there's that greaser-looking llama giving (a very drunk) Anneke a piggyback ride while she waves a pair of sparklers around.

My head's swimming. All this time, there was another prey in the Pack before me. And it looks like they were close, too, judging by some of these pictures. Not to mention all the other stuff in the box, too. I can't even process them all. Was the lighter a gift from Betty -- or maybe a gift for her?

Man, no wonder Ozzy was curious to know if I'd found the "stash". It was never about drugs or some quick-fix.

He was after the memories in here the whole time.

I glance at the clock. It's getting late, but I have one last errand to take care of before I can finally let myself get some rest. Slowly, I begin returning everything to the box, one piece at a time, taking care to make sure everything’s layered in gently so that it doesn't get damaged. What an unexpected topper for an already emotionally overwhelming day. I'm not even sure sleep would do anything at this point -- I feel like I need to spend a week in a sensory deprivation tank.

Just one thing first.

After a few seconds, the door opens and a familiar, sleepy-looking face pokes out.

"Oh. Hey, uh. You all right, man?"

The shaggy hyena in front of me scratches his neck uncomfortably, eyeing me up and down. I'm sure after the day I've had, I look like a fucking mess. But hey, I gave him my word.
I clear my throat, holding out the old box. "I think I got something for you, Ozzy."
Remmy spends a late evening hanging out with a friend.

I'd never been in it before, and I honestly don't know what I was expecting from Ozzy's apartment. A few dozen blacklight posters of Jim Boarison, maybe? Some half-stashed paraphernalia. A worn-in sofa, some old pizza and takeout boxes, probably a video game console. I don't know. That kind of thing.

Not this.

Man, and I thought my apartment was sparsely decorated. There's basically nothing here. It wouldn't be hard to convince me Ozzy had just moved in. Or was just moving out.

First off, no video games. And no TV. Not even a couch. The whole apartment is empty and blank,
nothing like the hyena that owns it.

It's a tiny one-room deal -- got a bathroom, but not even a separate bedroom. A bare mattress lies flat on the floor, near one of the corners. A handful of empty aluminum soda cans are strewn around it on the poured concrete floor, and within arm's reach is the radiator, strung with a cord of narrow, colored lightbulbs, like you'd see for festivals and holidays. Looks like that's the only thing in the whole apartment that's plugged in, and the only light beside the ceiling fixture. Which actually makes me realize there's not even a fridge in here. I thought those came with the unit.

There's not much else. A pair of shoeboxes sit by the door, and a half-crumpled cardboard box with some loose clothes spilling out. Then of course there's a stand for Ozzy's guitar. I've never looked too closely at the instrument before, but it's gotta be the most expensive thing in the room. The way it's built, one side curves up, and the whole thing's got a design that makes me think of goat horns. It must've been worth something once, given the unique build. It's pretty well-loved now, red finish worn down along the neck and around the frets. There's even a spot near the strings that I can tell Ozzy rests his paw on when he plays, just because it's the least glossy spot.

"Nice digs," I sniff, brushing my shirt.

"Yeah, yeah," Ozzy chuckles, elbowing my woolly midsection. "Sorry I ain't exactly puttin' the Kitz down here."

I breathe out my nose and shrug back. "It is kinda bare."

"Well I don't do a lot of entertainin', plus I spend most of my time out and about. Not all of us likes stayin' cooped up all night."

He cradles the little box of mementos I brought over, brushing dark fingers across its surface as he sits down on his mattress, then pats the threadbare sheets to suggest I do the same. It's a little awkward, with how low it is to the ground, but I join him.

"Can't believe you found it," he marvels, looking like he's paying it too much respect to even open it.

"I can't either," I admit, and that's the truth. I mean, it was total luck. I pretty much just bumbled my way into it.

With a soft, kinda respectful nod, he uses a claw to flick open the lockbox's latch and slowly begins sifting through the contents. I watch, on the edge of my seat, as he twirls Kenny's sunglasses around on one finger with a lopsided grin. I have to admit, I'm a little excited to see all this stuff through Ozzy's more "experienced" eye. It's kinda like watching a movie you've never seen before, then talking to someone who's seen it a million times and can tell you all sorts of trivia and insight and stuff you might've missed.

Honestly, insight's something I could really use right now. My head's still spinning trying to come to grips with this whole Kenny thing. What a game-changer. I mean, fuck, he wasn't just a prey species, he was a llama. What are the fucking odds of that? Another life, we could'a been wool-brothers. I wonder if we'd have gotten along. Though, I guess someone else would've had to move out instead. And who could I do without? Honestly, short list. Even as much as I might be having trouble with Anneke right now, I wouldn't want to imagine her gone. Doubly so 'cause it'd mean Wolt would go with her, probably. I couldn't get rid of Avo, Al, Charlie... definitely not Ozzy. And Marty, I mean -- even if he'd been gone, wouldn't that mean I'd have moved in with Charlie? And who knows what that would be like. I was in her apartment like, one time, and it was uh. Memorable. Does she go around the house naked often? Marty didn't seem fazed by it. But -- eh,
then again, wouldn't that leave Marty in prison? Even I wouldn't wish that on the little grape-flavored grouch.

Oh and man, you want to talk about game-changers -- how about that swimsuit photo of Betty?

Like, was Kenny into her, then? Was she into him?

Were they a couple?

Does that mean Betty's a... preyophile?

Fuck, if she is, that sorta puts that time she shaved my wool in a different light. And come to think of it, it looks like Kenny worked at Clippership's, so there's gotta be a connection there. And what about the time I ran into Betty and Avo at Pandora's? I wrote it off then as just me getting hazed, but now I almost wonder if she was flirting with me. Not to mention all the little call-outs to me every time I pass by her apartment building?

"Hey, Oz," I ask, drumming my hoof tips on my lap. "Do you know if Betty's got, like, a boyfriend or anything?"

"If she does, I ain't heard about it," he replies with a smile. "Lemme guess. You askin' 'for a friend'?"

I raise my hooves in mock surrender, chuckling. "Arright, man, just curious, that's all."

Ozzy laughs softly to himself as he pulls out the little bag of stones, sort of half-juggling them back and forth in his paws like he's playing with a hacky sack.

"Man, these bring back some memories!"

I shift a little on his mattress to get a better look at them. "Did you guys go fishing or something?"

"Naw, we went to the beach."

Ahh. Probably explains where that pic of Betty came from, too. "I didn't even know there was a beach anywhere near here."

"Oh, there ain't. We had to bus all the way out to the Canal District. Avo and Annie pitched it to Al as a 'Pack teambuilding exercise';" he says, making quotes with his fingers.

"Hah! I'm actually surprised to find out he'd go for something like that," I muse.

"Mighta helped that Velvet chimed in an' let slip she was the captain of the girls' volleyball team in high school and was itchin' to play again."

Not gonna lie, the thought of Velvet sprinting across the sand in a clingy swimsuit and spiking a volleyball with a fierce look on her face is actually pretty cute. I chastise myself for a second for entertaining the thought -- after all, Velvet's not just a taken woman, she's the Alpha's.

...But now I'm imagining her and Charlie squaring off against Avo and Annie, and then Betty in that two-piece, and...

"So, uh," I cough, reeling myself in, "her and Al were both kind of athletic in high school, huh? Makes sense, they're both in really great shape."

"Tell me about it. Al especially. Dude's fuckin' jacked," Ozzy says, holding his arms out at his side
like he's imitating the Alpha's physique. "Anyway, that's how it was. A bunch of us went up to the beach for the weekend. And y'know how Marty is. He gets it in his head to fuck with Kenny a little."

"Sounds like Marty," I nod.

"So he tells Kenny, he goes 'girls love a guy who can skip stones'. And he just feeds him this whole crock'a shit he says he got from some book, 'bout how it's all 'romantic'."

"Yep. Definitely sounds like Marty." I can't wipe this stupid grin off my face at the thought of trying to skip stones with hooves. These things are just not made for that kind of finesse. "Still, the beach? I mean, don't you usually skip stones at like, a pond or something? Calm water?"

"Well yeah," he replies, looking back to me with this 'no duh' smirk, "that's kinda the joke. And if you're doin' it at the beach, you'd prolly at least wait 'til there ain't any huge waves."

I sit back, propping myself against the bare wall with a cushion of wool. "But not Kenny."

His eyes light up a little and that smile of his just gets bigger. "Yeah nah, Marty told him he'd get more 'torque' with waves."

I'm starting to get an idea of where this is going. "Fucking hell. Even I know better than that."

"Hey, I guess he figured, go big or go home, y'know? So Kenny's just standin' there in front of Big B, hurlin' every rock he can get his hooves on at the waves, flexin' and actin' cool." Ozzy's got his paws up, the little baggie of stones clenched tight in one as he excitedly acts out the scene. "And he's startin' to get more'n more pissed 'cause, no shit, they ain't skippin'."

The hyena wipes his mouth a little, his giggle fit gradually coming under control. He puts the baggie down, gesturing with both paws.

"So Kenny, y'know, he rightly catches on that he's been had, as he was bound to. And he just stomps over, grabs Marty by his tail, and fuckin' slingshots his ass right at the water -- and damned if the little guy didn't skip like a fuckin' stone."

I bust out laughing at the mental image of a flailing Marty being hurled across the water, and Ozzy's quick to join me. Man, why couldn't they have gotten a picture of that? That shit would be my phone's wallpaper in a heartbeat!!

"Finally figured out the 'torque', huh?" I cackle.

"I'unno, the life vest probably helped a lot there," he wheezes.

"I can't decide whether to poke fun at him for being paranoid enough to wear a life vest to the beach, or being smart enough."

Ozzy sniffs, calming down a little. He places both his dark paws on the box, and in just that brief pause, his smile fades gradually, and the laugh on his lips dies into a sort of sigh.

"He still inhaled a lot of water."

I blink, sensing the change in tone. "Who, Marty?"

"...Broke two bones in his tail."

I don't move from my position slouched against the wall, not really wanting to move. I wasn't
really expecting--

"Was he okay?"

Setting the little bag of stones aside, Ozzy thumbs through without answering and pulls out a couple of the chomped-on guitar picks, rolling his eyes at them. It's this good-natured, wry sort of look, and I already can tell there's another story here.

"Kenny play, too? Someone realized too late that they look better than they taste?" I joke.

He shakes his head, smiling sorta halfway. "Nah, they're mine. I just chew 'em a little when I'm thinking, s'all."

"You do a lot of deep thinking?" I don't mean it as some passive aggressive insult, so I try to make sure the way I ask doesn't sound sarcastic.

"Here and there. Song lyrics and stuff. But even I got my serious moments too, y'know." He sets the picks aside, and sticks one claw up to interrupt. "Despite my best efforts."

"Hey, did you really get jumped?"

I slap my hooves over my mouth, and Ozzy kinda glances over at me.

"I'm sorry. That's-- I-- that's a fucked up thing to just ask about outta the blue."

"It's ancient history by now," he shrugs, smiling effortlessly. "Don't worry about it. I don't."

I wrap my arms around my knees, clasping my hooves as I kind of rock back and forth quietly on his mattress with this dumb smile on my face. Ozzy's just such an upbeat guy to be around. I honestly wonder how such a genuinely nice guy ended up here, in this sort of situation. Doesn't seem fair to me. The empty apartment, struggling to get by, the constant meetings with Velvet. For whatever all that's about.

Actually, come to think of it, I haven't really thought to ask.

"Hey, Ozzy?" I prompt after a moment. "I got somethin' else I wanna ask you. Serious question. If--"

"Woolly B," he interrupts, his voice suddenly harder than I've ever heard it.

I stop cold. "What?"

He turns to me really slowly, eyes wide, and without even looking, draws the racy swimsuit photo of Betty out between two fingers.

"...You weren't lookin' at this, were you?" His 'serious' act cracks quickly as his smile tugs itself wide across his face.

I can feel myself turning red, but I shrug and try to laugh it off. "Well it's not like I closed my eyes while I was goin' through it!"

He laughs back, flipping the photo back around and looking it over himself. "You shouldn'ta been lookin' through it at all!"

The more he laughs, the more I want to laugh, and that just makes him laugh more, and so now we're both grinning like the idiots we so clearly are. "Ozzy, c'mon man, I'm not made of stone!"
"Look, look, look," he tries to stop us both, making 'calm down' gestures with his free paw, "Just... arright. Let's just not tell mama wolf about this one, okay? I won't tell her you saw this if you won't."

"Deal," I agree immediately.

He goes back to picking through the rest of Kenny's stash, shuffling through the deck of playing cards and tapping lazily at the buttons on the broken game machine. He gets to the red rabbit-shaped keyring, which he looks at for a long, quiet moment without even a hint of a smile.

Then all of a sudden he just throws it back inside, shuts the box, and tosses the whole thing rather roughly onto the ground next to his mattress.

"Rem, thanks again for droppin' this by," he says, picking his guitar up as he stands, nudging the box against the wall with his foot.

I glance up. "Done already?"

"For now," he replies, giving his guitar an affectionate strum. Slinging the strap over his shoulder, he turns to me. "I'm thinkin' I might head out, maybe go perform for a bit, blow off some steam."

My late night feels like it's getting later. Which is weird because usually I'm wide awake at this hour, but I guess being jobless has started shifting me back to my old diurnal schedule. It's a shame, since honestly, I kinda like being nocturnal, and besides, I don't really feel like heading back to my apartment just yet. Just kind of hanging out sounds nice right now.

"You mind if I come with you?" I ask, standing up and following him over to the front door. "Of course, if you'd rather be alone--"

"What, really? I figured you'd be ready t'crash. Yeah, man, if you're up for it, then c'mon! I can always use some company." He slaps his paw down on my shoulder, all smiles. "I know a great place just up the street to play."

I straighten out my shirt and follow him out the door. "I'm in. Lead the way!"

Turns out Ozzy's "great place" is somewhere I've never been before: a place near the commercial row at the end of Pack, near where a bunch of chain stores meet what could generously be called the local main street. It's a little better kept than most of the area, though maybe with a bit more graffiti.

I can see why he'd want to play here. It's well-lit, there's some clean-enough benches to sit at, and of course, plenty of foot traffic. Some of the shops and restaurants here I've never really noticed before stand out, so I make a mental note to get out and explore this side more.

I mean, who knew Pack Street had a GameHop? I haven't been in one of those since I was a kid. The windows are packed so dense with bright poster ads for all the newest PreyStation games that I can't even see inside. And just next door's a Wok Softly? Damn, it's been ages since I had a good bowl of noodles. I can smell the bug meat sizzling even from here. And up the road's one of those discount clothing stores that sells off-the-rack suits and businesswear. I make a special note of that one, since it probably wouldn't hurt to invest in a nice shirt for my next job interview.

Setting an empty coffee can beside one of the sidewalk benches, Ozzy takes a seat and begins tuning his guitar and playing a few test chords. Even to my amateur ear, it sounds damn good. I
realize now it's been a while since I heard him play last. I do remember he's pretty good.

"So, any requests?" he asks of me, his lone audience member so far. "How 'bout somethin' upbeat, a real crowd-pleaser. Get their feet tappin'."

"Start off strong, huh?" Rubbing my chin, I mull it over. A song everyone knows... maybe like an anthem? Those are usually party favorites. "You know 'Mr. Brighteyes'?"

"Who doesn't? Not my pick for solo guitar and a wailer, though," he shrugs, testing a few chords. "Didn't figure you for the type to listen to The Maulers, though. Weren't you like, three when that song first came out?"

I look down at my Kings of Lion shirt, then back up at him, making a face.

"All right, grandpa. And how old are you?"

"I got a graveyard hand, I got a tombstone mind," His black lips split into a giggling grin and he strums out a strangely familiar set of notes, singing his answer back in a scratchy voice. "Yeah I'm just 21 and I don't mind dyin'."

"The Woolies?"

He cocks his head, ears flopping to one side, and slaps his knee. "Not bad. Didn't take you for a garage-psychedelic sorta guy. 'Cuz that's my lifeblood right there."

"Hey man, I got varied tastes." I nod appreciatively. "Are you really 21?"

"And some change."

"Damn."

"So," he stretches, flicking a claw over the strings, "what else y'know?"

"Well let's see, what else is good from around that era and is, at least, genre-adjacent?" I tap a hoof to my chin, trying not to show my excitement at finally being able to flaunt a little of the music fan in me. "You know 'Psychotic Reaction' by Mount Five?"

He licks his teeth, leaning back, and squints at me. "Arright, you got my attention. Spit it out, you got any other favorite nuggets?"

"Well we already covered how I feel about 'Woolly Bully', but uh... lessee." I rack my mind for appropriate songs, counting them off on my hoof. "Codine', 'Can't Seem to Make You Mine', 'Just Like Me', 'Too Much to Dream', 'Fight Fire', oh, and definitely 'Baby Please Don't Go' -- really anything by The Ramboy Dukes."

"Shit, Rem." I can see his tail wagging excitedly, and he nods repeatedly. "And here I was thinkin' you were a square."

"Oh, I totally am. Ninety fuckin' degrees on all sides," I affirm, sitting on the bench with a chuckle. "But I had a friend pass me a few albums in middle school and I was never the same."

He breathes out through his nose, smiling, and shakes his head. "Guess those shirts you been wearin' ain't hand-me-downs after all."

"Look, I've heard you playing 'Little Bit o' Soul', so I knew what kinda stuff would impress you." I try not to act smug, but kicking back on the bench as the crowds go by, I can't help but indulge.
"But honestly I'm into all kinds of stuff. Meles Meles, of course -- I actually have a signed copy of *Paper Tiger Gods*... I listened to a lot of *Black Sable*, or at least, their early stuff. *Fur Fighters*, ooh -- *Uncage the Elephant*, caught a live performance a few years back."

"Man, I've only ever been to one concert, and it was to see *Modest Me*."

"No shit! How were they live?"

"I don't know dude, I was fuckin' out of it," Ozzy manages through sudden laughter. "I was barely paying attention and I was only there 'cause I snuck in anyway. Am I boring you?"

"What? No, why?"

"You been:" He snaps and points to himself, faking a yawn. "Since we set up. S'all."

"Nah, nah. Just tired I guess. I've been up for a while."

"Hey, y'can head back if you want. Get some shut-eye."

"Yeah, when I'm ready," I smirk, clapping my hooves. "Let's quit draggin' and get to it, huh? I'm gonna officially request 'Last Time Around' by the Del-Vets."

"On it like a sonnet," he nods, straightening up his guitar. "All I'm gonna ask is you don't sit too close to the cup, or folks'll feel awkward chippin' in."

I hop to the bench on the other side of him, patting him on the shoulder as I cross. "Got it. Knock 'em dead."

Ozzy plays through a few songs and I listen, but it's hard to sit still while he's rocking, so I end up leaned against a lamppost at a respectful distance while mammals come and go up the street. To my surprise, a fair number of them do toss change or the occasional bill into his coffee can. It's not a killing by any means, but I know Ozzy doesn't do this strictly for the money. I think if he wanted to, he'd be up past daybreak, playing his heart out because it's who he is. He's a mammal with his own style.

I notice the way he holds his guitar isn't really like the way most musicians I've seen. Despite his wild, crazy nature, he's so gentle with it. He doesn't slap the strings or bang the side of the body like so many wannabe rockers would. I get the feeling that even if he could, he'd never pull a Pete Townshound and smash one of the things. Even the careful way he uses that chewed up pick shows this odd sort of respect for it. Makes me wonder how long he's had the thing. He's not much older than me, so it can't have been that long.

Hmm.

"Hey Oz," I sit myself down on the curb next to him once his song concludes and the nearby onlookers have finished their sparse round of applause. "How old are the twins?"

"Uh, let's see," he muses, idly flicking his pick up and down the strings. "I dunno about Annie, but Wolt's 18, so... yeah, 18."

I choke on air. "Sorry, what?"

He throws his shaggy arm around me. "Yeah man, and you're 19, right? Figures we're all about the
same age. Probably why we all get on so well, yeah?"

I blink repeatedly. "Anneke is 18?"

"And some change," he chuckles.

"Fuck!"

"What?"

"I-- I don't know!" I clap my hooves to my forehead. "I thought she was like, at least in her twenties?"

He giggles so much he has to stop and take a breath, elbowing me in my puffy middle. "Y'know, I'm pretty sure she thought that about you."

I gotta admit, that wasn't what I was expecting to hear. "Man, maybe I'm just bad at reading ages."

"Okay," he leans back a little, stretching. His tone makes me think he took my confession as a challenge. "How old do you think Charlie is?"

I chew my tongue, incredibly self conscious of any possible answer. "Uh, I dunno. Thirty? Thirty two?"

He wheezes between his teeth. Obviously my answer is funny. "How 'bout Al?"

"Thirty... three?"

That gets him laughing even harder.

"What?! I told you I'm not good at this!"

"Thirty three'!!" he cackles, kicking his feet out like he's being tickled.

"Oh shut up!" I huff, grinning.

He snorts and sniffs, just trying to calm himself down, but keeps on giggling between brief, idle riffs on his instrument.

"Let's get back to the music," I try to sound upset, but I'm too obviously smiling.

"Okay, okay," he waves his paw around in the air, nodding. "You know 'Open Up Your Door' by Richard and the Young Lions?"

"Yeah, I'm down. Hit it up, music man."

He wags a finger at me. "No no no, song like that, I gotta have me a backup singer."

"Forget it."

"C'mon!"

"No! I can't sing to save my life!"

"Rem."

I cough and hold my arms out, pleading. "Ozzy, I'm tellin' you, nails on a chalkboard man! I
couldn't carry a tune with a bucket!"
"You got a song in your heart. All the music you listen to, you gotta have picked something up." He gives me an encouraging grin. "Just for the one song."

"Fine, fuck it," I toss my hooves in the air.

"Hey, that's the spirit!" The shaggy musician brings his guitar up, steadying himself to play. "I'll lead. You just back me up."

"Let's get this shitshow on the road, I guess."

He strums out the intro and I brace myself.

"Sorry in advance for the donations this is gonna cost you," I mutter, blushing already.

When it's all over, I'm leaning on the hyena's shoulder, sweating and red from embarrassment. I think I got a few looks from the passing crowd.

"I mean..." Ozzy winces.

"I warned you, man!"

"I've heard worse," he finally says, after I've had time to sort of catch my breath.

"Don't spare my feelings, Ozzy."

"No, I have!"

"Yeah?" I glance up and wipe off my face. "Who?"

"Avo," he answers instantly.

"No way."

"Y'know Ewexsie and the Banshees?" He snaps, pointing a finger at me. "Like that. Except more off-key."

"I'll be sure to hold it over her next time I see her." Boy, I bet she'll love that. Not very often I get some kind of embarrassing dirt on her. "That have anything to do with her being Omega? Was she in the Pack long?"

Ozzy scratches his thick, scruffy neck, lost in thought. "Dunno. She was in when I joined."

"When was that?"

"Couple years ago? Not all that long, in the big scheme."

"Huh." I don't know what I expected, honestly. Never really stopped to think about anyone else's induction. "So you probably weren't the last one in, before me."

"Nah, the twins were in just a few months before you moved in."

"That recent!"
He wags his tail, shifting to rest his guitar against the bench. "For sure. They moved in from Bunnyburrow around that time and as soon as they found out about it, they pretty much made Al let 'em in."

"So Kenny was already in at that point, yeah? Means they joined right before he left?" There's still so much I want to know about him. "Were you guys close? I figure with the picks, you two must've jammed together a lot."

Ozzy's tail abruptly stops wagging, and I can see him kinda biting his tongue as he pulls his guitar right back into his lap.

"Hey -- I'm sorry, I didn't mean to--" I stammer, fumbling to recover the mood I've just soured. "You guys must really miss him, huh?"

He taps his guitar tentatively, then lets out a long sigh.

"Some folks, you know, you'd just as soon like to put behind you." He mutters, batting at the shaggy fur of his chest with a look of visible distaste. "Might find that's somethin' of a common sentiment, 'round here."

I sit up sharply, almost double-taking that last line.

"I-- wh--" My hooves find their way to the wool of my pompadour, tussling it in confusion. "I was under the impression he was well-liked. I mean, the box -- seemed like a lot of good times in there."

"Well, sure, but who clips out an' saves all the bad memories?"

I'm not really sure of what to say. From everything I saw, it seemed like Kenny was really close with the rest of them. That photo of the whole Pack together, thick as thieves... he looked like he was such a good fit for them. He looked like a better fit than I ever could be. But I guess, like Ozzy's wild man demeanor versus the way he lovingly caresses his instrument, looks can be deceiving.

The more I think about it, though, the more I realize he's kind of always been that way. That night at the block party when that drunk bear kicked me literally to the curb, Ozzy was right there to save my ass without a second's hesitation. I've never seen him that angry before or since, but he looked like he was ready to throw down with that guy. All for the sake of some stranger who he'd just met. Not even a member of the Pack and he was stickin' his neck out for me.

For whatever bad taste Kenny left behind, within a couple minutes Ozzy's right back to tuning and strumming, all smiles as if nothing had ever happened. I slowly take a seat next to him on the bench, twiddling my hooftips absently.

"Hey Oz?"

He stops and side-eyes me, his head tilted to one side like always. "What's up, Rem?"

"Thanks for being cool, man."

He cough-laughs till he's almost out of breath, then shakes his head and gives me the biggest smile he's got. "Aw c'mon man, don't go all sappy on me here."

"Hey, I mean it. Let me be-- c'mon. Let me be just a little corny for once here, okay?" I slap him on the back, and use my other hoof to wave away his protests. "You're a good guy, man, and I'm glad
to know you. So thanks. For y'know, everything."

Without another word he sweeps me up in a huge scruffy hug, squeezing like a compactor. When he sets me down, I'm pinched in the middle, and it takes a few seconds for my wool to puff back out.

"Arright, arright, that's as genuine as I can be at one time," I chuckle. "Let's get back to talkin' about other people's embarrassing details instead of my own. Like uh... ah, hey! Speakin' of Avo, what's up with that whole camshow thing? You know about that, right?"

"It's not really my thing, if that's what you're askin'," he responds, plucking loose wool from his shirt.

"Oh, get real." I sit up, scratching my chin. "Hey actually, on that note, you're not seein' anyone, are you?"

"Nope."

"Not a lot to go on, or...?"

His grin grows wider as he leans back. "You askin', or are you askin', Remmy?"

I blink. "I'm just tryin' to get to know you!"

"Yeah, I hear that one a lot," he laughs, winking hard enough to make me roll my eyes. "And I'm flattered -- maybe even a little curious -- but honestly, I'm not lookin' for a relationship right now. That's all. Still sorting some stuff out in my life."

"You mean like with Velvet?"

He clears his throat, plucking a string.

"Actually, about that, I still don't know what--" I start, only to be suddenly interrupted by my own stomach rumbling.

"Someone didn't get their protein," Ozzy snickers, elbowing me with another wink.

"Well, I did have a hot-bug earlier, but it didn't really carry me."

And checking my watch, I realize with some surprise that Ozzy and I have been out here shooting the shit and jamming for the crowds for over two hours.

I dust myself off, climbing to my hooves. "Okay, well, hold the fort. I'll be back."

"Aye-aye," he salutes.

I thought I saw another hot-bug stall on the way here, but when I retrace my steps, the streets are empty. Wok Softly's closed too, damn. With a shrug I start making my way around the block to see what else is open. Even as nocturnal as the residents of Pack Street are, and as hopping as it can get at night, I imagine a lot of the businesses mostly cater to diurnal schedules. Figures, that's what the majority of the city operates on. Still, there has to be someplace around here that's serving food, even if I gotta go to a gas station to get it.

Speaking of hot-bugs, that makes me think back to Leo, the vendor from earlier. I remember Al
saying something about him formerly being in the Pack a long time ago. Which means he's not anymore. I wonder if his situation was like Kenny's, or if he left on better terms. Al seemed to like him anyway. Maybe he just had to move or something. Hard to imagine someone just... outgrowing all this. Then again, Al was also adamant about me getting things settled with Anneke so that he wouldn't lose one of us.

And right there, walking down the street in the middle of the night without even looking over my shoulder, humming some old proto-punk song from the 60s, it dawns on me, all of a sudden, that I don't want to leave Pack Street.

There was a time when I was clawing at the walls to put this place behind me. Now I'm... not. And I haven't been in a while, if I'm thinking about it. Probably not since Bellwether got arrested. Even when it was really rough here, I wasn't thinking "how soon can I move out?" I just... don't feel like the best way to handle my problems is to leave, anymore. Maybe it's because most of my problems are gone, now. I feel safer than I ever have here, happier. For the first time since I moved in, I even feel like I have friends.

Ozzy's top of the list, of course -- I mean, hell, just look at us now. Once upon a time I couldn't stand the guy and now we're performing for strangers together like we're best buddies. And then that time I put in recently at Packer's with Martina, Cliff and Neil stands out. Wolter and I drove off together to Bunnyburrow and we ended up having a fucking ball. Avo gave me some cooking tips and offered to help fix up my place -- maybe I should ask her for some interior decorating help for Ozzy instead, because I think he needs it worse than I do. Hell, even Al bought me dinner tonight, and offered to go sort things out with my boss. And then he asked me for a favor. For Al, that's huge. I don't get the feeling Al asks anyone for anything. Fuck, there're times I've gotten the vibe he hated the sight of me, and now he trusts me.

That's a damn good feeling.

Yeah, Annie said she never wanted to see me again. But I know she's just hurting right now. You say things you don't mean when you're hurt. I know, because I've said some stupid shit, and recently, too. Fuck, it wasn't long ago that I'd have been happy to hear her say that. To give me an excuse, to strengthen my resolve to put Pack Street behind me for good. Now, I just want to make things right again between us. I think she deserves that much.

I think we all do.

I only notice the little cart in front of me when I nearly bump into it. Grilled cheese sandwiches from a street vendor? Not real cheese, of course, but... fuck, that sounds good right now. No one's even in line, and the wrinkled goat behind the grill smiles at me without saying anything.

Before I know it I'm hurrying along like a little kid leaving an ice cream parlor, two huge, wax paper-wrapped, deliciously melty grilled cheeses in my hooves. I bet Ozzy's gonna love this.

I'm just coming back into view of the bench I left him at when I see his audience is gone. In their place is a tall, muscular wall of a mammal wearing a police uniform.

Oh, fuck.

Whatever he is, an ox or something, he's right in Ozzy's face, towering over him and staring him down. I can't hear him from here, but I don't need to. His tough guy expression and confrontational body language says it all. I already know his type. Hell, anyone watching longer than five seconds probably would too. Brash, abrasive, domineering big-man-on-campus wannabe. Every bit the former high school jock that I once mistakenly pegged Al for, only this one's got a badge to hide
behind.

In one of his hooves is Ozzy's coffee can, and I realize he's shaking him down. Fuckin' unbelievable. What, there aren't real crimes for you to be out stopping, so you've got to come to Pack and harass a local musician? Haven't met your fuckin' asshole quota this month?!

All this and Ozzy's still just smiling in his easy way.

By the time my brain catches up to my hooves, I've already dropped the sandwiches and stormed down the street, right towards the guy. This is bullshit. Literally. I'm not about to let my friend get railroaded by some third-rate member of the rubber gun squad with delusions of grandeur.

"Hey," I call out once I'm close enough he can hear me. "There some kind of problem here?"

"Remmy," Ozzy murmurs. His smile vanishes and he shakes his head, making a low, cutting gesture with his paw.

"This guy's my roommate," I quickly intervene. Well, close enough. His room is adjacent to mine. That counts. "You wanna tell me what you're hassling him over?"

"Noise complaint," the bull barks back at me. "Now back off and let me do my job."

"Who complained?"

"Don't be a smartass, kid," he grumbles. "Additionally -- and he should know this already, because I've had to tell him before -- public performing without a valid permit is illegal in Zootopia."

"The can's mine," I blurt out. "I keep my pocket change in it. He was just playing."

He flicks the tip can -- which I notice is now empty -- at me. "Then I should be writing you up for littering. So be a good citizen and put that where it belongs."

Yeah, how about right up your ass? Fucking prick. Gritting my teeth, I move forward slowly, but not intimidatingly, hooves raised. Just enough to get a little closer to Ozzy, who, for his part, is stone-faced serious right now. Charlie would be proud. Assuming she wouldn't just fry this guy with his own taser when he wasn't looking.

I cough, irritated, and continue to glare at the guy. "Look, why don't you just quit harassing my friend, and we'll all be on our way."

He shakes his head at me as he begins writing down what looks like a fucking grocery list of shit on his ticket pad -- no doubt sticking the screws to Ozzy on every technicality he can. There's no way in hell Ozzy would be able to pay any of that. I mean, the guy's out singing for strangers probably just to keep the lights on in an empty apartment.

I can feel my blood boiling and I raise my voice a little more. "Hey, cut him some slack, man."

"Boy, tell me you're not stupid enough to try interfering with an official police investigation. Because I know Flock when I see it. You're about two seconds from heading downtown in cuffs, so why don't you run along now and quit poking your nose where it doesn't belong."

I scoff, my wool bristling at his choice of nickname. This guy's like, mid-twenties at the oldest. I ain't your fucking boy, asshole, and we all know nothing about this looks official!!

Suddenly, his pen in his hoof snaps like a twig. The cop turns his head to look at me, the
incredulous glare on his face visible from even behind his shades. Even Ozzy's staring at me with his mouth hanging open.

"What the FUCK did you just call me?!" he snorts at me, dragging one of his hooves against the concrete in a very typical bovine display of intimidation.

Ah. Did I say that last bit out loud...?

Well, if he wants to play rough, then fuck it. Might as well lay it out.

He thrusts his hoof at me, baring blunt teeth. "I am gonna blink, and if you're not halfway down the block when I open my eyes, I am gonna take both of you for a ride in the back of my car."

I step a little closer to Ozzy, but I don't give up even a single inch of ground.

"You do," I return, my tone dry, "And I guarantee you will never work in this city again."

He glares, lowering his sunglasses. "Are you threatening me?"

I reach into my pocket and he suddenly jolts, putting his hoof on his taser. Is he for fucking real??

I scoff, unimpressed, and slowly draw out my wallet, passing him my ID, which he accepts with some visible confusion.

"Do you know who Judge Cormo is? Savannah Central, Second District?"

I fold my arms, and he glances up at me over his shades.

"Yeah. That's my dad."

He glances down to my ID again, then back to my face, and I can almost hear the gears turning in his head as his eyes start to widen.

"So please, officer, I would love to see you explain to him that you were the only cop in your precinct dumb enough to drag his only son in cuffs, because he caught you slipping a suspect's cash into your own pocket."

Officer ox leans back, standing up straight, and pushes his sunglasses back up his face. He wordlessly hands my ID back, then straightens his tie.

"I have better things to do than waste my time with a couple troublemaking smartasses," he waves us off, dismissively, turning back to his car. "You're both lucky I don't have all night chasing every delinquent I see. Consider this a warning."

And like that, he climbs in, slams the door, and peels off.

When I turn away from the street and back to Ozzy, he's shooting me this wide-eyed look, his jaw hanging slack, like he hasn't even moved.

"Holy shit," he breathes. "Holy shit!"

"Well, taken care of, I think," I shrug, smiling as nonchalantly as I can.

He slaps his knees, still half-stunned. "Damn dude! Like-- shit, I didn't know your dad was a judge, man!"
I can't hold the facade. My eyes are wide, I'm grinning so hard my face hurts, and all of a sudden the laughter's coming out of me so hard and fast I'm having trouble breathing. Also, my heart is going like four thousand miles an hour.

"Ha ha ha he's not," I blurt, manic. "I just made that shit up. I'm not even related to the guy, it's just a common last name for sheep!"

The shaken hyena stares at me for a minute, jaw practically on the floor, and all of a sudden he just bursts out laughing like he's a fucking explosion of chuckles. He's slapping the curb with his palm, howling and gasping, tugging at his shirt like he doesn't even know what to do with his paws.

I can't help but join him.

We just laugh and laugh till we're crying. Like it's the funniest thing that's ever happened to us. Maybe it is. I get about three false starts where I think I'm good, but halfway through wiping my face with my sleeve Ozzy just screams with laughter again and all of a sudden I'm back in it.

I don't know how long passes. But there's finally a point where we're done -- at least for now. He's got his guitar slung and he stands up beside me, but for a minute, I'm still just watching the street, thinking.

So when he addresses me in a real quiet voice, I almost don't realize he's talking to me at first.

"Hey, Rem." It sounds important.

I nod up at him, slowly. "Yeah?"

"Thanks for that. I mean it. You didn't have to. But, uh." He takes a deep breath, standing real still and staring off down the row, into the distance. "I figure, y'know. After everything-- It's not easy, but if you really wanna know, I owe y'that much, I figure. So... y'know. If you wanna ask, I'll tell you."

I stare up at him. He doesn't meet my eye.

"Okay," I nod again.

He lowers his head, staring at the pavement.

"Ozzy?"

"...Yeah?"

I stand up, patting him on the back, and gesture the opposite way down the street.

"Since I dropped the sandwiches I was gonna bring us," I shrug, sheepishly, "You wanna like, hit up Bug Burga on the way back, instead? My treat, since you got your earnings snagged."

He looks over his shoulder, his eyes kinda twinkling, and smiles a crooked smile at me.

"Yeah, man," he laughs once, sniffing. "Yeah. Right on. Let's go."

"Cool," I grin back. "But you owe me a request next time we're jamming. I'm gonna make you sing some bubblegum ruminant-pop shit, you watch."
"Only if you sing it with me," he chuckles, ruffling the wool on my head as we head for home.

"Twist my arm, why don't you."
Nothing could spoil this day.

I may have overdone it.

I admit, my sleep schedule's been all over the place lately. But staying up as long as I did, even for a good cause like hanging out with Ozzy, is something I'm paying for now.

Still. Trying to stay more positive. Today's gonna be a good day. I can feel it.

Just gotta believe.

You ever get to that point where you're too awake to sleep any more, but so exhausted you don't wanna face the day? Of course you do, everyone does. Everyone knows what that's like. That's
where I am right now. Thankfully I don't have a job to be late for but I also don't have a lot else to distract me, and the few things I should be doing don’t seem like a lot of fun in my current state, so I guess I'm just gonna sit up in bed and surf on my phone for a bit.

Ha ha, nevermind. My phone's not getting service for like the third time this week. Guess I'll just take a shower. My wool feels all greasy and matted and a hot shower would be heavenly right now. Admittedly, it might just relax me enough to want to go back to sleep, but that's fine by me. I wouldn't mind a few more hours. A little nap would do me a world of good.

Several minutes of standing at the back of my shower with freezing ankles and hooves I realize the water isn't getting any warmer. Pilot light on the heater must've gone out again. That's fine. No big deal. Nice cold shower first thing in the morning.

In fact, even better than a hot shower. Because by the time it's over, I'm wide awake. My wool's still all tangled because I rushed, but my unheated room feels positively warm by comparison, and I barely even feel my teeth chattering.

Hey, you know what else is great? Those Buggie Nuggies™ I was saving went bad! It's great, because they're bad for me, so really if you think about it this is just the universe trying to keep me healthy. Instead, I'll have a bowl of cereal!

Just kidding, of course. Re-checking my fridge, I see I'm out of milk. Cool! That's cool and good. I'm glad that happened. Awesome.

Plain cereal sounds fine. No, it's great, actually. I wanted that.

My doorknob rattles faintly, which is the local vixen version of a knock, so I wipe the flaky crumbs off my chin and think of how much more I enjoy having great, friendly neighbors who never cause me trouble than I do being able to have even one meal in peace.

I swing the door open with the best smile I can muster for the oily-furred fox standing on my doorstep. "Morning, Charlie."

"Cormo," she nods back, sharply. "Nice outfit."

Oh, right. Forgot to get dressed after that shower. I've just been sitting at the breakfast table in my wet towel.

"I have news," she adds. I'm prepped for sarcasm, but something about her expression cuts through me.

I can feel something heavy in the pit of my stomach. Whatever this is, I can't remember the last time I saw Charlie looking so serious.

Well, maybe I can.

Ignoring the growing dread, I swallow the lump in my throat and push on. "What is it?"

"I got word from the doctor that the treatment has been a success," Charlie explains, straightening up. "Pandora will be able to receive visitors within a few days."
I think my ears just popped.

"What?" I blink, frozen in place. My hoof's still on the doorknob.

"She's okay," Charlie smiles crookedly.

Before I even know it, the vixen's in my hooves. I've picked her up into such a big hug her feet are off the ground, and I'm squeezing her so tight I'm wringing myself out on her sweater. She throws her arms around my neck in return, her chin on my shoulder, and squeezes me tight enough to almost cut off my air.

"God, I'm so relieved," I choke, a shaky grin plastered on my stupid face as I finally set her down.

"Everything looks good," she murmurs, wiping her face with her sleeve. I notice the entire front of her sweater is damp from my own wet wool, but she's taking it in stride. "Further details are forthcoming but once her system's flushed, there may be no long-term effects at all."

"That's the best news we could have hoped for," I sniff. "I was -- fuck, I'm just glad she's gonna be okay."

"Looks like we all will."

I run a hoof through my headwool, clutching my towel with the other. "I still can't get over all this. It feels like coming out of some long nightmare."

"I know the feeling," she sighs back, barely audible.

I'm not sure what else to say, but Charlie doesn't look like she intends to stay anyhow. She turns on her heels, her immensely puffy tail swishing behind her, and wrings the damp fabric of her sweater as she heads off.

"I'll keep you posted, Cormo. More good news is likely on the way."

"Yeah. Thanks, Charlie!"

The door closes with a soft click.

Holy shit.

I pace back to the table but like hell I'm gonna be able to sit still right now. I grab a hoofful of dry cereal and shove it into my mouth, chewing loudly as I pace around the bare wood floors of my apartment.

Holy shit.

I lean against my window, staring out over the sunny streets below, and a big grin splits across my crumby face.

I knew it was going to be a good day.

All the earlier cobwebs and grouchiness are long gone, fizzled away like a bad smell in a fresh breeze. That dry cereal was some of the best I've ever had. That cold shower was more energizing than any cup of coffee. And the sleep I missed last night might as well be a distant memory. The sun's out and despite my odd start this morning, I threw some clothes on in a hurry and now I'm
practically jogging down towards the commercial row. Me, of all mammals.

There's a few nicer shops there and I don't intend for Charlie to be the only one with a gift in-hand when our mutual tiger friend is ready to see us. Yeah, that's right, I'm gonna be there when those doors open. Not a force in this world could stop me. She was nice to me when I needed it. She helped me find my feet. Hell, as embarrassing as that whole 'presentation' I gave back in the lobby of the Crowns was, I think in the end it might've even helped me build bridges with my neighbors. Definitely helped with a certain aardwolf.

Anneke. Oh, Anneke. There's a sore fucking note right now. I'm in too good a mood to dwell on it, but man.

Okay. Reminder to self: find some way to make it right with her. I'll patch that up. I gotta. I can't exactly live on bad terms with my next-door neighbor if I'm gonna survive here.

Anyway, the gift.

See, I don't know a whole lot about Pandora, and the only material thing I truly know she likes is donuts, which I'm certainly not gonna buy, at least not days in advance. I'm not that stupid. But believe it or not, I'm actually a pretty good gift-shopper, so just gimme a few stores to peruse and I bet I could come outta there with something that'll bring a smile to that big cat's face while she's finishing her recovery.

Hell, maybe I can pick up something for Anneke, too. I mean admittedly I don't have a ton of spending cash, being between jobs and all, but hey, I've had to pinch pennies before. I'll be okay.

So, what do you get a 'thirtysomething porn magnate' who's just getting over 'going savage'? I suppose a greeting card that says "sorry you were targeted by a specist conspiracy theory to grab the seat of power in Zootopia" might seem a little impersonal, so I'll have to be clever. Lucky for me, I've got a knack for being clever.

Thing is, Pandora's for sure the most well-off mammal I know, so I won't be shopping for exclusive quality or anything. No, what I need is something thoughtful, even personal. Something that stands out because of where it comes from, not how much it costs. If I can get her a personalized gift that shows a little compassionate insight, it'll make that much more of a--

"Hey. Hey! You!"

I'm pacing down the sidewalk, eyes absently watching the dry cracks and countless black spots of chewed gum that pass along, when I realize someone's shouting.

"Hey! C'mere!"

They're shouting at me.

I stop in my tracks, glancing up, and peer over at the source of the calls.

In the narrow alley passing between an old brick warehouse and what looks like a row of boarded-up brownstones, there's a handful of mammals. One's waving me over.

And I think I recognize him.

I glance around just to be sure he's talking to me, and, not finding anyone else on the street, shrug and head over. I'm racking my brain trying to figure out where I know this guy from. I don't recognize the others sitting around with him on stained wood pallets and squatting with practiced
ease by the walls. Five of 'em total: couple canines of some kind, not wolves, uh, looks like a --
what do you call those wild goats? -- and maybe a wolverine? *Fuck* I'm bad at recognizing species.

But the guy calling to me is a coyote. Wearing a roughed-up looking business suit all undone around the neck, with no tie.

One of the other canines nods. "That him?"

"Lookit you," the coyote smirks, squinting at me. "I almost thought you got outta town."

"Huh?" I blink.

He chuckles, looking over his shoulder and gesturing to me for his friends, who smile back at me.

Turning back, he cocks his head, clapping his paws on my shoulders. "You recognize me, grazer?"

I squint for a second, searching my memory for some way out of an embarrassing slip, and all of a sudden the memory of two professional-looking mammals in line at the fish taco truck pops into my head.

"*Don,*" I suddenly snap my hooves. "*Don the coyote!* Yeah! Yeah, you and uh, Dewey? Seen you guys around from time to time? Uh, we met at Neil's truck, a while back."

He grins back, and again gestures at me for his friends. "How 'bout that? He remembers!"

A couple of his friends laugh as well, and the enthusiasm is almost contagious. I didn't realize I was a celebrity around here, but I do remember someone trying to film me when I was trying out those tacos. Herbivores downing real meat like that must be a rare enough sight.

Guess word got out.

"Hey, nice seeing you around. I'm actually--"

"I remember you too," he smiles, gripping my shoulders tighter and giving me a friendly shake. "*You're Cormo. You're Remmy Cormo.*"

I nod, shrugging sheepishly.

He grins wider.

"This is that piece of shit."

His grip on my fluffy shoulders pulls into a tight-fisted clutch and all of a sudden he's hauling me back, all but throwing me down into the alley. I stumble awkwardly just to stay on my hooves.

"Hey, easy, man! I get--" I turn to face him, and suddenly he's a foot away, charging me with an elbow-first shove, knocking me back again. I trip over someone's foot and like that I'm falling, crashing into a pile of old wooden boxes. My back hits a crate at a rough angle and I yelp out in pain.

My heart's pounding and my mouth is suddenly dry and the world's spinning around me and I can't even figure out what's going on. I clutch for a handhold to pull myself up, but just as I start, I feel something on my chest, and look up to see the goat pressing a metal pipe against my attempt to rise and shaking her head 'no'.

Maybe I'll just lie here for a minute longer, then.
"Remmy fuckin' Cormo," Don paces up to me, his paws rapidly clenching and unclenching as he speaks. "Thought you'da left town. You probably should'a. Gone the way of all your fuckin' friends."

"What are you talking about?!" I bleat, and the goat presses the pipe harder against my chest, wagging her hoof at me.

"You got some real fuckin' balls," the coyote growls, pacing around me. "Struttin' around here in broad fuckin' daylight. How the fuck dare you show your fuckin' face."

I gasp for breath. "Don--"

He spins, lurching down to grab me by the wool of my chest, and hauls me to my feet with impressive strength.

"You woolly little freak." He hisses through his teeth at point blank, flecking saliva onto my face. "Fuckin' make-pretend wannabite piece of shit grazer. You made a real fuckin' mistake."

I shake my head, just trying to hold on as everything spins out around me. This doesn't feel real. Nothing does, except maybe the pain in my back.

"Don, I'm--"

The ranting coyote throttles me, yanking me forward and back by my wool so hard I nearly get whiplash, and everything goes dizzy again. With a shove, he sends me stumbling back the way I came. I almost make a break for it in a panic, but some kinda spotted cat I didn't even notice before is blocking the way back to the street. He plants his foot against my fluffy midsection and with a stone-faced frown just kick-shoves me back towards the rest of the group.

Right back to Don.

He's in my face again, and that cheerful expression is long gone. In its place is a face twisted with a kind of anger I'm not sure I've ever seen in my life. Every muscle in his face is tightened, his snout's wrinkled and his lips are pulled back into a fierce, sharp-toothed scowl.

"We open our fuckin' doors for you. You come in here like you're one of us. You're not one of us. You're a fuckin' snake. You're poison. You're shit. You're scum of the fuckin' earth."

I don't even know how to react to that. My jaw hangs open and I blink, wordlessly, as his snout twitches and his bleary eyes narrow.

"It should'a been you," he bristles in a low and chillingly intense tone, slowly building in volume. "It should'a been you. Instead of my buddy in a downtown hospital bed it should'a been you on a slab in the fuckin' morgue!"

He throws me back, and I slam so hard into the wall behind me I hit my head even through my wool padding.

Everything's spinning worse than before, and I can barely keep my eyes on Don as he storms up to me.

"Look, man," I choke between gasps. "I-- I didn't know anything about that, I'm sorry to hear--"

"Take a good look, guys," he shouts, right in my face. "Because this is the piece of shit they let slide."
Over his shoulder, I can see the other canines moving up behind him. The goat circles around behind them, keeping a squinty eye on me, a huge sneer on her face and that metal pipe slung over her shoulder like she's itching to use it.

"Bellwether might'a forgot you, but we didn't."

I think my eardrums just popped.

"...What?" I blink, incredulously, and a deep chill runs up my aching back, right to my throbbing brain. "I'm not-- you think I'm with them?! I'm not a fucking conspirator!"

He leans into my face until I have to pull back just to avoid a headbutt. "You roll into Pack Street right before a 'savage' attack. You got seen following around the mammal who got tagged. You were even there the night it happened. Ground fuckin' zero."

How the fuck does he know I was--

**Cliff.**

The local gossip. He was there that night. I talked to him. He must've--

"It was chaos, man! Sirens and crowds!" I bleat, shaking my head. "A lot of mammals were there!"

"Yeah," he almost roars, grabbing me. "But just one sheep."

One of his buddies prowls up past him and spits on me. Literally just spits on me -- right on my wool, but misses my face, at least. I'd be pissed, if I wasn't so fucking scared. I keep glancing between Don and his friends, and the end of the alley.

I consider calling for help, but right about now I'm remembering the streets were empty.

I try to swallow, but my throat's dry. My hoof twitches.

"You got it all wrong, man!" I plead. "Just now I was on my way to get Pandora s--"

"You keep her name out your fuckin' mouth!"

The coyote moves suddenly and I flinch away from a sharp heat on my face, like I've just been stung by a bee. All of a sudden I'm staggering away from Don's group. I consider making a run for it, but there's no way I could outrun these guys.

I touch my face and look down. There's a red stain on my fluffy white palm.

Oh, fuck.

Glancing up, I see Don, flanked by his friends, paws flexed to claws and glaring at me with an intense look of pure, disgusted hatred.

"Maybe you didn't hear, grazer, but Bellwether got got." Don sniffs, wiping his face with the back of his dirty black suit sleeve. "Your friends, too. But ZPD missed one, huh? Half-assed it like they always do. Well guess what, cotton-head -- we don't take no fuckin' half measures here."

He takes a single step and suddenly my hoof flies under my shirt, like it's got a mind of its own.

Everyone kinda stops for a second, and some of Don's guys look sideways at him, but he doesn't
even flinch.

"He ain't got shit," the coyote murmurs, continuing his approach.

I stumble backwards, fumbling through my wool, and a moment later--

I've got it.

A gift from my Alpha.

I grip the metallic whistle in my hoof and without the faintest hint of hesitation, I bring it to my lips and blow like my life depends on it -- because it very well might.

For a second time, everyone Stops in their tracks.

I stop.

My ears are ringing from the most piercing sound I've ever heard in my life.

The sound of silence.

"No," I breathe, clutching the whistle, desperately. "No."

The goat grins, chuckling. "What the fuck was that, cotton-head?"

I stare at it, then quickly bring it back up, blowing again.

And again, nothing.

Oh god.

Oh god.

I'm fucked.

It's broken. It's fucking broken.

Oh, fuck. I should've taken better care of it. Maybe that time I threw it in the drawer?! Fuck!!

I need it and it's fucking broken!!

I try one last time, emptying my lungs into it as hard as I can, but all that comes from the whistle is a quiet, hoarse kind of wheeze.

The goat just bursts out laughing, like it's the funniest thing she's ever seen.

"Holy shit, lookit this fucking clown! Hey, Don, you think he's--"

Sweat pouring from my forehead, I slowly look up to see the goat glancing around at the others in her group.

She turns her head to the side, hefting her improvised weapon. "Hey, what's with you?"
Everyone's got an odd look on their face -- everyone but her. Don, particularly, is glaring strangely. He's biting his lip, ears perked up high, and his tail -- like several of the others -- is fluffed up and bristly.

"You know whose that is," someone says, almost too quiet to hear.

"This piece of shit's not worth my time," Don snarls, spitting on the ground in my direction.

"Yo, what?" The goat blinks, moving up to him.

"He'll get his," Don warns her sternly, holding her back with one arm. "But I got better shit to do than cut my teeth on this sobbing piss-baby."

The others nod, murmuring agreement, while the goat shrugs, looking as lost as I feel. "Don--"

"C'mon," he turns, heading down the alley in the other direction at a brisk pace and snapping his fingers in the air. "Leave the fuckin' traitor to his own shit."

Don and his pals make a hustle towards the opposite street, while the herbivore of their group gives me this last crooked parting look, squinting in genuine confusion.

As for the coyote himself, he pauses at the far end of the short alley to give me one last snarling glare.

"This ain't over, grazer."

And just like that, they're gone.

And I'm standing here with a whistle in my hoof, spit and sweat in my wool, and blood dripping from my snout.

I know I shoulda left. They're gone, but they were here. But right now I'm just trying to get a grip on the world revolving around me. I dunno how long's passed -- no more than a couple minutes, tops -- but I'm sitting on a broken wooden box, staring at the shiny whistle in my red-stained hooves, and all of a sudden the most horrifying noise I've heard all day comes outta nowhere.

Somewhere between a battle cry and a psychotic shriek, the words come ripping through the silence of the empty street.

"COME ON YOU MOTHERFUCKERS, I'LL TAKE YOUR FUCKING EYES OUT! I AIN'T AFRAID OF GOING BACK TO JAIL!"

My whole body tenses up. I nearly fall off the crate in recoil as a fluffed-up aardwolf screaming her head off comes careening around the alley corner like a bat out of hell, punctuating her shrill roar with the nerve-prickling crackle of a hand-held stun gun.

"Anneke?" I stare wide-eyed up from the trash heap I've practically just fallen back into.

She pants, whipping side to side to look around the empty alley, and cocks her head at me.

"Remmy?"

I just try to breathe. Two scares in one afternoon is about my limit. "Anneke, what the hell-- are--"
what? What was that about going back to jail?"

"Sounds scarier. Is--" The aardwolf lowers the zapper slowly, her bristling striped mohawk slowly relaxing. "Are you okay?"

"I mean-- I am now, yeah. I... there were these guys..."

She nervously thumbs across her weapon. "Are they gone? You sure?"

I struggle to stand. My legs feel like putty. "Yeah. Yeah, they-- they left. You have a stun gun?"

"Girl's gotta protect herself," she sniffs, reaching up to brush her mohawk down flat, even as the rest of her fur bristles. She breathes deeply, trying to calm herself down.

"You scared the shit outta me."

"That was the point," she says, still clutching her zapper.

I blink. "What are you doing here?"

"I heard the whistle," Anneke pants, looking almost as shaken as I feel.

My hooves trace the metal grooves of it, much more carefully now. "I thought it was broken."

"It's a pitch-whistle. Used to call it a dogwhistle. I forgot, some mammals can't hear it."

I stare, my tone low and quiet. "But you did."

"Three blows -- absolutely life or death. No one else was around I think, so... I mean. I came running with all I got."

With a deep breath in through her nose, Anneke pockets the device. Faintly, her lip begins to curl, and I see a hint of teeth, now all too familiar. My heart quickens a little as the fresh memory of Don pinning me to the wall flashes through my head.

"...But if I knew it was you, I wouldn'ta bothered."

My snout drips red, but I feel too pathetic to even wipe it with my hoof.

As bad as the cut on my face feels, that might sting worse. I don't have the energy to defend myself. All I can do is hang my head, staring at the sidewalk as it grows blurrier beneath me.

I've been frustrated before, miserable even, but this feeling... it's so much worse. My heart's tight in my chest and the floor's spinning and the sky is coming down, and everything smells like salt. I don't have it in me to clench my hooves, to sniffle my running nose. It's hard to believe there was any optimism in me, just ten minutes ago. Whatever there was is gone. I'm spent. Deflated.

I've never felt so hopeless in my life.

"Do you really hate me that much?" I swallow, wetly.

Weakly, in my peripheral vision, I see Anneke moving strangely, lifting her paws a bit and then dropping them -- more than once, in fact, like she's trying to make some kind of gesture and just failing halfway, rolling her head one way then the other. Something fighting inside her.

Finally she drops her arms to her sides and shakes her head, reluctantly.
"...no," she admits, sighing.

I sniffle, looking up at my neighbor as she takes her turn to stare at the concrete.

"I don't," she grumbles. "I don't-- I mean, I'm not happy with you, but that doesn't mean I want you to get fuckin' jumped or knifed or some shit."

I wipe the blood and snot off my nose, and turning to me, her ears perk up and her eyes widen.

"You're cut," she notices.

"Yeah," I nod dumbly.

She walks up to me quickly, and without meaning to, I flinch. She seems taken aback herself, straightening up like she's just taken real stock of this.

"Who the fuck clawed you?" She peers at me, leaning down to get a better view of my face. "Do you know who it was?"

I nod. "Yeah."

"Hey, all right, c'mon. Remmy, hey. This way, okay?" Anneke gestures, reaching out to gently guide me by my midsection without startling me. "Al would-- or I guess Betty, or Oz-- shit, the whole Pack would put my ass through the wall if I just left you to walk home alone after that. So we're goin' home. Okay?"

"...Yeah."

It's too hot out.

What I wouldn't give for a little cloud cover. Or a better outfit that's not dirty and bloody and sweaty. I feel like everyone I pass is gonna be staring. And fuck, my throat's so dry. I wish I'd had more to drink. My guts are in knots. I should've had something more robust for breakfast than just dry cereal. And as hot as it is, I'm shivering. Wish I'd taken a nice hot shower.

Wish I could take one now.

The sun beats down on me and Anneke while we plod back home. Not that far, but it feels like a million miles right now.

"Me wanting you to not die doesn't mean I forgive you," she mumbles.

"I know."

"I just-- what the fuck, Remmy," she sighs. "After that whole-- presentation you gave in the lobby, I really thought there was something different about you. How the fuck did it come to this?"

Her tone's not angry and accusatory like it was the other day. Instead it's just... sad. Same way I feel right now.

I just sniffle, rubbing my bleary eyes.

"Sorry," she sighs again. "Sorry, I-- I shouldn't be grilling you after you just got fuckin'-- god, I really am sorry."
"It's okay," I cough. "You still got more tact than me."

She strokes a dark paw through her headfur, through the zig-zagged mane that runs down her neck, and shakes her head.

"I'm sorry too."

"Yeah."

"I mean it, Anneke. I know I've hurt you--"

She shakes her head. "Okay, just-- just stop, okay? We don't have to do this right now."

"I never meant to--"

"All right, fine, look." The bristling aardwolf stops ahead of me on the sidewalk, folding her arms over her chest. "You're in no shape for this, right? Okay? And yeah, I appreciate that you're saying sorry. Okay? Happy?"

"I'm not happy while you're still upset," I sniff. "I'm sorry that--"

"Look--" she interjects, frazzled. "Just-- okay? You keep saying that. You keep saying you're sorry. You keep saying that. Why? Huh? Just-- why? Why do you even want to apologize at this point? Is it just because you don't want to be in trouble? Can you not stand the idea of someone who just doesn't like you? Or is this some path of least resistance thing?"

I stare at the sidewalk for a second, wiping my sopping face with my hoof and turning over her question.

It's a good question.

And even through the blurriness of the world around me, some strange little piece of something still pierces through. All I can do is answer. So I take a breath.

"When I-- when there was that big block party. A couple months back? I had basically just moved in. I was grouchy and angry because I just wanted to sleep, but I ended up out in the party anyway. And I stayed. Way longer than I had to. I just kept-- and I-- I saw something."

I glance to her, but she's just waiting for me to continue, so I do.

"I saw something I'd never seen before. I-- I don't know. Everyone was having fun. Everyone was having-- it was-- I-- I don't know. I'd never seen anything like it. It was this-- this other world. It was this other world. Everyone was having so much fun and just getting along so well and everything was good, and it-- I saw this little world you all had, and I--"

I shrug weakly, letting my hooves drop to my sides.

"I wanted to be part of it."

My shoulders slump and I sniff deeply. When I look up at Anneke, she's still standing there with her arms folded, but the fur around her neck's gone all fuzzy.

"Shit, that's..."

She drops her arms too, then, brows arched high, runs a paw through her headfur.
"That's a really good answer," Anneke sighs, shaking her head.

I chuckle reflexively, but it gets stuck in a choke, and I sorta just lamely sniffle out of it.

She nods in the direction of home and, with one paw outstretched, brings me back alongside her to continue the walk.

"Maybe it's more that you want us to be part of your world."

"Huh?"

Anneke glances sideways at me as we walk home, breaking the silence of the last few minutes. "You've been here how many weeks now? And you barely care about us enough to know a thing. You don't want to be part of our world. You just want us to accommodate you."

I stare at the sidewalk, blankly, and keep walking with her.

"You don't even know us. Like -- what's my last name?"

I sniff. "Van der Velde, isn't it?"

She shoots me a surprised look, brows arched, and a second later, slowly nods.

"What's my favorite color?" she asks, tone now much more probing than accusatory.

"Purple?" I cock my head, ears flopping. "You wear a lot of purple, including your swimsuit. And the only time I've ever seen you wear jewelry, it was amethyst, so--"

"What's my favorite food?" The aardwolf squints.

"...sliders?"

Out of nowhere she *laughs* and I nearly jump.

She shakes her head, gently putting her paw around my shoulder and gesturing down the sidewalk. "No, ha. No."

A car passes on the quiet street, rustling loose newspaper into spirals in the air.

"...But that's a nice guess."

I don't know how long passes by the time we reach our shared building. I've never wanted to get inside and back into my apartment so badly.

She speaks up for the first time in several minutes, looking sideways at me with an almost pitying smile.

"Guess you're in it now, Remmy."

I shrug. "It's gonna be okay, right?"

"Yeah," she nods instantly. "We'll take care of it."
We pass Betty's building -- quiet, with no sign of the big black wolf -- and come up towards the steps of the Crowns.

"And to think," she smiles strangely, shaking her head. "None of this ever would've happened if we'd just left you alone like you wanted."

"I never wanted that."

Anneke stops a few steps from the front door, looking over her shoulder with a curious expression.

"I said I did," I continue, shrugging carelessly. "I went on and on saying all I wanted was to be left alone. But every chance I had, I tried to spend it with you guys. Not just at the party, I mean. I didn't call in a noise complaint. I spent my night out there, eating sliders and chips and drinking soda and just... talking with mammals there."

The aardwolf turns to face me completely, so I push on.

"The day I got locked out of my apartment -- the first time we ever met -- if I hated it that much, I could'a gone anywhere. But I stuck around with you guys. Even early on."

She smiles, in spite of herself, glancing at the ground.

"You know that guy who lives on our floor? That wolf who's always carrying a laptop around?"

"Uhhhhh... Phil?" She squints, like she's trying to remember.

I shrug back. "I dunno. That's my point, I mean, I don't even know his name. But that guy, he lives right here and he's not part of the pack. Spoke to him maybe once. My first few weeks here, I didn't even know he existed. That guy -- that's what 'I wanna be left alone' looks like. 'I wanna be left alone' doesn't mingle and share stories. It doesn't hang out in the lobby, and tag along to the gym, and go drifting at parties and eat ABC lollipops."

She tilts her head curiously at me, and I manage a weak chuckle.

"So yeah," I sniff, clutching my shirt in both hooves to wipe my face on it -- which I immediately regret, given the greasy, red streak it leaves. "...you guys can feel free to come bug me any time."

"What the fuck is this," Al rises to his full impressive height, the 'great white wolf' of the Crowns turning to both of us as we enter.

"He got fuckin' jumped," Anneke mutters.

The Alpha comes over to me quickly, planting a heavy paw on my shoulder and tilting his head one way then the other to inspect me, even sniffing at the air. I must look like a fucking mess.

"Remmy. You okay?"

"I'm all right," I nod, quickly. "Just shook up."

He thumbs across my snout with surprising care, inspecting the smear of dried blood on his paw. His eyes narrow and the muscles in his face tighten visibly.

"Who did this." Notably, it's not a question.
"Just some guys," I shrug.

"Remmy." His paw squeezes my shoulder -- firmly, but gently. "That whole 'no snitching' thing you seen on TV, I appreciate what you're going for, that's for cops. You gotta tell me. That's how this gets sorted. That's how this doesn't ever happen again."

I hesitate, glancing at Anneke behind me, and she nods, softly.

"This is what the Pack is for, Remmy. Let me take care of it."

"This guy, Don. He's a, uh--"

"Coyote," Al growls. "Yeah. I know the pack he runs with."

"They're a-- of course they're a pack," I blink. "Makes sense."

"Look. Hey. Remmy." Al gestures upwards with his index finger, and I meet his eyes. "Listen to me, okay? I'm gonna take care of this. You got me?"

I nod slowly.

He pats my shoulder again, more firmly. "This is never gonna happen again. I'm gonna make a hundred percent sure of it."

I nod again.

"You look like hell warmed over," he chuckles, his stern expression finally softening. "Go wash up, get some rest. Take the rest of the day off. Anneke, put him to bed, would'ja?"

"What?!" She scoffs, almost laughing. "Have Betty put him to bed!"

"Betty's not here," Al explains as he would to a child. "Now put the Omega to bed."

"I can put myself to bed," I interject, glaring at both of them.

The aardwolf smiles up smugly at Al, who shrugs and puts his paws up, relenting.

I cough into my fist. "...but I wouldn't mind if Anneke did it."

All of a sudden Al claps his paw to his mouth, wheezing into it, and turns away. Anneke gives me this indignant, scrunchy-faced glare like she's actually really mad but also trying not to laugh anyway.

"You're really fuckin' pushing it, Remmy," she bristles, glaring over her shoulder at the snickering Alpha. "Fuckin'-- come on. I'll get your baby blankie."

Guess I'm taking that nap after all.
Remmy's in for a long night.

It's dark when I wake up.

I roll over in bed, staring at the blurry light trails of cars passing in the night. By diurnal standards, I'm up way, way too early. By nocturnal standards, I slept in.

So much for just taking a nap. I guess my internal clock's still a little fucked up.

Well, it matches the rest of me.

I slip out of bed as gently as I can, but shifting my weight onto my hooves causes me to groan out in pain. I'm sore and achy all over -- my head, my back, my face. And then there's that nasty coppery
taste in the back of my throat. I reach up to rub my itchy muzzle, only to flinch the moment my hoof touches the parting gift Don left me. I still basically feel like shit, just well-rested shit. I stumble over to the bathroom to clean up and change my bandages, and as I stare into the scratched, smudge-covered mirror, I lock eyes with the ram in the reflection.

My wool's a sorry sight, all filthy and tangled and matted from me getting tossed around the alley like a beach ball. A visible chunk of it's missing from my pompadour -- guess it must've snagged on something when I banged my head. Heavy, dark circles hang under my eyes. I've got scrapes and bruises all over my forearms and hooves. The bandage taped awkwardly to my face is stained a nasty mix of red and brown. Even my fuckin' teeth hurt.

And yet, despite everything, a shaky smile crawls across my face.

I was probably seconds away from biting a curb when I blew that whistle. Anneke didn't have to come. But she did. When I needed her the most, she came running. With hellfire in her eyes and a stun gun in her paw, an aardwolf came to my rescue, shrieking like a banshee all the way. Even if Don's pack took off before she got there, it's not like she showed up too late to help.

No, they only bolted because they knew someone was coming.

And then there was Al. Man, I thought he was mad that night he shredded my old gym bag in the lobby -- now I know how much he was holding back. That look on his face when he saw me stumble in... Al's the most terrifying mammal I know when he wants to be. And I gotta admit, it's nice to see it leveled in my defense for once. Hell, it's almost enough to get me to feel sorry for Don and his guys, because there ain't no telling what he's gonna do to them. Or maybe already did.

I lean against the counter, tugging my sweat-soaked shirt off with one hoof. And then I see it. The shiny little pitch-whistle -- half-embedded in my messy wool -- that saved my life. And, in a way, my relationship with Anneke.

I take hold of it in my shaky hooftips and turn it over, watching it glint in the dim city light drifting in through my window.

You fuckin' shower with that thing on if you gotta, as long as it keeps you from forgetting it.

Betty's warning echoes loud and clear in my head. After what happened yesterday, I'm never taking this thing off.

The sudden sound of floorboards creaking behind me causes my heart to skip a beat. Startled, I turn around abruptly before catching glimpse of a dark, fluffy, zig-zagged mane leaning in from around the corner.

"I didn't realize you were still here."

"Well I didn't bolt," she answers. "You feelin' any better today?"

Anneke's voice is soft and scratchy all at once, breaking a little as she speaks. All the animosity she's been holding onto for me seems to have run dry. The furious argument of the other day is a distant memory.

I nod, casually leaning against the bathroom counter before ripping the bandage off my nose -- and
there goes half the fuzz on my muzzle. Ow ow **OW**. I **immediately** regret using one with such powerful adhesive. What was this thing coated with, fucking **super glue**?

"I'm fine," I manage, using my sleeve to wipe tears from my eyes. "All systems go."

"**Verdomme.** I'll have to take your word for it," Anneke grimaces sympathetically.

She steps around the corner into the bathroom with me, and I lean back from the sink to glance her over. She catches me staring and smirks, raising one eyebrow.

"Your eyes are bigger than your stomach," she chuckles.

"No, I was just..." I squint, pointing a hooftip at her. "Is that my shirt?"

"I like the Bad Steeds," she shrugs. "I'm sure it's okay if I borrow it."

"It's a little big for you," I muse, tilting my head to one side.

It really is, too. It'd be almost funny, if it wasn't so fucking hot. Her long, bushy tail sticks out from underneath the hem, and I'm craning back to get a better look when she steps up next to me and brings me back to focus.

"Here, lemme help you."

I swallow the sudden lump in my throat and nod dumbly as she bends me over the sink to wash the dried blood off my face. Her small paws gently rub the refreshing cold water into my skin, and I notice she's taking special care to avoid touching me with her claws. Once she's satisfied, she shuts the water off, dabs my face with a dry washcloth, and gently eases some ointment along the scratches.

"Thanks, Anna," I mumble embarrassedly as she finishes applying a waterproof bandage over the wound. "For... everything."

She nods and starts to say something in reply before stopping abruptly. She stares up at me with an unreadable expression, one eyebrow cocked.

"What? What's wrong?" I'm suddenly feeling nervous -- usually, a stare like that isn't a good sign.

"...nah, nothing," she replies after a long moment, a faint smile at her lips as she turns and heads for the kitchen. "Hey, you gettin' hungry yet?"

I perk up, trotting out after her in a hurry. "What, are you making me breakfast? I mean I could eat, but I'm not like--"

Before she can answer me, my stomach growls right on cue, like some cheesy sitcom gag.

"Niiice. That's **way** better than Wolt's 'pull my finger' trick."

Laughing awkwardly, I wade out into the living room, almost tripping over a pile of clothes. Glancing down with a blush, I kick a bright orange bra loose from my foot.

"Uh... feel free to make yourself at home, by the way."

"Already done," she answers casually, already rooting around in my fridge. "You got any butter?"

"Uhh... bottom shelf, in a little carton behind the orange juice, I think?"
"OJ too? Sweet, a twofer."

She bends waaaaay over, leaning across the bottom shelf to reach inside for it, her tail wagging excitedly.

"Awooo."

Anneke stops dead still, then slowly cranes to look back at me, past a bottle of sparkling water. I can barely describe the confusion on her face. "What was that just now?"

"Just howling at the moon," I grin stupidly.

"Shut UP," she laughs, whirling out of the fridge and shooting me an incredulous look as she passes by. "You know you're like the only guy in this whole building who'd stare like that. I mean--maybe Marty."

Sadly, the view's passed, and so I take my seat at the table, wincing as I lower myself onto the uncomfortable wooden chair. Anneke hums softly to herself as she pours glasses of juice and operates the toaster. Before long she's sliding a plate of toast in front of me, slathered in butter... and apparently, uh, chocolate *cupcake sprinkles*...?

"I... didn't have any sprinkles."

"I know," she nods, sitting across from me. "I brought some."

"Do you just... walk around with a tube of sprinkles in your pocket?"

"Some days, yeah."

I hold the slice up in interest, glancing questioningly at her.

"What's that look? You never had *hagelslag* before?" she asks with mild surprise, popping a slice of the candy-bread in her mouth and devouring it in three short snaps. "Ohmmgoff. Haff *you* been fggin' *miffing ouf*."

With a shrug, I take a bite.

Wow. She's not wrong. I have indeed been 'miffing ouf'. I mean, okay, it's a little weird, and buttered toast is already a breakfast staple for a reason, sure, but with the addition of the sweet chocolate on top -- which has already started to melt just slightly -- it really gives it that little something special. Hell, I might have this on my own sometime.

"Well?" she asks, licking some butter off her pawtips.

"It's like... birthday cake for breakfast," I reply, finishing off my slice and contemplating a second piece. "Six-year-old me would've wanted this every day."

"Hah! No wonder you grew up to be such a muttonhead. Six-year-old me *did* have this every day for breakfast, and as you can see, I turned out just fine."

I roll my eyes at her as she brushes crumbs off her stolen shirt. "Ah. Is *that* the secret to your success."

"Course, I'm pretty sure Wolt ate it a lot too," she admits thoughtfully, "so maybe it can't fix *everyone*."
The two of us eat together for a while, mostly in silence, watching the early morning traffic pass by through my living room window. Red lights zip back and forth along the road like little fireflies, while the occasional mammal treks by on the street below. In spite of the pain I'm in, I can't help smiling at the sight of a real-life mailwolf with a bag slung over his shoulder, carrying out his sacred duty in the pre-dawn calm.

And as we sit here, quietly observing the not-so-still life of Pack Street, I'm hit by the incredibly sobering realization of just how truly lucky I am.

What if Anneke hadn't shown up when I blew the whistle? Or what if I'd done like I'd been doing for weeks and just left the whistle forgotten in the drawer?

Hell, what if I'd never joined the Pack itself?

Even though she used half the bag of bread, the Hoggen-Doez or whatever doesn't last long at all. Before I know it, I'm mopping up a few stray sprinkles on my plate with my last little bit of bread while Anneke stretches and begins to gather up her clothes and personal effects from the floor.

"As much as I'd love to lounge around all day, it's my turn to take care of the shopping," she says as she begins tugging her skinny jeans on. "You got any plans today yourself, Omega?"

"Oh, yeah. I mean, I dunno. I hadn't really thought about it," I murmur as I gather the dishes from the table and carry them to the sink.

"Maybe go down to the lobby and watch yesterday's replay with Al? Wolt said it was a hell of a game," she suggests.

"Sounds like a good time."

"Or hell, maybe you and Ozzy could go hit up Packer's and blow off some steam. Have you had a chance to swing by there since they finished the renovations?"

I lean against the kitchen counter and take a deep breath. I can tell where she's going with this. Might as well nip it in the bud now before she gets the wrong idea.

"...I'm sure I'll figure something out," I reply with a confident smile.

"Just, y'know. You seem like you're in a pretty good mood, even after everything, so--"

I hold up one hoof. "Like I said, I'll be okay. Don't worry about me."

"...Arright then," she nods, picking up her wallet and keys from the counter and heading for the front door. I hold it open for her, and she gives me a lopsided smile on the way out.

"Thanks again, Anna. For... well, for everything, really," I mumble.

"Yeah, yeah," she chuckles softly. "Um... look. Forget what I said before. About, y'know... not wanting to see you again."

I wave her off with a hoof. "Yeah, I kinda assumed."

"I mean it. Don't be a stranger, Remmy."

"Oh yeah, totally. You don't have to worry about me holing up or anything."
I slowly drift awake at the sound, looking around my room in confusion. What the *fuck* is that?

It's like the sound a long tree branch makes against your window on a windy night. Except, you know, it's coming from somewhere indoors. I squint aimlessly into the darkness of the room, trying to figure out what that could be, and whether or not it needs dealing with. After a few seconds of strained listening, I decide it's probably just my imagination before closing my eyes and trying to go back to sleep.

Or not? It's getting *angrier*. Grunting, I roll off the couch and nearly trip over the stack of pizza boxes, microwave noodle cups, and empty soda cans as I reluctantly trudge to the front door to see what the fuck that noise is.

All right already! I'm fuckin' coming! Geez!

"Well, that explains the *smell,*" Marty grimaces as I throw the door open.

And *that* explains the angry little noise.

The tiny stoat lowers his wolf-sized pencil to his side and leans against it like it's a walking stick. Judging by the permanent half-cringe, half-scowl on his face, he's clearly about as thrilled to see me as I am to see him.

"You look like shit, Cormo."

"Good morning to you too, Marty," I return.

"'Morning'. Right." His little muzzle crumples, and he waves a paw in front of his face, clearly trying not to gag. "When was the last time you *showered*?"

I scratch at my greasy wool with a greasier hoof, and shrug apathetically.

"Fuckin' hell..." Leaning around me, he peers into my apartment without a hint of subtlety. His whole demeanor shifts as his beady eyes scan the room. "Well, I'm sorry to interrupt, uh... whatever... *all this* is? This little isolated hibernation thing you've been on for what, seven days now? Eight? But we gotta get going."

Blink.

"'We'."

"Yeah, did I stutter?" He glares up at me, shaking his head. "*We* got something *we* gotta deal with. I can't do this on my own, and I'm not letting you handle it yourself."

For some reason, I'm not quite believing what I'm hearing. Call me nuts, but the fact he looked like he was in physical pain while asking feels like a bit of a tell.

I fold my arms. "Are you asking *me* for help? I had to practically beg to be included at the library."
Gritting his teeth visibly, Marty glares up at me in exasperation.

"And believe me, if I didn't have to, I wouldn't," he snaps. Well, that much I believe, anyway. Hefting his pencil, he points it at me eraser-first like the world's dorkiest fencer. "So how quick can you get ready to go?"

"Go? Go where?"

"That's what we're gonna find out." He waves a crumpled-up piece of note paper at me, both sides covered in scrawling. "This was taped on the front of your mailbox. You got any idea of what it could be about?"

My wool tingles and I feel my heart rise in my throat.

"It's for me?" I ask, leaning out my doorway to peer down the hall, both ways.

He shakes his head again. "I don't know. I think so."

"Well who put it there? Did you see someone--"

"Look! I don't know, okay?" Marty rolls his eyes, giving me an obnoxious sigh louder than someone his size oughta be capable of. "It's got a drawing of a sheep and it says--"

I snatch the note from his paws, scanning it as beads of cold sweat run down my forehead.

**WE HAVE WHAT YOU NEED**

And beneath it, a little crude drawing of a sheep makes it clear who this was for.

I try to swallow but my whole mouth is dry. "You don't think...?"

He gestures, waiting for me to finish. "...What?"

"...Don could'a left this?"

"No," he answers instantly.

My palms are clammy and my heart's getting too fast. "But you just said you don't know who--"

"Look. Cormo," the little stoat puts his foot down quite literally, and dismisses me with a wave of his paw. "If that piece of shit were within five blocks of this place, we'da known it."

"But it could be one of his pack."

"Remmy-"

"They said this wasn't over, they said--"

"Corno! Nobody in the city is a big enough idiot to try it. The Pack has got your back, okay? Al himself took care of it. If you don't trust me, you can definitely trust him."

I stand there for a minute, turning the cryptic note over in my hooves, staring at the weird drawings
on the back. A purple balloon, a bunch of stacked circles, a house on top of a stick... symbols and numbers. Real crypto stuff. I just look at it, trying to calm down, when something about the little handwritten flourish on the 'N' in 'NEED' catches my eye. Something that stands way out.

*Kinda* maybe looks an awful lot like the fancy N in *NEW SUMMER READING!* on that poster I saw at the library last time I was there.

I slowly lower the note, narrowing my eyes at Marty as he paces little circles in front of my door, rubbing his chin in a pantomime of deep thought.

"What do the numbers on the front mean? Combo to a safe? GPS coords? Or maybe it's just someone fucking around with us? Kids playing a prank?" He mutters as if to himself, but clearly loud and enunciated enough that I hear every word. "I'm sure they must mean *something.*"

That scared feeling drops away as I realize it wasn't someone from Don's pack that wrote this.

"I'm pretty sure it's just an address number," I mutter, handing him back the 'anonymous' note. "It's literally just--"

"Wait a minute -- it can't really be that simple...? Why didn't I think of that?" he interrupts not-at-all-convincingly, turning the paper over in his paws like he's seeing it through fresh eyes. "Of course! I was overthinking it! The answer was right in front of me!"

*And the Mauscar goes to...*

Look, I might not have any idea what half those scribbles are, but it doesn't take a genius to figure out what *this* is. Marty's made it clear he doesn't think I'm all that smart -- maybe that's why he didn't make it some full-on spy-cipher or whatever. If it was an actual code he needed help decoding, he'd turn to Charlie, not me. Unlike the rest of my neighbors, who've been making a habit of interacting with me since the day I moved in, Marty goes out of his way to avoid me. He seems perpetually pissed off at me. I can't possibly imagine him **willingly** coming over to ask for my help with anything (let alone butting into my business with some note meant for *me*) unless it was incredibly urgent. And I'm not getting that vibe here at all. No, I think it's pretty clear that someone -- almost definitely Betty -- sent him over to try to cheer me up. Maybe get me out of the house for a bit.

...then again, if lifting my spirits was their goal, I've got a hard time believing either of them are so tone-deaf they'd pick Marty out of everyone in the Pack. So... I mean, I dunno. Maybe I'm overthinking this too. Maybe this *is* the real deal. Either way, only one thing's for sure: I'm not getting out of it.

He nods excitedly, heading for the stairs. "I'll meet you outside. There's a game ahoof, Cormo, don't make me fuckin' wait!"

I watch incredulously as he hustles down the steps as fast as his short little legs can carry him. Did he seriously just reference *Sherlock Hound*...? What a nerd. Besides, that's not even the way the line goes.

"Gimme twenty minutes," I reluctantly call to him.

"You've got ten," he fires back.

Twenty minutes later, I'm standing in front of the Crowns with Marty, leaned over his shoulder
while he holds my phone in both of his paws.

"So I started checking the address line against any nearby streets," he explains, bracing the bottom of the phone against his leg so that he can work the touchscreen.

I glance down the street, craning past him. "Marty, even I know that's the--"

"Sure enough, boom."

Triumphantly, he turns the phone's display to where I can see it. Shown on the screen is the Zoogle Maps listing for the local library, complete with the address along with a warning that it's currently closed. No surprise there, as I'm standing next to the librarian himself.


"Don't be a fuckin' smartass. If they'd just written 'Pack Street Public Library' on a card and stuffed it in a mailbox I wouldn'ta thought shit of it. It's obviously a message," he grunts back irritably, handing my phone over. "The real question is, what's the message mean?"

"Wait, wait wait," I stop him, waving both my hooves. "If this note was stuck to my mailbox, what makes it any of your business? I mean, why'd you even touch it in the first place?"

He gives me this 'that was a stupid question' look, with his face all scrunched up and a dry laugh. "Really? You're gonna lecture me about touching other people's mail?"

I jab a hoof in his direction. I'm not taking that from him. "Hey, foul. I only did it because I thought Charlie might be in trouble! And I helped in the end!"

"And what do you think I'm doing?" He throws back at me.

His eyes widen and his face turns just a little red, like he just realized what he blurted out.

Yeah, I bet, Marty. The only trouble that note's gonna get me in is having to spend my morning with you.

He turns in a hurry and hustles down the street. "C'mon. Let's just go."

Sigh. "Lead the way, Sherlock."

My first blush about this being some time waster of a scavenger hunt is looking more likely by the second. Hell, if it wasn't for the fact that today's not my birthday, I'd assume he'd been saddled with getting me out of the apartment while everyone else planned a surprise party or something, and this was all he could come up with spur-of-the-moment.

"Look, maybe we should leave well enough alone," I say, trying my best to not sound like I've already got this shit figured out.

He shakes his head, not even turning around. "No way, we're in this together."

Cool. Great.

So now it's dark out and we're just openly strolling down the street. In the middle of the night. If Marty wanted to put me at ease, he's doing a shit job of it. Even though I know that sound is just my own hooves on the pavement, I keep glancing over my shoulder. Al did promise he'd take care of things, but I really don't want to tempt fate right now. 'Fate', in this case, being a rival pack that seems to want me dead. Still, it's been over a week, there are plenty of mammals out and about
tonight, and I am with somebody, so I guess we should be fine as long as we keep to the beaten path.

Yeah. Because Marty is gonna be able to bail my ass out in a fight.

We pass an empty lot where a couple preds are huddled against the fence, chatting low and smoking, and even though I try not to stare, I'm running my brain in overdrive trying to remember if any of them were there that day. If any of them were in Don's pack.

They disappear behind us and I tuck in the excess wool spilling out underneath my shirt. If I'd had more time, I could've at least sheared. As it is, I did well enough to lather. All I'm saying is if I die tonight I'd rather not leave a corpse with unkempt wool. But I guess that's assuming I'm in good enough shape for an open casket.

It's not long before I find myself lagging behind Marty, who's surprisingly nimble given his tiny frame. He's able to duck and weave around larger mammals in ways I couldn't possibly, and I'm doing my damnedest to give the ones we pass a lot of space. We're barely a block away from home when my legs start to cramp just trying to keep pace. I guess laying low in my apartment for a week didn't do my already scrawny body any favors. What do they call it? Atrophying? Something like that. My calves feel like someone's jabbing them with needles.

That said, the pain's a pretty good motivator. Gritting my teeth, I force myself to keep up out of sheer spite. I'm not gonna give Marty a shot to bust my chops, no way. I may not be the most athletic guy, but I shouldn't be this tired already. After all, I don't own a car, so I have to walk all over town all the time. Hell, I even visit the gym a couple times a week.

Or I used to, anyway, before I got backed into an alley and had the shit slapped out of me. I haven't been visiting much of anywhere lately, unless you count the fridge.

The Library's all the way at the end of the street, just before Pack turns off onto Trip. This is the older part of town, and by 'older' I mean 'historic'. I'm pretty sure this is where some of the oldest buildings in Zootopia are. Hell, the Library itself is actually a landmark -- says so on the preservation plaque and everything. Anyway, by the time we arrive, I'm considerably winded and end up leaning against one of the chipped stone pillars outside for support. Thankfully, Marty doesn't seem to notice (or care) as he stops to admire the building.

"You think whatever we're looking for's gonna be inside?" I pant.

"Not unless they've got the key," Marty answers. Yeah, I'm pretty sure you do have the key.

While Marty scopes the front entrance, I press my face against one of the windows, cupping my hooves around my head to see inside. My night vision's not great, so I can't see far, but I can make out a couple posters (which only confirm my earlier suspicions -- the handwriting's hard to mistake) and a big easel right past the front door, featuring a display made out of thick foamboard, like something you'd see at a science fair. It's covered in glitter and construction paper cutouts I can't quite make out. There's a black and white photocopied print of a children's book in the middle I also can't identify. But the big lettering on the sign, that much I can read: 'Back By Popular Demand' it says, and below the picture of the book in big foil letters is the name 'Kat Looptail'.

I pause for just a moment, tapping my hoof on the window and allowing myself a dopey smile. I guess that reading night really was a big hit.
I step back from the sight only to immediately jump at a clattering sound. My heart races and I scan the area, only to realize the source was me. A few scattered stones lie at my feet.

"What was that?" Marty asks, rounding the pillar.

I breathe. "Nothing. Nothing, that was me."

He stares at the little stones, tilting his head. "Well what was it?"

"I just tripped over some rocks."

"You don't think that's... weird?"

I glance down at him as he gestures encouragingly. "What? That there are rocks on the ground? No, not really?"

"Yeah but, don't they seem... out of place?"

"No??"

"Okay, but... think about it," he insists, an odd strain in his voice. "Y'know... what were they doing before you knocked them over?"

"They weren't 'doing' anything, Marty. They're rocks."

He groans aloud and drags his paws down his face, then draws out the note and shows it to me. "Okay, but look! See this stack of circles they drew? They could be rocks! I think that was our hint! At least, before you just bumbled into it."

Man, he's really into this whole shtick, isn't he? I haven't seen him this excited since the whole 'secret sheep society' prank I pulled on him. Well, all right, fine. We'll do it your way, Marty. I guess I can think of worse ways to spend my time right now. It's not like this is hurting anything, and it's not gonna kill me to play along, especially seeing as how he's gone to so much trouble on my behalf.

I kneel down and, scanning the area, prepare to root through the dirt where the pile was. But something catches my eye first.

"Hey, look," I call to Marty, picking up one of the stones. "There's a number on the bottom."

He scampers over, trying very obviously not to seem too excited, and tilts his head to one side. "Five?"

I gather up the others, reading them off one rock at a time. "One... another five... 'pack', a nine..."

Marty shrugs. "A clue?"

I flip the big one over. On it, in marker, someone scrawled the words **WE HAVE WHAT YOU NEED.**

"Looks like it," I respond.

I sit down on one of the library's front steps, stacking up the rocks roughly, by size. Seems the most likely order. The smallest ones are numbers, probably in order, ending with 'Pack', so...

Confidently, I toss the stones back into the dirt, rising to stand. "I know this address."
"...You didn't even check your phone."

"It's Bug Burga," I nod. "Yeah, I know it by heart. It was the first place I looked up when I moved here."

He gives me a strange face -- a smirk, but lacking in his usual mean-spiritedness. "Of course it was."

Dusting myself off, I shrug. "What can I say? I was hooked after the first bite, back in junior high."

"So like, what, four months ago?"

I roll my eyes at him, fighting off an annoyed laugh. "Oh fuck off, grandpa. I'm not that young."

"Yes, you are." Snickering, he hops off the steps and onto the sidewalk. "So you've been eating meat since junior high?"

"Yeah?"

"I mean... look, I don't know much about Flock, but isn't a prey kid 'going carnivore' usually gonna get some shit?"

Glancing down at the wool sticking out from under my shirt, I fumble with it a moment, trying to tuck it back in. Looks like it got all bunched up around my waist after that jog over here, making my midsection look like a woolly burga patty sticking out between a flannel-and-denim bun.

"You have no idea," I mutter back.

He sticks his paws in the pockets of his slacks, grinning toothily. "But you said 'fuck it' and did it anyway, just to spite 'em?"

I chew my lip for a second, thinking.

"Well, I wouldn't say it was outta spite, but I mean... I can be pretty stubborn when I want to be."

Marty stares at me for a few seconds, head tilted at a funny angle like he's trying to figure something out. And then, with a grunt and a shrug, he turns and gestures down the street.

"Then we'll have this all solved by sunup."

There's a rare lull at Bug Burga tonight -- maybe we're between the 'lunch' and 'dinner' rush for nocturnal predators. I can't remember the last time I saw the dining hall this empty except during daylight hours. It might be an odd thing to say about a fast-food restaurant, but after a diet of microwave garbage and crappy pizza, I'm ready for some comfort food.

"That'll be nine bucks even," the wiry, greasy little badger known as 'T-Rex' says with a low-key smile, popping the drawer on the till open. "You payin' cash or card today, Remmy?"

While Marty takes off with our waxy paper cups to get us drinks, I reach into my pocket and hoof over a twenty, but decline the change when Rex tries to hand it back.

"Nah, man," the badger laughs. "Not that I don't appreciate the generosity, but that's an eleven dollar tip."
"I mean it. Call it a 'jerkass tax'. I was a real prick to you the last time I was in here," I explain. "I wasn't having a good day, but that's no excuse for it. I'm sorry I treated you like that."

Bills still in one paw, he reaches up to scratch the side of his head with the handle of a spatula.

"...y'know, I've been working this job a long time, and I've never had a customer apologize to me before. Not like this. I'm usually the one doin' the apologizing." He smiles awkwardly and goes to shove it into his pocket, but then second-guesses and drops the change into the otherwise barren little tip jar on the counter. "You didn't have to do that, really, but if that's how you really feel I'm not too proud to turn it down. Thanks."

"So we're, uh... we're cool then?" I ask cautiously.

He shakes his head, sniffing. "You and me were always cool, man. Nothin' woulda changed that."

"I'm glad to hear it," I chuckle. "I mean, who else am I gonna go to for my sage advice fix around here?"

There's a cough from the drink fountain over to my left, and Marty's giving me an insistent glare. Oh, right. The reason we're actually here.

"Hey, speaking of advice, I don't suppose you've seen anything... 'interesting' around here lately?" I ask Rex, waving Marty off as he goes back to mashing the purplest button on the soda dispenser.

Rex glances off into the distance like he's spacing out, but then a slow smile creeps up his muzzle.

"Y'know, it's funny y'say that... matter of fact there was somethin'," he says cryptically, turning and heading toward the back of the kitchen. "Have a seat and I'll bring you your order."

"Sounds promising. Thanks, Rex."

As I make my way back to the tables, something soft and furry bumps against my side, jostling me a little. I step back, glancing up to see a tall leopardess bent over the trash can, scraping her plastic tray into it, her wide hips jutting out into the aisle.

"Oh, sorry!" she exclaims. "Didn't see you there."

I pause for a moment, suddenly overcome with a strange, wistful sensation as a long-buried memory resurfaces in my head. Of the very first time I visited this location, shortly after moving in -- and also when I accidentally bumped into a tall, well-built tigress that I'd end up crossing paths with again and ultimately befriending. Pandora just could not believe I was in here buying something for myself. I must've looked so bizarre to her at the time. Who would've thought we'd end up talking fish over drinks not long after that?

God, I can't wait to see her again. Everyone's gonna be so excited. The twins, Charlie -- especially Charlie. Hell, Avo should end up getting her old job back, too, once the place re-opens. I wonder if I can even get away with sneaking down to Pandora's Box and buying that toy before she gets hired back.

"Nah, please, it's my bad. I wasn't watching where I was going," I finally reply to the staring leopardess, before politely excusing myself to join Marty at the table.

I sit down in the seat across from the stoat and take a sip of my cola -- which I immediately recognize as having a surplus, distinctly grape-esque color and flavor. Marty cocks a brow at me like he's daring me to say something about it, but the joke's on him because it still tastes like cold,
sweet sugarwater, and that's about all I could want out of a soft drink.

Marty and I don't talk much, but I'm more or less lost in thought at this point. A few minutes pass, and I look up to see Rex arrive at our table, carrying a tray with two paper bags full of food. He plops it on the table with a wordless smile before shuffling back to the kitchen.

"Did you remember to ask if he had any leads for us?" Marty impatiently asks from his booster seat as he begins unpacking his meal.

"Yeah, and he said he'd seen... uh, something, I guess."

"Something'? That's it?"

"He said he'd scrounge up whatever it was," I mutter in confusion, watching Rex trundle off. With a shrug, I empty my bag out onto the paper sheet on top of the tray. Something tumbles out onto the table with a clunk next to my burga and fries.

I pick it up, examining it -- looks like a little plastic sailing ship. It's not really well-made, except maybe for a fast food toy. A step above what you might get in a cereal box, at least.

"I ordered a small combo, not a fuckin' kids' meal," the stoat grumbles as he starts to unwrap his (definitely child-sized) sandwich. "You'd better not have gotten me that stupid Buglet Mealie, too."

"Well, I sure as hell didn't order a kids'..." I trail off and a lightbulb goes off in my head. "This is a clue."

"What, the toy?" he asks, setting his sandwich aside and standing at attention. "Does it got anything written on it?"

I flip it around. On the bottom, predictably, are the words WE HAVE WHAT YOU NEED.

"Same message as before," I confirm. How'd they write so well on something this small?

"A toy sailboat," Marty murmurs to himself, sinking back in his seat with his burga. "Doesn't really give us a lot to go on. There's not a dock or marina around here anywhere."

A slow smile spreads across my face. Everything goes real quiet, and my wool tingles like it's electric. "It's not a sailboat."

Marty glances up. "Mm?"

"It's not a sailboat," I repeat, louder and more firmly this time. "It's a clipper ship."

Marty glances around with a mouth full of food. "...A clipper?"

"Yeah. See all the sails? Three masts, square rig. Merchant vessels, mostly. Couldn't carry much cargo, but they were faster than anything else at the time. Pirates and drug traffickers loved 'em."

He frowns. "It just looks like a boat to me."

"It's a ship, and this is our clue, man, I'm sure of it." I hold the piece up against the light, then shove it into my pocket. "And I know what this means."

"Okay, great," he mutters back, not looking convinced. "Can it wait till we're done-- HEY!"

I scoop up his unfinished meal and toss it into the paper sack with mine. "C'mon! You can finish it
on the way. I know exactly where to go next."

_Clippership Styles and Grooming_, reads the giant neon sign hanging over what has to be the single gaudiest building on all of Pack Street. With its _loud_ style and blinking lights, you'd think it was a bounce house, not a fur salon. Despite the late hour, they're not only open but _busy_, with a customer in every seat and several more waiting.

And boy, they're _all in_ on this whole boat gimmick. The nautical theme swallows the whole building: the windows are round like portholes, the walls are painted sea blue, and sure enough, there's an oversized bowl on the counter full of cheap little plastic boats just like the one that led us here, next to a handwritten sign that says 'FREE for good little sailors'.

"Looks like the right call," Marty reluctantly admits.

"It better be, considering how long the _walk_ is," I reply, feeling oddly proud of myself anyway. In hindsight, it was obvious, but still -- there's a weird dopamine rush from solving a puzzle. And with how much Marty resisted me on this clue, I'm starting to wonder if he really _did_ set this up, after all. Then again, if he didn't... I mean, someone in the Pack had to, right? And whatever's at the end of the line is sounding more tantalizing by the minute.

I walk up to the counter, where I'm greeted by a bubbly otter in a sailor's uniform. She looks up from her sign-in sheet, and before I can get a word out she's already shoving the clipboard my way.

"It's a great day for a sail at Clippership's," she sing-songs, all smiles as she presses a pen into my hoof. "Full body shearing today? Just a trim?"

I feel a weird burning sensation in my cheeks. I didn't even _know_ you could get a full-body shearing at a place like this. Not that I'd at all feel comfortable doing so. Getting buzzed down by Betty was more than enough for a lifetime, thanks.

"N-neither actually," I reply, gently pushing the paper and pen back to the otter.

"Oh, okay! Would you like to take a look at our products then? Pomade, conditioner, hoof polish?"

I'm suddenly wondering if this was a good idea. How do I politely ask if they have anyone more _serious_? A strange thought hits me, remembering the trinket box I found in my apartment that belonged to the tenant before me. I'm having a hard time imagining a guy like Kenny working here, based off of everything I saw and heard about him. He seemed too... I dunno, _aloof_ for such a goofy place.

"Actually, we just wanted to take a look around first," Marty interjects, jerking his head toward the back of the the salon. "Where's your restroom?"

"Oh! Uh... okay," the otter replies, face scrunched up behind her oversized glasses. "Right back there on the left."

"Perfect, thanks," he says, tugging at my sleeve. "C'mon, Cormo."

I self-consciously retreat into my wool padding as Marty drags me through the busy salon, hoping that nobody I know sees us in here. I'm having flashbacks to that time Avo caught us in the aftermath of my cotton ball prank on Marty. Last thing I need is for Betty to see us heading off together to the boys' room -- she'd never never _ever_ let us live it down. As it is I'm just thankful the girl up front didn't get too suspicious.
As we pass a warthog in horn-rimmed glasses getting her hair teased, Marty glances up at me.

"Hey, Cormo."

I glance down, then around the main barber line. "What? Spotted it?"

"No, no. I just--" He takes a breath, holding his little paws up in front of himself. "I just wanted to say, I heard about you stickin' your neck out for Oz. That was... real decent of you."

"Yeah, don't mention it."

"No, I mean it. You took a big risk to look out for him last week."

"You'da done the same, I'm sure," I answer, quickly checking on the otter behind us.

"You think so?"

We round the back corner, stopping by the restrooms. "You remember back when I played that prank on you, and I told you you'd get one favor?"

He squints, pauses, then finally responds. "...Yeah?"

"You wanted to use your one favor to keep Ozzy safe. Even over yourself. I never forgot that." I look over my shoulder into the main room, nodding. "So yeah, I think you'd have done the same."

Rather than stopping at the restroom, however, Marty continues on, further down the hallway towards the employees-only room in the back.

"Well, I'm glad you were with him."

"Uhh -- hey, you sure whatever we're looking for is supposed to be back here?" I ask under my breath, glancing back once more at the cheerful otter obliviously ringing up a customer.

"Just play it cool and keep a lookout," he hisses back, peering around the corner before ducking inside.

The second I turn around, there's the girl from the front.

"Hi! Everything okay?" she asks.

I suddenly wipe my hooves on my pants like I've just come from the bathroom and smile at her, all while stepping in front of the break room door to cover for an oblivious Marty. C'mon, hurry up!

"Heyyyy," I smile lamely. "Thanks again for all your help."

She giggles, adjusts her glasses, and nods back at me politely.

"No problem at all. I know how important this is to Marty."

Wait. What? She's in on this?

"You, uh... you know him?"

"Sure, he's a regular. There was a stylist that used to work here that was a friend of his, I think -- though I haven't seen him in a while. Marty would bring him lunch sometimes, so that he wouldn't have to leave work."
"Kenny?"

"Yeah, that was it," she says with a smile. "How is Kenny, anyway?"

"I couldn't tell you -- I never got a chance to meet him," I reply, and I'm kinda glad I didn't, if what I've heard about him's true.

"Oh! Okay." She seems a little confused but shrugs it off, fiddling with the long ribbon on her uniform's top. "Well, anyway, yeah, Marty's such a good friend. He stopped in this morning and asked us if we could help out with planning a surprise to help cheer up someone he knows -- I guess this guy's really in a bad way right now."

All of a sudden there's a weird feeling in the back of my throat. Like a weird lump I can't quite swallow down.

"Oh," I respond.

"Are you here to help too?" she asks.

I chuckle uncomfortably, wiping the scarred tip of my muzzle on the back of my sleeve. "Uh. Yeah, I guess I am," I answer honestly.

"Awesome," she grins, turning back to her post at the register and bobbing her head in time to the cheesy music piping in through the speakers. "Well, I really hope your friend enjoys whatever the surprise is!"

Marty emerges a moment later, holding an envelope over his head, grinning cockily at me with a 'See, I told you so' sort of expression.

"Yeah, I think he will," I mumble.

Half an hour later we're back outside the apartments, sitting on a bench outside. The night's coming to an end; sunrise isn't far off now. In my hooves is the faded manila envelope he recovered, along with the wax seal we broke -- like something a king would've sent in medieval times. And the design of the seal itself? Three crowns. Seems like a poetic end to a journey full of surprises, right back where we started.

Marty and I exchange thoughtful stares as I repeatedly turn the contained note over in my hooves, reading the words again and again.

"WE HAVE WHAT YOU NEED."

"Can't tell if that's ominous or promising," Marty murmurs.

"Well I hope it's something good," I suggest, acting like I don't know. "I could think of several things that'd mean depending on who it's from."

Frowning, the stoat crosses his arms as he slinks down against the backrest of the bench, a troubled look on his face. His pencil's draped across his lap, and he's idly fiddling with the eraser tip. "I feel like we're almost there, but it's just out of reach."
"We got this far," I counter, turning the page over in my hooves and squinting at it in the light of the streetlamp. "I'm not about to give up after we spent the last couple hours..."

Marty perks up as I trail off. "What? Did you figure something out?"

Tracing my hoof tip across the paper, I furrow my brow. "Lemme see your pencil a sec?"

He gives me a weird look, but hands it over to me with a nod. I begin to gently rub the side of the lead against a spot at the bottom of the page.

"I saw this done in a movie once," I explain, a smile creeping across my muzzle as clear letters begin to appear on the paper. The low-tech version of invisible ink -- the lead can't fill the indentations in the paper. "You can just make out the faint lettering..."

"Nice job," Marty says, looking genuinely impressed. "I can't believe you figured it out so quickly."

"Ahh, well," I chuckle self-consciously.

A little more pencil work reveals a second message beneath the first. Something new this time:

_Keep your chin up._

Marty puzzles over it, but I think I've got the hint already. Leaning back, I scan the edge of the roof.

And there it is.

"It was here all along."

Between the sparse, wiry radio antennas and satellite dishes, the final clue: A single purple balloon, tied to something and drifting just barely enough to be seen from the street.

I tap Marty on the shoulder and point up to it. "The, uh, the Crowns doesn't have an elevator I don't know about, does it?"

"Are you kidding? We're lucky to have running water," Marty scoffs. "We're gonna have to leg it all the way up to the top."

I scratch my fuzzy chin, considering. "I could lob you up there."

"I could punch you in the eyeball," Marty says without missing a beat.

"That's fair," I nod, drawing a breath. "Well, we came this far. Might as well go a little further for the payoff."

We make our way up several flights of stairs at a good pace, and even as tired and sore as I am, I don't slow down. At this point, I'm actually a little giddy with anticipation. A number of possibilities run through my mind.

Something I 'need'. Maybe Avo let slip that my apartment was underfurnished, and they got me some stuff. A new TV or something. A new phone even, I've definitely complained about mine enough. Hell, I'll take cookware. Maybe after the scuff-up last week the whole Pack is gonna be here for a surprise -- oh shit, what if I'm being promoted out of Omega? So then who's taking over -- not Marty? That might explain his hot-cold mood all night. As long as I'm dreaming, how about tickets to a day at the spa with Betty, Charlie, Anneke, and Avo?
Whatever it is, it's something I need. So it's gotta be something good -- a gift from the whole Pack? Or... just Marty? No way he did this on his own. Al's got a fund for Pack stuff, I know that much. Anyway, you don't need something bad. That just stands to reason.

I've just hoofed it up several flights of steps and yet I'm practically skipping as I push the door open, grinning like an idiot. Right as I come face-to-face with a blow-up sex doll seated in a folding chair.

What

Slowly I walk forward across the roof, staring at the doll -- a cheap, vinyl inflatable of a ewe, wearing a wig, lipstick, and too-loose teddie with the tag still attached. 'Her' eyes are closed and her lips are puckered like she's ready for a kiss, and I notice that she's been 'seat-belted' into the chair with a piece of decorative red ribbon, tied with a bow, to keep from blowing away in a breeze.

I turn slowly in place to see Marty leaned against the roof access doorframe, arms folded and wearing a grin to rival any I've ever seen Avo sport.

Oh, you little shit.

"What I need', huh?"

"Told you I'd get you back," he says in a tone that's as sharp as it is smug.

"I should'a fuckin' known," I curse, kicking the gravel rooftop under my hoof and laughing at the absurdity of it. "The whole fuckin' night you had me runnin' all over Pack, just for this! Ohhhhh, ho! Ohhhh ho ho ho Marty. It is ON."

With a wincing grin, already plotting my revenge, I stroll over to the doll and give her rubbery cheek a brush with the back of my hoof, shaking my head. Un-fucking-believable. He fucking got me!

"...Do I at least get to keep her?" I ask.

"You fuckin' wish!" He scrambles forward, catching up to me and tapping the 'what I need' with one paw. "This is a display model! I gotta return her to Charlie so she can take her back down to the Box later."

"Well that's a damn shame." I pull my phone out of my pocket and hand it off to him, red-faced and grinning. "Well at least get a picture for me to remember her by before we have to say goodbye."

"Oh, yeah, definitely. Kismet's serious shit," he laughs as I throw my arm around the shoulders of my 'date' with a cheesy grin. "Perfect. Hold that pose."

Opening the door to my apartment, I let out a satisfied sigh and collapse on my couch. Look, the joke may be on me, but at least I got outta my rut for a night. And me and Marty might've even bonded a little. In spite of everything, I have to admit, I actually had fun. I do have to wonder why Betty didn't end up just taking me herself instead of sending Marty, if she was that worried about me. Not that she probably would've, if she'd had any clue what his idea of getting me out of the house was gonna be.

No sooner do I close my eyes than there's an aggressive pounding at my door, followed by a
familiar, guttural bark.

"It's me, yarn ball. We need to talk. Open up."

Speak of the devil. Immediately I get back up and hurry to the door -- better not keep the Beta waiting or she'll gimme no end of hell.

"Arright, fluff," Betty growls in my doorway, burly arms on her hips as she leans down menacingly.

"Oh, hi, Betty," I smile, focusing very hard to look in her eyes and not down the collar of her shirt.

"Yeah, don't you 'Hi Betty' me. It's time for some tough love. Your ass has been holed up in here moping all fuckin' week. What's it gonna take to get you functional?"

Wait. Does-- did she--? Did she not send--?

Oh my god.

She doesn't know.

"Oh, thank god you're here." Fumbling with my hooftips, I look up at her as pitifully as I can manage, all while fighting back a grin. "As a matter of fact, I've just realized there's something I'm in need of. Maybe you could help me get it?"

"Good. Taking initiative," she sniffs authoritatively, boldly walking in as I 'timidly' step aside. "What've you got in mind?"
"C'mon old man, what're you gonna do?" Neil growls, grinning.

The tall, muscular lion aggressively throws his arms wide, staring down the Alpha. *My Alpha.* Daring the big white wolf to make a move.

"You're in over your head," Al growls back, sweat dribbling down his face. "I don't want to embarrass you."

"Worry about embarrassing *yourself,* old man."

A hushed round of *ooohs* ripples through the small crowd. I can feel my legs tense, my hooves
flex, and my brow twitch. Every part of me wants to intervene, to throw in and help, but I just have to trust that he's got this under control.

Across from me stands Betty, watching the scene with a placid look and a strangely cigarette-free frown. If she's calm, I'm calm. I catch a knowing look in the black wolf's eyes, like she's telling me what I'm already telling myself:

*Just relax, Remmy. He can do this.*

*Trust your Alpha.*

The two towering predators between us stare each other down for a long moment, till finally Al lowers his head and charges forward at the lion. Neil makes a good attempt at stopping him, swiping in with a massive paw, but Al's faster on his feet than he'd thought. The wolf shoulders past and goes for the layup.

It misses. Ball hits the backboard and bounces off the rim. Neil's there in a second, sweeps it up, and sinks a jump shot -- all net.

"That's game!" he beams, grinning like a little kid. I think he's actually bouncing on his heels, too.

With all the tension finally broken, the little alley court erupts into noise. Amid the boos and cheers of our little group, Al braces his paws on his knees and tries to catch his breath.

"Good moves out there," the Alpha pants, standing upright.

"Hey, you too, old man," Neil chuckles. He claps Al on the shoulder, nodding, and hands the ball over. "You got some real speed on you, but you could use a little stamina training. Y'oughta swing by the gym sometime, I could give you some pointers."

Al returns a pointed glare. "Think I'll keep to my job for that. If I'm gonna be straining myself for hours I might as well get paid for it."

Beside me, on the old stained crates we set up along the wall of the brick-lined alley, Anneke polishes off the last bite of her sub, burps, then takes a quick sip from her paper soda cup.

"Great game, chief! You really showed 'em how to lose with style," she giggles.

Al grins, walking past us and full-palming the stripy aardwolf's head like a basketball, giving her a playful shove. "Shaddup."

She rolls with it, tumbling back to lean against the wall, only pausing to interrupt her laughter with more soda.

Neil laughs too, watching all this play out, and strips his sweaty a-shirt off, revealing a chiseled figure underneath, damp with sweat and all but glistening. Everyone kind of goes quiet, and, not bothering to pretend he doesn't notice the attention, the ripped lion shoots a smile at us. Is there a photoshoot going on I'm not aware of?!

His dark brows raise. "You talk a big game, Annie. Why don't you and me go 1v1, if you're so confident?"

"Now he's done it," Ozzy whispers from my other side elbowing me and, between stifled giggles, makes a 'watch this' gesture at Anneke -- as if everyone on the block couldn't tell where she's about to take this.
"Hey, I already lost to Remmy earlier, I'm good," she purrs, lounging back and soaking up the impressive sight with a lick of her lips. "But if you wanna change courts, I bet I could take you one on one somewhere private."

"Hey, yo, I'm here! We playin' shirts versus skins?"

Everyone turns to see resident gym cat and local gossip Cliff hustle into the increasingly crowded court from the street. I watch as the tiger tosses free a tidy, business-ready polo to reveal a printed undershirt with near the exact same pattern of stripes as its owner, which he peels off just the same. He's instantly met with a huge, sweaty hug from Neil. Just... two big, built-as-fuck, sweaty cats, topless, pressed together. No big deal.

I lean to one side. "Hey Anna, can I have a sip of your soda?"

"Get your own," she scoffs, sticking her tongue out.

"So! Who's up for one more?" Neil claps his paws and rubs them together, looking us over. Anneke waves him off, as does Al, who's toweling his face and neck.

"Please," Betty rolls her eyes as they turn to her. "I'll watch Al do it, but I ain't about to make a damn fool of myself in front of everyone."

That leaves me and the music man.

"What do you think, Ozzy?" I turn to the shaggy hyena, nudging him. "I bet we could take 'em."

"What?!" He laughs back, incredulously. "No way, man. No chance."

"C'mon! Did I ever tell you I was--"

"The Stormclouds' best power forward in high school, yeah," he interrupts quickly, grinning from ear to ear and baring those sharp, crooked teeth. "Yeah, man. About a dozen times today. They're like, twice my size, dude! At least three times yours!"

"Let's go, Ozzy!" I jump to my hooves, dragging my reluctant neighbor with me, as both Cliff and Neil wave us over. "We got this!"

It turns out we did not, in fact, have this.

To be fair, Ozzy did make a single basket at one point, but the long and short of it is we got fuckin' routed.

Betty's sarcastic applause leads the group in pitying encouragement, but I thought we did pretty okay. Well. Okay, it wasn't the best showing, but we held our own. Okay, maybe we didn't, but it was close.

"Wasn't even close," Anneke hoots. "That was painful!"

"We gotta go," Neil says, almost apologizing. "It's been real, let's do it again sometime."

Al rises as the felines pass him, and he grabs the tiger's paw in his, shaking it earnestly and patting his shoulder. 'Good seein' you again, Heath. Neil -- you better take good care of this boy."

"You got it," the lion smiles back, nodding respectfully to the great white wolf.
"Say hi to your mom for me," Betty jokes. Or, I think she's joking, anyway.

"Hey! Good hustle out there, tough fluff." Cliff tosses me the ball with a wink as he and Neil head for the street. "You bring that kind of energy outside the court, maybe we oughta have you over for a private game sometime."

I laugh, Neil cuffs him upside the back of his head, and with a round of waves to and from our group, the two musclecats duck out of the alley. The second they're out of sight, I huddle towards Ozzy.

"So, okay but, do you think he was being serious? Or like--"

"Desperate's not a good look, woolly bully," Ozzy chuckles, still half-winded. "You gotta try playin' it cool once in a while."

For a few minutes, everything just sorta calms down, coming off a collective adrenaline high. The heat of the court's begun to simmer in the early afternoon shade, and just as I find myself settling in, my eyes lingering on the plain, flat brown coat of paint on the alley's brick wall, Al grunts loudly and climbs to his feet.

He checks his watch, tossing his towel over his shoulder. "So what time's all that going down, today?"

Anneke glances at her phone in response. "We're meeting up in about an hour and a half, then going downtown from there."

"Why?" I ask. "You planning on coming?"

"Sorta like to, yeah," Al mutters.

I shake some of the sweat from my pompadour, wringing the wool and leaving me with a strange cowlicky coif. "Didn't know you even knew Pandora, Al."

"She's a pillar of the community," he nods. "Grew up right on this street, same as me. I remember the first time I met 'er -- we came to blows."

"No shit?" Anneke hops up, suddenly excited. Her striped, scruffy tail's even wagging below her sporty little tank top. That's how you know she's really interested.

Betty smirks knowingly, and puts her paws on her hips. "Go on, Al, tell 'em."

"Yeah, I mean--"

"Who won?" Anneke grins.

"I did," Al answers instantly.

Betty rolls her eyes, while me, Ozzy, and Anna all kinda 'ooohh' in realization.

Al waves us off with one paw. "Before you get too impressed, she was like, ten years old at the time."

"Think we all had a phase like that," Betty nods. "Just wanna go around pickin' fights like you got somethin' to prove."

I raise my brows. "Yourself included?"
"Yes," she answers plainly.

Oh, now *this* oughta be good. "Well? Go on then," I grin.

"No."

Ozzy cracks the fuck up and claps his paws together a few times, which gets a smile out of the big black wolf. She fumbles in her pockets for a second before coming up empty.

"Way it was," Al continues, "I only ran into her because she was always outside the liquor store, 'bout halfway between the Crowns and where V lived. Place got ripped up years ago."

"Oh, I nearly forgot." I finish stretching before retaking my seat, enjoying the shade. "Is your fiancée gonna be coming too? I imagine she's not really involved in all this, but since you're going..."

I trail off, just resting in the cool air of the alley for a second. And as I'm sitting here, waiting, I realize just how still and quiet it's gotten. Nobody's making a sound -- least of all the guy I just asked a question. Slowly, almost hesitantly, I lift my eyes.

Al is staring back at me with an expression I have never seen before.

"What was that?" he croaks, though I'm not sure I even saw his mouth move.

"...Your fiancée? Is Velvet coming? I just figured since you were coming she might...?" I trail off again, but glancing around, I see nobody's going to bite, so I finish the sentence this time. "...also tag along?"

Feels like everyone's staring at me. But as I look, I realize everyone's actually staring at *Al.*

...did I just fuck something up?

All of a sudden, the whole alley comes to life, and I feel half-deafened by the explosion of laughter and roaring sound all around me, coming from everyone (except Al), and not just from Ozzy (but also definitely from Ozzy).

"Yeah, Al!" Betty grins, slapping his shoulder as she steps up to him from behind. "Tell us, *is* your fiancée coming?"

"When's the wedding?" Anneke coos, hopping over to him excitedly. "Ooh, tell me I get to be a bridesmaid!"

"So happy for you two," Ozzy manages between choking guffaws, wiping a very real tear from his eye.

Al bristles, staring at the ground. "Shaddup. All'a ya."

"Where you goin' for the honeymoon?" Betty leans over his shoulder, making a smoochy face.

Anneke wastes no time in matching her, making sugary 'mwah mwah mwah' sounds and pantomiming holding an invisible partner.

"I said shaddup," he growls. He doesn't raise his head.

"Hey, for real, good for you, boss," Ozzy howls with laughter. "I'm surprised she didn't say
"Lookit you two lovebirds," Betty giggles in an uncharacteristically girlish tone. "That's so sweeeeet!"

"That's enough!"

Al stomps the ground, suddenly standing up, and with fear swelling in my chest, I get a good look at his face. Not dark and furious -- but bright red and chewing his lip.

"Uh oh, he's craaanky." Betty leans in and pinches his cheek, making a cooing baby noise. "I'll call V to get you down for your nap."

"I got better things to do than sit here and take this," Al growls, bats her paw away with a flustered grumble, and, gathering up his stuff in a hurry, he storms out of the alley.

Anneke puts her paws in her pockets, grinning. "Al, don't forget--"

"I'll be there!" he huffs back before disappearing around the corner.

Ozzy laughs all the harder at his hasty exit, and everyone else takes a minute to quiet their giggles. Me, I'm just sitting here like I woke up on another planet. Betty chuckles to herself, leaning against the blank wall, and shoots me a knowing glance.

"They ain't engaged," she tells me.

"No, yeah, I kinda pieced that together," I mutter back, still trying to process what I just witnessed. "But they... I mean they are like... together. Just not engaged? ...yet?"

Anneke nods a smiling affirmation and Betty sniffs the air, peering towards the sunny side of the street.

"They oughta be," the Beta smirks. "God knows he's been putting it off long enough."

"Just 'waitin' for the right moment'," Ozzy sing-songs weakly, wheezing. Dude looks completely out of breath.

"Velvet -- uh, she told me they were," I explain. "I just thought--"

"She told me that too," Anneke beams, shooting Betty a grin and getting another in return. "So of course I have to remind Al every once in a while."

"Well uh, anyway, speakin' of the right moment," I interrupt, feeling just as sheepish and awkward about this as Al looked. "Great hangin' out, but I gotta get ready before we head out to visit Dora."

Ozzy coughs, coming back to himself. "Oh, yeah, I forgot you guys were makin' plans. Hey, put my name on the card or somethin', yeah?"

"And while you're at it, could you see if you can find Charlie and Marty? I still didn't get confirmation and Charlie's been--" Anneke waves a dark paw in front of her face, making a 'silenced' kinda gesture. "Kinda -- ghk -- all morning."

I worriedly glance to Ozzy, but he shakes his head at me, so I turn back to Anneke. "I'm sure it's nothing. I'll go see if I can round 'em up. They'd probably be at the library, this time of day."

"Preciate it," Anna nods, chucking her empty drink cup in the nearby trash can. "I'll see you at the
meeting spot, then."

"Yeah, see you there," I nod, shouldering my gym bag. "Oh, and -- Anna?"

She glances up to me, and I nod to her with an easy smile.

"Today's the day."

She matches my look, and the sweetness in her eyes almost kills me on the spot.

"Yeah, it is," she answers.

The Pack Street Library's quiet today. Not terribly surprised, since... y'know, it's a library. But the front desk's empty and there's no sign of the librarian I'm here to find. C'mon, Marty. How many places could a little guy like you hide?

...A lot, I guess.

My hooves trace the worn-in wood on a nearby shelf and I start walking, down one row after another. A few hushed voices between the aisles, a tiny feline student packing info amid a jumble of books at a table -- the usual sights and sounds. There's worse places to have to wander around, I suppose. My first impression was a good one, even considering I had to deal with Marty's shitty attitude. The mellow lights, the quiet rows of lined shelves, the soft carpet underhoof, and the cool AC flowing in from overhead always give me a calm kinda feeling here. Brings back old memories of going to the library in my elementary school to pick out silly children's books -- and of course, a much more recent trip to read those same stories to the next generation.

Without even realizing it, I look up to find I've drifted into the little side conference room, standing among the circle of kid-sized seats and the low table covered with bright, colorful childrens' books. Empty now, except for the echoes of giddy laughter and excited pleas for the next page. Really wasn't that long ago I was in here hamming up *The Wolf of His Word* to a bunch of starry-eyed kids, but I've been thinking back on it over and over ever since. Keep thinking about how nice it was to be appreciated, to give something back. Kept telling myself I'd have to do it again soon. But haven't actually done it yet. My recent time playing possum in my apartment didn't help, sure, but maybe the truth is I've just been lax.

Maybe it's time to stop being afraid and just put myself back out there. Try to be a part of the community again.

I'm holding a flat-cover book about a bear scientist who learns to build robots when I realize I'm not alone in the room.

"Excuse me," I cough, setting the book down and turning. "I'm looking for the head librarian, do you know--"

The words die in my throat and my heart almost stops in my fucking chest.

Standing there, a few steps into the quiet, empty side room with me, is the short-horned goat that cornered me in the alley the other week. Backing up Don -- the bastard who wanted me to get stomped on. I guess I'm just glad she's not wielding a metal pipe this time.

I swallow the lump in my throat and take a step back. She should know better.
"Whatever Don told you, I didn't hurt anyone," I insist, bringing my hoof to my chest and gripping my emergency whistle. "So back off, or I swear to god I'll bring my whole Pack down on this library."

She raises her hooves, palms towards me, and arches her brow with a shrug.

"Hey now, relax," she mutters in a coarse, nasal voice. "I got the lecture just fine from when the Great White Wolf and Mama Black Ivory had their pow-wow. I ain't about to bruise your pretty little face."

I don't move my hoof. "Al said you were all supposed to stay well away from me."

"Well I can't help it if I bump into you at the library, now can I? This is a public venue -- neutral ground. Everyone's got a right to read." She stretches a little on her heels, then, with a one-sided smirk, shoves her fists into the pockets of her baggy jeans. "Besides, I never was the kinda girl to stay in my pen."

"If that's a joke, I'm not laughing," I frown. "So what -- you come here just to apologize?"

"If you're looking for an apology, I'll tell you right now you're not gonna get one."

I blink at her, exaggerated. "Excuse me?"

She sighs, leaning against the wall. Seemingly unable to find something to do with her hooves, she pulls them back out of her pockets, scratches her head, rubs her horns, then finally folds her arms awkwardly over her chest.

"Look, I get it. I'm trash, I accept that. But... think about it from my perspective. The way I see it, I did the right thing for the wrong reason." She squints her already narrow eyes and taps her chin. "Wait no, other way around. I did the wrong thing but for the right reason. Point is I was just backing up a Packmate."

"Oh, yeah. You just got swept up in the spirit of beating the shit out of a stranger," I scoff bitterly.

She glances up at the ceiling, shrugs again. "Blame Don. We all do. But if one of your Pack told you they were sure about who put a friend of theirs in the hospital, and they needed someone to watch their back -- would you stay at home?"

"I wouldn't break someone's face if I wasn't sure."

She grins, baring her broad, flat teeth. "Your face doesn't look broken to me, preyboy."

"Look, lady--"

She pulls back suddenly, tilting her head. "Did you just call me 'lady'?"

"What the fuck do you want?" I snap.

"Man, look, clearly we got off on the wrong foot. But as long as we're taking up the same spaces, we might as well play nice, huh?"

She pushes off the wall, and I don't flinch -- just stand my ground. With flat-footed steps she walks up to me.

"My name's Jeanine," she offers, extending hoofed digits. "But people call me the Jean Genie."
I glance up at her, and she glances down at her extended hoof.

"...no they don't," she corrects after a second or two. "Nobody calls me that. I don't know why I said that."

I stare at her with what I can just feel is a weird look on my face, and finally, sighing, offer my hoof. "Remmy Cormo."

"Yeah, I know."

We tap knuckles, then she draws back, swirling her hooves in the air and making a *pcheww* sound. What the fuck is she, *five*? Is she going to airplane run out of here after we're done talking?

"Right on," she nods coolly.

Already uncomfortable, I lean to one side, glancing past her at the door. "So are we done here? Because I gotta--"

"You're lookin' for Marty, is that right?"

"Yeah."

The she-goat nods, turning to the door, and gestures for me to follow.

Fine, fuck it. I guess I believe that she's not gonna try something, and that this isn't just some elaborate ambush, so whatever. I follow Jeanine and she leads me out of the conference room and back into the main area of the library. We walk down the muted aisles of Young Adult titles, past the reference section, and around an empty book cart near the nonfiction aisle. I keep enough distance from her -- again, not that I think she'd send fur flying, especially in public like this -- but you can't fault me for being wary.

Finally, she rounds to the back corner of the library, in a small section marked *Academic and Dissertation*. She leans confidently against the shelf and thumbs a gesture down to the floor. And there in the corner, by itself on the lowest shelf, is an enormous, face-down hardcover about economic policies in Tundratown. I stare at it, then at her. So yeah, not an ambush, but maybe she's just *crazy*.

"Rise 'n' shine," she grunts, nudging the book with her foot.

The book emits a weary grumble, and suddenly a black and brown tail flicks out from underneath. "Fuck off, Jeanine."

I laugh, incredulous. "Marty?"

*Beat.*

The book shifts in place, and suddenly a face pops out from between the parted pages. There's the stoat I'm looking for.

"Ah, great," he sighs up at me.

"Marty," I repeat, feeling a smile spread across my face. "Sleeping on the job?"

"What do you know," he mutters, slinking out from under the spine. "You'd take a breather now and then, too, if you had to put up with what I do."
I fold my arms. "Yeah? And just what kind of things do you have to put up with that are so bad you gotta nap on the job?"

"I'm lookin' at two of 'em right now!" he snarks, shooting me a sour, mocking expression. "I see you've met this nuisance."

Jeanine waves, wiggling her hooves with a grin.

Marty sighs, says something under his breath, and turns to look up at me. "Hey, look. Cormo. I'm sorry about-- I mean I should'a said something. I didn't know she was there when it happened until, like, yesterday. And that was well after Al and--"

"Yeah, no, I get it," I nod back, sighing myself. "Nothing's perfect. I'll be okay though, I think."

He stares at the goat, who doesn't seem to react, and then back to me. "Well, she so much as recommends you a bad book and you blow that whistle. I'll sort it myself if I have to."

I kinda snicker at the thought -- and she does too -- but Marty doesn't so much as smile.

"Right, well, I assume you're wakin' me up because--" the bristly little stoat dusts himself off, checking his watch. "Yep. Arright, Cormo, let's get goin'. Charlie's already at the spot, gettin' something ready, she said. Jeanine -- much as I hate to do it, you're in charge till I get back."

"Aye-aye!" She snaps off a fake salute before dipping off back into the depths of the library, and Marty just shakes his head at me.

"C'mon," he says, scratching under his arm as he trots quickly past me. "We don't wanna be late. We'll miss our ride."

Pandora's Box stretches before us, soaking up the midday sun like a basking cat.

The awning and gutters are newly cleaned. The facade wears a fresh coat of glossy paint. In stark contrast to the alley court's drab coverup, the oddly calming pastels are marked through with the thin line of a pulsing heartbeat. The shattered glass underhoof, hastily toppled shelves, and broken windows are no more, and somehow the awful memory of that terrible night -- the night Pandora was attacked, and the last I saw of the nicest tigress on Pack before she was wheeled off to the hospital -- lingers in my head so faint and distant, it might as well have been a bad dream.

Something about the shining storefront has shaken free the grip of that night. Like the 'Savage' scare itself, that lingering air of dread and sadness disintegrated into thin air.

But I guess that's a pretty dramatic way to talk about an adult bookstore.

If not for the sign out front noting otherwise, I'd assume it was open for business. Marty plods up beside me, surveying the whole scene with his hands on his hips.

"They did a hell of a job," he admits, clearly impressed.

My jaw's still on the floor somewhere as I gesture wildly with both hooves at the storefront. "When the fuck did all THIS happen?!

From under the shade of the fluttering black awnings, a tall, chestnut-furred jackal steps into the sun towards me.
"Avo, did you do this?" I blurt, still too stunned to play it cool.

"Me and Charlie," she smirks, clacking a lollipop around between her sharp teeth. "Putting in a few hours here and there, over the course of the last week or two."

"Anneke and Wolter both pitched in as well," comes a quiet voice from nearby. "Though I suspect they had their own additional motives for seeing this establishment operational."

I don't know when Charlie got here, but after a few months on Pack Street, the sudden and unexpected presence of an oily-furred vixen in my personal space doesn't even phase me.

"I had no idea. You guys did an amazing job."

"Thank you," she smiles softly, but doesn't look away from the building's facade.

For a long few minutes, I stand there in the sun with the three of them, looking over the restored shopfront. You'd almost never know what went down here. I guess that's the point. More than that fateful night, I find myself thinking back to my first visit to the Box -- stumbling in from the heat, circling around the shelves for that toy (that I never did end up buying, now that I think about it) before getting ambushed by Avo and Betty. The hazing they gave me, which felt so much worse at the time, when I didn't realize they were just playing around.

...The way I fucking booked it out of the store with my tail between my legs the second I got the chance.

You know that saying about being able to look back on something one day and laugh? Well, with Pandora finally being able to get public visitors, I think that day's today.

"What's so funny, lambchop?" Avo leans over me, resting her elbow on the puffy wool of my shoulder and drawing the lollipop out of her mouth with an audible pop.

"Just reminiscing," I shrug.

She seems to accept that answer. She ruffles my pompadour for a second, then throws her free arm around my shoulders and squeezes me against her rather unexpectedly.

"A lot's happened lately," she muses. Her tone's quiet, but there's this hint of excitement in there, too. Guess we've all come a long way.

I pace toward the glass windows of the storefront, stepping past a pair of wildcats passing hand-in-hand, and she follows me. "I could've helped, you know."

Avo shrugs back at me, her expression unchanging. "You seemed like you were doing your own thing," she replies.

I sigh in response. "Well, hiding, mostly."

"We weren't going to say anything," Charlie coughs.

"I appreciate it."

Marty, who's been mostly quiet, paces up to the store to join our group. "Do you think she'll be a little, uh... y'know, awkward? Having all of us cram in around her hospital bed?"

Charlie smiles, just a little. Almost too slight to notice.
Avo shakes her head. "If I know anything about Pandora, I think she'd be happy just to have us there."

"Yeah, maybe," Marty sniffs, pressing his face up to the glass and peering around inside the darkened store. "But she's a little proud to have us all doting on her at once, don't you think?"

"She'll be fine," Avo huffs back.

Marty raises his brow, but relents with a sorta half-shrug gesture and turns toward the curb. "Ride's here."

I turn as well. "Ride's-- oh!"

Al's here. He rests his shaggy white arms on the roof of the plain, two-door sedan he's parked at the curb (in flagrant violation of the 'no parking from 8 AM to 8 PM' signs, mind you). Anneke, freshly changed into a loose black tee and jean shorts, hops out from the passenger side and waves to us.

"Hey," the aardwolf grins -- and I immediately realize I've mistaken one twin for the other. Again.

"Wolter," I wave back, nodding. "Where's Anneke?"

He laughs, plodding up to the rest of us while Al hangs back. "Didn't you just see her this morning? Jeez, Remmy, what're you guys, married?"

"I just mean I thought she'd want to see her," I shoot back, pretending not to notice Avo's snickering.

"Yeah, okay," Wolt chuckles, elbowing me. "She's got a thing so she said she's just gonna catch a ride down there later this evening. Make a later visit by herself. Don't sweat it."

"Ah. Well, uh... should we get going?"

"In a minute," Charlie murmurs back, tapping something out on her phone. She's playing it cool, but with how much she's been waiting for today -- not to mention the fact that big, puffy fox tail of hers is swishing all over the place -- makes it pretty hard to fake disinterest.

Another thought occurs, and I straighten up my headwool. "We all gonna fit in Al's car?"

"Oh, yeah," Avo assures. "No problem."

"You've been in it, you know how roomy it is," Wolt remarks, inspecting himself in the dim surface of the storefront glass. He licks one paw and starts slicking down the front of his shaggy mane, then finally shoots his reflection finger guns and a toothy smile. "Right on, I'm set. Let's go see the girl of the hour."

There's a sudden exhalation behind us, and we all spin at the sound of a scuffle.

Standing on the curb by Al's car, a tall and very well-built tigress in a stiff paper gown -- towering a good head or two taller than even the great white wolf himself -- has my alpha in a one-armed headlock. Al's scruffy white fur fluffs up around her grip, giving him an awkward, childish appearance as he appears stuck between a choke and a laugh. The tigress grins straight at us, baring her gleaming teeth in a big smile with just a hint of an overbite.

"Who are we going to see?" she asks pleasantly, without the slightest strain of exertion in her
voice.

Other than Al's breathy, struggling grunts, and the soft steps of the occasional confused passerby, the street's quiet. Nobody knows what to say -- least of all myself -- but a few seconds later I'm pretty sure I hear Avo's lollipop hit the ground. I'm almost surprised to find that it's my voice that breaks the silence.

"DORA!"

I glance around to see Avo's mouth hanging open, Wolt's eyes bugging out of his head, and even Marty's brows so high up they're about to pop right off his forehead. Everyone's looking as stunned as I feel.

Everyone except Charlie, who clasps her paws behind her back with a shaky smile.

"Mister Marshmallow? Is that you?" Dora playfully ruffles Al's tufty headfur and finally releases him, to which he responds with a grin and a short, huffing growl. "Are you here just to see me, too?"

"Oh my god," Avo chokes. Her eyes water and she brings her paw over her mouth. I've never heard her voice break like that.

"You're out?" Marty gawps. "You're-- we thought you were-- wasn't-- you're out? They let you out?!

Pandora gives Al a slap on the back, then paces calmly over in our direction, straightening her gown.

"Can't keep a good cat down," she purrs.

Everything's swimming. The street swells and dips in front of me. Talk about dreams -- is this really happening? This vision of orange and black just walking back into our lives like nothing happened? I've spent so many nights lying in bed, wondering what I'd say to her when she got better -- and before that, if she got better -- but for some reason I can't find the words. I can't even make a sound.

Charlie takes a step forward, gesturing plainly to the rest of us, as well as the restored storefront. "Consider this your welcome home party."

I start to move, just like that. I nearly trip over my hooves running forward, to greet her with a hug.

Except all of a sudden, there's a fox there first.

Charlie wraps her arms tight around Pandora's waist, doing her best to embrace her. Pandora reaches down in turn and, resting her massive paw on Charlie's little frame, squeezes her tight.

"Welcome home," the vixen manages.

They stay like that for a moment, and I'm standing there awkwardly halfway to them, when Pandora glances up to the rest of us, rolling her eyes with a knowing grin.

"Well? If any of you want a hug, now's the time to get one," she winks.

Nobody moves, for a second, but then Avo strolls over to her -- faltering for just a half-step -- and places a paw gently on Pandora's broad bicep.
"I'm glad you're okay. We've spent a long taaaAAWP--"

Pandora swings her arm out, snatching Avo up into a sideways bear hug that practically winds her. Wolt's next, hustling over and throwing both his arms around the three girls. Everything else sorta fades away into a white haze, and as Al comes over to respectfully, awkwardly join in, all I can see is this moment.

I strain to look down at my side, where Marty stands watching. He notices me, and he makes this really fake expression I don't like at all.

"I don't do group hugs," he says, about a half-second before I pick his ass up by the back of his collar and bring him with me to the group. He gives me a dirty look, but even his stern front melts away and with a hesitant paw forward he's swept up in the moment and hugging anyone his little arms can reach. I'd give him shit for it, a grown-ass man just hugging a bunch of unrelated, equally grown-ass adults like this is some kindergarten happy hour, but not even Avo would rib him for it right now. Plus, I'm sorta doing the same myself. It's weird, it's awkward, and none of us really care in this moment. All of Pack's gonna be happy to know the cat came back.

"Glad to have you back." Al jostles the whole group from behind -- when the Alpha hugs (and I can't imagine it's often), everyone feels it. "Place wasn't the same without you stomping around."

"You're the one who stomps, Albus," Pandora chides. "I jog. At least pretend you've heard of it."

From my position on the outside, I turn my head to Wolt with what I can only imagine is a wild expression, silently mouthing the word 'Albus??' -- and he gives me a shit-eating grin so exaggerated I feel like he's going to pass out if he smiles any harder.

Marty strains from behind someone's leg, trying to get some words out. "So you're all set? All that uh-- whatever's out of your system?"

Dora chuckles from within the unrelenting group hug. It's weird we're still hugging, right? Like, we're getting looks from mammals walking by. I'm feeling really self-conscious. But at the same time, I could've stopped by now if I wanted.

"Well," she beams, "I'll still have the occasional check-in, but I feel as right as rain for the first time in a long time."

"What was it like?" Wolt murmurs. "I mean... is it just a blank? Do you remember being-- like, Anna was worried--"

"I'd rather not think about it," Pandora interrupts, and a moment later the unfamiliar edge to her voice vanishes as quickly as it came. "Let's just chalk it up to a nasty chapter in my life I'm more than happy to move on from, and leave it at that."

"Of course, right," he quickly blurts, nodding. "I-- yeah, I'm sorry. Glad it's behind you. Anna'll be-- oh, shit, I should call her--"

"Mlrdy tgun khrr ff," Charlie's muffled voice comes from somewhere in the huddle.

Figures Charlie knew all along. For once, I wasn't the one left out of the loop. Hell, even Avo didn't see this coming.

Speaking of Avo, the jackal breaks the calm of the happy moment with a surprised yip. "Wolter, I SWEAR TO GOD if that's your PAW ON MY ASS--"
"All right, all right," Al grumbles, gently easing the group apart and leaving only Charlie with the tigress. "Let's give her some space, huh? She hasn't even had a chance to change yet, for God's sake."

Charlie disengages slowly, staring up at Pandora with a weary smile. Charlie's never exactly been peppy, but with the deep bags under her eyes and her slack posture, she looks ready for a long nap.

"Foxtrot," Pandora smiles back sweetly. "So nice to see you."

"Pandora," Charlie nods back, plainly.

The tigress places a thick orange paw on Charlie's shoulder. "You all did a lovely job on my store. Really, I'm deeply touched. It looks better than I left it. And you were right: I quite like the pattern."

"A homecoming gift," she offers, holding up a familiar parcel and presenting it to Pandora. "So as not to interfere with the celebrations, you may wish to open it later."

Pandora pockets the gift, and runs her thumb across the vixen's snout in an odd gesture. "I'll be sure to give it the attention it deserves."

Finally, the welcome aside, Pandora claps her paws, and Charlie produces a ring of keys and hustles to the lock. A moment later, the front door swings open, and both of them gesture to the storefront.

"Well then, friends," the tigress announces, flashing that big grin Pack Street's gone too long without. "Pandora's Box is open for business again, at last!"

Wolt gawps, as he and the others push to the door. "Are you kidding me?"

Avo and Wolt waste no time ducking inside. Hell, even Marty slips in through the door, when he thinks nobody's looking.

"Whoa, give yourself some time, first. You just got back -- haven't even changed. No one's gonna get on your back for needing to take some rest," Al says, shaking his head as he steps towards her, but she holds her paw up, stopping him.

"I've been resting for weeks. I'm ready to get back to my life."

Al hesitates, but finally relents with a sigh and takes a step back. "Hey, it's your store."

"It is," she nods back. "Please, won't you come in, too?"

"I ain't no deviant," Al scoffs.

"I'm sure you'll find something you like," she smiles, undeterred. "Maybe a little gift for V, to... spice things up?"

Al's face goes tomato-fuckin'-red and his brows scrunch up. "I can't believe I drove out here for this," he mutters.

That gets a laugh -- not just out of Dora, but from me, too. Al shoots me a look, but I just stare at him with this dumb smile on my face, and god damn if he doesn't end up smiling back.

"I'll be in touch, Pandora," he finally grumbles good-natured, and shoves his paws in his pockets. "You know where to find me."
She half-nods, half-bows to the huge white wolf as he climbs back into his car and starts the engine. "As always. Take care of yourself -- and take care of her."

Al reaches through the open window from the driver's seat, kinda slaps the side of the car, and pulls out down the street.

That leaves me and Dora out here with Charlie. Dora glances between us, and then shares a nod with Charlie, who turns on her heels. For a second, I see the shimmering baby blues of her eyes, leaning in as she passes me to sorta bump my head with hers. Her tail snakes and swishes behind her, and she heads into the Box.

"And then there were two," Pandora smiles down at me, clasping her paws together gently. "I must say I didn't expect to see you here, li'l lamb."

"I was there the night it happened," I blurt out without thinking. My face goes red, but Dora's smile doesn't falter. Only her brows knit together in a look of concern. And somehow that's the weirdest thing I've seen all day -- like she's feeling sorry for me.

"And you needed closure?"

"No, no -- god, no," I laugh, shaking my head. "I just wanted to, y'know, make sure you were okay."

"Isn't that thoughtful of you," she smiles gently, jostling my puffy shoulder with a comforting touch.

I swallow, tensing and untensing my hooves, and push on.

"I uh... I left you a voicemail," I mutter. "Did you... happen to listen to it?"

Her brows arch again, and her lips purse sympathetically. "Oh, I'm sorry, li'l lamb, I didn't. For, ah, security reasons I have my voicemail automatically purged if I don't check in."

"Ah," I nod. There's a tension inside me that relaxes. Maybe for the best.

"Was it... something you'd like to tell me now?"

I huff out my nose, embarrassed, and shake my head. "It-- ah, nah, it's nothing important, I was just... y'know, worried about you and... this kinda-- it was just a dumb, rambling message hoping you'd get well soon and... that you'd--" wow this is harder to get through than I thought when I started "--that you'd be okay. After everything. You-- you helped me a lot. The last time we talked, you uh, suggested I give a public speech a-about something."

For the first time I've seen her, Dora seems at a loss for words.

"Well, it turns out I did," I cough, bashfully. "It... changed a lot, for me."

"Oh, Mister Marshmallow," she looks genuinely surprised, a soft expression on her face and her paw on my arm. "That's so very sweet. I didn't realize we were that close."

"Maybe we're not," I shrug, smiling back. "But either way, I'm glad to know you."

She blinks, then that old overbite grin spreads out over her face again. Like the sunrise breaking over a dark night. Somewhere, the image of that thrashing, helpless tiger tail strapped to a stretcher shatters like glass.
"Well," she stretches a little and nods to her store. "Why don't we talk more inside? I'm sure they're waiting for us."

"Please," I nod, following her lead towards the door.

"And maybe I can get you that replacement toy you wanted."

"Aha ha HA, you REMEMBERED THAT, huh," I laugh very genuinely and not even a little awkwardly.

She winks down at me, holding the door open for us.

"Open for business."
There's something for everyone here.

Colorful balloons float overhead, and bright, hand-painted signs route the foot, hoof, and paw traffic all around me. If you didn't know better, you'd think some kinda big parade was coming through, or maybe a festival broke out on an otherwise-sleepy Saturday morning. Dozens of tents and loaded wooden kiosks line either side of the road, crammed into every possible free space of cracked asphalt, with vendors loudly and proudly hawking their wares. Hard to think I'd see this here of all places, just south of the row, in the empty lots down by the old warehouse district.

As she circles around in front, the slender jackal cocks her head and gives me a dull look.

"This is what you got your fluff all in a twist over?" Avo hums, unimpressed, a lollipop clicking against her sharp fangs as she surveys the scene. "It's just a farm--"
"Farmer's market!!" Wolter blurs like he's answering a game show's question. He shoves to the front of our little group, tail wagging. "What the hell is this doin' here on Pack?!

Grinning back, I watch the usually-lax aardwolf rocket up the sidewalk ahead of us, ducking and weaving between the legs of the gathered mammals. He glances excitedly from stand to stand, like his head's on a swivel. Call it a hunch, but after our day trip to Bunnyburrow a while ago, I had a feeling he'd be into this place.

"Figures farmer fuckboy here would be into it," Avo smirks as she shakes her head good-naturedly at Wolter, who's already gazing lustfully at all the fresh produce and assorted treats on offer. "But I wouldn't have pegged you for the sort to spend your weekends picking over dusty vegetables."

"Did a farmer's market bite you as a kid or something?" I shoot back, waving to a familiar little stoat standing atop a table next to glass dispensers full of punch and lemonade. "I mean, hey, I was still on the co-op's mailing list and I figured I'd stretch my paycheck a lot farther -- and with fresher stuff -- than I would at the store."

"A co-op? The rumor comes out: Remmy Cormo's been a flower child all this time," she grins, crunching up the last of the lollipop in her mouth before tossing the depleted stick in a nearby garbage can. "So you traded in your flaxseed oil and granola for bug meat?"

"Shut up," I laugh, pulling a fiver from my wallet and dropping it in Martina's tip jar as we wade past her stand. "Look, I found out about it back when I was in elementary school. There was a pop-up market that'd meet every year in the high school's parking lot -- selling, y'know, homemade candies and produce, all that good stuff. I haven't thought about it in years, but I checked my junk mail this morning and was surprised to find out they were still going. And branched out, apparently."

Speaking of bug, I sniff appreciatively as I catch that fried meat scent, knowing before I'm even finished turning my head that it's coming from Neil's taco truck. Sure enough, there's the lion himself, big mane wrapped up in a net -- and it looks like he's pressed Cliff into service today too. I smile at the sight of the big burly tiger, still dressed in his fancy work clothes, tie slung over one shoulder as he scoops bug meat into shells for the ever-growing line of hungry customers. Bet they'll make a mint off this crowd -- the vendors at the stalls are mostly prey species, but the buyers are overwhelmingly carnivorous.

And is that -- oh man, it sure is! They're selling roasted corn today! Now that takes me back. Guess they're hedging their bets for the few herbivores that showed up.

"Well, we're not all that far from Flock after all," Avo muses, basking in the warm summer air. "Still, elementary school? You been food-obsessed your whole life?"

"...Kinda sorta not really? Chloe'd just gotten her driver's license, so she'd drive me and my little brother down there on the weekends, and we'd just make a day of it."

She licks around the edges of her teeth, eyeing me. "'Chloe'?

"Huh?" I glance at her in surprise, only to realize I'd given her the name without realizing it. "Oh. My big sister."

"Awww, you're the middle child!" she coos playfully, eyes twinkling as she jabs my fluffy chest with her index finger. "Oh my god, that explains a lot."

I thrust my hooves into my pockets, huffing out through my nostrils as we watch the traffic pass by.
Bit hot out here today.

"You ever had street corn, Avo? From like, a sidewalk vendor?"

She gives me an odd look, pausing halfway through unwrapping her next lollipop using only her lips.

"'Street corn'? No, can't say I have." She licks the wrapper like she's teasing it, tilting her head to one side. "Carnival junkfood's never really been my cup of tea."

"No no no, this isn't anything like that. It's roasted, not fried. With some hot sauce and a little sour cream. It's damn good." I trot backwards towards Neil's stand, waving with both hooves for her to follow. "C'mon, trust me. My treat. We'll grab one for Wolter, too."

"I'll try anything once." She pushes the candy back into her handbag, and falls in beside me as we start heading toward Neil's truck. "Just make mine a small."

I squint at her, half-frowning. "Hey, I'm between jobs, not broke. You don't gotta take pity on me."

"Oh, trust me, you're the Omega now. You need all the pity you can get." Laughing, she musses my headwool. "But really, just a small one's fine. I got a date later tonight and I don't wanna fill up before dinner."

"Whoa, a date?" I reply, surprised. "You?"

"Don't act so--"

"What's this about a date now?" Wolt pants as he staggers up to us from behind. He's been out of our sight not even five minutes and he's already soaked through his shirt with sweat. Both of his arms are loaded down with two woven bags, bursting with colorful jars, sticky pastries, and all kinds of smaller tubes, packets, and bundles. "You've got a date, Avo?"

Avo rolls her eyes at both of us, chomping her teeth with a feral snort. "What? You think I'm not marketable or something?"

"What's this about a date now?" Wolt retorts hotly, blowing a stray lock of shaggy wet headfur out of his eyes. "Yeah right! If I'da known you were on the market, I'da made a move on you myself!"

"Yeah, right, yeah!" I chime in, seeing an opportunity to tease her for a change and leaping on it. "Don't we get like, first pick as part of Pack privileges or something? You gotta keep us posted on these sorts of things! What if we want to make a bid?"

"And who said you can't?" she tosses saucily, tail flicking as she places her paws on either of her angled hips. "Something holding you boys back?"

That shuts me up.

Wolter, however, doesn't miss a beat. "You intimidate me."

Avo stares at him like he's grown a second head, eyes wide and an incredulous grin on her face. "What? You think I'm not marketable or something?"

"Not marketable--" he retorts hotly, blowing a stray lock of shaggy wet headfur out of his eyes. "Yeah right! If I'da known you were on the market, I'da made a move on you myself!"

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Avo stares at him like he's grown a second head, eyes wide and an incredulous grin on her face. "What?" she asks, like she didn't hear him.

"Sexually. Like, damn, girl. I'm no slouch, but I don't know that I could handle all that refined power."
Avo cackles, like, straight up loses it laughing. Ozzy would be proud of the display. I'm not sure I've ever seen her so totally unguarded as in this moment, except uh, maybe that time I saw her in her underwear. It's hard to tell under all that chestnut fur, but I think she's blushing.

"Oh, you're just telling me what I want to hear," she waves him off.

He purrs a little, winking at her.

"Avo! Hey, how are ya?" Neil all but roars, flashing rows of sharp, gleaming teeth as he leans out at us, amid a billowing cloud of white steam. "What can I do for you guys?"

Tail swishing as she walks up to the food truck, Avo casually slides her elbows onto the counter to meet the surprised lion at point-blank. Her snout nearly jabs his.


Shifting his load of groceries in his arms, Wolt nods to me.

"Oh, uh -- however it comes is good with me," he says excitedly. "Thanks, Rem. I already blew through most of my pocket cash, if you'd believe it."

"Easy to do in a place like this," I shrug. "My allowance would usually last for all of about one stand whenever Chloe and I would come."

"Chloe?" Wolter and Cliff ask at once.

"What, is there a fuckin' echo in here?" I growl.

"His older sister," Avo clarifies, stifling a laugh as Neil rolls his eyes at his gossip-loving partner.

"Whoa, whoa, WHOA! You got a sister?" Wolt asks, tongue flopping out of his muzzle -- and somehow I doubt it's because of the heat. "Is she on the market? What's she look like? Got any photos? Does she shear?"

I narrow my eyes. "Wolter. C'mon, man, that's my sister you're talking about."

"So what? Might as well get while you're in a generous mood," he chortles, shifting his groceries around in his arms. "Besides, Anneke's my sister and you don't see me playin' babysitter on her. I figure let your baa-baa-bleating sister make her own decisions."

"He's got you there, Remmy," Avo grins, walking past me with a styrofoam cup of fresh corn and a little plastic spork.

"Yeah, but--" I laugh, very calmly and coolly, while gesturing even more calmly. "But, like-- but-- look, that was different, you can't just-- she's--"

"Oh my god," Neil murmurs to Cliff, who's biting his tongue trying not to laugh. "He is kinda cute."

Groaning, I slap the money down on the counter, slinking lower into my wool in an attempt to hide my own stupid embarrassed grin.
A few minutes later, the three of us find ourselves sitting around on plastic picnic benches under the cool shade of a big tent, just watching the crowd milling by. Here and there on nearby benches, locals and even tourists chow down on deep fried veggies, caramel apples, and what looks like steaming rice buns filled with juicy barbecue bug meat. Man, I wish this place would be here every day.

"Hey, hey look," Wolt sits up, his cheeks full of roasted corn. "Hey, they've got honey sticks! Someone's selling honey sticks! Oh man, I gotta go back for another sweep before I head home."

Just like that, out of nowhere, I feel paws in my headwool from behind. I whirl around with an exaggerated angry look, expecting to find Anneke or maybe Ozzy -- but all of a sudden I stop. A big canine of some kind, wild dog maybe, a little bigger than I am. He locks eyes with me and I realize I've never seen this mammal before in my life.

"*Get your paws off me,*" I bristle, sounding way more hostile than I imagined.

Honestly, I'm kinda reeling right now. I'm confused, scared, kind of insulted, and a little mad. Why the fuck are you touching me?

"The fuck--" Avo jolts to her feet.

"It is a fuckin' sheep," the stranger mutters hazily to his cohort, a similar-looking mammal beside him with splotchy brown spots up and down his face and neck. Could be brothers, I guess.

"Hey man, you know Dawn Bellwether?"

"Hey!" Wolter slaps his paws on the table, almost knocking over his cup. "Fuck off, assholes!"

"Specist little--"

"Yeah," I answer back.

The pred's smile sorta droops, and Avo and Wolt stop.

"She's a fuckin' asshole!"

One of the two stares dumbly at me, while the other starts cracking up with breathy little 'huh huh huh' s. The first notices the second laughing and joins in, and the two of them kind of aimlessly drift off into the crowd outside the tent, mumbling something about how Bellwether's a b-word, and then they're gone.

"Fuck," Avo breathes. "Remmy, I'm--"

"Hey, no, no," I wave my hooves in the air, gesturing for both her and Wolt to calm down as they settle into their seats again. "Look, they're just dumb kids, and probably high. Doesn't bother me."

Wolt shakes his head, running a dark paw through his tussled headfur. "You sure, man?"

I nod back, firmly, and he shrugs.

"You know if anything *did* happen I'd have your back."

"Sure. I appreciate that. But like I said, just kids. I'm not gonna let it ruin my morning." I've been through a lot worse since moving in. Couple dumb gawkers barely moves the needle. Besides, I had more mammals trying to touch my wool at the block party.
I sigh, looking across the table to where Avo's anxiously swirling her food from one side of the bowl to the other.

"So...?" I ask playfully, nudging her. "Go on, spill."

"Look, don't take it personally, but I think it's just not for me," Avo comments, wiping a little sour cream off her paw. "I'm sure it goes well on a fish taco, but I think you can have the rest of mine."

"Not the corn! I meant your date. You can't just drop a bombshell on us like that and then clam up! Who's the lucky mammal? Anyone we know? And where are you going? C'mon, c'mon!"

Rolling her eyes, Avo unscrews the cap on her bottle of vegetable juice and takes a sip.

"Don't you guys have better things to gossip about?" she asks.

"Hey, you're our friend. We just-- we care," Wolt pipes up, wiping sauce off his chin. "Also, we wanna tease the everloving fuck out of you."

"It's like, fifty-fifty," I reply. "Admit it -- you're going on a date with Marty and you're just too embarrassed to admit it."

A few seconds later, Avo hands me her paper towel, to wipe the mist of juiced veggies off my face.

"Sorry," she snickers. "If I ever get that desperate, I want you to scoop what's left of my brains out with one of these plastic sporks."

"If you ever get that desperate, I'd hope you come to one of us, first," I murmur.

"Ohh, c'mon, Marty ain't that bad," Wolt chuckles.

Still idly stirring, Avo stares down into her corn, a smile tugging at her lips. She looks up at both of us coyly, seductively -- but then it gives way to an almost goofy energy as she leans in close, like a schoolgirl sharing some secret.

"Okay, okay. I met this guy through work. Tall. Built. Shoulders. Very cute."

"Species? I blurt out.

"Same as me," she smiles, wiggling her paws. "Lighter, which actually--"

"Wait so, through work? So what, you two gonna shoot a porno together?" Wolter asks, lowering his eyelids and raising his eyebrows at her at the same time. "Have Dora help you film it, release it as a Pandora's Box Original maybe? You could make bank."

"You wish. I've got a good thing going, and if I ever decide to shift into hardcore, you'll know it."

Wolt lets out an over-dramatic sigh, wiping his paws on a paper napkin. "I better."

"Okay, okay, so he's a wolf," I interject, trying to steer the conversation out of the gutter and back on track. "Was he a customer or what, exactly?"

"He's actually from the inspection crew that got the place re-opened. He asked if my fur was
natural. At first I thought it was a lame pickup line, but we got into a discussion about it. Turns out,
he used to work for the same company that makes the dye I use. We ended up chatting through the
whole process, and now we're having dinner at Firepaw's and then maybe a movie."
I drum my hooves on the table. "You should totally wear that black dress of yours."
"What, the sleeveless one? What is this, prom night?" she says with an incredulous bark of a laugh,
but her tail won't stop wagging. "Hang on, when did you even see me in that?"
"Remmy's right," Wolter says. "Can't go wrong with a classic. Guys love it."
"'The guys', huh."
"Two out of two guys agree right here," I retort. "Trust me, he'll be into it. We'd know."
"Well goodness, as long as I've got 'the guys' on call... what should I wear that little black dress
with?" she asks, dripping swagger. "Heels?"
I look at Wolt, who looks back at me. We both nod.
"Heels, definitely," he breathes.
"I'm actually kind of offended you'd think there was any other option," I chime in.
Avo rolls her eyes and slides her styrofoam cup over to us, smiling to herself.
"Yeah, okay. Heels and a plain black dress, for dinner and a movie. Because apparently my fuckin'
life is a 90s teen romance flick now."
"Knock 'em dead, toots," I wink.

The three of us split up at the market, so I head for the Crowns to drop off my own haul -- a ton of
sweet assorted berries, a jar of peach preserves, some sourdough pretzels, stuff like that. Got a great
deal on mushrooms, so I'm gonna see if I can dig up any simple recipes for sautéeing. Can't be too
hard, right? I was almost tempted to pick up a tall, frosty glass jar of real milk from a nice old goat,
but while she was talking up the certification process it goes through, she explained it was hers,
and I had to excuse myself.
Strutting into the lobby with a spring in my step, I notice Betty and Anneke lounging on the
common area's broken-down couch, watching TV.
"Yarn ball," Betty nods in greeting. She doesn't turn to me, but that big black wolf snout sniffs the
air, and I can tell she's trying to suss out where I've just come from.
"Farmer's market," I helpfully fill in the blank for her, temporarily dropping my stuff by the side of
the old sofa. I guess that's enough, because she stops sniffing and turns her attention back to
whatever's on the screen.
"Is that where you and my idiot brother have been all morning? Hope you had fun talking to old
grandpas about how you can make pajamas out of wicker," Anneke giggles, straightening her jeans
-- which seem to be the exact same as the ones Wolter was wearing at the market. "Well, you're
just in time, because Catwell's about to propose."
"No fuckin' way. That scum-shark's proposing on the Twelfth of Never. Mark me." Scoffing, Betty


sips at her beer (little early to be drinking, but then again, I guess this is coming up on 'evening' for us). "She's pregnant with his kid and he doesn't even fuckin' love her! Snake."

Anneke nods lazily at the black-furred wolf beside her, arm dangling off the couch as the makeup-caked TV actors recite their sappy lines, taking every opportunity they can to look directly into the camera.

"Tellin' you, Bigby, you can see this one coming a mile off," the little aardwolf says. "And like, the worst part is, Leon's actually a decent guy even if he isn't as good-looking as Catwell. But of course, Marilyn thinks that she can make Catwell stay."

I climb onto the old couch and Betty graciously scoots over to give me room to sit next to her. "Who's Bigby?"

"Not Bigby. 'Big'... 'B'. Big Beta," Anneke clarifies. "Or Big Betty. Or Big Bad--"

"She comes up with new nicknames every goddamn week. She's worse than Avo," Betty growls through a toothy smile, reaching over and digging a claw at Anneke's side, which causes her to whoop in surprise and nearly jump out of her seat.

"YOU CAN'T TICKLE ME," Anneke wails, her stripy tail puffed out like a feather duster.

"Kinda looks like I can," Betty murmurs mischievously into her beer.

"I'm a grown adult!" Anneke pouts, in a very un-grown-adultlike way. "What if some random creeper put his paws all over you, huh? Why do you think it's okay for you to do it?"

"For one, I outrank you, so I can do whatever the hell I want," the big black wolf retorts.

"NO YOU CAN'T, IT DOESN'T WORK THAT WAY!"

"For two, you clearly love it, maybe too much," Betty continues, unphased. "And three, it's the best way to make you shut up."

"Remmyyyyyy," Anneke whines pitifully, rolling against the arm of the couch like some listless little kid. "Back me up here."

Oh boy. I do not want to get into a clash between two higher-ranking packmates. This could end badly. "Well, uh... I mean, if you actually have a pr--"

"Shhhh," the aardwolf suddenly interrupts, as both she and Betty quickly sit upright. "Commercial's over."

"Here -- watch, that piece of shit's gonna bolt as soon as he sees the pregnancy test," Betty growls, looking genuinely pissed-off as she raises her paw to her mouth for a moment only to let it drop to her side. "No such thing as a happy ending. Tale old as time."

"What are you two watching?" I ask in amusement as Betty kicks her feet up.

"Restless Paws, but it really went downhill after the sixteenth season," Anneke replies, hopping off her end of the couch and circling around to mine, whereupon she immediately shoves her whole face into one of my bags. "Ooh. Are these sourdough?"

Snorting, I roll my eyes. "Help yourself."
"Thanks, yarn ball," Betty grunts and leans wayy over. She half-smooshes me against the arm of the sofa and I find myself pressed tight against her side while she fishes out a pretzel.

She must've knocked the wind outta me or something, because I only snap out of it when Anneke taps my forehead with her foreclaw.

"You watching with us or what?" she asks, her scratchy voice cracking as she glances up at me.

"Hold on," I reply, running a mental checklist of anything in my bags that might need refrigerating. Nope. Should be good. I settle back against the well-worn fabric of the couch and stretch my legs. "Yeah, I'm in."

"I don't know what the fuck Ozzy sees in this show," Betty groans, rubbing her temples. "And I don't know why the fuck I can't stop watching it, either."

"It's addictive," Anneke agrees.

"It's shit."

"Right right right, look, here's Catwell now. So smug, so proud of himself," Anneke comments, pointing at one of the actors, a slick-furred panther in a crisp suit feigning a smile as a teenage wildcat bawls in his arms. "God, I just wanna sock him right in his perfect fuckin' dick."

"His per-- how the fuck do you know what that guy's dick looks like?" I bust out laughing.

"It's a figure of speech!" Anneke stammers as she slumps against her pillow, letting out a shrieky, barky yawn.

"Fuck it is!" Betty snorts, pinching her pretzel stick together between her pawtips like she's holding a cigarette. "I have never once heard you or anyone else say that."

"Arright, okay! Okay! Okay, so maybe there were some pictures online."

"You been lookin' at creepshots? Aw, shame, Annie. Let these poor freaks live their lives."

"He wasn't even naked! You could just-- kinda see it through his boxers!" Anneke yips, clearly annoyed. "What, you never look at porn?!

"That's got nothing to do with my point."

Anneke raises her brows. "Geez. Maybe that explains why you're so uptight, then."

With a sharp click of her tongue, Betty reaches a broad arm over my head with frightening speed. She grabs Anneke by her stripy mohawk and the scruff of her neck, and drags the yapping little aardwolf past me and onto the sofa.

"Fuck you say to me?" our Beta scowls, shaking her about (albeit in sort of slow motion, I guess to be sure she's not hurting her).

I can't help watching this with an amused grin. Seeing these two bickering back and forth with each other all because of cheesy, melodramatic daytime TV feels like a spectator sport.

"I'm right and you know it, Big B! Rem, c'mon, back me up this time," Anna pleads. "Is it weird to look at pictures of celebrities online?"

"I already said that ain't the issue -- and besides, the fuck kinda question's that? He's a boy, you
already know what he's gonna say," Betty chides, waving her off.

"Weeeelll," I grin, "maybe Anna's right in a way. Avo's got a date, and she was in a better mood than I've seen her in a while. When was the last time you went out with someone, Betty?"

The grappling pair release each other, and I suddenly find them craning to look over at me. The sordid love affairs of *Restless Paws* now a complete afterthought, Betty slaps the 'mute' button on the remote. The Beta's gaze is off the TV, now fixed squarely on me, and even though she's still reclined, I can see her tensing up, that thick black tail of hers twitching slightly.

"Arright, that's enough of that now," she grunts. "I ain't lookin' for love."

I raise my hooves in polite surrender, but my smile's pretty much glued-on at this point.

"So she really is seeing someone." Betty hums low, her half-chomped pretzel hanging from her maw like a cigar. "I knew somethin' was up. Well, shit."

"Who's the dumb stud she's got lined up?" Anna asks curiously, eyes wide as I've ever seen them as she leans forward to sit on the edge of the couch cushion.

"Some guy from work. Another wolf like her, I think she said. He sounds nice, but she didn't talk too much about him," I admit, shrugging. "She just... seemed excited about it. I'm happy for her, though."

Betty downs the rest of her beer before crumpling the can and tossing it at the too-full wastebasket by the front door. It misses.

"Hey, if she knows him from Pandora's, maybe they're gonna make a 'movie'," Anneke says with an exaggerated wink-wink at us, only to wilt when Betty and I both give her pointed looks.

"What?"

Like brother, like sister.

"Well, all joking aside," Anneke shrugs, idly lolling out on the arm of the sofa, "I hope wherever she's going, she has a good time. I think she's earned it."

"Yeah. She ain't the type to let it show, but the whole thing with Pandora really shook her," Betty comments. "I'm glad things are back to normal around here."

Our gaze turns back to the TV, and after a few minutes of silence, Anneke slowly nudges the volume switch with her foot once the show comes back from the commercial break. Just in time, too -- looks like the greasy, handsome bastard Catwell is standing in front of a female lynx. She's got what's obviously a pillow tucked under her dress. I'm guessing she's supposed to be pregnant. In Catwell's paws is a small velvet box, and on his face is a nervous smile.

"Oh my god, oh my god," Anneke gasps.

"Oh, fuck you -- it's gotta be a fakeout," Betty groans, dragging a paw down her face. "No. Dream. Calling it now, it's a dream."

I'm fighting back a giggle fit. "You two are taking the show more seriously than it's taking itself."

"Shut up," they both whisper.

Catwell stoops to one knee, opens the box, and inside is a cheap, rhinestone-studded ring.
"Wait, is that supposed to look cheap because Catwell's cheap, or is that just the best prop they could afford?"

Anna scoffs. "Thing looks like it came out of a fuckin' gumball machine."

Betty hisses through clenched teeth as Catwell slips it onto his soon-to-be-bride's finger, and the two embrace.

"Fucking unbelievable. **This** guy popped the question before Al," Betty growls, shutting the TV off as Anneke and I laugh.

It's just about sunset when I hear a familiar sound of click-clacking steps on wood, stirring me from my half-nap on the couch. At first, I wondered what Ms. Velvet Roe was doing here, but after a moment, I realize those are heels I'm hearing.

I check the clock with a furrowed brow. Avo's home early.

Her footsteps grow quieter as I hear her ascending to the upper floor. Her apartment's directly above mine, but I don't hear her come back to the hall, even through the paper-thin walls of the Crowns. Instead, pressing my ear to my door, I can make out the grating sound of metal squeaking overhead. That's the roof access door -- it sticks sometimes, usually after it's recently rained.

I turn around, grab my keys, and make my way down the hall and up to the roof to check on her. And as I push open the difficult door, there she is. Sitting on one of the big, boxy ventilation units, leaned forward with her paws on her knees, watching the sun slowly melt into the horizon. Wearing a beautiful, sleeveless black dress, with a pair of elegant heels kicked off beside her.

Frowning, I clench and unclench my fists a couple of times before walking over to her side. My hooves crunch along the gritty rooftop with each step, but if she notices, she doesn't seem to care.

"Hey," I offer quietly.

"Hey yourself," she yawns without even looking up at me.

I climb up onto the box beside her, and none too gracefully. My short legs dangle off the side as I scoot next to her. I probably look completely ridiculous -- like a little kid in a booster seat next to his big sister or something.

I'm pretty sure I already know, but I ask anyway.

"How'd it go?"

"Eh." She lets out a noise that's halfway between a sigh and a raspberry. "Turns out he was kind of a prick."

There's a sudden, sharp little pang in my heart. I look down at the roof, trying to think of something meaningful or worthwhile to say.

"That sucks, Avo. I'm sorry to hear it."

The jackal nods, closes her eyes, and idly stretches out in the cool evening air.

Avo's got a quick wit and a sharp tongue, and I've seen her take plenty of jabs in stride. For as much as she dishes out, she's always struck me as thick-skinned. And maybe it's like Betty said --
maybe she just plays it close to the chest. Or maybe she really is fine. Either way, she doesn't need my dumb ass chiming in on this.

And yet, I can't help myself. I never fucking can, seems like. But the spark of anger in my stomach starts to grow into a brushfire, and all at once, I slap my hooves on the flat metal surface of my seat and turn to look at her.

"Avo," I start, with as much restraint as I can manage. "You're-- you've got your own style, and it's incredible. You're self-made, and-- and confident, in all the ways most mammals wish they were. You know what you want, and you, uh, you make a really good stir-fry."

She tilts her head to look at me, and I nod back to her, forcing myself to reel this in while I still can.

"You're a-- a smart, witty, beautiful young woman. And if that guy can't see that-- well, that's his loss, not yours."

Avo doesn't reply, or even react much. Just sort of looks at me without speaking, just blinking softly. But after a moment, she reaches out around me, and I can feel her paw rest on my shoulder, giving me a gentle shake.

We sit like this for a while, just waiting out the sun as day gives way to night, and the nocturnal traffic begins to pick up.

"You know, you got a good heart underneath all that fluff."
A voice that sounds like gravel hits my ears about the same time as the smell of fish hits my nose.

"Hey, good-lookin'."

I look up from my drink at the guy standing next to me. Big golden-blonde bear. Dressed smart. Standing funny so he can show off his muscles. I smirk a little and don't hide it. Eyes go back to my drink.

He takes it like I'm encouraging him. "This seat taken?"

I lift my drink from the rim, swirling it. "I got a friend coming." Ah. I said 'friend'. I could'a said
'someone' and maybe he'da taken it to mean I was taken.

"Well," he smiles, squeezing in against the bar. "Guess I'll just switch to your other side when they show up. Unless you mind?"

Shrug. He sits down with a big smile, and that loose extra skin around his face pulls into big puffy cheeks. Y'know, the sorta smile all big bears got. It's almost cute. Like a little stuffed toy, 'cept he's like eight or nine feet tall and has a few hundred pounds on me.

He folds his paws on the countertop and signals the bartender. Bartender goes to fetch a drink. Bear smiles at me again.

"You come here often?"

I snort, shaking my head. "You can do better than that."

He kinda sits up, watching me as I take a swig, then nods.

"Okay." His voice doesn't shake, and he slides his empty glass from one paw to the other. "I'll be honest, then: I saw a powerful, beautiful mammal who's just my type sitting alone at the bar and so I came over here trying to think of a way to make you think I was worth your time. If you'd rather not make small talk, I don't mind."

A smile crawls up my face and I wrinkle my snout a little, but I still don't turn to look at him. "Never seen a bear play weak before."

"Mm, I wouldn't say weak," he says back, like he's thinking it over. "Vulnerable."

He smiles, chuckles out his nose, and watches as the bartender comes back and fills his glass. "Nothing wrong with being vulnerable, from time to time."

My ears flick.

I turn on my seat, lookin' right at him, and he doesn't flinch. I grab my drink, finish it. Got responsibilities to think about.

"I ain't the kind to stay out late," I tell him. "Got a little one at home."

That always get 'em to scatter. Works every time.

"How wonderful," he smiles, and his eyes light up. "I'm good with children."

Works almost every time.

I sigh, sitting halfway turned on the barstool. I look him in the eyes for the first time. His eyes are tired. Gentle. His smile makes them softer. I was thinking I'd do this harsher when he sat down, but now I put my claws away.

"Look, you seem like a nice guy. But I'm just not lookin' right now. Sorry."

Someone else interrupts. "Don't say sorry. You didn't do anything wrong."

I don't even have to look over my shoulder to know who it is. "I'm just bein' polite," I tell her.
"You don't owe him politeness," she says loud enough so he can hear it before waving and shooing him. "Go on now, I'm sure you've got other girls to bother."

I hold up my paw. "Hey now, relax."

The bear stands up slowly, without waiting. He nods, lifts his drink at us, smiles. "Ladies. Have a wonderful night."

Part of me wants to raise my glass back, just outta like... courtesy, I guess? Not bein' rude? But he's already turned and walked off, leaving us alone.

I sigh real loud, even louder than I meant to, and I turn on my seat to face the other way. I look up at the tall deer with the short antlers standing over me and watching that guy walk away with a smug look like she just saved my hide. Yeah, from a man's touch, maybe. Well, wait, I already told him no before she showed up. What the fuck am I sayin'? I ain't that desperate, anyhow.

Besides, we came out tonight for each other.

I slide my glass on the bar and point for a refill. "Y'know, you can be a real bitch sometimes."

She sits down next to me opposite where the bear just was, setting her nice white purse on the bar. "You don't owe him or anyone else your time or attention."

"I know that," I shake my head, grinning on just one side. "But he was bein' nice about it."

"Oh gosh, well if he was harassing you nicely then--"

"V!" I slap one paw on the bar, startling the bartender (he's a weasel, so I guess he startles easy), and hold the other up at my friend. "Look -- I don't need you watchin' out for me, you got it? I'm not a kid anymore and I don't need protection from boys. I can take care of myself."

She clicks her tongue and makes a little "ooh" sound, wrinklin' up her eyebrows. She leans forward at me and I don't realize what she's doing till she's squeezing my cheek like she's my fuckin' aunt or something. My eyes go wide open and I snap my teeth at her, almost biting her hoof. She looks impressed, and she laughs. I laugh, too. Then I lean over at her, grab her around her head with both paws, and bump my forehead against hers. This time, not so hard I hurt myself. Her antlers scrape past my ears and I come away brushin' the fur on my head, which is probably worse than usual right now.

She smiles. Tension's off. "Were you waiting long?"

"Nah."

When I look back to her, V's leaned back against the bartop, facing the room. The Strawhaus is about as busy today as any day, I'd say. Decent crowd. Mostly wolves, like usual, but there's always a few bears and badgers at this hour. Whole place is dark, smoky, and got that kinda quiet hum that makes a place feel cozy. Light's mostly blocked by the blinds. Feels like home.

I nod at the bartender, who's lookin' skittish, and slip him a bill. "Here, lemme get another, and a pony colada for my friend."

Then I notice V's watching me with a smile like I just said something funny.

"What?"
She shrugs. "Speaking of 'I'm not a kid anymore'..."

"Huh?"

"Betty, how often do we go out? And you still don't know what I drink?"

I look at her, then the busy bartender. Then her. "...You don't like coladas anymore?"

She laughs.

"Hey, I--" I sit up straight. "I can get you something else. Just-- remind me, is all."

Then, she gives me this little look, this look I see her give a lot, and her smile gets soft. "Actually, I think I will have a colada after all."

"Then--!" I throw my paws up, laughing hard enough I start coughing. "Why you givin' me shit?!"

She laughs even harder, spins in her seat back to the bar, and slaps her hooves on it.

I wrinkle my snout at her. "Okay, yeah. Laugh it up, you horny bitch."

V gets her drink a minute later and raises it to me like we're fuckin' toasting or something. Fine.

"Here's to, uh..." I scratch my neck, claws deep in my scruff, tryin' to think of something worth sayin'. "To friends?"

"To friends," she smiles, toasting back.

"So I'm covered up to my fucking elbow in machine oil and struggling to get the lock even turned to where I can work on it, and this lady, she won't stop circling around. I swear to-- it was like, she couldn't sit fuckin' still." I swirl the tip of my claw around on the bartop, tryin' to grumble away the way my lips are turnin' up.

Meanwhile, V is watchin' me so closely you'd think I was tellin' the most amazing story she'd ever heard. Maybe it's 'cause she's on her fifth drink. Even I'm not putting 'em away that fast.

"Anyway, finally I tell her, 'lady, can you please sit down or somethin'? I can't reach the lock with you distracting me like this!'"

"And of course, she didn't listen."

I laugh, slappin' my paw on V's arm and shakin' my head. "No no, even better. She goes 'oh I'm sorry, does this help?' and comes over and pulls the fuckin' bike apart!"

"WHAT?!"

V covers her mouth, glancin' around the bar like everyone's starin' at her for bein' so loud. They're not. They fuckin' mind their own, of course.

"What?" she says again, real quiet, like we're in the library or somethin'. That makes me snort.

"The fuckin' bike just comes apart! The frame was-- I don't fuckin' know, but it just came apart!" I laugh, setting my drink down for a sec so I can shove my face into my paws.
"Oh noooooo," V moans.

"I was like... 'lady, if you can just take this part off... can't you just get it out of the lock that way??'"

"Couldn't anyone?"

"And she just-- she stares at me for like a fuckin' minute, tryin' to figure out what I just said, and all of a sudden--" I click my tongue, shooting finger guns. "An' her face just goes bright fuckin' red an' in about five seconds she's paid me, apologized, and sent me back to the store."

V laughs, just like I knew she would. I smile. She smiles. I can't think of anything to say so I pat her on the shoulder, and take another sip of my drink.

Some days I can't tell when V's just humorin' me to make me feel better or if she really thinks I'm as funny as she's treatin' me. But I think maybe it's both. Y'know? A little bit enjoyin' the talk, a little bit just enjoyin' each other's company. That's the whole reason for takin' a day off, isn't it?

She sniffs. "If you really think I was over the line, I'll send that guy a drink or something."

"Oh, c'mon."

"Well you kept saying he was being nice--"

"I don't really care that much, V. He didn't seem the type to get mad about it."

"And if he is the type," V adds, "Then he can go scratch his little mad spot about it."

I laugh out loud, and then I'm coughing again. She finishes her glass, claps her hooves, and turns to me, and I know she wants to get into it. I swear to god, if this is gonna be another lecture on how I need to stop smoking, we're gonna have problems. I am cutting back, and if she says one thing about it, I can just go drink on my own.

"So, how's the little one?"

"Fine," I shrug.

She leans at the bar and watches me. "Just 'fine', huh?"

"Fine."

"Fine," she repeats.

I finish my drink. "He's mad at me because I didn't let him go to a birthday party."

"Betty!" V gasps. "No birthday party?"

"Oh my god," I groan.

"He must have done something really bad for--"

"It wasn't about him," I mutter into my empty glass, still holding it.

"Oh."

The bartender comes up and looks at me. It takes me a second, but I shake my head. My head's
pounding right now. Wave him off. V orders another something. I don't hear it. All the smoke in here is getting to me. Don't they know you can't smoke in here? Believe me, I'd fuckin' know. And what time is it, anyway? It's definitely not morning anymore. Did someone open the blinds? I don't even want to look over my shoulder. Too bright.

Smoke fills my nostrils. My claws twitch against my face. "I don't want him going near--"

"Is it-- I mean, is there abuse--"

"No. No."

V's hoof on my arm.

"...But they're trouble. Bunch'a..."

I bring the glass up to my mouth, but it's empty. Where's my fucking drink?

"I don't want him picking anything up from 'em."

"I understand."

V says she understands. And when she says it, I know she does. She's never lied to me about that kinda thing. Then again, if she don't understand something, I probably don't either. She's sharper than me on most things, and that's just the truth.

I hear her giggle and she says "Please, don't flatter me."

I sink into my paws again. "Did I say that shit out loud?"

She giggles more, and catches herself with a single hiccup. "You might have."

"How's Ozzy doin'?"

"Just like that, huh?"

Where's my drink? I swear I ordered a refill. "Sorry, you want I should work up to it?"

"Betty."

"I'm just askin' how my boy's doin'."

She rolls her head off to one side, and her damn neck's so long I feel like she's about to whallop the bartender with those antlers. "I'll tell you the same thing I tell you every time, which is that I can't tell you. You know I can't tell you."

She always gets like this. Stubborn as a mule.

I rub my forehead instinctively. I'm not supposed to say that. What if he picks that kinda shit up from me?

"I'm not asking for details, I just want to know if he's okay."

V folds her arms. I can tell she's not going to budge. "Then ask him."

"Be that way."

I tap my glass against the counter to get the bartender's attention. Where's the fuckin' service,
already? He comes hurrying over with this scared look, which I can't really understand because don't he serve wolves all day in this place? I'm not that much of an eyesore, so what's he shivering at?

"Gimme a drink," I mumble, wagging my empty glass at him like he doesn't see it, 'cause he must not if he's not filling me up.

"She'll have water," V smiles to him like she was on the clock. Oh my god, always gotta be the professional.

"I'll have whatever I want," I snap my teeth, grin­ning and lookin' at her like who the hell does she think she is. "Who the hell do you think she is?"

"What?"

"You've had more than me!" I tell her back, but it sounds like I'm whining even though I'm not, so I clear my throat and maybe that'll take care of that.

V gives me that same polite look. We're not on the clock, okay? "Yes, but I'm drinking pony coladas, remember?"

"Which are, what, 14 percent?"

"And what are you drinking?"

I look at the bartender and nod, wagging my glass again so he gets the message. "Gin."

"Gin?! You're drinking gin and you're telling me about alcohol content?" She looks like she's about to stand up right out of her chair, but stops herself so I don't have to do it for her. "Since when do-- You don't drink gin."

Claws on my face. Glass back on the bartop. My mouth is so dry.

"V, am I raisin' him okay?"

"Ooh," she coos like you would to a pup.

Can't steady myself. I feel her touch on my arm and her hooves pat me, gentle. I rest my elbows on the bar and she looks up to order.

"Two waters, please."

I don't know how long it's been, but it's still way too bright out. So couldn't be that long.

"We should go see that new movie."

"Which one?" I ask.

"The new one."

V's giggling and every few minutes she'll give this real loud hiccup like she just stepped out of a fuckin' cartoon show. Like she's gotta tell the whole bar that even after all that water she's still drunk. Her long neck is wobbling from one side to the other, like her head's too heavy to hold up. Her head always looked kinda like a wolf's, that's not just me right? With the big canine-lookin'
nose? Deers ain't related to wolves though, I looked that up once. Anyway, she's drunk and bubbly and talky right now, which is how she gets, 'cause she's drunk and nudging me. Even after all that water, she's drunk. Not like me. I'm just drunk.

But I've earned it. It's like she said over and over since we got here, and she's right: I've earned it. I work hard, and I take care of other mammals all day, and I got some time to myself so I can fuckin' enjoy it. Other mammals can, so how come I can't? That don't seem fair. I can have fun. I can do what I want. A big smile comes to my face and I'm grinnin' with my teeth and V nudges me. There's some cute guys here. The bear's long gone but that's okay because there's this shrimpy little pronghorn in glasses who keeps lookin' at me when he thinks I can't see, and I bet--

V pretty much shoves me and I glare at her. "What?"

"Behave."

I cough. "Be-- I wasn't doin' anything."

"You're staring at that young buck and licking your teeth."

"No I'm not." I lean down, cupping my paws around my snout. "Did I really??"

She laughs, hiccupping. Real Saturday morning style. "Betty, the poor boy must be ten years your junior, at least."

"They let him in here, didn't they?"

"Betty."

"What are you, his mom?" I laugh, slapping the bar and rolling my head the other way. "Fine, god. I was just lookin' anyhow."

She giggles, shakes her head, puts both hooves up. "Look. You've got the day off. We're here to have fun, so if--"

"No no no, we're here for you. I'm not gonna go run--"

"No, we're here for you, too," V points out, tapping me right on the nose with one hoof.

I look back at her, sniffing, and somethin' in me kinda clicks, like a stiff tumbler finally comin' free.

"Y'know what? Yeah."

I stand up, fishing some bills out of my pocket and slapping them on the counter. V grins about as wide as me, leafs through them, handing me back the spares, and then lays some down herself, plus what I figure is a tip for the bartender I kept spookin'.

I clap her shoulder and nod at the exit. "Let's go see that movie."

"What movie?" V smiles as we help each other to the door.

"I don't care," I tell her. "The new one."

"That's-- Betty, there's a ton of new ones."
"Shut the fuck up," I laugh, shoving her. She shoves me back. Somehow we make it to the door. I don't want to go out -- too damn bright -- but I'll manage.

I'll manage okay.

V pats my back as I finish puking in those dead bushes about a block from the Crowns.

"There you go, you're good."

"I'm not good," I spit on the ground. "I think there was something in that gin."

"It's called alcohol."

"Shut up," I groan.

She rocks on her hooves, talkin' all sing-songy like it's some fun little game for pups. "Looks like someone can't handle their drink as well as they thought!"

"Oh yeah? I can't?" I growl, spitting again. "Well which one of us puked in the bushes?"

"Y-- that was you!" She gasps, and all of a sudden her hooves are on her hips. "You did! It just happened!"

I snag a paper towel outta the back pocket of my boot-cut jeans and wipe my mouth off. Then, with V followin' along, I walk over to the nearest trash can and toss it in.

Can't be makin' bad habits, anyways.

We nod to each other and make our way down the street for home, passing Avo along the way. She's sittin' on the porch, watchin' me and V stumble and sway. But she has the good sense to keep her mouth shut.

"Sorry we missed your movie," I mumble.

"Hey, that's okay." She bumps me a little -- not too hard, 'cause even though I'm sure it's outta my system we know better than to take chances -- and then like that she just lights up. "Oh! Why don't we just go to your place, catch a movie at home?"

"Really?"

"Why not? We'll have a girls' night in."

She grins at me, lookin' as excited as I've ever seen anyone look for a night sitting on the couch, and even though I know she's just trying to cheer me up, it works. We don't need a fancy new movie and pricy theater tickets. We got everything we need right here.

"Yeah, I can manage that."

I'll manage okay.

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